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Natalia Manzurova, Liquidator in Chernobyl; "We were there when our country needed us"

Natalia Manzurova was one of the liquidators brought together as both volunteers and conscripts from all over the former Soviet Union after the nuclear accident to help with cleanup efforts. There are reports of between 600,000 and one million liquidators in total, most of them were male.

The radio biologist and single mother was deployed in Chernobyl from summer 1987 until Christmas 1991. She had just completed the thesis for her PhD in radio biology when the reactor exploded. Her thesis supervisor was one of the first scientists to be called to the accident site. Within just a few months he had died and she was never able to do the viva. At the time she was in her mid thirties with a young daughter, meaning that she could have declined to go to Chernobyl. In response to my question about why she went anyway, fully aware of the dangers, she explained that there were many reasons. One was that she was qualified precisely for such a situation. "There were not many people with our knowledge. We were needed then to determine what had happened and to decide how much of the contaminated area to close off and how to proceed with the clean-up. These were decisions that could save lives. At the time nobody realised the extent of the destruction or its consequences." Besides the moral obligation there was also a sense of "voluntary compulsion" as Natalia calls it. Yet how it was being among thousands of men, whom she had to command and bear responsibility for in addition to everything else, was an entirely different question. And the terrible living conditions there... She would prefer not to talk about this.

Her office was in Pripyat, a thriving city that had 50,000 inhabitants at the time. Immediately after the disaster, the Soviet government was above all else preoccupied with keeping the accident hidden from the rest of the world. Thus, when the evacuation of Pripyat began, the reactor had already been burning for one and a half days. Even then, people were merely told that there was a small problem and that they needed to expect the evacuation to last just three days. They left their homes without realising that they would never return.

Her task involved cataloguing and destroying or burying what people had left behind. She confiscated contaminated children's toys, as well as furniture, clothing, books, household appliances, T girders – yes, even entire houses, in order to prevent their former occupants from carrying out the deadly property into the world. It was gruelling and emotionally very strenuous work to dispose of these people's very personal and treasured belongings. She says that every day on their way to work, on the bus, people cried. And in order to forget what they had experienced that day at night, they drank a lot. After a while she was so emotionally numb that she did not even wince when she discovered children's bodies in the abandoned village.

Soon after she had left Chernobyl, the suffering that would make her bed-ridden for three years began. She is still plagued by headaches, extreme tiredness, and her immune system is very weakened. "I can't go out on cold days and I get ill as soon as I come into contact with people that have just a cold even. A normal life is therefore not possible." There is a thin scar on her neck, she tells me. This is the "Chernobyl necklace", as surviving liquidators call it – a sign of a thyroid operation. Many of these liquidators have thyroid diseases or thyroid cancer as a result of their exposure to radioactive iodine. "I have since 'befriended' many of my illnesses, and have made a 'contract' with them that they will not destroy me too much", she explains. The situation is probably only bearable with a decent dose of humour. But, she also suffers from depression, not least because she worries about causing too many problems for her loved ones.

"Do you know what a post-traumatic stress disorder is?", she asks me. "The doctors have come to understand what it is. Many people, who have been exposed to intense or ongoing stress, suffer as a result. You hide all of your memories and feelings deep inside yourself – until you see a particular

programme on the television or read an article in the newspaper. Then all the emotions come out from their hiding place and cause you great pain." It was especially bad during the first year after she returned from the Chernobyl-zone. People did not understand her and sometimes she was even scorned. Most doctors regarded her illnesses as imaginary and wanted to admit her into a psychiatric ward. One told her that she had "Chernobyl AIDS".

Aged 42, she was classified an invalid. At the time, she thought her life was over. More than once she contemplated suicide. But, in the end she always got herself together, thanks to psychotropic drugs, a trustworthy female psychiatrist, and a former classmate who taught her yoga. For many years she was unable to speak about Chernobyl. That was until she underwent psychiatric therapy. All that she is describing to me, is still only a small part of what she saw and experienced in Chernobyl. But the fact that she could speak about it at all is apparently a big step forward for her. No-one in Russia is interested – everyone is busy trying to get through hard times.

Seven years ago she founded the "Alliance of Chernobyl Invalids", which she has also since then been. The non-governmental organisation advises Chernobyl liquidators, their widowed wives and their children. I ask her if she is at least well provided for. She answers, "No. We were there when our country needed us, with our hands and our heads. But now that we are sick, nobody cares. Politicians would like to see us dead if they had their choice. But perhaps it is precisely this that keeps us alive – it gives us something to fight for between our attacks of suffering." Natalia Manzurova lives off incapacity benefits, an occupational pension and a small supplementary payment for food. In total this works out at 6,300 roubles a month, less than 180 Euros. The financial situation looks equally bleak for all female liquidators, activists and survivors.

Many of their colleagues from this time have already died. The "Alliance of Chernobyl Invalids" wants to make a documentary about deceased liquidators, and build a memorial for all those people who died as a result of radioactive exposure following accidents and disasters. "It is terrible when people forget their heroes. Young people today have no idea of the profound problems the people who saved them endured. They don't realise that history was written right here in their proximity."

At the end of our interview Natalia Manzurova emphasises that she would gladly accept invitations to come to Germany or elsewhere, where she can show her films, photographs and of course talk about her experiences. "I don't know how many more years I have left, but I want to tell people about Chernobyl for as long as I live. This is not just my life and my life story, but the history of our entire country."

This article is based on an interview with Natalia Manzurova, which has been supplemented with information that she sent us. I would like to thank Tatiana Dereviago / Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) for her support and her translations of the Russian interview and the additional material

Natalia Manzurova has written a brochure about her work in Chernobyl and the consequences of the nuclear disaster: "Unpleasant duty: the experiences of a woman in Chernobyl". Unfortunately, this is so far only available in Russian. An English translation is planned as well as subsequent publishing in the United States.

Translated by Hilary Myska

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For more information see: <http://www.genanet.de/tschernobyl.html?&L=1>