

Arnis Lapiņš, Latvia



Laura Lapina interviewed her father, Arnis, who was a doctoral candidate in history in 1986. At a time when Soviet newspapers hesitated to publish any information at all about the accident, Arnis had access to the „special funds” section in the university library which consisted of newspapers from abroad.

My father Arnis Lapiņš was born in 1960 in Cēsis- a small town in northern Latvia. He is the younger of two sons and both of his parents were teachers (mathematics and sports). They lived in a small village and his memories from childhood are pleasant. He was a very motivated student in school and liked to read a lot. Apart from that he was also very interested in sports and trained together with his father in volleyball.

As they lived in the countryside they also had to take care of the land and to do the chores. Altogether he describes his family as a rather typical for that time period - they always talked and dreamed about buying a car, never discussed politics, didn't practice religion and generally didn't bother thinking about things they couldn't influence.

After high school Arnis Lapiņš went to the capital to start history studies in university. Soon he met his wife Irina there and in 1983 they got married. The same year their first child was born - a son named Artis which was followed by daughter Laura in 1990. Nowadays Arnis works in PR, but at the time of the Chernobyl accident he was a candidate for a doctor's degree in history.

When asked about his political views at the time period he shrugs and claims that people at the time were divided in two groups - people whose job was to write propaganda and the other people who never read it. The average Soviet citizen formed his/her view based on what he/her heard from others instead of what they read in newspapers. Men in his age group weren't enthusiastic about the USSR because of the obligatory Soviet army and the prospect of being sent to the war in Afghanistan. However all of these were „kitchen discussions” not the matters you would talk about publicly.

Everyone had to go through civil defence studies as well as “the war department” in university; therefore people had to learn what to do in case of a nuclear accident. But the nuclear accident in people's minds only meant nuclear bombs, not accidents in power plants: “It didn't seem something worth bothering about. If someone threw a nuclear bomb, wouldn't it be the end anyways?” Nuclear bombing still seemed like a very possible scenario but in his opinion the USSR would have been the one to initiate it by starting some new war.

On the day the accident in Chernobyl happened he had just passed an exam and used a chance to have a swim (in April!?) in the Baltic sea with his friends. Officially, he first heard about the accident when it was officially announced on TV from *Moscow*. However as a history student in university he had access to the „special funds” in the library which were only available with special permission „for research purposes”. Special funds consisted of newspapers from abroad and of course doing „research” meant also reading everything else. He remembers reading *Die Zeit* and following the course of the contaminated cloud and reading versions about the reasons of the accident. However, even reading Western media didn't seem to make him very worried - no one predicted the consequences, not even those outside of USSR.

At the same time Soviet newspapers at first hesitated to put any information at all, afterwards just mentioned some „problems” in the NPP which would be solved soon. The popular comparison was that “Chernobyl accident is the same thing for USSR as the Challenger space ship catastrophe was for the USA”.

However as the liquidation of consequences in Chernobyl NPP began, soon his view on the accident changed. He remembers that there were men who wouldn't even sleep in their homes after finding out that they might be called in for service in Chernobyl. The “silent telephone” between people was working fast and soon everyone seemed to have a story about some acquaintance that had gone to Chernobyl, “put a few bricks” there and then came home disabled. Was he worried about being called in? He says that in his favour was the fact that he was a doctoral student and they usually weren't called in for the service. However, service in Chernobyl could have been a disciplinary punishment if there had been a reason for that. He was aware of the possibility.

Does he think that the accident would have been handled differently if the USSR government had the knowledge we have nowadays? It depends, he thinks. Of course

they probably would have thought more about safety etc. But the way things were usually handled in USSR he wouldn't bet on it. He uses an analogy - theoretically there were excavators in the army. But they weren't used. If there was a ditch to dig it was always easier to send some people to do the work instead of technology. All in all there would always be enough people to use as tools.

Did the accident change his opinion about nuclear power in general? Well, as he puts it, before the accident he simply didn't have an opinion in such matter. He doesn't feel competent enough to have a yes/no answer. He applauds the countries which can support themselves without any energy from NPPs (Latvia doesn't have one but it buys a lot of energy from other countries who generate it by NPPs); however he believes that one can't judge those who do. Criticism doesn't change anything, new inventions and initiatives could.