NUCLEAR FAMILIES

In 2005 two 11-year-old girls from Belarus came to stay in rural Ireland with **Philip Watson**, as part of a scheme that runs recuperative breaks for children affected by the fallout from Chernobyl. Three years on, Watson tracked them down to see if their lives had changed. Photographs by **Ziyah Gafic**

It's four o'clock on a fine spring afternoon and my girlfriend, Jacqueline, and I have driven for five hours to meet two 14-year-old girls. We are on the other side of Europe, in remote, secretive Belarus, a country ruled by such an authoritarian, old-style Soviet president that it has been described by the US administration as the continent's 'last dictatorship' and only remaining 'outpost of tyranny'.

Up here in the beautiful far north, on the road from the ancient city of Polotsk, the landscape is flat and epic. We drive through boundless forests of pine, spruce and silver birch, past a watery hinterland of bogs, marshes and peat fields, and on to a vast horizon of plains and fields growing flax, grain and potatoes. We turn off, and after a few miles cross a river to reach the village of Volyntsy. It is an archetype of Belarussian rural life. There are slatted wooden dachas, painted in faded greys, dirty greens and mustard yellows. We pass a brick-built Orthodox church with a corrugated-iron roof. Elsewhere, there are allotments and cottage gardens, neatly stacked piles of firewood, even an auspicious stork landing gently on an elevated nest.

The Belarussian capital, Minsk, may be only two and a half hours' flying time from London, but this part of the country seems like a leap back in time, not just to the austere Soviet 1950s but to an era as far away again. At the end of the village, though, there are reminders of Belarus's more recent past. As we turn a corner, we see rows of so-called 'Brezhnev blocks': large, squat, faceless three-storey apartment complexes built hastily in the 1970s to house the Soviet Union's rapidly expanding urban population. Like the nearby dormitories once used by young 'pioneers' and workers employed mostly on the area's collective farms, the blocks are in a bad state of repair.

Then we spot them – Tanya and Katya – sitting on a low concrete wall by a grocery store. We have not seen them for three years. Tanya is wearing a corduroy jacket, a shiny silvery top, black trousers and new trainers. Katya has on a long hooded leopardskin top, smart black trousers and high heels. Both are wearing a little make-up.

Jacqueline and I first met Tatiana Malei and Katerina Rubina on a similarly sunny afternoon in the summer of 2005. They had flown with a group of children from Belarus to Shannon in the west of Ireland for a month's 'rest and recuperation', organised by Chernobyl Children's Project International (CCPI). In the past 17 years, the Irish charity has arranged for more than 17,000 children, aged between seven and 14 and mostly from Belarus, to visit Ireland for summer and Christmas recuperative holidays.

It has been estimated by CCPI that 70 per cent of the radiation from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in neighbouring Ukraine fell on Belarus and that one in every seven of the population – 1.5 million people, of whom 500,000 are children – still lives on contaminated land. Many children suffer from acute thyroid, respiratory and immune-system problems (there has been a 24-fold rise in the incidence of thyroid cancer). CCPI initiated the rest and recuperation breaks in 1991 in the hope that breathing clean air and eating healthy, uncontaminated food would do the children some good.

There are similar projects throughout Europe, mostly in Italy, Holland, Germany, France and Spain. In Britain, there are 70 or more Chernobyl children's projects that organise recuperative holidays (about 4,000 children come to Britain every year), as well as raising funds for medical and humanitarian aid, convoys and ambulances, specialist operations, local social services programmes, and the building and renovation of orphanages and children's 'asylums'. Many people in the area of Co Kerry where we have built a holiday house have acted as host families, taking two girls or boys usually for a fortnight at a time. Unlike most of the host parents, though, we do not have kids. Children from Belarus are always placed in pairs, and matched by gender, age and home location. The local group regularly organises get-togethers for them with other children, both from Belarus and the immediate area.

When Tanya and Katya arrived, after a 16-hour journey from Volyntsy, they looked tired and disorientated – and we knew absolutely nothing about them. We did not know their family backgrounds, the state of their health, whether they could speak a word of English, or, if the truth be

'THE CHILDREN VERY OFTEN GET COLDS AND FLU WHEN THEY ARE IN BELARUS BECAUSE THEIR IMMUNE SYSTEMS ARE DAMAGED'

Katya and Tanya outside the apartment block where Tanya and her family live in Volyntsy, northern Belarus. In the pink cardigan is Katya's sister, also called Tanya

told, pretty much anything about Belarus. We had rarely felt so nervous.

Over the following two weeks, with the help of our local group's Belarussian interpreter, Miralda, a Russian dictionary and phrasebook, and the family photo albums they had brought with them, we began to piece together details of the girls' lives. Neither Tanya nor Katya had ever been away from their families for an extended period, left Belarus or been on a plane. Early on the morning after they arrived, we took them to our local beach and they seemed overjoyed; Belarus is a landlocked country and this was the first time they had seen the sea. Later, Katya told us that the Atlantic was a big surprise: 'It's enormous – and it goes on for ever.'

We also discovered something of their medical histories. Miralda showed us photocopies of their health reports, which are completed for CCPI with the help of doctors in Belarus, and they made for distressing reading. Tanya had spent three weeks in hospital that year after being diagnosed with inflammation of the gall bladder, and she had been treated for acute bronchitis and many other 'disturbances' of the thyroid, respiratory and immune systems. Katya had also been admitted to hospital because of problems with her heart, kidneys and abscesses in her mouth. Chernobyl children's charities argue that illnesses such as these are a direct result of the 1986 disaster.

'All the children who come to Ireland have health problems, and most live in contaminated areas and come from needy families,' Miralda told us, explaining some of the reasons why Tanya and Katya had been nominated for the scheme. She has acted as the interpreter for our group since 1995 and 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 wellbeing improves enormously by coming to Ireland.'

There had also been a good deal of tragedy in their family lives. Tanya mentioned a sister, Irina, but we later discovered that, before Tanya was born, Irina had been knocked down by a car and died aged 10.

Katya's family situation was, and remains, more complicated. She lives with her sister in her paternal grandmother's house in the country three miles outside Volyntsy. For much of the past few years, her father, Nikolai, had been living and working in Polotsk, 30 miles away, where there is more work. When Katya was eight, her mother died in circumstances that seem uncertain. Katya told us that her mother was using petrol to light a fire of damp wood when she accidentally set herself on fire, though there are suggestions that she may have burnt herself to death deliberately.

There were devastating photographs, which Katya kept in a separate section at the back of her photo album, taken at her mother's funeral. They showed 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. An Orthodox priest leads the service, and relatives, friends and neighbours stand around the coffin with hands covering their mouths and grief in their eyes.

Despite their adversities, the girls were fun, and full of an infectious sense of joy and discovery. As the days went by, they relaxed and grew in confidence around us. Their appetites improved and their personalities started to emerge. Tanya seemed a little shy and fragile; although she never needed to be taken to a doctor, we worried that she was quite unwell. By contrast, Katya was bold, confident and self-sufficient. She was also tough and hardy, the strength in her hands and grip suggesting that she was used to working on the land.

It was touching to see them playing so happily with the other Belarussian, Irish and English children at group barbecues, hearing them giggle in their room long after they had gone to bed, watching their faces light up when they telephoned home, and, after a day out without us, seeing them running towards us, arms outstretched. We tried not to be selfish, and we tried not to indulge or spoil them, but it was hard not to become emotionally involved.

It was an affection that we did not realise was quite so reciprocated until the time came for us to drop them off at the home of another family who were to host them for the second fortnight of their stay. Katya looked uncharacteristically sullen and subdued, and Tanya had her arms clasped tightly around Jacqueline's waist, her face buried in her chest. Her shoulders were gently heaving up and down, and she was sobbing.

We get out of the car and hug them somewhat awkwardly, announcing our arrival with repeated and exaggerated *privets* (hellos) – we have a Belarussian interpreter with us – and the girls take us to Tanya's family flat around the corner.

Inside the simply furnished apartment we are greeted warmly by Tanya's parents, Natasha and Misha, and Katya's father, Nikolai, grandmother Zina, and younger, 10-year-old sister. Tanya lives here with her parents, her grandmother and her 15-year-old brother, Sasha (an older brother, Sergei, 28, has already left home). There are three rooms, a small bathroom and a kitchen. The family have lived here since 1979; Natasha and Misha moved in shortly after they were married.

Laid out on a long table are salami, ham, cheese, cucumber, tomato, boiled potatoes and a rice salad. In the middle is a bottle of sweet 'Soviet champagne', which Misha opens with an explosion that sends the plastic cork bouncing off the ceiling. 'The Soviets don't exist any more, but at least their champagne still does,' he says, smiling. 'We usually only drink champagne at New Year or on special public holidays,' Zina adds. 'But today is a special day.'

Tanya's mother, Natasha, suddenly stands up. 'I would like to welcome you both to our tiny village,

PRESIDENT LUKASHENKO THREATENED TO STOP THE RECUPERATIVE HOLIDAYS BECAUSE HE SAID 'CONSUMERIST' INFLUENCES WERE CORRUPTING THE MINDS OF HIS COUNTRY'S YOUTH

Tanya and Katya attending an Orthodox Easter Mass with some of the other women from the village

and to say that it's a great honour for us, and for me personally, to receive guests such as you in my house,' she says. Natasha and Zina are employed at Tanya and Katya's school, as, respectively, a librarian and night guard. Misha is the head of a local state-owned land reclamation company; Nikolai is a tool-maker and boiler repairer.

The conversation turns to the two weeks Tanya and Katya spent with us in Ireland when they were aged 11, to their memories of the beaches, mountains, horse-riding and trampolining. 'We want you to know that we are really very grateful to you for hosting our girls,' Misha says. 'You gave them the chance to do something we have not had the opportunity to do: to see something of the world for themselves.'

The 22nd anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster falls the day after our reunion with Tanya and Katya. In Minsk, the occasion is marked by an annual march attended by several thousand people that, following mass detentions by the Belarussian military police in 1996, is strictly monitored and controlled. (The 10th anniversary march was attended by tens of thousands of demonstrators and activists; clashes with riot police led to many injuries.) At the school in Volyntsy, there is a special lesson and a film, and Jacqueline and I are invited to meet the girls' teachers and sit in on their class.

The village's new school was built in 1990 and is a solidly utilitarian two-storey building. There is a computer room with eight PCs, a library and a school museum. Class sizes are small: there are 203 pupils, and if there are more than 30 in a year, the students are divided into two classes.

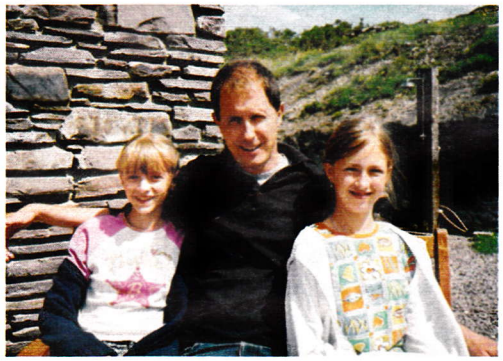
In the classroom, teacher Galina Sevastianova introduces today's lesson. On the blackboard behind her is the slogan: 'Chernobyl is our pain'.

'Today is not a very cheerful day for our country,' the teacher says solemnly. 'Back in 1986 no one could have possibly imagined that on such a beautiful day, not unlike today, there would have been such a great tragedy, and the world would never be the same again.'

Sevastianova explains that shortly after the explosion at Chernobyl, people living near the nuclear power station in northern Ukraine saw 'some sort of bright light in the sky': 190 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.

She mentions the 'heroic liquidators' – the estimated 800,000 soldiers, firefighters, coalminers, doctors, farmers and government workers conscripted by the Soviet authorities to clear up the aftermath – who received extremely high doses of radiation. She shows an old newspaper with photographs of the liquidators and asks everyone to stand and remember those who died.

Chernobyl casualty and mortality rates, and the links between cause and effect, are hotly disputed. Some reports claim that 25,000 liquidators have since died from radiation-related diseases or suicide, and a further 70,000 are permanently disabled. But a controversial study in 2005 by an



international team of scientists from such organisations as the UN Development Programme, the World Health Organisation and the International Atomic Energy Agency stated that the Chernobyl disaster has so far claimed fewer than 60 lives.

Jacqueline and I drive out with Tanya and Katya to Katya's house in Dekhtiarevo, a hamlet outside Volyntsy. We pass thick woods and sprawling state farms; at one point along the rough road there is a long avenue of towering birch trees – planted by Katya's great-grandfather.

We are met by Nikolai, Zina and Katya's sister, also called Tanya, and walk up a track to the house; there is no road access. We pass several houses, many of which look abandoned. 'This village is dying before our eyes,' says 58-year-old Zina, who was born less than a mile from here and has lived in Dekhtiarevo all her life. 'Only the old live here now.'

Katya's house is an unpainted old wooden dacha that provides a fair reflection of country life for many today in Belarus. There is electricity and a fridge, and a telephone line was installed two years ago, but there is no running water or sanitation – just a well and an outdoor privy. The family wash in a *banya*, a traditional wooden steamhouse. Vegetables are grown in the land around the house; the family has a cow, a pig, chickens, cats, and two dogs chained up in the yard.

Katya lives here with her sister, father, grandmother and 77-year-old great-grandmother, who recently had a stroke. Her grandfather died in December of gangrene in his legs, after being ill for 11 years with diabetes. Nikolai moved back home after his wife, Aksana, died, although he has spent much of the past six years looking for work elsewhere, returning mostly at weekends. Last year, he secured a state bank loan to buy a disused house in Volyntsy, one of several built for families who were resettled after Chernobyl. Nikolai tells us he earns just £50 per month, but he has been slowly renovating the house and there are plans for him and his daughters to move in later this year.

Until we came to Belarus we had not realised that the family lives of the two girls were quite so different. Whereas Katya wears the same clothes on each of the occasions we see her, Tanya is always dressed differently. She wears jewellery and carries a new Motorola mobile phone. Tanya has a computer at home. We also learn that, as well as owning the apartment, Tanya's family have a small dacha in the village, where they grow vegetables and celebrate birthdays and holidays. 'Our Katya doesn't have extra time, like other girls, for playing or going out to discos and youth clubs,' Zina says. 'She's either at school or at home helping me around the house and in the fields.'

We wash our hands in a bucket hanging from a tree and are shown into the main room. There is a large glass display case on one wall and Jacqueline spots a doll that she remembers buying for Katya in 2005; it has been placed in a prominent position and is still in its packaging. On the table is another generous spread of food, including *draniki* – potato pancakes made with pork and mushrooms.

I ask Zina about her previous jobs working on collective farms and at a petrol station, and how a few years back she had to give up work to look after her husband and granddaughters. 'Of course, life is hard, and the girls miss their mother a lot,' she says. 'To live, you just need to work hard, especially in rural areas, and that's it.'

Our time with Tanya and Katya fills in many gaps in our understanding of their lives. Belarus may lie just beyond Poland, but it is caught between the powerful and often opposing forces of the EU and Russia. The Belarussians are often described as the forgotten people of Europe. Tanya, Katya and their families are living in a country where, remarkably, the ideals of Soviet communism still reign. Although Belarus has been independent since 1991, the republic has rigorously retained its collective farms, centrally planned economy, KGB security service, compulsory ideological teaching and training, and countless statues of Lenin. A stroll around Minsk, with its imposing state squares and monuments, and brutalist Soviet architecture, is like a journey around a communist theme park.

The state controls most of the country's jobs, industry, media, internet access and, it is claimed by EU observers, elections – in 2006, president Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for 14 years, received almost 83 per cent of the vote. Political dissent and protests are cracked down on heavily. Many have been beaten and imprisoned, and activists and opposition figures have allegedly disappeared or been murdered. Belarus is the last country in Europe to use the death penalty.

'Lukashenko has put fear into this country in a way that hasn't been seen since Stalin,' Alexander

'THIS VILLAGE IS DYING BEFORE OUR EYES,' SAYS 58-YEAR-OLD ZINA, WHO HAS LIVED IN DEKHTIAREVO ALL HER LIFE. 'ONLY THE OLD LIVE HERE NOW'

Top Philip Watson with Tanya and Katya in Kerry, Ireland, in 2005. **Above** the girls with Katya's great-grandmother in front of their dacha

'A MONTH IN A HEALTHY COUNTRY BRINGS ABOUT REMARKABLE CHANGES. WE SEND THEM OFF SICK AND THEY RETURN HEALTHY'

Milinkevich, the opposition leader, has said. As a result, the EU has banned the president and many of his ministers and officials from entering member countries. Lukashenko's assets in the EU and US (if he has any) are frozen. In response, Lukashenko has expelled Western diplomats, who he claims are plotting against him. In Belarus, the Cold War is still being waged.

Lukashenko's robustly nationalist policies do win him popular support, particularly in rural areas. Many Belarussians credit the former state farm manager with maintaining economic and political stability, and for avoiding the post-communist turmoil seen in neighbouring countries. With Russia's assistance, the economy is expanding; wages and pensions are paid on time.

Yet Lukashenko can be as paranoid and eccentric as he is severe. Insulting the president, even in jest, carries a prison sentence. Rock music, which buoyed opposition crowds during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, is censored. Local bands have been banned, and a law requires 75 per cent of music on the radio to be Belarussian in origin. Belarus makes Albania, or even Cuba for that matter, look like Las Vegas.

Jacqueline and I have also come to Belarus to reassure ourselves that the recuperative holidays actually do some good, that Tanya and Katya have benefited in some way from their stay with us in Ireland. Certainly, there have been a number of criticisms of the work of Chernobyl children's projects in Britain and Ireland. Some researchers and commentators claim that Chernobyl charities use emotive statistics that exaggerate the effects of the Chernobyl aftermath and sentimentalise the plight of the children affected. There is little scientific proof that the holidays improve health or boost immune systems. Because of lack of resources in Belarus, radiation levels in the children's bodies are very rarely tested before and after their visits abroad (where tests have been possible, the reduction has been significant).

But there is empirical evidence that very often the children's health recovers. We and many others in our group in Kerry have hosted other children from Belarus since 2005, and almost all the children become notably stronger, fitter and more active during their stay. Dental problems, which are common among children affected by Chernobyl, are treated. Children have also been given much-needed glasses and treatment for more serious, often undiagnosed, medical conditions. 'We are very careful about the children we send abroad, the procedures are very concrete and tightly controlled, and we make sure that only the most deserving and needy are chosen,' says Valentina Kudlatskaya, who acts as a voluntary organiser for CCPI and various other NGOs in Tanya and Katya's local area. 'A month in a healthy country such as Ireland with a good ecology and environment and good-quality food brings about remarkable changes in the children. Time and time again, we send them off sick and they return healthy. For a long time afterwards, they do not get their normal colds and flu. These breaks give the children a chance to recover.' Tanya and Katya have had no serious health problems, and almost no colds or bouts of flu, since they returned home.

We are also aware of a widespread criticism that recuperative holidays only spoil the children and make them dissatisfied with the standard of their lives back in Belarus. In 2004 Lukashenko threatened to stop Belarussian children travelling abroad on trips sponsored by Chernobyl charities because he said 'consumerist' influences were corrupting the minds of his country's youth. Yet there is an argument that the holidays foster a positive change in the children: they broaden their experience of the world, boost confidence, promote independence and motivate them at school. The breaks abroad at once show them a possibility beyond what they presently know and the enduring value and importance of their family life. 'We have a saying,' Zina points out, 'that it's good to be a guest, but it's always better at home.'

At a family picnic and barbecue in a nearby forest on our last day, I ask the girls what their time with us three years ago meant to them. 'I have looked at the photos that you gave us of our time together every month since I got back,' Tanya says. 'I think I became more confident, independent and self-reliant after my time in Ireland. And I also think Katya and I formed a very strong connection with you and Jackie.'

'Coming to Ireland changed me,' Katya says. 'I improved at school when I got back, especially in English, and I also felt better and stronger. She looks at me with a glint in her eye. 'I probably became a more cheerful person.'

For information on Chernobyl Children's Project International, go to chernobyl-international.com. A list of UK Chernobyl children's charities is available at chernobyl.org.uk. For general information about Chernobyl, see chernobyl.info