

Milena Čakić, Slovenia



Milena Čakić was 22 when the Chernobyl catastrophe happened and worked in a laboratory. She still has a vivid recollection of the events back then and she believes that although we should have learned from Chernobyl we actually have not. Her daughter Tamara conducted the interview.

For an ordinary time-witness of the Chernobyl accident in Slovenia, I decided to interview my mother. We conducted the interview in the afternoon in the relaxed atmosphere of our living room.

My mother, Milena Čakić was born on 28th of January 1966 in Maribor, Slovenia, which was at that time a socialist republic, a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After she finished secondary school for chemistry she started to work in a laboratory. In the year 1986 she was already married and lived in an apartment in Maribor with her husband. She hadn't had any children back then, so her family was actually her husband and her parents. Today she is a mother of two daughters and lives in a house together with them and her partner. She runs a firm which produces rubber products.

When Milena hears the word Chernobyl she gets an image of greyness, radiation and diseased, exhausted people in that area. For her, the concept of 'nuclear threat' is mostly connected with warfare, nuclear weapons and terrorism. At the time before the Chernobyl accident Milena didn't know much about nuclear energy production,

since people in a socialist regime were not much acquainted with it. Back then she accepted nuclear power plants and nuclear energy production as a necessary evil.

However, people were not asked about their opinion, because that was the time of socialism in Slovenia. Of course, people had their own opinions and views, but they did not have any power or influence. As she remembers they also did not talk about nuclear energy a lot, such discussions started mostly after the Chernobyl accident.

Milena said that if she compares her knowledge about radiation today with the knowledge she had in 1986, she didn't know the radiation at all back then. However, she believes that even today she does not know enough. The reason for the "lack of knowledge" is mostly the difference of expert opinion. For example, some experts nowadays speak in favour of standpoints which were not long ago still considered dreadful. Because of different arguments of experts one can not be certain in knowledge about radiation and its consequences, explained Milena.

In 1986, Slovenia already had a nuclear power plant in Krško. Today, the distance between Milena's hometown and Krško is nearly the same (approximately 100 kilometres) as it was between the town she lived in in 1986 and Krško. She does not remember any nuclear accident before the one in Chernobyl and she also did not know anything about the Chernobyl power plant before the accident. Despite the fact that her country had a nuclear power plant she remembers that back then she did not know anything about precautionary measures in the case of a nuclear accident.

Milena first heard about the accident in Chernobyl during the Labour Day holidays via the radio and the television. For quite some time the media were intensively reporting about the accident and the Chernobyl catastrophe was one of the top news for a certain period of time.

After being informed about the radiation, some people stayed mostly inside, at home, because there was a certain fear of being outside, in nature. She remembers that she and her family were observing possible changes that could be visible and present because of the accident. Since it was spring time there was a lot of yellow pollen in the air and on the surfaces of tables, chairs, cars and all the other things which stayed outside. After hearing the news about the Chernobyl accident she was wondering together with her family and friends what this yellow powder is – is it just pollen as usual or is it some unnatural powder from Chernobyl?

She remembers that the media reported about tragic accident at the Chernobyl power plant, that there are presumably many victims and that there are likely to be catastrophic consequences of vast extension.

As Milena recalls she was not that scared, because she was still young and a certain idea was present that the accident happened far away. She did not change her daily routine or stayed mostly at home. There were some warnings about washing the vegetables, which were at that time very important and up-to-date since it was the time of picnics. As she recalls she was more careful when washing her hands and she

had a certain fear of eating fruit or vegetables from the garden because of soil contamination. For that reason she did not eat any vegetables or fruit after the accident. However, the population was not seized with a general panic – more frightened were only young mothers and pregnant women – she said that at that time she did not have any reason for such worries.

Milena believes that Chernobyl obviously had some influence on her, although not directly. The reason for such belief is the fact that despite 24 years which passed since the accident, she still has a vivid recollection of the events back then. She remembers that she was affected by the reports about sick children, adults, about cancer. She vividly remembers that there was information which contained the assertion that women in the Soviet Union are more afflicted by the harmful consequences of the accident than men, because women worked on contaminated and radioactive fields and because men drank a lot of Vodka. However, she says that all the information about sick and suffering people is something that impresses on one's memory. What she also finds interesting is that when she hears about the Soviet Union and Chernobyl she sees misery, but when she hears about Krško that impression does not appear.

Albeit the Chernobyl accident did not affect her directly, it did additionally strengthen the belief she always had – she is trying to live in a way that does not harm the environment and nature. As she says, we should live in harmony with nature, because of our spirit and its connection to nature. According to Milena the technological development that humanity faced in recent 50 years can be compared with the development that back in history lasted one or two centuries – thus through slower development humankind in the past had time to adopt to those changes, but nowadays we are not able to adopt anymore. If we slowed down a bit, she believes, we would be happier and healthier. And in that sense the Chernobyl accident is a kind of reminder.

For Milena the victims of the Chernobyl accident are all the people that lived in the area that was highly affected by the accident. They are the victims, because governments are never going to take enough care of them, they were not properly protected by the government. All the governments' reactions were more or less just a part of public appearance and not the real actions. These people had to survive on their own, how exactly were they going to survive and what was the quality of their lives were not the governments' concerns. About the situation in the Soviet Union after the accident she knew only what the media reported – that some people were evacuated and resettled and that they are being taken care of. However, despite such information she had doubts because she knew that ordinary people are insignificant in socialist regimes.

Her opinion about the significance of the Chernobyl accident today is that it should be perceived as a lesson of how authorities can wrongly introduce the consequences of an accident and at the same time how a certain topic (e.g. use of nuclear energy) can be tabooed.

The Chernobyl catastrophe is obviously also a tragedy that had to happen so that all the necessary precaution measures were finally taken in other nuclear power plants and that all the other operating NPPs were later equipped with appropriate safety procedures and technologies.

Milena strongly believes that generations which have not yet lived at the time of the Chernobyl accident should be informed about it. At the same time they should also know, that although a lot of people know about the accident, people in Belarus and the Ukraine who live on contaminated areas are still alone and they have to fight against their pain and suffering on their own. People should therefore fight against all that can harm humanity now or in the future. We should ask ourselves what we are going to leave to our future generations.

When I asked Milena if she still talks about the Chernobyl accident with the people she knows she smiled and said that the amount of discussions about Chernobyl in recent months is comparable to the one back in 1986. However, nowadays she knows more about the accident than she did back then. The knowledge she has now is also deeper and more extensive.

About the situation in the contaminated areas she knows that the soil there is radiated and therefore inappropriate for cultivation and life. She also knows that people had been evacuated from those areas and that these are forbidden regions.

Milena thinks that the biggest change in her country after the Chernobyl accident was a higher awareness of people, their interest for the situation at the nuclear power plant in Krško and an interest in the safety measures in the case of nuclear accident.

Nowadays she rarely reads about the Chernobyl accident, because there are not many articles about it in Slovenia, there is only a mention of it at the anniversaries of the accident.

She believes that although we should have learned from Chernobyl we actually have not. The only exception are the experts and scientists who probably made some useful observations from the Chernobyl accident, but the fact is that politics and money make the world turn and sadly we will always make money- and profit-based decisions, regardless of the possible consequences.

Milena is strongly convinced that countries should invest more in the development of energy production from renewable sources. If she was in the position of a decision maker about the state's usage of nuclear energy she would strongly tend towards the development of other energy sources and try to abolish the existing nuclear power plant, because if there is at least one country in the world which survives and satisfies its needs for energy without use of nuclear energy, then we can certainly have more such countries.

*Before the interview I gave Milena a blank map of Europe and I asked her to mark two points on it – the point of the place where she lives and the point of Chernobyl's*

*location. She marked the location of Chernobyl closer to her location than it really is. She lessened the distance between her town and Chernobyl by approximately one fourth. The deviation between the real and perceived distance indicates Milena's certain level of fear, which was caused by the Chernobyl accident.*