

Artist's Statement, by Gabriela Bulisova

Life on the Edge...The Half-Lives and Half-Truths of Chernobyl

"It was Stalin who said: 'A single death is a tragedy; a million of deaths is a statistic.' In order to counter statistical thinking one must focus on individuals. Not a million deaths, but one death. Not thousands of refugees, but one survivor at a time, with a name and an image." David Levi Strauss, Between the Eyes, Essays on Photography and Politics, Aperture, 2003.

Can't see it, can't smell it, can't taste it, can't talk about it...The Chernobyl exclusion zone, or "zone of alienation" -- initially set at 20 miles in radius, but expanding over time with the spread of radioactivity by wind and water -- splits towns and villages in half: half hospitable and living, half lethal and uninhabitable, as if the radioactive contamination stops at some arbitrary line. What is life like in those settlements on the edge of one of the most radioactive areas in the world? What is it like to be one of the nearly 2 million people living in radioactive zones in Belarus alone? To be a refugee in one's own home? To be denied entry to places that were before just a thought away. Before.

Before 'time and space died' in Ukraine and Belarus. Before history stopped there. Before 1:23 a.m., April 26, 1986. Before the Chernobyl catastrophe -- an event many speculate had tremendous, although latent and covert significance for the collapse of the Soviet Union. There is the history of Ukraine and Belarus 'before and after Chernobyl.' There is the inescapable reality of living with the radioactive contamination, and the self-imposed denial -- perhaps necessary for survival -- of Chernobyl's legacy. Both are present and intense.

"As other tragedies are vying for the world's attention, Chernobyl has been relegated to history. The images of Chernobyl are different than the deeply disturbing images of war where the immediacy of bombs and bullets are all too apparent. The war that has been waged by Chernobyl is a silent and invisible war, but nonetheless, deadly." Adi Roche, Founder and CEO of Ireland-based Chernobyl Children's Project International, recipient of the prestigious 2010 "Nobel Prize for Children" World of Children Award for Health, delivered November 4, 2010 at UNICEF House in New York City.

World dictionaries define Chernobyl as the worst environmental catastrophe in the history of humanity. But what the 'worst environmental catastrophe' actually means in the everyday lives of the people of Ukraine and Belarus, cannot be explained by any dictionary.

The complexity of living with Chernobyl can only be understood empirically through breathing Chernobyl, eating Chernobyl, sleeping with Chernobyl, and most of all, through denying Chernobyl. Left out from the dictionary is perhaps the main link to understanding the complexities of the problem, an addendum: Chernobyl is among the worst of psychological disasters in human history.

The stigma of 'Chernobyl victim' is profoundly prevalent. Personal medical and family problems are rarely discussed and are often hidden away in shame. Medical data is frequently unreliable and incomplete; governments and the nuclear industry repeatedly refuse to make links between medical consequences and radiation; contaminated food is being grown, consumed, and distributed nationally;

people are falling ill. Shocking morphological mutations exist but so do slow-ticking genetic changes caused by poisons that will radiate for decades, centuries, even thousands of years. We don't know what those genetic changes may bring. The future of these countries, based as it is on the genetic pools of its populations, is uncertain...

An excruciating war waged by Chernobyl's 'atoms for peace gone wrong' has been emitting its long lasting poisonous legacy for almost 25 years, but will continue to do so for centuries into the future. According to the UN, 7 to 9 million people were affected. 4.5 million children and adults live on contaminated land. Over 800,000 children are at risk of cancer. 400,000 people became environmental refugees.

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