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Chernobyl: 20 Years 20 Lives



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Meet Galina Bandazhevskaya Pediatrician, Minsk, Belarus

"Every scientist must have a critic and publicise the results of his/her work. It is important that there are those who agree or disagree with the work. One should enter into a good scientific dialogue in order to reach the truth. Unfortunately this is not possible for us."

Galina is an ambitious woman. She fills out piles of papers and goes from one public office to the next. Her project is to start an independent research laboratory in Belarus. She wants to continue with the research for which her husband, Yury Bandazhevsky, was imprisoned.

Although it will probably start as a modest laboratory it is a courageous initiative in Belarus, where everything is normally controlled centrally by the government. After many years of resistance Galina has become a strong woman, but her eyes are not bright – they often fill with tears. "I only live in the present. If I have a good day, then I'm happy. I thank God my family wasn't harmed."

Galina and Yury have always had a sincere scientific view of the world and fully adhered to the natural scientific method. They got married in 1978, aged just 21, and together they filled their little studio apartment with mice and hamsters. When their peers were out dancing or at the cinema the young couple would spend their time feeding the animals. "We bought cottage cheese and bread for the animals with our university grants. We had to breed these animals as we couldn't afford to buy many of them," Galina recalls. "We had to have enough to enable Yury to continue his work with them once he'd finished university. We asked all our neighbours for old newspapers for the animals. The whole room was used for these creatures."

The mice bit their little newborn baby but this lifestyle was considered essential for the sake of science. "Our parents were very critical of us, but we couldn't understand why they were angry with us."

Yury had a great talent for science and it was easy for him to achieve his degrees in science. He was awarded his Master's degree when he was 25 and in 1988, age 32, he was awarded a Ph.D. at a Lithuanian university. As one of the Soviet Union's youngest medical scientists the university predicted a great future for him.

The couple were living 800 km from Chernobyl in the town of Grodno, western Belarus, when the disaster occurred in 1986. This town was one of those least affected by the disaster, but as doctors Galina and Yury knew that one should immediately drink iodine and they advised everyone they knew to do this. The government, however, failed to urge the population to drink iodine. "People wouldn't believe us – they didn't think the accident was dangerous. We had the day off on 1st May. Everyone took part in the demonstration. It was great fun and we enjoyed ourselves. People weren't afraid. There was no panic. But when the disaster was announced officially four days later people started to get worried. "People worried about those who lived in the areas close to Chernobyl, about the children on summer camps and people in their summer houses. All these people were unprotected."

After two weeks children from the south of the country started coming to Grodno. The government had issued an order that all small children up to the age of three should be evacuated to 'clean', nonradioactive areas and be put into children's institutions.

"For a long time we didn't hear anything. When children from the Gomel region started being admitted to our hospital in Grodno we understood that this was a disaster on a large scale. Not all the children were healthy. Some of their blood tests were worrying and some children generally unwell. Naturally, at the time nobody made any connection between these problems and Chernobyl. There were no children who immediately went down with leukaemia, but there were some abnormalities in the structure of the blood. We registered it as 'vegetative dystonia' – a breakdown of the growth-promoting processes."

At this point in time problems with adults' immune systems were already being registered and after six months this also became common among children. Parents told the doctors that their children were often sick. The illnesses that usually went away again quickly became chronic. Bronchitis turned into infections of the lungs and lymphadenitis – an enlargement of the lymph glands – was also observed.

The intense sense of duty towards science, which had caused the couple to give up their youth, caused them to move to the provincial town of Gomel in southern Belarus in 1989. In this affected area one could better study the effects of radioactivity on the human body. "We didn't move in order to make a lot of money, to submit our dissertations or Ph.D. reports, to get an apartment or anything like that. We wanted to investigate people's health after the disaster."

Their friends and colleagues could not understand why Yury, who lived in a 'clean' area, who had attained the title of professor, who had a good job and whose wife was a department manager at the

hospital, dropped everything to start all over again. At that time the Gomel region had only 40 % of the doctors it needed. All the highly educated people moved away from there. "People couldn't understand that it was highly interesting for him, as a true scientist, to research something that nobody had researched before: how radioactivity affects the human body."

"Many people had arrhythmia, which is a disruption of the heart's rhythm. It was the first time in my life that I saw an eight-year-old child with a pacemaker. There were many cases with serious heart pathology, which I never saw in Grodno. And there were also autoimmune disorders, which we call Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) – rheumatic infection of the connective tissue. Normally it was very rare to run into a patient with SLE but in Gomel these patients were there in large numbers. I became a little worried about the increased number of children with this illness, but according to the statistics there were no major changes in the condition of the children."

Right into the 1990s they observed an alarming number of children with heart problems and a dramatic increase in the number of congenital heart disorders. Often children as young as six had arrhythmia. Therefore they began to keep statistics on their patients and discovered that there were 2½ times as many cases of heart disorders in children after Chernobyl as there had been before the disaster. When one is the first to research a subject there will always be much uncertainty connected with the results. Yury would have to do controlled research for many years in order to conclude that it was the radioactivity that was the single reason for the increased number of heart disorders.

Belarus has never had the finances to conduct this type of research and the Institute had nothing, but the doctors were enthusiastic and helped in their spare time. Yury also got a number of students together to take part in the research on a voluntary basis. The work was divided into three types. First they conducted experiments and later clinical examinations of sick people at the hospital, then finally they performed autopsies on the dead. The research took off and Yury led investigations into eye pathology, the effect of caesium on the heart and kidneys, the women's reproductive capacity etc.

The conclusion was that the human body will accumulate radioactive elements such as caesium 137 over a long period of time. Yury proved that a contamination level of as little as 50 becquerels of radioactivity per kilo body weight could cause serious health problems to a child. Caesium enters the body through food and accumulates in different organs. The thyroid gland and the heart are particularly vulnerable. When caesium 137 enters the heart it destroys the energy system in the heart cells. The result is that the mitochondria in the cells die and the structure of the cells is destroyed. Therefore problems with the heart rhythm and heart attacks occur. The same is true of the kidneys. The kidneys filter radioactivity out of the body, but if there is too much caesium they become overloaded and the most important parts of the kidneys' structure – the nephrons – die. There are about a million nephrons in each kidney in our bodies. If these nephrons die the body develops 'kidney insufficiency'.

"Through the analysis of the results of these investigations he came to some serious conclusions, which some people were not happy to hear about, for example people involved in the nuclear energy industry, IAEA etc.," says Galina, with reference to subsequent events.

The problems began gradually. In Belarus's scientific circles the Chernobyl topic was always treated with reservations. As a researcher one has to make one's results public in scientific magazines, but it became difficult for Yury to publish anything in Belarus. The directors of the Belarus universities were afraid of having anything to do with Chernobyl. From 1995 onwards Yury's students began to submit their dissertations in Russia, where the focus was different. Here the universities were willing to take the students, comment on their dissertations and allow them to submit their work.

As with all managers of large institutions in Belarus Yury had to apply to the authorities for permission to go on business trips. In 1996, when he was awarded the Gold Star and order of Albert Sweizer in Poland the Ministry of Health would not allow him to participate in the ceremony. He ended up going on holiday and travelling to Poland using his own money.

Unlike most other people in Belarus Yury was not good at remaining obscure. In 1998 he joined a commission to check the work of the 'Research Institute for Radioactive Medicine' in Minsk. He was accepted by the commission because they needed an Institute director from the Chernobyl area who was involved with medicine and there were very few others with Yury's profile. When he heard through the commission about the scientific work that the Institute was carrying out he was very critical and wrote to the Belarus president Lukashenko and to Parliament. He participated three times in the annual Chernobyl hearing in Parliament, where politicians, doctors, scientists etc. gathered to hear about the problems. Yury gave speeches about his research, about the children's and women's state of health and what needed to be done to minimise the consequences of the Chernobyl tragedy.

However, the biggest problems began when Yury had a television station make a film about his work. Many of his colleagues warned him of potential problems with the authorities and thought it would be best if he quit his job so that it didn't affect the entire Institute. Gradually people started to behave as if they did not know Galina and Yury. Their friends disappeared and stopped calling. When Galina called the director from the television station he said that he would not discuss anything over the telephone and that he did not know what had happened to them. "Everyone treated us like strangers. The people who had made the film about my husband would not continue fighting for him. When things got really serious they ran away like rats from a sinking ship."

Six months before the arrest Galina noticed that security personnel were keeping an eye on them when they came home in the evenings.

On 13th June 1999 Yury Bandazhevsky was arrested, charged with receiving bribes from young people trying to gain entrance to study at the Institute.

"The charge was based on two people's statements and these two people were also charged. They were teachers who were examiners involved in the Institute's entrance examinations. They were caught by the police when they came to evaluate an applicant whom they had earlier coached for the examination. They had given him a copy of all the examination papers with the correct answers."

According to the evidence of the two teachers they had not taken the bribes for themselves but on behalf of the principal of the Institute – Professor Bandazhevsky.

"They had no evidence against my husband. We had no secret bank accounts, we hadn't built a house. We lived in a state-owned apartment. We had no wealth, which my husband was accused of. The entire accusation was based on the statements of two witnesses. There were no witnesses who could testify how these two had forwarded the bribes to my husband and the amount of money that my husband had received, according to the witnesses, varied all the time. They said they had forgotten how much money they had given my husband. I say it was the police who set up the whole thing in order to isolate my husband from society."

In Belarus the president appoints a commission to examine young people applying to an institute. Yury suggested that the court invite members of the president's commission. These were all people with important government positions and they declared that there had been no wrongdoing, that all the grades were correct and that none of the students had cheated. Yet although the commission had declared that everything had taken place by the book, the legal proceedings against Yury continued and he was sentenced to eight years in prison.

A journalist from the Russian television programme 'Vremya' ('Time') asked the judge if he could state the evidence against Bandazhevsky, as he was unable to see it himself. 'Isn't the fact that two people testified against him evidence enough?' answered the judge.

After his arrest Yury was placed in an isolation cell without a bed, only a wooden floor. There was no wash basin and he was not permitted to use any personal hygiene items. He was not permitted to speak to his family or a lawyer. He grew a beard and lost 20 kg in 25 days. "I didn't recognise my husband when I saw him through the window on the way to the hearing," says Galina. "By then he had already developed stomach ulcers and bleeding. Then he developed some serious health problems. When he was imprisoned his health certainly didn't improve."

One has to have a very good imagination to compare Belarus prisons with those in the western world. Most of the prisoners have problems with their teeth because they lack protein and vitamins. Their tooth begin to disintegrate and fall out. For the first year Yury shared a cell with 80 other prisoners. Galina could only send things to him every fourth month and the parcel had to weigh less than 30 kg.

Bandazhevsky had now become a political case. Amnesty International reacted and the EU Commission came to check how he was. They had him transferred to a cell where there were three other people.

"In any democratic country it would be quite unthinkable to have a person sitting in prison without a trial, without being able to consult a lawyer, being interrogated in the night, being forced to say that he'd taken at least 100-150 dollars as a bribe just to be treated a little better. It's hard to imagine that this is possible at the beginning of the 21st century," says Galina, her eyes brimming with tears.

After Yury went to prison Galina moved to Minsk and found a position as a science secretary at the BELRAD Institute. On 31st May 2004 Yury was moved from the prison to Peskovtsy, hard labour institution number 26, a closed village close to Grodno. At first he had to take care of cows, then later he was made a guard on a warehouse. Galina was allowed to visit him but nobody else could.

The new research laboratory, which Galina is setting up, is being organised as an NGO (Nongovernmental Organisation). However, in Belarus one cannot start a non-governmental organisation as a matter of course, as the government has to give its permission. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for permits and every third month a commission gathers, consisting of members from the president's administration, representatives from the security service and from the Ministry of Justice.

Bandazhevsky's research could provide scientific evidence that the international limits for low radioactivity are insufficient. The damage to the Belarus people has happened, but if the government were to recognise Bandazhevsky's research it would mean that it would also have to recognise that it could not control the situation. It is thus easier to put the researcher in prison. In spite of years of problems Galina still, a little naively, thinks that neither she nor her husband is in any way 'political'. For them science and politics have absolutely nothing in common. "We don't participate in political work and we think that a doctor is always a doctor in all political systems. My husband and I believed that the situation would continue that way. We gave our opinion in order to protect people

from a hazard. Since we didn't belong to the opposition I never thought that my husband would end up in prison."

"Now that my husband and I have been through our system I can say that there's no justice in this country. If a person doesn't fit into the system and he says something different, then his freedom can be taken away with no justification. He can be accused of anything at all: corruption without evidence, murder, drugs, absolutely anything. And he'll never be able to contradict it or find any kind of justice."

Yury Bandazhevsky was released from prison on 5th August 2005. He is now working with Galina in setting up the new research laboratory.

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