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Fukushima: A Second Chernobyl?

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With an introduction by David McNeill

Waiting for the Future in Fukushima

As the sixth anniversary of the Fukushima nuclear disaster approaches, the area around the hulking corpse of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant continues to exude a horrible fascination. Arkadiusz Podniesinski is one of thousands of photographers and journalists drawn there since the crisis began in March 2011. In 2015 his first photo report from the area attracted millions of views around the world.

Podniesinski brought to Japan his experience of chronicling the aftermath of the world's worst nuclear accident in Chernobyl, which he first visited in 2008. It was, he noted, people, not technology that was responsible for both disasters. Japanese politicians, he adds, are offended by comparisons with Chernobyl. Still, rarely for a foreign report on Fukushima, his work was picked up by Japanese television (on the liberal channel TBS), suggesting there is a hunger for this comparative perspective.

Podniesinski's first trip strengthened his belief in the "catastrophic consequences of nuclear disasters." Apart from the suffering caused by the disruption of so many lives (160,000 people remain homeless or displaced), there is the struggle to return contaminated cities and towns to a state where people can live in them again. Billions of dollars have already been spent on this cleanup and much more is to come: The latest rehabilitation plan by plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. puts the total bill for compensation alone at 7.08 trillion yen, or nearly $60 billion.

Thirty years after Chernobyl's reactor exploded, Ukrainians have long come to terms with the tragedy that befell them, he writes. The dead and injured have been forgotten. A 2-billion-Euro sarcophagus covering the damaged reactor is nearly complete. The media returns to the story only on major anniversaries. What, he wonders, will become of Fukushima? Last year, Naraha became the first town in Fukushima Prefecture to completely lift an evacuation order imposed after the triple meltdown. But despite rebuilding much of the town's infrastructure and spending millions of dollars to reduce radiation, the local authorities have persuaded only a small number of people to permanently return there.

Radiation is only part of the problem, of course. "The evacuees worry about the lack of schools, hospitals and shops," says Podniesinski. "About the public infrastructure, which has not been sufficiently rebuilt. It must be adapted to the needs of older people, who, after the departure of so many young people from the zone, will now be the majority. However, the evacuees are most afraid of loneliness, as few of their family members, friends and neighbors have decided to return."

The sense of life suspended, of waiting for the future to arrive, resonates in Tomioka, once home to nearly 16,000 people, now a ghost town. Podniesinski arrives just as its famous cheery blossoms bloom, but there is nobody to see them. The irony of fate, he writes, means

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that this Japanese symbol of new, nascent life blooms in contaminated and lifeless streets. "Will the city and its residents be reborn? Undoubtedly, the last word shall belong to them alone." DM

Fukushima: A Second Chernobyl?

Exactly a year has passed since my first visit to Fukushima. A visit which strengthened my belief of how catastrophic the consequences of nuclear disasters can be. A visit that also highlighted how great the human and financial efforts to return contaminated and destroyed cities to a state suitable for re-habitation can be.

The report on the Fukushima zone through the eyes of a person who knows and regularly visits Chernobyl received a great deal of interest in the international community. Viewed several million times and soon picked up by traditional media around the world, it became for a moment the most important topic on Fukushima. I was most pleased, however, by the news that the coverage also reached Japan, where it not only caused quite a stir (more on that another time) but also made me realise just how miniscule Japanese knowledge about the current situation in Fukushima is.

As a result, over the last year I started to go to Fukushima more often than to Chernobyl. This is hardly surprising for another reason. 30 years have passed since the Chernobyl disaster, so the majority of Ukrainians have long since come to terms with the tragedy. The dead and injured have been forgotten. The same is true for media interest, which is only revived on the occasion of the round, 30th anniversary of the disaster. In addition, after nearly 10 years and 2 billion euros, work on the new sarcophagus is finally coming to an end, and soon a storage site for radioactive waste and a 227-ha radiological biosphere reserve will be established.

Will the decommissioning of the power plant in Fukushima also take 30 years and end with the construction of a sarcophagus? Will the contaminated and deserted towns located around the destroyed Fukushima Daiichi power plant be called ghost towns and resemble Chernobyl's Pripyat? Finally, will Fukushima become a popular place for dark tourism like Chernobyl and be visited by thousands of tourists every year?

I Never Want to Return Alone

The Japanese, particularly politicians and officials, do not like and are even offended by comparisons between Fukushima and Chernobyl. It is, however, difficult not to do so when analogies are visible everywhere. While the fact that the direct causes of the disasters are different, the result is almost identical. A tragedy for the hundreds of thousands of evacuated residents, hundreds of thousands of hectares of land contaminated, and decades of time and billions of dollars devoted to eliminating the results of the disaster. And the first cases of thyroid cancer.

The situation in Fukushima resembles a fight against time or a test of strength. The government has devoted billions of dollars to decontaminating the area and restoring residents to their homes. They must hurry before the residents completely lose hope or the desire to return. Before the houses collapse or people are too old to return to. In addition, the authorities soon intend to stop the compensation paid to residents, which according to many of them will be an even more effective "encouragement" for them to return. Deprived of financial support, many residents will have no other choice but to return. Many young families are not waiting for any government assistance. They decided long ago to leave in search of a new life free of radioactive isotopes. They will surely never return.

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Landfill bags with contaminated soil in Tomioka
Decontamination of personal possessions

But radiation is not the only problem that the authorities must worry about. The evacuated residents worry about the lack of schools, hospitals and shops. About the public infrastructure, which has not been sufficiently rebuilt. It must be adapted to the needs of older people, who, after the departure of so many young people from the zone, will now be the majority. However, the evacuees are most afraid of loneliness, as few of their family members, friends and neighbours have decided to return.



Deserted streets in the town of Okuma, closest to the destroyed power plant

Can the authorities manage to convince the residents to return? Has critical mass been exceeded, after which evacuees will learn from others and return? The authorities are doing everything they can to convince residents that the sites are safe for people. They open towns, roads and railway stations one after another. Unfortunately, despite this, residents still do not want to return. A recent survey confirms that there is a huge gap between the government's current policies and the will of the affected residents. Only 17.8% want to return, 31.5% are unsure and 48% never intend to return.

It Became Chernobyl Here

During my first visit to Fukushima, I met Naoto Matsumura, who defied official bans and returned to the closed zone to take care of the animals abandoned there by farmers fleeing radiation. Matsumura has taken in hundreds of animals, saving them from inevitable death by starvation or at the hands of the merciless officials forcing farmers to agree to kill them. Thanks to his courage and sacrifice, Matsumura soon became known as the Guardian of Fukushima's Animals.

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Matsumura was not able to help all of the animals, however. According to the farmer, a third of them died of thirst, unable to break free of the metal beams in barns, wooden fences or ordinary kennels. Matsumura took me to one such place.





Naoto Matsumura on an abandoned farm

Not all appreciate Matsumura's sacrifice and courage. Many people believe that helping these animals, which sooner or later would have ended up on a plate, is not worth the risk the farmer is exposing himself to. Matsumura always has the same answer for them – there is a fundamental difference between killing animals for food and killing animals who are no longer needed due to radiation.

Cow Terrorist

I also returned to Masami Yoshizawa, who like Naoto Matsumura decided to illegally return to the closed zone to take care of the abandoned animals. Shortly after the disaster, some of the farmer's cows began to develop mysterious white spots on their skin. According to Yoshizawa, they are the result of radioactive contamination and the consumption of radioactive feed.

Yoshizawa's farm is located 14 km from the destroyed power plant. From this distance, the buildings of the plant are not visible, but its chimneys can be seen. And, as Yoshizawa says – one could also see [and hear] explosions in the power plant as well as radioactive clouds that soon pass over his farm. Consequently, nearly half of the nearly 20,000 inhabitants of the town of Namie were evacuated to Tsushima, located high in the nearby mountains. But soon people began to flee from there when it turned out that the wind blowing in that direction contaminated the area even more. As a result of the radioactive contamination in Fukushima, a new generation known as the hibakusha has arisen. Up to now, this name was only given to people who were victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now this concept has also been applied to victims of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. As Yoshizawa says – of the 120 surveyed hibakusha, he ranks third in Namie in terms of the amount of radiation doses received.

Defying the completely ignorant authorities, Yoshizawa quickly became a professional activist and his cows got a new mission – they became protestors. And, soon after, he brought one of them in front of the Ministry of Agriculture's building, demanding that research be undertaken to explain why white spots have appeared on the animals' skins after the disaster. Yoshizawa says, "I protested [by] bringing a bit of Fukushima to Tokyo. May the cows and I become living proof of the disaster, and the farm a chronicle telling the story of the

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Fukushima disaster."

When protesting against the construction and re-starting of subsequent nuclear power plants, Yoshizawa does not bring his cows along anymore. Instead, he has a car festooned with banners that pulls behind it a small trailer with a metal model of a cow. "I have a strong voice and can scream louder than die-hard right wingers!" explains Yoshizawa. "I'm a cowboy, a cow terrorist, a kamikaze!" he adds in a loud voice, presenting an example of his capabilities. "We are not advocating violence, we don't kill people, we are not aggressive. We are political terrorists," he concludes calmly. And after a moment, he invites us to a real protest. The occasion of the planned opening of the railway station is to be attended by Prime Minister Sinzo Abe himself.



Yoshizawa on his Farm of Hope. The slogans on the auto read "Solidarity and ready to die" and "TEPCO, government: we demand compensation for our injustices!"

The protest goes peacefully indeed. Yoshizawa first drives round the city to which the Prime Minister is soon to arrive. Driving his car, he shouts into the microphone, "When a fire broke out in the reactors, TEPCO employees fled. The fire was extinguished by the young men of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces. Why were you not able to control the power plant you built?" He continued immediately, "Today the Prime Minister is coming here. Let's get up and greet Abe. Let's show Abe not only the beautifully prepared railway station, let him also see the dark side of the city. For 40 years, we supplied electricity to Tokyo. Our region only could support Japan's economic development. And now we suffer. Tales about the safety of nuclear power plants are a thing of the past," Yoshizawa concludes. When the moment of the Prime Minister's arrival approaches and the crowds grow larger, policemen and the Prime Minister's security detail approach the farmer. They order him to take down his banners and leave the site. Yoshizawa obeys, but carries out their commands without haste. As if deliberately trying to prolong their presence, hoping to have time to meet and "greet" the Prime Minister.





Yoshizawa talks with the police
Yoshizawa leaves the square under police

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escort, which wants to make sure that the farmer will leave the city





Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe leaving the railway station

No-go Zones

As always, a major part of my trip to Fukushima is devoted to visits to no-go zones. Obtaining permission to enter and photograph the interior is still difficult and very time-consuming. However, it is nothing compared to the search for owners of the abandoned properties, persuade them to come, show their houses and discuss the tragic past.

Sometimes, however, it's different. Such as in the case of Tatsuo and Kazue Kogure, who with the help of Japanese television agreed to take me to Tomioka, where they ran a small but popular bar. It was not only a place to eat and drink sake, but also to sing karaoke with the bar's owners.

Unfortunately the city, and with it the bar, stood in the way of the radioactive cloud and had to be closed. Earlier, I saw many similar bars and restaurants. Overgrown, smelly, full of mould, debris and scattered items. This place, however, is different. It is distinguished by its owners, who despite age and the tragedy they experienced, did not give up and opened a new bar outside the radioactive zone. Mr and Mrs Kogure not only showed me the abandoned bar, but also invited me to their new one.





Kazue Kogure inside their abandoned bar in Tomioka
Tatsuo and Kazue Kogure in their new bar in Iwaki

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What is unusual and extremely gratifying is the fact that the couple's efforts to continue the family business are also supported by regular customers from the previous bar. "It's thanks to their help that we could start all over again," Kazue Kogure acknowledges. She immediately adds, "By opening the bar again we also wanted to be an example to other evacuated residents. To show that it's possible."

The Scale of the Disaster Shocked Us

I also visit the former fire station located in the closed zone in Tomioka. Due to the nuclear power plant neighbouring the city, the firefighters working here were regularly trained in case of a variety of emergencies. I am accompanied by Naoto Suzuki, a firefighter who served here before the disaster. In the middle of the firehouse, my attention is drawn to a large blackboard. "That's the task scheduler for March 2011," the firefighter explains. "On 11 March, the day of the disaster, we had nothing planned, but," he adds with an ironic smile, "the day before we had a training session on responding to radioactive contamination. We practised how to save irradiated people and how to use dosimeters and conduct decontamination."

Unfortunately, the reality shocked even the firefighters, who had to cope with tasks they had never practised. For example, with cooling the reactors. Even the repeatedly practised evacuation procedures for the residents were often ineffective and resulted in the opposite of the desired effect. It turned out that the data from SPEEDI (System for Predicting Environmental Emergency Dose Information), whose tasks included forecasting the spread of radioactive substances, was useless and did not reach the local authorities. As a result, many residents were evacuated for more contaminated sites and unnecessarily endangered by the additional dose of radiation.

The monthly work schedule at the fire station in Tomioka (no-go zone). Firefighter Naoto Suzuki shows the training session on how to help people exposed to radiation planned for the day before the disaster. A committee meeting to provide information in the event of a fire in the nuclear reactors was planned for 14 March.





Firefighters' dispatch. Local firefighting tasks in Tomioka were managed from here.

In the spring of this year, thanks to the help and support of many people, particularly the local authorities, evacuated residents and even a monk, I was also able to see many interesting places mostly located in the closed zones in Tomioka, Okuma, Futaba and Namie. Although five years have passed since the disaster, most of them still remain closed and many valuable objects can still be found there. Due to this, I have decided not to publish information that could aid in locating them.

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Izakaya Bar
Restaurant



Overturned shelves of rental video shop
Temple







Swimming pool complex
Main pool

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SEGA arcade



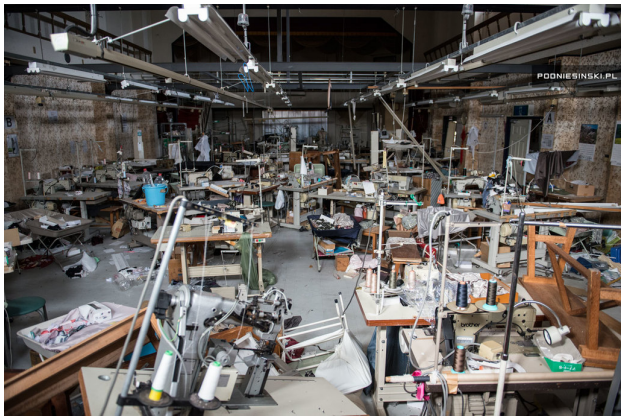
Children's bikes in the courtyard of the kindergarten



Supermarket



Hospital



Clothing factory

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Gym
Pachinko arcade





Kindergarten.
The dosimeter reading here is 9.3 uSv/h.
Children's school bags



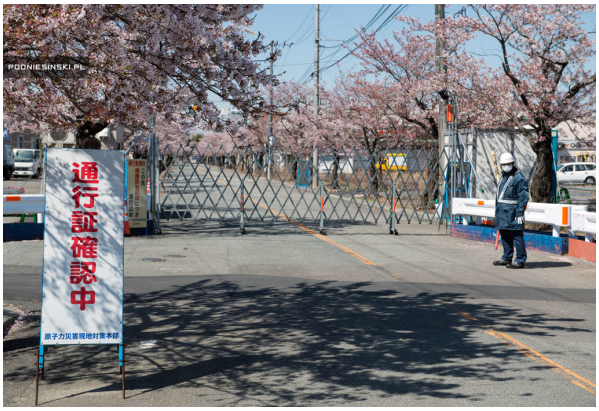


School
School library

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Nighttime police patrol



Entrance gate to the closed zone in Tomioka

Hope

Ending my series of travels around Fukushima, I return to Tomioka to see the thing for which the city is most famous and its residents most proud – one of the longest and oldest cherry blossom tunnels in Japan. For the residents of Tomioka, cherry trees have always been something more than just a well-known tourist attraction or the historic symbol of the town. Not only did they admire the aesthetic attributes of the flowers, but they were also part of their lives, organised festivals, meetings and the topic of family conversations.

The natural beauty and powerful symbolism as well as their constant presence in Japanese arts have made cherry trees become an icon of Japanese cultural identity. They signal the arrival of spring, the time for renewal and the emergence of new life. In the spiritual sense, they remind us of how beautiful, yet tragically short and fragile, life is – just like the blooming cherry blossoms that fall from the tree after just a few days.

The nuclear irony of fate meant that this Japanese symbol of new, nascent life today blooms in the contaminated and lifeless streets of Tomioka. Will the city and its residents be reborn, along with the cherry trees blossoming in solitude and silence? Undoubtedly, the last word shall belong to them alone.



Main street with flowering cherry trees

Arkadiusz Podniesiński is a Polish photographer and filmmaker, a technical diver and a graduate of Oxford Brookes University in Great Britain. Since 2008, he has been continuously engaged in the photographic documentation of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, which he has

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visited dozens of times. His main pursuit is photographing places associated with disasters, conducting interviews with workers and the residents of the evacuated areas, as well as documenting the progress of the nuclear power plant's liquidation and the building of the new sarcophagus. His other work on Fukushima can be seen here, and on Chernobyl here.

David McNeill writes for The Irish Times, The Economist and other publications. An Asia-Pacific Journal editor, he is a coauthor of Strong in the Rain: Surviving Japan's Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Disaster (Palgrave Macmillan).

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