In the Dark

1986 Chernobyl: Lily Poberezhska, a young Ukrainian mother and teacher, recalls the moments, days and years following the nuclear accident.

The day after the explosion of Saturday April 26, most Kievites carried on as normal in blissful ignorance. On that day the foreign languages college where I taught held an amateur concert organised by teachers and students. We were all in an excellent mood until a colleague said: "Oh, you don't know yet what happened last night—there was an explosion at the Chernobyl power plant." She happened to be the daughter of the Minister of the Interior of Ukraine.

There was no information from any Soviet official sources on that day, or the next, or all day Monday. For three days after the accident people were kept completely in the dark. But this information cover-up happened against the background of what we saw—ambulances and empty buses snaking northwards and troop movements, when the authorities decided to evacuate the population within ten kilometres of the power plant.

No wonder rumours began spreading and we were feeling increasingly panicked. Nobody knew how badly the reactor was damaged and whether we should expect a full-blown nuclear explosion or an order for evacuation. No one told us what precautions we should take to protect our children and ourselves. In search for information, people turned to nuclear scientists and doctors they knew—who suddenly became extremely popular. But without verifiable data, they were not much help either.

Reluctant Admission

Finally, at 9:00 p.m. on Monday April 28, an expressionless TV newscaster on Moscow television read a terse four-sentence statement from the Council of Ministers that raised at least as many questions as it answered: "An accident has taken place at the Chernobyl power station, and one of the reactors was damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Those affected by it are being given assistance. A government commission has been set up.''

Afterwards, the official propaganda machine still tried to convey the message of normality. Even when the radiation levels in Kiev increased dramatically on April 30, the authorities decided to go ahead with the traditional May Day parade in Kiev. Thousands of people marched with their children along the main street. Moreover, to show that everything was okay, Ukrainian party bosses who greeted the crowds had their young grandchildren with them. Kievites soon heard through the grapevine that immediately after the parade, the children and grandchildren of the nomenclature were whisked away to the airport and evacuated. It made us feel betrayed and extremely resentful.

In early May, the authorities admitted that the accident was more serious than had been originally thought

but there was still "nothing much to worry about." Local media broadcast and published recommendations that Kievites should take some "precautionary" measures like keeping windows shut and washing the floors. But by that time, trust in official information was completely undermined, and most Kievites, including myself, decided that Kiev was no longer safe for our children.

A City Without Children

By the first week in May, a mass exodus of mothers and children from Kiev began. I moved my three-year old daughter to Moscow to stay with relatives. At the Kiev railway station frantic parents were pushing their infants through the train windows, asking more fortunate passengers to deliver them to their relatives at the other end. The remaining population took to drinking red wine in unprecedented quantities (thought to help remove radiation from the body) and black humour. Kiev without children looked eerily like Hamelin Town from the fairy tale, "The Pied Piper."

For at least a year after the disaster, Kievites lived in a state of nuclear paranoia. Rumours sprang up about once a month that there was a high risk of a nuclear explosion, that river Dnieper was highly contaminated etc. We joked bitterly that we "will die of information, not of radiation," meaning the swarm of highly contradictory rumours and the total lack of trust in any official information.

A Boomerang Strategy

At the beginning the "communication strategy" of the Soviet State was that of a complete information blackout or cover-up. When that failed, they tried to play down the scale of the disaster, to whitewash the State and its source of pride—the Soviet nuclear industry. To ordinary people it looked like incredible arrogance and blatant disregard for their lives.

It was a textbook case of how not to communicate in a crisis, because the "firm" (a communist State) was perceived to be putting its own "corporate" interests above people's lives, health and the environment. And it backfired very badly. Not only did it deal a very heavy blow to the reputation of the nuclear industry worldwide and made the public more aware of the risks associated with it, it also brought about the policy of glasnost which in its turn contributed to the demise of the communist system. You could say the nuclear cloud had a silver lining.

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Photo: Lily Poberezhska with her daughter in Ukraine