

Exploration ☐ Childhood
..... ☐ Uncertain Future ☐
Remembrance Day ☐ Chernobyl
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Exploration

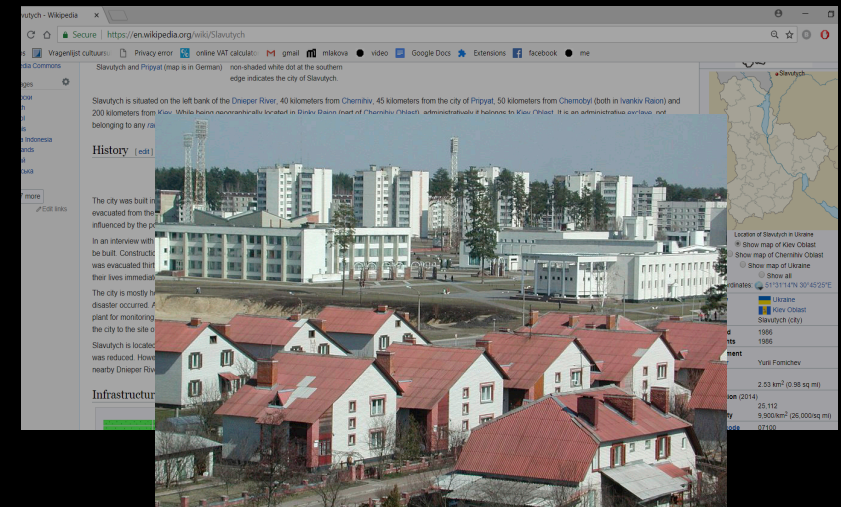
Slavutych, April 25

Slavutych is a city in northern Ukraine, purposely built for the evacuated personnel of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant after the 1986 disaster that occurred near the city of Pripyat. Geographically located within the Ripky Raion, Chernihiv Oblast, Slavutych is administratively subordinated to the Kiev Oblast as a town of oblast significance. As of 2014, the city has a population of 25,112 inhabitants.

This is what the Wikipedia page says about Slavutych and except an article found in Wired magazine, I barely knew anything more about this city before spending a whole month on artist residency there.

Silence. Almost no cars, no public transport, no people. The city is empty. The town seems like it's frozen in time. According to history, after the explosion of the reactor, the eight Soviet republics gathered resources and forces to build twelve distinct districts, each representing unique architectural and design characteristics found in the main Soviet cities: Moscow, Kiev, Baku, Tallinn, Yerevan, Tbilisi, Riga, Vilnius, etc. This gesture of solidarity was also a final attempt to show that the Soviet ideology can survive even Chernobyl.

In Slavutych the majority of the panel buildings are only five or nine stories high, a rather pleasant height for the eye. The flatness of the landscape allows you to clearly see the sky and the horizon. Slavutych was built in the forest just two years after the explosion. It promised clean land and clean water; a land without radiation, as radiation was spread around by foot, air and water. Ten meters of sand were placed in order to secure the ground, different measurements of the air and water were taken to ensure that is all safe. The new town had to be close to the nuclear power plant since its



Slavutych, 2018



inhabitants would still have to perform their duties at the station while being exposed daily to a level of radiation within “the norm”.

I am at the main square of the city. On my left side there is an oval monument of a lone angel, the symbol of the city placed there to protect it. Locals make sarcastic jokes that his left hand raised up in the sky looks like a Naz salute. In the center of the monument there is a tiny holy stone brought all the way from Jerusalem.

It's an episode still outside our culture. Too traumatic for our culture. And our only answer is silence. We just close our eyes, like little children, and think we can hide. Something from the future is peeking out and it's just too big for our minds. Too huge for us to handle.

– Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future.
Svetlana Alexievich



Childhood

Slavutych April 2018 and Sofia 1987

- “Поляна” (Meadow) – shouts a kid probably around the age of four.

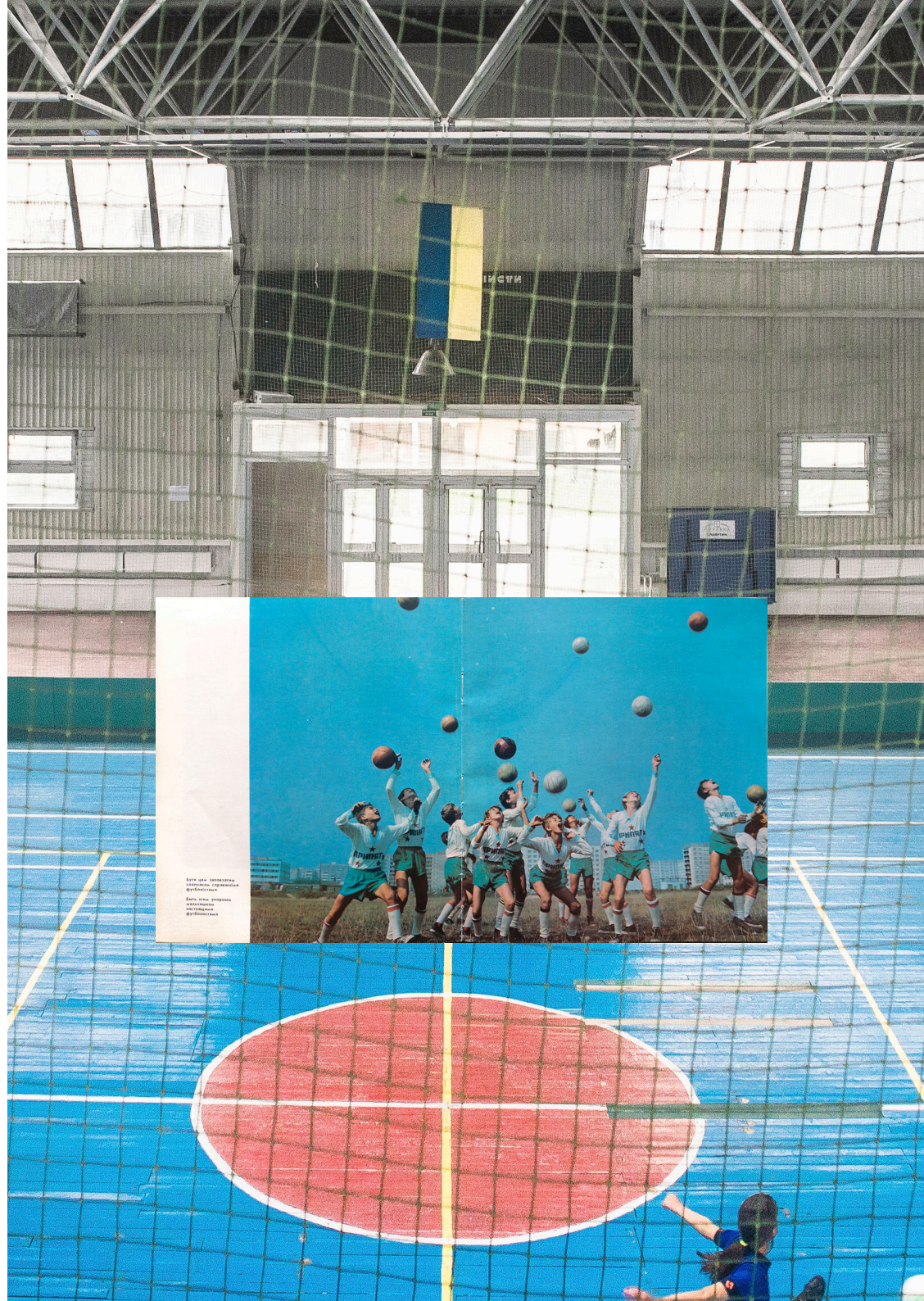
A few children are giggling and playing around me. The sound of their voices resonates inside the inner yard between panel buildings situated in the Moscow district. It sounds like the echo in a large hall. The vibrant voices of the kids could be heard by every block and every neighbour.

Slavutych – a calm post post-atomic town is the utopian paradise for kids. Slavutych – the neverland for children. Children who never grow older. Even when they do they feel trapped here; the city becomes too small, too narrow for their dreams and ambitions. Then they just try to escape.

When you are small, you are safe; when you grow older, the feeling of an enclosed environment or panopticon is present. In the evenings youngsters and teenagers gather at the main square (an oversized plain square which according to the initial planning of the city was never built entirely) or at the Kotlovan – a gigantic ground hole which was meant to be an artificial lake. As like everything during Soviet Union, the town of Slavutych was planned to be bigger. Instead of 12 districts, the initial urban plan was to mirror the town and have 24 districts but only if the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant was still functioning. In 1988, they still had the utopian dream that the station would survive. In 2000, all the reactors shut down completely but some construction and cleaning still had to be completed.

I want to remember the general mood at the time Chernobyl happened. Because they will always go together in history: the downfall of Socialism and the Chernobyl disaster. They coincided. Chernobyl hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. It blew the empire apart.

*– Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future.
Svetlana Alexievich*



Was it because of the Chernobyl disaster that the Soviet Union collapsed? I am asking myself this while reading this line in Chernobyl Prayer – a collection of short stories by Svetlana Alexievich portraying the victims of the catastrophe.

But what do I know about the Communism period in Bulgaria. I was born in 1987 in Sofia just two years before its collapse I have no real memories about that time. But the past remains inscribed in the surrounding architecture. I do remember the smell of concrete coming from typical Soviet panel blocks mixed with the smell of blossom trees. Mid of April the first sign of spring. This smell is terribly familiar to me as I recall it from my childhood.

* * *

How can I forget as I grew up on the 15th floor of apartment No. 87 (an almost symbolic number since I was born that year) in one of these tall buildings in the suburbs of Sofia. In 1986 my father got an apartment in Надежда 2 (Nadejda 2), as a reward for his hard work as a Communications Engineer at the Bulgarian Air Force. This privilege gave him the chance to live and work in the capital. Years had to pass and only when the regime collapsed did he manage to obtain permanent residency or the right to proudly call himself proud Софиянец (Sofianec).

When I was born, my family received 120 leva as state allowance for having a second child and the remarkable 20 leva generously collected by the inhabitants of their building as a gesture of encouragement for the newly born member of the family. There was maybe a feeling of community because of the fact that we all shared the same building with another 95 families. Two other babies were born that year and their families all got the same allowance.



Identification document of Miladin Lakov, personal archive,
April 26, 1986



Lenin's flag, Slavutych
April 2018

Uncertain Future

Slavutych April 2018

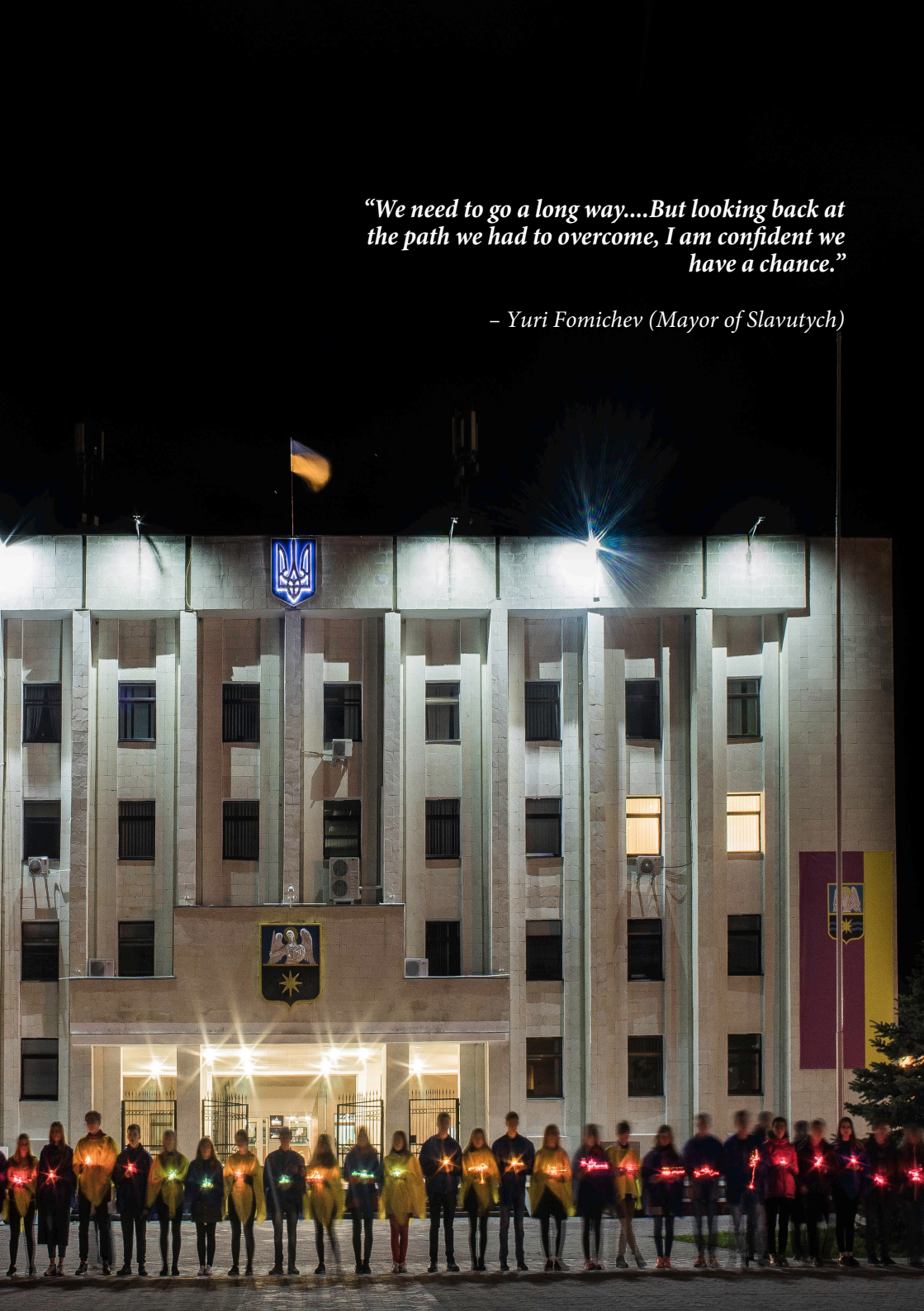
– “If I do not work here (pointing at the cafe), I have to work at the nuclear power plant. I don’t want that. I want to leave this town... what is the perspective here.”

Evgeny tells Katya when she picks up a portion of вареники (varenyky), steamed dumplings filled with veggies or meat usually served with a generous dose of cream (a typical Eastern European dish).

Even though the radiation level at the power station remains normal, for many young people staying in Slavutych is not an option. They want to leave to go to Kiev. The fact that there is no university does not give them a long-term perspective or a reason to stay.

Slavutych – A place for new ideas (*Місто нових ідей) as the slogan of the town says. A dedicated team of municipality officials headed by the mayor, Yuri Fomichev and Aryna Starovoitova, as his right hand, are trying to promote the city as worthy of foreign investment. Aryna is an ambitious, progressive middle-aged woman who perhaps daily spends more time posting images of herself on facebook rather than working for the image of the city.

Most of them are convinced that there is a future for the young generation growing up in Slavutych. Slavutych as a research and innovation center; a center for studying nuclear power; a place where international experts can come and learn from the past and present experience at the frontline of one of the world’s most disastrous and traumatic nuclear accidents. Armed with the mission to develop a long-term plan for foreign investment into higher education and technology they want to prevent the young people from leaving.



“We need to go a long way....But looking back at the path we had to overcome, I am confident we have a chance.”

– Yuri Fomichev (Mayor of Slavutych)

Remembrance Day

Slavutych, April 26

End of part one. They didn't clap. They didn't stand up. Silence. Part two. End of the play. Again, no clapping, and they didn't stand up. Silence.

– *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future.*
Svetlana Alexievich

Today is April 26th, the day that Slavutych commemorates 32 years since the Chernobyl catastrophe. The so called Remembrance day. There are approximately two hundred people gathered at the main square. Several men are dressed in white uniforms representing the Liquidators of Chernobyl or the firemen heroes who first arrived after the explosion happened. Most of them died shortly afterwards. They are all standing still holding candles in their hands like soldiers on duty.

First is the литургия (liturgy) – a religious ceremony typical for the Eastern Orthodox Church. There are two priests holding a large icon of the Virgin Mary and Christ. They read the names of the official twenty-two heroes who lost their lives putting down the fire on that horrific night of the explosion; the aftermath of Chernobyl. But the full list of victims of Chernobyl is uncountable and incomprehensible. The global statistics of those victims have never been made public. Where are all those names of the unreported victims?

The liturgy is over. A melodramatic song is played over and over again from two ancient speakers. The sound spreads in the air. As the time progresses to midnight, fifty kids holding candles and dressed up in blue and yellow capes — the colors of the Ukrainian flag — form a line. Most of them seem hesitant as to what they are there for. While some are smiling and constantly talking to each other, others are trying to be serious and well behaved.



A minute of silence, the clock on the main square shows the time: 1:23 am (the exact hour of the explosion). The radiation level is 0,3 uSv/hour (displayed on an LED screen). A sound of a bell counts five times and then silence. A group of officials led by the mayor of Slavutych and the director of the Exclusion zone, who hold a huge wreath composed of yellow and blue fake flowers are parading towards the Chernobyl monument. Then they leave the wreath down and cross themselves followed by a stream of people who are holding two red carnations each. The uneven number of carnations is typical for Orthodox funerals and represents the commemoration of dead person.

There are reporters with cameras from local and national broadcast channels everywhere, constantly flashing through the faces of people, documenting every step of the procession.



ПОЖАРНАЯ ОХРАНА.
АЛЛО, ПОЛЕССКОЕ?
ДА-ДА.
ВЫ, ЗНАЧИТ, ВЫЕЗЖАЕТЕ НА АТОМНУЮ СТАНЦИЮ,
ТАМ ГОРИТ КРЫША 3го И 4го БЛОКА!

Chernobyl explosion announcement; phone call,
archive material, April 1986

Chernobyl

Chernobyl April and Sopot 1975

Silence. The city is empty. Looks almost as if it has been recently evacuated. The first shift of workers leaves at 5 am early in the morning and heads up to the вокзал (train station). The train that goes to Chernobyl. The ride takes approximately 30 minutes, passing by picturesque landscapes of forests and lakes and crossing the invisible border between Belarus and Ukraine. Is that already *Зона отчуждения (The Exclusion zone)?

I am asking myself if perhaps out there it is already highly contaminated. What about the water? Is it poisonous? This area will remain uninhabitable for people for more than 12,000 years to come but still nature has found its own way to deal with the radiation.

What lingers most in my memory of Chernobyl is life afterwards: the possessions without owners, the landscapes without people. The roads going nowhere, the cables leading nowhere. You find yourself wondering just what this is: the past or the future. It sometimes felt to me as if I was recording the future.

– *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future.*
Svetlana Alexievich

Then I am back to my childhood. I remember the smell of roses and rose water. Every summer we go to my grandma's house in Sopot (Southern Bulgaria) and she treats us with rose water against all kinds of bouts. The Rose Valley (*Розова долина) is famous for its rose-growing industry which has been cultivated there for centuries, and which produces close to half (1.7 tonnes) of the world's rose oil. Each year in mid-May, festivals are held to celebrate the roses and the rose oil. Leading companies in the health and beauty industry have their headquarters there.

My mom remembers the time of the rose picking (розобера) when the whole valley smelled of roses. During communism there were boys and girls of different ages (like my mom) who were assigned to do mandatory work in different brigades in agriculture depending on the region. These dedicated young workers were entrusted by the

State with contributing to the development of the 'new society' and so with their volunteer work they were pushed to develop so called 'versatile personalities' as part of the ideology of communism.



Rose Picking, personal archive, Sopot
May 1975

Kiev

May 15

I am in Kyiv now. I left Slavutych a few days ago. I am walking on the street not far from the Maidan. The square that became a revolutionary battlefield not that long ago and the West was looking away as if it was not happening in Europe. The city reminds me of Sofia fifteen years ago. The time when I was sixteen years old and I was growing up in Nadejda; the familiar post-Soviet architecture; the streets, the signs in Cyrillic; the semi-abandoned industrial sites; even the holes on the streets and the lack of street lights during the night. The scale of it is different though. Kiev is bigger but somehow familiar. I feel safe here but also threatened in a way. Military signs recruiting soldiers are reminding me that there is still a war zone in East of Ukraine, the so-called "forgotten war" or "frozen conflict". Every day there are casualties reported on the local news — the forgotten victims of unnecessary and forced conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Then I think about Slavutych and the time I spent there. Everything there was so peaceful and silent almost as if the time had stopped. Sometimes it is so easy to forget...

I am on the plane now flying back to Amsterdam, leaving Ukraine behind. My experiences and time spent there were fascinating. I am haunted by mixed feelings; of uncertainty and pessimism about the future but nonetheless a feeling of the joy of life and an eagerness to feel alive.

