



Barys Piatrovich

The Chernobyl that nobody wants

Twenty-five years after the Chernobyl disaster, Barys Piatrovich recalls the tension of unknowing during the days that followed, his desperate attempts to contact his relatives in the zone, and the arrival of evacuees during Easter celebrations in his parents' village. Today, barely any of the Chernobyl evacuees are still alive. Dispersed throughout Belarus, they died alone and unnoticed, statistically insignificant.

The dust has gone already...

There's no dust — it's been blown away... Great gusts of wind pick up tiny grains of sand and slash you with them, in your face, on your legs and chest: it hurts like you're pushing your way through thorny bushes of raspberries or blackberries. And meanwhile there I am, walking round the town, Homel, amazed by the wind: where has it come from today, this wind — biting, strong, insistent, nasty... Why has it suddenly got up, blowing the sand from Ukraine into Belarus and from Belarus towards Moscow?

I didn't know anything yet, didn't have the slightest idea of what had happened, but I well remember that day and that evening in Homel, 26 April 1986, I remember that I was unable to do anything because of the silent scream that, as it seemed to me, filled all the space around me. The silent scream uttered by all things animate and inanimate, even dust and sand, as they try desperately to escape from disaster. This is how elk and wild boar, wolves and deer, hares and squirrels flee from the merciless forest fire, in silence with their eyes wide open in panic. With the same terrifying scream adders and grass snakes, beetles and caterpillars try to crawl away from the fire, and with the same silent scream they die in it...

Chernobyl 25 years on
Eurozine marks the 25 anniversary of Chernobyl with Belarusian author **Barys Piatrovich**'s moving [recollections](#) of the aftermath of the disaster; and the late German "sun king" **Hermann Scheer** [warns](#) of the dangers of the pseudo-consensus on renewables and explains why double-standards are nowhere more apparent than in ongoing investment in nuclear power. **Also:** [articles](#) from the archives on Chernobyl and the energy question.

That was the day terror came to hang over Homel, over Palesie, over the whole Earth, and I could sense it, without knowing what had happened or where, not even suspecting that something had happened somewhere.

I wanted to cover my head with my arms, close my ears and eyes, hide myself in a hole in the ground, in a den or a chink in a wall, curl up and stop breathing, or else — run from here, also with my eyes wide open in panic, run,

run, run...

But where to run to and why? I kept on trying to calm myself. Stop being such a fool and open your eyes: it's still sunny outside, even though it's windy and evening is coming on, and your wife is getting ready to go to work, she's on duty — it's Saturday evening. I'm a journalist writing for the rural affairs section of the regional paper; yesterday I got back from a trip to the district around Vetka. I've got to write some drivel for the next issue about the "sowing campaign", about how a spring day feeds the year... But I don't feel like writing, and I keep on putting off the moment of actually sitting down at my desk in front of a blank piece of paper.

"OK, I'm off", says my wife.

"I'll go with you to the bus stop..." — this is me clinging on to the possibility of not writing drivel, the possibility of postponing the moment when I have to begin the "creative process".

"No, you've got work to do, I'll be alright..." — and so here I am on my own, alone with my enormous pain, so big that it engulfs even my complete lack of desire to write. Once more I stand by the window, watching a film about how my wife walks to the bus stop, stooping under an unbearable biting wind — my wife, the mother of my future children, so small and defenceless, so alone in the totally deserted town...

The town is deserted because it's the weekend and most people — not so long ago villagers themselves — have gone off to their allotments or native villages to work on their bits of land: as you sow, so shall you reap, a spring day really does feed the year. Under the Soviets, after nearly seventy years of their absolute power, we have reached a situation where the shops are half-empty, meat you can get only in the special shops reserved for party and state functionaries, and as for chickens — well, when the ordinary food stores have any they "hand them out" or, to put it more precisely, they "throw them out" (catch one if you can, there won't be many of them). Vegetables you can find only in the private markets, where they come from individual allotments or all the way from the Caucasus; there won't be any in the markets run by the collective farms. The only person you can rely on is yourself: if you don't grow your own potatoes, cabbages, beetroots, cucumbers and tomatoes on your own six hundred square metres of allotted land or your parents' kitchen garden, you won't be able to store up enough food for the winter and you'll go hungry...

So most of the townsfolk are now out of town, in the country, breaking their backs beneath this cutting wind blowing from the south, from Ukraine, as they strive to get their daily bread...

I never did sit down that evening to write up my "material", I just couldn't force myself... I padded from one corner of my one-roomed flat to the other, did a bit of reading, flicked through a few pages of something or other, watched some TV, hoping that tomorrow — another day off — I would manage to get something written, there was still time...

The evening ebbed away into night... The night was long; there were times when I was awake and times when I was having terrible dreams, nightmares, delirious ravings, but again they didn't seem to be connected with anything, they were just dreams...

Later on almost all my friends told me they had had just the same horrific night: each one of them believed that their insomnia had been unique to them

and so sought the cause only within themselves.

The next day, Sunday, in Homel was again dry, the wind blew hot and strong. In places the ground was bare and hard like asphalt; all the sand had been blown away from the town.

In the afternoon at around four o'clock my wife and I went out for our usual walk. The ground was crying out for rain, but no rain came, even though, high up in the sky, heavy grey clouds were continually passing over. There was a kind of tension hanging in the air, in the rustling of the trees, in everything. The tension was like a taut bowstring, you could physically feel it. Just like the moments immediately before a thunderstorm when there's about to be a cloudburst, but no cloud ever bursts.

So we cut short our usual route and went back home unusually tired and depressed.

I still did not know anything... Only later, much later, was I to read those oft-quoted words written by a scientist, that on those April days "the wind was fortunately not blowing in the direction of Kiev..." Whoever wrote that was writing in the Soviet tradition; he was either not thinking at all about what he was writing, or thinking only about things that were important to him. After all, whatever direction the wind was blowing in, it brought only misfortune to our small planet Earth... And the first place it brought that misfortune to was my Belarus...

...Right then I knew nothing... Yet it was at that time, even at those very moments (it was about five o'clock, and more like evening than afternoon) on 27 April, that my mum and dad, together with friends from the same village were on their way back home from a trip to Kiev. The shortest route to Khoyniki lay through the town of Prypyats, where the people who work at the Chernobyl power station live. They had been through the town early on the day before, but this time they weren't allowed to go back that way. There was an endless line of buses and cars snaking out of Prypyats, while the only traffic going towards the town was a river of armoured personnel carriers and covered military lorries with soldiers inside.

Sitting in their bus they didn't know what had happened either. The bus was stopped by soldiers with gas masks hanging to one side wearing startlingly white masks on their faces, like the ones doctors wear. Without a word of explanation they directed the bus further and further to the left towards Mazyr rather than Khoyniki.

Somehow the word "evacuation" worked its way into the bus, not a word that comes easily to speakers of the Palessie dialect, but one with a meaning that people well remember from the war. And the people on the bus were mostly children of the last war; in the 1940s they had been between five and ten years of age. So, alongside "evacuation", another much more frightening word rose up and stuck in their minds — "War".

What war? Who are we at war with and why? Have the Americans attacked us? Maybe it's the Germans again? Why are the soldiers here and not on the frontier near Brest? And how are we going to get home through these columns of buses and cars and lines of soldiers? Let's get home, back to Belarus — that's where our children and grandchildren are. We must get home, as soon as

we can! It was frightening to look through the windows of their bus at the faces of the people in the buses coming in the other direction streaming out of Prypyats — not a single smile. How could there be? Their faces were stunned, wooden, eyes wide open with the suddenness of it all, with the violence of being made to leave, with not understanding what was going on or why they were being driven off somewhere.

At one point where the bus was yet again made to change route the driver jumped out and went up to a middle-aged officer with stars on his shoulder straps. The officer told him in a whisper, like it was a secret, that it wasn't war, nobody had attacked us, not to worry: it's only an evacuation, there had been an accident in Prypyats at the nuclear power plant, there was a fire and that's why people are being temporarily moved out of harm's way. Temporarily...

A fire... People began to breathe easier: it's OK, there's been an accident, there's only a fire. It's just a fire, not war... It's happened here in Chernobyl, at the power station, not near us. It won't affect us, we're OK, everything's alright back home. And this word "evacuation" now began to sound completely different; it had a calming effect, it was simple and familiar...

The anxious silence left the bus and everyone all at once began to chatter and interrupt one another, saying how yesterday they saw a pillar of fire in the mist above the town, yes we think it was over the town, on that side where the nuclear power station is. Very early in the morning it was, right at the crack of dawn, while they were standing on the Khoyniki side of the river Prypyats, still in Belarus, waiting for the ferry to take them across to Ianau on the Ukrainian side (Ianau is what they used to call the power station workers' town of Prypyats which got built where the small village of Ianau used to be). Really big this pillar was, going a mile up through the clouds, but it wasn't scary, it just looked as though it should be there. It wasn't red, more some sort of raspberry colour, like what you get in the Aladdin film when the genie flies out of the lamp, except this time it was real and on a cosmic scale. It looked as though the genie would appear at any moment in the sky, and his enormous mouth would explode into uproarious laughter... They couldn't help feeling their insignificance in the face of some mighty force...



They started getting out of the bus in the early light of dawn to gaze in wonder at this unusual "natural phenomenon". So they gazed and it didn't occur to any of them that a disaster had occurred, so strong was their faith in the "peaceful atom". Then they

drove through Ianau, peacefully sleeping with only the yellow traffic lights blinking, and headed for Kiev.

They spent the night in a hotel, bought loads of tasty things to eat and presents to take home — the kind of sausage that they hadn't seen for a long time at 2 roubles 20 a kilo (the state kept Kiev a lot better supplied with food than Homel or even Minsk) — and chatting happily they excitedly set off home.

And now this! Evacuation... why? Just because of some fire that they themselves had seen with their own eyes the day before... If it weren't for this worrying fuss, the fear and horror brought on by soldiers in uniform and the columns of buses filled with people staring fixedly ahead, not knowing why troops had herded them together, put them on to buses and were now driving them off somewhere. If it weren't for their terrifying eyes, huge, filling half their faces, staring despairingly out of the bus windows in blank incomprehension... The children especially... If it weren't for the total blackness, the fog of not knowing what is going on. If it weren't for all that — well, nothing had happened: so there had been a fire, flames, some smoke, so what? The sun was still in the sky and everything around was still green.... There may be radiation, you say? What do you expect, this is a nuclear power station... What radiation?! Where is it? Show it to us... There isn't any... You can't see it... You can't feel it... There's no smell, it doesn't stink... It doesn't burn, it doesn't sting...

Trained to know their place after nearly seventy years of Soviet power, people knuckled under and did what they were told by the soldiers and the militia, who themselves had no realisation of what was happening or of the risk they were being exposed to, believing it to be some daft exercise. So they were simply carrying out the orders of their superiors who, even if they didn't know everything, certainly knew a great deal, and were themselves looking to the authorities above them to take all the responsibility. So, instead of making a start on evacuating people out of Prypyats immediately, on the very first day, within a few hours of the accident (not, note, a catastrophe), the authorities waited thirty–six hours before doing anything. They wanted to reduce a tragedy for the whole planet to the status of a neat little misfortune for an unimportant district. Indeed, it was at first seen as a problem just for a town inhabited by nuclear power specialists. While the authorities were dithering thousands of innocent people were living with a fatal dose of radiation and, not suspecting that anything was wrong, even strolled off to take a look at the fire...

My parents and their fellow villagers got back home late at night. When they arrived and saw their own dear village sleeping peacefully, there were one or two of them who secretly shed some emotional tears...

It's 28 April, Monday morning, editorial meeting in the offices of the regional paper I work for, the *Homelskaya Pravda*. Not a word about the Chernobyl accident, let alone radiation and any possible danger. There's not even a mention of a fire, or of any kind of incident at the nuclear power plant. Even though something had been said a few weeks previously about an incident in a similar power station near Smolensk...

As always, the editor starts off with a joke. I now recall that there was nothing in his voice to show that he knew anything, although there is no way he could not have known. Then he gets more serious, he says we've got a busy week ahead, the May Day celebration is coming up, we have to get a team together to cover it and make a list of who's going to be on duty in the print room and who's going to write the "carcass" for the holiday and about the holiday itself...

The "carcass" is the backbone of a report of the May Day celebrations in Homel and the rest of the region. It is always written in advance; this was the practice in all newspapers back in the days of the USSR, from the lowliest local rag right up to *Pravda*. The scenario for the celebration would be drawn

up in the ideological departments of the regional and local committees of the Party: who was going to march in the procession after whom, which factory or collective farm would head the demonstration (whichever had come out on top in the socialist competition) and which one would close it, what "greetings" were to be proclaimed from the platform, and which of the bosses would be there to "wave" at the workers, who was going to carry which flags, slogans or portraits (members of the Politburo, Lenin together with Marx and Engels) above the column of demonstrators on the square — everything was planned down to the last detail... On the basis of this scenario the reporters would write the "carcass" and hand it in to be typeset one day before the holiday, otherwise it would be impossible to produce the paper for it to appear on the day after, informing the readers dead on time about the most significant event in the life of the Soviet people and of each region in particular...

"Dead on time!" — what an important phrase that was in Soviet journalism! "No sleeping for three days, keep in step for three days, all for the sake of a few lines in the paper" — this sort of thing was drummed into us. Meanwhile no one knew anything about the tragedy in Chernobyl, not even the reporters on the "organ of the regional committee of the Party" closest to the place. They certainly knew how to keep the truth from their own people... It was certainly a job well done, dead on time: they simply blocked all the channels of information.

It is difficult to imagine now, because, of course, it would be impossible to do anything like that these days: the age of the Internet and mobile telephones has had an effect — any item of news, however discomfoting for the authorities, can circle the globe in seconds. But back then, well — even in our quite large village there were only two telephones, one in the collective farm office and one in the post office. In order to phone me my parents first had to walk to the post office, then book the call and wait a long time for the connection to be made... Why go through all that? So they didn't phone. And as for my telephoning them, that was quite out of the question. At the same time, radio, TV and newspapers were under the strictest censorship.

It was only towards the end of the day that a rumour started spreading around the editorial office that something was supposed to have happened at the Chernobyl nuclear power station. Not an accident, just "something" — some kind of fire, maybe, or an explosion. But that's all it was, colleagues whispering amongst themselves, uncertain and not at all alarming...

29 April passed by in routine activities and preparations for the May Day celebration, and on the next day the Moscow *Pravda* reported in a tiny note that an accident had apparently occurred in one of the Chernobyl power station's reactors. It went on: "at the present time the radiation levels in the power station and the surrounding area have stabilised, the injured are being treated". How nice — "in the power station". And it gets even better: "The people living in the power station housing estate and three nearby villages have been evacuated". "The power station housing estate" means the town of Prypyats, where there were about 45 000 people living at the time... That's how clever they were at "doling out" important information, "reducing" tension and putting an end to nervous rumours. Anyway, what would be the point of upsetting the nation on the eve of the greatest holiday in the calendar. And what do 45 000 people mean in a country of 250 million?

On the morning of 1 May, somewhere around ten o'clock, my wife Ludmila and I set off for the village to help my mother-in-law plant potatoes. The sun

had been shining since early morning, it was great in the country, warm and by dinner time so hot that I took off my shirt to get a bit of a suntan while digging manure into the furrow.

After working my wife and I sat down on our boundary strip and noticed that pale-green leaves of sorrel had already started to appear, with a nice sourish taste. We picked quite a lot of it to make the first borsch of spring and returned home to Homel almost happy...

My wife set about making the soup at once, and I switched on the radio. I twiddled the knob to see what I could pick up until I hit upon a Russian-language station that I didn't know. Through the crackle and noise I could make out that it was Radio Sweden. They were broadcasting the news. I can't repeat exactly what I heard, I can only recall the sense of what I remembered — a terrible accident had occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine, a reactor had exploded in the fourth unit. Radiation contamination had spread across Ukraine, Belarus and countries adjacent to the USSR. It had even been registered in Sweden. People in Ukraine and Belarus, and especially in the area around Homel, should go outdoors as little as possible, they should take iodine, and especially avoid food contaminated by radiation, which means not using young vegetables: onions, lettuce, sorrel.

I believed this news immediately. Sorrel? By now the borsch was ready, that tasty spring smell that I loved so much was wafting around the room, my wife was preparing to ladle the delicious soup into the plates... I went to the kitchen, grabbed the saucepan with the borsch out of my dumbfounded wife's hands, opened the door to the toilet and flushed it all down the loo...

Somehow, without fully understanding what was going on myself, I explained to my wife... So it was that this terrible word "radiation" with all its serious implications entered our lives at last.

Meanwhile on the TV they were showing happy people with flowers and balloons in the May Day parade... Smiling, they waved their hands at the camera: we're being filmed... In Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, Homel, Khoyniki, Brahin and Naroulya... "Long live the First of May — the Festival of all progressive peoples!" "Long live the Soviet press — the most truthful press in the world!"

But I was not the only one to feel fear deep inside myself... Others must have been listening to Radio Sweden as well.

The information could not be kept hidden from the whole world behind the "Iron Curtain". Chernobyl is not Chelyabinsk, it's Europe; it's a known fact that radiation is no respecter of international frontiers... It was, however, impossible to ask anyone what had happened. At the time — I do remember this and I'll say it again — I really did believe, with no reservations at all, the information the Swedes had broadcast, especially because they said on the radio that even the pastures of the northern reindeer had been contaminated by radiation. The reindeer themselves were contaminated; they were slaughtered and the meat was thrown away... The thought occurred to me at once: how far away from Sweden is Chernobyl, and where are we in comparison? If they are so frightened, what should we be?

On my way back to my flat I peered in at the box where the letters are left and picked up the newspapers. It was only now that I remembered about them.

What could I expect: after all five days had passed since the accident. There was nothing to read in them, apart from reports of successes published in advance of the May Day celebration. Only in *Sovetskaia Belorussia* was there a report "From the Council of Ministers of the USSR", which began in the usual Jesuitical way "As has already been reported in the press (where? when? just one little note in *Pravda*) there has been an accident at the Chernobyl power station (once again, just "power station") situated 130km to the north of Kiev. A government commission of inquiry is now working on the spot... According to preliminary findings the accident occurred in one of the rooms (!) of the fourth block; it resulted in the destruction of the building constructions (!) of the building (!) housing the reactor. The reactor was damaged and there was some (!) leakage of radioactive material..." The report continues: "As a result of measures taken over the past few days the escape of radioactive materials has been reduced and there has been a drop in radiation levels within the nuclear power plant and the nearby housing estate". This then followed, to calm the Belarusians' fears completely: "Some Western agencies are spreading rumours about how thousands of people are supposed to have died in the accident at the nuclear power plant. As has already been reported, two people died and only 197 were hospitalised; of these 49 have been discharged from hospital following medical examination. Work in factories and on the land is continuing normally".

It was these final words that put readers on their guard more than any others. In Soviet times we had learned to read "between the lines" and to believe the "rumours" that were spread by "Western agencies".

The second and third of May were spent in fruitless efforts to phone our relatives in the village of Vialiki Bor in the Khoiniki district. Chernobyl is less than 80km from there... Of course we had to try to phone the post office where a neighbour of our relatives works as postmistress, just to have a talk with her, to ask her how our parents are, what the situation is like and to hint at, or even tell us all about the frightful things that I knew. The problem was that the authorities had given us four days off, from 1 to 4 May, and naturally the post office wasn't working. There was something else as well: I knew that my sisters had returned from Minsk and Harodnia to our village for the holiday period, and realised that they could not possibly know anything about what had happened not far from where they were...

I never did manage to get through on the telephone, and that wasn't because the post office was closed; each time I dialled I heard only short beeps, "line busy"... This was another of the authorities' "tricks", to make sure that there was no leakage of information in any direction.

The fourth of May was Easter Sunday; the night before a start was made on evacuating people from the villages in the Brahın, Khoiniki and Naroulya districts that were closest to Chernobyl, the so-called 30km zone... It had begun at last, one week after the catastrophe... At last, because some of these villages were less than 10km from the now depopulated Ukrainian "housing estate" of Prypyats...

Some of the "Chernobylites" living closest to the reactor were resettled in my home village; virtually none of these evacuees is still alive today...

The men under fifty were the first to be cut down by Chernobyl. The locals said that when death came to men who looked healthy (what kind of age is 45?), it came suddenly. A man would go off with a bucket to fetch water from

the well, fall down and not get up again, or would take his scythe and go off to the meadow and... An easy death, but there were children, the first little grandchildren left behind... There was still everything to live for. Then death came for the older men, and after that started on the women. Now death is cutting down the children and grandchildren of the "Chernobylites"...

How many more are going to be cut down? Scientists say that the amount of caesium in our soil will have been reduced by only 1 per cent after 200 years... And as for strontium-90, americium-241 and plutonium... The half-life of plutonium-239, for example, is 24 390 years... Virtually the whole of the radioactive end of Mendeleev's periodic table fell on Belarus. Even now hundreds of thousands of people live, work and grow "clean food" on contaminated land. They have been stripped of all their concessions and benefits. Going away for recuperation and convalescence is beyond the pockets of most of them... So Chernobyl goes on exacting tribute payments, thanks to the indifference and the complete lack of principles of officialdom.

But now let's go back again to 1986.

As usual my mother prepared everything on Holy Saturday for the Great Sabbath on the next day. Here I need to add that, in spite of nearly seventy years of Communist rule, the Great Sabbath, or more precisely the whole of the Easter period, was still our most important festival. People prepared for it long in advance, like they did for no other. On Thursday they tidied up, cleared up the rubbish and last year's leaves and burned it, swept up the yards, washed the floor in the cottages and went to the bathhouse...

On the Friday before the Easter weekend and even more on the Saturday, my mother would cook all the special dishes for the next few days.

On the Saturday evening, just before the all-night vigil, the young people light huge bonfires at a number of sites just outside the village; they dance round the fires, have fun, the lads pinch the girls, the girls squeal but they don't run off home... Then all of a sudden a column of buses arrives in the village... carrying evacuees...

That's what they were called — "evacuees". Or, even more frighteningly "Chernobylites", as they came to be called later. For the moment they were just people: near panic, anxious, with no idea of what was going on. They had been given two hours to gather in the centre of their villages, both large and small, near the shops, village Soviets, collective farm offices, taking with them only bare necessities: their papers and food for a day. They had been strictly forbidden to take anything else, because, so they were told, they were going to be away only for a few days. So they left all their possessions in their homes, piled weeping into the buses, sensing that something was wrong but not even suspecting that they were leaving their homes forever...

A large family consisting of grandfather, grandmother, their daughter, her husband and the grandchildren from Masany, a village some 6–8km from the Chernobyl reactor, was quartered on my parents. They piled up their few bits and pieces in one corner and sat motionless, in silence, full of shame and sorrow that they had been simply dumped on strangers who were getting ready for the Easter festival. They looked at my parents who themselves were equally stunned by what had happened, not knowing what to do with these people or how to approach them...

It was the Easter festival that finally brought all of them together... Next morning they sat down at table, drank a toast to Easter and began to talk...

The evacuees kept repeating like a refrain just how much they wanted to go back home, how good the life was there, the cottage and private bit of land that they had looked after so carefully was there, all the things that they had worked for all their lives. They did not doubt for a moment that the evacuation was only temporary. They could not yet allow themselves the thought that they would never see their home and hearth again. They did not want to think about it. Indeed how could they have entertained such thoughts, everything happened much too fast for that. Only yesterday they had been getting ready for the Easter festival, when a whole load of officials and soldiers arrived in the village. They went in twos and threes round all the cottages. "You won't be able to live here for a bit", they said and gave them an hour to collect a few things. Not all the villagers managed in time, they were so shocked by the suddenness of it all, even though they had seen the equipment and the thousands of troops that had arrived in the last few days, and had begun to suspect that things would not end well. The domestic animals, cows and pigs, were herded together onto vehicles. Two hours later the villagers were already seated in the buses holding little bundles in their hands with a change of underwear, papers, money. And that was all. The soldiers thoroughly searched even that... It was these thorough searches that made people think that things were not as simple as the authorities would like them to seem. But what are simple folk supposed to do?

The evacuees spent a week in our cottage, they got on well with my parents, and then they were loaded onto buses again and taken off somewhere. Obviously they weren't taken home... Some people said that they been taken to the Zhlobin district. Nobody ever saw them again.

By the time the authorities started on enlarging the exclusion zone and moving people out of ever wider circles away from the reactor, it became clear that the evacuation was not temporary but permanent. People started to ask to be resettled as a whole village or at least as a street in a new place of settlement. They did not wish to be separated and scattered among several families, so as not to mix strangers with strangers. The authorities did not listen. They "resettled", or rather scattered people from 415 villages in the "zone" among thousands of villages and towns across Belarus and so dispersed the memories of these people and any memory of their existence... Yet each village is unique in itself, an authentic and inimitable world with its own traditions, legends and linguistic features. Each village has its own names for places in the locality, for distinctive natural features, streams, headwaters and fields... After twenty-five years no one has got around to collecting the heritage of Chernobyl or to setting up an all-Belarusian museum of the villages that have perished and been lost.

The fact that the authorities made no concessions to the evacuees is evidence of their "farsightedness" and just how well informed they were about the consequences of the accident. As I have said already, most of the "Chernobylites" from the 30km Belarusian exclusion zone died within ten, fifteen or twenty years of "being moved". It would have been immediately obvious that something was wrong if whole villages or streets had died out, leaving empty houses behind. As it is, the "Chernobylites" died off quietly, one by one, almost unnoticed, without spoiling the national statistical picture even at district or local level...

The authorities at the time ensured that everything was quiet and calm, and that nothing would give any indication of the misfortune that had come to hang over the country. The situation was not in fact as simple as it may have appeared to anyone then living in Khoiniki, Brahlin, Homel, and so on as far as Sakhalin. The authorities did not know what to do with the fourth reactor; there could be another explosion at any moment, or the fire could spread to the third reactor... The wind was blowing towards Belarus, carrying radioactive clouds with it in the direction of Moscow... Forget the 30km zone, it might soon be necessary to evacuate people from a zone with a radius of at least 100km...

The most straightforward decision possible was taken in regard to the radioactive clouds: make them "land" beyond Homel on the areas around Vetka, Chachersk and on part of the territory around Bryansk in Russia, the districts of Krasnogorsk and Novozybkovo. As a result radiation contaminated the banks of the three great Belarusian rivers: Prypyats, Dniapro and Sozh... I should add here that geographically the ash from Chernobyl fell on Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, but ethnically it fell almost exclusively on Belarusians. The Chernigov territories around Chernobyl in Ukraine, and the area around Bryansk were settled mainly by Belarusians.... You have only to look at ethnographical maps, or visit the areas around Bryansk, Smolensk and Chernigov and listen to way people, especially the elderly, talk, to convince yourself of who lives here....

Now I look back on the last days of April and the first days of May that year I realise what it was that saved the Party and the government from violence and panic: the fact that people did not know anything about the disaster and that there was a whole series of celebrations and special events — first there was May Day (1–2 May), then Orthodox Easter Sunday (4 May), followed by less significant occasions but which were nonetheless important in the USSR: Print Workers' Day (5 May), Radio Workers' Day (7 May), then Victory Day (9 May) and Radaunitsa (a springtime version of All Souls' Day — 13 May)... In the two weeks that fate gave Gorbachev and his team, they somehow managed to get the situation just about under control... At least the threat of a second explosion had been lifted, thanks to the bravery of the soldiers, who succeeded in putting out the fire and building the sarcophagus around the damaged reactor.

I could not get off work until after 9 May to make a trip back home to my parents. By that time my sisters had already left, and besides I had to write something about the heroism of the people who had been affected by the Chernobyl disaster... There was heroism and acts of bravery aplenty, but just how necessary had they been? Did these "heroes" fully understand the real cost of their "acts of bravery", and why they acted in the way they did? They probably did not. It is certain that the authorities were saved from a likely rebellion by the fact that, as usual, the people were uninformed. No one gave a thought at the time to what radioactive iodine was, or to the "hot particles" that were the most dangerous things in the first few days after the accident, or to the way they could get inside you through food as well as through dust and air... Something else that "helped" was fear of the authorities, a fear even greater than that of radiation, a fear that resided deep inside the Soviet people, who had borne the yoke of collectivisation and Stalin's repression.

I well remember those days, even though I see them through some sort of haze... I remember the first rain that came to Homel a few weeks after the accident. There hadn't been any before that. People were saying that special

planes were being used to disperse the clouds and to sprinkle them with some kind of nasty stuff, reagents of some kind, to stop radioactive rain falling on the ground... Then, after the first heavy post-Chernobyl rain there were yellow and orange rings around the edges of puddles that people for some reason had not noticed before. There was a simple explanation, some people said: it's the pollen from gardens in blossom, or from chestnut trees or some other plant... But why had there not been anything like it before? Why did no one remember these things from the times before Chernobyl, and why were they there now? At least, no one had noticed them earlier... The orange colour was no coincidence, apparently — orange is the generally recognised colour of radiation, the colour of danger, it's the way nature warns people... The whole town was lit up with this "pollen", all the holes in the asphalt were ringed with this mute sign of danger; people went round them to avoid stepping on them just in case they really were stains giving off radioactive particles...

I first managed to get into the zone when the second wave of evacuations began... Once again I was in my home district of Khoyniki, in the village of Kazhushki... It was the end of May. Again there was mist and dust. There was no wind, the dust rose above the ground and for some reason did not fall back down, but stayed there for a long time, hanging in the air like a murky greyish brown fog, as if a herd of cows had just been driven down the street. But there were no cows, they had all been brought into the barns where they were kept almost unfed and with no one to milk them... Yes, that's how it was, the women and children, the collective farm milkmaids, were the first to have been evacuated. That was the right thing to do but no one thought to ask who was going to look after the livestock. I found the chairman of the collective farm in his office. He was holding his head in his hands with no idea of what to do. He hadn't slept for several days. Red-eyed he looked at me, completely unable to understand what it was I wanted from him...

I too was in quite a state, like I had been smoking weed, everything was dissolving before my eyes in a kind of drug-induced haze, or mist, or dream. It was only later, maybe not until now, that I can explain my state as due to the effect of radiation. But I had been there for only a few hours, whereas the collective farm chairman had been living there right since the accident... We were sitting in his office. He showed me some apparatus for measuring the radiation level that the soldiers had left him. It was a sort of large suitcase with an indicator that looked like a golf club and little windows with pointers dancing behind the glass. How do I use it? I couldn't tell whether he was asking me or asking himself. What does this thing show, and he pointed at the dials, do I multiply these numbers by a thousand or by ten thousand, and how do I find out what the real situation is? And will that be the real situation? Rumours were already going round then that all this equipment had been fixed so as "not to frighten people". It was only later that pocket dosimeters appeared that gave off little squeaks, and they weren't very accurate either, but way back then... There was a continual stream of local people dropping into the office to see the chairman. They came to seek help, they came with their grief and their despair, but where was he, the chairman, supposed to go with his own despair, which was no less than theirs and probably much greater?

I didn't write anything at the time — no reports, no articles. In fact I have written practically nothing about Chernobyl until today. I simply couldn't do it.

Then, last year, I lost all connection with the place where I was born. My mum and dad both died in the same year. All I can do now is spend time at their graveside... That may be the reason for my venturing to write these lines about

the month after Chernobyl, without trying to look any further or closer into more recent history... This is where I will finish what I am writing... I do not want to go beyond the limit of one month, otherwise the text would grow to unreadable dimensions.

As it is, there was so much that happened in just that one month that I have not mentioned here! There was, for example, the visit to "the zone" by the top Party bosses, including the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, Slyunkou. People would recall his "change" of clothes and shoes long after this visit — how he put on the clothes that were waiting for him when he got out of the car, took them off when he got back in and then threw them away when he had left. It is only Party bigwigs who think that people notice nothing and know nothing. They have learned to suffer in silence, that's all...

There was also that typical Soviet way of doing things just for show, to pretend that everything is fine and dandy: "people are working and relaxing in the way they always have, the situation is stabilising". Take, for example, the football match between teams from Brahlin and Khoyniki that was arranged on the first weekend after the Chernobyl accident and shown on the news on central TV. Where are those footballers now? Where are the spectators who were herded on to the stands? Without knowing it they risked their health and their lives by exposing themselves to abnormally high doses of radiation...

Then there was the visit of the People's Deputy for this area, Ivan Shamiakin, honoured as People's Writer of Belarus. Not long before his visit he had been Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Accompanying him were Barys Sachanka and Mikola Miatlitsky, both of them writers and also from these parts. Maybe they didn't even think at the time about how their visit to the "disaster zone" would be used as part of the propaganda campaign aimed at calming the "people" — if such respected persons are not afraid to come and visit us, it must mean that the devil is not so black as he is painted...

Then there was the evacuation from the contaminated areas close to the "exclusion zone", firstly of pregnant women and women with babies, followed by children of pre-school age, and finally of all schoolchildren. As a result, only men were left behind in the towns and villages, and they had been totally reliant on their wives to feed and wash them... Horror! It's a story worth several novels... How did those "temporarily resettled" women and children live in unprepared, unheated rest homes and pioneer camps (where the women compared the conditions to those of concentration camps) all across Belarus, cold, hungry, sick, stressed... What about how no one in the so-called "clean" zones would go near them, how they would be called "Chernobyl hedgehogs" and shunned... Who is going describe all this and when?

What about the decontamination of the villages and towns most affected by radionuclides? So much money as well as people's health and lives (that too!) were wasted on this nonsense in the very first month... The "reservists" who were called up for service from all over the USSR were dubbed "partisans". Their job was to remove the upper layer of soil everywhere in the 30km-radius exclusion zone — by hand, using spades — load the contaminated earth on to lorries and drive it off to "mass graves", to re-roof the houses with new slates, wash the asphalt and hose down the walls of buildings with soapy water. They were often left forgotten by the authorities, unfed, hungry, torn away from their families... All this "decontamination" was done in villages that a few weeks

later would also be depopulated, abandoned and then buried...

That is the end of my personal recollections of the first month of the new post-Chernobyl Age that began at 23 minutes 40 seconds after one o'clock of the morning of 26 April 1986... The recollections are not mine alone, because even according to official figures Chernobyl affected 23 per cent of the territory of Belarus, i.e. some 47 000 square kilometres, 3678 villages and towns and more than 2 500 000 people. It means that almost any Belarusian could have written something similar. Everyone has their own experiences and memories of those times, right from the very first month...

It is customary to think that Chernobyl mainly affected the Belarusians and a few Ukrainians. But is that in fact correct? What about the Europeans and indeed everyone on Planet Earth? Doesn't it affect them? They haven't heard anything about chronic fatigue syndrome...

What will happen when the half-life of caesium, and then of strontium comes to an end?

It is not something that humanity as a whole wants to think about, there are enough problems as it is... The main preoccupation now is "global warming". That's where the "real money" is. What can you get out of Chernobyl? Maybe "extreme tourism", visits to the evacuated towns and villages that time has half-demolished, where you can still sense the suddenness of the inhabitants' departure, the haste and brutality that accompanied it and the ghost of the long-gone USSR that still hangs there. Visits could be made to the "un-resettled" forests and meadows, rivers and lakes where tourists will find "un-resettled" wolves and elk, hares and hedgehogs, snakes and frogs... "Tourism" of this kind might possibly bring in some kind of income, but everything else involves spending money: on restoring the health and wellbeing of the place, on decontamination, on curing the post-Chernobyl illnesses... What for? It's of no concern to us in Rome, Paris or Stockholm... It's somewhere far away, in somewhere called Belarus, White Russia... In Minsk people think the same — it's not here, it's somewhere far away, where are these places called Brahlin or Khoyniki, Vetka or Naroulya? You get the impression that everywhere, both in the capital Minsk and in the "Chernobyl zone", any mention of the accident or of radiation causes only irritation, because anyway there's no hope that anything will change...

We haven't died yet, judging by all the evidence, provided we don't take into account the attitudes that I've just mentioned and the complete indifference to ourselves, to those closest to us, to future generations, to our native country and to Planet Earth... However, judging by our total lack of concern, we may well still be alive, but without giving a single thought to the future. To put it more precisely: it's been a long time since we were really alive, now we simply exist... There's no other explanation.

It's been a long time since we were simply indifferent, we are emotionally dead.

P.S. It was difficult for me to write this text. I've been working up to it for over twenty years... More than once I have started to write but given up after the first few lines. It's because I just wanted to talk about the things that I had experienced myself, and not to write an essay about Chernobyl with information culled from other books and the Internet. Writing about personal

matters is always very difficult...

Finally I managed to make the effort and wrench the text out of myself...

The hesitation and uncertainty that run through the whole text will in the end drive me to despair as to whether it is worth publishing at all. Just as nothing appeared to be happening at the time in Belarus, so nothing happens in this text either, just as there was no clear understanding of the tragedy then, so there is none now in the text. In short the result is a kind of diary of those events with annotations made more than twenty years later.

All that is left is perhaps the hope that mentioning those events will stir some people's memories and they will recall that scorching, rainless May and its hot winds, the decontamination and the resettled "Chernobylites"...

We all know that time blunts many of our emotions, but the general mood still remains. That's how it was: we didn't understand at the time what Chernobyl would bring, and even now we still don't understand what the tragic consequences will be. Radiation is a terrible thing: it doesn't burn, doesn't sting — it kills silently, without leaving a mark. Amnesia is a terrible thing — it also kills silently. Except that it kills a nation, not just individual human beings...

A whole nation...

First it kills one nation and then what? The whole of humanity?

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