UNINVITED

25 Stories About the Russian Occupation of Ukraine

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U55 **Uninvited: 25 Stories About the Russian Occupation of Ukraine** / Bielokobylskyi, O., Cherepanova, T., Dombrovskyi, V., Ibrahimova, S., Ivanova, I. Kozak, A., Fedorchuk, V., Huran, N., Komlyk, T., Kostenko, A., Kuznietsova A., Merzliakova V., Nesenyuk, N., Nesterenko, N., Obydenna. M., Oleksenko Y., Palii, K., Pylypenko, O., Rudnytska, M., (...) Zalohin, I. (2025). Uninvited: 25 Stories About the Russian Occupation of Ukraine (I. Goyal, D. Makarchyk, U. Pasicznyk, O.Smerechuk, O. Voloshchuk, Trans.). N. Nesterenko, S. Svitova, V. Shcherbachenko, (Eds., Edition in Ukrainian), S. Halling, V. Shcherbachenko (Eds., Edition in English) // Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives (Original work published 2024). Kyiv , 2025. – 248 p.

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The book contains 25 personal stories of Ukrainians who share their experiences of living under Russian occupation. The publication contains memoirs by residents of the Zaporizhzhia, Kyiv, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson and Chernihiv regions, covering the period from 2014 to 2022. The dramatic stories of civilian Ukrainians of different ages and backgrounds illustrate why life under Russian rule is unacceptable to these people.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of the efforts of many individuals to whom we owe our deepest gratitude.

Our sincere thanks go to the authors of the stories featured in this collection. Their courage in sharing painful experiences, their trust in us as custodians of their memories, and their dedication to revising their texts have made this project possible.

The transformation of thoughts, memories, grief, sadness, and resilience into words owes much to the exceptional teaching skills and creative empathy of Slava Svitova. We are deeply grateful for her tireless work with the authors and her unwavering support in helping them to articulate their experiences. The journey has been long and sometimes challenging, but the results are truly remarkable.

We worked on the initial Ukrainian version of this publication together with my colleague, Nadiia Nesterenko, who was involved at all stages of the book's creation: from concept development to preparation for printing. Her contribution to the publication of this book cannot be overestimated.

Among our German partners, Steffen Halling played a particularly important role, not only performing important administrative functions in the joint project of our organisations, but also putting a lot of effort into making this publication high-quality and accessible to Western readers.

This is the first time that our organisation, the Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives, has published a collection of essays in English. It was of utmost importance to us that the emotions, reflections, pain and hope expressed by our compatriots were translated with dignity and presented in a way that would resonate with English-speaking readers. We are very grateful to Chrystyna Holman who, together with Louise Polland, provided invaluable support in the literary editing of the translations. Ms Holman guided us throughout the preparation of this collection, drawing on the expertise of experienced translators, Oksana Smerechuk and Uliana Pasicznyk. Despite their busy schedules, Oksana and Uliana graciously translated several texts for this collection on a *pro bono* basis, for which we are deeply grateful.

The editing of all translations was made possible by the generous volunteer efforts of three individuals from a tiny island in Canada, who worked on this project in the hope to accomplish something helpful and informative for the readers of this book. Thanks to the efforts of Marieke Droogsma, an international peace worker from KURVE Wustrow, the final linguistic preparation of the book for publication was completed. The invaluable contribution of these individuals has greatly enhanced the quality of this book, and we are extremely thankful for their help.

Overall, the entire process of preparing this collection and its publication was supported by our German partners at KURVE Wustrow – Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action. We are grateful to our German colleagues for their steadfast, long-term support.

This book is being prepared for publication in wartime, in Kyiv, which is under almost daily attack from Russian ballistic missiles and drones. However, thanks to our fellow Ukrainian citizens who have the strength and courage to actively resist Russian aggression we are able to work on this publication right here, in the capital of independent Ukraine. We are deeply grateful for this to them and all the countries, organisations and people who support our struggle.

IN LIEU OF A PREFACE: HOW THIS BOOK CAME ABOUT AND HOW IT HELPS ONE SEE THEIR LIKELY FUTURE

The idea for this book arose during a conversation with my German colleague, Mr Steffen Halling. Steffen worked at the Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives from 2020 to 2025 as a representative of the German partner NGO KURVE Wustrow — Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action as part of the Civil Peace Service. Within the framework of the Civil Peace Service, we implemented activities aimed to empower civil society in Ukraine and to transform commemorative culture by centring the voices of those often marginalised in grand geopolitical narratives.

In 2022, while thinking about how we could be useful in this extremely hard time for Ukraine, Steffen said that not everyone in Western Europe understands why Ukrainians are resisting the Russian occupation. According to some European laypeople, the Russian occupation should pose no problems for the civilian population of the occupied territories, since the Russian army is theoretically supposed to fight only against Ukrainian military forces. However, the practice of Russian occupation proves the opposite. The war waged by the Russian regime does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. Every civilian faces a high chance of being killed, maimed or raped by Russian soldiers. That is why my colleagues and I liked Steffen's idea: the more people abroad know about the true events in Ukraine, the easier it will be for us to gain such important external support for our country.

While working on preparing the book for publication, I more and more thought that this book would be useful not only for us Ukrainians, but also for the residents of all the countries that Russians imagine as part of their so-called "Russian World." Let me give you an analogy. I have heard that some parents use a rather radical way to stop their children from smoking. They take their teenagers to a morgue, where they may see how unsightly the dissected lungs of a heavy smoker look. I don't know if this method is really used in practice, but our book gives the readers the opportunity to see the "Russian world" through the eyes of those who were forcibly made to become part of it.

You may ask, why should readers of this collection learn about the inner workings of the "Russian world" if they do not belong to it. The fact is that although the conquest of Ukraine is an important goal for Russians, it is not the only one, nor is it the last. There is no doubt that if Ukraine falls as an independent state, other European countries will become the next targets of Russian aggression: first its neighbours, and then others. Europeans may continue to turn a blind eye to this, but Russian political culture is steeped in the delusion of revanchism and external expansion.

The geopolitical ambitions of many Russians are aptly captured in the slogan popular in Russia, "To Berlin!" It clearly indicates the most desirable general direction of Russia's external aggression. This slogan is rooted in the historical experience of WWII, which ended 80 years ago, but ordinary Russians still enthusiastically write it on children's toys, civilian cars and lorries, and military equipment. Politicians, journalists, and public figures proclaim it in their speeches. They confidently add to it another threat towards Western countries that is popular in Russia: "We can do it again!"

The call "To Berlin!" is not only about conquering the capital of one of the largest European countries. It is about the anti-Western and anti-democratic vector of Russian aggression. According to the concept of the "Russian world," this imaginary world is not limited by the borders of the Russian Federation. It seems to reach everywhere where there are Russian language speakers, lovers of Russian culture, or followers of the Russian Orthodox Church. This includes all European countries, the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond—as far as Africa, the Americas, and even Australia. According to many Russians, the mere presence of people who are bearers of the "Russian world" concept in a certain territory is a sufficient reason for armed invasion of any country. They are sure that Russian "special interests" extend everywhere where there are such people. However, the countries that were subject to Soviet occupation and political influence in the 20th century, including Austria and Finland, are likely to be the first to be attacked, as they are considered to have been unlawfully and temporarily lost from the sphere of the "Russian world." It would seem that the threat of a Russian attack should not be taken seriously, yet a glance at the facts of recent history proves that since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been persistently trying to

return the former countries of the Soviet bloc to its sphere of influence, including through overtly forceful means.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and in 1992, the 14th Army of the Russian Federation and paramilitary groups of Russian Cossacks occupied part of Moldova and created the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic.

In 1992–1993, Russia provided financial and military support for the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia.

From 1994 to 2009, two Russian-Chechen wars took place, which drowned in blood the Chechens' attempts to create an independent state.

In 2008, the Russian–Georgian war broke out, ending with the occupation of 20% of Georgia's territory, and Russia's recognising the "independence" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the following years, Russia's political and financial influence in Georgia increased due to the establishment of the Moscow-aligned regime under Ivanishvili.

In 1999, Russia actually absorbed the formally independent Belarus through the creation of the Union State. After suppressing mass protests against the falsification of the 2020 presidential elections, Belarusian President Lukashenko made his country completely dependent on the Kremlin's political and financial support in order to retain personal power.

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and created puppet "republics" (the "LPR" and "DPR") in the captured parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

In 2016, Russia attempted a coup d'état in Montenegro in order to change the country's foreign policy course towards NATO membership.

In 2020, Russia deployed a battalion group in Goris (Armenia) and set new border stations along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. This was done in addition to strengthen the already deployed forces of the Russian Federation's 102nd military base in Gyumri, Armenia.

In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war against Ukraine.

In 2025, the geography of Russian provocations expanded, with numerous violations of NATO countries' airspace by Russian military aircraft, as well as Russian drones' reconnaissance flights and blocking the operation of military and civilian airports in EU countries.

This picture of military and political intervention is complemented by Russian sabotage at military depots, industrial facilities, and critical infrastructure in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, Germany, and Northern European countries, as well as murders and attempted murders of opponents of the Russian government in the EU and Britain. Russia is using various hybrid methods to destabilise

the situation in the Balkans, primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The Russian Federation is training the security forces of the Republika Srpska, supporting radical paramilitary groups in Serbia, as well as facilitates the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, which is a covert hybrid military base in the Balkans.

Have a look at this list and geography, and it becomes clear that the question of which country will be the next victim of direct Russian expansion is no longer theoretical. It is only a matter of time, a convenient excuse and Moscow's economic capacity to carry out such an act of aggression.

Now, let's get back to how this book can be useful to readers in the free world, especially those from Europe. The majority of those who will hold this book have never lived in wartime and have learned about war from the news, films, books, and perhaps from the stories of refugees. Previously, my knowledge of war was also limited to information from the distant past or news about conflicts in faraway countries. However, this book can tell you how civilians like you are experiencing war here in Europe right now. Perhaps this will prompt parallels with your own life.

In 2023, after the conversation with Steffen that I mentioned above, we at the Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives appealed to Ukrainians who had been under Russian occupation and wanted to share their experiences with the world to participate in the creation of this collection. More than 100 people responded to our call. We formed two training groups from some of the applicants and conducted a course of creative writing for them. As a result, we now have a book with 25 personal stories, thereby giving a voice to all those Ukrainian men and women who had to live through or are still living under occupation. These stories are important for Ukrainian society, to preserve the memory of local resistance and survival of ordinary citizens, and to document the human rights violations that are so wide-spread in occupied territories. Capturing these eye-witness accounts is especially important to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda, spreading false narratives not only within the currently occupied territories, but also in other parts of Ukraine and in Western media.

The authors of this book are ordinary Ukrainian civilians of different ages, professions, life experience, and places of residence. Almost all of them were lucky enough to spend relatively little time under occupation. Yet, even those days and months have been enough for each of us to gain experiences and emotions that will stay with us for the rest of our lives. These experiences, emotions, and reflections on them are expressed herein. The authors of the book write about bombings and shelling, the loss of loved ones and acquaintances, their homes and property, injuries, hunger, kidnappings, torture, extrajudicial executions and sexual violence, delving into the traumatic family experiences of previous Russian occupations of Ukraine. Despite these terrible words, our book does not

contain descriptions of explicit scenes of cruelty and violence. It merely half-opens the door to the dreadful world of war.

Some of the horrors mentioned above are primarily experienced by those who physically and spiritually resist the occupiers, or by their loved ones. Such people include current and former military and law enforcement officers, formal and informal leaders of local communities, journalists, civil servants, cultural figures, educators, religious leaders, and representatives of minorities. Yet, the experience of wars waged by Russia teaches us that the victims of these crimes are, to a large extent, ordinary civilians, those who hold no public office and are not involved in the resistance movement. They simply want to continue living peacefully, quietly and happily. Russian occupation leaves civilians no such chance. It brings forced displacement, years of separation from loved ones, living in conditions of permanent stress and fear for oneself and one's loved ones, surviving in extremely difficult living conditions, days and nights spent seeking shelter from bombing in cellars, bathrooms and corridors. All of the above stress the need for choosing between losing all your possessions and your home or remaining under the rule of people who will destroy you and your identity. This is the prospect for everyone who finds themselves under occupation or under threat of occupation.

The complex experiences gathered in this book will help interested readers understand how events may unfold for the inhabitants of many European countries in the near future. I am not exaggerating. Fifteen years ago, a friend of mine from Luhansk spoke to me about a possible Russian attack on Ukraine. I still remember that short conversation. At that time, it seemed simply unbelievable to me and even irritated me unexpectedly. I took her words as just hysterical hallucinations and almost told her that straight to her face. It seems that I did not want to hear what she had said. I worry that for many who continue to live in peace, what is written here may resonate much the same as my acquaintance's words once did for me.

I was also born in peacetime, in a peaceful country with a friendly foreign policy, and I could not imagine that acts of aggression by a neighbouring country would force me to live in the context of war for over 10 years. During this time, the war has forced me to leave my home twice. I have lost my loved ones. The war has scattered my relatives across five different countries and two continents. For more than 10 years, together with my colleagues, I have been helping those affected by the war, and every day I live with hundreds of stories of violence, loss and suffering.

How much I wish the last 11 years had not been part of my country's history! That is why, from time to time, I remember 2008, when Russia attacked Georgia. At that time, I lived in the United States, studied at university, and was already a conscious adult capable of analysing events and acting purposefully. Russia's act of aggression provoked outrage and a sense of solidarity with the Georgian

people in me, but I took that war as very distant. The Russian attack lasted only five days, yet I still regret that my solidarity with the Georgians was limited to posts of support on social media and heated debates with Russians who studied at the same university. Now, I would like to do something more effective: organise a solidarity campaign at the university, collect aid for Georgians who were forced to leave their homes in South Ossetia, and advocate for the restoration of borders that were violated by force. If my like-minded friends and I had been more active and decisive, perhaps it would have helped us prevent Russia's attack on my own country six years later.

I really hope that our readers will not have to experience what we are going through now. I wish to believe that some of those who read this book will conclude that it is unwise to await the Russian assault upon their own or a neighbouring state, but rather that they should help Ukrainians and join us in stopping the Russian invasion where it is now. The further Russia's borders under the current regime are from your country, the greater are your chances of living a life without the terrible experience of war.

We would be grateful for any expression of solidarity with us: a post on social media, a donation, an appeal to your country's politicians to continue supporting Ukraine and do everything possible to weaken imperialist Russia. If you have already supported Ukrainians, please don't stop!

Only a joint and decisive response to the aggressor will save the well-being and peace in our countries. Let us not allow our lives and the future of our children and grandchildren to be destroyed. Let's act now!

Volodymyr Shcherbachenko, editor-in-chief of the English-language collection

Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives

OLEKSANDR BIELOKOBYLSKYI

Oleksandr Bielokobylskyi was born and lived in Luhansk for 41 years. After the beginning of the occupation, he and his family left for Kharkiv. Before the relocation, he had enough time to "feel the spirit" of the "Russian world," when on September 2014, he ended up in the militant's podval[1] as an "improper" journalist.

From Kharkiv, he continues to write for the "Realna Gazeta" newspaper (after its relocation from Luhansk it exists only online), "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty," and some other publications. The main topics of his work are life in the temporarily occupied territories, political and economic processes, as well as Russian propaganda. Together with the portraits of other journalists who left for the Ukrainian-controlled territory, Oleksandr's portrait was publicly burned in Luhansk.

On the morning of February 24th, 2022, Oleksandr left with his family for the West but he returned to Kharkiv in a few months. During the full-scale war, he investigated the crimes of the Russian Federation in the temporarily occupied territory, identified war criminals, and participated in information resilience. He is currently the editor-in-chief of the online publication "Farvater.East."

Oleksandr believes that Ukraine will regain control over its entire territory. He considers his task for the near future to conduct the mental de-occupation of the inhabitants of the temporarily occupied territories. It will not be easy to eliminate the long-term influence of Russian propaganda, but there must be an answer to this challenge.

[1] A "*podval*" (pl. "*podvaly*") is the Russian language informal term for an illegal place of detention and torture, usually located in a basement.

HORROR AND DISGUST IN LUHANSK. FIVE MINUTES ON THE BIRTH OF HATRED

Things around us become real when there are words for them. We had no words for what started in Eastern Ukraine in the spring of 2014, and we searched for the right words for years. Those other people (Russian occupiers) with the "Georgian ribbons"[2] had a dictionary prepared in Moscow, well in advance: "opolchenie" (people's militia), "Russian spring," "Novorossiya" (New Russia), "ukropy,"[3] "natsyki" (nationalists).

> THEY HAD A DICTIONARY PREPARED IN MOSCOW, WELL IN ADVANCE

Things and phenomena finally become reality when we experience them physically. When you trip over the "porebryk" (curb), or when your jacket gets wet from the rain. For me, the "Luhansk People's Republic" (LPR) became a real

[2] The "Georgian ribbon" or "St George's ribbon" is a Russian military symbol consisting of a black and orange bicolour pattern with three black and two orange stripes. Since 2005, it has been the main symbol in Russia commemorating the victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Since the mass anti-government protests in Russia in 2011 and 2012 and the war against Ukraine since 2014, the St George's Ribbon has also served as a symbol of support for the political course of the Russian government and President Vladimir Putin.

[3] "Ukrop" (pl. "ukropy") is a Russian language ethnic slur which refers to Ukrainians.

thing when in the commandant's office I heard: "Well, what do you mean by 'What should we do?' To the *podval*, he goes."

Even then, my brain resisted. No, it's not about me, it's not happening to me. What *podval* are you talking about? Rubbish! But the *podval* turned out to be quite real: under a flight of stairs, with a grate instead of a door, with two banquettes along the walls, cardboard on the concrete floor where we later slept, and a couple of dirty blankets. Yeah, this is happening to you, dude. What was the point of saying you are a journalist at the checkpoint?

LUBYANKA PODVALY IN THE "LPR GOVERNMENT BUILDING"

"My name is Nikolay Nikolaevich. My last name is Pavlov," he introduced himself and sat down at the head of the table.

Beginning of June 2014, they captured the regional administration building. The editors of the Luhansk newspapers wanted answers that Pavlov, the "LPR Press Secretary," did not have. Therefore, he called someone who could provide those answers. A short, stout man with oily, slicked back, black hair and a week's stubble strode into the conference room. He put his AK gun in the corner near the door. He was wearing a black vest, camouflage pants, and fingerless gloves. He spoke with a peculiar Moscow accent. "Where am I from? I'm a local, from Luhansk." And indeed, he had the answer:

"Well, no one cancelled 'Lubyanka's *podvaly*.'"

It was sincere. At that time, we did not know that one of these "Lubyanka's *podvaly*" was located in that very building. In three months, I would have an opportunity to appreciate its hospitality.

In a few years, I managed to find out who that "Pavlov" actually was. His real name is Pavel Karpov. He turned out to be a Russian spin doctor from the orbit of Vladislav Surkov, the then adviser to the President of the Russian Federation, and a friend of Aleksandr Boroday, another puppet ruler from Moscow. At that very time, Boroday became the "Prime Minister" of the neighbouring "Donetsk People's Republic" and later was an adviser to the "Head" of the "DPR," Oleksandr Zakharchenko. "Lubyanka's *podvaly*," yeah right.

When, in September, we were brought from the commandant's office to the "Government House," we were lined up on our knees along the wall, ordered to raise our hands and place our palms against the wall. They kept us that way for... I don't know how long—10, 15, 20 minutes? It seemed endless. It doesn't seem difficult, but try to remain like this for at least five minutes. Those who were leaning against the wall were kicked in the kidneys by drunken jailers, who didn't even have to raise their legs too high.

By that time, the "Head of the Republic" had already changed. Valery Bolotov, the first "People's Governor," disappeared somewhere in the Russian Federation, and Ihor Plotnytsky, who commanded the "Zarya" battalion in the summer, became the "Head" instead. He was accompanied by a bodyguard—a regular Russian soldier. I saw this bodyguard in person when he came down to our *podval*.

SHELLING FOR THE SAKE OF MOBILIZATION

July 2014 again. It was later that we learned to distinguish outgoing shelling from incoming. That night, the wooden floors of the Stalin-era building trembled, and I thought: "It would be embarrassing if the house is suddenly hit, and I would be found under the rubble in only my underwear." However, that was outgoing shelling. They fired from my house. In the morning, the "LPR" reported that "ukropy fired at Verhunka," a settlement in the urban strip of Luhansk.

"Let them just come. For this, I will tear them apart with my teeth," a 50-year-old comrade told me. He came to build a checkpoint near Verhunka—I would not be surprised if he joined the militia at that time.

At that time, we had not yet seen high-rise buildings which were completely destroyed. A gate cut by debris, broken windows and a damaged corner of a private house seemed like terrible consequences. The Ukrainian troops who were far from Luhansk at that time were getting the blame. I looked for funnels from mines or large-calibre shells but found only minor potholes on the asphalt. If you

Militiamen inspect a refrigerated truck at a checkpoint in Verhunka on 4 July 2014, after night shelling. Photo: Oleksandr Bielokobylskyi

don't know their origin, they could be mistaken for ordinary potholes typical for Verhunka.

These potholes are the traces left by small-calibre mortar mines. It is likely that these very mines were flying from my house. Well, where else could they aim from in the city centre, if the range of the 82-mm mortar is 4 kilometres?

In a couple of years, Bolotov, the first "LPR Head" who escaped, said in an interview that Luhansk was shelled by fighters from Plotnytsky's "Zarya" battalion. However, Bolotov called them Ukrainian saboteurs. But we remember Plotnytsky's Russian officer's bodyguard. This had nothing to do with Ukrainian hit squads.

QUIRKY PROSPECTS OF "NOVOROSSIYA"

Some people still remember how in 2014 the "Russian Spring heroes" talked about "Novorossiya." There was even a flag invented for it, like the one for the American Confederates, only without stars. Nevertheless, some details have been erased from memory even by the events' participants. I am talking about the "Union of People's Republics." Have you heard of it?

In the spring of 2014, flags appeared online for a bunch of "People's Republics"—Kharkiv, Odesa, Zaporizhzhia, etc. They were designed for all Ukrainian regions, for which Russian spin doctors invented a common name—the "South-East of Ukraine." In the end, there was no need for all those rags, since events went according to the Russian plan (well, more or less) only in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Various flags for "People's Republics" that appeared online in 2014.
Source: Detector Media: https://tinyurl.com/mry7zxh3

So, in June of that year, the "People's Councils" of the Luhansk and Donetsk "Republics" approved the "Constitutional Act of the Union of People's Republics."

The meeting of the "People's Council of the LPR" took place in the session hall of the regional council, which I knew well. Usually, the press sat at the back, there was a special balcony with a separate entrance. At that time, places for the press were allocated in the aisle in the middle of the hall, as in the "People's Council"—damn, who elected it, when and how?!—there were fewer "deputies" than in the Regional Council.

Old acquaintances who wrote for other Luhansk newspapers were sitting next to me. In a few months, they would work in the "LPR" propaganda system. Then we had the usual small talk. At that time, I discovered "The Year's Best Science Fiction Anthologies" and recommended them to my old friend Andrii Kuznetsov. He was a short journalist nicknamed Batman since his student days; he was very annoyed by the nickname.

"No, I don't like it. It's too complicated. I'd rather re-read Golovachev,"[4] *Batman* replied to me. You say, Golovachev, Andrii? By the end of 2014, he was already working for the "LPR."

As we sat there, I skimmed a two-page printout of the "Constitutional Act of the Union of People's Republics" that had been distributed to the press. Confederate system? A common currency? Nuclear-free status? Holy shit, are they crazy?

"The Constitutional Act is a provisional Constitution," explained Oleg Tsarev, a former People's deputy, and at this time, he introduced himself "as the leader of the South-East movement."

He added that the real Constitution would be drafted later, and at that time it was important to quickly adopt that Act simultaneously in the "LPR" and "DPR" to then form a joint structure. Tsarev came with the text of this "Constitutional

[4] Vasili Golovachev (1948–2025) was a Soviet and Russian writer, author of military science fiction novels. He promoted the ideas of the 'Russian world,' portraying Russia as a 'stronghold of the virtuous forces' and the successor to Hyperborea. His works are full of xenophobic rhetoric and racist connotations.

In his books, Russian soldiers and representatives of the special services oppose foreigners and secret organisations that serve satanic forces. In particular, he portrays Freemasons, Illuminati, and Jews, who use blood in dark rituals in his novels. He attributed the Orange Revolution to the activities of dark forces.

In 2015, he was awarded a Certificate of Merits from the Russian State Military Historical and Cultural Centre under the Government of the Russian Federation 'For active citizenship position and creative contribution to the formation of a civic worldview.' He was awarded the medal 'For Contribution to Victory. Special Military Operation' by the pro-Kremlin association 'Guardians of Russia' for the series of novels 'Wandering Fire Group (WFG)' (2024–2025).

Act" from Moscow (don't be surprised) and was pushing for the adoption of this document as soon as possible.

"You bastard, you bloody dog!"—my great-grandmother, from a Ukrainian village in the Belgorod region, temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation, would say.

Eventually, as in a sad anecdote, "the concept changed." Everyone forgot about the constitutional act, and the "young republics" began to acquire the attributes of statehood on their own. Then they got closer, like Achilles and the Tortoise in the ancient Greek paradox. Until they stopped their "subject" existence and finally became part of the Russian Federation.

So once again: "Novorossiya" and all other "people's republics" were invented in Moscow.

WHY I HATE RUSSIAN ROCK

At that time, all this seemed unreal to me. What "Republics" are you clowns talking about, for God's sake? Hold on, now the curtain will drop, everyone will take a bow, the hall will applaud, and the audience will go home. And tomorrow everyone will go to work again—to the editorial office, to the bank, to the police station, or to the market.

But no, it was not just a performance. Because, here and there, there were signs of the Russian presence. After the storming of the Security Service of Ukraine in Donetsk and Luhansk on April 6th, 2014, the crowd sang the Russian national anthem. How many people were there in Luhansk who even knew a single line?! In June, tanks and armoured personnel carriers entered the city.

In September 2014, we were taken from the *podval* of the "Government House" to the base of the "Zarya" battalion. From dusty, unmarked "Ural" trucks we unloaded old, rotten boxes with grenades and large-calibre mortar mines. The Ryazan-faced drivers spoke with a peculiar accent.

A guard in the *podval* of the commandant's office with the nickname "Astrakhan" shared his plans with another guard: "I'll go home for vacation—you won't believe me, to Astrakhan—I just have to go first to the district headquarters in Rostov to get my salary."

Since then, I cannot listen to Russian rock. The mobile phones of the convoys were blaring it all the time—*Alisa*, Kino, even *Letov*.

NOW WE KNOW THE CORRECT WORD

In the *podval*, I badly wanted to read. But there were no books. When I was transferred to the *podval* of the "Government House" (the seized Luhansk regional state administration), only propaganda newspapers with articles by my former colleagues were found there.

My fellow student, Natasha Maksymets, who was delicate-looking and boisterous as a student, and in recent years had turned into an obese city council deputy for the communists, wrote with enthusiasm about "the first day of the city of Luhansk in the independent republic": "We survived!"—You are a silly goose, Natasha!

Although it nauseated me, I found out other news about the life of the "young republic." From the same newspapers I rolled cigarettes for the whole cell. In the absence of books, I began to invent a story about the adventures of Captain Nightmare and his friends Kangaroo and Wombat. Sometimes those adventures seemed more real than the "LPR."

In the following years, the new reality of the "republics" was imprinted in thousands of texts. It was created in the columns of local newspapers, on radio and TV, and on the websites of occupied cities and Russian news agencies. This work was carried out constantly and according to their plan. The lists of topics came to Luhansk from Moscow: what topic should one of the speakers cover on this or that date.

Thus, the temporarily occupied territory was approaching the beginning of a full-scale invasion. At the same time, we were also learning. Once, we did not have words to describe the events in the east of Ukraine. We went through different options: "the LPR and DPR groups," "separatists," "militants," I even saw "rebels" somewhere. We heeded the advice of the tolerance teachers and used "neutral" wording: "conflict in the east of Ukraine."

Now, we have the right words: "occupation administrations," "occupation," and "war."

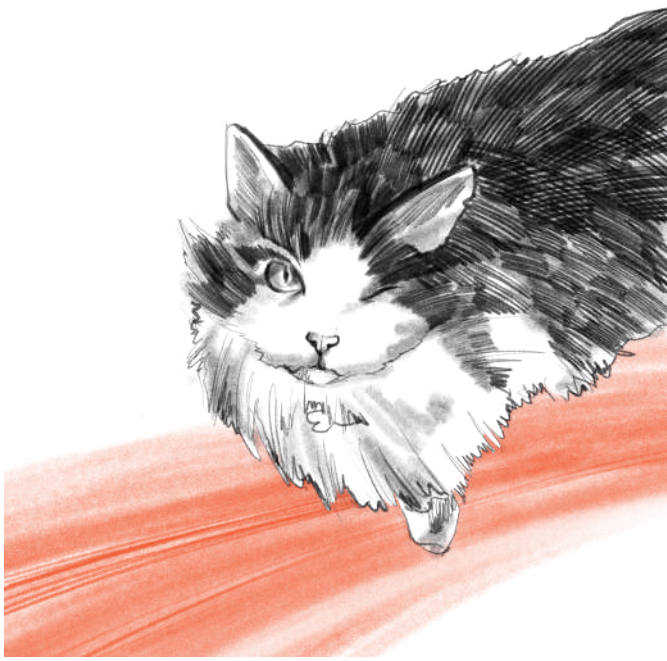
War. This is what it was from the very beginning in 2014. And this is what it will stay until our ultimate victory.

NATALIIA HURAN

Nataliia Huran was born in the village of Hnarovskyi in the Zaporizhzhia oblast. After finishing school, she moved to Kyiv, the city of her dreams. She is an IT consultant and community activist.

From February to April 2022, she survived under Russian occupation in the Kyiv region, near Bucha and Hostomel. For a few months after the liberation, she lived with her parents in Kyiv, at the Dominican monastery. After the roads had been cleared of mines and her home repaired, she returned home to a dacha in the Bucha forest.

She works to secure patients' rights and to inform Ukrainians about free medical care, so that people know how to exercise their rights and stop refusing medical care because they don't have the money to pay for it. She hopes that future generations of Ukrainians will learn about the Soviet system from history books. She also dreams that children and adults alike will forget the noise of roaring from the sky and will look up to see a rainbow.



MY DOG, CATS, AND A HANDFUL OF FEATHERS

My summer cottage cooperative is called "Dream"—*Mriya* in Ukrainian. It used to take a long time to explain where it was. Now it is enough to say that I live in the Bucha forest, and everyone understands everything. And if someone should ask again: "Did you manage to leave?"—no, we didn't make it.

✦✦✦

It was a long-held dream of mine to live in a house with a lawn and climbing roses, cats and a dog. "Dream"—*Mriya*—that was also the name of the world's largest airplane, which was set aflame and destroyed by the Russians not far from us. *Mriya*...

My dog Blondie is very afraid of explosions; her ears hurt from the noise and she tries to bury herself under the *kalyna*, the viburnum. The cats try to climb up on my head: they don't understand anything and just keep trying to hide in my jacket. Gradually they have stopped walking upright on their paws and now just crouch and crawl along the floor, almost on their stomachs.

The first to join my household was Mosinka, my striped feline pillow of silky fur, with a spot like the letter M on her forehead. When I stroke her fur, all my dark thoughts and bad memories disappear. One-eyed Livsi was also a stray, and now it's hard to see him as the scrawny, barely alive kitten he was. Blondie came from a shelter and is pure white according to their records, but rolling around in ashes or on a freshly mown lawn and being transformed into a Dalmatian with green or

black spots is her great joy. They are happy. They just don't like getting into the car because they know it's to take them to the vet. But under the car they feel safe, especially during a thunderstorm. Perhaps, they have already realized that this is not a thunderstorm. Nobody is going anywhere. The internet went down first. Tomorrow power and communication will be lost. For now I'm trying to catch up on as much news as I can.

✦✦✦

On Facebook people wrote that two walls and a room without windows are sufficient to protect yourself from bombardment. But my house has windows everywhere. There's even one in the bathroom, which catches the sunset, and the ones in the kitchen and bedroom catch the sunrise. By noon the living room is flooded with light, which leads to dreamy afternoons. If it weren't for the stove being on, you might think it is already spring.

Today the stove is cold. I sit by the stairs, pressing my forehead to their metal frame, trying to collect my thoughts. A piece of ice rattles in the refrigerator—this is the third day without electricity. Outside the window, a row of tanks is rolling by.

The smell of diesel in the house is so strong it's like we're sitting in a barrel of it. I bend over a burner to avoid being seen from the road. I prepare steaks and green peas. It's a feast from the fridge tonight, because what's in it is defrosting. During the night we'll move further away from the road and closer to the forest.

✦✦✦

We gave all our milk and bread to the neighbours, who have small children. The youngest is running a fever. They already know that all the bridges into Kyiv have been blown up; they're hoping for a "green corridor" to allow safe passage. We're fearful of getting out into the road alongside the tanks.

✦✦✦

During the day they searched us, took away our phones, and sought out neo-Nazis. All the Russians are festooned with "St. George" ribbons, even their weapons and helmets. Later we learn that these are their talismans. In a clearing their tanks have turned around several times where yellow and lilac-blue crocuses were just beginning to bloom.

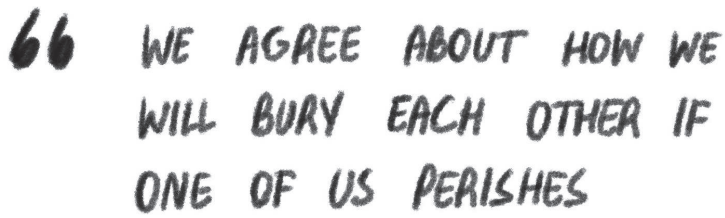
The Ternovskys, a pair of cordial pensioners, live beside us. They recently bought a new car, and they bring to mind couples pictured in advertisements for sea cruises geared to seniors. When they go out for a stroll through the forest, everybody in our cooperative takes pictures of the Ternovskys' primroses. They fuss about in their garden, and their Chinese Crested barks at anyone who passes by.

Toward evening a wind picks up, everything begins to clatter, thump, and screech, knocking down torn-off doors, broken fences and windows.

Despite the closed windows, the house stinks of burnt tires. We are having dinner, and Mr. Ternovsky is hanging in the neighbouring house[5].

✦✦✦

We agree about how we will bury each other if one of us perishes. We can dig a shallow grave, for digging a deep one is dangerous. Wrapping the body in a sheet as is; all conventions about dressing the dead are just conventions.



✦✦✦

I didn't plan to engage in community activism, but I have long helped people fight for their right to get medical treatment without having to pay for it. My Dad trolls me about my heightened sense of justice. He recalls how I once dragged a heavy encyclopaedia to school to prove to my teacher that the strongest bird is the secretary bird. I know what the Russians do with community activists, and worry that neighbours may tell them about me.

✦✦✦

My elderly parents have two aged dogs. Following the explosions, they have concussions; often they waggle their ears and sometimes they don't recognize us. Mushka bit Dad's hand and afterwards whimpered and hid her eyes in shame. They did not survive the occupation.

✦✦✦

The Russians again searched for "Banderites"[6] and "neo-Nazis." They stripped men naked right on the street and searched for tattoos. They nearly shot our neighbour for having a firemen's tattoo. From one building they took out a portrait of Stepan Bandera. It became the basis for their search for "Banderites," but in the end they didn't find anybody. We laugh. Helicopters are flying around again, dropping a fresh new supply of mortar shells over the forest.

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[5] I do not know the circumstances of this man's death. He was hanged in his own home during the first searches of our houses by Russian soldiers. Due to the danger of mining and shelling, no one dared to remove his body and bury it for several weeks.

[6] Alleged followers of Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), a Ukrainian nationalist politician and leader of the radical wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists from the 1930s until the 1950s.

✦✦✦

The windows are covered with blankets. We distinguish the sounds made by heavy tanks from those made by light tankettes, fast armoured personnel carriers, trucks, and cars. We recognize the sounds of multiple rocket launchers, mortar fire, tank guns, and howitzers. From the highway periodically comes the sound of gunfire from automatic weapons and machine guns. If it's quiet, I can't fall asleep. You never know what will shatter the brief peace the next time.

Every day cars drive up and Russians carry things out of empty houses.

A very lovely Doberman, singed with burns, has come to us. She barks at us but begs for food too. We feed her the same porridge that we eat ourselves and give our cats and dogs. The car with the family that owned her was shot to pieces near us, on the highway designated the "green corridor."

✦✦✦

We are running out of food.

✦✦✦

My gate was smashed down by tanks, but Blondie and the cats don't cross the imaginary line of the former gate, defending the gutted and looted yard. I no longer love my "Dream" cottage. It's no longer mine.

I sit on a ledge and look at the feathers: white with black spots and cuckoo-like grey. My Granny Nastia always had chickens. Dignified black ones with shaggy feet and small noisy ones, red and white. The rooster fought and Granny rescued me from him more than once. I collected feathers in a candy tin, imagining they were the feathers of fairy-tale ostriches or peacocks. I was thinking of decorating a ball gown with them.

Once I got a snow-white Juliet and a speckled Conchita, and last summer I added cuckoo-like Zita and Gita. They are hybrids of cats and hens, because they love to be petted and run at the sound of my voice. On top of that they saved my rows of plants from the snails.

The day before yesterday wet snow fell, the buckets were supposed to fill up, so my parents and I dared to crawl up to them, to get water for the chickens and take the cats and Blondie closer to the forest, where we could still hide from the shelling.

We did not make it in time...The Russians ate my Juliet and Conchita and the piebald Zita and Gita. I'm not getting ready to go to a ball anymore: I just twiddle my Juliet's white speckled feather in my hand.

✦✦✦

Today mortars have been going off since dawn. Dad and I unfold a map of the Kyiv region—they're striking around Moschun. When the occupation there ends, not a single house will remain whole. Artillery counterfire comes during the night. Our eyesight is dimmed by plaster dust. Another explosion. Windows were opened, but the panes are intact. A ripped-off roof lies in the yard. A dog with contusions howls and whimpers.

Fire breaks out in the forest. In the morning, smoke covers everything. The wind shifts in our direction, and a blaze rapidly nears our building. We lug water from our neighbour's well, but the fire comes closer. When the edge of it is less than two meters away, the wind shifts direction again and the blaze moves down the length of the yard. I thank God for everything and go to feed the cats. Blondie has found a bone and is meditating in the sun.

✦✦✦

They shoot at buildings from the road, so to avoid detection we light the stove only at night and only when it's cloudy. I am constantly cold. We get water from the well between bursts of gunfire, and there's never enough. Evenings I heat the same rubbery tasting water that filled the heating pad—I don't change it, so it's very thick and stinks. I lie down like a soldier, to warm up and fall asleep. We're hungry. We haven't washed in over a month. Why aren't Nobel prizes awarded to the people who came up with wet wipes? Every day, I ask God: does he still have a plan for me or not? I wash dishes, skimping on water, and look at the dishwasher and microwave, now useless furniture; the refrigerator at least has shelves.

✦✦✦

Chloe is a striped miracle—she was a kitten when we took her in from the street and now she's a real beauty; she jumps into your arms, purrs, and brags about the vole she brought from the forest. There's mortar fire near us, and Chloe hunts there between volleys to find rodent victims of the carnage. The mortars feed her. We heard that they're putting up barricades in the forest. Chloe has not returned—our forest is mined.

✦✦✦

Mom says: I don't like waiting for you to come back, but I like it when you come in with presents.

Blondie greets me as if we haven't seen each other in a year, though all I did was rush out to the post office.

On February 25 my dad and I are scheduled to see a doctor; he's become sick but we can't get out to the hospital. We made signs to put up on the gates:

"Children" and "Old people." My car was stolen and we were told not to leave the house. When prisoners are deprived of their freedom, at least they get a release date and can count the days until then. We've been without light and phone connection for a long time. We turn over the leaves of a paper calendar. Mom is counting down the days. It's been over a month: her blood pressure pills and eye drops will last another two weeks, any longer and she'll begin losing her vision.

✦✦✦

We found an old radio and listen to the news every day. A little at a time, so as to preserve the batteries. Dad has lost 12 kilograms in a month and a half. He is bleeding, and he hasn't gotten up for several days. For lunch we had soup that smelled of meat and breadcrumbs; it had a gastronomic effect. I dream of a latte. One hundred percent Arabica with a soft coffee-milk taste. I'll pour sugar on the whipped foam, eat it, and then drink the coffee.

In Irpin they are fighting from house to house. A neighbour has crawled across the street, bringing a fragrant and half-rotten orange, and says that we are being liberated.

✦✦✦

Dad's neighbour keeps several Malinois sheepdogs. The largest of them is the muscular and intelligent Walter, who looks like he's carved out of stone. The neighbour drives around with him in the passenger seat, saying that then there's no need to lock the car.

The Russians stopped for the night in a new house by the road and tried to get the heat there started. In a few minutes the house is on fire and soldiers are jumping out of the doors and windows. Walter rushes up to the fence. Automatic weapons fire. Wounded, Walter begins to wail.

"If I hear one more noise, I'll kill everyone!" a Russian yells.

The neighbour tries to calm the dog but it keeps howling. By morning he will have suffocated the dog with a towel.

✦✦✦

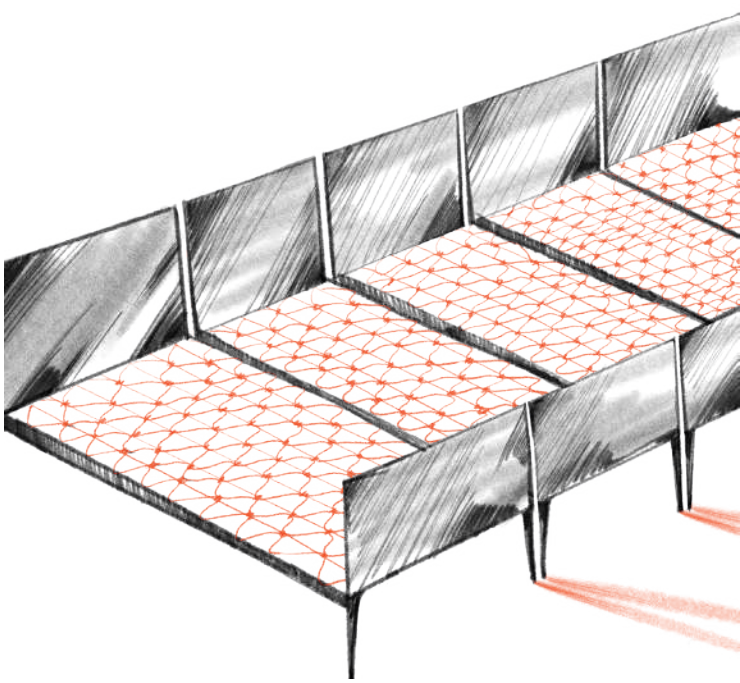
Volunteers brought bread and took me and Dad to the hospital. For the first time in a month and a half, I feel so warm that I unbutton my jacket. Lights are on everywhere. I open the faucet and hot water pours into my hands; I begin to cry and can't stop. Dad has at last fallen asleep: he has cancer, and I don't yet know how to tell him.

For breakfast they bring him an egg and white bread with butter. In Kyiv there are shops and a pharmacy. I meet a young woman out with a child; the little girl is eating cookies and she smiles at me, showing her first teeth. I buy a latte, pour sugar on the foam, and burst into tears. The barista pretends not to notice, and treats me to an oatmeal cookie.

VOLODYMYR DOMBROVSKYI

Volodymyr Dombrovskyi was born and raised in the picturesque town of Skadovsk, situated on the Black Sea coast in the Kherson region. He endured six months under occupation before being evacuated, while his hometown remains under occupation.

Volodymyr now resides in Irpin, in the Kyiv region, where he leads an active life—studying, working, and enjoying peaceful walks in the park. Reflecting on his time under occupation, he believes it allowed him to witness the remarkable strength of the Ukrainian community and the unwavering resolve of the Ukrainian people. He holds steadfast to his belief in victory.



LIFE AND FEAR UNDER OCCUPATION

Life under occupation is scary. Very scary. And that horror is not easy to put into words. However, I want to tell you about how I lived under occupation for 181 days or 6 months. I saw how different people endured that horror, together; people pulled together which gave them the strength to survive. This story is not only about my life. In fact, it's about Ukrainians, and how time and time again, they managed to overcome hell, for life, because of their ability to unite and be there for each other.

In 2013, I watched the news. The news reported what was happening in my country at the time. I was still very young back then and didn't understand much. My father and I used to go frequently on vacation to Crimea. One day I decided to listen to what my father and uncle were talking about while watching the news. It was then, amid the conversation, that I heard the words: "Crimea has been occupied." I didn't understand who did it and why, it was just a phrase for me. The only thing that was perfectly clear to me then was that my father and I would not be going to Crimea that summer. I saw a video of tanks driving through the very locations where I had been vacationing with my father, just a year ago.

Later on, in school, I attended history lessons which I used to hate. I learned that the occupation of Crimea took place in 2014, when the Russian Federation seized the peninsula and declared it its territory. This happened after Viktor Yanukovych, the then-President of Ukraine, had fled the country. The conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk began simultaneously with the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity. In the southeast of Ukraine, tensions rose between Ukrainians and pro-Russians, these tensions led to a war.

MEMORIES AT GUN POINT

The news of the full-scale war came in the middle of the night and caught me in my student dormitory. I remember it as if it were yesterday: here I am, sitting on my bed and installing an update to a game on my laptop. It's four a.m., everything is quiet. Suddenly, someone telephoned my girlfriend. She picked up the phone and left the room. A few minutes later she came back, pale, with tears in her eyes, and said: "Mom called...Our village was bombed." I got scared. Actually, I was in a complete panic. We started waking up everyone we could, telling them to quickly pack up their most important belongings. I called my mother in Skadovsk.

"We can hear explosions over here!" I shouted at her.

"Are you drunk? Go to bed!" my mom said and hung up.

I called her back again. This time my mom was fully awake. She wanted me home, but I had seen the line of vehicles trying to leave Kherson and decided to stay in the dormitory. If the war found me here, then that's where I should be.

Suddenly I heard a loud explosion. The balcony near me was shaking as if it was about to collapse. My thoughts were: "They blew up the airport!" I hung up the phone and ran into the room where all the others were. Everyone was looking out the window—at the airport, covered in smoke. Neighbours ran home. Together with some friends I ran out to prepare a bomb shelter: we needed a place where we could be safe from the shelling.

We brought in old metal spring beds. We agreed that two of us would carry them and the other two would assemble them. But then one of the boys decided to go home. I was left to put all the beds together myself. To say that I was tired is an understatement. My back was aching, and when I lay down on the last assembled bed, I just fell asleep. The girls woke me up. They said the beds needed to be rearranged a bit. We moved the beds side by side to make one big bed for the whole group. It was very cold, so everyone put on two jackets and we curled up into a big ball, and that's how we stayed warm and cosy. We were happy to be alive.

We could hear explosions outside. It was frightening to hear. My parents kept my spirits up by phoning to say that all was quiet where they were and that not a single Russian was to be seen. My friends and I sat in the bomb shelter, oblivious to the passing of time. All we had were board games and a lamp hanging from the ceiling. I heard water dripping somewhere, drop by drop.

We would cheer each other up, the girls would cook, the boys would go to the shop to buy bread and other food.

It was scary to walk in the streets. We didn't know what was under our feet. You could walk along and not see a trip wire. That's how I understood that

one careless step could cost your life. The queues to the shop were very long, several hundred metres. When you see them, you realise that your chances of buying anything are slim. You might not even be able to enter the shop that day. Everyone is hungry and wants to eat. As you stand in line, you hear explosions. You can't decide whether to run or stay and wait, hoping that in a few hours you'll have something, at least some kind of food, in your hands. On the bright side, if you did make it back to the dorm with a bag of food, you would feel like the happiest person in the world.

Two weeks in a bomb shelter and I was beginning to feel discouraged. I wanted to go for a walk, get some fresh air. Finally, I went out and I saw a very different Kherson. The city isn't the same, it's not what it used to be before the occupation. There is no end of cars with military personnel from the Russian Federation and machines with the following markings: "Z," "O," "V," "To Berlin!" "We can repeat 1941–45." Constant gunfire. It was petrifying. The Russians would just drive around and shoot at anything or anyone in sight. It annoyed them that people would gather to form human walls to stop their tanks. These people were ordinary civilians trying to free their homes from the invaders. This made the Russians even angrier. But the civilians were united in their cause. And that gave everyone hope.

> "THE RUSSIANS SIMPLY DROVE AROUND AND SHOT AT ANYTHING OR ANYONE WITHIN EYESIGHT

To distract myself a little, I went back to my little room on the eighth floor and started staying there for the night. I was very scared of the war. My great-grandmother, who survived World War II, used to say that "war is bad." My grandfather constantly repeated, "may there be no war." Now, I will also be saying that war is bad.

My parents arranged for me to come home. I packed my laptop, my clothes and my most valuable things. Deleted all videos and pictures that could harm me, due to the "improper" content. There were rumours that people were taken captive and beaten on the spot, and even that a gun may be put to your head. I deleted most of my data, including Messenger. However, while waiting for the driver, I had to download the Telegram messaging service to call my mom. After talking to her, I didn't delete Telegram. The driver arrived, I got into his car, and we went to pick up the others who needed to be taken home. We passed through some roadblocks. We had an old lady with us who kept saying "yes" all the time and a man who didn't say a word. I had my headphones on and was listening

to music. The driver told us all to hide our phones. But I had music playing on my phone, it helped me to calm down. We approached the first checkpoint. I understood this from the loud knocking of the AK-47 barrel on the window. I opened the door. My phone was between my legs, a briefcase with clothes on my lap. I was asked to hand over my phone. Confident that it was "clean," I calmly handed it over to the Russian soldier. He checked up the Gallery and other content on the phone. Then he opened Telegram where Ukrainian news were and began to threaten me. He ordered me to delete everything from the Gallery and to unsubscribe from all groups on the spot or I'd be kept there with them. Thank God they didn't check my briefcase. In it I had a Ukrainian Armed Forces uniform that had been a gift. I deleted everything. They let us go. We went to the village of Stepanivka, to the psychiatric clinic, to pick up a young girl there. After that, we headed for the road to take us home. There were numerous line-ups at the checkpoints but the military no longer inspected our belongings.

Finally, I was home in my native Skadovsk. The city was still under occupation, but I was with my parents. I was happy. I saw my grandmother and my younger brother, we took the suitcases and went home together. I wanted to see all my friends as soon as possible! I wanted to walk along the small, familiar streets. It was my first day at home with my family. The trip to Skadovsk was hard, so after having a brief chat with my family, I went to bed. The next day I went out for coffee with my best friend. We met up and had a smoke.

"Soon, they're going to install Russian Internet here," he said, suddenly.

"No way, that's not going to happen. We will be taken back soon, there's no point in even thinking about it," I replied.

But my friend wasn't giving up: "We will not be retaken. We're going to be the Kherson People's Republic now."

"Fuck them. They won't get a Kherson People's Republic! Are you kidding me, talking shit like that?" I burst out.

"It's clear that they are here to stay. As soon as I get the chance, I'm going to get a Russian passport!" my friend said proudly.

My throat was dry. I swallowed an invisible stone. I was trying to find the words, but I didn't know what to say. And then, I turned around and left. I wanted to scream out loud. I realized that I no longer had friends. I sat at home, feeling sick. I didn't understand how my former friend could do such a thing. He used to want to become a career military officer and now he's saying this... I was losing faith in people.

VOICE FOR FREEDOM: A RALLY AGAINST THE OCCUPATION

One tragic day of the occupation left me with painful memories. I understood very well all the danger, as well as the responsibility I had for my own life, but one day I got ready and went to the local "ATB" supermarket. There I saw a huge crowd of people standing in line.

They were protesters. People were pulled into becoming part of the protest, even those who simply came here to buy some bread. This gathering of people turned into a threat to the regime that the invaders tried so hard to enforce. The Russian military arrived at the scene immediately and began to brutally break up the rioters. But the people were not going to go anywhere. The protest grew in scale. The invaders threw tear gas grenades at us. It was hard to breathe and look at the light. Eyes were tearing. The invaders threw around stun grenades, making us feel like we were on a battlefield.

HOSTAGES ON THE STREET: A STORY OF MEETING RUSSIAN MILITARY

Somehow my friend and I got into our car and drove towards home. We almost made it, when unexpectedly two civilian cars stopped us. Unfortunately, people in those cars were not civilians at all. Our car was completely blocked. We couldn't make the slightest move. The Russian soldiers got out of their vehicles with weapons in their hands and forced us out of the car. It was terrifying! I saw ten armed men. About 20–25 years old, medium build. Their faces were covered up with masks. Among them there was a big man with broad shoulders, they all looked very strong, yet still tense. It seemed that they just rotated from the front and didn't understand that Skadovsk was a small, quiet town, and not a front-line area.

The Russian military held us hostage and searched our car. Finally, they realized we weren't a threat and let us go. It turned out we broke curfew by one minute. This was far too scary for me. Regardless of my fear, something caught my attention.

I observed these Russian soldiers and they too looked very scared, themselves. There was a dwarf among them, his whole body was shaking. He was literally quivering! Despite my fear, it was interesting to watch him and the other invaders. It's good that everything ended well for my friend and myself, and we quickly dashed home.

Now I am in the Ukrainian controlled territory. I left the occupied area in August 2022. When the war came to my city, everything changed there. Like most residents of my city, I witnessed incredible cruelty and violence on the part of the

Russian invaders. I saw my friends and acquaintances disappear without a trace. They were simply taken—nowhere. I've lived through a lot of fear. I'm not the carefree fellow I used to be anymore.

I've been through a lot, but I can't say that I'm proud of who I've become after this terrible experience. I've become more withdrawn and unable to trust people. Because I've seen those who sided with the invaders. Still, I keep trying to find inner strength to live on. I have learned to appreciate little joys in life and to enjoy simple things. It gives me strength to move forward. To the Great Victory.

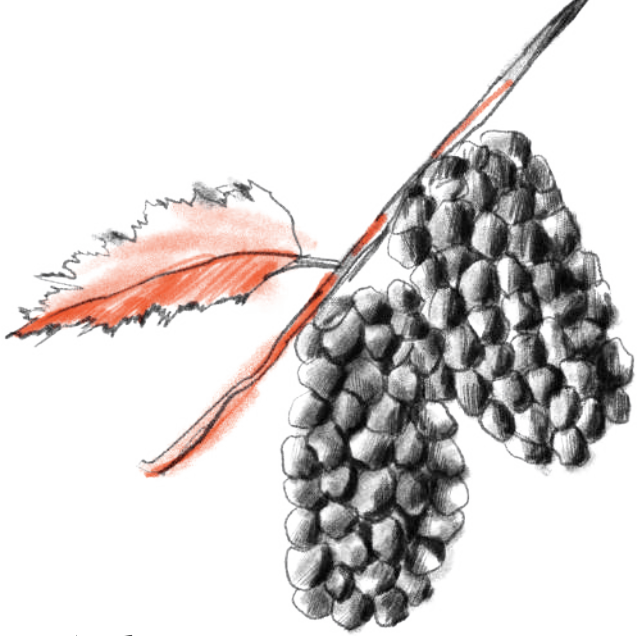
IVAN ZALOHIN

Ivan Zalohin was born in the city of Luhansk and has lived through two occupations during his lifetime: from 2014 to 2016 in his home town, and then in 2022 during the first week of the full-scale war in Bucha, Kyiv Oblast.

During the first months of the war in the east of Ukraine, he was a 13-year-old teenager, and was living with his grandmother in the village of Milove in Luhansk oblast. From October of 2014 to May of 2016 he lived in Russian-occupied Luhansk. Ivan described his memories of these events in the text.

In June 2016 Ivan, together with his parents, moved to the town of Bucha, Kyiv Oblast. In the first days of the full-scale war he fled from there to Lviv.

At present Ivan lives in Kyiv and organizes cultural, art, educational and social projects, a part of which involves recording social history, the dramatic stories of people who are living through war.



COLOURS AND SOUNDS OF THE OCCUPATION

Each colour has a sound, each sound has a feeling, each feeling has an effect.

TCX 19-3722[7] MULBERRY PURPLE—THE COLOUR OF LOVE, OF PRESENCE AND PAIN

Tiutina has always grown in Luhansk Oblast. Only here did they use this name for the mulberry tree. It's in the local dialect, which used to be spoken in the entire Don River region, in the land that once belonged to the Ukrainian Cossacks.

For me, *tiutina* always represented home. Although everybody always said that the symbol of Ukraine was viburnum, the *kalyna* berry, for me the ripe, purple mulberry, which we always ate in my childhood, came to be its main symbol. We would carefully climb up onto the highest branch of the tree and feast on the berries, because there they were always the tastiest.

Of all the berries, I always liked this one the most. It was purple, not too tart, very sweet, firm, and a bit buttery. I loved these berries, the juice of which would fill my mouth with the taste of childhood and a whole bunch of little seeds, which were then a pleasure to crunch. Many other people didn't like mulberries, because they left their inky stains on hands, nails, on and around the mouth; the stains seemed to seep under the skin, and left behind permanent traces on clothing and on the pale soles of sneakers. While I write about this right now, I can feel how their ink has left traces on my heart forever.

[7] This and the codes which follow are computerised Pantone or hex colour codes.

A great number of genuine and heartfelt conversations in my life have taken place on the branches of maples, oaks, cherry and apricot trees. However, the most precious to me were the conversations at the top of the *tiutina* tree, at the end of the unremarkable Kachalova Street in the village of Milove, which you would never find just by chance.

When you climb up to the very top, you can always feel the freedom of the strong wind which ruffles your hair, and also the lightness, peace and security of being at a height where nobody else will climb. And also the presence of the little inky berries, which touch my skin one after another in order to remind me: "We are here."

There was also a *tiutina* growing near my father's house. The tree belonged to our elderly neighbour. He never stopped children playing next to it, hiding under its long branches, thickly covered in leaves and berries, which reached right down to the ground and which could totally hide you underneath. However, he always protected the tree, and would scold anyone who would break its branches or attempt to climb up. Sometimes the neighbour liked to play games with us. When he noticed that we were hiding, he would come up slowly step by step, like a cat stepping quietly on padded paws, behind the tree and would softly ask, "Now who is hiding here?" Sometimes this would scare us, sometimes it amused us. But the answer to his question was always the same: "Awwwww, Mr Neighbour!"

My neighbour, who was called "Mr Neighbour" (because I never did find out his name), spent his whole life building his large three-storey house himself. Each part of the building contained a little piece of his bright smile and his careful work. In his yard somewhere in the corner, there was always some combination of cement, tiles, bricks and some construction tools scattered about. Each time when I asked him why would he need such a large building, he answered without pausing or hesitating: "So that someday I can reach the stars."

During the active part of the war, a Russian shell struck his house and destroyed the entire third floor, which the neighbour had been building with his own hands from the time of my birth right up to the beginning of the war. After this he stopped. Then he died three years ago, never having reached the stars.

The *tiutina* tree was hit by shrapnel as well; part of the tree dried up. It still blooms and bears fruit but it can no longer hide me from the gazes and the presence of the inhabitants of 13 Donetsk Street, or from the postal letter carriers, the strangers and the soldiers on patrol walking past. And the branches of the *tiutina* tree can no longer provide as many purple berries.

#96959D GREY CHATEAU—THE COLOUR OF ABSENCE

28.09.2014. We return home, that is, my Mum, my sister and I. My step-father is somewhere else. In these times, that is normal. The apartment is empty and cold. Inside it smells of damp and of the eggs, fruit and vegetables rotting in the

fridge. Even the pasta has gone bad. On the table there is a dried up and mouldy ciabatta with olives, which I always used to buy after school in the recently opened "Absolut Fermer" supermarket. There is no water, gas or electricity, but we do have candles. The first two days of the city's occupation, my mother would also light a candle on the shelf with the icons, in the little angel figurine, which she had bought a year before the war.

After two days, my mother understood that living like this was impossible and started to look for other options. There was mother's first cousin, Aunt Olesia, whose apartment was small, and she herself tended to be conflict prone. So, Mum decided to phone her friends, the couple Ihor and Natalia, who everybody called Huliky (the party animals). Each spring, summer and fall, while it was still warm enough, they would invite everybody for brunches and parties to their dacha in the pine forest in the town of Shchastia (the name of which also means "happiness"). Under the town sign of "Shchastia" in the summer of 2014, there lay a human corpse.

The party animals didn't really like the idea of us living at their place, but my Mom convinced them: after all, during the active shooting they were living in the village with our grandmother and so their apartment stood empty and was unheated.

The first month and a half we lived in their apartment, which was located in a part of town with the Soviet name of The Heroes of Stalingrad, shortened to "Herstal." The apartment was very dark and smelled of tobacco, because they often smoked at home. But there were some details of their home that brought me hope. There was a warm, round rug in light red and light brown colours, which was so soft and cosy, that each time when I lay down on it, it seemed that I was slowly sinking somewhere deep beneath the earth, and here I lay at the bottom of the carpet, engulfed in warm carpet pile.

The carpet was placed under the television, on which, a few years ago, I had watched Sponge Bob and the Ninja Turtles. At the moment they would only run news about the "Banderites" and other propaganda.

The groceries on the store shelves were by and large Russian, and the quality was much worse and they were more expensive than Ukrainian groceries. Quite often they had expired use-by dates.

What I remember most is the first week of living in that apartment, and in particular the food that we had. Mum went out and received some Russian humanitarian aid. In the package there was: 1 kilogram of rice, 1 kilogram of buckwheat, some apricot jam, a can of stewed meat, a can of tuna and 100 grams of crackers. The package was for 3 people. I wouldn't say that we were poor, but at that time it was difficult to estimate how long our savings would last. My Mum's business had been looted by Russian militia, and the building near the

railway station, which she had been renting out as workshops, had been hit by a Russian shell.

A main meal at that time was this strange "salad," as Mum would call it, but it was really more like a spread. It was made of three ingredients: eggs cut into julienned sticks; crumbled tuna, with skin on, out of a can; garlic, and mayonnaise. When I first tasted it, I thought that it had definitely been made from calamari, because the taste reminded me of dried salted squid, the sort that old guys eat as a snack when they drink beer with their neighbour on the bench out in front of the house.

The taste was strange and any notes of tuna were drowned out by the greasy mayonnaise, which mixed the notes of all the other foods, and in tandem with the egg slices created an artificial clam taste. We didn't eat this salad very often, because even despite our problems with finances, Mum was always particular about healthy nutrition with no trans fats or sugar or store-bought sauces.

Sometimes we went to visit Aunt Olesia and her son Dmytro. They lived seven minutes away and were our relatives. Once we even stayed with them at their place, because at the Party Animals' apartment the hot water heater had broken down and it was incredibly cold. At that time my Mum managed to phone through to her step-Aunt, who lived in Moscow. Her aunt told her about her small pension, her one-room apartment, for which she had saved 20 years, and then added that we were lucky. Because Putin had cleansed our land of the "Nazis and Banderites and other monsters so they will never poison our land" and that Putin will bring order and will raise the pension and salaries for everybody. Nothing like this has ever happened.

#HEX #5C3E29, ANTIQUE OAK—THE COLOUR OF DISASSOCIATION

My main solace during the occupation was the floor. You could always lower your gaze and not see anything that was happening around you. In my new school the floor was parquet. It was dark shades of brown oak, laid out in a herringbone pattern. The Luhansk Lyceum of foreign languages used to be the best school in the city before 2014, and in all of Ukraine it ranked in the top 100.

> "MY MAIN SOLACE DURING THE OCCUPATION WAS THE FLOOR. YOU COULD ALWAYS LOWER YOUR GAZE AND NOT SEE ANYTHING THAT WAS HAPPENING AROUND YOU"
>
> IVAN ZALOHIN

My Mum had always dreamed that I would pass the entrance exams and that I would have the opportunity to learn amongst the children of the most well-to-do of the city, because, in her mind, wealthy people invest money not in toys, but in education for themselves and for their children.

The parquet floor was particularly attractive in the history classroom, where the Principal of the Lyceum would hold his classes. The room was full of icons and prayer books but the main feature there was a portrait of Jesus, which covered the whole suspended ceiling. In reference to the fact that the classroom had been blessed by a Russian Orthodox priest, the principal said that: "Every word that comes out of the teacher's mouth in this classroom is holy and truthful before God." All his speeches about "the rotting West," "cannibalistic Ukraine, which is coming to the Donbas" and "shooting and slaughtering people like animals," were made in this room of course, always having his answers prepared.

#3A3C40 HEX, CAST IRON—THE COLOUR OF THE STREET AND OF THE DESCENDANTS OF THE CAST IRON MANUFACTURE WORKERS

It was getting near the end of 2015, and it was an evening in an occupied city. Night came. Outside the window you could once again hear the sounds of convoys of military equipment being moved. Almost every day and every night you could hear the noise from armoured personnel carriers and the grinding of scrap metal being cut up at the Foundry, which is the place where the history of the city started. I was tired of the noise, which wouldn't let me fall asleep. I was tired of the drunk militias, who would constantly binge on "Rossiyskaya" vodka at the bus stop below my window, and then would shoot at each other.

I was also tired of the street low-lifes who were always looking for excuses to beat up a girl or boy who was walking down the street. In a year and a half of occupation, a lot of new reasons had appeared for beating up people.

Reason 1: Clothing. The local scum had a list of clothing brands, *"shmot,"* for which you were obliged to "explain yourself," if they happened to pick on you in the street. The list included: Staff, NorthFace, Trasher, the Ukrainian brand Miaso, and many others. The local *gopniks*[8] would usually either try to rip those clothes, or throw a green die on them, or beat the wearer to death. The only way to protect yourself was to fight back and to earn the title of best Gopnik Protection Thug, or to have friends like that.

[8] The pejorative term "gopnik" is used in the jargon of most East Slavic languages to describe delinquent or vagrant youths, often uneducated and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Reason 2: Sexual Orientation. After the occupation, the local terrorist authorities reverted to Soviet laws, which forbade any other type of sexual relations other than heterosexual. Which is why all members of the LGBT-community were in danger of receiving a sentence of 10 years in a corrective penal colony. But most commonly, they were not victimized by representatives of the authorities, but by teenage street gangs, the kind to which my classmates belonged - "Russian Self-Defence in Luhansk" (RSL for short). Usually becoming a member of one of these gangs was voluntary, but the top guys would receive money for organizing riots and implementing the policies of the so-called (Luhansk People's Republic). These organisations would hunt for members of the LGBT-community. They would create fake accounts on lesbian and gay dating sites, would chat with a person for weeks to lure them out on a date, and then try to inflict as much physical harm as possible.

The legacy and dignity of the ironworks and foundry workers, who had majestically carried large blocks of metal, working against a backdrop of molten metal, was destroyed by a handful of their young descendants, who were triggered by blond hair and words for haircuts like "undercut" and "crop." The descendants, who wanted to kill and maim.

#RC100, RUSSIAN GREY GREEN—THE COLOUR OF MUDDY DIRT

It was November 2015. I don't remember the exact date. I just remember how during the last lesson in school, they said that there would be no lessons the next day. Instead, we would all go to a celebration of the "Republic," where we would meet with "the President." The same "President," who only a month ago, on live TV, was trashing local MP's (who they found, by the way, through Want Ads, and some of them were dvirnyks, or yard cleaners, before the occupation) because the assets of the "Republic" had been decreased to the count of two pig carcasses and three chickens. It was not possible to not attend this event. The head teacher of our school went around to each of the classes in person and threatened that "If you are absent, you will have problems. I personally will write you a reprimand, will call up your parents, and we will consider whether you will be allowed to continue attending our school. Have you all understood?" And our class teacher answered, "Yes, Natalia Vladimirovna, everybody understands. Everybody will be there."

I remember the next morning being so bright, that the light was blinding. Although the sun shone brightly, the night temperature had been -3 degrees Celsius, so at 8 a.m. it was very cold outside. They gathered us together at the Avangard Stadium, where before the war, Luhansk football club Zorya used to play, and where two weeks before the war Okean Elzy played a concert.

I lived 10 minutes away from the stadium, so I went on foot. I went in my winter parka because my parents didn't have enough money to get me a fall coat. On the way I saw a row of buses with signs of bus routes from occupied cities (in Russian): "Alchevsk-Lugansk," "Krasnyi Luch-Lugansk," "Stakhanov-Lugansk." They were absolutely packed with children and teachers, half of whom had to stand for the hour-long journey. An order is an order.

Our class gathered near the entrance. Our teacher pulled out her list and started to mark us off: Ponomareva? Kaliuzhnaya? Zalogin? Rozum? Everyone was present, and only two managed to get sick notes from their doctor and didn't show up.

There were 5 minutes of roll call and all the children of the "Republic" went into the stadium, one after another, where the "president" was waiting for them. There was an exhibition of Russian military equipment the colour of mud, and huge screens which were running videos, where an elderly granny was beating cars marked "OSCE," where "Ukrainian fascists and Nazis," that is, Ukrainian prisoners of war, were being led through occupied Donetsk, where Russians were rescuing "the Holy Land of Donbas." After an hour of speeches and of watching advertising for terrorism, we were told to stand, were handed the new anthem of the "LPR" on orange pieces of paper and were made to sing. For me, this was an epiphany: "So this is what propaganda looks like! It appeals to the emotions!" Having thought this, I sat down demonstratively, which annoyed my teachers and the supervisors, because 7 more students sat down along with me.

#15-6437, TCX GRASS GREEN—THE COLOUR OF FREEDOM AND ELATION

Milove is a small border village, where my grandmother used to run a hotel. The road from Luhansk to the village of Milove always took 3 hours by bus and went through pine woods, past lakes, small villages, fields of rye and sunflowers and the wave-form steppes, where lazy prairie dogs sunned themselves. These are the symbols of the Ukrainian east.

In 2014 Luhansk oblast was divided into two parts: the first part was under the Ukrainian control; the second was occupied by the terrorist group LPR and was controlled by Russia. That is why an ordinary trip to visit grandma turned into 2 border crossings, 7 hours through depressing Russian towns and down Luhansk roads, all beat up by tanks. Of course there were other routes, which didn't involve entering Russia, but they were longer and took about 12 hours in one direction.

Nonetheless, the summer of 2015 became one of the best ones in my life. Here, on Ukrainian territory, life was completely different: I didn't have to return home by

11pm; I could listen to and say whatever I wanted; and didn't have to be afraid of being taken in "for questioning" or being expelled from school.

At that time Lera, a girl from Luhansk, who now lives in Kharkiv, was also there. We just happened to meet when we were outside in the street. Together with other children we were cleaning garbage out of a well that had gotten smelly, and where leeches lived (we called it *Yarok*).

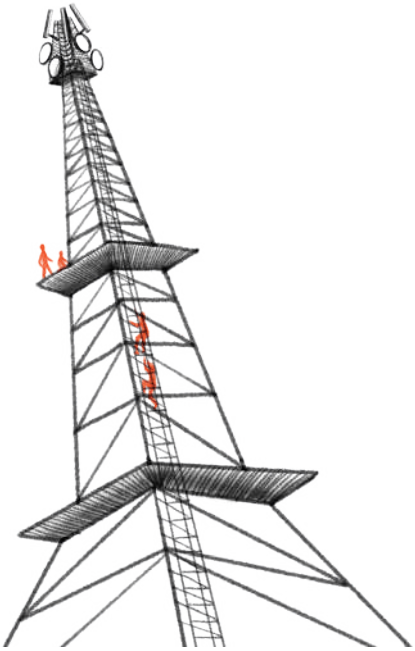
Together we searched for and listened to Ukrainian music, which for us was like salvation during our life under occupation. Once we found a book on Black Magic at Lera's grandma's place and studied it and performed various rituals like "Invoking Bloody Mary," invoking "leprechauns" or something like that. We had a routine of going out twice a week on trips into the local steppes, the hills and the woods. Early in the morning we'd meet at the end of the village and in the evening we'd return home.

My best memory is the day when I braved a trip on my own. I went out far into the fields, and found myself a spot somewhere deep in the metre-high feather grass. The silver leaves of the feather grass waved about fluidly in the air and gave off glimmers of gold and silver and blended in with the sunlight. This was the moment when I understood that green is the colour of freedom.

SABINA IBRAHIMOVA

Sabina comes from Suvorivka in Kherson region, which is watermelon country, located in Ukraine's black earth heartland. She spent half a year under Russian occupation and saw many things which she would prefer not to remember any more.

She managed to leave the occupation zone and at the moment Sabina is living in Odesa. She continues to work on completing her education in Journalism and at the same time is working in one of the biggest, most popular electronics stores in Ukraine. Sometimes she has dreams about the occupation but tries not to pay too much attention to that. She makes donations and helps with fundraising for the cause of victory.



BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: JUST WAIT!

That morning I was to go in to Kherson State University for lectures in Journalism. Then I was to see Andriy Fedorovych, and as usual, toss around a few jokes, then afterwards to hang out with some classmates on Arestanka Quay, on the banks of the Dnipro.

“Wake up Sabina, the war has started!”

That was the phone call from my mother that lasted all of 30 seconds. Chaos in my head. My body made of cotton wool. The burgundy-coloured suitcase. The back-pack. The railway station… The Antonivsky bridge.

“It hasn’t been blown up yet. We’re going to make it across. The Russian paratroopers are not here yet!”

The mood in public transport was very tense, the air felt like it was crackling. There were a few incoherent bursts of memories and I was home in Suvorivka. The two tall poplars standing at the entrance to the village, the bus-stop all in blue and yellow, and four streets in a row. Oh God, now I can breathe easy. But actually no, now comes the hard part.

I spent the first night almost without sleep. I would set the alarm clock for every hour, so I could react quickly if something “terrible” was about to happen. But my mind was betraying me. I didn’t feel like doing anything. I didn’t want to feed the chickens, or wash the dishes, or cook up some mash for the dogs. What was the point if I was going to die soon anyway. I packed an emergency backpack - a phone charger, a pen, my documents in a folder, some cat food, my wallet, concealer make-up. Why concealer? Don’t know, but I guess I needed it.

And all on that same day, as it was getting dark, Russians in tanks and armoured vehicles drive up to the village. And that's how it began. Panic attack: are we really going to die this evening? Where are our guys? Is anybody going to protect us?

A friend of mine was herding some cows out in a field, through which the enemy drove. He was wearing military camouflage, not because he was in the military, but because in the village, it doesn't particularly matter what you wear.

"Sabina, they drove past me… I stood there and didn't know what to do. How was I going to prove that I wasn't military?"

The occupiers kept going to the army base, fired some shots at it with their tanks and then drove back to nobody knows where. Right then I could feel the first seeds of hate within me. The whole village was frightened. People came out into the streets, because it was better that way, being together. When the Russian tanks drove away again, everybody went back home.

1st of March, 2022. The first Russian cluster bomb was shot down over our village. Some people were killed, others maimed, and injured. I couldn't understand anything, all these sounds were new. I could only distinguish what was outgoing and incoming.

I got a text message from a friend: "Sabina, I love you very much. I hope you are still alive."

I was alive, Daryna, but only in the physical sense.

Sitting in the cellar of a country house with its spiders, stores of homemade preserves, mesh bags of potatoes and onions, the smell of damp and of rotting potatoes, our neighbour praying. Who was she praying to? At that time she didn't know that damned Russia would take her son…

Life as such came to an end, and the period of survival started. It was like some overly realistic video game. Today your mission is to "Find some flour." Tomorrow it is "Take cover from the shooting." The day after it is "Hide all objects which could betray you as pro-Ukrainian." Not achieving any of these missions would mean a forever "ban" from the game in the form of death. At that time I was 17, but after a week, I started to feel like a 35 year old. I learned how to make three loaves of bread from a kilogram of flour. How to make dumplings from industrial corn, how to make a small piece of cheese stretch to last 3 to 4 days. In those days, that was a luxury. The one thing I didn't learn was how to stop hating Russians.

Did I live with impenetrable darkness all around me those six months during the occupation? No. We laughed just as loudly with friends, we listened to music, we sang songs with guitar, we played cards. Sometimes we simply lay on the road and looked up at the starry sky.

A rural basement with canned food for shelter from Russian missiles, Kherson region, 01.03.2022.
Photo: Sabina Ibrahimova

"Look, there's something flying up there. Do you think they're ours?"

"Yep, probably ours. Let's give them a wave."

I hated them every day I spent under occupation. I often thought about fighting them. How? I can't shoot. I'm not going to go out and fight a huge army alone. What can I do? I could send their location coordinates to our Special Forces. I know where they live. And what if they find me? Together with my friend we tried to figure out how to do this.

Simply sending coordinates through Telegram was too dangerous. They could easily find me that way and take me away to their *"podval."*[9] I needed a reliable VPN. However I couldn't find the sort of reliable service that I needed from open sources. Hang on - my sister works with some IT guys, and what if... Within an hour I had a reliable VPN file installed, set up especially for me. Now we could really start working.

[9] A "*podval*" (pl. "*podvaly*") is the Russian language informal term for an illegal place of detention and torture, usually located in a basement.

It was night, we were going to bed. I understood I had to do it right away. For some reason, right then. I knew exactly where they lived and where they kept their equipment. Google Maps - Telegram - StopRussianWarBot - and the deed was done. The most difficult part remained, which was waiting until they took me away. I was sure that I would wake up in the presence of a few Russian soldiers standing around my bed and then they would take me away to answer for my deeds. To some extent I was even psychologically prepared for this, only I was very worried how my close family would handle it. Thanks to my reliable VPN and the IT guys who set it up for me, I woke up instead to the sound of the rattling of empty jars, which my mother was saving for the preserves she would make. I had never been so happy to wake up at 7am to the sound of empty jars rattling!

THE 70-METRE TOWER

Then we had no internet or phone service for 8 days. I had all kinds of thoughts crowding into my head. Maybe they had isolated us and had dropped a nuclear bomb onto some other part of Ukraine. Or maybe they had started something like a Holocaust and had cut us off from the rest of the world to finish us off like a snack afterwards. Or maybe it was a sign that our guys were coming to liberate us? All this was driving us crazy. We understood that our relatives did not have an iota of information about what had happened. And what's more, I was imagining all sorts of horrors about what was happening to them. We had to do something about this.

It was a warm evening, the cherry trees were blooming, and the young crowd was hanging out in the street. I was among them.

"Hey Sabina, do you want to climb the tower with us?"

"Who me? I'm scared of heights. What for?"

"Maybe we can get some sort of reception. Hey, maybe it'll work."

I just nodded silently, and off we went. Just the four of us. Maksym, Irka, Nazar and I. While going there along the road, I realized it was very risky, but damn it, what a brilliant idea! When you're up there, way up high, you could probably get some sort of signal reception. We were so optimistic and even, I could say, quite sure that we would soon hear some dear familiar voices on the other end of the phone line. This was our ultimate plan. We were sure that we had cracked the system.

Then we got there. So who was going to climb up first?

"I'm scared. Let Max go," said Nazar nervously.

"No problem, because Sabina's going to follow me."

It was night. It was a 70-metre tower, and there were four junior geniuses who were trying to climb the tower. Max raced up so fast as if he had no fear at all. For me, each rung on the way up seemed to be like conquering Everest, my knees were getting shakier each minute, my hands were simply refusing to hold on to the upper rungs due to the cold, because it was colder higher up than it was below.... And high up there, as it turns out, was permanently windy! And a pretty strong wind at that, so it felt like it was making you sway as well as this giant tower.

We crawled up to the mini balcony. I stood there on my knees, because standing on my feet would have been too high. What if my legs crumple and I fall? Reaching with my hands, which were still refusing to obey me, I got my phone out of my pocket. I was expecting to see one bar of cellular signal on my phone. Two would have been too much, and definitely not all of them. Just one bar. Damn! There was nothing. This cannot be!! Don't tell me I climbed this damned tower for nothing!

"Max, are you getting anything?"

"Nope. And you?"

"Nothing. Now what do we do. Hey, shout down to Nazar and tell him not to come up because there's nothing here."

I climbed down, angry and offended at the whole world because I couldn't catch a signal. No one was ever going to find out that we were here and that we were alive. It was just that the Russians had taken away all means of communication.

THE BLUE AND YELLOW PLANE

It was an ordinary paper aeroplane, the kind that everybody makes during boring lessons at school.

Around the village there were whole fields of stunning golden yellow rapeseed in riotous bloom. Impossible not to take photos of this beautiful sight, because this landscape was the only "permitted" combination of blue and yellow that we could view. The tricolour flag of the heathens was already making my eyes sore, but the combination of Ukrainian flag colours was like a refreshing gulp of fresh, cold water. I made a little paper aeroplane out of those same two colours. Daryna took my photo with this background. For having this photo we could both be made to disappear from home for a few weeks. We went home. I brought my paper aeroplane in my backpack, then I stuck it on top of a cupboard and simply forgot about it.

A few months passed. The Russians came to our home, obviously, not to drop in for a cup of tea, but to harass us. And as soon as the first Russian stepped into

A self-made blue and yellow paper aeroplane, May 2022. Photo from the personal archive of Sabina Ibrahimova

my room, I remembered that I was going to be in big trouble, because of the aeroplane… It was just lying there, I could see it, and I had forgotten about it! The "soldier" carefully passed his gaze around the walls of my room, touched my sheets with his hands, examined the neon lamp on my windowsill. I stood behind his back, feeling barely conscious. I could only hear the blood rushing in my ears and the thumping of my heart. He did not notice the little aeroplane. Then he left, but I was still shaking until evening. He no doubt has forgotten about this, but I still remember.

IN THE LITTLE KITCHEN

When fear takes hold of you, it shakes you like a rag doll. When I'm in a frightened state, I'm capable of doing risky things. That's what happened when the next search happened in the village. The Russians drove in with their vehicles and equipment, which is usually surrounded by a cloud of unbelievably smelly, ancient diesel fuel. In the place where their armoured personnel carrier or other armoured vehicle was parked, their vehicles usually leave a huge, caustic puddle of oil or fuel, which you then need to cover with sand. There's a big puddle like

that in front of our yard. Their vehicles were moving through the village, slowly. Grandma and Grandpa lived a bit further on in the village, on the next street. And Grandpa owned a hunting rifle with bullets. In a second I ran to my bicycle. Because if the Russians find out that my Grandpa has a weapon, they'll take it out on him with all the cruelty they're capable of, no holds barred. I ignored the fact that a few of their vehicles, along with their soldiers were standing on the street outside my yard. While their colleagues were harassing the neighbours, I grabbed my bicycle and raced through the length of the village. And here was Grandma's house. I rushed into the little kitchen, where Grandma and Grandpa were calmly eating lunch. What a relief!

"Come sit with us, have something to eat. I've made your favourite mashed potatoes."

"No thanks, Gran. For some reason I'm not hungry. But you should hide Grandad's rifle! The Orcs are back in the village. They're walking around, searching, checking everything."

"What? Really? You don't say! Vitya, quick, go think of something... I have had it up to here with them! I hope they all drop dead..."

BACK TO REALITY

They came to terrorise the family of my best friend. The raid happened, the beating up of their Dad who is my uncle Yura, all members of their family were being questioned by the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service), their home was being searched.

"My God, they were digging around in my underwear drawer. What were they looking for? And how did they know that my boyfriend was from Sadove?"—Daryna's voice was still trembling, and I didn't know what to say to her. How could I let her know that I was very afraid for her and I would like her to forget all this, as if it was just some awful nightmare. I could recognize her emotions inside me all too well. I was still shaking, well into the evening, and I couldn't stop my tears. It would have been better if I could have been with her. But wait, really, could I have helped at all?

66 MY GOD, THEY WERE DIGGING AROUND IN MY UNDERWEAR DRAWER. WHAT WERE THEY LOOKING FOR?

Then I received a call from “Podruzhaika.”

“Sabina, pack your things. You have 24 hours, time to leave.”

I let go a flood of tears right from the very first second. I couldn’t accept this thought. I felt despair. I tried to bargain. Eventually I accepted it. The whole next day passed in a fog. I behaved like a little girl, who was going to be kidnapped from her home. I couldn’t tell anyone except close family that we were leaving because it was too dangerous.

I already knew that I would be going to sunny and relatively safe Odesa, but the thought didn’t cheer me up much.

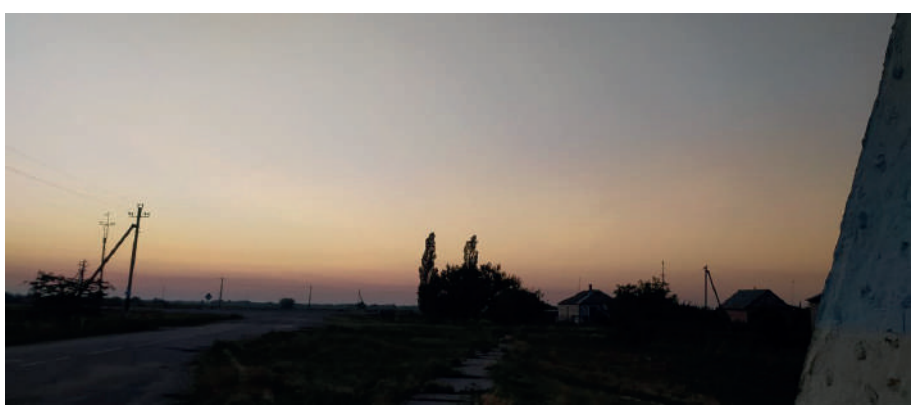
“Ma, will you promise me that you’ll follow and join me?”

“Of course, I will, dear. I’ll follow you, don’t you worry.”

Now I understand that she just said this to calm me down, because she knew that it really worried me that she was staying to live alone under occupation.

Ninth of August, 4 am. It was dawn. That same burgundy suitcase, leopard patterned bag, backpack, guitar. My whole life was packed into those seven words. Grandpa came to give me one last hug and to tweak my nose. His hands smelled like fuel oil and his face was shiny with after shave lotion. Then he gave me such a strong hug, as he had never hugged me so tightly before.

“Sabina, make sure you call. I’ll pass the telephone to Grandma, and we will all talk. Best of luck!” and he patted me on the shoulder, looking quite concerned. Grandpa lowered his grey head, took up his bicycle and stood there, watching, how my mother and I moved further and further away from the house. We were going towards the bus stop, where we had arranged the pick up, and he just stood there…. I could feel his gaze through my back.



Dawn in the author’s native village, Kherson region, 09.08.2022, 5:32 a.m.
Photo: Sabina Ibrahimova

Zhuchok the dog was also upset. He was virtually jumping up and down on the spot.

There was not much time for long good-byes. We quickly got into the car, put our things into the trunk, a hug for my Mum and off we went. Mum walked away from the car, she was wearing a grey shirt with small checked pattern. She wiped away some tears.

"That's it, dear. Don't cry, I'll be off now."

Then the familiar streets of Suvorivka flicked past for the last time. It was our last dawn there.

Then there were many Russian checkpoints. There were the ravenous gazes of the occupiers, and a feeling that I was just a piece of meat to them. We arrived in the zone where they were to release us into freedom. There was an endless queue of cars and people, who were just sitting there in the field, and the children among the crops. There were Russians in front of us, and behind us as well.

It was the fifth day of waiting, I took out my guitar and played a few chords. Waiting in line to exit the Russian occupation we started to sing popular Ukrainian songs like *"Chervona ruta,"* *"Bilya topoli,"* *"Dodomu"* and tracks by the Ukrainian group Scriabin. At that time we weren't even thinking what that meant and what the consequences could be. It only dawned on us later.

Then the grey zone. There were land mines lying right on the roads. On the shoulder of the road there was a car, still burning. Some unexploded shells, still stuck in the road. None of the buildings had roofs any more. No people left in the village, not a living soul, just our queue of thirty cars. In our car everyone was silent, now was not the time to talk. The level of tension was rising, but Uncle Yura kept moving the car forward with certainty. He'd often break into coughing. Because of the stress his thyroid gland was acting up. There was a full moon in the sky. The Russians could open fire on the grey zone at any time. The Russians could. Ours would never do this, knowing that there were civilians in the grey zone. 20 more minutes of driving like this and we became free people. That's how it was and that's how it will be. Now we could shout all we wanted: "Yes! I love Ukraine! I was born here and I want to live here!"

Then there was the first encounter with the first UKRAINIAN military at the first UKRAINIAN checkpoint.

"Good evening! Could we see your documents, please?"

"Oh my God! You are REAL!"

The doors of the car opened. I leaped out of the car and simply hugged him. His camouflage uniform absorbed my tears. He simply looked pleased, not surprised

at all. Every day there must be at least 10 Sabinas that throw themselves at him like this, that simply cannot control themselves.

“Relax, you’re home now. Here, hold onto this water.”

“I can’t believe it! You are so nice… and they…. Tortured us, mocked us, hated us. They just wanted to kill us. You could see it in their eyes.”

“They haven’t got much longer…”

I was so tired that I could barely feel the ground beneath my feet. I was standing near the car although I could have been sitting. I wanted to stand on this soil! Our people walk on this soil every day and now I can walk here as well!

“You have a spider in the car, did you see?”

He reached inside through the window and pulled the spider out.

“Mum, we’ve arrived, we’re near Zaporizhzhia already!”

“Oh thank God, because I’m just about dying from not knowing. I’ve been imagining all sorts of things! How are you dearie, are you all OK? Do you have something to eat?”

“Nobody’s been harmed, we’re all OK. Mum, our guys are here! I gave one a hug just now and they gave me some water!”

Mum was silent. I could hear a sob She was choking back tears. I knew that she wanted to feel the freedom as well.

I promise you, Mum, it will be soon.

I still see a scene that I made up myself on constant replay in my head: in an empty house, my Mum goes to make herself some coffee in the kitchen, takes her favourite ceramic Turkish coffee pot with the sunflowers, makes her aromatic brew, goes up to the window and sadly waits for her children. But instead she sees the rude, smelly, dirty, uncouth Russians, who only have one goal: killing. Mum, I’ll be back soon, and I’ll bring you some of your favourite Snickers bars, just wait.

Just wait…

IRYNA IVANOVA

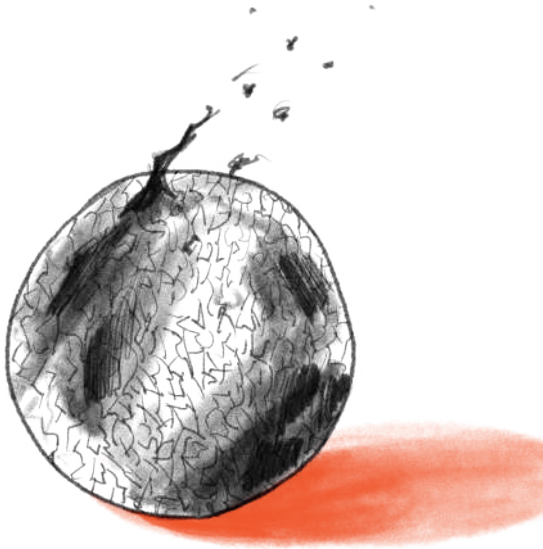
Iryna Ivanova spent her childhood in Yalta in Crimea. Later she moved to Kharkiv, where she graduated from the Faculty of Philology at Kharkiv University. She is a specialist in the history of Ukrainian advertising, rhetoric and media manipulation techniques.

In 2014, Iryna witnessed the annexation of Crimea while attending her aunt's funeral. She was forced to follow the Kharkiv-Yevpatoriia-Kharkiv route, among Buryats, machine guns, St. Petersburg special forces with dead eyes, and Cossacks with red faces. Then came the feeling of disaster and the understanding that it was necessary to prepare for war.

In 2014 Iryna had another terrible experience. In Donetsk, under the thunder of the airport battle, the defence of the last candidate's thesis in Ukrainian philology was taking place. Iryna was a research supervisor. From there, she brought back a lot of material for future war museums: the first Russian propaganda leaflets and calls to fight with Ukraine; in the Donetsk State Administration, a paratrooper tried to persuade Iryna to join the troops of the Russian warlord "Strelkov." This experience greatly influenced her work as a journalism educator. Iryna began to prepare students for work under war conditions and in war. Her students are now well-known military journalists, heads of press services and PR specialists. The film "20 Days in Mariupol," produced by Vasilysa Stepanenko, a former student of Ms. Iryna, won an Oscar and a Pulitzer Prize.

Three months before the Russian full-scale invasion, Iryna was ready for the war: her belongings were packed, her family had moved to Poland, and the documents for a cat and two dachshunds were prepared. On February 24, without a moment's hesitation, under the thunder of explosions, Iryna left Kharkiv for Chernivtsi, then for Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and finally stopped in Poland.

Iryna currently lives with her family in the city of Gdansk. She teaches journalism remotely at the Kharkiv State University of Economics, prepares young people to work under difficult conditions, and learns to work with trauma and provide psychological assistance. She is a volunteer in refugee adaptation programs in Poland and an organizer of events presenting Ukraine and the Ukrainian army in Europe.



GOD IN IZIUM

Out on the street, the sun is brilliantly shining. Still, I am afraid to let the spring sunshine in. There is a smell which creeps in through the open window. It is the sweet, sticky smell of rotten melons. It permeates every crevice of my house, my hair and my clothes. The windows of my apartment in the building are all shut. I hate this smell. I am afraid that tomorrow my daughters, my mom and I will smell like those melons. I check every window in the apartment. All are tightly closed.

My ears are covered with headphones. They play a musical pop collection recorded long ago. There is no internet, no choice. That is why I listen to what I have. My ears are already swollen and they hurt, but I cannot stop the musical marathon. What I fear are those other sounds... the ones coming from outside.

I take out a packet of porridge. Thank God, we have some food supplies. There is a constant subconscious habit of stocking up: tins, sacks of potatoes, and buckets of cabbage. My daughter used to laugh about it. Now, I understand. Well, there is—a genetic instinct woven into our subconsciousness to survive wars. Every hundred years or so, a bloody human harvest sweeps across the land of Ukraine.

Our local authorities have abandoned us. We, Iziumians, curse them all. We curse in the online Telegram group of a fitness trainer—when there is internet. When there is no internet, we curse along with our neighbour, Nina, who is an old woman. Every now and then, her old flowered bathrobe flutters between the balcony frames, rotted by rain, wind and time. Her windows are also shut. Her curses, insults and promised punishments fly over the heads of the mayor, the firefighters, the janitors and the police... although they are gone, the power of her curses can be felt in our bodies. They are without sound, behind closed windows. I understand her. We elected the authorities, we relied on them, and one morning, when trouble came, the city authorities were gone. They vanished into thin air. Especially, now, when we need them so much. Me, the old woman

Nina, and the people who lived across from us, in an ordinary grey building, with haphazardly glazed balconies.

Now that house is gone. Russian missiles took out the poorly constructed architecture. It collapsed like a house of cards. My fingers are shaking. I try to reach for my blood pressure pills, but I cannot manage it straight away. My body trembles and I find it difficult to swallow. I know the name of my problem malady—it is malevolence. It is fear—big, cold and fierce. It exists. I swallow the pill. I tell myself that this is not happening to me. Then I go to stir the porridge.

I look at the contemptuous face of the fluffy grey cat, Mr. Vasyl Petrovych. He doesn't look like someone who would want to eat sticky oatmeal, least of all without milk. But there is no choice. There is only porridge, nothing else.

I will not go to the shop, because there is still that sweet sticky stench of death outside. Even through the headphones, you can hear people moaning under the rubble. Almost a week has passed, and those moans are still heard.

There are living people who are buried under the concrete ruins, studded with rusty needles of rebar. They want to live and they cry out for help and scream in pain. Their endless pleas for help have been with me for a week. And now, as well there is rotten death smell. I hear the sounds, as do all the residents in our building.

There is no one to save them. There is no one to carry out rescue operations because there are no authorities. We need equipment, cranes, excavators, at least a truck. It's not possible to do this with our bare hands.

I look at the rays of sunshine, and at the young leaves of a maple tree. I want to go for a walk. I am overcome by an intense rage. I cannot believe that this is the reality of what's happening around me! I remember my neighbour Sashko. My hooligan classmate with whom we used to play *hide-and-seek and at-the-store*. He called me an eggplant when I refused to let him copy my homework. This friend with kind blue eyes who was great at barbecuing meats and changing the tires on my old yellow Peugeot. Sashko lived on the 3rd floor. Since childhood, I have known his door, upholstered in black Fabrikoid, with a cheap gold-like edging. Now, all this is gone. And Sashko is gone too. He lies there, under the rubble.

> "AND SASHKO IS GONE TOO. HE LIES THERE, UNDER THE RUBBLE

This stench of death, this requiem of whimpers, groans and unintelligible yawns reigns over him... And I am powerless to do anything about it.

Today it is raining in Gdansk. A biting cold wind is blowing again. But I walk the dachshunds on their usual route, along neat little houses surrounded by lovely little gardens with flowers and pine trees. I walk and remember how I fled. Three times. The first time was from sandy Yevpatoriia. It was an amateur race between Buryats with machine guns and red-faced Cossacks, dirty and loud. Then, in the minibus, there were the eyes of a Special Forces soldier from Petersburg, cold and empty, the eyes of a homicidal maniac. Next was Donetsk. I defended the last dissertation on Ukrainian philology at the University of Donetsk in Donetsk. There I was already an experienced escapee, with a legend and special clothes. I jumped onto a moving train car. The train did not stop at the station in occupied Donetsk; it just moved slower. There was also the barrel of an Ossetian Special Forces soldier's machine gun pointed at my chest. I suddenly realized the huge trouble and grief which was about to unfold. However, it is only now, that I understood all this completely, despite my constant terrible fatigue.

Now, there was Izium. I fled from Izium to Poland. There, I froze. I'm empty and terribly exhausted. I have no will to run again. The Dachshunds barked at a polite mongrel again... Fatigue is always with me; it holds my hands and lowers my arms. Exhaustion is my state of being...

But I also have a dream. I want to meet our Izium priest, Father Oleksii, and shout the truth which I discovered to his face.

I know for sure—there is no God. Surely, if there was a God he would not allow this to happen. There would be no sweet smell of rotten melon in that peaceful Ukrainian town, warmed by sunshine and the aromatic smells of the steppe's sagebrush.

ANASTASIA KOZAK

Anastasia Kozak was born in a city renowned across Ukraine for its delicious watermelons and tomatoes. With two university degrees, she had always dreamed of a career connected to travel but instead found work as a Social Media Marketing manager at a scientific library.

The first explosions on 24 February echoed from the outskirts of Kherson, just a few kilometres from Nastia's home. What followed were two long months under occupation. She spent nights in the hallway of her apartment, retreating to the basement of her ageing five-storey building when the shelling grew especially intense. Days were consumed by endless queues at nearly empty shops, hoping to buy even the barest essentials. When the initial shock subsided, Nastia resumed her work, managing the library's social media accounts. But as the danger escalated, publishing anything in Ukrainian became life-threatening.

In April, Nastia managed to escape Kherson, embarking on a gruelling three-day journey to Khmelnytskyi.

Now living with relatives in the Khmelnytskyi region, Anastasia continues to work remotely for the Kherson Regional Library, despite the library building itself suffering repeated damage from shelling. Her first return to her flat, hastily abandoned in April 2022, came four months after the liberation of Kherson. Though trips back to her hometown remain perilous and brief—rarely exceeding three days—her longing to be home sometimes outweighs her fear of the constant shelling.

Nastia's greatest wish is to one day return home for good and never again face the harrowing experience of packing her life into a single suitcase.

LACKING SLIPPERS WHILE ABROAD

"But dad bought it! I want to take this swimsuit with me!"—little Nastia was sobbing, her delicate face had turned completely red. She held on with her hands to the new swimsuit, its price tag still attached. She was defending its rightful place in the evacuation suitcase. There would be no compromise! She was unaware of why the suitcase was needed, but her mother told her to pack only essentials. In went a red-haired doll, a fairytale book and that ill-fated frilly pink swimsuit. These were her most valuable possessions.

The adults, stood silently, looking at Nastia. I felt a lump rising in my throat. I remembered her christening when I held Nastia in the church. She was so small, with her dad's eyes and a completely white head of hair. A little bundle wrapped in a white terry christening towel. I felt happy to have such a quiet goddaughter. Nastia never cried, never whined, never threw any big tantrums. Not until today.

On this day, in this apartment, where we used to gather on all the holidays, we were preparing for the most dangerous trip of our lives.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw everyone. I saw my godmother carefully packing Nastia's t-shirt into the suitcase, saw my goddaughter's mother trying to squeeze a thin terry cloth blanket into a small bag. Even their cat Angelinka sat stoically by their belongings, not interested to play with any of the small items scattered randomly around on the floor.

Then I looked up and saw my godfather. Always tall, stately, with broad shoulders and a thick black moustache, now he seemed to be half his height. For a little while he stood silently in the doorway of the room, clicking a cheap plastic

lighter, then he uttered a short curse through his clenched teeth and went out onto the balcony. I saw him quietly crying there. He didn't want anyone to see him. But I saw him. Yet I couldn't muster up the courage to walk up to him. What could I tell him? That everything will be fine? That our car wouldn't be riddled with bullets by a Russian machine gun? That we would safely pass all the roadblocks? That they wouldn't kill us, all? Who knows these things? Tomorrow, we will try to get out of occupied Kherson, again, for the third time. The day before yesterday we wanted to go through Oleksandrivka. Thank God, we didn't manage to get ready in time for the trip. The dam in the village had been blown up. Along with all the cars.

We have to get ready. We need to have an early start, and to be ready by 5 a.m.

These are my two suitcases. I need to repack the two into one. I'm looking at my laptop and have no idea where to hide it: among the things in the suitcase or under my sweater. I know that getting out with equipment is almost impossible. They will confiscate it at the checkpoints. Yesterday they took away Maryna's camera, "for the needs of the liberators," they said in Russian.

I pack only the bare minimum: new, never worn jeans, one sweatshirt, warm socks (my mom always said to keep one's feet warm, in any situation), a standard medicine set—paracetamol, citramon and a Bifren pack, as well as a blister pack of valerian pills.

I forced everything down, and pushed the lock button. Now there's only one suitcase. My entire life fitted into this one suitcase.

We didn't sleep that night. Each one of us played out the worst scenarios for tomorrow's trip, in our heads. How many people before us have already tried to leave?! Someone was shot to death right there, in the car, someone made the wrong turn and hit a mine. These stories are stuck in my head, like the one about the old shepherd dog:

A man was getting his family out, and they had an old shepherd dog in the car with them. She was sitting in the back seat wearing a muzzle. When, at one checkpoint the Russians started to take all their belongings out of the bags and brutally search the passengers, her instincts kicked in. She became protective of her family. The Russian soldier really disliked the dog's loud barking, so he just shot her. No dog—no problem. I knew they killed people just as easily. These stories were brought to us by those who tried to escape, but were turned back.

And in a few hours, we were going to face these same soldiers.

> "I KNEW THEY KILLED PEOPLE JUST AS EASILY

ANASTASIA KOZAK

It wasn't even five in the morning when everyone gathered in the large kitchen. The last time it was that crowded was at Christmas. We ate Kutya—a kind of porridge served on Christmas Eve— prepared by my godmother, we laughed, and made plans. Today, no one could bring themselves to eat anything. My godmother tried to force us to eat at least something. Little Nastia managed a sandwich. Some strong coffee and three Bifren pills were what I had for breakfast. But even after the sedative, my hands were shaking.

✦✦✦

We have two small cars, 11 people and a cat. Nothing fits in easily. We ram our bags into the trunk with our feet. I hid my laptop under my sweater. Otherwise, it wouldn't stand a chance.

My godmother cries, makes the sign of the cross over the cars and sprinkles them with holy water. At night, she would sit in the kitchen and read psalms by candlelight. I hardly believe that holy water or prayers can save us from missiles or Russians with automatic rifles. But at that moment, we all wanted to believe in a miracle, if only to save our lives.

On a piece of paper torn out of my goddaughter's notebook, I carefully write the word "CHILDREN" with a black marker. There are two small children in each of our cars. My godfather hangs white rags on the mirrors, a signal that ordinary civilians are riding in the car. Later on, along the road, we will see more than one destroyed vehicle with the same inscription and white rags, but now, in my godmother and godfather's yard, we are ignorant of those brutal sights.

We are on the road, at last. I look out the back window and see them, my godparents. They are crying and making the cross signs, again. At first, they flatly refused to evacuate, because who would look after the apartment. I can see my godfather constantly mumbling something, his lips moving under his black moustache, his gaze focused somewhere on the ground. I don't know if it's the words of a prayer or something... I won't find out until a few months later when I have a telephone conversation with my godmother. What it turned out to be and what he kept repeating to her was: "It's your fault that they are leaving. Tanya, if anything happens to the children, I will never forgive you." My godfather didn't want us to go. I knew how much he loved us all, and how much he wanted to protect us.

On the road we are silent. We join the line at the city's outskirts. There are hundreds of cars ahead. The same - behind. Only about two hundred cars are allowed through every day. We are incredibly lucky, we are somewhere at the beginning of the second hundred. After an hour of waiting, our nerves on edge, we reach the first checkpoint.

"Good morning, girls! Where are you going?"—three Russian soldiers walk up to the car, smiling.

They are smiling and pointing automatic weapons at us. I hold my goddaughter firmly by the hand and do not breathe. I don't understand anymore, whether it's me shaking or whether she's trembling too. The laptop under my sweater puts terrible pressure on the ribs. I imagine a big bluish bruise appearing in that spot—this trip's going to last many hours, but that's nothing. I will get through this. No one will take my laptop away from me.

Everyone is very polite at the first three checkpoints. The Russians with their automatic rifles wish us a good morning, a nice trip, and are inquiring how we are doing. Some even try to flirt. They seem to be okay with flirting while pointing guns at our heads. "Kharoshie Russkie"—*good Russians*— they are like that.

Of the seven checkpoints, the most difficult to pass were the ones manned by representatives of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. They absolutely didn't understand why we were leaving. And I, in turn, did not understand how they could stand there. The most horrible stories were told about these roadblocks. They robbed, interrogated, and killed here. But a few dozen kilometres from here, is the beginning of a free Ukraine—an attainable dream.

✦✦✦

A trip from Kherson to Mykolaiv takes 40 minutes by car, in peacetime. It took us 21 hours. And then, it took another half a day more to get to Odesa.

Ukrainian checkpoints were many, we were held for quite a while. They checked us thoroughly. But we were no longer afraid. This was our military, who is defending our freedom and our Ukraine. We laughed with them, we joked with them, and shared food with them. In return, we received sweets from them. I still remember the Roshen chocolate bar, with nuts, which I received from a Ukrainian soldier. It was the most delicious chocolate ever, in my life!

✦✦✦

And here I am with my little red suitcase, standing in front of the railway station in Odesa. I don't understand what's happening. People are smiling, sitting around in cafes and talking freely on the phone in the street. They have no occupation. It seems there is no war, here.

Yet another half a day on the train and I'm in Khmelnytskyi. It is the same here – there is no war. I remember standing near the railway station and crying, looking at the windows of the buildings around. They could turn on the lights! Absolutely freely! In Kherson, I turned the light on, only in the bathroom. And before I did that, I would close the window curtains tightly and glue a piece of paper over the peephole, in case, God forbid, someone would see.

Why exactly did I light the bathroom? Because there was a small light bulb there – its light was not visible from the other rooms and the apartment windows. However, the bathroom light dimly lit a part of the hallway. And you needed to

see the hallway to know where to run during the bombings. Although, I rarely needed to do this. More often than not, I just slept in the hallway (or tried to sleep for that matter).

✦✦✦

A day later, I was finally able to hug my mother. We both cried. We cried for a long time. Right there, by the bus. We talked all night. In the morning, we both had red and swollen eyes from all the crying. I told her about the first explosions in the city, about Russian armoured personnel carriers by the house, and the first months of the occupation.

But I will never tell her about how I was afraid, but not of death, no. How would she cope was my concern. I had a clear picture in my mind of the moment when a family member or a friend would call my mother and tell her that I was gone. It wouldn't matter how – being shot with a gun, killed by a mine or a rocket explosion. I would be no more. I knew she wouldn't survive this. And that was my greatest fear.

This fear kept me going when I stood in line at the store two days in a row trying to buy some bread. Of course, I returned home empty-handed, because there was simply no flour in Kherson to bake that bread. And those several hundred loaves that the bakers still managed to make from some leftovers were distributed among their own.

This fear tuned my hearing, when sitting alone in the apartment in the evening, I listened closely for footsteps on the dark stairs of the doorway. A knock on the door predicted certain death.

Sometimes my fear produced tears of despair, as the food in the fridge was inevitably running out. Only one bag of millet porridge remained untouched. I hate porridge. But in a week, I will eat it too.

Mom, I love you very much, but I will never tell you about all this.

✦✦✦

Once, when I was leaving Kherson, I was overcome with a feeling of repulsion – I no longer felt at home there.

The city had changed. A few limited shops were open only until 2 p.m., several elderly ladies sold vegetables from their own gardens right next to my house. And that's all that was left of the city's infrastructure. There are almost no people on the streets in the afternoon. Only packs of hungry stray dogs. In large buildings with hundreds of apartments, only a few windows are lit at night. Almost all windows are taped or boarded up.

I'm standing at the station again, waiting for the bus, and I realize: I simply don't have a home anymore. Yes, I have a physical home but it doesn't feel like one. I

don't feel at home either in Khmelnytskyi or Kherson, a place to which I so badly wanted to return. My friends are scattered all over the world - Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, America. We keep in touch only by phone, while we'd so love to be able to get together, as we used to, for some coffee and a chat.

Up to this moment, I always travelled to the liberated Kherson by train. Now, one can see shell craters, burned Russian armoured personnel carriers, destroyed towns. After a few trips, they don't look that scary anymore. Traveling by bus turned out to be much more difficult. The road itself is simply non-existent. It is unlikely that even the best-quality asphalt would survive the weight of tanks and the shelling. But I was stunned by something completely different.

The village of Posad-Pokrovske is known to many residents of the south. It is located halfway between Kherson and Mykolaiv, and a busy highway runs through its central street. In the past, when traveling back to Kherson, it was near Posad-Pokrovske that I used to call my family to let them know: "I'll be there soon!"

The bus approaches the village. I knew back in the early spring of 2022 that the village had been destroyed. However, knowing something is very different from seeing it with your own eyes.

It's a few minutes past 7 p.m. It's already getting dark. Music is playing on the bus, but one barely hears it, everyone is lost in their own thoughts. I have my small duffle bag on the seat next to me. I have learned to travel light. We pass through Klapaya. Posad-Pokrovske is next on the way. But... it's not there!

Just a rubble of stones and bricks in the place where there was once a life. And big yellow daffodils dot the landscape. They were planted by a lady... long before the war.

The driver slows down, he turns down the music volume. The bus route was renewed only four days ago and the drivers are not familiar with the scenery outside the window. "Fucking hell!" – he utters. Then we keep driving in absolute silence.

My girlfriend lived in this village. She and I used to go to the pool together. Tanya left for Odesa and hasn't returned home since. On the other hand, she has no reason to come back, there is no home.

The whole village seems to be covered with a blue film. It covers the torn roofs of the houses, which are lying in pieces on the street... And in the midst of all this horror I see a light in a window. The only surviving house on the entire long street. We drove by slowly taking 15 minutes! The house has walls and the roof is almost intact! No, its owners were not born under a lucky star. It had to be under a constellation, at the very least!

The neighbouring houses, and entire streets were simply wiped out, but this one stands. Having heard the sound of the bus engine, a man comes out of an old

glass veranda. He is wearing a pair of old worn-out jeans and a sports jacket. His step is calm and confident. He must have seen it all in this life. He takes out a lighter from his pocket, lights a cigarette and looks at our bus. There used to be a lot of traffic here. I remember Tanya was always complaining about the noise that kept going on, even at night. Now it's two buses a day and several cars.

I look at this man and start crying. I just couldn't hold back the tears all the way to Mykolaiv. But now, I know exactly what "being home" means.

✦✦✦

I've been living with some relatives in the Khmelnytskyi region for almost a year now. I have a roof over my head, it's relatively quiet, as explosions are rare, I have my relatives by my side, but... living in this place makes me more depressed, every month. Absolutely everything drives me mad - tasteless water, cold climate, lack of basic amenities, someone else's furniture. It's all completely fine and suitable for living, of course, it's just that it's not mine. I am 700 km from home, I have a physical need for my black cat mug. When I first returned to the de-occupied Kherson, I took it with me right away. I bought it for myself in 2010, on the day when my little brother was baptized. I chose a mug with a cat. I keep it on the edge of the kitchen shelf. It's already old, the picture is half-faded, but green tea tastes the best in it.

I'm not the only one like that. My goddaughter's mom keeps whining about a pot she's missing. She lives in Poland, and her kitchen is full of various utensils. But she would prefer cooking mashed potatoes for dinner in the very pot that remained in her kitchen in Kherson. According to her, it makes food taste better.

A friend from Hola Prystan dreams constantly of wearing her bathrobe. Volunteers in the Czech Republic provided her with a robe, an almost new one, long ago, but she says it's not as comfortable nor as warm.

Someone may say: "Too much of a good thing." But if you have to leave your home during a war, you would understand. Thousands of kilometres away from our beloved homes, the unexpected happened - we miss worn-out house slippers, a favourite pillow and a trivial mug with a faint pattern.

We had chosen carefully the items which we considered so essential to pack in our evacuation suitcases, but we did not unpack anything, not for a while, not at first. We tried to fit our lives into a suitcase, our memories into a plastic bag and a cosmetics case. We were so worried that we wouldn't be able to exist without our normal routine, our household appliances and our favourite clothes. It turns out we cannot imagine life without seemingly trivial little things. We don't want new things. Those at home are what we need and will do just fine.

TAMARA KOMLYK

Tamara Komlyk is from Zaporizhzhia oblast. Before the start of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation, she was living and working in the town of Vasylivka, initially as a Ukrainian language teacher, and later as Head of the Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Department of the Vasylivka City Council.

At the time when the town was captured, she stayed behind to help the local people deal with the horrors of the occupation. Over the course of two and a half months, together with the team of officials from the City Council and with volunteers and charity organizations, she assisted in organizing the evacuation of civilians from active war zones. She organized aid for refugees, who were evacuating via the occupied town of Vasylivka.

With steadfastness and her patriotism, she continued to resist the occupation administration, which was forcing her to cooperate; she endured interrogations and being manipulated by the enemy. When it became impossible to keep on resisting, she left for Zaporizhzhia with her young daughter and son, arriving there after travelling through 13 enemy checkpoints.

Having evacuated to Ukraine-controlled territory, she chose not to flee any further from the air raid alarms and the enemy shelling. For the time being she is living in a town near the front line, only 40 kilometres away from enemy-held territory, continuing to fulfil her educational, human and creative mission.

I'M STILL NEEDED HERE, JUST A LITTLE

UNCLE VANYA

The first page of the passport was dirty, stained with engine oil, with the corners curled up. Uncle Vanya held the document in his hands and was angry with me for not taking pictures fast enough, because they needed to get the people out before the shelling started.

At 6am that day the First Deputy of the Town Mayor phoned me and said:

“Find me a driver for the school bus!”

“Right, we already employ some, six of them,” I answered.

“No, you don’t get it. We need a driver to evacuate civilians to Kamianske….to drive through the shelling.”

He said his piece and hung up, not waiting for further arguments. I quickly went through the names of the drivers in my head. No one, except for Donchenko would agree to this… But he may not even pick up the phone, after receiving that last reprimand…

I phoned:

"Uncle Vanya, we need a driver for evacuation."

"Got it. At what time and where?"

"Near the church at 7am. We'll provide the fuel. Except, you know, there will be Russian checkpoints and shelling…"

"I said, I will be there!"

I put the phone down and try to collect my thoughts, so as not to forget anything in haste. We need to hang a white cloth on the bus, and make a sign which says "Dity" ("children" in Ukrainian), so that they don't come under shelling. I find a snow-white sheet in the children's cupboard, tear it into pieces and wonder at myself, where I found the strength. Previously, I could only have done this so efficiently with scissors. Then I print out the words "Deti," yes, exactly, "Deti" ("children" in Russian), in the damned language of the occupiers!

The doors of the school bus closed, hiding people inside (whose names I didn't know), a little Chihuahua in the arms of some child, and a German Shepherd with no muzzle or leash. I follow the convoy of cars with my eyes and remember the time Uncle Vanya had a fight with the boy from 11th Grade on the bus, I remember all the complaints from the grade school parents about the rudeness of the bus driver, and the number of requests to fire Donchenko. That very same Ivan Ivanovych, who now was rescuing them all from the war.

STRANGERS IN TOWN

The church square gradually quietened down, and the chatter of the local gawkers moved towards the market, leaving behind fragments of conversations about sugar at 100 UAH a kilo, about who was last in the queue for washing powder, and whether they would deliver more matches today… I stood on the white curb and didn't move. My jacket was not warm enough for the cold spring, and I never wore a hat, not even when it was freezing. To the right of me, an elderly man stood silently, and to the left of me was the town Mayor, who as of today would come every day to see the evacuation convoys off. The town was teeming with Russian soldiers, it smelled of their dirty uniforms and it spoke a foreign language. The town was learning to live in a different way; it was resisting, like a child that doesn't want to go to daycare or have an afternoon nap. Everything around was changing: the people, the faces, the buildings… and only the *dvirnyks*, the yard cleaners kept on sweeping the streets through habit.

Serhii Anatoliyevych came up to me, silently raised the hood of my jacket onto my head, as a mother would do to her disobedient child. He put his arm around my shoulders and together we went to the town council building. Before we entered,

we stopped to take a selfie with the Ukrainian flag in the background (as of today, this would be our daily ritual).

Another ritual for me was touring the bomb shelters. We had quite a number of these shelters in our town; they were all different according to the amount of protection they gave, their location, and how they were equipped. We would get into the official car. It was me, a few of my colleagues and Gena the driver, who always used to sing along to "Russian Radio" and oddly enough shake hands with the occupiers, when he met them. We would drive along our regular route: Day-care no. 6, the lyceum and the city centre. The shelters were in order, not very many people there, they went home to fetch some duvets for the night. Closer to the highway there was a half-destroyed high-rise building, and not too far away, there was the building where the parents of my friend lived. Now this was not a planned stop. I just ran in to say hello and to check and see if everything was in place. I went down the familiar stairs.

Only the previous day this used to be storage for all sorts of old junk, which the grandmothers would carefully save for their grandchildren, just in case: the baby carriage with no wheels, a bundle of copper cables, a doll with blue hair and also, I think, missing the left eye…

This shelter was like dozens of others in my town. It remembered the taste of watermelons from Kherson, cherries from Melitopol and warm corn on the cob eaten on the beach in Kyrylivka… When it couldn't stand listening to the arguments and whining of the teenagers because of the lack of internet service, the shelter would listen to the parents' stories for small children of the missile, which would leave behind a rainbow in the sky.

THE ROAD OF LIFE

I got into the car, still following our plan. I felt tired, because the alarms at night and the early waking had become a normal routine. The time spent under occupation was measured for me in passports, suitcases, vehicles, and pies with cabbage. And also in kilometres, and in particular, by the 15 kilometre Road of Life. That is the distance between two Russian and Ukrainian checkpoints, the town of Vasylivka and the village of Kamianske. At the entrance to the town, the occupiers organized a filtration checkpoint. That's where the checks took place and often the tortures and the executions of civilians, who wanted to leave the occupied territories. Regardless of the season or the outside temperature, the occupiers made people at the checkpoint undress down to their underwear. Young men, women, the elderly, children. They examined their tattoos, searching for Ukrainian service personnel, and for those that openly supported Ukraine.

This checkpoint was a place of humiliation for those who were living in their own land and speaking their own language. If the filtration check was successful and the occupiers gave permission to drive through, the refugees then started out on the only Road of Life in the direction of Zaporizhzhia, 15 kilometres away. The stretch of road between the two towns was constantly under enemy shelling, was mined and simply too dangerous. When heavy rains fell, part of the dirt road would turn into a muddy trap for cars and buses. So, people were faced with a difficult choice: to stay home and accept the new rules of the occupiers or to leave via the Road of Life towards free Zaporizhzhia. Most chose freedom.

> “MOST CHOSE FREEDOM

THE CRISIS

Many convoys from Kherson, Berdyansk, Melitopol, Enerhodar, and Mariupol started to travel through my town… but not for long. The Russians started to block civilian evacuations. There was a humanitarian crisis looming, the terrorizing of Ukrainians continued. The shelves in the stores were empty. The pharmacies were shut. Ordinary goods, which were essentials needed to satisfy basic needs, were unavailable. Humanitarian aid was not reaching the occupied territories; it was being confiscated by the occupiers or they would deny permission for it to enter the town. The community couldn’t supply enough groceries for the locals, let alone the thousands of refugees, who were waiting for a “green corridor” to evacuate.

The farming enterprise run by Kaliman’s brother started to supply locals with fruits and vegetables for free. That enterprise also provided flour and bread, which had been baked in a local bakery. They would process some cereal wheat, bring in oil, and meat and dairy products. The local farmers and business people were a saving lifeline for all of us. They gave away their own agricultural products, their generators, fuel, machinery and vehicles for the essential needs of the people. In the kitchens and dining halls of various educational institutions, the teachers and admin staff would make tea, and bake cabbage and apple pies, and we would give these to the refugees waiting their turn for evacuation, if the Russian military allowed it. There were cases when approaching the convoys was forbidden. We had food and hot tea ready but couldn’t give it to them. When the occupiers turned the other way, the locals would throw bread and bottles with water into the crowd, at their own risk. The enemy showed no humanity and tried to sow anger among the hapless refugees, but without success. At that time we were all united by a common grief, and also by a common faith in Victory. In those convoys, friendships were born and mutual assistance was discovered. Total

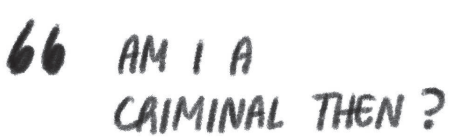
strangers would share medicines, blankets, clothing, fuel and food. Could the occupier imagine that an elderly diabetic woman would give away her last dose of insulin to a young mother, that men would go halves on their last cigarette, and that a little boy wearing brand new Ecco sneakers would make sure that there would be enough tea for everybody?

For the occupiers, the civilian convoys were just a live shield, that stopped the shelling from the Ukrainian military. People would wait for a "green corridor" for weeks. They would be weak from fatigue, from the cold and hunger. Babies would fall asleep on bus seats and wake up in the same place.

KALIMAN

He would always begin his morning in the same way: he would check his Facebook page and do his inhalations, because of his lung disease. Rather, he had only one lung, because part of the other lung had been removed due to a tumour many years ago. Over a few weeks he had noticeably lost weight and had shrunk. He had let his beard grow and had let his normally perfectly-trimmed balding head get untidy. War had changed the pedantic Kaliman.

Today he was at a loss. He felt totally beaten down by the mock execution and the five-hour interrogation at the command headquarters. Before his eyes, humiliation and despair played out in slow motion: he remembered the conference room of the town council, the fresh smell of the recent renovations, of herbal tea and honey. From here they took him under guard to the place of execution. "Am I a criminal then?" He thought, when he was being taken under guard escort through the central town square. His lips were stubbornly pressed together, his cheekbones were moving, they left hollows in his cheeks. You could read silent resistance in each movement of his body. He didn't know what was waiting for him on the other side of the Command HQ building, but he knew most definitely, that he would not be asking for mercy. He did not plead, he did not ask to be freed when they forced him on his knees, when they said that "He had been taking too many liberties, and he's not here for long." He was staring down the barrel of a gun, he heard the sound of the weapon reloading and thought about one thing, he wished that the soldier would have enough skill to shoot precisely on target. The gun fired a round into the fence behind Kaliman's back, just slightly above his head… This was a mock execution.



Kaliman quickly took his telephone, his leather wrist band from Mount Athos and drove to the checkpoint. "Good God, they were leading me under guard like

the worst criminal. What did I do wrong?" and in his thoughts he returned again and again to the town square... "I thought that I was living a righteous and honest life, always... so that my children should never be ashamed of me." In his phone he found a photo of his grandchild and trembled. "Yes, I am a criminal—to my family. I say good-bye to them every day, and possibly, it's forever..."

THE REFUGEES FROM MARIUPOL

A 17-kilometre-long transport convoy... The road was packed with buses and cars: school buses, city buses, long distance buses, some with broken windows, doors damaged by shrapnel, vehicles with flat tires, with white pieces of cloth, with signs saying "Deti"... At that time we counted almost five thousand refugees from Mariupol (among them 680 children). They asked for water, warm blankets and baby formula. One mother asked for a litre of petrol, just one litre to put in the car to save her young baby from the cold.

> "ONE MOTHER ASKED FOR A LITRE OF PETROL, JUST ONE LITRE TO PUT IN THE CAR TO SAVE HER YOUNG BABY FROM THE COLD

Serhii Anatoliyevych came up to the group of Russian militaries. The old scar under his sportswear reminded him of his brush with death many years ago. The whole convoy became quiet, from Hill you could hear explosions. A bunch of bearded little green men sometimes raised and sometimes lowered their rifles. They gesticulated, with grimacing smiles, and spat in anger through their teeth. Kaliman spoke about something very loudly, it seems he even interrupted the senior one. The bravest people got out of the overfilled buses to gawk. Everybody was waiting for a decision, the right decision, because there was no place to return to.

In an hour it will be curfew; I reach for my phone. My medical mask falls out of my pocket, a reminder of a previous life, when it was scary to die, not from missile shelling but from some unknown Chinese virus. Scrolling through the news feed, I catch myself thinking about the rapid disappearance of the coronavirus. I read: "Evacuation convoys from Mariupol, which were held hostage for several days by the occupiers at the checkpoint in Vasylivka, are now reaching Zaporizhzhia. The refugees are being provided with professional assistance." The battery in my

phone is almost gone. I switch it off and try to inhale deeply, and tears come to my eyes. I knew the price of this "successful" evacuation, the same as everybody, who despite the danger, remained working at their job. That time, together with the refugees from Mariupol, we succeeded in passing through the checkpoints some wounded Ukrainian soldiers, who had defended their country to the last and had hidden from the occupiers.

The work day had ended long ago, but nobody was going home. We wait there silently.

"Denis, take the girls home! Dmytrovych, you take Nastia and Svieta. That's it, let's go! Tomorrow will be a hard day again. More convoys are coming."—he picked up his telephone and his bracelet from Mount Athos. "Let's go!"

Today, there was no one in his community who had died.

THE UNBEARABLE MORNING

During the night there were air raid alarms and in the morning everything was annoying. I was irritated by the artillery fire, the cold coffee, and the morning, which was repeating itself in the same way every day. I put on my usual jeans and the sneakers with the crack in the sole, and quickly ran to work. Today there were a lot of people in town. The farm women from the closest villages had come to town with milk and meat. People were selling candy and chewing gum and single-serve instant coffee packets out of car trunks. The Russian military were patrolling the town and making eyes at the young women. I instinctively pulled the hood of my sweater lower over my forehead and hid my telephone. I should walk calmly and slowly. But this square with its Russian tanks was just too large for me...

There was once again a crowd of locals near the church with their suitcases and backpacks, with their pet animals and a parrot...

"Tamara Serhiivna, you need to pay me a bonus. I have never evacuated feathered creatures before. Just kidding." Uncle Vanya and his friend Sasha stood on the stairs in front of the Town council. Now there were two school buses that would evacuate Vasylivka residents.

"Everything OK?" I asked uncertainly, already knowing the answer.

"We're ready to go, just waiting for you to command."

"And when will someone give me the OK to leave?" I catch myself thinking. In organizing the evacuation convoys, I had the opportunity to leave at any time. At the same time I also felt guilty before my own children and in my own eyes.

What was keeping me so long in this town that stank of Orcs[10]? What was driving me each day when I went to work on what could be my last day? Possibly, it was confidence in the people who surrounded me, and possibly, a lack of fear, because there was too much of that around for my liking.

What did I really want, standing on that same white curb in that same jacket which was still not warm enough? To get warm, to hide my hands in my pockets? To throw the weight of multifaceted human grief off my shoulders. To throw out all the candle stubs of trench candles from my memories. To tear out from my subconscious the steps of the heavy army boots of the Russian soldiers. To refresh my consciousness, to forget everything and everybody… Except for my memories of the sea, warm, always changeable and calm. Not that I was particularly fond of it, it was more that I loved the emotions that it would evoke.

I loved to watch the sea early in the morning. To breathe in the sunrise, warm and at the same time so fresh. To sift sand through my fingers and to imagine myself as the creator of the eternal Egyptian pyramids. Did I realize then that I was seeing the sea for the last time, and that when I promised to return in a year, I would be deceiving and betraying the sea?

Time flies by. The innocent souls of refugees, wounded by the war, sift through my fingers like grains of sand, and are scattered by the winds to all corners of the world. Sometime I will join them. But not yet. I'm still needed here, just a little.

Today my Sea is black and deep.

[10] "Orcs" is a pejorative commonly used by Ukrainians to refer to Russian soldiers participating in Russia's war against Ukraine. It comes from the name of the fictional humanoid monsters of the same name from Tolkien's fantasy novel "The Lord of the Rings."

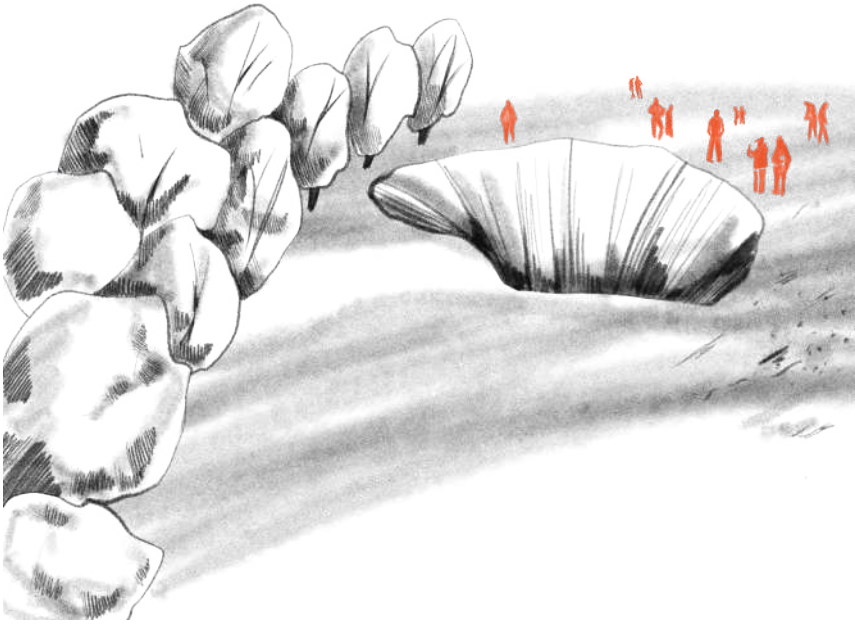
ANASTASIIA KOSTENKO

Anastasiia Kostenko was born in Krasnokutsk, a settlement in the Kharkiv oblast, and spent her childhood in the nearby town of Borova. After completing school, she moved to Kharkiv, eager to embrace the opportunities of a large city and transform her life.

Just hours before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Anastasiia managed to return to her hometown of Borova, where she would soon face the grim realities of war. Located in the "grey zone," the town was marked by constant tension. For a month and a half, Anastasiia and her neighbours worked tirelessly, organising humanitarian aid during the day and taking shelter from enemy shelling at night.

In mid-April, as Borova edged closer to occupation, Anastasiia and her mother fled to Krasnokutsk to stay with relatives. There, she joined a group of volunteers dedicated to supporting those affected by the war, distributing vital aid to those in need.

Today, Anastasiia remains in Krasnokutsk. She is a fourth-year university student, works in communications, and continues her voluntary efforts with unwavering dedication. Despite the immense challenges of living in the "grey zone," she feels the experience has made her stronger and more self-assured. Anastasiia firmly believes in the power of human kindness and the resilience needed to overcome even the toughest obstacles.



BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE

What do you associate with the colour grey? For me, personally, it's ashes, sadness, and uncertainty. And my sweet home too... because I live in a "grey zone." The "grey zone" is an area between light and darkness where you can't be sure about anything. It's a place where rules are broken, where boundaries are crossed, and a clear division between good and evil disappears. And it's in the "grey zone" that all kinds of stories happen. One such story happened to me. It won't be about heroism, rather—it's about the abundance of life.

It happened in one of the villages in the Kharkiv region. Let's call it village N. It's located on the bank of an artificial lake, and to get to village N, one has to cross a forest and a bridge that was destroyed on the very first day of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Village N is a place of contrasts. Here, bad roads and devastation are combined with splendid landscapes – endless fields, dense woods and a mirror-like river. When the war came, the contrast disappeared, having been replaced by greyness. The houses looked dirty and neglected, with chipped windows and tatty doors. The streets were covered with litter that had not been picked up for quite a while. Small grocery stores, pharmacies, children's playgrounds, and cosy cafes were closed. Life seemed to have hit the pause button. Local residents, who could be seen on the streets every now and then, moved fast and kept looking back. They were scared because danger could be anywhere. Fun and joy were long gone from this grey village. Despair and hopelessness were found at every corner, and there were no signs that this could ever change. That's the "grey zone" for you.

UNDER THE BLANKET OF MEMORIES

Here is a multi-unit apartment building. Apartment number 18 on the ground floor, is located in the second section of the apartment building. This is where I live. In addition, all of us, who have the same mailing address, share the basement. This is what my neighbours and I have in common – a shared basement. In many buildings these basements serve as storage for old items, a pantry, parking space for bicycles and strollers, or even mini garages. And since February 2022, the basements have acquired yet another function – shelter.

My first night in the sub-apartment (don't be surprised, that's what I call the basement) was "unforgettable." The air raid sirens kept going. There was chaos and panic in the residents' online chat. There were rumours about a high probability of Russian shelling. Rumours… "Heard the song but got it wrong." I'm not a fan of "word of mouth" and this: "someone said something, someone saw something." I'm all about official data and verified information. However, I got scared that day. I wanted to run away from the whole world and hide somewhere no one would find me. The one who brings me down to earth and brings me to my senses is my mom. Mom. I look at her with my frightened eyes and try to understand how she manages to keep her cool. Over the last few hours, since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, she seemed to have aged ten years. She copes well, trying not to show her fear but her eyes betray her. I spot desperation in those deep green eyes of hers. A grimace of pain, along with a forced, unnatural smile, are frozen on her face. Mom ordered me to quickly go down to the basement.

My mind was in a haze. I didn't even notice how I got to the sub-apartment. It's cold and smells of dampness. Time and time again the question pops up in my head: "What did we do? Why should we, Ukrainians, live like this? Why should we hide in a basement, because the eastern 'neighbour' decided to 'liberate' us?" A dusty basement, cobwebs everywhere, all kinds of junk? All that gave me an unstable sense of security, for the first time today.

A few minutes later, mom came down. She brought a mattress. Together, we set up our own space next to the big battered box where we stored our old things. I sat down on the mattress and looked around our sub-apartment. On the floor, right by our boxes, lay an old, abandoned children's blanket. The little, soft-purple blanket with teddy bears on it looked painfully familiar to me. It stirred something deep within me, my heart skipped a beat. "Well, if it isn't my… my favourite blanket!" I remember it, protecting me from cold nights and guarding my precious sleep, as a true friend would, when I was little. A wave of nostalgia washed over me. My whole childhood flashed before my eyes. I wished I could go back to those carefree days even for a moment. That blanket ensured happiness during the dark times. I actually fell asleep hugging it.

A CRATER IN THE HEART

It's sunny. I feel a warmth in my heart. A forest plantation is spread out before me, with a huge variety of trees. The thick branches of mighty oaks look like forked hands. The pines were tall, with trunks which stretched upwards for several meters. There's a smell of pine branches and oak leaves in the air. Sun rays poke through the branches. The whole forest is filled with the sounds of nature – the bird songs, the rustle of leaves, the rapid stream of the river that flows nearby. Tranquillity. Harmony. Safety.

That's how it used to be. In a past life, the forest plantation used to be a place of harmony, but now it has become a place of chaos. There is a crater in the centre of the plantation now. A crater created by an explosion of a Russian rocket. A radius of 10 meters, 6 meters deep. Abyss... The size and depth of the crater are striking, in a negative sense. Bushes and trees are scattered around the crater, within a radius of about 30 meters. They didn't survive the shock wave. People survived though – fortunately, there were no casualties after the hit. There is a strong smell of smoke and burning near the place where the rocket hit the ground. To think about how many lives that rocket would have ended, had it struck say 300 meters to the right or left, is scary. How many tears would have been shed in this forest plantation?!

As weird as it may sound, the crater has become quite a popular spot among the village residents. A lot of people would flock to the crater with one goal in mind—to take pictures. To record our history. To document Russian crimes. To remember this moment and understand how much they have gone through already and how much more was yet to come. I myself have stood on the edge of that crater. I don't know why I did, but that's how I felt, at the time. It was creepy. Standing a step away from the "earthly abyss," I felt vulnerable and helpless. I felt like a small, insignificant person in the middle of a war. I saw how much damage had been done by one rocket; and there were hundreds of them across Ukraine. Yes, of course, you can get the rocket out of the ground, cover up the crater, and it will be as if nothing ever happened. But it's impossible to fill up the crater in the heart.

A STORY ABOUT BREAD AND GROWING UP

For the first time since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the day was relatively quiet. Fortunately, the air raid alert went off only once (though it would have been better if it didn't go off at all). I decided to seize the opportunity and finally spend the night at home, in a cosy room, in a warm bed with my favourite stuffed toy. I was a little scared. Intrusive thoughts were creeping into my head. "What if shelling starts at night? What if I don't make it to the basement in time?" And many more of those if's. In the end, I did stay at home. I was lucky—the night was peaceful.

Around six o'clock in the morning I heard voices in the yard. Female, male, high, low, hoarse, gruff, twang, elderly, grumpy, whiny—there were different voices there. At first, I didn't even understand what sort of meeting was going on under my apartment windows. It turned out all those people (and there were about 25-30 of them) came here with one purpose—to get in line at the store. It was a bread delivery day. Bread disappeared from the shelves of local grocery stores as far back as February 24. For about two weeks there were no resupplies at all in the village. One might think that bread is an ordinary food product that every Ukrainian has on their table. Not now, however. Not during the war when bread becomes a luxury. So, our local women started to bake bread themselves, to somehow meet the demand. Naturally, there wasn't much of it, but it was available. And that's already something.

Some people came to the store at six in the morning for a loaf of fragrant bread with a crispy crust, although the store doesn't open until eleven. I understand them because we are in the same situation. We are all surviving on humanitarian aid and food stocks, which were purchased on the first day of the invasion. Grandma's preserves and pickles helped, too. "Grandma, why do you keep canning those jars. It's so much trouble... It's easier to buy them in a store," I used to always say. However, my grandma was adamant: for her, canning was a special kind of meditation. Over the years, it finally dawned on me as well that one should not rely solely on stores, it's good to have some food stocks at home. Well, I'm growing up fast!

PILAF UNDER FIRE

There were 12 of us in the sub-apartment in the basement, back then, on that first horrible day of the full-scale invasion. Days passed, and many neighbours managed to evacuate. There are three routes to get out of the village: two of them through the occupied territories, and the last one was through the city where the fighting was going on. The village was literally surrounded on three sides, isolated from the region. People still took risks. People fled. People were afraid of Russians coming to the village. They were afraid of occupation.

Within a month of the full-scale invasion, our basement crowd had dwindled down to 4 people: an elderly couple, my mom and me. Lubov Pavlivna and Anatolii Petrovych are my neighbours from the apartment across the hall, who don't like it when I address them so formally. That's why they are simply grandma Liuba and grandpa Tolia. They have been living in perfect harmony for 45 years now. I think that grandpa Tolia and grandma Liuba are incredibly similar to Mr. and Mrs. Fredricksen from the cartoon "Up." Grandpa Tolia is 70 and he is a bit of a grump. He is not too fond of people, but he loves birds. Therefore, it's not surprising that he devotes most of his time to pigeon breeding. And he is helped by his wife—a super-positive grandma, Liuba, who melts the heart of her grumpy husband every day. The full-scale invasion destroyed that paradise.

These neighbours flatly refused to leave the village. "Where we were born is where we will die," they repeated those words like a mantra. We were together during all the air raids. My mom always loved to cook. That's why I wasn't surprised when I saw her bringing a pressure cooker to the basement one day. To my mom cooking was what canning was to my grandmother—a special kind of meditation. It runs in the family. "Now we are going to cook my signature dish—pilaf!" mom said cheerfully and assigned a task to everyone. Grandpa Tolia handled carrots and onions, while grandma Liuba chopped meat. I got the most important mission—to peel garlic, a lot of garlic. Alerts, shelling, missiles, bombs—we forgot about all that while we were cooking pilaf. We talked, laughed, shared real-life stories. We were happy, we were in the moment. I hope that in the near future grandpa Tolia will release one of his pigeons into the sky over free Ukraine!

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE PALACE OF CULTURE

It's the morning of April 11, 2022. In the Village N, I'm approaching the local Palace of Culture. It has always brought me warm memories. I remember my first performance on the palace stage. I remember how nervous I was. I was a member of the dance team called Inspiration. Back then, in 2010, the thing I was afraid of the most was forgetting my choreography, making a mistake.

Backstage, the air is filled with anxiety. I'm wearing a short but such a cute light pink dress. My mom braided my hair into tight pigtails so that it wouldn't get in the way during the performance. Literally 10 minutes ago she gave me a Little Fairy perfume and told me that I was the best and that I would be fine. I was beyond happy but my nervousness didn't go away. I could feel my heart beating fast with anxiety, my hands shaking. I didn't notice how I adjusted my pigtails, tapping my foot nervously on the floor. When the presenter announced our dance team's name, I felt my heart stop for a moment.

I fondly remembered my first stage performance, which seemed like a global catastrophe; my innocent time when I didn't know what war was. Right now I'm standing in line in front of the Palace of Culture, a place so close to my heart and so alien at the same time, to get humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid for people affected by the war and I came here for sugar. We ran out of our pre-war stocks of the so-called "white death" a week ago. The shops are empty. And I would kill for some sweet tea…

There was an explosive sound. My heart was pounding, hoping that it's not an air raid. It came from different directions all at once, it seemed. There were screams, panic, and chaos. Frightened people were rushing to the Palace of Culture. Someone was sick. Someone was silently crying. Someone was praying. Someone clutched at their chest. And someone fainted. I was frantically searching my

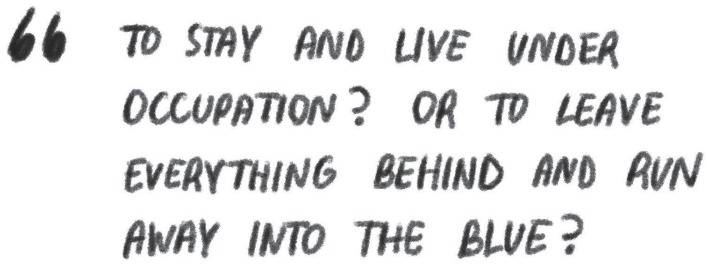
purse for some medicines to help those who didn't feel well. Amidst all that commotion, I noticed a small boy, about seven years old, sitting on the floor of the Palace of Culture, with his arms wrapped around his knees. He was very slowly and carefully swaying from side to side. His face was contorted with tension and fear, and his breathing was deep and uneven. The room got stuffy. When the boy took off his jacket, his hands were shaking, and his eyes seemed to be looking for someone but not finding them. It turned out that the boy's name was Denis. His house was a five-minute walk from the Palace of Culture. He said he came with his mother to get humanitarian aid. A few minutes before the shelling began, Denis' mom ran home to check on his little sister. The boy stayed in the line alone. When the shelling started, he was very scared. I hoped his mom comes back, soon. In the meantime, I am trying to calm the child down and cheer him up somehow. The shelling doesn't seem that loud anymore. People are starting to leave the Palace of Culture. Amidst the crowd at the door, a woman going against the flow stands out—she is trying to get inside the building, rather than getting out. Denis' happy eyes tell me that it's his mom. A joyful moment of family reunion. I feel incredibly relieved, as my little "palace companion" is in safe hands.

The shelling has stopped. I am walking home along the street, surrounded by dead silence, as if everyone has died. I can't even hear any dogs or cats. Only the sound of my own footsteps on the asphalt breaks the silence. Just two months ago, this street was bustling with life, alas it seems neglected and abandoned now. That felt scary and creepy.

IT'S NEVER GOING TO BE "AS IT USED TO"

April 11, 2022. Village N. It's lunchtime, and I'm on my way home after a shelling. The premonition that something bad is about to happen never leaves me. I am worried. And rightly so, as it turns out.

My apartment greets me with a mess. All the cabinets and drawers are turned upside down, my things are scattered all over the apartment, and there is a pile of suitcases on the floor. "No way." I thought. My mom came out of the room, worried, and said the words I wish I could forget, forever. "Russians are in the village. We are occupied. We've got to run." My heart was pounding incessantly, my hands were shaking. My mind went blank. My heart sank. To stay and live under occupation? Or to leave everything behind and run away into the blue? "Living under occupation" sounds absurd. Because one doesn't live under occupation, one survives, that's if they stay alive in the first place. I realised that the move was inevitable. Although a protest was raging in my heart. I absolutely didn't want to leave my own home. And it's not even about the apartment being of a material value. Not at all. First of all, my small apartment is a place of memories and happy



moments in my life. That's why, leaving my apartment, I lost a piece of my soul. I buried it in the village of N.

Relocation is a ten-letter word and implies hundreds of kilometres at the same time. Relocation is a period of uncertainty and tension. I was riding in the back seat of the car and looking out the window. A grey, faceless village, but so dear to my heart, nevertheless. It's mine. My childhood passed here, here I learned to love, hate and just live. I didn't know if I would ever be back here again. I didn't know whether my apartment would be hit. I didn't know if I would make it to a new place of residence at all. I didn't know if I'd survive. I was scared of the future… But what I knew for sure was that it would never be "as it used to."

The sun set below the horizon, leaving behind a bright red streak in the sky. A regular sunset on my street. There's one difference though: my street is not mine anymore. Had I not evacuated the occupied village, I might have stood on this street, watching the sunset and listening to the battle sounds. I might have seen the Russians ruining my apartment. I might have witnessed my fellow villagers die at the hands of the Russians. I might have died myself.

Now, looking back, I realize how timely my evacuation was. A new stage has begun in my life, but I still don't know what to do with myself. There is still hope in my heart that the war will be over soon, and I will finally come out of the "grey zone" into the light, into the sun. One fine day, I'll return home!

ANASTASIIA KUZNIETSOVA

Ten days prior to the full-scale invasion, Anastasiia Kuznietsova got a job as a press and public relations officer at the Vasylivka City Council. Anastasiia comes from the village of Kamianske, Vasylivka District, Zaporizhzhia Region, which has now become an outpost in the Zaporizhzhia direction of the front. Anastasiia stayed in her village under artillery fire for two weeks and after that she made a conscious decision to go to the occupied city of Vasylivka.

She worked in the occupied city under the Ukrainian flag for about two months, was part of the team of the Vasylivka City Council headed by the mayor Serhii Kaliman. She tried to support the community daily operations, helped evacuate everyone who wanted to, and supported those who didn't want to leave their homes.

After five months spent in the occupied city, she left for the front-line city of Zaporizhzhia. Together with the team of the Vasylivka City Council, she now works there, providing the displaced persons from Vasylivka with everything they needed in Zaporizhzhia. She has a large blue and yellow flag, signed by close friends and family from Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Warsaw, that will surely fly over the de-occupied Vasylivka community soon.

MEMORIES

Was I ready to kill him? Yes. The automatic rifle hung on his shoulder too carelessly, as if a weapon. It would take me seven seconds to grab it and shoot it. He stood in our office, as if at home, as if we had come to him, and not the other way around. He had a surprisingly unnaturally grey beard and plump lips. I never personally communicated with him, but I knew: that person was playing a familiar scenario for the second time. Only now it was all happening, not on the news, and not in Donbas, but in my Zaporizhzhia Region, in my city of Vasylivka. In our city council, here and now, in our office. He was waiting for a Russian-language script from us for the May 9 festivities. While the whole world honours the memory of those who died in the Second World War, he was used to celebrating that day on a grand scale. He needed children who would recite poems in Russian and sing Russian songs. I'd like to disappear, to evaporate, not to see this person. How did I end up here? I close my eyes.

MEMORY 1: WINDOWS

February 24. The twenty-sixth session of the Vasylivka City Council. The city hall, third floor, wide, spacious windows. Physically I am in the room: I have a camera in my hands and a phone in my pocket with the recorder turned on. I can't take my eyes off the long line at the Privatbank ATM. Panicky people try to withdraw as much cash as possible.

I went to my aunt's after work. She decided to pack the most critical items into her suitcase just in case. My cousin and I sat in the kitchen, updated the news, looked out the window to take a good look at the military vehicles. Two hours later, I found out that my uncle lost a leg and was in intensive care. He and his

colleagues were driving trucks in a convoy that was on the move somewhere in the Nova Kakhovka area. A helicopter with Russian markings fired at three unmarked trucks. Empty trucks. Three hours later, I found out that my aunt and my cousin evacuated, after all. In tears and despair—that's how my war began on the evening of the 24th.

MEMORY 2: SOUNDS

The first artillery shelling of the village. In the basement there is a musty smell of dampness, which I had noticed every time when I'd taken canned jars over there. I didn't think that this smell would bother me so much. But I have allergies. I blow my nose all the time. This really annoys my brother. After a few hours it got very cold in the basement. My prolonged sitting in one position caused body cramps. Dad brought down a bottle of mulled wine that my aunt had brought from Poland. My parents didn't open it—they kept it in a bar, saving it for a special occasion. It was supposed to be drunk hot, of course. After a small glass of the cold drink I started to warm up. I never thought that I would see my parents convincing my fourteen-year-old brother to drink alcohol. Dad brought down some blankets and foil insulation. He found an old vacuum cleaner and started building a heating furnace. During several minute intervals between the shelling, my brother came out of the basement and gathered wood chips near the firewood shack. We started to use the furnace a day after the power was cut. At first, we couldn't breathe, because of the carbon monoxide, as Dad's product had a far from perfect ventilation system. But day by day the heating furnace got modernised.

Every now and then, Dad turned on the generator to save fuel. We heated the kettle and washed ourselves in "a spoonful of water," as my grandmother used to say. Mom baked cookies (also called *pyshkas*). That made up for the lack of bread. I will never eat cookies again in my life.

In a few days, the shelling got more intense. Dad covered the top of the basement that looked like a small hill on level ground, with iron sheets—I thought that our basement, half a S-300 missile deep, was the safest place in the world. That evening, we heard automatic rifle fire on the Kharkiv–Simferopol highway for the first time. We sat quietly and listened. The sounds were different from those we were used to hearing—it was a new symphony for the ears. I didn't know if it was possible to root for someone in this situation. A bullet's lethal range is approximately 1500 meters. We lived 450 meters away from the road. Late at night, when many minutes had passed since the last shot, we left the basement. I froze before entering the house: a military vehicle was on the road with its headlights on. Black specks were visible next to it and along the section of the road that was visible from my yard. Those were the bodies of dead soldiers that were taken away two days later. My temples were throbbing, as if my head were a kettle that had boiled. I didn't allow myself to cry, because I didn't know which side those dead soldiers belonged to.

A few days later, Serhii Anatoliyovych called me: "It's dangerous to stay in the village. You either go to the occupied Vasylivka, or to Ukrainian Zaporizhzhia." That's how the riskiest fifty-four days of my life began.

MEMORY 3: OFFICE

Volunteers brought parcels. Sashko was the name of the person in charge of their operations. They went to Zaporizhzhia, where relatives, friends and simply caring people gave them medicines, house cleaning products, fast food, and less frequently, money, Ukrainian mobile SIM cards for address deliveries to our community members. We have sunk so much into deficiency of everything that old people started reminiscing about the Soviet Union times. At that time, when the Russian military allowed volunteers to travel with Ukrainian goods to the occupied territory, our office looked like a Nova Poshta branch (a Ukrainian postal and courier company). About a thousand parcels passed through my hands, with some of them ripped up and plundered at enemy checkpoints, even the ones with the inscription "Urgent! Insulin for Masha."

We always had a woman with us at the city hall who helped with parcels. Olia (that was her name) communicated perfectly in Russian and didn't have the "g," so characteristic of the Ukrainian accent. She often left the office when the Russian military entered the building and wandered through the corridors. The rest of us, on the contrary, sat still. She often went to the management office where there was no one except the Russian military. She explained her behaviour by wanting to get her mug from the office. I saw her weird smile and the way she behaved around the Russian invaders. As one of the administrators of the administrative services centre, a huge database was on her computer screen all this while. I didn't understand why she was worried about the damn mug and not about the information she didn't bother to delete. A few months later, she started working for the enemy.

Serhii Anatoliyovych, the mayor of the already occupied municipality, entered the office. Once a handsome man in formal suits, he was now hunched over, wearing two jackets, with a phone in his hand. All the time I worked under occupation, I never saw him without a phone. His face was disfigured by wrinkles that I hadn't noticed before. I don't know how many hours a day he slept—his eyes weren't just tired, they looked right through you. Risking his own life and health, he negotiated with the Russian military commandant, convincing him of the need for the so-called "green corridor." My mission in this large-scale process was photo and video recording of the evacuation process. We had to show other occupied territories that it was possible to evacuate through our city. Videos spread on social networks. "Nastia, come. They are allowing people to evacuate."

I left the town hall. I was a kind of signal for those who regularly evacuated people to Zaporizhzhia in their own cars. They knew that I would only come out when

there was a hundred percent confirmation that people were allowed to leave. I was afraid to go out without a reason or unaccompanied. Serhii Anatoliyovych got on the buses, calmed people down, and said a few parting words. The woman sitting in front was not just crying—she was sobbing. Her gaze was unfocused, she looked at the church, then at the confused child next to her. She was saying something, but all one can figure out from that crying is that she didn't want to leave her home, and she demanded the mayor to promise that she will return soon. Embraces. I put my phone down, I couldn't take a picture like that. I was crying. Nobody ever said parting words to the bus drivers, but I saw those handshakes and hugs. As if for the last time. Everyone who came to see the evacuation convoy off, came to pray for them because they understood where the bus was going.

The first obstacle was the enemy checkpoints, where the soldiers toughened their routine every day. The road was the second one. Talk of a "green corridor" didn't always mean a "green corridor." No one wanted to risk people's lives, but the Russians' words "we won't shoot" were the only hope for evacuees willing to leave. What should a driver do when, halfway to the drop-off point, the shelling begins? What should the people on the bus do? There is no manual for that. Obstacle number three was the drop-off point. Buses headed to the village of Kamianske. There was a bridge that had been blown up. There was no more road. People got off the buses, crossed the river on stones, and headed to where the volunteers were waiting for them, to take them to Zaporizhzhia. One hundred meters to be walked in the village, where artillery shelling doesn't stop for a second. One hundred metres of trail: not a step to the left or to the right. Everything around was laid with mines. It often happened that people would walk or crawl for hours to traverse those crucial hundred meters. I don't know what thoughts they had when they reached the volunteers' vehicles that always had a white cloth on them.

> "TALK OF A "GREEN CORRIDOR" DIDN'T ALWAYS MEAN A "GREEN CORRIDOR"

MEMORY 4: COLOURS

The Vasylivka city hall has always flown three flags: the EU, the Ukrainian and the raspberry-red flag that was, actually, the flag of the Vasylivka Region. The administration building was located five hundred metres from the city hall. The flag the Russians put up was the exact same flag that the USSR troops once raised over the Reichstag in 1945. Armoured personnel carriers with Russian flags were parked near the entrance. That's how our main city square lived for fifty-two days: Ukrainian, EU, Vasylivka, Russian and Soviet flags. It so happened that we had to constantly be in contact with the enemy personnel, in order to support the community and not leave people to the mercy of fate. One day, one

of the important figures of the occupation authorities aggressively asked Serhii Anatoliyovych about the EU flag on the city hall. To this day, we remember the mayor's clever answer: "Our city is a unique case in the history of modern Ukraine. The country didn't become a member of the EU, but our city did. I photograph this flag every day and send the EU a report, do you understand?" He seemed to have understood. The flag wasn't touched for another two weeks.

MEMORY 5: DAILY ROUTINE

A nucleus is the central part of an atom. It holds the particles together. If the nucleus is overloaded with energy or suffers negative influence of external factors, it becomes unstable and can cause destruction. Serhii Anatoliyovych Kaliman was the nucleus or the core of our work during the occupation. The man who vowed to be with people, as much as his own health and Russian military with guns would allow. He tested their patience and his fate.

"Put your hair in a bun and wear your hoods tightly when you go to the city hall"—was the beginning of the office meeting. Each day at city hall started with an office meeting, announcing the action plan until the evening, and recording a video message for the community residents. Those videos pursued several goals: to support people who were intimidated to death and to show that the team was there and working. Usually, the video contained words of gratitude to the city hall, the parliament members and the volunteers who worked twenty-four seven. The issue of electricity, gas, and water supply was always raised. Due to non-stop shelling, several villages in the region were always without electricity. The videos mentioned the possibility of signing up for evacuation by school buses and joining the general convoy with your own car. Serhii Anatoliyovych gave an update on the shelling impact: how many facilities had been damaged and destroyed, the number of wounded and killed. Every time he reminded the audience about information hygiene and the importance of trusting only official sources. The videos always ended with the words "Take care, let's stay strong, see you later."

Videos showing the evacuation, with the caption "it was a success today," spread on the social networks, and people from the south and east of Ukraine began to join our convoys. As cars and buses were added to the convoys, the waiting time at checkpoints got longer. We accommodated and warmed people who fled in slippers and light jackets in our kindergartens, schools and the lyceum, all of which were converted into temporary accommodation places. We used 100% of our humanitarian supplies to meet the needs of those people. That decision was made after shops had partially reopened, were stocked with essential goods and were able to accept payments by credit cards. We provided local residents with the opportunity to purchase the essentials, and we used all our resources for helping those who spent the nights in cars and our "invincibility centres" or temporary shelters.

The situation worsened when chaos got into people's heads. There were moments when no one wanted to understand that humanitarian aid tends to end, that the mayor can't influence the frequency of shelling and amount of destruction, that the Russian military won't leave the city. Serhii Anatoliyovych emptied his own farm's warehouses in his native village nearby, in order to provide people with at least some vegetables. A few thanked him for his care, the majority were unhappy that they got only half of the cabbage. We explained that if it were not for such a division, there wouldn't be enough for everyone. I felt exhausted.

A dangerous critical point was reached when the city hall employees started chatting about rumours concerning the mayor's potential shooting, the pressure from the Russian authorities increased, and their military visits became more frequent. I knew little, which was a blessing at the time. The less you knew, the less interesting you were to the Russian authorities. That's why, posing for another photo with Serhii Anatoliyovych with the city hall and the Ukrainian flag in the background, I didn't know that it was our last one. Thank God he managed to leave, because by April 25, the Russian flag was already flying over the city hall and a new administration was in charge.

The new government of the temporarily occupied Vasylivka community adored provocations. But more than that, it seemed to me, they loved not to think them through. All their provocations were immediately debunked. While the new authorities were posting on their Telegram online channel that the morning shelling was carried out by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, some locals would already be standing at the crater and seeing the opposite. Any person, even without strong analytical skills, could figure out that if an artillery shell flew from one side, it would land slightly slanted, tearing up the ground/asphalt on the opposite side. Sometimes we heard the release of a projectile, counted four to five seconds, and something would be hit in the city. The Russian authorities' attempts to convince the locals that the city was shelled by the Ukrainian military failed.

The administrator of the Telegram channel with the largest number of subscribers made his position known on Easter. The man urged everyone not to be afraid, gave out the time and the three different locations for the Easter bread blessing, with the caption "The Pantsyr-S1 and S-400 'Triumph' Russian air defence systems will be protecting us." At the first announced location there was only the man who covered the event on his Telegram channel and the military. Even the priest didn't come to the second advertised location—the school, where the believers gathered, was shelled. The Telegram channel administrator published the post with the subject line "New shelling by the Armed Forces of Ukraine."

Thoughts are different when you are desperate. My despair began on the day the flag was changed on the city hall, when our work stopped and when I realised

that from then on I was helpless. I couldn't be useful when I was at home, I didn't have a possibility to help others alone. That's when I got acquainted with "ye-voroh," a chat service launched by the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation, which stands for "the enemy is here." In this Telegram service, Ukrainians could report the Russian military equipment and personnel positions. My first contribution was uploading a photo and a brief description of events in the city of Vasylivka. After processing the information, the operators called me. After seven days of non-stop phone conversations with various personnel, the operator Mykhailo began to correspond with me on Telegram on a regular basis. "Yesterday, there were about ten white cars of the Russian Ministry of Emergencies in downtown Vasylivka, the curfew was conditionally extended (it wasn't announced anywhere). All those who came early to the market or the shops were dispersed. Shops were banned from trading yesterday. Today was 'business as usual,'" was one of the messages I sent. On May 25, Mykhailo told me about the movement of an armoured train from the city of Melitopol to the city of Vasylivka, with many tanks on platforms and ammunitions in train cars. My mission was to observe the movement of the train at least until it arrived in Vasylivka. Ideally, count the tanks and other equipment. For safety reasons, I never went out without my mom or dad. That evening, I had a hard time coming up with an excuse why I wanted to go to the playground by myself. But it was all in vain—the armoured train never showed up, neither that day, nor later.

Maxim is my fiancé. He is a military medic and gunner, and has been defending the country in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since 2019. It became extremely difficult to get in touch with him after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. On May 30, I had a video call with him. The video quality started to deteriorate, I turned it off to call again. At 15:35, the mobile connection and the internet went down in the city of Vasylivka. For the first two days, we lived in hope that the connection would be restored. On the third, the occupiers started distributing newspapers with Russian propaganda in the city.

After several attempts by the "ground breakers" to find a network signal at least somewhere, rumours began to spread around the city that the best spot was near the church. Ironical. During the war, the church reached the peak of its popularity—first it served as a gathering point for people who were evacuating, now it was a place where you'd get two Vodafone bars on your phone.

We went to that church like it was our workplace: every morning. It was the only way to call relatives and read the news. Next to the church was a park, which had been being reconstructed since 2021. There was a high fence around the excavated pit. After a month of regular visits to the church, the pit began to smell very badly. Over time, under the scorching sun, the stench became unbearable. Suspicions about the dead dog in the pit were not convincing—it seemed that there were people there. A strong, thick smell that tests your endurance—that's what death smells like. It seemed to me that the Russian military were simply

dumping their dead comrades, brought from the "grey zone," there, but that was just guesswork.

After the attempts at catching a mobile signal and maybe five minutes on the phone if we were lucky, we would go to the market place. The occupation set us back decades. Obsessively, we grabbed at any opportunity to withdraw cash, because everyone understood—the longer we were in occupation, the fewer Hryvnias remained in circulation. The market reached its zenith in the first months of the occupation: open-air trade was not in demand in Vasylivka, where the infrastructure was well developed, but the Russian troops' invasion affected absolutely all the aspects of life. The choice of goods wasn't wide. Thanks to God and the brave people who had gone shopping in other cities, we were able to buy basic necessities. Prices were determined by several factors: how much fuel the seller used, how many roadblocks he crossed, and how well the product was preserved after hours of waiting for the pass at the roadblocks. Russian soldiers were always among the buyers. Crowds of people hustling, children looking for something colourful on the counters, sellers quickly packing your order and faceless men in military uniforms with assault rifles. Why faceless? I was always afraid to meet their eyes, so I cast a quick side-glance.

Every day you would meet a person with complaints about the Russian military's inappropriate behaviour. No one had ever claimed what the reason for that was: alcohol, drugs or just an unstable psyche. Once, my mom and I were standing in line for vegetables. Two military men were standing nearby. They looked away and laughed. The reason for the laughter was their elderly friend with an automatic rifle. The man frightened those around him and caused them to raise their eyebrows with his behaviour: he mumbled some melody, waved his hands sharply and inconsistently, his legs were swaying and he was salivating. He came up to me and started talking about the sequins on my sweatpants. We never bought vegetables that day.

On another occasion, I once again happened to meet the invaders who appeared to be on some psychotropic drugs. This second time was in the park. My mom was able to get a signal of the mobile network Kyivstar under the fir tree, I got two Vodafone bars and tried to download a book onto my phone, and my dad was just waiting for us. Two Chechens in Russian military uniforms were passing by. One of them looked at dad and started shouting loudly "Hello, father, was it you who bombed Mariupol?" They stopped. We didn't know how to react to that, so we smiled nervously. They liked our reaction and moved on. There was a children's playground a little further. There the Chechens beat a rhythm with their feet, tried to do push-ups and went on a swing.

There were so many Russian troops in the city in general, that the ratio of civilians to soldiers seemed to be one to three. They were frequent "guests" on our street, because a member of the local Ukrainian government authorities lived next to us.

This person was an elderly person with a wealth of experience, his own business, and influence and authority among the locals. I don't know how the invaders tried to persuade him to cooperate, and he didn't want to share it. I just saw their cars near his yard both at night and during the day. His wife said at the end of another visit one of the soldiers said: "Don't hope in vain. We really liked your city, but if we retreat, we will burn everything here." Our neighbour currently has no business, because the Russian authorities took away everything he had built up over the years, due to his disobedience. He has great hopes to see the Ukrainian flag in his native Vasylivka again.

Gradually, Russian soldiers started to take off their military uniforms and change into civilian clothes. I learned about these developments in a newly opened grocery store. My mom was talking to a friend about another bombing of a village near Vasylivka. A man dressed in a black jean jacket, a cap and blue pants intervened in the conversation with the question "Whose plane was it?" The Russian language had always been a common thing in our city. Some people communicated in Russian before the invasion, so when I heard that remark about "whose plane," I took a deep breath and was about to answer. But I caught the shop lady's eye. She looked at me with her eyes wide open and tried to signal something with her gaze. I kept silence. And that man went away. The shop lady whispered that it was a Russian soldier. It was good I stopped in time. Who knows what my careless remark would have cost me?

MEMORY 6: CHECKPOINT

During the five months under occupation, I reassured myself and my family with the phrase "we'll be liberated soon." But I didn't want to wait in vain. I found a young man who was delivering cars from the occupied territory to their owners in Ukrainian controlled regions. I made arrangements to go with him. Before the trip, I deleted all social media and messengers from my phone. At the end of July 2022, I left the occupied Vasylivka for the Ukraine-controlled city of Zaporizhzhia. Without make-up, in sweatpants, I hid my jewellery in my sneakers. The last Russian checkpoint. The last Russian in my memories. A lustful look and an ironic smile.

"Why are you leaving?" he asked, looking closely at my passport.

"I need to settle some things, related to my studying at the university," I answered calmly, looking into his eyes.

"And then you'll come back?"

"And then I'll come back," I lied.

"What's your major?"

Under stress, my blond head doesn't operate as fast as I would like it to, so I honestly answered:

"Journalism."

The expression on his face changed instantly, his gaze changed from hungry to hostile, hateful, the smile disappeared, and his muscles tensed up. He asked for my phone and started rummaging everywhere he could. He gave it back after a ten-minute check. The photo gallery, my contacts, the Google browser and even the calendar windows were open. He asked if I had a boyfriend and licked his lips. I answered that I did.

"And where is he?"

Where the war began in 2014, in the trenches of the Donetsk Region. Covered in sweat and blood, he's been fighting to take every piece of our land back from the enemy who came to us with weapons in their hands. Where he takes the remains of his dead brothers and drives them in the vehicle with an eye-popping stench to the place of transfer of the dead. Where on February 24, 2022 the earth never stopped shaking and he called me to say goodbye. Remembering the first days of the full-scale invasion, he said that he was 100% sure that they wouldn't survive, "We wanted to hold out for at least a day so that it wouldn't be so embarrassing." He is there so that we can live freely, with the right to vote. So that people under occupation have hope for liberation. I would like to give him that answer, but the self-preservation instinct kicked in.

"He is in Poland, for seasonal labour, building residential and office buildings."

He nodded, and we drove on in a five-kilometre long line of cars. Passing the Ukrainian checkpoint, I started to cry. After five months of seeing Russian soldiers with machine guns, it was impossible to hold back tears when you saw your own. Those who checked your IDs and calmed you down, gave sweets to crying children. That was my first, in five months, slogan "Glory to Ukraine," that I shouted so loudly.

Before the full-scale invasion, a trip from Vasylivka to Zaporizhzhia usually took a maximum of forty minutes. That day it took me eight hours. The Russian checkpoints and the ID check right before the entrance to Zaporizhzhia took the most time.

The Vasylivka City Council works from Zaporizhzhia now, gathering around it our community residents, most of whom also left for Zaporizhzhia. We arranged for them to get education in Zaporizhzhia and set up a coordination and humanitarian aid hub, to provide assistance to internally displaced persons from our community. We allocate funds to finance the needs of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the Territorial Defence Forces. We are writing grant applications to receive funding for rebuilding our community after de-occupation. We work for Victory here and now.

VLADYSLAVA MERZLIAKOVA

Vladyslava Merzliakova comes from the small village of Khomivka in the Luhansk region. Her dream was to become an investigator, so she entered the National University of Internal Affairs in Kharkiv and became a cadet. At the time of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, she was studying in the city of Kharkiv. Because of the war, she returned to her native Khomivka to live with her parents. On March the 6th, 2022, her village was occupied, and all the roads were blocked. She could not leave for the unoccupied territory of Ukraine, but managed to leave the occupied area five months later. Her entire family remained in the temporarily occupied territory.

Currently, Vladyslava is a 4th year university student, and she will become an investigator very soon, just as she had dreamed. After graduation, she will receive her first officer rank and go to serve in the de-occupied territory, where she plans to help Ukraine get back on her feet.

THE LIFE THAT WAS STOLEN FROM ME

Evening. Summer. Rain. Thunder. The air was filled with freshness. Dark clouds covered the sky. Dark blue shadows cloaked the ground. The grape leaves at the vineyard collected the first rain drops. I hear mom shouting in the yard: "Dinner is getting cold." The delicious smell of mom's goodies fills the entire yard. Individual droplets start to fall faster and more heavily.

Bang. Bang. Powerful sounds of thunder spread throughout the neighbourhood, making the ground vibrate slightly. A second later, the thunder rumbles even louder. It sends powerful sound waves through the wet air. A cold sweat runs through my body. Another clap of thunder—this time so loud that I stopped breathing. I take a step, lightning flashes before my eyes, the ground shakes. A loud bang. Dad's voice: "Into the basement, hurry up!" I see him quickly open the old wooden cellar door. The blue paint had faded in the sun long ago, the dry, peeling pieces that dad touched were blown away by the wind. With the speed of light, mom, dad and three nephews find themselves in a damp, semi-dark room. Moisture is everywhere. There are racks with jars of home preserves attached to each wall. Drops of water fall from long-rusted shelves.

There's a window in front of me. I am standing at the doorstep of the house. My niece, my brown-eyed little sunshine is by my side. We all know the two-wall rule: try to protect yourself behind two walls from the outside. I take a step back, squat down, touch the door frame with my back. My thin body barely covers

her. We are being shelled. Artillery shelling, is one manifestation of the "rescue operation." The barking of dogs pierces the ears. A voice from within: I must save her. I hold her closer; I feel her whole body tremble. My elbows cover her head, her blond hair gets into my eyes. I whisper in her little ear, "Sunshine, calm down, I'm right here, everything is fine." I hear dad's voice, as if from a distance: "Over here, faster, over here," although they are just two meters away from us, in the basement.

Unexpected silence. I count to three and understand that it's now or never. My niece's life is in my hands. A moment later we are in the basement. The eyes. The brown eyes are staring at me, filled with fear. Holding her tight, I kissed her forehead with my cold lips. I myself had no idea what happened. My wet flip-flops reminded me that we had just covered the distance from the house to the basement. I didn't notice how I stepped into the mud, my foot was wet up to the ankle, water was running down my toes. Thank God we were all together. In the corner, under the rack along with my mom's prized pickled tomatoes, three frightened boys sat on a broken wet wooden potato box, mumbling to each other. Dad was standing and trying to bring mom out of her stupor on the other side. This happened to her a lot lately.

I am a cadet, I was in my second year at that time, so I knew how to behave in extreme situations. I acted first—and only afterwards did I think about the consequences for myself. The lives of others were a priority for me. My mother is a strong and intelligent woman. After enemy planes started flying over our house almost daily, my mother seemed to become a different person every time. She didn't know what to do, her body seemed to be paralysed, and she seemed to lose her mind. During such moments, I would hug her and say, "Calm down, it's just a plane." Even very strong people can lose self-control. After listening carefully to the voices of the little ones, I heard their conversation. They were talking about the war. So young, yet the conversation was not childish at all. It was at that moment that the first tear ran down my cheek. The rain began to ease off outside. Only the barking of the dogs never stopped. My stomach rumbled and reminded me that my stomach was empty, yet I didn't feel hungry. We had been cut off from all communications for a long time now, so we didn't understand what was happening outside.

I don't know how long we sat in the basement filled with jars of pickles. The rain stopped completely. There was silence everywhere. Listening closely, you could hear the last drops rolling down the old broken slate that covered the basement. It was getting dark. We decided to look outside. The neighbours would be the only source of any information. Consequently, my mom and I left the yard and went outside. People came out of almost every yard. Everyone was in shock. That evening, shrapnel wounded a boy, my nephew's classmate. It hit him in the head. He didn't survive. His mother and he were on their way home from the river, and he didn't make it. It all happened before his mother's eyes. He was a very cheerful boy, his green bicycle always with him. He and his bike were inseparable. The grief of a mother who sees the death of her child is hard to imagine. Terrible grief.

A couple of weeks earlier, Russian troops came to our village. We couldn't understand anything at first. There was a terrible roar for two nights in a row while enemy vehicles entered the village. They left the the vehicles in pine tree plantations, near the river, wherever there were thickets. They covered them with camouflage nets and green branches, they dug in.

There is a professional agricultural lyceum in our village. The invaders settled in the lyceum's dormitory, the village traitors offered it to them, and the lyceum director gave the go-ahead. The person in charge of the dorm swiftly changed sides and accommodated the invaders, giving them the rooms of the students who would never be back there again. The Russian invaders told everyone: we will not stay long. They walked the streets as if they were at home, trying to bribe the civilian population with goodies from the store. Some people would deliberately stand near the store and wait to receive some free delicacies. They were traitors who sold their village for a cheap ice cream. A day before that terrible evening, the invaders informed everyone that they would be leaving tomorrow. Indeed, the next day, around noon, they took the equipment and left the village.

And in the evening, the main strikes were made on the dormitory and the pine tree area near the river, exactly where the invaders used to be based. Do you understand what happened? It wasn't the first time, that the Russian invaders would stage everything in such a way that people would gradually start losing confidence in the Ukrainian authorities. We didn't have any communications for a long time. Television and radio would broadcast Russian propaganda non-stop, trying to feed us that vomit of the Russian authorities.

The rays of the sun no longer woke me in the morning. The potted plants began to wither. The grey plaid blanket that warmed me in the harshest winter nights has been preventing me from seeing whether it's already morning outside the window or not. The dark rooms inside the house gave a feeling of peace. I was afraid to go outside. There was no Internet. I wasn't able to study. I was afraid that someone would report to the newly appointed authorities that I was studying as a cadet. They were looking for people connected to the Ukrainian authorities all the time. They would take them "to the basement," they would beat them up so badly that they were taken from the basement straight to the hospital, barely alive. My parents were afraid for me, so I hardly left the house.

66 THEY WOULD BEAT THEM UP SO BADLY THAT THEY WERE TAKEN FROM THE BASEMENT STRAIGHT TO THE HOSPITAL

Constant searches. We couldn't evacuate. With the beginning of the war, my parents stopped receiving their salaries, and my family didn't have any significant savings. I began to withdraw into myself. I lost interest in everything. I no longer found comfort in raising my little nephews. The lack of connection and communication was starting to eat at me from the inside. So I borrowed old tattered CDs from my aunt and watched long-forgotten movies. I was glad that I had an old laptop that had a DVD-drive. A TV cartoon channel was always on—the only channel that didn't broadcast the events from outside. I started reading books. The shelves in the store were empty, yet local businessmen never seemed to get enough, increasing the prices of food that had long passed the expiration date. We had it easier than the city folks. We had a garden. There was enough food. I withdrew deeper and deeper into myself every day. Every now and then, the university management would get in touch and demand that I leave as soon as possible. I felt dizzy. I began to lose more weight. My mom heard from a friend that there was an evacuation trip to Ukraine. I was afraid, but I couldn't stay in the village any longer. We collected money for my trip; we harvested a lot of strawberries that year, and mom and dad decided to sell them at the market, to have at least some money.

The decision was made suddenly. On Friday, July 15, 2022, after asking who knew anything about getting out through the bombed-out dam in Pecheneg, I began to pack my black travel bag on wheels. The suitcase managed to get dusty over the five months of occupation. I knew I had to take as little luggage as possible, just what I could carry. On Monday, July 18, we were already waiting for the carrier near "The Family," the supermarket on the square. I sat down in the bus. I felt some relief. Mom and dad were standing outside and waving at me. Like me, they didn't know when we would meet again. I could contact them only after I was in the Ukrainian-controlled territory.

It was a hard road. 17 enemy checkpoints. Fields. The routes not plotted on the map. My heart would skip a beat every time the driver stopped at another roadblock. And what if someone finds out that I'm a cadet now? I left alone, without acquaintances or friends, I was most afraid that something would suddenly happen and my parents would lose track of me. I had heard a great many of these stories.

And there I was, carrying a bag with a laptop over my shoulder, pushing a bag on wheels with one hand, and holding a plastic bag in the other. My mom made me sandwiches in the morning so that I wouldn't be hungry, but I didn't feel like eating.

Miraculously, finally, we arrived in the unoccupied zone, at our destination. We were safe. There were volunteers on the other side of the Pecheneg dam, whom I had contacted before leaving. A guy in a dark blue t-shirt and a helmet took my bag and loaded it on another bus. We were taken to the checkpoint, where a

search dog, a control of the Security Service of Ukraine, and a lie detector were in force. And then I had the feeling that I was at home.

College. New life.

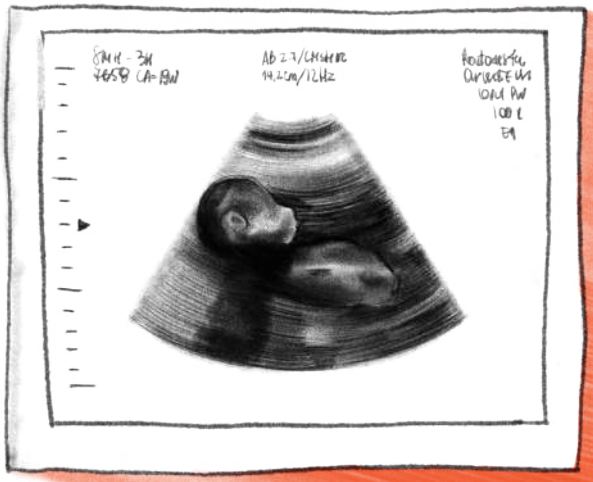
It's been a year since we last saw each other. My parents are still in the occupied zone. I'm here. All alone. I've been living someone else's life, because for me time stopped ticking that very night, on February 24, 2022.

NATALIA NESENYUK

Natalia Nesenyuk was born and lived in Mariupol. She had to leave the city, because of the war. She found shelter in the fine city of Ternopil.

She was pregnant at the time of the full-scale invasion. She survived the siege and occupation of Mariupol by Russian troops, constant bombardments, hunger, cold, dehydration, and lack of telephone communication. She was able to leave and give birth to a healthy son.

Natalia is currently raising a child and has returned to her profession as a psychologist/psychotherapist. She was able to overcome her psychological trauma and has been helping others to do the same.



WHEN THERE IS WAR IN THE ANAMNESIS

CHAPTER 1

I waited for my son for six years. A thought about leaving my husband crossed my mind more than once. Why does he need a wife who cannot give birth to a child?

The year 2014 was a challenge for me. After the occupation of a part of the Donetsk Region, crowds of people poured into Mariupol. Retired people from the village of Shyrokyne—that doesn't exist anymore. They were wealthy, now they didn't even have a bed. I met an old lady whose husband was killed at a roadblock. In the director's office, I let her cry and taught her how to cope with hand tremors. There was a man from Shakhtarsk, together with his wife and a small child; they had a nice car, and he wanted to exchange it for a house. I helped people to find jobs. I put together humanitarian aid packages, I submitted lists with names to the government so people could receive monetary assistance, clothes, and shoes. There were too many people.

All that work led to me being diagnosed with an endocrine disease and cancer. Treatment, hormones, chemotherapy. I experienced a lack of strength and a feeling of constant fatigue. My husband was there for me when I felt like a lost child. When I was undergoing surgery, he was waiting in the corridor. Even under anaesthesia, I felt his love.

Care and support helped to return to life and undergo treatment. But the question remained: would I be able to get pregnant and give birth to a child?

And finally, I had a pregnancy test in my hands with such a desirable result. I hesitated: could this be a mistake? My husband and I went to the pharmacy and bought two more tests. We stood in line, due to "COVID rules." We came back

home; the two tests showed the same result. I didn't know what to think. I was beyond myself with joy. It's scary to be happy. He's not born yet. My husband and I were silent. "I want baked fish—" I suddenly heard myself say. My husband nodded.

CHAPTER 2

I got back on my feet after the disease. I gained an extra 10 kg. At work, they started talking about working with people who commit violence. It's scary, but you need to be able to protect yourself. Last year, before the news of my pregnancy, my husband and I went to boxing classes. There I met people who were part of the self-defence detachment. They taught me how to shoot, invited me to join their self-defence unit. I refused. I thought to myself: "Don't lie to yourself, you'll never be able to kill a person." I look back at that time and understand how much I was mistaken. I can and I want to. I want to drop everything and shoot at the Russian military. What happened to those I trained with? Our coach, a boxing champion, was captured. He had no chance. Our city was shelled with almost all types of ammunitions that are in existence. The athletic self-discipline skills he had taught us, were only helpful to survive the starvation.

CHAPTER 3

Four months have passed since that day. Explosions. My husband and I are on the floor, in the doorway. My sister's family is here too. They came to save themselves, because their city district has been almost destroyed. We live on the fifth floor, the top floor. If they drop a bomb on the building, we will be done for. The earth shakes. We are no longer afraid of artillery fire and shooting. A deadly roulette is ahead. Aircraft carrying bombs come every four hours. They don't care where they drop them. Four bombs. One, two, three, four. The high-rise building next to ours is gone. I want to kill Russians. Give me a weapon, please. I shift my gaze to my slightly round belly. You are responsible for this life, so... you keep on sitting in the doorway, in your husband's arms. All he can do is cook on the fire, get firewood and water, and hug me. We were deprived of gas, electricity and drinking water. This is the Russian strategy, they call it "encircle and bleed them dry." What will make you die faster? Hunger, cold, dehydration or weapons? It's impossible to leave, cars are being shot at, gasoline is practically nowhere to get. My child is not born yet, but he is already suffering so much.

CHAPTER 4

I have a feeling that the baby will die soon. It's been a month since I slept more than four hours. The nighttime explosions feel like a wake-up call from a horror movie yet to be imagined by filmmakers—but one already created by our

> 66 THE MATERNITY HOSPITAL WHERE I WAS SUPPOSED TO GIVE BIRTH WAS DESTROYED. THERE WILL BE NO MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

"neighbours." The maternity hospital where I was supposed to give birth was destroyed. There will be no medical assistance.

All that is left for me is to talk to my child in my mind:

"Forgive this world, my dear. I know it's hard for you to believe, but it can be different. If you stay with me, I will introduce you to its good side. You will see the Pacific Ocean and whales, Niagara Falls, Everest—" My thoughts are interrupted, another explosion, the building shakes.

"My dear, I'm sorry that there is such cruelty and inhumanity in the world. Stay with me, please, I've been waiting for you for so long."

I know that my feelings are transferred to him. This thought hurts me even more. You can still somehow hide your feelings in front of a new-born baby. But here there is complete helplessness, horror and guilt. I don't understand why this is allowed, where is the humanity? If my son dies, maybe this will be the right choice for him. But time goes on. And he and I continue our struggle for life.

CHAPTER 5

People say there's a way to get out. No one gives any guarantees, but there is an understanding. The Russians are in Mariupol. Having worked with people who had moved to the city back in 2014, I had a rough idea of what to expect. The Russians would play the state game and manipulate. Over time, in order to survive and not die of hunger, we would become completely dependent on them. We would go and take food from them.

There is such a thing as post-rape candy. Paedophiles silence children that way. And then continue to fuck them...The price of such candy is a mutilated psyche and a mutilated life.

The price of humanitarian kits from the Russians is even higher. You must step over the corpses of Ukrainian children and adults. Disregard the dead defenders. Taking food, you are giving up your conscience and human dignity. We decided that we wouldn't do that. We would leave.

Some people call the road from Mariupol to Zaporizhzhia the "Road of Life." And it's true. If you can drive through it, you will survive. There are mines on the roads, destroyed vehicles and countless Russian soldiers with their searches and interrogations. They differ in appearance and manners. There are well-mannered and there are rude ones. The latter ones, at least, don't pretend. I share a "joke" that I've heard from them,

"What brand is this car?"

"Well, fuck if I know, let's just fuck it up with an "Grad" artillery shell."

Laughter follows. And I keep silence, because I'm smart. My body doesn't belong to me only. They would beat me in the stomach.

We almost made it, but the road is closed. There's a "Mines" sign. We leave the car and go on foot. Smoke rises from a car in the field. As the Ukrainian military would tell us later, a woman with a child was behind the wheel. She chose to drive through the minefield, in order not to remain in the occupation. We understood her. We were lucky, the Ukrainian military showed us where the car could go through. We are in free Ukraine, but I can't exhale.

CHAPTER 6

I exhale only when the doctors put him on my chest. A living son with protruded ears, the very image of his father. My hero, my personal saviour, my award: Illia.

According to the psychoanalysis theory, he was supposed to be born hostile to the world and depressed. My husband likes everything about him. The way he babbles something very gently, cries, carefully explores the world, tries to walk, crawls, poops. He already has eight teeth, and it looks like he is proud of it. He often bites and laughs. He is my happiness and miracle. He is healthy and smiling. Sometimes he looks at me with very mature eyes. That's not surprising, given his experience.

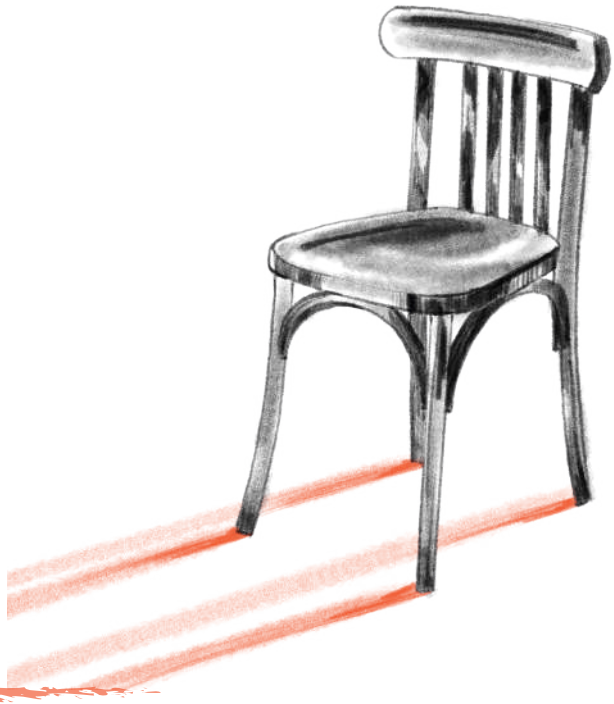
He is a year old today. He takes his first steps. This gives great joy to me and my husband. We are going to order a cake. And make a wish. I feel calm and warm, now I know exactly what love is. When my husband, my son, and my dog are around me, an invisible battery turns on inside me. Could I be happier? I know I can. After I reclaim my stolen sea and my stolen home.

NADIIA NESTERENKO

Nadiia Nesterenko is a native of Bila Tserkva, Kyiv region. Once she began studying at university, she moved to Kyiv, where she lived until the full-scale invasion.

At the beginning of the full-scale war, she moved to Uzhhorod for a while in order to evacuate the documents on Russian crimes that she and her colleagues from the Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives had been collecting for many years. She helped many war victims to evacuate abroad.

Currently, she lives in Kyiv. Together with her colleagues, Nadiia works to restore justice for Ukrainians.



CHAIRS

We no longer gather together for Christmas or Easter. The empty chairs are weighing down on us. Our family, which had been like a thousand-year-old wall, had crumbled in a few years.

In 2015, the first one to go was Dima, who suffered two severe concussions. The next was Grandpa Ivan, not being able to reconcile himself with the grief, then Uncle Andriy. Later we lost Sofiyka. Maksym died in battle last summer. Recently my Aunt Alla passed away. Lusia is in hospital after having a stroke brought on when a missile hit the neighbouring building. Uncle Serhii is in a serious condition in a military hospital. As for the rest of us, the war is tearing away at our nerves.

Many of us have left. Aunt Shura and Ania are in Poland. Polina is in Slovakia. Olia is in Canada. Everyone just looking for a place to live. We're like a string of beads that has broken and the beads have scattered into many places in the world.

At one point my sister and niece returned, because they wanted to spend some time with an aunt who was ill. It was evening and there were Shahed drones flying about. No explosions so far, only a menacing whirring sound. We had to cover my niece's ears because she was crying and having a meltdown. In the morning, she put her pink unicorn backpack near the front door and made a determined statement.

"I have packed our things and some cookies. We are going to Slovakia," she said.

I go through the options and try to think how we can fill these achingly empty chairs. Who can we invite?

Hm. Liudmyla is living under occupation. She cannot come to us—nor can we visit her.

I call Olenka. My timing is really bad. She says she can't reach Pavlo, and he hasn't called. Crying, she keeps repeating that she doesn't want anything anymore, only that Pavlo should be alive, and that she will never forgive herself if he just dies leaving nothing behind. She and Pavlo did not have enough time to have children yet. I calm her down as best I can. At the same time, I can hear the letter that is lying in my desk drawer breathing. "I am sorry. I knew that there is a possibility that I could die. Please stay happy, for me!"

This is so hard. Perhaps I should visit Maryna? She, her mother, and her sister all live in different countries, while Grandma has remained in Ukraine. She stayed because she couldn't leave her goats behind. And then she eventually stopped making her goat cheese, because no one ate it any more. Not because it wasn't good, but because there was nobody left to eat it.

I went to spend New Year's Eve with Maryna. In the evening we had wine, and there were champagne-scented candles. We were just two young girls. We ordered meal delivery from a restaurant. We had planned this evening quite a while in advance, reserving plane tickets and planning train routes. Maryna had found beautiful plates with a starry pattern and had prepared a playlist. We both wore dresses. We needed a celebration, of course we did!

"Why do you think the Russians rape our soldiers and then release them? Why don't they just kill them?" she says.

"Hm..."

Then our conversation between two girls moved on to everyday topics.

"What I mean is, they can then testify about it in court. Why aren't the Russians afraid of this? I can more or less see why they would release women. But even court testimonies aside, the men can then return to fight, being even angrier."

"I don't know. Impossible to know really. But I would say that they do it in order to traumatize society more. Applying the maximum amount of emotional horror per square metre, they try to kill us emotionally, to sap our strength, our energy, and enthusiasm for life. So that we as a people cannot develop, do not multiply, and so that we just exhaust ourselves. And an exhausted people are not capable of putting up much of a resistance."

"Exactly! So that they won't want to live on and have children. I have no doubts about it. Really! Look, I honestly couldn't have sex for more than half a year. And whoever I speak to from the girls, they're all going through similar shit. And always those images before my eyes of the shit the Russians do to us, which takes away any desire for anything," she said and blew on her hands. It's a thing she does when she means that she's afraid of this happening again.

"Right. And psychologists are writing about women having problems with lack of libido on a massive scale."

"Well, OK, others. But what about me. You know, it's nonsense."

We laugh. It's good that there's still things to laugh about.

"Yes, this is complicated. Perhaps it's not their main goal, but it is definitely one of the reasons they do this. They know how to make it wear into your brain."

"Yes, in terms of information and psychological warfare the Russians are pretty strong. They have had experience of this, like, forever."

We breathe out. There is silence, then we come to a conclusion.

"I know what we can do. We can give birth and raise children."

There's a pause.

"Fuck, I know what that sounds like! I'm totally in shock by what I just said. My feminism died just now, is turning over in its grave!"

"And what about your libido? If you don't have any, it's kind of difficult."

"Don't laugh! That's exactly why they want to destroy it. And not having children—that's definitely one of the results. Oh, bloody hell, everything's gone upside down… And look at her, now she's gone to live in a new country! And she is planning, bloody hell, to learn the language and go to university…"

And then soon after there is a call from Iryna from overseas. It's strange. We are all very different, but despite our best efforts, our conversations are all on the same topics.

At last she has started to come out from the bottomless pit of apathy. It was rather difficult and rather expensive. It would have been easier if it had been covered by insurance, but the American psychologists could not understand her at all.

"So, how are you? What's new with your therapist?"

"You know, it's going well with this one. It's not just empty, meaningless chat with some sympathetic nodding."

"No way. Well, I'm glad!"

"We have worked through a lot and we're getting results. I'm getting out of bed in the mornings. I brush my teeth. I'm eating normally now. And I even want to do it. That's new."

"Wow! Well, congrats!"

The expression on her face changed.

“What now?”

“But… there’s one ’but’. Now I’ll tell you the real story. Ha, ha!,” and she covered her face with her hands.

Pause.

“Now I desperately want to have children. Now. Right now. To the point of having panic attacks.”

“Oh…”

“And I don’t know how this is going to… fit in.”

“That is, you’ve already decided?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything! You understand…”

And she cried.

“The American dream will never forgive you.”

“Forgive me! I still need to work hard for years to get anywhere. To really knuckle down! To focus on work, to the max. I have been here for a while, I didn’t arrive just a year ago. It’s a goal that I’ve been working at for a while and I need to keep to my plan! And it’s not just the wrong timing, it’s like, fucking hell the wrong time.”

I cannot find the right words of support, because I’m bothered by the same thing. Somewhere from inside my being, a deeply ingrained mantra breaks out:

“Sur-vi-val!”

It’s an animal instinct. The most basic of all basic needs has been disturbed, and that is safety. It’s not the threat of being struck, not the threat of pain or a blown off leg or a gouged-out eye. It’s the threat to a biological organism, to a species. It’s the threat of being pulled out by the roots, of being reduced to zero. A disappearance in all its forms from the list of fauna and flora and from all descriptions in ancient registers. There is a primal roar that’s breaking out from inside of me to preserve my genes, to survive at least in this way, and least partially.

“Hello there, genes! This is not the time! Have you heard of words like ambitions, dreams, and self-realization? Well yeah, hello, that’s also me!”

There are two desires that have been placed on the scales and hang in the balance. The balance has been brought to a point of tension by the war so much so that I can see beads of sweat on the scales of decision.

"Irynka, you know that you can simply continue on towards your dreams. It's the right choice, and you have put in so much effort towards this goal! You can preserve whatever is Ukrainian in art, you can promote it. You can stimulate people towards finding out more about Ukraine. You don't need to give birth to a Ukrainian child in order to be useful!"

"I understand all this. I understand it very well with my mind. But I can't do anything about my feelings. It's just…. Some sort of howling coming from inside of me… It's a very strong feeling. I didn't expect it and I don't know what to do about it. Actually, due to all this shit, things are not going well… It's consuming me."

We talk about it. I convince her to continue working with sculpture. We talk about family, the talents and the skills which were lost due to the totalitarian Russian system.

I remember that Grandpa Ivan and his friend added some years to their date of birth in order to get into the militia school. Not that they particularly wanted to go there, but it was a way of escaping hunger and jail. In 1946, when the Russians once again took away grain from the peasants, they were caught stealing a few ears of wheat. The children were small and it was easier for them to hide in the fields, and the solidly built men, who went about beating the wheat stalks with whips to flush out any thieves, knew that. And that's how they caught them. They were yelling with pain. On the other hand, the militia school did feed their students, and the Soviet authorities made sure of that also. They needed to bring up new solidly built men wielding whips.

I know about the tools of his life's work carefully hidden under a pile of wood. The mill for sifting flour. The cart and its wheels, dis-assembled in order to make it inconspicuous. They found all this when Uncle Sasha was getting married and they decided to build a house. I see how Great Grandpa Stepan tried to save at least a little of his tools of the trade from the process of "dekurkulization" (dekulakization)[11]. I see how he carefully unscrewed the wheels, how he placed and repositioned each board that made a pile of wood half the size of a hut. He piled the boards in a way that no one would see it. He did it in a way that 50 years later, that cart was still sound and the wood had not rotted. It's easy for me to imagine his love for farming. I am not allowed to despair, because he never told anybody about this buried treasure. He enlisted in the *budionovtsi* (Red Army). However, we heard some positive words about the Soviet rule only once in that house. And then Great grandma Tetiana quickly lashed back: "The Soviets wanted to eat you alive. Have you forgotten?"

[11] Dekurkulization (from Ukrainian), dekulakization (from Russian)—the official confiscation of land and property from relatively wealthier peasants and those who resisted Soviet rule.

In 1933 some man had made his way to our house. Like many others, he had been driven to despair by the artificial famine. He broke a window to get into the house, grabbed my grandfather and started to pull him out of the house. Luckily, my great grandma had returned to the house in time and managed to beat him off, barely. This was about my grandpa Mykola.

My grandfather Mykola. At the moment I am spending so much time thinking about him. He had been the oldest of the relatives that were still living in my time. He could remember the Holodomor of 1933 and the famine of 1946, the Second World War, the Soviet occupation. The empty chairs weighed very heavily in his memories.

"In our house four people died from the artificially created famine. In Baba Musia's house, three. In Tetiana's house, her husband and the baby wasted away. Semen and Maria were put through dekulakization and their children were put into an orphanage. In the house where Valik lives now, there used to be Grandpa's brother with his family. The Russkies sent them to Siberia and took away all their property. Grandpa Ivan was killed in 1936 during Stalin's time..."

10-year-old me couldn't remember all the names, the numbers and the details. I just remembered the flat expression on his face when he told me this. Now I understand that expression. I can feel the chill wind of the "brotherly peoples" on my back as well.

Grandpa remembered how in 1941, when the Germans entered Bila Tserkva, many people greeted them with bread and salt, as one would greet liberators. And Stepan from the neighbouring street gave the soldiers a set of hand carved wooden furniture as a sign of gratitude. They were hoping to finally rid themselves of the Russians and to breathe freely, but they did not have enough resources to do it themselves. It didn't work.

When the Red Army entered the town, they wanted to shoot my grandma Nadia. The naive child had asked them why they didn't hand out chocolates like the Germans did, and then she spent two days hiding amongst the weeds, so that they wouldn't get her.

At that time, they rounded up all the boys who had grown up a bit from all the houses. The other adult men had long ago been mobilized into the army or had been sent to Germany to be forced to work as so-called "ostarbeiter" ("eastern workers"). They gathered them together and sent them to be a live shield in battle at Vilshanka. Afterwards the fathers went there and collected the dead bodies of their children, so that they could at least have a proper burial. My Great-grandmother Uliana would tell my father about these and other crimes committed by the Russians each time she came for a visit to see her grandchildren. She would wake them up at night and tell the stories in whispers. She would warn them that they should not speak openly about this, because they would be sent to Siberia or killed.

All these crimes are once again being repeated on my land. And they are being committed by the same country and by the same people.

They have once again occupied our land and force people to take up their citizenship. They persecute those who resist, they torture them and rape them.

We are shouting about this to the world both day and night. We are shouting so that those crimes will not multiply.

"Can you hear us?"

Can you hear how they are forcibly mobilizing Ukrainian men in the occupied territories and sending them to the front lines to be human shields? Can you see how they are once again using hunger as a weapon against us, by destroying grain terminals, blocking seaports, shooting at poultry farms and at places where humanitarian aid is being distributed. They keep people in blockades without food and water. Can you hear how they once again are looting the fruits of our labour from our homes—cars, money, and even children's shoes. They are stealing the harvests from farms, agricultural machinery, and metal products from steel plants. Can you see that they are destroying us, regardless of whether we are alive or dead? They desecrate the bodies of fallen soldiers. Cemeteries are being shelled. Once again there is no peace, neither for the living nor for the dead.

> "THEY ARE ONCE AGAIN USING HUNGER AS A WEAPON AGAINST US

My Grandfather Mykola once told me how the Soviets destroyed three old cemeteries, which had held the graves of our ancestors. On top of the bones and the crypts of one cemetery they built a "Park of Glory" (a Soviet war memorial). The site of another cemetery was used to build a kindergarten. The third was built up with housing. A similar fate befell the buildings in the city centre, which had once been wealthy and beautiful houses. They had not been stolen from someone, but were built through work and talent. They destroyed them. They built high-rises and gave those apartments mostly to Party members. As for the previous owners, the lucky ones got a one-room apartment. And no one objected. It is difficult to object when you're being marched around at gunpoint. Grandfather would tell this story and then would repeat:

"Shutting up and accepting it never helped anybody."

Grandpa lived to breathe freely for 13 years, which was from the renewed Declaration of Independence up till his death. I'm not sure if that was much, taking into account how old he was. But I'm glad he made it.

I'm also breathing freely, although I can't manage to get my lungs full of air. And that is why I'm gathering strength internally to continue the battle. In a week it will be 40 days since my aunt died. I need to get people together and figure something out about those empty chairs. I'm reading emails from our international partners who are wishing me a Happy Easter.

How can I make this Easter happy?

MARIIA OBYDENNA

Mariia Obydenna was born in the city of Chernihiv, located in the north of Ukraine. She moved to Kyiv while still a student. She is a translator and writer by profession and vocation.

She was in Kyiv on the day of the full-scale invasion. In the first hours of the Russian offensive, all roads to Chernihiv were blocked, and it was very difficult to get home because it was surrounded by enemy troops. Despite the extremely difficult situation, Mariia finally managed to get to Chernihiv. This is where her father and her grandmother lived, and now she saw with her own eyes the consequences of the bloody, unjust war. The peaceful life of the city was completely paralyzed by the Russian aggressors. In the half-ruined city, without electricity and water, the residents stood for hours in line-ups for bread and humanitarian aid.

Mariia lives in Chernihiv now where she takes care of her grandmother, who is a long-living resident of the city. In her spare time, Mariia loves to write.

THE SIEGE OF CHERNIHIV: THE STORY OF ONE FAMILY

The morning news reported that a war had begun in Ukraine. Martial law was enforced throughout the country. When I heard that Russian troops had crossed the border and were advancing, I didn't perceive it as a serious threat. I called the office and found out that all the employees were told to temporarily switch to working remotely.

I come from the city of Chernihiv. It is one of the most ancient cities in Ukraine, with its history dating back to the times of Kyivan Rus. Chernihiv has experienced many upheavals throughout its history. My relatives, my dad and my old grandma, as well as a tomcat and a molly cat, live in Chernihiv. On the day of the Russian invasion, I was in Kyiv. The sun was shining and it was warm outside. My father called me and said that the approaching artillery fire could be heard through the windows. Chernihiv was shelled from Grad artillery systems. Residents were asked to stay inside.

Despite the bad news, I decided to go to Chernihiv. The entrance to the Red Line of the Kyiv metro was closed. Traffic was paralyzed in Kyiv. I got to the Lisova metro station and didn't see a single bus there. I felt lost for a moment. But then I remembered about the commuter train. I took my passport and went to the Darnytska station. The dark-skinned, slim woman at the ticket counter informed me in a low voice: "The connection with Chernihiv is closed."

I called my grandma. My grandma's name is Tamara, she is a long-lifer. There are very few people of her age among the city residents. Grandma is 92. She survived the Second World War and has lived in Chernihiv for as long as she can remember,

for over 50 years. My grandma asked me several times whether Russian tanks were really near Chernihiv and whether Russians were really shelling our city from artillery systems.

"Yes, grandma," I answered. "No one believes in war, but it is real. Chernihiv is surrounded by Russian troops."

And then the bombing of Chernihiv began: unbearable hours and days of non-stop explosions, when it was impossible to tell where the terrible roar and gunfire were coming from. Street fighting broke out, and one by one, the city apartment buildings started to lose electricity and heating. It became very cold in the apartments, so I slept fully clothed.

The United News TV and radio channel transmitted information about the course of actions during the siege of the city. They said, "You need to survive and hold out as long as possible." As soon as the internet was back on, I entered the phrase "city siege" in the search. The search rendered a government website page, with tips on how to survive and what one needs to have in the event the Russian offensive intensified. They explained: "The main thing is to maximize the chances of survival. At home you should have a large supply of water, food that doesn't spoil for a long time and doesn't need to be cooked, flashlights, matches and candles, warm clothes, charged power banks, personal protective equipment, a piece of white sheet (during evacuation, it can be worn over clothes to identify you as a civilian). You need to know the address of a shelter, have a first-aid kit with the most important medical drugs, mobile communications and identification documents." I checked what things I had from the list and packed an emergency bag, in order to quickly evacuate in case the situation got worse.

My grandma and I live separately, so I asked her to pack the essentials and identification documents too, in case of an evacuation. In her youth, my grandma listened to the radio so as not to miss any news about the war. She was waiting for victory. My father tried to buy food and stood in long lines for hours to feed the whole family. Whenever we had electricity and internet, I searched for ways to leave the city and for refugee asylums abroad. I constantly googled, hoping to find the locations of aid centres for Ukrainians, so I could find an asylum for us.

Beside us, there were also cats in the house. Red Marquis and grey Martha. They were having a hard time. Frightened by the terrible stories about abandoned dogs and cats in Kyiv during the evacuation, I knew that I would do anything to make it less traumatic for them. Just like for humans, the most important things for cats are water, food and peace. I remembered my favourite TV show "My Cat From Hell" starring Jackson Galaxy, a famous American expert in cat psychology, who has saved the lives of thousands of animals. I still remember his words: "Don't disturb the animal, don't frighten it, let it be in a safe place, don't take it out of its hiding place." So I didn't disturb them.

"My Cat From Hell." I remembered the series with a smile. The real hell was in Chernihiv. If someone thinks cats are animals from hell, well, so be it. But the real hell is war, shelling and people's deaths. Hell is the normal world collapsing before your eyes. All living things around felt horror, anxiety and restlessness. The animals were terrified. I looked at them, in their frightened, round eyes that asked, "What's going to happen to us?"

My grandma called me. I heard her crying on the phone. This scared me.

"What happened?" My hand gripped the phone, my heart pounded somewhere in my throat.

"Aunt Nadia, my neighbour, came by...oh my God, oh my God... what a disaster... it's worse than the worst nightmare. I can't believe it...tragedy, terrible tragedy, such a loss..."

"What happened?"

"Our neighbours'...children died...The shelling hit their house, it caught fire. The children couldn't get out...The horror of this! She came by to commemorate her family...we're sitting at the table...she's crying...they don't bury bodies in Chernihiv these days. The morgue is bursting at the seams...Dead bodies keep pouring in... they no longer know where to put the dead...Russian soldiers are at the Yatsevo cemetery...they struck the cemetery, monsters..."

My grandma was born in 1930, prior to the Second World War, in the Russian city of Kursk. She has experienced a lot throughout her life: the Second World War, the Soviet regime, the declaration of independence of Ukraine. She was only 11 years old when the war started in 1941. Since my childhood, she and my grandfather, who had fought at the front, told me a lot about the Kursk arc and the tank battle near Kursk. I have known since childhood that war was very scary.

Grandma was crying.

"Nadia can't cry anymore...and I can't find the words to comfort her. She looks at the pictures time and time again...She chastises herself for not having been in their place with uncle Viktor...oh, what a disaster...She brought me some beets and cabbage. I'm going to make borshch..."

Every day it was more difficult to buy bread and food in Chernihiv. We stood in lines at the other end of the city for six hours to buy a few loaves of bread. Our favourite bakery was destroyed by shelling. I could feel the fear of death spreading through the city. The power was out, refrigerators turned off, the internet didn't work. We exchanged news with acquaintances when we met, in lines or at the entrances to our apartment buildings. The phone service was bad.

When the siege began, the city residents moved to their country houses. They had stoves and heating, and were farther away from military men, while battles

were already raging on several streets of the city. One day, they started dropping bombs on the Stara Podusivka country estate near the pine forest. A shell hit our country house. The slate flew off, a big hole was formed in the roof. When I arrived at the country house, I saw several shell fragments near an apple tree.

I was frightened, both of the explosions and of the state of uncertainty that had been going on for almost a month. I felt terrified as sirens blared throughout the city. The local authorities advised the residents to go into the bomb shelters, in order to protect their own lives. The bomb shelters were not suitable for a long stay. These were basements of local government buildings or semi-dilapidated basements of apartment buildings. We decided to stay at home. Whatever will be, will be.

There were line-ups everywhere. The few shops that were open in Chernihiv attracted crowds of people every day. One day, having travelled half the city, my father wasn't able to buy any bread. It was on that day that the power went out in my apartment. Having no electricity was totally unbearable. My father removed the battery from the car to charge the phone, as well as to try to turn on a small light bulb. When the water supply got cut, that was the worst. During the siege, one could get water from hydrants, but the line-ups at these locations were huge. We live near the river, so we filled canisters with water, put them on carts and took them home. One can't live without water. There were fewer and fewer food products in stores.

> “ONE DAY, HAVING TRAVELED HALF THE CITY, MY FATHER WASN'T ABLE TO BUY ANY BREAD

I called my grandma again. She could hardly hold back her tears.

“What happened?” I exhaled into the receiver.

“My acquaintance...you know her, aunt Galia...she lives near the pilot school, her husband was killed by a shell fragment. In the afternoon, shelling began and one of the fragments wounded him right on the street. Sudden death.”

All that felt like some horror story. I couldn't believe that people were dying from Russian weapons.

“They still don't bury the dead in Chernihiv. Aunt Galia and Yulka are crying...I can neither walk or drive to them. I have known them all my life...They say humanitarian aid is being handed out. They were given a big box of food—should last them a week or two,” sobbed my grandma.

Sirens sounded throughout the city. Endlessly. Again and again.

We tried to find at least something positive. My father got excited when Russian pilots failed to hit military targets. He knew well where the Ukrainian military were located in Chernihiv and realized that the Russians simply missed their intended targets: the Ukrainian military were the main target. All of us began to get used to explosions and life under siege. But can you actually get used to a disaster?

The roads were blocked with anti-tank hedgehogs and the city looked like a set of a post-apocalyptic movie. Military patrols armed with automatic rifles, gunfire on the streets day and night. It seemed that it was happening to someone else. A dream from which it was impossible to wake.

My uncle Oleg stayed in the city because of his very old mother, my grandmother's age. My uncle is a painter. As a creative person, he's emotional, sees inspiration in everything and never stops halfway. As he had spent a certain amount of time in the trenches, he began to hallucinate. He couldn't cope with such a big psychological trauma on his own and ended up in a psycho-neurological hospital. My uncle perceived the world around him as unreal and illogical. Fortunately, treatment helped. I learned about that tragedy only when uncle Oleg returned home. His mother cried with happiness. She had been alone for two weeks. A neighbour brought her water and bread.

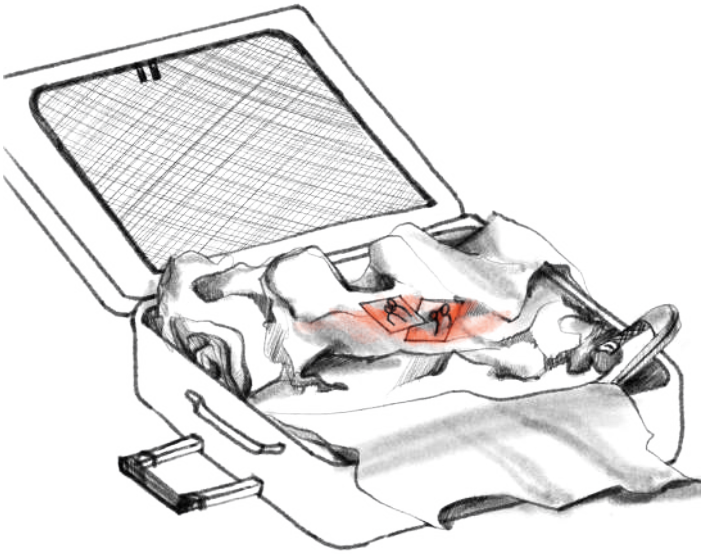
One day, my father came home from the store, opened the apartment door and heard a terrible explosion. It jolted our apartment building. The walls were shaking. After a series of explosions, there was a sudden silence. My father went outside and saw the neighbours who gathered at the entrance. The bomb hit the nearby hospital compound. A huge bomb crater was visible near the maternity ward. The blast destroyed the main entrance to the medical treatment building and blew out the glass in the surgical department. My mother used to work at that hospital as an anaesthesiologist. During her lifetime, she saved many lives. A bomb hit the district hospital, the polyclinic was destroyed by the blast wave, and several artillery shells destroyed two apartments in residential buildings nearby. There were black holes at the point of impact and gutted furniture on the side. The windows in the doorway of our apartment building were broken. The glass fragments were everywhere. I walked around the city and saw how carefully residents taped the windows crosswise, so that the glass would not fly apart from shelling or blast waves and injure anyone. The white crosses on the windows added to the sense of horror.

On April 2nd, happy news arrived—Chernihiv Region was liberated. The Ukrainian troops launched a counteroffensive. The Russians began to retreat. But it was clear to me that the end of the war was still a long way off.

YAROSLAVA OLEKSENKO

Yaroslava Oleksenko was born in Kharkiv, now known as the City of Reinforced Concrete. She is convinced that the same characterisation applies to her. She chose journalism as her profession and planned to write texts for slick magazines about fashion, the mysterious world under the spotlight, and the glamorous life of celebrities. After February 24, 2022, Yaroslava was forced to change her path and instead of covering glamorous lives, she began to tell the stories of ordinary Ukrainians who, against their will, found themselves in real hell.

The war found Yaroslava in her bed, in the middle of the night. It drove her and her family into a damp basement. The basement saved their lives more than once in the months to come. Yaroslava was forced to flee from the war to Slovakia, where she stayed for half a year, after which she returned to Kharkiv, where she feels happy, studies, works, believes in herself and hopes for a quick victory for Ukraine.



WAR HAS SETTLED IN MY HOUSE

Nine steps and you are in the safety buffer. These steps lead deep down, where there is no light, but there is hope that this dark place will one day save your life. The realisation that my new home is the basement is still absent, but the body remembers where it all began.

“Damn garbage truck! Who came up with the idea of collecting garbage at 5:00 in the morning?”

I’m still scared of that truck’s roar. It does sound like bombs dropping.

Then it took five seconds to realise that the war that had been prophesied and discussed for the past two weeks was now my reality and not empty talk.

I try to get out of bed, but my body has turned to stone. It seems to me that there is already a column of tanks with the Russian tricolour outside my window, and there are about seven seconds until the shell hits my room. As a child, I often watched films about war, so now my imagination does not spare me, generating new bloody pictures.

My hand gropes for the phone and the only news page shows me what I was so afraid to see outside the window. I cover my mouth with my hand. I don’t want my parents to hear my screams in addition to firearms.

On the same day, together with my parents, I found myself in the basement of a two-story private house of our friends. I had been there before, though I had never descended to the cellar. Nine steps underground, a small corridor, a boiler room and three more rooms of different sizes. This was the place I was supposed to call my home.

The owners of the house, Aunt Olena and Uncle Yusuf, used this enclosed space to store canned food, old and rather worn furniture and the rest of the junk that did not find a place in the house. Now, I slumber with them. Russia decided to abolish the nation, and me personally: putting me in a cellar just because I am Ukrainian.

Now I watch how Uncle Yusuf slowly takes down the angle grinder, two metal rods of different lengths, and a toolbox. All this may be needed if the two-story building above us collapses like a house of cards. I look at it and mentally prepare myself for the most terrible events in my life.

War films practically do not show how people outside the battlefield live. It turns out that life does not stop. There is time for loud laughter, cooking delicious meals, birthday parties, and guitar songs.

For two weeks now, my mornings begin in the basement. I feel my lower back aching, and a sharp pain pierces my thigh. The body still cannot get used to sleeping on a hard-sewing table and protests with bruises on my back. At such moments, you desperately need ordinary and even strange, at first glance, things. Every night when I go to sleep on a hard table in a damp basement, I long to put my head down on my pillow. It may be old and have spots from wet hair that will never disappear, but I need it. At times, it seems that even such a banal thing can heal at least part of the wounds that bleed inside of me. Over the next five months, I would put my head on dozens of different pillows belonging to someone else; some would be new, some would be orthopaedic, but not at all like the one that lies on my assembled sofa, together with a blanket.

I can hear fragments of conversations and the clatter of the oven with metal sheets. I don't know what time it is. I'm lying in the dark, breathing in the damp basement air. Kamila's desperate exclamation, "Oh, no! I'm late again!" brings me back to reality.

After getting out of the dungeon, I find myself in the kitchen. A fresh sponge cake is steaming on the table. Kamila is sitting in the corner on a stool, her cheek smeared with flour, and her unwashed hair put into a slightly dishevelled bun. Kamila is the daughter of Aunt Olena and Uncle Yusuf. On February 24, she and her husband left their apartment together: he went as a volunteer to the front, and she, grabbing a backpack and their young son, went to her parents' private house. Today is little Artem's birthday. The day before, I searched all the open and half-empty shops for the best gift. Even during the war, in the rare hours when the air raid sirens finally went off, I looked for a bright red fire truck for him. For a long time, Artem could not understand why he stopped going to kindergarten, why he could not play even in the yard of his grandmother's house, and why his mom screamed at him when he did not want to go down to the damp, dark and scary basement.

> IN THE RARE HOURS WHEN THE AIR RAID SIRENS FINALLY WENT OFF, I LOOKED FOR A BRIGHT RED FIRE TRUCK FOR HIM

We wanted to make a party for him—bake a cake, light candles, and solemnly present a gift. It probably won't work. Kamila is sitting in a corner on a stool, hopelessly folding her flour-dusted hands and looking at the sponge cake. Today, the light went off for the third time. She miraculously managed to bake the cake but never managed to beat the cream.

Well, those are trifles. At night, after celebrating Artem's birthday, she receives a message from her husband: "We are surrounded. Raise a decent son." I see Kamila silently weeping.

I did not last for a long time. Every night, when I went to sleep on the wooden surface, I did not know if I would wake up in the morning. Every day lived during the war is a small life. In the morning, I lie without blinking, look at the ceiling, and go through the most terrible scenarios. During the day, I gladly eat homemade dumplings with cherries, but the last one remains on the plate. I rush headlong to the basement, forgetting how to breathe. Fighter jets scream over the house. The night allows singing quietly, almost in a whisper, a folk song, "In the cherry orchard..."

After twenty days of the war, I hysterically asked my mom and sister to leave the country. Dad was in tears. He quietly repeated, "Go... Go. This way, it will be even easier for me."

Here I am, standing in my room, leaning my face against the cold wall and I cannot hold back tears. I look at how my things are arranged: there is an unfinished cup of tea on the table, in the middle of the room, there is an empty suitcase ready to hold all my belongings. I try to commit to memory everything, every detail, so that later, at least mentally, I could return to this place. I look at the windows. My father taped each glass in the shape of a cross, which is probably why they are still intact. Near the entrance to the building, the residents are cooking porridge on a bonfire. There has been no light for about a week. I cannot understand how the always-elegant woman from the ground floor has become fifteen years older in a few dozen days, even her bloodless lips look completely unusual without the eye-piercing red lipstick. A new wave of shelling brings me to my senses. I nervously open the wardrobe and throw my things in a pile. With inflexible hands, I try to fold t-shirts, sweaters, and three pairs of jeans; I don't want to

think that the main thing—my soul—will not fit into this tiny suitcase. How to fold it? In half or criss-cross? How will I go without it?

I leave it. A new thought gripped me. "What if I never come back here again?" I open an album with childhood photos and try to choose the best ones. I opt for the picture where I am on a blue horse, riding a carousel with my mom, she lightly supports me with her hand. The second photo is with my dad: we are on a sledge, flying down a steep snowy mountain, our faces are out of focus, but sincere albeit blurred smiles warm me in this cold room.

Then, there was the train station. There were more and more people every hour. It seemed that this building, known to all Kharkiv residents, would no longer be able to accommodate any living being. But the door opened again, and like a wave, a new stream of refugees was spreading through the waiting room: the frail girl was carrying two backpacks and a bulky carrier with a dog; the military men, who were trying to somehow regulate the boarding of the trains, pushed her away for the third time,

"Girl, calm down! First, women with small children, and then everyone else—and you're getting on with your dog! There's not enough room for all people to leave!" The refugee chewed her lips distractedly, and a shaggy dog was barking in the carrier, eager to fly at the throats of everyone in this hall. I had already been standing in a growing line for eight hours and I understood that dog like no one else. I could no longer feel my legs, I was surrounded by a mass of people, and it felt like I was being squeezed by pliers. I saw only the main door, which was an unattainable goal for me. It periodically opened, people rolled out, and I remained in place. I never managed to leave Kharkiv that day.

The second attempt was successful. Here I am, standing by the stained glass window and watching my native Kharkiv fading away. The train is taking me away from Ukraine, I don't even know where. The words echo in my head, "My house can be taken away, my city and even my country can be taken away from me, but they will never take me away from me. I have to act. I have to live."

You cannot compare Ukrainians who chose to leave their home and those who decided to stay. You cannot judge for whom it was more difficult, who experienced more grief, and which decision was the right one. In this task, there is only a given, there is no correct answer.

This road was difficult not only physically, but also emotionally. I saw so much grief, tears, separation, and absent looks. At times, I was surrounded by just the bodies; those people moved automatically, dragged their bags, and called all the numbers from their phone books, but there was an emptiness inside them, and their vacant stares gave it away.

Texts became my medicine. I sat on a beautiful veranda in a small house in Slovakia and started writing. I did not see the beauty. Over some time, I began

Kharkiv. Railway station. February 2024.
Photo: Andriy Tsaplienko. Source: UNIAN, https://tinyurl.com/3wjrp3cn

to forget life before the war. All my dreams and plans fell apart and turned into a single desire—to live. Everything that I had built around my whole life fell apart in a second and became an unnecessary pile of junk. I felt that there was only now, the future was so illusory that it was ridiculous to even think about it. Everything you need can fit into one suitcase, and if you wish, even into a backpack. Only the soul never got in, no matter how hard I pushed it. So here I am, sitting in quiet and peaceful Slovakia: there are airplane trails above my head, mountains spread out on the horizon, fields are covered with greenery, but I don't need all this.

I want to go home! I had so many goals, ideas, and dreams, but as it turned out, they do not translate into another language. And the land for their successful planting and growing can only be fertile Ukrainian soil.

KATERYNA PALII

Kateryna Palii was born in the small town of Bashtanka, Mykolaiv Region. For a long time her dream was to move to another city, because she believed that she wouldn't achieve anything in her hometown.

After graduating from high school, she entered university and together with her boyfriend moved to Kherson, where she lived until February 24. On the first day of the full-scale invasion, she returned to her hometown, where eventually, she experienced all the horrors of war. On March 13, after airstrikes on her town, Kateryna and her younger sister moved to be with their relatives in Poland. There Kateryna organized rallies to save the Mariupol defenders, including her father, a military man who was also in Mariupol at the time.

Kateryna is back in Ukraine now. She and her boyfriend moved to Khmelnytskyi. She didn't like her life in Poland and wanted to return home. Kateryna carries on with her university studies, remotely. She also found her favourite hobby—she bakes dessert pastry to order and gets great pleasure from it.

WHEN I WASN'T BREATHING

I didn't wake up this time. Ever since, I've been wandering around inside my nightmares, that seem to destroy my soul more and more every time. Every day is a test. Losses are becoming a part of my life. My girlfriend will never be late for a meeting with me again. She was killed by a Russian missile. My bubbly and cheerful friend Asya is not with me anymore. My world is decaying, like my abandoned town that smells of ashes. It was also destroyed by the war. I'll never go to the dacha, that used to be my second home, anymore, and I won't eat cherries from the dacha's garden. All that is gone. Russia destroyed my dreams, peace and happiness.

I remember my 16th birthday in the pine forest. I remember my sneakers, worn from dancing and games. Now that whole area is laid with landmines. What used to be my escape from heavy thoughts has turned into a graveyard of my happy moments. That forest was a shelter for my soul; I felt free and protected there, among the trees. And now, with that carefree teenage soul of mine, full of misunderstanding, sadness and despair, I wander among the ruins and the smoke that rises above the town.

The horror began on February 24. My boyfriend and I lived in a rented apartment. It was the first home that I could furnish myself, to create home comfort, to my liking. We'd lived there just for a few months, but I already felt like the lady of the house. For me, that apartment is the smell of apple pie, which my boyfriend made for me for the first time. It's a feeling of peace, and a life full of dreams. All that doesn't exist anymore.

It's six in the morning. Mom called. Crying and shouting on the phone, "Baby, Kulbakyne[12] was shelled!" I'd known something terrible was going to happen a few weeks before, when dad was deployed to Mariupol (he is a military service member). Breathing heavily, I walked up to the window and saw a black haze over the town of Chornobayivka. For a moment I felt that I wouldn't be able to breathe anymore. I heard a shot, then—the second one, I felt like I was going to pass out.

Surprisingly, my boyfriend was quite calm. And I panicked. My boyfriend's calmness began to annoy me, and I started screaming.

"Vania, we've got to pack fast!" I shouted at him. "What are we going to do, what is happening?"

"You pack our identification documents, put my green jacket and black warm pants in a bag, and I will go and collect my pay cheque."

"What pay cheque?!" I shouted again in a hoarse voice. "I'm going to die of fear right now Vania, stop messing with me! And don't go anywhere!"

I was tired and scared, terribly afraid to stay in the apartment alone, so I begged him not to leave. Roughly, from that moment on, my memory erased itself, and my recollections became confusing. I remember the road, the girl at the entrance to an apartment building who held her teddy bear and showed him where the fire was. The traffic jam stretched from Kherson to the Mykolaiv traffic circle. All the vehicles from the city and the region seemed to have gathered on the highway. Vania was terribly annoyed, the traffic barely moved forward, he turned the steering wheel sharply and drove into the oncoming lane. Other cars followed us almost immediately. I saw only one vehicle that was driving towards Kherson. It was the police, in a white Toyota.

To be honest, I've always been ashamed of the town in which I was born. I always underestimated it. It almost never appeared anywhere, it wasn't talked about, it wasn't known. It seemed to me that only in a big city would I be completely happy and finally achieve that dream of success. However, fleeing from the war, I went to my native Bashtanka. Only after I arrived there was I able to calm down. I no longer wanted any success, I felt that I was protected here, that no misfortune would ever befall my town, which so few people knew about.

But I was wrong that time too. On March 1, Vania's father received a phone call from his brother. He served in the Territorial Defence Forces (TDF) and knew the situation. It was he who informed us that a convoy of a hundred tanks was moving towards our town. He said that the TDF urgently needed jars and gasoline (to make Molotov cocktails); he added that they had very few weapons. I was filled with sheer terror. There was nowhere, nowhere I could hide. Was it all still going on?

[12] Kulbakyne is a Ukrainian military airbase near the city of Mykolaiv.

I started to panic again, screaming and crying and rolling up and down the sleeves of my pyjamas. I have never been so scared in my life. Vania tried to be calm, but constantly walked from room to room and looked out the window. And I saw that he was scared too. We knew we had to act quickly. Vania, together with his father and brother, drained the gas from the car, and Vania's sister-in-law, his mom and myself sorted through the jars and shredded cloth. And then we heard some rumbling. I understood that it wasn't the sound of a car. The tanks were here. With frightened eyes, the men grabbed Molotov cocktails and ran into the street. I felt that a little more of this and I would pass out from fear. I heard those tanks, their tracks. I heard them clanking on the road, reminiscent of the heavy step of menacing creatures. My heart was jumping out of my chest and pounding madly.

Fighting began outside the town. The streets were filled with smoke, dust and the cries of neighbours who didn't have basements and asked to be let in. Children cried. I also cried together with the strangers' children. Vania's mother and Alina, Vania's sister-in-law, reacted very quickly. We were supposed to have dinner, so hot cabbage rolls and butter-and-sprat sandwiches were already on the stove. Hastily, they put water and food in a bag. I couldn't come to my senses and was standing by the door, with a glass into which they dripped some valerian for me. I should have run to the basement with everyone else, but I couldn't. I was overcome with fear and in a stupor. I thought about my family, who were not with me (they were on the other side of the town), and I was terribly worried about the men who left the yard a minute later. They thought out their plan of action in advance and began to act according to that plan.

By this time, I had recovered from the shock. When I did go down to the basement, I saw frightened little children there. They were shaking and crying. The neighbours, who didn't have a basement, asked Vania's family for shelter and came here with their children. I saw little blue eyes first, and then the tiny girl herself. She looked like she was no more than six months old. I love children very much, so I immediately sat down next to her and started to entertain her. Everyone around was discussing the situation, but my attention was entirely on the little Nikusha. I grabbed the children's rattles, keys that were lying on a small table that the men had set up for us, and tried to calm and distract the baby. Shots, explosions and people's screams could be heard from somewhere on the street. I still remember those frightened little eyes, I remember the two bottom teeth that had just erupted. I remember the smile that appeared on her face when we managed to cheer her up. And so two hours and forty eight minutes had passed since the beginning of that horror.

I burst into tears when I heard the familiar voices. Our men were back. I hardly ever felt such mixed emotions. I cried, I was happy that they were alive and ran to hug them. Then I was shaking with my whole body, but I still don't understand whether it was from fear or from joy. I wanted to know what was happening over

there, and at the same time, I just wanted the peace that I'd always felt in the arms of my boyfriend.

And then Vania's dad shouted:

"Everyone, to the basement now, they are on our street!"

I stood motionless, while tears streamed down my cheeks. I wanted to run far away from that reality. The men took me down to the basement. They kissed us and left.

Until the morning I sat in a corner of the damp basement and cried. When I got completely exhausted, I managed to fall asleep, but from time to time I was awakened by gunshots and people's screams. And I cried again, and then fell asleep again, and so on in a circle until the morning. In the morning, I woke up from loud conversations, and saw our men again. I was happy more than ever to finally hug my boyfriend again. "Thank god, they are back!" was the only thought in my head.

Then finally we were all able to get out of the basement. I hoped that everything was over, although I understood that everything was just beginning.

"Girls, everything is very serious..." Vania's father started the conversation.

We listened carefully and froze in anticipation.

"Part of the convoy was destroyed, the other part went to Snihurivka, and the rest are wandering around the city. People died, the downtown is gone..." He sat down on a chair, he looked down and wiped his sweaty forehead.

Vania and his brother, stone-faced, stood silently at the kitchen doorway.

I cast scary eyes over everyone present and then I heard my own voice:

"People died? Who...died?"

That's how I found out about everything that happened that night. Casualties, destruction, the town in fear. We decided to act. Vania, together with his brother and father, took on the task of blocking one of the streets to create an obstacle for unwanted guests. The women and I decided to organize the basement where neighbours and children could hide during an enemy attack. The feeling of fear remained, but we supported each other and it helped us stay calm.

I always had my phone in my hands. I was hoping to see a call from dad. He was in Mariupol. I managed to connect to the internet every now and then, I always had news open in the Telegram mobile app. The pain was tearing me apart. "Dad, what are you going through there?" We figured out the time when the shelling was the most intense, and whenever there was a several-hour break, Vania and

I always tried to go and see my mom. She knew more about my dad and the situation in combat zones. The news was always disappointing, but dad always kept up a fighting spirit and positivity: "Family, everything will be fine, we will definitely win, we will kick out all the foes from our territory." I never doubted his words, I believed him the most.

Time flew very quickly, and we began to lose track of the hours and days. The walls of the basement became our witnesses, we shared our memories, and tried to cheer each other up. The children who were with us surprised us with their endurance and courage. We tried to find entertainment for them, while a sense of powerlessness, uncertainty and fear for the future grew inside of us.

As time passed, we started to stay in the basement overnight less often, there was a feeling that everything was coming to an end. Even inside the house, we never took off our warm clothes. It was unbearable. I dreamed of taking it all off, taking off those clothes that were soaked with pain, tears and worries, and that made my whole body itchy. Vania wouldn't let me. But one night I took off all the clothes. And fell asleep like a baby. How little it took to make me happy!

Early in the morning, I woke up hearing Vania's screaming: "It's coming!" And then I was thrown from the bed by a shock wave. It was a Russian aircraft, dropping aerial bombs that killed people, destroyed people's destinies and remained in the memory of Bashtanka residents forever. Covering my face with my hands, I lay in a stupor for a few more seconds, until Vania ran up and picked me up, handed me clothes on his way... the same clothes that I dared to take off, and that I kept on for a very long time after that morning. Panic began. "Mom, how is my mom... and my sister, dad... are they all right?" I was very worried about my family at that moment, because I imagined the consequences of the bombing but didn't know where it hit.

Grabbing all the clothes we could, we threw them down to the basement, and got fully dressed in there. Each of us was restless, each was shocked, each was silent and immersed in their thoughts. We didn't know what to do next. The windows were blown out by the shock wave, and it was freezing outside. There

66 EARLY IN THE MORNING, I WOKE UP HEARING VANIA'S SCREAMING: "IT'S COMING!" AND THEN I WAS THROWN FROM THE BED BY A SHOCK WAVE

was no water, electricity or gas, because everything was destroyed by the "Russian world."[13] They had reached people's homes now. The homes that Ukrainians built with their own hands all their lives, the homes in which whole generations were born, the homes in which we put our hearts and souls.

A shot... the third... the fifth. It was Grad artillery systems shelling us from occupied Snihurivka. We had become very good at ascertaining such things after two weeks of living in those conditions.

Everyone got down to the floor and covered their heads with their hands, Vania covered me with his body. It was terrible, I heard how the shells flew right over our heads. I heard the houses collapsing, heard the alarm that went off in Vania's car. It was at that moment that I said goodbye to life, holding Vania tightly. Closing my eyes, I saw the faces of my mom, my sister and my dad. My heart was beating so fast that it seemed it was going break into small pieces.

Each explosion pierced me from within, it hurt badly.

Seconds seemed long, like hours, eight minutes of non-stop explosions and... finally silence. However, I could still hear the shots and explosions in my head, there was no silence there.

The men immediately went upstairs. The summer outdoor shower was destroyed, the windows were shattered by the shock wave, and there was a pile of debris at the gate. Ten houses away from us, a town district was completely destroyed, houses, apartments, a park—destroyed. People were screaming in the streets, children were crying, elderly people fell on their knees and held their heads in despair and grief. It was from that moment that I felt anger towards the whole "Russian world." I started to hate everyone, I cursed everyone, I didn't wish the worst for them, because there is nothing more terrible than genocide. The terrible days dragged on for eternity, when there were multiple explosions in a row. We were no longer human, we became shadows of our former selves, our lives were ruled by fear.

Morning. Explosions. The damp basement again, a glass of valerian on the table again. That morning, I heard the most terrifying words of the entire period of the full-scale invasion from Vania:

"Pack your things quickly, everything you need, and go with Alina to Poland, I will drive you to the border."

I was speechless. My heart sank.

[13] The concept of the "Russian world" is an element of the Putin government's revanchist idea of restoring Russia's influence to the former borders of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire.

“Are you kidding me? I’m not going, I’d rather die, but I won’t go anywhere from here by myself. Do you understand that I have a mother and a sister here? And how am I going to communicate with dad? How will he call me in Poland?”

“It can’t go on like this, Katya, you shouldn’t live like this, you shouldn’t suffer through this.”

I cry even harder. Vania runs into the house and starts packing my things. I take them out. He scolds me and puts them back into the travel bag. I start getting hysterical, I accept the fact that I have to go, but I can’t think about anything but my family, I think about how my mother will react, I think about my sister. Will I see them again? Vania understands that I can’t calm down, he takes my hand in his warm palm and says, “We will see each other again, you will return home, don’t worry. Everything will be fine, I promise.” Everything happened very quickly, there was no time for anything, I begged Vania to stop by where my mom lived, I couldn’t just leave town and not say goodbye to my family.

Driving up to my gate, I saw my mom on the doorstep, she rushed to hug me. I hugged her so tightly, as if I knew it would be the last time. She cried so hard she began to choke on her tears.

“Mom, I’m going to Poland.”

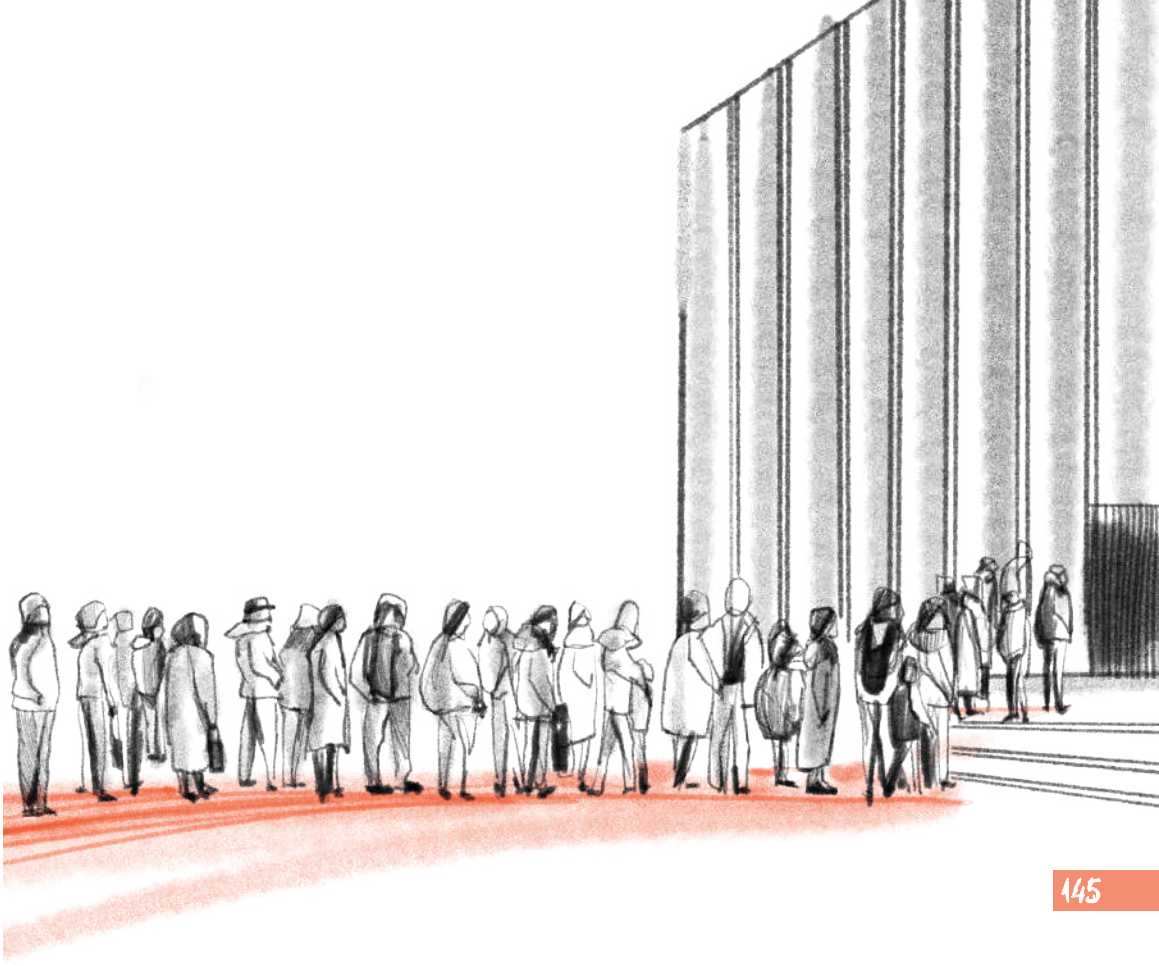
A minute later I was completely broken, and after ten minutes, the person leaving the town was no longer me. It was a devastated person who lived but didn’t breathe, or breathed but didn’t live. I felt that I was supposed to be there, be a part of the beating heart of this place, and at the same time, it was impossible to stay. I had always dreamed of traveling abroad, and Poland was already waiting for me. The dream that once seemed so vibrant and realistic had now lost its colour and its power.

Leaving the shelled town, I felt broken, not free, and life seemed empty, like a palette devoid of bright colours. Crossing the border, I felt my heart shrink, as I was losing the last connections with the past. On the other side of the border lay uncertainty, and my heart was clutched in the arms of pain.

OLEKSANDR PYLYPENKO

Oleksandr Pylypenko was born and lived in the city of Berdyansk, Zaporizhzhia region. He is a former police officer and a local city council member. For the past five years, he has been running his own business and doing social work, as well as practicing journalism. He is the Chairman of the NGO "Social Interaction Platform" and the editor of the "Lokator-Media," an online publication that specialises in anti-corruption exposures (and now also in military topics).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army found Oleksandr in Berdyansk. Since there were almost no police left in the city, on the very first night Oleksandr together with a former colleague guarded the city hospital. When the city was occupied, he gathered a group of volunteers from his neighbourhood via a Facebook announcement to deter the night looters. During the day, he was busy providing humanitarian aid to the city residents—this went on for as long as it was possible to receive support from the outside. He stayed in the occupied zone for thirty-seven days. When he realised that it became critically dangerous to stay, he left for Zaporizhzhia in a Red Cross convoy, proceeded from there to Dnipro, and lived in Lviv for a while. He now lives in Transcarpathia, where he can carry on with his usual activities.



FROM THE SEA TO NOWHERE

On February 27, at two thirty p.m., an event occurred that split my life and those of other residents, into "before" and "after"; the city was captured by Russian troops. A convoy of URAL military trucks, Buk artillery systems, BMPs (infantry fighting vehicles), BTRs (armoured personnel carriers), and other equipment with the "Z" marking drove into the Pearl of the Azov Region unhindered. There were no barricades, or trenches, or dugouts on the approaches to Berdyansk. Late in the evening, the first blood was spilled: one Berdyansk Harvester Factory security guard was killed and another was wounded, because they were dressed in camouflage and because they refused to give the invaders their phones so that they could call home. On the same day, the enemy took control of the city hall, the police building, and the TV tower. The next day, the residents held the first protest rally that the invaders failed to disperse with automatic rifle fire and a salvo from heavy artillery across the bay's water area. It became clear that peaceful life had left Berdyansk for good. An oppressive sense of danger hung over the city, and time seemed to stand still.

SURVIVAL

Life was reduced to endless line-ups at shops and pharmacies, with almost empty shelves during the day and deserted streets at night. There were *Rashist*[14] checkpoints and patrols, pro-Ukrainian rallies and news about tortured activists. We were subjected to the roar of URAL trucks and other military vehicles moving around the city twenty-four hours a day, the absolute loss of a sense of security and confidence in the future—that is what our life became like under the occupation.

A pro-Ukrainian rally in temporarily occupied Berdyansk, 07.03.2022.
Photo: Oleksandr Pylypenko

Communication problems began practically from the first day. To prevent residents from handing over the coordinates and other important information about the Rashists to the Ukrainian security forces, their phone communication and internet were cut off. Sometimes it lasted for five days in a row. We were cut off from each other, and Berdyansk was isolated from the outside world. The only exceptions were the Ukrtelecom land lines, Wi-Fi that one could access in the Central Market, near the Raiffeisen Bank branch, and several other locations. Dozens of people started flocking there at the same time. Due to network overload, sending one text message could take up to half an hour, but the understanding that there was no hurry and the desire to send a message to your loved ones made you wait.

[14] A portmanteau word transcribed from Russian and Ukrainian, composed of the words "Russians" and "fascists," used to refer to the Russian Armed Forces and supporters of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine.

The city blockade caused a shortage of food supplies, hygiene products and medicines. All the large chain stores and numerous small shops were closed, and prices sky-rocketed, creating all the necessary conditions for a humanitarian crisis. On March 7, due to the fighting near Mariupol, the main gas line was damaged and the supply to Berdyansk was cut (not to be restored until October). As a result, the power grid was overloaded, which led to blackouts. The city was left without electricity, heating and hot meals.

The absence of internet made it almost impossible for us to make payments through bank terminals. ATMs had not been working from the first day, and we were running out of cash. One day, I happened to find a way to solve this problem. There was a huge line of displaced people from Mariupol in the clothing store with a working bank terminal. They paid in cash, so I walked up to the counter and offered to pay for them by credit card. The refugees didn't mind, and so in a few minutes I got several thousand Hryvnias in paper banknotes, but they didn't last long, because the prices in the city were sky-high. A few days later, I had to repeat the same trick. But soon, the people from Mariupol either ran out of money or moved on, while the cash deficit had increased.

> "ATMs had not been working from the first day, we were running out of cash

RELOCATION

On April 1, I saw the Russian tricolour appear on the city hall. It was the 31st day of the occupation of Berdyansk and the 31st day of decision-making, whether or not I would be able to stay in the city. All this time there was hope that the enemy troops might leave, and it would be possible to return to a more or less normal life. I understood that I was losing the opportunity to engage in journalism, because there was no freedom of speech under occupation. My NGO was cut off from the outside world and all partners. I couldn't be myself, I couldn't do my social work anymore. That rag on the city hall was a clear signal that the horror would drag on for a long time, and it was time to make a decision.

My wife and I decided to leave by evacuation buses that occasionally arrived in Berdyansk from Zaporizhzhia. To do this, we had to get to the large traffic circle outside the city, where the invaders had set up the first checkpoint, as early as possible, and join the line. We took a backpack and a travel bag with us—exactly as much as we could carry. We said goodbye to our parents, our cats, the shepherd dog named "Dick," and left home.

People waiting for evacuation vehicles near Berdyansk, 05.04.2022.
Photo: Oleksandr Pylypenko

It was six in the morning. We found a taxi, paid 500 Hryvnias (ten times more than it cost before the war) and arrived at the place. But it was in vain—the bus convoy hadn't arrived yet—the invaders didn't let the convoy pass the demarcation line in Vasylivka. We returned home.

The next morning, we did it all again. Again, there were no buses, although it was already 10 a.m., and the line of several hundred people was starting to thin out. By around 11 a.m. the line was shorter by half. My wife and I decided to keep waiting. Finally, a vehicle convoy showed up, but from a different direction—that of Mariupol. Those were the five Red Cross buses. They were denied entry to Mariupol and decided to try to take people from Berdyansk. It took the Pakistani volunteers quite a while to negotiate evacuation with the invaders, but they finally agreed.

The line dissolved into chaos because everyone wanted to get on the buses. A Russian soldier with a Georgian accent announced loudly that women and children would go first, and then it was up to everyone's luck. All bags were carefully inspected; it was a stampede. My wife and I were let through quickly, and we even got seats next to each other. In the end, all four hundred people wishing to leave managed to get on the buses, although many had to sit in the aisles or on the steps. There were no empty seats at all—everything was filled with bags, backpacks, and packages.

The driver warned us that the buses would stop only at the checkpoints, and it would be possible to get out only if demanded by the military. We were to answer their questions briefly and not to react to provocations, otherwise one could be

left standing on the road, as this had already happened during previous trips. Stepping away to the shoulder of the road was not allowed either, because of mines. We set off.

We expected the trip to be difficult, but not by that much. It took us more than a day, instead of the usual three hours. Near the demarcation line, the invaders stopped the convoy and made everyone spend the night at a bombed-out gas station. The air temperature outside the bus windows, as well as in the cabin, fell below freezing; explosions could be heard somewhere nearby. However, all was worth it. The realisation that the free Ukrainian territory was just around the corner warmed us better than anything else.

We drove away from powerlessness and hopelessness, because our city had turned into a grey area where there are no human rights, laws or justice; they were replaced with the eradication of Ukrainian identity. We relocated to preserve our national identity and to be able to fight for the restoration of peaceful life under the yellow and blue flag.

MARIIA RUDNYTSKA

Mariia Rudnytska comes from the village of Shevchenkove, Mykolaiv region. She moved to the city of Kherson, where she studied at the university. As soon as the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began, Mariia left Kherson for her native village, where she spent the first three weeks in her basement, hiding from the shelling. After the successful battle for Mykolaiv, she left for the Lviv Region, where she began volunteer social work, to help displaced people from all over Ukraine.

Currently, Mariia lives in Mykolaiv, where she works as a charity foundation coordinator and, at the same time, studies to become a journalist. She does a lot of good and with all her heart believes in Ukraine's victory.

THE WAR THAT CHANGED ME

I've always been afraid of dark basements. I've always thought that someone was sitting there and watching me. And now I live in the basement. I sleep on rotten shelves where my grandmother's preserves used to sit. I remember the delicious strawberry jam we used to eat with bread at the dinner table. Warm memories are silenced by pain. The shelves painfully pierce into my back.

"Darling, no need to worry, but our airfield has been shelled, something is starting... Come back home." The call came at six in the morning. Damn it. I remember how in the ninth grade, during the health basics lessons, we were always told not to panic and keep a cool head in difficult moments. I remembered that rule so well, as if I knew that I would definitely need it someday. "OK, mom, I'll be there soon." The call made me feel cold, so I reached under the bed for the heater. A black mushroom cloud from an explosion was already visible outside the window. It was so close that it seemed as if I could reach it with my hand. The downtown was being shelled.

I packed my suitcases. Every item is a precious memory of mine. Great-grandmother Anna had embroidered this dress for her daughter Yaroslava. It was passed down from generation to generation, because in our family, embroidered traditional Ukrainian clothes are, I quote: "an attribute of high Ukrainian fashion." I took out my favourite sweatshirt. I wore it every time we got together as a family to play bingo. These memories warmed my heart, but I forced myself back into reality. The suitcases were packed, and the car was waiting. I left my cosy apartment in a restless city. People were running around in search of ATMs to withdraw cash. The city was engulfed in traffic jams. Rumours and whispers were in the air. Gas stations were out of fuel and gas. There was a bitter aftertaste

of chaos in my mouth. My Kherson, I will miss you! I will definitely return someday, because we still have so many moments to look forward to, together.

Loud explosions were heard. I ran to the car and with my trembling hands gave the driver my suitcases. A few minutes later we were driving through the city, and I was watching Kherson residents. Some ran through the streets, some stood in line for medicine at the pharmacy, others rushed to work, pretending that everything was as usual. We stood in a traffic jam for a good hour. My phone was overwhelmed with messages, "How are you there? Are you alright?" And then my sister sent me a video and said, "Watch it and calm down." In the video, a Ukrainian military service member stated that the Ukrainian Defence Forces had been informed about possible provocations from the neighbouring country and knew that it all would begin at four a.m. I understood then that the shelling was temporary intimidation on the part of Russia, and also that the Ukrainian Defence Forces were already in their positions in any case. I was relieved. I believed that this horror was short-lived. Well, who knew, who knew.

We got out of the city, out of that human Armageddon, and I felt a little better. The sun was shining, the wind stirred the treetops. It felt like a dream. Just a silly dream, or maybe a movie that's about to end. A huge haze of black smoke stretched to the sky, the fire it came from was devouring everything around—the Chornobayivka airfield was burning. Soon we ran out of fuel, and the nearest gas station was two or three kilometres away. At that moment silly thoughts started to cross my mind. My brain told me: "No one will help you, if you don't make it to the gas station in three minutes—you will be hit by a rocket. You will die on this highway, because very soon Russian tanks will be driving on it." I didn't know what panic attacks were, but at that moment I realized that I'd just had my first one.

When we got to the gas station, I somehow pulled myself together. And then I was home. How nice it felt to be in my native village, quiet and peaceful. I believed that I was totally safe here. The walls of my house were my guardian angels. Mom wasn't there, she had gone shopping. My younger brother hugged me and started crying. "I was so scared! It's good that you came," he said. Together we unpacked my things and made up emergency bags. Until the last, we didn't believe that we would need them. But there was no choice. Mom came back with bags full of groceries and medicine and we immediately took everything down to the basement. To that same damp, dark basement that became my protective dome.

We decided to spend the night in the shelter. There wasn't much space there anymore, as everything was covered with stuff. There was a shovel and an axe near the door, in case we were buried under the stone walls that could collapse from the explosion. We moved the jars of preserves and pickles from the shelves to the garage so that there would be a place to sleep. The first night was relatively quiet, so we returned to the house. We blacked out the windows with towels and sheets

and sat at home by candlelight. We slept with our clothes on, in order to quickly go down to the basement, in case the shelling started. My body itched from the clothing. I was so done with it. I wasn't used to living like this. "Stupid ambitions of the Russian dictator," I thought, making a cup of hot coffee. I felt a need for frosty fresh air, so without hesitation I went outside. I went to the vegetable garden, where my grandmother and I planted potatoes and watermelons when I was a child. I remember how she said, "Let's plant a few more rows and then you can go and get yourself some ice cream." The blue sky from my childhood memories was replaced by a red sky. Mykolaiv was being shelled. Russian scum fired rockets at military barracks, gas stations, and residential areas. The city was on fire, drowning in tears and covered in blood. Tears fell from my eyes into my drink. What's it like, salty coffee? I don't know, because the cup fell from my hands when I heard a loud noise in the sky. It was a Russian fighter jet that was aiming at the bridge on the way from my village of Shevchenkove to the Kherson Region. But it missed. An aerial bomb fell on a farm field where wheat was supposed to grow.

"The larger part of the Kherson Region is no longer under the Ukrainian forces' control," the Telegram news channel wrote. The invaders entered Kherson. Around one p. m., I was sitting in the kitchen eating a cherry pie when I heard a loud roar. My mom and I looked out the door and saw a tank convoy. The convoy was going to Mykolaiv. It was difficult to understand whose tanks they were. "One hundred percent ours," mom said. I thought so too, until I saw the Russian flag on the last one. Another panic attack. My mom and I ran to the basement. Intuition told us to hide.

Automatic gunfire, explosions. The Territorial Defence Forces and the Armed Forces were fighting the invaders. Russian tank fire struck a house on a nearby street. The roof caved in, the windows shattered, and a wall had collapsed. My mom and I called our neighbours, because we knew that a family lived in that house. The boy and his parents were unharmed because they were in the basement at that time. The fight continued and it was so hot that the air burned my skin. Russian tanks were fleeing. They were backing off, returning to where they came from. The first small victory. The defence of Mykolaiv was successful.

Sensing defeat, the invaders began to enter some of the more remote, rural villages, those located very far from the main highway. It was through those villages that one could access the bypass road to Mykolaiv. When the Russian troops entered the villages of Novohryhorivka, Myrne and the town of Luch, all hell broke out. Shevchenkove was surrounded on three sides. We could no longer sleep in the house, and the shelling never stopped. My twelve-year-old brother had learned to tell the difference between the shells. "That's Grad artillery system rockets flying to Mykolaiv," he said. "Oh, cluster munitions are being used nearby." I was impressed by how fast he learned new information

and also taught us. Moreover, he could tell when the aggressors were firing and when our troops were fighting back.

The Russians destroyed everything. No longer was there a hospital in the village, because a Smerch multiple rocket launcher struck nearby. No longer was there a pharmacy, because an aerial bomb hit its centre. No longer was there a semi-finished products factory, because an S-300 missile destroyed it. Store shelves were empty. Sometimes a car came to deliver bread to the villagers. But then the invaders also destroyed the bread factory. I became more aggressive with each day, because I couldn't counter the actions of Russian criminals.

For some reason, it seemed to me that it was much safer to hide in the village than in the city. But even here, death was constantly catching up with people. Aunt Zhenia, my physics teacher's mother, was the first. Aunt Zhenia was on the terrace of her own house when the Russian army opened artillery fire. After receiving shrapnel wounds, she died from blood loss. Antonina Stepanivna, her daughter and my teacher, said that on the morning of March 18, she talked to her mother on the phone. "Mom blessed us for the rest of the journey, and by lunchtime she was gone." Sometimes they say that death doesn't choose. The war makes its adjustments. And it happens sometimes that your death may await you under your own roof.

The nights were so black that it seemed as if I had lost my sight. It was difficult to find the way from the basement to the house door, although they were only a few steps apart. You want to turn on the flashlight for a few seconds, but then paranoia instantly kicks in. You think that an aircraft might fly into the light, because it will think that it's another target mark.

Even nature helped us in this terrible war. As if it knew that the Russians didn't belong here. Winters in the south of Ukraine are usually warm. Typically, snow barely touches the streets and tree branches and it melts very quickly. But that winter, I came out of the basement early one morning to have a cup of coffee. Finally, I had a few hours of sweet silence. I pushed on the door, but could not open it. I pushed with all my might and then saw snow. And the snow was knee-deep! The last time I saw so much snow was the previous year, when I was vacationing in the Carpathian Mountains. But was it a coincidence? I don't think so. Nature also has feelings and seeks justice.

My dad had always been a positive person. He was often called the "life and soul of the party," because of his charisma and funny jokes. With the beginning of the war, he seemed to have lost his zest. His voice was barely recognizable on the phone. My dad was no longer the same as in my pre-war memories. Instead, he turned into a harsh, rude man who had neither feelings, nor any warmth in his heart. He had completely changed. We were no longer who we once were or who we hoped to become. We were driven by anger against our common enemy now.

Dad came home from the capital at the time when our highway was controlled by the invaders. A few days before his arrival, on that very highway, the Russians destroyed an ambulance and killed the driver, a nurse and a wounded soldier. A few days before that, the murderers shot a convoy of civilians leaving the hot zones. How dad got home safe and sound is still a miracle for us. We hugged for a long time, because we thought that we would never be together again. Memories of how my dad taught me to ride a bicycle as a child and how to drive a car as a teenager came to my mind. How I won my first chess game, also thanks to my dad. He taught me almost everything he knew himself.

> "HOW DAD GOT HOME SAFE AND SOUND IS STILL A MIRACLE FOR US

There was silence in the basement when dad made a desperate decision to teach us how to make Molotov cocktails. First, we learned the theory, and the practice started the next day. We practiced in my grandfather's workshop. We prepared everything necessary and began. Surprisingly, I got it right the first time. Dad then said, "I didn't think that my gentle, fragile girl was actually such a commando." I myself didn't know that I could be like that. I simply had no choice. While my dad taught me the art of war, looters and collaborators were regularly detained in our village. They, like vile rats, hid in abandoned houses and also in basements, but they were found anyway. Looters were tied to poles for public condemnation, and collaborators were handed over to law enforcement authorities for questioning. I never thought that supporters of the "Russian world" would be found out in my native village, named after the fierce Ukrainian and talented writer Taras Shevchenko. The war unmasked everyone, and everyone got what they deserved.

Dad could no longer bear to see my brother and me flinching at every shell that flew over our heads. Our nervous systems had completely failed. Therefore, my mom, my brother and I went to a more peaceful place. Each of us had a backpack where we kept the essentials. The volunteers picked us up at six in the morning. We said a long and painful goodbye to dad, grandmother and grandfather, and then, under fire, we went to the railway station. My dad, like most brave Ukrainians, is serving in the Ukrainian Defence Forces now and defends our right to exist.

With tears in my eyes, I returned to my native village on November 23, 2022, when I read the news about the liberation of Kherson. It was raining, and a little foggy. There was a blackout all over Ukraine, due to large-scale shelling by the Russian invaders. Although there was no power, I decided to walk the streets of the village. Every other house was destroyed. Was there a military base or did

Nazis live there? My heart aches when I see what seems to be footage from a movie about the apocalypse. Just give a terrorist country an excuse and it will destroy everything.

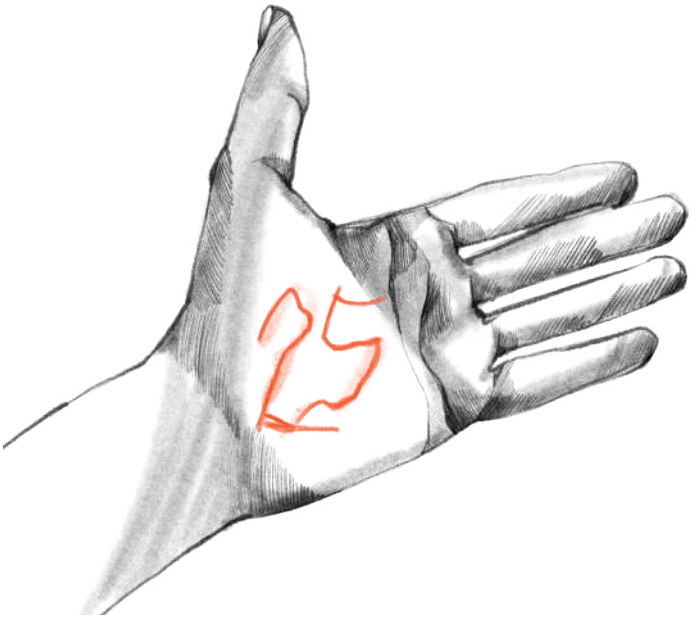
Every evening I hear the Ukrainian air defence at work, but I am no longer afraid, because I know that I am protected. My nervous system has adapted to this reality. It's 2023 and the invaders are still terrorising Ukrainians, who, like me, have great gifts inherited from our ancestors: indomitable spirit, combativeness, and faith. Our belief is that good always triumphs over evil, and our unity will definitely overcome the evil that has come to our land. We believe that it will happen very soon.

ARTEM TERESHCHENKO

Artem Tereshchenko is from the town of Slobozhanske, Kharkiv region. Artem's ambitions and desires have outgrown his town with its population of fifteen thousand people. Therefore, as soon as he entered the university in Kharkiv, he immediately moved there. He lived in Kharkiv for two years.

When the invasion took place on February 24, 2022, Artem was at home, in his native town, 60 kilometres from the city, and fifteen minutes by car from the towns that were later occupied. Artem stayed in Slobozhanske hoping his native town would not be the next to be occupied. He is currently still there.

In August 2022 after the Kharkiv operation resulted in the liberation of the Kharkiv Region, life there became much easier. People stopped living one day at a time, not knowing what would happen next. Artem continues to study, work, and help his country. Now he is confident that no one will take his future away tomorrow.



SLOBOZHANSKE. THE LAST CARBONARA

The saddest day of my life was the one when I finally realised that it wasn't just going to be two or three weeks. Life would never be the same as before. Whatever 'before' even means?

My life as a nineteen-year-old was as bright as all the colours of the rainbow. I had just celebrated my birthday, and passed my last exam of the semester on the same day. I was just enjoying the carefree life, typical of most students: I lived in a dormitory, attended classes, and visited my hometown to hang out with my friends. Every week was like that.

Now, even if the war suddenly ends in an instant, and Ukraine wins, and all the territories are re-taken, my friends and I won't gather again to have the most delicious half-burnt kebabs near the Donets River. Because the riverbank will stay strewn with mines for a long time. Not all of my fellow-students will be there to meet up again at our favourite "smoker's spot" near the university, where we'd deliberately come half an hour before the start of the classes, just for a chat. Some of us have already started a new life in another country. We will never have a carefree walk around our beloved Kharkiv again because the scars left by the war will constantly remind us of the times when the words "peace" and "security" were considered impossible luxuries.

I've often heard people say that they don't remember the first days of the war at all. I remember everything. Everything that happened to me and everything I felt. I remember my mom waking me up and saying, "The war has started. You are not

going to Kharkiv today." I remember how I didn't believe her because I knew how gullible my mom was. I said to her, "Oh, it's not true, it's just panicky Telegram chats. I'm packing and I'm going to the dorm." However, it turned out that my mom was telling the truth.

I stayed in bed and read the news for the first few days of the war. I wrote to everyone. To relatives, friends, acquaintances, fellow students. I checked if everyone was OK. As much as it was even possible. I can't say I was very scared. It was much quieter in Slobozhanske than in Kharkiv, only at night we started hearing missile strikes in the distance.

Then I went out for the first time, because I needed cash. The only thing everyone was talking about was that bank cards would stop working. So I needed an ATM, and food. I decided to go to the store with a friend. We agreed to meet at my place at nine o'clock. A little later, my friend Ruslan and I were already in line-up at the checkout counter in the ATB supermarket. There were some elderly ladies ahead of us, with their shopping baskets laden with packets of sugar and cereals that they greedily grabbed, out of fear of supply shortages. Behind us, the line was growing at such a speed that one couldn't see the shelves through the crowd—only people. I looked at my companion and asked him to get some bacon. I didn't yet realise that in a week, regular sausage would make me happy, but then, in the first hours of the full-scale invasion, I wanted to make carbonara. A couple of minutes later, Ruslan was back with a pack of sliced bacon. It cost as much as two chicken fillets. We kept standing in line but it barely moved. On the way home, I endured another line, this time for an even more useless purchase—parmesan. Because what kind of pasta is it without parmesan?

An hour later, my friends and I were already busy in the kitchen. One of us watched the pasta, another one grated the cheese. I made tea for everyone, and those two friends who never help made sure we were not left without their very relevant advice even for a minute. No one was afraid. Many of us didn't believe that war would be a reality. Neither in the previous eight years, nor in these few hours.

We jokingly mentioned our only friend who had been walking around all pale for the last month and talking about nothing but the beginning of the war. Now he sat in a bunker, with his girlfriend's family, feeling proud that he was right. And we sat in my room, into which we had dragged the kitchen table, and ate carbonara. So delicious, but so out-of-place that this absurdity was the only thing that warmed our hearts. Back then we didn't know that the next time we'd meet like this would be in the winter.

In recent years, my mom and I have gotten used to living together in a three-room apartment. On the first evening of the full-scale invasion, my sister, her husband and my two nephews moved in with us. Our apartment is the closest to the basement, and it's on the first floor. The two children, whose combined age

wasn't even ten years old, couldn't understand why they had moved to live with us, and why everyone would sleep together in the hallway at night.

We heard the first explosions that evening. Something was banging non-stop somewhere in the distance all day, and it sounded very scary, especially for a person who still didn't realise that the war had begun. Yet in the evening, aircraft noises and loud explosions could already be heard all over our town, and I understood: another kilometre and a shell may be in our yard. Everyone in my apartment building panicked.

> "I UNDERSTOOD: ANOTHER KILOMETRE AND A SHELL MAY BE IN OUR YARD

When my nephews and I walked out of the building, there was already a line of frightened old ladies who had rushed outside in a split second in front of the basement. My nephew's first words about the basement sounded like this: "Why is it so bad here? Why hasn't it been renovated? Will we live here all the time now?"

In a few days, a small town in the Chuguyiv District was cut off from the world. There was an open field on one side, beyond which Balaklia was located, the city Russian troops would soon invade. On the other side there was a river, with the bridge that had been blown up so that the enemy couldn't advance further. There were no buses to Kharkiv, commuter trains didn't run, and the only things left in the ATB were shelves fully stocked with bags of chips from Poland. That's pretty much the only thing that kept being delivered once a week. Eventually, the chips became so precious that we would line up for them at the store at 5 a.m., despite the curfew. The ATB staff would walk along the line and scribble numbers indicating our places in line on our palms, so that people could step out. And so, after standing in line for several hours, I bought that pathetic bag of royal-cheese-flavoured chips, and felt amused at the ridiculousness of the situation.

Eventually, life began to get back to normal. The Zmiiv Thermal Power Plant, in support of which our town was built, unexpectedly became our shield. "Why bomb the plant if it can work for us?" the Russians must have thought, because while they were in the area, only one shell actually hit the town itself. Food trucks started arriving via bad country roads, making a 50 kilometre detour each time. Several months later, food was no longer in short supply.

Slobozhanske, a small town of 14,000 people, 60 kilometres from the regional centre, didn't have a particularly interesting life before the start of the full-scale

invasion. There are only five decent establishments where you could take a girl to on a date, three proper shops and two schools. It's easier to restore the daily life of such a small patch of land than, say, one of the typical sleeping districts of Kyiv, Kharkiv or Odesa.

Every evening, as soon as it gets dark, both sides start shelling each other. I look up and see dozens of lights rising into the sky and flying towards Kharkiv or Balaklia. And we are just somewhere in the middle, hoping that none of them fall on us. There are still people left in the town. People who don't want to live under occupation, people who need only one country—their own. Even those people who had stayed understood: the enemy can reach us at any moment. All they need to do is go across a ten-kilometre field. Till the end, even the Ukrainian military, when asked "Will they take Slobozhanske?" answered, "Who knows? They might. But we are also doing everything possible to prevent it from happening."

My mom, besides being the best person in the world because she gave birth to me, is also a nursery school director. It took her 20 years to get there—my whole life. Before I was born, she worked at the school and was one of the best teachers. Everywhere she studied, she graduated with honours. This is a woman for whom learning was no longer love, learning was her life.

And then I was born. Small, very weak and allergic to everything. Because of me, she quit her job at school and got a job at the nursery school to personally monitor her child, who was also diagnosed with asthma at the age of four.

Now she is a mature and strong woman who, even during the war, didn't abandon her post and her duties. And although the nursery school has not been filled with children's laughter for over a year now, it keeps functioning. Along with other volunteers, she spent the whole summer in the town hospital, which has become a military hospital. In this place, a dozen ordinary people, side by side with doctors, fought for the lives of hundreds of our defenders. I have never seen my mom as tired as when she came home after a voluntary 24-hour shift. Even random Ministry of Education inspections of the nursery school didn't exhaust my mother as much as the screams, blood and all the horror that she and the hospital staff had to deal with on a daily basis.

Every day she came home, went to bed, woke up and went to work again. A few months later she would hear the happy news from the military personnel who had become her friends: "Kharkiv Region has been completely liberated."

It's been relatively safe in Slobozhanske, as in the entire Kharkiv Region, for the past six months. The brave soldiers of the Ukrainian Defence Forces drove the invaders out of the Region, liberated Kupiansk, Balaklia and Izium, and most importantly—made it possible for Kharkiv to live and flourish. Hundreds of thousands of residents who love their city and for whom it's the best, have already returned to Kharkiv.

They remember the terrible nights in the basements. They remember the attempt to raze Saltivka to the ground, they remember that terrible hit on the government administration building. Thanks to our military, who re-took these territories, people were able to come back home, breathe new life into the city and begin its reconstruction.

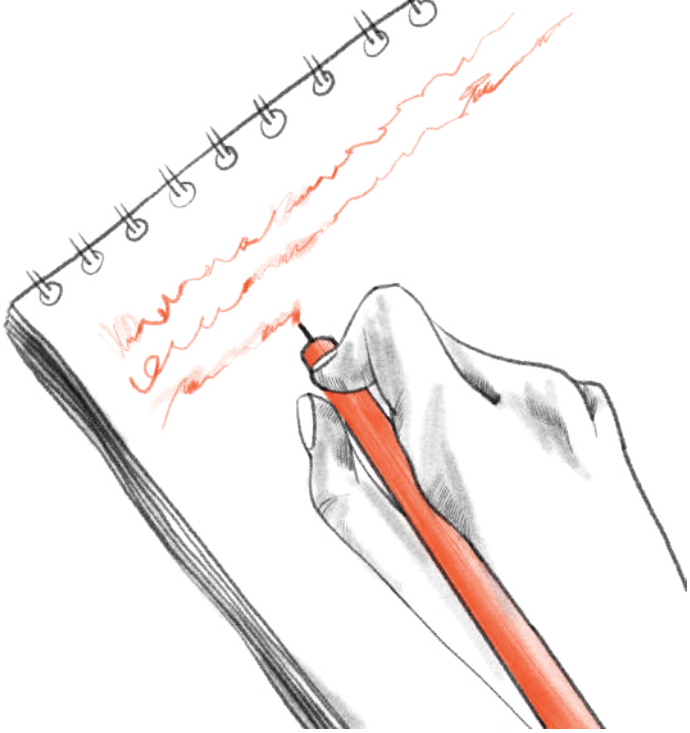
I really hope that the same thing will happen for every occupied region—that the land will be liberated and people can return home like in Kharkiv. I also hope that every Ukrainian will be able to gather with friends for a carbonara or something else. This time—to celebrate our victory.

VALENTYNA FEDORCHUK

Valentyna Fedorchuk was born in the village of Borozenske, Kherson region. Her favourite childhood activity was reading books from the local village library. After graduating from high school, she studied at Kherson Agrarian University, but after a while realised that this area of study was not her interest.

When the full-scale war broke out, she was working as a journalist in Kherson. During the occupation, Valentyna's 8-year-old daughter was living in a relatively safe location in Kherson oblast with her grandmother, where they had evacuated to in April 2022. Meanwhile, Valentyna and her husband remained in occupied Kherson where, despite the danger, they continued to work, filming on their phones right under the noses of the occupiers and making live broadcasts for Ukrainian TV channels.

At present Valentyna continues to work as a journalist in the de-occupied Kherson region. She has been filming stories about life in a city on the front lines, and about the aftermath of Russian shelling and Russian crimes. She dreams about filing stories from a Crimea freed of occupiers.



A FEW KILOMETRES TO FREEDOM

The first thing that we noticed were the mines along the side of the road. There were a lot of them, in fact, it looked as if the shoulder was made of cobblestones. It was a deadly road shoulder. I could see how the wheels of the car travelling in front of us were sliding around on the sticky mud, how it was slipping in various directions. Our car was sliding around as well. Vlad gripped the wheel tightly, all tensed up, because our lives depended on him. I did not say a word, so as not to distract him. Silently, I was praying: Please make it, there's just a little bit to go. There were burned out cars in the ditches. Those were the ones that did not make it. We passed a village in the grey zone, I don't know what it was called. But that's not important, because the village is no more. Totally destroyed buildings, open doors, hungry chickens wandering about the yard. Where was their owner? Did he leave his home, and leave them behind? Or maybe he was still in that house with no windows, just lying there?

I didn't know how our journey would end. Would we remain here with my husband, in the middle of the grey zone, together with the abandoned chickens? Would I see my daughter again or would she be left with just that letter that I wrote her. The only thing I wished for at that time was to live!

The price of freedom from Russian occupiers was high… but we were willing to pay.

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I remember the day when the occupiers entered Kherson very well. Our military couldn't hold the Antonivsky Bridge any more. We didn't know what would happen next when the enemy entered the city. This information was available on the official web site of the Oblast Administration, but the rumours hadn't started circulating through the city yet. My husband and I rushed out into the street. The situation in the city could change any minute. Vlad held the phone and framed the video. Then, standing in the middle of the street, I said my first words, "Good morning, studio..." Around me, passers-by rushed to find shops and ATMs that worked. And I continued, "The Russian army has broken through the defences ... and is entering the city." I was speaking about something that the passers-by on the streets of Kherson didn't know yet. And I was afraid.

The next few days we observed, in horror, the convoys of military equipment moving through Kherson. Telegram Chat became our main source of information. I remember a video circulating in one of the public groups: the occupiers shot through a civilian car right there in the city centre, and one of the passengers was a teenage girl. Her mother was writing posts in every group, searching for the girl, wanting to believe that she was still alive. People were being kidnapped right off the streets, from stores. At that time the Russians didn't know anything about us and they would grab anybody, just to scare the others. Armoured personnel carriers would go around shooting at parking lots, buildings or groups of people.

It was about that time that the tragedy in the Lilac Park happened. A few dozen Territorial Defence servicemen were shot, men who had believed that they could stop the invasion of occupiers simply with guns and some Molotov cocktails. The Russians shot them from a tank at point blank. I don't know why our Territorial Defence did not have enough weapons, why the authorities did not do anything to defend the city, and where the police and the military were. I know that ordinary boys were among the dead. Some of them were holding weapons in their hands for the first time in their lives.

We found out from a video, also in Telegram, that the Russians had set up a checkpoint next to our building: they occupied a two-storey building which had been a store, and had set up machine guns in the windows. Right next stood two armoured personnel carriers and a whole lot of military. We were afraid to go out into the street.

There were a few packages of cereal grains on the old yellowed shelf and a half-dried bread crust wrapped in cellophane bag. That was all that was left in our kitchen, because we had gone through our supplies in a week. We needed to go to the store, but the armoured personnel carrier was right there on the road. And this thought was in our heads: what if they simply shoot us? Our attempt to leave was unsuccessful. We returned to the apartment and cooked up some porridge

and ate the rest of the bread. At that time, we didn't know that would be the last piece of bread that we'd have for the next three weeks.

It was evening. I was reading news in the local Telegram channel. "We are gathering for a peaceful protest against the occupiers on Freedom Square, at 10am," I read aloud to my husband. I caught his glance.

"Shall we go?"

"Of course."

In the morning, we went on foot. If we had gone by car, they would have stopped us at the checkpoint for sure.

Walking around Kherson in those days seemed a luxury. Then I was amazed to see just how many people had come out onto the street. I didn't notice it at first, but they were all moving in one direction. The pedestrians all merged into one stream of people on the central Ushakova Street. They were all going to the same place as we were, to the protest.

In the square, you could now hear the shouting and chanting, but when we came closer, I was shocked. Thousands of people with flags and signs had taken over the space, it was even getting difficult to move through the packed crowds. The Russian military, with weapons, stood along the white walls of the oblast administration building.

"Domoi poka zhivoi" (Go home while you're still alive!), "Kherson is Ukraine!," "Russian soldiers are fascists and occupiers!" chanted the crowd. The Russian soldiers with their empty eyes stood and surveyed the people, who, risking their lives, had come here with Ukrainian flags. We chanted along at the top of our voices. Through the shouting, the hate, the anger and the fear left us. Actually, we were afraid no more. And then someone from the crowds shouted out:

"Let's go walking through Kherson! It's our city! What are we afraid of?"

And everybody went. We were not afraid any more. This was our country. It was our Kherson!

The feeling of euphoria was pleasant and at the same time dangerous. After the protest we returned home. We felt free. In the store we picked up the last packet of oatmeal and some canned fish. That was all that we had for dinner.

And then SOBR, the Special Rapid Response Unit, entered the city. I didn't know what that stood for, I just knew that they had been professionally trained to suppress any resistance. They started to shoot at our protests indiscriminately. The most active protesters were taken away. I remember there being a puddle of blood, and an elderly man lying in it. Three or four young men tried to carry him to a safe place. The women were shouting and crying. Someone nearby, in a panic, was calling emergency services.

After that incident, the protests did not stop, although there were fewer people now. We changed the locations, the time, but they kept on persecuting us.

It became much more dangerous. Each time more residents stayed at home. It was more important to stay alive.

Vlad and I attended the protests until the last one, until stun grenades were used against us. There was shouting, panic, people moved further back, but did not disperse. I lost Vlad, even though he was standing a few metres from me. Under our feet, something whistled by, sparks flew. Following other protesters, I started to move back to behind the cinema building, and I caught a glimpse of Vlad, and ran to him. He was uninjured. Our lips were smarting, our eyes were filling with tears. One man remained in the middle of the square. Through tears and coughing he continued to chant "Kherson is Ukraine" until they took him away. Three burly military men ran up, twisted his arms and led him away. I don't know what happened to him next.

Two more people were injured that day. An elderly woman received severe burns, as her synthetic jacket melted into her body. A grenade hit a boy in the knee and an ambulance took him away.

There were no more protests. But the struggle continued.

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Walking through the city helped us remember that we were people, not prisoners. We did a lot of walking. We went to those parts of Kherson which we knew well and those parts where we had never been. They would check pedestrians less frequently, so these outings seemed safe to us. We used to leave our telephones at home. It was too complicated to delete conversations before each outing. We would always take our documents with us, in case of checks.

There were always Russian military standing at the entrance to the city hall. We always passed this place in silence, and tried to be invisible. But one time I saw a teenager who was standing on the grass verge. He was tied to the light pole with tape. He looked like he was about 13, still a child. Standing beside him was an annoyed occupier, swearing at him loudly. A second later I heard a loud slap. The young boy swayed. That sharp, loud sound remained in my memory for a long time. I started and Vlad grabbed me by the hand. The boy was sobbing, but did not try to break free. He stood there silently with his head down. At home his mother was probably waiting for him and worrying why he was not home yet, but he was standing there, tied to a pole with duct tape. Right there in the centre of Kherson. We walked past in silence. I was very ashamed. I could not defend a child, our child. It's still painful.

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After some time, the coffee shops in Kherson started to open. We loved to get a coffee, sit with it on a bench, and imagine that we were living a normal life. Spring was all around us, girls were wearing dresses and families were out with their children. The imaginary idyll was only broken by the sounds of explosions somewhere else outside the city and by seeing the Missing Persons announcements pasted onto poles. First the coffee shops, and then the cafes and little restaurants began to open. The prices were crazy, the available selection was small, but despite this people were trying to latch on to an imaginary sense of normality.

We were living life the best way that we could, as well as we knew how. We did our cooking, stood in queues and fell asleep to the sounds of explosions. Sometimes they were so loud, that we had to go hide in the bathroom and play cards on the cold floor, sitting on towels folded over in four. But the thin line between normal life and the war became thinner each day…. Still, we needed to keep on living.

One day a family restaurant opened in the city, a place where I often spent time before the full-scale invasion. I used to drink wine there with friends, and hold business meetings, and most recently went and discussed my plans for the future. It was incredible how much I wanted to return to those days. I put on a breezy white polka-dot dress, delicate sandals, and Vlad and I went out. And there I was on the patio of that restaurant, and in my hand was a glass of cold cheap wine, which didn't taste good to me at all. However, it was something more than just cheap wine. With each sip I could taste life. It was that same normal life, which the invaders took away from us. And then at that point in time everything seemed normal to me, as long as I didn't turn my head to the left, where a dark green armoured vehicle with the letter Z was parked.

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"I'm alive!" I shouted to my Mum over the telephone and then the line broke up. There was no cell service for a long time, neither in the city nor in the surrounding countryside. There were a few locations where you could get some minimal cell service, but there were always so many people there, that the network would become overloaded. And in addition, telling family about what was going on in Kherson was daunting, because the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service) was everywhere.

For my Mum, the most important thing was just one word: "Alive." More than anything else in the world, I wanted to hear my daughter, whom I had not seen since the beginning of the war. I listened to one ring-tone, then another. It seemed that the connection was getting better.

I shouted to my mother:

"Put Katya on the line!"

"Hello..." I heard a small voice in the telephone.

"Honey, I love you!"

"When will you come, Mummy?"

"Soon. Hello?"

And the connection disappeared again. The conversation was over for today.

✦✦✦

I was preparing supper. Frozen pelmeni (dumplings). It was the only thing that I managed to grab in the store, having stood in an enormously long line. They had thawed in our ancient fridge and then had turned into one enormous dough ball.

"Never mind," I smiled. "I'll toss them in the blender and turn them into meat patties."

I heard a knocking on the door and looked at Vlad in fear. Vlad gave me a hug:

"That was only the washing machine going into spin cycle."

Knocking once more. This time it was someone for the neighbours.

We ate the improvised meat patties in silence. In my head, I rehearsed my actions in case the knocking was to be on our door. We were on the sixth floor, with nowhere to run. The USB stick with videos was hidden inside a toy. But perhaps we should just not open the door? What if we sat here quietly like mice, and they would think that we were not home, and they would go away?

I washed dishes. Vlad was gaming on the PlayStation. For a second I thought that I would be going to work the next day, and then later meeting a friend for coffee, and perhaps we'd go somewhere for the weekend. Outside there was a flash, then an explosion. And my thoughts returned to earth. There was a war on.

✦✦✦

I never liked having my birthday and I always cried on this day. I remember my birthday when I turned 12. I was not expecting a fancy party. "There's no money," my Mum always said. But this year, she allowed me to invite a lot of guests. I invited everybody whom I regarded as a friend. I was happy, I was wearing my new dress, and I had been looking out the window since morning. Then just one friend came. I cried.

My birthday just before the war was on the bank of a river. I was earning money, so I could afford it. I put on make-up, bought expensive alcohol, plenty of food on

the table, shashlik on the grill and organized a wooden pavilion. Then it rained and half the guests didn't come. My mascara ran.

It was my 27th birthday. Outside it was summer, but my country was at war. In the morning Vlad gave me a small bouquet of cornflowers, which he had bought for 50 Hryvnia from an older woman in front of a closed ATB supermarket. She spent most of the occupation sitting there and selling things. She sold flowers, nuts, and even mulberries in disposable cups from the mulberry tree that she was sitting under. Once I saw how she was selling her new set of china. I think it was the most expensive thing that she owned at that time. I was happy with the cornflowers. They were so blue, like a clear sky in peacetime. We had an outing, walked through the city, bought some beer from a guy in the street, who was pouring it straight from a plastic barrel, and a packet of chips, which cost the same as 10 kilograms of potatoes. Damned expensive. But today was a special day, so it was allowed.

It was 2022 and we were in a terrible full-scale war. While Vlad was setting out our special birthday dinner, I went into the washroom. It seemed to me that I heard some knocking on the door. I told myself I was being paranoid. Then I heard steps, and a click. Vlad opened the front door and I heard a muted female voice:

"I need to speak to Valentyna."

My head began to buzz. I was planning to walk out, but I crouched near the door. My legs were not obeying me. They have come! They have come to get me! In a few seconds the action plan, which I had rehearsed so often just before going to sleep, at dinner and in the shower, flashed through my head. It became apparent just how inadequate it was.

I made one decision instantly—to flush my telephone down the toilet. But no, if they had already come, then it wouldn't help. Through the window? We're on the sixth floor. Should I go onto the neighbour's balcony? Sounds like something from the movies. My thoughts were interrupted by Vlad:

"Valya, you have guests!"

I was afraid of the basement, and not because it was damp and cold, but because I had heard of the torture chambers, that prisoners were forced into. They would feel lucky to have caught a journalist and it was unlikely that they'd let me go just like that. If they were to see conversations in my telephone, where I informed on enemy positions, they could kill me. They would probably also take Vlad away. He is a man, so they would beat him with more cruelty. But they wouldn't rape him, as they would me. Although…

I pulled myself together and walked out of the washroom. In any case, the thin doors made of chipboard would not save me.

"Does Valentyna who's having a birthday today live here?" the voice in the corridor said once again.

I looked out. There stood a slightly built girl holding a bouquet of flowers.

"It's for you!"

Attached to the flowers was a card: "We love you so much! Your family"—the worst kind of present. I was crying again.

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It was September. The occupiers decided to hold a pseudo-referendum.

I remember how in those days I glimpsed a man voting through the window of our car. He was crouched down near the gate of his own yard. A Russian soldier with a gun stood over him and watched attentively, where was he putting his cross.

66 A RUSSIAN SOLDIER WITH A GUN STOOD OVER HIM AND WATCHED ATTENTIVELY, WHERE WAS HE PUTTING HIS CROSS

Another place where voting took place was the parking lot near the supermarket. There was one little table, a large woman with glasses, and a few metres away there was a Russian military man sitting on a stool. The observer.

We could guess, that when the sick fantasies of the Russians would start calling Kherson Oblast a "subject of the Russian Federation," the horrors would start. We did not want to live under their laws at all, because I would be living under the threat of imprisonment somewhere like Magadan in Siberia, and Vlad, in the best-case scenario, would be mobilized by the Russians, or he would be lying dead in a ditch. Although... the end result would be the same.

With each day I began to understand more clearly that I couldn't remain living next to them, standing in queues, meeting them on the street, or breathing the same air as the Russian occupiers.

We were waiting for our liberation for so long, that sometimes we stopped believing in it. We couldn't wait any more, and decided to leave.

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We prepared for the trip methodically and rationally. I sorted through our things, sometimes stopping to wipe away tears, because there were many things that I had to leave behind.

The thing that I was most afraid of was that I would never see my daughter again. Since the 24th of February, when the war began, she had been with my parents. In April, they managed to leave the occupation zone. I remember how anxious I was, how there was no communication with them. But there was no way that they could have remained. My place of residence was registered as being at my mother's address, and if they were searching for me, they'd immediately go there. It was frightening to think what they could have done to my family.

Later, my little 8-year-old Katrusia told me that during their departure, she had prayed at each checkpoint. I don't know who taught her to pray, but it was definitely not me.

People who were leaving would share their experiences in Telegram. They often told of the Russians shooting at civilian cars, despite them having signs saying "Dity" (children). Or they would let a convoy of people through and then shell them with mortars.

I understood that our attempt at departure could end in the same way. The worst thing was that I couldn't say my final words to my daughter.

I couldn't leave her anything, except her memories and some photos. However, I had made my decision. It was the most difficult decision in my whole life. Then I wrote her a farewell letter.

I tore out a sheet of paper from my notepad and I cried as I wrote. I wrote and cried. I wrote how I could imagine her being grown-up, how proud I was of her. I promised that I would always be by her side—her first kiss, her wedding, and the times that she would be sad. I wrote that I loved her more than anything in the world. Nobody knew about that letter at the time. I hid it amongst my things so that they would find it when they would come to sort them at some time after my death…

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Freedom lay a few kilometres ahead.

When we stopped in front of the checkpoint in front of the entrance to Vasylivka, I began to shake. We had waited for this for a month. Four weeks in Zaporizhzhia oblast, nights spent in the car, strained nerves and tears. I had spent 720 hours preparing for this departure, I had gathered the telephone numbers of those who had left earlier, phoned them and asked them a bunch of questions: what did they check, what did they ask about, to what did they pay attention?

And here I am. And I already knew: now they would pull out all our things. They would check bags, the car, and if we were lucky, they would let us through. Ahead of us was the scariest part—the FSB checkpoint. There the inspection was more serious: they would check laptops, telephones and ask provoking questions.

We got out of the car and a Russian soldier approached us. He kept his hands on his gun, as if he was ready at any moment to grab it and shoot.

"You have come late!" he said, as if spitting out the words.

"We are on the Departure lists," I said uncertainly.

"I said, you are late! It's three o'clock in the afternoon. You won't make it through today."

I felt like bursting into tears…

Another Russian came up to him, his face was open and he was smiling. But his smile did not seem friendly to me, rather it horrified me. He whispered something into the ear of his colleague and waved his hand at us:

"Get your things out! That's all."

We quickly unloaded our bags out onto the side of the road.

"Get your things out of the bags!" he yelled at me and went towards Vlad.

I watched as the Russian took Vlad's documents and put them in his pocket. In silence, I bent over the bags and laid out my carefully packed possessions onto a blanket, which I had spread out onto the road. He came up to me and scrutinized everything. I pulled out jeans, sanitary pads, underwear. My thoughts were elsewhere: I remembered the story told by my friend, who had told me that the occupiers had beaten her husband badly at the checkpoint; and I recalled that for many people, this departure had become their final trip. I was most afraid for my husband. His eyesight was bad and he shouldn't be beaten about the head.

Suddenly, our car started up and went through the checkpoint into Vasylivka proper. Vlad was not there. My heart was beating furiously. I understood that something was wrong. The guy took his documents, sent him to Vasylivka… exactly! That's where the command post was! It was a search! What would they do to him there?

"Where's he going?" I asked a soldier in panic.

He lifted his gaze in surprise and looked at me, "He'll be back soon."

"What happened?" I insisted.

I was so afraid, but I knew that I needed to do something.

"I said, he'll be back soon."

He went up to the next car, and shot back at me in passing, "All checked. Get your stuff."

I wanted to fall onto those bags and just cry. I was imagining the most horrific things possible. I stood there by the side of the road feeling totally lost and totally petrified. Our possessions were scattered everywhere, our bags were open and I felt a despair so deep that I felt like shouting it out over all of Vasylivka.

In 10 minutes, Vlad returned. I came back to life…in those 600 seconds I had managed to die of fright several times over. He saw my look, but did not say anything in reply. I knew he was also scared. I knew that my brusque, grown-up, bearded husband was also afraid.

A few more minutes and we were now passing the inspection hut at the checkpoint. Vlad opened the window and gave the soldiers a block of cigarettes, for which he had driven into Vasylivka. This was the tax for being allowed to leave.

We had no right to relax now. The FSB was still ahead. I was afraid of this more than anything in my life, and I had prepared for this every day during the occupation. I had deleted all photos from my phone which in any way hinted at me being a journalist. Instead, I spent 8 months collecting photos of flowers, cats and food. The numbers for police, the military, and officials in my contact list had turned into numbers for waiters and drivers.

I had thought my legend through carefully. I was a wedding planner. I had prepared an Instagram profile with the appropriate photos and posts way in advance. In Kherson I had heard that the "Feissy" (that's what we called them) had a program which could renew deleted data and conversations. If they were to do this to my phone, I would be finished. There were chats with our special forces, to whom I had supplied enemy locations, and conversations from work, and hundreds of other reasons to "take us in."

I took Vlad's hand just before the checkpoint, "Now we'll either make it through, or we won't."

This was so simple but so painful.

I had heard stories of people, who had tried to leave, but the FSB had written "Home" on their car with markers and they wouldn't let them out. For no reason, simply because they felt like it.

The seconds of waiting felt like an eternity. The squeaky marker left a big fat black mark on our windscreen. It was a number! A number! They let us through!

Vlad started the car and moved the car forward.

I was afraid to smile, in case they see me and change their minds.

Inside I was in turmoil.

Freedom. Previously I had thought that this was an abstract concept, a huge idea, and something that everybody had. Except that it was taken away from us. It lived there, beyond the "grey zone," beyond the road of death, where the blue and yellow flag was fluttering, where I could freely say: "I am a journalist! I am Ukrainian!"

There were only a few kilometres left to Freedom…

TETIANA CHEREPANOVA

Tetiana Cherepanova was born in Berdyansk, a seaside town, and spent the happiest days of her childhood there. In 2010, when Tetiana was an adolescent, her mother moved with her to Kyiv. The big city did not suit her, and after a year she returned to her native Berdyansk. Twelve years later, her city was occupied by the Russian army and Tetiana went through that experience together with her city. She and her husband lived under the occupation for nearly two months. She lived through cold and the expectation of being put in the cellar (the place the occupiers put those who did not cooperate with them). Having lived through being shot at, she and her husband broke through to unoccupied Ukraine, taking with them their dog and two knapsacks. She once again lives in Kyiv, which is still not home to her. She teaches children their native language and the literature of the world. Every night, Tetiana dreams of the waves rippling on the beaches of the Azov Sea as she waits to return home, to Ukrainian Berdyansk.

THE CITY TO WHICH I SHALL NOT RETURN

For me, the morning when all of Ukraine awoke together began with a lesson in my 6th grade literature class. Before meeting my pupils online, I sat in the kitchen, thinking that for the first time I had nothing to say to them. The coffee my husband made for me had gone cold long before. I held the cold cup in my hands, and for the first time I was not ready to face my class. Probably none of my fellow teachers were, and so we simply did what we usually did. The zoom session began, and screens vibrating with scared voices appeared.

"Yaroslav, turn on your camera. Zhenia, microphone—I don't hear what you're saying."

The children are bewildered and ask a lot of questions, responding to each one themselves, interrupting one another. My pupil Vika has her little brother with her on the screen; as usual, they're home alone, their parents off at work.

We were discussing Charles Dickens and his "Christmas Carol," the text and its meanings. Right now, none of us sees any meaning in anything. But I force myself to keep smiling, so as to keep up my pupils' spirits. I glimpse a rocket flash by. If I turn the microphone off fast, maybe the children won't hear it. Please, at least not at us—at least, not at us.

Every one of my kids has heard the missile. In their room, Vika's little brother cries out. The next lesson is cancelled. From February 24 to March 1, I don't conduct any lessons at all.

The first missile attack reached us that evening. In the vestibule, together with our neighbours, we kept to the rule of two walls—we made that rule our own that first day: if there are two walls protecting you from the outside, you are more or less safe. That whole night, in chatrooms across my city, rumours spread about its capitulation. We knew that Berdyansk would not defend itself, since no local defence force had been organized. We knew that the doors of the military commissariat had closed, and saw Ukrainian military convoys leaving our city and moving out to defend Mariupol and Zaporizhzhia. We knew all of this, and because of that we began to organize our own resistance effort. Boys, girls, men, and women squinted with distrust at each other; nonetheless, we acted in unison.

Three days after the full-scale invasion began, Berdyansk was occupied. I met the reality of the city's capture outside the doors of the student residence of the pedagogical university. There were many of us, but in comparison with the kilometres-long line of Russian tanks, we were nothing at all. From above our heads came the sound of a plane.

"They're tracking us from the air! They might start shelling us!" shouted a fellow in the crowd.

People rushed to the residence doors, but I stood still. Most of my friends and my husband stood still too—we were too far away to get to the doors.

"I am not going to die. Not today." The thought went through my mind as I looked at the shadow of the plane. We had to get home. Young guys began shouting about gasoline and alcohol to make Molotov cocktails. That day two of them were made and were thrown, not by the guys, but by a young woman from her car. The line of Russian APCs halted, but they didn't catch fire. The young woman managed to get away and post a video of her deed in the city's online chats.

I witnessed the next cavalcade of infantry and tanks from the grounds of our high-rise. Russian had been heard around our building before, but now for the first time it sounded foreign. We were standing on the balcony, taking a video on our smartphones and feeling an anger unlike any we'd ever felt before. We were not afraid. The anger was coming out from under our skin.

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On the first of March, contact with the nearest villages was lost. I wondered whether those villages were still whole, whether people were still living there. Landline internet service vanished, but there was still cell phone service. That day I first saw a video of shelled cars on the road and photos of dead bodies. My mind imagined disturbing village scenes that I couldn't shake. Many people had

gone to the village, thinking it would be safer there. They were mistaken. The villages were shot at and plundered. Frightened people hid in their basements and listened as military vehicles roared by outside. That night I couldn't sleep at all. Wearing jeans and a sweater, under two comforters, I lay in bed and froze. Our dog Nilson wiggled in under one of the comforters too, something he'd never done before. For my husband and me, he was our 38-degree heater. Central heating was gone, because the furnace had been blown apart several days before. It was between 16 and 12 degrees in the apartment. We were freezing.

Outdoors it was minus 7. The spring would prove to be as chilly as February was. My husband and I hunted for another comforter; we couldn't turn on the heat because that could overload the electricity system. Some parts of the city were already experiencing blackouts. Darkness, cold, occupation, and fear—but Lyosha and I resolved not to turn on a heater; that was only for people with small children. The Ukrainian city administration of Berdyansk was still operating, but not in its municipal building, for it had been chased out by the Russians. Online and with great difficulty, city officials coordinated humanitarian aid and communal services, striving to stand up to the occupiers, even under death threats. All that the city officials were asking of us now was not to turn on our heaters. And so we didn't, out of understanding and respect. We didn't, nor did our neighbours, friends, or acquaintances, or just about anyone else, because there was already no gas in the city and we wanted to keep the lights on, at least.

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Evenings, nobody now thinks about what day it is. In the city, pro-Ukrainian chatrooms multiply, calls to action sound louder, as collaborators figure things out from two or three messages. In one closed chatroom which still exists, Yulia writes: "We have put together a leaflet. Who can print it and put it up?"

We print 25 leaflets stating the Russian losses in the first week and calling on them to withdraw. We go out into the night. My building and the military area the Russians have taken over are separated by a square. I freeze going out there.

"If they catch us, they'll kill us right off."

"More likely, they'll put us in a cellar," my husband interjects jauntily.

My hands are shaking. The bag with the leaflets seems to glow in the darkness.

"I can't do this. This would be a stupid death—it won't make any difference."

"Tania, you go back. I can do this myself."

"You can't! No! Nilson will die without us! Please, let's go home—it's not too late. Please."

We stand there. In the military area machinery has begun to move, and we see two red lights—signal flares.

"Please...," I have begun to tremble from the cold and fear.

My husband takes me under his arm and begins to pull me toward home; I myself can barely walk.

During the night I lie sleepless, making sure Lyosha doesn't go out himself to hang up those accursed leaflets. We hid them in the wardrobe under a pile of clothes, and later scatter them in the wind.

In the next few days, leaflets and appeals to the occupiers to go home begin to appear throughout the city. People come out in protest, waving Ukrainian flags and crying "Go home while you still can!" Lyosha and I go and cry out too; our two small flags, hardly bigger than palm-size, were among a hundred other blue-yellow ones, but we all understood that this couldn't go on forever. The occupying army knew that too, and it was probably strongly affected by the videos of pro-Ukrainian demonstrations in occupied Berdyansk. Cellphone service stopped. We were in a news vacuum now, but we were ready for it. Pro-Ukrainian demonstrations continued to gather by the city hall every day at noon, as planned from the very start.

Every day at noon the protests continued, until the Russian army started to fire above the heads of pro-Ukrainian demonstrators. A couple of days before that began, the Russians had seized two "organizers" of the demonstrations. They may not have been organizers at all, just a man and woman who took the microphone more often than others, shouted out slogans more often than others, and then endured torture in the cellars of their native city from those who were foreign there. The woman, also a Tetiana, was "in the cellars" twice. She managed to get out of the occupation zone to speak about the beatings, electric currents, and physical and psychological violence inflicted on her, a wife and mother. I, who was never struck as a child, was stunned and shocked by such violence.

The same treatment could have awaited me: even during the occupation, I made pro-Ukrainian posts on Instagram, volunteered at school, and distributed from Ukrainian humanitarian sources medicines to the elderly. I did not lead any partisan activity, but I was warned that even volunteer work like I was doing could lead to being "in the cellar." For taking part in pro-Ukrainian chats or having amiable contact with Ukrainian military personnel, there was the threat I might be killed in my own home.

The question of leaving hung over my husband and me like a cloud, but there was then no place to go. I loved my city so much that I had not even imagined life outside it. My mother had been living in Kyiv for twelve years, and I could have gone to live with her long before; we had a warm and exceptionally close relationship, even though for her Berdyansk had been too small and provincial a place, and once, long before, that had separated us.

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When my birthday came around, there hadn't been any contact with the outside world for four or five days, but then we heard from a neighbour that a supermarket nearby had internet access. My husband has never liked going into shops, and once the full-scale invasion began that dislike just became deeper, yet he was the first to say:

"We have to go right away! We've got to call our family."

Since the occupation began, we had only ventured out of the house together, so we both hurriedly got ready and ran out the door. The supermarket was packed with people, everyone quickly and intensely writing texts or making calls, one or two people managing to smile. A very large man with silver-grey temples caught my attention: crying and standing against a wall, he kept looking at his phone, and I saw tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Mom, everything's okay! We're alive, we've got electricity," I say into the phone, "Yes, we've got water too, but for gas and heat we'll have to wait until at least summer. Thanks, Mom—don't cry. And so what, that it's my birthday? Everything's good, we're alive. How are you? It's Kyiv that's getting rocket fire every day, here it's quiet. That's right, here there's no shooting, no rocket attacks. Yes—I don't know about Mariupol. Nilson has gotten very thin, there's hardly any of his food in the stores. What do you mean, buckwheat? He's been living on millet for the past two weeks. Lyosha's okay, he's talking with his dad…"

The conversation is short—greetings, tears, pleas, and again tears.

"Ma, everything'll be okay, phone service will come back, some people are even getting landline internet. I love you too. We'll do some shopping now and go home."

And that's how we lived. Lines to get into stores, home, reading books aloud to one another, and, once a day, a short walk with the dog.

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Nilson, my Shar Pei. He was three years old, and until the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war he had never heard an explosion. The sound of thunder had sometimes frightened him, but, remarkably, he took the explosions of that February morning calmly. Now he is four and a half and he trembles at every alarm, whether it comes when he's on a pillow or in the corridor.

My fingertips stroke his fur to comfort him, and I'm glad to feel that he's trembling, for that means he's alive. And where once he was fearful only outdoors, now he's scared at home, as well. I am scared too. Scared because my husband and I have

> MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE TALKED ABOUT KILLING OUR DOG, AS SOMETHING THAT MIGHT HAVE TO HAPPEN, OR MAYBE EVEN BE UNAVOIDABLE

soberly talked about killing our dog, as something that might have to happen, or may even be unavoidable. My husband lived through the occupation of Donetsk in 2014, and he knows all too well what filtration camps[15] are.

One evening Lyosha began to talk about how we must flee, even if it has to be on foot, for the fate of a teacher of Ukrainian language and an instructor of Ukrainian history under the occupation is well known. Our colleagues are already being pressured to cooperate. Our refusal to do that and its consequences are only a matter of time.

"Without Nilson, I'm not going anywhere."

"God grant that he makes the trip."

The next day, we bought dog tranquilizer. For people, the only tranquilizers left came in glass bottles or tin cans.

Every night we downed our "tranquilizers," so as not to dream. We went to bed in our clothes, not out of fear of being shelled but for purely practical reasons.

If they came for us at night, at least we'd be dressed.

We exchanged house keys with our neighbour and agreed, just in case, that she wouldn't abandon our dog and we, if needed, would take her cat.

In truth, what scared us most was the unbroken silence and expectation of some or any kind of action. Some sign, at least, that Ukraine had not forgotten us, that it needed us. That sign came in the form of the Russian ship blown up in our port. That day, the people of Berdyansk walked the streets smiling at each other, because the Russian landing ship Saratov had gone down to the bottom of the

[15] Russian administered concentration camps used for detention, deportation, and torture of Ukrainians.

Azov Sea, and nearly all its crew were lost, too. While just about everyone went about smiling, my husband and I were getting ready to provide refuge, if needed, to students and colleagues in our home.

The windows of the pedagogical university in Berdyansk opened out onto the port where the ship stood, so the occupiers lost no time in breaking down the doors to student rooms. They drove the students out, using their combat boots and rubber batons, and the students had no right to return.

"We actually got away easy," says one woman I know, whose blue coat bears the mark of a Russian footprint. "Sasha has hematomas all over his body, Ihor got blows to the head and probably has a concussion."

I convey this information to friends in Ukrainian controlled territory. "Please—tell the world about this. As everybody is celebrating the destroying of the ship, our university students are being interrogated in the assembly hall. They've taken away their phones and told them not to go to the hospital."

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Phone service would go down and then come up again. Every time the line went down, my mother became more and more anxious.

"My dear, the Russian Army has left the Kyiv region. Come here, to us. The shops are open, there's plenty of food—and we are Ukraine!"

My husband and I begin to search out evacuation routes and stand in line to join the columns getting out from Mariupol. It seemed that the contents of our one-room apartment, and the more than twenty years we had each lived there, fit into a bag and a knapsack.

"Nilson has become so thin," says Lyosha. "It'll be easier for us to carry him, if need be." He sighs sadly.

Seven kilos lost in a month and a half. Our dog looks like a skeleton wrapped in skin and reddish fur. We had lost weight too, but not such a critical amount. Hunger and thirst had been a part of our life for a month and a half. Although we had money in our accounts, since it's not in cash, it was worthless. I remembered my grandmother and her advice to always have cash on hand and regretted my imprudence. They knew something, those grandmothers. They knew life.

Sadly, I look at the keepsakes on our shelves, our large library, and the renovation Lyosha and I had recently done. All this is my life, and I am leaving it. My father and two grandmothers are buried here, I won't even be able to go visit their graves before we leave. The occupying authorities weren't letting the living go to the cemetery.

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"You know what they call this road? The road of life," says Pasha, a former police officer who left two days ago and has now called me.

"The road of life." He laughed a small nervous laugh. "I nearly died there. My ribs broken, maybe my nose too, hematomas all over my body. They found deleted photos of some military equipment on my phone. I'm lucky they didn't kill me; some guys didn't make it to the Ukrainian roadblocks. What happened to them nobody knows—maybe they're down in the cellars, maybe already in the ground."

I chew my fingers nervously.

"They have lists. I don't know whose names are on them, but mine wasn't, and so I got through," Pasha goes on. "Delete everything—they check."

We had looked through our smartphones and deleted everything a few days ago, but now we check our conversations with family once again and delete any mention of our national stand.

During the night, a message pops up: "Disappeared." Then another: "I don't believe it." And another: "That can't be." These messages seem to tear my insides to bits. I don't believe it either, but this is war. I know that anything can happen.

In the morning, we get on an evacuation bus. Nilson lies down at our feet. Tranquilizers are at work in all three of us: for the road my aunt gave me half a pill, for Lyosha and me both.

A trip that used to take three hours took eleven hours that day, four of them under fire.

We passed through seventeen Russian checkpoints. Men were stripped down to their underwear and examined for "extremist" tattoos. Women and children waited in the buses. One use of the toilet was allowed, no one got out to smoke.

At the checkpoints, they looked through documents and bags. Our nerves were stretched as tight as the barriers along either side of the road. They grumble, wish us a good trip—and then start shooting again, behind us.

As our bus enters the grey zone between the checkpoints of the temporarily occupied zone and Ukraine, we catch sight of a civilian vehicle suspended from a tree. It was thrown there after going over an anti-tank mine. A little further on, we see two totally burned-up tanks, bodies already gone.

Ten to fifteen minutes before the Ukrainian checkpoint, shelling from the Russian side begins.

"They don't let anybody leave alive"—that's the thought that runs through my head.

I see smoke and hear gunfire. With one hand I grip Lyosha's palm as the other keeps stroking the dog. Our column of buses halts, but not for long.

"We're going to make a run for it," says our driver.

"Today I'm going to die," I think. "Mom won't forgive herself, she'll blame herself for telling us to come."

I am not sorry, I tell myself. I tried to get out of the occupied zone, but just wasn't able to do it. I've had a good life, joyous and happy. I had love and dreams. If we could all just die at once, I don't want to suffer. Nilson might get away, but he won't survive on his own—for the second time since the full-scale invasion, I am crying.

I hear a whistle, and the bus makes a turn.

"Glory to Ukraine!" Before us, a blue and yellow banner and the smiling faces of Ukrainian soldiers.

"Welcome home! You got through! Men, get out and take your documents with you. Gals, you wait a bit." A Ukrainian soldier smoking a cigarette passes apples out to the kids. "What do you mean? Of course, we'll move out—but we've got to wait out the gunfire first. You can get out, have a smoke."

We get out and breathe in the sweet smoke of freedom. I hear bursts of gunfire very close by and whisper, "What happens now?"

✦✦✦

I think about the trinkets in my apartment. For each of us, they aren't just things. Can we get back that particular book or postcard that a friend sent from another country? Can we find the same bracelet that I wove with a friend at summer camp? Is it possible to again have beside me in bed that toy without which I couldn't sleep in childhood? Will Granny again knit us warm and colourful sweaters?

My fingers come upon the keys lying in the bottom of my bag, and I ask myself the question: "Will they ever again open the doors to my own, native home?"

Our "trinkets" will stay in memory and remain there on the shelves of life. But the city to which I will return, my Berdyansk, will never again be the same.

VOLODYMYR SHALOIMENKO

Volodymyr Shaloimenko was born in the city of Vasylivka, Zaporizhzhia region. After graduating from the university, he lived and worked in the city of Dniprorudne, Zaporizhzhia Region.

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine, he worked to inform the citizens of Dniprorudne about the events that were happening around him. He was responsible for posting information on the social media pages of the mayor and of the city hall, and he managed the local media resources. After the Russians imprisoned the mayor and invaded the city, he lived under occupation for another month.

In April 2022, he evacuated to Ivano-Frankivsk, then to Lviv. Currently, he lives in Lviv, works in the field of project management in the public sector, helps war veterans go through the stages of socialization and helps them reintegrate into civilian life. He participates in a number of volunteer activities and dreams of rebuilding Ukraine and all of the cities once they are liberated from Russian occupation.

THE STORY OF ONE MAYOR

I was once the voice of the mayor of Dniprorudne on social media. Currently, he is in captivity, but his voice cannot be silenced. I can't stand aside and bury my head in the sand like an ostrich, when the person I worked with is being tortured by Russian savages. I broadcasted his thoughts online and now I feel guilty about it. For I can't feel free while he is enslaved.

Fifteen days of war flashed by like one. Every morning, the cameraman and I streamed the mayor's live broadcasts on social media, promptly communicating his decisions and the needs of the Dniprorudne community. Now, when I look back, I understand that some days, like frames, are now cemented in my head and memory, forever.

February 24, 2022. In the morning, I was urgently summoned to the city hall to write a post about Russia's armed attack on Ukraine. At that time, the mayor's account was bursting with messages from the residents of the city. "What should we do?," "Where is the mayor?," "Are we going to be bombed?" The myth that "the mayor surrendered the city" was being spread throughout local public accounts.

We decided to broadcast live from the mayor's page, on which he first called Russia an invader, declared that we didn't need any help from the Russians, and said that they should get out of Ukraine. There was panic in the city; people were buying fuel, withdrawing cash from ATMs, emptying the shelves of shops and pharmacies. At the end of the day, we refuted several fake stories about the power outage, as well as about the surrender of the city to Russia.

February 25, 2022. The morning started with a broadcast. The night passed peacefully. We kept calm, gradually solving problematic issues. We tried to ignore the loud passage of Ukrainian BUKs and other heavy artillery systems that we heard in the city, but we couldn't talk about that. We started experiencing problems with shortages: in ATMs; food in stores; medicines in pharmacies. But at the same time, the true spirit of Ukrainian patriotism was being strengthened. The local residents mobilized and rallied to oppose the enemy. The most active ones formed the People's Guard to patrol the city during the curfew. Yes, it was done by ordinary residents, not the police. Only seven police officers, if that, remained in the city. The day ended with a broadcast: "If you hear a siren, go down to the bomb shelters."

February 27, 2022. After the live daily broadcast, we heard the first explosions. The Russians bombed neighbouring villages and my native Vasylivka. The sirens wailed. Someone sent a message to our site, "Why is the siren on?" "Because of the alert," I replied. Everyone temporarily fell into a stupor, numbness. The mayor was sitting, impulsively fidgeting with his fingers and scratching his beard. Everyone was silent. "I won't surrender the city, I'm going to fight back," he said after a short pause. We all began to discuss the action plan in case "the invaders with automatic rifles enter the city."

The majority of staffers supported the evacuation of people and documentation; we decided to leave the city hall empty. Our mayor, Yevhenii Serhiyovych, said with determination: "I will be in the office, first I will hold negotiations, if we fail to come to an agreement, I'm going to take several invaders with me into the other world." His deputy scoffed and added: "We may just as well do nothing. What's so bad about them taking the city?" Back then, we didn't know yet that that person would later become a Russian minion.

The mayor got a call, "A KAMAZ military truck, carrying Russian personnel, drove through the city." "What did they want?" "They were looking for fuel." Later we received the information that the Russians were already robbing a store in a nearby village; the cameraman and the driver from the city hall hurried to the location but by the time they got there, the invaders had already fled.

At 12:30 we heard a loud explosion, we went out to the square near the city hall, where residents had already started to gather in the square. Everyone was waiting for guidance from the mayor. Groups holding different views were formed. Some wanted to be radical and pelt the enemy's vehicles with Molotov cocktails, others intended to do nothing and simply surrender the city. (Later those people became Russian collaborators.) Someone thought of starting a partisan movement. Information was received that about 10, 40, or 170 units of equipment were moving towards the city. The mayor didn't support the radical approach, because we didn't have the necessary weapons for defence. Instead, he said, we would negotiate. The main task is to preserve peace and save people's lives.

It was 1500 hours. We were on the exit road from Dniprorudne, and the railway bridge was above us. The road was blocked by cars. The city residents were ready to stop the invaders with their bare hands, to prevent them from entering the city; the mayor was with them. Suddenly, a man with a box in his hands came out of the forest-steppe area. There were Molotov cocktails in the box. He looked at everyone, surprised: "Oh, I thought there would be no one here, I decided to stop the invaders myself." The Molotov cocktails were now Plan B.

A car, our civilian reconnaissance, was speeding along the road. It made a U-turn, the wheels rubbing against the asphalt, and making a loud hissing sound. "There, the tanks are coming!" the driver shouted. We were ready, and the cameraman started a live broadcast. The noise of heavy equipment was getting louder, and the ground began to shake under our feet. We saw tanks. We went to confront them, but the mayor stopped us, saying: "I was elected by you, I am responsible for you, so I will go alone." He limped because he has a problem with his knee and walked towards the tanks, which have stopped. The muzzle of the first one was aimed at the mayor. A couple of minutes of negotiations ensued. Yevhenii Serhiyovych turned around, took a couple of steps towards us, and looked at the sky, apparently thanking God. The tanks backed away. "Well done, Matveyev!" "The mayor drove the tanks away," shouts were heard from the crowd. People rejoiced, and showed support with applause. They shouted, "Glory to Ukraine!," "Glory to the heroes!" But not for long. The recon team, the car, the sound of wheels again. "There's infantry, armoured personnel carriers, KAMAZ trucks." We drove them out together.

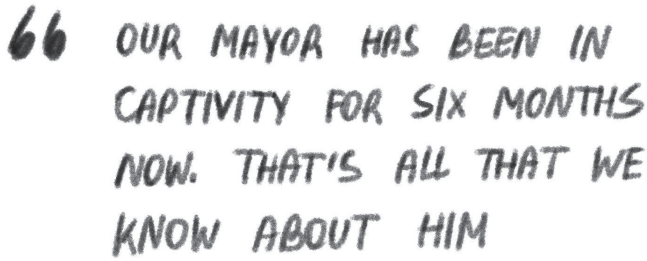
The banner above the roadblock bears the ironic message
"The City of Dniprorudne Welcomes You." Photo: Volodymyr Shaloimenko

February 28, 2022. 02:00. The mayor and the residents, we stood together at the roadblock we set up, warming ourselves by the bonfire. One of the team members threw tires into the fire from time to time. We talked about life and death. Young people started talking more about death and the fear of dying without dignity. The mayor reassured them: "I'm the one who has already lived, and you have your whole lives ahead of you." As if preparing to throw himself under some Russian BTR. "How can you say that? We'll stand with you through thick and thin," one resident said. The mayor cheered him up by saying, "Just kidding, we all still have long lives to live."

March 1, 2022. The mayor's speech focussed on the value of life, resilience, raising morale, and community support. Everyone continued to stand at the barricades. The mayor manned his post, next to the people. We are Ukrainians, we stand for Ukraine.

Yevhenii Matveyev, the Mayor of Dniprorudne, is telling the residents about the value of life. Photo: Volodymyr Shaloimenko

August 2022. Our mayor has been in captivity for six months now. That's all that we know about him. Everything else is rumours. Some rumours are: that he has already been released and is vacationing with his daughter on the Black Sea coast in Crimea; that collaborators come to him every now and then for advice on how to govern the city; or that he is simply hiding abroad. Another rumour is that after his release, he was walking on the roadside towards the city, away from the place of his imprisonment, was killed by friendly or hostile fire, and now his tortured body is rotting somewhere in the forest-steppe. And the most absurd



thing I've heard was that he staged his own kidnapping, to become a colonel with the Russian Federal Security Service, to secretly rule the city. However, all those turned out to be speculations. The mayor was taken to the shared women's cell at the Dniprorudne city detention centre. The women were brought there for shouting the slogan "Glory to Ukraine!," for a social media post in support of Ukraine, and arrested because a neighbour snitched on them. Or perhaps the women simply gave the invaders an unfriendly look.

By chance, I found out about Yevhenii Serhiyovych's imprisonment through an acquaintance. From March 14 through July 30, he was kept in solitary confinement in the city of Melitopol, fed one can of rice and goulash from the Russian Army ration packs per day. Although, he was in a depressed psychological state and in an information vacuum, he worried whether other prisoners had bread and water. During the six months of occupation of the city, he didn't receive any information. Once a handsome man, he lost a lot of weight, he grew out his hair and beard. He was still wearing winter clothes and shoes (in fact, in the middle of summer he was wearing what he had been abducted in). He was very impressed by the availability of food (hot dogs, pizzas) that family members brought for the imprisoned girls. The next day, he was taken to an unknown destination.

March 12-13, 2022. Every now and then I think of the night I sent him a final message before his capture. It was the information from the Zaporizhzhia Regional Military Administration that the Russians had blown up a bridge in Kamyanske, and it was precisely through this bridge that our drivers from Zaporizhzhia, who were evacuating the residents, were supposed to return. We were worried about them. Yevhenii Serhiyovych didn't read the message. I called him and told him about the bridge. He became upset, and said: "That's bad," but from his words I understood that he was already looking for the right solution. It was 3 a.m., so we agreed to coordinate in the morning.

From my apartment window, I didn't see his government car parked in front of the city hall in the morning, and I had a bad feeling about it. That bad feeling turned out to be well founded. Yevhenii Serhiyovych Matveyev, the mayor of the city of Dniprorudne, was abducted by the Russian invaders. Later, in the afternoon, my night message was read, not by the addressee, but by a torturer who was probably trying to find evidence of a "terrible anti-Russian position" in it.

Anxiety tightened my chest, fear for my family and myself kept growing. I was afraid I would be next, because only I had access to all the official sites of the mayor and the city hall. My muscles began to twitch nervously, and I felt terribly tired almost all the time. Going to work was difficult. I tried to communicate information remotely. Writing is my purpose in life, writing means working with my brain. I don't know if I could survive physical torture. The impact of the Russians' presence, the fear of losing my sanity affected my morale. It was a month of constant stress. The invaders said they wouldn't enter the city, yet they drove through every day. On one of the days of the occupation, I was walking down the street towards home and at first I didn't see a tented KAMAZ truck with Russian soldiers passing by. One of the invaders with a rifle in his hands looked and smiled at me contemptuously. I looked at him and wanted to spit at him, I thought they'd shoot me, but luckily the truck drove on.

April 2022. I evacuated at the beginning of the month, after another Russian rotation. The route ran through four Russian roadblocks: first by cab to Vasylivka; then by bus to the blown-up bridge in the village of Kamyanske; then by minibus through shell craters and unexploded missiles on the highway to Zaporizhzhia... After that, it was by train to Ivano-Frankivsk, and finally to Lviv. Only now I've realized that I've lost everything that I had in Dniprorudne...

At the first Russian checkpoint, the invader who was checking my ID noted with joy in his eyes how nicely our apricot trees were blooming and that it would soon be time to harvest them. I was disgusted to hear that. At the last checkpoint, they wished us a "Happy journey and a peaceful sky!" while artillery shells from Grad systems flew after us. The experienced minibus driver shouted "Turn off your phones and close the windows!" He sped along the highway towards Zaporizhzhia.

At the end of the month, the cameraman who remained in the occupied city contacted me and said that they were looking for me, but he didn't snitch on me. During the "police" interrogation, when asked "Do you know the person who put together news reports and wrote social media posts," he answered that he had only handed over the recorded video materials and didn't know anyone, though we were friends. It's good that he and his family managed to get away from the occupation...

End of March, 2023. The mayor's number appeared on the instant messenger Viber. That's how I realized that a year had passed, and his number had already been sold to another person. He, the person who defended a Ukrainian city, is beginning to fade into oblivion. He is somewhere, in an unknown location, without any means of communication. Is he even alive? Unfortunately, this question remains unanswered.

P.S. At the end of 2024, the Head of the Zaporizhzhia regional military administration Ivan Fedorov reported that the mayor of Dniprorudne, Yevhenii Matveyev, was tortured by the occupants. In December 2024, the body of the deceased was returned to Ukraine.

DARIA SHVETS

Daria Shvets was born in the picturesque town of Orikhiv, in the Zaporizhzhia region. After graduating from high school, she moved to Kharkiv to study journalism. There, at five in the morning on February 24, she witnessed the full-scale invasion. She was only 19 years old.

She sought refuge in her hometown of Orikhiv. There was shelling, a shortage of products, and a lack of communication services and gas—this was in the first days of the Russian invasion in February and in March 2022, when she had just fled from Kharkiv to Orikhiv. However, the occupation did not reach her town; the Rashists[16] were stopped 12 kilometres from her house.

Daria has no plans to leave Ukraine, currently, she is living in Zaporizhzhia. Her main activity today is journalism, and Daria continues to work with the Kharkiv Press Club, making her small contribution to the future victory of Ukraine.

[16] A portmanteau word transcribed from Russian and Ukrainian, composed of the words "Russians" and "fascists," used to refer to the Russian Armed Forces and supporters of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine.

MY TRUTH: THE WAR WE CANNOT BE SILENT ABOUT

Do not read my story: ignore the post, scroll down the page, skip this confession, but instead name at least one person who has managed to escape the truth...

I learned about the war when I was 4 years old. No, not about a full-scale invasion, but about the definition as such. The image of war often appeared in family stories. My great-grandfather Mykola lost his youth in a German concentration camp, and after returning home, he was awarded the beloved Soviet label "traitor." My elderly neighbor Kateryna told how she hid in the cellar and ate shepherd's purse during the fascist occupation; my great-grandfather Kote made a long journey from Georgia to Orikhiv in the ranks of the Soviet army. But most of all, I loved the story of my great-grandfather Petro, who, barely alive after execution by a firing squad, was saved by my great-grandmother Dunia, who hid him from the fascists in her basement.

But that war was a legend; it happened a long time ago. It's just yellowed photos of fallen military relatives and laying flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on May 8th. Or is it not?

I was good at history in school, diligently writing down the causes and consequences of armed conflict. The deeper I got into it, the more I was frightened by the thought: "Well, we haven't had a war for a long time!" If you open textbooks on the history of Ukraine, you will see how long our nation has defended its independence. The blue and yellow flag reminds us that the glorious spirit of Ukraine shines and lives forever. No matter how cynical it sounds, the attack of the "brotherly" *(sarcasm)* people was expected. But even the internal logic denied this truth...

Indeed, the war started in 2014. However, I did not feel it at that time. Everything changed in February 2022. But even then, it seemed like an artificial idiocy, a deception.

For four nights in a row, I went down to the basement, hearing the sounds of artillery shelling nearby, reading the news about the occupation of neighbouring villages, and struggling to believe it. Could this happen to me? I did not choose to be the heroine of a movie about war! But the truth is not about scripts.

Almost immediately after the start of the Russian full-scale invasion 2022, a lot of military personnel appeared in Orikhiv. The city centre and the military commissariat were flooded with armoured personnel carriers (APCs). Checkpoints were opened on the roads. This was the first time a tank drove down my street, which had been repaired a month earlier. The school bus took me along this road, I drove a car there for the first time. And now, damn it, a tank!

> 66 THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME A TANK DROVE DOWN MY STREET

During breaks in shelling, I studied Russian weapons to accurately identify every type of tank: acquainting myself with all possible varieties of enemy equipment, their dimensions, range and sounds of shots. Not a common activity for a 19-year-old woman. However, I googled and read extensively because I realised that the enemy was close. And I needed to know what they wanted to kill me with.

Most of the stores in Orikhiv closed almost immediately. People snapped up everything—even lollipops, which had been lying on the cash register for ages. Food deliveries occurred twice a week. Those dates were circled in red on the calendar because I had never looked forward to going to the store as much as I did then. It was a chance to escape from the four walls or the basement.

On the 19th day of the full-scale invasion, I went to the store for condensed milk. I never liked it, and considered it a relic of the Soviet system. But now, my cat Serhii Kuzmych and I, the 19-year-old Daria, wanted condensed milk.

However, I couldn't find any condensed milk! It was not there. "It's not an essential product!" Larysa, the saleswoman from the nearest store, told me. I was already thinking about making the damned stuff, from regular milk. It was only in Zaporizhzhia that I had experienced the nauseating, too-sweet taste of condensed milk. The can of milky happiness cost UAH 57. However, during that time in Orikhiv, the electricity was only on for three or four hours every day when

there was a break in the shelling. Cooking milk was far from a priority on my to-do list.

When the war started, I fled from Kharkiv to my native hometown Orikhiv. I didn't think anyone would care about a small town like mine. But I was very wrong. Every evening in my hometown's online group chats, I read the phrase: "They will capture Orikhiv today!" This "today" has been going on for 411 days, yet the invaders have failed to take my "fortress." The nearest occupied settlement is only 12 kilometres away.

I tried hard to convince myself that Zaporizhzhia would be better. When I got there, there was dissonance in my head: people were walking in the park, drinking coffee on the terraces, singing karaoke, while 50 kilometres away, in my native Orikhiv, people were dying. Daily.

Grandpa and Grandma struggled the most with the move. They simply didn't understand how they could leave everything behind. Grandfather had laid the brick facade of our house with his own hands. Grandmother had spent 40 minutes choosing saffron curtains, which I never liked, for the tiny kitchen. They loved their home. It was their personal secret place that gave them a sense of peace—full of folk songs sung at the evening family gatherings, and memories of straw amulets, decorated with orange marigolds which I wove as a child. But after one bombing, our house was left without windows and glass doors in the bedrooms of my grandfather and my younger sister.

"The thing is that I don't have a home..."—oddly enough, I began to remember lines of a song that popped into my head. But my truth is not about a damaged house...

During this time of war, I changed apartments four times, but none of these places gave me comfort. I missed the comforting taste of my grandma's mushroom pies, the smell of my grandpa's freshly caught fish from the Kinska River, and a warm cup of coffee from my favourite mug with cats. Yes, an ordinary mug with cats has become very special for me. Do you think I'm crazy because I miss it? Do you know how many such crazy people are scattered around the world today?

Later, my entire big family moved to Zaporizhzhia. Then I felt better. When I first saw Grandpa after the large-scale invasion, I was a little scared. He had aged significantly.

Grandpa is a typical village angler. In his wardrobe, you can find two old check shirts and three pairs of worn-out pants, because it is pointless going to our swampy Kinska in normal clothes.

But in the last eight months of war, he changed a lot. My younger sister couldn't even count the wrinkles on his face. His grey hair had grown a lot and was below

his shoulders, like mine. It was the first time I saw him with a beard. He did not shave all those weeks, because it was almost impossible to find the necessary hygiene products in Orikhiv during the war. I remember neither his look nor the clothes he was wearing when we first met in Zaporizhzhia. I only remember how dad said, "Phew, I already thought that the old man had forgotten how to smile." Grandfather was smiling, but what was there, behind his smile?

On October 6th, he was very scared for me. That day, a void emerged on the map of Zaporizhzhia, marking the location of a now non-existent five-story building that once served as the centre of life for several families. Their days were cut short by Russian S-300s. It's a fluke that they only just missed me. I was in the next entrance. My apartment was "scarred," a bit: the windows and panes on the balcony were broken; the kitchen door was smashed by debris. That day I couldn't let go of the thought, "I could have been in that place." A single wall became the border between death and life.

After that incident, I felt a lot of support. Many people reached out to ask, "How are you?" I realised that these three simple words had taken on a new meaning for all of us. "How are you = I love you," a new semantic born out of the war.

When the communication services were jammed in Orikhiv, I climbed an old cherry tree and wrote "How are you?" to Olia who was staying in a Kharkiv dormitory, to Katia who suffered from depression in Vilniansk, and to Alina who was living under occupation in Melitopol. All of our conversations ended with the words: "Take care of yourself!"

The war has changed me and continues to do so every day. I have re-assessed my priorities and plans for the future. With all my heart I do not want to leave the borders of my Motherland. I am sure that the moment will come soon when all of us in a free Ukraine will recall this time and share our truth. The war demands us to be unbreakable, confident and united, and we, Ukrainians, are like that.

I live in strange times, terrible times. "Tulips" and "Peonies" have become some people's death, military operations have acquired the status of "sacred," and someone's sons turn into impiously stolen fur coats.[17] This is my truth. Well, you see, I warned you: do not read.

[17] *Tyulpan* ("tulip") and *Pion* ("peony") are self-propelled Soviet weapons systems that Russia is using in its military aggression against Ukraine.
The war, which is termed a "special military operation" in Russia, receives divine blessing from Russian clergymen.
In one Russian propaganda video, the widows or mothers of soldiers killed in the war against Ukraine were presented with fur coats as a form of recognition. According to media reports, these coats had been stolen from shops in occupied Ukrainian territories.

YEVHEN SHLIAKHTIN

Yevhen Shliakhtin was born in the mining town of Stakhanov, Luhansk region. In 2014, he led rallies for the Unity of Ukraine, and, as a result, was captured by Russian mercenaries and spent thirty days in captivity. After his release, when his native town was fully occupied, he left for Odesa.

He has been working as a project manager in the public sector for more than ten years. He focuses his efforts on social adjustment and integration of internally displaced persons.

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, he stayed in Odesa. Together with his family, he has survived regular shelling of the city. Yevhen works as a volunteer assistance coordinator at the "Caritas Odesa" Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Charity Foundation.

BORN AGAIN

CHAPTER 1: PREFACE AND THE CONSCIOUS UKRAINIANS OF STAKHANOV

For me, the war didn't start in 2022. It began with the annexation of Crimea and the Anti-Terrorist Operation[18] in the east of Ukraine. My home town of Stakhanov—the birthplace of the Soviet myth about the Stakhanov movement and mining glory—has been occupied by the Russian Federation for more than ten years now.[19]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of Donbas needed economic help. Additional state funding was needed to survive, and the lack of this led to the closure of mines. The Stakhanov Vuhillia Coal Mining Association was closed. Suddenly, 25,000 people, most of whom were men, lost their jobs. Unfortunately, the government didn't offer any alternative. Those men felt that they were not needed. Many of them went to look for a job in Russia, in the big cities of Moscow and Rostov-on-Don. And they thought that the high standard of living they saw in those cities was the same throughout the Russian Federation.

Local politicians of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions added fuel to the fire and spread the myth that Donbas was feeding the whole of Ukraine and that Russian-speakers would soon face oppression.

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[18] Upon the invasion of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions of Ukraine in 2014, the Ukrainian Government declared the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in the region, to fight back Russian troops and pro-Russian separatists.

[19] The Stakhanov movement was a mass movement of workers that was a product of the Communist propaganda in the Soviet Union. The "Stakhanovites" modelled themselves after Alexei Stakhanov, a coal miner; the idea behind the Stakhanov movement was to produce more than was required by working harder.

Added to that was Russian propaganda: about the loss of the Soviet Union that used to be feared by the whole world, about how strong a leader Vladimir Putin was because he lifted Russia from its knees, and how wrong the "brother nation of Ukraine" was to have taken the path towards Europe. Therefore, the events of the "Russian Spring" (a number of pro-Russian and separatist events in eastern Ukraine in 2014) were developing incredibly fast. At the time, I wasn't able to assess the scale of the threat and couldn't imagine the things awaiting me.

In February 2014, I went abroad for the first time. It was an educational training trip for those who studied the Polish language and culture. I visited Zielona Gora and Wroclaw in Poland. And on the way back, my teammates and I visited Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. As it turned out later, I arrived from Golden Prague straight to captivity in the so-called Luhansk People's Republic.

I returned in March, but my hometown had already become difficult to recognize. It was "grey" and hostile. As if out of nowhere, crowds of women and men I had never seen before flooded the city. Most of them were marginal in appearance. Each of them was ready to rally for any random thing: some for the restoration of the Soviet Union; some wanted to become part of Russia, and some wanted to have "big" Russian pensions. All of them were angry and dull. And all of them were united by hatred of Ukraine.

Of course, there were Russian flags and red flags there. And everyone frantically shouted: "Russia! Russia! Russia!" I still remember it like a terrible dream. I remember, going through the photos of these rallies and noticing some very strange people in them. They were unusually dressed, wearing some kind of military uniform, without any insignia. Those people with an air of military bearing about them stood at a distance from the main events and watched them with a self-confident smile. Like puppeteers who controlled their puppets. They were the Russian instigators who set off the hybrid war in Stakhanov.

Soon the most aggressive rallyists formed a "people's guard." They dressed in military uniform and tied a red cloth around their right hand. Then they set up a tent in the centre of the city and "protected public order" there twenty-four hours a day. At the same time, the Ukrainian flags were removed and the flags of Russia, Belarus and the city of Stakhanov were put up in their place. The "people's guard" placed their trust in Russian propaganda that was broadcast daily: "Buses with right-wing radicals from the Right Sector[20] are moving to the east of Ukraine. They are going to destroy the monuments of the Soviet era."

[20] Set up as an alliance of ultra-nationalist groups in November 2013, the Right Sector was a radical wing of Ukraine's protest movement that toppled President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014. The Right Sector was depicted in Russian media as "neo-Nazis" who threatened the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

But the Right Sector never came to the city. And the "people's guardsmen" received weapons from "Brother Russia" and formed a militia that stood against common sense and the modern world. They created complete anarchy in the city. Only the law of force applied.

When I returned from abroad, I saw a young man with a Ukrainian flag come to a pro-Russian rally. I have never witnessed that much hatred and aggression from pro-Russian demonstrators. They all shouted in unison: "Traitor! Provocateur!" The man was almost torn apart on the spot because of our yellow and blue flag. He was pushed out of the square until he disappeared.

Everything in the town had changed. It was a weird thing to comprehend: there still seemed to be legitimate government authorities, but at the same time some armed people set up roadblocks in the town. They started checking IDs, extorting money and cars. Whoever had more guns was the master of life. The search for "enemies of the people" began.

It was incredibly difficult to be in such an environment. It was as if all of them suddenly turned into zombies, who started speaking the language of Russian propaganda, saying that Ukraine no longer existed, foreign rule had been established, a coup d'état had taken place in the country, and so on. I started searching for like-minded people. And I found them on a social network. It was the underground association called The Conscious Ukrainians of Stakhanov. Those people were a true breath of freedom for me.

We started meeting secretly. And we even found a place for our secret meetings: a room in the offices of the tram and trolleybus administration. The room wasn't in the best condition, with old Soviet furniture and a hole in the floor. But there was something unusual about it, we felt like a secret resistance group.

Different people, of different ages, from schoolchildren to the elderly, attended our meetings. We didn't want to be part of Russia, we didn't want war, and the main thing that united us was love for our country.

CHAPTER 1.1: SHEVCHENKO READINGS

On March 5, I received a message from Oleksandr Hail, my acquaintance from the university. He proposed to hold readings of Shevchenko's works in Stakhanov, on the occasion of Taras Shevchenko's[21] birthday. I agreed, and we quickly created an event online and invited all the subscribers of the

[21] Taras Shevchenko, foremost Ukrainian poet of the 19th century and a major figure of the Ukrainian national revival, is one of the most important symbols of modern Ukrainian nationhood.

Conscious Ukrainians of Stakhanov page. Before that, I learned at work that the Enlightenment City Association was also planning a similar event. I called Nina Semenivna, the head of the "Enlighteners," and we agreed to conduct a joint event.

Our meeting place was on Lenin Street, opposite the Peremoha stadium, at a memorial sign where a Taras Shevchenko monument was to be erected.

Unfortunately, back in 2011, some vandals stole Shevchenko's bust and the town was left without Kobzar (Shevchenko's nickname, meaning a person who plays a string instrument called kobza). Our readings turned out to be very intimate. Young people and the Enlightenment members of a more respectable age read poems, everyone was full of optimism and believed that the separatist nightmare would be over soon. We spent a few hours in the company of like-minded people.

On the same day and time, the Ukrainian People's Town Hall Meeting took place in Luhansk and was attended by many patriotic people who cared about Ukraine. An enraged crowd with Russian flags broke into the square where the meeting was held. There were plenty of them, several thousand people, they pushed and beat people with yellow and blue insignia, even children. There was a lot of blood and fear.

The separatists quickly pushed back the town hall participants and occupied the square around the Shevchenko's monument, then they threw away the flowers laid at the monument. After that, shouting "Russia! Russia!," they began storming the Regional Government Administration. The police didn't interfere. The crowd broke into the office of the Regional Government Administration's Chief and forced him to write a resignation letter. A Russian flag and a red flag were installed on the Government Administration building.

Local residents organized Shevchenko readings for the 200th anniversary of the poet in Stakhanov on March 9, 2014. Photo from the personal archive of Yevhen Shliakhtin.

CHAPTER 1.2: "LUHANSK REGION IS UKRAINE" LEAFLETS

Svitlana Yevseyeva, a Conscious Ukrainians activist, reported in one of our meetings that her friends had sent her a thousand leaflets with the text "Luhansk Region is Ukraine."

Five people volunteered to distribute them. They loaded a ladder, glue and tape into the car. Around seven p.m. they started posting the leaflets on lamp posts on the central streets—Lenin and Karl Liebknecht. Everything was going well until someone called the police. Our boys and girls were forced into a police car and taken to the city police station. They were held there for several hours, and each of them was interrogated. They managed to inform me in time, and I started calling lawyers, Euromaidan SOS[22] human rights defenders and other representatives of the public sector. Many people called the police and asked what were the reasons for the detention. The flurry of phone calls worked, and everyone was let go without a single fine.

Organizing and participating in those patriotic events was the most genuine thing that has happened in my life. But, God, how naive we were and how couldn't we see the real threat. We even tried to communicate with the organizers of pro-Russian events. We asked them, "What are you doing? Do you understand that you are bringing war into your hometown?" And they answered, "Everything will be fine. Everything will be like it was in Crimea, and we will become part of the Russian Federation."

CHAPTER 2: MARCH 30, 2014

It was a sunny Sunday. I enjoyed my day off to the fullest, reading in the morning and planning to go to the movie theatre with friends in the afternoon. But a phone call from Svitlana Yevseyeva ruined it all.

Svitlana (or Sveta) was a journalist for the regional publication "Telegazeta," and we often crossed paths with her at work. But since 2014, we had become friends because we supported the Revolution of Dignity[23] and a united Ukraine.

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[22] Euromaidan SOS is a grassroots initiative created in response to the violent dispersal of a peaceful student demonstration on Maidan Square, November 30, 2013 for providing legal and other assistance to persecuted protesters across Ukraine.

[23] The Revolution of Dignity, also known as the Maidan Revolution or the Ukrainian Revolution, took place in Ukraine in February 2014 at the end of the Euromaidan protests, when deadly clashes between protesters and state forces in the capital Kyiv culminated in the ousting of President Yanukovych and a return to the 2004 Constitution of Ukraine. It also led to the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian War.

Collaborators put up a stand with opponents of the "Russian World" with trumped-up accusations in Stakhanov on March 30, 2014. Photo from the personal archive of Yevhen Shliakhtin.

The call was very emotional: "Come quickly to the rally! They set up a "Nazis" of Stakhanov stand with your photo on it in the central square." I quickly pulled myself together and ran to the rally. Angry people were going crazy with excitement after the speeches made by Communist Party members, and were chanting, "Russia! Russia! Russia!"

Looking around, I found the stand, my photo was in the right corner at the bottom. I saw several more familiar faces on it: Stas, my former classmate; Sashka with whom I worked during the election campaign, Kostya who almost got killed later for his patriotic stance. There were pictures of the Lytvynenko family, real Stakhanov nationalists, on the stand as well.

While I examined the stand and called the police for help, the collaborators began to look at each other in confusion after seeing me, a "Nazi" in the flesh. The Chief of the Stakhanov Police Public Order Protection Division walked up to me, and I asked him to remove the stand. I told him, "What Nazis? You and I attend the same meetings at the city council. Remove this disgrace immediately." He examined the photo and ordered the organizers to get rid of the stand. As soon as he left, they hastily installed it again. We went back and forth like this several times. Eventually, my temper kicked in, I tore down my photo from the stand and went home.

CHAPTER 3: THE CONSCIOUS UKRAINIANS OF STAKHANOV'S LAST RALLY

On April 26, 2014, the Conscious Ukrainians of Stakhanov organized the United Ukraine car rally (through the towns of Stakhanov-Kirovsk-Irmino-Bryanka). I was energized by the real freedom and the people's earnestness. Then I started getting calls from the police: "Have you received any messages announcing a car rally?"—"No, I haven't." Although I organized it myself and was in the convoy that very moment. The police got worried after seeing us drive by the town police station.

Patriotic rally in Stakhanov, Kirovsk, Irmino and Bryanka. April 26, 2014.
Photo from the personal archive of Yevhen Shliakhtin.

But our happiness didn't last long. Four hours later, forty armed collaborators from the Luhansk office of the Ukraine Security Service arrived in the town. The first takeovers of administrative buildings began; they seized the town hall and the Gorky Concert Hall, and started to put up barricades downtown. Before that, there had been attempts to seize the police station, and the event was filmed by Russian propagandist TV channels. And the police, in order to stop the crowd, took down the Ukrainian flag and put up the red flag of the Soviet Union.

The situation escalated dangerously and grew like a snowball. One of the motor rally participants was threatened with a gun, but miraculously, he survived. Conscious Ukrainian teenagers, Bohdan and Volodymyr, put up the Ukrainian flag on a pile of coal refuse. The militiamen started shooting at them. The police didn't help to find the culprits, and the teenagers themselves were taken to the police station. But the most terrible thing that happened was Volodymyr Popov's murder. He was shot. He argued with all collaborators and very openly supported Ukraine.

CHAPTER 4: MAY 9, 2014

I will remember May 9, 2014 for the rest of my life. I could have been stabbed to death.

The city council had planned festivities to commemorate the Victory in the Second World War. I was tasked with filming any provocations that might happen during the event.

The separatists distributed Colorado ribbons,[24] their symbol, to everyone near the town hall. And everyone was happy to wear them close to their hearts. They gave me one as well. I put it into my pocket.

All of a sudden, Oleksandr Klimanov, my neighbour, who was also standing in the square with everyone, pointed his finger at me. "He is with the Right Sector," he shouted frantically. "Dmytro Yarosh's[25] henchman! Remember? And he was in Poland, in the Right Sector training camp."

They twisted my arm behind my back and started beating me. The bloodthirsty crowd surrounded me. There was hatred in the air, everyone wanted to push and hit me. I was very scared. I don't remember how long the beating lasted,

[24] "Colorado" ribbon is a Russian military symbol consisting of a black and orange bicolour pattern. During the events of 2014 in the east of Ukraine the Russian troops and pro-Russian population of Ukraine used the ribbon as a symbol of pro-Russian and separatist sentiment. Ukrainians used the derogatory term "Colorado" ribbon in reference to the Colorado potato beetle.

[25] Dmytro Yarosh was the commander of the volunteer corps "Right Sector."

but it seemed like an eternity. I said: "Check my pocket, there is a city council employee ID in it!" The beating stopped, separatist Oleksandr Kashparenko looked at the ID card and tore it... Throwing it away together with the Colorado ribbon.

And then Kashparenko took out a knife and swung it at my stomach. The knife cut through clothes, my leather belt and trousers in an instant, but left just a scratch on my body. I was that close to being killed. Exhausted, I was dragged to a Soviet made Niva car. My two colleagues, Vladyslav Shapovalov and Serhiy Stroev, tried to save me but were not successful. I was taken to the militants' headquarters that they set up at the Stakhanov Police Unit for Combating Organized Crime.

I was escorted into the building. They took my IDs, money and work equipment. They took me out to the backyard and locked me in an iron garage. I thought it was the end. In an hour and a half or so, they took me out of the garage, gave me back all my belongings, apologized and said they made a mistake. My boss Volodymyr was waiting for me in the car in the yard. He took me to the town hall and called a doctor to examine me... Then I was taken home.

CHAPTER 5: WORK

I continued to work in the town hall. The town was under dual power, split between the legitimate government and armed separatists. I thought to myself that I would keep working until they start forcing me to swear allegiance to the separatist organization called Luhansk People's Republic. Because you pledge allegiance only once.

The situation inside the town hall was difficult: one third supported the separatists, ten per cent remained faithful to the oath, and the rest of the employees were waiting to see what happens next.

My "circle of trust" included Volodymyr, my department chief; Maksym, the legal department chief; Mariana, the deputy chief of the youth and sports department; and Ella, the mayor's secretary. A different fate awaited each of us. Volodymyr went to fight the separatists with weapons in his hands, Maksym was captured, Mariana and Ella and their families left for the free part of Ukraine.

On July 21-22, 2014, Stakhanov was fully occupied. At that time, the Ukrainian Armed Forces successfully liberated the cities of Rubizhne, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk and already reached the city of Pervomaisk, which is eight kilometers away from my hometown. The separatists retreated. At night, a convoy of heavy military vehicles drove along the Stakhanov bypass: there were artillery systems, Grad multiple-launch rocket systems, armored personnel carriers and tanks.

Entrance to the Stakhanov City Council before its capture by illegal armed groups. Until March 2014 - Photo from the Internet. Photographer is unknown

And in the morning, a real horde passed through all the central streets of the town: an endless convoy of separatists and mercenaries from Russia. Cars, buses and trucks. All the personnel were in camouflage, with machine guns, grenade launchers and mortars. They were covered from head to toe in patches and flags of Russia, Novorossiya,[26] the "Luhansk People's Republic," red flags of the Soviet Union, the separatist Ghost Battalion flags, and the Russian Don Cossacks flags.

As a result of the active combat actions, the water pipeline was damaged and the town of Stakhanov started experiencing problems with water supply. Utility services delivered potable water according to a predetermined schedule. Having taken time off from work for the first half of the day, I went out to replenish the household supplies.

My father and I took a garden wheelbarrow and an extra barrel and drove to the yard of the Military Mountain Rescue Unit. There was supposed to be a water delivery to that location from nine to twelve a.m. After standing in line with fifty other people, we replenished our water supply.

[26] Novorossiya or New Russia, also referred to as the Union of People's Republics, was a project for a confederation between the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic" in Eastern Ukraine, both of which were under the control of pro-Russian separatists.

I got changed and went to work. Halfway there I met my dreadful neighbour Klimanov. Three weeks had passed since our quarrel. He said with a disgusting smile, "Are you still alive?" I wasn't surprised, I replied, "More alive than all the living."

At work, the boss gave me the task of posting several messages on the city council official website, so I returned to my office. I turned on the computer and the electric kettle. Just then, five to six armed separatists broke into the office. All of them wore camouflage. They addressed each other exclusively by their callsigns. I remember: "Samara," "Bars," "Radical." And one of them had a badge that said "Sergey Cherezov. Assistant commandant of the town of Stakhanov." They all had insignia with the flags of Russia, Novorossiya and the Platov Don Cossack Regiment.

They shouted, "Are you Shliakhtin?" "Yes," I answered, feeling doomed. I was instantly hit in the stomach with the stock of an automatic rifle. Sweat flowed like a river, I thought about how to save myself. I could not bounce back, more blows followed—to my body and my head. They took my phone, checked my messages and recent calls. They found a Ukrainian flag in my office, they took away cameras, video cameras and computer hard drives.

My colleague and I were escorted out of the premises. Colleagues from other departments watched all this, they looked away because they couldn't do anything. Finally, the separatists draped the Ukrainian flag, they had found, over my shoulders. They ordered us to get into the car and drove us in an unknown direction.

They brought us to the militants' headquarters, the same place where I was held on May 9. There were tire barricades at the entrance, and there were a hundred times more separatists and Russian mercenaries now. The former Police Department for Combating Organized Crime has been turned into a major centre of crime.

My colleague Maksym and I were taken to a room. Before the seizure of the police department, this had been a relaxation room for employees. There was a pool table in the middle of this large room. Now, instead of pool balls, there were instruments of torture on the table: batons, pliers, knives and scalpels. And in the corner of the room there was a chair with a rusty iron chain. There were traces of blood everywhere.

We stopped in the middle of the room, near the table. Several militants began to beat us with police batons on our hands and feet. They beat us on soft tissues, thighs and forearms. I was ordered to take off my pants and shirt and wrap myself in the Ukrainian flag. And they started beating me even harder. The executioners changed, and the beating continued. Insane fear was accompanied by intolerable pain. Another camouflaged man entered the torture chamber. He was healthy, and under two meters tall. He took the iron chain, wound it around my neck

66 MY SPINE CRACKED, MY EYES ROLLED FROM THE PAIN

and began to strangle me. My whole life seemed to flash before my eyes at that moment. There wasn't enough air, I started to suffocate. My executioner threw me on his back and continued his torture. My spine cracked, my eyes rolled from the pain. When I was thrown to the floor, I began to gasp for air. At this time, Yevhen Tymofeyev, an acquaintance of mine, was brought into the room. His head was smashed and his green T-shirt was covered in crimson blood stains. This didn't give me optimism.

After such a "warm welcome," the three of us were taken to the garage in the yard. I felt a shock of realization that the enemy could destroy me from the inside. I was numb with fear. What scared me even more was what I saw inside—a place absolutely unsuitable for keeping people. The garage was made of steel, and the air in it warmed up like in a sauna. Dirt and dust. Broken chairs, rags, some kind of mattress and cardboard boxes were scattered on the concrete floor. There were people among all this garbage.

First, I saw a woman in her 60s. She was exhausted, and when she turned around I noticed her right arm, completely blue from the beatings. When they brought us in and threw my things and the flag inside, she immediately grabbed the flag and hid it in some kind of bag. "Do you want us all to be killed?!" she exclaimed.

Another girl shouted after the militants, "When are we going to be fed? Even the dog in the yard is fed!" There were several other men in the same garage, but I was in total prostration and didn't know what to do. I was in a state of complete stupor caused by hopelessness. After putting on my pants, I silently sat down on some rags near the wall.

I had barely come back to my senses, when I was summoned again for questioning. Armed guards took me to a small room. There were three men in camouflage uniforms there. Two of them with pistols were sitting at the table, and one, with a baton, was standing in the corner of the room. The vilest one began the interrogation: "We are the LPR counter-intelligence. You trespassed against the Republic's constitutional system! And you're probably an artillery observer. Give a statement. What Ukrainian secret services do you work for?" I answered, "I have never worked for any secret services. Yes, I organized rallies against the war and in support of Ukraine in Stakhanov." I immediately received several baton blows on my shoulder. I screamed in pain.

"Think until tomorrow. Tymofeyev has already started telling us everything," added "Consul." "Saint" nodded to "Big Face" and he started hitting me on my arms and legs again. Then I was locked in the garage again.

My thoughts about the possibility of my life ending in such a pathetic way were interrupted by the guards. "Ukrops[27], come out and unload the shells!" As it turned out, the garage consisted of two parts: one used to hold civilian prisoners, and the other half was a warehouse filled to the brim with artillery shells. We walked up to the truck and unloaded two dozen boxes of shells and anti-tank guided missiles.

When Ukrainian military aircrafts showed up in the sky a few days later, I had a certain feeling of dissonance. On the one hand, there was hope that an offensive was coming and Stakhanov would soon be liberated, and on the other hand, if rockets were to strike the separatist headquarters now, there would be nothing left of us. Meanwhile, the prisoners began to hide, some under door panels, some in the car inspection pit. And I froze as if in a living picture. I remained there, on the dirty floor, not looking for any shelter.

After unloading the munitions, I was taken to wash the car of separatist leader Pavlo Dryomov. Loud music was playing in the yard, "Get up, Donbas. Mother Russia is with you." The car was parked at the entrance to the headquarters. It was there that I saw my frightened parents. They asked the separatists in charge to let me go. But the separatists yelled at them and ordered the guards to immediately take me out of their sight. I just managed to shout, "Bring food." We were no longer allowed to communicate with our relatives. It was a deliberate system, whereby the "conscious" were demonstratively taken away from home and work so that everyone could see and fear that the same could happen to them. In this way, the separatists tried to contain any anti-Russian resistance.

A few hours later, we were handed two packages of food. "Shliakhtin. Tymofeyev. Take it away." Before the doors had closed, a separatist named "Consul" rushed in: "Ukrops, outside! What the hell are you doing! Special treatment and individual meals?! You are not at a resort here!" I couldn't stand it and answered, "Ask the people who have been here for a while, they don't feed us here." He cursed and gave permission to bring us food.

But I had yet to experience the first night in captivity. The prisoners, who had been in the garage for a long time, warned: "It's going to begin now." And so it happened. The shutter creaked. Drunk militants started entering the cell "to have fun."

A militant with the call sign "Colonel" ordered all of us to line up. They smelled of recently consumed vodka. They began "morale building exercises." They were rumored to have come straight from the front line where they were defending

[27] Ukrop literally means "dill" in Russian, but for those opposed to Ukrainian government, army, or even nation, it became (initially a derogatory) word for Ukrainians. In the war-torn Donetsk and Luhansk Regions it indicated Ukrainian soldiers and volunteer fighters. This neologism was invented by separatists but soon became popular with the Ukrainians.

Donbas from the "Kyiv junta," as the separatists called the legitimate Ukrainian Government. If it weren't for them, all Russian speakers would have been killed. They said that when the militias retreated from Slovyansk, the Ukrainian National Guard "punishers" crucified a little boy there. And there was a lot of other Russian propaganda, which could be summed up in two words: sheer nonsense.

The "Colonel" started yelling, "Why are you here? What are your crimes?" Everyone started in turn, "I broke the curfew," "arrested drunk."

"Which of you are the fucking Ukrops? Step forward" shouted the militant again.

Max, Tymofeyev and myself took steps forward. And he immediately started threatening us, "We will send you to the minefields! You will collect corpses!" Then they beat us with batons and fists. The same bruiser who strangled me earlier with an iron chain approached me again. "So, whoever doesn't jump is a Moskal?"[28] he asked. I stood in silence. "Jump, I said!" he roared. And he hit me with a baton with all his might. He beat me purposefully, on the head. I tried to protect myself with my hands, the beating didn't stop. He shouted something, but I could no longer hear him. I fell down from the pain and passed out.

I regained consciousness because of terrible pain. My head and the whole body hurt. I had two swollen bruised claws instead of hands. My fingers wouldn't bend. Later I found out that I had six fractures in my arms. The executioners left. Exhausted and stressed, I fell asleep on a rag strewn in the middle of the concrete floor. I woke up from terrible pain and from the news that our numbers grew. New people arrived in the prison. Every time the door opened all the prisoners had to line up.

The morning began with the guards taking everyone out into the courtyard. Riflemen stood around the perimeter and watched us. The yard felt like "heaven on earth," because the iron garage was heated to the temperature of a sauna. It was as if we were boiling inside, and the stench was terrible. We couldn't breathe, and the dust on the floor added to that, causing everyone to start coughing sooner or later. The temperature inside was so high that some of the prisoners were shivering from the cold when they got outside even though the outdoor air temperature was about 27 degrees Celsius.

After the morning routine, the "Ukrops" were called in for interrogation. They "talked" with each of us for about an hour. I was brought in and saw the same line-up again. "Consul" began, "Write a confession. Say you are an artillery

[28] Moskal is an ethnic slur (formerly neutral term) that means "Russian," literally "Muscovite," in Ukrainian, Romanian, Polish and Belarusian.
The Ukrainian soccer fans' humorous chant "If you are not jumping, you are a Moskal" that would be sung at a stadium while jumping (the aim being to stretch your legs or warm up during cold weather) is hated by Russians and their supporters.

spotter and work for the Security Service of Ukraine." I refused, "It's not true. I won't write it." "Saint" gave the go-ahead to "Bruiser" yet again, and he started beating me with a baton. He hit my head, my body, my broken arms. The pain was unbearable, and I passed out. And then, like in a Hollywood blockbuster, they poured a bucket of cold water over me, so that I would come to my senses. Then, the beating began again.

Eventually, under force, I "confessed" to everything. Because if you don't do what they need, they continue the torture. Somehow, I managed to write the text they dictated. And writing with broken hands is quite a challenge.

While I was writing, "Consul" noticed my hands, "What happened?" I said "Fell over at night." I was sent to see a nurse. A young girl greeted me with a shout, "Our boys don't have enough medicine! And I have to help the enemy here!" But it could barely count as help. She rubbed my hands with a warming gel and bandaged my hands. And finally she gave me two pain-relief tablets blister packs. That was all the medical care I received during my entire time in captivity.

We spent ten days in the garage. During this time, they also imprisoned Serhiy Potiomkin (they came to pick him up at home). Oleksandr Hailo joined us. Oleksandr (Sasha) tried to hide, but they still found him. Because he is an ultra[29] of Zorya Luhansk Football Club, they beat him on one hand only. That is why it turned the colour of a ripe plum.

At the peak of this persecution, there were fifty people in the garage. The prisoners had to take turns sitting and standing, because there was not enough room for everyone. Each new prisoner was a carrier of information from the free world. And we tried to find out the news, to understand the real situation. Because according to the militiamen and their counterintelligence, their forces were practically on the outskirts of Kyiv already.

My interrogations and torture continued every day. When you pass the "three day" mark, you are in such a state of shock that you cannot even talk. Having accepted the reality, the "political" prisoners started to talk to each other in whisper. We agreed upon what each of us would say during interrogations so that we wouldn't be beaten. "Tomorrow I will talk about the rallies in Luhansk. You're talking about the motor rally. And most importantly, we will be talking about rally participants who have already left the city," I suggested. Everyone agreed. This tactic proved to be effective, and the number of beatings decreased. It was as if we were giving them some real information during the interrogations.

When the number of beatings decreased, I began to comfort the new cellmates so that they would "adjust" more easily. I explained the routine in the cell and how

[29] Ultras are a type of association football fans who are renowned for their fanatical support. The term is used worldwide to describe predominantly organized fans.

not to get on the guards' nerves. But one can't possibly predict the behaviour of sadists and maniacs. Militants constantly came into the garage and threatened us. Once, the one who strangled me with a chain and who hated my colleague Maksym because he had a higher education and held a senior position in the city council, fired several single shots at Max's feet inside the garage.

A big man with the call sign "Bars" came to see me, "I liberated Crimea, now I'm here, in Donbas. Do you know what I'm going to do to you? I will drug you and cut your skin to pieces. I will do this until you die." "Samara" told me about the history of the Russian Empire and the role of the Ukrainian people. He told me about his three terms served in prison. And at the end he said that he would shoot me or send me to the minefields.

But the most terrible thing that happened there was the murder, of course. On August 6, 2014, new prisoners were brought to the garage—Mykola Zahlada and his son. He was a former police officer. In April, while resisting the militants' attempt to capture the police station, Mykola was severely beaten. Then he left the town for a while, but later he came back to Stakhanov.

And as soon as he returned, he and his son were caught and their house was searched. They interrogated father and son separately. During the search, the militants found Zahlada Sr.'s flash drive with some information, and he was badly beaten again. They made his son clean the interrogation room, and wipe up his father's blood. One time, after the torture, they brought Zahlada Sr. to the garage, blue from the beatings. His hands were tied and already blue, and his ribs were probably broken. He was chained to the garage door, and the other inmates were warned that if any of them came near him, they would be treated the same. Zahlada was in a very bad condition, he moaned for a long time, he rattled his chain because of the excruciating pain. And then he was taken out of our garage into the yard and chained to an iron pipe. He was silent for a moment. The militants said later that he was allegedly taken to the doctor... However, no one has seen him since.

CHAPTER 6: ORPHAN BOARDING SCHOOL

On the tenth day, the established routine changed. The guards were saying nothing. After lunch, they ordered the main "enemies of the people of the LPR" to gather: the "conscious," the "artillery spotters," the religious and the "terrorists." I was considering two options in my mind: they could relocate us to the former police station (because I saw them hanging out there), or shoot us.

At gunpoint, we were loaded into a minibus. I could see that they were not taking us to the police station, as we passed by the pond. That's it. They were taking us to the quarry where they would kill us. My whole life flashed before my eyes yet again. Looking at the faces of those around me, I realized that I was not the

only one with such thoughts. All of a sudden, the representative of an evangelical church began to speak, “Brothers, don’t be sad, because the soul is eternal! And if we die now...” Before he could finish, we all shouted in unison, “Shut up!” It seems funny now, but back then it was very scary. Those two religious men would be freed. But before that, during an interrogation, their heads would be smashed and their bodies cut with knives.

We were brought to the orphan boarding school on the Matrosov street. There the separatists had military barracks, counter-intelligence and a hospital. And then we were sent to the basement.

The conditions were terrible. A silence fell among us. Everyone was lost in their thoughts. Half an hour later, the old separatist man started telling jokes and funny stories. That cheered us all up a bit. But not for long, because I had to sleep on the damp earthen floor. Some of us were lucky enough to sleep on wooden boards, doors or table covers, or some old mattresses. A lamp that was always on produced a dim beam. There was no daylight. In place of the unbearable heat came terrible humidity. After a short time, most of us began to cough.

The interrogations continued. The worst thing about it was that the torture chamber was nearby, right behind the wall. And every time someone was taken away for interrogation, we heard terrible screams and moans of pain. Butt strokes and screams every time. So when the door opened, we had mixed feelings. On the one hand, it brought hope that you could get the so much desired freedom, and on the other hand, it could mean that you would be taken back for interrogation where they would mutilate you or the person sitting next to you. Constant fear. And I am still not sure what is scarier, to be beaten or to hear the screams of another person.

We were taken to the bathroom once or twice a day. When guards came, everyone had to move away from the door. Then the door opened and the prisoner had from seven to ten minutes to get out of the basement, go up to the first floor, and run 50 meters along the corridor, where we had an unappealing choice: either use the latrine, wash up, fill water bottles with water or pour urine out of the bottles. We ran this entire route under the muzzles of the guards’ automatic rifles, guns and pistols. Even in the restroom, there were always militants with weapons standing nearby and rushing us.

Our prisoners’ line was formed the following way: first, those who needed to take a crap, and then, those who would pour out urine and fill the empty bottles with water. Smokers were the last to go, because whoever went last had to clean the toilets, and was given a few cigarettes afterwards.

I remember the first time we ran like that and I saw a purple sunset, I noticed it almost by chance, with my side vision, when I was running on the ground floor.

I had only a few seconds to admire it. But that sunset will stay in my memory for the rest of my life.

After the transfer, we thought we would run out of food. However, we started receiving our parcels. One day I found a piece of paper at the bottom of the package. I recognized the handwriting of my mom, Olena Vasylivna. The note consisted of just a few words, "Love and kisses! Mom and Dad." It was incredibly difficult to read those lines. I read them again and started crying. I sobbed uncontrollably. There was complete silence in the basement. Nothing had made me feel the emotions that note evoked, neither my fingers being broken (I screamed in pain, but I didn't cry), nor the beating during interrogations until I passed out.

By the third week, there were fewer beatings, but they tried to break the "political" prisoners psychologically. They would tell us, "We will not shoot you, but you have seen too much, so you will be here until the end of the war."

CHAPTER 7: MY SECOND BIRTH

On August 28, Pavlo Dryomov, the local commander of the Don Cossacks, came to visit the LPR counter-intelligence unit. The "political" prisoners were transferred to a separate cell, many times smaller than all the previous ones. At most, it could accommodate up to ten prisoners.

They began to hastily summon the prisoners. I remember very well the commotion, the slamming of the doors of the first, second, and third cells, the quick steps of the prisoners on the first floor. About forty people were released that evening. And the total of over 200 people went through the "basement." And there wasn't a single military man among them.

They came to us too. They took Max. He came back to collect his kitchenware. I nodded to him and asked in a whisper:

"Did they let you go?"

He nodded affirmatively in response.

"Leave it here for us." I point to his watch. Max heard me and quickly put it back in its place. The electronic watch was a real treasure for us. Because with it, and with no daylight, we had some notion of time.

That night was the happiest for "political" prisoners. We hoped that one day we too would be free. Maybe in a week, a month, six months, but we would get out of the prison. We spent half a night talking in whispers about how our lives would change when we were released.

On the morning of August 29, Shliakhtin, Potiomkin, Tymofeyev, Vozniuk, and Hailo were summoned one by one. The "Consul" took out a gun from his holster: "You don't have any complaints against us, do you? Write a statement: 'I am such and such, while being detained by the counterintelligence, I have no complaints about the conditions of detention. No physical force was used against me.'" After the "formal part" they gave me back my passport and my empty wallet.

All the guards, investigators and other militants instantly became so friendly that it made me sick. As if there were no murders, constant psychological pressure, torture and abuse during interrogations.

The five of us were released.

Outside the prison, I ran into my mom first: she was carrying a bag of groceries to be delivered to me. At home, I found my father, whom I've never before seen in such an emotional state.

August 29, 2014, was my second birth. Thirty days of hell were behind me. I had a whole life ahead of me. Life after captivity.

VOLODYMYR SHCHERBACHENKO

Volodymyr was born and had lived in Luhansk for most of his life before the war. Since studying at the Luhansk Oblast Ukrainian Gymnasium, Volodymyr has been actively involved in the local social movement; he was the founder and long-time leader of the Luhansk Oblast Student Brotherhood, and later started the Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives.

In 2014, Volodymyr became the coordinator of "Justice for Peace in Donbas," a coalition of over 20 human rights organisations dedicated to documenting gross human rights violations resulting from Russian aggression. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, he has continued to document war crimes and, alongside his colleagues, has provided critical support to affected Ukrainians while ensuring the dissemination of accurate information about the war.

Volodymyr firmly believes that Ukraine's territorial integrity will be fully restored. He is convinced that lasting peace is impossible without holding the war criminals to account, as well as the politicians, and propagandists who have promoted and facilitated Russian armed aggression.

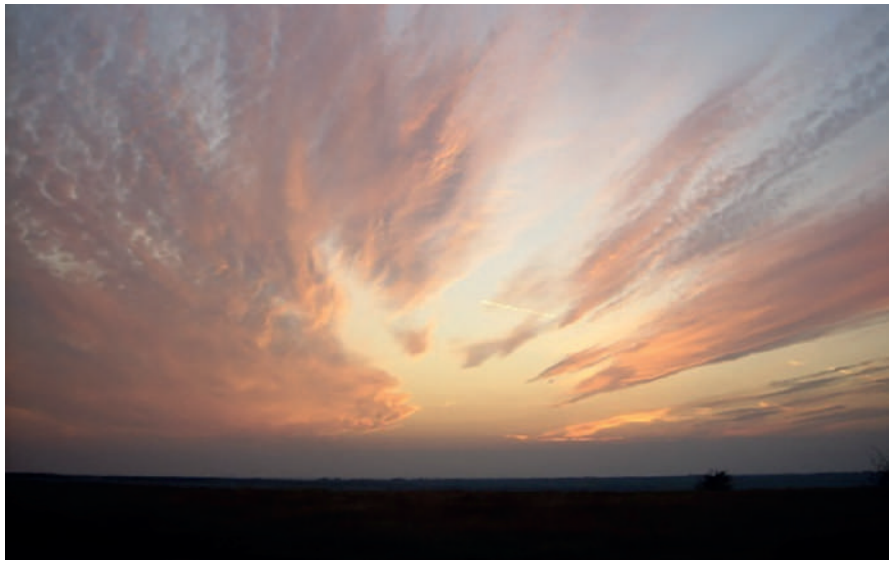
THE TALE OF A SMALL MOTHERLAND, A LOST LIBRARY, AND A GOLDEN SUNSET

A FLIGHT FROM THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY THROUGH THE PARCHED STEPPE

It was July 14, 2014 when I set off on a journey that has been going on for 11 years. Luhansk was already in the hands of the separatists that day. I packed two large chequered bags and a backpack. I took only as much as I could carry by myself. I quickly said goodbye to my house. I took a photo of its empty rooms, and for the first time in my life, I took a selfie in the bathroom mirror.

The house dates from 1913. It has crown moulding, a cellar with a limestone arched vault, and a tiled stove covered in thick black paint, with shiny bronze doors. There was also a huge, old apple tree by the porch. It was covered with white and pink flowers every year and brought forth large sweet and sour yellow apples. I lived here for only a few years, made some major repairs to the building, and fell in love with the view of the road, where I could watch the big orange sun setting over the hot Luhansk summer.

Those evening moments reminded me of my childhood, when my father and I went up to the roof of our nine-storey building and watched the same sunset from there. Quite often, on windy days, the evening sky turned dramatically bright, and those evening minutes were imprinted in my mind as a symbol of the beauty of my native land.



Sunset in the steppe in Luhansk oblast, Lutuhine region, 2007.
Photo from the personal archive of Volodymyr Shcherbachenko

I will never return to my last house in Luhansk.

I asked a distant relative to take the keys. That kind woman was part of the family, and we had never discussed politics with her. I heard from my relatives that she voted for the pro-Russian "Party of Regions." Along with the house keys, I left her a note with the contacts of those who needed to be called in case of my detention. I did not explain to her in detail whose phone numbers they were and why I was leaving them, but she seemed to understand.

I prepared to close the door for the last time. There was an unpacked box with an electric generator in the corridor. I bought it in the Epicentre store back in January 2014, in anticipation of the war. Back then, I imagined the war differently. Hostilities on the border with Russia, perhaps, somewhere near Krasnodon. I thought there might be missile attacks and power cuts in Ukrainian Luhansk. The reality turned out to be completely different. The occupation ate away at the city from the inside within a few months, with no real resistance from the authorities and virtually no armed resistance from the security forces. Perhaps the only heroes to openly offer armed resistance from the outset were the Luhansk Border Guard Detachment. The generator has remained unpacked.

I walked to the railway station through the backyards, since I didn't want to be seen by the wrong people. The station was patrolled, so the next goal was to quickly cross the station square and jump into the carriage. I did this successfully.

I had to travel in a carriage with reserved seats, but even getting such a ticket in those days was difficult. There were more people in the carriage than seats. The shelves were crammed with bundles and suitcases. I was enveloped in a stuffiness that made it difficult to breathe, and in a few minutes my t-shirt was already unpleasantly sticking to my sweating body. The train started moving, accompanied by the sound of shelling. I had no feeling of irreversibility yet, so I silently sighed with relief. Later I found out that it was the second to the last train from Luhansk to free Ukraine.

I still have my ticket for that train. Every year, in early summer, some of my friends make posts on social media with memories of the same tickets. Why have we been keeping these sad electronic mementos of our escape from our small motherland for so many years, although we cannot return with these tickets? Perhaps, for us, it is symbolic proof that this land is ours, and we have the right to get it back.

Railway Ticket Boarding Pass

TERMINAL No. 61	Railway Ticket Boarding Pass SE "Main Information and Computing Centre Ukrainian Railways" 21 I. Franka Str., Kyiv		000B38C3-4311-B5E9-0001 #Ф9У-Е1-3310157-1307		PN: 215793826073 FN: 2659023176 ZN: 3T00000002 FK: 2396394
IPS	**RAILWAY TICKET BOARDING PASS IS THE GROUNDS FOR TRAVELLING**				13.07.2014 20:52
Name, surname			Shcherbachenko, Volodymyr	Train	**134 D NET**
Departure	2214200		**LUHANSK**	Carriage	**16 WITH REGISTERED SEATS**
Destination	2200001		**KYIV PASSENGER**	Seat	**025 Full**
Departure date and time			**14.07.2014 19:55**	Service	BIL
Arrival date and time	133*		**15.07.2014 12:20**		
PRICE=UAH 117.85 (TICKET: UAH 49.18+SEAT: UAH 23.53+SLEEPING PLACE: UAH 15.00+VAT: UAH 19.47+INSURANCE: UAH 1.09+FEE: UAH 9.58) #ACCIDENT INSURANCE: 6,000 TAX-EXEMPT MIN. PJSC "UKRAINSKYI STRAKHOVYI DIM", 3 SPORTYVNA SQ., KYIV, T. 0442388081 DEPARTURE TIME: KYIV TIME					
This Railway Ticket Boarding Pass allows travelling by train without obtaining a physical ticket at the ticket office. It is the proof of payment. This Pass can be returned before the departure.					

The train picked up pace, and the landscapes of my native Donbas began to drift by. Dozens of trips turned those landscapes into a film for me, which I can easily recall in detail even now. How much I would like to see this film live again from the train window...

The suburbs of Luhansk, the Olkhovka River, the steppe, a penal colony, the Alchevsk Iron and Steel Works, and piles of coal refuse. That time, the steppe was on fire from shelling, burning out at dusk in ugly black spots.

The train stopped for several hours, and we spent several anxious hours near Horlivka at night waiting. The battle was going on. Finally, the train started

moving again. I felt a sense of relief in the tense atmosphere of the carriage, and fell asleep.

I woke up the next day close to Kyiv. Ten years of my next life began. Ten years of documenting crimes and helping those who were crushed by the war especially cruelly. Ten years full of human pain, suffering, injuries, deaths, forced disappearances, abandoned and destroyed homes, unrecovered families, unborn children, and unfulfilled hugs.

ANTICIPATING THE OCCUPATION

There is a question in my working questionnaire for those affected by the war: "When did the war begin for you?" I sometimes ask this question not only to others, but also to myself.

The first time the war knocked lightly on the door of my house was on December 29, 2013. It was evening, and I got a message from friends from the Maidan protest movement in Luhansk: "Some Party of Region's supporters came with a sign about you! Come!"

It was intriguing. I quickly got dressed and went out. My adrenaline level was higher than usual, and I was feeling a mixture of curiosity and slight danger.

Young men with posters were hovering about the Shevchenko monument in the center of the city. "Shcherbachenko is an agent of the U.S. Department of State,"

Anti-Maidan protesters in Luhansk attacking civil society activists, 29.12.2013.
Photo from the personal archive of Volodymyr Shcherbachenko

one of them read in large letters. Hah! About me? Really? The names of three other colleagues from friendly NGOs were on other picket signs. Kostiantyn Reutskyi was accused of travelling abroad for long periods of time (was that a new sin?), and all the "civil society activists" were accused of sodomy. I shook my head at the absurdity of that.

Young men held picket signs so that they covered their faces. Oleksandr Kharytonov, one of the leaders of the local anti-Maidan movement, shouted slogans into a megaphone. An insolent headman and his assistant managed sign-bearers. These two were not hiding and were handing out leaflets. The leaflets contain our coloured photos and the amount of donations our organisations received from charitable foundations.

For those who are interested in more detail, anti-Maidan activists offer a lengthy article by local "journalist" Viacheslav Husakov, "Young Cockerels of the Third Sector," published in the newspaper of the Luhansk Oblast Council. It was prepared in the first half of 2013. The propagandist reflected in the article on whether our NGOs were dealing with the right topics and whether we were spending money on the right projects. It was not surprising that the names of the organisations in Mr Husakov's article and those on the anti-Maidan sign were the same. Mr Husakov did not avoid the topic of grants even after 2014. After fleeing Luhansk, he actively participated as a journalist in various grant projects of NGOs in the Kherson oblast. It turned out that grant money smells bad for a propagandist only when it is not in his hands.

The Anti-Maidan picket sign still looks ridiculous. Luhansk, 29.12.2013.
Photo from the personal archive of Volodymyr Shcherbachenko

I was uncomfortable when I realized that information was being manipulated, and they wanted to make us the object of unjustified envy and attacks. Actually, all information about our organisations' funding was open. We wrote about it in our reports and talked about it in our speeches. The money went to benefit people in this city and region. I had nothing to be ashamed of, and this thought brought me back to balance.

The fear shown by my opponents with picket signs made me more courageous, and I felt empowered to take a few photos with the sign bearing my name. I tried to strike up a conversation with the sign-bearers. I wondered what motivated them to come out to the square on a winter night. I was trying to see their faces, but they were hiding them. In response to my questions, they mumbled something senseless. Their leader hurried to help his protegés, but we did not manage to have a meaningful conversation either. I heard only threats and irrelevant answers. My interest in the young Party of Regions members faded, and I joined the Euromaidan protesters who were holding a multi-meter-long Ukrainian flag along the main street and shouting pro-European slogans.

After ten years of war, the excitement I felt that evening seems like an absolute trifle, but for me, irreversible changes began with that evening's event.

In a couple of months, the signs that caused such thrills would be replaced by phone calls and letters with threats and suggestions that I should leave my home city. Our office phone would be disrupted for hours by silent callers. Friends would be followed by annoying stalkers, and leaflets accusing them of sexual perversion would be put into their neighbours' mailboxes. The first illegal prisons would appear in the city in April and May. They would be accompanied by kidnappings, public humiliation of opponents, torture in its most savage, medieval forms, slave labour, sexual violence, and even extrajudicial executions. I would learn about all that in the summer. And at that moment, the "Russian Spring" was pouring into the city like a small but noticeable stream of sewage. This muddy stream was being stirred up by people who at first seemed just weird.

WEIRD CHARACTERS

Several images of those weird people have been living in my memory since the spring of 2014. Let me introduce them.

March 2014. Luhansk was officially still a Ukrainian city. State institutions were still functioning, but the streets were already partially controlled by the pro-Russian followers. Massive old men wearing sagging trousers with Don Cossack stripes, loud teenagers armed with sticks and rods, pseudo-workers and their girlfriends with boozy faces and missing teeth.

It is easy to distance yourself from them in ordinary life: you can just walk the length of a specific street or block, move to another bench, or simply look away.

However, I didn't have that opportunity in Luhansk in the spring of 2014. Such characters had taken over public spaces where you would never expect to see them. They became key figures in the central streets, squares, public gardens, as well as entrances to government and law enforcement agencies.

I remember a stout young man in sweatpants with a baseball bat. With his legs spread wide, he stood at an imaginary post in the middle of the street at the main entrance to the oblast state administration. The man was passing the bat from hand to hand and exuding self-confidence. It was unclear what exactly he was doing in the middle of the road on the main street of the city. But he exuded a sickening threat and a sense that the official authorities no longer controlled the city. Now, the power was in the hands of that man in a tracksuit with a heavy stick.

"RUSSIAN SPRING" BEGINS HUNTING FOR OPPONENTS

March 5. One of the last rallies in support of state unity was held: about a hundred or two pro-Ukrainian citizens with picket signs, flags, and ribbons gathered in the park opposite the regional office of the SSU[30] and the "Children's World" store. There were songs, chants, shouts, and the atmosphere was tense but generally

A group of supporters of the "Russian Spring" armed with sticks preparing for a provocation. The group was led by Dmitry Pindyurin (in the photo on the right in a green camouflage suit). Pindyurin would later head the illegal armed formation "Bryanka-USSR," whose members committed robberies, illegally apprehended, tortured and killed civilians and military personnel. Luhansk, Heroes of the Great Patriotic War Square, May 28, 2014. Photo: Oleksandr Volchansky

[30] SSU—the Security Service of Ukraine is the main internal security agency of the Ukrainian government.

positive. The event took place along the main street. Some drivers honked their horns in encouragement. But the situation suddenly changed. The police secretly warned the organisers: "Clear the place! Your opponents will disperse the rally by force in a few minutes." My brain refused to accept the situation. How would they disperse us? Why wouldn't the police protect our peaceful event? Was the law still in force? But there was no one there to answer such questions. We needed to solve the issue quickly because people were leaving in a hurry.

I left the park through an alley. There was a central department store nearby. With no peculiar plan, I entered one of the boutiques on the ground floor. Less than a minute later, a couple of young men rushed into the store. One of them was holding a huge shovel handle at the ready. They stopped in the doorway and looked around attentively. Apparently, they were searching for people with Ukrainian symbols. I felt like a chameleon. My whole body was tense, but I pretended to be a calm, ordinary customer, so I was thoughtfully looking at the shop-window while watching those "goblins" out of the corner of my eye. The tense seconds passed surprisingly quickly. The "goblins" disappeared, but the possibility of being hit with a shovel handle right in the hall of a central department store plunged me unpleasantly into a new reality.

LUMPEN PICNIC

I love a little excitement. About a month and a half after the events in the store described above, I decided to visit the same park opposite the SSU building again. At that time, the Special Service Building had been captured by Russian proxies, and the main street was blocked with sandbags. A round-the-clock anti-Maidan "festival" was taking place in the park.

At that time, people were already being held and tortured in the building of the seized regional office of the Security Service of Ukraine, but I did not know this yet. The entrance to the park for the anti-Maidan "festival" was still free, but some tents were already covered with barbed wire around the perimeter. By a miracle, I persuaded a friend, who had almost lost a tooth during the dispersal of a pro-Ukrainian rally on March 9 (Shevchenko's birthday), to accompany me on my excursion to the park. A half-hour visit to the anti-Maidan camp was enough to confirm our impression of its participants.

I was a little upset to see some cleanly dressed Luhansk residents carrying boxes of cookies and marshmallows for the local "campers." I can only guess at the reasons that motivated these people to support those events. Otherwise, the camp was a massive and poorly organised gathering of mostly the lumpen proletariat and their cronies.

Some of them were engaged in activities that we could not understand, while others were socialising, listening to music and drinking alcohol. Even for me,

Supporters of the "Russian Spring" near the seized building of the Luhansk regional SSU office, Luhansk, spring 2014.
Photo: the author is unknown /Ihor Humeniuk's social media page in Odnoklassniki, social networking service primarily in Russia.

a person who grew up in industrial Luhansk, a few places where people were drinking strong alcohol in the Central Park seemed too revolutionary. I had seen something like this only once in my life, during a night walk in Antratsit, where locals were drinking *horilka* (Ukrainian hard liquor) while sitting on the curb of one of the city's main streets. But it was midday here, and small groups of pro-Russian protesters were grouping around dirty newspapers spread out on the dusty park ground. Their typical meal consisted of a bottle of *horilka*, a couple of crushed boiled eggs, a withered pickled cucumber, and a few slices of bread. Staying in a park full of such characters boded no good, so we decided it would be wise to leave the "festival."

A little later, I saw a couple of my acquaintances among the participants of the camp established near the seized SSU office in the photographs. One of them was the leader of the Luhansk Komsomol[31], Ihor Humeniuk, and the other one

[31] Komsomol is the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League the organization for young people in the USSR that was primarily a political organ for spreading Communist teachings and preparing future members of the Communist Party.

was my university mate, a newspaper man and local political scientist who simultaneously tried to be friends with people of two different political views. My relationship with the latter ended a few years before the war when he undertook to publish a book for our organization, but did such a poor job that we had to recoup his wages through a lawsuit.

This man's desire to be friends with everyone ended up badly for him. The gang of "Batman" (field commander Oleksandr Biednov) did not appreciate this multi-vector approach. They first expropriated his old "Volga" car, and then put him in a basement torture chamber in the East Ukrainian National University for almost six months. There, they broke the man's arm, and his wife was forced to earn his right to freedom working as a nurse's aide and cleaner in the hospital of the same gang. Both of them still prefer not to talk about this sad experience. In general, everything happened according to the classics of the genre: a Russian-inspired riot devoured (or rather crippled) an enthusiastic supporter and his family.

THOUGHTLESS SUPPORTERS OF WAR

The story of this couple is similar to those of tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, of people who thoughtlessly tolerated the "Russian Spring" and later became its victims. In the spring of 2014, I still had the opportunity to closely communicate with such people. One of the portals to their world for me was found on the trains that still connected Luhansk and other Ukrainian cities in the spring of 2014.

On my way back from one of my business trips from Kyiv to Luhansk, I shared the compartment with three recently retired miners. They had just completed a preventive course of treatment for pulmonary silicosis in a Kyiv hospital and were returning to Donbas. The friendly men treated me to a delicious dinner and poured me a glass of *horilka*. The conversation naturally turned to political topics, and they shared their intention to go to the checkpoints to "defend Donbas" from the nationalist government as soon as they returned from their trip to the capital. They spoke surzhyk[32], the dinner they had was not poor, their pension payments were VERY decent, and in general they seemed happy with their lives. However, Russian propaganda had convinced them that life was unbearable. I encouraged them to look at reality and realize that they needed to question more of what the Russian propagandists were saying. Unfortunately, my arguments did not work for them.

It is unlikely that I will ever see these men again, but I am sure that the following years of the war they so eagerly supported did not bring anything good to their

[32] Surzhyk is a Ukrainian–Russian pidgin language.

lives. Have their homes remained intact? Are their relatives alive and thriving under the conditions of war? Do they continue to receive large pensions and necessary medical treatment? It is more than certain that the programme for their happy old age has failed in one way or another.

"MINERS AND TRACTOR DRIVERS"[33] WERE NOT THE ONLY BRAINWASHED VICTIMS OF THE WAR

The monster of Russian propaganda was eating not only the brains of the working class but was successful in influencing educated people, as well. Returning from another trip, I found myself in a compartment with a young music teacher. She was a nice and refined woman on her way from a visit with friends in Kyiv. At their invitation, she had stayed in the capital for a couple of weeks. Her friends invited her to relieve the stress of the first weeks of the ATO[34] and to see for herself that Russian speakers were not being dismembered in the capital. She had a positive impression of her trip. She seemed calm, and her judgements about social and political life were balanced and rational. However, as we approached Luhansk, it was as if someone had turned a switch in her head. Absolutely seriously, she started telling me a story about a "Right Sector" unit[35] walking around Kamianyi Brid (one of the oldest districts of Luhansk), wearing black uniforms and holding knives. She allegedly saw them with her own eyes. Having been familiar with the nationalist milieu in Luhansk for many years, I knew perfectly well that there were no such crazy nationalists in the city who would openly walk around the city at night with unsheathed knives, especially at the peak of the "Russian Spring."

The fantastical nature of the woman's story and her inability to accept reality stunned me so much that I was completely at a loss for a while. Our train was

[33] The expression "miners and tractor drivers" is used to refer to those residents of Donbas, primarily representatives of the working class, who supported the Russian invasion in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Since Donbas is an old industrial region, Russian propaganda initially used the expression "miners and tractor drivers" to imitate the claimed support for the separatist movements by representatives of "genuine" inhabitants of Donbas, blue-collar workers. By using the expression "miners and tractor drivers," Russian propagandists tried to deny the presence of Russian regular military troops in Donbas, claiming that there was a civil conflict between the local population and Kyiv, but not an act of external aggression, as it actually was.

[34] ATO - Anti-Terrorist Operation, the term used in Ukrainian legislation for the initial period of Russian military aggression against Ukraine (2014-2018), when Ukrainian government tried to not officially recognize the status of war with Russia in order to avoid negative political and economic consequences for the country.

[35] Right Sector was a coalition of Ukrainian right-wing nationalist organizations formed in 2013. In 2014 it was transformed into political party. The organization was a dominant theme in Russian media in 2014, which grossly exaggerated its strength and influence in Ukraine.

fast approaching Luhansk, and I was never able to find out how and why she had invented this story.

I heard many such unbelievable stories. The people who told them did not question the absurdity of the figures and "facts" on which they were based.

One of the classic stories that I personally heard was that about 40 buses with "Right Sector" members were allegedly on their way to seize the centre of Luhansk. The number of buses, their destination cities, and their goals changed from story to story. The only thing that never appeared in them was a critical assessment of the "Right Sectors'" ability to mobilise and bring so many people to the east.

Another tale that stuck in my memory was the story of the residents of Sloviansk allegedly killed by being dropped from helicopters into the marshes near the city. Who has ever seen marshes that large near Sloviansk? What is the rationale for dropping bodies from helicopters?

Such stories did not pose a direct threat to me personally, but I was sad and irritated to see that many people living nearby believed in outright nonsense. More and more often the question of their naïveté arose. It was not always possible to refute these rumours on the spot. All that we could do was to appeal to common sense and logic. I'm not sure if it helped, but over time, I developed better skills in handling such situations.

In 2015, while collecting information about war-related sexual violence, I asked a taxi driver who was taking me to the train station from Sievierodonetsk to Rubizhne if he had heard of such cases. The man eagerly responded to the topic and categorically stated that he personally knew a woman whose vagina had allegedly been injected with sealing foam by Ukrainian National Guard soldiers. The case seemed shocking. I tried to find out more, asked a few additional questions, hoping to discreetly find out the survivor's contacts. As a result, the story of a personal acquaintance turned out to be a fiction. The taxi driver was allegedly told the story by an acquaintance of his, whom he did not want to name. Of course, I was unable to find and help the woman, as she most likely did not exist.

THE POWER OF THE ILLITERATE

Not only the changes in the minds of the people around me were frightening, but equally so was the transformation of the leaders who were trying to seize power. In March 2014, I accidentally witnessed a telephone conversation between Oleksandr Kharytonov and his allies. Kharytonov was one of the leaders of the local Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine and the first self-proclaimed "people's governor" of Luhansk. The man was one of those who actively influenced the

situation on the streets of the city in the spring of 2014, organising a local anti-Maidan. He was later arrested by the SSU and released; he fled to Moscow and now works as a Communist Party official in Luhansk.

On a spring day in 2014, I was walking down a small and completely deserted Dzerzhinskyi street, where the self-proclaimed governor was talking on his mobile phone in front of the now-closed "Harbin" restaurant. As I approached, Kharytonov was loudly complaining into the phone: "You cannot imagine. There are no staff! The ones we have can't even draw up a protocol!"

The part of the conversation I heard gave me a bit of groundless optimism. I say groundless, because in a few months people like Kharytonov controlled a large part of the seized area of the Luhansk oblast.

Nowadays, the question of Moscow's role and influence on the events in Donbas is less frequent, but in the early days it was more common (especially among foreigners). In this context, I recall Kharytonov's loud complaints during the conversation I unintentionally overheard. No so-called republics would have been possible without Russia's planning, coordination, financial and military support.

Several years have passed since 2014, during which Moscow sent its political and military managers to the Donbas, and gradually the occupiers managed to control the situation. The street robbery of "kharytonovs," "biednovs," and "mozhovyis"[36] was replaced by the experienced and well-thought-out terror of Russian-controlled KGB officers. In the "LPR," these processes were led by a retired SSU colonel, the son of a Soviet cop, Leonid Pasichnyk.

ETHNOCIDE, OR HOW NOT TO DESTROY YOUR OWN LIBRARY UNDER THE RULE OF THE "LPR"

Since the beginning of the "Russian Spring," loyalty to Ukraine has been considered a crime in the so-called republic. To be not only a conscious Ukrainian, but simply to have Ukrainian sympathies meant political persecution in the "republic." Ukrainian was replaced by Russian in school curricula and disappeared from official broadcasting. Just like in the days before the collapse of the USSR, Ukrainians in Donbas were being forced to give up on their cultural identity. There was a total replacement of everything that symbolises Ukraine: from official symbols and the language of signage to traditional symbols, colours and costumes in amateur groups.

[36] Kharitonov Oleksandr, Biednov Oleksandr and Mozhovyi Oleksii are leaders and active participants in pro-Russian illegal paramilitary, and later armed formations that operated in the Luhansk oblast in 2014–2015 and practised political terror, robbery, looting, illegal detentions, torture, extrajudicial executions and other forms of violence against both their political opponents and ordinary citizens.

There was no place for those who wanted to publicly express their Ukrainian character, neither in politics nor in public life, nor in other forms of public space. If you were not ready to become a "Russian," the only way to realise yourself as a person was to leave those territories. Conditions have been created that push you out of this territory physically. Therefore, people who were not ready to accept the rules of the occupying "Russian world," but had the strength and resources to arrange their lives in a new place, fled. There are also those who were obliged to stay in the "republics" due to certain circumstances: old age, sick relatives, owning their own accommodation and not being able to earn money for a new one elsewhere, unwillingness to leave their land and home, and so on. Not all people are fighters by nature, so they have to hide their Ukrainian identity. You can only be yourself at home, behind closed doors and windows. This is exactly how the current ethnic cleansing is carried out by the Russian Federation; this is how it looks. I could not imagine myself in this new Russian reality, so I left.

My house, which I left behind in Luhansk, was empty for several years. The longer it was empty, the more its maintenance became a burden. Like people, houses need care. They need to be repaired, heated, and bills have to be paid. Fewer and fewer of my friends and acquaintances stayed in the city, and it was becoming more and more difficult to maintain the house. Eventually, there came the time to say goodbye to it. Gradually, furniture, tools, and household appliances were given away and sold. The day came when only a few hundred books from my library and a large ochre-coloured chest which belonged to my grandmothers remained in the empty house. The question remained of what to do with the books, my precious books; this became a huge challenge for me over the last 10 years.

A significant part of my library consists of books that, according to the official policy, were forcibly removed from the libraries of the "LPR" in 2014. The seizure of the library of the Ukrainian-Canadian Centre "Renaissance," which housed 30,000 books donated to Luhansk by our diaspora, caused a furore. In the summer of the same year, one of the Luhansk propaganda channels aired a story about the seizure of the office of the People's Movement of Ukraine. The empty flat was described as the headquarters of the "Right Sector," and a fiction about the "extremist intentions" of the imaginary nationalists was concocted by "LPR" propagandists, based on a pair of thin brochures with Stepan Bandera's biography found in the apartment. These brochures were used to illustrate the alleged crimes of the "extremists." If these propagandists had come to my now former home in 2014, they could have written an entire dramatic series of programs.

Aware of this, in the summer of 2014 I burned the files of UPSD's[37] "Ukrainian Horizons" newspaper (from the late 1980s), which included instructions on how to mine bridges and make incendiary mixtures. I had kept the newspapers

[37] UPSD—Ukrainian People's Self-Defence is a Ukrainian nationalist organization.

for more than 25 years, not for the sake of instructions on sabotage, but as an interesting example of the Ukrainian press from the time before the restoration of independence. But who of the employees of the "Ministry of State Security" (which was just being formed) would have believed in my bibliographic interest in those newspapers while interrogating me in the basement?

Despite clearing out the periodicals, there were still several hundred books in the abandoned house: Ukrainian classics, history, books on human rights and international relations, academic textbooks, dictionaries, i.e. all the books that librarians would have called valuable publications back in the autumn of 2013.

We worshipped books in our family. The notion of throwing a book away is still something unimaginable for me. I've been building up my library for over 30 years. I can still describe the appearance of dozens of those books, like people, from memory: covers, paper to the touch, illustrations, damage.

I had left in my home the first books on the history of Ukraine that I bought as a high school student: a reprinted brown two-volume Polonska-Vasylenko; a blue Krypiakevych's history printed on thick heavyweight paper; Bahalii in a beautiful red cover; a worn history of Subtelnyi that was our textbook in the Ukrainian gymnasium. Many of those books had been sent by friends from the libraries of almost extinct Ukrainian communities in the United States and Canada. Some were the books of my youth (mostly published by "Smoloskyp" publishing house), with the autographs and inscriptions of now well-known Ukrainian writers and politicians. These included *Kobzar*, a collection of Lesia Ukrainka's works that were kept in my parents' house. "I have neither fate nor freedom, There's only one hope left..." are the lines I learnt from this collection for my lessons at the Soviet school. There were also the heavy green volumes of the *Ukrainian Soviet Encyclopaedia*; the more fragile volumes of the *Encyclopaedia of Ukrainian Studies*; collections on human rights and the rule of law, which I had brought from Warsaw, Brussels, and Washington; the thick blue volumes of an explanatory dictionary of the Ukrainian language, given to me by my mother as a present; and collections of Ukrainian sayings and proverbs, *How We Speak*, by Antonenko-Davydovych; *Customs of Our People*, by Oleksa Voropai; and books by Lypa, and Dontsov.

Five years after the proclamation of the "LPR," trying to find people in Luhansk who would dare to accept even the most neutral of these books turned into a great challenge. I had been searching through my phone and social media contacts for hours and days, looking for friends and friends' acquaintances who were ready to take at least some of the books. Some promised, then thought about it, and never got in touch again. People sighed and sympathised, but the fear of bringing problems upon themselves and their loved ones or getting "to the basement" won. I didn't feel I had a moral right to ask people to take the books: it could only be an offer and their free choice.

After a long search, calls and correspondence, several people agreed to come and take the books they were interested in. A couple of elderly former teachers took the works of Marquez and several dictionaries. They looked at the rest and refused. Other friends agreed to take a dozen of my most precious books out of the city. Some Ukrainian classics and non-political literature were secretly taken to a cultural institution. No one dared to take most of the books.

It's horrifying to realise that in five years, a city where people protested in the streets without fear, criticised the authorities, published opposition media, and freely exchanged thoughts and ideas, has turned into an intellectual concentration camp. I kept works by Engels and Nietzsche, Ozhegov's dictionary, and the collection of the *Executed Renaissance* at home, and no one thought of it as a crime. But there is no place for freedom in Russia and its satellites. In a few years, they have driven hundreds of thousands of people in the occupied territories into a stable of intellectual fear. The right to free thought, especially Ukrainian thought, has become a crime.

> IN FIVE YEARS, A CITY WHERE PEOPLE PROTESTED IN THE STREETS WITHOUT FEAR, CRITICISED THE AUTHORITIES, PUBLISHED OPPOSITION MEDIA, AND FREELY EXCHANGED THOUGHTS AND IDEAS, HAS TURNED INTO AN INTELLECTUAL CONCENTRATION CAMP.

Now that my library is gone, I recall my efforts to save the books more calmly. I think of it as a past loss. Now, it is a fact that has happened. At the time, I perceived the inability to save the books as a betrayal of myself and my beliefs.

I realise now that nothing irreparable has happened. The books can be reprinted, brought back to Luhansk, and made even more accessible and popular, including through online means. Of course, this requires time, effort, and money, but the most important thing is the availability of Ukrainians and Ukrainian institutions willing to do this.

RESISTANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout the ten years of war, I have been asking myself whether the occupation could have been stopped and who could have done it. I remember the beginning of the socio-political confrontation in 2013 and the repeated attempts

of my colleagues from the Luhansk Euromaidan to establish a dialogue with opponents.

I did not participate in such initiatives. They never seemed promising or enjoyable to me, but I thought my colleagues' efforts were right. At the time, such attempts seemed logical, since there had been virtually no cases of physical violence against political opponents in the history of Luhansk oblast for 25 years of Ukraine's independence, until 2014. It seemed that there were no credible obstacles to the exchange of views.

It is now clear that all attempts to establish a dialogue between the Maidan and anti-Maidan sides in Luhansk were illusory. Anti-Maidan activists set out to seize power by force and physically neutralise the pro-Ukrainian part of the public (since it was the public, not the authorities, that was opposed to pro-Russian movements). The reason for those failed attempts to establish the dialogue was simple: local separatists were not independent in their decisions, and the instruction from Moscow was to escalate and seize power by force.

If attempts at public dialogue failed, could more decisive action by the Ukrainian authorities have prevented the occupation of part of Donbas in 2014? We will never know. Perhaps Moscow was expecting a more drastic military response from Kyiv and sought such an escalation scenario to justify its actions. But it hardly matters what Moscow thought, because, as practice has shown, it was the lack of resistance that encouraged Russia to be aggressive. They wanted to destroy us as a people, and they were ready to invent a false pretext for an attack under any circumstances.

The building of the Donetsk Regional State Administration seized by participants of pro-Russian actions, Donetsk, April 8, 2014. Photo: Steffen Halling.

A pro-Russian participant in anti-government riots near the seized building of the Donetsk Regional State Administration, Donetsk, April 8, 2014.
Photo: Steffen Halling

Key state institutions, city councils, SSU offices, police and army units were handed over to the separatists without much (and sometimes no) resistance in Luhansk, Donetsk, and most of the major cities in these areas. I witnessed a police unit armed with riot gear clearing the entrance to the oblast administration without any physical confrontation.

The same was true of the SSU building, which had a huge warehouse of weapons. In many other cases, the security forces simply laid down their arms in front of the "kharytonovs with shovel handles." Of course, the notional "kharytonovs" were led by experienced Russian agents with weapons, instructions and money from Moscow, but the fall of seemingly powerful state and security structures in Donbas before these groups of boorish and stupid people looked pathetic. Many of the so-called law enforcement officers and officials who had been receiving privileged salaries and bonuses, benefits and pensions for years to protect this state, handed it over to the plebeian mob at the first and slightest sign of a real threat.

Unfortunately, in 2022, the situation in Kherson and Sumy was much like Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014. Although this time the cities were captured by the regular Russian army, it was again the civilian self-defence forces and some of the military who put up real resistance to the occupiers. A significant number of security forces and high-ranking officials quickly left these regional centres.

Luhansk Border Guard Detachment: those who heroically resisted the occupiers. Luhansk, June 2014. Photo: Luhansk Border Guard Detachment, from the web-site of "Suspilne Movlennia," https://tinyurl.com/26ae4waw.

If the authorities in Donbas were incapable of resistance, what was the position of the residents of the two eastern regions? Until 2014, approximately 6.5 million people lived in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. As of the spring of 2024, over a million of these citizens refused to live under the occupation of the so-called "LPR" and "DPR" and moved to the government-controlled territory of Ukraine. They made an involuntary but conscious choice in favour of Ukraine. After all, residents of the occupied territories can leave for Russia and as well as many other countries around the world. There are no official statistics, but we know from our circle of friends that hundreds of thousands of Donbas residents with Ukrainian passports have emigrated to Europe and North America. All of them chose not to stay in Russia. For many of these people, fleeing their homeland has been accompanied by the deaths of their loved ones, huge financial losses, severed family ties, and irreparable physical and psychological damage.

Over a million people made a difficult choice when they realised that it was impossible for them to live under Russian occupation. But where was their civic stance in the first months of 2014?

At that time, a few demonstrations with thousands of participants under Ukrainian flags would have been enough to suppress the "Russian Spring"; local separatism would have been impossible, and not a single shot would have been fired. I do not want to sound like I'm accusing my fellow countrymen. There is no

point in such accusations. In fact, at the time, many people did not take the threat of the "Russian Spring," seriously, including me. It seemed like after a little more time, this circus performance would end.

I sometimes come back to my thought: "Was I radical enough to join in those days?" Was my participation in public events, media interviews and organisation of new people who would join the civil society movement in the wake of Maidan enough? Or should I have joined my colleagues in a violent confrontation with the supporters of the "Russian Spring," instead of trying to find a dialogue and nipped this Russian-inspired rebellion in the bud?

I know now that I was wrong, but at the time, violent confrontation seemed impossible and inappropriate. I didn't like my political opponents, but I perceived them as fellow citizens with their right to freedom of thought and association. I left the right to violence to the state. I believed that in order to protect the constitutional order, we had law enforcement agencies that should preserve the very structure of the state as a basis for interaction between citizens of different political views.

There were people (I bow my head to their immediate reaction and public heroism) who, in the spring of 2014, moved on to intelligence and sabotage work, established contact with the special services and military intelligence, or formed volunteer battalions. My faith in the basic capacity of our local state institutions was a mistake. We will never know how the civilian violent confrontation in Donetsk and Luhansk would have ended (as it did in Odesa), if the supporters of state unity had attacked first. Would we have won, without the support of local law enforcement officers and with the hostile attitude of the majority of the local power elite, if our civil society sector had relied on force? We lost the limited violent confrontation that did take place, both in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

The real key to a potential victory (and the antidote to the occupation) was in the tens of thousands of Ukrainian citizens of the east who did not see the threat as real. They did not consider it necessary; did not have time; did not want and were not used to defending their homeland and their rights in an active constitutional way. Unfortunately, these lessons are costing all of us (and eastern Ukraine residents in particular) very dearly. But it is never too late to learn, and I want to believe that we can do it.

WE WILL DO IT

I am sure that those who want to, will have the opportunity to return to their home towns and villages after the deoccupation. Just as we once left our homes, so will the occupiers and the families they brought here run back to Russia. It will not happen without ungrounded violence, but with a sense of justice and an understanding that in the 21st century, the long Russian tradition of preying on

other people's lands is coming to an end. Humanity is changing, and the world is becoming more just, even though it is happening not as quickly as we would like. Justice will come to our home, too.

I believe that I will again be sitting in a train carriage, the wheels will be chattering, and I will be looking out the window, searching for my native landscapes. My heart will clench with the feeling of approaching my home city. The train will pass the Alchevsk Iron and Steel Works, and I will know that only an hour is remaining to Luhansk. I will see steppes and piles of coal refuse, the Olkhovka River, the suburbs of Luhansk, where mostly workers live, and the old railway station... The Kyiv train will slow down and, like many years ago, slowly approach the first platform and the entrance to the city.

I will again be able to visit the graves of my ancestors, the first of whom came from today's Zolochiv district in Kharkiv oblast to settle in Donbas back in 1793. I will show my grandchildren the houses and streets where their mother, I, and their great-grandparents lived. We will see the collection of "stone women"[38] in the park of my alma mater, take a drive to the forest park at Hostra Mohyla, which we preserved in the early 2000s, and visit the Shevchenko monument, where people gathered in the Luhansk Maidan. We will walk slowly through the dusty streets of our native Verhunka village, founded by the Zaporozhian Cossacks, abundant with apricot trees, where apricots lie beneath our feet. It will be a peaceful summer evening. We will be standing in the street where I walked to the train station in 2014. The city upon Luhan River, like many years ago, will catch the last rays of the hot orange sun, as the light slowly disappears into the steppes of the Ukrainian Donbas.

[38] Anthropomorphic stone stelae installed in kurgan cemeteries in Iron Age and medieval time in the Pontic–Caspian steppe.

The project "Empowering civil society for a transformation of commemorative culture - non-violent contributions to deal with Russia's war against Ukraine"

The Eastern Ukrainian Center for Civic Initiatives prepared this book in the frame of the project "Empowering civil society for a transformation of commemorative culture - non-violent contributions to deal with Russia's war against Ukraine" with the support of Kurve Wustrow – Centre for Training and Networking in Non-Violent Action as part of the Civil Peace Service (CPS).

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