Mitja Gustinčič, Slovenia

Mr. Gustinčič is a civil technician and a journalist. He believes that people today are less prepared to cope with a nuclear accident than they were in 1986. All the shelters built in Yugoslavia have been turned into storage rooms when Slovenia became independent and storage rooms usually don't have gas masks! This and other thoughts he shared in an interview with Irena Ipavec who works for him.

1. Familiar background of the time witness

Mitja Gustinčič is a journalist, specialised in motorcycles and motor racing. He was born in 1957 in Koper, a town on the Slovenian Coast, but for the majority of his life he has lived in

Ljubljana (the capital of Slovenia). His profession is a civil technician. He was born in the editorial family and has one brother.

When the accident in Chernobyl happened Gustinčič was 29 years old and he had a job in a small building company as a computational technician for the production charging. Already at that time his hobby was journalism connected with testing motorcycles and sports reports. He was also racing with motorbikes so he was travelling quite a lot.

Today, Gustinčič has a 31-year-old son, a 2-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old granddaughter. He is the owner of the successful motorcycle magazine called "MotoSI". He is knowledgeable about many different topics and he claims that he is not concerned about the nuclear energy at all, because he is ready to accept the risk in the name of progress and he trusts that we have learnt from our mistakes. Nevertheless, in the map he marked the location of Chernobyl approximately 700 kilometres closer to Ljubljana than it actually is (its actual location is about 1700 kilometres from Ljubljana).

2. Knowledge about and attitude towards nuclear energy before the catastrophe

Back in the year 1986, he, his friends and family didn't know anything about Chernobyl, but they had heard – even though he cannot recall its name – about an American nuclear power plant which had melted into itself shortly after it started to operate. But in his opinion this was probably, like nowadays, more "affair approach" than realistic informing.

Prior to Chernobyl, he and the people within his circle had much more knowledge about the affairs connected to the atomic bomb. They were well informed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the "experimental" cities where the atomic catastrophe had taken place. They knew about its principle and effects and they were coping with the fear of some crazy people setting off the atomic bomb much more than with the fear of a nuclear accident caused by "no one" happening in a civil sphere. Obviously, they didn't know much about terrorism yet. They also knew that radioactive elements were the subject of medicine and of the small reactor near Ljubljana. But he doesn't remember precisely when Yugoslavia started to talk about NPP Krško and building it (on the territory of today's Slovenia).

His opinion was that nuclear energy was not something "from yesterday" although compared to other human inventions it was still relatively undeveloped. As far as he knew it worked for military purposes, for example with nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers, and he could not think of any case of explosion. The main problem in those times was the hypocrisy of politics which did not put out all information on malfunctions. Nuclear energy among Slovenes actually did not represent a bogeyman, only a consciousness that a major human accident could have happened if two idiots had started a war against each other. Americans and Russians were competing all the time and one could think that if they became a bit clumsy, there was a big potential for things to go terribly wrong.

Being a building constructor, Gustinčič knew the emergency plans in case of a nuclear accident. This was the era when every newly built apartment block in Yugoslavia had a legal obligation of a fallout shelter in a basement in case of a war. They were equipped with sand and chemical filters for air filtration, air pumps, beds, tanks of water, toilets, first aid kits and Geiger counters (detector that measures ionizing radiation). But also the owners of private

houses were obliged to build a small fallout shelter or to pay a tax or a fund which was intended for the construction of public shelters so if something had happened, at least one part of people would have been safe. Although Gustinčič was familiar with construction specifications, he has actually never known the criteria of how many people might have been left to die as a collateral damage of the accident and how many of them the shelter could have been ensured for.

For Gustinčič, the question of the consequences of nuclear calamities always seemed very deep and complex. He thought that the most important element of reducing fear was human ability to think logically and to live in a country that one could trust. If the country had functioned as a system, if it had had an efficient legislation and an independent monitoring or supervision company, if there hadn't been manipulating of private interests and economy, NPPs and other nuclear energy producers should have functioned properly. Therefore nuclear energy never concerned him at all; he can even say that he was more afraid of the water energy, when enormous dams (for instance the Hoover Dam Lake in California) with millions of cubic metres of water potentially threatened the people in settlements below. Slovenes faced a similar problem in Log pod Mangartom, a village where a landslide was triggered and it erased houses and people inside. This was entirely an act of God and no one could predict and prevent it.

In case any kind of disaster had happened in Slovenia, Gustinčič himself would not have paid any attention to the question of economic and political damage. He was already used to constant changing between "bad times" and "good times". He would estimate that in such case the major problem was health, environmental and demographic aspect since he knew that the radiation was far from an innocent phenomenon where one could just wash hands in order to make it disappear.

3. The Chernobyl catastrophe and its direct consequences

Gustinčič remembers that on 26th April he was staying with his parents in Izola (town near Koper). They just had a family picnic outside. The weather was nice and they were feasting on grilled food and fresh salad from their garden.

He found out about the accident in "a certain remote Chernobyl" just after Labour Day, which they still spent peacefully. Later, in the next few days, they got better informed. He explains that in 1986 people in the Primorska region were well stocked with newspapers, radio and television programmes. They could also watch or listen to many Italian programmes. At the beginning no one in his company actually worried or panicked about it, because for their circumstances Chernobyl was horribly distant. They were aware that in Ukraine people were in trouble, but they did not expect any in Slovenia.

Panic started only when the media grabbed the information and in its "best manner" produced an affair when it published huge numbers regarding the amount of radiation not considering that people were not informed on ionizing radiation units and on actual influence on the human body. Two weeks after the accident the fear was on the climax and people were calling the given emergency numbers and asking what to do with the salad and onion from the garden. Gustinčič searched for an explanation at his neighbour who was an atomic physicist employed in working protection and was in charge of RTG isotopes control,

so he was familiar with radiation issues. He calmed him down by saying that this accident is negligible for people's health in Slovenia and that because of another nasty incident that had happened around 1960, we received a lot more dangerous amount of strontium, but we didn't have advanced measuring equipment to measure it.

This answer comforted him and therefore he didn't take any precaution in the days/weeks after the Chernobyl accident. His opinion is that there was really nothing you could do. People had to go to their jobs, take their children to the kindergarden, eat some vegetable – if they didn't eat their own salad, they also couldn't really know where the bought one was grown. He maybe only washed fruit and vegetables three times instead of twice.

He also can't recall if the media published the official statement of the Slovenian government on the announcement of extraordinary circumstances or demanding the mobilization. At least this was not the case in any of the major daily newspapers (for example Delo) which were trusted the most by people. There were no warnings put up on posters or by speakers on the street, as they were in some of the most dangerous circumstances in the past. Gustinčič is certain that in Slovenia politicians couldn't deceive the public like they could in some other, mostly socialistic countries. While Yugoslavia had definitely been covering up its own dirt (the lack of money and printing it without any basis) it could have never prevented people from being up to date with developments in Europe. Inhabitants of the Primorska region also had a possibility to compare information with those in the Italian media. The question was if the Soviet Union told us everything essential. In 2010 he is still not acquainted with how seriously the Soviets handled atomic energy before 1986 and whether the possibilities of mistakes were objective or terribly large.

Despite decent informing, in his opinion people in Slovenia, and he personally, didn't know enough about the severity of the Soviet people's situation. They were informed that one of the reactors was demolished and that those in charge were trying to save Europe from even more extensive pollution. They heard that they had sent an army and other people to clean up and protect that area, but of course they didn't get any information on how poorly they were protected. Only many years later it became known that people were dying because they had to work in horrible conditions for unreasonable amounts of time.

4. In which context were Chernobyl and the nuclear energy issue important in the life of the time witness?

Gustinčič thinks that the accident hasn't influenced him and his family essentially, neither physically nor psychologically.

The accident hasn't changed his personal opinion on nuclear energy. The fact that this happened to Russians calmed him, as in his words people were always saying that the Russian products are sloppy (their cars were falling apart and no one wanted to drive their motorcycles). They were convinced that their design and realization is a bit behind in comparison to that of Westerners or Japanese. That was one of the reasons that Slovenes believed something similar couldn't happen to them. They would have been much more concerned if this had happened in England, France or Germany, which were the example of well organised production.

5. The importance of Chernobyl today

He believes that Chernobyl has brought both, negative and positive consequences and changes in the nuclear production, as for each plane that crashes and every procedure or product that turns out to be a weak point presents misery for people and the country where it happens, but in the long term we can all learn from it. For example, Marie Curie and her husband, who discovered the radiation, got seriously ill because of their excellent working progress which unfortunately often demands victims. In the case of Chernobyl the range of negative consequences was even larger and more tragic, but since he had never felt any of them Gustinčič thinks he can see them more objectively.

In general, Slovenes today don't come across the issues connected with Chernobyl, except when the media brings out an anniversary or searches for a sensation which could be published as cheap news. He finds a scientific or popular science magazine such as National Geographic far more interesting since they published several intriguing stories showing cemeteries of "forgotten" trucks, buses and sanitary material. These make you think about the dimensions of the accident and how terrible the consequences of a similar catastrophe in Slovenia or anywhere else – in such a case the national borders make no difference – would actually be. However, today under the influence of information produced by the media he still cannot be completely sure of how many and which information was and is correct. If the informing is driven only by the profit motive, the validity of information can be very questionable. In addition, scientific internal publications are not always accessible or understandable to the public.

All in all, the most important question in his opinion is whether we are acquainted with the valid emergency plans of individual governments today. What would you do if reactor in Krško exploded and you had 30 minutes before the radiation reached Ljubljana or other towns? He believes that people are not informed on how to react if the alarm went off and they are probably less prepared than in 1986. All the shelters built in Yugoslavia have been transformed into storage rooms at the time Slovenia became independent; homes usually don't have gas masks …

In spite of a reasonable doubt, Gustinčič would increase the number of nuclear power plants in Slovenia, if he was in charge of the future of the energy production. He believes it is the best possibility: fuel oil is too expensive and its quantity is getting lower and lower, coal is a major pollutant and we release large amounts of CO_2 into the atmosphere. We can still cough in the incineration plants of old tyres, such as the very controversial Lafarge Cement in Slovenia; we can dam all our rivers and sink all the country or we can choose nuclear energy and make sure it works perfectly.

It would be utopia to cover the entire land with the solar cells – maybe they will become more efficient in a few years. His opinion is based on his experiences in automobile and motorcycle industry: product managers have been announcing electric vehicles for 30 years now, but we haven't seen serious functional product yet. On the other hand, Ljubljana had electric public transportation back in 1960s, but authorities removed the wires and tram lines with the excuse that they were old-fashioned and ugly. One of the most promising sources in his opinion is wind. Even though the wind farms are wide; it appears to him that

they function well, so the Slovene environmentalists' opinion on how birds could get tangled into them doesn't make any sense.

He thinks that except for some "school facts" it is not easy to approach new generations with the entire insight into Chernobyl. The time distance is so long that the incident became emotionally unintelligible. Even the Second World War with its concentration camps, gas chambers and crematoria has similar impact on people. For those who experienced it, the memory brings tears to their eyes; for those who were listening about it 15 or 20 years later, it still means something; but for the 20-year-olds today, it is just a data which they should think over rationally. Maybe he would emphasise that Chernobyl was an accident that hasn't repeated in such extensions since the fluctuation of the knowledge has enlarged in 25 years.