FOR WHAT?

The publication is based on the results of in-depth interviews with residents of settlements that have been at the epicentre of hostilities during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war

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INTRODUCTION

During the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, information about civilian casualties is received daily. Behind every statistical figure on the dead and wounded civilians, every fact of residential buildings being destroyed, and every screaming headline in the media, there are the fates of ordinary people who have experienced and are experiencing the most terrible moments of their lives.

This publication presents the living stories of those for whom the consequences of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war turned out to be particularly cruel. **These are people who have survived the terrible everyday life of the occupation, filtration measures, injuries to children, loss of loved ones, destruction of homes, and dangerous evacuation from the war zone.** These stories cover a wide range of suffering, multifaceted and diverse fates of people who never in their lives could have imagined that they would find themselves at the epicentre of the worst war since the Second World War.

Over a period of six months, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with residents of Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Chasiv Yar, Bucha, Starobilsk, Bakhmut, Hostomel and other Ukrainian settlements, 24 of which are included in this publication. The stories feature people of different social statuses, ages, and occupations — teachers, entrepreneurs, housewives, pensioners, human rights activists and others.

Settlements where in-depth interviews were conducted

The purpose of recording and sharing people's personal memories of the war is to prevent them from being forgotten. Such materials should be made available to as many people as possible and used in as many scientific, artistic, documentary and educational programmes as possible. Through living stories, society sees how war changes the lives of ordinary people and forces them to face uncertainty, loss and forced adaptation to a new reality. But despite this, the Ukrainian people demonstrate the incredible strength of the human spirit and solidarity that helps them survive and find ways to rebuild.

Informing the international community about the war in Ukraine on the example of specific living stories should affect a wider awareness of the consequences for civilians and maintain the focus of attention of Ukraine's international partners on the ongoing war.

In the publication, the names of some respondents were changed at their request.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

These living stories show how ordinary people going about their daily lives were forced to leave their homes and flee the war. They survived dangerous evacuations, faced separation from loved ones, loss of homes and property, and uncertainty about the future.

Below are the main points that provide a general understanding of the wartime challenges faced by residents of settlements in the epicentre of hostilities.

→ War affects the emotional state of people living in the immediate area of hostilities and leads to post-traumatic stress disorder. The loss of loved ones, homes, and property has a profound impact on people's lives, causing psychological trauma and the need for rehabilitation. Obsessive thoughts, constant anxiety, nervousness, imbalance, fear of the future become constant companions.

→ Military conflicts have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the war zone. They create waves of displaced persons and emigrants who are forced to seek safety and new opportunities in other countries. This creates a need for humanitarian assistance and acceptance from the international community.

→ Fighting forces people to seek refuge in other settlements. Often, residents of dangerous regions do not evacuate until the last minute — some are kept by relatives who are not mobile, others cannot leave their homes either because they fear further looting or because they are afraid of the unknown in a new place. Some people do not have enough money to set up their lives in a foreign city, and the realisation that they will be sharing a room with several people in a volunteer centre leads to the decision to stay in danger, but in their home.

→ The lack of electricity, gas, and water supply has become a constant problem in settlements located near active hostilities and systematically shelled. Interruptions in heating in the winter, lack of gas and electricity, force people to look for alternative energy sources and use improvised methods of heating and cooking.

→ Residents of Bucha and Mariupol expressed their outrage at the actions of local authorities. At the beginning of the hostilities, the local authorities created

a false sense of security by not calling for evacuation, reassuring the population, saying that everything was under control, and not describing the true state of affairs, so many local residents believed them and made no attempt to leave the settlements while they had the chance.

→ People who remained in dangerous areas near the hostilities united, searched for water together, cooked over a fire, helped each other in difficult circumstances, fed stray dogs and cats, and became one big family. It was easier to get through crises together and feel supported.

→ Some respondents who had pets said that they used to believe that no matter what happened, they would never leave their animals behind. However, the realities of war force us to make difficult decisions in situations where organised evacuation is not possible, and we have to choose between fleeing alone or staying in dangerous conditions with a huge risk of being killed or wounded by enemy fire.

→ During active hostilities, it was impossible to humanely bury people who died for various reasons, both from concomitant diseases and from Russian attacks. The relevant services did not respond to calls, and it was dangerous to be in the open area because of the constant shelling, so people wrapped the dead in sheets and carpets and buried them in their yards. There were cases when people were forced to live with the dead in the same basement or room for several days.

→ Some respondents, who returned home after the liberation of their cities, said that they could not be in the building during the air raid, constant vivid memories of the terrible events they had experienced prevented them from living a normal life. People feel out of sorts and fall to the floor at the slightest extraneous sound.

→ Some respondents, especially those whose homes were destroyed, are depressed, losing their vision of the future, despairing, and do not understand what to do next or how to survive. Residents of villages who had their own farms and gardens find it difficult to find work in cities. Some are strengthened by family ties, children, grandchildren, some are kept afloat by faith in Ukraine's victory, some try to live one day at a time and not think about the future.

→ People left, often with only one bag of essentials, so they often miss the photos and other things that were left behind and were part of their previous happy life. When a person loses everything, the absence of some basic, everyday things (dishes, bed linen, household appliances) constantly reminds them of their situation. One of the respondents shared that it was very difficult for her to realise that she no longer had her own home and that she could be asked to move out of her rented house at any time. Before the cold weather started, she was overcome with panic that her family would be told to leave in the winter.

→ The respondents said that watching the Russian army destroy their settlements — their home streets, schools, hospitals, and other places dear to their hearts, associated with childhood memories — was particularly painful.

→ During the interviews, it was often said that after the experience, life priorities had changed. Someone has completely lost the desire to postpone something for the future, because life can end at any moment. Some say they spend all their free time at the volunteer centre, weaving camouflage nets, so they have less time for entertainment.

→ For people who have become internally displaced and have overwhelmingly lost their sources of income, humanitarian assistance and IDP payments are important in the initial phase, as they help to meet basic needs, including food and medical care.

→ Despite the horrors they have experienced, people are trying to remain optimistic, settle down as best they can in a new place, and look for work. At the same time, they miss their homes very much and dream of coming back home when the war is over.

LIVING STORIES

HANNA, 30, EMPLOYEE OF THE CARITAS CHARITY ORGANIZATION

Mariupol

On 24 February, Hanna and her husband were woken up by a phone call from their mother. What everyone was talking about but didn't want to believe had happened — the great war. Hanna and Serhii lived in the Skhidnyi microdistrict, and their flat windows overlooked the Tahanroh highway leading to the Russian border. They had packed a few days ago, so they quickly threw everything into the car and drove away. They would return to their flat only once more, that same evening, to pick up their two cats and take them to their grandmother. They would not return to their neighbourhood again, and a shell would hit their flat in a few days.

It was a nervous morning on 24 February: they had to fill up the car, then each went to their respective jobs. Hanna — to the office of the Caritas charity organization, her husband — to his workplace.

Hanna's mother and a few colleagues came to the Caritas office, and later her husband arrived. They decided not to return home and stay in the office.

For the next two days, people were brought to the Caritas office from nearby villages near Mariupol, where the situation was even worse. Caritas provided people with shelter and food until 2 March, when the power went out. A charity canteen was set up in the office: we baked bread for ourselves and for the bomb shelters, and volunteers delivered bread to them. Along with the power outage on 2 March, the mobile phone service was cut off. But while it was still available, Hanna says, people were constantly listening to the addresses of Boichenko, the mayor of Mariupol:

> *"The mayor was addressing the townspeople, saying that everything would be fine, that everything was under control, that the city was being defended. He never said a word about evacuating, and we had no intention of leaving the city — we believed that*

Mariupol was protected, that it would survive."

After the power was cut off, the only people who remained in touch were volunteers, who came every day, bringing food and news. On 8 March, Hanna's father came to the Caritas office, he served in the Ukrainian Armed Forces and held the defence in the area of the Illich plant. He came for five minutes because someone told him that the area of Livoberezhnyi no longer existed, and the Caritas office was there, 500 metres from Azovstal. The father gave Hanna a military first aid kit, painkillers for her mother and a leaflet with operational information from the Ukrainian Armed Forces headquarters — this was the only information she had received in the last few days about the situation outside Mariupol.

Before 11 March, Hanna and her husband managed to go to the city centre twice to visit their grandmother. On 11 March, the Russians focused on Azovstal: at night, fire and explosions were heard over the plant. And on 13 March, the volunteers came to Caritas for the last time.

> *"In the morning of 13 March, the volunteers came to us and said that this was probably the last time they would come. And at that moment, none of us even thought that this was our chance to escape, that we had to get in the cars and follow the guys. We had two cars, and there were only enough seats for Caritas workers. We couldn't leave 14 people, including children, because they didn't have cars. So, we stayed. And the volunteers left and said: 'Don't give up! As soon as we can get to you, we will come'," Hanna says.*

The shelling usually started at 7-8 am and lasted until the evening. But since 13 March, the area of the Azovstal plant administration (where Caritas was located) has been shelled at night.

> *"The buildings near the office were destroyed. We knew that there were many people under the rubble, no more than 50 metres from us, but the shelling did not stop, so it was dangerous to even go outside," Hanna says.*

On the night of 15 March, the shelling started, it hit the Caritas chapel, which was on the second floor. A shell demolished a corner of the church, leaving a hole in the wall. The shelling lasted until two in the afternoon. The office was already badly damaged: the windows were smashed, the doors were torn out, and the roof was shattered. Hanna's car was also hit. She watched their car burn through the broken windows of the office.

Caritas had no basement or bomb shelter. The only place more or less protected was a closet under the stairs near the dining room. Hanna's mother offered to vacate the space to hide there.

When the shelling started, at around 5pm on 15 March, Hanna, her mother, her mother's friend and her husband got into the closet. None of her colleagues wanted to stay there, they all hid under the stairs.

> *"The son of my colleagues, a 10-year-old boy, wanted to hide with us in the closet. He came in, but his father told him to go back under the stairs. The boy had just come out and closed the door when an explosion occurred. My eyes were open, I remember how hot it was, everything was red. I tried to cover my face with my hand and saw my fingers coming apart, one of them was broken by the blast wave. I didn't lose consciousness, I saw my mother's friend unconscious, I heard my mother calling me, and I saw my husband, covered in blood and unconscious. He was sitting with his back against the wall where he was hit. Both he and my mum's friend came to their senses, but my husband was in very bad shape, he couldn't talk, couldn't move, he was bloody, his teeth were broken. I gave everyone water because the dust had clogged everyone's mouths, noses, and ears. My mum's friend was very weak, I had a bruised hand with broken fingers, so my mum had to clear the rubble on her own. She was the first to get out. She looked around, came back and said it was apocalypse: all the buildings around the office were destroyed, half of the office where we were sitting was also ruined."*

For seven hours, the three women dismantled the massive pieces of the building inside. According to Hanna, these seven hours felt like one hour. Hanna was not wearing shoes, only socks. On 16 March 2022, in Mariupol, the temperature did not rise above 5 degrees during the day, and dropped to minus two at night. Hanna walked around in just socks for five more days. She did not feel the cold, nor did she feel the time.

At two in the morning, the three women got out from under the rubble, but they were unable to pull Serhii out, he was too heavy for them. They went for help, but the men from the nearest basement refused to risk their lives and pull the wounded man out of the rubble. After spending the night in the basement, in the morning the women decided to go to the hospital, which was just a kilometre away from the office. They walked past the office and were able to see everything in the sunlight.

“Our office was surrounded by a high, about 2-2.5 metres, red brick fence. The fence had survived the nighttime shelling, but opposite the destroyed wing of the building where we were hiding at night and where two families of Caritas workers had died, there was a large, a half metre diameter, round, and clear hole. It looked like the shell that destroyed the building and killed the people did not come from above, because the fence was intact, so it must have been fired at close range, perpendicular to the fence. I can’t say for sure, but I think it was a tank that came and just shot at our building,” Hanna says.

It was zero degrees outside, and Hanna was wearing only socks: she had taken off her sneakers before entering the closet, and when everything was destroyed, she couldn’t find them. She says she didn’t feel cold, and the only thing she was thinking about as she walked to the hospital was that she had left her husband alone. Later, at the hospital, Hanna met the women who had been hiding in Caritas with them, and they told her that her husband had been dragged out, and the military had taken him to the hospital, but they did not know where exactly. This is the only information about her husband’s fate that Hanna has known to date.

At the hospital, Hanna was examined, X-rayed (the generator was still working) and put in a cast, but they refused to go to the Caritas office to get the wounded man. On the same day, the Russians shelled the bakery. It was no longer working, but it had its own well, so people lined up in long queues to get water. It was the queue that was hit by Grads that day. They started bringing the wounded to the hospital.

“I saw a lot of wounded people. Their arms and legs were connected to their bodies only by tendons, and they were bleeding. Surgeries were performed in the corridors, because there were windows in the operating theatres and offices, which posed a threat during the shelling. The bodies of those who were brought in already dead were asked to be put near the hospital morgue, which was nearby, and it was necessary to leave documents or notes with all the data in the pockets of the dead so that they could be buried and registered later,” Hanna painfully recalls.

The women stayed in a bomb shelter on the hospital’s territory, with about a hundred other people. The women stayed in this bunker from 16 March to 6 April. During these 20 days, they did not bathe and used a bucket to go to the toilet. Hanna and her mother helped the wounded who were brought to the bunker. Many were dying of blood loss because there were no haemostatic agents, and the doctors from the hospital had already left by then.

In early April, the Russians started targeting the hospital. The bomb shelter was hit, and one corner of it collapsed. On 6 April, Hanna, her mother and her mother's friend left the bunker. The Russians had already captured the Livoberezhnyi district, including the hospital area, so they stopped shelling it.

> *"The hospital was destroyed, and it was just a skeleton. We walked by, and in the rubble, I could see the bodies of dead people — there were people living in the hospital whose homes had been destroyed, about 300 of them. We were walking down the streets, passing by the dead. I looked at their faces, but they were people I didn't know. We were walking through the private sector — everything was burnt, there were no roofs. There were dead people near the houses, graves in the yards of high-rise buildings, dead people wrapped in carpets, at least two carpets in each yard..." Hanna says.*

The women were taken to the occupied village of Bezimenne. There, Hanna was able to contact her father via voice messages and found out that he was with his unit at Azovstal.

> *"Our goal was to go to Europe. We had to go through Russia. At the entrance to Russia, we were filtered. I was lucky: they didn't check my phone because it was dead. I am a member of all patriotic groups, and my phone contained photos of my father that he sent during the siege and his stay at Azovstal. He told me: 'Delete everything!' But I could not do it, I was afraid that these might be the last photos of my father. God saved me. On 13 April, we were already in the EU. There I finally exhaled, because being in Russia was hell for me. I looked at their cities and wished they were on fire! I saw their people living under a peaceful sky and wished they were all killed! Furthermore, I grew older by ten years. I realized that life is not as rosy as I thought it was before. Life is cruel and treats you harshly, regardless of whether you are a good person or a bad person. No matter what you did before the war, the war will not spare you. Everything is not given for merit, and terrible things happen to good people."*

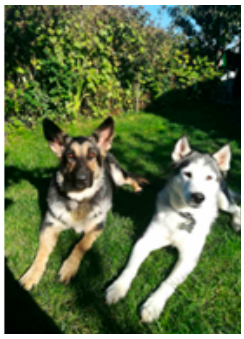
OLENA, 59, ACCOUNTANT

Bucha

Olena and her husband Serhii moved from Yasynuvata in Donetsk oblast to Bucha in 2013. In a cosy town near Kyiv, they lived in a private house with their pets, two dogs and a cat, who were full-fledged family members.

Olena worked as a chief accountant in a company that serviced residential complexes in Kyiv, took care of the household and grandchildren and considered her life to be full and happy.

> *"In an instant, it all just disappeared. One morning, our lives were just crossed out. Multiplied by zero. We were simply killed! They killed everything we felt, everything we lived, everything we wanted. Everything was just wiped out by these 'crazy wasps' flying overhead at five in the morning!" the woman says.*



At dawn on 24 February, fighter jets started flying low, with a terrible noise, and explosions were heard, which made Serhii, Olena's husband, who was walking his dogs in the field, hurriedly return home. At the time, Olena's 8-year-old grandson and cousin from Kyiv were staying at the house. Upon learning of the outbreak of full-scale war, Olena's daughter and her husband immediately left for Bucha, spending six hours on the 30 km journey. Her sister tried to go home, but the transport was no longer running. According to Olena, if she had known what she was going to go through, she would have walked to Kyiv that day.

During the first two days of the full-scale invasion, people could still drive out of the area of the town where Olena's house was located, but on the third day, Russian tanks moved in and practically blocked Bucha. At first, the family considered evacuating, but because only one car was filled with fuel, and they had six people and pets, they decided not to go anywhere and wait at home.

In the conditions of constant shelling, lack of electricity, water and gas supply, fear and uncertainty, Olena's family survived until 6 March. There was no more internet, and the day before, mobile phone service was cut off. The woman's house on Vokzalna Street was in the line of fire, and street fighting was taking place

right next to it. As long as there was a connection, Olena wrote and called everywhere she could, asking for help, but it was impossible to approach the house. Then the family decided that staying in a house without a basement, falling to the floor from every explosion, was a certain death, because each attack could be the last. The green corridor was given only five days after these people left their homes. Later, it turned out that the room they were hiding in had been shot at: there were shards and broken glass on the floor.

> *"Until the last minute, we were convinced that we would never leave our dogs — we would die, but we would not leave them. But there was a "but". At that terrible time, we happened to be not alone, our grandson, our daughter, and her husband, our sister were with us... The shelling was terrible, it was very scary. My husband and I had a fever because we had caught the coronavirus. When we realized that no one would help us, spontaneously, on the morning of 6 March, my daughter, son-in-law, and sister simply took my grandson, surrounded him, walked out of the gate with their hands up, and then ran towards our checkpoint. My husband and I had no choice but to run after them. I can't walk well because I had an accident in 2011 and was diagnosed with a spinal fracture — I have a second disability group. In 2021, I had a severe coronavirus infection and spent several months in the hospital on a ventilator with serious lung damage. It was simply impossible to take the dogs with me: there was shooting all around, they would not have made it.*
>
> *Our neighbour, who has a large farm, chickens and ducks, was not going to leave and told us to leave the dogs and cat. She promised that she would feed them and let them out to go to the toilet, as the dogs know and love her. Our neighbour also stayed in our house for two owners, she also had a farm and a lot of cattle, which she was definitely not going to leave. So, we agreed. There was no evacuation, we just ran," Olena painfully recalls.*

Behind the gate, on the road near her fence, Olena saw fragments of a torn body, then a burnt-out Russian tank with a burnt corpse, and several dead Russian soldiers lying nearby. Olena's daughter tried to cover the child's eyes. From the road, we heard shouts from a Ukrainian checkpoint, and the guys from the territorial defence warned us that it was impossible to pass through the road, it was mined. The only option was to climb over the ruins of a smashed and burnt garage opposite the petrol station on the way to safety.

> *"We crawled on all fours — the child and I with my broken spine and fever. Then we were met by the territorial defence soldiers, who immediately told us that there would be no evacuation from*

Romanivka today because Irpin was being heavily shelled, we would not make it, we had to hide somewhere in the basement. But where? We didn't know anything about Irpin," Olena says.

The woman saw her daughter, grandson, and sister running further towards the bridge in Romanivka. She, her husband, and her son-in-law, who was pulling Olena, had to run after them, having already lost sight of them. At that time, the shelling of Irpin began, and the hits were not far from Sobornа Street, where people were running. It was very scary. When we passed the centre of Irpin, the shelling intensified, the hits were very close, a couple of houses away. Sobornosti Street was already broken in many places, houses, garages, fences were destroyed, and we had to avoid the craters from previous arrivals. People were falling, getting up, running, falling again...

At that time, Olena's daughter and grandson were already in the area of the destroyed Romanivka Bridge, and they came under heavy fire, which literally killed a woman and her two children who were trying to evacuate. In 2014, this family was already fleeing the war in Donetsk.

"My daughter was already in the middle of the bridge, and this family was running alongside. With each arrival, everyone fell to the ground. And that time they fell down in the same way. And when they got up and ran further, they saw that no one from that family had risen: they had all been killed... We reached that place in about 40 minutes, their bodies were already covered," the woman recalls.

Olena is grateful to the territorial defence soldiers who warned her of the danger during the shelling. They also showed her how to go off-road to get to a temporary crossing point across the river. One of her biggest worries was that Olena knew nothing about her daughter, grandson and sister, and only saw constant explosions on their way.

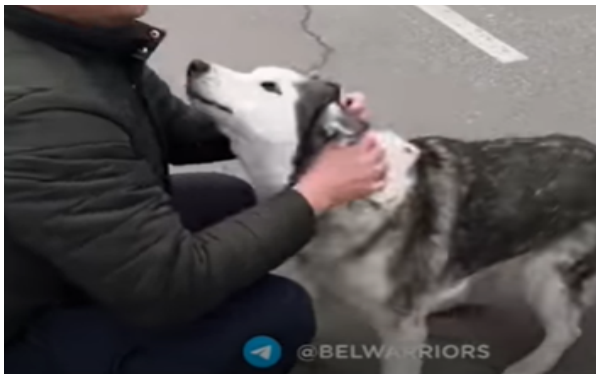
Another shelling caught them under a destroyed bridge. They witnessed a dog, frightened by the loud explosions, break free and run along the river. The owner ran after it, but to no avail. Olena and her husband decided that they had done the right thing by leaving their animals with their neighbours, because they would not have been able to get there with them, and they would return and get

them as soon as possible.

Then they had to cross the river on planks. Olena, who had practically never walked before because of her injury, with coronavirus-related lung damage, shortness of breath and fever, after running about 8 km under fire, simply stopped and could not move on. Her son-in-law and husband began to pull her, and the soldiers helped: they moved her over obstacles, carried her over a bump, behind which an evacuation bus was standing, which was already completely full at that time. Luckily, a volunteer drove up to them and took them into his car.

> *"That's how we got to Kyiv. Our daughter and grandson were already waiting for us there. We met, everyone was crying with happiness that they were alive and had escaped from this hell. All dirty, with smeared faces, but alive! The volunteer took us to the Kyiv railway station in the same car. My sister went to her home, my son-in-law stayed in Kyiv, and we — my daughter, grandson, my husband and I — took an evacuation train to Chernivtsi, and from there to Bulgaria. My son and his family have been living and working in Sofia for about three years, so we decided to go there. What a joy it was not to hear the explosions! We simply did not believe that it could happen!" Olena shares her memories.*

Five days later, a green corridor was opened in Bucha, and the neighbours were forced to abandon their farms and livestock and evacuate. Olena's dogs and cat were locked in the house, given two buckets of water and a bag of food. Olena and her husband could not recover from the horror, hoping that the animals would jump out of the broken windows in a critical situation. However, later, when it became known what kind of shelling had taken place in the yard, they realized that the animals had survived only because they were locked in the house. The place where they liked to lie outside was heavily shelled. As soon as Olena and her husband found out that the animals were locked in, they started looking for volunteers to take them out. But it was all to no avail: the Russian military were in the city, and no one could get there.



The animals were rescued only after the Ukrainian Armed Forces entered the town. Nessie, the husky, came to the military on her own. She was taken to Kyiv by Belarusians from Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, who contacted her owners (the dogs' collars had contact information). The touching meeting between Pavlo's son-in-law and Nessie was filmed[1] and covered

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKuKFybfFBQ

by many media outlets. Unfortunately, the dog was never able to recover from the stress she had experienced: at the end of 2022, Nessie died.

A few days later, the volunteers took the cat from the house and took it to Olena's friends. The fate of Greta, the shepherd dog, remained unknown. Volunteers and the military approached the broken windows, calling for her, but to no avail. Later, Olena's colleagues went to Bucha, opened the house and found Greta there. As it turned out, the dog had been in the house all this time, but due to the heavy shelling she had lost her hearing and did not hear the volunteers come in for the first time. Greta, frightened by the visitors, jumped out the window and ran away. The dog came home the next day, and the woman was informed about it by her returning neighbours. Olena and her husband asked Zoopatrol to take the dog to a veterinary clinic in Kyiv. After the examination, Greta was transferred to family friends. A year later, the pets still live separately from their owners: while the couple lives in Kyiv in a rented flat, the dog and cat stay in the village with Olena's relatives.

> *"The biggest crime against us, the locals, was that our city authorities did not announce the evacuation. We had great respect for the local administration, listened to them, believed them. At some point, we saw Russian tanks near our yard, and a video appeared on the Internet showing the Ukrainian flag being raised in Bucha. And we calmed down. When we realized that it was too difficult, we started calling the hotlines of the executive committee to ask for help. And everyone reassured us: "Calm down, it's nothing to worry about. No one can come to you, but it's okay. We cannot help you, there is no evacuation." If at some point, we were told: "Good people, save yourselves as best you can," we could have left in the first days. But we trusted our government," Olena says emotionally.*

The woman's house was heavily damaged by the shelling. The facade was completely smashed, six windows were broken, one wall of the room was pierced through, and there were about 40 holes in the roof. One unexploded shell hit the window where people used to hide, damaged a piece of the roof, broke a swing and tiles. The shell that exploded nearby destroyed everything in the yard. Everything inside was smashed by glass shards — a TV, a freezer, air conditioners and other household appliances. At the beginning of the war, the interior doors were removed to close the windows in the room where people were hiding. After the shelling, they were broken through. Olena's family suffered significant material losses. They have now repaired the house on their own. According to the woman, as part of a government project, houses on Vokzalna Street are being restored, where a large convoy of Russian equipment was destroyed by the Ukrainian military at the beginning of the war. People's houses are being restored, roofs are being replaced, and fences are being promised.

After returning to Ukraine from Bulgaria six months later, Olena and her husband rented a flat in Kyiv, where they have lived ever since. In addition to the current roofing repairs, there is another reason why the owners are in no hurry to return to their home — the emotional component, the horror they experienced. The couple cannot stay in the house during the air raid because they feel out of sorts and fall to the floor at the slightest sound. For example, they planned to stay in Bucha for three days, but they can't stay in the house for more than half a day. Constant vivid memories of the past do not allow them to live a normal life. Fortunately, Olena's eight-year-old grandson does not remember much of the events of the past year: the flexible child's psyche has "erased" unwanted memories, although sometimes some details of the beginning of the full-scale invasion come to mind.

The psychological state of all family members who survived the terrible evacuation is still extremely difficult. Obsessive thoughts persist, constant anxiety, nervousness, unbalance, and deteriorating health poison their lives.

According to Olena, after everything they had been through, material values faded into the background.

> *"We felt that the most precious thing was our grandson's hand clenched in our fist when he was with us. When we fled, we didn't know what happened to the house, we didn't know for a month. And we were the least interested in that. At that moment, we were happy to be alive and together. That we were able to escape and go through this hell, both during the evacuation and while we were there. That we survived. We left with nothing at all, no belongings — we left in what we were wearing. And we didn't care about that, because we were all together!" Olena emphasizes.*

VALENTYNA, 65, BUSINESSWOMAN

Sievierodonetsk

Valentyna is from Sievierodonetsk. Confident, successful, energetic—it's all about her. She has been an entrepreneur since 1992. Before the full-scale invasion began, Valentyna's family had several businesses: manufacturing, real estate, construction, and a large rehabilitation centre. Valentyna was particularly proud of the latter because it helped people with musculoskeletal problems.

> *"I was a happy person. I had everything. I had children and grandchildren by my side. Furthermore, I had a good life, a business, and plans. We were not wasting our lives, we were living to the fullest, and everything was fine," Valentyna describes her life until 24 February 2022.*

That day changed everything. The building that housed the rehabilitation centre quickly turned into a shelter for frightened residents of Sievierodonetsk, whose homes were affected by the full-scale war. The centre was located in the basement, so it was possible to create a more or less safe space there. The experience of 2014 played a cruel joke on people who thought that in 2022 the situation would repeat itself, that in a couple of weeks the situation would stabilize, and the city would return to a relatively peaceful life. But already on 25 February, Valentyna saw with her own eyes from the porch of her centre how a shell hit a neighbouring high-rise building and pierced two flats. On the same day, Valentyna's

Toyota parked outside her office was also hit: the explosion mangled the car, and her friend's car, which was parked nearby, burned to the ground.

Every day brought new troubles: one of the most beautiful districts of Sievierodonetsk, with the mythical name Oriana, was almost destroyed in front of Valentyna's eyes. Its neighbourhoods were shot up by the Russians in the first days of the full-scale invasion, ruthlessly destroying beautiful and comfortable houses where a week ago a happy life was bustling. Valentyna's own home was not spared, and now an unexploded shell is stuck in her flat on the ninth floor instead of a modern, stylish chandelier. Valentyna's daughter's flat was also destroyed, but an unexploded shell stuck in the ceiling of their grandson's room, which his parents had carefully decorated for him — it pierced a map of the starry sky. Valentyna says that the shelling she witnessed came from Novoaidar, Smolianynove and Borovenky, which had already been occupied by the Russians.

The day of 8 March 2022 is forever etched in Valentyna's memory. This is her birthday, which has always been filled with flowers and congratulations, but not this year.

> *"On that day, the air raid started at four in the morning. Everything was shaking so much that I thought the building was rising and falling."*

Valentyna and the families of her son and daughter spent the night in the premises of her centre. They arranged a place to sleep behind "three walls": it turned out that Valentyna's daughter was very adamant about this. When the first explosion occurred, Valentyna covered her grandson. Her daughter tried to protect her with her body, and Valentyna's son-in-law tried to cover them all. From the side came the voice of the son's wife (their family was located a little further in the room): the daughter-in-law was shouting that something had happened to Valentyna's son, he couldn't get to his feet. There were about 30 people in the centre that night, including a doctor who examined the man and suspected that he had a stomach ulcer, and that he was bleeding internally due to stress, so he needed urgent medical attention. Fortunately, the town still had mobile connection, and Valentyna, who knew everyone in the relatively small town, called the director of the Sievierodonetsk hospital and described the situation through tears. The doctor was categorical and ordered her to immediately find transport and take her son to the surgical department.

The son-in-law got behind the wheel of his car and drove his relative and the woman to a hospital on the other side of Sievierodonetsk under continuous shelling. The men managed to get to the hospital, and the patient was admitted by doctors who, in those extreme conditions, tried to provide help to everyone who needed it. On the way, the daughter's husband saw the horrific consequences of the bombing. Therefore, when he returned, he stated categorically: "We are

leaving the city. You have five minutes to get ready." Six other families decided to evacuate with them. They had already formed a convoy and were about to leave when Valentyna's daughter-in-law called from the hospital and said that her husband would be undergoing surgery in an hour. She also asked Valentyna to urgently go to the hospital to see her son, as she had to get her children out of war-torn Sievierodonetsk first. Valentyna was looking at her daughter's family in confusion, when her youngest grandson suddenly threw his arms around her neck and said: "Grandma, I'm not letting you go anywhere, because they will kill you."

Valentyna's son intervened and said over the phone that he would be fine, he was already in hospital under medical supervision, and that both the mother and his wife with children should evacuate, taking the children out first. Valentyna hesitated: a mother, even though she has an adult son, is always a mother. The son handed the phone to one of the surgeons, who sternly told that women had no reason to be in the city, which was under fire, and these words were decisive. With eyes full of tears, Valentyna got into her son-in-law's car and headed west.

> *"When we were leaving on 8 March, I saw houses burning and people running through the streets. And I remember our hospital in ruins. It was very scary," the woman recalls the horrific images of the destruction of Sievierodonetsk, which had recently been beautiful and comfortable.*

Initially, Valentyna's family settled in the Khmelnytskyi oblast. After recovering from her experiences, Valentyna turned her tireless energy to helping those who, like her, were forced to leave their homes. Valentyna's entrepreneurial spirit allowed her to find something to do in the new place, restore a small part of her business and gradually earn a living. However, the fate of displaced people is often unpredictable, and Valentyna's family has moved twice. Now they have settled in Uzhhorod.

> *"We live somehow, thanks to God and our hardiness," Valentyna says with a sigh.*

Valentyna has also devoted time to her old hobby, which she has been doing for more than fifteen years, Nordic walking. Of course, all her equipment remained in Sievierodonetsk, but she plans to buy poles soon and resume regular training. Anti-stress colouring books, which Valentyna loves, also distracts her from sad thoughts.

> *"I colour with gel pens, felt-tip pens, and paints. Now all my friends give me various drawing sets. I'd rather colour than just go to bed," Valentyna says, sharing her way of reducing stress.*

And there are more than enough reasons for stress. News come from occupied Sievierodonetsk that a workshop where one of the family's enterprises produced construction materials has been completely destroyed. A vegetable storage facility, another small family business, was also destroyed. The building that had been the office of the NGO that Valentyna co-founded and served on the board of for eight years burned down. It's upsetting to learn about all this, when she had put her heart and soul into every business. Valentyna is also very sad that her eldest grandson had to interrupt his studies in Poland.

> *"My eldest grandson studied in Poland for 2.5 years before the war. He came home because he was sick with coronavirus, but he could not return to study because the borders were closed to men," Valentyna admits.*

But most of all, Valentyna is concerned about her son and his family remaining in the occupied territory. His health condition did not allow him to evacuate when it was possible, and now the family lives in the occupied Bilolutsk, a hundred and fifty kilometres from Sievierodonetsk.

At the same time, Valentyna admits that her life priorities have changed a lot—she has completely lost the desire to save anything for the future:

> *"Things need to be used here and now. I bought it and put it on. Because so many things are left there that have never been worn..."*

Valentyna says that she sees the same changes in the people around her. For example, her neighbour in Khmelnytskyi made insoles for wellingtons out of a mink hat: his priority was to keep his feet warm, not to show off his wealth.

> *"There is no desire to save anything now. The old money is gone. We spend what we earn on housing and food. We have a child, so I saved a little and bought him a bicycle. It's like that."*

Valentyna sincerely believes in Ukraine's victory and that it is the younger generation that will be able to rebuild the country.

“You know, I’ve never envied anyone, but now I envy young people. We have such good young people! And I think they will draw the right conclusions. They will not make mistakes. They will be active. More active than their parents. And I want to believe that they will care about everything. I hope that everything in Ukraine will be fine. Because we have someone to do it. After the victory, we just need to do everything we can to ensure that young people return home.”

PAVLO, 21, STUDENT

Chasiv Yar

This story will be short, but it will only complement the cross-section of society and the impact of the war on families in difficult life circumstances. During the conversation, Pavlo answered in fragmentary phrases, it was difficult for him to control his emotions, probably due to his strong traumatic experience and deep grief. He said that before the full-scale invasion, he had a quiet, peaceful life. Pavlo studied at a vocational school to become a carpenter. His father earned money by doing odd jobs at a construction site, his mother worked as a cleaner in a shop, and they also lived with his grandfather, who had a group 1 disability. Pavlo also has this group 1 disability (due to heart disease).

According to the young man, on 24 February 2022, Chasiv Yar was shelled with aerial bombs:

> *"We didn't react to it at all, because at first we thought it was some kind of training."*

But the realization of the full scale of the war came when the shelling of the district centre, Bakhmut, began. This city is located three kilometres from where Pavlo's family lives. Many people began to move from there to Chasiv Yar, because Bakhmut is closer to the occupied territory, and there was a hospital in Pavlo's hometown that housed the displaced. Later, the institution moved to Dnipro, and people mostly went there as well.

Chasiv Yar also suffered from shelling, and in July 2022, Pavlo's home was destroyed:

> *"I witnessed a terrible shelling of the building on Borysohlibska Street. All the flats burned down."*

The territory of the town was controlled by the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the time, so it is easy to guess that the Russians were responsible for the shelling of Chasiv Yar.

Pavlo's family covered the windows with wooden panels and continued to live in the flat. They did not leave the city because of their sick grandfather, they did not want to leave him, and they did not see any possibility of evacuating the whole family. In autumn, his father's brother moved in with them because a shell hit his home. The boy continues:

> *"My uncle started drinking a lot. There were constant scandals between my uncle and my father. It made my grandfather nervous."*

On 19 January 2023, on the feast of Epiphany, Pavlo's grandfather asked his father and uncle to take him outside because they were blessing the water, and he wanted to join in. Before that, the elderly man had always been in the flat. They put him in a wheelchair and took him outside. When the man saw the deep craters in the yard and the completely burnt building opposite, he felt sick:

> *"My grandfather turned pale, lost his breath, and started waving his hands in fear. We tried to call an ambulance, but we failed: there was no connection."*

They dragged my grandfather back into the room and put him on the bed. They tried to help him: they rubbed his arms and legs. When they tried to give him medicine, they realized that the grandfather had died. Pavlo says that after that, his uncle and his father started drinking together, out of fear and grief. This lasted for several days. According to the young man, they could not take the deceased away because of the shelling. It was very cold in the flat at the time, so the presence of the dead man was not felt.

> *"There were no funeral homes, and we couldn't get through to social services. My mother and I went to look for help in the city centre. It is 8 kilometres away," Pavlo says.*

They were planning to get to the district administration and find a way to bury their grandfather. On the way, Pavlo and his mother met volunteers who were passing by in a minibus. After learning about the situation, they suggested that the woman and her son evacuate:

> *"They asked us if we wanted to come back for our things and who was left in the flat. We answered that we would not return, we were ready to leave immediately, but there was a dead grandfather and two men in the flat. They were drunk."*

Volunteers took Pavlo and his mother to the Pokrovsk railway station, where trains to western Ukraine ran. That's how they ended up in relative safety, in a volunteer centre in Uzhhorod.

It should be noted that there is a video [2] of volunteers entering the family's flat in an attempt to evacuate the men. It shows Pavlo's deceased grandfather still lying in his bed, next to him is a bed with the boy's father and uncle, both of them are drunk. One of them refuses to leave, not listening to the volunteers' advice. It is clear from the context that the volunteers cannot take the deceased away, because the death needs to be recorded by the police. They will do this later, but now it is time to evacuate. During the discussion of this video, Pavlo can't hold a cup of tea in his hands, he is shaking and crying.

The guy is completely exhausted psychologically. He is mourning the loss of his grandfather. In terms of material support, he notes that volunteers on the ground helped with food, clothing, relocation, and accommodation. They also provided medical support and assistance in processing IDP documents. However, neither the state authorities nor international organizations interviewed Pavlo for his testimony.

After telling us about the loss of his grandfather, Pavlo is no longer able to continue discussing additional issues. In the end, he says the following about the war:

> *"My family lost everything. God forbid anyone should have to go through that."*

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMTYIHCCsIQ

LIUDMYLA VASYLIVNA, 75, DOCTOR

Hostomel

Liudmyla Vasylivna says with a smile that she was born in the first half of the last century and is now 75 years old. She has spent her life in medicine: first she graduated from a medical school, then from a medical institute. Her specialization was not an easy one: Liudmyla is an anaesthetist and resuscitator. She lived most of her life in Poltava oblast, near Kremenchuk. And after she retired and buried her husband, she moved to Kyiv oblast, to Hostomel. It was here that Liudmyla's extended family lived—her brother, son, grandchildren, and nephews. She lived in a high-rise building, so she missed her garden a little. Liudmyla always remained active, and her grandchildren came to visit her on weekends, which kept her grandmother from getting bored. But the woman did not forget about herself: sometimes she went to the theatre in Kyiv, read, mastered the computer, made friends with her neighbours, and communicated with her friends who were scattered in different cities and countries.

The normal routine changed dramatically on 24 February 2022. The first sign of trouble was the helicopters that filled the sky over Hostomel. Then came the almost continuous shelling of the town. Some neighbours managed to leave, while others moved to the basement, which seemed to be a safer place. Liudmyla's granddaughter left for Lviv on the very first day. She also tried to persuade her grandmother to leave, but she flatly refused. The woman did not go to the basement either, so she stayed in her flat. Right from her window, she watched the Russians deploy their equipment near the residential buildings, the shelling, and the explosions of mines. On 6 March, a neighbour came to her door, and with him were two Russians with assault rifles, one of whom looked Asian. As soon as the woman saw them, she got furious:

> *"When they came in, I wanted to hit that Yakut over the head with a frying pan. I wanted to hit him over the head with a big cast-iron frying pan!"*

The neighbour gave signs with his eyes to Liudmyla not to risk her life. The Russians demanded that she move to the basement. Liudmyla was adamant:

> *"If you want, shoot here, but I will not go to the basement."*

She stayed at her home. A neighbour brought her water and a Russian ration pack, but Liudmyla Vasylivna categorically refused to take it. She only used the

dry alcohol in the ration pack to heat water. Her appetite disappeared due to stress, and she ate through the force because her blood sugar level was rising, so she had to take a pill and eat something.

The shelling was becoming more intense, with Russians firing at houses from tanks with direct fire. They were shooting from the direction of the airport. Liudmyla recounts:

> *"I was at home when our building was shot at from a tank. It was shaking. I thought it was going to collapse, but it survived."*

Some windows in Liudmyla's flat were blown out by the shelling, and her balcony was completely smashed. But she was especially bitter when the Russians shot down her favourite crane, which she used to watch in peacetime:

> *"I can see our crane from the window. There was construction going on earlier. And here are four tracer bullets flying into this cabin. Did it bother them? Or was anyone there? Or is this the kind of entertainment these racists have?"*

It is to be expected that not only buildings and cranes suffered from the shelling. One day, two wounded civilians were brought to the building where Liudmyla lived: a man with a large wound on the back of his head and a woman with injuries to both legs. The men who lived in the basement broke down the door to the outpatient clinic on the ground floor and brought the wounded in. Then one of the neighbours remembered that there was a doctor in the house, and they called Liudmyla Vasylivna. She took a professional look at everything that was left in the outpatient clinic:

> *"We have antiseptics, we have novocaine, we have systems, we have solutions... But we don't have any medical instruments. And I see that it is urgent to stop the bleeding and stitch up the wounds."*

I remembered that I had once brought home from work a pair of surgical clamps that I used in the process of conservation, pulling out the lids hot. I also had tweezers at home. That was all. There were no special threads either. Liudmyla took regular No. 10 thread, treated them with an antiseptic and set to work. She started with a woman. It seemed easier: the tissues on her legs were soft. The doctor stopped the bleeding, stitched up the larger wound, and did not sew up the smaller one, just drained it. Liudmyla was assisted by a nurse who used to work in a local optician's shop, and her neighbours, people who were far from being

medical professionals:

> *"The guys were helping, holding her. They served everything I needed. They ran to my flat for additional materials."*

Then it was the man's turn to treat the wound, but his head was not a leg, the skin was hard. The doctor stopped the bleeding and started stitching. The guys twisted an ordinary needle to make it look a bit like a surgical needle, but there was nothing to hold it with. Liudmyla Vasylivna barely managed to sew up the wound, treat it and drain it. That same evening, another man was brought in, about 60–65 years old. He had wounds from a machine gun burst and an open shoulder fracture. It was already dark, so they turned on flashlights so that the doctor could examine him. But the patient died right in her arms — his injuries were simply incompatible with life.

One of Liudmyla's most terrifying memories is the day when Russians broke into her neighbouring flat and three machine gun bursts were heard. She thought she even lost consciousness for a while:

> *"I think they were shot. And when I came out, I saw a bag—whether there was a body or not, I don't know. But it was a black bag, the kind used for corpses. So, I didn't touch it, I just walked by."*

This event had a great, great impact on the woman, and now her voice trembles when she recalls this incident.

Every day, Liudmyla called her granddaughter in Lviv, and she persuaded her grandmother to look for an opportunity to leave. On 14 March, the girl told her that this was the last opportunity to evacuate, and Liudmyla decided to do so. She packed a small backpack with her documents, a blood pressure monitor, a glucometer, half a litre of water, a white cloth and left. Broken glass crackled under her feet, and Russians in tanks and armoured personnel carriers were racing along the road. Slowly, Liudmyla Vasylivna reached the glass factory where the evacuation was supposed to take place, but there was no one there — everything was broken and smashed to pieces. She went into the looted shop and sat down to rest for a while, thinking about returning home. But she called her granddaughter again, and the girl said that the evacuation was now starting from the university in the forest, on the road to Bucha. Liudmyla started walking that way, although her legs were no longer able to carry her. She saw an abandoned broken-down car on the road, sat down to catch her breath, and called her granddaughter one more time:

> *“Nastia, I’m probably going back. I have two more kilometres to go. But I can’t. I won’t make it that far.”*

Her granddaughter was desperate to persuade the tired woman to crawl, but to leave the occupied town. Liudmyla Vasylivna slowly moved on, and suddenly a miracle happened: an old car heading to Kyiv stopped near her, with an elderly woman, a young man in his 30s and the driver Vasyl Vasylovych. They took Liudmyla with them. On the way, they passed four Russian checkpoints. Each time, the driver demonstrated miracles of acting: he greeted the Russians in Russian, told them that he was from the Kemerovo Oblast, named some villages, mentioned some rivers. He pretended to be looking for his countrymen. He said they were going to Belarus. Because of this tactic, the occupiers treated them quite leniently, and when they reached Kyiv, Vasyl told how he had drained thirty litres of diesel from a Russian tank, and that he had stolen the car from them. The Russians, in turn, had confiscated the car from someone else, put a “V” letter on it and drove it around Hostomel. Vasyl Vasylovych tore off the letter, drove away with the car and took the people with him. That’s how they got to Kyiv, and the next day Liudmyla Vasylivna was already in Vinnytsia oblast, where her children had evacuated to earlier. Later, the whole family moved to Poland. With tears, the woman recalls how ordinary Poles welcomed them:

> *“In a shop, if you speak Ukrainian and say you are from Bucha or Hostomel, people offer to pay for you. They catch up with you on the street, try to treat you to some goodies. And all with the words ‘you are from Ukraine’.”*

However, after a while, Liudmyla returned to Hostomel. When she reflects on how her life has changed, she says that she has less time for entertainment. Now she no longer goes to the theatre in Kyiv, but she often goes to the volunteer centre to weave camouflage nets for the military, trying to help the guys at the front as much as she can. She also has a very specific dream: after the victory, she would like to have a rest in Gurzuf in August, to improve her health. Speaking of health, Liudmyla Vasylivna was recently found by the man she had stitched up a head wound in occupied Hostomel. He told us that he had a fracture of the base of his skull, which caused him to lose hearing in one ear. But he survived! And the doctors told him that he should be grateful to the person who stopped the blood in time and professionally sewed up the wound (with regular No. 10 thread) — Liudmyla, a real doctor who was born in the first half of the last century.

SERHII, 62, PENSIONER

Mariupol

On 24 February, Serhii went live on his YouTube channel, telling his subscribers that Russian missiles were flying towards Mariupol, right at residential areas. By the evening, 5,000 people had unsubscribed. The man is sure that these are Russians who do not want to hear the truth about this war and their country:

> *"I don't even know what to call them. Non-humans. What kind of mothers brought them up? What did they put in their heads if they decided that I was a fascist?"*

Serhii is a pensioner, he was born and lived in Mariupol all his life. He spent half of his life working for Azovstal. Serhii, his wife, son, two cats and a dog lived on the Left Bank, which is how Mariupol residents refer to the city's Livoberezhnyi district, located on the left bank of the Kalmius River. The Azovstal plant is located here, and this district is the closest to the Russian border, only 40 kilometres away, 20 kilometres to the demarcation line (author's note — until 24.02.22). Residents of the Left Bank have heard the war for all eight years, because the frontline was close. It is for this reason that on 24 February 2022, the first attacks did not surprise most people.

> *"In the early days, we thought they would shoot somewhere far away, like in 2014, and it would be over. We still had electricity, I watched all the addresses of our mayor Boichenko, as if he was in a bomb shelter: 'Calm down. Everything is under control.' I believed him. If he had said something about evacuation, at least 'evacuate on your own!', maybe we would have left the city right away. And on the first of March, a howitzer shell came in, and the explosion was five metres away from our five-storey building. My son said: 'Let's go to Azovstal'," Serhii recalls.*

The whole family worked at Azovstal, and they knew their way around the plant, the location, and strength of the bomb shelters there.

> *"We knew there were real bomb shelters. The ones in the city's high-rise buildings are not bomb shelters, they are just basements. So many people died under the rubble! In my opinion, at least 150,000 people died in the city," Serhii says.*

The territory of the plant is large, 11 km2, and there are several bomb shelters. Where Serhii and his family were hiding, there were 45 people in total, including small children and animals. Fortunately, the bomb shelter had a large supply of drinking water and dry rations. We divided them up and got five for each person, and there was plenty of water. Each dry ration contained a meal for one person for one day. Serhii, his wife, son and three pets lived on these rations for 25 days.

> *"We saved food. We drank only water for breakfast and dinner. In the first few days, we went around the workshops and looked for food in the lockers in the workshop baths. I am ashamed of the fact that we were looting. In peacetime, people used to leave tea, coffee, and sugar in their lockers. And for some time, we had tea or coffee in the morning and evening, not just water," Serhii says.*

For lunch, the family received a half-litre glass of soup, which was divided among three people, two cats and a dog. Serhii lost 35 kilograms in those 25 days. He says he would not wish such a diet on anyone.

On 8 March, the Russians began to deliberately destroy Azovstal, and air strikes began.

> *"Planes are the worst thing. With howitzers and Grads, you hear a shot, a shell exploding, and you know roughly how much time you have to hide. You don't hear the plane right away, you hear it when it's flying away, and then the hiss of a rocket and almost immediately the explosion. Even today, after almost a year in Europe, when I hear a plane, I automatically look for a place to fall," Serhii admits.*

The shelling of Azovstal did not stop. Every time we went to the surface, it was risky, but we had to go: dinner for the entire bomb shelter was cooked over a fire. For the Russian military, the smoke from the fire was a target, and they focused their fire on it. Therefore, the residents of the bomb shelter set up several fires in different places, diverting the occupiers' fire to false targets, and cooked on one of them. Fortunately, the makeshift "kitchen" was never shelled.

Serhii says he had a strange feeling that someone was protecting them all, although he considers himself an atheist. The ground around the bomb shelter was littered with shrapnel, each of which was potentially fatal.

> *"During all this time, only one woman from our bunker was injured, and even then, it was a scratch, so we disinfected it, and*

the wound healed. We had no doctor. And, surprisingly, no one got sick during this time, even though it was cold and there was a lack of food. The only thing that happened in the first few days was dysentery, because people drank raw water. It was a problem because there was a toilet in the bomb shelter, but the water was frozen, and there was no way to flush it. So, we agreed that we would go to the bunker toilets to pee, and otherwise we would only go up to the surface during the day and go to the workshop toilets. I also insisted that we not drink raw water, but only boiled water, and that's how the dysentery stopped," Serhii says.

The shelling became more and more intense, Azovstal was bombarded with explosives both day and night. Serhii began to think that if something powerful like an aerial bomb hit the bomb shelter directly, the entrance could be blocked or damaged so that it would be impossible to get out:

"Our military used to come to our bunker to check on us, ask how we were doing, bring us some of their food, share it. And the more intense the shelling became, the less often they came. I realized that if the entrance was destroyed, there would be no one to dig us out from the outside."

The guys also found a small portable radio with batteries in the bunker, and "caught Ukraine," as Serhii put it. Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk says that evacuation from Berdiansk has been organized. And it's about 130 kilometres from Azovstal to Berdiansk... After a family meeting, they decided to leave.

On 25 March, in the morning, Serhii's family and nine other people left the bomb shelter and headed for the main entrance gate of the plant.

"When we came out, it was quiet. But when we got to the blooming workshop, the shelling started. I realized what a gamble I had started when I took responsibility for people's lives and promised them that I would get them out. At that moment, a woman was wounded before my eyes. She was not with us, and I have no idea where she came from. She was standing under fire in the field between the workshops, and at that moment her stomach was torn open. I wanted to run to her to help her. But the shelling continued, and my son grabbed me and held me, saying: 'Dad, you can't help her. She needs serious medical attention. We have nowhere to take her.' In about three minutes, the woman was quiet...", Serhii painfully recalls.

The Ukrainian military, having learned that a group of civilians was leaving Azovstal, opened the fire outside the plant to distract the occupiers from the people. It took two days for the people to reach the outskirts of Mariupol. As they left the city, they saw many dead citizens lying in the open air:

> *"When we were walking along Prymorskyi Boulevard, a man was sitting on a bench. When I came closer, I saw that it was a corpse. It was a young man. He was already stiff, and half of his face was eaten by animals. There was a crater from the explosion about ten metres away. In the port area, where the church of Petro Mohyla is located, we saw a blown-up car and the bodies of the dead near it. People we met there told us that they were volunteers. The day before, they had brought bread, and people from the neighbourhood came to get it. At that time, a mine hit. Not all the dead were removed, we saw four of them."*

The entire group of 12 people reached Manhush, an urban-type settlement on the way to Berdiansk, which was already occupied territory at the time. Some people decided to stay in Manhush, so Serhii and his family continued on their own.

There were many checkpoints on the roads. Because he was young, Serhii's son was forced to take off his clothes and was checked for bruises from small arms. At one of the checkpoints, he was detained for three hours because they found a photo of a policeman friend in his phone. He was interrogated and pressured to confess that he was serving in Azov. But in the end, they let him go.

Serhii and his wife were not checked so closely, but at one of the checkpoints, the cover of their passport in the colours of the Ukrainian flag was torn off. The family spent two days on the outskirts of Berdiansk, spending the night in an unfinished building without windows and doors, where they could somehow hide from the icy wind.

Eventually, they managed to get on an evacuation bus to Zaporizhzhia.

> *"Only here did we breathe the air of freedom," Serhii says.*

The man's son went to serve in the army. He had been wounded several times, but not seriously, so he returned to the ranks of Ukrainian defenders after hospitals.

> *“Everything has changed. Only memories remain. On 20 March, our house was shot at by a tank, and the garage with the car was also hit. I lost my vision of the future. The only thing that gives me strength is faith in our victory. This is a war between good and evil. Good must win,” Serhii is convinced.*

The man is currently writing a book about everything his family and the people around him have gone through.

IRYNA, 38, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER

Sievierodonetsk

Until February 24, 2022, Iryna and her family lived in Sievierodonetsk. Having received a degree in finance, she confidently built a career in the banking sector until 2014, rising from a customer service specialist to a branch director. As for many Ukrainians, 2014 was a turning point for Iryna. She radically changed her priorities and began to develop in the human rights and educational sectors. In addition, Iryna and her husband started a small family business: they bought a mobile planetarium and used it to organize various entertainment and educational events for children and adults. Speaking of family: Iryna has a husband, a 10-year-old daughter and a 15-year-old son.

Describing her life until February 24, 2022, Iryna notes:

> *"Everything was going according to plan, positively, with development in all areas of my life. That is, I fulfilled myself as a mother, as a wife, as a woman, as a professional. Everything was not just going smoothly, but with an annual improvement in the quality of life."*

The family lived in a private house, which is the exception rather than the rule in Sievierodonetsk. Iryna and her husband invested as much as possible in making their home modern and comfortable. Two months before the full-scale invasion, the couple decided to make a serious investment to equip their home — they installed a modern solar station. In addition to providing a kind of autonomy, this investment made it possible to receive passive income, as they could sell the remaining electricity to the state at the so-called green tariff.

Having quickly analysed the situation, Iryna decided on the morning of 24 February to evacuate, primarily for the sake of her children. They decided to go to the Czech Republic. Iryna's husband stayed in Ukraine because of the introduction of martial law. Her daughter took all these changes, which shook up their regular family life, very hard, and the separation from her father was especially difficult.

> *"My 10-year-old daughter was very affected by all this because we had to leave her father when we went abroad. We lived there for two months. It was two months of daily tantrums. She missed her dad, her grandmothers, her dogs," Iryna painfully recalls the Czech period of their lives.*

Iryna's daughter was also very concerned that she was forced to stop her favourite training, as she was a professional swimmer. Due to this psychological state, the girl began to have health problems. The doctors officially diagnosed her with dermatitis, emphasizing that it was caused by the stress she had experienced.

Iryna's son, Mykyta, who was already 15 years old at the start of the hot phase of the war, also had a difficult time with the changes in his life. And it was thanks to her son that another child appeared in Iryna's family.

> *"Now I have three children," Iryna says, smiling.*

A 15-year-old boy had a romantic relationship with a classmate in Sievierodonetsk, but the war intervened in their lives. Oleksandra stayed with her parents in the embattled Sievierodonetsk and spent three weeks in a bomb shelter while the city was being bombed daily. The girl's parents took a principled position: to stay in Sievierodonetsk no matter what. Nothing could change their decision—neither the fighting nor the subsequent occupation. Iryna says there were also objective reasons: their elderly grandmother needed constant care. However, the unwillingness to leave the property they had acquired played a role: Oleksandra's father simply could not bear to leave his home. The girl herself wanted to leave from the very beginning, especially as Mykyta kept asking her to do so. The girl's parents could not decide to let their daughter go for a long time, and even when they decided to take this step, they were looking for a relatively safe option for a long time. They would not let her go on the evacuation train and were against leaving by evacuation buses organized by volunteers. And the shelling was becoming more and more intense every day, so the chances of getting out of the war-torn region were becoming less and less. Finally, the girl's family found out that a family friend was leaving Sievierodonetsk in her own car, and Oleksandra was allowed to go with her. However, Iryna is sure that leaving by evacuation transport in the first days would have harmed the girl much less than three weeks in the basement.

> *"She spent three weeks in Sievierodonetsk under fire, in a bomb shelter. And, in my opinion, it had a very negative impact on her psyche. Now, when there is some shelling, you can see that this fear is present, it has not gone away. Even after a year. However, we do our best to create safe and comfortable living conditions."*

Through various means, Oleksandra made it to the Czech Republic, and Iryna immediately took her into her family. For Iryna, quality education for children has always been a priority.

> *"We did our best to keep the children studying all the time. Even for two months, when we were abroad in the Czech Republic, the children went to a Czech school, not even to an adaptation class, but straight to a Czech school."*

However, seeing how hard her younger daughter was going through the separation from her father, Iryna decided to return to Ukraine. At home, Iryna decided to officially apply for custody of Oleksandra, but immediately encountered all the complexities of the Ukrainian bureaucratic system:

> *"I came to civil servants with a question about what to do, because it was not my child who was living with me, and it needed to be recorded and documented somehow. It took a lot of effort on my part to get it done in accordance with the law. That is, the state authorities did not want to do this at the first request. I was faced with various demands for additional documents that were not provided for in any way."*

But, as often happens in life, a lot depends on the human factor. Therefore, Iryna was lucky to meet worthy specialists from the children's service on her way.

> *"They were very interested, they helped us with all the paperwork as much as possible. They gave us tips, advice, and together we looked for the best way to solve the problem," says Iryna, now Oleksandra's legal guardian.*

Currently, Iryna's family lives in Kyiv oblast, in the village of Sviatopetrivske. Since 1 September, all the children have gone to a Ukrainian school. This is a particularly important period for the eldest, as they are in the 11th grade. The family is now carefully considering all options for entering Ukrainian universities. In parallel, the children continue to study additionally. Before the war, Oleksandra and Mykyta studied at a computer academy, and now Iryna's family has done everything possible to ensure that the children continue their studies in this area. In the new location, Iryna is also trying to resume swimming lessons for her younger daughter. As expected, the appearance of a new family member was not easy for everyone:

> *"Once in a strange family, Sasha had to adapt to the new rules of life. It was quite difficult for both her and us. We had to learn to live together according to the new rules, respecting each other."*

Of course, Oleksandra is also painfully affected by the forced separation from her parents:

> *"The child has lost the opportunity to communicate directly with her family, with her parents. That is, now, for example, since my mother is in Sievierodonetsk, there is practically no communication, these are extremely rare calls."*

Iryna and her husband continue to work. Her knowledge and skills in human rights and non-formal education proved to be in demand, and she now works with a number of international organizations. Her husband's job involves frequent business trips to the de-occupied territories, and he currently works in Mykolaiiv oblast. However, no matter how hard the family tries to build a new life in a new place, there are times when they remember Sievierodonetsk, and it just hurts. Especially when sad news comes from their hometown. For example, that the roof of their house is badly damaged, that all eleven windows are broken, that the once beautiful fence now resembles a sieve, that a huge crater is deepening in the middle of the garden from a direct shell hit. That their new solar power plant was completely destroyed and that their business equipment is most likely gone. It is the loss of their home that Iryna is most concerned about.

> *"It was very difficult for me to realize that I no longer have my own home. That at any moment I could be asked to leave the rented house. This was a very big problem for me, especially before the cold weather started. I was just panicking that in winter I would*

be told that I had to go somewhere. Plus, the realization that you are homeless, it also did not give me peace of mind," Iryna admits.

Almost immediately, she turns her sadness into positivity and notes that her morning coffee, sports, caring for her dachshund, her favourite job, and her desire to motivate her children to get a quality education remain unchanged in her life. Iryna also states that the war has changed her attitude to life: she is now even more acutely aware that it can be very short. That's why she tries to live her life in such a way as not to put anything off until tomorrow. And in the end, Iryna thinks for a moment and adds confidently:

"I am very glad that I managed to take out at least one child and not leave her in the occupied territory."

ANTON, 37, TEACHER

Bakhmut

Before the full-scale invasion, Anton, his wife and teenage stepson lived in Bakhmut. Life was calm, stable, and prosperous:

> *"Home, family, work. There were some domestic difficulties or work issues, but everything was always resolved."*

Anton and his wife taught at the same school. He was a computer science and physics teacher. They worked remotely, both before the war and during martial law. Initially, this was introduced due to the coronavirus pandemic, but after the full-scale invasion, they continued to work as long as they had a connection. In winter, due to the lack of heating in buildings, Anton's 57-year-old mother-in-law and her 85-year-old mother moved in with the family:

> *"We took them to our house because we had stove heating and the conditions to live more or less normally."*

The man talks about the horrific events he experienced in a rather ordinary way. For example, how he was going to work during heavy shelling, as he was helping with the distribution of humanitarian bread, and saw destroyed buildings on the way:

> *"Of course, I saw the shelling! You could say I was a witness. Once, a shell exploded 15 metres away from me, but it didn't hurt me."*

Anton describes his condition as mild concussion, recalling that it was around the beginning of May 2022. Later, the situation with the Russian shelling of Bakhmut only escalated. The events that Anton and his family experienced during the year of active hostilities are listed below in chronological order.

10 July 2022 is etched in the history of Anton's family: on that day, a shell hit the yard of his wife's cousin, who lived with his family a few metres down the street. As a result of the hit, his wife's brother was injured in the eye, his wife was injured in the leg, and his mother-in-law had wounds from glass shards. Fortunately, the children were not physically injured. Anton notes that it is very scary when something suddenly happens to your family:

> *"Nothing was a sign of trouble, and they were cooking for themselves... and this happened. They were all in a very strong state of shock."*

Anton's family took in his nephews for the night, and their parents were sent to hospital. Later, they all went to Lviv for rehabilitation.

Overall, the man says, the summer and autumn of 2022 were still bearable, despite everything. There was no more gas, and they had to cook over a fire or in a stove. In September, the power went out, and later the water went out. When problems with electricity arose, Anton's family bought an electric generator:

> *"It helped us to survive, to conduct online lessons. We charged laptops and phones. There was a connection, so we could continue working."*

It is well known that difficult times bring people closer together, as it makes it easier to survive crises. Anton shares this observation:

> *"All our neighbours down the street became like one big family, this terrible situation united us, everyone was for each other."*

The street where Antonov's family lived was located on the outskirts, which is why it became the epicentre of the shelling. It was the neighbourhood of Litachok, as the locals affectionately call it. The man said he also witnessed the shelling of five- and nine-storey buildings nearby:

> *"It was very, very heavy shelling, flats in the buildings from the first to the ninth floors were burning down."*

Anton notes that there were definitely people killed on their street. Most of them were elderly people, because, according to the man, it was difficult for them to react quickly to sudden shelling: they did not have time to hide in the basement. Anton and his family did not live in the basement all the time, they only went down to wait out the most powerful shelling. A neighbour left them a house next door with a basement, so the family used it for convenience — the five of them shared two basements.

The locals who remained learned to distinguish between launches and arrivals by sound. They partially learned to understand weapons from the debris they saw in

their yards. Anton notes that they were hit by 120- and 80-calibre mortars, Grad rockets and tanks:

> *"If it's a mortar, you can hear the launch, then the whistle, and only then the arrival, there is a possibility to fall somewhere, to hide in a shelter."*

The man says that the worst thing is the tank and Grads, because you don't hear the launch like a mortar, but immediately hear the explosion.

As a teacher, Anton is particularly concerned about the children who also stayed and lived in these conditions:

> *"It's scary to imagine how much the war has affected children. No child should hear or see this..."*

Closer to the New Year, the family still had water supplies and received some humanitarian aid, so there were no problems with food. But there was more and more shelling, the situation deteriorated in general, and the shelling was very frequent. Residents of the city were more determined to leave their homes, leaving the keys with their neighbours and asking them to look after their property. At some point, Anton's family had to evacuate. It was already challenging to organize, the connection was lost, and it was difficult to contact anyone to get them out. When there was heavy shelling, they had to go to an open area and catch the connection.

> *"It was very dangerous. It was impossible to predict anything. It seemed like silence, but in a moment a massive shelling could start," Anton recalls.*

On the eve of his departure, on 17 February 2022, at two in the morning, one of the shells hit Anton's house — the roof directly above his son's room. The teenager was pinned down by the roof structure, which resulted in his injuries: open fractures of two fingers and head injuries. First aid was provided by the military personnel who were nearby. Later, the boy and his mother were hospitalized, and the older women were taken out of the house. Anton agreed with the military to evacuate in the morning:

> *"Since volunteers were no longer allowed into the city at that time, the military was in charge."*

Unfortunately, the tragic story of the last night at home did not end there: 20–30 minutes after the shell hit, the roof of the house caught fire, and the fire quickly spread to the entire house.

> *"The fragments of the shell fragments were very hot, and maybe a spark got somewhere, there was a dry structure there, and that's probably how the fire started," Anton thinks.*

We tried to extinguish the flames somehow, to get things out. The struggle lasted about three hours, but the fire won — only the building remained of the house. On the same day, there were at least two more hits to this yard, more in the garden. Gathering the few belongings they could save, the family left for Bila Tserkva via Kramatorsk and Pokrovsk:

> *"We were the last ones to leave our street, on the same day as some other neighbours."*

Anton has not seen any information about his experiences in the media. He says that some photos were taken by volunteers, even by foreigners, but he does not know whether they were published or distributed anywhere.

Now Anton lives in Bila Tserkva, and his wife and son are undergoing rehabilitation in Lviv. The teenager is waiting for surgery.

> *"It's as if his arm was put together, and now they are waiting for the final result. Of course, he is also in a state of shock and wants to go home, just like the rest of us," Anton says.*

The interview was conducted a little over a week after the events. Anton notes that it is still strange for him to see civilization and people around him:

> *"We have hardly seen anyone in Bakhmut lately, except for our relatives. We haven't gone out, just the routine at home."*

He also says that it is quite difficult mentally:

> *"The realization that all this has happened, and that it will probably continue for a long time is also very scary."*

The job helps him to keep his head above water and distracts him. He and his wife were reinstated at the school, for which he is grateful to the administration. Since the teachers' spouses have not been working recently, they will have to delve into the process anew, restore their teaching skills, and, so to speak, "get into the flow". Anton is determined and does not give up:

> *"In principle, there is a place for us, we will work and have some income. Maybe I'll look for a part-time job at the same time. In any case, we have our hands and feet, and we will start a new life."*

An important support for Anton's family in the new place was the relatives they came to visit. Anton's mother and sister have been living in Bila Tserkva since September. In the future, the family plans to rent a separate place to live.

Anton emphasizes the relevance and gratitude for the humanitarian aid he received from the volunteers:

> *"They transported us, sheltered us in a safe place, and we are extremely grateful! We met very nice people on the way and here too."*

Anton also speaks with gratitude about the doctors who helped his son. Both in Kramatorsk and Lviv — everywhere the family was supported, accompanied and provided with quality medical care. Currently, their son's health is at the forefront of their minds. As for psychological support for himself, Anton notes that he has not received it and hopes that he will not need it.

It is worth noting that during the admission to medical institutions, the mother, and son were interviewed as witnesses about the cause of the injury. This was a standard procedure, as the police are obliged to question people who are admitted to hospital with injuries. There was no other record of evidence of war crimes. The family has been granted IDP status and receives appropriate payments. However, there is no certainty about more significant compensation for the loss of housing, and Anton needs legal assistance on this issue and an understanding of the correct algorithm of actions in this situation. As for psychological support, he emphasizes that he has a large and close-knit family, so they will try to cope on their own.

Summing up the story, Anton emphasizes that it is difficult psychologically be-

cause “everything disappeared at once, nothing dear to our hearts remained, and it is difficult to estimate how much we have lost in some material equivalent.” The man still hopes to return home, to his native land, to a quiet and peaceful life.

NADIIA, 50, HOUSEWIFE

Stepne village (Vuhledar community, Donetsk oblast)

For the past 9 years, since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian War, the Ivanets family has lived directly on the contact line, in the so-called grey zone. There was no work, people relied only on their farms, vegetable garden, livestock and small pensions, which were used to buy the bare minimum. No one felt normal in the village any more.

> *"Life came to a standstill. Constant shelling and its consequences, there was no place to work," Nadiia recalls.*

It was hard in the early years because of the intense shelling, as the village was actually a battlefield.

> *"I saw with my own eyes how a shell hit a neighbour's garage. The children were injured by shrapnel," Nadiia recalls.*

It happened on 30 August 2014. She explains that she remembers the date so well because it was National Miner's Day, a very important annual event for local mining settlements.

Civilian infrastructure was also affected by the shelling:

> *"For the first three years, there was not even water — it was transported, and in winter we had to melt the snow."*

At the beginning of the war, the residents of Stepne were constantly hiding in basements, where they set up sleeping places, moved furniture and utensils, and spent most of their time. This became so commonplace that even the cats knew and ran to the basement with their owners.

On the eve of the escalation of Russian aggression on 24 February 2022, Nadiia's husband had surgery, had just had his stitches removed, and needed care and special nutrition. On the morning of that day, Nadiia woke up thinking that something was too loud today. The situation was getting worse, and at night the sky turned into a continuous light from the Sea of Azov — the occupiers were de-

stroying Volnovakha. All the time, the family was forced to stay in the basement. Of course, Nadiia's husband was unable to follow the post-operative recommendations. It was impossible to leave the basement due to the density of shelling, and it was even difficult to go to the toilet:

> *"Our village was bombed by planes at once: they bombed the centre and the neighbouring street because there was some equipment. It turned out to be tractors, but the Russians thought it was military equipment and bombed everything to pieces."*

Every day, the couple stayed in the basement, eating their own food. On 9 March, the village was bombed almost completely: houses were burning and there were pillars of smoke everywhere. Nadiia notes that the bombing was carried out with heavy weapons, as she saw and heard the low flying planes and very loud explosions — this sound cannot be confused with anything else, probably only those who lived through it understand it.

On the same day, two shells hit Nadiia Serhiivna's yard. All the outbuildings were affected, all the windows and doors were smashed, and the roof of the house was damaged. As soon as they had the opportunity, they decided to come out of the basement and see if the house was still standing, because in the shelter they could only hear the loud, scary sounds of the planes. All that was very close, right above their heads:

> *"We didn't have time to record the destruction: the shelling started again. We got into the basement and didn't come out until the morning."*

According to Nadiia, they had no intention of leaving at all, because they had lived close to the war for more than eight years and had become accustomed to it. And they didn't know where to go. But when they came out of the basement the next day after the shelling, they saw all the neighbours fussing and running. Nadiia's children also insisted that their parents evacuate immediately. Her brain didn't understand anything that was happening, she was in a state of complete apathy — either it would kill you or it wouldn't. They asked their neighbours to wait for them and go together. They packed without any conscious thought, on automatic, and in fact took almost nothing. Furthermore, they had to leave behind everything they had acquired during their lives.

> *"We had a bag with medicines and documents in the basement, we took them, some minimal things we had with us, and left the village under heavy shelling that did not stop," Nadiia says.*

There was no so-called green corridor for civilians, so we drove at random, like blind kittens. About 30 km from the village, at a crossroads, we stopped and saw other villagers. Everyone left in the clothes they were wearing: wellingtons, jackets, everyone was confused. No one knew anything for sure. The information we received was fragmentary, "someone heard something somewhere, someone called someone". We stood there, deciding what to do next and where to go. We decided to go to our children. Five days later, the village was completely occupied, and if Nadiia's family had not left, they would have remained under occupation.

Now there is no contact with those who stayed in the village. In the first weeks, there was unprecedented activity: everyone who had left tried to find out about their loved ones and friends. People were constantly posting information on social media about who were wanted, their description, and where they were last seen.

> *"People left so suddenly and then tried to find each other. We found out through strangers about the fate of our relatives — whether they were alive, dead or had left. I am very grateful to those brave people who went and checked, somehow passed on information about their neighbours," Nadiia Serhiivna recalls with emotion.*

There is evidence that many locals died. Because it is a village on the contact line, where young people were trying to leave before the full-scale invasion, the dead were mostly elderly. Nadiia said that her neighbour died of chronic illness in the basement where her whole family was staying. The body was wrapped in a carpet and laid on the floor: because of the constant shelling, people could not leave the room to bury the deceased. The body remained in the basement next to the living for about a week. Representatives of the occupation 'authorities', when they entered Stepne, promised that they would collect the dead and bury them. However, it is not known for certain whether this was done, as the village remained on the line of hostilities for several months, and it is still under occupation.

Nadiia notes that after her experience, she habitually listens to the surrounding sounds, whether a plane is flying or shells are falling, she could not sleep and was in a state of constant tension. As Nadiia says, they "turned into one big ear". The fear remains today, and she feels no joy at all in anything. Now, when air alert is announced, when massive rocket attacks take place, and it is impossible to predict where the missiles will land, fear and panic have only intensified. The woman describes trembling in her body, the inability to do anything, and pressure in her chest. However, Nadiia does not seek psychological support because she does not believe it can help. She does not give up because of her children, who are happy that their parents survived and were able to leave.

In terms of living arrangements and needs, it is difficult for IDPs from Stepne to rebuild their lives after losing all their property. The state provides a payment of

UAH 2,000, but this minimal assistance hardly covers their needs in the face of ever-increasing prices. Humanitarian support is fickle, so you can't count on it either. It is difficult to receive additional payments, as there are still many bureaucratic requirements — to collect documents, various proofs that people may not have. Nadiia describes her family's financial situation as survival:

> *"There is no normal life any more. There is some kind of expectation, but I don't even know what it is."*

She emphasizes her fear about the future. It is also very painful to realize that everything they have accumulated over the years and wanted to pass on to their children is lost:

> *"Our life was completely taken away from us. We don't even have any photos of how everything looked, how our children grew up..." Nadiia cries.*

She no longer believes that she will be able to earn anything because she is not adapted to the requirements of the new time, and she has moved from the village to Kyiv. She has no experience of any work other than working with her own hands on the land and on the farm, no knowledge of modern technology, and no education:

> *"It's hard to meet the standards and competition, we're in an environment where we don't belong yet."*

The loss of social ties is even more difficult to deal with. Many friends and even relatives remained there. If they did leave during the occupation, it was only towards the previously occupied territories or to Russia, because there was no other option. Very few people left through Russia and Europe because it is very expensive. Of course, there is no desire to communicate and have relationships with those who supported the war and stayed. There is some support from those who managed to leave for Ukraine, but they are scattered in different cities. Nevertheless, people help each other in times of need.

Nadiia considers her family and health to be her greatest values. These are the only things that help her to hold on and give her the inspiration to live. However, sometimes despondency, lack of meaning and a lack of understanding of how to live on come back. As for her dreams, she wants to have her own corner again and wants to hear good news at last.

Nadiia considers this war to be criminal and terrorist, unjust and incomprehensible. She does not find words to describe the Russian president:

> *"People just can't be like that! He had everything! Such a great country with such great resources. And it's not enough for him! And he decided to subjugate another country. And in some strange way: he burns everything, destroys everything, kills everyone."*

She notes that she is surprised by the Russians who support the war. The woman believes that all the perpetrators should be punished, just like after the Second World War. Both "those who voted and passed laws to keep the war going, and those who brainwashed people into this war" should be held accountable.




Photos of the village of Stepne, Donetsk oblast, in April 2012

OLENA, 51, HOUSEWIFE

Chasiv Yar

Olena is a courageous woman who has survived a lot, but cannot recall the events of the war without tears. At the time of the full-scale invasion, Olena was in Chasiv Yar. Even before the war, life was not easy for her: she worked in trade and simultaneously took care of her sick elderly parents. She lived between Kyiv, where she had a job, and Chasiv Yar, where her parents were. At some point, Olena had to quit her job and devote her time to her parents. Olena's daughter helped her mother financially, sometimes visiting and supporting the woman morally. Despite these difficulties, she recalls life before the invasion as filled with peace, tranquillity, and family warmth.

After 24 February 2022, everything changed: due to the stress, her parents' condition deteriorated, and the closed hospitals and lack of medicines made treatment difficult. Olena also experienced separation from her daughter, who was no longer able to come to help. The woman stayed with her sick parents in the city, where electricity, water, and gas were often cut off due to constant shelling of critical infrastructure.

> *"It was impossible to cook, there was no gas, electricity was cut off, and it was indescribably difficult with bedridden parents who needed round-the-clock care," Olena admits that she could barely stand it.*

She recalls cooking and boiling a kettle on a fire in the yard. To do this, she had to leave her parents and go to chop wood, because the neighbours who could help had almost all moved away by then. There were three other people left in the building where Olena's family lived. Olena was stockpiling water for her family and her neighbours, bringing barrels of water to the fifth floor, where she lived at the time. As soon as the water was supplied, she filled all the vessels she could find with it. Fortunately, the community of Chasiv Yar was not under occupation, so during these difficult times she was not left alone, receiving help and food from local authorities and humanitarian organizations. Olena is also grateful to the volunteers who helped her with nappies and other hygiene products she needed for her mother. The Ukrainian military, who were nearby, also helped. She recalls how her mother fell out of bed: "I could never have lifted her myself, and it was just misery!", but the military responded and came to her aid.

It became more difficult when Olena's father became paralysed after suffering a stroke. It was almost impossible to call an ambulance due to the lack of connection. In August 2022, Olena's father died, as she says, because he just couldn't

take it anymore. The woman cannot hold back her tears when she tells how she buried her father alone because no one else was there:

> *"I would not wish this even on the enemy, although I would like to."*

The shelling continued and intensified. Olena is sure that it was Grads (author's note: Grad multiple rocket launchers) and air raids. Bombs were also dropped from aircraft on the eve of her evacuation:

> *"For several nights before we left, the Russians did not let us sleep."*

She heard very loud explosions somewhere nearby. The front door of her building was blown out, as well as windows in the flats and stairwells.

> *"We boarded up the windows with whatever we could find, I helped my neighbour," she says.*

The next day, Olena went to the store to buy some tape, other things to cover the windows and some essentials for the trip. What she saw took her breath away:

> *"I had a lump in my throat, tears were flowing. This is such grief! This is a horror film! I could only imagine this in a film about the Second World War! I never thought that this could happen to our city."*

The aftermath of the shelling was filmed by journalists and covered by the media. However, Olena notes that seeing the consequences of the shelling on TV, in the news or in photos is incomparable to seeing your hometown in ruins.

The woman is also very worried about the elderly people who stay in the city under such circumstances:

> *"These old ladies are unhappy, hunched over, confused... It's good that at least some locals are helping them, and the utilities are still working, trying to seal the windows somehow. Everyone is trying to support each other. It is very important."*

Olena had to evacuate on her own in February 2023. The woman said that she was getting ready by the light of church candles, because her flashlights were out of power and she didn't have any batteries. On top of that, she was also sleepy and exhausted:

> *"All night long I ran around the flat with candles and threw everything I saw into some bags. It took me until morning to get ready, and I burned all the candles. I hadn't slept for two days before that, because the Russians kept me awake with their shelling."*

Later, when Olena left, she realized that she had not taken many important things.

Olena's daughter helped to find a person who could evacuate Olena and her bedridden mother. It cost a lot of money, because the sick elderly woman had to be brought down from the fifth floor and placed in a car. And the distance was considerable — they had to evacuate to Kyiv. In addition, after the trip, the driver increased the previously agreed amount.

Olena summarizes her experiences as the worst thing that could have happened:

> *"This is an unjust, incomprehensible, and generally stupid war. Killing people for no reason — what is it but genocide? It's just genocide."*

Now Olena is in Kyiv, living with friends for almost free. However, she admits that it is difficult to live in a strange house: she has to adapt to a new life and give up the familiar environment – it is hard for an elderly woman. Olena misses her friends and relatives: her uncle and aunt, who are sick (bedridden), and their nurse are left behind in Chasiv Yar. Olena is worried about them and wants relatives to leave the dangerous place, but she has almost no contact with them.

> *"It also hurts my heart for the cats and dogs that people fed with whatever they had. People leave, pets are left unattended, wandering in search of food and protection," Olena sighs.*

It is important to note that this interview was recorded a week after Olena left Chasiv Yar, so many domestic issues have not yet been resolved, and the paperwork is still in the process of being completed:

> *"I still don't understand a lot of things. I'm still not here, but I'm not there either."*

The woman plans to find a job and hire a nurse for her bedridden mother:

> *"To be able to work and live a full, normal life. At least that's what I dream about."*

She notes that the silence and the understanding that her mother is safe, alive and well give her strength. Her daughter is also a good support.

> *"When we lived at home, I was worried about my mum. She is a bedridden, overweight woman, and if something happened to me, for example, I came under fire, how would she go to the store? She would have been left there alone, locked up on the fifth floor," Olena says.*

Now the woman is calm, because everyone has left together and everything is more or less fine. She is going to seek psychological help and is making plans for the future.

SERHII, 58, PHOTOGRAPHER

Starobilsk

There are many cities and towns in the world that are shrouded in myths and legends. For example, according to one of them, Starobilsk in Luhansk oblast is the prototype city of Starhorod from the 12 Chairs novel by Ilf and Petrov. Another legend says that it is in this city that the "golden reserve" of the famous anarchist Nestor Makhno is hidden. And somewhere in faraway Finland, there is the city of Rovaniemi, the heart of fabulous Lapland, where, according to legend, Santa Claus has a manor house. Strange parallels? But not for Serhii, who was thrown so far from home by the war.

Serhii was born and lived in Starobilsk until he was 58. And if someone had told him a couple of years ago that he would be moving to the largest city in Europe, where you can see the northern lights, he would have been at least very surprised. However, now Serhii and his family live in Rovaniemi and are grateful to the Finns for the shelter provided to Ukrainian refugees.

Until 24 February 2022, Serhii lived an ordinary life. He had his own small photography studio on the second floor of the local bus station, and the business was doing well. Serhii's son, who had already married and had a three-year-old daughter, also had his own studio. Since 2014, Serhii and his wife have been involved in volunteer work, helping the military based near Starobilsk. The man planned to open another photo studio and spent the whole month of February fixing up the new premises, even working until 9pm on 23 February. And on the 24th, everything changed. At first, it was hard to believe that it was real; Serhii even went to work that day, but he returned home around one in the afternoon. His son and daughter-in-law decided to leave Starobilsk immediately to avoid endangering their child. Serhii and his wife stayed behind:

> *"My wife and I stayed there. Why? I don't even know why. We stayed, even though it was very risky. I don't know why it happened. The children left, but we stayed."*

The fighting near Starobilsk lasted only three days, which the couple spent in the basement. On 27 February, the occupiers entered the town. Almost immediately, they began to search the homes of local residents, finding out who lived where and what they did. There were some desperate people in Starobilsk who tried to resist. Serhii's neighbour, his namesake Serhii Serdiuk, made Molotov cocktails and drove his old Zhiguli to stop the tanks.

> *"Two months later, they found him somewhere in a field or in some garden... They found him... The family buried him. Everything is, as they say, half-secret," the man sighs with pain.*

Other residents of Starobilsk, such as military personnel and former ATO participants, began to disappear. People began to actively leave the city, mostly young people and families with children. Serhii understood that the occupiers would soon get to the volunteers, but he could not decide to evacuate. He was only slowly taking home the equipment from the photo studios and the remains of his goods — frames and albums — as he was not thinking about work at that time. He gradually tried to erase the photos of his family's volunteer work from the computer, but it took a long time:

> *"I don't know much about computers. I slowly started deleting files. I did my best. The electricity would be switched on for 5–10 minutes, and during that time I deleted everything I had time to delete. I spent about a month and a half doing this."*

Over time, Serhii gradually began to return to work. At first, he would only go out for a couple of hours. One day, several men in civilian clothes burst into the studio. Serhii, who never climbed by word in a pocket, was loudly outraged. Then, in response, one of the young men started shouting that they had "freed" them, that they had been rebuilding everything in Luhansk under fire, and so on. The former director of the bus station came running to the noise and explained that in order to work, Serhii had to renew his lease with the new government.

> *"Well, what could I do? I have a photography studio full of property... And again, you have to live for something," Serhii explains his difficult decision.*

But he was not in a hurry. It was not difficult to stall for time, because with the arrival of the occupiers, Soviet "traditions" were rapidly returning to Starobilsk, including kilometre-long queues everywhere.

> *"I think I will slowly make these documents. It took me about 40 days to make them... There were queues all around to get some documents done. It is now a 'country of queues.' There are queues everywhere," Serhii recalls.*

With this approach, Serhii's business suddenly became in great demand: every-

one urgently needed photographs for paperwork. And the occupiers were introducing new documentation wherever they could, even issuing passes for children to schools and kindergartens. So Serhii had enough work to do. To be able to work, the man re-registered his business — it was a prerequisite for the occupation authorities.

Representatives of the MSS (the so-called Ministry of State Security) visited Serhii several times. The first time, 3–4 men came directly to the studio. They checked the computer, and then took Serhii "to the basement". They asked him questions, trying to find out who he knew, who he had heard about, who he communicated with among those whom the occupiers considered "unreliable". But even when they mentioned familiar names and surnames, the man answered:

> *"I don't remember them all. Time has passed, and I have forgotten... What are you going to do? Are you going to break my arms or what? I don't remember anything anyway," Serhii stood his ground, pretending to be a simple-minded forgetful person.*

Then the occupiers decided to check all of Serhii's places of residence. In Starobilsk, he had three flats, his mother's estate and two photography studios—his own and his son's.

> *"They searched all my houses, including my son's photo studio. They went through everything: basements and attics... They found nothing. When they came to our house, my wife and I had no electricity. They could not check the computer. They took the phones for examination. Furthermore, they returned them in 12 days," Serhii says.*

However, the occupiers found old photos of the Aidar battalion on a computer in his mother's estate, which Serhii had taken back in 2015. The man had completely forgotten about them, so he did not delete almost 200 photos. The photos were different—both documentary and artistic. Serhii felt cold from the inside when he saw these pictures. However, for some reason, the "inspectors" ignored them: the man was just lucky.

Another time, five men broke into the studio. They were looking for a local "currency dealer" and for some reason confused him with Serhii. The man showed them a photocopy of his passport, but they were not satisfied. Swearing and threatening, they took Serhii away and went to his house to see the original. At home, they went through all the computers again and found nothing. They said that this conversation was the "last Chinese warning" for Serhii. While the first time he was taken to work "after the conversation", this time he was left at home. He exhaled

and went back to work. Meanwhile, the neighbours were already looking at him sideways, saying that he had been taken and released twice; it was suspicious.

The last time the occupiers came to Serhii's studio was at the end of December. He had a lot of work to do, there was a queue outside the studio, and there were five visitors inside. And then a crowd of armed soldiers burst into the studio. They immediately put an assault rifle to Serhii's forehead and roughly handcuffed him. They began to ask him to whom from the SSU he was passing the photos. The man denied everything. They started checking the computer again, found nothing, but pulled out the hard drive and took it with them. Serhii was put in a minibus in handcuffs and taken home. There was another search. They looked through his computer and tablet. They took the computer with them. All this was accompanied by swearing and threats. They did not like the answers of Serhii and his wife. They asked the woman why she spoke Ukrainian.

> *"I am Ukrainian, I have lived in the village all my life. I speak the way I speak," she replied.*

When the occupiers were leaving, they demanded that he urgently make a Russian passport and added that the only chance for Serhii not to have problems was to hang a Russian flag on the window and a portrait of Putin in the corridor, and not to forget to praise Putin everywhere. Obviously, without searches and threats in the occupied territory, people were in no hurry to do this voluntarily. According to Serhii, they were in no hurry to go to the so-called referendum:

> *"We all hid back then. Everyone in the city hid like rats. No one went to the referendum. Except for those who worked at the enterprises and supporters of the 'Russian world'," Serhii recalls the details of that 'expression of will'.*

After the last visit of the invaders, Serhii kept thinking that he had to leave. However, for some time, he pretended to be making a Russian passport. He also bought two portraits of Putin and three enemy flags. He kept some of them at home in case the occupiers came again. In the studio, he hung the flag on the mirror and hung the portrait of Putin above his head. Serhii knew that these paraphernalia would allow him to buy time until the right moment to escape. Another thing that held Serhii back from leaving was the fact that his wife was ill, and the long journey was too much for her to bear. But then the woman began to insist on the need to leave. She practically organized everything on her own—she found a carrier, arranged everything, told her neighbours a legend that they were going to Belgorod to get Russian passports because there were long queues in Starobilsk.

On 4 August 2023, at 9:20 a.m., they left the town where they were born, where

they started a family, where they had children, where their parents' graves remained... And now Serhii does not know if he will ever return to his home. Now he and his children live in Finland.

> *"My family is doing well. We have a three-room flat. We live with our children—my son, daughter-in-law, granddaughter. Everything is fine, everything is good. Finland has accepted us very well. We do not need anything. We are happy that our granddaughter is with us, that we are not hungry, that we have a roof over our heads. God forbid we should live like we do in Starobilsk now." Serhii talks about his current life, but his voice does not sound cheerful at all: "We are in a foreign country. We left everything behind. What can I say... In my old age, I was left with nothing..."*

Volunteers are looking for a job for Serhii in Finland, but it is not easy because of the language barrier. It is a little easier for the children to adapt: both his son and daughter-in-law are already employed. However, in Starobilsk, the daughter-in-law taught at the university, and, in Rovaniemi, she works as a cleaner at the Santa Claus estate. Of course, such a transformation is not easy for a young woman. However, perhaps one day she will be able to convey to the Christmas wizard the common wish of Ukrainians.

LIUDMYLA, 67, PENSIONER

Mariupol

On 23 February, Liudmyla came to visit her brother's family. He, his sister-in-law and niece lived in their own house on the eastern outskirts of Mariupol. The Skhidnyi microdistrict, the closest to the Russian border, was the first to feel the 'Russian world': the shelling started on the first day and did not stop. On the morning of the 24th, Liudmyla filled up her car and offered her family to go at least to her flat, also in Mariupol, but on the western outskirts of the city, on the way to Zaporizhzhia. But the relatives were convinced that everything would end very quickly, so they refused. Liudmyla decided to stay with them. Four days later, they finally decided to leave, but the shelling was so intense that they could only leave the yard, so they had to stay and wait for the silence.

On 26-27 February, aerial bombardment began. On the same days, electricity and water went out.

> *"There was still gas, we cooked on the stove. Several times a day, we would be cooking something and my brother would shout to us: 'There's a plane!' and we would drop everything and run to the basement. When the shelling stopped, we came out. Somehow, we forgot to switch off the stove. We did not sleep in the basement until the end of February. We took the mattresses off the beds and laid them in the dining room in a corner that had no external walls. But at night we were sleeping when the shelling started, we were scared, so we went to the basement. There was heavy shelling during the day, and less at night. We even slept one night," Liudmyla recalls.*

But since the first of March, everything has worsened, and we had to move to the basement permanently. In her brother's house, the basement was small, not designed for four adults to live there permanently. But we had to make it possible somehow. We dragged mattresses and blankets down there and made ourselves comfortable. Liudmyla is thin and small, she slept on a shelf for preservation.

On 4 March, the shelling started in the afternoon. Liudmyla's brother came out to drag the dog into the basement, and at that moment there was an explosion.

> *"Everything started falling, crumbling. We didn't understand what was happening. Sasha [my brother] said: 'Our house is screwed,' and ordered everyone to get out of the basement quickly. We got*

out, there were holes in the roof everywhere, and above the dining room there was the sky and the sound of flames, the tulle started to melt and drip, it got on my shoes, burned my hand... I wanted to save the house, but there was no water, and we would not have been able to put it out with buckets," Liudmyla says.

Luckily, the woman's car was almost unharmed, only the windscreen was cracked. The family managed to grab an "alarm suitcase" with documents and medicines, outerwear, put their dog in the car and leave.

The Livoberezhnyi district where they lived was already partially destroyed. They decided to move to the city centre.

"When we arrived in the centre, we felt like we had escaped from hell: there was no destruction here yet. The shelling was going on, we could hear the hits, but somewhere far away, not in the centre," Liudmyla recalls.

We decided to spend the night at a friend's place. At night, a shell hit the courtyard of the nine-storey building, and the windows in the friend's flat were blown out. It was clear that we couldn't stay there either. In the centre, there was still mobile connection in some places, and the next morning the family found out that a green corridor was promised that day. Buses were supposed to arrive at the Drama Theatre and evacuate the city's residents. Private cars were also asked to gather near the Drama Theatre and follow the buses.

We decided to go in two cars — Liudmyla with her brother's family and a friend with her son.

When they arrived at the Drama Theatre, people were waiting, there were no buses, and the shelling started; they had to flee, but decided to leave on their own.

"We tried to leave through the 23rd district, past the Metro hypermarket, to Zaporizhzhia, but our military did not let us out, saying it was too dangerous. We tried to leave from the Epicentr, but the road was barricaded, so we couldn't leave. The 23rd district was badly damaged, the PortCity shopping centre was on fire, it was scary. We started thinking about where to go, where to hide. We thought about taking shelter in the Drama Theatre, but they wouldn't let us in, saying there was no room. And a friend who was with us found us all a shelter in the Prymorskyi district, in a building owned by Metinvest."

Liudmyla calls it a bunker, even though it was not a special shelter, it was just an ordinary office, it was just located opposite the port, and it was not under fire at the time, so it was safer there.

They had almost no food with them, and had to constantly go in search of products. They would go to destroyed shops and sometimes find something. A couple of times they came across Ukrainian soldiers who were distributing food to civilians. Sometimes they had to walk far, to the city centre.

> *“One day we went far away, about five kilometres from our bunker, and there was a shop there. There was a huge queue, we stood there for several hours, but they gave us bread, some cereal, and tinned food. While we were standing there, the shelling started several times, the queue scattered, and then people gathered. When we returned, we saw dead people on the streets who had not been there before. Once I went to my flat, it was far from the bunker, and it took me about an hour and a half to walk in one direction. It was scary to walk: you could hear whistling and explosions somewhere. I took the food and gave the neighbours the keys, told them to take everything they needed — I had plenty of drinking water, old disassembled furniture could be used as firewood,” Liudmyla says.*

The family hid in this office for ten days. In total, about 36 people gathered there. They slept on boxes of office paper and cooked their meals over a fire.

> *“I wanted to cut my hair short, like a boy, when we were in the bunker, because I hadn’t washed my hair for three weeks, and I was disgusted by my own unwashed hair," Liudmyla recalls.*

Towards the middle of March, they started shelling a shipyard located in the same area. We decided to leave the city. We gathered 10 cars and headed towards Zaporizhzhia along rural roads. The first to drive was a man who knew the area well. He immediately warned everyone to keep a distance of at least 10 metres between the cars: if one of the vehicles hit a mine, the others would survive. At the edge of the city, the first car stopped in front of the checkpoint, and the man warned them again.

> *“He said: ‘Watch very carefully how I manoeuvre, and drive the same way, follow me, because there are mines on the road!’ I said to my brother: ´Sasha, I won’t be able to see, I have cracks in my windscreen, and my eyesight is bad!’ And so we set off: this check-*

point was smashed, the trees were down, it was clear that it had been shelled, and there were round anti-tank mines on the road. I watched everyone driving around, and I did the same... I don't remember how I survived it. I didn't understand how I managed to do it," Liudmyla says.

Near Mariupol, one of the vehicles ran out of fuel. The whole convoy stopped, no one wanted to leave people to their fate. And the driver who was leading the convoy solved the problem again: he went somewhere and brought a can of petrol. The woman, remembering this man, asks God for a reward for him.

On the way, we counted 14 occupation checkpoints. Then, in mid-March, some other Donetsk fringe people stood there and, checking Liudmyla's passport with a Donetsk residence permit, asked: 'A woman from Donetsk? Why aren't you going to Donetsk?'

"I am not a sentimental person. I didn't expect this from myself, but when I saw the checkpoint with the Ukrainian flag, I cried," she admits in a trembling voice and adds: "Now we are all together in Germany. I have everything here, everything is fine. I am very grateful to the German government and also to Poland. But I really want to go home. I am supported by my belief in our victory and that I will return home. Not to Mariupol, but to Ukraine."

MARYNA, 42, DESIGN ENGINEER

Sievierodonetsk

Before the full-scale invasion, Maryna lived in one of the nearest suburbs of Sievierodonetsk, the urban-type settlement of Metolkine. She has a husband and son, and they lived with her parents. Maryna had a highly sought-after profession — she was a specialist in preparing cost estimates, worked as an individual entrepreneur, and her services were used by many budgetary organizations in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

Metolkine is located almost next to the Sievierodonetsk airport, which, like most Ukrainian airports, was attacked by Russians on the morning of 24 February 2022. Maryna's house was 1.5 kilometres from the airport, and it didn't even have a basement to hide from the shelling. That is why on the very first day, the family decided to move their parents to Sievierodonetsk, as their aunt's flat was free. That building was designed in such a way that you could get to the basement directly from the entrance.

> *"My parents are old, and my aunt's flat is on the second floor. So, they could quickly go down to the basement and at least somehow protect their lives," says Maryna.*

On the same day, around nine in the morning, Sievierodonetsk airport was shelled again. Maryna and her husband were nearby, coming to the settlement to pick up some things they needed in their new home. For three days, the couple travelled this route regularly, transporting their belongings and constantly facing danger.

> *"On the fourth day, the military did not allow us to pass. They said we couldn't go, there would be a defence line here," Maryna sighs.*

Since then, the whole family has not left Sievierodonetsk. It was during these days that the city was attacked daily. Maryna and her family spent ten days in the basement, near the Cathedral of the Nativity of Chris. They only occasionally went upstairs to try to buy bread somewhere. Maryna also went to the flat and cooked for her family and other people with whom they shared the basement. The intensity of the shelling was increasing, and on the morning of 6 March, a very heavy shell hit one of the houses on Kosmonavtiv Avenue, right next to the basement where Maryna and her family were hiding. They were upstairs in their flat. For eight years of living almost on the contact line, Maryna could clearly distinguish what was flying, where it was flying, where it was going, and how it was flying. And that time, when she heard a distinctive whistle, Maryna shouted to run into the corridor. This is how she recounts the incident:

> *"We were just leaning against the wall in the corridor, and it just blew out all the glass on the stairs. And the windows in the wooden frames in people's flats were completely smashed out."*

Maryna's experience allows her to say with certainty that the shelling took place from the territory previously occupied and controlled by the Russians. During that shelling, one of her neighbours was seriously wounded — she just didn't have time to get to the basement. Luckily, ambulances were still responding to calls, so the woman was taken to hospital. After this incident, Maryna and her husband looked into each other's eyes and decided they had to leave:

> *"When we saw this, we decided that the next shelling could hit our home, and no one knows how the debris will fly..."*

An additional reason for leaving was that the family's car was still intact, but the risk of losing it was growing every day. The family took a minimum of belongings and the cat. They set off towards Dnipro, which was at the intersection of most evacuation routes. They travelled in a large group — Maryna, her husband, son, parents, aunt and uncle, and daughter-in-law. This large family spent several days

in a shelter that was hastily organized in the gym of a school in Dnipro. From there, they travelled to Kamianets-Podilskyi, and from there to Ternopil oblast.

> *"Good people gave us a whole house here. It has three rooms, just for us. We are still living here," Maryna sincerely thanks those who gave them shelter. "The people here are kind, at first, they brought us everything in bags: potatoes, stew, some canned food. They brought us mugs, spoons, bowls, everything we needed."*

The residents of Ternopil oblast were very surprised by Maryna's excellent Ukrainian language, which she has been speaking for many years. The locals were equally amused by the desire of a large family from Luhansk oblast to start a farm. On the third day, Maryna bought chickens and later asked a local farmer to sell her potatoes for planting. The man was outraged, told her to borrow a mare from a neighbour and loaded a cart full of potatoes; in the autumn, the internally displaced people harvested two or three tonnes. The only problem was that it cost only 3 hryvnias per kilogram.

> *"I didn't go to university for six years for that. I don't want to grow potatoes for three hryvnias. I want a normal job," Maryna says about her dream of finding a stable and well-paid job in a new place.*

This was a crucial issue for the whole family, as they lost almost ninety per cent of their previous income. But the worst was yet to come: in Ternopil oblast, Maryna received the terrible news that the occupiers in Metolkino had completely burned down their house. The woman claims that it was done deliberately, using phosphorus shells:

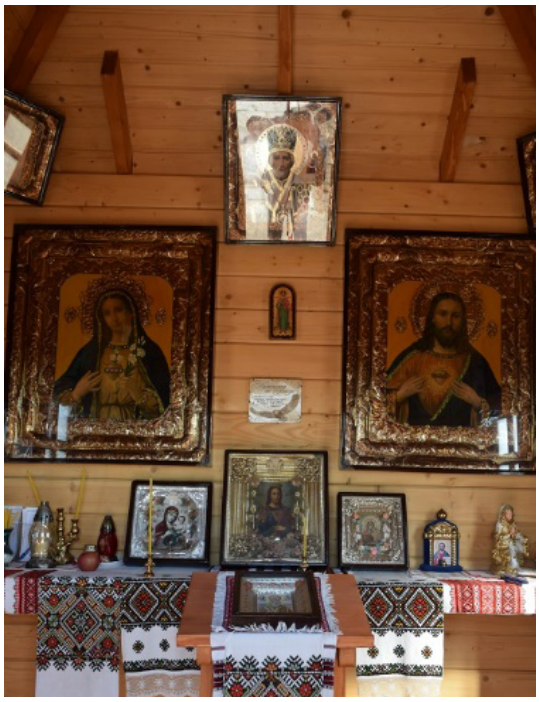
> *"They burned our house with phosphorus and painted a sign saying that 'Banderites' lived here."*

The sign was a schematic image of a lightning bolt, similar to the one depicted on the chevrons of the Azov regiment. Maryna filed a complaint with the law enforcement authorities. The woman now has a document on the registration of a criminal offence in the Unified Register of Pre-trial Investigations.

> *"There is no use for this document..." Maryna says with a sigh, not really hoping to receive compensation for the destroyed property.*

At the same time, there is an event in Maryna's life that she perceives as a real miracle. In 2020, Luhansk oblast suffered from terrible forest fires, and the residents of Metolkino were also affected. Maryna's parents' house burned down completely. Later, to honour the memory of all her fellow countrymen who suffered and died in the fires, Maryna, her friends and relatives built a chapel with a memorial plaque on the ashes of her parents' house. It was built by craftsmen from Verkhovyna. Now there is nothing near the chapel — all the surrounding houses have been destroyed, but the chapel has survived. Inside, there are embroidered towels, books for children and even humanitarian aid distributed by Maryna. When the woman left her home village, she left the door to the chapel open, but it still stands intact.

> *"That chapel we built is still standing. There are icons hanging on the wall and embroidered towels. They don't affect it! I don't know how it happened, everything around is destroyed, and only the windows in the chapel are broken, but it is generally intact. Apparently, everything is God's will," Maryna says, shocked.*



By the way, the towels and icons that remain in the chapel are mostly the work of Maryna, who was known for her love of embroidery:

> *"People were running around saving fur coats. And I was saving... everything I needed for embroidery. I embroider."*

Maryna's works now adorn the churches of Ternopil oblast. However, it is not only spiritual things that fall into Maryna's circle of interests — over the winter, the woman knitted more than a hundred pairs of warm socks, which were sent to the guys at the front.

Of course, Maryna also dreams of returning to Luhansk oblast. Among other things, she would like to look into the eyes of her neighbour, Kateryna Fedorivna. A milkman used to come to the village every morning to bring fresh milk. On the side of the village where Maryna lived, housewives from the eight nearest yards would come to the milkman to buy milk. At these meetings, Kateryna Fedorivna would always say:

> *"God, when is Putin going to come? When is he going to take us away? When will I have a Russian pension?"*

Maryna could never keep silent and always told her neighbour:

> *"Kateryna, don't invite war here, don't invite it. If he comes, he will not ask you if you are Russian, Ukrainian, Chinese, or Vietnamese. He will not ask about your religion. He won't care what language you speak."*

And now Maryna really wants to look into this woman's eyes, because her husband is buried in the yard of Maryna's burnt house, right next to the chapel. He wasn't killed, but died of diabetes, in a coma, just not waiting for the vital medicines. And Kateryna Fedorivna's son is buried near the church at Lisova Dacha, where Sievierodonetsk residents began burying both identified and unidentified victims of the Russian-Ukrainian War when the traditional cemeteries around the city became inaccessible. As a result of the stress, his leukaemia exacerbated, and three months after his father was buried, he also died. Their house was also completely destroyed. Only, unlike Maryna's house, Kateryna's home did not burn down, but was completely destroyed by a direct hit from a shell. And she has nothing left. And now Maryna really wants to look into Kateryna Fedorivna's eyes and ask her:

> *"Well, have you waited for the Russian pension? Does it make you happy?"*

TETIANA, 59, TEACHER

Hostomel

Tetiana worked as a teacher in Obukhiv for 27 years. She started out as a primary school teacher, then became a teacher-organiser, and ended her career as a head teacher. Tetiana is passionate about her students. She says that in her work, she has always tried to foster love for Ukraine in children. She recalls how, back in 2010, her former students invited her to the last call celebration. When Tetiana arrived, she was simply fascinated: all the graduates were wearing embroidered shirts, it looked very charming and touching.

> *"Patriotism was in my blood. It was my job, and it was how I raised my children," says Tetiana.*

The woman did not give up her teaching career when she retired. She no longer worked at a school, but worked with children individually, teaching and developing them. This activity allowed her to earn a substantial supplement to her small pension. Meanwhile, her own children were growing up, and she had two daughters. The eldest got married, and her husband, a glass production technologist, was invited to work in Hostomel, a city that was growing rapidly at the time. There was an opportunity to invest in a property that was just under construction. Everyone in the family worked hard, saved money, and looked for ways to make their home more comfortable and cosier. And this perseverance paid off: first, her daughter and son-in-law were able to buy a flat in Hostomel, and then Tetiana bought a flat in the neighbouring building with her daughter. Later, Tetiana's matchmaker, her son-in-law's mother, also moved to the town and bought a flat in the same building as her children. In 2020, Tetiana took her almost 90-year-old mother to live with her. So slowly, almost the entire extended family moved to Hostomel, a friendly, cosy town in Kyiv oblast that became their new home.

> *"We all loved Hostomel very much. We enjoyed this nature very much. We were very delighted when the Happy Park was opened. Not only that, but we went for walks, enjoyed the smells. Our lake is very beautiful. In our free time, we always admired nature," Tetiana recalls.*

My daughter and son-in-law are modern and sporty. Skiing occupies a special place among their hobbies. For several years in a row, the young family has been visiting the ski resorts of Georgia in winter, and the winter of 2022 was no exception. Together with a large group of friends, Tetiana's children—both daughters

and their husbands—set off in mid-February towards the snow-capped ridges of the Caucasus. The eldest daughter had three cats in Hostomel, and both mothers volunteered to look after them during the holiday. They took turns feeding the cats. And it was no different from their previous holidays. But not this time...

On 24 February, Tetiana received a phone call from her brother, who said words she could only imagine in a nightmare: "Tania, the war...".

Her mind refused to take it seriously. Tetiana answered her brother that it was quiet in Hostomel, and at that very moment she heard the sound of helicopters, and a moment later she saw them in the sky. They were circling the town, like black dragonflies, and there were so many of them. Tetiana saw that the helicopters were releasing some kind of fireballs. As she later found out, these were "heat traps" that prevented missiles from hitting the helicopters. And then explosions began to sound, buildings caught fire, and the sky was filled with black smoke. All this was happening right in front of Tetiana's windows. People gathered near the building nearby, staring at the sky, not wanting to believe their eyes.

> *"It started to get really loud. But I see that people are standing, no one is running away. People are standing. And the kids are with them. And everyone is watching. It was like something spectacular and interesting was just flying there," Tetiana says, amazed.*

However, the explosions continued unabated, and Tetiana realized that she had to do something to ensure her own safety and that of her elderly mother.

The building where Tetiana lived had a basement with their own closet. She decided to set up a temporary shelter there. She spent half the night gathering the necessary things—blankets, pillows, some warm clothes to take to the basement. But the tricky part was getting her 90-year-old grandmother down there. At about six in the morning, they slowly started to go down. There were hardly any people there, except for someone sleeping on a rug wrapped in a downy shawl under the basement wall. It was a neighbour, a laboratory technician, who quickly realized that it was safer there than in her own flat. Tetiana took her mother into a closet and made her comfortable on a folding chair. Then she called her mother-in-law, and together they went to the children's flat to collect documents and some valuable items that came to their attention. Tetiana also took an air mattress, which she then laid on the floor of her basement shelter. Her elderly mother stayed in the basement almost all the time, and sometimes Tetiana decided to spend the night in the flat. One day, it seemed that the shelling had subsided a little, so Tetiana and her mother even went up to their flat. Then the shooting started again. The women were heading for the door when a terrible explosion suddenly occurred.

> *"Mum, we have to leave the flat. Let's try. Let's take the chairs and go into the corridor," a frightened Tetiana hurried the disoriented old woman.*

In the corridor, they saw a neighbour with a four-year-old daughter in his arms, who told them that their balcony had been blown out. Tetiana looked into her flat and saw shattered windows and shell fragments... One of them got stuck between two panes of glass, missing the women hiding in the corridor. A true teacher, even in extreme conditions, takes care of children first and foremost, so Tetiana began to distract her neighbour's daughter and gave her a homemade toy. So, they sat on folding chairs in the corridor of the shattered flat: an old woman, a teacher and a little girl whom Tetiana was teaching to count... At that moment, another terrible explosion sounded: it was the Russians who hit the sixth floor of their building with a tank. Everything was rumbling around, something collapsed, a fire started, and a wall of dust rose. A neighbour shouted to crawl on knees towards the lift. Tetiana barely managed to get her mother in. Picking up his daughter in his arms, the man ran down the surviving stairs. Very slowly, Tetiana and her mother also reached the first floor.

There were many frightened people in the entrance. Many were with children. The smell of smoke was spreading through the building, and people did not know what to do. The pre-war algorithms were not working: Tetiana called 101 and reported a fire in their house, the call was accepted, but they said they could not send a crew because there was fighting going on around them. Some neighbours on the lower floors who survived let people in. Some, out of desperation, saving their children first and foremost, simply entered the surviving flats, breaking down the doors and apologizing for it in the house chat. One neighbour helped Tetiana get her mother down to the basement. And there, clinging to her backpack and hugging her mother, she sat thinking that it was most likely just a bad dream. But unfortunately, it did not end. Her daughter's cats were still in the children's flat. And periodically, taking turns, in between shelling, Tetiana and her matchmaker would run there to feed them.

Once, Tetiana's matchmaker was in the children's flat. She fed the cats, locked the door and was just going down the stairs when a terrible explosion sounded. It turned out that the Russians were shooting at the building from a tank for fun. The enemy tank was standing behind the bridge, near the cultural centre, and was simply hitting the building with direct fire, where people were staying. One of the shells hit the flat of Tetiana's daughter. The place was smashed. The neighbour's flat and several other flats in the building caught fire. In her daughter's flat, the bathroom started to burn, and black smoke filled everything. The matchmaker called Tetiana. What could the two elderly women do when they found themselves in the middle of hell? Of course, they started rescuing the cats. They pulled out all three wildly frightened animals. Tetiana took her cat, and the matchmaker took her cat. They set up a kind of "dormitory" for the five animals in their closet in the basement, and moved to a neighbouring closet where there was not even

a door — the entrance was simply covered with blankets. With the help of her neighbours, Tetiana made a makeshift bed for her mother out of wooden boards so that the exhausted grandmother could lie down to rest. She and the matchmaker somehow made themselves comfortable on folding chairs. They stayed in that basement until 11 March. There were a lot of people with them – almost every closet was occupied by someone. The neighbours quickly organized themselves: someone made a stove, the girls from the outpatient clinic brought a small generator, and they found a slow cooker and an electric stove. People brought food from their flats. The canned food, potatoes, and everything else came in handy. Men took turns guarding the buildings from looters.

> *"It's not that everything was very bad. Of course, it was cold, because we didn't close the doors, we were afraid that if the house collapsed... It was late February-early March. But we used to put blankets in these closets, and it was still a little warmer than outside," Tetiana says, showing surprising optimism.*

The day came when a tank drove up to the building and Russians entered the basement. They took all the phones from the people, leaving them without communication with the outside world. When they were asked if the phones would be returned, one of the occupiers gave his "word as an officer" that they would. And then the neighbours said that all the phones were dumped in a pile near the entrance and simply smashed. Tetiana had two phones, and she managed to save one of them by hiding it under her mother's bed. The Russians were telling people about their "victories": they said they had already captured Odesa, that in a couple of days they would take Kyiv. The soldier who told us this was about 30 years old and boasted that this was his fifth hotspot. He emphasized that this was his last mission. At the same time, other Russians were breaking down flat doors and taking everything that they could carry. And people sat in the basement and heard how they were being robbed. Some Russians were living in the surviving flats, while the rightful owners could only get in by signing up for a "visitation list", where they had to indicate which flat they were going to and what they wanted to take. The Russians kept assuring us that the government in Kyiv would soon change and that people would have a better life. Tetiana once asked a military man who liked such conversations:

> *"Please tell me how my life will improve when my children no longer have a flat, and now you can hear the doors of our flats being broken down?"*

In the evening of 10 March, the Russians packed up and drove away from Tetiana's building. Locals were afraid that the flats were mined. But in the morning, people went to their homes to take the most necessary things and try to leave.

There were nine cars in the yard, and the neighbours crammed into them as best they could: some made a deal with someone, some took someone. But there was someone for whom there was no room in the car. Tetiana was one of them:

> *"We and another family stayed behind. They have a boy with a disability. I'm standing there, and they're driving away. All these cars are leaving. The last one left. I'm standing there and don't understand where to go with a sick old woman. It was ten o'clock in the morning. The sun was shining. And I look up at the sky. I started to cry. I hadn't cried once in all that time... And then I started reading the prayer "Our Father" and crying."*

Suddenly, Tetiana remembered her hidden phone. She switched it on and called her daughters in Georgia. They were in a state of distress because of the unknown and the inability to help their families. The daughter said that in a couple of hours there would be an evacuation from the plant and persuaded Tetiana to try to get there. The woman let the cats out, gave them some food, took a folding chair and slowly led her mother to the evacuation site. Shooting continued around them, and exhausted people were walking along the road:

> *"People are walking like zombies — just zombies walking down the street! And there are Russian tanks running back and forth. And we are walking. We walked five metres and my mum feels sick, she sits down."*

Tetiana was beginning to lose faith that they would make it. Suddenly, near the Karapuz kindergarten, they met a woman who gave them a garden trolley. Together they put the old lady on it and took her to the plant. There were already many people who had learned about the evacuation in various ways. At twelve o'clock, yellow Bohdan buses arrived, which looked like rays of light to the exhausted people.

> *"And when a column of yellow minibuses, these buses, appeared, people started crying, just everyone started crying. It was like this light, this yellow light that appeared. And in front of it there are young girls and boys, volunteers, walking without being afraid of bullets."*

Then the volunteers were able to evacuate everyone they found. They even negotiated with the Russians to evacuate about a hundred people who were hiding in the basement of a local school and who did not know about the evacuation. A

huge convoy of evacuation buses managed to get to Bilohorodka that day, from where Tetiana and her mother were taken by relatives to Obukhiv.

After the de-occupation of Hostomel, the woman returned to her town, to which she had grown attached. She is happy to see how Hostomel is coming back to life:

> *"They are slowly starting to rebuild everything, and people are living in the future. There are still rocket attacks, but people still live in hope. And they build like bees. Russians bomb, but people build and believe."*

Nowadays, Tetiana goes to the volunteer centre almost every day, where she and other caring people weave camouflage nets and make trench candles, contributing to the victory. And when she hears a question about what gives her strength now after everything she has been through, she thinks for a few seconds and then confidently answers:

> *"The fact that we are defending our country gives me strength. All of us — our Armed Forces, our volunteers, our people. This gives us hope and strength so that we can continue to live and add our small part to our common struggle."*

VALENTYNA, 34, NURSE

Siversk (Bakhmut district, Donetsk oblast)

Before the full-scale invasion, Valentyna and her family had a stable and peaceful life. She had a husband and two daughters (12 and 13 years old). She worked as a nurse, and together with her husband ran a household that was sufficient for the family's needs, even selling food to earn extra money for the family budget:

> *"We had cows, calves, chickens, pigs. Everything you need for life. We lived well. The children went to school, had friends, went for walks, communicated with their peers, which is very important for adolescents, because now they don't have this."*

Siversk was and remains under the control of Ukraine. The shelling there began in April 2022 and became more intense in May. Valentyna's family moved to the basement of their house as their neighbourhood was being shelled. At that time, there was no electricity, water, or gas supply.

> *"We cooked on the fire, near the basement, so that we could escape faster. Our neighbours also ate with us because they were elderly, and it was hard for them, so we helped them," Valentyna says.*

When the shells started falling too close to the house, the family decided to move to the basement of the hospital because they were so scared.

> *"There are more people there, and when you are not alone, it is not so scary," she admits.*

At first, they only went there at night, and during the day the children stayed in the hospital basement with their aunt, while Valentyna and her husband went home to do the housework and cook.

One day, a woman and her husband could not leave the hospital basement because of intense shelling. They did not go home because they were afraid to leave their children behind. And there were cattle and cows at home, which had not been fed for several days. So Valentyna's neighbour let the cows out of the yard, and they came to the hospital themselves, as the house was nearby and the an-

imals knew the area.

> *"We found buckets, called the cows and started milking them. One of them was 10 years old, and she was not only our breadwinner, but also a family member."*

Valentyna says that later the animals came to her every day, both in the morning and in the evening, for milking. Then they began to spend the night in the hospital yard. By then, the couple no longer went home at all. They lived in the basement of the hospital, leaving only to milk the cows, take their children for a walk and cook — all near the basement.

> *"We lived like this for two weeks, then there was a very heavy shelling near the hospital, which hit our cows and calves, and they all died together," Valentyna says with pain.*

She could not find the strength to go out and see what had happened to her cattle. She only says:

> *"People took everything that was left after the cows. They buried what they didn't want and took the meat."*

The woman said that there is a video of volunteers showing the consequences of the shelling [3].

After the tragic incident, Valentyna's family lived in the basement of the hospital all summer.

> *"Of course, no one thought it would take so long. Everyone thought the fighting was about to end. But no miracle happened. Autumn was coming, it was cold, and the children had to study," Valentyna says.*

This prompted the decision to leave. Through the local council, volunteers evacuated the family to Zhashkiv in Cherkasy oblast, where the woman had relatives.

3 https://www.facebook.com/100015946423623/videos/346264577707288/
https://www.facebook.com/100015946423623/videos/720876139016411/

Recalling what she went through, Valentyna says:

> *"I could never even imagine that there would be a war in the twenty-first century. It's very scary!"*

The family was not physically affected, but the woman is very worried about the children, as they do not communicate with their peers and have lost interest in their favourite activities. Valentyna also complains of poor sleep because of disturbing thoughts:

> *"I worry what will happen next. Will we return to normal life? Will we go home? Will we have a place to go back to?"*

As for material things, like many IDPs, the family lost everything: housing, work, and a farm that brought in a small additional income. The family currently receives IDP payments from the state, two thousand hryvnias per person. The local authorities also provided support with food and hygiene kits.

> *"Thank God, we don't seem to need medical and psychological help. We are very grateful to the volunteers who evacuated us, risking their own lives, and to those who helped us on the way," Valentyna says.*

Currently, Valentyna and her family are living in a three-room flat together with her sister's family, a total of six people. Of course, such conditions cause certain domestic inconveniences. The woman complains that she cannot find a job:

> *"I've looked for a job in the medical field and any other speciality, but to no avail. There are lay-offs in healthcare now, and I can't find a job elsewhere either."*

So now the family lives on state payments to IDPs. Among her needs, the woman mentioned only the need for legal assistance in the matter of lost property.

Valentyna summarizes her story quite optimistically and emphasizes her values:

> *"In my life, both before and now, the most important thing is my children and their health, both physical and mental. You can find*

a job if you really want to, and I think I will. My friends, if they are real, will not go anywhere, they will always be with me, as I will be with them. And I am happy that, thank God, we are all healthy, the children are healthy, and we are healthy."

NATALIA, 50, HOUSEWIFE

Chasiv Yar

Three children, a father-in-law with a disability, lonely neighbours (an elderly couple), 18 cats and two dogs — this is Natalia's large family, which she moved out of Chasiv Yar after the second shell hit her house in May 2012.

Natalia recalls her life before 24 February, which was full of troubles and hard work, but it was a happy life because she lived in her own home, slept in her own beds and her children did not suffer emotionally.

Chasiv Yar came under artillery fire for the first time on 5 March 2022: Russian troops shelled residential areas at four in the morning.

Natalia says that three shells landed on their street:

> *"A loud 'boom', then another 'boom' — everyone woke up and realized that something terrible was happening. And when the third shell came, it hit our house. The windows were smashed, the roof was damaged, and we couldn't find the front door at all. And I was thrown by the blast wave and fell on the children, but it was good, because the wall fell on top of me, so the children were at least a little protected by me."*

When it was already dawn, the family went to inspect the consequences of the disaster caused by the occupiers. The summer kitchen was completely destroyed, the roof was smashed, and the house was left without windows.

> *"Tears were flowing! My hands were shaking, my legs were trembling. I was in a state of shock," Natalia recalls.*

Back then, after the first attack, she did not decide to evacuate. A large household, sick elderly people, and children made it difficult to move and settle down in a new place. They decided to repair the house somehow.

The local authorities did not have the resources to help, so Natalia bought slate at her own expense, organized roof repairs, and volunteers helped with film, sheets, nails and screws to somehow put the damaged house in order. They also provided hygiene and food kits.

> *"We boarded up the windows and doorways with chipboard sheets and moved to the basement the same day. Firstly, we were afraid of shelling, and secondly, it was still cold, and we had neither normal windows nor doors. We had prepared the basement earlier, just in case. We had a stove installed there to provide heat, and we cooked on it. However, there was no electricity. We had to go to the neighbouring street for water," Natalia recalls.*

For ten days, the family lived in the basement without electricity. But after some time, following the residents' insistence, the authorities of Chasiv Yar repaired the power grid, and the street where Natalia and her family lived was turned on.

But in May they were attacked again. The house was damaged again. Then Natalia decided to leave for the sake of her children. The farm had to be sold for a pittance, and the chickens were given away.

> *"I packed all my 50 years of life into one bag, took my neighbours, an old couple, because no one wanted them, their own children had abandoned them, my father-in-law, who was bedridden, and all my 18 cats and two dogs. They are also dear to me, almost family, they have grown up before my eyes," Natalia says.*

The family moved to Dnipro oblast. Later, an elderly couple of neighbours passed away there.

> *"I looked after them to the last. It just so happened that they were buried in a foreign land," the woman sighs.*

But the family had to suffer with moving. It seems that IDPs should be happy with any housing, but how can you be happy when the humidity in the house is so high that your clothes are covered with mould? The children started to get sick. Natalia had to look for a new home. And she was lucky to find a cosy two-room flat. There is not much space, but Natalia can live with all the animals.

> *"When I started looking for a new place to live, everyone refused as soon as they found out that we had so many animals. I cried and my heart hurt, but I took them all back to Chasiv Yar. I asked my neighbours to feed them and take care of them as much as possible. Furthermore, I transferred money to a card — 4,000 hryvnias a month, and volunteers brought food. But when we found a new flat, I called the owner and honestly told her that my heart was*

breaking, every day I think about how my animals are doing without me. And she, a kind woman, gave me her permission."

Natalia rented a car and transported all her pets to Pavlohrad, where she and her family still live. Nowadays, life is slowly getting better, but Natalia recalls the terrible consequences of Russian shelling:

"After the shelling, my thirteen-year-old son was afraid to leave the house, he followed me around, and at night he would wake up screaming: "We are being bombed!" It was very difficult to calm him down. This went on for four months. So, we decided that he needed a psychologist. We went through psychotherapy, and now everything is coming back to normal: the fear is gone, my son sleeps well, and goes to the store by himself."

Natalia sustained a concussion as a result of the explosions: she cannot hear in her left ear. When they were relocating, Natalia did not pay attention to this, because there was a lot of work to do — selling off the farm, transporting cats and dogs, and both old and young needed attention and care.

"It was a very heavy load for me alone. And then, in Pavlohrad, I went to the doctors, and they said that too much time had passed, it was impossible to restore my hearing. This deafness will remain until the end of my days," Natalia sighs.

The family's life changed radically after 24 February 2022. The family lived a full life: the children had friends, hobbies, and did well in school. Natalia worked and had a decent, stable income. The woman says bitterly:

"We lived, and now we are surviving. On 24 February, they took everything away from us — peace, a healthy psyche, and our children's childhood. They turned our lives into hell! The only thing that gives you strength is the hope that the war will end soon, and we will return home."

ANDRII, 26, SHOP ASSISTANT

Mariupol

Andrii recalls that on 24 February, mobile networks were overloaded, like on New Year's Eve. He was unable to reach his mother and grandmother in another part of the city. He was renting a flat on the western outskirts of Mariupol, near the exit from the city to Zaporizhzhia.

> *"I went to work, I worked at Rozetka, we removed expensive alcohol from the windows, and they let us go. I saw the queue at the petrol station and the queue to leave Mariupol, and I even thought that now I could just turn towards Zaporizhzhia and leave the city. But I couldn't leave my mother and grandmother behind," Andrii recalls.*

By lunchtime, the whole family had gathered at my grandmother's flat. No one took the danger seriously, thinking that Mariupol was an outpost, an impregnable fortress. Andrii did not return to his flat, he decided to stay with his family. On 26 February, the power went out, and the family decided to move to Andrii's aunt, his mother's sister, because it was quieter there.

The grandmother's building is located on the eastern outskirts of the Livoberezhnyi district of Mariupol, and it was from there that the offensive began. And from the very first days, the Skhidnyi neighbourhood was being destroyed by Grads and heavy artillery, and on 26 February, fighter jets joined in.

The whole family of eight gathered in my aunt's three-room flat on Peremohy Square in the same Livoberezhnyi district; and my aunt's friends, a husband, wife and adult daughter, also came, they came on foot from the Skhidnyi district: tank battles were already going on there.

In the last days of February, the gas supply was cut off, and people were cooking in the yard of a two-storey building.

> *"At the beginning of March, the shelling moved closer to the centre of the Livoberezhnyi district, it was coming from somewhere very close to our house. The artillery started shelling from 5-6 am, and at night, planes were bombing. I already had a certain reflex: the plane flies, drops a bomb, there is a bang — and the door to our balcony opens, I calmly get up and close the door. The glass was shattered from the first days, of course, so we had already installed*

plywood in the windows and balcony doors," Andrii says.

In the first days of March, they started running out of food. There was a Silpo supermarket nearby, and the family learned from their neighbours that they were distributing food. All eleven of us went there and bought food for everyone and medicine for the grandmother. And the next day, Silpo was hit by a plane, and the supermarket burned down. We still managed to get food at the large food wholesale warehouses that were nearby:

> *"We found out that there were food warehouses nearby. I've never seen so many people, even our military were there, taking food. We took some for ourselves, even frozen meat. We came there twice. We fed this food to everyone who was with us in the basement, about 15 people. We had enough of this food until the very end of the fighting for Mariupol."*

There were a few cats in his grandmother's building in the Skhidnyi district, and an elderly woman who lived next door. Until mid-March, Andrii went to feed the cats under fire and took the food to his neighbour, as the old woman could barely walk. When he came back to the Skhidnyi district, he found his neighbour dead.

> *"She died of old age. She was in bed, probably went to sleep and never woke up. Her building was intact, even the windows were intact. There was no way to bury her. It was freezing, so I put the iron door on the pit in the garage, with aunt Svitlana's body on it, and left it there. A neighbour came and read prayers over her. After that, I managed to go there one more time to feed the cats," Andrii says.*

The guy complains about the mayor of Mariupol, Vadym Boichenko, saying that the mayor evacuated only his building and did not care about the townspeople at all.

> *"I think our mayor did not do a very good job. In early March, there was shelling near the building where he lived, and he evacuated only its residents. A bus was coming, we saw it. We thought that the entire district would be evacuated, but only his building was evacuated, and I think he evacuated only his friends. And the fact remains that the mayor kept saying that everything was fine, and we were safe," the guy says indignantly.*

Andrii had two of the darkest days in his time in besieged Mariupol. It still hurts him to remember 22 March. On that day, he and Vitalii, a man who came from the Skhidnyi district with his adult daughter and wife and stayed with Andrii's family, went to the warehouse to buy food. On their way back, the car came under fire almost near their two-storey building. Andrii and Vitalii jumped out of the car. Andrii managed to escape and got to his family unharmed. Vitalii was found dead nearby.

> *"It happened in three minutes, I managed to get to our yard, and my mother and I went back to look for him. And there was Vitalii, already dead, lying on his back. When I saw him, I fell to the ground and started crying, I couldn't get up. A neighbour gave me some alcohol to drink. We buried Vitalii in the kindergarten near our yard. I did not take part in the funeral. I became very attached to him during these days. He was very good. Perhaps because of our friendship, his daughter and I have a good relationship. The boys buried him themselves so that Inna and I would not see it."*

At that time, street battles were already taking place almost all over the Livoberezhnyi district. Andrii says that the Russians were driving a loudspeaker truck around the neighbourhood, playing Soviet songs loudly. It was surreal: people were dying nearby, there was no heating, no electricity, they had to melt snow to get water and cook food on a fire under fire. And someone who had electricity turned on the song "Grass by the Home" for the whole neighbourhood.

On 30 March, Andriy was born for the second time. In the evening, the men went outside for a smoke. A mine landed right under their feet. At that moment, the guy was about to enter the entrance, he opened the door — the explosion threw him into the entrance, he flew to the middle of the stairs to the basement and fell there.

> *"A mine hit, I heard an explosion, it deafened me completely, and a thought flashed through my mind: 'I'm dead'. It was like in war films — whistling in my ears, blood everywhere," Andrii recalls.*

That mine killed four people. The boy's stepfather was among the dead, and his aunt's husband was injured. Across the road, just 100 metres away, was a large hospital complex. Andrii's mother and aunt decided to take him there, but he thought he was dying and asked to be left alone, especially as the gunfire was still going on around him.

But how could a woman leave her only living son without help? Andrii says that his mother was not herself, she ran out into the yard and started screaming: "Stop

shooting! Let me take the wounded out!" Suddenly, the guns went silent, and someone shouted back: "Come on, quickly!" It was quiet for about half an hour. It was enough time for two women to run to the hospital and bring a gurney back.

> *"I was laid down with a woman from the neighbouring building, she was also badly wounded by the same mine, her leg was blown off to the knee and her stomach was pierced. She only got to the hospital and died. My mother was screaming: 'Just live, you're the only one left!', but the hospital smelled like a corpse, there were no doctors, just two paramedics and that was it. They examined me: I was cut by shrapnel, but no serious injuries; then they looked at my leg: there was a fracture, but we made some kind of splint ourselves, and the paramedic said everything was done correctly. They did not help me with anything else."*

In the building where Andrii's family was hiding, there was a fourth-year medical student, and a man who had been hiking for half his life and knew how to provide first aid. The two of them gave the guy antibiotic drips, treated and bandaged his wounds, and looked after his broken leg.

The family had found the medicines about ten days before the terrible incident, in a broken-down private medical centre near their home. They took almost everything to that hospital, where later there was no one to help Andrii, but they kept some medicines. This saved his life, as he had been injured in the basement for ten days, and the only medical care he received was from his neighbours.

On 9 April 2022, the boy, his mother, and girlfriend Inna were taken by Russians to Donetsk. There, he underwent surgery on his leg, was fitted with an Ilizarov apparatus and had most of the fragments removed from his body.

In May, Andrii and Inna moved to the United States, where the boy's father has lived for many years.

> *"When we were crossing the Russian border with Estonia, the FSS officers put pressure on us. They delayed the bus for two hours because of me. When we arrived in Estonia, an Estonian border guard officer took my bags, helped me carry them, and asked if I needed accommodation. The attitude is like heaven and earth," Andrii recalls.*

In the United States, Andrii is gradually recovering. He says that it is difficult to live with all this experience: he has difficulty falling asleep and sleeps poorly, haunted by memories and guilt that he did not save Inna's father's life.

When asked about returning to Mariupol, he says that he will not be able to live there because of the number of people who died, even if the city is completely rebuilt.

> *"My whole life remained there until 24 February. I lost a part of my youth. I don't know what will happen next, I'm in a waiting mode. But the fact that I miraculously survived twice means that this world needs me, so I have to go on living and not complain."*

HALYNA, 55, HEAD TEACHER

Shulhynka village (Starobilsk district, Luhansk oblast)

Before the full-scale invasion, Halyna worked as the deputy director of educational work at the Shulhynka Lyceum. Since 2014, she has been volunteering, helping the Ukrainian military on the front line, as she says, "morally and with goodies". Volunteering and hard work at the school made her life stressful, but she enjoyed it despite everything.

She found out about the invasion on 24 February at 6am from a friend with the same active pro-Ukrainian stance. On the very first day, these women went to Starobilsk, where their husbands had joined the territorial defence. Of course, they were aware of how patriotic people were treated in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

> *"We had no illusions. We knew we had to leave home," Halyna says.*

Before the evacuation, however, she managed to help her colleagues and the lyceum principal hide important things (evidence), arrange a basement for her 80-year-old mother and even provide the military with the coordinates of the village where the occupiers' tank column was supposed to be located.

> *"I was so happy that I could help our soldiers in this way!" the woman said.*

Unfortunately, the next morning, the tanks broke through to Starobilsk. A day after the invasion, Halyna had to leave her home because the occupation posed an immediate threat to her life. So, on 25 February, she and her friend left, and on 27 February, the occupiers entered Shulhynka. They managed to evacuate by bus, with the help of the head of the community. They were leaving at night, it was scary:

> *"Not only is it dark, but you don't know whether our car will be coming towards you or whether it will be a racist vehicle."*

Halyna assumes that the feeling of this incomparable horror will remain in her memory for the rest of her life. Initially, she was determined to return home by

the same bus, to her husband and mother. But when the bus disembarked and quickly drove off, she thought it was a good thing she didn't have time to get on. Halyna's husband was sent to Lysychansk for further service.

The head of the community, who organized the evacuation for those residents of Shulhynka and Starobilsk who wanted to leave, together with her administration, was quite active in the area, even after being evicted from the village council. When the tanks entered the village, the head of the community went out alone to stop them (this is confirmed by a video on YouTube). And on 8 March, about fifty people rallied near the Shulhynka village council in an attempt to defend their peaceful life under the Ukrainian flag:

> *"Every day, the head of the community posted important information and videos on Facebook for those who stayed in the village. For me, it was like a connection to my home."*

For about a month after the evacuation, Halyna lived in the urban-type settlement of Blyzniuky (Kharkiv oblast), where she continued to work at the lyceum, which had come out of the holidays to study remotely (at that time, its building was already under occupation). Other teachers of the lyceum remained in Shulhynka for a long time, but conducted their lessons over the phone. Halyna was shocked to learn that her colleague, a teacher-organiser, had agreed to take over the Shulhynka lyceum under the Russian flag when the principal refused the offer. Halyna recalls:

> *"She began to terrorize the lyceum's principal so that she would hand over all the documents, a laptop, a printer and forbid 'outsiders', i.e., teachers with a pro-Ukrainian position, to enter the lyceum. The sad thing is that the teacher-organiser had made a huge contribution to the national and patriotic education of children in previous years."*

However, Halyna is glad that the lyceum continues to work remotely, according to Ukrainian law, and all the teachers who left remain in their positions. Those students who remained in the occupied territory continued to study even without access to the Internet in the village, travelling to other areas to catch the network and send their assignments. They did this until it became too dangerous.

> *"There are colleagues who work from the occupied territories, risking being caught and sent to the basement, and give assignments to children on flash drives," Halyna admires.*

Some of the children who remained under occupation and did not enrol in distance learning are considered to be enrolled in external education. But the woman emphasizes:

> *"When Shulhynka is de-occupied, those children will still be our students."*

Halyna is also very concerned about the fact that children in her village are forced to study in Russian, and teachers punish and harass those brave enough to speak Ukrainian.

Because of the war, she had to break her usual way of life and adapt to other circumstances, living in not always acceptable conditions. This situation has also affected her psychological state: it's hard mentally, and she wants the victory she is hoping for to come soon.

During the evacuation, she was able to take with her only a change of clothes and a single document — her passport. Now, in addition to the upheaval of changing her place of residence, she has to find everything, even clothes. The material losses are less painful, even though she feels sorry for some things dear to her heart, such as a computer with photos from 2014, awards, flags signed by the military she supported during her volunteering. All of these things, along with Halyna's work laptop with important information and documentation, were taken by the occupiers during the search. But the woman believes that she has not lost anything, because what is in the heart cannot be stolen.

Due to the removal of the thyroid gland, the woman is eligible for group 3 disability. Just before the invasion, she underwent a medical examination, almost completed the procedure, and saw her last doctor on 22 February. But due to the full-scale invasion, Halyna did not have time to receive a disability group.

While living in Blyzniuky, Halyna received IDP status, and when her husband retired from the army due to age, the two of them registered as IDPs in Kyiv and receive financial assistance from the state — UAH 2,000 each. Now she also volunteers, weaving camouflage nets for the military at a local school. When asked about her needs and assistance, she refuses. She says that her teacher's salary and payments from the state are enough for her.

The woman tries not to dive into painful reflections, but rather tries to remind herself that she is alive, and therefore everything is fine:

> *"I will not allow myself to go deeper into my feelings. I try to live in the here and now."*

Halyna tries to keep herself busy with positive activities, learning new embroidery techniques at courses, painting, watching films, reading books and walking with her daughter. She is glad that her family and children are healthy, although she has not seen her elderly mother, who remained in the occupation and with whom she has almost no contact, for a year:

> *"My friend and I agreed that we would cry after the victory. I'm not giving up yet, I'm not going to lose heart."*

Halyna is proud of her country and the brave people who have stood up to these difficult times. She thinks about the war as follows:

> *"From our side, of course, this is a war of liberation. A war for our existence. For the existence of Ukraine as an independent state. If you look at it more broadly, it is a war for the future of Europe. And since it concerns Europe, it probably concerns most of the world. From Russia's point of view, this is a vile, aggressive and senseless war. They are trying to drag us into their swamp, where they have been living for centuries. We are a fairly large country for the size of Europe. And I hope that after the victory we will have a certain influence in Europe and, perhaps, in the world."*

TETIANA, 43, EMPLOYEE OF THE CIVIL-MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

Donetsk oblast

For Tetiana, the full-scale invasion did not begin on 24 February 2022, but earlier. She is a two-time IDP: in 2014, she left Donetsk but stayed in the oblast. She now lives in western Ukraine.

> *"Since 2014, we have been on the contact line, and we have been hit, but it was somewhere 'before' or 'near', sometimes in the village. We knew they were shooting from tanks. But on 17 February — heavy artillery, it was something unusual, something powerful and endless. I realized that it was serious, it was unclear what was happening, but it was something terrible."*

Tetiana was a civil servant, working in the local civil-military administration. Back in early February, worried about the information about the invasion, she turned to the district and regional authorities to ask what to do, how to respond, and whether to prepare. She always received the same answer: "Everything is fine, don't worry."

In mid-February, BBC journalists came to the administration and asked: "There will be an invasion, how are you preparing?" Tetiana recalls:

> *"I told them: 'We are not preparing. We are calm, everything is fine.' People from the BBC came to tell us that the war was starting! Perhaps that interview made me think that I should run away. I can't stay with my life's credo."*

On 17 February, Tetiana decided to take her children out of the city. She bought train tickets for 19 February. Before leaving, on her way out of work, she asked her supervisor again: "Are we taking the documents out?".

> *"No, everything will be fine," she heard back and left the office, leaving everything on the table. "We started walking to the train, and it was rumbling from all sides, and I was thinking all the way: 'Oh, my God, how are we going to get through this section?', even though I had become accustomed to explosions over the years,"*

Tetiana says.

She went to her sister's house in Kyiv, planning to leave her children and return to Donetsk oblast in two or three days. On 24 February, when the whole of Ukraine woke up to shelling, the shelling at Tetiana's home stopped, because in the evening of that day, Russian troops occupied her village.

Fortunately, Tetiana did not have time to return home.

> *"Do you know whose houses were smashed in the first place, back on 17 February? We have a former ATO participant. At first, one of his houses was hit, and he was in his wife's house at the time. And then a shell hit her house as well. And he and his wife left. And after them, the next shell hit our village headman. I think the Russians were targeting, someone helped them. Because how come two of his houses were hit first? And then I was told that we had leaflets on the pillars with pro-Ukrainian activists. A gauleiter was appointed in our village, and they asked her: 'Tell us who served in the army, who is who.' She didn't give anyone up. But in the neighbouring village, people who had left the area were reported. They came to their parents' house, took their car, took everything out of the house, and took them to the basement," Tetiana says.*

In her position, Tetiana was responsible for children who had been left without parental care. After 24 February, she called the administration to ask what to do, because her children's documents remained in the occupation, and moreover, her computer with all the databases was also left there. Again, she received no answer. The community had more than thirty children under its care. All the personnel files with court decisions on granting the status of "orphan" and decisions on guardianship remained in the occupied territory. These are documents that are extremely difficult to restore.

> *"I think it was an instruction not to panic. I'm kicking myself for believing these people," Tetiana sighs.*

Still, before she left, she organized the evacuation of her children. On 22 February, the children were taken to Sviatohirsk to a children's camp and to Mariupol to a sanatorium. These were home children, but they went to the evacuation without their parents because they were sent to wait it out, not thinking that everything would be so scary and would last for a long time.

> *"When Mariupol was captured, the children were taken to Donetsk. Those who had gone to Sviatohirsk were transported to Lviv when the attack on Sviatohirsk began. Then the parents of all these children appealed to the 'ombudsman' appointed by the occupiers, who contacted our ombudsman, and the parents went to Lviv themselves to get their children. Six months later, they took the children and brought them to the occupied territory."*

The woman also tried to organize the evacuation of the children in her care:

> *"On 24 February, I called the principal of one of the schools in our community from Kyiv and told him to take the children out, you have the most of them. Those who wanted to go, went. And those who didn't want to leave, left anyway, because this village was wiped off the map. We thought our village had suffered a lot, as the whole street was destroyed. And then Volnovakha started... and we realized that we were lucky that only a third of our village was burnt down..."*

They started thinking about children in care only in September 2022: whether or not to force them to be taken to the unoccupied territory. During martial law, guardianship can be terminated. But if this is done, then this child must be placed somewhere — in an orphanage, for example, or with another family. At that time, orphanages were taken away, and it was necessary to somehow organize where to place them.

> *"In general, my attempt to take my children out ended up in criminal proceedings in the occupied territory. Because parents were worried about where their children were. And who is to blame that they are not with their parents? Of course, it's my fault! I understand that they were separated, but it's not a given that they would have survived. And now they are all alive and well, they have been taken care of by volunteers, they have seen Ukraine, I don't think they would have been better off under rocket attacks. So, they wrote a statement that Ukraine had stolen the children," Tetiana says.*

The woman admits that the main question she is concerned about now is what to do with the collaborators. And the second question is how to live next to these people?

> *"They crossed out my whole life, everything I did. Our Ukrainian language teacher, the head teacher of the school, was the first to go to the occupiers, she went to Moscow for an internship. They took down flags and symbols. She was the one who was in charge of all this. They said they were burning Ukrainian books. I hope it's not true, that they just hid them," Tetiana sighs.*

The woman notes that being an IDP for the second time is easier than the first. Losing for the second time is not so hard. In her opinion, things weigh you down. Worrying about material things does not allow you to understand the picture of the world. And when you lose everything, you start thinking about who you really are:

> *"You make choices, you don't think about the flat. God, how I used to suffer for a towel left in Donetsk! And what? There is something more valuable! Life fits in one suitcase. I checked it," Tetiana says.*

YULIIA, 46, BUSINESSWOMAN

Sievierodonetsk

Yuliia describes her life until 24 February 2022 as follows:

> *"I lived a full life. I had the house I wanted, the house I dreamed of. I had a job I loved in a very friendly team. Not only that, but I had a hobby. I was actively involved in social activities, involved in various processes. In general, my life was bright, interesting, and full. And everything was great."*

She is married and has two adult twins, a son and a daughter. Their house was in the settlement of Metolkino, a suburb of Sievierodonetsk. In fact, they had two houses next to each other: the family lived in one for five years, and they didn't have time to live in the other, the new one, they just ordered furniture for it. Yuliia was a businesswoman, running her own auto parts store, which she knew perfectly well. Yuliia's husband was also an entrepreneur, specializing in car sales and repairs, and the couple also had their own tow trucks — a kind of family car cluster.

On 24 February 2022, Yuliia's family left Sievierodonetsk for Sviatohirsk, as planned, for a couple of weeks to wait until the lull. Many people in Sievierodonetsk made such decisions — it was a kind of echo of 2014, when the fighting barely affected the city.

> *"I left with one suitcase. I had a tracksuit and pyjamas in it. I didn't even take my make-up bag, because we had already had the experience of two thousand fourteen and hoped that it wouldn't last long. But it didn't happen as expected," Yuliia says.*

They stayed in Sviatohirsk for three weeks. But when the bridge near the Lavra was blown up, there was a threat that if another bridge was also destroyed, it would be impossible to leave for Ukraine, and Yuliia's family did not even consider the option of the so-called LPR. They moved to Dnipro and initially stayed at a local school, because they still thought that it would not last long. But as time went on, business partners from Lutsk persistently called Yuliia and her family to Volyn, offering them accommodation with only utility bills to pay. It was an offer that in March 2022 was a sin to refuse. But the thought of what was happening in her native Metolkino did not let go.

Due to the specifics of the family business, it was impossible to take everything valuable out of the town, and the family had a lot of equipment in Sievierodonetsk — trucks, cars, special vehicles, equipment, and components. There was also Yuliia's car, which she used to drive all the time. Therefore, at the end of March, they decided to return to Sievierodonetsk and take out at least the minimum of what was still intact. On 1 April 2022, the couple returned home. They did not go empty-handed, but loaded a bus with humanitarian aid, carrying everything necessary for both people and animals who also needed help. At that time, Metolkine was still controlled by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and civilians were hardly allowed there. However, Yuliia and her husband managed to get home. What they saw was chilling: the village, which had been in the epicentre of the fighting, was almost destroyed. Both of Yuliia's houses had no windows, and there were no gates to protect the yard.

> *"It was then that I saw all the destruction. And I heard the explosions — we were under fire. It was very scary. And then I made a decision for myself that I would never go back there again until the war was over," Yuliia says.*

Later, at the end of May, a neighbour who stayed in Metolkine sent horrific photos and videos: direct hits completely destroyed both houses. Moreover, Yuliia claims that the shelling was carried out with phosphorus shells, as the ruins were burnt to ashes.

When Yuliia describes how this situation turned out for her family, she tries to explain the tragic details:

> *"Seven of us were leaving home together with our dog. We were in one car, even though we could have gone separately in our own. We did not do that. Likewise, we didn't take any money with us, either. I didn't leave home, I left work. My husband picked me up, and that's how we left. We had no belongings and no money. We didn't know what to do."*

It is obvious that before the full-scale invasion, Yuliia's family was not rooted in poverty, they were a fairly wealthy family: they had houses, a business, a shop, a service station. People lived in prosperity, in the comfort they created on their own. And almost overnight, they lost everything.

> *"At some point, I realized that I was homeless. That I had nothing. The shelling hit my house, my shop and my service station. So, I have no business, no house, no flat. Of all the assets, only my son's flat remained. Everything else was destroyed. It was very hard to accept," Yuliia admits with despair.*

But this family is definitely not one to give up. They began to settle down in Volyn, and her husband and son started repairing cars to earn a living. Yuliia actively joined the volunteer movement and now heads a women's NGO, whose members are now scattered around Ukraine and the world, but still help those who are even worse off.

> *"We are living. We try to earn money and do something. We help the soldiers, we volunteer. Fortunately, we are now clothed, shod, not hungry, and have a roof over our heads. That is, the basic needs are met. We are trying to return to the level we had before the war," says Yuliia.*

Surprisingly, the optimistic, determined outlook on life that IDPs from Luhansk oblast have was not always perceived by the locals. They thought that IDPs should only cry and beg. This even sometimes caused misunderstandings.

> *"Of course, I had to sacrifice comfort. But what I don't like most is that I don't have the resources I had before February 24th. And I need them to be useful to others. The request is still there, people still have the phone number, and they call and ask for help. But now I have nothing here — no contacts, no links, no money. There is a desire to help, but the opportunities are not the same. But we don't give up — we think of something, we come up with some-*

thing. We're working our way through," Yuliia says.

And it's not just words, she does a lot of things, including studying. She understands that there will be no return to her old business, and that she needs new knowledge and skills to fulfil herself in a new field.

When Yuliia reflects on what gives her strength now, she confidently states:

> *"Faith. Faith that we will win. Despite all the troubles, I am glad that everything happened as it did. Because we, Ukrainians, like no one else before us, kick them in the teeth so that they will never forget it."*

LIUDMYLA, 54, NURSE

Serebrianka village, Bakhmut district, Donetsk oblast

Before the full-scale invasion of Russia, the woman had a normal, quiet life in the village — she had her own house and husband. For the past 2 years, her husband had been living in the neighbouring town of Siversk, 10 km from Serebrianka, to take care of his elderly father. Liudmyla worked as a junior nurse at the Siversk Multidisciplinary Hospital and also tended to her garden and household.

> *"Now I realize how good a life it was. I had poultry, cattle, and a house. If I needed firewood, I could buy it, because I worked and received a salary. I had almost no need for anything."*

Liudmyla's village was part of the Siversk community, which was located in the territory controlled by the Ukrainian authorities. Until 24 March 2022, the woman stayed in the village, but the day before there was a heavy shelling, which forced her to go down to the shelter:

> *"There were strong explosions, a shell fell in the garden, there was a crater, I was even afraid to go there."*

The basement where she was hiding was also damaged by the explosion, and the door was blown off, so Liudmyla realized that she could not stay there, as it would not save her. It is worth noting that there were no special shelters: most people usually used ordinary household cellars as a shelter, where they stored fruit, vegetables, and preserves for the winter. Often, these cellars were already old, abandoned, and showing signs of destruction. Liudmyla's was just like that.

The shelling continued, the power line was damaged, so there was no electricity. Liudmyla decided to leave the village and move to the city to live with her husband and his father, whose flat still had electricity and gas. But the situation there was getting worse: the shelling was getting more frequent, causing the power to go out. During the heavy shelling, Liudmyla and her husband had to drag the grandfather into the corridor to protect him from being injured by shrapnel. The woman says that the old man was getting worse, so the family moved to the bomb shelter of the local hospital where Liudmyla worked. She knew they could take people in. They set up a bed and a couch in the shelter so that they had two beds for three people. The living conditions were minimal. They left the shelter only for the most necessary things, for example, when bread was brought. They

lived like that for more than two weeks.

> *"My grandfather wouldn't get up at all, he was getting worse, we had to use nappies. Then the power went out, there was no water, and we lived in the dark for the last two days," Liudmyla recalls.*

On days without electricity, for example, we stood in line to get boiling water, because we heated it on a small gas burner. There were a lot of people around, and my grandfather was very weak and needed care. She and her husband thought about the need to evacuate.

Liudmyla's daughter strongly supported the idea of leaving, even insisted on it. Despite the poor connection, the woman managed to call her brother, who was still in Serebrianka, and persuade him to leave the village by car and pick them up. The daughter was able to find temporary accommodation for her parents in Zhytomyr oblast. They were given an abandoned house where no one had lived for several years. Previously, it had been inhabited by an old lady who had died, so the house was in very poor condition — old, drafty, and they had to insulate it as much as they could at the time. Thanks to local people, the family received help with firewood, and the house became warm. They also received help from the UN, and received a payment for IDPs.

> *"This is the two thousand hryvnias I receive today. While my grandfather has a pension, I have nothing but this money," Liudmyla sighs.*

The woman noted that at the beginning of the invasion, she still received a certain percentage of the salary paid to the staff, even though the medical facility was not open. However, these payments stopped in the summer of 2022. The family received food packages from the social service, and local NGOs provided humanitarian support and psychological assistance.

> *"They helped me, because my mental state at the time I left was miserable," Liudmyla admits.*

Liudmyla and her family members have not been interviewed as victims or witnesses by law enforcement agencies or international organizations, and no protocols have been drawn up.

The woman says that she often sees stories about their area on the news on central channels:

> *"They showed Bakhmut and Siversk, and we recognized the people the journalists interviewed because we lived with them in the bomb shelter."*

Liudmyla also sometimes meets her fellow countrymen in the nearest district centre:

> *"I meet people here from near Sloviansk, from our region, a lot of people from Bakhmut, from Soledar."*

In one of the local group chats, the woman found a photo of the building where her husband's father's flat used to be. This place was destroyed.

The woman emphasizes that it is almost impossible to come to terms with the fact that she has lost everything. For a person who has never been forced to leave everything behind, it is hard to imagine why IDPs sometimes get hung up on things and grieve that they had them at home, and now they are gone. In fact, when you have a fridge, a microwave, and bed linen, you don't appreciate them because they are basic, everyday things. At the same time, when a person loses everything, the absence of some things constantly reminds them of their situation.

Liudmyla says that she was only able to take what was in the basement with her. There was very little space in the small Lanos, so they had to take the minimum, because there were four adults travelling, and a gas cylinder and a supply of petrol took up half the space in the boot.

> *"We also put in 5-litre bottles of petrol because we had nowhere else to buy fuel at the time," Liudmyla explains.*

So, when they left their hometown, they took the most necessary things: documents, medicines and some change of clothes. The woman noted that her priorities had changed at that point, for example, she took nappies for her bedridden grandfather because they were in short supply there. And when they left,

it turned out that they could easily be bought in any store, and they could take something else instead:

> *"I still don't understand how I was left without a home, without property, without anything at the age of 54. Me, my grandfather, my husband, and my brother, too."*

Liudmyla noted that the roof of her brother's house was blown off during the shelling. Even if the building itself remained intact, the rain and snow over the years would make the rest of the property uninhabitable. The woman knows nothing about her own house, except that the roof was damaged in her presence. In the photos she found in the groups, she sees a lot of destruction in the area. She cannot ask any of her fellow villagers to go and see her house because there are no locals left in the area. There are other people in the village, but they live on the outskirts, and because of the constant shelling, no one walks around the village:

> *"It's impossible to go out and see anything! Everyone, if they do go out, goes 2-5 metres away from the basement, no further."*

Liudmyla is having a very difficult time dealing with the loss of her loved ones. She said that her friend, who was like a sister to her, came under fire. A shell hit her house, and because she was nearby and did not have time to run to the basement, she sustained a spinal injury. She was taken for treatment first to Kramatorsk, then to Dnipro, and from Dnipro to Lviv.

> *"In Lviv, she was waiting for surgery. She was told that they had applied to international medical organizations, which then take people to have surgery abroad. Unfortunately, she couldn't wait and died," Liudmyla says with undisguised pain.*

The woman lost her best friend, and it is still difficult for her to understand and accept.

As for legal support, Liudmyla notes that she has no idea how the issue of housing documents or compensation for damage will be resolved in the future. Since there are many issues with property rights, it is unclear whether there will be any compensation under such conditions. Unfortunately, improperly executed documents are a fairly common problem in the village. It often happens that the owner of a house has died, and his children continue to live in it without re-registration. In crisis cases, this becomes a significant obstacle to receiving compen-

sation. The woman is very worried about whether she will ever be able to restore her home:

> *"Will we be paid anything at all? Even if I go back there, how will I live? The roof is broken, there are no beams, by that time everything will have rotted inside, I won't be able to restore it. I don't have a job now, and I don't have the money to rebuild it all later."*

The war changed the family's life completely. Firstly, the health of her husband and his father deteriorated. Liudmyla describes her perception of reality as not life, but existence. She has lost interest in everything around her because it is alien and does not belong to her. She notes that the family uses household items that belonged to the former owner:

> *"I have a bed to sleep on, some dishes, but if I need to leave, I will stay with the bag I came here with."*

The advice of an IDP from Bakhmut helps her to stay strong: the idea is to live one day at a time:

> *"I managed to wait for tonight, so I'm waiting for tomorrow morning, and that's it."*

The fact that it is difficult for her to communicate with her friends because "everyone has the same problem" adds to her sadness, and she feels worse and mentally distressed by what they tell her — whether it is bad news or about their own suffering. Liudmyla considers this war a nightmare and says that she would not wish even her enemies to go through this:

> *"It's impossible to stand there and watch everything you hold most dear being destroyed. As one woman said, my whole life, all my 54 years, fit into that handbag."*

OKSANA, 52, SHOP ASSISTANT
OLHA, 48, HOUSEWIFE

Chasiv Yar

Oksana lived in Chasiv Yar with her husband, who has a disability, her son, and his family — his wife and 9-month-old baby. Their flat was located in a five-storey residential building, on the ground floor.

On 9 July, at around 21:15, there was a powerful explosion: a Russian missile hit a dormitory located next to the building. The strike partially destroyed the building and completely ruined two of its entrances. The second missile hit the building where Oksana's family lived. Luckily, that day she, her daughter-in-law and grandson were at a rented dacha, and her husband and son remained at home, miraculously unharmed.

> *"All five floors collapsed into my flat. In the room where the ceiling collapsed, my husband was watching TV. A minute before the explosion, he went to the toilet, and my son was on the balcony watching where the first missile landed. When it hit, they were both blown into the corridor along with the door, and my husband was hit in the chest by a piece of slab. Several hours had already passed before he was taken out of there and an ambulance was called. When we found out what had happened, we immediately went home," the woman recalls.*

Oksana's son, after pulling his father out, ran to help the elderly get out. Many of them had their doors blocked, and one woman was injured by debris. As it became known later, the attack was carried out by Iskander-K missiles.

In the morning, the police, the mayor, and the media arrived at the scene. Employees of the executive committee drew up the relevant acts recording the destruction. According to Oksana, later they received the acts of loss of housing, which they registered in Diia, a Ukrainian electronic service for public services.

In an interview with journalists, Oksana said that she was unable to leave because she was taking care of her elderly mother, who has stage 4 cancer, and her husband with a disability [4]. For another six months, the family lived in their dacha and received humanitarian aid from both local authorities and volunteers.

> *"On 26 December, my mother died, thus freeing my hands a little. We buried her and moved to Vilnohirsk in Dnipro oblast. We found a house in an advert, and the owners gave us two rooms. It so happened that after arriving, my husband had a heart attack and died a week later. He was buried in Vilnohirsk, on someone else's land. So, we live here: me, my son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. We came here with nothing! We lost everything in an instant. Only a boiler and a toilet survived in the flat, but everything was destroyed. Emotionally, we are all very depressed..." Oksana says.*

Olha and her elderly mother also suffered from the shelling of Chasiv Yar on 9 July. They lived in a private house near the dormitory that was bombed. That evening, the women were sitting on a bench near the entrance to the dormitory when the explosion occurred. The shockwave threw Olha's mother against a tree. When the dust cleared, her daughter saw the destroyed entrance and the ruins of her own house.

> *"There was a pile of stones with people screaming from under them. My mum and I were in a state of shock and didn't know what to do. My nose and ears were bleeding, it was very scary. We started calling for help. Our neighbours came running and called all the services — the fire brigade, the ambulance. People started to dismantle the rubble, passing bricks to each other. Later we found out that my mother's friend had died. When they took out her body, my mother had a heart attack," Olha says.*

The building of the victims was completely destroyed, nothing could be saved. The rubble of the dormitory was being cleared all night. According to official reports, the bodies of 48 people were found, including 1 child, and 9 people were rescued from the rubble.

4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKnLX11nA_Q

On the morning of 10 July, volunteers arrived at the scene and offered Olha and her mother to evacuate. The women agreed: they had nowhere to live, their house was destroyed, and it was becoming increasingly dangerous to stay in the city. They were taken to Kremenchuk in Poltava oblast and settled in a volunteer centre, where they have been living to this day. Despite the fact that the living conditions are good and there is an opportunity to receive medical advice (note: Olha and her mother have disabilities), all the woman's thoughts are about going home.

> *"We were given housing, food, moral support, but nothing makes me happy. I just want to go home and that's it! Everything needs to be restored there, and we need money for that. I really want to be compensated for everything..." Olha sighs.*

NATALIA, 57, HOUSEWIFE

Mariupol

Natalia lived with her husband and elderly mother in the centre of Mariupol, on Myru Avenue, between the Drama Theatre and the 1000 Trifles shop. They lived on the twelfth floor, and from the windows of their three-room flat they could see almost the entire city at a glance. The dream flat became this family's nightmare after 24 February 2022.

The centre of Mariupol really experienced the war only in March. And in the last days of February, Natalia was still filming a video for her daughter, who has been living in the United States for many years, showing the courtyard of her twelve-storey building, the number of parked cars, and children walking in the yard. When her daughter persistently asked her to leave, Natalia replied that it made no sense, because it would all be over soon.

Her daughter-in-law and grandson left the city on 25 February, and they also insisted that Natalia and her husband go with them.

> *"We were too self-confident and frivolous, and we didn't want to leave. And in early March, the connection was lost. We didn't know what was happening in Kyiv, we didn't know what was happening around us. The first time I felt very scared was when a plane flew over our house at night. It was probably a reconnaissance plane. It didn't bomb, but it flew very low, right overhead. It was very loud and very scary. It was clear that something terrible was happening," Natalia says.*

And then the shelling started. Natalia is crying and recalls how Mariupol was being targeted right before her eyes. She saw all the shelling, all the air strikes. Her windows, for which Natalia loved her flat so much, now became a front row seat to the horrific drama of the destruction of her beloved city by the Russian occupiers:

> *"Fear is fear, but you still look out the window. You hear the sound of a shell, but you don't know where it will hit. Then you see an explosion — a column of fire and smoke — and burning buildings. We saw five-storey buildings burning near the Centre for Administrative Services and near '1000 Trifles' shop. The supermarket 'Obzhora' was on fire for two days. We saw the shelling of the private sector with Grads and how the flames spread from house to*

house, it lasted for days. Opposite our home, there is a nine-storey building without several floors, it was hardly a Grad, most likely an air bomb or rocket. We looked out another window and saw the nine-storey building where our friend lived on fire. We were literally shaking on our twelfth floor. I saw a shell flying in front of me that hit the children's hospital. It flew over our house, I was sitting by the window, I saw how my window was bent. We have high-quality, expensive double-glazed windows, and they withstood the pressure of this wave, but the glass was bent by 10 centimetres, as if it were rubber.".

One day, there was a powerful, very loud explosion at Azovstal, and from her window she saw a huge flare of burning gas. Realizing that something serious had happened and that the gas would probably be cut off soon, Natalia cooked a large pot of borscht, prepared all the vegetables they had, boiled all the eggs and even managed to bake two large loaves of bread. Natalia had taken care of the food in advance and had a large supply of drinking water. The gas supply was indeed cut off soon, so they had to heat and cook hot food and boil water over a fire in the yard. We cooked under fire, and people were hiding under the buildings. There were small stones in the food that flew from the explosions.

Natalia recalls the day she and her husband went to his relatives' house nearby to cook together over a fire.

"We were outside by the fire when we saw planes in the sky. One dropped a bomb on the private sector. It landed on the street on the other side of the house we were standing next to, and all the debris flew over the roof and over us. But the two houses near where the bomb exploded were completely destroyed. Fortunately, there were no people. But a family with small children lived across the fence from these houses. The family we visited also had two teenage children. I can't imagine how the children survived this horror," Natalia says.

The shelling took place three times a day: in the morning, around seven o'clock, at noon and then in the evening. The shelling became longer and longer, and at certain times it did not stop at all, it could just be less or more intense. The city was shelled with Grad rockets, heavy artillery, and aeroplanes.

Natalia and her husband tried to find some kind of bomb shelter or basement, but everything was just packed with people, there was no room anywhere. Neither her husband nor Natalia's mother wanted to leave Mariupol. And Natalia could no longer stay in the city. She started having hysterics, and eventually her husband agreed to evacuate.

> *"I could no longer stand the sounds of the round-the-clock explosions. It was cold, we were wearing a lot of clothes. I always wore a hat and a hood, and I also covered myself with a blanket so that I could not hear anything. The sounds of explosions had a terrible effect on my psyche. I was constantly in a state of panic. I prayed to God that I would die immediately if I was hit. Even death didn't scare me as much as the thought of being blown up and still being alive," the woman recalls with horror.*

Talking about her departure, Natalia cries bitterly. It was hard for her to leave her mother, she persuaded her to the last, but her mother was adamant. "Do you understand that I'm leaving you here to die?" Natalia asked her, and the elderly woman agreed.

> *"I was in a hysterical state, I didn't feel anything or realize myself. We didn't even say goodbye properly. I was standing on the doorstep, stomping around, and she went to her room. And then a shell hit the neighbouring house, the sound of broken glass rang out, the glass on our loggia cracked, and my mother jumped up: 'Hurry up, save yourselves!' I ran out, I didn't even take my documents. At that moment, we didn't even realize that it could be for so long," Natalia says with pain.*

When they were leaving, they saw people burying a dead man in the garden of a private house, without a coffin, just buried in a sheet.

At the exit from the city, there was a huge convoy of civilian vehicles. It took Natalia and her husband a whole day to get to Pervomaisk, although it is no more than 30 km from Mariupol. There was an occupation checkpoint. Fortunately, at that time, filtration had not yet been organized.

Currently, the woman and her husband are renting accommodation in Ternopil. Natalia no longer had contact with her mother. Through her friends, she learned that the building had been hit and part of it was destroyed. The Russian military took people out of the house and then allegedly sent them to the occupied Novoazovsk. Natalia's flat is empty, her mother is not there. But it was not possible to find out where the woman is and whether she is alive.

Natalia cried almost the entire interview. The woman is very empathetic, takes human pain to heart, crying almost every day over every news about the fallen defenders or civilians.

“People have turned into creatures that have crawled out of the other world and are creating horrors. My heart is breaking with pain. These are non-humans, devils from hell. My children and grandchildren give me the strength to live. I am calm that they are not in Ukraine now. I have hope for victory and for a meeting with my children, grandchildren and friends,” Natalia concludes on an optimistic note.