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Nuclear holiday

by *Nicola Shulman*

On comedy in the shadow of the Chernobyl tragedy.

Tourism is low in Ukraine. War in the east and radiation in the west have taken their toll on the figures: 1.06 million foreign tourists visited Kyiv in 2017, compared with Warsaw's 2.7 million, Krakow's 2.8 million, and St. Petersburg's 3.4 million. Aside from commercial and political, there appear to be two principal categories of visitor. The first are attendees at one of the arsenal of book fairs, expos, festivals, and the like, which Kyiv is developing to attract new visitors. The second are mainly Jews: Israelis who left Ukraine in 1991 and now return to visit relatives here; and the descendants of those other, earlier Jews who fled the pogroms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coming from the West in search of ancestral remnants. Then there are visitors to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, paradoxically enough the fastest-growing attraction in the region. As tourists, my brother Jason, my sister Alexandra, and I were at the sweet spot of the Ukrainian tourism Venn diagram. We came because Alexandra was talking at a book fair. We came to look at my grandmother's birthplace, Zhytomyr, a city west of Kyiv. Granny escaped as a young girl (class of the pogrom of 1905) to make another life in Canada. Later, her son, our father, settled in London, where he lived for fifty grateful years untroubled by curiosity about his origins. We're the first generation to be able to afford the nostalgia. Likewise, we are far enough away from the Chernobyl disaster in time and space to be interested. No one we met in Kyiv had been there, or wanted to go.

Nevertheless, they were agog to know what it was like. A hard question to answer in a sentence, because what it was like, more than anything I have ever experienced, was a tangle of contradictions: severity and leniency, rules and anarchy, preservation and decay, pride and dismay, sincerity and cynicism—where every impression that you form is undone by a counter-impression, either at once or later on. The process of application is the first taste of this. You apply through a designated tour company (there is no other way), which means filling in online forms of a minatory officialdom seldom met with nowadays in the hospitality industries. If you do not do this, or that, if you wear the wrong kind of shoes or shirt, or leave your passport behind, if you are one minute late, *you will not be admitted*. You are required to carry first-aid and antibiotic cream, waterproof clothing, mosquito repellent, food, and water. But once you have sent off your forms,

then a rarity of the opposite type arrives: not an automated response, but a friendly, welcoming reply from an actual human being named Olena.

This same Olena was one of two guides who counted us onto the bus when we arrived, early on Sunday morning, to board it outside the Kyiv railway station. She turned out to be a sparky young woman in cargo pants, with a background in television journalism and a flinty sense of humor. Her audience, in contrast, had come with solemn faces befitting the scale of the disaster, an attitude somewhat at odds with Olena's worldly and practical banter. They didn't laugh at her jokes.

We consisted, in the main, of gay couples and people past their childbearing years. Uneasily, I recalled what our twenty-something guide in Zhytomyr had said about Chernobyl: "my grandfather made me promise not to go in there until I'd had my children."

You spend a lot of time on the bus. It takes two and a half hours to get to the Exclusion Zone, and when you get there it's so immense that even though we walked twelve kilometers, you still feel as if you've barely alighted from the vehicle. But we were not bored. As we set off, Olena gave us a lucid account of the accident at reactor number four on the night of April 26, 1986, the result of a failed turbine experiment, and the frantic, hopeless efforts on the part of the Soviet government to conceal its dreadful outcome. Small drop-down screens then showed us Thomas Johnson's short 2006 documentary *The Battle of Chernobyl*. The film includes an interview with Mikhail Gorbachev, sounding plaintive and uncomprehending of why nobody wanted to tell him what was going on at the time, as though a culture of factual disclosure had been the keynote of his government. "[Scientific director of the reactor] Aleksandrov told me [the reactor] was no more dangerous than a samovar," he says reproachfully. But it was: with the result that thirty years later here we were, with Olena distributing yellow flip-phone-sized radiation dosimeters to those tourists who had booked them, with the air of a guide on a diving trip handing out the snorkels. Dosimeters are set, she said, to give warning at a certain level of radiation. But, this means, they will be going off many times. If we are irritated by the noise, she can re-calibrate the level for us.

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As she explained how they work, an open landscape trundled by, lampposts decorated with the Ukrainian red-flower symbol, farmhouses with steep pitched roofs in the Austrian style, low-eaved barns, black-soiled fields furring up with pelts of spring wheat. Forty minutes from the checkpoint,

the woods closed in. Nothing but trees on either side of the road, supposedly the legacy of the region's historic function as a princely hunting ground. Yet most of them were the fast-growing species, poplars and white-flowering acacias, that were planted in the seventies and eighties: cover of a different kind for the sequestered nuclear plant.

At the checkpoint of the exclusion zone, the Army is in charge. No photographs allowed. Uniformed police mounted the bus, unsmilingly removed our passports, and jerked their chins in the direction of the door to indicate we should disembark at once. We were then funneled into a concrete outbuilding where we passed through a wall of radiation detectors. All in a line, we stepped up under a row of metal arches, placed our palms on radiation-sensitive plates, and waited there, placidly attached to these contraptions like cows in a milking parlor, until one of two grimy lamps on our respective arch flickered on. We went through a lot of these. The official who curtly returned our passports had a dog at his side, tagged at the ear with a radiation monitor.

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Anyone thinking, *aha*, here is a taste of Old Soviet—which was all of us at this point—was then obliged to recalculate when the first thing we saw in the Exclusion Zone proper was the gift shop. Here, along with a small range of lackluster snacks and Chernobyl-branded gifts, stood a refrigerator painted with a nuclear symbol advertising "Chernobyl Ice-cream" and a rudimentary mannequin modeling a decontamination suit, available in sizes XS to XXL. Tempting, but hard to think of places you would wear it. Apart from here, that is, and as we've been assured that the dose of radiation for the day is no more than you would absorb on a long-haul commercial flight, it might look churlish to get back on the bus in full hazmat gear.

What I did have, however, was my own dosimeter, already reading higher than the one the tour had supplied to my sister. I had no idea how to recalibrate its hazard warning level, so when the bus set us down to wander through an abandoned village, evacuated in the days following the explosion, I could feel it jumping and beeping crazily in my shirt pocket.

The village of Zalissya has largely succumbed to nature. The small wooden houses slump at curious angles. The trees have spread their saplings to the doors. Inside—where we ventured at our own risk, struggling under low branches—ceilings lie in heaps of lathe and plaster on the floors. A collaboration between looters and rain has left little to suggest what lives were lived here. You may see a sideboard, a tiny kitchen range, a plastic tablecloth with a pattern of purple grapes, a coarse lace curtain in what was once a latticed window. Here and there a bald and bruised children's doll stared out, placed by visitors in scary postures as props for the "inappropriate" and "disrespectful" photos that have squeezed some outrage from the British press of late. Our guides, however, were neither dismayed nor surprised by such touristic high jinks. Even before we got to the village, or the even-more-gothic primary school, where rows of little iron bunks and painted

lockers sagged, rat-eaten and urine-soaked, in the tree-strangled light at the window, Olena had instructed us in the how-tos of creepy selfies: “Please, do not take crippy dolls for souvenirs,” she said crisply. “Or soon, will be no more crippy dolls for selfies. Also, dolls are radioactive.”

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It struck me suddenly that this isn’t disaster tourism, as practiced at, say, Auschwitz or Buchenwald, where the tourist buses also come rolling in. A terrible thing has happened here, but the relationship between that terrible thing and the people who suffered has become less straightforward over time. As far as I know, there are no jokes in Auschwitz. There were no heroes in Auschwitz, save for the occasional gesture of futile resistance. Here there were heroes: firemen and miners and nurses and doctors and engineers who endangered their lives to save the people of Chernobyl and the wider world. The extent to which their actions were voluntary may be disputed, likewise the actions of those who tried to contain the truth. Yet it’s possible to construct a narrative where, regardless of compulsion, enough good was achieved at enough personal risk for a monument to be erected to the first responders. Then there is the fact that the explosion, as Gorbachev himself has said, was the event that blew apart the fractures in the Soviet Union, a regime much deplored in this part of Ukraine. In the years after, Chernobyl has grown to become an emblem of Soviet lies and incompetence, and a living metaphor—with all its language of leakage, fallout, and incontinence—for the welcome collapse of Soviet control. So when Olena talked about the regime’s inane attempts to contain the truth even while radioactive clouds were drifting over Europe, she could barely repress her admiration at the sheer anarchic disobedience of gamma radiation, passing unseen through checkpoints and borders, and its genuinely equitable treatment of persons, in contrast with Soviet hypocrisy in such matters. As she caustically reminded us: “In Soviet Union, all people are equal, but some are more equal.”

There were no sightings today of the lynxes and wolves which are said to be thriving in the zone. All the same, anarchy is everywhere here, in the form of unhusbanded nature. The grimness of a distant catastrophe can be hard to recollect when all around you the late-sleeping Ukrainian spring has finally jumped out of bed and is doing cartwheels around your head. Skeins of little birds weave patterns in the sky. Birdsong rings from all directions. Wild roses burst out through stone, tree trunks absorb iron fences. It was hard to know if what we were looking at was hope or despair. What was certain is that this is a very unusual tourist site, having no curator to impose the “official version.” No visitor’s center, no glass cases of pitiful belongings; no reconstruction, no conservation, no guidance or tutelage, because nothing can be touched. It leaves the site exposed to the winds of interpretation, which can change in an instant.

Back on the bus, we turned into the forest and burrowed down an apparently endless lane, both sides of which were thick with trees, their branches almost brushing our windows. Olena was apologizing about the state of the toilets, which seemed to be an obsession of hers. I thought they were fine. But toilets, I later learn, have a history here as a source of concern. In 1986, when Hans Blix, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, came to inspect the site after the explosion, the authorities had to decide what would be worse: take him by car and expose him to the truth about Soviet toilets, or take him in a helicopter and risk him seeing the thing we were now about to see: the Radar Duga-1, a vast, top-secret anti-ballistic missile warning system hidden in the woods. (They chose the helicopter.)

The idea that Duga-1 was ever secret is boggling to the mind. Imagine an electricity pylon as tall as the Eiffel Tower, then repeat it for the length of a New York City block. As we stepped into its clearing, we leaned and craned our necks, but could see neither the top nor the end of it.

On the sandy floor beneath our feet were some outcrops of tiny wild mushrooms, about two centimeters high and bearing the same height relation to us as we did to the Duga-1. Mushrooms, with their extensive underground traceries and absorptive fruiting bodies, are radiation hotspots, so Alex and I squatted down to take their readings, careful not to touch them, as instructed. When the numbers settled, we compared notes: 5.32 micro-sieverts (Sv) per hour for the tour's dosimeter; 9.86 Sv/h for mine. For scale, the room in the English countryside where I am writing this gives a reading of 0.09 Sv/h. The highest hotspot-reading of the day in Chernobyl was 19.6 Sv/h for my dosimeter, 5.38 Sv/h for Alex's. I showed the two screens to Olena. She shrugged. "Is more sensitive," she said, as if to imply that radiation readings were a matter of opinion, like squeamishness. She was drawing a diagram in the sand to show how the Duga-1 radar, costing seven times as much as a nuclear power station, had never worked. In the usual course of events, she explained gleefully, it would have been taken down for scrap. But because of the contamination, it must stand here—as a monument to Soviet magical thinking—till it topples over.

Another paradox: while the Exclusion Zone is an agent of destruction, it's also an agent of conservation, the Soviet Pompeii. Everything that remains here is just as it was in 1986: posters, mosaics, statues, buildings from the Soviet era that will soon exist nowhere else in Ukraine. Few images of Lenin remain. There's one on Mykhailivska Street, Zhytomyr, in the unorthodox form of a statue of Ilarion Ohienko, the priest who translated the Bible into Ukrainian. He has Lenin's head because it was the only head obtainable at the time. But the rest are here, protected from the program of "De-Communization" now afoot, whereby Ukrainian Nationalists are dismantling the public art and monuments of the old regime. Some enlightened people, thinking outside the political frame, have

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been sprinting ahead of the iconoclasts to record Soviet-era mosaics before they vanish. They are published in a wonderful book, *De-Communized: Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*, by the photographer Yevgen Nikiforov, and some are very beautiful, such as the swirling blue-and-lilac mosaic—mined with hidden Christian motifs, says Olena—on the walls of the cinema in Prypiat town, the nuclear workers' town that we visited after lunch.

Lunch was probably the most time-warpish experience of the day. We ate it in what had been the nuclear workers' canteen: a handsome first-floor space painted white and duck-egg blue and glazed on three sides with wide light-collecting windows. Here, pugnacious-looking women in plastic shower-caps banged out an authentically historical reenactment of Soviet-era food. The slice of cheese was orange and unlike any dairy product I have encountered, somewhere between a bath sponge and a section of stomach lining. There were pegs for clothes, a wall of radiation monitors, and a motorized conveyor belt that was supposed to bear our discarded trays into the kitchens, but which broke down halfway through lunch.

Still, the people who originally ate here were among the most fortunate in the Soviet Union, because they lived in Prypiat. Prypiat town was conceived as a Soviet paradise and built in 1970, within walking distance of reactor number 4. Unexpectedly, there are places in Prypiat—mossy corners and damp paving fragments—with much higher radiation than directly outside the decommissioned reactor, where we alighted to admire its newly completed metal "sarcophagus," a radiation prophylactic that will keep it safe for a hundred years. Around the reactor, everything is clean and shaved of radiation-trapping plantlife, whereas in Prypiat the tall residential blocks are barely visible through the trees, the soccer field—which was due for its inaugural match on May 1, 1986—is a virgin forest, and the only paths are the goat tracks trampled into the undergrowth by tourists' feet. Look up, said Olena. What seemed a tangle of whippy twigs in the branches above turned out to be a lamppost, adorned with a calligraphic wrought-iron star finial. We were in the town's main street. Olena walked ahead of us with a book of laminated photographs showing the broad, swept, car-less avenues with central reservations bedded out with red geraniums, the culture center, swimming pool, hotel with skyline restaurant, the supermarket where the shelves had, for once, been stocked with foodstuffs. In one of the documentaries I watched, an ex-Prypiat resident reminisced: "We had ketchup. It wasn't like a town, it was like a fairy-tale."

It's still like a fairy-tale. Once a wonderland, it's now a sleeping beauty's castle guarded by invisible thorns of radiation, as well as a true tale to frighten our children at night. And now, thanks to Ukrainian independence and a culture of investigative inquiry, a new wave of myth is gathering, in the form of a global television series which has its own version of events: goodies and baddies, and actions with the linear, rational consequences that television demands. At the time of our visit, only two episodes of hbo's hugely successful *Chernobyl* have been aired, but already the experience is bending to its pressures. A couple of tourists asked where such-and-such a character worked, or lived. They expected the guides to know.

In the meantime, we ended the day poised between terror and wonder at what we'd seen today. As we were leaving, the bus pulled up next to a statue dedicated to the emergency workers at

the disaster. We were weary, not paying attention, thinking of our supper. We'd walked twelve kilometers. Suddenly, somebody pointed and everyone rushed towards the windows to look at something near the bus's wheels. It was a hedgehog, snuffling along in the middle of the road, oblivious to an oncoming army vehicle which, we could all see, was about to run it down. At the last minute the driver spotted the animal and braked hard, inches to its rear. Then, at stately pace, with the hedgehog trotting in front like a regimental mascot, the military vehicle processed down the road. Everybody clapped.

Nicola Shulman, a writer living in London and North Yorkshire, devised and curated the exhibition "Fashion and Gardens" for the Garden Museum, Lambeth, London.

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