

My Good Life in Pripyat, the Disaster Caused by Chernobyl, and the Catastrophe of the Nuclear Power Station and of Our Lives

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I would like to begin my story by writing about the beautiful natural setting of the land where I was born. My village is called Leskonope. Its houses are small and lie hidden in the dense green of its many trees. It is located on a hill and from its highest point there is a beautiful view of the river, a branch of River Desna, that flows nearby, with thick tall rushes and woods on each bank. However often I visit my birthplace, I am never tired of its beauty. My heart beats more quickly at this magnificent view. For me, nowhere is as beautiful as this place with its vast meadows, its forests and the fast-flowing Desna.

At the village school I attended, I was taught to love nature, to respect my elders, to study hard, to do my best to earn better grades, and to love hard work. For these lessons, I will always be grateful to my first teachers. Looking back on my childhood, I remember how proudly I used to sing at village concerts. Students from my school participated in the concerts the village held on every festive occasion. After finishing the eighth grade, I continued on to the ninth and tenth grades at Ushinsky Boarding School in the same district. At the center of this ancient region is Novgorod-Seversky, from which, as the histories of long ago record, Prince Igor Svyatoslavich departed on his punitive expeditions against the Polovtsians. I studied hard at school and participated in extra-curricular activities. I loved to sing and always dreamed of continuing on to sing before audiences.

When I finished the tenth grade, I took the university entrance examinations. I went to a preparatory course at night and worked as an electric panel controller at the steel mill in a machinery factory in Kostroma during the day. However, when I was unable to enter the department of engineering at the university, I returned home. At that time one of my relatives was home from Pripyat and he suggested I get a job in that town. He praised the place where he lived, telling me that it was a town of young people and that I would come to love everything there.

That autumn I went to see him in Pripyat. With his help, within a month I found work planting trees for the town. I have never been afraid of hard work. I lived in a dormitory at work. How I loved this small, quiet town of Pripyat where most of the residents were young people. It was as if my youth spread its wings and took flight. This was the happiest time of my life.

I often think of the time when I was young and had just arrived in Pripyat to start working. I made many new friends in the dormitory. One of them was an acquaintance of the leader of a music ensemble of young working people. Most of the members of this ensemble were five or seven years older than I, and some were already married. That did not matter as long as they shared the same interest in music. After work they gathered and practiced in a music room, which was in the men's dormitory and was where all the instruments were stored. There were such instruments as drums, cymbals, a bass guitar, a rhythm guitar, a lead guitar, an electronic organ, a saxophone, a trumpet and an electronic bayan. The ensemble's leader Stanislav Ivanovich was responsible for all of the instruments.

One day when my new friend heard me singing, she suggested I should go to see Stanislav Ivanovich. So one evening we went to the music room to see him. He asked me to sing something and he liked my voice very much. This was how I made more new friends and began to sing in this music ensemble. Singing with accompaniment, I thought my modest dream had come true. How happy I was every day rushing to rehearsals to practice new songs and talk with friends after work!

During the summer, concerts were held in front of the Pripyat Culture Center on holidays.

Many groups like our ensemble performed on these occasions. These days in 1981 and 1982 were truly filled with joy. We often played for the nuclear power plant construction workers. At first I had inexplicable fear in front of that audience but later I became more courageous. Such cheerful and carefree days flew by so quickly. How beautiful were the summer nights in our town, with the sweet fragrance of white peonies and Chinese roses growing near the culture center. Around the town there were many beds of roses whose scent always reminded me of the river near my home with its white water lilies. The smell of these splendid flowers somehow resembled each other. There were pine trees beside the bus terminal I used to walk through the woods to work. These woods also reminded me of my home village.

The air in our town was very clean! The many pine trees filled it with much oxygen. We frequently played and sang at Lazurny, where every year the power plant workers celebrated the anniversary of the start of operations at the nuclear power station. So my youth flew by quickly with work and singing practice. After working for the tree planting project for a while, I got a job at the 'Jupiter' Radio Factory. This was a subsidiary company of the 'Mayak' Radio Factory in Kiev. I was employed as an apprentice lathe operator in the mechanical press section. Most of girls working in the same team were between seventeen and twenty-five, and there were only four over thirty-five. I began work on a machine with only two functions. Within a month I was already working on a semi-automatic lathe with 16 functions, grinding side units of the 'Jupiter' tape recorder. This work was very hard. We had to grind 600 units per shift. When I was working the first shift, I used to run to the music room to see all my friends after work. When I was on the second shift, I did not see them for a whole week. One day my friend told me that a knitting course was open to us. I wanted to learn machine knitting, and so I began to attend the course before I set off to work the second shift. I learned the basic usage of knitting machines and I liked it very much.

It was time that girls of our group of young lathe operators should be married. At one of these weddings held at Chistagolovka, a village five kilometers away from Pripyat, I met my future husband, Viktor. Later I heard from his grandmother that he immediately fell in love with me and told her that he would be the happiest man in the world if I would marry him. Two years would pass after that first meeting before we met again. During that time, I completed the crane operators' course, which was attended by mostly only young people.

Passing the examination, we obtained certificates that allowed us to operate both gantry and tower cranes. It was time to find a job as a crane operator. I remember that I was so scared to climb up on a crane for the first time that I almost had to be driven up there with a willow switch. With great effort, I got into the cabin but getting down from it was another big task for me. I had to fight and overcome my fear of heights. I continued to sing with the ensemble as before. We began to perform at weddings on the side. I sang and the others played instruments. It was so nice to perform in front of happy young couples with their eyes shining and full of love.

I decided to look for work as a tower crane operator. I visited the crane section of a construction office and they told me that they had hired a crane operator only a few days before. I told this to my friend in the ensemble. She calmed me down by telling me that she would immediately telephone a mechanic in the crane section who would help me. Her telephone call in fact gave me a lot of hope. I took the bus to once again visit the head office of maintenance of the crane section. This time I was hired as a substitute crane operator.

The next day, I went to my new work and was given instructions on technical safety. And that morning I met my future husband for the first time in two years. He greeted me first and then asked whether I had attended the wedding at Chistogolovka. I answered yes. Gazing at something on his desk, he then asked if I had a picture taken at the wedding. I had no memory of a photo with anyone at the wedding but I was actually in a photo with other girls and beside me was Victor. It was only in spring 2000 that my husband brought that photo back from Chernobyl. I had never seen it before because he

had always kept it with him at work.

This was our second meeting. I began to work in the same section where Victor had been already working as a mechanic. He had a good relationship with his boss in the construction division. Victor's approach to me was quite elegant. But I was a very serious girl even though I had more male friends than female ones. I worked as a substitute, learning how to operate all kinds of gantry cranes at the loading and unloading area and then tower cranes at the second and the third construction sites of the nuclear power station. How I liked this work, up on a crane where I could see everything. For me going to work was like going to a festival, and with such joy I went to my job as a substitute crane operator. My effort and sense of responsibility gained me the respect of the assemblers I worked with. I was proud of working at the nuclear power station and living in this city surrounded by green and filled with young people. I continued to sing with my friends in the ensemble. I loved music and I loved to sing.

Victor and I had been very good friends for a whole year and in spring 1984 we decided to get married on July 14. At the end of September, Victor was offered a one-room flat for a small family, with one big room, a kitchen, a closet, a balcony and a toilet with bath. It was splendid for us. We left Victor's parents' house, though their village was only five kilometers away from Pripjat, and we started to live on our own. I stopped singing when I got married. Soon our first son Yuri was born. He was a sickly child, and often suffered from colds and tonsillitis. When I was on parental leave to look after him, I was always curious to know how it was going at the construction site: which cranes were they using and how high were the walls they were building? I was very interested in any news I could get about construction progress.

And so the spring of 1986 arrived. By that time, Yura (our nickname for Yuri) could walk a little if we took his hands, and we often visited Victor's parents with him in a buggy. Victor's youngest brother was about to depart for military service. We went to the parents' house a day before his farewell party and helped to prepare for it. That evening many relatives and friends gathered and the party continued until the next morning. Yuri and I were outside. Friends and relatives drove Nicolai to the national service command just after five o'clock in the morning. At seven o'clock people in the village started to talk about an explosion at the nuclear power station. Although I could not believe the news, I was anxious waiting for the car to come back from the Chernobyl national service command. Many little children besides my son were left waiting with me. The car had to take a roundabout way through the forest to come back, as roads were closed down everywhere. It was true that there had been an explosion at the plant. But we continued to clear the tables and wash the dishes.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Victor's sister's husband, a police officer, arrived. He said he had come to evacuate us. The wind was blowing towards the village and thus the amount of radiation was increasing. We got into the car and decided to go towards the nuclear power plant, but we stopped at a restaurant called Evrika. My husband said it was better for us not to go any farther with a child, and we turned the car around. We saw flames burning under the smokestack of the power plant. It was only because Kolya was a police officer that we could reach that point at all. So we became witnesses of the nuclear power plant accident, without understanding all the seriousness of the disaster that had happened. We went up on the roof of our apartment and through binoculars we watched the flames of the plant until late that night. That night we received iodine treatment and were told to close the windows. Nevertheless we did not understand sufficiently what all had happened.

The next day, on Sunday, the evacuation started. We were told to take only the things necessary for three days. Yura and I went to my parents' and Victor stayed at home in Pripjat. Victor's parents stayed in the village until May 9th and then they were evacuated to a village in Borodyansky district. I well remember the day of the evacuation and how we went through villages and the city of Pripjat in a bus. We saw people standing on roadsides whose eyes were telling us, "you are going and we are staying."

When we arrived at my home village, there were six other mothers with children like me. Their husbands had stayed behind to join in the clean up after the accident. Our clothes and shoes were examined to check the amount of radiation. The radioactivity detector made sounds. Our clothes were confiscated and we were given new clothes and shoes to wear. Victor stood guard duty against an invisible enemy who could not be heard or seen. He came to the village to my parents after finishing his shift. He told me that a cold sweat ran down his back as he rode in an armored car with young soldiers through the forest that had taken on an orange color, and that he was sorry for those young soldiers who had just begun their duty and their lives were brought to clean up after the accident.

When my husband came to us in June, he took me and Yuri to Chernikov for Yuri to have an operation – he was suffering from an acute hernia. Victor drove us to Chernikov early in the morning and then he returned to his duty. Two weeks later, after Yuri was already out from the hospital, Victor visited us again.

A new place to live was provided to us in the middle of August but my son and I did not move in until the 21st of September. We gradually bought some furniture with the compensation money we had been paid then. We were now in Kiev and I thought there was no way we could get used to this big and noisy city. We missed Pripjat and still do to this day. What a small and peaceful town was our beloved Pripjat! We could walk all round the town in just a short time.

As time passed, Yuri was growing up. My husband continued to work as a watchman and soon he became the chief watchman. I pleaded with him not to go to work in the contaminated area but to stay with us. Yet his answer was, “Can you imagine not being able to go back to your hometown?” However, his hometown had already been turned into a wasteland with only one shop, a war memorial, and a single house left at the edge of the village.

When big holes were dug and the houses in the village were all buried, Victor asked the white birch growing by the well be left to mark where his house used to stand. Victor always visited his village whenever he was on watch. He loved it so.

My health declined with time. I began to suffer severe headaches and very frequently felt something wrong with my heart. In five years, two more babies, Vovochka and Maryka, were born and Yuri turned 5 years old. They were not very strong children and I stayed home with them. Victor’s health was also clearly unstable but he never wanted to listen to us telling him to quit his job in Chernobyl. I begged him to be treated in the hospital, but he was somehow scared to go. One day he told me that when he goes to the hospital it means he is dying. None of my attempts to persuade him had any effect. He was always telling himself that he would not die until our daughter got married. I myself often had to call the ambulance, and, when Victor was away in Kiev, I would enter the hospital for treatment.

He continued to work at Chernobyl. In 1995 there was a large amount of salary that was owed to the people working at Chernobyl. Workers organized a strike and those who went on a strike were paid, but what my husband received was very small. We could barely survive with the help of my parents. The amount of unpaid salary kept increasing until 2000. My husband did not quit his job only because he had hopes of receiving what he was owed. Even now, however, we have yet to be paid this money.

At the end of 2000 my husband’s condition went terribly bad--he could not sleep or lie down, but could only stand and walk. Once when he was feeling very hard he said to me, “Tamara, I have not had a single day off for seven years.” Nevertheless, he did not go to hospital. He was scared. In November he took time off to rest at home. December passed and at the end of January he at last went to hospital and had an X-ray taken. Doctors said that he was suffering from tuberculosis, but I never believed them. Later I was proven right. He did not cough at all. Instead he had a severe backache. It was as though an iron hoop were squeezing his chest. He abruptly lost weight. The results of the examinations were bad, but nothing was made clear by ultrasound.

At the hospital in Solomenka district, a professor told me after administering an ultrasound



Younger son, Vova. He died in 2001.



Daughter, Maria and elder son, Yuri. 2004.

examination that my husband had pancreatic cancer. It was as if the ground collapsed under my feet and I felt like I lost my consciousness for a moment. I did not want to believe the doctor's words. I prayed day and night believing that a miracle would happen after all. With all my might, I tried not to cry in front of my husband but on the way home I could not stop tears from flowing. At home I also held back in front of my children. I prayed to God and begged for help. Before going into the operation, Victor wept and I assured him that everything would be all right. That night he was moved to surgery from the intensive care unit. Hope for life seemed to light up in his eyes. On the second day, Friday, he was again moved to the intensive care unit and the light of his hope was snuffed out. Ten days after the operation, he passed away.

However reluctant I was to go on living, I had to bring up and educate my three children. Still I felt that life without Victor was meaningless. I cried and my medical condition was aggravated. I had medical treatment but did not get well. When I lost my younger son, three years after my husband's death, I thought I would go mad. It was the second time and I was saying to myself "why my son and not me?" Two children were left. Even though I knew that they needed me, I could only walk like a robot for a whole year. How hard it is to live with such wounds, unable to breathe deeply or to stand up straight, unable to do anything with such a burden on my shoulders. I am always afraid about how I can go on living.

I am very grateful to the kind Japanese people who support us by sending money and medicines. Medicines are essential for us but doctors cannot prescribe expensive medicines at no cost. It is impossible to buy expensive medicine for my children and myself even when they are ill. Dear friends, may be God with you and protect your families from misfortune and grief. I thank you for your kindness. May the same kind of accident that happened here never happen anywhere else. I would like to finish my story of why I came to live in Pripyat and how we live in Kiev now. May all people of the world be blessed with happiness and love.

(Translated into English by HASEGAWA Kaoru)

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