Chernobyl in the eyes: mythology as a basis of individual memories and social imaginaries of a "Chernobyl child"

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Abstract*:* Some five to seven years after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, a whole culture of helping "Chernobyl children" grew in the regions most affected by the radioactive fallout, fuelled by the presence of several international charity bodies such as the Red Cross and national charities of some Western countries. For the generation of Belarusian children who travelled abroad via 'health trips', this activity was both a positive and a traumatic cross-cultural experience that contributed to the growth of the Chernobyl mythology and subculture. Based on personal memories of the author's five trips to Germany, France, and Italy, evidence given by her friends and relatives interviewed on their travels to Germany and Italy, as well as on the content analysis of online communities in the biggest Russian-speaking social network Vkontakte, the author argues that all aspects of living in the Chernobyl-affected area, which was subject to the special care of both domestic and foreign authorities(including the 'humanitarian aid' aspect), were (to varying extents) based on a Chernobyl mythology that played a big role in constructing the "Chernobyl zeitgeist" for the young inhabitants of the "zone".

Keywords: mythologization of culture, social myths, Chernobyl disaster, Chernobyl children, social memory

Introduction

What do I remember of that day of April 26, 1986? I was five years old and I was walking along the main street (still named "Sovetskaia" or "Soviet") of Gomel somewhere in the morning with my mom who was dragging my hand (and me with it) in some direction similar to that of my future school. I vividly remember her nylon raincoat, and I cannot see her face; I'm looking to the skies over my shoulder instead. The sky is cloudy, the clouds are dark, they have some grey tint that is unusual, there is quite a strong wind (also unusual for our city), and there's dust in the air. There is a feeling of anxiety and some fear in mom's gestures, and I do not know where we're going.

The picture is very vivid, but the problem is I cannot say for sure whether I saw it with my own eyes. I'm almost sure this is a false reconstruction, one that gradually formed on the basis of mom's retelling this story many times in our new home city, St. Petersburg, where my family moved as I was 13. I must not remember that picture, since I could not have been going anywhere with mom: I had to be in the kindergarten that morning, and going there meant walking in the opposite direction from our block. I, for instance, do not remember the annual Parade on May 1, a very big event where I stayed bare-headed, hand in hand with my mom.

This is how my memory worked to doctor my reminiscences, but there were also facts. What I can remember as a true fact was a conversation in June 1986 when my dad, who worked in the Party structures (though he was quite young for it), gathered our close relatives at home and told them that there had been an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power station and this was very dangerous, but we couldn't yet judge to what extent. I never witnessed such serious conversations of the family before, and I wanted to look very clever and adult, and I remember saying: "Well, we never used to know any Chernobyl but now we even know it has exploded!" Days after, mom and I went to the Russian Pskov region, the

only place we could go to stay at distant relatives', as we were looking for a "clean" area, but didn't have enough money to stay long in a hotel in another city. I spent over a month there, and this I can remember as well. It was there where I first experienced that reserved pity towards my family and me that was in the eyes of our hosts' neighbors: 99% pure sympathy and 1% strange interest, as if we were exotic animals. To tell the truth, we treated ourselves somehow similarly, not knowing anything precise, and thus having too big a horizon of expectations.

After Pskov, we went to "the south", as the Soviet people called it, to a Black Sea resort in the south of Russia named Anapa. By that time, I had a huge problem with my hair. I used to have strong, long hair, a family heritage from mom's side, but that July it was falling out enormously, and in September I went to school for the first time with a long bob haircut, which remained a subject of my everlasting regret and of which I have photographic proof.

It seems my family, due to my dad's access to scarce information available for the Party apparatchiks, and due to the fact that my parents' higher education background was in mathematics and physics, was one of those rare families in Gomel who realized the danger of "Chernobyl" quite quickly. For me, it was a summer full of impressions, almost the first sustainable impressions in my life, and this is how my Chernobyl mythology started. My sister was born a year later; for her, this mythology was a fact of surrounding reality. In several years, we both became "Chernobyl children".

Being a "Chernobyl child": the subculture of "health trips"

When we say "mythology" we only partly have in mind "a system of semiotic values that has an ontological status and is actual for a certain society during the certain period of its development" (Andriyenko 2008:172). The Barthesian tradition of interpreting the concept of social mythology affirms that myths make social, cultural, ideological and historical peculiarities turn into something "natural" for a person or a social stratum by the phenomenon of mythical inversion (Barthes 1989:47). Another approach would be to interpret myths in a practical way, that is, as social constructs with inherent ideological or political will of individual or group-like social actors that tend to indoctrinate the bearer (Kirillova 2005:131). Both approaches only partly correspond to the innermost feelings concerning the Chernobyl childhood (in all senses). In this analysis I prefer to think of a myth as a mental structure that helps to interpret reality based on distorted factual background (where, e.g., some facts may be over- or underestimated, may not correspond to the true facts, or be combined with pure fiction). Such mythologization distorts the perception of reality; moreover, it influences behavior and future life choices. In other words, back in Gomel, mythologization of "Chernobyl" could be understood as 1) substitution of firmly known facts by non-transparent and fragmented information flow; and 2) creation of a picture of the disaster detached from reality in both whole and detail.

Between 1989 and 1993, more than a dozen special charities were opened in Gomel. They were engaged in organizing "health trips" for the inhabitants of the polluted area, or the "zone". The "Chernobyl zone" for us, then, meant the vaguely described contaminated area, rather than the arbitrarily defined - 30 km from the epicenter - zone of resettlement, since we all considered ourselves living in the "Chernobyl zone". One of the charities got the name "For the Chernobyl Children" ("Detiam Chernobylia"). Maybe it was this foundation (at least for Gomel) that provided the naming for the participants of the group trips abroad. Their partnering organizations from abroad included the Red Cross and other international charities.

As it is widely known today, the foundations were also responsible for receiving "humanitarian aid" ("gumanitarnaia pomoshch'", or "gumanitarka") from Western Europe. It included mainly food, second-hand clothes, and some pharmaceuticals. Other types of aid included, for instance, delivery of discarded medical equipment (e.g. hospital beds) from Europe, financial aid in building a hospital or consulting in the development of monitoring schoolchildren (blood count, hormones of thyroid gland). My generation witnessed all this, but to various extents. Arguably, the most evident changes in how the city looked came with food and clothes. In most of our relatives' and friends' families, there were at least several packs of cereals from gumanitarka, sugar, sweets and other food, though the city dwellers who had strong connections with surrounding villages did not seems to suffer from real hunger. But food from "Europe" – as we called every country to the West from us - went as a stable flow for several years. This was help not so much against radioactive "Chernobyl products"; rather it was help for the hard times of perestroika. The "European" clothing became also evident on the streets. With the absence of colorful quality clothing on the shop shelves, the city (mainly its children) looked quite colorful, and the kids who had access to second-hand clothing from gumanitarka differed from their classmates. This sometimes provoked small-scale conflicts at school, especially in villages. Bigger-scale scandals could take place between school teachers and parents of schoolchildren, as the flow of "humanitarian" clothing coincided with the abolition of the Soviet-standard school uniform, and old-style school teachers felt awkward about striped pants on a girl or a green sweater with a foreign logo on it on a boy. A shade of absurdity was cast on the whole picture by the fact that, over all that, a red Pioneer tie had to be worn, since in Belarus a separate Belarusian Republican Pioneer Organization ("Belorusskaia Respublikanskaia Pionerskaia Organizatsiia", BRPO) was established after the fall of the USSR and the demolition of the All-Soviet Pioneer Organization ("Vsesoyuznaya Pionerskaia Organizatsiia", ASPO), and those who had been accepted for ASPO were automatically transferred to BRPO, and thus were made to wear red ties for several more years.

Clothing was brought in not only from humanitarian aid but also from the "health trips" themselves. And foreign clothes were not the only change in the city. In the 3-floor supermarket "Gomel" (the "New Department store", as it became known), a big department on the ground floor was dedicated to Belarusian souvenirs, especially straw dolls, towels and tablecloths with national ornaments. In contrast with other shelves that were not always full of goods, this department had both stable supply and stable demand, as most of the travelling kids took souvenirs with them abroad to give as gifts.

The third feature that appeared in the city were busses that gathered on the "Vosstaniia square" from May to September, right under the monument of the Tank 101, the (conventional) first Soviet military tank that entered Gomel after the city was captured by the German troops in World War II. The busses came and went, and there were always some people around them, but some busses stayed longer than others: there was never 100% confidence that the trip would take place. Some of the trips were postponed for weeks, and formation of the culture of "Chernobyl children" started with this pending: you are on the list, but you still never know. Each time there were rumors that the trip would not start, as there were problems on the border, or there were no individual invitations for those who travelled for the second or third time to the same family, or that it would be postponed till the next year… The general uncertainty on almost every issue in the Chernobyl agenda and the opacity of the majority of activities within this agenda was strongly expressed by these rumors.

Getting on the list was a half-opaque procedure as well. Having gone on six trips of various sorts, I can remember that groups consisted of several sub-groups that were informal but naturally formed within the big one. One consisted of children from the most polluted

villages of the Gomel region who passed for the "real Chernobyl kids"; another contained kids from Gomel who got on the list more or less via their parents' connections. The matter of illness did not seem to play a major role, even though I remember several children with serious illnesses, like diabetes, one or two per group. Sometimes there was one more sub-group where the kids could perform some sort of arts, like singing or dancing folklore dances. Such kids took part in various events in the hosting country to help raise awareness and funds as they provoked sympathy to the poor but very talented nation. Rather than having fun abroad, they were having, say, a performance tour. Usually, there were 6 to 10 such kids in a group of 30 to 40 Chernobyl children.

During my first three trips to Germany, I was one of those "performers": we stayed at a nice hostel called Horschhof in the German federal state Baden-Württemberg land, near Crailsheim. Living in an inn surrounded by fields - Herr Seiffer, our host, was a farmer, and his wife took care of the hostel - was not like staying in a family. Here, children grouped together and became friends; "touring" boys and girls gained the unique experience of performance in circumstances totally unfit for dancing, like on asphalt, grass, or the special floor covering sports halls. Kids of the same villages could, to some extent, reproduce their homeland practices of playing together outside, going to the nearby lake, or gathering flowers and nuts. Here, family life in another country was more or less hidden from our eyes.

However, social, consumer or behavioral shocks were stronger, as too many things were different - not only due to the cultural distance between our homeland and the hosting country, but due to the general organization of life which seemed more human-friendly. This exposure to social rather than family life, again, created interest in personal aspects of living and helped to engender a special form of speculation among children: if someone of the group got an invitation to a German home, which happened from time to time, all the unusual details in the apartment were discussed afterwards with the rest of the group, and thereby often exaggerated or misinterpreted. These stories were brought home, and this contributed to the mythologization of the Chernobyl trips. One funny example was that of a boy who never saw a microwave before, because we did not have them in Belarus at this time, and told his friends of an unusual TV set in the kitchen.

For this article, I have conducted four interviews with 1990s' Gomel inhabitants who were previously "Chernobyl children" and trip facilitators. And as is evident from these interviews, it was the general difference in the quality of life that provoked the biggest cultural shock for "Chernobyl children". In the hostel life, the quality of products that were available stimulated the children's constant wish of misappropriation and misuse. One boy took toy cars from the playroom and dug them into the ground beyond the road, to dig them out later and take them home. Drinks and Nutella pots were plundered in the first days of the stay, and group facilitators kept finding them under the beds of the most enterprising kids. Also, the schedule for using our hosts' small swimming pool was several times ignored by the older group of children. The public-private divide, it seems, reproduced itself in Horschhof in its post-Soviet forms: in public, "Chernobyl children" showed more discipline than their German counterparts based on the mixture of a sense of responsibility, collectivist habits, and shyness, as well as the wish to come again and a fear of not being selected to the next group. But within the space they considered theirs they sometimes behaved as appropriators or even competitors in conquering the available goods.

When we went on some excursion or to a venue such as swimming pools in the nearby city of Bad Mergentheim, there was always a wish to do what was prohibited. Though there was clear understanding that such deeds were inappropriate, the temptation was much higher. Several days had to pass before the group realized that there was an abundance of food, strict rules to follow, and the image of Belarus at stake. Out of this, as well as because of the very kind treatment by the hosts, Red Cross officers, volunteers, journalists, German

facilitators and donors (who were just ordinary people), natural co-operation and openness grew quickly within each group. It was especially true for older Belarusian village boys who ended up helping Herr Seiffer with his farming work. They were not used to wasting summer time with no work at hand and asked for some job to do. They repaired broken bicycles and cleaned farming equipment. One boy asked for a scythe to help with field corners where rye could not be picked up mechanically – but apparently Herr Seiffer had never heard of a scythe, as it turned out.

Another shock was the encounters with the other inhabitants of the Horschhof. In 1991 and 1992, it served as social asylum for some disadvantaged social strata like elderly lonely German ladies, whom we called "babushkas", repatriated families and emigrants ("Aussiedler") from Poland and, in 1992, two dozen persons with mental illnesses who were brought there for the summer holidays. But it was really the "Aussiedler" who were the only blemish on the bright picture of the German summer. We kids got a hint that the German society was not deprived of its own difficulties, since repatriates told us they were put into conditions (language, work) too tough to bear, in particular with babies on their hands. Scraps of their family histories later transformed in our minds into family dramas, as we were sure we had met "typical" repatriates. This provided a sharp contrast to how we perceived our short-term stay in Germany. For those of us who encountered unsuccessful "Aussiedler" in Germany, moving for good from polluted Belarus became a less evident perspective in our adult life, as the experience from our childhood provided to some of us a strong feeling that no one is willing to receive us abroad - 'No one's waiting for us there', as it is often said when it comes to migrating.

For many of us, visits to Germany were also de-mystifying – or, rather, re-mystifying. In post-Soviet Belarus, in the country that lost one in four of its people in World War II, and especially in Gomel (which, with only three buildings remaining and almost all inhabitants killed, suffered most), West Germany was often mentioned in a negative context: either nazist (purely negative) or capitalist (negative but envious). For example, some of the best pieces of literature in Belarusian were dedicated to World War II. They were studied in every school in "Belarusian literature", a compulsory discipline, and the depiction of Germans there was inevitably negative. As we went to Germany for the first time, some of us recalled the "fascist" theme, but the good treatment we received went much beyond the expectations of the boys and girls who had never travelled outside the Gomel region, and the antagonistic background was overcome easier than one could expect. However, on the other hand, one could feel that a possibility to help Belarus was, for many Germans, to some extent a way to overcome the post-World War II syndrome, to fill the guilt gap. The countries most active in collaboration with the Chernobyl charities in the first period after the disaster were Germany and Italy.

But new mythology, though comparably simplistic, came instead to our minds. We stayed in the countryside, amidst small towns, and local inhabitants from Swabia and the Black Forrest came to Horschhof to see us and bring presents and money. We danced in front of the Hohenzollern palace in Stuttgart and enjoyed the Nürnberg zoo, but we did not really see German cities with their plural population, social conflicts, or night life. What we saw of Germans made us totally sure that the foundations of human nature are similar everywhere in the world. Affection and sympathy expressed by people around us, the micro-heroism of those who gave money collected for travelling or health treatment to buy us shoes and clothes, smooth roads (we could sleep in buses with heads stuck to window glass, ah!) and picnics with Bayern sausages made us think of Germany as slow, unproblematic, very open and rich. On the whole, staying in Horschhof could be compared to a much advanced summer camp in the south (Crimea), with group activities, international communication, absolutely new consumer goods and a huge amount of care and media attention. This is what

Germany was for us. We saw life there through such a lens. Who would bother thinking deeper at age 11, with Coke and Nutella within daily reach?

It seems the "Chernobyl children" were the first pool of post-Soviet kids who systematically, and in large numbers, travelled to Western Europe, some ten years earlier than our mates in Russia or other CIS countries could afford. The impressions received at such an early age when we were not ready to critically assess them left a magnificent imprint upon our future life goals. The direct influence of "Chernobyl health trips" on the emigration to Europe of the generation of Belarusians born during 1975–1985 remains subject to research, but of nine girls of my "Paletki" dancing club who I have befriended on the "Classmates" ("Odnoklassniki") social network, five now live outside Belarus (and just one of them in Russia). We started to look at our own reality with altered eyes; we were given a chance to realize the difference, and it was striking. I won't exaggerate if I say that thanks to the group trips we could grow up faster, as we could not help comparing and thinking over these comparisons, many of which appeared drawn in black and white.

Family-stay-oriented "health trips" were a different matter. There, personal and family culture, as well as everyday life patterns, were explicit. The homes of the hosts' relatives, schools, leisure activities like taekwondo lessons or bars, local festivities, churches were visited, and private excursions to big cities were undertaken. For many "Chernobyl children" who had an overwhelmingly positive experience with their stay in host families, an unusually clear and very detailed memory of the trips is typical even if they travelled many times. The reason for that was perhaps the collision of the stress of trying to behave oneself and of the kind treatment they received. "I remember every detail exactly because everything, absolutely everything provoked positive emotions in me! Thanks to them for this!!!!", says Irina Shaporova, 31, of the "Paletki" dancing club who travelled to Italy many times as a "Chernobyl child" and later on as an interpreter and facilitator. Now she lives in Padua, Italy.

For boys age 11 to 14, perhaps, trips to Italy were more about having fun: "Recreation, communicating to friends, many new impressions, sun-sea-mountains", recalls Sergei K., 32, from Gomel. But for the girls of the same age, it seems what struck post-Soviet kids most, especially in Mediterranean countries, was how openly love and tenderness were expressed in the families and even publicly in local communities. "The most vividly remembered moment is that of 1996: I was in Italy for the sixth time, and the parents in my new family once kissed in the kitchen, with no vulgarity but with love! I didn't see such things [in Belarus] even in the happiest families! I was, then, shocked that after 20 years of marriage Italian parents still had desire for each other, and hug each other, and make jokes… Nothing vicious at all!", says Irina. My own experience echoes this: One of the revealing moments was a simple phrase "Vuoi ancora, Gio?" ("Do you want more, Gio?") said at dinner by my Italian "mamma" Maria to her husband Giovanni with an intonation absolutely impossible in Belarus in a similar situation, in front of children. A flush of unbearable confusion gulped me down as I heard this phrase, as simple and normal as one could imagine. The whole culture seemed to be very keen on beautiful relations, on something that was tabooed for a long time in the USSR. For young girls, this was an important moment of personal growth, since they encountered patterns of family behavior that could influence their entire future family orientation. Living in families in German Papenburg and French Prix-les-Mesières made similar but less intense impressions.

The intensity of impressions varied according to the extent of purposeful inclusion and involvement of the "Chernobyl children" into family and community daily life. Where kids were left to themselves, even the best families remained temporary hosts. But if a kid followed the lifestyle of the family children, he/she easily became almost a family member. According to ex-facilitator Tat'iana Kamornikova, 53, the best families were those where

children were attended to. France and Italy often provided examples where kids visited school lessons (due to the fact that the school year ended in June rather than in May as in Belarus), participated in regular activities of personal development, and went to family feasts and picnics, as well as to the church - which they had never done before, in secularized Belarus where only the older generation was usually involved into religious practices. For those who stayed in small towns and villages, life seemed not very different from a stable life setup at home – with the exception of features that were unfamiliar, like church or in-house traditions. Some kids spoke vividly about differing traditions during meals, like long discussions at the table, or visits to the church.

To some extent, the more involved children became, the more mythologized their perception was, since a month was not enough to see the full picture, but was more than enough to generate affection to peculiar features of foreign life and to people. This affection grew and became mutual if kids were invited to the same family several times. Back in Gomel, many families lived in expectation of personal invitations for children, and sometimes for adults, too. After the visits, having international friends (or, rather, pen-friends) became a regular practice which had some symbolic importance, since no practical benefit laid under this, though some kids received private parcels with presents from time to time. Letters to Germany or Italy were a ritual in my family for several years even after we moved to Russia in 1994. Years later, finding my Italian host family on Facebook was tearful and at the same time de-mystifying. Before that, "friends were like stars: you do not always see them but you know they're there", as Giovanni told me in a Christmas greeting text message in 2002. And my parents did everything to visit Brigitte Schenkel whose children I befriended in Germany, and my Sardinian hosts, the Fresi family as we travelled to Europe from St. Petersburg. I will never forget how both my "moms" cried almost the entire time of our visit to the family in Italy, because of deep of feelings of pity, gratitude and joy at seeing each other. For seven years, Maria preserved my nail-repair kit that I forgot at their house. She said she knew I would come back one day.

My story was, though, a more or less ideal case, with my photo hung on a wall of a house in Sardinia among the pictures of other family kids and old ladies remembering my name when meeting me on the streets of Perdasdefogu after seven years. In other cases, a more pragmatic attitude to family stays prevailed. In host towns, there gradually formed a tradition of buying presents for "Chernobyl" children and their families: jewelry, clothing, shoes and perfume as the most frequent choice. This created a sort of a competition among Gomel families for "a better family" in Europe, the one that would invest most into the arriving kid. The best option would be a pensioner couple with adult kids who live separately. Such families were considered rich and indeed tended to invite kids for humanistic reasons, not for some deduction of taxes that we heard of. They also kept inviting their guest children again in subsequent years. Struggles for the most advantageous matches created forms of corruption that went beyond suspect means of getting oneself or one's child on the list for trips. In some Belarusian families, parents instructed kids to ask for particular presents or to reject second-hand goods. For hosts in France or Italy, not being able to provide expensive enough presents meant being worse than others, and sometimes this put both the families and "Chernobyl children" in awkward positions. One of the distressing moments in France was when my host took me to several perfume shops where he asked for small testers for me and my family, those that were given as promos to the consumers. I pretended I did not understand or I was not with him, as for us asking for free goods seemed very similar to behaving like a beggar. My family could afford cosmetics, and even if not, being perceived as poor was terrible. I would prefer not to have any presents if it meant begging for them, but I was not given a choice.

Adult people, mostly women, who came to Europe as facilitators, translators, and group leaders were of course much more exposed to conflicts in families, children's improper behavior, and the haughty or didactical approach of hosts and charity members in charge. For the facilitators, "health trips" were an additional source of income in the summer. For these women, "health trips" became a second occupation, like for Tat'iana who learnt Italian when she was roughly 40. Although they were much underpaid for taking care of the groups, they from time to time got money from compassionate Europeans or local community foundations. If for children staying in a family was beyond expectations, adults considered foreign hospitality to be much calmer, if not colder, in comparison to the traditional Belarusian habit of "laying oneself out" for guests.

The women, who accompanied groups, together with the managers of Chernobyl foundations were usually also responsible for meeting what has become known as "convoys" with humanitarian aid in Gomel. These meetings, sometimes in restaurants or in nearby villages where local and Gomel media were present and "Chernobyl children" performed some arts as well, also became a part of what can be called "Chernobyl children's subculture". In Bourdieu's terms, it was living that involved elements of a special habitus, like going abroad, organizing meetings with Germans or Italians in Gomel, studying languages... and waiting.

All in all, the subculture of "Chernobyl children" in Gomel was, to my viewpoint, based on a child's perception of European lifestyles contrasting in many aspects to that in Belarus, as well as on practices surrounding the trips themselves. It was marked by ignorance to practical details of international trips, high expectations, a certain pragmatism in some cases and pure gratitude in others, cultural clash in terms of quality of life and gender relations, and growing up at an accelerated pace under the influx of new cultural impressions.

Being a "real Chernobyl child": the mythologization of the disaster

Back in Gomel, the mythologization of "Chernobyl" took on a much bigger scale. We did live inside the post-disaster realities, and were reminded of such by the daily facts of life. Those of my age (around 30) remember that we had to clean school classrooms ourselves two times a day: dust was considered dangerous. We underwent biannual hormone screenings at school. If we got abnormal results we went to a special medical center built with the help of European money. We had milk produced and sold for children and adults separately. Most of us had dosimeters, though they were bought more for fun than for use. Even if the values on it were over the top, we still ate fruit and vegetables from our own orchards – maybe we several times took the dosimeters with us to the market but we skipped this idea later on, as we were not sure of the results. Our dosimeter tended to show differing numbers for the same subject, and we did not know whether it measured air pollution or the level of radiation in tomatoes.

To say information was scarce is not to say anything. The main genre of publications in the press years after the disaster was information of the levels of leukemia or abnormal levels of hormones (e.g. male hormones in girls' tests). From time to time, parents received guidelines from somewhere: you should not pick mushrooms, berries, or flowers, you should not take them home, and you should check what you eat with a dosimeter. But I never saw a written recommendation or heard one myself on radio or TV. Instead, there were pictures of mutations in the newspapers, and I saw several strange-looking dandelions myself.

There was no sustainable and reliable information on how big exactly the danger was, for whom it was most dangerous to stay in the Gomel region, or how harmful the consequences would be. It was like knowing you are disabled but not knowing why, and

expecting to get worse by an unknown cause in an unpredictable time. The main problem of information was not even its scarcity but its principal fragmentation. There was no coordination or information center that would be available as an info point for everyone to refer to. By the early 1990s, what we knew of the catastrophe was drawn from the USSR media, namely local and republican newspapers and news on TV. Documentaries appeared later, and wide social recognition of what had happened somehow coincided with their appearance. No special information campaign that a kid would remember was ever organized. Neither there was any instruction procedure at schools; we were just told to do this or that, with no clear explanation.

Nowadays, with Internet and new levels of societal openness it is almost impossible to imagine that for years millions of people literally lived in the atmosphere of uncertainty about their health and conditions for their children. No significant social protest against the scarcity and fragmented nature of information ever took place. But then, in the hard times of the dying USSR and perestroika, "Chernobyl" was perceived by ever-patient Belarusians as just one more shared misfortune; plus, there were no immediately visible consequences for the majority of the population (except, perhaps, my thinning hair or Tat'iana's operation on her thyroid gland in the early 1990s). Maybe the problem was that, for national Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian medical dosimetric centers, it took years to create databases on clean-up workers (CUWs, known in the "Zone" as "liquidators"). According to the Russian database, over 550,000 data entries on former "Zone" inhabitants now living in Russia, including over 180,000 of CUWs of various years, have been collected (Tsyb/Ivanov 2001). But this tremendous work was too slow for those who stayed 100 kilometers away from the epicenter or closer and had to live their everyday life. Soviet patterns of information supply that had been worked out to cover previous atomic incidents of smaller scale were very obvious to everyone, even to kids, but no alternative info sources were available anyway. Grief, fate, doom, or fear, not fury or protest, were the dominant moods and feelings towards the disaster, fuelled by mistrust to government information, absence of exact data and overall uncertain economic and political conditions.

In such circumstances, the Chernobyl context emerged as made up of distorted and unchecked facts, rumors, myths, and folklore. Examples of facts that we could not check included information that the wind tail drew radiation as far north as Norway, that on local markets tomatoes were big enough that three of them made up a kilo, that rates of blood cancers among children increased several times (but no one knew exact figures for the current year), that all the rains were radioactive and reddish dust on rain pools was very radioactive. Which of these were true? Hopefully none. But the culture of lying about where the products in local grocery markets were grown accelerated just as quickly as the alleged cancer levels.

Chernobyl rumors were brilliant in their ingenuity. Rumors on mutations went as sea waves. Some of them told of giant mosquitoes and double-headed calves and were perceived as jokes. Others questioned the status of the Chernobyl nuclear power station - open/closed for further work - and the state of the station's "sarcophagus", allegedly very poorly constructed and just having a bunch of logs as a roof. But the very base of the Chernobyl mentality was myths.

The very first myth that appeared was that of a strong wind on April 26, but none of my respondents could really remember it. One of the most persistent myths was that of the death of almost all CUWs in a short-term period after working at the station. In my interviews, answers to the question "What percentage of CUWs, to your knowledge, remained alive?" ranged from "No one, unfortunately" and "Hardly any" to "If you ask about real CUWs, 10 percent". Whether this is a myth at all remains disputable. Official data collected by Russian medical personnel is dramatically different: In 1986-87 only, clean-up

work in the 30-km zone involved 230,000 people, of which 55 percent were on military service; only 134 of them got the verified acute radiation syndrome (Gus'kova 2004). As many publications state, in the distant period after the disaster, CUWs experienced growth of morbidity in a wide spectrum of diseases, accompanied by growth of disabilities. CUWs' health misbalances demonstrated a "poliorganic" and atypical character as well as certain resistance to the practiced treatment. But the structure of their overall morbidity did not vary significantly from that in Russia on the whole, and the death rate was higher than that for the population in general. These circumstances do not confirm the presence of a specific impact of radiation factors of the disaster to the long-term dynamics of morbidity. They, rather, tell us of the absence of meaningful damage to CUWs' health by ionizing radiation (Karamullin 2007:27, 31). To me, the reality seemed very different from this. Still today, if you visit online forums dedicated to Chernobyl you will easily find a good dozen persons whose close relatives were CUWs and died in throes after several years. But there was really no clear statistics publicized, and cases of sudden or poignant death were exaggerated in numbers up to ten times in the fearful society.

Another stable myth was a conspiracy theory. The station was, allegedly, imploded for some hidden purpose, maybe for atomic trials. It was a diversion, a new element of Mendeleev table, allegedly called "ameritius", was tested – or maybe it formed occasionally under the sarcophagus and was destroying the roof slowly but constantly by micro-explosions under it. For years, such a discourse provided bread and butter for journalists, but was fiercely rejected by those activists who preserved the memory of "Chernobyl" and today do it online.

But living in constant fear or ignorance was impossible. Folk humor covered "Chernobyl" with the wrap similar to those for the Party and other late Soviet phenomena. Chernobyl art may be divided into serious and humoristic. The first ranges from poems of doubtful quality published in official newspapers each April to rock compositions by Belarusian and Ukrainian groups, mostly unknown. The second is more attractive. It includes anecdotes, very short stories of humor and wit, original songs and cover versions, poems, and chastuchki – 2- or 4-lined rhymes sung on a known folk motif. "Why can't one gather mushrooms in the Zone? – They run away!" "How is radiation similar to prostitution? – Neither officially exists in the USSR." "Is it a mouse? – No! It's the Chernobyl hedgehog!" This last one became emblematic: bold people were teased as "Chernobyl hedgehogs". And an extremely popular cartoon by Iurii Norshtein "A little hedgehog in the mist" ("Ezhik v tumane") inevitably received another meaning, since its atmosphere, being a combination of uncertainty, hope and despair, reflected that of "Chernobyl" right to the point.

The truth about "Chernobyl" opened gradually, and thus ecological emigration from the polluted area beyond the zone of resettlement was neither rapid nor substantially big. But still Gomel looked really half-deserted in early 1990s, when ecological migration was only a small stream in a huge flood of migration from the ex-Soviet republics that was based on economic and national motives. But at least "Chernobyl" was one more pressure factor for those who moved, including my family. Neither in Gomel nor in St. Petersburg did we request any documents of our Chernobyl refugee status. In Belarus, this was somewhat less common than in Russia and Ukraine, where those entitled to special financial benefits held a riot just recently against benefit cuts. However, none of the benefits could eliminate the fear of the future for children, including the unborn ones.

Today, the Chernobyl disaster is less and less a background of everyday life in Gomel, as one could judge from a distance. During my relative's pregnancies, the theme did not appear even once. In the interviews, dosimeters were generally described as unnecessary and frequent recalling of the disaster was characteristic of those who had to take regular pills. The chronology of events at the station that night has been practically reconstructed,

databases filled in, benefits assigned, and emigrants seen off. But still, the Chernobyl subculture exists in social networks such as "Vkontakte", where the biggest communities are "Чернобыль" (http://vk.com/chernobyl_world) with 61,204 followers, and "###ЧЕРНОБЫЛЬ###" (http://vk.com/chernobyl_group) with 29,884 followers. They focus on a wide range of issues including those relevant today, like excursions to the exclusion zone or the "Arch" ("Arka") project of a new sarcophagus. The moderators of these groups are Chernobyl activists, who try to de-mystify the whole story and simultaneously maintain the social memory of the disaster. In these communities, Chernobyl amateur art is collected, books are discussed, and trips to the Zone are planned.

These communities struggle with what may be interpreted as the third (and most expressive) mystification of the disaster, more destructive than the luminous Chernobyl children's subculture or in-house Chernobyl myths. This wave of mythologization has been provoked by youth products of the 21st century, namely online games and their by-products. The Chernobyl ambience has inspired such games as "Shadow Of Chernobyl", "Clear Sky", or "Call of Pripyat". But the biggest impact was evidently made by the "S.T.A.L.K.E.R." project - a very popular video game, a book series, and a range of by-products. This game created a wave of interest to "Chernobyl" in the youth stratum of the Russian-speaking Internet. Many of the users born after the catastrophe learnt of "Chernobyl" from the game. Such knowledge is very much a double-edged sword: informing about "Chernobyl" may seem anyway positive for raising awareness of the nuclear dangers. But what we get in the end, if we take a quick look at the "Vkontakte" community forums, is not the awareness of the dangers, but a warmed-up interest to mutations, abandoned and dead cities, stalkerism, and romantics of the place where time stopped. Tragic aspects of the disaster do not seem to be of much interest for today's gamers.

A quick analysis of the responses to the question "What was your primary stimulus to get interested in Chernobyl?" in the "Vkontakte" social network communities demonstrates that over half of the respondents have to some extent been influenced by the gaming culture (see Appendix I). Taking both communities combined, 17.7 percent directly related their interest to the "S.T.A.L.K.E.R." product line. An even bigger group, almost 19 percent, is interested in the topic because they are attracted by emotionally-loaded scenes or activities like dead cities or lonely romantic places, and this sensationalist stance is unacceptable for inhabitants, CUWs and their relatives (over 14 percent). For the latter, "the catastrophe at the Chernobyl nuclear power station is as painful for Belarus (Russia and Ukraine) as World War II. You can't help getting interested," as "Siarozhka Perats", one of the community members, puts it. The third biggest group (15.32 percent) had a vague, non-reflexive interest in the topic, though very similar in the grounding to the "emotional" group. Here, the influence of gaming is also easily traced. For these youngsters, such pseudo-romanticism and post-apocalyptic mystery overshadows the tragedy and the dead city of Pripyat overshadows the exploded station itself. This is not the case for those for whom the disaster is "a part of personal/national memory", "a catastrophe of global scale", or a fact that struck conscience in childhood (less than 12 percent altogether).

From the answers, three more things should be noted. First, Fukushima, paradoxically, did not at all influence the interest in its predecessor disaster. Second, the role of media appears to be negligibly small in raising interest and involvement. It played a much smaller role than information within families and a strikingly smaller one as gaming, which reflects the policy of non-transparency of the first years after the disaster. This "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann 1977) that started with the media seems to have some relation to the fact that an unusually small number of respondents would wish to know the truth (roughly 2.5 percent in one community, none in the other). A possible explanation of the low role of media would be that the abundance of online information compensated the scarcity of

data in traditional media, at least for the younger generation; but it is not likely, as no one has directly stated Internet (reading online) as the primary cause of interest to "Chernobyl". Third, a strikingly small number of respondents are motivated by heroic, tragic, or catastrophic aspects of Chernobyl (40 of 446 in one community, less than 10 percent).

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For me, as for many of my generation, "Chernobyl" has become a double-sided coin. The obverse was "health trips" which opened the world for me and me for the world. The reverse, though, was more weighty, as my family and many relatives emigrated, "Chernobyl" being one of the factors, if not the only one, that made us bring ourselves to it.

… One summer evening in 1995, my uncle Alexander was giving me a lift in his car to downtown St. Petersburg, and the dawn clouds were so colorful and fiery that I told him: "Uncle Sasha, look, what a dawn." "Yeah… This must be how the Chernobyl sky looked that night", he answered. The sky immediately turned black and white.

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