

Boris Iljuk, Czech Republic



Dr. Boris Iljuk is a Volhynian Czech and at the time of the Chernobyl accident he and many others of this ethnic group lived in an enclave in the Soviet Union, about 100 km away from the Chernobyl power plant. He talked about how he experienced the days of the Chernobyl catastrophe with his interviewer, Vojtech Pojar.

Introduction

Dr. Boris Iljuk is a member of a group of Volhynian Czechs. Their ancestors left the Czech part of the former Austrian Empire in the 1860s and moved to imperial Russia where they hoped to find national and religious tolerance and also a better living. There they inhabited some provinces (Volhynian gub. and the neighbouring ones; i.e. certain areas which are now on Ukrainian ground). It was more than 40 000 people. Through many generations they managed to preserve their language, customs and their national identity.

Because of the unbearable conditions during Stalinism, the decision was made to leave the country and to return back to Czechoslovakia. This massive exodus took place in 1945/6 and was based on a bilateral Czechoslovak-Soviet agreement. But for specific reasons not all Czechs were allowed to leave the country and so there remained thousands of people, who had to spend the following years in the Soviet Ukraine.

The inhabitants of the village of Malá Zubovščina were among those people. They lived about 100 kilometres from the site of the nuclear power plant Chernobyl. The catastrophe, its consequences and the fall of the Iron curtain sparked their desire to attempt again to return to their homeland. After many negotiations with the Czechoslovak and the Soviet (and then Ukrainian) officials, they finally managed to get back to the Czech Republic in 1991/2.

I asked Dr. Boris Iljuk, university docent of psychology at the University of Hradec Králové (near Prague), to share his memories of the accident. He was an important activist in the movement that was fighting for their right to return home.

He had agreed to share his memories with me. We met in a small cafeteria in Prague and over cups of tea and coffee he started talking about how he experienced the days of the Chernobyl catastrophe, which changed his life as well as lives of other Volhynian Czechs.

Before Chernobyl

Mr. Iljuk as well as all the other inhabitants of the village Malá Zubovščina were aware of the existence of the power plant. They weren't afraid, they were maybe even proud that there was such a modern thing near there. After all, peaceful use of nuclear energy wasn't perceived as dangerous back then. Mr. Iljuk, unlike the most inhabitants of the village, who were working in agriculture, didn't work in the village. He lived and worked in Kiev, at the Ministry of Education.

The scale of the catastrophe

Dr. Iljuk remembers precisely what he was doing at the time of the accident. He was at some scientific conference, not very far from Chernobyl. People at the conference probably did know what happened, because they were very anxious.

The official media of course remained silent. But there were other sources of information: Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America, which started providing unbiased information and to which people listened. At the time of „perestrojka“, as Mr. Iljuk remembers, listening to foreign radio broadcasting wasn't that dangerous as it had been before.

When he arrived at Malá Zubovščina after the accident, the villagers were still working in the fields. He managed to get a dosimeter at the ministry and performed some measurements in the village. The radioactivity level was of course high.

But people weren't exposed to radioactivity only at work. On the 1st of May, the Soviet regime organized the usual massive manifestations in the streets. The party officials overlooking the marching crowds were wearing protective clothes.

Step by step, different restrictive regulations appeared, showing how deep the impact of the catastrophe was. Dr. Iljuk remembers how leaves falling from the trees were quickly gathered and driven away, that next to the forests were planted signs reading: „No entry.“ and so on. The villagers including the inhabitants of Malá Zubovščina later started to receive some help from the government.

The Chernobyl catastrophe changed his view of the nuclear energy: now he describes himself as „nuclear realist“. It had some other effects on his life: he was fired from the ministry of Education (for political reasons). He was allowed to work at the university in Kiev.

Aftermath

The Chernobyl catastrophe and its consequences made the Volhynian Czechs realize that life will never be the same and that they are living in an area dangerous for their health as well as for the health of their children. They had to cooperate to make their situation better.

Dr. Iljuk was among the founding members of the organization „Jan Amos Komenský“, which supported not only cultural events and cultural heritage of Volhynian Czechs in general, but which also became the leading organization which, benefiting from the easing political situation during the „glasnost“, started articulating the claim to return back to Czechoslovakia.

A big change was the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which made the idea of return more realistic. New Czech democratic government officials (including the president Havel) were eager to help the Volhynian Czechs. Their children could go to Czechoslovakia for a vacation in the nature, their school in Mala Zubovščina was provided with the teacher from the Czechoslovakia and so on.

Finally, after complicated bilateral Czechoslovak-Soviet negotiations, the organization succeeded and 2000 Volhynian Czechs could move in 1991/2 to their new homes, back to Czechoslovakia.