

Life After Chernobyl Blast Shown in Photo Exhibit

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Viktor Gaidak, 24 years at the plant, shows his scars after colon cancer. **Michael Forster Rothbart**

NEW YORK — Families walk their children to school. Teenage girls smile backstage before a concert. Couples work out at a gym not far from villages where subsistence farmers draw well water and raise crops.

Welcome to the present-day Chernobyl region.

A quarter-century before a tsunami triggered a nuclear crisis in Japan, the world's attention was riveted by the Chernobyl nuclear power plant as it spewed radioactive material across much of the Northern Hemisphere. A generation later, thousands of people live in the region — and even still work at the disabled plant.

Freelance photojournalist Michael Forster Rothbart wanted to understand why anyone would choose to stay in the radioactive area, so he went to Ukraine on a Fulbright Scholarship in

2007 and for two years lived 16 kilometers south of the Chernobyl “exclusion zone.” He got to know the people whose lives changed on April 26, 1986, when the No. 4 reactor blew up 100 kilometers from Kiev, Ukraine’s capital.

His “Inside Chornobyl” exhibit, a photographic collage that focuses on five families who work in the Chernobyl zone, opened last Sunday at the Ukrainian Museum in New York. A parallel exhibition of his work, “After Chornobyl,” is also open at the Ukrainian Institute of America.

Both run until May 8.

“People told me ‘I’d rather die here than live anywhere else,’” he said of the 3,800 people who work at the plant, many of whom live in Slavutych, 50 kilometers to the east.

“In this country we’re so mobile that it’s hard for us to conceive that people have such deep ties to the land and community that they would stay in the face of such adversity,” he said. Some stay for lack of alternative or a sense of duty, others because they have decent jobs or simply because it’s home, Forster Rothbart said.

Chernobyl workers make about \$500 a month, about twice the country’s average monthly wage.

Many of Forster Rothbart’s images belie the enormity of the 25-year-old catastrophe. The explosion released about 400 times more radiation than the U.S. atomic bomb dropped over Hiroshima. Thousands of children developed thyroid cancer, and other possible health problems are still being documented. But how many people died is still debated. Several international agencies say 50, and others predict that radiation-related deaths will eventually climb into the thousands.

The plant stopped making electricity in 2000, but nuclear fuel remains on site. The Chernobyl plant lies within the exclusion zone, where workers live for two weeks at a time because of high contamination.

The zone also is home to some 400 elderly people who returned to their ancestral homes despite the government’s warnings to stay out.

For “Inside Chornobyl,” which uses the Ukrainian spelling, Forster Rothbart focused mainly on those who commute daily by train from Slavutych. It’s a city of 25,000 people built after the accident for displaced workers from Pripyat, which was abandoned after the explosion and is now an eerie ghost town about two kilometers from the plant.

Some are involved in a project to build an enormous cover for the reactor building intended to block fallout from escaping when the reactor is disassembled sometime in the future.

Forster Rothbart said his goal was to go beyond the “sensationalist approach” that showed the suffering but obscured the complexity of how displaced communities adapt and survive.

“I sought to create more nuanced portraits of these communities. Their suffering, of course, but also their joy, beauty, endurance and hope,” he said.

People expect the Chernobyl zone “to look like a bombed out crater,” he said, but a walk along

the Pripyat River is like any scenic area of Ukraine.

The difference is that the radiation — invisible to the eye — “is all around you,” he said.

His photo montage is combined with text mounted on large vinyl banners. Among the most chilling images is that of two dolls lying on a shattered kindergarten windowsill in Pripyat. A caption quotes the school’s former director: “I only went back once. I couldn’t stop crying.”

Another is that of the plant’s burned out fourth-block control room, where a combination of design flaws and human error triggered the accident. Another photo shows three workers checking their hands and feet for radioactive contamination before heading home.

The exhibition juxtaposes images of people’s working and private lives. It shows Oxana Rozmarisa operating machines that measure radiation levels in the plant and her husband, Leonid, as a shift supervisor there. The photos also portray the couple’s passion for bodybuilding. In one image, Leonid holds up his wife in one arm and his son in the other.

In other photos, engineer Tanya Bokova poses at the plant’s decommissioning office and at home with her husband. Their smiling faces make clear that the Chernobyl disaster does not overshadow their lives.

“I feel happy because I have a family, a beloved husband, parents together. I have a good job, which I go to with delight,” she is quoted as saying in a photo caption.

As for Forster Rothbart, he said, “The story seemed important enough that I was willing to undertake some risk.”

“In this country, every day people die in car crashes. We’re used to it, and so we don’t even think about it. The same is true in Chernobyl.

“Radiation is just part of living there,” he said. “Everyone in Slavutych knows someone who has cancer or who died of cancer. It’s sort of a veil of normality over this very troubling background.”

He said it was impossible not to draw parallels between the Chernobyl accident and Japan’s crippled nuclear plant.

“They’ll be forming a similar exclusion zone 25 years from now; they’ll still be dealing with the consequences just like the people in Chernobyl are today,” he said.

The exhibit is presented jointly by the museum and the Children of Chornobyl Relief and Development Fund.

Forster Rothbart, 39, lives in Oneonta, New York. He has done freelance work for The Associated Press and other media outlets. Among his other projects is “Fracking Pennsylvania,” which explores the effects of natural gas drilling on rural communities.

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