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# The First Nuclear Refugees Come Home

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## Chernobyl-area natives return to find a city of ghosts.

by Maryann de Leo

On a bright Sunday morning in Kiev, outside the Minskaia metro station and in front of a Ukrainian McDonald's, a streamlined yellow tour bus idles its engine. The driver waits for passengers heading into the exclusion zone, a radioactive no-man's-land created two decades ago by the [Chernobyl nuclear accident](#).

Soon about 20 people, mostly Ukrainians and Russians, gather near the bus. Two young, dark-haired men hand out white and blue radiation hazmat suits, yellow plastic slickers, and bottles of water. One of the day-trippers is Alex, born and raised in Pripyat until he was 10. Now 30, he is part of a virtual community of mostly young people who once lived in [Pripyat, the forgotten city](#) that was built in the 1970s for workers at the Chernobyl nuclear power station less than two miles away. At the time, Pripjat was called the [City of the Future](#). Instead it was abandoned April 27, 1986, when its residents became the first and, so far, only permanent nuclear refugees in the world.

The trip, which the former Pripjat residents organized, coincided with the 20th anniversary of the explosion. It also happened to fall very close to Radonitsa, the day of remembrance of the dead, when family members visit the graves of their relatives. The entire city of Pripjat is a grave, a place that died more than 20 years ago and will never come back to life.



The "Sarcophagus" surrounding reactor 4.

Image courtesy of Wikipedia

Once we are all collected, radiation protection suits, water bottles, and lunch bags in hand, we board the bus. The organizers begin the trip by introducing themselves. People have come from all over the world, including the cities of St. Petersburg, Odessa, Vilnius, and Kiev. Most of them have never met except on their virtual community at [pripjat.com](#). Alex, from Kiev, and Dmitri, from St. Petersburg, sit behind Christophe Bisson and me. Bisson, a French painter and philosopher, invited me to come on this trip when he and I attended a Chernobyl conference in Budapest. "I'm the only English speaker. I can translate for you," Dmitri says.

While the bus heads north to the exclusion zone, the 18-mile-wide region around the reactor, the Web site organizers start showing Pripjat movies. After a few adjustments to the bus's faulty video player, a small monitor begins to display gruesome scenes of the aftermath of the fire at the reactor. Scratchy black-and-white footage of the emergency workers shows graphic images of men in agony, with peeling sheets of skin and severe burns covering their bodies. Then we watch the mass exodus from Pripjat, a procession of 2,000 city and school buses inching their way out of the city like some strange funeral procession.

There are also images of April 26, the day of the blast, before residents knew of the danger. Home movies capture ordinary weddings, blurred bluish footage of brides in white dresses and smiling grooms. Only the horrific and the shocking remain in my mind. "How did people find out what had happened?" I ask Dmitri.

For 36 hours after Chernobyl's RBMK-1000 reactor let loose a radioactive cloud, Soviet officials said nothing. Then, in the afternoon of April 27, the officials sent one person from each apartment building to hand out flyers and iodine pills to occupants. The iodine pills were useless, given too late to be effective, but the residents didn't know that. The flyer instructed them that they would be evacuated the next morning because of an accident. They were told to bring only what they would need for three days. The 49,000 residents of Pripyat, including 15,400 children, left everything in their apartments, not knowing that they would never see their homes, their belongings, or their town again.

After the Chernobyl accident, 76 surrounding villages were also evacuated, creating their own communities of nuclear exiles. Radiation from the disaster was detected in parts of Scandinavia, Poland, the Baltic states, southern Germany, Switzerland, northern France, and England. Four days after the accident, the radioactive particles were already in Africa and China. But Pripyat was the front line. Scientists estimate that the most dangerous radioactive elements will take up to 600 years to decay sufficiently to render the town safe. Until then, spending any extended time in Pripyat is tantamount to playing roulette with your DNA.

In Pripyat, [the reactor](#) was visible from rooftops and terraces, an icon of electricity, progress, modernity itself. In the end, though, it changed the lives of the people there in ways they could never have imagined. "Ten of my closest relatives died from cancer, and they tell me it has nothing to do with radiation," one former resident tells me. "Do you think I believe that? Of course it has to do with radiation. I will die from it too—and all for electricity."

The bus has been traveling north for over an hour. The vast monolithic apartment complexes of Kiev have disappeared, giving way to small wood frame houses in a bucolic landscape of green and brown fields. All looks peaceful at first glance, but the exclusion zone is a dead country. Although trees and birds and animals remain, humans are gone from the landscape, except for pockets of people who have drifted back, despite the official prohibition, to live and die in their small villages. There is a silent emptiness here.

We arrive at the zone checkpoint. Everyone who enters the exclusion zone needs a special permit. If you are a refugee from Pripyat, it is easy to get. Journalists, scientists, and even some tourists are also allowed in, but all visitors must be accompanied by a guide of Chernobylinterinform, a government office that oversees Chernobyl tourism. All of us on the bus show our passports to the young Ukrainian police officers. They check our names off a list and wave us in. It is done quickly; the men seemed bored by our arrival and soon raise the gate that will allow us into the zone.

Our first destination is Chernobyl itself. Although the complex was shut down in December 2000, the reactors are still being emptied of their nuclear fuel, so they have to be maintained and checked. Thousands of workers, wearing badges to monitor their radiation exposure, remain to service the plant. They do not live in Chernobyl itself, but nearby. We stop at a near-empty grocery store, a white building that doesn't look like a store, where there are a few glass cases with items neatly arranged—a few razor blades, three batteries, and small bags of raisins, nuts, and American candy bars. At the administration building entrance, a bronze statue of Lenin raises his hand in the direction of the power plant.

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The Pripyat ferris wheel as seen from the former Palace of Culture

Image courtesy of Keith Adams

Inside waiting for us is our guide, Yuri, a former English teacher. He traded his teaching job for a position at Chernobylinterinform. "It's three times the money, so I took it. I have a family. They rotate us out of here every few weeks just to be safe," he says. We are sitting in the room where the Chernobyl trials were held in July 1987. The Soviet Supreme Court found the former director of the power plant, the chief engineer, and the engineer's deputy guilty and imprisoned them for 10 years each. At the front of the former courtroom, Yuri shows us the dosimeter (radiation detector) he will carry so he can measure radiation levels as we travel around. While we drive to Pripyat the organizers replay the evacuation scene, and everyone falls quiet.

Yuri leads us through the city streets, miles and miles of nothingness. No cars, no human life, just paved roads waiting for no one. We stop at Pripyat's former cultural center and enter a theater. A bright red-and-blue mural high on a wall is the only thing intact. It is a classic Soviet painting of large sheaves of wheat, women holding baskets filled with food, and men working as farmers. Everyone looks happy. Upstairs there are hundreds of books strewn from one end of the floor, spilling over into the other rooms.

Christophe and I follow another couple to a school building. Outside there are letters and numbers etched into the facade. Inside there are wide windowed classrooms aglow with sunlight, a tumble of overturned chairs and desks. And then on a table lies a perfect arrangement of teachers' notebooks, attendance records, and grades for students, all written in Cyrillic. How did this survive—or has some intruder rearranged it?

The entire city of Pripyat is a grave, a place that died more than 20 years ago and will never come back to life.

Yuri enters the school and checks for radiation. He holds the dosimeter near the chairs and desks. Everywhere he goes it clicks off the sound of radiation: in the classrooms, in the theater, in the music room, near the piano keys, in apartments, along the ground. No place has escaped. The levels vary, sometimes near 100 micro-roentgens per hour but not much higher. [Background radiation](#) levels in New York City are around 12. A level of 100 is not considered dangerous for short periods. "It's safe for you to walk around," Yuri concludes.

Christophe wants to walk over to the town swimming pool, a place he visited on his last trip. Dmitri comes to warn us away. "There's a plutonium spot around the swimming pool. Don't go closer," he says. Plutonium spot? How does he know? And are we really as safe as we thought? When some murky yellowish liquid drips from a ceiling in one of the buildings onto Christophe's head, he takes a photo of it to document the event. "This stuff fell on my head," he says. "Do you think I'll be OK?"

Down a long, quiet road overgrown with tall brown grasses, we see a [tiny dun horse](#) trotting away and wonder if it's real. "Yes, that was a horse you saw," Yuri reassures us. "They were introduced here several years ago to see how they would survive. For some reason the radiation doesn't seem to affect them. Scientists are studying them."

At lunchtime, while Christophe and I eat our snack of Ukrainian pork fat, black bread, and red caviar, the organizers hand us

blue garbage bags. "Stage one is beginning," Dmitri says. "As part of our remembrance day, we wanted to clean up our hometown. Thank you for helping us." If that goes well, he plans to move on to stage two, making Pripyat a living museum, a tribute to its far-flung exiles. ?

We spread out on the wide, open streets picking up debris, mostly empty vodka bottles. "If anything is in the mossy area, don't pick it up. Radiation accumulates in moss. It could be dangerous," Youri tells us.

Alex, from our tour group, motions to Christophe and me to follow him. He attempts to speak, but when he can't find the English words he motions with his hand. "My English bad," he says. "Come." We follow him through a brambly path, overgrown with tall bushes and prickly branches. He winds his way quickly until he reaches an apartment building, the entranceway crumbling, with peeling paint and broken windows. "Me," he says. He touches his chest, smiles and points to the top of the building, counting one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. "My home," he says.

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Image courtesy of [International Atomic Energy Agency](#)

Alex walks in the open front door. We climb the cracked steps, littered with broken glass, rusted piles of old pipes, crushed ceramic tiles, and mounds of dust. On the stairwell landings there are odd pieces of furniture, a busted chair, a table missing its legs, and more rusted pipes lie on the steps of the cement staircase. He peers into the elevator shaft. "Whew," he says and shakes his head. There's just a gaping empty space with loose cables stretching all the way to the ground floor. Pripayat was looted soon after the accident, and since everything here is radioactive, all the things that were stolen and sold have spread radioactivity all over the former Soviet Union. The elevator car and its parts are now somewhere else, shedding their radiation.

The decay and destruction have an odd beauty. Life and objects left to the elements have become like art. They are all part of a time gone, a time that does not exist anymore. The Soviet Union fell apart not long after the Chernobyl disaster, in part because of the widespread distrust and dismay it inspired. Gorbachev said, "For me, life is divided into a time before Chernobyl and a time after."

Alex climbs two steps at a time, and we follow. There is more and more debris the higher we climb: discarded refrigerator and stove parts, slats of wood, and more shards of glass. He quickly reaches the eighth floor and points to a moldy, brown padded door on the left. It creaks when he pushes on it, and he walks into his musty, decaying apartment. He darts from room to room as though to make sure he is not in some dream.

Alex stops, tapping his foot on the floor. "Here, bedroom," he says. He stands in a small, sunny room with a decades-old mattress in the corner, soggy, ripped, springs sticking out; near the window a pile of moist clothes sits in a heap. He picks up a pair of kid's navy blue shorts. "Mine," he says and drops them to the floor back on the same heap. He walks through his old bedroom to an adjacent room. "Here play games, stereo," he says.

From a tiny terrace outside the apartment's living room, the Chernobyl reactor is visible in the distance, its blocky shape now covered over by the sarcophagus, the concrete coffin designed to contain its radioactive dangers. "We see fire," Alex says, shaking his head. He goes into the kitchen, looks out the window for a moment, then walks out of his home. He goes across the hall and taps on the door. "My friend, here," he says and touches his heart.

I walk behind Alex as he leaves. We don't say anything. He showed me something close to him. Why? I don't know. Maybe Alex wanted someone to bear witness. Maybe he wanted another human being to live this moment with him.

We follow him through a brambly path until he reaches an apartment building. He touches his chest. "My home," he says.

All day there have been moments when groups of Pripjat returnees gather outside a building or along the bare road, and they stand around drinking beer, chatting. It is difficult to detect how they are reacting to all this. Late in the day, on a side street, a few of them find an old soccer ball, deflated and covered in dusty ash. They take turns kicking it around. Are they happy or sad? Dostoyevsky wrote, "Man is a creature that can get used to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him."

"Our permit only lasts till 6 p.m.—we have to get going," Youri tells us after we have spent most of the day walking the avenues of Pripjat, opening doors, peering into people's homes, looking at the remnants of lives we will never know. In one apartment we found a set of black-and-white photos of children dressed up for a party. The photos were sitting in a wooden étagère, their curled edges showing age, but the arrangement was intact. Who left it behind? Or was this some form of tribute, placed there by another intruder who had also sifted through these dead, contaminated rooms?

Before we leave we drive to the sarcophagus, a massive concrete building. It is hard to believe what went on there, what radioactive cauldron is still cooking within. Chernobyl reactor number 4 looks utterly inert. There is nothing to tell you of the danger inside. Youri takes out the dosimeter and puts it near the ground in front of the sarcophagus gate. It clicks up to 1,300 in seconds, the highest level we've seen since we arrived. No one wants to stay here long.

Alex takes a group shot in front of the sarcophagus with a big [www.pripjat.com](http://www.pripjat.com) banner hanging in front of us. And then we drive away as the sun is setting in the zone. The golden light illuminates the thin, dark brown trees, and it looks beautiful, lonely, and unreal.

I return to Chernobyl almost a year later working on a film with Christophe Bisson. I can still see the power plant's corridors, long silent except for the clicking of the guide's heels on the black-and-white tiles. The floor patterns change as we walk through miles of hallways—black-and-white floors, golden triangles, then black-and-white again. Christophe says it is like being in the organs of a giant beast.

I am not impressed or amazed that I am here. Rather, I accept it, like the thousands of workers who come here every day. It seems ordinary, mundane. It is only in the cafeteria of the former nuclear power plant, while we sit with the other workers eating their free lunch, that we look around, noticing faces that register, well, nothing. "You could do a film just in the cafeteria," Christophe says. "Look at those two men, sitting side by side, not speaking. In their green uniforms, they say it all."

We ask to follow one worker. Alexi, a sandy-haired, tall, thin man who wears glasses, meets us in the Estonian restaurant. We are late, and so he is already eating from a little Crock-Pot filled with tiny ravioli when we arrive. "Sorry," I say.

He doesn't look up, just nods his head and keeps eating.

"Did you choose to go work at Chernobyl?" I ask.

"Well, you could say that," he says. "When it was still the Soviet Union in 1987, they offered me a choice to go work in Siberia or come to work here. It was an easy choice. I came here."

"And the danger?"

"Well, it's dangerous to do many things."

He keeps eating and never looks up.

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Alexi tells us that he rides the morning train with thousands. We accompany him. The workers file in, crowding into the seats,

keys and hats left on benches by regulars to mark their seat. Men gather in fours and fives, get out faded playing cards, set up chessboards. When Christophe films some dark-haired men playing cards, they yell out in Russian, "We don't want to be filmed." It's aggressive—we know what they say before our translator tells us. There are few women on board the train. One woman—"the reader," Christophe calls her—sits all in beige, turning the pages of a book in the glistening sunlight.

In one apartment we found a set of black-and-white photos of children dressed for a party. Who left it behind?

The 40-minute ride takes us from outside the exclusion zone to the area closest to the reactor. The train chugs slowly, crossing over into Belarus then back to Ukraine. We pull into the station as the night shift is readying to board the train home to Slavutich. "Don't film," our translator says. Instead I record everything in my mind: the scene of thousands rushing toward the reactor, thousands rushing toward Slavutich, old Soviet-style music playing in the background, the young uniformed guards who sit in chairs at the entranceway to the reactor and check everyone in. This seems to be the last place on earth where the Soviet Union is still alive. No one mentions the word radiation. They hand you a small necklace to wear when you arrive, a miniature dosimeter.

All in this land of make-believe, where everyone says everything is all right. And after you are here for a while, you start to believe it. Maybe radiation isn't so bad. Maybe the body does adapt. Mice aren't affected. Maybe humans aren't either. Then I flash back to the apartment building in Kiev they call the House of Widows, where emergency workers' wives outlive their husbands, and to the worker raising his shirt to show me his mile-long scar, and to his wife with thyroid problems, and their son Kolia, who was taken to Cuba for his health problems.

In Slavutich, we stop a group of gleaming schoolboys walking home from the nearby grammar school. "Do you want to work at the nuclear power plant?" I ask.



Image courtesy of [International Atomic Energy Agency](#)

"Nyet, nyet, nyet," they scream at once.

"Do you think nuclear power is good?"

"Nyet."

"Why?"

"Radiation."

Slavutich is the town created in 1987 by the Soviet Union to replace Pripjat. There are Estonian neighborhoods, Latvian, and others. The town was the city of hope, Pripjat the city of the future. Both the future and hope died in these towns.

Youri, our guide, told us: "They built it after the accident when the other reactors were still operating. We still believed the future was bright. We had hope that the reactors would keep operating, that Slavutich would replace Pripjat, that everything would go back to normal. But it didn't, and then the Soviet Union collapsed. Then the reactor closed, and everything in Slavutich started to fall apart. People left, the city faded, began to look like the abandoned Pripjat. People didn't have hope anymore. It became like Pripjat. Sure, people still live here, still work in the reactor, but all the hope is gone. I didn't want to

live there anymore. Then I went to work in Chernobyl as a guide.”?

During our filming, we returned again to Pripyat with Maxim, a young Ukrainian filmmaker. He has a question. ?

“Are you making a film about death?” he asks.

“No,” I answer.

“Is radiation death?” he asks.

I don’t answer. After a long silence, he asks again.

“Yes, I guess so,” I say.

Maxim strokes the car window when he sees his apartment house. “My house, my house,” he says in English. In his bedroom he goes to a large poster of a white horse and strokes the face of the horse. He wanders from room to room picking up things. He picks up a blue ball. “This was my favorite toy,” he says. And then at the closet door he stops and looks at a wall-size 1986 calendar. He begins to rip apart the months after April.

“I need some time here alone,” he says.

He doesn’t take long, and when he walks out of the apartment, he says, “I won’t come back here anymore. This is the last time,” and bounces the blue ball he has been carrying back into the apartment.

He walks down the stairs and heads back to the car.