

THE HORRIFYING LEGACY OF WORLD'S WORST NUCLEAR

A powerful new Sky Atlantic drama based on the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant explosion – the worst nuclear disaster in history – hit our screens last week. At 1.23am on April 26, 1986, the explosion – ironically triggered by a safety test – rocked the city of Pripjat in Ukraine, blowing the roof off the reactor and shooting a fireball into the sky. Radiation spewed out of the building and walls, and equipment collapsed.

After the explosion, some of the residents of Pripjat gathered on a railway bridge just outside the city to get a better view of the fire. They were mesmerised by the colours lighting up the sky – tragically, it's been reported that none of them survived. The next day, residents

within a 30km radius were evacuated and the area remains largely off limits to this day.

The official death toll is 31, but experts fear the intense radiation could have affected as many as 500,000, with children still being born with severe birth defects and rare types of cancer all over Ukraine and neighbouring countries. Experts believe the lethal substance will pollute around Chernobyl for up to 320 years.

British mum Linda Walker was so moved by the tragic plight that she set up the Chernobyl Children's Charity, which provides help and support. Here, she tells *Closer* why she fears its deadly legacy will continue to overshadow generations for many years to come.



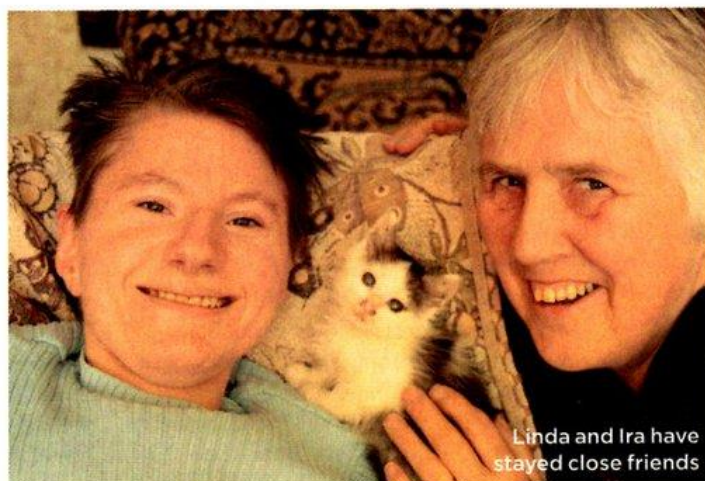
'I can't see an end to the suffering'

Mum-of-three Linda Walker, 66, from Glossop, says, "When I first met Ira Rozhkova she was nine and lying in a cot in a baby home in Zhuravachi. She was born just a year after the explosion at Chernobyl with tiny arms and legs that were completely useless. She couldn't move and I was told she was too frail to touch. It broke my heart.

"Ira, now 30, was one of many babies whose deformities were believed to have been caused by her mother's exposure to the radioactive cloud which engulfed her village, close to Pripjat.

"Her mum had been encouraged to give her up as there was very little help for disabled children.

"Gradually, with support from volunteers, we helped Ira to learn to read and moved her to a different home. Eventually she



was reunited with her mother and now lives happily with her and her nieces and nephews."

HARD TO COPE

"Hers is a happy story, but sadly I've seen and heard many terribly sad ones.

"I first went to Belarus – a country that sits between Poland, Russia and the Ukraine and which bore the brunt of the fall-out from the disaster – in

1994, after hearing campaigner Adi Roche speak. I was working for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at the time and it moved me immeasurably. Afterwards we got talking and she invited me to go along on her next visit.

"What I witnessed was very hard to cope with. I met children with cancer and their parents. Unlikely things affected me – the old woman

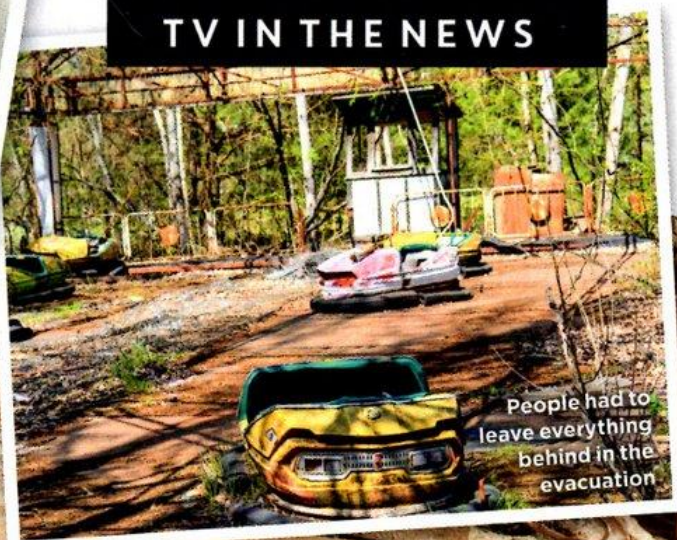
sitting in her new apartment in the city with tears streaming down her face as she described the home she longed for, surrounded by forests and a river. Generations of her family had lived there and she felt lost and isolated. I remember two young boys, who both had heart conditions, their lips and fingers blue. One of them begged me to take him to Germany for an operation as he'd heard that they might be able to cure him – luckily the did both get operated on a few months later.

"I was also struck by the immense bravery and stoicism of people. I met liquidators – men who'd been sent in to "clean up" the contamination. 300,000 men were involved, some of them exposed to a lifetime's dose of radiation in just 90 seconds as they removed tiles from the roof of the plant itself. The fate of those men has never been recorded, but the

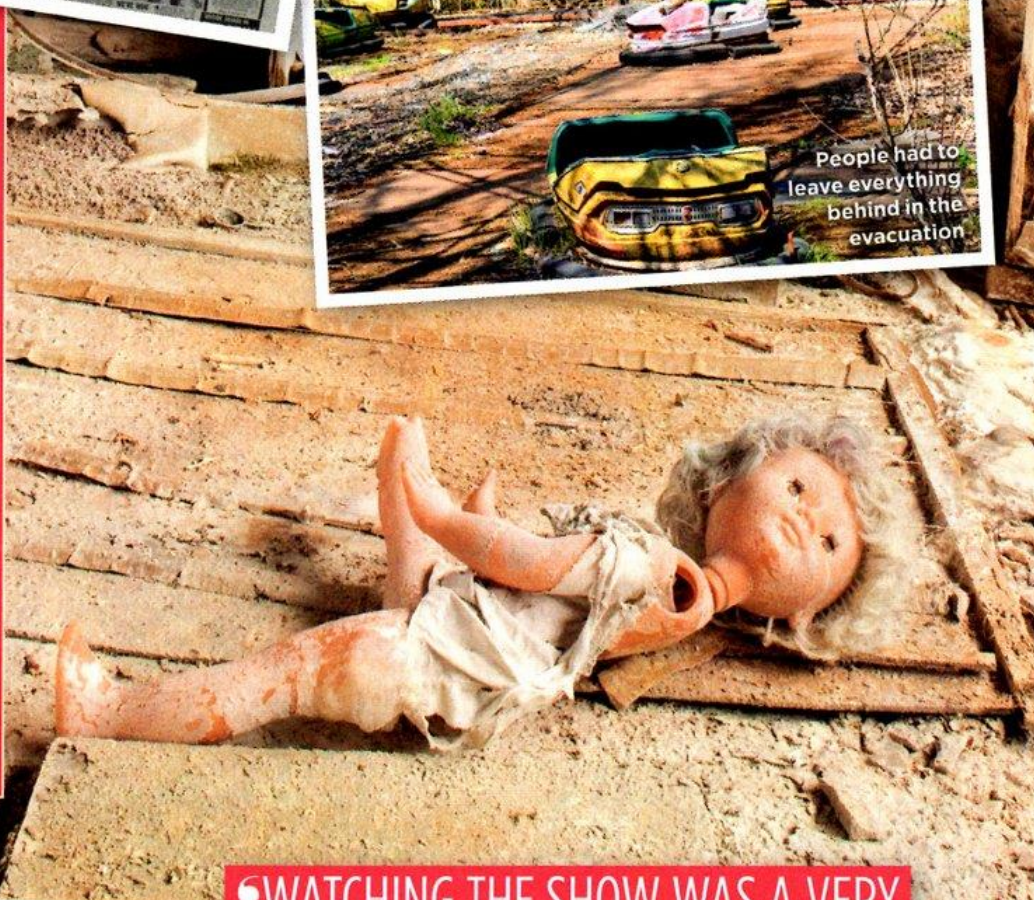
THE DISASTER



TV IN THE NEWS



The Sky Atlantic drama has received rave reviews



WATCHING THE SHOW WAS A VERY EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR ME

ones I met had breathing and blood disorders.

"Coming home after that first visit in December, I cried and cried. I couldn't celebrate Christmas, it all seemed deeply frivolous compared to the suffering I'd witnessed.

AVOIDABLE

"It was eight years after the explosion and there was already a surge in children born with deformities. It's now 32 years on and the problems are far from over. Haematologists speak of blood disorders in children, which are normally only seen in the elderly and heart disease and respiratory problems are widespread.

"In the orphanages, there are many children who do not grow, still looking like toddlers into their teens; babies are born with missing or twisted limbs and breast cancer among young women is a major problem.

"But, incredibly, thyroid cancer is the only illness

which is indisputably linked to Chernobyl – despite all the anecdotal evidence to the contrary.

"I struggle with the fact that some of this horrific impact might have been avoidable if the government hadn't minimised how dangerous the effects would be. In the 80 or so visits I've made, I've never been to see the actual power plant – that would feel too voyeuristic to me



Her family dressed Ira in children's clothing

– but I've been in the exclusion zone around it.

"There, I met an old couple who'd moved back – they were eating vegetables that had been grown in their radioactive soil. It will undoubtedly harm them and yet they know no better and have no resources to do anything else anyway. It's a terrible situation.

NEVER FORGOTTEN

"And it's impossible to know the effects this sort of exposure will have on future generations. Some research indicates that it might get worse and there will be more children born with cancer or deformities. It's hard to see an end to the suffering.

"I've found my work with our charity both heartbreaking and fulfilling. I cope by focusing on the good we've done. Thousands of children have

come for breaks in the UK and, after breathing clean air and eating unpolluted food, they've ended up looking and feeling so much healthier. Their immune systems that were wrecked by their environment have picked up.

"We've also arranged holidays within Belarus, built respite homes and "foster" homes for children and worked with the authorities to try to educate them about how best to help.

"It's not enough, but it's something at least.

"Watching the show was a very emotional experience – I hope it helps people realise why the victims of this tragedy must never be forgotten."

By Mel Fallowfield

● www.chernobyl-children.org.uk

Closer TV Chernobyl, Sky Atlantic/
Now TV, 21 May, 9pm