

TIIU RÄTSEP, Estonia

Mrs. Rätsep is a physics teacher. Because of her profession she was aware of most of the dangers concerning nuclear energy. In 1986 she was 30 years old, Estonia was still part of the Soviet Union, and she realized that the Soviet government didn't really care about people and that an individual's life held no value. She was interviewed by her pupil Mare Heinluht.

The interview was conducted on the 3rd of December 2010 with Mrs. Tiiu Rätsep, a physics teacher in Audru Secondary School, Estonia. The interview took place in her physics class after lessons. The interview situation was relaxed and open. The answers, however, were rather laconic yes/no answers.

The familiar background of the time-witness

Mrs. Tiiu Rätsep was born on the 14th of March, 1956 in Pärnu, Estonia. At the age of four she moved with her family to Ida-Virumaa, an industrial area in Estonia, where her father worked as a chief agronomist in the local state farm and her mother as a cashier in a shop. She has a brother, with whom she has always had a great relationship. The social status of her family was middle-class workers. Religion had no part in their lives. Mrs. Rätsep has a bachelor's degree in physics and has worked as a physics teacher since graduating. She's not legally married but lives with the father of her two adult children. She said to have been firmly opposed to the Cold War. She wasn't into politics back in her youth and didn't spend time analyzing the political status and effects of the Cold War. She did say that she didn't realize any direct effects or consequences to her life during the Cold War.

The knowledge about and the attitude to nuclear energy before the Chernobyl-catastrophe

She didn't think about the risks of living close to a country with nuclear power plants at the time and such scenarios didn't seem to be very likely. She was aware of most of the dangers concerning nuclear energy because of her profession, like the harmfulness of radiation and the possibility of inheritable injuries. She was against the use of nuclear energy but wasn't active in any movements. There wasn't really a debate about the nuclear situation in Estonia, since we didn't have any nuclear power plants. She was aware that any safety protocols and regulations must be strictly followed and didn't think that such an accident would happen. As far as the people knew, there was no such threat. Any knowledge about dealing with a nuclear pollution was very theoretical. While living in the Soviet Union, she realized that the government didn't really care about people and an individual's life held no value.

The Chernobyl-catastrophe and its direct consequences, how the time-witness them has experienced

She heard about the accident via the media and was at home at the time. People only knew as much as they were told which was very little. The gravity of the situation was greatly

reduced and all that was mentioned was “a little explosion in a power plant”, nothing about a nuclear catastrophe. It didn’t seem to be a very big deal, since the government didn’t want people to know about the extent of their mistake. She did feel like she would have liked to know more about what had happened but there was no one to ask and certainly not anyone who’d answer. There weren’t any direct consequences to her life, since she lived far enough but she was still frightened about what had happened.

At the time, not knowing the full gravity of what had happened, her view of the Soviet Union didn’t change much, but looking back now, she’s disturbed by the USSR’s careless attitude towards the people living there, the liquidators and their health. The situation seemed to be under control in Estonia and she wasn’t aware about what was going on elsewhere. The media’s reaction was all the same, vague comments about “an incident”, the people did talk but no one knew anything.

She got to know the whole truth 10-12 years after and now knows exactly what and how it happened, being a physics teacher. Responsible are the people who decided to push the reactor to the maximum and let the reaction get out of control, it was a harsh violation of the safety protocol. The liquidators had absolutely no idea what they were getting themselves into. They received commands from the Soviet Army to participate in a re-drill and had no chance to decline. The doctors however must have known more about the implications of such an accident. Mrs. Rätsep is familiar with a few liquidators from Chernobyl and all of them have irreversible health damage because of the volatile lack of protective gear. The public was given no instructions on how to act in case of pollution and there was no public debate afterwards.

In which context were Chernobyl and the nuclear energy issue important in the further live of the time-witness?

Mrs. Rätsep didn’t experience any long-term change in her life because of the accident but she definitely started thinking about the dangers and possible implications of the use of nuclear energy. She believes that the accident didn’t effect her health in any way and wasn’t afraid of outdoor activities. Right now, she isn’t concerned about a possibility of a similar incident here, since we don’t have any nuclear power plants in Estonia. Still, there’s always a chance but hopefully, people are smarter know and have learned from the past, since what happened was the fault of a mistake made by people.

The importance of Chernobyl today

Today, she feels aware of what can happen, there’s always a threat. She’s certain that it has changed the status quo in the nuclear debate and is a tragic example of what can happen. She also feels that it has slipped the minds of people it didn’t directly affect but the liquidators certainly haven’t forgotten since many of them are depressed, sick and disappointed in life because of the damage to their health and with every right because what was done to them was a screaming injustice.

Her stance on nuclear energy is opposed and she’s against building a nuclear power plant in Estonia, which has been a subject of debate in the last few years. She feels that the next

generations definitely shouldn't forget what happened in order to avoid the same mistake and also keep it in mind as a reminder that nuclear power should be handled with utmost care. In case such an accident should ever occur again, she thinks that the liquidators should be volunteers but the doctors should be ordered to go. She is still against The Cold War, and any war, and frustrated of the waste of resources and human lives it was.