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As the Japanese recover from the devastation of a tsunami and the quake-stricken Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, Ukrainians worldwide prepare to mark the 25th anniversary of the another nuclear disaster – Chernobyl.

Victims and survivors will be remembered at a Toronto concert May 6 organized by the Children of Chornobyl Canadian Fund, a charity founded in 1990 and dedicated to the medical needs of those affected by the April 26, 1986 disaster in Ukraine, the worst nuclear power plant accident in history.

The charity's mandate has since evolved to provide technical aid and medical support to hospitals in Ukraine, said co-chair Dr. Michael Kondracki.

Among those in the audience will be survivors who remember the paralyzing fear, and later the anger, once the truth of the meltdown was revealed:

Anna Kicil – Lived 500 kilometres southwest of Chernobyl, in Lviv, western Ukraine. Now president of the Golden Lion Restaurant in Etobicoke:

Kicil, pregnant with her daughter Iryna and living with her husband and son Andrij, 5, recalled a paragraph buried in the local Soviet-era newspaper reporting a minor mishap at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station.

It was days before government officials confessed a catastrophic accident had occurred.

"We boiled water, took showers, washed our hands frequently and didn't drink milk," she said.

When it rained, the streets were covered with yellow stains. "We were terrified to leave our homes." Kicil said she scrubbed her furniture, floors and windows several times a day to remove contaminated dust. "There was no protection. There was nowhere to hide."

The family fled the city to her mother's home in the Carpathian Mountains, remaining there for months. Since coming to Canada, Kicil has worked to support those affected by Chernobyl. Her business ventures and philanthropic work earned her the Ordinance of Merit, Ukraine's highest honour.

Raissa Galechko – Lived about 110 kilometres south of Chernobyl. A journalist, she now lives in Mississauga:

Galechko was hosting a picnic in the woods just outside the capital Kyiv for her daughter Zoya's 12th birthday. Galechko didn't pay attention to the phalanx of military vehicles driving north out of the city. When word spread that government bosses were quietly moving their own children out of the capital, she knew something was seriously wrong.

After the accident, many women in early stages of pregnancy were forced to have abortions. "Women fled to villages so they wouldn't have to abort," Galechko said. Those closer to term were told to deliver early.

A few years later, spots appeared on Zoya's back. A doctor recommended immediate surgery "and told me to move to a clean zone," Galechko said, adding 18 melanomas were removed. She can't say for certain that Chernobyl was to blame. "We'll never know."

Two years after Chernobyl, she travelled there to interview the editor of the local Soviet-run newspaper, who told her that he was never allowed to write about the accident or document the aftermath.

"People were sick in the streets but that was never reported," Galechko said.

Halyna Pilat – Also lived in Lviv, 500 kilometres from Chernobyl. Now lives in Mississauga:

Pilat was three months pregnant with her eldest son Maxim when Reactor 4 exploded.



Raissa Galechko

LESLIE FERENC/TORONTO STAR

Pilat and her husband spent April 26, 1986 strolling the streets of Lviv and celebrated May Day by attending outdoor events. When she heard about Chernobyl, Pilat could only think of her unborn child.

"People were terrified because of the high levels of radiation."

Many believe the impact of the nuclear disaster was more widespread than official reports said. It's why news that Chernobyl has become a tourist destination is repugnant to Pilat.

"It's like taking people on a tour of a cemetery."

Ihor Bokiy -- Was serving in the Soviet army in Lithuania, 900 kilometres away from Chernobyl. Now lives in Etobicoke:

Bokiy was outside the borders of his homeland when he heard about the accident through Western media -- days before people in Ukraine were told. He said he can't forgive the Soviets or then-president Mikhail Gorbachev for hiding the truth. "The government fooled the people for days after the disaster and encouraged everyone to attend May Day celebrations across the country," he said. "The Soviets sent people to their deaths."

Proceeds from next month's concert, featuring the Elmer Iseler Singers, Gryphon Trio, Vesnivka Choir and Toronto Ukrainian Male Chamber Choir, will support on-going CCCF programs and initiatives. The concert will be held at the Plast Hucal Community Centre, 516 the Kingsway, Etobicoke. For tickets, call 416-604-4611.