

**DESTROYING THE PEN**

by

Carole Seymour-Jones

**REPORT**

**ON**

**ENGLISH PEN WIPC**

**MISSION TO BELARUS**

**12-21 JULY 2004**

UNDERTAKEN BY

**TREVOR MOSTYN and CAROLE SEYMOUR-JONES**

**‘Lukashenko makes people destroy the pen. He makes writers  
enemies of state.’**

Gary Pahaniala, Vice President, Belarusian Helsinki Committee,  
Lawyer to Prof. Yury Bandazhevsky

## 1 BACKGROUND TO THE MISSION

The case of **Professor Yury Bandazhevsky**, medical scientist and former Rector of Gomel Medical Institute, arrested in 1999 on suspicion of bribery and imprisoned following the publication of his research on the effect of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster upon the Belarusian people, and not due for release until January 2006, is one of great concern to English PEN's WiPC. Bandazhevsky is an Honorary Member of English PEN. I have been his 'minder' since 2002, sending him books, writing up his case as Prisoner of the Month for The New Statesman in November 2003, and sending letters of protest to **President Alexandr Lukashenko**. **Sara Whyatt**, Programme Director, International WIPC, reported in January 2004 that Bandazhevsky might be included in Lukashenko's forthcoming amnesty, but by March **Lucy Popescu, WiP Programme Director, English PEN**, reported that if Bandazhevsky was not released, she had 'been advised that a mission to Belarus may be useful' (WIPC minutes 30 March 2004.) Trevor Mostyn and I volunteered to undertake the mission at the May meeting of the WiPC, 'on behalf of English PEN's Honorary Member Yury Bandazhevsky and to meet other writers and human rights organisations.' It was stated in the minutes that 'the situation for writers and journalists is currently very bad there and the FCO have reported that this is a good time for a visit' (WiPC Minutes Monday 10 May 2004.) The mission was funded by the **FCO's Human Rights Policy Department Fund**, and followed an earlier PEN mission to Belarus in 2002.

**Simon Lavender**, Far Eastern Desk, FCO, met us at the FCO on 5 July for a pre-mission briefing on Belarus. Sara Whyatt warned us that we might be kept under surveillance by the Secret Police (KGB). **Susie Nicklin, Executive Director English PEN**, and Lucy Popescu confirmed that a grant of \$500 was available from the **Prisoners of Conscience Fund** to assist prisoners and their families. SN also informed me that English PEN's new translation initiative might be interested in the translation of Belarusian literature into English.

**Anna Gerasimova** of **Belarusian PEN** had kindly pre-arranged a schedule of meetings for us, including a proposed visit to Prof. Yury Bandazhevsky at his settlement near Lida, and another to his wife Galina Bandazhveskaya in Minsk. On

Sunday 11 July Anna informed Trevor that she had been notified that a formal written request to visit Bandazhevsky would now need to be submitted to **Vladimir Kovchur, Head of the Committee for the Execution of Punishments of the Ministry of the Interior**. English PEN immediately wrote in both English and Russian to Kovchur asking him to permit us to visit Bandazhevsky. The letter was signed by **PEN President Alastair Niven**, and sent that same day, with the request to fax the reply to the British Embassy in Minsk, where **Gregory Quinn, Deputy Head of Mission** was already in touch with us.

## **2 MINSK, WED 14 JULY**

**Book launch at the Pushkin Club, at the invitation of Ales Ancipienka, Director of the Belarus Collegium.**

**There is standing room only at the Minsk Pushkin Club as, one by one, members of Belarusin PEN** mount the platform to speak. Sonorous Russian syllables rise and fall: I cannot understand the meaning, but the mood is clear enough. A thin, dark-haired poet plucks at the strings of his guitar: 'I love my country of grey skies, I love my country of black bread and potatoes,' he sings. 'I love my Belarus.' In his mournful, defiant eyes I read the frustration and anger of intellectuals persecuted by forty-nine year old President Alexander Lukashenko, a former collective farm manager turned Soviet-style dictator. His critics may have given their president the derogatory nickname 'kolkhoznik', collective farm worker, meaning someone not very bright, but as the KGB beat up 'enemies of the state' and political opponents disappear, it is Lukashenko who is laughing as he tightens the screw on his fiefdom.

**POLITICAL BACKGROUND: Lukashenko** surprised his opponents by seizing power in the 1994 presidential election. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the period 1990-1994 was one of fragile freedom: the Belarusian language flourished, there were a huge number of independent newspapers, and Channel 8, an independent TV station, broadcast in both Belarusian and Russian. But at the same time the Belarusian people experienced Soviet disintegration as trauma. Formerly Belarus had been at the forefront of the Soviet Union, a highly industrialised and technologically sophisticated 'assembly line' for the whole USSR. Belarus, remembers Ancipienka,

had no bread shortages at the time of Krushchev. In the 1970s its standard of living increased further. Under Brezhnev it had no problem with food supply. But with the breakdown of the USSR, the plants stopped. National identity, as Russia's prized 'younger brother' crumbled, for Belarus, ruled in turn by the Lithuanians, Poles and Russians, has always had a weak sense of nationhood. Independence, first proclaimed in the early twentieth century, lost to the Bolsheviks in December 1918, and once again enshrined in the Republic of Belarus 1991, was built on shifting sands.

Into this power vacuum stepped Lukashenko, who took advantage of the mood of nostalgia. 'I will rebuild the Soviet Union for you,' he declared, recalls Ancipienka. 'I'll make the plants work again. I'll restore order.' A populist and an accomplished communicator, his platform impressed voters during a period of economic chaos and allowed him to wrest power from the Nationalists, whose advocacy of the Belarusian language was as unpopular as the soaring food prices.

In the ten years since coming to power, Lukashenko has pursued an increasingly authoritarian path. In 1996, following the dissolution of the democratically elected parliament, he imposed a pro-presidential constitution and instituted an effective dictatorship. The **Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)** declared the conduct of the referendum to have been neither free nor fair.

**Relations with Russia.** As other ex Soviet bloc countries began creating a specifically Central European identity, putting distance between themselves and Eastern Europe and facilitating the path towards integration into European institutions such as NATO and the EU, Belarus chose the opposite path. Lukashenko proposed union with Russia, a popular policy among 'traumatised' Belarusian who had lost so much in the wake of the break-up of the USSR, and one which appealed in particular to pensioners (37%) in the population whose pensions Lukashenko has ensured are paid on time.

Belarus gained economically from its pro-Russian stance. A member of the Community of Independent States (CIS) established when the USSR broke up in 1991, in January 1995 Belarus joined a Customs Union with Russia as well as signing an agreement on military cooperation, which allowed Russia to lease military

facilities in Belarus for 25 years. Dependent upon Russia for nearly all its energy supplies, Belarus benefited when prices of oil and gas were reduced by approximately 40 per cent after the establishment of the Russia-Belarus 'Community of Sovereign Republics', which aimed to deepen economic integration. Russia wrote off Belarusian debt of around \$1.4 billion, and sheltered its 'little brother' from high inflation, thus persuading Belarusians of the success of Lukashenko's inefficient 'command economy'.

But the relationship between Belarus and Russia soured after Vladimir Putin took office in 2000. The Russian President has pursued an increasingly assertive policy towards the CIS countries, putting paid to Lukashenko's fantasy that he himself might command enough popular support to become president of Russia. In November 2002 Putin stated that in the past Russia has given too much to Belarus and that the time had come for Belarus to give something back. He demanded that economic convergence precede monetary union with Russia, a condition unacceptable to Lukashenko, who is now going cold on the idea of union on Russia's terms. It seems unlikely that Belarus will adopt the Russian rouble as its currency in January 2005 as previously announced. Meetings between Lukashenko and Putin, including the latest at Yalta in May 2004, have indicated that no progress is being made towards union between the two countries.

In 2004 relations between the two countries worsened. Russia's Gazprom halted gas supplies as payback for Belarusian illegal siphoning of gas in transit to Europe. Gazprom was also demanding the acquisition of the Belarusian gas transit company Beltransgaz on terms refused by Lukashenko. Such suspension of supplies remind Lukashenko of where the levers of power lie in the relationship with his giant neighbour, in whose school textbooks Belarus has historically featured simply as 'Western Russia,' a valuable buffer zone for Russia in its relations with the West.

## **HEALTH**

**In 2006 it will be twenty years since the Chernobyl nuclear disaster which contaminated one third of Belarus in April 1986.** Although Chernobyl is located in Ukraine, over 70% of the radioactive fallout following meltdown and explosion fell

on the territory of Belarus. 20% of Belarus' forests are contaminated as well as over 6,000 sq km of prime agricultural land.

## **HUMAN RIGHTS**

The greatest casualty of Lukashenko's government has been the situation for human rights. Re-elected in 2001, in presidential elections whose fairness was again challenged by international observers, Lukashenko has established, in the opinion of the Parliamentary Assembly of the **Council of Europe (PACE)** `a police state with conditions similar to those prevailing in the country during the Soviet Union era' (Resolution 1372, 28 April 2004). In January 2004 the Bureau of PACE rejected Belarus' application for re-granting it special guest status to the Council of Europe, on the grounds that it did not see any progress towards democratic development since January 1997, when special guest status was suspended.

In April 2004 PACE adopted the resolutions and recommendations of the Pourgourides report on `**Disappeared Persons in Belarus**'. On 14 May the EU called for a truly independent investigation to be opened into the disappearances of four opponents of the regime in 1999/2000, including former Belarusian Interior Minister Yury Zakharenko and Viktor Gonchar, a deputy of Belarus's 13<sup>th</sup> Supreme Soviet and a leading member of the political opposition. Gonchar and Anatoly Krasovsky, the owner of an independent publishing house, disappeared after leaving a Minsk sauna on 16 September, and have not been seen since. Bloodstains and broken glass were subsequently found nearby.

Another case of particular concern to journalists is that of ORT (Russian Public Television) cameraman Dmitri Zavadsky who previously worked for Belarusian television as Lukashenko's personal cameraman. He was last seen on 27 July 2000, when he went to Minsk airport to collect a colleague. His car, apparently wiped clean of fingerprints, was later found in the airport car park.

## **UN Resolution 2004/14 and the Establishment of a Special Rapporteur on Belarus**

In April 2003 in Geneva, the 59<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UN CHR) passed a resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus. A further resolution, co-sponsored for the first time by the EU and the USA, was adopted at the 60<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN CHR in **April 2004**.

The resolution condemns the general human rights situation in Belarus, including `persistent reports of harassment and closure of non-governmental organisation...independent media outlets...and the harassment of individuals engaged in democratic activities, including independent media (Point 1(d)). It establishes the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Belarus to monitor any process towards democracy, especially in the spheres of law-enforcement, the judiciary and civil society, and to report back to the Commission in its next session (Point 5). This appointment indicates the severity of the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus, since special UN country rapporteurs are only established in cases of persistent and widespread human rights violations.

In **July 2004** the question of everyone's lips is: **`Will Lukashenko stand for a third presidential term?** This move would be in defiance of the Constitution, which only allows for two presidential terms. Unofficial reports say that Lukashenko has instructed lawyers to prepare constitutional changes to allow him to run for a third term in 2006.

- Can Lukashenko afford to ignore the international community, or does he need the EU as a counterweight to Putin's increasing power?
- Will he follow `big brother' Putin in further repression of human rights?
- Will Putin continue to tolerate Lukashenko in his `backyard'?

These questions are hotly debated, in Minsk, in Grodno, and in Gomel, in the heartland of the contaminated area.

There are two schools of thought: **pessimists and optimists**.

### **3 GRODNO. MIKOLA MARKEVICH AND PAVEL MOZHEIKO.**

**Mikola, middle-aged former editor-in-chief of PAHONIA**, a Grodno-based independent newspaper forced to close by the authorities in November 2001, sits on a battered chair in the paper's newsroom. The green-painted walls are dingy, the floors bare, and there is only a single computer: days before the intelligence services, the KGB, broke in and seized the rest.

Mikola is finally free – but for how long? He was released from prison in April 2004 after completing his sentence for infringement of the Belarusian Press Law (BPL), which is widely used to silence the voice of the free press. Two `offending' articles, Markevich's `Going to the Elections' and Pavel Mozheiko's `He is not Lukashenko' in the 36<sup>th</sup> issue of *Pahonia*, led to the initiation of criminal proceedings against the two men for the publication of articles deemed to insult President Lukashenko. The Criminal Code's notorious Articles 367, 368 and 369 provide for a sentence of up to five years in prison for libel of the President, up to three years for `insult' to the President, and a two-year term of `corrective' labour for insulting the authorities. Criminal legislation penalises journalists for exercising their right to freedom of expression, despite the fact that Belarus is a signatory to Article 19.

During Markevich's incarceration his colleagues maintained the *Pahonia* website, and on 29 January 2004 the paper was re-opened under the new name *Djen* (`Today'). Within weeks *Djen*, too, was subjected to three attacks by the authorities. `It was comic,' says Markevich. `The police detained two KGB guys who tried to break in during the night - a unique situation for a former Soviet Republic.' On 7 April the KGB confiscated the eleventh issue of *Djen*, a print run of 4,800 copies, while the newspaper was being transported from its printing site in Smolensk, Russia. Four days later they returned with search warrants and raided the office, removing the computers. Their charge: that the eleven journalists on *Djen*'s staff were producing protest leaflets, which they planned to distribute at the forthcoming celebrations on 1<sup>st</sup> May.

Walking past the KGB HQ in Grodno with Mikola, Trevor and I actually witnessed men unloading *Djen*'s computers from a van and carrying them into the building. Confiscations and raids, as well as refusal by printing houses and the State-owned distribution company Belsayuzdruk to print and distribute independent newspapers,

act as effective tools of repression. Non-State print media are forced to print outside Belarus (the independent newspaper BDG also prints in Smolenk). Recently *Djen* has been distributed by couriers who deliver the paper, taking 20% of the price as payment, but this system is inefficient.

The local authority's latest attempt to close down *Djen* has taken the form of terminating the lease of the NGO which sub-lets an office to the newspaper. Tax inspections have resulted in a crippling fine of \$900. 'We are suspended now,' says Mikola, looking round the bare newsroom. 'Every charge is made up. We are accused of producing a non-registered newspaper, which will contribute to civil unrest. They say: "You are guilty."'

The respect in which Mikola and Pavel are held as symbolic figures of resistance is demonstrated by the fact that Pavel has just been chosen as head of the local office of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). Meanwhile, *Djen's* voice is silenced. It is hoped that the grant from the POC fund, which we made to Mikola Markevich, will enable him to print a new issue of the newspaper.

Nationalist Belarusians like Mikola and Pavel long with passion to join the EU. The border of Poland, which became a member of the EU in May 2004, is tantalisingly close – only 8 km from Grodno. Housewives used to cross the border to buy cheap Polish food and goods in bulk and sell it on to their friends: this has recently been forbidden by presidential decree. To Belarusians the Polish and Lithuanian borders seems like a **new iron curtain**. In a recent poll, 60% of Belarusians said that they wanted to be part of the European family. When Prodi, the Commissioner for Enlargement of the EU, said recently that Belarus would not even be a contender for membership for ten years, many Belarusians, alleges Mikola, felt betrayed. 'We have a long history of European values,' he says, referring to the days when Belarus was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the sixteenth century and the Bible was translated into Belarusian. In Grodno, red and white carnations, the colours of the GDL, decorate statues of the old heroes of Belarusian history; but in front of a larger than life size statue of Lenin the giant flags waving in the wind are red and green, the colours of the old Soviet Belarusian flag reinstated by Lukashenko. Mikola, like others we talked to, compared his country to North Korea.

His fear is that Russia will annex Belarus: 'Then Russia will get a **new Chechnya**, because the young generation will fight for freedom.'

**Lukashenko's assault on the Third Sector**, comprising NGOs as well as the non-State media, has intensified in 2004. There are barely a dozen non-State newspapers surviving in Belarus; similarly, of 2000 NGOs who tried to get registration nationally, one 6% succeeded in so doing in 2003. Five years ago 70% were granted registration. In Grodno only five youth NGOs now exist, although in 1996 there were twenty-seven, say members of the School of Young Journalists, who consider their problems typical of Belarusian NGOs.

'Now the prospects for journalists are more dangerous, and the sector is less prestigious, so more women are joining the school of journalism than men in Minsk,' says **Lana Rudnik**, responsible for launching women's initiatives. A new presidential decree has made fund-raising more difficult: it is now necessary to obtain a government statement that the work of the NGO does not 'hamper national security,' and Lana and her colleagues fear that existing assistance from TACIS (Technical Assistance to CIS countries) is in jeopardy.

The young journalists feel that Belarusian national identity is threatened by Lukashenko, who comes from Eastern Belarus and 'has that mentality.' The president has frequently cited the inferiority of the Belarusian language:

You can't express anything beautiful or great in Belarusian. It is a poor language. There are only two great languages in the world, Russian and English.

**The same fear for the future is felt in Belarusian PEN**, where the Chair, Liavon Barshchenski, said: 'We are one of many NGOs threatened with closure.' Members of BAJ agreed: 'The government hates us but lets us survive.' Since the Soros Foundation pulled out of Belarus in 1997, Belarusian PEN has survived on its subscriptions and US and Swedish support, but some of Belarus's greatest writers fled into exile, for example the late Vasily Bekov, and Svetlana Alexeyevich. 'We

live under a **soft dictatorship**," said **Andrej Dynko, Vice-Chair Belarus PEN and Editor-in-Chief of *Journal Arche* and *Nasa Niva* newspaper**. The disappearances have stopped, for the time being, and most of the population remains passive for fear of losing their jobs. 'If you devote yourself to freedom, what price do you pay?' asks one young NGO worker.

The chances are pretty slim that you'll get a job with a government body, if you've worked for an NGO. There are three choices for Belarusians: to be for the system, or against it. The third, is to put your head in the sand. There are a very large number of inactive people here.

'**Life's better, we've all got happier!**' proclaims an old Soviet revolutionary poster in the windows of GUM, Minsk's Soviet department store which is thronged with pretty young women shopping. The streets are clean, the restaurants busy. Lovers stroll hand in hand beside the river Svisloch. Young Belarusians tell us that yes, life is better than under the Soviets. Few dare to take part in street demonstrations for human rights for fear of the consequences.

**Ambassador Eberhard Heyken, Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk**, has condemned an assault, which took place on the evening of 1 July 2004, on opposition politician General Valery Frolov. The leader of the Respublika parliamentary group was severely beaten by five unknown men near his Minsk apartment. Political intimidation has intensified in the run-up to the October parliamentary elections, despite the Head of the OSCE Office calling for open and fair elections.

Nevertheless, Ambassador Heyken remains cautiously **optimistic** for Belarus's future relations with the EU, despite Prodi's remark that Belarus must wait ten years before applying: 'I think within ten years Belarus will be democratic, but I cannot imagine that it will be a full member. I wish for closer relations between Western and Central Europe. Certainly Belarus and Ukraine are part of Europe.' Observers are waiting to see whether there will further democratic development in Ukraine, a country which has influenced Belarus in the past.

**Alés Ancipienka, former Director of the Soros Foundation**, is also fundamentally optimistic: ‘I believe Belarus will be a democratic country with good prospects for European integration,’ he says. **Alés Lahviniec, Professor of Political Science** at the private **European Humanities University**, and **President of the Belarus Robert Schumann Society**, is a young politician passionately committed to European values who believes that Belarusians must take their fate in their own hands. ‘No other country will solve our problems,’ he says. Ignoring his parents’ fears, Lahviniec plans to run for a parliamentary seat as an independent. ‘I know the dangers,’ he says. Despite the low turnout at the polls, the passivity of the population, and the allegedly fixed results, he hopes that some candidates will get through:

I am thirty-two. I do hope that my generation can do things differently.

**If we are not optimistic we should not live.**

### 3 MISSION TO PROFESSOR YURY BANDADEVSKY

**On 2 June 2004 Bandazhevsky was moved from his prison in Minsk to Peskovstky Village, near Lida, Grodno Oblast**, to serve out the rest of his eight year sentence. In Minsk Trevor and I wait for a reply to PEN’s request to allow us to visit him.

So pervasive is the **culture of fear** in Belarus that when we visit cardiologist **Galina Bandazhevskaya**, Bandazhevsky’s wife, at Charity House, Minsk, she cannot invite us into her office at **Belrad**, a private medical research institute investigating ‘radioactive security’ following Chernobyl. Tax inspectors are searching the building.

We sit on upturned logs in a silver birch grove. Although it is summer, a chill wind blows. From the nearby playground come the sound the children’s voices. Galina pulls her beige anorak around her. Her face is weary and defeated, and she is on the verge of tears. ‘Please don’t visit my husband without permission,’ she begs us: she has received threats that if any human rights activists or aid workers go to the settlement without permission, Bandazhevsky will be sent back to prison.

She has heard that two weeks ago nine EU Ambassadors – including HM Ambassador **Brian Bennett** - had gone down in their diplomatic cars, flags flying, to the settlement, in an unprecedented show of European solidarity with Bandazhevsky. A local journalist had also visited. Allegedly this had infuriated President Lukashenko, hence his new decree forbidding spontaneous visits.

‘Yury has been disorientated by three years in solitary confinement,’ she explains. Subjected to intimidation by his captors, he became ill with depression and stomach ulcers. He was offered bribes by the Speaker of Parliament to confess that he accepted bribes from his students, charges he has always denied,’ she tells us. ‘Yury refused: when he told the man not to come back, he said: “You will die in this jail.’

When Lukashenko announced an amnesty to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Stalin’s liberation of Belarus from the Nazis in World War II, the Bandazhevsky was again offered a deal: he would be amnestied in turn for a confession ‘He will never do that,’ says Galina, lifting her head proudly. ‘The research he has been doing is very important for the whole of mankind, for all countries with nuclear plants...His term expires in 2006. But I know the system very well. Don’t expect anything.’ She blinks back tears. ‘You just get very disappointed.’

In February 2004 Galina was dismissed from her post as cardiologist at a Minsk hospital after having briefed NGOs at international forum held in the capital. The KGB accused her of asking for help for her husband. Twenty-five year-old Olga, the couple’s elder daughter, a neuro-pathologist in Gomel, is also unemployed. ‘Officials abstain from our family for fear of getting into trouble,’ says Galina, explaining that she doesn’t blame them. Now Olga is at home on maternity leave.

‘How old is the baby?’ I ask.

‘Katerina. She is nine months.’ With her hands Galina indicates the baby’s size.

‘Now I am a babushka.’ For the first time in our interview, she smiles.

We can only respect Galina’s wishes. The worst scenario would be for PEN to cause repercussions for Bandazhevsky and his family. We continue to press for permission. Phone calls to the Committee for the Execution of Punishments bring the reply: ‘The Chairman is on holiday.’ The man handling our file refuses to give his name.

At the embassy, Oleg waits for a fax. From London Richard McKane, Deputy-Chair of the WiPC, calls in Russian. Galina has told us that a French delegation from the foundation, Les Enfants de Chernobyl, will be visiting on Friday, and we may be able to go with them. HM Ambassador, Brian Bennett, receives us and telephones the French ambassador. But as the days tick by, there is no reply from Kovchur: this is the Belarusian way of saying no.

### **Bandazhevsky, The White Crow of Belarus.**

From BDG investigative journalist **Irina Makavetskaya**, who has risked her career to follow Bandazhevsky's case, we learnt more of the background to Belarus's most famous prisoner of conscience, and the price journalists pay for reporting the truth. Recently Makavetskaya's office was smashed up by the KGB, her computer confiscated. She has received death threats: one night a caller rang at 3 am and told her: 'We will bury you.' She was warned not to find a new office. 'The right to freedom of expression in this country is almost completely crushed. You are looking at a persecuted, unemployed journalist,' she tells us, glancing nervously around the Gomel café. Irina is now seeking political asylum in Germany.

Yury Bandazhevsky had seemed destined for a brilliant future when, aged thirty-two, he took up his post as head of the research laboratory at the prestigious Grodno Medical Institute. But then the unthinkable happened. 'The Chernobyl catastrophe gave me ...an enormous psychological shock,' said Bandazhevsky. 'I considered that my duty as a doctor demands that I work towards a solution to the problem.'

The young scientist, whose mother affectionately called him 'the white crow' (black sheep) of the family for his habit of filling her small Grodno flat with five thousand mice, cockroaches, rabbits and fish, in a bid to create his own home mini-lab, volunteered to go to Gomel, at the heart of the area polluted by the explosion. 'Bandazhevsky will be back in twenty months,' his colleagues said. Sixty per cent of the elite had fled the area, and Bandazhevsky had a young family. Instead the passionate doctor stayed, dedicating himself to his research. He has published over 200 articles and eight books in which he claims that not only have rates of cancer of the thyroid (the only pathology recognised by the government) but many other

diseases have been triggered by Caesium 137 present in the atmosphere. Children are born with deformities, develop leukaemia, heart disease, blindness and early diabetes. 'Rigorous control of foodstuffs is essential,' says Bandazhevsky. 'This especially concerns children, who are more sensitive to radioactive caesium.'

Silencing the whistleblower became a priority for Alexandr Lukashenko. Bandazhevsky was arrested on charges of accepting bribes from his students at Gomel Medical Institute, where his Deputy, Boris 'Goldhand' Kuznetsov, allegedly ran a profitable bribery scam - \$2000 for a place in the medical school – of which Bandazhevsky, who lived 'in a world of science', says his lawyer, **Gary Pahaniaila, Vice President of the Belarusian Helsinki Society**, was unaware. Betrayed by two colleagues, the scientist was brought to trial, although no proof has ever been found of his guilt.

On 10 June 2001, two days before the verdict was due to be announced, Bandazhevsky was allegedly seized by the KGB in the street, pushed into a car and driven at speed towards the Ukrainian border. 'Yury thought the KGB were taking him out of the country to murder him,' says Irina. 'When they reached the border checkpoint, the KGB presented false passports, claiming to be Ukrainian MPs. But just as the car was about to be waved through, Yury shouted, "Help me! I am Professor Yury Bandazhevsky.'

The Belarusian border troops came to his rescue, refusing to allow the car out of the country. 'You should be grateful to those troops,' Yury told Galina. 'They saved my life when the Secret Service were about to kill me.' This story was corroborated by three sources.

After the foiled attempt to take him across the border, Bandazhevsky was brought into court in handcuffs and falsely accused of trying to flee the country. This influenced the judge to give him the exceptionally harsh sentence of eight years. Bandazhevsky was tried in a military, instead of a civil, court and his trial was not legitimate, claims Pahaniaila, who has taken his client's case to the UN Court of Human Rights.

Meanwhile Lukashenko is considering building a nuclear plant in Belarus, preferably in the underpopulated south west of the country. His aim is to have an independent source of energy, instead of being totally dependent on Russia. 'Like every fascist dictator, Lukashenko wants a big project,' says Pahaniaila. 'No-one can resist this project, despite the disaster which has affected the population so tremendously. The obedient press and obedient scientists will do everything Lukashenko wants.'

Pahaniaila, who knows the president personally, is deeply pessimistic Belarus's future 'Still people say that we will come to the family of European nations. But civil society can't do anything. If NGOs and human rights groups grow more active, they come under pressure and the authorities close them down through tax inspections and court rulings. **Fear paralyzes your will and your freedom.** The Security Forces beat people up at the street rallies. Lukashenko has reopened the Comsol, the old Soviet professional and youth organisations, now renamed 'Lukamol.' People are forced to join them.' As for the personality of Lukashenko himself: 'He has a real thirst for power. He is very enthusiastic about watching tapes of the KGB beating up people.'

#### **4 CHERNOBYL.**

**We drive four hundred kms south-east of Minsk, through forests and farmland, towards the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, the thirty km no-go ring around the reactor.** In this flat, land-locked country, approximately the same size as Britain but with only ten million inhabitants, you can drive for hours without seeing another human being. We are near the Ukrainian border, close to the deserted, polluted villages. This is a forgotten world of collective farms, of rusty tractors and horse-drawn carts, where hay-making is still done with pitchforks and peasants go barefoot in the mud. It shows us in harrowing detail why Lukashenko wants to bury Bandazhevsky's story, although medical authorities believe that the full impact of the fallout upon public health may not be known until after 2006.

Driving past the silent forests of silver birch and pine, we pass a sign: 'RADIOACTIVE DANGER. KEEP OUT.' A red barrier bars the way into the forest, but a family of mushroom pickers ignores it. Traditionally people here have supplemented their diet with mushrooms, berries, and game, and although aid workers

tell them that they must boil mushrooms three times in salted water before eating them, few bother.

Following the disaster, villages within the Exclusion Zone were abandoned and people resettled. The official line is that much of the area is now 'clean:' 159 villages, the 'forgotten villages' Galina is trying to help, have been taken off the government list for aid. Immediately after the explosion, Belarus spent 20% of GDP on the after-effects of Chernobyl, but this has now been reduced to 8%.

**Natasha, twenty-four year old mother of two**, stands barefoot outside her grandmother's tumbledown wooden dacha in the ghost village of **Kiroy**, less than a mile from the edge of the Exclusion Zone. She is holding her eighteen-month old daughter, Anastasia, in her arms: a blond smiling toddler. Behind Natasha her grandmother nurses three-month old Anatoly and chickens scratch in the dust.

Previously a manager of a collective farm, Natasha is staying at home until the children go to the creche, at the age of two. 'It's hard to manage now,' she sighs. 'The government has suspended the Chernobyl grants they used to give everyone. Before, everyone got 70,000 Belarusian roubles once a month. Now they're only giving it to the children: that's all right if you've got eleven.' She nods towards the family next door, immigrants from Kazakhstan.

The average farm worker only gets 80,000 roubles (£20) a month, and cannot afford to buy safe, imported food. 'We keep cattle on the farm, so of course we drink their milk and eat their meat,' says Natasha. She smiles as Anastasia sucks hungrily on the bar of Swiss chocolate I have brought. 'We can't get into Mosyr, the local town, buying things.'

Behind are waving fields of rye and maize, but there is strontium and plutonium in the soil. The bread the villagers eat is contaminated, as is the milk they drink, but the tragedy is that you cannot see or feel radioactivity. Most able-bodied men have left Kiroy, and only the old and children remain. The local clinic and shop have closed and weeds grow on the deserted main street.

‘Chernobyl? That was a long time ago,’ say a grinning group of teenage boys we talk to in nearby Narovlia. ‘We don’t worry about that.’

**Dr. Ludmilla Tsariova**, the emergency doctor, shows us round the clean but under-equipped hospital which serves the area. Here the mortality rate is much higher than the death rate. Patients present with many thyroid and heart problems, and are dying in their thirties and forties. Lukashenko’s 2003 decree requiring all foreign aid agencies to register with the government has hampered aid, although work continues in monitoring radiation among children and giving them holidays abroad.

The dangers are hidden from the locals, whose only source of information is a State TV Station. Once a year, on 26 April, the anniversary of Chernobyl, Lukashenko visits the contaminated area. Last year he made a new promise: ‘All the grannies will have mobiles.’

The grannies are still waiting for their mobiles. And the people are still dying.

#### **4      20 July, Conversation with Bandazhevsky.**

**It is our last evening in Minsk, and news comes Yury Bandazhevsky will be brought to the telephone at his settlement to speak to us.** Inside the empty lobby of the Palace of the Republic on Oktyabrskaya Square we wait, crouching over our interpreter’s mobile, as the minutes tick by towards six o’clock. Anatoly dials: Bandazhevsky answers. We listen uncomprehendingly.

‘Da...spasiba.’ Anatoly hands us the mobile in turn. It is an emotional moment. Bandazhvesky has agreed to speak in French. I manage to tell him that the whole world admires him for his courage, and the work he has been doing. Yury thanks us warmly for the support we have given his wife: books, bags of tea, sugar and dried milk, a small grant from the Prisoner of Conscience Fund. He has been the recipient of so many awards that I am touched when he says: ‘To be an honorary member of PEN, that is so important to me.’

He tells us that the authorities have informed him that on 6 January 2005 a decision will be made on whether to release him on probation. For now, he is simply happy that because of his 'mauvais dents' he is to be allowed to visit his dentist in Minsk.

'You will be happy to see your family again,' I say.

'Je suis très content.' For the first time, his voice broke.

'Bon courage, Monsieur!'

'Et très bonne santé, Madame.'

## **Conclusion.**

**Although PEN was refused permission to visit Prof. Bandazhevsky, the contact we made with him and his family was a valuable one.** Bandazhevsky has subsequently offered English PEN chapters of the new book he has begun writing, which he wishes to have translated into English. It is significant that so many difficulties were put in the way of PEN. By contrast, the Head of the OSCE Office was permitted to visit Bandazhevsky shortly after our departure from Belarus. The government's refusal suggests that, although Lukashenko purports to be immune to Western opinion, he does fear the power of the pen. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bandazhevsky is due to be released on probation in January 2005. The paradox is that fascist governments say they do not respond to pressure at the door – but often they do so. Lukashenko has suppressed freedom of expression, and views writers as 'enemies of state,' but can he ultimately, 'destroy the pen?' For us, this mission underlines the need for English PEN to develop its role in arguing for freedom of expression in Belarus, and to continue to work for persecuted and imprisoned writers worldwide

On our last day in Belarus, Lukashenko announced that a referendum will be held on 17 Oct 2004 in order to change the constitution and allow him to stand for a third term as President. It is impossible to forecast whether, as Brian Bennett intimidated, Luakashenko might survive into a fourth or fifth term or whether European values will prevail in this forgotten, poisoned, central European country existing under the shadow of its immense neighbour, Russia.

