The Conductor of Victory

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Oh, I’m just an ordinary Ukrainian, a regular Ukrainian mother who believes in our Victory, in God, and in justice... A conductor.

The 24th of February was my shift. I live in Malyn, in the Zhytomyr region. My daughter called, saying: "Mom, don’t go anywhere. They're heading to Kyiv." But I immediately knew I had to get to work by any means. My son is in the "Azov" regiment, in Mariupol. How could I stay at home?

I knew I had to be there. We thought it would only last a few days. So, I got ready for work. Found the last car going to Kyiv on "Bla-Bla Car." We drove in silence. I also noticed an unnaturally dark and eerie cloud hanging from Borodianka to Irpin. We drove silently, hearing "boom, boom, boom"—the sound of explosions.

Once at the station, I found out that the road we had just traveled was bombed...

For the first siren, I took cover. But then I stopped running. Sirens or not, in the carriage, I still had to clean, make beds, set things in order, and sweep.

The train was boarding. And then—a real human flood... A crowd. Shouts, cries, sobs... Sirens. Panic. Horror and despair.

People rushed into the carriages. First class, compartments, reserved seats... Without distinction. Just to leave. Someone shouted, "I’ve got tickets!" But it was in vain! They pushed in a crowd. Men with suitcases forced their way through. Pushing, shouting, sometimes even fighting. An old woman fell—they stepped over her, a child fell—they stepped over them as well. A mother cried—they stepped over her. They were dragging huge bags, claiming they were important strategic documents, but their eyes betrayed them. Money...

I argued with them. In the carriage, I picked up and pulled children out of the crowd first. Kids cried, "Mom, mom!" while their moms were trampled in the crowd. Who were these people saving their pets in cages, cautiously held high above their heads, stepping on women at the platform? But someone did stop and halted the chaos, lifted a mother from the platform, and led her through the crowd to the carriage. I reached out, pulling her toward me. I tried to halt the flow, shouting, "Folks, not everyone will fit!" But no one listened.

They nearly threw me out of the carriage. Barely closed the doors.

Counted one hundred forty people in a "luxury" compartment meant for eighteen. We moved out. We stand. We will endure.

I wasn’t myself; I didn’t know what to say, but I had to find words to prevent panic. And I shouted, shouted. My voice broke. But then—suddenly silence, and I spoke, and everyone listened...

– I’m the one in charge here. Make me a path. From end to end, – I commanded.

I walked through, checking. I saw most people with full suitcases, bags, backpacks, and some had nothing at all.

Before, I worried about my meager conductor’s supplies. Pillows, sheets, blankets. But then I handed everything out.

– Don’t turn on the lights! Don’t open the windows! Keep the curtains closed! Quiet! No panic or hysteria! Close all blinds on the windows again and don’t open them. If there's an explosion, the curtain will catch the fragments. We’re traveling in darkness.

For about an hour, everyone was silent. Only the sound of wheels. Later, people started talking to each other. Sharing their sorrows, their misfortunes. I told them that today, everyone has one shared sorrow... And I held on. We’ll stand firm. But my own daughter was in a bomb shelter. My son in Mariupol. "Azov."

I sat the children in my compartment; they were chatting about something, already acquainted. And where are they going? What awaits them?

In Khmelnytskyi, I was moved to tears. We stopped. And there were already volunteers, volunteers, volunteers with treats.

– Are there children in the carriage? What age? – they asked, handing hygiene kits with wipes, diapers, soap.

And for adults, they brought food: hot meals, drinks, wipes, and toilet paper! Ran to get some medicine for someone.

– And this is for you, – they handed me a small bag. There were some canned goods and cookies...

I refused, but they insisted: "Take it, who knows when you’ll eat, we made a separate little bag for each conductor. Here are bananas, give them to people, just return the box."

We moved on. I asked the people:

– Who wants something to eat now?

I handed out my bag, shared... This happened constantly, and at every station, volunteers saved us... Deepest bow to them. There’s no need for words; one can see and understand firsthand that Ukraine is united. We travel. We will endure.

In my soul, everything was turning upside-down! My daughter in Kyiv, my son in Mariupol.

In our family, it’s customary; it’s our tradition with Dima and Dasha as well: once a day, each must call or write that everything is fine. Sometimes, Dima himself would call: "Mom, what’s this? Why the silence on the air?" And we had a family chat group; I told everyone to write that everything was okay. And I awaited those ‘okays’ and plus signs as for who knows what.

I had to hold myself together on the outside, showing that everything was fine. But deep inside, all this despair, all this pain accumulated within me; I closed myself off several times a day in the restroom, just to let it out, to cry it out. For a few seconds, just a moment of weakness. Then, I wiped away the tears and returned to the people.

My rest compartment and work compartment—was all occupied. I was just there, next to it, near the little corridor where I turned over a bucket, and sat. After the first trip, someone left a small pillow. I put it on the bucket. And for the rest of the trips, I made my spot more comfortable. I couldn’t sleep. Couldn't. I kept an eye on order. I walked around or sat, thinking. And my thoughts were—better they weren’t there. Daughter in a bomb shelter for days. Son in Mariupol.

I thought it would get easier after the first evacuation ordeal. At the Kyiv station, the crowd again. God! What’s up with people?! The hustle and bustle not as chaotic as before. Like ghosts standing. Tattered, dirty, entirely without belongings. Only eyes. Eyes... piercing like those from ancient icons, filled with horror and hope. Martyrs. From the cold basements of Irpin, Bucha, Hostomel. And when the train was ready, chaos resumed. Boarding was a storm. Sirens, shelling, horror, and despair!

Fleeing. Moving. We left. And I kept thinking about the children. Again, I rushed to the bathroom, hiding, calming myself, putting on a smile and returning to the carriage—to calm the people.

– The child is ill! She’s dying; please, do something, help, – cried a pale mother, herself just a girl.

The child was a toddler, two years old. Burning up. Fever—forty.

– Sweetie, – I said, – no one will die. Recite "Our Father."

I thought she’d get distracted. The mother gave her Nurofen and some other medicine, but the child—threw it all up, could not swallow. Not responding. Vomiting.

– Don’t panic, sweetie. I’ll do everything I can.

But the child wasn’t opening her eyes anymore. Wasn’t moving. Already without signs of life.

And I screamed. But silently. I didn’t know what to do. Where to run. The main thing was, there was no way. Everything was packed with people. I remembered that Galya, my fellow conductor friend, stocked up a medicine kit for the journey.

I called her in another carriage.

– Galya, what do I do?

– You need to give her an ampule of medicine immediately. I have one, but only one. How do we pass it? There’s no light either.

– Attention, this is "the ampule of life!" You must carefully pass this ampule along a human chain through the passageways to the last carriage, – Galya shouted to the people in her carriage.

And people passed it hand to hand, saying, "Careful, it’s the ampule of life." Each passenger, hand to hand.

I received the medicine. My hands trembled. The ampule—was the last one. In it was the child’s life.

– Now, sweetie, – I said to the almost unconscious, grief-stricken mom, – everything will be okay, everything will be fine. Hold on. We’ll survive.

And I screamed inwardly and prayed silently. Pretending this was not my first time and that I knew what to do with those ampules. Opened it, poured it into the child’s mouth, and held the semi-conscious mother close.

Minutes later, the child opened her eyes and said, "Mom, mama."

We saved her. I couldn't fail. I’m the one in charge here.

I hid in the bathroom. Exhaled, so no one would see my state then.

And then a text message from my son. "Mom, we're surrounded. I’m at Azovstal."

And again, a silent scream, desperate.

I learned to scream silently. Breathe. Forcefully disconnect from my grief. Put on a smile and go to the people.

I’m always with the people. And around me, news about Azovstal. And there is my son. It’s easier when I'm helping someone. It feels like my contribution to Victory.

With prayer, faith, and kind words, I can support my son, my daughter, and all my passengers...

And every time I announce Lviv, I see people don’t know what to do next... People don’t want to leave the train.

I say, "This is our country; you won’t be abandoned. There’s help immediately; no one will get lost, no one will be forgotten."

And the volunteers are already in vests, everything is clear, everything is organized.

And so every trip—hundreds of people in the carriage. And every two-way trip, I sit on the overturned bucket. Look into the carriage, at the people. Look out the window and rejoice that war isn’t visible there. In ten days—five such tours. The "population" of the train is the same.

And my Dmytryk is at Azovstal. I scream silently. A smile on my face. People must stay calm. There must be order.

And everywhere news about Azovstal. And my Dima... Dima—Dmytro Kozatsky, call sign Orest, who uploaded photos of an unbreakable Azov on the internet before captivity.

And those images were everywhere: in Boston, Sydney, across Europe, and the world... On streets, online, in newspapers, on TV… My heart is steel... my blood is Azov…

Half a year later, Dima was released, but how many of ours are still in captivity! We need to shout with all our might!

It was hard for me, hard for everyone, but we will win. We will stand firm. I am sure because I saw our unity, I saw the unyielding spirit of our Nation with my own eyes. We are a Great Nation, each in their rightful place.

Previously, I couldn’t and was afraid to speak, to present publicly, but now I feel that my mission is to bring all this truth to people. I say that I learned to scream silently. And I screamed from pain… silently.

But now I will scream as loud as my son’s photos scream, about the unwavering fight of Ukraine, to the whole world, out loud and in full voice!

So many children we managed to save, but so many of ours, my children, are still in captivity...