

# CHORNOBYL'S CHILDREN

**A generation  
between  
two realities**

by **Olga Bubich**

Tatsjana, a Belarusian girl from Chachersk province, spending time in the Italian summer camp in Piedmont in June 2006. Both her brother Aliaksandr and she were hosted by Antonella Montemurro, a member of Grugliasco-based association "Genitori per Cernobyl." This fund helped children from radioactive areas for around 20 years.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH



Children from Buda-Kashaliova province taking part in a Dutch humanitarian program, ready to board the plane for the first time in their lives. Spring, 2013.

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**L**arge families, joblessness, underpaid manual labor at factories; *kolkhozes*, or dairy farms; poverty, limited access to education and healthcare; alcohol abuse and domestic violence – these are the stereotypes often associated with former post-Soviet states during the first decade after the collapse of the USSR. Unfortunately, they were close to reality. Visiting the rural areas of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the country’s only president since 1994, mostly did so in a “Potemkin village” format, ignoring the actual economic and social collapse. From 1993 to 2002, average yearly inflation reached 247.2%, while salaries and pensions stayed below 100 USD.<sup>1</sup> The suicide rate between 1990 and 1995 was 32.28 per 100,000 – the sixth highest in the WHO European Region – with cases among males (mostly related to binge drinking) being five times higher than among females.<sup>2</sup>

However, a parallel reality began to emerge at approximately the same time, thanks to humanitarian respite programs launched in more than a dozen countries for the so-called “Chernobyl Children.” These programs operated across various periods and countries in Italy, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, the USA, and other European and North American states.<sup>3</sup> Overall, around 1 million children are estimated to have participated, traveling abroad for a temporary stay to improve their health. For many, given the world they were accustomed

## abstract

After the collapse of the USSR, rural Belarus faced severe economic and social crises and psychological issues. International humanitarian Chernobyl Children respite programs enabled hundreds of thousands of children to spend time abroad in Europe and North America. Although designed to improve health after the 1986 disaster, these initiatives gave encounters with other ways of living and thinking. Personal testimonies and long-term observations suggest that the experience significantly influenced the youth’s aspirations, self-perception, and life trajectories. These projects became a transformative encounter with a bigger world.

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to, participation in these initiatives meant much more than a strengthened immune system or the intake of radiation-free food and air.

## Half a million Belarusian children

The first and largest Belarusian initiative of this kind was the “For the Children of Chernobyl” charitable fund, which operated from 1989 to 2012. It was headed by Gennady Grushevoy – a



Dziana sees the North Sea for the first time in the Netherlands when taking part in programs aimed at helping Chornobyl children. Spring 2013.

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Belarusian academic, politician, and human rights defender also involved in the Belarusian Popular Front movement. Its network was impressive: by the mid-1990s, the fund's teams were active in over 20 cities and towns in Belarus, managing more than 40 long-term programs for charitable, medical, and humanitarian outreach.

Children from areas contaminated by the 1986 catastrophe were offered respite from lingering radiation. Some stayed with host families, developing lifelong personal bonds, while others lived in groups with chaperons in communal accommodations. Medical checkups were regularly arranged, often alongside essential dental care.

FOR SOME INTERNATIONAL associations, aid went beyond the initial scope of respite from radiation. It evolved into targeted support, from assistance for low-income families to long-term partnerships with local schools, hospitals, and crisis centers. Support often came through the purchase of equipment, furniture,

or medication which were a tangible investment in the long-term functioning of local infrastructure. Although the exact number of participants is difficult to determine, researchers estimate the figure at half a million – roughly 7% of the country's population.<sup>4</sup> While Grushevoy closed his fund in 2012, stating it had “fulfilled its social mission” and that grownups must now be “in charge of their own destinies”,<sup>5</sup> many other NGOs continued their work until 2020, when they faced a prolonged hold caused first by the pandemic and later by a crackdown on civil society.

### **“I have no idea where I would be now”**

It was in June 2000, when carrying a bulging folder with all sorts of documents required to navigate notorious Belarusian red tape and coordinate the humanitarian trip, I met the first group of mine at the airport. Watching them clutching chocolate boxes and poorly hidden, jingling vodka bottles that their parents had handed them as souvenirs for Italian host, I could hardly imagine the amount of work I was to face. Forty-nine minors, two group

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Planning to establish new contacts and create projects of targeted help, some associations visited schools in rural areas.

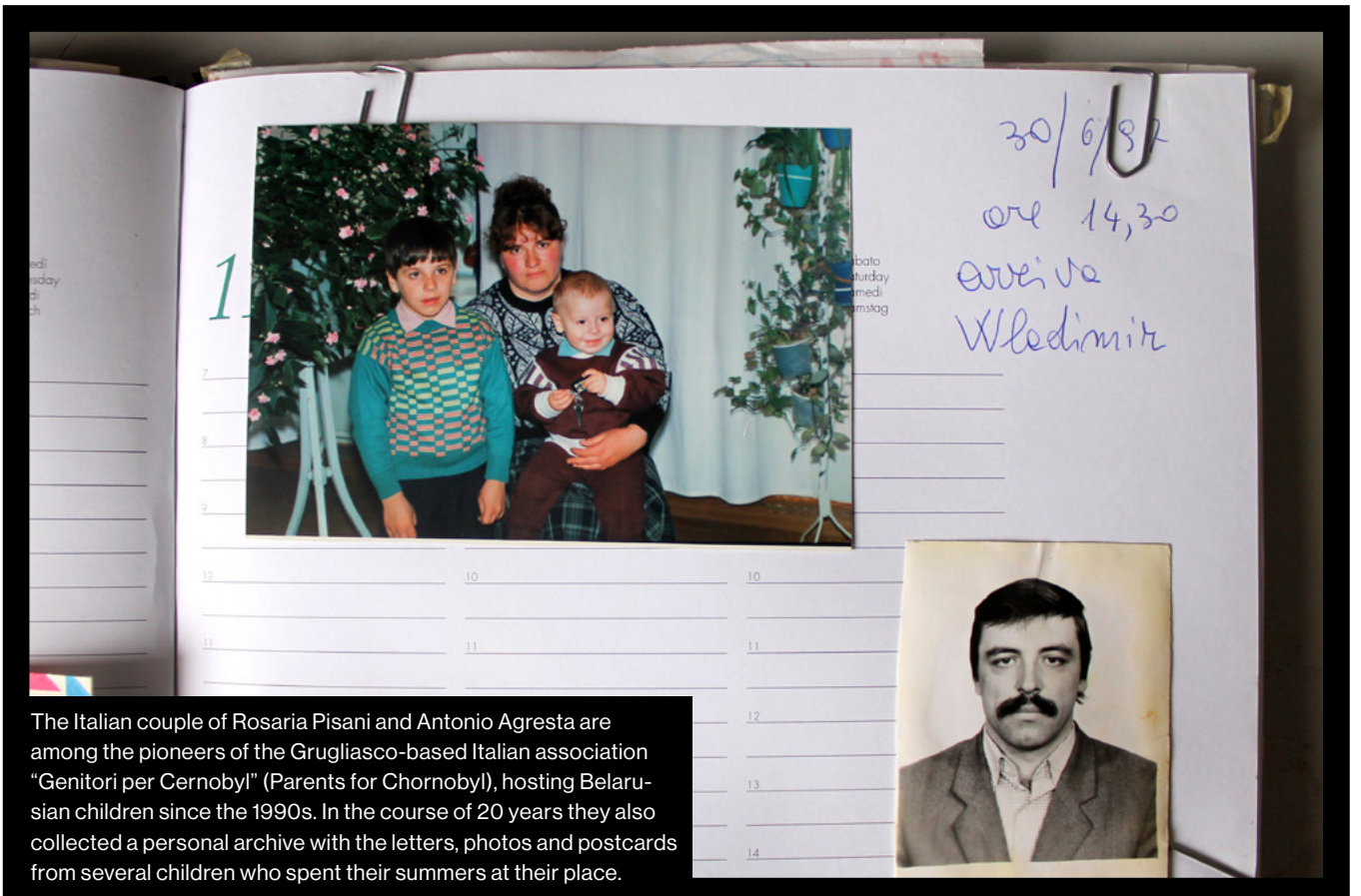
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The Italian couple of Rosaria Pisani and Antonio Agresta are among the pioneers of the Grugliasco-based Italian association "Genitori per Cernobyl" (Parents for Chernobyl), hosting Belarusian children since the 1990s. In the course of 20 years they also collected a personal archive with the letters, photos and postcards from several children who spent their summers at their place.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

leaders, and 40 days in a small Italian town – this is the scenario I would then repeat each year for around two decades. However, during these years what I witnessed was not only health-related, but social and psychological changes in the growing children – the mindsets of the entire generation of Belarusians underwent transformations due to the unique intensive exposure to what one of the former participants of such a project defined as “the world that was bigger than I.”

When looking at Belarusian youth today, one might conclude that the technological revolution and internet access have bridged the gap between them and their global peers. However, in the late 1990s, the divide was stark, especially in the case of the children from rural areas. Many families I worked with lacked basic sanitary facilities, let alone rotary telephones and landlines – to say nothing of a mobile connection. Even ten years later, while accompanying Dutch host families to the southern district of Buda-Kashaliouva, I still saw homes using traditional Russian stoves and horse-drawn transport for daily needs. For children in these areas, going to school often meant a daily, several-kilometer journey on foot through forests or along desolate highways.

**ULADZIMIR**, a former participant in an Italian program, recalls that due to his village’s remoteness, he and his sister Alena were sent to a *internat* – a boarding institution for orphans and “social orphans” (children from disadvantaged families whose parents, however, despite of their negligence, were not deprived of parental rights – mainly to allow the state to show good statistics). For these children it was their only way to receive basic education.

He remarked:

**We lived in a small remote village with no job opportunities for my parents or school for my brothers or sister. The only company I had was that of Alena and one more girl next door. I didn’t have a clear idea of**

**what the world beyond looked like. In 2000, I was lucky to be added to the list of kids who went to Italy, back then I was only eight years old and everything happening to me seemed like a dream or a fairy-tale.**

Uladzimir’s stays in Tuscany dramatically changed his trajectory. He eventually managed to relocate to Minsk where he graduated from a polytechnical university. Many orphaned children from his *internat* moved to Italy upon reaching adulthood. Since international adoption has been virtually banned in Belarus since the early 2000s,<sup>6</sup> these programs were the only way to reunite with host families who cared for them. Some even chose to Italianize their names, eager to turn the page on their previous traumatic lives.

Darya, now a translator for an international firm, reflects on an “alternative” scenario:

**I often think about the ‘whats’ and ‘whys’ of my life. If I had stayed and never seen the world outside? School, university, two years of obligatory state service, a salary hardly enough to buy food and, if lucky, a pair of tights. A husband (probably drunk), kids, a rented apartment. A typical life many my age have – some better, some worse. Many are already divorced, and if single, stigmatized as spinsters.**

### **Freedom and the invisible infrastructure of change**

The memories shared by Chernobyl Children programs participants are strikingly similar: the fear of the unfamiliar, strange new food, the shock of well-stocked shops, the first time swimming in the sea, and the discovery of new languages. Now, as adults, they ask: *Why were our lives so different? Why were we so “unfree”?*

Katya, now an office worker in Hrodna, recalls:

**Antonio and Rosaria, my hosts, didn’t let their age stop them from being ‘crazy.’ We pushed each other in shopping carts around the mall, went to late-night discos, and danced in giant bunny costumes. In Belarus, people of that age just stay home and watch TV or go to doctors. Living with this family showed me that Italians are much more relaxed than we are; they don’t worry about what others would say about them. In Italy, I felt so free.**

These and other stories I witnessed and collected while volunteering for NGOs show that, even without it being a conscious goal, Chernobyl Children programs turned into something more

than a temporary escape from post-Soviet economic and emotional austerity. They became a form of informal diplomacy – a window of opportunity to learn both about “a bigger” world and about themselves. It would not be an exaggeration to say that many children found role models in the people who hosted them. Through the comparative lens present in the accounts similar to those of Darya’s and Katya’s, critical evaluation of one’s own realities was stimulated.

**“IF YOU HAVE** a goal and can pull yourself together, everything is possible,” summarizes Aliaksandr. Now 40 years old, I first knew him as a boy from a traumatic home defined by violence and heavy alcohol abuse. Surrounded by the trust of his host family, he grew into a self-sufficient man who now drives to Minsk

## **“THE POVERTY AND STAGNATION OF THE HOMETOWNS OF CHORNOBYL CHILDREN WERE NOT INEVITABLE ‘NATURAL LAWS,’ BUT RATHER PRODUCTS OF A SPECIFIC SOCIO-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT.”**



One of the teenage girls from Belarus during her summer visit to Italy as a part of the humanitarian programs, 2010s.

PHOTO: OLGA BUBICH

in a white suit for business. Stories like his show that the legacy of learnt helplessness and perception of life as “survival mode existence” which is often inherited together with other attitudes from previous Soviet generations, can be questioned and altered. The poverty and stagnation of the hometowns of the children were not inevitable “natural laws,” but rather products of a specific socio-political environment. The cycle of rural poverty could be broken as a result of conscious efforts invested into education, individual agency, and community support.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the international Chernobyl Children programs represent one of the largest unplanned social experiments in modern history. They proved that while a state can control its borders and its narrative, it cannot easily erase the memory of a “bigger world” once a child has experienced it. For 7% of the population who crossed physical borders and questioned internal frontiers, mental, emotional, and psychological were also crossed.

Even as these programs remain on hold, the transformed mindsets of a half-million Belarusian adults form a resilient counter-narrative based on inner freedom, empathy, and solidarity they encountered in strangers as children. These foreigners gradually became family. Ultimately, my hope for this new generation is that, in order to cherish such values, they won't have to go through another radioactive catastrophe. ❌

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