

Nikolay Vakulchik, Belarus

Before the Chernobyl accident Nikolay didn't give much thought to the possible danger of atomic engineering. But ever since the accident has brought irreversible changes to his health, he believes that "green" energy is a good alternative to nuclear energy. He spoke about his experiences and his failing health with Elena Sermaksheva.

Part 1. Familiar background

Nikolay Vakulchik was born on May 13, 1941 in the village Olshany of Pruzhany district, in the region of Brest. His father Vasily was drafted into the Red Army in 1944 and died in 1945 in East Germany. Nikolay's mother, Ksenia, was Catholic by faith, and was born in the same village as his father. They married in 1932 and had 6 sons.

From the moment of the formation of collective farms (in 1949), Nikolay worked on the fields of a collective farm. In 1959 he graduated from 10th class of secondary school in the town Orsha, Vitebsk region. In 1967 he graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University. In 1970 he married his second wife, Tamara, with whom he has 2 children (he has one child from his first marriage) and in 1973 he finished his postgraduate studies at the Institute of Philosophy and Law, Academy of Sciences of the BSSR. In 1984, Nicholas was awarded the title of senior lecturer in the department of philosophy.

During the Soviet period Nikolay was a member of the CPSU. Politically fluctuated together with Party. Internally Nikolay concerned to the Soviet power indifferently and when he was asked: «Are you against the Soviet power? », he answered: «No. I'm for the Soviet power» because the place on Kolyma was waiting for all opponents of the Soviet power. However in relation to collective farms Nikolay always stated the non-acceptance openly and consistently. Nikolay's mother often went to the Pruzhansky regional executive committee and petitioned for material aid. Young Nikolay saw, how officials humiliated her, offended and beat her, threw her out of offices, and he cried and rushed behind her. Since then Nikolay has fiercely begun to hate the Soviet power in the name of its cruel representatives. Then he has realized that the Soviet power and local officials are not same, these are two big differences.

Today, Nikolay and his wife live in the village of Linovo in the Pruzhansky region. He is a pensioner since 2001. The pension is 250 dollars. It is 2/3 of the pension due to him.

Part 2. Knowledge and attitudes to nuclear power before the Chernobyl disaster.

Before the Chernobyl accident Nikolay was interested in the information about radiation influence on living organisms. This interest developed in Nikolay during his time at the vocational school. Those were years of Khrushchev's thaw and because of that the teacher, the former military expert colourfully told about tests of the nuclear weapon in Northern Ural Mountains, New Land, Semipalatinsk range, about explosion of a nuclear bomb on army maneuvers in Southern Ural Mountains, about explosion in storehouse of a nuclear waste near to the settlement Kushtym, known nowadays as «Kushtym'sky trail». Also the big influence on Nikolay was made by messages of the Soviet mass-media about dead, about consequences of radiating influence as a result of nuclear bombardments of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Teaching and scientific activity induced Nikolay to gather and judge a considerable quantity of various information. Nikolay was especially interested in the information about problems of interaction of the person and the environment. Since 1974, Nikolay began to involve students of the scientific circle (at that time he worked on the chair of Marxist-Leninist philosophy of the Perm state university) to work on questions of interaction and interrelation of ecological and moral consciousness.

They had to discuss questions about the increase of number of atomic power stations in the world and influence of this process on the environment, influence of the big and small doses of radiation on a human body, questions of an adaptability of the person to worsening inhabitancy, interaction of people through their influence on environment and other questions having in the maintenance philosophical aspect. Nikolay said that they operated with data (extracted basically from foreign sources) about quantity of the atomic power station in the world at that time, about failures on them and on nuclear submarines. He however noted that their knowledge was rather poor in comparison with that knowledge which was generated as a result of Chernobyl accident.

Before Chernobyl accident Nikolay especially didn't think of what threat is born to mankind by atomic engineering. He says that they wanted to believe words of academic Aleksandrov told by him on television in 1981 that the Soviet nuclear reactors are so reliable that they can be put on Red Square in Moscow. Neither schools, nor Universities, nor lectures provided information of how to protect yourselves in case of radiation increase.

The Soviet censors sharp-sightedly watched that citizens weren't reached by the information which can cause them to mistrust everything that official propagation inspired to them. As the secretary of a commission of experts, Nikolay carried in Central administrative board on affairs of the literature and publishing houses certificates of examination and saw, how censors carefully worked. Nikolay says that the Soviet mass-media (before reorganization) reflected not all the events occurring in the world. All was ignored that could possible in some measure harm the Soviet power, a socialist social order.

Only now we learn about many events, which people learned that hour in the democratic countries. Before Chernobyl accident in newspapers, magazines, on the TV, radio didn't give any information on radiation, radioactive substances, elements and radiating failures in the territory of the USSR. It informed only about those failures on the atomic power station which occurred in England, the USA, Germany and other capitalist countries.

Nikolay regularly listened to foreign radio since 1957. Therefore he knew about those failures, strikes, revolts which occurred in Soviet Union. Other people who, like Nikolay, listened to "the Voice of America», «BBC», «the Cologne wave», "Freedom" etc., knew also.

Nikolay's knowledge that atomic power station operation can be dangerous to the person, were generated on the basis of the information received from irradiated participants of military maneuvers of 1954 in Southern Ural Mountains under the direction of G.Zhukov, workers of factory "Beacon", the sailors serving on nuclear submarines, and also those people who participated in the liquidation of failures on the atomic power station. The information received by foreign radio about failures on the atomic power station and about evacuation of the population from a dangerous zone, has enriched and has deepened Nikolay's knowledge of risks for the person and all lives.

In the lessons about civil defence it was told about how to behave in case of nuclear bombardment, but it was told nothing about how to behave in case of explosion of the Soviet atomic power station. Especially it was not mentioned anything about evacuation plans. Possibly, they didn't exist, - Nikolay says, - as the Soviet atomic power stations were considered the most safe in the world.

Part 3. Knowledge about the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences.

On April, 26th, 1986 Nikolay woke up, as always, at 5.45 in the morning and ran to the river Muhovets in beach area to do body exercises. The sun was shining and its reflection in water was especially fine. One neighbour in the house and the employee of his chair came to do body exercises and swim. He said that he had heard that the atomic power station in Ukraine has blown up. Nikolay hasn't given special value to these words. Having come back home, Nikolay turned on the receiver and got on radio of Sweden. The announcer said that in some places of Sweden radiation level has increased 8 times and that, possibly, on one of the Soviet atomic power stations there was a big emission of radiation.

As any other Soviet person, Nikolay didn't suppose that on the Soviet atomic power station there can be something very terrible and furthermore that there can be an accident. Nikolay went out in a court yard of his house and met the neighbour in a ladder platform who asked him about whether Nikolay knows that the Chernobyl NPP has blown up. Nikolay said that Swedes say that the radiation has increased in 8 times at their area. The neighbour told that says not to start up children on street.

At institute (where on that day Nikolay had two lectures) he too heard that in Chernobyl the nuclear station had blown up, that there were radioactive ashes and that a train Gomel-Brest which came that morning from Gomel was carefully washed, clearing of a radioactive dust.

Nikolay didn't have a sensation of fear, confusion, there was no desire to take a family and to leave somewhere far away. There was no panic, there was no movement of people. All went a usual turn as yesterday, the day before yesterday etc. the Calmness defined by cares of an everyday life – this is how it is possible to define Nikolay's emotional condition when he has learned about Chernobyl NPP explosion.

Until the middle of day on April, 26th, 1986 already many people said that they heard that in Chernobyl the atomic power station had blown up. In the second half of this day Nikolay already knew from worker of Committee of the State Security about that what happened: Nikolay as the assistant to the secretary of the party organization on ideologies and the dean of faculty was invited to conversation by this worker. He said that they must not to admit a panic among students and employees of faculty. Also said about explosion on the atomic power station in Chernobyl. In particular, he told that the radioactive cloud has risen above twenty kilometers, moved at first in the western direction, but when it approached the city of Baranovichi, the wind turned northwest and moved this cloud towards Sweden.

On April, 29th in the evening Nikolay knew that it is necessary on April, 30th to spend work among students and employees of faculty that they must be on demonstration and meeting concerning the 1st of May.

On 1st of May Nikolay took the daughters Victoria and Olga and went to a meeting. The day was sunny and warm. And after all a threat developed. On May, 1st in Brest was east wind. On May, 10th the command on evacuation of students at 19 o'clock arrived. Nikolay as the ideologist went to collect students in a gathering point. However, at 22.00 the command was abolished. Later they were explained that this command has been given to avoid panic.

The first communiqué about Chernobyl NPP explosion was made by academic Velihov 3 or 4 days after this accident. Then, in the beginning of May, M.S.Gorbachev acted. He, in particular, said that two persons completely disappeared. His television performance was long discussed by people who already knew much about this failure. They stated mistrust to the governmental message and said that local party and government officials in first two days have taken out the families from the territories exposed to radiation.

Personally Nikolay didn't believe the message of the Soviet government because already knew from transmissions of foreign radio stations that there was an effect of a weapon barrel that radioactive substances reached stratospheres that gross weight of the thrown out substance almost 200 tons. All this data were published in the Soviet press, in particular, in the newspaper «Arguments and the facts» later.

After the communiqué of the government Nikolay began to listen to foreign radio more attentively and longer, to talk about this theme to civil and military experts, with the people who have arrived from suffered areas.

According to Nikolay, the government in this case was held hostage by a deep-rooted policy of classifying, concealments from the people of all data which could undermine the trust of people to the country top management and by that to loosen a social order. The government should operate by an example of the USA and other countries in which there were failures on the atomic power station, quickly to evacuate the population from the affected areas, give them full, exhaustive information on threats to their life and to their health.

The reaction of a society to messages about this accident was quiet. The Jewish families began to drink milk with iodine (on a glass of milk two drops of iodine). Other families even didn't do this. At work, in public transport, in informal talks people spoke about what happened easy. Who was sent to failure liquidation, went basically like he went for work, and some even with the big desire because some said that there was vodka given as preventive maintenance.

Neither Nikolay personally, nor members of his family received any help from the state. Only in 1991 it was possible through fund «Children of Chernobyl» to send younger daughter Olga to Germany on improvement. Nikolay is deeply grateful to the German family which accepted his daughter.

When Nicholas learned of the accident, the limited presence of their children on the street, began to suggest to them that they may become sick incurable disease. He was wearing cap and light clothes (after all, at nuclear power plants in other places with high radiation wear white clothes).

In the city Brest and the Brest area the authorities hadn't to worry especially about opposition to any negative changes in a society in connection with this incident. If milk, for example, in Poland at once stopped to be used in food and even in some places simply poured out in the

water drain, in Brest milk was still sold in shops and people bought it. Moreover, milk was given without iodine to children at schools. So Nikolay's daughter Olga (in February, 1987 at medical inspection at school) revealed the increase in a thyroid gland to the third degree. And now at it 4th degree of increase, very weak sight, a constant allergy.

Efforts of the government on fire extinguishing and the termination of eruption of radiation were crowned by success because by health and life of pilots of helicopters the 4th block of the Chernobyl NPP has been filled up from air by lead granules. People have settled out from 30 kilometer zones.

The authorities didn't recommend any safety measures except the prevention of inadmissibility of mushrooms and berries which aren't checked in laboratory on the maintenance of radio nuclides. Besides began to take away products from rather polluted and pure territories in polluted, and from the polluted took away in the pure or rather polluted areas. So radiation on all territory of the country extended. People began to speak: «And, eat, radiation everywhere!»

Nikolay had familiar immigrants from the suffered areas: Narovya, Petrikov. They died. They told about the illnesses received as a result of accident. There were no changes in the environment in the city of Brest on the day of disaster. It was unflawed sky, pure air and a shining sun.

The next days the small nausea, pains in a stomach, desires on vomiting began to be felt, tears flowed from eyes. In Nikolay's health there were irreversible changes: in the summer of 1987, Nikolay's eye sight worsened. At once after the disaster Nikolay felt a squelch in lungs, frequent frustration of a gastroenteric path, a pain in bones, joints which earlier never was. Certainly, Chernobyl accident has affected Nikolay's life. It is hard for him to look at his sick, almost blind daughter. And he suffers from a pain in lungs, heart, stomach, kidneys, femurs and joints.

In the first days of May, 1986 drivers, tractor operators and other experts were sent to Chernobyl. Many of them Nikolay knew personally. After returning from Chernobyl many of them died, and some drank, muffling a pain in bones and other body parts. Even now, about 25 years after, they have no pension and slowly die.

Already in the beginning of June, 1986 Nikolay had seen the liquidator who was doomed on the death. Nikolay followed reception of the international passport for a trip to GDR to visit a tomb of the father. He was given direction to the survey in regional hospital for inspection about his level of radiation. In regional hospital Nikolay saw a familiar guy who said that he returned from Chernobyl, having received there 10 X-ray of an irradiation and now will receive the permit in sanatorium. Having come into an office of the doctor, Nikolay gave his direction; Doctor put to Nikolay's thyroid gland the device in the form of a tube, hesitated and in this direction something was written. Having returned, Nikolay gave this direction and the international passport was given to him. Nikolay asked the people who know what it means. He was answered that German frontier guards don't pass on the territory of the people irradiated with radiation.

Concerning the people, who decided to stay in the polluted territories, Nikolay then and now has mixed feelings. On the one hand, he understands them as people for whom attachment to a native place is stronger than fear of death, and on the other hand, he considers that they make the big sin, without trying to prolong the existence in image and similarity of God.

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

The Chernobyl accident brought harm to his health and the health of his daughter. In front of his eyes there are images of those liquidators whom he well knew, the actions connected with this event in which participated, sufferings of the people whom parents remained in the polluted territories and have died there. Nikolay personally is afraid of radiation action as silent murderer.

After the Chernobyl accident, Nikolay's life has considerably worsened, because he began to read less because of the worsened eye sight, and it has in turn compelled him to reduce scientific activity and to concentrate basically on teaching work.

In his opinion all fault in what happened lies on the Soviet government. It is impossible to use the atomic power station not for the designated purpose. After the accident Nikolay's relation to atomic engineering radically changed. Earlier he was the supporter of peace atom, and now is the convinced opponent as he knows that when on the Earth there will be 1000 atomic power stations annually one of them will blow up. The weapon or peace atom in hands of bad people bears death to all life. After the Chernobyl accident Nikolay has even more deeply realized, as the Soviet government is indifferent to human life, to its value. Nikolay always remembers I.V.Stalin's words that «the person is a worm». The communism and humanity, humanism – are incompatible.

Part 5. The importance of Chernobyl today.

Today, Nikolay is already aware of the positive and negative aspects of the Chernobyl disaster. People can see already in the nuclear industry not only good, but a great evil. Personally, Nikolay's plant - is evil. The Chernobyl disaster can never be forgotten. It is necessary to speak about it everywhere and always, always. We should be more frequent and insistent talk about it, even more than the military atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

If there are explosions in atomic power stations local authorities must inform the population in a dangerous zone and if an accident concerns interests of the nation the President or the country government should inform people.

For Nikolay personally there was one unsolved basic question: «Why was there a Chernobyl accident?» It is possible to guess only a partly subjective and objective in this accident. Nikolay is convinced that there are many energy sources which do unnecessary atomic engineering. "Green" energy is a worthy alternative of atomic energy. The sun, wind, water are useful to us and as founders and keepers of our health, and as energy sources. The devices transforming "green" energy into electric and mechanical, much easier and more reliably, than nuclear reactors. Therefore the adverse effect of the human factor is excluded.

Nikolay considers that the nuclear power became today more dangerous than before. The threat of terrorist attacks on the atomic power station increases; abductions of nuclear materials and manufacture of "dirty" nuclear devices.

Today information about Chernobyl accident is absent. This information is intentionally limited, as it is incompatible with atomic power station building in Belarus.

Nikolay knows many people who have suffered from Chernobyl accident who are living with illnesses and in poverty today. Now problems of liquidators and injured have receded into the background, became irrelevant.

In Belarus the fear of a possibility of an accident in atomic power station in Ostrovets that's under construction is growing. Nikolay personally disapproves of its building. Except trouble, it won't bring anything else to the people...