

# Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster

S. Alexievich

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On April 26, 1986, an accident occurred in an old Soviet-designed RBMK nuclear reactor in the country of Belarus. The accident destroyed the reactor core of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, releasing more than 50 million curies of radionuclides into the atmosphere. Air currents carried the radioactive material in the form of gases and dust particles over much of the Soviet Union and Europe, with smaller amounts scattered over the rest of the northern hemisphere.

The international medical community responded immediately. Medical care involved treatment of skin burns, support for bone marrow failure, amelioration of gastrointestinal injury, and prevention of infections. The unique and valuable role of nuclear medicine physicians and physicists in the disaster was in understanding radiation and quantifying its dose impact.

Twenty years after this international disaster, Keith Gessen has translated this powerful book by Svetlana Alexievich. Alexievich was a journalist living in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, at the time of the Chernobyl accident. Instead of choosing the usual approach of trying to quantify a disaster in terms of losses and displacement, the author chose instead to interview more than 500 eyewitnesses over a span of 10 years. These eyewitnesses included firefighters, liquidators (members of the cleanup team), politicians, physicians, physicists, and ordinary citizens. The result of this work is *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*.

The book opens with the account of Lyudmilla Ignatenko, the wife of a deceased firefighter. They were newlyweds at the time of the disaster, awaiting the arrival of their first child. Lyudmilla remembers being wakened by the explosion at the nuclear reactor plant and seeing her husband getting dressed and going to the fire there. Instead of wearing his usual fire gear, he wore short sleeves, because he thought it was just a tiny fire that could be put out easily. The next time Lyudmilla remembers seeing her husband, he was all swollen at the hospital. She remembers hearing no talk about radiation, but all the military people were wearing surgical masks. Her husband eventually was brought to a special hospital for radiation poisoning in Moscow. In the hospital, most of the staff was afraid to care

for him, calling him a living nuclear reactor. Lyudmilla personally performed many of the nursing duties herself, while her husband suffered through the various stages of acute radiation poisoning. When he eventually died, they scraped down the walls of his home and buried him in a zinc coffin under several layers of concrete. Their child died at birth because of multiple birth defects that were due to high radiation exposure from the child's father.

Alexievich also presents interviews with people who described the arrival of troops and the evacuation of nearby villages. There were so many planes, helicopters, and trucks that people thought a war had begun with either the Chinese or the Americans. Soldiers were issued white robes, white caps, and gauze for surgical masks. They were ordered to clean the territory because the high radiation levels interfered with the circuits of robotic workers. Once in the neighborhoods, police and soldiers put up signs next to houses stating "70 curies" or "60 curies"—the amount of radioactivity at that location. Soldiers killed all the neighborhood dogs. Old ladies were crawling on their knees begging not to be taken from their homes. One liquidator relates how many fellow soldiers would down shots of vodka and then drive to the actual reactor block to take photographs of themselves for their friends at home.

Svetlana Alexievich also interviewed teachers who were sent to the countryside to educate the public about radiation and who described the difficulty of such a task. How does one explain the difference between becquerels and roentgens? People were given new clothes but did not understand why they had to be washed every day. People did not understand why they could not eat cucumbers and tomatoes "when they taste fine and your stomach doesn't hurt... nothing is glowing in the dark."

Anna Petrovna Baddaeva lived 30 km from the nuclear power plant yet never heard about the atom. She remembers first hearing about radiation after the accident in Chernobyl: "What's it like, radiation? Maybe they show it in the movies? Have you seen it? Is it white, or what? What color is it? Some people say it has no color and no smell, and other people say that it's black. Like earth. But if it's colorless, then it's like God. God is everywhere, but you can't see Him."

For many, the Chernobyl reactor facility was a place where one could buy inexpensive salami and meat in the company store, as in Moscow. Apples could be seen in the garden, leaves on the trees, and potatoes in the fields, yet no radiation.

Not all the stories in this book are tragic; some are even humorous. The former director at the Institute for Nuclear Energy at Belarus tells how he carried a dosimeter in his briefcase. He did not use it to measure uptake but to gain access to important politicians and leaders. When bureaucrats would refuse to see the physicist, he would take out the dosimeter and hold it beside the thyroids of their secretaries and personal chauffeurs, who would become scared and get him through to see these important people.

As nuclear medicine physicians, radiologists, and physicists, all of us have read the scientific articles on the environmental and biologic impact of the accident at Chernobyl. *Voices from Chernobyl* tells a different story. It tells us

about the psychologic and personal tragedy of the modern-day nuclear disaster. It is about the experiences of individuals and how the disaster affected their lives.

After the hijacked planes hit the World Trade Center towers, a new era of terrorism and the possibility of a dirty bomb attack or nuclear disaster became a reality. In the face of a potential catastrophe worse than that of Hurricane Katrina, nuclear medicine physicians and their support staffs must be able to deal not only with the physical and medical management of a disaster but also with its human dimension.

I strongly recommend *Voices from Chernobyl* to anyone in the nuclear medicine or radiologic fields. I picked up this book one night before a long plane trip and read it straight through, almost missing my flight the next morning.

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