

## **EY2010 Journalist Award DENMARK**

### Winner print/online

**Steffen Stubager**

**Article title: "En atomby nedsmeltning" ("The meltdown of a nuclear city")**

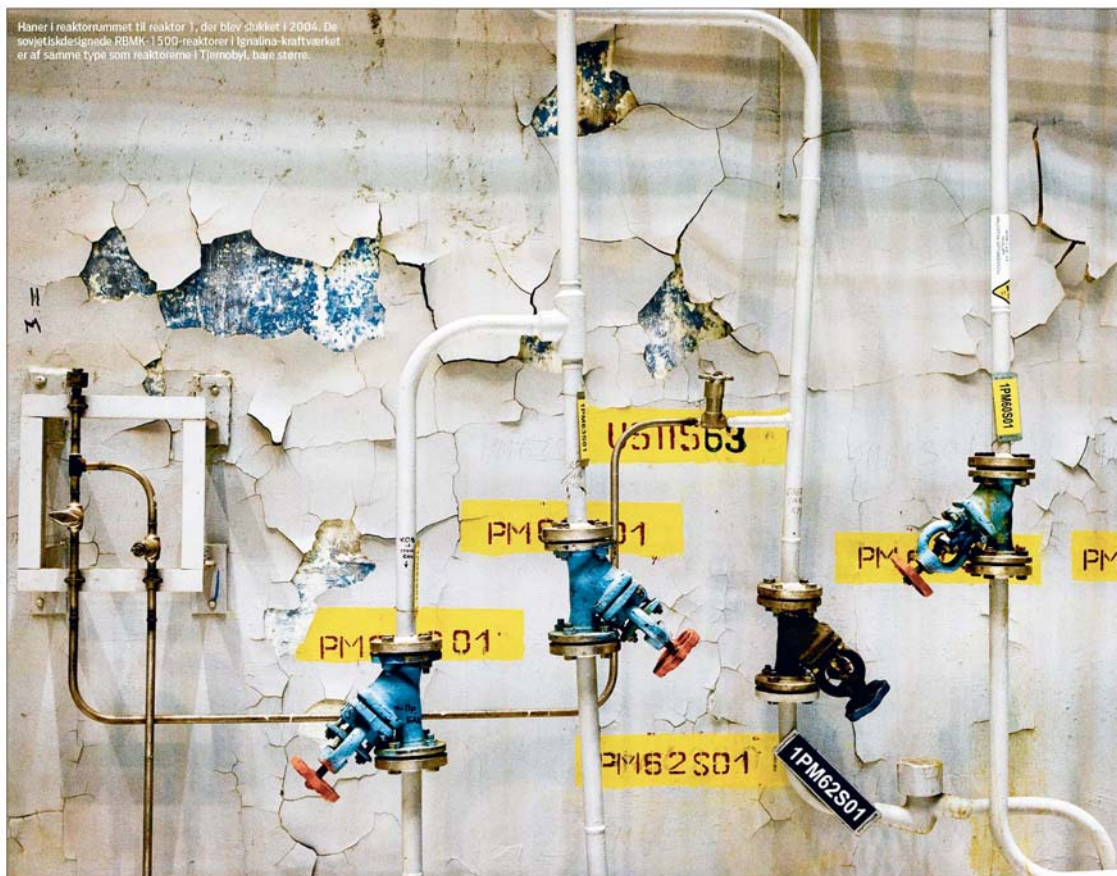
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Steffen Stubager is a 23 year old student at the Danish School of Journalism. Previously he has worked for one and a half years as an Intern at the Danish daily Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten, and also at the public organisation Region Syddanmark.

Currently Stubager is on sabbatical from journalism school in order to travel the world and write articles of varied topics. During these travels he has worked for a short period with the national Ghanaian newspaper, The Daily Graphic.

Stubager's articles have been published in Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, Århus Stiftstidende, JydskeVestkysten, various smaller magazines, and most recently in the Daily Graphic (Ghana) and The Sunday Island (Sri Lanka).



Hænder i reaktorrummet til reaktor 1, der blev slukket i 2004. De sovjetiskdesignede RBMK-1500-reaktorer i Ignalina-kraftværket er af samme type som reaktorerne i Tjernobyl, bare større.

## EN ATOMBYS NEDSMELTNING

**Lukning:** Hvad gør 30.000 mennesker i en by, der udelukkende eksisterer på grund af et atomkraftværk, når værket lukker? Indblik tog til den litauiske by Visaginas, hvor et af verdens største a-kraftværker nytårsaftnen blev slukket, for at undersøge det.

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### VISAGINAS, LITAUEN

På torvet i den litauiske by Visaginas var stemningen langt fra sit vanlige nytårskøgepunkt.

Nogle raketter susede gennem luften over den snedækkede plads, men med gabende pauser mellem eksplosionerne. Grupper af politibetjente stod med deres kniplet og schæferhunde klar til at opløse mulige optøjer, men de fik aldrig noget at lave. Og byens indbyggere fortættede sig ikke på pladsen, som de havde gjort det gennem tre årtier, men stod i klaser hist og her og betragtede stille den sorte nytårshimmel, det lysende juletræ i midten af pladsen og hinanden. Nej, der var intet at fejre i Visagi-

nas nytårsaftnen, da Litauens atomkraft blev slukket som betingelse for landets EU-medlemskab, og byens eksistensgrundlag dermed smuldrede.

«Faktisk er det den værste dag i Visaginas' historie,» konstaterede en af de fremmødte, den unge Kristina Mitkinych, som besøgte sine forældre i sin barndomsby. Hun har indset, at hendes fremtid ligger uden for Visaginas og studerer nu friluftsliv i Norge.

Det var for byens fremtid, at en mand med stridt skæg og russerhat en time efter nytår dypede en kort fakkel i væske og tændte den med sin lighter. Faklen blussede op med et »vrusj-«, og Visaginas indbyggere vrimlede og sjoskede til byens midte fra alle hjørner og kanter og tilstødende sidestier og fra skoven og fra blokkerne, og menneskekla-serne blev røbet sammen til en samlet masse. For at græde sammen, for at mindes en svunden tid og for at håbe på en fremtid for deres by. Manden med faklen tændte en

brik under en papirlanterne, som hans kone og børn holdt for ham. Familien lod varmen fylde lanternen, slap den og lod den svæve op. Sådant sendte visaginaserne i fællesskab hokke af »håbets lanterner« til himmels for en bedre fremtid for deres by.

### En mønsterby

Historien om byen og kraftværket begyndte i 1975 som en kommunistisk drøm. Om at være stærk, stor og stolt samt selvforsynende med atomenergi. Om at være Sovjetunionen. Ignalinas atomkraftværk skulle være verdens største – som Tjernobyl, men større – og producere strøm til hele den vestlige del af Sovjetunionen. For at køle reaktorerne placerede planlæggerne værket ved Litauens største sø Druksiai, som fordyber sig i landets nordøstlige del og overskrider grænsen til Hviderusland.

At bygge og drive verdens største atomkraftværk krævede arbejdere, ingeniører og

specialister. Der skulle bygges en by, og den blev navngivet efter lederen af Litauens Kommunistparti Antanas Snieckus. Byen Snieckus skulle blive en sovjetisk mønsterby af den bedste beton-arkitektur – fra oven formet som en sommerfugl.

Grantræer blev fældet, og tusindvis af byggearbejdere med at rejse betonblokkene. Efter to år stod superbyen Snieckus, bygget hurtigere end nogen kunne forestille sig, klar til arbejdere fra hele Sovjetunionen. De dygtigste russiske atomspecialister og ingeniører blev hentet fra Moskva, Ukraine, Kirgisistan, Sibirien. I dag står byen som dengang, bare slidt. Overalt rejser terningformede betonblokke sig mellem skove af slanke, spidse grantræer, og drysset ud over byen er legepladserne, som alle er bygget efter samme opskrift: tre-fire klarrestativer og ribber af solmatte røde, gule og grønne rør, der tilsyneladende altid har været nok til at



Visaginas blev bygget på få år af sovjetisk beton i slutningen af halvfjerdserne. Boligblokkene indeholder både store og små lejligheder.

Nytårsaften mødtes folk i Visaginas på byens torv efter midnat og sendte flyvende papirlanterner afsted i fællesskab. Lanterneerne skulle symbolisere håbet for fremtiden.

Vejen til atomkraftværket seks kilometer uden for Visaginas. Enorme rør ledte indtil for nylig opvarmet vand fra værket og ind til byen.

Boligerne i Visaginas blev anset for meget attraktive, men kun arbejderne på værket fik adgang til dem.

underholde alle byens børn. På stierne mellem træerne og blokkene går folk tur med deres hunde eller kærester, og drengeløkke slentrer rundt med cigaretter i mundvigene og lytter til popmusik på deres mobiltelefoner. 9 af 10 i byen taler stadig kun russisk. Spørger man efter et toilet på en tankstation uden for byen, får man for eksempel svaret: »Njet toilet«.

Det er Visaginas.

#### Den halve sommerfugl

Atombyen voksede sig 33.000 mennesker stor. Mere end 10.000 arbejdede på kraftværket som specialister, håndværkere, rengørings- og kantinepersonale og så videre. Alt voksede. Indtil den 26. april 1986, hvor Ignalina's søsteratomkraftværk i Ukraine, Tjernobyl, nedsmeltede og udsatte hundredtusindvis af mennesker for livsfarlig radioaktiv stråling. Uheldigvis for mange beboere i Snieckus, for Ignalina's atomreaktorer var af samme slags som Tjernobyl's. Nedsmeltningen skabte fornyet fokus på sikkerheden, som bremsede byggeriet af Ignalina fuldstændig. Den tredje atomreaktor blev aldrig til mere end rør, stolper og pinde, der strittede op fra en firkantet byggegrund. Sommerfuglen Snieckus fik aldrig sin anden vinge. Så brød Sovjetunionen sammen. Litauen fik selvstændighed i 1990. Snieckus fik navnet Visaginas, og de fleste af byens russere fik litauisk statsborgerskab. I dag er Visaginas den eneste by i Litauen, hvor litauerne udgør en minoritet. Det nye Litauen orienterede sig mod vesten, men nød stadig godt af elektriciteten fra Ignalina.

na. Det var først, da Litauen begyndte sine bestræbelser på at blive optaget i EU, at Visaginas igen rigtig mærkede modgang. EU frygtede en Ignalina-katastrofe i stil med Tjernobyl og krævede en dato for atomkraftværkets lukning, hvis landet skulle optages. EU var vigtigere end atomenergi for regeringen og for størstedelen af befolkningen. Datoen for den endelige lukning blev sat til den 31. december 2009, og landet blev optaget i EU. Den første reaktor blev lukket allerede den 31. december 2004, og tusindvis af arbejdere blev fyret. I de efterfølgende måneder rullede en bølge af selvmord ind over Visaginas. Op mod 30 arbejdere fra kraftværket blev fundet hængende fra træer i skoven og i deres kontorer og lejligheder.

#### En russisk ø i litauisk hav

Nu ligger Visaginas dér, isoleret, som en russisk ø i et litauisk hav, langt væk fra alt i Litauen med en mærkelig historie, som ingen af landets vestvendte litauer er rigtig stolte af. Men mest af alt skyldes isolationen indbyggernes mentalitet. De lever i deres egen tidslomme, mener byens engelsklærer, Tatjana Goloskokova, som gennem en årække har undervist byens voksne i engelsk, fordi behovet for at kunne et andet sprog end russisk stiger.

»For mennesker, der hver dag gennem 25 år har taget samme busrute til det samme arbejde og det samme kontor og hjem igen til den samme lejlighed og den samme hverdag og ikke ved andet om livet, er det umuligt at skabe sig et liv uden for Visaginas.



Det er i hvert fald svært at lære dem engelsk.

I dag har Visaginas godt 28.000 indbyggere. Spørger man nogle af dem om, hvor folk er rejst hen, findes der to svar: De er taget til udlandet for at arbejde, eller de er endt på gaden i Vilnius, Klaipeda eller Kaunas, hvor de drukner deres depressioner med alkohol.

»Sådan nogle kender vi alle sammen. Sådan er det bare,« sagde Kristina Mitkynch efter nytårsaften. »Kun Gud ved, hvad der skal ske med resten af byen.«

Ignalina har fået prædikater som »Litauens torn i øjet« efter EU's kritik af »Tjernobyl-reaktorerne«, men også som »Litauens kraftfulde hjerte«, der skabte strøm og sørgede for landets fuldstændige selvstændighed.

#### »Alting har en ende«

En torn eller et hjerte. Kun nedleggelsen af kraftværket og deponeringen af de radioak-

tive brændstoffer er tilbage, og det skal værketets 61-årige direktør gennem 19 år, Viktor Sevaldin, stå for – hvis hans helbred og det litauiske energiministerium lader ham gøre det, siger han.

Viktor Sevaldin bor i sit hus i Visaginas' naboby, Ignalina, som ligger 50 km syd for Visaginas og deler navn med kraftværket. Døgnet lyse timer bruger han på sin arbejdsplads.

Noget rumsterer i ham, her få dage efter nytårsaften, mens han sidder for enden af sit 15 stole lange langbord i sit kontor og på skift piller ved sin kuglepens og sine briller. Han er vant til at forsvare sikkerheden på værket og fortæller per automatik, at man ikke bare taler sikkerheden til tops, men må gøre noget for den.

Fra sit kontor har han hver morgen kunnet se tusindvis af arbejdere stige af busserne foran kraftværket. De fleste af dem har han fyret. Det har været en del af hans job.

»Jeg arbejder ud fra en politisk beslutning. Vi må bare gøre, hvad regeringen befaler, og glemme vores personlige følelser. Alting har en begyndelse, alting har en ende, og alle atomkraftværker skal lukke før eller siden, og sådan er det bare,« siger Viktor Sevaldin.

Han fortæller, at kraftværkets ene reaktor er tømt for radioaktive brændstoffer, mens den anden vil være tømt om seks år. De næste store opgaver bliver at omdanne de radioaktive stoffer til atomaffald og dernæst at bygge en deponeringshal, hvor atomaffaldet kan ligge. Indtil radioaktiviteten løser sig af om op mod 100 år.

Fortsættes ►



Tatjana Miolla (tv.) og sønnen Jan Miolla, som er på besøg hos sin mor i forbindelse med jul og nytår.



Ægteparret Lidija og Stefan Volchanova.

Fortsat »

## »Visaginas er perspektivløs«

**Jan Miolla** kravler op ad en tung, grønmalet jernstige og videre ud på taget af boligblokken. Her viser han det sted, hvor han som lille hang ud med sine venner og smagte cigaretter og øl og spejdede ud over granskovene og søerne. Få meter under ham, i lejligheden på syvende sal, sad hans mor Tatjana Miolla. Hun vidste godt, hvad der foregik på taget, men hun sagde aldrig noget til det.

Den 25-årige Jan Miolla besøger sin dobbelt så gamle mor i Visaginas til jul, nytår og gennem det meste af januar. De begge kom hertil fra Estlands næststørste by Daugavpils i 1986. Tatjana Miolla var netop blevet skilt fra sin mand, da hun hørte om »atombyen« og begyndte at drømme om et nyt liv i den nye by. Hun fik arbejde som istandsætter på Ignalina Atomkraftværk. I 2008 blev hun fyret.

Eller »smidt ud«, som hun kalder det. Der var ikke længere brug for hendes hjælp til at tapetsere og male. Tatjana Miolla forsøger i dag at tjene penge som istandsætter og dekorator for indbyggere i Visaginas, men der er langt mellem opgaverne.

»Nu er Visaginas perspektivløs. Hvad skal den bruge indbyggere til, når arbejdspladserne forsvinder som dug for solen?« spørger Tatjana Miolla, som sætter på at finde et arbejde i Italien og ellers lade årene gå, så hun kan få sin pension.

For Jan Miolla er det umuligt at få et arbejde i Visaginas. Han har taget, hvad han kunne få. I første omgang blev det at klargøre biler til salg i Liverpool i England. Der bor han i dag, og der vil han spare op, så han en dag kan flytte tilbage til Daugavpils for at studere »noget«.



Fra venstre ses Ivan Nenasev, sønnen Vitalis, Ina Nenasev og sønnen Alexei.

## »Man dræber en høne, der lægger guldæg«

**Ivan Nenasev** er en lun russisk mand på 55 år, der byder på hjemmebrændt vodka dagen efter nytårs-aften. Stolt viser han sin mappe med diplomer fra sine 23 år som reaktoroperatør på Ignalina Atomkraftværk. Til februar er det slut.

I 1986 hørte Ivan Nenasev og hans i dag 52-årige kone, Ina Nenasev, at Ignalina havde brug for arbejdskraft. De boede i Kaliningrad syd for Litauen, men en ny tilværelse lokkede i Visaginas. Dengang var det som at flytte rundt i samme land, siger Ivan Nenasev, for Sovjetunionen var som et stort kammeratfællesskab. Hans kone fik arbejde som ingeniør på kraftværket, men er siden blevet fyret og arbejder nu på en tysk tøjfabrik i Visaginas for en knap løn.

Ivan Nenasev nægter at indse, hvorfor Litauen bøjede sig for EU's krav om at lukke Ignalina.

»Man dræber jo en høne, der lægger guldæg,« siger han og tager sig til hovedet og uddyber:

»Det er jo en katastrofe: Ingen job, og elregningerne bliver dyrere, mens Litauen ikke magter at støtte alle os, der bliver arbejdsløse.«

Foreløbig holder han fast i et spinkelt håb om en stilling på det nye urandepot ved kraftværket, men han ved, at flere tusinde gør det samme, og samtidig kan han ikke få arbejde i Kaliningrad, fordi han tog litauisk statsborgerskab, da Sovjetunionen kollapsede.

»Uden statsborgerskab kan jeg ikke engang blive gadefejer. Sådan er Rusland. Jeg kan højst blive fisker,« siger Ivan Nenasev, der ser sort på en fremtid i Litauen: »Jeg kan umuligt få et arbejde, når arbejdsløsheden er mere end 15 pct., og man hverken kan engelsk eller litauisk.«

## »På en eller anden måde skal vi nok klare os«

Det er minus 16 grader udenfor, så **Stefan Volchanova** serverer varm brandy i sølvkopper, som hans kone Lidija Volchanova fik foræret, mens hun arbejdede som altnuldamer på Sugardas, byens lokale tv-station, avis og udbyder af kabel-tv.

55-årige Stefan Volchanova og hans 61-årige kone ler, når de taler om deres unge år. Han kom til Visaginas fra Angarsk i Sibirien i 1983, efter at han i en reklame havde set byens fir-kantede boligblokke omgivet af grønne landskaber og skinnende søer – og jobgaranti på Ignalina Atomkraftværk. Han blev svejset. Efter et halvt år kom hans kone og fik arbejde på Sugardas efter én dag i byen. Det var gode tider, siger de.

»Og vi er stadig vilde med byen, landet, naturen. Jeg græder af glæde, når jeg kommer tilbage fra ferie,« siger Lidija Volchanova.

Men når det russiske agtepar taler om de senere års nedtur, græder de. Lidija Volchanova sagde op på grund af for højt blodtryk, og Stefan Volchanova blev fyret fra Ignalina-værket i 2006. Siden har han svejset i Sverige, Finland og Norge og har sin kuffert pakket og er parat til at rejse fra byen, Lidija og deres 18 år gamle kat, hvis en arbejdsgiver skulle ringe.

»Det er hårdt at være af sted. Jeg savner altid Lidija og min by, og det er svært, når man kun taler russisk,« siger Stefan Volchanova.

De to går, hvad de kan for at bevare håbet. »Vores venner er optimistiske og siger, at alt nok skal gå, så det prøver vi også at være. Jeg håber ikke, at Gud vil lade byen dø. Hvad ellers kan vi gøre?« spørger Lidija Volchanova. Hendes mand svarer:

»På en eller anden måde skal vi nok klare os.«



Alexander Bolgarov og hans kone Jelena. Til venstre er det datteren Nadja.

## »Livet slutter ikke på grund af Ignalina«

**Alexander Bolgarov** viser en film på sin computer, hvor en atomarbejder simulerer, at han isfisker fra reaktoren. Filmen lavede han til Ignalinas 25 års jubilæum i 2007.

»Det var næsten umuligt at lave filmen på grund af sikkerheden,« siger den tidligere reaktorkontrolingeniør på Ignalina Atomkraftværk på engelsk. Han taler engelsk med accent, som han har tilegnet sig via sin 21-årige datter, der studerer i Bradford i England.

Russiske Alexander Bolgarov på 52 år kom til Visaginas med sin kone Elena Bolgarov i 1982. Han var færdiguddannet som atomingeniør på Moskva Universitet og blev tvunget til at arbejde på kraftværket.

»Men det gjorde bestemt ikke noget. Byen var fantastisk, alle var unge, og vi er her stadig i dag,« siger han.

Siden har han været et fremtrædende medlem af

Kommunistpartiets ungdomsafdeling og lært sig selv engelsk, fået to børn og arrangeret årlige festivaler for atomarbejdere verden over. I januar 2009 sagde han sit arbejde op, inden han blev fyret. Han fik i stedet en stilling på det nye Bushehr Atomkraftværk i Iran som sikkerhedsspecialist. Nu er han hjemme for at fejre jul og nytår med sin familie i Visaginas og for at gruble over sin situation.

»Jeg kan ikke fordrage arbejdet i Iran. Faktum er, at ud af 100 sikkerhedsfolk er mindst 20 af stillingerne ikke sikkerhedsrelaterede, selvom de burde være det,« siger Bolgarov, som håber på at være færdig med arbejdet i Iran til sommer. Bagfter sætter han på at få arbejde i et hvilket som helst land i Europa.

»Men vi vil altid beholde vores lejlighed i Visaginas. Byen er fantastisk, og livet slutter ikke på grund af Ignalina,« siger han.

## Translation

### **The meltdown of a nuclear city**

Closure: What do 30,000 people in a city, which only exists because of a nuclear power plant, do when the plant closes? Indblik went to the Lithuanian city of Visaginas, where one of the world's largest nuclear power plants was closed on New Year's Eve, to find out.

#### ***VISAGINAS, LITHUANIA***

In the square of the Lithuanian city of Visaginas the atmosphere did not reflect the usual high spirits of New Year.

A few rockets whizzed through the air above the snow-covered square, but with long gaps between explosions. Groups of police officers stood at the ready with their truncheons and Alsatians to break up any riots, but they never had anything to do. And the city's inhabitants were not thronging the square as they had done for three decades, but standing in clusters here and there, looking at the black New Year's sky, the illuminated Christmas tree in the centre of the square and each other in silence. No, there was nothing to celebrate on New Year's Eve in Visaginas after Lithuania's nuclear power plant was closed down as a condition of the country's EU membership, therefore removing any reason for the city's existence.

"In fact it is the worst day in Visaginas' history," said one of those in attendance, the young Kristina Mitkinych, who was visiting her parents in the city where she grew up. She has realised that her future lies beyond Visaginas, and is currently studying outdoor life in Norway.

It was a gesture for the city's future when, one hour after New Year, a man with a neat beard and a Russian cap dipped a short resin torch in fuel and lit it with his lighter. The torch flared up and Visaginas' inhabitants teemed and trudged into the city centre from all corners and adjacent alleyways, from the forest and from tower blocks, and the clusters of people pushed together to form an assembled mass. To cry together, to recall a lost time and to hope for a future for their city. The man with the torch lit a briquette under a paper lantern which his wife and children held for him. The family let the heat fill the lantern, released it and let it float up. Then, in unison, the citizens of Visaginas released many "lanterns of hope" into the sky for a better future for their city.

#### **A model city**

The history of the city and the power plant began as a Communist dream in 1975. To be strong, great and proud, as well as an auto producer of nuclear energy. To be the Soviet Union! Ignalina's nuclear power plant was to be the largest in the world – like Chernobyl, but larger, and to produce electricity for the whole of the western portion of the Soviet Union. To cool the reactors, the planners located the plant next to Lithuania's largest lake, Druksiai, which extends into the north-eastern part of the country and over the border into the Republic of Belarus.

To build and run the world's largest nuclear power plant required workers, engineers and specialists. A city was built and it was named after the leader of Lithuania's Communist party, Antanas Snieckus. The city of Snieckus was to be a model Soviet city with the best concrete architecture – shaped like a butterfly from above.

Fir-trees were felled and thousands of soldiers from the Russian army helped thousands of construction workers to raise the concrete blocks. After two years the super city of Snieckus was finished, built faster than anyone could have imagined, and was ready to receive workers from all over the Soviet Union. The most highly qualified Russian nuclear specialists and engineers were brought from Moscow, the Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Siberia. Today the city is as it was then, only more run down. Everywhere cube-shaped concrete blocks tower between forests of slender, tapered fir-trees, and spread across the city are playgrounds, all built to the same specifications: three or four climbing frames and wall-bars of soulless red, yellow and green pipes, which have apparently always been sufficient to entertain all of the city's children. In the corridors between the trees and tower blocks people, go for walks with their dogs or partners, and groups of boys stroll around with cigarettes in the corners of their mouths and listen to pop music on their mobile telephones. 9 out of 10 people in the city still only speak Russian. If you ask for the toilet at a petrol station outside the city, for example, you get the response, "Njet toilet".

### **That is Visaginas.**

Visaginas was built from Soviet concrete in a few years at the end of the seventies. The residential blocks contain both large and small flats. On New Year's Eve, people in Visaginas met in the city's square after midnight and sent paper lanterns flying up in unison. The lanterns were supposed to symbolise hope for the future. The road to the nuclear power plant six kilometres outside Visaginas. Enormous pipes carried heated water from the plant to the city until recently. Homes in Visaginas were considered very attractive, but only the workers at the plant had access to them.

### **The half butterfly**

The population of the nuclear city grew to 33,000. More than 10,000 worked at the power plant as specialists, tradesmen, cleaning and canteen personnel etc. Everything expanded. Until 26 April 1986, when Ignalina's sister nuclear power plant in the Ukraine, Chernobyl, had a meltdown and exposed hundreds of thousands of people to fatal radioactive radiation. Unfortunately for many residents of Snieckus, Ignalina's nuclear reactors were the same type as Chernobyl's. The meltdown resulted in a renewed focus on safety, which halted the construction of Ignalina completely. The third nuclear reactor was never more than pipes, posts and pins, sticking up from a square building site. The Snieckus butterfly never got its second wing. Then the Soviet Union collapsed. Lithuania became independent in 1990, Snieckus was renamed Visaginas, and most of the city's Russians obtained Lithuanian citizenship. Today Visaginas is the only city in Lithuania where Lithuanians constitute a minority. The new Lithuania looked to the West, but still needed the electricity from Ignalina. It was only when Lithuania began its efforts to be admitted to the EU that Visaginas really experienced hardship again. The EU feared an Ignalina disaster in the style of Chernobyl, and demanded a date for the closure of the nuclear power plant if the country was to be admitted. The EU was more important than nuclear energy to the government and the majority of the population. The date for final closure was set for 31 December 2009, and the country was admitted to the EU. The

first reactor had already been closed on 31 December 2004, and thousands of workers made redundant. In the following months a wave of suicides rolled over Visaginas. Approximately 30 workers from the power plant were found hanging from trees in the forest and in their offices and flats.

### **A Russian island in a Lithuanian sea**

Now Visaginas is isolated, like a Russian island in a Lithuanian sea, far from everything in Lithuania, with a strange history, of which none of the country's Western-oriented Lithuanians is really proud. But most of all, the isolation is the cause of the inhabitants' mentality. They live in their own time warp, thinks the city's English teacher, Tatjana Goloskokova, who, for a number of years has taught the city's adults English, because there is an increasing need to be able to speak a language other than Russian.

"For people who, for 25 years, took the same bus route to the same job and the same office and home again to the same flat and the same thing every day and know nothing else in life, it is impossible to create a life beyond Visaginas.

"In any case, it is difficult to teach them English."

Today Visaginas has just over 28,000 inhabitants. If you ask any of them where people have gone, there are two answers: they have gone abroad to work, or they on the streets of Vilnius, Klaipeda or Kaunas, drowning their sorrows with alcohol.

"We all know a few like that. That is just how it is," said Kristina Mitkinych on New Year's Eve. "Only God knows what will happen to the rest of the city."

Ignalina has been described as "Lithuania's thorn in the side" after the EU's criticism of "the Chernobyl reactors", but also as "Lithuania's powerful heart", which generated electricity and ensured the country's complete self-sufficiency.

### **"Everything has an end"**

Be it a thorn or a heart. All that remains is to decommission the power plant and to dispose of the radioactive fuel, and the plant's 61 year old director of 19 years, Viktor Sevaldin, says he will oversee this – if his health and the Lithuanian energy ministry permit.

Viktor Sevaldin lives in his house in Visaginas' neighbouring city of Ignalina, which is 50km south of Visaginas and shares its name with the power plant. He spends the daylight hours at his workplace.

Something is going round in his head here a few days after New Year's Eve, while he sits at the end of his 15-chair conference table in his office and reaches for his ballpoint pen and glasses in turn. He is used to defending safety at the plant and says automatically that it is no good just talking up safety, you have to do something about it.

From his office he could see thousands of workers getting off buses in front of the power plant every morning. He has made most of them redundant. That was part of his job.

"My work was based on a political decision. We just have to do what the government



dictates, and forget our personal feelings. Everything has a beginning, everything has an end, and all the nuclear power plants will close sooner or later, and that is just how it is,” says Viktor Sevaldin.

He says that one of the power plant's reactors is empty of radioactive fuel, while the other will be empty in six years. The next major tasks are to convert the radioactive material into nuclear waste, and then to build a depot where the nuclear waste can be stored until it is no longer radioactive, in approximately 100 years' time.

### **“Visaginas has no future”**

**Jan Miolla** climbs up a heavy iron ladder painted green and out onto the roof of the residential block. Here he points out the place where, when he was young, he hung out with his friends to smoke cigarettes, drink beer and look out over the spruce forests and lakes. A few metres below him, in the flat on the seventh floor, sits his mother Tatjana Miolla. She knew well what was going on up on the roof but she never said anything about it.

25-year old Jan Miolla is visiting his mother, twice his age, in Visaginas for Christmas, New Year and most of January. They both came here from Estonia's second largest city, Daugavpils, in 1986. Tatjana Miolla was newly divorced when she heard about "the nuclear city", and began to dream of a new life in the new city. She got a job doing repairs at the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. In 2008 she was made redundant.

Or “thrown out”, as she puts it. Her papering and painting services were no longer required. Today Tatjana Miolla tries to earn money by doing repairs and decorating for the inhabitants of Visaginas, but there are long gaps between jobs.

“Visaginas has no future now. What will it use its inhabitants for when jobs are disappearing like dew in the sun?” asks Tatjana Miolla, who is hoping to find a job in Italy, and otherwise let the years pass so that she can get her pension.

For Jan Miolla it is impossible to get a job in Visaginas. He has taken whatever he could get. For the time being, this is assembling cars for sale in Liverpool, England. He lives there today, and he wants to save up so that one day he can move back to Daugavpils to study “something”.

“They killed the goose that laid the golden egg”

**Ivan Nenasev** is a quiet Russian man of 55 who sells homemade vodka on New Year's Day. Proudly he shows his folder with diplomas from his 23 years as a reactor operator at Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. It was closed in February.

In 1986 Ivan Nenasev and his now 52-year old wife, Ina Nenasev, heard that Ignalina needed workers. They were living in Kaliningrad south of Lithuania, but a new way of life drew them to Visaginas. At that time it was like moving within the same country, says Ivan Nenasev, because the Soviet Union was like a big club. His wife got work as an engineer at the power plant but has since been made redundant and now works at a German clothes factory in Visaginas for a low wage.

Ivan Nenasev refuses to see why Lithuania bowed to the EU's demand to close Ignalina.

“They killed the goose that laid the golden egg,” he says, putting his hand to his head and elaborating,

“It is a disaster: no jobs, and electricity bills are going up, while Lithuania is unable to support all of us who have lost our jobs.”

In the meantime he is holding onto the slender hope of a job at the new uranium depot at the power plant, but he knows that several thousand others are doing the same, while at the same time he cannot get work in Kaliningrad because he took Lithuanian citizenship when the Soviet Union collapsed.

“Without citizenship I cannot even become a road sweeper. This is how Russia is. At most, I can become a fisherman,” says Ivan Nenasev, who has a bleak view of the future in Lithuania, “It is impossible for me to get a job when unemployment is over 15 percent and I cannot speak English or Lithuanian.”

“One way or another we will still pull through”

It is minus 16 outside, so **Stefan Volchanova** is serving warm brandy in silver cups which his wife Lidija Volchanova received while working as a general assistant at Sugardas, the city’s local TV station, newspaper and cable TV broadcaster.

55-year old Stefan Volchanova and his 61-year old wife laugh when they talk about their earlier years. He came to Visaginas from Angarsk in Siberia in 1983, after he had seen the city’s square residential blocks surrounded by green landscape and glistening lakes in an advertisement – and a guaranteed job at Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. He became a welder. Half a year later, his wife came and got work at Sugardas after one day in the city. They were good times, they say.

“And we were always wild about the city, the country, the countryside. I cry for joy when I come back from vacation,” says Lidija Volchanova.

But when the Russian couple speak about the downturn in recent years, they cry. Lidija Volchanova resigned due to high blood pressure and Stefan Volchanova lost his job at the Ignalina plant in 2006. Since then he has worked as a welder in Sweden, Finland and Norway and has his suitcase packed and ready to leave the city, Lidija and their 18-year old cat, if an employer should call.

“It is hard being away. I always miss Lidija and my city, and it is difficult when you only speak Russian,” says Stefan Volchanova.

The two do what they can to keep up their hopes. “Our friends are optimistic and say that it will all still work out, so we also try to be. I hope that God will not let the city die. What else can we do?” asks Lidija Volchanova. Her husband replies,

“One way or another we will pull through.”

“Life does not end because of Ignalina”

**Alexander Bolgarov** shows a film on his computer, where a nuclear worker simulates fishing in the reactor. He made the film on the occasion of Ignalina’s 25-year jubilee in

2007.

"It was almost impossible to make the film due to security," the former reactor control engineer says at Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in English. He speaks English with an accent he has acquired from his 21-year old daughter who is studying in Bradford, England.

Alexander Bolgarov, a 52-year old Russian, came to Visaginas with his wife Elena Bolgarov in 1982. He qualified as a nuclear engineer at Moscow University and was forced to work at the power plant.

"But that did not matter at all. The city was fantastic, everyone was young, and we are still here today," he says.

Since then he has been an eminent member of the Communist party's youth department and has taught himself English, had two children and arranged annual festivals for nuclear workers around the world. In January 2009 he resigned from his job before he was made redundant. Instead he got a job as a safety specialist at the new Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in Iran. Now he is home to celebrate Christmas and the New Year with his family in Visaginas and to consider his situation.

"I cannot stand the work in Iran. The fact is that of 100 security personnel, at least 20 of the jobs are not related to security, even if they should be," says Bolgarov, who hopes to finish the job in Iran by summer. Afterwards he is hoping to get work in any country in Europe.

"But we will always keep our flat in Visaginas. The city is fantastic, and life does not end because of Ignalina," he says.

The national winners were selected by a national jury which consisted of:

- Jan Sjursen, The Council against Social exclusion
- Michael Vedsø, EC Representation
- Rune Kamstrup, Ministry of Social Affairs
- Klaus Slavensky, Human Rights Institute
- Knud Vilby, Freelance journalist and author