



The Chernobyl Project – 1991/1992

In April 1986, a nuclear reactor at the Chernobyl power station in Ukraine exploded sending radioactive materials into the environment across many parts of Europe. A vast number of people were affected by the fallout, especially children, who developed radiation sickness, malnutrition, and the inability to experience a balanced diet. Many of their staple foods (milk, fruit, vegetables) were irradiated adding to their overall health conditions.

In 1990, UNESCO, together with the Soviet Children's Fund and the World Scout Bureau established a program to bring children to various countries to remove them from their local environment and improve their physical and mental health. The initial project brought 46 children (boys and girls who were mostly orphaned or abandoned) between 11 and 14 years from Ukraine and Belarus to Melbourne in April 1991 for four weeks, sponsored by Victorian Scouts. A number of young adults accompanied the children to act as interpreters and supporters.

The children were assigned to host families in Scout Groups in Heathmont, Frankston, Balwyn, Kew, Mitcham, Templestowe, and Glen Waverley, who provided clothing, a Group scarf, pocket money and other personal items to care for the welfare of the children's needs during their stay. Almost none of the children spoke any English and a 60-page Russian/English 'Pictionary' of statements was provided to host families.



The Chernobyl children loved interacting with Australian native animals at Healesville Sanctuary

Victorian Branch gained sponsorship support from business, community organisations and individuals to provide medical checks, medicines and hosted the children at a week-long camp at Gilwell Park, Gembrook, as well as visits to Melbourne Zoo, Puffing Billy and to other activities.

The home hospitality experience created a stable opportunity for the children to be clothed, have regular rest, experience Australian food, and integrate into Australian family life. Some host families 'twinned' together to ensure that the Ukraine children still had regular contact. with each other.

Despite the language barrier, communication between the Ukrainian and Australian children did not tend to be a problem. The interpreters were in great demand, although sign language was widely used.

Word swapping was common - the Australian kids all learned to say 'silly goat' in Russian; the Ukraine kids learnt to say 'stupid' in English and inevitably Russian swear words were taught to the Australians!

The main aim of the visit was to provide the children with a break in a clean environment and in turn, it indirectly helped to provide them with new skills.

Headaches, lethargy, nose-bleeds were replaced with rosy cheeks and boisterous high spirits. They learnt how to get on with other people, how to pitch in and help at home and camp and during the last weeks, it became obvious most had gained in confidence by their interaction with others.



At Gilwell Park, a wide range of activities were arranged for the children, including canoeing, archery, boomerang-making, orienteering, tree planting, etc. For many it was the first time that they had camped out under canvas. The camp organisers found that the children were fascinated by more modern activities such as computer games, videos, and electronic wide games. Local wildlife also fascinated them around camp.



Children learning new skills at the Gilwell Park Friendship with John Noke - Camp Chief

Some of the children became skilled in 'finding the Bunyips in the bush' and the Gilwell Gauntlet Commando became an outstanding activity. Scouts from host Groups camped in Troops and the children learned how to put up tents, prepare and cook meals and explore the areas and take part in campfires and night time activities.

The case of the Disappearing Fruit

Leaders and the caterers were perplexed about how quickly the fruit bowl became emptied in the dining area. Restocking it led to it disappearing just as quickly as it was filled. Bananas were vanishing swiftly. The mystery was solved when a sleeping bag check of the Chernobyl children turned up the



missing fruit as many had never seen fresh fruit in their homeland. They were told to eat as much as they wanted, and the bowl would be refilled regularly to cater for their appetite. The children had never seen chocolate easter eggs at home. This was a new experience, and they were somewhat regulated to avoid overeating and affecting their digestive systems.

In 1991 the children were weighted to demonstrate improvements in their health with exercise, nutritious food and building resilience from their time in Australia.

As the experience ended with the imminent departure of the children to return home, emotions ran high amongst the organisers, Group members, host families and the children themselves. Final goodbyes at the airport were filled with tear and heart-wrenching embraces. The children were given clothing and other gifts to take back and be shared at their orphanages. The tears of many were those of joy, to be able to bring a positive difference in their lives, physical and mental improvements, and memories for the future lives of these children.

In 1992, a wider visit program occurred to other Australian Scouting states, again coordinated by Richard Simpson, the National International Commissioner. 54 children came to Victoria with 9 Soviet Interpreters who were also hosted by the Groups.



A similar program was established for host families building on the experiences from 1991. The children came from the Commonwealth of Independent States (former Soviet Union) and there was a greater emphasis on the children's health on arrival through blood tests and to make sure they had long sleeved shirts hats and sunglasses (even in winter) to ensure they were not exposed to UV radiation. This visit occurred in June and July 1992 and a Leaders briefing day occurred to ensure all the details and questions were answered. The month-long visit included a week's camp at Eumerella at Anglesea and three weeks of home hospitality with families of the host Groups.

At Eumerella, they camped in Troops with their host children and a wide range of activities were provided, including evening activities and campfires. The camp offered the opportunity for the children to engage in Australian culture and Russian cooking recipes, songs and handicrafts were a part of the experience.

During the host stay period they attended an AFL football match (and met the players), visited the Melbourne Zoo and Puffing Billy as well as activities organised by their local Groups. Host Groups included 3rd Highton, Heathmont, 1st Keilor Village, 7th Ballarat, 1st/2nd Warragul, 1st Lower Plenty, Wonga Park, Milpara, 1st Beaumaris and 10th Malvern who were supported by fundraising efforts from Victorian Branch and local organisation and supports.



Dr. Michael Kidd – Project Medical Adviser and now Deputy Chief Medical Officer of Australia).

“The memory of the Chernobyl children will remain with us. The increased understanding and international friendship engendered by their visit has profoundly affected all participants. As a result of the worldwide operation of this program, increased public awareness has led to a marked increase in aid to assist all the victims of the world’s worst nuclear accident”.

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References:

Various newspaper articles

Victorian Branch files

The Victorian Scout

Photos: contributed by Leaders and Group members

This article is in a series of Victorian Scouting History published by Scout Heritage Victoria