

LITTLE REACTORS

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Background

I was born in Russia, in Siberia, in Chita Oblast. My father was in the military, my mother, too. They both survived the war. My father worked in intelligence, my mother in counterintelligence. And that is why we were always going somewhere, we were on the move all the time. And I found myself here after I was finished at the Institute. My husband and I looked for a place get away from our closed city where we had no contact with anyone (*so-called closed administrative territorial formations - a city with limitations on moving and residence due to its military and nuclear significance - expl. A.P.*). And that's how we found this place. First my brother, who was a liquidator, came here. Then my husband came, and me on the basis of an assignment. I had been assigned to Chita Oblast, on the border with Mongolia and then I came to Prypiat, I was summoned. And that is how I found myself here.

The City

Prypiat was a very young city. The average age of the residents of Prypiat was 26-27. It was a young city, there were lots of children. It was a very beautiful city: lakes, rivers, Belarus on one side and central Ukraine on the other. It was a new, clean and beautiful city.

We came here from Sverdlovsk, Tomsk, Zhovti Vody, Krasnoturinsk, Krasnokamensk. In Prypiat from 1977 they started to build the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. And when the explosion occurred – there was graphite, pieces of graphite lying on those first houses. And our children, on the 26th, after the accident, went into those houses to see how the reactor was burning.

Helicopters landed on the stadium which flew over the reactor, and there were thousands of roentgens. Then these helicopters were put in the storage yards as garbage, because they were glowing like the reactor itself, and our children ran to this stadium and watched these planes.

I was in a closed party meeting. And there they told us that generally speaking, every resident of Prypiat got no less than 75 rems, and 25 rems is already a dose of radiation exceeding what a person should come in contact with.

I am simply telling you how it was for me on the 26th. I am a paediatric doctor. I was. Now I am an internist. On the 26th I didn't feel so well. I took a sleeping pill and went to sleep. I woke up because I heard some noise. I woke up and somehow intuitively felt that it was a nuclear explosion, that they dropped an atomic bomb on Kyiv. I sat in bed and thought now there will be light radiation and then a shock wave. But nothing

like that happened. So I lay back down and went to sleep again. This time the telephone woke me. My friends called and told me: Galina, there is a very serious situation in the power plant. Drink iodine, give the kid iodine, close the windows, get water, turn on the radio and listen for the announcement. There was supposed to be an announcement at 6.

I did everything, but there was no announcement at 6, and nothing at 7 either. And we, right on the eve of this, a week earlier had received iodine tablets and distributed them in kindergartens and in all schools. And in the clinics for adults, the iodine was only for adults. I told my son – go to school and you will get your dose of iodine there because the rumour had already reached us, although officially nothing was known yet. It was a beautiful day, very sunny, warm, there were puddles. Children were running in the streets, jumping in the puddles. There was no panic, absolutely none, nothing could be seen or heard. The only thing that caught everyone's interest is that there was a haze, something was smoking, you could hear some sort of quiet banging.

In the evening, sometime after dinner they summoned us and told us to give out the tablets immediately and people started to retreat. In the hopes that our children would receive the tablets in kindergartens and schools, we took the packets that were only for the adult population and when we started to go to the flats in the evening, it turned out that neither children nor adults had received them. There simply weren't enough tablets for us. For example, if I received tablets for 5 houses, I gave out 2 and already there weren't enough. That is why not everyone received them on time.

Our friends called us – you have to take the children away right now. Our friends and us – 5 families in total - we gathered the children in three cars and our husbands went to take them away. We wanted to take them to Kyiv but our husbands returned 3 hours later with the children. They didn't let them in. They tried some detour, looked for some place to get them out, but they didn't let them in. Everyone returned.

When Prypiat was evacuated on the second day, right at 12 there was a bus parked in every driveway. They had already announced that there would be an evacuation. We weren't to take anything, only documents and water for the first three days and a small amount of food. We were all supposed to return after three days. And everyone left, they evacuated absolutely everyone, no one could stay at home. A militiaman knocked on my door, I opened it and told him: I can't go. I'm a doctor and my son isn't at home. He looked at his list and said that I wasn't on the list of people who were to stay. I closed the door and he put his foot in the door and said: "I'll force the door open, you'll leave, the door will be left open and when you come back after three days, I don't guarantee that you won't have been robbed, that nothing in your home will disappear." And I was forced to leave and get on that bus.

And then we were evacuated and the doctors stayed and took the sick people who couldn't move. Until May 1st they took the sick people by cars. That is, ambulances.

The first ones appeared, naturally, around the burning reactor. When the doctors held the stretchers, they got burns on their hands. They had thousands of roentgens on their hands and the skin came off. They got these burns on their hands only because they were holding these stretchers, they were carrying the sick. There was not enough space, there were so many injured people, even though it was said that only fire fighters were injured, but even staff and residents, of my building, too, suffered.

There is this region “Nakhalovka”. There were gardens there. It was a day off then and people were in the gardens. It was hot, people had stripped down. For example, my neighbour already on the evening of the 26th, when I was giving out the tablets, they called from her place and told me “Galina, come here, she is feeling really bad, she’s having trouble breathing, she has a temperature of 39.” I asked her where she was and she said in the garden. Her back was already all red. When I called to take her to the hospital, they told me that they were already out of room, to set up a drip at home. And many people got help in their homes this way because in the clinic, at the hospital there was no room for the people who needed help.

And later the really serious cases were taken by planes to Moscow. These planes were later buried, just like the fire fighters, because they were like little reactors in themselves.

Some people made it to Kyiv, to our hospital. There they didn’t transplant bone marrow, but grafted it – as in the case of my brother, two times. They took the bone marrow oh...from there, they enriched it and put it here.

People were calm, there was no panic. They took us for three days and we left for our whole lives. We left everything except what we took at the very beginning. Later they still let us go – someone didn’t take their documents, someone left money, but it wasn’t possible to take anything more back. Some tried to go there in their own trucks, tried to transport things, but soldiers were called in, the whole army, and threw things straight out of the window from 16 storey, 12 storey buildings. They threw out all the furniture, then the trucks gathered the furniture and took it so that people didn’t do it themselves because everything was contaminated.

I had the possibility to collect my furniture. I had recently purchased a new set of furniture – Yugoslavian. And I really wanted to get it back from there, or at least the bedding. After five or six years I worked in the clinic in Chernobyl and I decided to take the furniture set and put it in my office. They brought it to me and I arranged the furniture. Then I came on duty and they said to me: “Galina, just don’t get angry...”. I went into the yard and there was my furniture all chopped up. “The furniture was so contaminated that we couldn’t leave it with you” and they chopped it up and threw it out.

The Hospital

This was our waiting room – here, on this side. Here there were showers. The liquidators carried everyone on stretchers and washed them in those showers. These showers, baths. Here there was the waiting room, we accepted patients here. Here we washed, changed; washed, changed and went up to the next floor – that's where the internal diseases ward was. There was still a laboratory there. The laboratory ran without breaks because the results were so bad that they were made almost every hour in order to see how many people could still survive, what type of help they needed.

The surgery was above, on the fourth floor was rehabilitation. The rehabilitation ward was bursting at the seams so people were lying on the floor. Oh, here there were stretchers, now there aren't any here. They were right here. Here there were drips. Washed and undressed people were already there.

Then I was a simple person. Except that I worked here in the “Eurohouse” as a neonatologist. I worked in two kindergartens and a polyclinic. I was the only one in the medical-sanatorium Centre who got paid two wages. That is why there were still so few doctors then. And so many children were born here.

Now I feel emptiness, just emptiness. Everything is empty, I don't want to talk. I don't want to talk about “now”.

The clinic was connected to our health centre, which is why they immediately sent children to us...They were born...they took care of the mums...Usually in twos. Not one child, but more than two. People lived well here. They were well off. There was work. At any rate, in those times we felt normal, as far as money is concerned. Young people felt like they could afford to buy a refrigerator, television on their salaries. Now that is impossible for our young people. We, thank God, lived good lives. We lived in closed, very rich cities, we had money, our children grew up in wealthy families. But now nothing is right.

For the whole time we thought we would return. And it wasn't nostalgia, we were all in euphoria that we were eradicating something, that we were helping and saving people. And it wasn't a sense of despair. The despair came after some 5 years, when we understood that we would never come back here again and that our lives would never again be as beautiful as they were here. And life here really was just beautiful. The doctors here in this area could collect over a bucket of mushrooms in an hour before work. Imagine what such places were like. Such "indulgent" places – berries, further on lakes full of fish on the Belarusian side. We got into the car and went to this lake on all our days off, it was wonderful. And all of a sudden we lost everything. And when we lost it, we didn't understand that we had lost it.

In the first days we all still stayed and worked. Moscow declared that in order to limit radionuclides, we need alcohol and we distributed spirit alcohol. They came from work and we served them and on every table we put a teapot full of alcohol. And those who went to work, when they got onto the bus we were standing in front of the bus with a case of wine and we gave everyone a glass of red wine. This lasted about

a month and a half. At that time everyone was under the influence of alcohol, there was no one who wasn't. People weren't drunk, but everyone was under the influence of alcohol. Drivers, operating staff, absolutely everyone. The managers came to me, the building manager, I poured drinks for everyone, this spirit alcohol. But there were no accidents, not a one. But it was lifted after a month and a half. They said consuming alcoholic drinks is prohibited. My God, you should have seen it. We were driving along the road and a car was lying there, another car lying across from it. Around the corner we were driving, and we looked and there's a vat, my God, it had been flowing and flowing, right around the corner the vat was lying there. Accidents started. People's pressure dropped. Right at the moment they banned alcohol it started. And it was simply...really something...cars lying here and there.

And then after about 3 months people lived without alcohol and it somehow subsided. These were just the sort of episodes we had in our lives.

But then everyone really took care of us, from every side, from the whole country people came together, came, fed us... We had caviar, all delicatessen goods, prepared like home made, there was such borscht... this was in the first years – 86, 87 and for some time still in 88. Every month a new team came and looked after us as best as possible, cooked the best, brought the best presents. They organized entertainment, cafeterias, hung posters, baked korovai. And then gradually everything disappeared, went away, went away. These were also the sort of episodes we had in our lives.

Home

And this is my home, my God, everything is so overgrown. And here is our house of culture, further on there's a restaurant, that's the administrative building and here is part of the medical-sanitorium. And here is the pool. And this is where we went. Just imagine. We went after the accident as well. The pool was in a good state, they changed the water. It's big. Olympic sized. There was a sauna. We also used the sauna. Many people came here. At that time there were still various businesses here. There was lighting. There was illumination everywhere.

The city was full of roses. You've seen the pictures where everything is covered in roses. Full of children and roses. 27 – that was the average age of people who lived here. A very young city, beautiful, clean. We had prospects ahead of us. We wanted everything so much and all at once it all disappeared, everyone was scattered around different cities. The older people didn't leave, they gave them flats, it's more or less all the same to them. We serve them. There are some such villages here where only two people live. Close to here is Shypielycy where one family lives – an old man and woman. We go to them, it's just beyond Prypiat.

This was my second flat after I divorced my husband. I got a one-room flat. This is Janov station. We got on here, we travelled through the night to Moscow. To despair.

Oh, panel 67. That's the one. 2 surgeons lived in our building, Kola – may he rest in peace – died young. Otroshchenko – his picture was on the board. He used to come here. On the 4th floor there was a woman who was exposed to radiation. She's in Leningrad now. They gave her a bone marrow transplant, 2 or 3 times, she survived. And Otroshchenko, Petya, who works at the clinic now, but he's on holiday. The three of us here, and me – the doctor. We lived.

If it weren't overgrown, you could see the station from the window. When the explosion happened my bed was here. I sat up and thought – it's an atomic bomb. They dropped it on Kyiv. War has started. There will be a shockwave, light radiation. I sat and sat, nothing happened. So I lay back down and went to sleep. The phone woke me up, it was someone warning me that the accident had started. The window was open, the furniture, bedding was exposed to radiation. I took the metal box with photographs away from here. And to this day it's still irradiated. After 25 years. I took it, I couldn't throw it out, I have pictures from my entire life in there. My husband brought the box from the Olympics, a candy box, there were various candies in it. He was at the Olympics in Moscow and brought this box back. And I put pictures in it. And this whole time it's been irradiated.

Life would be beautiful. Beautiful. I had a good position. I had a wide circle of acquaintances, I had good friends. We still keep in contact to this day. There was a little piece of paradise here. Life here would be fantastic. This flat...They tell me, Galina, we'll find something for you, a nice flat, big. Everything without a problem. Everything was without problems. Everyone here was treated very well. After all, the majority was staff of the power plant. Such as "Sriedmash". And there was always respect for Sriedmash. Do you know what this Sriedmash is? It's the nuclear power plant and the defence system. For example, "Jupiter", we drove up near Jupiter. It was that sort of system.

The surroundings were fantastic. And there was enough money. There was everything. And the place was delightful. That's why everyone came here.

In this flat on the fifth floor lived a woman who is now in Leningrad. She got 400 rems, 600 is already a lethal dose. And she had 400 and they took her to Moscow in our Institute, in Lomonosov, not in Lomonosov...what is it called...I forget, and they gave her a bone marrow transplant and she survived.

Under me the woman's husband died. She has diabetes. They cut her leg off. The children have thyroid diseases. There are lots of problems. The people who were evacuated from the zone have them. I have thyroid nodules, atrial fibrillation. Like they told us, everything would come after 10 years. After ten years we would feel the effects of the catastrophe.

That woman from the 5th floor whose husband died, who has diabetes. I haven't had contact with her for the last 3 years and it seems to me that she's already gone to the

kingdom in the sky. Those two from Leningrad. When they evacuated us we all lived together, we slept in one bed. She got 400 rems, she was a little reactor, and I slept in the same bed as her. Because there was no room.

And the greengrocer's is not far from here. We came here to shop. You could always get a piece of meat here any day. They valued us. And in Kyiv we're nothing and nobody. They don't like us there because we were given help and Kyivans weren't. They weren't far from the power plant either. Their children also suffered because of it. And they didn't get anything. That's why they don't like us...