



Anatol Klashchuk

Children of Chernobyl

For ten years, in Belarus — which received 70 per cent of the fallout from Chernobyl — people suffering from thyroid cancer were not recognized as victims of a nuclear catastrophe, in particular the sick children born before or after the accident. Twenty years later, photographer Anatol Klashchuk returned to the Baraulany oncology hospital, where he had photographed child patients shortly after the Chernobyl accident, and found that it is still full of people suffering from radiation-induced cancer.

Today is a special day for me, a happy one: I am going to a meeting with a former oncology "prisoner". It is almost 15 years since we last saw each other, since the time I photographed him in the Baraulany clinic, one of many seriously ill boys and girls, tied to a drip-feed, bald-headed, wrapped in a padded quilt. Then he was dying of leukaemia. "Chernobyl children" we used to call — and still do — the ones like this sick lad. Some of them, worn out and exhausted by illness, never went outside those walls again. But this one was more fortunate. So today I shall see a completely different person, a tall, dignified lad, full of joie-de-vivre, with sparkling eyes, good-looking, with no trace to be seen of all he has lived through. He is a student at Mahilou University, a future engineer, with plenty of friends — and in love. An ordinary lad, like many others, one of the new generation who have been given the chance to build their own future. Of course, I am happy when such meetings take place. But I am also unhappy. For in them there is a sense of my years of wandering the gloomy corridors of hospital cancer units, where children were dying in agony. By tens and hundreds. They justify my intervention in that strange life and strange sorrow to which even their nearest were not admitted. Did I ever think, did I ever hope, that such a day would come? It is difficult for me to acknowledge this now, but at that time I had no such belief.

A smallish room with one window. Four beds, and beside each a drip-feed with bottles of fluid. Many people in the room. A child in each bed. A mother beside it. But an unnatural silence in the room. For the children, their faces pale and puffy from hormone treatment and the veins in their arms damaged by the needles, lie motionless. The mothers watch how the drops of chemical solution run down the transparent tubes. In their bowed, exhausted figures one can see resignation and weariness. Their heads are full of frightening and heavy thoughts, and this can easily be read in their eyes — sad eyes, filled with tears. But hope, even the last hope, gives them strength. I have seen this, too, in the neighbouring ward, through the wall, and in the next one, and the one opposite. While in the surgical block they were starting to remove the kidney of a three-year-old boy. Children doomed to death. Doomed by something unseen and unknown. The doctors are fighting for their lives with

all their ability and knowledge and the mothers hope for the best. Once I happened to be an involuntary witness to how a young mother was kissing her little daughter, not believing the doctor's words that the little girl's days were numbered. This family from a remote Chernobyl village in the ill-equipped ward of an old hospital became for me a symbol of an unshakeable and insuperable faith in resisting the Chernobyl tragedy. This little girl was only two years old — she was born at the time of Chernobyl.

Strange and incomprehensible was the post-Chernobyl time in Belarus. For a full ten years, in the country which received 70 per cent of the fallout, people suffering from thyroid cancer were not recognized as victims of a nuclear catastrophe, in particular, the sick children born before or after the accident. Society still needed to assert its right to justice and truth. And it asserted it with patience and suffering. Nothing was said about other illnesses. Oncology units were full to overflowing. Today we are a little more experienced and are not afraid to speak of the adverse effect of radiation on people's health. But at that time, the Chernobyl factor was deliberately ignored. But a threat existed — not only to the individual victims, but to an entire generation. And the first innocent victims of this war were the children. How could one feel this, see this, and then pretend that nothing had happened?

Even today, 20 years on, the Belarusian Thyroid Cancer Centre, set up shortly after the Chernobyl accident, is full of patients, adults and children. The director and founder of the Centre, Doctor Jauhien Dziamidchyk, is one of the first in Belarus to warn people of the harmful effect of the Chernobyl fallout on human health. In Belarus in the period following the accident, the number of children suffering from thyroid cancer rose 50-fold. In the 13 years before the accident, only eight such cases were recorded in Belarus, in the next 13 years there were 726. As before, those who fell ill were mainly young people up to 35 years old.

Nadzieja Klimovic was born two years after the Chernobyl catastrophe. In her seventh year, the doctors diagnosed her as suffering from cerebral oedema and she was admitted to the haematology unit in Minsk to which children diagnosed with leukaemia were sent from all over Belarus. The treatment was long and difficult: for a whole year she was confined to a hospital bed. Here, for the first time and before she could read and write, she heard strange and incomprehensible words — Chernobyl, radiation, strontium, thyroid gland, puncture, biopsy, cancer, chemotherapy, intensive care. Her mother was constantly at her side. But for some reason, she did not want to explain to the little girl what these words meant. Nor did she tell her why Nasta, her neighbour in the ward, "went home" without saying goodbye. Just the day before she had been playing with her in the long corridor, swapping dolls, and she had said nothing. And Vitalik, in the next room, who was just her age, also vanished somewhere. They took him away one evening on a gurney and she never saw him again. But she did see Nasta's Mummy; she was crying and burying her face in her hands. This upset Nadzieja very much and she clung to her own Mummy. And Mummy's presence helped the little girl get better more quickly. And they went home together happily — there was no tumour or metastasis, the analyses were good. They were dreaming that at last Nadzieja would cross the threshold of the school. There were joyful encounters with the world outside, with home, and relatives. But their joy was short-lived: soon there was a recurrence of the disease, her condition deteriorated sharply, and once again an urgent journey to Minsk. The familiar hospital, the intensive care unit. Only this time the doctors' efforts were in vain.

Nadzieja's death was one more on the list of the oncology victims and made me even more aware that we are living in a country of dying children. Many more, just like Nadzieja, will become sacrifices to modern civilization. And this thought alone is terrifying. For no one knows if their son or daughter will be next. I could not but attend Nadzieja's farewell, I had no moral right not to go. I had become her friend, and while she was undergoing treatment, I had photographed her many times. I did this in the certainty that this little girl must get better, that she would grow up interesting and pretty, and would have a happy destiny. And I looked forward to taking more photographs to bear witness to her happy path through life. The doctors often called Nadzieja a photo-model and the trusting little patient gratefully responded to the smiles of the people in white coats as a sign of hope in her rapid recovery. Often she did not understand her mother's tears when the doctors said such nice things to her! But nothing could save this little girl, not the profound symbolism of her name, which means "Hope", not her parents' prayers, not radiotherapy, not chemotherapy. No miracle happened. And the terrible illness once again confirmed its essential nature: that it cannot be cured.

Often I felt a desire to finish all this. And at this time, especially, I wanted to take my camera away far beyond the walls of this oncology clinic and to weep like a sick man myself. But I knew that Nadzieja's death must not stop the course of this sad chronicle. I had to tell the world what my country was being forced to endure because of the disaster at this shoddily built nuclear station. And so I went back to Baraulany, to the Oncology Centre, which by now had become known throughout Europe. The Centre where pain and death intersect and coexist in some strange way with hope and rescue. Every year, some 300 children with various oncological diseases of the blood and body pass through Baraulany. Not all of them are destined to survive; not all of them have equal chances, but every one of them has the chance to strive, take the risk, and try. This is, as it were, the site of an uninterrupted struggle, sometimes unpromising, hopeless, and with no result. But while a mother believes, hopes, and prays, this unequal struggle will continue. I should like to put up a monument to the Chernobyl mother, who so heroically treads this *via dolorosa* beside her mortally sick children.

Meanwhile in Belarus, almost 2 million people, including half-a-million children, still live in the areas contaminated by radioactive fallout. In the affected counties, the public health registers testify that the incidence of endocrine disorders and diseases of the nervous system has doubled. Diseases of the respiratory system are up by 76 per cent, of the alimentary organs by 79 per cent, congenital defects are up 80 per cent, oncological illnesses by 27 per cent, and thyroid cancers by 30 per cent. For 38 specific diseases, the child morbidity rate has increased; child mortality generally has trebled. Population growth in Belarus has been halted. Of course, the aftermath of Chernobyl is not the only factor responsible for these gloomy indices, but radiation has been the catalyst.

No one can now remember exactly when the first premonition of this great sorrow entered the home of 11-year-old Natasha. It was certainly not when the little girl's leg began to grow more and more painful: in a big peasant family no one pays much attention to childish complaints. Nor was it when the pain made it impossible for her to sleep at nights, They thought: this is temporary, it will pass. They took her to the provincial hospital, and — just in case — she was put in plaster. Maybe it was then she began to feel frightened and felt trouble coming when her nine-year old neighbour died of leucosis. Only in the Minsk accident and emergency hospital did her mother suddenly

experience the shock of hearing where they were sending her daughter. For who in Belarus has not heard of Baraulany? And there they reached the terrible diagnosis. Cancer.

If they had amputated her leg straightaway, maybe today there would be no regrets. But what mother would not take the risk, would not struggle to the end? Two years went by with the hard struggle for survival, full of suffering, grief, and tears. And the oncologists did everything possible. They used chemotherapy and radiotherapy, they operated on the liver and lungs to destroy the metastases, and in place of the diseased sections of leg–bone they implanted a plastic brace. Perhaps an operation abroad, where medicine is at a significantly higher level, would have helped, but who is there to help simple, penniless peasants? Amputation of the little girl's leg was unavoidable.

And now? Natasha is a different person. In a certain sense, a new and free one. She learned to walk again with a prosthesis and to swim and ride a bicycle. To go to school again, help in the house, look after the younger ones. She is not only reconciled to her condition but has accepted it as part of her life. And only rarely now does a look of sadness appear on her face. But her earlier fear of the unknown future remains insurmountable, for she knows literally everything about her illness. And not only from the five years she spent in Baraulany. How could she not be aware that recently in her own fairly small village several people have died of cancer? And who can tell her what is happening to her and the rest of them now? She knows only that there was nothing like this before Chernobyl. On the collective farm in another village, the whole herd of milch–cows went down with leucosis. And their calves, too, are born with it.

I have long since ceased to ask myself what point there is in this terrible chronicle of children's suffering and deaths, whether it is worth continuing or whether enough has been said, written, and done about it already. When these questions first came to me, I wondered if it would be right to "change course"; enough sadness. But our society is strange. Many people already consider the Chernobyl catastrophe as belonging to the past. After all, the inhabitants of the contaminated areas have been resettled, so why go on worrying and spending unending sums of money? That is well–known. But somehow it seems to me that these people have not come into contact with the sorrow that has consumed thousands of children and their parents.

Twenty years after, it is no longer so urgent to seek Chernobyl in the evacuated zone, long–since robbed by looters and blackened by fires. But Chernobyl lives on in our bodies, blood, and bones; research on the Chernobyl problem should be directed first and foremost at the physical state of the population: at the health of individuals and of the nation as a whole. The uninhabited zone, like it or not, will demand our attention for a long time yet. I go there from time to time seeking strange, exotic, sharp sentiments. The Zone remains a symbol of this greatest of catastrophes. But not the main one, not the principal one. It is, indeed, a visible part of the tragedy. But there is another one, one with a face and a future that are not apparent to everyone.

And I know that I am seeking for that invisible wall that separates us, the healthy and happy, who know neither sorrow nor suffering, and those who have already reached the very edge of the fatal borne. And what do I want to say in the photographs of these child patients and of medical research establishments? And why, for so many years, have I read in mothers' eyes the reproach that I am, so to speak, "recording" their children and felt I was guilty? No one ever forced me to do this, no one asked, and certainly no one planned it

— no one has forbidden it. Why is it so important to know this, to see and to photograph, to show others? The photographs taken in oncology units cannot leave one unmoved: they arouse anxiety and alarm and trigger many new, complex questions, one of which cannot go unasked: is this Chernobyl? Even two decades has proved too short a time to answer exactly what it is that is happening to us, and what awaits us in the future. Where are the limits to Chernobyl in space and time?

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