

NUCLEAR SECRECY

Yuri Shcherbak
and Svyatoslav Dudko
**Remembering
Chernobyl**

'I realised that you had to speak out. It was a crime not to. For 70 years they have been doing such things to us ... things to which no people should ever be subjected'

Writer Yuri Shcherbak and ecologist Svyatoslav Dudko were in Kiev on 26 April 1986. Here they recall the aftermath of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant 120km away.

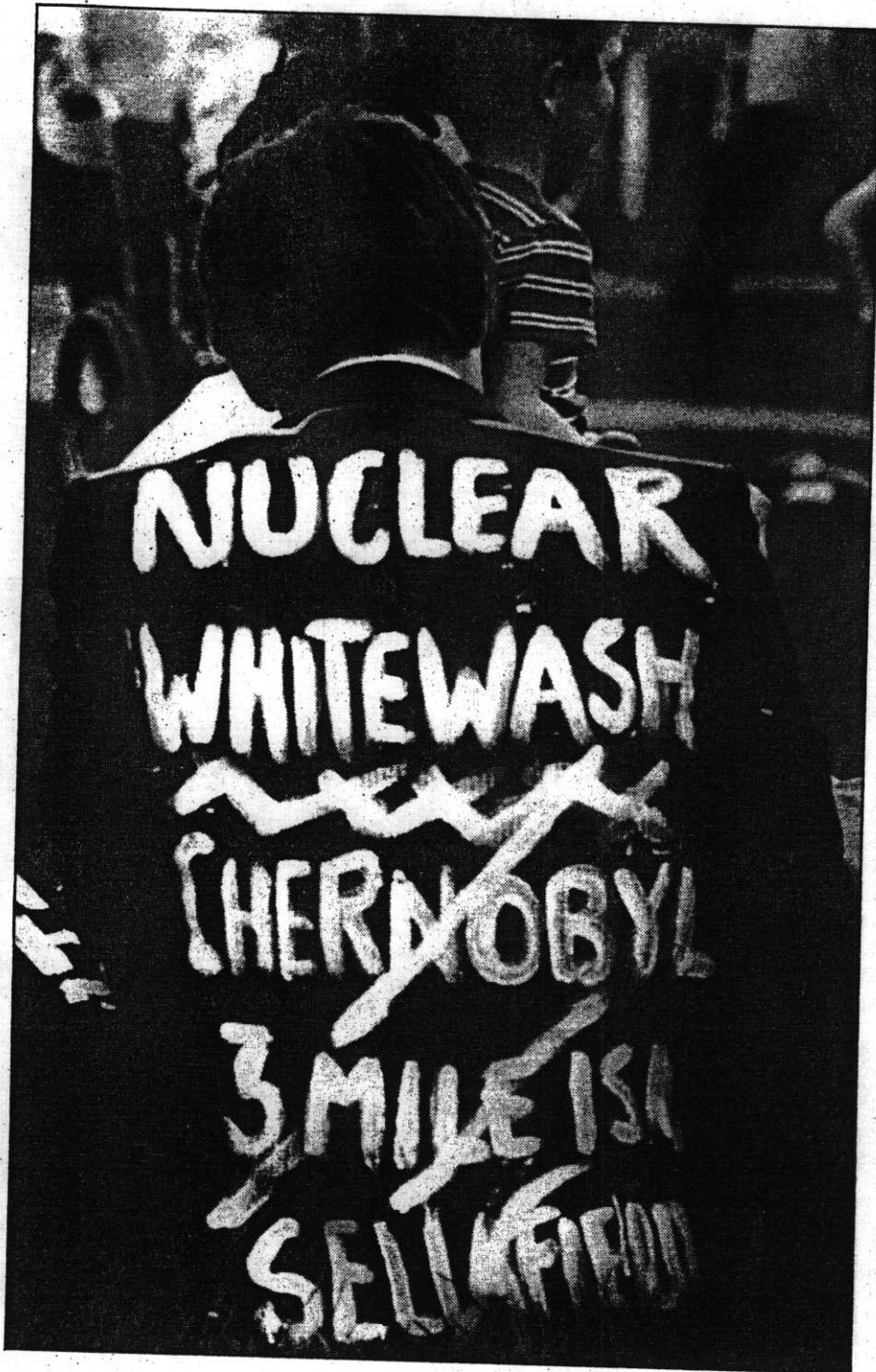
Yuri Shcherbak, once a practising epidemiologist and now a writer, was one of the first people to fly over Chernobyl before radiation from the stricken reactor was contained. He has written a documentary novel about Chernobyl (shortly to be published in English), and is currently working on a history of the 1932-3 famine in Ukraine. In March he was elected to the Congress of Peoples' Deputies.

‘I went out knowing that the radiation cloud was being blown towards Kiev. Nothing had changed: children running about, people waiting in queues, and that lethal cloud moving closer and closer... My wife said she had a faint taste of metal in her mouth; I had a sore throat. Later we found out that it had been much worse in Prypiat — there people were developing sores on their legs.

‘During the first few days of May the tension grew. People didn't know whether to stay or to leave. On about 5 May there were rumours that another explosion was imminent. I remember it as a nightmare. Thousands of would-be travellers were blocking the railway station. Huge sums of money were being offered for tickets to Moscow.

‘I travelled out to Chernobyl on 8 May and found myself in an anti-world. It was all quite, quite dead. I was working as a special correspondent for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Literaturnaya Ukraina*. I saw no reason to repeat what had already been reported, so I started talking to people who had been involved in the accident, and wrote down their stories as I heard them.

‘It was something I felt I had to do,



CAROLINE AUSTIN 'MARCH FOR NUCLEAR-FREE BRITAIN, LONDON, 25 APRIL 1987'

NUCLEAR SECRECY AND THE STIFLING OF OPPOSITION

because this really was the greatest disaster since World War II. So I gathered my material, and later, when the editor of the literary magazine *Yunost* asked me for a novel, I began to do it more systematically. The first volume of my book is really about impressions gathered from visits to Chernobyl over a period of two years. I had a series of semi-legal passes to go there.

'There are about 1,000 people back in the zone now, most of them old and infirm. They wanted to go back home. There's a 'black' zone with a radius of 10km around the reactor, and that has been cordoned off. I've seen leaves three times their usual size there — mutants. Houses have collapsed, five-storey buildings are standing empty. No one lives in Prypiat. The inhabitants were moved out to other villages. They've been uprooted, they are rejected by their new communities and they can't adjust. Their lives have been broken and they are waiting for the cancer to grow. Going back to Prypiat is quite out of the question and will be for hundreds of years. But beyond the barbed wire, you are free to re-settle.

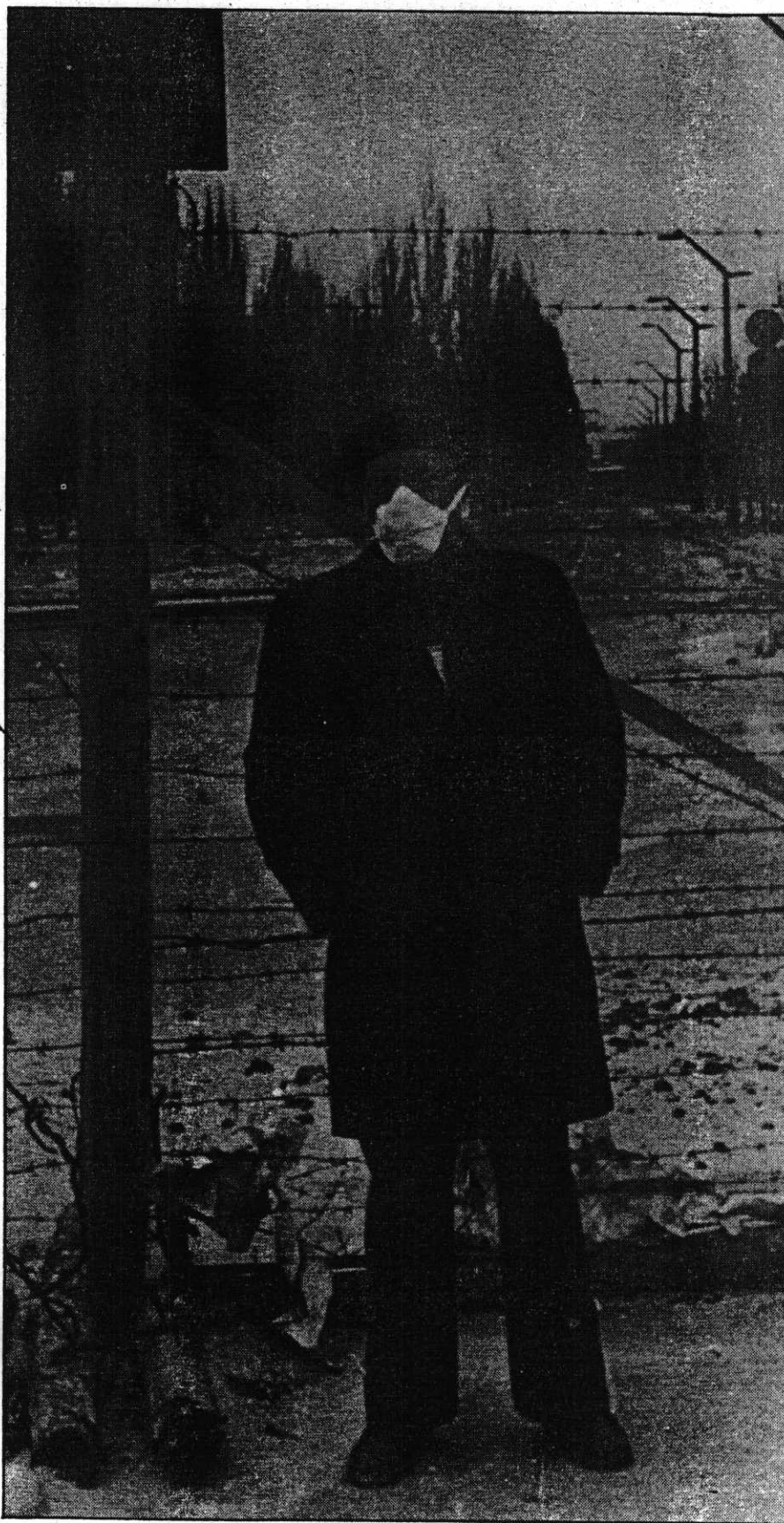
'There are people working in Chernobyl now, though they aren't allowed to live there. They work for two or three months at a time, wearing special clothing and shoes, eating only in canteens. They are all under supervision, living 30 to 50km away in Zieleny Mys or Slovtich. Only scientists and biologists working on the decontamination of the reactor live in the town.

'Three blocks of the power station are still in operation. They were cleaned in the Autumn of 1986. It was a political decision. The reactor is unproductive and unsafe. They still don't know what to do with the fourth block. It's extremely dangerous.

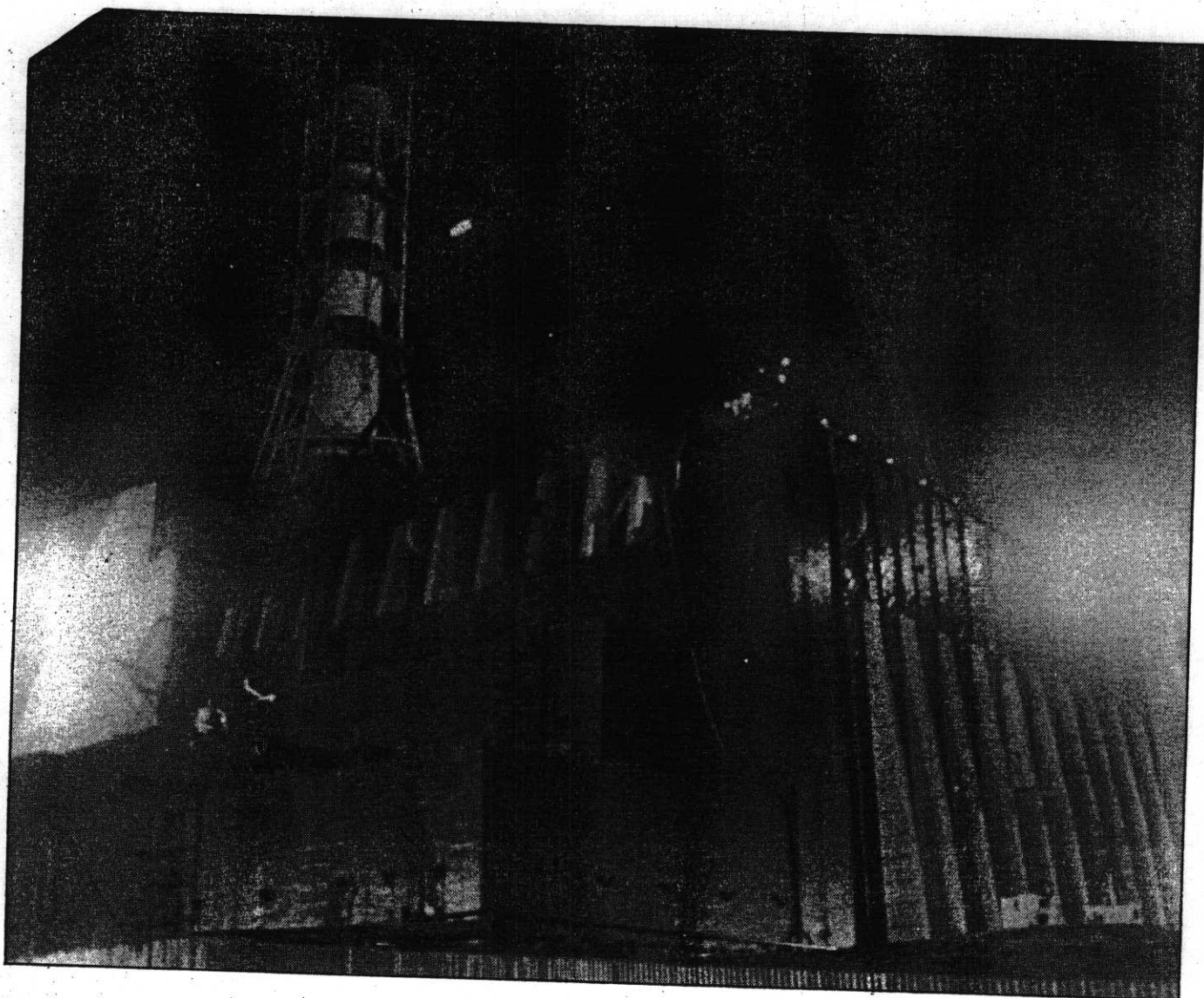
'Chernobyl was the turning point of my life. I gave up a career in medicine and turned to full-time writing, because I realised that you had to speak out. It was a crime not to. For 70 years they have been doing such things to us...things to which no people should ever be subjected...'

Svyatoslav Dudko is an ecologist and the initiator of the 'Green World' organisation.

'I heard about the accident quite early on because of my connection with the ecology unit at the Academy of Sciences. On 28 April (two days after the explosion) they told us at work that something had happened at the Chernobyl power plant — though nobody knew quite what. So I rang home and told my wife to close all the windows and keep the baby in. She wanted to know what was wrong, but I couldn't tell her over the phone because



Yuri Shcherbak against the fence surrounding the 10-mile forbidden zone at Chernobyl.



there was no knowing what the truth might be. By the end of the day I knew that it was serious; something to do with the reactor, some kind of escape, but I still didn't know that there had been an explosion. It was two or three days before we had any firm news.

'I took what precautions I could to protect my family. We kept the windows of the flat tightly closed. We have a baby, a granddaughter born six weeks before the accident. A child of that age needs fresh air, but we had to keep her shut up at home. It was very hot, I remember, the temperature went up to 30°C in May, but neither my wife nor I could take a holiday immediately. It was a full month before I was able to take the child away, but we did try to protect her by administering iodine.

'Other people took similar measures, though some tended to be a bit casual about it. Children of school age were eventually evacuated, and women with younger children were allowed to take a holiday from work so that they could go

away with them. I took our granddaughter to the Carpathian mountains 600km away.

'There weren't really any physical symptoms, although some people had headaches and dry throats...but nothing worse than that. Perhaps it's because we're a resilient lot — though at work people did complain of feeling tired and sleepy...but it may have been psychological. Nobody knew what was happening.

'The city was quiet, there wasn't any sense of panic, although a great many people wanted to leave once official reports were published. There were enormous queues for train tickets. Families with young children were given priority. When I rang for my ticket to the Carpathians that was the first thing they asked. Without the child, I wouldn't have been allowed to go.

'It was all quite sensibly done, except that it was so late in the day. We lost so much time. And even if it doesn't matter that much from our point of view as adults, there are the children...and yes, we are a bit anxious about them, of course. 9



Top: Chernobyl power plant
Bottom: Yuri Shcherbak at Chernobyl