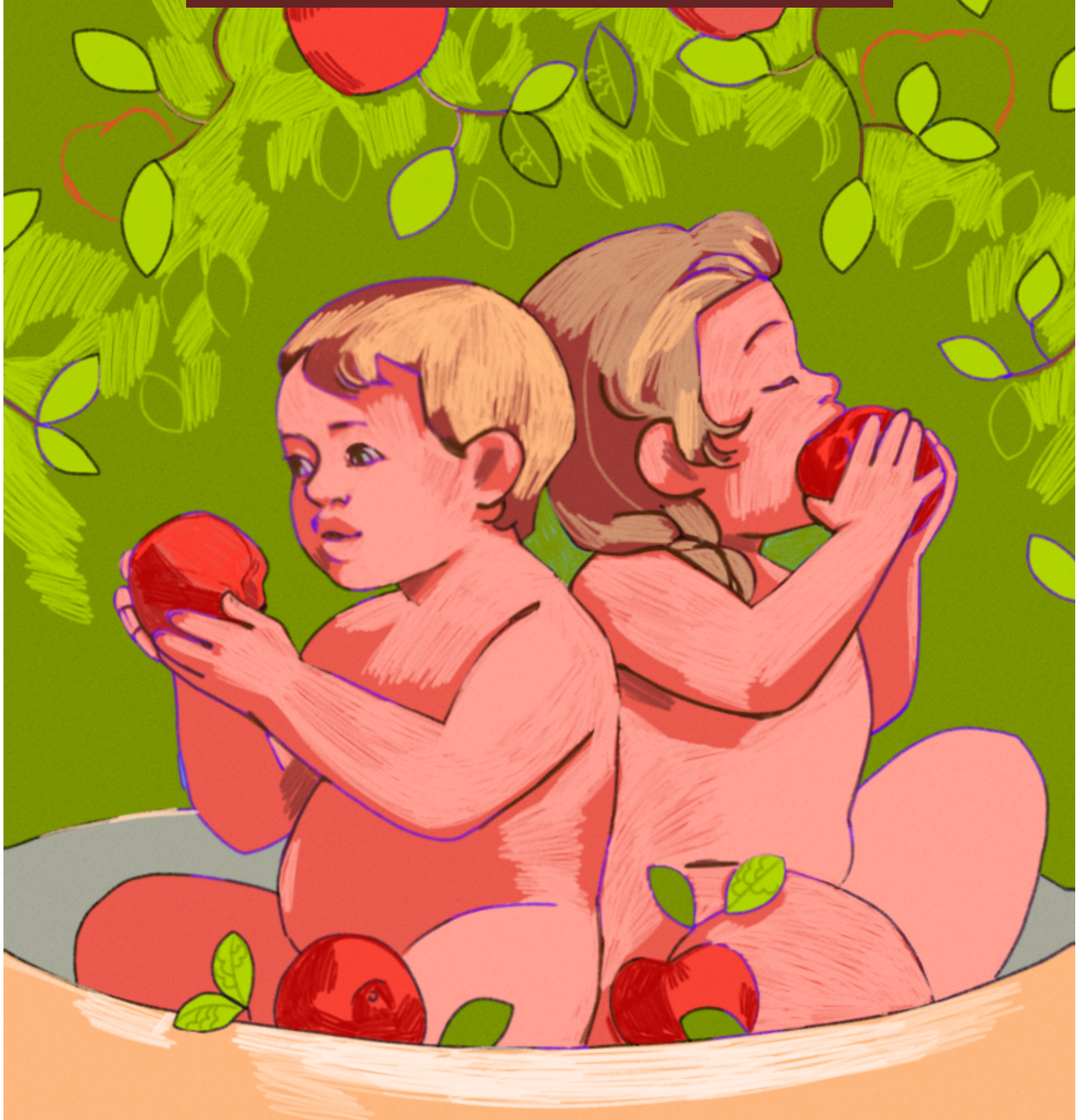


Fruits of One
APPLE TREE



*Dedicated to the young people of Donetsk and Kharkiv,
in particular to those who will be young forever*

Fruits of One Apple Tree



This collection was compiled by the participants of the 2020–21 Donetsk-Kharkiv Dialogue of the Peaceful Cities Youth Initiative.

The political positions of the authors expressed in the text do not necessarily correspond to the views of the editorial team. The Peaceful Cities Youth Initiative is politically neutral.

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Foreword

Fruits of One Apple Tree is devoted to the recollections of the war of young people in Donetsk and Kharkiv. Ten short stories from youth on different sides of the line of contact allow readers to see the armed conflict from a new perspective. These personal, autobiographical accounts do not leave one indifferent. War viewed through the eyes of young men does not look necessary or heroic; on the contrary, this collection reveals the horrors of war and the destruction it causes, narrated by young people with personal experience. Acknowledging the problem is the first step toward solving it.

Fruits of One Apple Tree is not a title chosen arbitrarily: the fruits are we, the youth, who have been separated by the war. They say that the apple never falls far from the tree: How great is the distance between the apples in our case? All readers should answer this question first for themselves.

We are grateful to the set of authors from Donetsk and Kharkiv who have voluntarily shared their deeply personal past experiences with readers. Compiling this collection has also proved useful to the editors, who are themselves on different sides of the no man's land. A genuine dialogue was established in the process, and stereotypes were broken down. The editors believe in the power of the truthful word and that it leaves its mark. We dare to hope that the more similar texts are presented to the public, the sooner this war will come to an end.

In these pages you will find no political agitation or propaganda – simply the lived experience of young people.

We wish for our readers to, above all, discover the person across the contact line. Let this new experience and perspective become one more step on the path to reconciliation. Recognizing that we are fruits of one tree is the basis for peaceful life in our homeland.

May 2021, Donetsk and Kharkiv

M.V. Aharkov, O.S. Overchuk, and others

Under My Skies



Have you ever noticed that the sky is different in every city?

Skeptics will say it's the chemical composition of the air, but I think the sky reflects what goes on underneath. When the polka that was my childhood played, the sky was pink. When my youth swirled in a waltz, the sky was crystal blue. But when the war came, all colors seemed to fade.

It was the spring of 2014. As we expected, when it warmed the streets were filled with blooming trees, and it was as though the soft rays of the sun dissolved in the air, leaving behind an aroma of youth and hope. We never would have thought this was to be our last spring at home. Having survived the challenging winter full of fear and grief, we were glad that the turmoil in the capital had begun to die down and the aspiration to honor and justice was prevailing.

I am sixteen, and I am a student in school. My graduation is soon. And after that, I anticipate, will follow years of university life away from home, the fulfillment of my sweetest dreams and happy visits home on breaks. When you're sixteen, the world seems much kinder and more generous, the victory of justice seems inevitable, and even the rallies in Donetsk do not frighten because after Maidan you are somehow certain that there will be no more evil. Of course, it is still not clear what is going on in Crimea, and the faces of the Heavenly Hundred's mothers glisten with tears, but it's already spring, which means that your remaining worries are necessarily about to melt away, just like the snow recently did. Such naive thoughts filled my head while there was more and more talk of the

oppression of the Russian-speaking population and, consequently, accounts of dreadful violence against bearers of yellow-and-blue ribbons. Arguments broke out between long-time neighbors, between strangers at bus stops. Society abruptly split; the impending referendum and soon enough its results became the hottest subject of discussion. While making prognoses about the future of Eastern Ukraine, we tried not to forget about our approaching exams and the need to choose prom dresses.

Until those troubling weeks, I'd had little interest in contemporary politics, but suddenly I realized that history, which had always drawn me in its scientific regard, was being written right then, on the streets of my city. I heard how armed strangers were taking people's cars, how they were storming government offices, how threatening phone calls became more and more common. And even as I sang my beloved "*Vivat, academia*" within my school walls, my soul would not be relieved of worries that the conflict was only gaining momentum. That's when the sky began to fade. Certainly, those people who never took their eyes off the newspapers or televised debates no longer had time to observe the sky.

Graduation came. Flowers, congratulations, tears – everything as it was supposed to be. It was an amazing evening, when the rustle of dresses muffled the heated arguments about recent events. Warm recognitions and sincere wishes were said, hugs were given, and the last school waltz was danced. We were excited and happy. The only thing left was to see the sunrise, which was supposed to symbolize the beginning of adulthood, the start of a beautiful journey. I'm sure the sunrise was unusually beautiful that

morning, but we didn't see it, for it was somewhere above the clouds. The skies covered their expanse with a dense haze that diligently obscured the watercolor patterns of the emerging sun. My school life didn't end quite like it does in American movies about graduations: I wept that morning, yet not out of joy or even disappointment at the invisible sunrise, but rather because of a phone call that came closer to the morning. My father answered it and then in a calm and even tone announced that my brothers and I would spend that night at my grandmother's because it was dangerous to return home.

When war comes very close to your family, when you begin to sense its rotten smell, any naive youthful ideas about life recede without a trace. When military vehicles, APCs and tanks fill hitherto peaceful streets, when tricolor flags brazenly wave over your birthplace, when expressing your opposition entails endangering not only yourself, but also your loved ones – then you completely forget to look at the sky. Reality turns out to be deadly, and death turns out to be fully real. More and more acquaintances and friends plan their departure. The silence becomes more oppressive.

A few days after our graduation, my brothers and I traveled to Kyiv to take the nationwide university entrance exam, and the next day the rail connection ceased to function. For some time we thought we would be able to go back home, but when a few weeks later our parents managed to leave the conflict zone by some miracle, it became clear that there was already no way back. My brother and I passed our exams and entered university. That's how my student life in Kharkiv began.

The events in Donbas were developing rapidly, and, despite all the engrossing affairs of freshman year, I never stopped following the news. Memories of happy days spent with old friends on the streets where "everything is simple and familiar" tantalized my soul. I liked Kharkiv; I had planned to study in this city all along. But the realization that the war had drawn a line not only across the earth but also in my own biography, forever dividing my life into "before" and "after," rumbled like thunder in my ears. I wanted to go home just for a bit, but I couldn't. I wanted to see my friends, but most of them are still scattered across the country and will be so forever. I so wanted to see the sunset above our street, but there were battles on the next street over. Thinking back to my home often, I didn't lift my eyes to the Kharkiv sky for a long time. This meant that I couldn't fall in love with this city with all my soul.

A year went by. The intervals between shooting grew longer and people began to sleep a little more soundly. I came home then for the first and last time during all these years. My heart fluttered with joy in anticipation of visiting loved ones and the places where I had learned to walk. We passed the Ukrainian checkpoint and as we approached the DNR one I saw a tricolor flag blotting out my native sky. I'll never forget that moment: something inside me burst, and pressing back into my seat, as if trying to get away from what I had seen, I suddenly had the urge to jump out of the car and run as hard as I could, away from home. During those days I realized for the first time that my home had been taken from me. I roamed my dear alleys, walked around the schoolyard, and met neighbors who had treated me with candy in childhood. And I saw bombed-out buildings, empty children's playgrounds, and an anger that I did not understand in the eyes of old

acquaintances when they would learn that I was "a Ukrainian." My home was taken from me, that dear and intimate thing that every person should have. My city is no longer mine. Do you think I'm being dramatic? You have the right to, but this is my story, on which the war has made its mark unsolicited.

The last thing I remember about home is the sky. It was August and we sat for a while in our yard, our heads looking up. The warm air enveloped us totally, the sounds of the summer night carried to us from around, and we were silent, gazing hungrily up into the starry sky. Never had I seen such depth. It seemed as if somebody had laid out the entire universe before us. The stars fell one by

one, and we, long frozen in excitement, completely forgot that on the other side of the fence there was war.

It's an amazing thing, the sky. It's different everywhere, in different cities and at different times. Still, the sky that saw you as a child will forever remain special. The protagonist of one Soviet movie said: "Nowhere and never, in no city in the world ... do the stars shine so bright and mesmerizingly as in the city of your childhood." It's true. I know. My home was taken from me, and I learned to love the sky above Kharkiv. But I will never forget how the stars shine over the city of my childhood.

Such People!



It is the summer of 2013 in the city of Svyatogorsk. Here, in the children's camp 'The Pearl of Donetsk,' the second season has just come to an end. On the day of departure, children run about with their bags and backpacks along the alleys amidst the buildings and tall pine trees. Some sort of pleasant music fills the camp, echoing through the speakers, although it is barely audible because of the collective hum and laughter of people and the creaking of doors and windows in each building. In the crowd some are clearly glad to be leaving 'The Pearl,' whereas others cannot hold back their tears, warmly hugging their favourite camp counsellors.

So, after having said goodbye and exchanged promises to meet with all those both familiar and unfamiliar to me, I left the emotional crowd, a thirteen year old in a Shakhter Donetsk T-shirt, which I had acquired from my roommate by trading a can of 'Zhyvchik' lemonade and a black bracelet patterned with skulls. My father walked beside me, helping me carry my bags. I told him about my time at the camp the entire ride home, and he shared his recollections of the pioneer camps of his childhood. Leaving sunny and green Svyatogorsk, we were both sure that my father would, once again, receive a voucher for this camp, and that I would again come here for a break.

That didn't happen.

I remember how chaotically events began. It was April and then May of 2014, and spring was in highest glory. Everything was in blossom and green, and one could already swim in the Sea of Azov, which is where our village was. It was in May that a new flag was first hoisted above the town hall. At that time, many were interested in the new colours on the flagpole, as they had not been changed since 1991. There had been much commotion

about the referendum, and some journalists had arrived. Although war was already being waged in Slavyansk, Kramatorsk, Lugansk, and Donetsk, we only heard about it from acquaintances, while it was discussed much more often and more passionately by strangers on television.

The new design of the flag did not last long: By the end of May the bicolour flags had returned, and there were many multitudes more of them – flags were hung up wherever it was possible to hang them. At the same time convoys of grey pick-up trucks with the 'Azov' emblem rolled into the village. The people in the back of the trucks clearly wished to resemble American commandos, with their black uniforms, their just as black tactical vests, and their fashionable aviators, machine guns drawn.

Many such fighters rolled through the streets, from time to time organising round-ups in summer cafes or conducting door-to-door document checks for the purpose of 'identifying separatist groups.' I am unsure whether they found what they were looking for, but before the end of July the 'Azovites' abruptly vanished from the village and its neighbouring areas, and the 'Dnipro' battalion took their place. In essence, there was little to distinguish them from their predecessors, except that they occupied a few guest houses with good beaches to suit their needs. Skipping forward, they were in turn replaced by 'Aidar,' who were there a very short time indeed. The purpose of these chess-like manoeuvres is unclear to this day. Most likely is that the numerous armed groups, emerging like mushrooms after heavy rain, simply divided spheres of influence. Either that, or they were deciding who was more worthy of defending this rather prosperous resort area.

But the battalions of 'commandos' were nothing compared to the surge of refugees, at once a headache, pity, and fright. The capacity of our village was by far exceeded. My mother, who at that time worked in the village administration, came home exhausted and emotionally drained, since all tasks regarding the registration and allocation of refugees from the war fell on the shoulders of the administration. State offices were filled with crying children, queues, countless folders with countless papers, and the July heat. That summer was the first time the phrase 'humanitarian aid' became common usage; funds came in the form of food deliveries, while concerned citizens helped with home appliances and clothing.

The situation was such that the guest houses not occupied by the 'commandos' did not suffice to accommodate all those in need, so many locals accommodated them for free in rooms which they would usually lease during the summer holidays. There were also those, however, who intentionally raised the prices of their rooms when the village was at its most overcrowded. 'Such people!' said my father. 'They haven't come here for a holiday, but our degenerates try and rip them off. There are just no words!'

There really were no words, and this was the case for the actions of some refugees, too. It was widespread practice at that time to put up a 'children' sign on your car to improve one's chances of being able to get away from a checkpoint faster. After all, children don't handle the steppe heat well. I saw many times how light trucks, loaded with all sorts of personal possessions and with no more than two seats, would brazenly overtake an entire convoy of cars while bearing a 'children' sign. Moreover, there were even those who

shamelessly complained about the rooms offered to them for free. 'Such people!' – there's not much more to be said.

One August evening, after returning from the sea, I was sitting in our yard and talking to my parents. My father said that a friend of his in our district's centre had heard the sound of faraway shells, which meant that war was closer than we thought. I immediately dismissed the idea, since just that day I had read online that everything was calm south of Donetsk.

At night I was woken by a powerful thunder, and, hardly having realised what was going on, I understood that the media were not to be trusted. War was already here. For some reason we all went outside. The horizon shone – that was a neighbouring village, no more than three kilometres away. 'Go back to the house,' said my mother, although we both knew well that in the event of shelling such advice would change nothing. I stayed to watch the blazing, roaring fires of war, complemented by the stutter of machine guns and the streaking of tracers across the sky.

The next morning my mother was part of the response team from the village administration. The events of that night are still the source of rumour and have been forgotten against the backdrop of war. Three border guards were killed while on duty monitoring the radar – a small structure for surveilling the coast. It is still unknown who fired on them, where from, and why. Someone claimed that it had been military boats, while someone else found traces of armoured vehicles coming from the village. Either way, this was the first warning call that we, too, would soon suffer the same fate as those cities already in battle. My mother, incidentally, said that by the time they arrived at the scene, locals had already

managed to pull out metal fragments from the site of the shelling to sell off as scrap metal. Such people!

A week before September 1st I came to school to help get the classroom ready for the holiday. While putting up new curtains, I overheard the conversation between my class teacher and a colleague: Have you heard the orders? We're meant to use the first lesson to teach about 'United Ukraine.' But what can I say about a united Ukraine if the children see everything themselves?

That lesson never ended up happening, and we only returned to school in October, for on one of the last days of a troubled summer the walls shook at around five in the morning. This time the fighting had reached somewhere very near. It seemed that an 'emergency bag,' into which were packed all essential items and documents, would soon come in handy. Fortunately, after a little while, things quietened down; there was no need for the bag, although it would be kept close at hand for almost a year. That was the worst time, when no one knew what would happen a couple of hours hence. Information about bombardments and changes of authority spread through rumours, and everyone was suspended in this vacuum, left to glance periodically at their emergency bags.

War is war, but day-to-day life must go on. One afternoon I was picking grapes while shots could be heard in the distance. The crop had been especially good that year, which meant there was lots of work to be done. I remember that moment vividly: I was standing on a stepladder, cutting another bunch of Isabella grapes, and behind the fence an elderly lady was riding past on her bicycle. A second later there was the thunder of an incoming shell, so loud and sudden that I stumbled and almost fell. The impact was unremarkable,

however, and I was most impressed by the elderly cyclist, who stopped, quite literally threw her old 'Minsk' cycle onto the asphalt, and began to express to the whole street her opinions on those 'b*tches' and 'c*nts' whose 'f*cking guns were shooting up normal people.' After exclaiming exactly where such people ought to shove off to, she shook her fist at something nearby that had gone up in flames, righted her bike, and continued on her way. I'm not sure why, yet the fervent speech of the indignant senior citizen lifted my mood a little. But then it was our hospital being shelled.

The bicolour flags disappeared. So too disappeared the warriors of light together with the warriors of goodness, who, by all accounts, did not offer any sort of serious resistance. An abandoned BMP tank with a broken track became an ironic symbol of the retreat of 'Aidar.' The track bore the inscription 'to Moscow.' It didn't get there.

I cannot say that the advent of new authorities changed our lives dramatically in any way. It didn't. We, just as before, 'sat on our suitcases' and listened to cannon fire, just as before not understanding at all what was happening around us. Only after a while, when everything had 'settled down' and it became clear that the Republic was serious and would be here for a long time, did people continue to live approximately as they did before – work, family, home. Some people I knew joined the militia, and others who had left the village enrolled in the Ukrainian National Guard. I eventually began the ninth grade, where my first lesson was on 'Donbass – sweet Homeland.' In those years, teachers were trying not to touch politics in our lessons, always repeating the slogan: 'School lies outside politics.' For example, in a geog-

raphy lesson, a dispute about Crimea was interrupted by a teacher, who said the following:

'For the time being, let's say that Crimea belongs to nobody, or that it's something like Greek.'

Gradually more attention was paid to basic military training in schools and the organisation of every sort of military-patriotic competition. I enjoyed taking part. I liked marching, doing what was expected of me, defending the school's reputation at Republic-wide gatherings, and standing as a guard of honour during ceremonies. My enjoyment didn't come from a zealous support of the DPR or a desire to go to the front, but simply because I was a teenager who was fascinated by military affairs and history. Our school was always poorly supplied with technical equipment and materials, and we had no model weapons to swiftly disassemble and assemble in preparation for military competitions. Know how we solved that problem? We used real weapons to prepare instead.

Our school negotiated with staff of the military command that several students would go to a base after classes and practice there under supervision. This worked – we marched brilliantly in competitions, disassembled and reassembled Kalashnikovs faster than everyone else, and easily handled chemical protection suits. As a reward for such success we were taken to a military training ground and allowed to shoot at targets.

While we were training, I, as the commander of the school platoon, became very

close to the soldier who oversaw our activities, who turned out to be a pleasant man with a tired gaze. He talked to me about his life before the war, about the airport and Slavyansk. He also said that he didn't want to see either my friends or me on the frontline, and that it was better for us to be wearing school uniforms than camouflage worn out by shrapnel. Incidentally, the trips to the training ground were his personal initiative.

Strangely, it was at that very difficult time that the Ministry of Education of the DPR began to allocate money to carry out various projects, and some of that money ended up in our school. Before the end of my time at school, I was able to attend summer camps in Crimea and the Moscow area for free, as well as to compete and win prizes in international contests held in Moscow. At the same time people were receiving humanitarian aid from the Red Cross, from Rinat Akhmetov, as well as from the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations. Some came to collect their food packages in expensive cars. I don't know how they ended up on the lists of 'those most in need,' but packages of food were enthusiastically loaded into the boots of elite foreign cars in plain view without qualms. Such people!

The years go by implacably quickly. With the benefit of hindsight, I think that there are still changes to come concerning our passports, flags, car registrations, and the borders on our maps. Attitudes to the past and present will change, the world will change. The only thing that will remain is the feeling that we, the people whose younger years fell during wartime, will never truly be understood. Future generations will not understand us, nor will our contemporaries in Kiev or Moscow. They will not understand our tired gaze, or why we react strangely to the

rumble of the May thunder. They will not understand why so many of us do not, and will

not, have a homeland. After all, we understand little ourselves.

When the military conflict began, I was in school. Neither I nor my relatives have ever faced any linguistic discrimination or harassment at the hands of “Ukrainization.” I speak and write in Russian and Ukrainian equally well. At school, we had classes exclusively in Ukrainian. Sometimes, we did not have enough textbooks in Ukrainian, so, for some subjects, we used textbooks in Russian. I would say that, at the time, almost everyone spoke Russian in daily life; few people spoke Ukrainian on the streets. Some people spoke the so-called “*Surzhyk*” — they combined Ukrainian with Russian words.

Before the war, every summer, I went with my family on vacation to Berdiansk, Odesa, Crimea, or abroad. We were well received everywhere. Now I understand how wonderful life was before the war: people had good jobs, housing, their near and dear were nearby. Everything was going well, I had bright prospects: I would finish school, study at Donetsk University, work, and live in Donetsk. Everything was going to be well. And suddenly the military conflict, which ruined my life, made me and my family say goodbye to our hopes.

First, what happened in Crimea. I could not wrap my head around how a neighboring country could start a military invasion. It seems to me that plans to seize Crimea and Donbas had been conceived long ago and they were just waiting for a convenient time. Our chosen course towards the European vector of development, in my opinion, was only a pretext to seize the territory of our country. If not this, there would be another excuse. Nobody expected such aggression. In Ukraine, neither the government nor the army were prepared to defend their territory.

I remember when the shelling began. Sometimes, we heard volleys during the day, sometimes at night. This made us shiver... The explosions were sometimes close, sometimes far away. To be honest, I at first didn't understand what it was, naively believing that it was just some random kind of noise — well, anything can happen... In our class group chats, the topic was often discussed, but everyone was divided into two camps: some panicked and were horrified by the explosions, whereas some laughed it all off, and said that they were “just sounds from factories,” that it had “happened before” and that we were “too frightened.” Every evening, my parents and I checked V Kontakte groups like Typical Donetsk; at about eight in the evening, there was an “evening roll call,” where people wrote about the explosions and in which parts of the city they heard them. I still remember those restless discussions and the fear I felt when I read about the neighborhoods close to mine...

My parents and I immediately sealed all the windows and began to stock up on essential products. In our building, a shelter was opened. The school canceled classes and taught us what to do if shelling were to start: where to run, how to escape. Mostly, everyone stayed at home: my parents did not let me go out, fearful of danger. I would ask for their permission at least to sit on the bench by the entrance. I remember how my best friend once said that she and her parents wanted to go to Kyiv for a week or two, wait until things calm down a bit, and come back. I was keenly awaiting her return, and she wrote to me that she might even persuade them to come back earlier. But this did not happen. They left their apartment and never returned. Generally, many have done this, and our family is no exception.

In July 2014, my mother told me that we would go away to stay for a little while with her cousin in Konstantynivka (Donetsk province). I did not even imagine that would be the last time I'd see our Donetsk railway station, with the reflective blue coating on its walls, and that I would be leaving my room and my apartment for the very last time, too. When we arrived, my parents kept on following the news, talking to friends on the phone, and trying to find out what the situation was. We also talked to friends from other areas, and those from far away thought that our stories were exaggerated and we just wanted attention. People who live in the controlled regions of Ukraine will not fully understand us; they do not understand the horror of shells, the dread of facing mortal danger. To us, that is not just like footage from a film.

After a while, my parents decided to go home. The railway operations in the Donetsk direction were already suspended, the road to Donetsk was closed, so they went by bus. Soon, they returned and brought some things. We lived on our savings and planned to move to a rented apartment either in Dnipropetrovsk or Kharkiv province. People feared that hostilities would spread all over the entire Donetsk province, and Konstantynivka was only eighty kilometers from Donetsk... However, as soon as the landlords saw our permanent residence address, they immediately refused to cooperate. That was what hurt the most, the intolerance which meant they considered us dangerous strangers and were afraid of us. It was the same case with finding work. Now, this problem has mostly disappeared; it is easy to find housing and work regardless of one's place of registration. People already have more understanding and sympathy, although not all. Ultimately, my parents could only find an

apartment in Konstantynivka (we could not stay with relatives for such a long time). I was placed in a new school. Again, my parents told me that this was only for a month, because, in Donetsk, the beginning of the school year was postponed to October, so I'd just study here for now, and by October everything would be fine, and I would continue to study as before. But, at the same time, they wanted to move their parents from Donetsk, but the latter flatly refused and said that they had survived both World War II and the difficult post-war times, and that they were not afraid of death.

Of course, we didn't return home in October. I continued my studies at the new school. My knowledge from my education in Donetsk allowed me to remain one of the best students. It was difficult to join a new class and frequently answer sensitive questions my classmates asked. Another displaced boy from Horlivka was transferred to our class, and he became my first friend. It is easier to establish contact with a person who has a similar fate and understands you and your feelings better than others. Over time, I assimilated into the new class and found more friends. In addition, in our school, all displaced children had assigned days when the school counselor came and talked to us, so I had a friendly environment.

However, not everything was so perfect, and, very often, internally displaced persons still feel, in some instances, like second-class citizens, especially standing in lines at various social services offices. I had many problems with obtaining a Ukrainian passport (as my place of registration was Donetsk).

Of course, I really missed my grandparents and friends who stayed in Donetsk.

Since 2014, I have been to Donetsk only three times. That was enough to see all the horrors of crossing the Donbas checkpoints: hours of waiting in line, crowded buses, humiliation, frightening interrogations at checkpoints (about where I was going, what I was taking, and a full search of my personal belongings), the fear that you will not be allowed in, then the fear that you'll never be allowed out... It is very painful to realize that before I could safely get from Konstantynivka to Donetsk in an hour and a half, whereas in 2016 it took five hours, or even seven — depending on luck and the day of the week.

When I came to Donetsk for the first time, I did not recognize the city. There were DPR flags everywhere, martial law, curfew, abandoned houses and shops, lots of soldiers, high prices, and the persistent sound of shells. Many friends have left. But this was my home, which I missed, which I dreamed of at night... Even the air was familiar here; it is impossible to convey that happiness I felt when, upon arrival, I walked my familiar path from home to school, walked through the park, where I often roller-skated with friends, and visited other personally memorable places. But, at the same time, it was very painful to observe the decline of my city... This became especially noticeable for me in 2018, when I had already begun to live and study in Kharkiv and could compare my hometown with it. It's so sad to be in a mini-bus and look at the windows of empty shops, where only the name signs remain, and the doors are boarded shut, and at the same time, to remember prosperous Kharkiv, where, on the contrary, foreign companies

are entering the market, new stores and chains are opening, more and more opportunities for development are arising, parks are being developed at a tremendous speed, modern houses are being built, and much more. It is a bitter realization that all this, or maybe even better, could have been here, in our Donetsk. *But now it is a totally different reality.*

I grieve these thoughts and injustice. Although almost seven years have passed, sometimes, before going to bed, I think about it, dreaming and imagining an alternative, happy reality. I hope that such a reality will not just be confined to my dreams.

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the situation has become much worse. The Ukraine-DPR border has been closed for virtually a year already. You can only get to Donetsk through Russia, but currently, I lack the financial means to go. I want to see my relatives and friends in person so much.

I would like sometime for many citizens of Kharkiv to be taken on a tour, to be taken across the scorched earth, through the checkpoints, the destroyed houses, taken to see the "Danger. Mines" signs, and so on. Then, perhaps, they would understand more clearly what they could lose, and would learn to appreciate peaceful skies and the ability to live and work freely. My story may be a sorrowful one, but I think that one should hope and believe in better prospects. Each generation faces its own challenges, its own test of strength.

School Days



Winter of 2017. In Makeevka, it is the third year since the start of the war in Donbass. Active and passive phases of war alternate. It is impossible to guess when shelling might begin. No agreements or truces guarantee that a sudden spate of shelling will not destroy a residential area, or that a single wild projectile will not fly into somebody's house. People wake up and do not know if they will live to see the end of the day. And as they go to bed, they do not know if they will get to wake up. But, somehow, we had to go on living. Somehow, we did.

During "quiet" times, schools, like other institutions, operate normally. Just in case, each school has two evacuation plans: one for fires, one for shelling. When a fire breaks out, it's clear what to do — lead the students out of the school building in an orderly manner. When there is a threat of shelling, children need shelter. Usually, everyone is sent down into a bomb shelter (if there is one) or the basement. However, even with regular drills and strict adherence to the plan, its implementation in practice may be ineffective. Shelling, as already mentioned, can begin out of the blue, and its intensity and duration can never be predicted in advance. Therefore, it seems that it is unlikely that it will be possible to act in advance of the shelling and manage to guide the children into the shelter in time. If the shelling begins while everyone is inside the school building, then it is safer to look for the closest options on the spot: lie on the floor, assume a position near a load-bearing wall, avoid standing in front of windows, etc. Allowing students to move around while shells are falling nearby and threatening to hit the school means putting their lives in greater danger.

To avoid such situations, especially when there was a flareup at the frontline and civilian lives came under real threat, remote learning was implemented in schools, similar to what students all over the world experienced in 2020. Before that, remote learning was uncommon. For example, remote learning might usually be implemented for the sake of quarantine, to prevent the spread of disease among schoolchildren if one student fell ill. We had other reasons for remote learning: so that children would not die from shell shrapnel or be buried alive under the rubble of their school.

At the end of January of 2017, shelling of residential areas in Makeevka became more frequent. By the end of the New Year holidays, when people were expecting colorful fireworks in the sky, they got shells instead. Obviously, under the prevailing conditions, it was unsafe to have children coming to schools located in dangerous areas. There were no students in my school on Tuesday, January 31st. The administration had decided to move us to remote learning.

It feels strange to stay home because classes have been cancelled for shelling. It is understandable that we stayed home from school for our own safety. Indeed, it would be difficult to evacuate an entire building of children during a shelling attack, and it can't be foreseen where a shell might hit. The situation that would arise in such a case would be critical. In an instant, the school could become a concrete grave for hundreds of students.

Therefore, it makes sense that it is safer at home. I stayed in my house in a former mining village. The basement was always close by, in the next room. When I would hear a painfully familiar whistle or be

startled by explosions nearby, I could immediately run down there, making sure, on the way, to bring with me a folder of documents gathered in advance.

But there was no sense of security at all. It might seem that if you are at home, in your dearest place, with your family, in your closest circle, any dangers should not worry you, because you are with those whom you love and who love you. However, at the same time, there is a feeling of detachment from the world... You are not alone, but all of you are alone together. The fear of death, constantly hovering in the air, is keener, more pervasive, as if everything ends with this house and the people inside it, and whatever is outside is unknown, covered in a thick gray fog. You don't know what's going on around you. You see nothing past your walls. The feeling of loneliness is complemented by anxiety, and the anxiety intensifies with the dull sounds of incoming shells, which are becoming closer and louder. You are not safe, you are imprisoned.

Wednesday morning, February 1st. Around 9 am. Hit. The floor, ceiling, walls, and furniture, everything is shaking. A deafening roll of thunder.

Humans have an evolved fear response to extremely loud sounds. Hearing thunder, even the primitive man would seek refuge, guided by the instinct of self-preservation. Natural phenomena such as thunderstorms and lightning have always been dangerous. But nothing can compare to the thunder of war. The thunder of war is much stronger; it strikes all living things, plunging them into horror. It cannot be conveyed with precision to those who never lived through it. No matter how skillful the writer is, the reader who has not experienced war will not

understand. One can scarcely imagine what it is like to hear such a powerful burst. Once, I tried to imagine it myself. But, without hearing the thunder of war firsthand, you will not be able to understand the feelings one endures.

A mortar exploded a hundred meters from my home. Fortunately, it did not fall on a house and there were no people within the blast radius. It was not a lone shell; others fell a kilometer away, right where my school was. Several shells hit the school grounds on the inner courtyard side. Shrapnel ripped through the entire inner façade of the building, and all the windows were shattered. Some pieces of the exploded shells hit the classrooms. Most of the damage was done to the main corridor on all three floors of the school, as the classrooms were located on the opposite side of the courtyard.

It's scary to imagine what could have happened had the children been at school. By good fortune, classes had been canceled the day before the school came under shelling. How many lives were saved by that decision! At that time, there were only a few teachers and staff members at school. Hearing the burst of shells nearby, everyone present was immediately evacuated to the safest and most accessible place in the building at that time — to the school cloakroom, which was below ground.

Later that evening, I received a phone call from my class teacher. It was then, actually, that I learned about what had happened, that the school had been damaged and quite badly. The teacher phoned all the boys in our class to call on us to help deal with the aftermath of the shelling. He asked me to bring a hammer and, if possible, other tools. Without further thought, I quickly got

dressed and went to school. Late in the evening. Not at all to study.

When I arrived, I learned that the teachers had called all the high school students and asked for their help. They also asked the students' parents. And help was truly needed. Besides broken glass in the corridors, damaged walls, and doors which were broken down, the school suffered other critical damage. The shell had destroyed the boiler room, which provided heating. In February, with broken windows and no heating, it would be impossible to conduct activities at the school; the temperature inside the building was basically the same as outside.

Measures had to be taken. Our goal was to temporarily patch up the broken windows. The administration, using the school's budgetary funds, promptly acquired the necessary supply of oilcloth and nails for us to start repairs. I will never forget this experience. Perplexed by the common mission of restoring their dear school, students, parents, and teachers formed a conveyor belt: some measured and cut off the necessary pieces of oilcloth, while others, including myself, took the cut pieces and nailed them to the window frames. Work was in full swing on all floors. The goal was clear: as swiftly as possible, as well as possible. There was no room for thoughts of fatigue or coldness. The work had to be done without delay.

it was then, probably, that i first witnessed the concept of civic duty embodied truly.

United by the common misfortune, we worked vigorously to repair the damage. Of course, this is not the kind of self-sacrifice that can be found only at the front on occasion. But it was then, on February 1st, 2017, that I felt not artificial, but genuine collectivity. We were often told that it is characteristic of our people, although, in fact, you will not encounter it in everyday life. People are divided into little groups. No one cares for the common, for that which belongs to society. Therefrom derives the degradation of the environment, the indifference to the problems of passersby on the street — from this fixation on self and the closest of loved ones. But, in such an extreme situation as this, there arises solidarity. At such moments, collectivity awakens, as though it is innate, yet buried deep in everyone's mind. This instills faith in people, in the good nature of man.

Ultimately, the task set before us was successfully completed. The damage caused to the school was hastily repaired to the extent possible under the circumstances. I wandered home, tired, in the dark. It would be a long time, however, before I came back to school.

The Smell of Forgotten Roads



It was 2014.

I was in my second year of university in Kharkiv, enjoying the spring. The sun shined brightly. And, returning to my student hostel from a lecture, I called my mom to check that everything was alright. Instead I heard some troubling news.

“They shot up a bus in Sloviansk.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, since I hadn’t been able to follow the news as I didn’t have a TV.

Mom was extremely worried about the proximity of the shootings to Donetsk, and that they had allegedly been perpetrated by Russians, meaning any forecast for the events to come was bleak. My entire family were from the region. Although I said, “It’s nothing serious. These things happen. Don’t worry,” to my mom, I thought to myself, “Will I really live in wartime? On the other hand, there have always been wars throughout the ages — why should our age be an exception? A war was due sooner or later.” That was only the beginning...

Like all students I would return home during the summer. This time it was more interesting, however.

Trains were still operating then — eight hours and I was home. My parents met me at the train station, and we walked in conversation — it was less than a fifteen-minute journey. Everything was as usual.

Several days later my father was warned at work about which regions might come under artillery fire, and that the boss was going to move his employees and their families to Mariupol, to the base for which he had single-handedly paid. Little by little, we

began gathering documents, money, and everything else which might prove useful. We taped our windows so they’d be able to resist the explosions. The main thing was not to show any fear and support each other. Meanwhile we talked to our neighbours, told them about the barrages, and told them to be careful. We asked them about the whereabouts of their cellars, so we knew where to dig if a shell were to hit their house — the village consisted of private plots and everyone hid in their basements.

Life there was not as it was before — filled with quiet, calmness, and the sound of digging in the backyard, with wandering in nature and trips to fields to enjoy the sunset. Now, every time you leave your house, even just to go to the store, you subconsciously begin to look for potential shelter and you listen closely to whistles in the wind; it could be a shell or it could be machine gun fire. Whenever you climb up to the second floor of your garage, you imagine how you might descend as quickly as possible. You go to sleep believing that it might either be your last night or that you might be woken up and need to go hide immediately in the basement. At least the neighbours know where it is and would save us. You begin to feel sorry for all the dogs roaming in the courtyard, because you can’t take them and hide with them; that would take time and might even cost someone’s life.

We had to use our basement a couple of times. It was scary. We heard a whistle of a shell flying in the direction of our village. We stopped whatever we were doing in those minutes. Come fire or flood, we would survive. Those minutes in the basement were an eternity. We listened closely to everything that was happening around us to the very end. When everything seemed to have

calmed down, Dad was the first to go out and inspect the situation.

First he opened the doors of the basement, and then went into our house (since our basement was within the house), and then went into the yard. My heart turned to stone in that moment; if we wouldn't have heard the shell, that would've been the end.

So we prepared to go to Mariupol. A few days before the trip, Dad found out that he had work on those days, so he couldn't travel with us. It was the day of departure, and early in the morning; I usually liked these moments, as generally we only got up at this time to visit the sea with our parents. We loaded the car. In the car, I would usually enjoy the pleasant morning dampness and the first rays of light, which belonged to us and us alone. My brother would cover himself with his sweater and fall asleep with his legs stretched out on top of me. This had its own charm. That morning, however, was perplexing, characterised by fear and turmoil.

We rode without knowing our destination and date of return. We left our grandmother, pets, and other relatives behind. We sat in the car which had been sent by Dad's workplace. He accompanied us for around half the journey, after which we got into a different car, while Dad stayed behind to go to work.

We were in the base for around a week or two – I don't really remember. Dad would speak to Mum every day and tell her about what was going on, how he would hide in the basement and listen to houses being shelled on neighbouring streets, the movement of heavy artillery, and explosions. He had to share his experiences with someone, understandably. Mum was his rock. In turn, my brother and I tried to support her; we would

listen to her talk and go for walks with her. It's scary to imagine what they were both going through at the time.

Perhaps they wouldn't see each other again, nor was it certain that he would remain alive and unharmed. Perhaps something would happen to us on the way back, or perhaps there was nowhere for us to return to; how would we pay for my education and educate my brother then? The rent for the base was over, and we returned home with dread.

We were already in the car, driving through our area, and silently looking at the broken façades of houses. The entire duration of our stay at home was filled with tension, observation, and suspicion. You understand that the phone has to be switched on at all times, that you absolutely must answer every call so that people know that all's well. But when we reply, 'All's well,' to the question of 'How are you?' the response doesn't mean that all is, in fact, well, but simply, 'I'm alive.' On the phone we would let people know the latest news regarding impending shelling. It was unknown where these rumours would originate. In some cases, however, they turned out to be accurate. We tried always to let people know where we were going as accurately as possible in order to assuage their worries, and to protect ourselves. Two months passed. I returned to Kharkiv.

2018.

Over the last four years in Donetsk there have been many changes: The airport and train station have been destroyed, military checkpoints have been built and buses to the Antiterrorist Operation region have been set up – this system is already in operation. Transit passes have been distributed (but not to everyone), as well as curfews, and a local phone operator has appeared. Ukrainian

products have stopped being supplied and Ukrainian TV has stopped being broadcast. The city has become increasingly surrounded, and locals have gone to the front themselves. Those who had Ukrainian state pensions have lost them. They've been accruing pension over the years, but it's very hard to collect. My grandmother, for example, who can only move short distances, and that too, with a walking stick, was forced to travel several times to Mariupol so that the government employees could see she was alive, and so that she could sign to allow her daughter to collect her pension for her. When she travelled there, the documents weren't always ready for her to sign. My father lost his entire pension; he couldn't travel to Ukrainian territory, as he was in the reserve and there was the chance that they'd call him to arms.

it is absolutely low to fight against others from one's own city.

Ultimately, I finally plucked up the courage to go home again. I no longer had any friends, classmates or acquaintances there. Everyone left to different places. I lost contact with them.

The road was long, about fourteen or sixteen hours, through Volnovakha. We rode one bus to the main checkpoint, where we were transferred to another that we rode through the occupied territory. This was quite convenient, since the driver would take our passports, present them himself at checkpoints and quickly hand them back.

When we visited in 2016, the situation was completely different. We were stopped at every single tiny checkpoint, men were forced outside, our documents were checked

and our baggage was often randomly inspected. We were treated like animals, and this was evident from the tone of the soldiers' voices, their behaviour, and their glances. It was best not to look once too often in their direction, not to talk, and to keep gestures and emotions to a minimum, if one had any hope of seeing relatives. We travelled to the main checkpoint, which we had to pass through on foot. There was a 15-minute walk to get there, carrying heavy luggage with the sun beating down our backs. Our morale was low since we understood that the roadsides were covered in mines and that straying from the road was simply impossible. The entire ordeal was unbearable. Then we had to stand in a crowded queue for several hours to have our documents checked, without any respite from the sun, or even an opportunity to use a telephone! After this we walked to the bus that would transfer people from the checkpoint. It was loaded to maximum capacity and then moved off. Even after that there were additional document checks en route.

Everything was different in 2018, although the checkpoint commander still picked me out, checked my phone, and asked me if I had any acquaintances serving in the Ukrainian forces, as well as why I was going home. That was the only nuance of this journey. The city itself was surprising; it was functioning well on its own, was clean, and life appeared to go on. This was simply a superficial impression, however. People's moral condition was depressing. They were constantly stressed from the shooting, the deaths, and the destruction of houses, all of which continued ceaselessly. Mom told me how, a couple of years ago, while sitting down at work, she had seen a piece of heavy artillery go by in her vicinity. Many have lost relatives, parents, and children on the frontline. One lady was almost

hysterical in remembering Ukraine, because her son had died on the frontline.

I saw destroyed houses next to where my friends had lived. There are seemingly jobs and education, but a normal salary is around \$200, while prices rise every day. Living there, you feel as if under a bell-jar: you hear only local and Russian news, and there is nowhere to leave to smoothly, nor can one seek employment abroad (except in Russia).

This situation caused significant strife within families. Many harbour anger at their

close relatives for leaving, and those who have left reproach the ones who have stayed behind.

Some have simply lost contact with their loved ones, especially when people were forced to switch operators and Ukrainian telecoms towers were brought down. Fortunately, telephone connection has been restored. People are pressed to change passports, if they would like to receive a pension or other benefits, although even the new passports are issued, so it is written, in the DNR, Ukraine.

The Iron Bird



War will never change. Mutable are only conceptions of war, of its essence, of its strength and scale, of its tragedy. Each of us knows about it, I think, even while in the womb. We all inherited an understanding of this word and its original meaning. What is war? Blood? Death? Destruction? Fear? Perhaps ... Yet I see it differently.

I see it as an imposing brick house blazing with amber fire, empty inside, with scratched windows, a broken door, a sloping foundation, yet a flat roof. Within there is a child. A child with pure eyes, eyes full of hope, childhood experiences and joy, eyes untainted by all that surrounds us. His soul has not experienced pain, his body has not suffered injuries, but he is unhappy, thinking that everyone has abandoned him, that no one needs him. This even though a few moments ago he was beside his mother and father, and his closest and dearest friends played near his home. As if one flash of thought and the stroke of a paintbrush on paper had deprived him of all this. He pleads for help, pleads for rescue, pleads for protection. You cannot run to help him, for you are impeded by the dirt that eats away at this house, eroding the foundation. You are deafened by sudden bursts of laughter in your head from the heavens, you are blinded by the bright light of fire, but still you hear the cry and pleading of the child very clearly. You can feel how he pulls you in.

And all the people around you seem not to notice. They only wave flags, shout slogans and go about their business, whereafter they drop dead unpredictably, eyes remote and lost. Are they dead? Yes, but half, only on the inside.

Repellent? Yes. Scary? Maybe. Is there a chance? Not in the slightest.

For thousands of years, mankind has blathered on about war and been horrified by it like a black cat, a cat which, with just a flick of its tail, could destroy the continent, ending millions of lives. This same human race which hypocritically espouses the cause of "not allowing war" already knows when a new one will unfold, already begins to muster all the bile, all the anger and rage, all the strength needed for the destruction and massacre of not only the adversary country, not only soldiers, but, before anyone else, those who built, or will build, this world for humanity: the elderly, children, men and women. Regular people. And even upon descending deep below the gates of hell, the once sophisticated kings of nations will not look regular people in the eyes for a last time. For the rulers, this is the true way of the world. For everyone this way has become normal, and they have ceased to care. For everyone this has become one of the true norms in life — killing. That's what really repels, that's what really frightens, that's why there is no longer a chance.

I do not like to do much remembering, my recollections are too blurred, or maybe my consciousness unnoticeably wiped my memory from my "hard drive." Too heavy are the recollections and images that my eyes have seen, even seven years after a new life began for a fourteen-year-old youth who had loved going out with friends, going to school, learning about the world and watching the bright and warm spring sun. Everything has changed, and I'm afraid, forever. Only the war will never change.

The unraveling of the events of that year is a film that continues to this very second. I did not take anything that happened then seriously. This, probably, helped me not to lose my mind when the whole world, which

had just started to take form, which held interest for me and which I loved, began to burn and disintegrate into large concrete ruins. Maybe no one understood how everything was happening, maybe everyone else also believed that this was just a film with a bad plot or a daytime nightmare evoked by heat-stroke from the April-May sun. After all, I did not even fully know what war was. I knew about war only from books, films and stories, and even now I am not completely sure of what I know and what I will still find out, or which I will never be able to learn.

The events of that spring destroyed and changed a lot. my adolescent life, my thoughts about "world peace," my faith in humanity.

It is impossible to give a brief account, and the complete picture of everything that happened, most likely, will never be accessible to anyone. Everything is too blurry and crumpled. Boundaries blurred, what constituted the right thoughts, words and deeds blurred, the understanding of what was good and what was evil blurred, morality was erased and faith in everything sacred and steadfast was destroyed. I do not consider myself a pessimist by any means, or someone ill-fated, who has lost all hope of fulfilling his dream and his goals. No, this is not the case at all. Rather, my aspirations transformed under the influence of many factors and many events, one of which I would indeed like to tell you about.

In the summer, in my city, the chorus of guns and the whisper of shells flying over my house could be heard distinctly, as could short

bursts of machine gun fire, reminiscent of the dull blows of a woodpecker on a tree. If an ordinary person slept in those days, this indicated one of two traits: either one was stupid, or one was very brave. I may be neglecting to mention the "fatigue," because such was the fate to which I was doomed from a couple of weeks, perhaps a month, of scrolling the oppressive and frightening constantly updating Internet feed of incidents not only in my city, but in the entire province. Blood, death and tears appeared in those places where before there had been only joy, where there had been childish laughter, where lovers had met face to face, where teenagers had played football, where young people had gone out. And each of them could not have suspected that literally a few months later wounded men and women, slain children and elderly people maimed by injuries would be carried away from there. My city in its entire history had never been a contender for the distinction of "Green City," yet its main square had previously been seeded with new red flowers, which I had hesitated to remember carefully because they had been delightful even without an encyclopedic knowledge of them. The redone hedge, recently painted black before the Ninth of May, gleamed in the sun, while the streets, cleaned of dust from factories and litter, looked so festive, it seemed. However, now the square was heaped with tires of various sizes, ranging from small ones to such huge tires, I thought, that I could not even imagine what kind of vehicle they were intended for. There were strewn sandbags that did not fit into the general layout of the square at all. Daunting music played constantly. People with homemade banners and flags proclaimed fiery slogans calling for action, for some kind of response from someone and for dissent from something. It seems to me, though, that none of them knew what they

were doing and what they would do tomorrow. Just nobody besides me will tell you the truth.

All these things I witnessed more often with every day. The effect they had was getting stronger. Trying to describe those emotions, I am overwhelmed by fear and the horror of what happened, as if I am remembering a song and instead of hearing my favorite guitar piece, I hear only a beginning violinist's attempts at playing movements of Tchaikovsky. Or it is as if I am looking at my photograph with a friend, in which I see only the reflection of quarrels and fights between people dear to one another, conflict which cannot be stopped even by smashing the frame.

My conscience did not allow me to ignore current events. It devoured me inside and out. I could not sleep, I could not even rest for a minute, without carefully managing affairs in my house. Although I understand now that then I could not control anything, that everything depended on the trajectory of an airborne shell. I was very worried for my family. This is what I wanted to control; I wanted to secure them and hide them anywhere, just so as not to leave them under the red stripe of a plummeting iron star.

But still, after several days in this condition, my strength would run out and my spirit would be exhausted. I had to fall asleep. But to fall asleep, I had to promise myself that nothing would happen to my loved ones. The night I would like to recount was one of the calmest in recent days. There were no discharges or explosions of shells. There were no phone calls that would have followed bursts of machine gunfire before nightfall, and the night sky truly resembled itself. The sky was not marked by tracer ammunition or projectile haze, nor did I see the glow that was

the main achievement of the iron star—the indication that it fell on target. I do not feel comfortable now thinking that what mattered most was that the star should simply fall and the wish of those who launched it be fulfilled, sending up human souls in the plume of smoke left over from the plummeting piece of iron. How wrong I was then.

It was on that night that my most intimate fear came true – my family came under direct threat. As I said earlier, no one and nothing decided my family's and my fate besides the shell, which this time fell near my house, entering my life and memory with this most terrible whistle. The shelling had begun. I don't want to imagine and think about the force of that explosion and the dreadful explosions that followed. The double-glazed windows of our home miraculously endured. The old bed shook, as if mimicking the times when my parents would rock me in the crib as a baby. It was at that moment that I did not even want to think about the wisdom of my actions. I just wanted to instantaneously take my fate away deep underground, as far down as possible. Walking down the street, however, was mortally dangerous. We had gathered all our most important belongings at the front door. All that remained was to open the door and run down to our basement, which at that time was our only shelter and at once a place where we might stay forever, for such places are not designed to shield people from the force of an exploding shell. I acted in a matter of seconds, yet for me time stopped. It froze the moment I darted into our living room, gloomily and totally dark so as not to draw the attention of drones. There my father sat on an old couch watching the blue screen of the TV, the sole source of light, and drinking tea or coffee, as was his daily custom. His face betrayed no fear. He sat still, fixed on the

broadcast, which was awfully disrupted by interference due to the hostilities. For a moment I didn't want even to imagine the most terrible prospect, but such thoughts pierced my head with the smashing blow of an axe. Then I saw my father's blinking eyes, wherein lay reflected the images flashing on the TV.

Time could get ahead of my thoughts no longer. Father refused all requests and pleas to go down with us, never even explaining the reasons for his answer. For me that was the moment "the roof of my house was built anew," as I may describe it. Together with my mother, I was struck by panic. And yet, I managed to suppress it. Most likely, once again, this was because I lacked awareness of what was happening around me. My father changed in my eyes at that second. I did not see him as a coward and would never see him as one from then on. I did not see doubt or resignation in his eyes. At that very moment I saw a soldier, I saw a hero and saw a true man who under no circumstances would get cold feet and run away from what rightfully belongs to him: the life he has lived, his house, his family.

No matter how hard it was for me, I had to descend to the basement with my mother. My fear for my father never left me for a second, but, for some reason, I was sure deep down that everything would be fine with him. I tried to escort my mother to the basement. For some reason, this is when your legs stop obeying you, as though turning into cotton wool. My strength vanished very quickly, but we needed to go further down. Fortunately, we knew where to go and how to reach others through the underground tunnel, for we had needed to flee to the basement more than once before.

The shelling continued. The sounds grew quieter, but the vibrations of the house,

basement walls and ceilings did not stop and even intensified. At that moment in the basement, my mother and I, along with the other residents of the house, became detached and, so to speak, faced uncertainty and fate with an empty and tired gaze. I no longer knew and could not suppose what would happen next. Trying to fall asleep, I wanted to fly out of this basement and go back, back to myself and my life, calm and measured, contented and happy, peaceful and sweet. Probably only when you have lost this in life do you begin to appreciate and treat all these things differently, while despising others' neglect of the same. This proves that there is nothing better than a peaceful life, even though earlier you neglected it yourself.

Lying down on my mother's lap, I seemed to switch roles with her. She controlled the situation now. Maybe this is what I wanted, maybe I didn't want to take on so large a role at so young an age, maybe I would have liked to be for at least a couple of months more a fourteen year old who knew neither grief nor fear, who did not know that at any second he could lose everything and never get it back, who did not feel like a hostage to events, who did not "rebuild the roof of his house" in response. But I had no choice. Fate, as it seemed to me then, had bestowed upon me these responsibilities, and I had to carry them until the end. And lying on her knees, I seemed to slip into my fourteen years before these events. Her gentle, swanlike hands enveloped me in a blanket of calm. At once, her embrace served as my shield and wings, on which I was ready to rise again and reassume "the role of the responsible one," as if nothing had happened. Her gaze was tired, distressed, and afraid, as was true of all of us in the basement, yet I saw in her eyes not weakness, but duty and love for me and my father, love of life and everything around her,

love for music and poetry, literature and nature, good coffee and, most importantly, for the hopes and dreams of her family.

So it went on until dawn. One of the residents of the house had contact with the “outside world,” as we, the new inhabitants of “The Basement,” called it. The information thus reached us that it would be safe to leave the basement in an hour or two, for the shelling of the city and its environs began to gradually cease.

At about six in the morning, my mother and I left the basement and returned home. I examined our house, hoping not to find that its firm concrete brick walls had come under fire or even suffered damage. Terrible fears and thoughts struck me again with renewed force when, most likely because I had slept poorly, I hallucinated damage to my floor and my room. This sensation and the second that it lasted pushed me onto the verge of existence. Although it was just an illusion...

And I was glad that I was just “muddled.”

At home, we saw that everything was fine and that my father was waiting for us, not closing his eyes and not revealing his tiredness. I don't remember how we dealt afterward with the bitter emotional wound left by the metal star, but we managed it, all together...

Ever since this episode, I am truly wary of silence. Sometimes I startle at a sharp whistle, and sometimes I fall asleep still in my clothes. But above all I fear one thing. I fear that someday, when I am much older, I will have a dream where I am once again fourteen years old, where I smile and genuinely so, because it is all over, because every year, month, week, second, and instant gradually kills all the life in us. If we don't end it and forget about it, if we consider it normal, will we die? Yes, but half, only on the inside. And that is terrifying indeed.

A Youth's Perspective on the War



My name is Vlad. I would like to share a story about the events that took place in the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. I witnessed the capture of Luhansk and Sloviansk. My family and I lived in the city of Rubizhne, Luhansk province.

In 2013, I entered the Sloviansk College of the National Aviation University, and witnessing the events of Maidan, I was already beginning to hear how students and employees at college were talking about their relatives from Russia and that they did not know what to do and which side to take. I didn't realise that the impending situation would drag on for several years.

In April 2014, I attended a youth conference in Luhansk. I did not fully understand that the Luhansk headquarters of the Security Service of Ukraine had already been captured. I arrived, spent the weekend at the conference, and went home to Rubizhne, thinking that everything was fine, and that I would return to school. But then my tutor from college called me and said that I better not come to Sloviansk, since the city police department had been seized, and education had temporarily been suspended until the situation in the city would improve. I thus lost my first year at college, one could say.

The capture of Rubizhne was not as aggressive as that of Sloviansk, but one could still hear shooting on the outskirts of the city. My parents thought about what to do and where to go in case brutal war broke out in our city. I remember it clearly: It was spring, and the whole city, or rather the entire Luhansk province, lost power. On the one hand, the prospect of what was to come terrified us, but on the other, everything was so beautiful, especially at night, when the stars would illuminate the whole city. In those moments one would be lost in thought, pondering the

things that one had not noticed before. Everything stopped in its tracks; the hustle and bustle ceased, plenty of citizens left the city, and all that could be heard were the shots of tanks and artillery. Everything froze.

In the summer, our city Rubizhne was liberated on July 22. After a while, our relatives and friends began to come. They thought that they would go and visit the sea, come back and everything would be over, but everything just dragged on. They all began to visit us. We hosted them and started looking for housing for them. I remember that around fifteen people arrived at once, and our rented three-room apartment was filled with guests. By the evening they were all already accommodated in rented apartments. One family, though, lived with us before our relatives arrived. Everyone thought it would end and that they would go back to their homes. But most of these people still live in our city, Rubizhne.

The most frightening thing, probably, is not leaving behind one's property, but starting over from scratch.

Summer ended, and autumn began. I returned to college. When I had left in the spring, I thought that I would just be gone for the weekend rather than for six months. I had left my things in the dormitory and when I arrived, nothing was there. It was unclear who had taken my things because many people had been to the dormitory. And, as I have said, it is harder to start over from scratch.

Our dormitory was taken over by the Ukrainian army. Our college had not yet managed to sign agreements with other dormitories, so I simply did not know what to do. I

commuted every day to Sloviansk from Rubizhne for a whole month until I found a place to live. Every morning I would get up at five o'clock to catch the bus, and I would return home from school at six in the evening so tired that I did not feel like doing anything. Fortunately, I come from a family with many children, so I could travel almost free of charge from Rubizhne to Sloviansk and back; if it were not for concessionary fares, I do not know how I would have made the commute. After some time, Sloviansk began to recover, and people started to return.

Studies resumed and life went on, not the same as it was before, but quite exciting and varied. Honestly, I could narrate and narrate; not even a book would suffice. I think that everyone lived through these events in a unique way. I believe that no matter what, we need to know how to appreciate what we have, be happy and enjoy every day we are granted.

Thank you for your attention.

Near the Frontline



I've never had any doubts that my home is here, in Donetsk. After visiting other provinces, other countries and having seen how other people are living I've made up my mind that I will never give up my home for anything else. From an early age, love for Ukraine was fostered in us: through school lessons on the history of Ukraine, the Ukrainian language and literature. Those were my favourite subjects, not counting sports lessons. At the time when everything unravelled, I was the age my sister is now, thirteen years old. I wasn't a child anymore, nor was I grown enough to understand and remember fully what happened. Seven years of hostilities haven't passed me by. I was left with sporadic, yet very vivid memories. From that moment on, my life took a totally different trajectory. Here's how it all started.

It was a wonderful end of the year. My dad received a vacation ticket to the children's camp in Svyatogorsk for one session that was supposed to start in mid-October. Without hesitation, he took me there. I was in seventh grade and I couldn't imagine that instead of going to school one could study remotely and relax in nature at the same time. I didn't think about anything serious back then and I didn't differentiate people; everyone around me was a friend regardless of the language they spoke. It's worth mentioning that the camp was Artek-level modern. The only difference is that children from all over Ukraine came there, rather than from the whole world. It was there that I improved my Ukrainian, speaking and understanding dialects. I made a lot of friends and kept in touch with them even after the end of the session.

It was one of those cold November evenings when the heating season had only just started and it was still cold at home. I snuggled to my parents who were watching

the news with some uneasiness. They were showing rallies and mass demonstrations in the centre of Kiev. Back then I didn't understand what was going on and what exactly my parents didn't like in what they saw. But they understood it well and my mom said as though prophetically:

"Sooner or Later, this will get to us."

Such pessimism quite frightened me, but, as it would soon turn out, it was not rallies that we should have been afraid of.

On weekends, as usual I called my friends from camp, and we discussed all things under the sun, from how school was going and who got what grades to what we would do next summer at camp. One boy told me quietly that he was unsure whether he would make it to the camp since his mom quit her job and went to Kiev, to the Maidan. No one made a big deal out of this. Sure, we were only twelve-thirteen years old. My mom's phrase popped in my head again but because of my age all of this disappeared rather quickly from my memory. I finished talking with my friends and went to bed. For some reason, that was the last we spoke.

The year 2014 began. My parents divorced because over those sixteen years of living together they didn't manage to reach an understanding and couldn't go on together any longer, an outcome that my sister and I failed to stop. But dad often visited my sister and me because he loved us. During one of those visits, he discussed with my mom how lucky Crimea was and how its fate could affect us, as well as how great it would be if Russia annexed us, too. I don't remember well that conversation but I remember clearly that I didn't share their opinion. "What for?" I

thought. We are living quite well in Ukraine after all.

It was a very rough period in our life since my sister was still so little and my mum was forced to work two or three shifts at her job so that we could afford everything we need. But the thing that weighed her down the most was that Donetsk proclaimed itself a separate republic and that armed conflict broke out in Slavyansk. My mum isn't very trusting but her intuition has never let her down. She was scared that war would come to our doorstep. She didn't allow us to go for walks and asked my grandma to meet us at school. One evening she called me over to talk with me while my sister was excitedly watching cartoons. I wasn't interested in the news and I knew only by hearsay what was going on. I remember how she looked at me, at once serious and frightened, and told me that she had to make a difficult decision: to escape with us or to stay. This question loomed over her and me for two years. I, of course, was against it because here, in Makeevka, was my home, here were my friends, my dad and my grandmas — how could we leave them here? My mom understood that no less than me but our safety took precedence.

In summer, when the fighting intensified, my dad visited and told us that he wanted to join the militia. My sister didn't understand a thing, my mum was sitting perplexed — this decision came as such a shock to her. I ran up to my father, hugged and whispered through a torrent of tears: "Don't do that, dad, we will be afraid without you!" Perhaps my words had an impact on him or perhaps he thought everything through himself, but ultimately, he didn't join the militia.

By mid-summer the shelling reached Makeevka. Before that, we had only heard about shells falling somewhere, we had

heard eyewitnesses' accounts, in particular how to distinguish "arrivals" from "departures" of shells. We would pack our bags and documents, while our basement was already fully supplied. All preparation for hiding happened very fast, in mere minutes because everyone was afraid. Families with children left, no one else my age remained on my block and my class size shrank by half. No one would walk outside. Adults would make no extra trips to the store.

One night when we went to bed we heard a loud whistle and then an explosion. My mom put on a robe, woke me up and told me to take my sister with me, who was very afraid and crying. My mom grabbed our bags and we ran out of the house. It's one of the main advantages of living on the first floor. All our neighbours ran outside, too. But instead of vanishing into the basement straight away, the curious people were looking at the night sky and were speculating where the shell had hit. The star-spattered sky was especially shimmery that night because a phosphorous shell had struck a mine just twenty minutes' walking distance from my home. We found out about that early in the morning when one of our neighbours returned from his inspection. Our neighbouring villages on the outskirts of town were shelled numerous times after that incident. We were left listening to rumours and accounts and feeling afraid.

In August, when my dad visited us once again, he offered that we go to the village of Bezymennoye. A refugee camp was established there on the grounds of a children's camp for families of employees of the mine near my house and mine rescue workers like my dad. We weren't refugees, of course, but it was necessary to take us out of danger since Makeevka was being shelled constantly at

that point. Army hospitals and training facilities had been set up at unfinished construction sites, on slag heaps, and on the field of the old boarding school.

It was hard to get out. There stood a checkpoint at every turn, either a Ukrainian or Donetsk one. My dad tied a small white cloth to the car's antenna and posted the sign "CHILDREN" on the windows to avoid problems. We were stopped just once, well short of the village. A menacing man in army clothes and with an automatic rifle requested our documents. He spoke Ukrainian with a mix of dialects. He looked into the car and after noticing me with my sister became somewhat more relaxed. He left our car and when he came back he was holding a jar of honey. My dad thanked him and we made it to the refugee camp without any further incidents.

We stayed there for about two weeks. Dad's brother with his family joined us there but I still didn't have anyone to talk to, so I downloaded a couple of books and read voraciously. Toward the end of our time at the camp my classmate arrived there.

She told me how scary it had become back home and how hard the journey to Bezymennoye had been – there had been frequent stops and inspections. We were anxious to return to Makeevka. Every evening at the camp the sound of shelling became increasingly louder. On our last evening there, we heard the echo of machine-gun fire. We needed to go back; it would be hot here soon.

The day before we left my dad and uncle left the camp to inspect which roads were closed and which way would be easiest to go. Upon returning my dad grinning told us a story that he and my uncle thought was funny. Upon exiting the camp they got stuck in a traffic jam. It was unclear what was the

reason for the heavy traffic. They left the car and walked ahead to find out what was going on. It's worth clarifying that my dad and his brother served in the army and underwent military training, so they had knowledge of mines. It turned out that the traffic jam was caused by a mine left in the middle of the road. But it was an anti-tank mine. My dad as someone with experience with mines called the police and sappers. While waiting he twisted out the mine's fuse himself and laid it nearby. When the sappers arrived they swept the area, checked my dad and uncle and let them go.

The journey back home I remember much more clearly. Just upon leaving Novoazovsk, we were stopped to have our documents checked. There was a field nearby entirely dug out into trenches. From one of these trenches a mortar was fired. All four of us in the car jumped. My sister was frightened but she didn't cry as she did at the beginning of summer. At seven years old she had already accustomed to the sounds of war. She will turn fourteen this summer. She doesn't remember these events, how a man in a trench shot a mortar practically just outside our car. But she isn't afraid of the sounds of the descent and detonation of shells. She just remarks with a bored look on her face, "What, again?"

Our trip continued. I don't remember the exact point where it happened but I vividly remember smelling burnt gunpowder. I had never smelled it but the moment I smelled it I knew what it was. After going further we saw the completely burnt "skeleton" of a tank, a whole column of ambulance cars and unarmed soldiers with Ukrainian insignia seated on the side of the road. Our car was stopped and we were politely asked to turn around and wait until the operation ended. Later,

from the news, we found out that those soldiers had surrendered. Back home, we didn't hear the sounds of combat. It was exceptionally quiet. It even felt a bit strange. A couple of days after our return, my dad told us that there had been fighting near the refugee camp and a shell struck its territory.

The fear disappeared somehow after that small adventure. Fatigue from being amid hostilities set in instead. Unfortunately, apart from taking away my carefreeness and happy childhood, the fighting also destroyed our relationships with relatives. My mother's cousin whom I loved very much, let's call her Ira, began to write unpleasant things. She called for all of us, Donetsk people, to be annihilated, to be flattened by tanks. My mom was very dismayed, and she even fell ill from worry. But time put everything in its place. About a year later Ira came for a visit to Makeevka, her hometown, because her parents were living there. It's hard to describe my mom's astonishment and indignation when her cousin asked her for advice and help. She helped her, of course, but she couldn't forget the hurt Ira's words had caused.

The chronology of the events is hard to distinguish since every day nothing changed. But one day my dad called and asked if I wanted to go to camp in Russia. First responders were offered subsidized excursions for their children and I immediately agreed. On the day of departure fell a light but disagreeable rain. I took the bus and left reality for twenty-four hours, which was how long we were on the road. After reaching our destination in a suburb of Anapa, we were separated into groups and went to the canteen to have some food after the long way. We ate dumplings and cabbage salad. Because of the noise of childish voices we couldn't hear what was happening outside. The very first night there I

was woken up by the noise of a plane, as were my neighbors. However, while for me this sound was only unexpected, the other girls hid under their beds because they remember how their town was shelled from planes. They were from Gorlovka, as were most children during that session. It was hard to keep in touch with family because there was not enough WiFi signal for all. We were not the only ones there. Only three groups out of twelve were composed of Donbass children. The camp staff was curious about our life in Donbass and how it was possible to get used to constant shelling and ever-present danger. It is possible. One readily adapts to such conditions if one wants to survive. And all of us very much wanted and want to live. Sometimes the staff would tactfully, as if by chance, inquire about life in Donbass. Some children would tell of how they buried their fathers, some would tell of how shells hit their houses or schools and took the lives of friends and family. And they told of everything in a very solemn manner, without tears, without jokes — in a single tone and with faces of stone because one doesn't joke about such things. I was very lucky in this respect: my friends, who had already returned home, were alive and sound, our homes remained intact and our hearts were not pierced by the woe of loss.

Over three weeks at that camp, I got used to hearing planes, and to being safe. It was very striking to look up at the sky and see no traces of smoke. On the other hand, I saw a tank column pass right by my window on the day I came home. I felt then that I was home.

It's been seven years since the fighting began but I've decided that I want to stay here. Together with Donetsk, Makeevka endured so much, experienced the scariest. I remember being very dismayed when I learned

that the pool where I used to go had been bombed to smithereens. Now, though, I hear that it will open again. In spring the air fills with a flowery aroma, the city breathes, the city lives. All the people who left Donetsk whom I talk to regret their decision because they can't return. Yes, from time to time the

earth keeps on trembling under our feet. Yes, sometimes we see the dark trace of smoke from a shell. And yes, columns of tanks still pass by my window, their tracks scratching the pavement. But I keep on telling my mum that I don't want to leave, that I like it here, my home is here.

Donetsk, Our Pain and Hope



I was skeptical when I was invited to tell the story of the last six years of my life. I don't believe my own story is unusual; there is nothing heroic or interesting in it. Most young people who left the DPR to move to Ukraine can recount such stories because of the war and conflict.

As I have said, my case is a typical one. I was born in a miner's family which consisted of different nationalities. My grandparents came from central Ukraine to restore the mines of Donbas after the war. Ukrainian cuisine and Ukrainian-Russian traditions were prevalent in our family. Both Russian and Ukrainian songs were sung at the table. After school I started at an institute for a technical specialty, because it's better for a man from Donbas to have a technical specialty, and besides, I wasn't interested in politics; I had more ordinary youth interests, such as sport, music, and IT. I'd been studying about a year when the war started. Because of the shelling, the last year of my education has been fractured. I didn't really understand what was happening: Who was liberating whom and from what? Who asked to be liberated? Certainly, there were discussions in the family about the developing situation. It was clear that the situation was heating up, and that young people should depart to finish their studies and get a job. Some of my relatives went to Russia, and others moved to Ukraine.

I studied in the DPR until the summer of 2015. Why didn't I leave Donetsk immediately? I believed that everything would normalize, that a peaceful life would return. There were meetings in my institute at the end of 2014 in which the management and teachers discussed the main issues, deceiving everyone. They said that 'institutions had no relations to politics,' that the 'institute was still Ukrainian' and there was 'nowhere to go'

and 'no-one waiting.' I didn't understand the position of the Ministry of Education, which, I believe, failed to keep students adequately informed about matters: about the universities which had relocated to Ukraine and the organized evacuation of students. But maybe that last statement was a little too heated. What organized evacuation could there have been? There was no opportunity to bring computers, files and books. Still, many of the students and teachers began to leave to Ukraine. Some students followed the relocated university, while others initially became auditors at other Ukrainian universities. A lot of students had difficulties in picking up their documents from Donetsk universities. They would tell deans there that they were leaving to study in Russia, or give some other cover.

I finished my second year in the DPR. But it didn't count at the institute in Kharkiv, so I needed to take exams and tests in some subjects.

I decided to relocate to Kharkiv. My extended family lived here so I could stay with them for the first time until I was offered accommodation. In addition, they were able to help me in case of emergencies.

I graduated from the institute in Kharkiv and I was satisfied with the quality of education there. I received a social scholarship, a dorm and supplementary income as a forcibly displaced person according to Ukrainian law. This didn't suffice, so I had to earn extra money constantly as a call center operator, a waiter, a courier, and a salesperson. Well, I endured certain life experiences, but I have never regretted these decisions. I got a diploma that allows me to get a job all over the world, whereas with a diploma from the DPR, your only hope of work is in Russia, and for that too, you need luck.

I used to go to Donetsk to see my family every year. I was convinced that the economic and political situation of the city was getting worse every time I visited. Many industrial plants were closed, and the property of these plants was gradually either moved to Russia or stolen. People had to take any job they could because of unemployment. Men had to search for work in Ukraine and Russia. The elderly, women, and children stayed at home. Many acquaintances who worked in Russia sought to obtain Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure, as this might help them with employment in the future.

Unexpectedly, those retirees who managed to draw a pension both in DPR and in Ukraine became the breadwinners. It was scary and painful for me to see how old people with canes and with huge bags of Ukrainian products stood at the border checkpoints for hours on end. I heard a lot of life stories about people's constant difficulties while I was standing in line at these checkpoints. On the DPR side kilograms of meat and sausages would be taken away from crossers, while on the Ukrainian side people would not be allowed into Ukraine because of errors in their permits for transit.

Visits to my hometown were always stressful for me but the desire to see relatives and friends and help them, in whatever way I could, was stronger. I brought food and money. Unfortunately, I can't take my parents to Kharkiv with me, and moreover, they won't abandon their home and possessions. The only way is to sell everything for a small amount of money because it's impossible to move anything out. I haven't been to the DPR for almost eighteen months and I won't be able to go in the near future.

If the conflict ends in a few years I will still be able to return to Donetsk. The city will however have the mammoth task of rebuilding the economy, transport systems and housing. The longer the conflict lasts, the less likely that those forcibly displaced will be able to return to their homes. You can't live solely on the hope for a better future and an eventual homecoming; you have to live in the moment. You have to get used to a new place, and start a new life.

in any case, Donetsk is my home, my 'dear birthplace,' my pain and hope.

The War in Donbass



Seven years ago, a particularly terrifying and monstrous event divided the lives of the people of Donbass into a "before" and "after." This phenomenon has affected me, my family, my friends, and all the people I have ever known. Of course, I refer to the war in Southeastern Ukraine, which in particular has wound through my hometown of Donetsk. This occurrence that reached our streets not only affected the homes and lives of citizens, but also shattered the psyche of children, who learned what war is. They will never be able to erase those memories and feelings of nights spent in basements, hearing explosions and the bursting of shells above their heads. They will never forget the sudden peals of thunder in broad daylight due to mortar fire, and they will certainly never forget the deaths of loved ones.

The hostilities in Donbass have made children grow up at one stroke, literally in the blink of an eye.

Even when the situation is relatively calm, children develop gray hair befitting of an elderly person, so their parents tell them. Such children tend to talk not only about typical, immediate childish subjects, but also about adult matters, such as the impact radius of a mine or any other shell, how this or that artillery piece fires, or how to tell by ear from whence comes shooting and, most importantly, who is shooting – our forces or not ours, from us or from them. Such conversations may come as a shock to the average person or a visitor from another city or country.

I am an average resident of the city of Donetsk, currently the capital of the Donetsk People's Republic. As is true for everyone

around me, this war has undoubtedly influenced and changed my character and general perception of the world. How fundamentally so is difficult to say. "The question is philosophical," as my father says. The conflict has decelerated and the dynamic has died down in the last few years, but all those years lived under conditions of shelling have left an indelible mark on my memory.

For me, the strongest emotions, by no means positive ones, are evoked by the events of the spring and summer of 2014, when the war did not come but, as though with a dropkick, flew into my house, my yard and my heart. The problem was that my place of residence is on the edge of town, a small homestead with one vast field behind it, and not far from my house lay one of the militia's many foxholes. During the given period, these two sites simply burst into flames: explosions and flying shells became an everyday occurrence and, to some extent, normal for me. Some people start their mornings with coffee or a contrast shower, whereas my mornings began with a thunder that seemed to sound from all four cardinal directions and fly right into my room.

But the "best part" came at the end of the day, in the evening, when you would already be going to sleep after a pleasant, refreshing shower and then hear explosions or mortar discharges. "That was probably from us" is the first thought that springs to mind. You get into bed, ignoring the annoying noises and withdrawing into your typical personal nighttime musings, preferring to worry about school, about the next laborious and challenging assignment. However, the entire stream of thought is interrupted by a deafening blast, the shockwave of which shakes not only the windows of the room but your heart as well. At such moments, as I recall, I would

grab the first things I could reach and run to my mother to help her carry the bags down to the basement. My mother is an ultra-responsible person, a trait I even find hard to put into words. She would always pack our documents into folders beforehand and put them in a huge bag along with all sorts of pills and water. Thus, I would help her carry the bags to the basement space where we would stay overnight, or until the noises stopped.

You know, working on this story, I caught myself thinking, "What scared me the most in those moments?" Certainly, first of all, I experienced the primal fear of being killed by a shell fragment or being submerged in the basement underneath all kinds of "rubbish" and being literally buried alive. I also feared for the people closest to me: my parents and family. For even now, at a mature age, I can hardly imagine life without them, let alone at my tender age at the time of the bombardments.

But more than anything it was my wild childhood fantasy that added "fuel to the fire"; for some reason, during those hours in the basement, I remembered my now late grandfather's frightening stories about the Great Patriotic War. More specifically, about how the Nazis destroyed entire towns, villages, and, needless to say, houses by shelling and air raids. They would then wander around the scorched and ravaged land and hearing the voices of people in a shelter (whether a bunker or an ordinary basement), they would remove cinder blocks, stones, or other objects that ended up atop the temporary shelter. It would seem that they were helping the buried people come back to the light, above ground, but they were not. They would take their documents, pretend to check their passports, for instance, and then, putting on a smart look

and smirking, as if any of them knew Russian, they would shoot the poor souls.

To this day I do not know whether this is a true story, so to speak, based on real events, or a fiction of my grandfather's to fascinate his grandson, small and not the smartest at the time. But you know, whether this and similar stories were grandfather's fantasy or flashbacks bothered me last of all, whereas the fear that you would be shot just because was present indeed. Having done this bit of recollecting, I would like to cite a quote of my favorite author, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, a truly brilliant man who created his own pantheon of gods in no way inferior to that of the ancient Greeks. He wrote, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." And heavens, how right he was that in those moments, now and, I'm sure, in the future that fear of the unknown will always be with me like my shadow or name.

But this story is not about Lovecraft, and it's already coming to its logical conclusion. I don't know if it will be the most voluminous of all stories presented or the highest quality one, but I would like to finish with my stance on our military conflict. I along with all my relatives, friends, close contacts, and fellow residents of Donetsk impatiently await the end of the war in Donbass. In fact, many if not all of us truly have had quite enough of this waiting. My mind immediately recalls World War I, when the year was 1917 and both warring sides, or rather the soldiers fighting in the conflict, simply tired of it, of all the monstrous events.

Now then, that conflict lasted four years, while this one is in its seventh year and, judging by a deceptive and somehow undulating escalation (an "ebb and flow," to be precise), has no intention of ending. I sincerely

believe that all this will not drag on like the Moldovan campaign or, God forbid, the conflict in Syria, both in terms of the extent of destruction and the timescale. Personally, I am not a supporter or antagonist of either Ukraine

or Russia, but like all citizens I am waiting for the moment that these black clouds above our heads will finally vanish, and all the residents of Donbass will see that very peaceful sky!