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Traumatic Chernobyl: Women's Memories

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Introduction

The accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, which occurred on April 26, 1986, is the largest man-made disaster in the history of the world. Its horrific after-effects are still evident today. Each anniversary of this tragedy makes the world remember not only the environmental consequences of the destruction of the nuclear reactor, but also the people whose lives have been radically changed by this disaster. Even more than thirty years later there are no straight answers to the huge number of questions about the Chernobyl disaster, starting with the causes of the tragedy and ending with its impact on different spheres of people's lives. Unfortunately, they discuss the Chernobyl accident only around the time of its anniversary, which leads to a decrease in scientific discourse on this subject and to the gradual forgetting of this event. But the memory of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the tragic significance of which many were not aware at the time, has been preserved by hundreds of thousands of people, both those who lived in the disaster area and those who were sent by the state to the site of the accident to participate in its remediation work.

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The historical events of the 20th century, which include numerous wars, genocides, and catastrophes, have led to an interest in the study of traumatic memory in modern society as a distinct area of memory studies. The authors that devoted their work to the study of traumatic memory have made significant progress in this field. Thus, the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka has identified several types of trauma: biological and demographic trauma (famine and epidemics), socio-political trauma (anarchy and revolution), and cultural trauma (the decline of fundamental values and behavioral models).² It is worth noting an article by the Ukrainian researcher Vitaliy Ogienko, who analyzes the study of cultural trauma in international historiography.³ The tragedy of the Holocaust provided a powerful basis for studying trauma as well as its varieties, markers, mechanisms, and signals. According to the well-known trauma researcher Cathy Caruth, studying the traumatic experience of the Holocaust has opened a new aspect of study in the humanities, one in whose special significance comes not from the event itself, but from its impact on the person.⁴ Thus, the emphasis is not on the fact itself, but on the memory of it, taking into account psychological and anthropological factors.

It is worth recalling the definition of memory policy proposed by the historian and writer Alon Confino, a professor at the University of Virginia and Ben Gurion University in Israel, best-known as the author of the book *The World Without Jews*: “In other words, it’s about who wants to get to remember what and why.”⁵ When a certain topic is dominated by an artificial, politically determined silence and the witnesses are invisible, the impression is that an event has not occurred at all. Therefore, “the story of personal history about the traumatic past is not only an urgent need for a person, but also an extremely important social act.”⁶

² П. Штомпка, Социальные изменения как травма, “Социологические исследования,” no. 1, 2001, pp. 6–16.

³ В.І. Огієнко, *Культурна травма у сучасній зарубіжній історіографії: концепт та метод*, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/publication/ogienko-vi-kulturna-travma-u-suchasni-zarubizhnii-istoriografii-kontsept-ta-metod> (accessed: 24.11.2019).

⁴ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History Paperback*, Johns Hopkins University Press 1996, p. 168.

⁵ A. Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*, New Haven 2014, p. 304.

⁶ D. LaCapra, *Historia w okresie przejściowym. Doświadczenie, tożsamość, teoria krytyczna*, Kraków 2009, p. 347.

While studying the Holocaust, Dori Laub⁷ has noticed that long-term survivors of the Nazi death camps were “beyond the reach of human ability and the desire to understand, tell, or imagine. [...] The need to narrate the history of the Holocaust bumped into the impossibility of such a story, which ruled universally the silence of the truth. [...] And the longer the story remained unsolved, the more distorted it appears in the perception of the person itself; therefore, it doubts more and more in the reality of those events.”⁸ Meanwhile, Cathy Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience* that through the notion of trauma we come to a new understanding that permits history to arise where immediate understanding is impossible.⁹

Despite the fact that the researchers have offered different concepts of perception of the Chernobyl accident and the “exclusion zone” as “cultural trauma,” “information trauma,” “collective trauma,” and “place of memory” against the backdrop of Ukrainian national history, the stories of hundreds of thousands of people involved in this tragedy and their emotions remain behind a strong wall and devoid of contemporary research discourse.

This should be noted by researchers who are engaged in personal stories of the event. Personal interviews with participants in the event have been published by the well-known researcher and writer Svetlana Alexievich.¹⁰ This Nobel Prize winner pays attention to memories, giving her narrators space to speak about the Chernobyl experience on the pages of her book. The most recent thorough work on Chernobyl is Serhii Plokhii's *The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*,¹¹ for which the author has received numerous international awards. He combines the individual testimonies of the participants of the event with an analysis of official documents, reports, and orders. It is in these works that women's voices are present, along with the testimonies of men, and this is a positive trend. Nevertheless, these works present oral history evidence without gender specifics or distinguishing between female and masculine memories of the event.

⁷ D. Laub, *Truth and Testimony* in C. Caruth (eds.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore 1995, p. 45.

⁸ К. Карут, *Почути травму. Розмови з провідними спеціалістами з теорії та лікування катastroфічних досвідів*, Київ 2017, p. 496.

⁹ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience...*

¹⁰ С. Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва. Хроники будущего (Chernobyl Prayer: Chronicles of the Future)*, Острожье–Москва 1997, p. 224.

¹¹ S. Plokhii, *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe*, New York 2018, p. 432.

In the work *The Politics of Invisibility*, Belarusian author Olga Kuchinskaya¹² explores the effects of radiation on the health, behavior, and mood of different categories of people who have lived and continue to live in the contaminated area. Its main purpose is to show the multiperspectivity of the invisible danger, as it can be generally understood, based on the examples of medical, radiological, and environmental research as well as an oral history of the people. Her research shows how the consequences of a nuclear accident were made invisible and how we deal with other modern hazards – toxins or global warming – that are largely imperceptible to the human senses.

Author Kate Brown's research corresponds with Olga Kuchinsky's work. In her book *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future*,¹³ she shows the magnitude of the consequences of the accident and serves as a guide for survival in the present and future. Kate Brown pays much attention to the problem of hiding the catastrophic world consequences not only by the Soviet authorities, but also by world organizations, including the UN. This work is useful for this article in that she encounters many everyday protagonists, often women, who fought to bring attention to the ballooning health catastrophe and adapt to life in a post-nuclear landscape, where dangerously radioactive berries, deformed trees, and birth defects still persist.

According to the well-known Ukrainian researcher of oral history Oksana Kis:

[a] women's oral story gives the opportunity to open at the same time several new dimensions of Ukrainian history in the '20th century: individual, everyday, gender. The study of the circumstances and factors that formed the social identities of Ukrainian women, their political, social, and social guidance, etc., is crucial given the key role of women as agents of the socialization of children. On the other hand, women are half of Ukraine's citizens, so a study of the genesis of their political views, societal ideals, values, etc., may provide a clue to understanding the factors of women's electoral behavior, the criteria for political choice, the motives for social activism, etc.¹⁴

¹² O. Kuchinskaya, *The Politics of Invisibility: Public Knowledge About Radiation Health Effects After Chernobyl*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press 2014, p. 239.

¹³ K. Brown, *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future*, New York 2019, p. 432.

¹⁴ O. Кісь, *Репрезентація етнічної та регіональної ідентичності в автобіографіях жінок, "Україна Модерна,"* vol. 11, 2006, pp. 85–98, http://www.womenhistory.org.ua/images/texty/Kis_ethnic_regional_UM.pdf (accessed: 04.12.2019).

The liquidation of the Chernobyl accident involved a gender division of roles, which involved male liquidators (firefighters, power engineers, military personnel, doctors, etc.) who occupied their niches in the historical memory of the Chernobyl space, while the share of female liquidators (3 percent) remained obscured. It should be noted that women also should have a place in the collective memory of the accident. After all, along with men, they carried out severe liquidation work in the first hours after the explosion, lived in the field, and risked their health. Chernobyl not only radically altered their lives, but in many cases it destroyed it, removing people from a stable place of residence, breaking up family ties and friendships, and taking away the health and life of relatives and friends. However, the liquidators are not the only ones in the issue of insufficient attention of researchers: the forgotten witnesses of the Chernobyl catastrophe include evacuees and the resettled residents of Chernobyl, Pripyat, and the surrounding villages. Thus, this encompasses different categories of participants and witnesses to the Chernobyl accident, including liquidators and evacuated and displaced people.

The main goal of this publication is to study the memories of women, who were evacuated and displaced or liquidated the consequences of the accident and based on oral interviews collected nearly thirty years after the Chernobyl accident in order to track what they remember and what they emphasize in their accounts. What is the place of trauma in their stories? How did their world change after the accident? What did they encounter after moving or returning from the high radiation area? The analysis of women's memories of the Chernobyl disaster combines these interfaces into the collective memory of the events of April 26, 1986, and afterwards.

Methods

The oral history method plays an important role in this study. Using this method, a field study that gathered interviews with witnesses to the Chernobyl events was conducted. All these recorded interviews are contained in the Archives of Oral History collection on the official site of the Chernobyl Historical Workshop.¹⁵ Today, the Chernobyl Workshop Archive of Oral

¹⁵ The Chernobyl Historical Workshop started its work in April 2012 in Kharkiv as a joint project of the International Education Center Dortmund (IBB Dortmund), the German-Ukrainian Affiliate Network (DUN) and the Kharkiv City Public Organization "Union

Histories has about two hundred interviews that are not used in any historical research. Women's autobiographical accounts are the main source of this study, which shows the impact of the individual historical experience of women in the process of forming their personal attitudes to the events at the moment of the Chernobyl disaster and afterwards.

In this article, I re-evaluate Fritz Schütze's biographical interview method with its orientation towards the analysis of social problems experienced by the individual. Schütze offers unique insights into the process of identity formation. These insights are made possible because of the "triple bind of narration" inherent in Schütze's methodology, that is to say the requirements to close, condense, and provide detail.¹⁶ This method and its application to each story make it clear to us that the memories of all the women about the events at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant are traumatic. Also, such general methods of historical research as comparative, typological, structural, and functional, as well as analysis and synthesis, were used. They allowed me to analyze the interviews to reveal the features of each account.

The story chosen to write about in this publication is a sample that provides us with a field to explore the history of the Chernobyl disaster and enables us to draw on women's experiences.

Before going to the narrative itself, it is worth defining trauma. Barbara Misztal writes:

'Traumatic memory' is such a kind of memory which is based on a terrible experience; most often, it is particularly expressive, obsessive, uncontrollable, persistent, and somatic-manifested. Psychologists study trauma in two directions: first, this is an event that happened in the outside world with a person, who was subjectively experienced, so external and internal realities are considered simultaneously within the concept of 'traumatic state' or 'traumatic situation.'¹⁷

Chernobyl." The workshop is a consulting and research and educational center, on the basis of which legal assistance and social support are provided to the victims of the Chernobyl catastrophe and meetings, thematic exhibitions, contests and other important events are organized. An important area of the workshop is the Archive of Oral Histories.

¹⁶ Fritz Schütze's *Autobiographical Narrative Analysis Applied to Nursing Research*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0104-07072017004260015> (accessed: 03.12.2019).

¹⁷ B. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering*, London 2003, p. 47.

The second meaning relates to further pathological consequences, which are considered to be caused by the former trauma by extrapolation from the past. Oral history researchers show that narrators use special forms of expression of their own experiences, feelings, and emotions in their narratives. When they share their traumatic experiences, the trauma is expressed in a different way than other stories.¹⁸

It is also worth mentioning the article by Oksana Kis about collective memory and historical trauma that focuses on female memories of the Holodomor. In it, she provides a wide range of historiography and research analysis in this area.¹⁹

The signals of trauma, which were classified by the well-known psychologist and anthropologist Gadi BenEzer, are useful to this article. With these signals, we can trace the presence or absence of trauma in the narrative: self-awareness; a hidden event; long-lasting silence; emotional explosions; emotional isolation; numbness; repetition (obsession); getting stuck in the past; intrusive images; excuses; disorientation; the inability to talk; voice changes; and body language.²⁰

Gadi BenEzer notes that in his or her account, a traumatized person will show some of the above-mentioned signals.²¹ These signals of suggested injury have become important to this study and have helped to distinguish between certain traumatic experiences from the narrators mentioned in this article.

However, identifying trauma issues is not easy in the case of Chernobyl. The actors in these events have very different memories; they are the representatives of different categories of witnesses, so the definition of trauma here should be more voluminous in nature and show multiple perspectives. Their memories also include psychosomatics, which defines trauma as an aversive event involving actual violent or accidental death or the threat of it and trauma as an event that has changed people's lives and their sense of meaning of life. Chernobyl trauma should be discussed

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ О. Кісь, Колективна пам'ять та історична травма: теоретичні роздуми на тлі жіночих спогадів про Голодомор, Харків 2010, р. 191.

²⁰ G. BenEzer, *Trauma Signals in Life Stories* in S. Leydesdorff (eds.), *Trauma. Life Stories of Survivors*, New York 2017, pp. 1–16, <https://ru.scribd.com/document/345736232/Trauma-Signals-in-Life-Stories-by-BenEzer> (accessed: 11.10.2019).

²¹ *Ibidem.*

from an interdisciplinary perspective, taking into account medical, environmental, psychological, and philosophical components.

The direct ontologization of the Chernobyl issue is questionable.²² The experience of women that is transmitted through oral histories shows us different memories and the different experiences of each. Thus, when we talk about trauma, we use a multi-perspective approach, discussing the pain and wounds that are living in these people's lives and their changing life orientations, which have led to a change in the world of storytelling and has influenced their daily lives and ways of getting out of trauma.

In this article, I present the testimonies of women who have experienced trauma due to the accident. Typically, the interviews were conducted in the premises of the above-mentioned Chernobyl Historical Workshop, and the interviewers used a semi-structured interview method, where the first question concerned the life of the narrator ("Tell us your life story"), gradually proceeding directly to the topic of Chernobyl.

The interview with Mrs. Lyudmila was peculiar because there were three meetings, and recording took place both in a workshop and a city park. The story of Lyudmila Nikolaevna Baziyeva,²³ who was born in 1948 and was evacuated from Chernobyl, begins with an account of her family. Her mother was a native of Chernobyl, while her father, an army officer who served with Soviet troops in Germany for four years, hailed from the Tambov region. When Baziyeva's father retired, her family returned to their mother's homeland in Chernobyl. Lyudmila married and gave birth to a son and a daughter; she lived with her family in Pripyat, ten kilometers from the nuclear power plant. Her story is an example of a human life with trauma.

She said there was a small technical failure at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and was told that there was nothing to worry about. Lyudmila Nikolayevna notes with frustration that there were no safety lessons given to people living in the epicenter of the nuclear power plant. Nobody knew anything about radiation, the possibility of emissions, or danger. "This

²² Я.О. Яковлева, *Чорнобильська трагедія як "культурна травма" України*, "Антропологічні виміри філософських досліджень," vol. 6, 2014, p. 43–53, http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/Avfd_2014_6_7 (accessed: 24.11. 2019).

²³ Interview with Ludmila Baziyeva recorded by Natalia Kozlova, Kharkiv, 30.05.2013, 14.06.2013, Chernobyl Historical Workshop, Oral History Archive, <http://www.1986.org.ua/uk/workshop> (accessed: 04.12.2019).

shows [...] our illiteracy, that there was not enough information [...] about what a nuclear power plant was [...] about the possibility of an explosion."²⁴

After moving from the Chernobyl zone, Lyudmila and her family received housing in Kharkiv, but the Kharkiv residents she met were not very pleased. The way people treated Lyudmila Nikolaevna while she was living there and passing medical exams to get a job was a psychological shock. She has repeatedly heard people say to her: "You are radioactive! You are dangerous!"²⁵ This once again confirms the lack of awareness of the population about the disaster, radiation exposure, ways of infection, and the consequences.

It was difficult to arrange everyday life in a new place and enroll children in school. Fears for the future and, above all, the future of the children became the biggest nightmare. Mrs. Lyudmila recalls: "Fear, fear, and nothing but fear [...] especially for my two children. My daughter was eleven years old and my son was fifteen years old, and they needed to attend school."²⁶

Based on my observations as an interviewer, the greatest source of pain and emotional trauma for this person was not the absence of a well-arranged everyday life, the state's refusal of subsidies and pensions for the evacuated, the court's evidence in the case of her son's disability and the small pension received later, nor the state of her health and the consequences of the catastrophe itself, but the resettlement and the moral oblivion by the state (both Soviet and Ukrainian) of this category of participants in the Chernobyl catastrophe: the evacuated.

After all, she is aware of the effects on the health of her family, speaking quite calmly about the link between various diseases that have worried the whole family since the accident. The way she talks about health and well-being is different. The respondent mentions that even being far from Chernobyl and knowing about the state of the exclusion zone they were ready to gather immediately and return to their city: "We watched TV and listened to the news. There were a lot of people sitting in front of the TV, staring at the announcer with our eyes open and listening when he would say that we could return to Chernobyl."²⁷ As we can see, the loss of a native home turned out to be painful and the milestone event that affected her life. Her individual

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

trauma manifests itself both psycho-somatically and mentally when she talks about the accident, given the overall history of memories and focus on pessimism, and the negative impact of the event on her later life.

At that time, the main task of state agencies was to overcome the consequences of the disaster: to extinguish the fire as soon as possible, to relocate the people, and to provide them with housing and medical care. These were basic necessities, but they were solved mechanically, without considering family relationships, family bonds, or the emotional and psychological state of the evacuated. Thus, Mrs. Lyudmila's family had to go to different parts of Ukraine: her sister relocated to Mukachevo, while her parents moved to Odessa, which was psychologically traumatic for her. During the interview, she emphasized that the liquidators whose service she did not question in any way were in a better position than the evacuated, because they returned to their homes and relatives. The evacuated lost not only their homes but also their relatives and friends. With tears in her eyes, Mrs. Lyudmila says that they are all "orphans" who have been deprived of their homes, relatives, friends, and acquaintances: "We are orphans. That is what they say; we are orphans in an emotional way."²⁸

Mrs. Ludmila's story is very emotional; her words and the way she was interviewed tells us that the events of the Chernobyl accident were a great shock to her; it was an event that dramatically changed her life and left a traumatic impact. More than thirty years have passed since the resettlement, and the longing for the evacuees' native land continues to live on in the narrative. Her excitement, emotions, tears, how she identifies displaced persons with "orphans," and the forgetfulness of the state and society show that the trauma has not left her; she continues to live with trauma that has affected her consciousness and life. After all, she is self-aware of her trauma; she describes it, identifies it, and passes the traumatic effect verbally because she cries, her voice trembles, and her emotions are volatile. The impact of these events on her life is crucial because she consciously talks about the tragedy, recalling her feelings and pain. The word "fear" repeatedly sounds in her narrative. We can notice certain repetitions in her story because she constantly repeats the same phrases, recalling how honored the liquidators were, and how they forgot about them, the resettled. During the interview, her trembling voice, tears, and gestures reveal traumatic

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

memories. The interview with Mrs. Lyudmila is evidence of a fundamental change in the lives of resettled people from the radiation-contaminated area in general. The fate of her family has suddenly changed; her story is permeated by the emotions of the total destruction of her happy life in Pripyat and her life after the accident. Another indicator of her desolation and despair is in the language of the respondent. After all, according to the opinion of the Ukrainian folklorist Oksana Kuzmenko,²⁹ repeated use of the particle *no* indicates the anomaly of the described situation. Mrs. Lyudmila mentions adjusting to life after resettlement under new conditions: “And we had *nothing* to wear, *no* shoes, let’s say *neither* a spoon *nor* a fork; we had *nothing* of our own [...] and *nowhere* to go. As of now, there are things like napkins to wipe the table. And we did *not* even have a rag to wipe the table because there was *nothing* to break piece [...].”³⁰

Female liquidators also fall under the definition of this language marker, because their memories are permeated with similar facts. Thus, remembering the arrival to Chernobyl immediately after the accident, the laboratory technician N. Tereschenko recalls:

That’s how people responded to the health of others: by misunderstanding where they were sent and what to do. Here. Then again, nothing was said about what to take with us, what to do, and how to protect ourselves. [...] Nobody was prepared for anything like this. [...] Well, when we went inside, to be honest, it was scary. I thought: Lord, where am I? I did not know anything; there was nothing at all. Doctors did not have either specialized protective clothes or any protective masks. I arrived. Well, how was it? Like a war. Frankly speaking, I had such a feeling like I had visited a hot spot.³¹

This example tells us of the visual signs of the trauma that Benzer has noted (psychosomatic), while its history tells us about the presence of another trauma, so-called autopsychological trauma, which is characterized

²⁹ O. Kuzmenko, *Folk Features of Folk Stories About the Holodomor (On the Materials of Their Own Records from Vinnitsa). Echoes of the Famine-Genocide of 1932–1933: The Ethnocultural Consequences of the Holodomor in Ukraine*, Lviv 2005, p. 94.

³⁰ L. Bazyeva, *op. cit.*; O. Кісь, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³¹ Interview with Natalia Tereshchenko recorded by Natalia Kozlova, Kharkiv, 19.03.2014, Chernobyl Historical Workshop, Oral History Archive, <http://www.1986.org.ua/uk/workshop> (accessed: 04.12.2019).

by decreased self-esteem, the loss of life prospects, feelings of inferiority, and concern for one's fate and destiny family and relatives.³²

Unlike the conscious evidence from the evacuated Mrs. Lyudmila, there are narratives that at first glance look quite calm and weighed, but, in most cases, they are traumatized – the so-called “hidden event” about which Oksana Kis writes in the article on the tragedy of the Holodomor.³³ Thus, Glukhovskaya Lidiya Mikhailovna,³⁴ attended classes of advanced training in Kyiv along with other doctors from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, and volunteered to go to Chernobyl.

She says in her testimony:

I will tell you honestly, I could not even immediately remember the word ‘Chernobyl.’ Well, it’s funny right now, huh? And then somehow, well, there were other cases: there were other problems; we all somehow were far from it and then we were on a business trip, right? [...] We went to our dean’s office and told him that we were doctors, we were specialists, and that if our help was needed we were ready to participate in it.³⁵

From Lidiya’s experience in Chernobyl, traumatic memory with the corresponding emotions flared up in the following story: Glukhovskaya returned to Kyiv on May 9, 1986. She narrated her feelings as follows:

Here, I mean in Kyiv, we went to Khreshchatyk Street by subway from the railway station. The other girls took a taxi to the dormitory, because they had microscopes. I decided to walk a little bit around the city just to calm down. There was a dissonance there because there were nicely dressed people celebrating Victory Day and everything. [...] On the other side there was such grief. You know, I suddenly got some kind of hysteria. I burst out into tears just

³² С. Табачников, Психосоматические расстройства и постчернобыльский синдром, “Доктор,” vol. 6, 2002, p. 14–16.

³³ О. Кісь, *Коллективна пам’ять...*

³⁴ Interview with Lydia Glukhovskaya, recorded by Natalia Kozlova, Kharkiv, 19.04.2014, Chernobyl Historical Workshop, Oral History Archive, <http://www.1986.org.ua/uk/workshop> (accessed: 05.09.2019).

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

because of this. Well, it was probably something emotional, some sort of nervous breakdown. Then I came to the dormitory; everyone was taking a shower, as always...³⁶

This episode is the most emotional of all the memories of the respondent who basically detailed her huge amounts of work in Chernobyl, constant fatigue, and the duty to help those in need. Her narrative was generally perceived as routine work; doctors and laboratory assistants appeared to be robots who mechanically and systematically performed endless work, and as soon as she had left the zone, her emotional state changed. That very moment her trauma, which had previously been hidden, manifested itself, declaring its existence in her language and emotions.

Similar narratives have been noticed in the memories of women of other professions. For example, the professional pastry chef Maria Petrovna Ivanova says:

Yes, it's painful to look back and remember, and this is just terrible, and what impressed me the most is that there was nobody there; you couldn't hear either children or adults. [...] Darkness, emptiness, and everything stopped there. [...] It was especially terrible seeing the villages. The one we were passing through – that was something horrible. I still remember those children's tights hanging on the ropes as if it were yesterday. What broke my heart and made me feel sad was that there were no children's voices around.³⁷

Analyzing the narratives of women related to the Chernobyl accident, I have noticed that the trauma can consciously or unconsciously be seen among almost all the respondents. Many women evacuated or relocated from the thirty-kilometer zone began crying almost right when they heard the first words about Chernobyl, unlike the female liquidators who carry their traumatic memories into the call of duty to the Motherland, helping people and conducting the liquidation work. Tatyana Grigorievna Suprun recalls her first impressions from Chernobyl with sadness and tears:

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

³⁷ Interview with Maria Ivanova, recorded by Natalia Kozlova, Kharkiv, 04.09. 2015, Chernobyl Historical Workshop, Oral History Archive, <https://bit.ly/35VavuO> (accessed: 04.12.2019).

And I would like to say that when I arrived in the city, it struck me with its beauty, with its abundance of roses. In Pripyat, there were five roses per person, per inhabitant. We had them everywhere; everywhere there were just flowerbeds of roses, lots of them, and they were all different: yellow and orange, and wine red and dark. And, of course, their smells were their beauty – always in the early morning they greeted us with droplets of dew. And we were happy.³⁸

Among the narratives of the majority of people resettled from Chernobyl and Pripyat, there is a marked division of their lives: before and after the accident. Most of them describe joyful, fun, prosperous, and happy lives in Pripyat:

That's why it somehow hurts. At the beginning it hurt so badly. You know, it was my youth, nevertheless. There I had so many friends, so many people I knew. You know, we had such interesting meetings there. There, if we had a Christmas tree we would gather at the square and we would all wear costumes and everyone would sing and dance. That's how we lived, according to God's laws, just like children. Everyone was happy. And we had experienced some interesting events there. We went fishing, we spent time outdoors. There were lots of mushrooms. [...] Well, Pripyat had been spoiling everyone. We had been spoiled with everything; we'd been loved and taken care of. We always had a lot of fish; that's why we went fishing often. Each Saturday, we went to spend some time outdoors with friends. It was always very beautiful there. Later, we didn't want to see another side of Pripyat. [...] Of course, you would not want to. [...] I would never return there. Maybe I could just go and see it, but it would be painful.³⁹

Respondents who describe their lives as perfect before the accident seem to become immersed in the past in order to revive those emotions again. Their memories sometimes impress with details: many women remember the variety of flowers growing, the smells, and the clothes they wore, sometimes in the tiniest details. Separate memories of Chernobyl can be singled

³⁸ Interview with Tatiana Suprun, recorded by Natalia Kozlova, Kharkiv, 01.11.2013, Chernobyl Historical Workshop, Oral History Archive, <https://bit.ly/2OMONDH> (accessed: 04.12.2019).

³⁹ Interview with Nadia Butenko, recorded by Natalia Kozlova, Kharkiv, 11.11.2016, Chernobyl Historical Workshop, Oral History Archive, <https://bit.ly/387DgpZ> (accessed: 04.12.2019).

out in certain stories that flash in the memory of the interviewees. They have the appearance of photographic images that have crept into their consciousness and have a clear picture against the background of a rather “gray” monotonous general presentation. Such memories are called “memory flashes,” meaning “exceptionally bright, accurate, precise, unforgettable memories of the circumstances surrounding a person at the moment when he was brought to a certain unusual event.”⁴⁰

In the opinion of trauma researchers, the ability to share memories of the traumatic past and recognize them as a part of the history are necessary steps on the path to liberation from suffering for both an individual and for society.⁴¹

Results

Taking into consideration the fact that more than thirty years have passed since the accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the victims of this event continue to live with an injury and the concept of “trauma” is what makes Chernobyl relevant, which sets new challenges for researchers: to investigate the “phenomenon of trauma” and to integrate the results into a common historical heritage, reconstructing the full picture of the past. The injury can be verbalized by the observations and known techniques mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Based on the interpretation of trauma in the broad sense, as an event that has changed one’s established lifestyle and had clear and hidden signals, the experience of women mentioned in the text was traumatic and had certain commonalities and differences. Every woman experiences her trauma in a different way: some talk about it openly, while others hide it. There is an obvious division between life “before” and “after” among all people who have had traumatic experiences. In a sense, it combines memories, defining the boundaries between happy life and its radical changes. For women liquidators, this is usually endless work and damage to their health upon returning home; for women who were evacuated and displaced, this was losing a home and changing their lives from better to worse, from fun to sad, and moving from the forest to the steppe. Thus, the common narrative of the evacuees is sentimental memories of leisure, mass festivities, and frequent hikes to the forest for mushrooms and

⁴⁰ G. BenEzer, *Trauma Signals...*

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

berries with friends and acquaintances. These are testimonies that are the most emotional, positive, and detailed in the descriptions of their resettled lives.

A description of the special beauty of those places is contained in every interview, and the painful, traumatic subtext is well read, both morally, psychologically and somatically. All categories of women confirm the lack of true information about the accident, the effects of radiation, the absence of basic preventive measures, and the lack of awareness of the magnitude of the disaster. Researcher Kate Brown has written: "I would like scientists to know a bit more about the history behind the science."⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, women's memories of Chernobyl are unique, adding a new perspective to the history of the Chernobyl accident. Trauma and the way to fight it is urgent and requires more study and analysis, but neither the researchers nor society should neglect this experience. Examples of passing traumatic experiences in female biographical stories do not pass without notice; trauma has affected their subsequent lives. Each experience presented in these texts is individual and unique. Each story represents its own course after an injury. Some of them, such as Mrs. Lyudmila, could not survive the trauma because it followed them for so many years; her memories are sensual and emotional, and they point not only to her personal experiences, concerns, and fears. These memoirs give a voice to the entire category of displaced people who have not resorted to the loss of their home and have not been able to cope with the injury. In other stories, trauma is manifested in other signals, such as speech, gestures, and repetitions, which are difficult to distinguish at first glance, unlike the expressed somatic manifestations. That does not mean that these memories are not traumatic; most likely their narrators are not aware of the trauma and they continue to live with it without admitting it, without moving on in life and fighting the injury.

Publishing the stories of the people who were at the epicenter of the Chernobyl catastrophe or took part in its elimination, we reconstruct the history of those times, recreate its vivid character, and fill it with the emotions, experiences, and everyday lives of all who have survived these events.

⁴² P. Dizikies, *Chernobyl: How Bad Was It? A Scholar's Book Uncovers New Material About the Effects of the Infamous Nuclear Meltdown*, <http://news.mit.edu/2019/chernobyl-manual-for-survival-book-0306> (accessed: 04.12.2019).

Dry facts and statistics turn into real subjects and real people. Their testimonies of the Chernobyl tragedy become historical narratives that reconstruct our past and enable the public to rethink it, draw conclusions, take on experiences, and be prepared for such challenges in the future.

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*Traumatic Chernobyl:
Women's Memories*

This article presents interviews with women who witnessed the Chernobyl tragedy; they were liquidators of the accident, evacuated, or displaced. The stories are stored in an archive, which has become a significant part of the activities of the Chernobyl Historical Workshop in Kharkiv. These examples show that there is the presence of injury in each of these memories. The article is of a narrative character, which reflects female emotions, experiences, pain and anxieties. The Chernobyl tragedy and its participants continue to remain in the shadow of scientific discourse, so this work is an opportunity to give them space to tell their stories related to the elimination of the accident, evacuation, and resettlement.

Keywords: trauma, trauma signals, memory, Chernobyl tragedy, women's oral history