

The Era of 'Severe Accidents': Insights into the Chaos of Chernobyl

An interview with Anatolij Gubariev, as 'Liquidator' a 'first responder' at the destroyed nuclear reactor at Chernobyl

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"My daughter said recently: 'Mama, even if I have a deformed child, I'll love it anyway.'..."[1]



Photo: Igor Kostin (1936-2015)

The Atomic State, a System of Oppression

When I was in school, the phrase 'serious accident' already meant 'no big problem.' In January 1981, our local paper reported: "Nuclear accident leaves Paris unconcerned. The La Hague (plutonium factory and reprocessing plant) is temporarily closed."

I stuck that article in Robert Jungk's 1977 classic book "The Nuclear State." In it Jungk describes a 'Plutonium future' that would rob us of our human freedom.[2] Not just through environmental contamination from radiation emitting substances, but also because of sabotage and nuclear terror.

Jungk saw in the atomic age a new dimension of violence, that among other things could not separate the 'peaceful' use of atomic energy from its military side, the production of atomic weapons.

He went so far as to describe the nuclear state as an entity that would turn into a kind of concentration camp, so as to 'guarantee' the actually impossible complete security of the dangerous industrial facilities.

The controlling state mentality included the tactic, that the population should be allowed to know as little as possible about what happens behind the facilities' walls. Serious accidents, 'near catastrophes' and irreversible global disasters were downplayed and redefined, to be forgotten as quickly as possible. On the contrary: Chernobyl is "a problem for all humanity," says Ukrainian journalist Alla Jaroshinskaja, who for her revelations received the Right Livelihood ("alternative Nobel") Prize in 1992.

Telling the Tale

Another Ukrainian, Anatolij Gubariev, has made it his life's work to fight against forgetting the Chernobyl disaster that began in April 1986; the nuclear accident at that power plant changed his life, as that of many thousands if not a million people, forever.



Anatolij Gubariev. IBB meeting in Geseke, Germany. October 2015. Photo: U. Gelis

Newspaper report: Monday, April 28, 1986 -- two days after the disaster in the reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the former Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic: "The Forsmark nuclear power plant north of Stockholm was evacuated after radiation was measured in a radius of 4 km around the plant (...). The entire amount of radioactivity had increase to 15 times normal levels." [3] - In this way the West learned about the nuclear catastrophe in the former Soviet Union.

Today Anatolij heads a group of 'liquidators' called "Union of Chernobyl" in Kharkov, Ukraine. He was one of the many vital young men who were quickly drafted to help quell the catastrophic release of radiation from the reactor following the first explosion. This organization of survivors from the deadly job was founded in 1988 and was the first association that worked for the interests of the people known as liquidators, those who labored in the Chernobyl area following the accident.

It is estimated that between 600,000 and 800,000 people worked in the disaster area. "The exact number [...] is unknown, because there was no exact registration, and they just returned to their normal routines after their assignment." [4] That is, if they survived it.

"Information about the irradiation of the workers during the cleanup of the disaster in the Chernobyl nuclear plant is classified," said the head of the third highest administrative level of the Health Ministry of the Soviet Union Schulshenko." [5] And to this day there is a ban on discussing the problematic health effects of the reactor accident.

In 1991, Anatolij went to Germany for an oncological examination. Diagnosed with vascular cancer, he thanks the operation in Germany for saving his life. But other cancer illnesses followed; the last surgery took place in August 2015.

Two Lives

"My life is divided into two parts," said Anatolij quietly. "Into the time before Chernobyl and the time afterwards." He was born in 1960, and in 1986, at the time of his service in Chernobyl, he was 26 years old. At that time, Anatolij worked in a tool-making factory in Kharkov. Before his military service, Anatolij had studied economics for two years (1977-79).

While he did his military service, from 1980-82, he was at the Balkash, the large lake in what is today Kazakhstan. There a secret spying center observed missile testing in England. But Anatolij did not know about the Soviet atomic testing in northeastern Kazakhstan, which went on from 1949 to 1989.

After his two years of required service in the Army, he studied and then worked in the tool factory. "I did a lot of sport, was completely healthy and only had one filling in my mouth," he said smiling, describing his situation before the catastrophe. From May 4 until June 7, 1986 (35 days), Anatolij was in Chernobyl. Two weeks after his service

there ended he noticed the first health problems, like memory loss. His visits to clinics started...

Orders to follow

Easter was at the beginning of May, 1986, and Anatolij visited his mother in their village during the holidays. He returned to Kharkov around 8 pm. It was raining, and Anatolij quickly sought shelter in the entrance to his house. Unnoticed by him, other men followed him in. He was just able to close his front door, when he was pushed from behind into his apartment. With the words: "you are Gubariev, right?" he was handed a written order.

The summons ordered him to appear within an hour at the regional military commission office. Anatolij set off with just his passport and military service ID in hand. At this point he didn't know that he would arrive at the meeting point for the authorities at the Pioneer Palace, the center for official youth groups.

When he arrived he found some 150 people there, and an hour later twice as many. Their identity cards were taken with no explanation. One young neighbor, whom Anatolij met by chance, advised him not to give up his documents; he wanted to protect those who had just finished their military service.

What had happened? On the radio there was already talk about Chernobyl. That made Anatolij suspicious. At the gathering place men from all occupations and different ages were gathered.

In the first months, the emergency crew was brought together from the vicinity around the disaster site. The distance between Kharkov and Chernobyl is about 660 kilometers (410 miles).

Suddenly twelve buses appeared to transport the recruits. After two and a half hours they came to a city and halted before its cultural palace. Military uniforms were distributed, and they were told to sleep on the floor of the building. No additional information was given to the men, as they were awakened at 4:30 the next morning. Then the process of organizing the detachment started, according to military rank and whatever specialization they had acquired in the military.

Anatolij became a mechanic in a 'fire-fighting batallion.' From an administrator (in the

tool factory) to mechanic in a disaster relief crew in less than ten hours! Five days of training followed, learning to operate fire hoses and other fire fighting techniques. "We got gas masks, but there was not a word about radioactivity." Anatolij thinks that even the higher officers didn't know about such dangers at the time.

Buses with recruits and equipment set off towards Iwankov, a city 60 kilometers (37 miles) from Chernobyl. There a tent camp was put together on a field. "I had a basic awareness of radiation from my physics courses." Anatolij tried to find sleeping places far above the floor, around 90 cm high (35.4 inches), for better protection against radionuclides. The others just laughed, he remembers, finding such measures unnecessary. At the time, Anatolij thought that his fellow combatants would someday be grateful for these precautions.

No iodine was distributed in the tent camp; the Liquidators first received iodine during the life-threatening work at the reactor. The iodine was supposed to prevent accumulation of radioactive iodine in the thyroid.



Tschernobyl 1986 Photo: Oleg Veklenko

Operation 'Bio-robot'

Robots could not be used for this work because of the high level of radiation. Thus the

Liquidators were also called Bio-robots, because they didn't give up.

A week later the order came to get ready to leave for Chernobyl. "As we got into the bus, it was suddenly clear that no driver was ready," remarked Anatolij. So he, who didn't have a driver's license, drove the fire department vehicle in the direction of the reactor! Thus they came to the fire station in Chernobyl. Finally the men were given their assignments.

In the night of May 19, cables between the 3rd and 4th reactor blocks had caught fire, creating an additional danger to the facility. That is when Anatolij was sent into the reactor the first time.

The administration building contained a 2 square meter wide large tub, containing iodine. All the workers had to walk through this iodine tub with their boots on, to prevent radioactive iodine from sticking to their shoes. As they went into the reactor they were given iodine pills. The working groups were of 2-4 people. At first, the men just had to wait. Anatolij waited for 1.5 hours until someone came for him. The men were then told to put on rubber suits, to protect them from the chemicals. No one knew what was happening. That night 300 liquidators waited in the acutely dangerous zone, while only 50-80 actually worked.

Besides the green protective clothes, Anatolij had to carry two water hoses. They jumped into cars and were driven to reactor 3, where the water supply was sufficient. Anatolij was told that there, where he was standing, radiation levels were about 2 'Röntgen.' Someone pointed to a metal door, saying that behind it, radiation levels would mount up to 60 Röntgen. The staff even disclosed the fact that Anatolij would be facing a dose of between 200 and 600 Röntgen at the working place he would be sent to soon.

The iron door opened and following a leader, Anatolij climbed up one level in the building. There he saw water hoses, laid out into the direction of the fire. They had to follow the 'snake trace' of hoses until it ended. There, the task was to connect the hoses they carried to the end of the other hoses. The goal was to reach the fire's source, and put it out.

They were told that because of the extreme levels of radioactivity, they should not be inside for more than two minutes. Yet it was also said that the task could not be finished in less than seven minutes. In addition, the workers were advised to economize their

energy so they could make it safely back.

Heat and pungent smell

But how to run back, while wearing a rubber outfit filled with sweat and very heavy? In Anatolij's case, another difficulty arose, because the rubber suits were designed for a person no taller than 1.86 meters (6 feet, 1 inch), while Anatolij was 1.90 m (6 feet, 3 inches) tall! In addition, it was hard to find the end of the hose. They were standing in a dark tunnel barely lit by small lamps. They had to jump over a concrete plate was standing in their way. One man fell down into a hole and died two years later from his injuries.

Their mouths and noses were covered, but no glasses were available! As the plastic masks were unbearable in the heat, the men simply tore them off, breathing without further protection!

The hoses – each worker had to carry two of them – were complicated and constantly getting tangled, making their work extremely difficult. “All the time I was afraid that we would not find the end of the previous hose,” Anatolij told me, breathing unevenly.

The liquidators received no construction plans and were virtually sent into the dark. Hose followed hose: slowly they approached the source of the fire. “I could only hear my heart beating,” remembers Anatolij.

In addition to the heat and smell of the burning cables, there was the sound of running water. The fire's source was near to Reactor 4. That assumes that the liquidators who came nearest to the fire were also exposed to the highest levels of radiation, as reactor 4 was the damaged one.

For Anatolij, the way back through the tunnel seemed endless. “I was more frightened there than ever in my life.” When he finally passed through the iron gate, his time inside was measured. Instead of the two minutes permitted, Anatolij had been inside the tunnel for a full seventeen minutes!

Then they had a shower next to block 3. But that was a full 50 meters from reactor block 4. Anatolij struggled to remove the rubber suit. “Still today I almost vomit if think of the struggle with that suit. I was terribly afraid!”

The exhausted workers were given reactor personnel's white clothing. A car with the

next eight liquidators arrived, and Anatolij and the seven others had to wait another hour unprotected in the vehicle before leaving the area! All this happened in the vicinity of reactor bloc 4, just 50 meters away. Anatolij thinks that they had to wait in the car because they looked like ghosts in their white clothes. They certainly had scared the others in the administration building.

The body rebelled

The journey did not end at the former tent camp but at a school in the village of Saliecija, four kilometers from the reactor site. "There the horror started. My body reacted to the high dose of radiation. I became apathetic and felt like falling asleep instantly, anywhere. I struggled hard to stay awake."

When I went outside, I saw my 21 year old neighbor from Kharkov, vomiting. Later I learned that a dose of 200 Röntgen can cause this reaction. The young man asked me to hold him and so I embraced him. We stood like that for about two hours, leaning on a tree. No thoughts of eating or drinking, as the body would not tolerate such things."

Around noon, ambulances appeared. Those who were unconscious, or nearly so, were transported to the hospital in Kiev. "My neighbor was also taken away," Anatolij comments. He dragged himself back to the school gymnasium and slept for 24 hours.

He guesses that around 80 people worked at the reactor site that night. Afterwards they slept in the school. Those who did not work at the reactor that time were driven back to the 'clean' camp, Ivankowa. Out of the 80 liquidators, 50 disappeared into Kiev's hospitals the next day. Meanwhile, Anatolij tried to recover at the gymnasium.

Human material

"By then I understood that we were just goods to be consumed," Anatolij emphasizes. He had the feeling that those who were already irradiated would be 'used' first. After a two day break, they had to return to the reactor site. Anatolij had his blood checked once. Otherwise, nothing was done.

The huge influx of cooling water into the block to cool it, increased the danger of a steam explosion.

The new working place was located two floors down, inside Reactor building 3. This time Anatolij had to operate the pump. The irradiated, extracted water was pumped into

the water tanks previously filled with the water used to extinguish the fire.

After the new 'employment,' the men returned to the school. Anatolij's next task took place inside the administration building of the reactor. From there, operations inside the evacuated 30 kilometer zone were coordinated.

They drove into the villages and washed the roofs of the cottages. At that time it was still thought that the inhabitants could soon return to their homes. By the end of June 1986, such thoughts were abandoned – the high levels of radiation made a return impossible. Instead, villages within a 10 kilometer radius of reactor 4 were buried by military vehicles available for the task. No one could return to remove contaminated belongings.

Until the end of May 1986, the Soviet government still assumed they could regain control over reactor 4, whatever it took. They thought it possible to resume business as usual in Chernobyl.

After the explosion in Reactor 4, Reactor 3, located next to the catastrophic situation, was immediately shut down, while Reactors 1 and 2 continued to run normally. Personnel worked there while the liquidators struggled desperately at the disaster site nearby.

By May 20, Anatolij had already accumulated the permitted radioactive dose of 25 Röntgen. Despite that, the operation continued.

On June 7th, the workers received cards informing them about the levels of their irradiation. The person in charge was afraid to be held responsible for the levels mentioned. Anatolij's record: 52.6 Röntgen.

Foreign misfortune does not exist

After a two day break at home in Kharkov, Anatolij returned to work at the factory. He experienced nausea, headaches, then fainting. It ended at the radiological institute in Kharkov, with one month of treatment there. At the hospital the liquidators were reunited. The evacuated inhabitants of the 30 kilometer zone were stationed there as well. Their levels of radiation were measured. The norm was exceeded more than 100-fold!

In 1987, during Anatolij's second stay at the hospital and after a colleague from the

operations had died, a deeper understanding grew, connecting the disaster of Chernobyl and the recurring illnesses. Every 6 months Anatolij had to visit a hospital for about 20 days. He has been hospitalized every year.

The liquidators were told that there was no connection between their health problems and Chernobyl. Anatolij thought: "What will happen to my wife if I die because of my work at the reactor?" The perplexed victims came together at the radiological institute and decided to establish an organization for the Chernobyl workers and their families.

In 1988 the group was established under the temporary name 'Foreign misfortune does not exist.' Later it was renamed 'Union Chernobyl.' The main goal was to support the liquidators. At that time the dissolution of the Soviet Union was taking place and members of the organization managed to get the hospital's personnel to actively help the victims. Where previously party chiefs enjoyed special treatment, priority was now given to the radiation victims.

Soon food shortages occurred, and the organization tried to guarantee supplies for the victims of Chernobyl. In 1990, work began on a law about the people stricken by the reactor disaster in the Ukraine. The law came into force a year later. Anatolij reports that in his health files no connection to Chernobyl is made. Only during surgery in Germany did he become aware of his cases of cancer.

The medical staff was composed of friendly and other characters. "The fact is," says Anatolij, "that it was forbidden to give the correct diagnosis." The official version was that there are no victims of Chernobyl. Therefore the liquidators faced severe discrimination; only after the law came into force in 1991 was there a change of attitude.

"I believe, we are back to the times of the beginning of our organization because the greatest discrimination against us is taking place right now," Anatolij remarks thoughtfully. "I do not see a logical explanation for this. I ask myself how can a person and his family survive on 85 Euros a month. In addition to that, medication is far more expensive than in Germany!"

The expert council established in 1991 after the protective law for the liquidators went into force was very helpful in those days. After ten years, support for the liquidators was constantly diminishing, the earlier interest dampened by other urgent topics. The atomic industry might also have played a role in this development.

How expensive is a human life?

It is difficult to persuade people that alternative energy is a real alternative, says Anatolij. Five nuclear power plants are currently operating in Ukraine, Anatolij believes. The oligarchs and the atom lobby naturally do not like to see nuclear power discredited.

The consequences of the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl influence life continually. When Anatolij's daughter became ill, he immediately thought that it was related to the accident, and was therefore his fault. For that reason he did not want more children.

"We have to know exactly how high a price we are paying for the continued existence of nuclear power. Only technologies in accord with ecology can guarantee our future. We are sometimes asked how much it costs to end the consequences of Chernobyl? There is apparently only one one answer: How expensive is a human life?"

Anatolij's organization is collecting eyewitness accounts. Experts from the university of Kharkov are supporting the project. Two hundred stories have already been archived, and a collection will be published in Russian, with translations to follow. The Chernobyl history workshop in Kharkov will certainly be part of it, in close cooperation with the International Education and Meeting network in Dortmund, Germany. (www.ibb.org.ua).

"...how fast does radioactivity spread? Under favorable or unfavorable conditions? Favorable for whom?"

Christa Wolf. Störfall. [6]

The interview was conducted by Ursula Gelis at the IBB conference in Geseke, Germany in October 2015.

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English translation from the German original by the author and the Women & Life on Earth Internet Project.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Svetlana Alexijewitsch. Tschernobyl. Eine Chronik der Zukunft. Berlin 2006, p. 236.

[2] Siehe: Plutonium. Tödliches Gold des Atomzeitalters. IPPNW-Studienreihe Band 5. 2. 1994.

[3] Lutz Mez. 'Der Super-Gau im Atomkraftwerk Tschernobyl. Eine Chronik der Nachrichten, Informationen und Spekulationen'. In: Klaus Traube u.a. Nach dem Super-Gau. Tschernobyl und die Konsequenzen. Hamburg 1986. S. 20.

[4] Astrid Sahm. Liquidatoren – die vergessenen Retter Europas. In: Verlorene Orte. Gebrochene Biographien. Hg. IBB Dortmund/IBB 'Johannes Rau', Minsk, o. J., Seite 56.

[5] Alla Jaroshinskaja. Verschlussache Tschernobyl. Die geheimen Dokumente aus dem Kreml. Berlin 1994, S. 35.

[6] Christa Wolf. Störfall. *Nachrichten eines Tages*. 1987