

Belarus 1997

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In 1986, when Chernobyl in the northern Ukraine blew its top, most of the radiation went north into neighbouring Belarus. My destination was the town of Gomel in south-eastern Belarus, in the middle of the fallout zone.

Just eleven years earlier, "the accident," as everyone called it, occurred. Today, whole villages will not be habitable for millennia. Hundreds of thousands of people must learn a new skill, living with the dangers of radiation.

Of course, there's a lot of rubbish talked about nuclear fallout. Like a little is dangerous—perhaps it is, but everyone on Earth is

dosed daily with sun radiation. Even a glowing wristwatch gives off radiation. How do you think they make it glow?

This is why some people think Gomel ought to be renamed Glow-mel.

One foreign consultant hired early in the World Vision program to teach "radiation awareness" was a little too aware himself. He brought all his own water and food. Steadfastly refused to take any food, drink or hospitality offered to him. Did not bathe during his two-week assignment. And when he left, he wrapped all his clothes in a paper bag and put them in the trash. Naturally, everyone was slightly offended by this extreme behaviour, not to mention the way it undermined his credibility as a teacher of "How to live with radiation." So, the staff found his clothes and mailed them back to him in the United States!

Belarusians do have a sense of humour.

Gomel is unremarkable in appearance and style. Nothing in the town points to nuclear fallout. Nothing. It is just another poor city in a trying-to-be post-Communist country. The very ordinariness and normality of the town contribute to the current government's attitude that Chernobyl is plain history, that there is no radiation problem, and that, conveniently, nothing needs to be done now.

The truth is different.

I flew into the capital, Minsk, on a Tuesday. My heavy travel schedule of the past month must have been beginning to show because a man in his twenties offered me his seat on the bus in Frankfurt. I refused, a little churlishly.

The plane to Minsk was half full and the only flight that day. To receive us, it was one of the biggest terminals I have seen. Not quite on the scale of Singapore, the Minsk air terminal was nevertheless noteworthy, if only for the fact that it was so big compared with the passenger traffic that barely a tenth of it was occupied.

The terminal rose out of the plain on the edge of the runway like the beached superstructure of the QE2. Nautical in style, with half-hexagon-shaped outer panels and long strips of glass windows, it looked like something out of a 1950s architect's portfolio.

Dimitri (Dima), Belarus's World Vision program manager, informed me that it had opened less than ten years before. "But it took twenty years to complete." I had also heard this sort of story in Russia.

Dima's arrival in Minsk served two purposes. The obvious one was meeting me and driving me four hours back to Gomel. And another of arranging for the transit of some Gifts-In-Kind that had arrived from one of the overseas World Vision offices. He needed to call the office in Gomel and set a few things in train, so we went to an office with phone booths half a kilometre along this vast empty terminal. He found the staff at lunch and asked if I would mind waiting the twenty minutes until they returned. I asked to go to the toilet. This turned out to be the half kilometre back in the other direction, and by the time I used the squats and walked back, lunch was over, and communications began. I had the presence of mind to move my wallet from my jeans pocket before using the facilities. Not for nothing are all those stories of people losing their wallets down pit latrines!

Dima indicated that clearing customs was something of an ordeal. In the first place, not too many organisations were even authorised to receive goods from overseas tax-free. World Vision was on a select list of about seventy. To get on the list, you needed to be sure of receiving quality goods (usually medicines and vitamins) and have transparent bookkeeping that could demonstrate to the authorities that the goods were used properly. This sounded only reasonable to me, and it was telling that so few organisations could make the grade.

The drive down to Gomel was pleasant, if featureless. After over an hour in which we had not breasted even a rise, let alone a hill, I commented. "The land is very flat. I haven't seen any mountains."

"Belarus has no mountains at all," said Dima without a sense of deprivation.

If the road from Minsk to Gomel were typical, then Belarus wouldn't even have hills. But it did have some beautiful avenues of beech, pine and plum trees in full blossom. Across fields marched oceans of yellow dandelions or, more seriously, the dull green of crops. The road was generally of good quality, although nearer the airport, some of the expansion joints in the concrete were so large as to simulate speed humps.

Dima's car was a Lada Samara. These cost well under \$10,000 in this country, and they had all the build quality of such a bargain. But Dima expected two to three years of service. Then, it would be returned for a new one. I recalled that the early Ladas to be imported into Australia had such a dreadful reputation for unreliability that it forever prejudiced the hopes of the importer.

The scenery was interesting, if unrelenting. Mostly, the road bypassed villages until closer to Gomel. Sometimes, we were in a forest, other times between farms. That was about the sum of it.

Such houses, as we saw, were either old log cabins with hand-carved window frames or smaller structures built on small garden plots (dachas).

"Some people go to the quarantined villages and take the houses and rebuild them here," commented Dima.

"Aren't the houses dangerous from radiation?"

"Many are. Certainly."

Bring a Geiger counter with the real estate agent!

Mostly, the scenery was mid-toned and even. Dull would be an unfair adjective, but it certainly lacked the contrasts of Europe's mountainous countries, the deep rich greens of other places, or the bright and highly painted homes. Here, everything fits into a narrow colour spectrum. Except for the colours that God Himself provided. The dandelions were provocatively yellow. The plum trees are brilliant white.

We arrived in Gomel in the early evening, and Dima took me to the guest apartment. This was in a large block of flats in the centre of town. The guest apartment was on the tenth floor. We entered through a side door, slipped across an almost black room that smelled of urine, sweat and alcohol, up two stairs in the dark, along a narrow corridor, around a corner and into a two-person lift. It clunked into life, and we ascended to the 10th floor, so designated by a freehand “10” drawn with red paint on the wall opposite the lift door.

One door with a tricky lock opened onto a foyer with four doors. One of these doors opened onto a second door behind it. Behind these double doors was the guest apartment, a two-bedroom flat of European dimensions (compact but liveable). And as with most European apartment blocks, the inside was nicer than the outside. Although, one has to say, outside showed that no one was responsible for its tidiness and state of repair. Or, if there were such a person, they were going about it in the most desultory way possible.

I hypothesise that foyer quality is directly connected with a sense of ownership. We learned this lesson in development a long while ago. If World Vision digs the well, then it is our well. If the people dig the well, it is theirs. If the pump breaks on our well, who do the people expect will fix it? And who will they blame if it just lies there useless? World Vision.

So it is with houses, probably. Unless there is a body corporate, entryways, outside gardens and common areas are bound to be neglected. It is, after all, not the tenant's responsibility, nor is it in the landlord's interest.

The guest apartment proved more than adequate for me. It was clean and comfortable, with a nice firm bed, clean sheets and towels, a refrigerator stocked with snacks, a toilet that worked, lights that didn't go out unless you wanted them to, and everything except hot water. I'd have been prepared to trade something for a hot shower.

“This is the trouble here,” admitted Dima apologetically. “The boiler is for a whole area of flats. Unfortunately, they are often unreliable.” I wondered whether the central boiler idea (not just for a block of flats but for a section of the city) was some central planner's bright idea.

But sir, we can save heaps by doing it in a centralised way. Very efficient.

In my experience, the most efficient hot water is obtained from one of those instant gas heaters that sits over the bathtub. You can have as much hot water as you want when you want it. There's nothing efficient about not having what you want. This mistake is often repeated in organisations, too.

Still, if a few days without hot water was the worst that ever happened to me, I could say I led a good life! Worse had already happened to me—but not on this trip.

Dima picked me up in the morning as he dropped his six-year-old son, Sacha, at the nearby kindergarten. We went to the World Vision office, actually the office of the local charity which is “World Vision-in-Belarus”. It was in a grand three-storey building beside a heavily wooded park at one end of the main centre. The front of the building had Greek pillars and large doors.

“Very impressive office!” I said jokingly.

“It used to be the Cultural Centre,” explained Dima, “but after the break-up of the Communist system, they struggled for funds, so they rent us a few rooms at a good price.”

They were nice rooms too. Cool in the summer warmth. “Just as cold in winter, unfortunately,” observed Dima. And with delightfully ornate ceilings.

“Yes, but I am thinking of getting a crash helmet because bits of the ceiling fall on me at my desk.”

The staff gathered for devotions. I talked about World Vision's big circles and reflected a little on the use of the word *glory* in the Gospel narratives. We are to understand this as a reference to the character of God. If we are to reflect God's glory, we should do it by living lives consistent with his character, his values, and his priorities.

The Belarus team was young and friendly. Once the ice was broken, they talked easily. It is difficult to break the ice if the first thing one has to do is something religious, but soon, the conversation flows freely again.

I talked with Sergey about the radiation alert project that, among other things, provided almost a thousand children with a few weeks' holiday outside the radiation-affected area. Expert medical advice was that just 20 days of living, with a good diet, outside the contaminated area would rid the growing body of most of the poisons.

This thinking was behind many of the programs that had started to bring out Belorussian and Ukrainian children for holidays. Most of these holidays were in distant Western countries, and our local team was concerned about the difficulties such experiences caused. Children were confronted with a significant cross-cultural challenge. In response, the team had devised a program in which the children are taken in groups to a Christian campsite in Moldavia—still a foreign country, but not quite so foreign, nor so far as Germany, the UK, America or Australia. Local teachers accompanied the children. We were embarking on our third year of this program, which had already been hailed as a great success for the children's social development. Only time would tell if it cleaned the poison from their young bodies.

Such programs were controversial locally because the official line was that Chernobyl was over, and there was nothing now to worry about. As the radiation cloud moved away from Chernobyl, it dropped its lethal cargo in a haphazard pattern. Some villages were drenched in radiation and had been closed off. The people left or were forced out. Other villages, a kilometre away, were officially "clean". One could argue that everything would be OK if you didn't go in the no-go areas.

But it was not that simple. One statistic hit me like a flying mallet. Here it is:

The normal rate of thyroid cancer is one person per million:

In the most affected areas, for children aged 0-3, one in FOUR is expected to develop thyroid cancer.

One in four!

And the source? An authoritative World Health Organisation Study.

"I can't say whether the numbers are right," said Dima, "but we know ourselves that you can find some kids operated on for thyroid cancer in every village. So, the rate is already way over one in a million."

The truth was, however, that no one knew the truth, and not too many people were doing anything about finding out. Diseases from radiation are a long-term proposition. It was, therefore, a political irrelevance.

People with local information were afraid to reveal it since it contradicted the official political line. An official would reveal some statistics, but when asked for a copy, the reply was, "Oh, this is just between us."

Dima said, "All we know is what people predicted about this problem a few years ago, and we now see it coming true. The average life span in Belarus is now down to 63 years. Too many children are slow, tired, or have sight problems in the most affected areas. Teachers and health care professionals know it. But it is not in their career interests to go out of their way to prove it."

It looked like up to eight million people had been, or will be, seriously affected by the Chernobyl disaster. Without serious analysis, even such large numbers were easy to ignore.

But not for World Vision and not for our colleagues in Belarus.

After a pleasant lunch with Dima and Natasha in a quiet restaurant, where I ordered beef, and the waitress recommended and brought pork, I drove out to see one of the abandoned villages. I was surprised to find you could drive right in, a practice that was permitted as long as not too many people did it.

Over lunch, Natasha talked about World Vision's antenatal training. It was a marvellous success, not least because it created a sense of community among the participants.

"This hit home to me last year when I went to Tanzania," said Dima. "There, I found people with a natural sense of community but no infrastructure or education. Back here in Belarus, it is the opposite. Even though some systems don't work properly, there is infrastructure, and everyone is educated. Still, the years of Communism have resulted in the sense of community being almost destroyed. You won't find it in the cities anymore."

Communism had destroyed community. And radioactive fallout had added to the destruction.

The village, just 25 kilometres from Gomel, appeared as normal as possible. Nothing visible told you there was a radiation problem here. There were no two-headed cows nor beech trees with flowers the size of sunflowers. The only real surprise was the good quality road right through the village. I commented on it.

Sergey explained: "This is the only benefit to Gomel province. The roads. You see, the radiation is on the ground, in the dust. Cars are the worst thing for picking up and spreading dust. So, we have bitumen roads everywhere now."

Sergey commented that things had changed in the months since he last had come through. More houses were being demolished and buried. We saw the idle bulldozers beside the huge house-sized holes they had dug, ready to entomb the houses standing beside their own graves.

Around one corner, we saw two young men carrying off timber from a half-demolished public building. "They are taking it away to use or to sell." Bring a Geiger counter when you go to the timber merchant!

"It's illegal, of course," said Sergey and, as we turned round to exit the village, "See, they are gone now. They don't know who we are."

"They are playing safe," I said. Then the thought struck me that "playing safe" was hardly an accurate description for two youths who were spending their afternoons in radiation-soaked villages stealing radiation-soaked timber.

Amidst the discussion, I discovered one fascinating fact—that apples are safe to eat, not mushrooms, berries or grains. Apparently, the pectin in apples keeps them clean.

"You can eat the apples that grow right outside Chernobyl," said Sergey, "although you had better wash the dust off first."

Much of Sergey's explanations revealed another interesting post-Chernobyl phenomenon. People could speak radiation-ese. Sergey's comments often included numbers and units of measure that meant nothing to me. Yet, Sergey and the driver argued whether it was 20 or 30-somethings, while I had no idea whether 2 or 2000 was dangerous or noteworthy.

"You can't swim in the rivers or lakes anymore," Sergey advised, and I thought of all those fish sellers I had seen by the road on the way down from Minsk.

I retired to the guest apartment, having mastered the puzzle of the locks on the way in.

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A teacher earns 800,000 roubles a month, but it costs 400,000 roubles to fill a car's petrol tank.

"That's absurd," I commented, "how does anyone survive."

"The shadow economy," Dima explained to me the next morning when I sat under the tenuous masonry in his office. "The great rulers always preferred peasants in their army because they would not only fight, but they could feed and clothe themselves by their own skills in working the shadow economy."

We drove across the city, past small wooden houses made from logs. The window frames of the houses were heavy and ornately carved. The roads were paved but rutted. Much like any other, in one street stood a large building with the outward appearance of dull industry. We drove around it into a yard where various motor vehicles stood, a barn-like structure, and a workshop. Inside the large building was a worship centre beautifully and ornately decorated—a modern baroque joy. Something symbolic here.

Leonid, pastor of Gomel Central Baptist, was a young man who gladly told the story of his church. His own great-grandfather had been forced by hunger to go to the Ukraine in 1906. There, he discovered a Baptist church and a new faith in God. He came back and established a Baptist church. Over the years, it suffered many repressions. During Stalin's time, several of the church leaders were sent to Siberia, but they were never heard from again. Their original building was lost in 1938, and after the Second World War, they established regular services in a home church, which was later bequeathed to the congregation by the owner.

In 1960, there was an issue over whether to register with the State as an official church or not. The church split on the issue, with this church standing against official registration. After this time the KGB neutralised and controlled church life with few areas of freedom.

"And what is it like now?" I asked, expecting him to say it was much freer now.

"Now," he said with a shrug, "it looks like it is getting back to that. There was a time between 1988 and '92, when the church had freedom. So much freedom, even more than the church enjoys in America!" he smiled.

"We had complete access to schools. We were welcomed in universities. Given free office space. But the church was not ready. There were many missed opportunities."

"Then, in 1992, the entrepreneurial spirit awoke," he said with deep irony and a sarcastic grin. "We discovered rent and taxes. And increasing political pressure. Now, it is concerning. Of course, many sects came to Belarus with these freedoms, and the government needed to crack down. But how far?"

I was conscious that I was speaking with the pastor of a tiny minority within the church's expressions. Because of a change in my plans, I missed a meeting with the head of the Orthodox church, which is considerably larger and more significant. Now, he was out of town when I wasn't.

"The (Orthodox) church is greatly trusted," Dima, himself Orthodox, commented. "People see it as a point of security and authenticity. I would say it is the most trusted institution in the society. Perhaps the only institution that is trusted."

"Do you have relationships with the Orthodox church," I asked this Evangelical pastor.

"I regret not. We must do better at the leadership level. Especially because some people fear that the Orthodox church inspires oppression against our church."

Dima and his team had arranged for several school directors to come to Gomel for a meeting to discuss plans for the summer camp program. The group was enthusiastic, some of whom had been sceptical about the program until they had experienced it in previous years.

Dima asked me to say a word or two about World Vision's regional program, and I obliged. Their questions were interesting and challenging.

"Who are these people who give money through World Vision? Who is the donor? I make donations too, but then the government decrees that I work one day a fortnight as a donation!"

I reassured them that private donors to World Vision programs were ordinary people like them who cared about the poor and oppressed and had some capacity to help. They did so entirely voluntarily. The concept seemed a little strange to them.

One person asked about Aborigines after hearing I came from Australia, a place of mythical character for them.

"They are cannibals, aren't they?"

I was shocked to think that of all the news reaching Belarus, it might be the tendentious mythmaking of the Hanson factor. The discussion that followed revealed the unconscious racism of people who have been isolated from a world of cultural diversity. Later, on television, I saw comedy routines that included African racial stereotypes that long ago became unacceptable in the West.

I reassured them that I doubted any Australian Aborigines had ever practised cannibalism and, if it had occurred, it was a minuscule minority. I did say that I had heard that some South Sea Islanders had been known to eat body parts of a conquered tribe after warfare symbolically, but as far as I knew, people were not on anyone's regular menu in the Southern Hemisphere.

"What does it mean to be a Christian organisation when there are so many churches?"

This was easy to explain in a post-Communist society with a large Orthodox population but hard to communicate. I tried to point out that World Vision was not a church but a group of people from different churches who had a common desire to help the poor.

"Do you get the support of public officials?"

This question fazed me. What was behind it in a society where the official system is so widely distrusted? I discovered the real interest was why the European Union and other governments don't give more money to Belarus.

"Why is the European Union not more interested in post-Chernobyl funding for Belarus!" they asked rhetorically. "There are dollars for the Ukraine." And not only European Union "dollars" but American ones. In the irrational world of development funding, Ukraine comes third in the list of most popular places for US foreign aid. After Israel and Egypt!

We enjoyed lunch together, and the team discussed the four-part program involving the schools: first, the summer camp. Second, continuing training in radiation awareness. Third, providing vitamins with special iodine supplements to combat thyroid cancer. Fourth, micro-enterprise development training to help the schools and communities generate resources for their own use. There was great enthusiasm about every aspect.

We discussed the need for careful planning in a children's camp program. Sadly, protection against child abuse must be on the agenda. The teachers also talked about other camping programs they had heard about. "Those kids who go away to Germany don't want to come back!" The wisdom of the World Vision team was to give the children an experience that connected them with their own culture.

The teachers also echoed earlier conversations about the difficulties of working with the official system.

“One school in the most affected area was suddenly declared clean. It was ridiculous, and the authorities quickly admitted that it was an error on the computer. But it took eight months to declare it unclean again! Meanwhile, people suffered from losing the daily food subsidy and other benefits.”

As the day ended, Dima drove me to his home for dinner. The home for Dima and his family is in an apartment block. Dima and Marina had made a pleasant oasis amidst the relative decay of Gomel. Their apartment had few rooms, but they had made something of them. Through the windows, they looked out onto trees. I enjoyed their company, food, beer and television (even though I only knew the comedian’s punch lines by the audience response).

After dinner, Dima took me back to the guest apartment, and I wandered onto the narrow 10th-floor veranda to look over the city in the twilight. The apartment overlooked a busy intersection. I had noticed a group of men from time to time approaching motor vehicles. They were money changers, of the illegal variety, of course. They seemed bold and unafraid of detection.

People passed by. There were many children, either alone or in twos or threes. No fear of the streets here. Young people came by. Four or five young men swaggered loudly across the street. One punched his mate on the shoulder and skipped out of range of the return blow. A happy chase followed.

Women in mini-skirts or long dresses with thigh-revealing slits complemented others in jeans and T-shirts. A man in the apartment block beside me came onto his veranda for a smoke. A boy of about three years toddled after him and played around his knees while his father relaxed.

On the third floor of the building opposite, a young man in a T-shirt leant on his balcony railing smoking a cigarette. A completely naked woman stepped from the curtains behind him and pressed herself into his back. He shrugged her off and gesticulated angrily in the direction of the large apartment building opposite. She playfully poked him and retired through the curtains. He turned to follow her. He was only wearing a T-shirt.

The next day, I mentioned the last episode to Dima and asked if this sort of brazenness was common in Belarus (although I carefully avoided using the word “brazen”).

He laughed. “Not at all, I assure you. We are providing you with many interesting experiences this week!”

At the office, I spent some time talking computers with David. Remarkably, in a place where communications are, at best, unreliable, World Vision has one of its most sophisticated computer sites. Belarus was the first World Vision entity to have a World Wide Web page, and David had been an advisor to governments and others on how to be linked to the Internet. His work in North Ossetia was so impressive that World Vision was well-known there as “those computer people!”

Soon, it was time to leave. I met with the staff one more time, and we exchanged farewells. The long drive back to Minsk replayed the tape in reverse order.

My last echo of Belarus was of the shadow economy. On the final check before entering the departure lounge, a young, uniformed woman asked me if I had been in Belarus on business or as a tourist.

“Business,” I replied, wondering how easy it would be to explain my line of business in simple words. Instead of the obvious line of questioning, she launched off on an unexpected tangent.

“Would you like to buy some excellent Russian black caviar?”

Since people in uniforms invariably stimulate my paranoia, I mistook a simple commercial request for some form of sophisticated entrapment. Am I about to be set up to buy illegal caviar and sent to a Belorussian jail or Siberia?

“No thanks,” I replied before my brain caught up with the notion that this was simple commerce, by which time I had the presence of mind merely to add lamely, “but I quite like caviar, thank you very much.”