

Belarusian Tales: Chernobyl's Impact on Belarus and More

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 14 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

I gave many talks on Chernobyl, particularly to government agencies. It was on the fifth anniversary, in April 1991, that I found myself in Washington, DC. If I recall correctly, I had been part of a gathering of anti-nuclear activists headed by Helen Caldicott, as well as a talk at the Institute of Strategic Studies at Georgetown University and a hearing at the US House of Representatives. On that same visit, I was invited to a meeting that included the Belarusian gymnast Olga Korbut. There I met a man called Yourie (his own rendering of his Christian name) Pankratz, who instantly regaled me, quite rightly, for focusing solely on Ukraine in my work on Chernobyl. The fallout in Belarus had been very severe. He invited me to a conference (it was termed a Congress) in Minsk the following April, at which, he said, I would be invited to speak.

Thus, I flew to Minsk for the first time in the spring of 1992. The city seemed spartan and Stalinist, with very wide streets and little traffic. A very large Lenin statue glowered from the central square, which had recently been renamed from Lenin Square to Independence Square. Its metro station still bore the former name. A journal from Lithuania had termed Belarus a “Soviet theme park” and in 1992 it was a fair appellation. The city of Minsk had seen a major protest in 1990, and the popular movement here began in the late 1980s but was smaller in scale than its counterpart in Ukraine, and its founding Congress was held in Vilnius since its initiators could not get permission for it to be held in Minsk.

It was a unique period in the history of Belarus. The Soviet period had ended but there was a power struggle between the Prime Minister Viacheslav Kebich,[1] who supported a military-security union with Russia, and the Chairman of the parliament Stanislau Shushkevich,[2] a noted physicist, who had found himself suddenly elevated to state leader after the failed putsch in Moscow in August 1991 but lacked popular support or the backing of a political party. The Popular Front (BPF) was large and active and mounting a petition for new elections to replace the old assembly elected in 1990. The BPF placed the problems caused by Chernobyl in Belarus at the top of its agenda.

My host was an association called “Children of Chernobyl” – a very familiar name in this period as there were probably a dozen similarly named organizations. This particular one was under the leadership of Gennady Grushevoy (Hienadz Hrushavy), an ethnic Russian and a professor of philosophy, who had been part of the Popular Front and the Belarusian national revival movement. The event was held in the Yubileinaya Hotel, on the street then adorned with the name Masherau Praspekt. On the podium in front of the Children of Chernobyl, Grushevoy presided, young (he was 42) but balding and with a moustache and what seemed at that time a brusque and somewhat condescending attitude, though subsequently I realized this description was a complete misrepresentation of his character.

The Congress was a little disappointing, for the same reasons as in Kyiv, namely that there were no attempts by the scientists speaking to make their findings comprehensible to a lay audience. Many would rush through overhead charts and graphs claiming to show the impact of additional radiation on various parts of the body. There were also

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more politically oriented offerings opposing nuclear power – in fact an anti-nuclear power sign hung in the background for the duration of the congress. Belarus did not have a nuclear power station of its own, but the Moscow Ministry of Power and Electrification had authorized the construction of a nuclear-powered heating station on the road between Minsk and its international airport.

The occasion was an eye opener in terms of contact between locals and the few selected Westerners in attendance. We (Germans and Canadians) were in big demand for social occasions and it was wonderful to be invited to the homes of various attendees. I stayed at the home of two professors at Minsk Linguistic University, Uladzimir and Tamara Tiomkin, and met numerous people who later became close friends, including Lyuba Pervushina, at that time a violinist with the State Orchestra, Yourie and his wife Mila Pankratz, Katya Stulova, and Seriozha Lapteu.

In December 1993, I teamed up with a University of Alberta Hospital pediatrician, Dr. Ernest McCoy, a small, vigorous man of 69 years, and we visited several Minsk clinics. At the Belarusian Republican Center for Cancers of the Thyroid Gland, director, E.P. Demidchik provided us with detailed evidence of the spread of thyroid cancer among children, noting that its cause, radioactive iodine, had spread through the air in the first days after Chernobyl, embracing most regions of the republic. Only Viciebsk in the north was outside its range. Around 5,000 children had fallen victim to this cancer by the early 1990s. Most scientists concur that this illness among children was the most discernible medical consequence of Chernobyl, and caused from fallout in the first few days after the accident. Belarus lacks iodine in the soil so children's thyroids took it in through the air. The children most susceptible were conceived and under the age of five by April 1986, thus providing a readily discernible group for future monitoring.

McCoy had stayed with the Tiomkins during the visit and brought a leg of frozen Alberta beef to Minsk, which he wanted to cook for his hosts. We were invited to the home of Yourie Pankratz for the occasion of our leaving the city, and McCoy prepared an elaborate meal. It proved very difficult to find all the ingredients in Minsk and he spent some hours at Komarovsky Market. Having cooked it, he donned a three-piece suit that he later told me had cost over \$2,000 and we prepared for a celebration. All went well until Pankratz decided to open a bottle of his home-made wine. The cork came off like a champagne bottle and wine came spurting out. Pankratz turned around and quite unintentionally fired the entire contents directly at McCoy, who gasped for his breath in horror as his suit changed to a bright red color. The rest of the room collapsed with laughter.

McCoy was ambitious and wanted to pursue a more in-depth study of children's health in Belarus. He was convinced that he could get support from the Canadian government, as he had done with an earlier Chernobyl-related project in Ukraine with a team of Edmonton-based doctors. We applied for funding and were offered \$100,000. I was elated but he was not satisfied. "I can get more," he said. "Trust me." But our next application for \$200,000 was firmly rejected. Moreover, we could no longer abide by the original request having submitted a second one. Thus, a promising project came to nothing.

At this same time, however, I did publish my most ambitious paper on the health consequences of Chernobyl in this republic. Entitled "A Correlation between Radiation and Health Problems in Belarus?", it was published in *Post-Soviet Geography* (No. 5, 1993) and noted some of the unexpected consequences of the disaster and the divisions within the scientific community that had emerged as to their origins. It also noted that thyroid gland cancer among children was now widely accepted as the most discernible consequence of increased levels of Iodine-131 in the atmosphere in the first week after the explosions.

In an interview earlier in the year with Arnold Beichman and published in *The Washington Times* (February 13, 1993), I had described the political conditions of Belarus as follows – my comments in quotation marks and Beichman's text:

"Whether Belarus constitutes a national state is debatable." What is not debatable, he says, is that Belarus "is very much a nation in chains." It is the most militarized state in the former Soviet Union. Its secret police is not only active, but openly works with the former KGB in Russia. In fact, the chairman of the KGB recently charged that goodwill organizations in Belarus were recruiting agents of influence and that foreigners working in the Chernobyl area were really collecting intelligence for their governments. While the voice of the KGB is heard in the land, says Mr. Marples,

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“the democratic voice in Belarus is struggling to be heard beyond the borders of the country.”

Grushevoy held another congress in 1994, notable because that time in Minsk also featured the campaigning for the first presidential election campaign, eventually won by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The organization lent its support to the campaign of Shushkevich, one of two democratic candidates – the other was Zianon Pazniak – who inevitably split the vote of the democrats, thus allowing Lukashenka a comfortable lead on the first ballot, and then a run-off against Kebich in the second round, an event of significance for the future study of the Chernobyl disaster. The victory of Lukashenka did not appear particularly tumultuous initially: like Pazniak and Shushkevich, he was an outsider to the hierarchy, a low-level functionary, and he had socialized with Social Democratic circles. Grushevoy described him as a fringe politician desperate to be appointed to a position but without any real supporters before the independence period.

A third Chernobyl congress in 1996 proved to be too sensitive for the authorities (attendees included Ali Hewson, wife of Bono, the lead singer of U2, and Adi Roche, who heads the Irish Chernobyl Children International group). The atmosphere was quite tense. One doctor was refused permission to deliver his paper, and at one point the microphones were abruptly switched off. By then I had become much more aware of Chernobyl-related problems in Belarus having visited various hospitals and clinics, and interviewed doctors and scientists. Adi had interests in both Ukraine and Belarus and at one time travelled to the region in an Irish ambulance her group had acquired. She was passionate and devoted to helping Chernobyl children, and attracted a lot of media attention to the cause. Having Ali alongside only enhanced her mission.

Grushevoy labored on long after his former friends from the Popular Front had departed the scene (Zianon Pazniak emigrated to United States in 1996, for example). On one occasion, his staff arranged for me to visit families in the contaminated zones of Mahilou region, accompanied by some members of the Fund. It was evident that these families had been living off the land since 1986. A few of their children had travelled abroad in the summers through the Fund, but most people had remained in their villages, though the local factory, which produced flax, had shut down.

There was general poverty in evidence and most of the males I encountered were drunk or sleeping. In one place, seven people slept in one room in the middle of the day, most of them ill, though not as a result of radiation brought from the Chernobyl reactor. In almost all the cottages, the reception was uniformly warm with tables set for a feast in each one – I forget how many “lunches” we ate but it was at least three. In some, small pigs would run freely through the cottage. The fear of radiation was manifested everywhere, as was the sentiment of gloom and hopelessness. I took a photograph of a more cheerful family of seven, which appeared in my first book on Belarus, *Belarus: From Soviet Power to Nuclear Catastrophe*, published in 1996. I was later reprimanded by a member of the Belarusian Society of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, where I presented the book, for presenting too gloomy a picture, as highlighted by that particular photograph.

Grushevoy, in one of the many long conversations I held with him, attributed the pessimism less to radiophobia and more to the tradition in Belarus in depending upon state direction and largesse. Gorbachev's Soviet Union from 1986 to 1991, in the victims' view, had betrayed this trust by concealing the dangers of radiation and declining for three years to reveal the scope of its dissemination. Grushevoy's goal, which he emphasized most fully at the 1999 Congress of Children of Chernobyl, attended among others by the future Nobel Prize for Literature winner Svetlana Alexievich, was to set up self-help organizations at the grassroots level, something he had started to do in the early 1990s. These groups met at camps in the forest and were passionately anti-nuclear.

In 1997, however, Grushevoy's organization had fallen under government scrutiny and a special commission of the KGB was set up to investigate its operations. For several months, the KGB officials simply sat in the offices in Starovilenskaya Street in a restored older part of central Minsk and carried out audits (especially of its links with German organizations, where many children were sent for the summer months for recreation) while monitoring all facets of business. Ultimately, the Fund was evicted from the building and forced to operate, under a different name, out of a hotel room. Some of its leaders moved to Germany, with the help of partner organizations. The years 1997-2000 generally were a bleak time for NGOs in Belarus as the government began to become more authoritarian.

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The Irish Chernobyl Children's Project, members of which I had met in 1996, incidentally, formed ties with government organizations and thus was permitted to continue. But despite its name its main work today is less with Chernobyl victims than in mental asylums where it has carried out fundamental changes as well as medical operations on the sick, either by flying in teams of doctors or transporting children to Ireland. In 2003, its leaders helped to produce the documentary *Chernobyl Heart*, directed by Maryann DeLeo, which won an Academy Award for Best Short Documentary. The film focused on cardiac degradation among children, though there is no verifiable link of this condition to additional radiation from the disaster.

Therein, however, lies a fundamental issue arising from the Chernobyl disaster: how many people did it actually affect through death, illness, or evacuation? That question pervaded the dozens of conferences and meetings I attended in places as far-flung as Tokyo, Kyiv, Minsk, Ottawa, London, Berlin, Munich, and throughout North America from Los Angeles to the White House. It was difficult to separate the issue from that of the future of nuclear energy and fiercely antithetical organizations such as the IAEA and Greenpeace, which disagree profoundly on the number of deaths to date from Chernobyl-induced radiation and the impact of low-level radiation.

The post-Soviet years have seen many border changes in Europe, mostly due to the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Border incidents are always daunting because there is a feeling of vulnerability at a border that does not occur in the normal walk of life. For a few moments someone has the proof of your identity, looks over it, and then decides whether it is worth allowing you to proceed. And then there is the equally unpredictable customs, which is not usually a problem in the EU countries, but was always and sometimes remains a serious hurdle in those of the former Soviet Union. I had a few border incidents in my early years visiting Belarus, which began slowly to open itself up to the notion that foreigners might wish to visit.

Border Crossings

It was the fall of 1992, and I was about to make my second visit to Belarus. I began at the Central Railway Station in Warsaw, currently an ornate building but at that time approaching dereliction, a place of drug lords and other criminal types, the homeless, and perhaps those left embarrassed by the economic shock therapy that was beginning to transform the Polish economy. The decision to enter Belarus by train was a result more of curiosity than anything else. And I had no visa, having read that it was possible to enter the country without prior accreditation and secure one on the border.

As I boarded the train, an official took me aside to give me a warning that there were criminals on board. He asked for my ticket, which had no specific seat assignment, nodded slowly, and then asked me to follow him. He found me a compartment for four people, occupied only by a man about 30, clad in a leather jacket, and then bid me farewell, with a strong suggestion not to venture far beyond my compartment. The train was headed for Moscow, but my part of the journey to Minsk was a total of 12 hours, and we departed at 9 am.

My companion proved very affable. Before we had crossed the Vistula he had reached into his bag and taken out a bottle of Bell's Scotch whiskey. He was a Pole from Warsaw and though he spoke no English and I no Polish, we conversed in Russian. He poured us both generous servings into the tea glasses provided and immediately dispensed with his. He then proceeded to tell me a melodramatic story about his Catholic upbringing and how he was traveling to Kazakhstan, against the wishes of his parents, to marry a Kazakh woman. I took a sip from the glass and then pushed it aside. The Pole refilled his glass, drank it, poured himself a second, then third, and within minutes was snoring on his bunk.

The next couple of hours passed peacefully and when I ventured into the corridor and looked out of the window, we were approaching the Polish border town of Terespol, though I was not aware of it at the time. I just saw many men in uniform on a platform waiting to board the train. They came in droves and before long there was a knock on our door, and I gave them my passport, at which they gave a peremptory glance before returning it. Their attention turned to the sleeping Pole. To say they slapped him around was an understatement. I was shocked at such treatment and having noted earlier that he had returned his passport to his briefcase after showing it to me, handed it over, which appeared to satisfy them. As for my friend, he had never even stirred. He began once again to snore quietly.

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This traumatic arrival at the border gave me a false sense of security once they had departed and the train shunted forward once again. I returned to the corridor window to see what lay ahead and this time the welcoming party was considerably larger and even more unpleasant looking. They swarmed the train like locusts and before long two officials were in our compartment demanding passports. I had the Pole's ready and handed it to them. They were surprisingly much gentler with him than his own countrymen and seemingly satisfied. Finally, they turned to me.

"Where is your visa?"

"I don't have one."

"You have come to Belarus without a visa? What were you thinking?"

I mumbled that I had read somewhere I could acquire one at the border.

"When we get to Brest," they said, "we will come back for you."

With that, they left.

After a few more minutes we had crossed the Bug River and arrived at Brest station, a place with which I was to become very familiar over the coming years. This time three officials arrived, two very large and one quite short, and they marched me off the train onto the platform like a prisoner, one in front, one at my side, and one behind. As we walked, the train started to pull out again. I was horrified. I was told not to worry about the train, but I imagined my baggage, like the Pole, heading to Moscow.

"Why have you come here?" the smaller official asked. He was a young man and seemed genuinely inquisitive.

"I am an historian," I said, "I am interested in the history of your country."

He looked shocked. "We have no history here."

There was really no appropriate response and so I provided none.

Even though it was the middle of the day, everything inside the station was dark, no lights on anywhere and nothing open. I was told to wait outside an empty kiosk adorned with a fading sign that said "Visa." And I waited. After about an hour, a figure descended some stairs on the other side of the station. Her hair was tied up 1950s style in a big bun over her head, and her face looked as though it had been dipped into a makeup bag. She was simply plastered in makeup with bright red lipstick. She entered the kiosk and the light went on. But the window remained closed. Thirty more minutes went by and it was hard not to panic. The train had evidently left without me and I was left only with my wallet and passport.

Suddenly the hatch opened and the woman demanded my passport and \$60, which I handed over. She then took an instrument the size of a mallet and crashed it down onto the open page of the passport, making a splendid looking visa. I was truly in Belarus. The history-denier then reappeared, much friendlier in disposition.

"Come with me, David."

We went to the platform and then down into a lengthy tunnel, which came out at another platform on the other side of the station. The platform was empty.

"Wait half an hour," he said, as we shook hands. "The train will come back."

I could do little else but stand forlornly but after 30 minutes I could see a shape on the horizon that eventually materialized into a train. My train. I had never been so pleased to see a train in my life. I bounded on board, found my

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compartment and was relieved to see everything intact, including my Polish friend, who was still comatose. To any regular traveler to these parts, it would have been evident that the train had left to change its wheels to the Russian tracks, which are wider than the European ones, a device it was once said, to deter foreigners from attacking. The statement is a myth, though the Nazi invaders of 1941 did find the wider gauge burdensome.

My Polish friend did wake up, though not until I alighted from the train in Minsk. He appeared at the window waving to me and wishing me luck. I often wondered whether he married the Kazakh woman.

Two years later I was traveling in the opposite direction, from Minsk to Warsaw, once again on the train, which left Minsk in the early evening. Before leaving, friends had showered me with gifts, all of which were alcoholic in the shape of six bottles of vodka. At that time, it was the most appropriate and affordable gift. I packed them carefully in my suitcase, which I then put on the top rack in my compartment. I was absolutely alone in the train and the journey was uneventful until we arrived at Brest. After a fairly lengthy stop, officials came on and made off with passports. When they would be returned was not immediately clear. It was by now very dark. The train then shunted to the sidings for the three-hour wheel change. It was a desolate scene, accompanied by the sound of hammering. Then my compartment door opened.

At the entrance was a large man in his 50s, wearing full military regalia. A KGB colonel, I thought, but I am no expert on uniforms. I was quite clearly his business for this particular journey. He sat down, awkwardly, and the interrogation began, all in Russian. Why had I visited Belarus? Who did I see? What was my business? He then made a comment that was unexpected.

"Give me your wallet!"

For any Westerner in the newly independent Soviet states in the early 1990s, this was not a question that prompted any ready response. I allowed myself a moment of composure, then reached into my coat and handed over my wallet. He examined it carefully. He then asked for my customs form and checked carefully the amount of money with which I had entered the country. Everything appeared to tally. One does not play games on customs forms. He sighed and then looked around the compartment. He saw the suitcase and asked me to take it down.

"Open it!" he shouted.

Once open he started feeling around with both hands. Before long he had found one of the bottles of vodka; then he found a second, third.

"How many bottles?" he asked.

"Six."

"Six? You know this is illegal. Are you an alcoholic?"

I thought of answering that if I continued to visit collective farms I soon would be, but decided that a polite 'no' was the most sensible answer.

"Then why are you bringing six bottles of vodka out of Belarus?"

"They are gifts," I said.

"It's not allowed." This was perhaps the most exclusively Soviet statement in the lexicon.

And then we sat there, for what seemed an interminable period in the compartment on the dark wheel-less train in the dark sidings of Brest station. I wondered if he was assessing his options or just trying to intimidate me. I had reasoned that my best course was to say nothing. And then just as suddenly as he had entered, he hoisted himself to

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his feet and left the compartment. Fifteen minutes later my passport was returned. Shortly thereafter the train sidled back to the station, preparing for the short trip to Warsaw.

A few months later, by contrast, I was in Moscow for a conference, and decided to visit Minsk for the last portion of the trip. I was so busy in Minsk that I extended my time there and changed the date of my return home. The change did not present a problem, but it meant that my Russian visa had expired. One could still enter Russia from Belarus without any form of passport or visa control so I had no problems returning to Sheremetyevo-2. One should recall that the spring of 1994 was not Russia's happiest time. Its economy was struggling and its president, Boris Yeltsin, increasingly unpopular and in poor health. Sheremetyevo, like Brest station, was also quite dark, with no lights turned on and a massive crowd trudging forward toward passport control. I was hoping that the border guards would not be particularly discerning and that the expiry date on my visa form would not be closely examined. I was particularly buoyed by the fact that the guard looked like he was barely out of high school.

And indeed, I almost made it. He had the stamp in his hand ready to bring it crashing down when something made him pause. He re-examined my passport and uttered the words, in English, "Big problem." He then consulted with someone far more senior, and in front of sympathetic hordes, I was led away to a private room quite far away. It did look very serious and I was anticipating some sort of short-term detention. The officer's solemn expression was that of a hanging judge. We sat down at opposite sides of a table and he lit a cigarette. My excuse was that I had forgotten to renew my visa. There was nothing much else to say.

"Give me \$90," he announced.

Ninety dollars US crossed the table, and he produced a stamp and extended my visa. But I was not dismissed. There appeared to be a serious difficulty judging by the frown on his face.

"Look," he said, "I need to ask you something else."

"Yes?"

About 30 seconds expired. I was by now in full panic mode.

"Can you help me emigrate to Canada?"

The tension in the room evaporated. Now he needed something from me, and though I could not offer much help, I could at least provide some basic information.

Occasionally, it was possible to fly to Moscow from Minsk-1 Airport, close to the city center, and far more convenient than the 42-kilometer trip along the Moscow highway to Minsk-2. I found myself there in the mid-90s, large suitcase in hand. There were several passengers, but I was the only one with any baggage. It seemed that everyone else had carry-ons. I checked in to the flight and received a boarding card but the woman behind the desk never so much as glanced at my suitcase. It was about a minute before I saw a roughly dressed man behind a neighboring desk winking at me and rubbing his finger and thumb together. And a further 10-20 seconds passed before I realized his intention. I took out my wallet and gave him \$2, all I had in small change. He seemed perfectly satisfied and whisked my suitcase away by hand. But where would it go, I wondered?

Eventually, a tractor appeared outside the airport window, pulling a large cart. The cart contained my suitcase. Off it chugged over to the other side of the airport where a decrepit propeller plane awaited it: the Belavia flight to Moscow.

In Warsaw, perhaps a year later, I was once again travelling to Minsk by Belavia. The plane I had booked was not listed on the departures board so I went to inquire at the Belavia desk.

"Is there actually a flight to Minsk today?" I asked.

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"Perhaps," said the woman behind the desk.

"You are not sure?"

"Well it seems, yes, you are booked on it, second class. For \$10 more you can fly first class."

It seemed like a bargain, and the \$10 duly changed hands. About ten minutes before departure, at around 9:50 am, we went through the gate and were assembled on the tarmac like rodents for about ten minutes. We then ascended up the stairs at the back of the plane, with our bags, which we left near the entrance. I looked in vain for my seat, but was asked to go forward, through a dirty looking curtain to the front of the plane, where the seats looked more or less the same as the back. I was deposited in the front row before a sort of cabinet with a large empty space behind it. A gold-toothed flight attendant then arrived down the aisle.

"Vodka or brandy, sir?"

I told her that I needed some tea.

I was then aware of a noise on the front stairs outside and left my seat to look through the window to see two men staggering upward with a very large TV set. They eventually arrived at the plane entrance and deposited the TV in the space directly in front of me. A video was inserted into it and "Men in Black" started playing, a 2-hour movie for the 50-minute flight. Belavia first class in the 1990s.

To the Kolkhoz!

I had settled comfortably into a work routine in Minsk on this, my fourth or fifth visit (1994), alternating between work and leisure, the former at the time mostly in the National Library, then in its old location, close to the presidential palace and the headquarters of the "Lukomol," the patriotic Union of Youth, who occupied the former building of the Komsomol. A journalist friend who wrote for several opposition outputs, Vladimir, stopped at the apartment in which I was staying one day, and suggested that we visit a collective farm. It was something I had long wanted to do, having written my PhD dissertation on collectivization – albeit in western Ukraine rather than Belarus. As the days went by I had more or less forgotten this invitation.

One morning Vladimir returned. It was the day, he announced, to visit the kolkhoz. The trip had been carefully arranged. He had hired a minibus complete with driver, and we were accompanied by a man dressed immaculately in a grey suit, small and intelligent, who was interested in every aspect of our trip. It transpired that he was present at the behest of the collective farm rather than Vladimir, and obviously he was from the KGB. I learned gradually that much of my activity in Minsk was followed by the KGB, and appropriately enough, the kolkhoz was located near the settlement of Dzerzhinsk, the birthplace of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the first leader of the Cheka, the original secret police established by Lenin in December 1917.

The farm was about an hour's drive from Minsk, and clearly well prepared for the visit of a foreigner. The place was spotlessly clean, the manager polite and attentive, as he showed me around the buildings and discussed his livestock. Not a single person on the farm was over the age of 45, he informed me, providing an impression that no one over that age could be trusted to work efficiently. The KGB man attended constantly, always adding some information and making notes. It was evident that this place was not only a model farm, but was the outstanding example in Belarus. I felt like I had seen my first Potemkin village.

The business of the day over, the attendees, including the chairman of the farm and of course our KGB friend, crammed into two vehicles and set off through the nearby forest until we reached an exquisite lake, with dachas alongside, evidently exclusive to the nomenklatura. One man informed me that Shushkevich used to have a dacha in this area to which, the state had alleged, he brought illegally obtained materials leading to his (trumped up) corruption charges that brought about his removal as state leader in January 1994.

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The trunk of the car contained two large hampers of food: sausage, salad, cucumbers, bread and last but not least some very cold bottles of vodka. Everyone ate with gusto and then, standing, they prepared for a vodka toast. But it was not the usual vodka toast as a full 100 grams were poured into large glasses. And everyone was watching the foreigner intently. I should add at this point that I was a novice at such inductions. At the toast, I took a sip and the Belarusians scoffed in uproar. Was this the way Canadians drank? Was I trying to insult their offer of friendship? I emptied the glass.

A second toast followed. At that point, the world had become a much finer place, and I began to appreciate the beauty of the forest. The conversation was beginning to deteriorate somewhat and before long the KGB man was telling anecdotes, long and complicated ones but nonetheless extremely funny. Unfortunately, I only recall one with any clarity. It was about the Yalta summit attended by Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin. Churchill was berating Stalin:

“Comrade Stalin, you must make some sacrifices to achieve your goals.”

“What do you suggest, Mr. Churchill?”

“How about giving up Crimea?”

Stalin looked pensive.

“I think that’s quite a reasonable suggestion, Mr. Churchill.”

“Thank you! The world will appreciate Josef Stalin as a moderate and wise leader.”

“One moment,” said Stalin, “We Russians are peaceful people and make concessions, but in return I wish to ask you a simple question. If you answer it correctly, we will give up Crimea.”

“That sounds fair, Comrade Stalin. What is your question?”

Stalin held up his thumb and two fingers: “Which one is the middle?”

Churchill gave the matter a moment and chose the forefinger. Stalin’s face broke into a delighted grin.

“I am sorry but you are wrong.” He promptly put his thumb in between the two fingers in the universal gesture of vulgarity: “This one is the middle.”

Vladimir was in the middle of proceedings and competing with the KGB man for attention. And so the evening continued. Or rather it didn’t because, as I was informed the next day, the Canadian guest suddenly disappeared and no one could find him. A lengthy search ensued. And eventually I was found, knee deep in the lake, alongside the driver of our car, who had not been imbibing. We were catching frogs! This was now the trip to the country’s best kolkhoz ended and to this day friends from Belarus bring up the incident with great delight. My subconscious passion for this ancient rural pastime had evidently surfaced.

Iryna

During one of my first visits to Belarus, Lyuba Pervushina had mentioned that her friend Alla’s daughter, born in 1991, had a serious illness. Initially, Alla and her husband Aleksei Sokolov, believed the ailment was related to the Chernobyl disaster. But it transpired that the daughter, Iryna, had something called phenylketonuria (PKU), a very rare genetic disorder that can be inherited from healthy parents. It can be very dangerous if untreated, resulting in seizures, and brain retardation. Simply put, the child needs a carefully monitored diet that is low in protein. In Belarus in the early 1990s, that was particularly hard to attain.

As I got to know the family, it seemed to me I was in a good position to help, though it took me some time to reach

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this decision. Aleksei worked for the Ministry of the Interior, as a member of the vice squad, a particularly difficult task. He was unfriendly with me at first, saying that he had never met any foreigners before and did not trust them. He had a habit, after arriving home, of interrupting meals with a smoke break outside in the hallway of the apartment building, sometimes with friends. Gradually, however, he warmed to me, and we became, if not friends, then certainly more than passing acquaintances. Eventually, I joined him during the smoke breaks, albeit as a non-smoker. Alla was already quite a prominent doctor, and prepared to spend hours preparing meals for her daughter.

In Alberta, I started to search for places that might sell low-protein products. We had a store called Heart Smart, which was hard to find, and somewhat limited in the variety of products. But some University of Alberta doctors put me on a better track with advice that medications for PKU were used only to the expiration dates and then discarded. In fact, they remained viable long after such time, and could therefore be used. At the University of Alberta Hospital, I was able to amass a large quantity of such products. I took a few with me to Minsk the next time, and Alla approved. But the need was constant.

On the second return, I filled an entire suitcase with such products, hoping it would make its way through airport security. I doubt that such a shipment could be sent as regular baggage today, but in the 1990s, I had no problems. The customs office at Minsk International Airport was more interested in the Bailey's in my hand luggage. I had two bottles, which she said was illegal.

"Do you like Bailey's?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

I handed over one of the bottles, which she carefully transported to a corner of the customs zone. Once I was through, I was met by a team of Ministry of Interior men, plain clothes, and headed by Aleksei. They opened the case in front of the outgoing passengers and examined the packages, poking into the white powder. It could only have appeared like a drug raid to onlookers. Aleksei then shook my hand, took the case, and they all exited the airport. I felt satisfied that I had helped the family, and even more so as I watched Iryna grow, healthy, in the years ahead, into an intelligent and beautiful woman. The Irish Children of Chernobyl group also provided food supplies for a prolonged period. I remained close to both the Sokolov family and Lyuba over the coming years.

A few years later, I was asked to serve as an expert witness for a refugee hearing in Atlanta for a Belarusian woman who had presented documents to show she had been beaten by militia and treated in a local clinic, with a note signed by the relevant doctor. The would-be refugee maintained that her life would be in danger if she returned to Minsk because of her association with an opposition group. I met her, and believed her, but told the lawyer I would try to verify the documents once I was next in Belarus. Because of the Sokolovs, it was entirely feasible to do so. And perhaps to be expected, the documents turned out to be forgeries. The doctor who had allegedly signed the medical statement did not exist, at least in any clinic in Minsk. And Sergei confirmed that the claimant was free to return to the city at any time: she had no criminal record and was not even under observation. The lawyer in Atlanta promptly ended all communications after I sent him the information. He did not wish to know.

Sergei died at the age of 46, worn down it seemed by the pressures of his work. I will always remember him for his simple honesty and warmth beneath the rough exterior. He helped me dispel one preconceived notion: that because Belarus is an authoritarian state, then its officials must all be of the same ilk, committed to the regime and willing to follow orders to the letter. To the contrary, both among the authorities and the opposition, there are good and bad, there is no dividing line between them. That was also obvious in Communist times – at least after the Stalin era – which is why in some respects the transition from Communist to authoritarian or even to some form of democracy was not always difficult. People make adjustments.

Notes

[1] Viacheslav Kebich (b. 1936) was born in Volozhyn region of Poland (now Belarus) and was Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, 1990-1994. He was a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet

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Union from 1962 to 1991.

[2] Stanislau Shushkevich (b. 1934), a Doctor of Physics and Academician, who served as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus in 1991-1994. Along with the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk, he initiated and signed the Belavezha Agreement of December 1991, forming the Commonwealth of Independent States that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

About the author:

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