MY NUCLEAR FAMILY

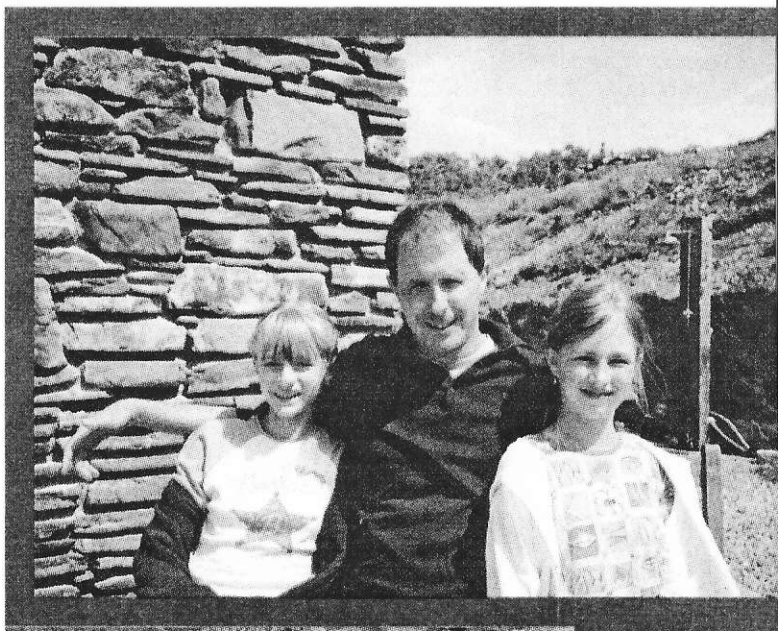
Katya and Tanya arrived in Caherdaniel last summer, two 11-year-old girls suffering from respiratory illnesses and scarred by personal tragedy. The holiday in fresh Kerry air not only helped the Belorussian guests, it had a profound effect on their hosts too. Twenty years after Chernobyl, **Philip Watson** looks back on an unforgettable fortnight

It's 4pm on a Sunday and my partner, Jacqueline, and I are pacing the house, waiting for two 11-year-old girls to arrive. They have flown to Shannon from Belarus, as part of a group of children brought to Ireland for a month's rest and recuperation by Chernobyl Children's Project International (CCPI) and are making their way by minibus to south Co Kerry.

They and the other six other children who will also be staying in and around Waterville and Caherdaniel are accompanied by Lavinia, the project's group leader in the area, and Miralda, a Belorussian translator. This much we know. We do not, however, know their names, their family backgrounds, the state of their health or whether they can speak even a word of English. We cannot speak Russian. If the truth be told, we know very little about their country.

We have learned in the Chernobyl Children's Project resource guide that up to 70 per cent of (*pahzhalosta*). They have brought their own Russian-English booklet, but it seems wonderfully idiosyncratic. "Good Lord almighty", "he will repent it", "by Jove", "phoeey" and "do you have the Western Union money-transfer system?" are some of its more comprehensible expressions. But Miralda is at hand to interpret and smooth things over – until, of course, she and Lavinia have to leave, and we are left looking at the girls blankly across the dining table.

Soon after, though, they go to the large plastic laundry bags they have brought with them as luggage and present us with an amazing collection of gifts from their families. There are chocolates, liqueurs, cloths, table mats and handmade wooden boxes. They have a second, identical set of gifts for Lavinia, her husband, Seamus, and their family, who will host the girls for a fortnight after us. When Jacqueline goes to help them unpack, it emerges that Tanya and Katya have arrived with little more than these presents. Each has a jump-



the radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, in 1986, fell on Belarus and that 90 per cent of the country's children may have been affected; many suffer from acute thyroid, respiratory and immune-system problems. The project initiated recuperative holidays in 1991, in the hope that breathing fresh Irish air and eating healthy, uncontaminated food would do them some good.

Many families in our area have become hosts, taking two girls or boys, usually for a fortnight at a time. Yet this is the first year that Jacqueline and I have been in a position to sign up. Unlike most of the host parents, we do not have kids. And we are the last stop on the children's long journey. We look at each other and agree that we have rarely felt so nervous.

Then they are here, appearing at the door looking tired and wan. Handwritten tags pinned to their tops identify their destination (Caherdaniel) and names (Tatiana Malei and Katerina Rubina), but luckily Lavinia introduces them to us simply as "Tanya and Katya". We show them to the room they'll be sharing, then serve a late lunch, and they seem smiley and happy, but it's obvious they are too dazed and disoriented to eat much or take a lot in.

Miralda tells us that they left their town, Volintzy, in northern Belarus, while it was still dark and have been travelling for 16 hours or more. Tanya and Katya, who are in the same class at school, have never been away from their families for an extended period, never left Belarus and never flown. When, later, we look at an atlas, it becomes clear that they have very little idea, in fact, where Ireland is. They point to an island. It's a good start, but it's one off the south coast of Sweden. Perhaps they are too young to take in the scale of the change they are experiencing.

We have a simple phrase book provided by Lavinia, and a Russian dictionary, and we practise "hello" (*privet*) and "you're welcome" er, bedclothes and some spare socks and underwear, but little else. They have pretty much arrived with the clothes they are standing in.

The accident at Chernobyl, in northern Ukraine, has been described as the largest technological disaster of the industrial age and the worst environmental catastrophe in the history of humanity. Twenty years ago, in the early hours of April 26th, 1986, a combination of defective Soviet design and egregious human error led to an explosion at reactor no 4. One hundred and ninety tons of highly radioactive uranium and graphite were released into the atmosphere; the emissions created levels of radioactivity estimated to be 100 times greater than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atom bombs combined.

Over the next few days, a colossal cloud of radioactive dust spread across Europe; poisoned rain fell on parts of northern Wales, southwestern Scotland and Northern Ireland (even today nearly 400 farms in the UK have their contamination levels routinely tested). After two weeks, traces of radiation had been detected across Russia and as far afield as Japan, Canada and the US.

Although the initial blast killed just two plant workers, and in the next few months 29 workers and firemen died from acute radiation poisoning, hundreds of thousands received extremely high doses of radiation. Of the 800,000 "liquidators" – soldiers, firefighters, miners, doctors, farmers and various government workers conscripted by the Soviet authorities to clear up the aftermath – 25,000 are believed to have died from radiation-related diseases or suicide, and a further 70,000 are permanently disabled.

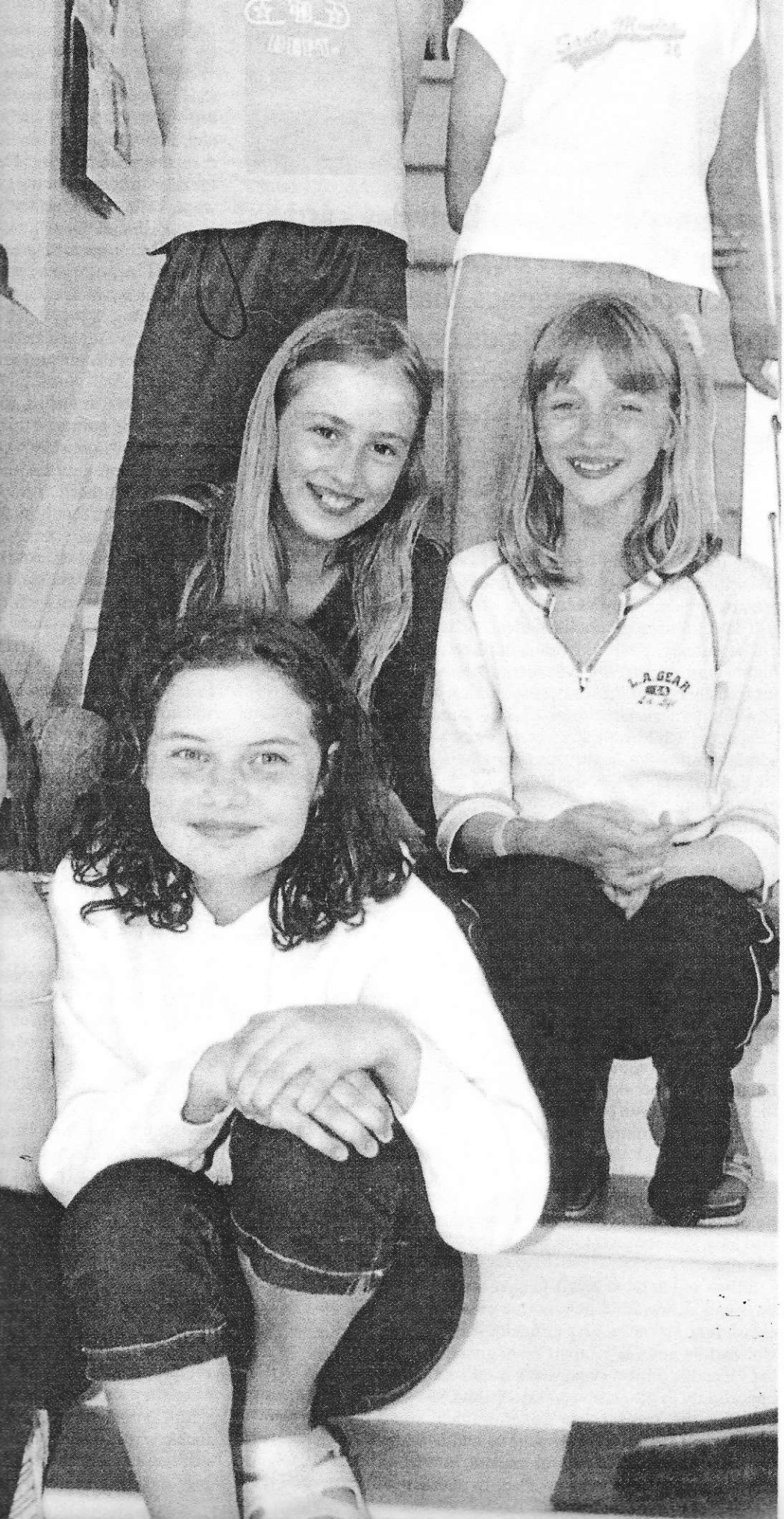
Mortality and casualty rates may be much higher, but reliable official figures are mostly unavailable. Many tens of thousands may yet exhibit serious medical conditions, and the links between cause and effect are hotly disputed. The

● Top: Tanya (left), Philip Watson and Katya outside Philip and Jacqueline's house in Caherdaniel ● Above: Tanya (left) and Katya with Jacqueline ● Far right: Chernobyl nuclear power station pictured through crosses of an old graveyard

United Nations estimates that nine million people in Ukraine, Belarus and western Russia have been affected by the disaster. In Belarus, one in seven of the population – 1.5 million people, of whom 500,000 are children – still lives on contaminated land. According to Chernobyl Children's Project, cancer and leukaemia have doubled overall – including 24 times as much thyroid cancer – and congenital birth deformities have more than tripled. Radiation specialists have predicted that as many as 100,000 people will contract thyroid cancer in the next few decades, and some scientists estimate that the toxic waste from the disaster will be around for almost 25,000 years.

Chernobyl Children's Project was set up in 1991 by Adi Roche, who was then a 35-year-old volunteer at the Cork office of the Irish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. She received a fax from doctors caring for sick

Right: The six girls from Belarus on the stairs of Philip Watson and Jacqueline O'Driscoll's house in Caherdaniel: Dasha Shamsur (top left), Olga Gavrilenia (top right), Katya Rubina (middle left), Tanya Malei (middle right), Elena Guz (bottom left), Anna Petrovich (bottom right)



children in Belarus. It read: "SOS appeal. For God's sake, help us to get the children out."

Since then, Chernobyl Children's Project has brought more than 13,000 children, aged between seven and 14 and mostly from Belarus, to Ireland for summer and Christmas holidays. The project has initiated 16 aid programmes and raised €60 million in medical and humanitarian aid, mostly through its local groups and 7,000 volunteers.

Up to 30 similar projects in Ireland are dedicated to helping children affected by Chernobyl; other schemes bring children from Belarus to Britain, Italy, Germany, France and Spain for holidays; some even travel as far as the US, Canada and, because of former Soviet ties, Cuba.

Early on the morning after they arrive, we take Tanya and Katya to the beach at Derrynane. It is a balmy summer day, and the rock pools and warm waters of the sandy estuary that leads to the long strand are perfect for playing in and exploring. The girls seem overjoyed to be on the beach and to look out to the ocean. Photographs in the albums they have brought with them show Tanya and Katya swimming in (probably contaminated) rivers and picnicking with family and friends, but this is the first time they have seen the sea, as Belarus is landlocked. Later, through Miralda, Katya tells us that the Atlantic was a big surprise. "It's enormous, and it goes on forever."

Tanya especially seems to enjoy this and subsequent trips to the beach, swimming in the cool sea, building sandcastles, catching baby crabs in the fishing net and playing with Jacqueline's nephew Ethan. At the end of her time with us I ask her, again through Miralda, what has been the best thing about coming to Ireland. "To go to the beach and swim and to be near to the sea," she replies, quick as a flash.

As we get to know the girls a little better, they seem to relax and grow in confidence around us. Their appetites improve and energy increases. They also become more affectionate. Being so far from home, and in such an alien environment, it seems as if they yearn for a certain amount of comfort and contact; as the fortnight progresses, they hug us more and more.

We also learn something of their medical histories. Miralda shows us photocopies of their health reports, which have been filled out for Chernobyl Children's Project by doctors in Belarus. They are distressing reading. Tanya recently spent three weeks in hospital after she was diagnosed with inflammation of her gall bladder; the report also says that she has been treated for acute bronchitis, acute pharyngitis and many other "disturbances" of the thyroid, respiratory and immune systems. Katya has been admitted to hospital a couple of times, once because of kidney problems and once because of an abscess in her mouth. She has also had chronic bronchitis, abnormal enlargement of her thyroid and

problems with immune and respiratory systems.

"All the children who come to Ireland have health problems, and most live in contaminated areas and come from needy families," says Miralda, who has translated for the Caherdaniel and Waterville group since 1995. She has herself spent periods in hospital with thyroid and nervous-system problems. "The children very often get colds and flu when they are in Belarus, because their immune systems are damaged, but when they are here they are almost always healthy and happy. It is my experience that their well-being improves enormously by coming to Ireland."

By looking through their photo albums with them, and asking occasional questions through Miralda, we also begin to piece together Tanya and Katya's family lives.

Tanya lives with her parents in a small apartment in Volintzy and has one sister and two brothers; a second sister was 10 when she was knocked down by a car and died. Her father is a labourer and her mother a librarian, and home life seems happy and orderly. There are photographs of cheery birthday parties and Christmas gatherings, and her parents have obviously brought her up to be polite, honest, thoughtful and conscientious. Like Katya, she is very pretty, but she also seems a little shy and fragile; you wonder if she is actually quite unwell.

By contrast, Katya is bold, confident and self-sufficient. She is more cheeky, carefree and adventurous than Tanya; she is also tough and hardy, the strength in her hands and grip suggesting that she is used to working on the land. Her family situation is more complicated and tragic. She lives with her younger sister in her paternal grandparents' house in a small village outside Volintzy. It seems more basic than Tanya's home; the family, for example, do not have a telephone. Because there is not enough work locally, her father labours in another part of northern Belarus during the week, returning home most weekends.

Katya makes Philip a birthday card. 'When Katya was eight her mother died in circumstances that seem uncertain. She tells us her mother was lighting a fire with petrol, when she accidentally set herself on fire'

Each of the 65 outreach groups in Ireland is affiliated to and administered by the project, but each is also self-financing. The Caherdaniel group raises funds by organising a local art exhibition and selling pancakes on Shrove Tuesday; finances are also generated by volunteers who arrange a golf day and stage productions in the village hall.

The money pays for the children's return flights from Minsk, the Belorussian capital, and

these kids come from a background where they have nothing. It hopefully makes them a bit more grateful for the many things they do have."

Despite these testimonies, CCPI faces an increasing challenge recruiting host families. While 12 households (including ours) have signed up to the summer programme again this year, the number of volunteer families in the Caherdaniel and Waterville area has fallen to as low as eight in recent years, and the nearest projects to Caherdaniel are now in Tralee and west Cork.

One afternoon towards the end of their fortnight with us, Jacqueline and I take Tanya and Katya to a discount store in Cahirciveen. Friends and family have given them a little money, and they are keen to go shopping. In fact, after trips to the beach, shopping seems to be their favourite activity. They have no more than €15 or so to spend, but it's a fortune compared with wages in Belarus. Miralda tells us that her salary as an English and Spanish teacher at a university in Gomel, in southern Belarus, is €80 a month.

Tanya and Katya explore the toys, gifts and knick-knacks in the shop methodically, making careful choices and calculating how much they have spent. After half an hour or so, they have basketfuls of dolls, purses, pens, photograph frames and gifts, which we assume are all for them. "No, no," says Katya when I ask if the doll is for her. "Sister." She points in turn to the other items in her basket. "*Babushka.*" Grandmother. "*Pra-babushka.*" Great-grandmother. "*Papa . . . dyedooshka.*" Grandfather. "Aunt . . . friend . . . *dyaada.*" Uncle. "Friend." Nothing is for Tanya and Katya.

It's surprisingly easy to communicate with them. Certainly, there are occasional frustrations. The first weekend the girls are with us, Tanya becomes very withdrawn and melancholic, and it's hard to stand by, merely looking on, not being able to understand what is ailing her. Another of the hosts, Mary Dineen, finds the lan-

When Katya was eight her mother died in circumstances that seem uncertain. Katya tells us that her mother was trying to light a fire of damp wood with petrol when she accidentally set herself on fire. We also learn, however, that there are suggestions that she may have burned herself to death deliberately.

Either way, there are devastating photographs, which Katya keeps in a separate section at the back of her album, taken at her mother's funeral. They show villagers carrying a shallow, homemade open coffin to a sandy burial mound. In other photos her mother's blackened nose and face protrude from a white sheet and paper veil. A Russian Orthodox priest leads the service, and relatives, friends and neighbours stand around the coffin with hands covering their mouths and grief in their eyes. There is also a heartbreaking photograph of Katya kneeling down to give her mother a final kiss on the cheek, and another in which her weeping father wraps his arms protectively around her. They are mostly, though, too painful to look at.

The Caherdaniel branch of Chernobyl Children's Project started in 1995 after a local architect named Roger Foxall spoke to the village's women's group about his extensive travels in Russia, including the suffering of the people of western Russia and Belarus as a result of Chernobyl. Afterwards he and several members of the group, including Jane Urquhart, Helen Wilson and Ita Corridan, contacted Roche's organisation to start a local branch. Many of the original members had young families; they also believed Caherdaniel would be an ideal place for the children to visit.

for transfers, insurance and local outings. The air fare for the translator must also be found, and Chernobyl Children's Project charges a small administration fee, mostly for obtaining visas. In all, the cost amounts to about €360 per child. Any extra money raised is given to the project to be distributed among its many other programmes and activities.

Over the past 11 years, 27 families in and around Caherdaniel have hosted more than 100 children. There have been occasional difficulties, such as dental problems, acute homesickness and squabbling and fighting. Two 13-year-old boys visited in 1996 from a "boarding school for the mentally challenged"; they stole money, let handbrakes off cars and nearly set fire to the house they were staying in. Since then children with special needs have been accompanied by trained staff from Belarus. In general, though, the experiences of the hosts have been overwhelmingly positive.

"It's been absolutely fantastic having the two girls to stay. All I can say is that I hope the children got out of it as much as we did," says Teresa Cronin, who with her husband, Dessy, has taken Belorussian children for the past two years. They also have two adopted sons, one of whom is from Ukraine.

Eithne and Brían Ó Ríordaín have always taken boys and always for a month; this year was their eighth year. "It can be very difficult to do anything worthwhile nowadays, apart from giving money, but I like this project because it's hands-on. It's an opportunity to get involved," says Eithne. She also believes the project has benefited her sons, Eoghan and Diarmuid, who were 13 and 17 when the first children from Belarus arrived, in 1998. "I think it's important for my own lads to realise that

guage barrier hardest when the two girls who are staying with her are due to leave. "I would have loved to have said that we loved having you, you were brilliant, to say hello to your mum and dad, and we're going to miss you," she says. "But it's hard, because without Miralda you can't say anything like that to them."

Mostly, however, we practise very successfully the fine art of nonverbal communication, using a wide range of manual gestures and facial expressions to convey anything from celebration to censure. As 16-year-old Clíona Sugrue, whose family have acted as hosts four times, says: "It's like playing a big game of charades for two weeks."

The phrase book that Chernobyl Children's Project gave us also proves useful. We note wryly, for example, that previous hosts have heavily circled the expressions "quiet, please" and "go to sleep now".

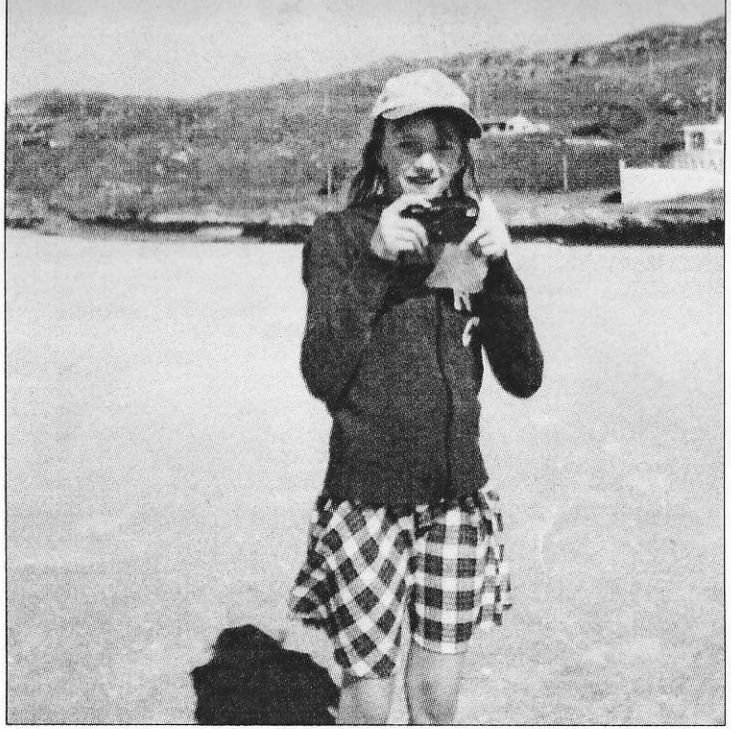
It is moving to see Tanya and Katya playing so happily with other Belorussian and Irish children at group barbecues, hearing them laugh and giggle in their room long after they've gone to bed, watching their faces light up when they telephone home and, after a day out without us, seeing them running towards us, arms stretched out. You try not to be selfish, and you try not to indulge or spoil them, but it's hard not to get just a little bit emotionally involved.

It's an affection we do not realise is quite so reciprocated until the day comes, two weeks after they arrived, to drop off Tanya and Katya with Lavinia, Seamus and family. There has been mock wailing and quivering lips since we explained, the day before, that they would be leaving, and even more hugging and cuddling than

usual. But as they get out of the car at Lavinia's house, both girls look surprisingly sullen and subdued. Katya is holding herself together; life has perhaps cast her of sterner, unsentimental stuff. Tanya, however, has clasped her arms tightly around Jacqueline's waist and buried her face in her chest. Her shoulders are gently heaving up and down, and she is sobbing.

The slogan of Chernobyl Children's Project is "Offering hope to live". Adi Roche first heard the phrase when she was visiting the Belorussian town of Soligorsk, where the project had provided medical aid and recuperative holidays to the children of two orphanages. As she wrote in her book, *The Children of Chernobyl*, a local priest told her: "The people of Ireland are not only saving the lives of our children, but you are offering them hope to live."

The first part of this assertion is hard to refute. There are countless examples of how the project and other Chernobyl charities have provided critical medical supplies, treatments and operations. As well as bringing seriously ill children from Belarus and Ukraine to Ireland for long-term care, Chernobyl Children's Project has established a cardiac programme that provides financial and logistical support to the International Children's Heart Foundation. The foundation's cardiac surgeons make regular trips to Belarus to perform up to 150 vital operations a year on children suffering from a previously unknown condition termed Chernobyl heart.



'At the beach, Tanya snaps away with her old Russian camera, taking photo after photo of the glistening ocean, expansive horizon and crowning sky. Within minutes she has used her film. Later we discover it's her only roll'

We see Tanya and Katya several times during their second fortnight in Caherdaniel; reassuringly, it takes Tanya only a day or so to get back to her normal self. It takes us – me in particular – longer to adjust to not having them around. They were great fun, full of an infectious sense of joy and discovery, and we realise that we've become surprisingly attached to them.

The moment comes, however, for the girls and the other six children to board the minibus to Shannon for their flight home. Thinking that I can help with their heavy luggage – all have been bought new bags, which are crammed full of gifts, clothes and new photo albums – I decide to travel with the group. The children and host families assemble in Waterville, and the goodbyes are long and emotional.

During the journey to the airport Tanya, Katya and I use the English-Russian dictionary to communicate anything from star signs to future careers. (Tanya wants to be a doctor; Katya agrees yet seems attracted to modelling, too.) At one point they mimic an expression they have picked up from me – "See ya" – which I repeat before realising it is more a question than a farewell. I deflect and demur, but the girls are keen to elaborate. "Tanya, Katya, *doma*" – home – "Minsk. Shannon: Jackie, Philip. See ya, yes?" says Katya. "Yes, see ya, see ya," enthuses Tanya. It's a tricky situation, and I remain noncommittal, but they are not to be put off, and "See ya, see ya" becomes the mantra of the long journey.

The idea of hope to live is more open to debate. One statistic that Roche has very successfully lodged in the minds of volunteers, host families and journalists, for example, is that each child brought to Ireland for a fortnight of rest and recuperation gets back two years of otherwise stolen life. This claim was first made by Dr Zolovkin, director of the children's hospital in Soligorsk. Chernobyl Children's Project uses it to communicate a very strong message: that the work of the recuperative-holidays programme can be specified and quantified. You give two weeks; they get two years. It is an excellent piece of marketing that makes everyone involved feel virtuous and creates a definite intrinsic value. "The Irish host families are literally giving these children the gift of life," says Roche.

The problem, of course, is that it cannot be proven. Not yet, anyway. A controlled experiment, to test it scientifically over the lifetime of the children, is a tall order. The use of such an emotive statistic has led some to conclude that Chernobyl charities have exaggerated the effects of the explosion's aftermath and romanticised the children's plight. The journalist Jon Ihle, writing in *Magill* magazine last year, pointed out that "there is considerable dispute about the extent of negative health effects in Belarus and Ukraine due to Chernobyl" and that a 2002 UN report, *The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident*, "concluded that apart from very high rates of thyroid cancer (but totalling fewer than 2,000 cases), there were no statistically significant increases in other cancers or deformities in the affected area".

In September a controversial (and much criticised) study by scientists from such organisations as the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN Development Programme and the World Health Organisation came to a similar conclusion, stating that the Chernobyl disaster has claimed fewer than 60 lives (although it did recognise that about 4,000 people could eventually die from exposure to radiation).

So how do the children who come to Ireland benefit? Their health certainly improves while they are here. As well as relief from the constant colds and flu that they suffer in Belarus, all eight of the children staying with families in Caherdaniel and Waterville become notably stronger, fitter and more active. Colour comes into their cheeks and their eyes brighten. It's as if they arrive in sepia and return in Technicolor.

"We get so much satisfaction seeing the change in them over the two weeks," says Eileen O'Sullivan, one of the hosts. "Especially as they are asking so little from me. All I really have to provide are things I like anyway: fresh air, walks on the beach and good food."

It may well be that the children revert to their more sickly state after returning home, but there are more direct health benefits. The dental problems that are common among children affected by Chernobyl are treated, often free of charge. Children who have stayed in south Co Kerry in the past have also been given much-needed glasses and treatment for acute psoriasis.

Although most hosts are aware of the common criticism that recuperative holidays only spoil the children, making them dissatisfied with their lives, they are quick to point out the psychological improvement they see in them, including a growth in confidence. Roche refers to the "quiet diplomacy" of their experiencing a political and social system that is infinitely more open than that of Belarus; President Aleksandr Lukashenko's authoritarian, one-party administration has been described by US officials as the "last true dictatorship in Europe".

Hosts say they get a lot out of the experience, too. For some the impulse seems primarily practical; "I can help, so I do help," says Mary Dineen. Lavinia Cunningham agrees: "Most of the hosts see it simply as a good thing to do, something they can do at home, but that is organised for them."

For others there is an environmental dimension: a distrust of nuclear power and an anger at the price the children are paying for a man-made disaster. "It wakes you up to the fact that we're so lucky and for these creatures it's just not fair," says Teresa Cronin.

We arrive early, but soon the airport begins to fill with children, hosts and organisers from other groups around the country. Young girls hold on to tearful Irish mothers while boys in new Nike trainers chase each other around luggage trolleys. A group of Belorussian children are wearing green Kinsale AFC soccer shirts with their surnames printed on the backs; others are wearing caps donated by AIB. In the melee of group leaders, translators and volunteers, Chernobyl Children's Project organisers stand out in red or white T-shirts – some have Russian slogans, others are emblazoned with the word "Convoy".

As we queue to check in, Tanya and Katya hug me tighter than ever; it's something some of the other children, whom I have hardly got to know, also want to do. This time there are no tears, but at one point Katya asks me for the dictionary. She flicks through the pages, and her face lights up as she finds a word. It could be anything: Sagittarius, sandwich, phoeey. She shows me the word "friendship" and gives a broad smile, and I realise for the first time that Katya is perhaps not quite as tough and invulnerable as I imagined.

Lavinia and I walk Miralda and the group to the departure gate to say our goodbyes. I glance at the departures board. Seeing Minsk listed next to such everyday destinations as Malaga, Birmingham and Dublin re-emphasises how remarkable and unlikely the recuperative-holidays project is. And what an achievement. There are farewell hugs and kisses, and the children file slowly through the gate, Tanya and Katya looking back all the time at us. I see Katya mouthing a slow, final "See ya". And then they are gone. ◆

◆ For information on becoming a host, or to make a donation to Chernobyl Children's Project International, call 021-4312999 or see www.chernobyl-international.com ◆ For more information about Chernobyl, see www.chernobyl.info ◆ Fund-raising pancake sales take place on Tuesday in the Blind Piper, Caherdaniel, Co Kerry (11am-4pm) and the Butler Arms Hotel, Waterville, Co Kerry (3-5pm) ◆ Adi Roche's new book, *Chernobyl Heart*, is published by New Island (€19.99)