Donetsk Stories

By Volodymyr Rafeenko

Ten years have passed since the war began, and throughout these ten years, I have never returned to my hometown. That’s where I was born, where my childhood years passed. Somewhere there, my youth still runs under the morning rains. There, in the very center of the city, stands my university - the Vasyl Stus University. Of course, the occupiers tore down the plaque bearing the name of our great poet, but for me, it will always remain His university.

Somewhere there still remain the streets and squares that remember my upbringing. They come to me in dreams, regardless of anything. All these years, they haven't let me go.

I dream of our steppe. It's the majestic sun rising above it, the fields and rivers, the forests and ravines. I dream of the air of the grand Ukrainian steppe and the people I haven't seen in ten years and probably will never see again.

I cannot visit them because I would likely be killed by the Russians. I'm too well-known a figure and have clearly expressed my positions regarding the occupation and the Russians' "great culture"—a culture of rapists and murderers.

But at least I can share these three short stories. They are entirely documentary. The people I will talk about, for various reasons, have been forced to remain in occupation all these years. For me, they embody Donetsk; they are my steppe. They are the Ukraine that the occupiers could not and will not be able to destroy, no matter how hard they try.

These people, they are not heroes. They are people of the Ukrainian Russian-speaking province. They merely live. They do everything possible to remain human. And in how they do it, there’s a lot of simple truth and honor.

These civilians, simple and unremarkable, can be killed but cannot be defeated. Because they are people, they are Ukrainians.

August Celebrations

He's well into his seventies. He has lived all his life in Donetsk and though he wished to move from the occupied city to Kyiv, life doesn't allow it. His younger son, an odd thirty-something, is unemployed, consumes alcohol, and hides from conscription into Russian terrorist groups under his father's bed. If Serhiy Oleksandrovych doesn't feed him, he'll perish under that bed.

He has an elder son too, who has been working in construction in Moscow since the nineties and wants nothing to do with his father. Not least because Serhiy Oleksandrovych has always been and remains a person of absolutely pro-Ukrainian views. The son, who chose Russia as his country of residence, never understood such principled stances, and in the context of war, perceives them as madness.

My mother-in-law, with whom Serhiy Oleksandrovych doesn't often, but still regularly communicates on social networks, always knew him not only as a friend of youth but a true pro-Ukrainian activist and public figure. He was never a boss or a deputy, never one who is usually called influential, but in his place and environment, he did everything possible and impossible to promote the ideas he believed in. And it needs to be said honestly: the main subject of his faith was and remains Ukraine.

Tall, dark-skinned, and quite unhealthy, he once, for the first time in all these years of Donetsk’s occupation, came to visit us near Kyiv. It was the autumn a year before the full-scale invasion. Naturally, we spent almost the entire day together at the table. He told us what it cost him to leave Donetsk and reach Kyiv. We asked him about the situation in the city, about the general mood, about the everyday life of an average Donetsk pensioner. And the more he talked, the more despair rose in me. I couldn’t understand how he could continue to exist in the conditions that currently exist. Where does he find the strength for life, for irony, which is also directed at himself, and for that smile—gentle and intelligent.

The "Russian pension"—in Serhiy Oleksandrovych's case, an amount around fifty dollars a month—is enough for a week of semi-starved existence. It's impossible to receive a Ukrainian pension in Donetsk. But there are "business people" who, for twenty-five to thirty percent of the total amount, undertake to bring it to you. Some pensioners, who have reached extreme poverty, take the risk and give these people their passports and pension documents in the hope of receiving at least part of their money. Everyone tries to survive as best they can. But the truth is, a substantial part of Donetsk's pensioners, the elderly who found themselves without relatives in an occupied city back in 2014, simply died from starvation amidst constant stress and later the COVID epidemic, which severely affected the Donetsk steppe. No one writes about this; no one wants to know about it. It's excess knowledge that helps no one but only raises painful and difficult questions, to which no one will provide answers.

As far as I understood him, he is a person essentially incapable of lying. Open, sincere, honest, and very gentle. Serhiy Oleksandrovych never particularly hid his pro-Ukrainian sympathies, even during the occupation. As a result, he currently fears even his own neighbors because they once asked him if he intended to get a Russian passport. Serhiy Oleksandrovych expressed himself on this subject directly and honestly. He said he is physically incapable of doing so. It is impossible for him. He will not give up his Ukrainian passport and will never take in hand the document of the country he considers an aggressor and terrorist. And yes, he understands that the local occupation authority will stop paying him even the ridiculous sums they paid before. And yes, he doesn't know how he will exist in the future. Especially, as we know, with a son who sits under the bed and trembles for his life. But the Ukrainian passport is his last bastion, and he will not surrender it.

My mother-in-law looks sadly at the smartphone screen and asks him:

"But how do you plan to live on, Serhiy?"

"Oh, I'll manage somehow!" he laughs and shifts the conversation to something else.

She purses her lips sternly, and they continue with their topics. About the fates of those who left, about the life twists of mutual acquaintances who still remain in the city, about the August weather, which turned out hot and generous with rains, about market prices and potential opportunities to get necessary medications, which at this age and in these living conditions an elderly person simply cannot do without. They talk for a long time and, for some reason, sometimes laugh. They have known each other for too long not to find a reason for a joke and a smile.

But when the conversation begins to fade on its own, Serhiy Oleksandrovych suddenly asks my mother-in-law:

"Why haven't you congratulated me?"

My mother-in-law, despite her age, is a clear-minded person and remembers all the world's holidays of friends and acquaintances. But here suddenly she cannot understand what it's all about.

"Forgive me, Serhiy," she says politely, but thinks that her friend simply has nothing to be congratulated for—one son is an alcoholic, another is a renegade, he has no money, health is failing, he lives in an occupied city in an apartment that is impossible to sell—but something I can’t grasp, what holiday are you talking about? What should I congratulate you on?"

"Why, Olga?" he asks, and his voice begins to tremble slightly. "Today is Ukraine's Independence Day."

She stays silent and tries not to cry, then apologizes again and congratulates him:

"Happy Independence Day, Serhiy!" she says. "Happy Independence Day, dear!"

And the holiday finally enters her room.

And fills our home.

Ninel, Who Loves Herself

Indeed, a name carries a lot of weight. In "Ninel", which is how her parents intended her name to be pronounced, there could be no ordinary nature, and character, which it is widely known, is the starting point for the formation of fate. A person with such a name could not have an ordinary fate by definition.

Of course, there will be those who will argue with me. But please, think for yourself, if your name is Ninel—that is Lenin, only backward, can your mind function normally? For me, the answer is absolutely clear—it cannot.

The very fact that you are a girl, yet you are Lenin—a Russian and Soviet idol, a political and state leader of Soviet Russia and the USSR, an unwavering and ruthless revolutionary, builder of a new beautiful communist world, bad writer, and great Marxism theoretician, leader of the so-called "Bolsheviks", one of the main initiators and organizers of the Red Terror—cannot but affect your mental state.

What was in the heads of her parents, who decided not only to name their daughter this way but also embedded this knowledge into her head, is a huge mystery, and I'm not sure I want to solve it.

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But be that as it may, we met when she was over forty. And Ninel in those times was something special. In a sufficiently large publishing team where we worked together, it was impossible to find a more selfish and narcissistic individual, a person who so unquestioningly and recklessly loved herself.

She was not young and solitary. She had black hair. General communication in the publishing department. Ninel says:

"All black-haired women are beautiful, all non-black-haired ones—are dreadful."

And after that, she closely watches her colleagues—mostly women who can't boast having black hair. And with grandeur, slightly condescendingly, she smiles.

Among colleagues at work, who have known each other for a long time and share the suffering of an eight-hour workday, absolutely strange conversations sometimes occur.

"So, tell me," she asks, "if someone from your acquaintances came to your home just to use the bathroom or just to wait out some time, would you let them in?"

"Of course," I say smiling, "why not? We are all human."

"I wouldn't let them cross the threshold," she says. "And I never will! And I think I'll be right."

She highly valued her own space, her right to be how she found comfortable to be. She considered herself a beauty and enormously respected herself, seemingly regarding her as the only real representative of the fair section of Homo sapiens.

If expected and generally desired guests came to her, they had to take care of themselves. And this concerned everything: from making drinks and food to setting the table.

Nelly's own sister lived in Crimea. Nelly often traveled to relatives, and in their own way, they loved her, even though they couldn't help but react to her peculiar character traits. Her loving nephew jokingly called her a "monster," and her self-assuredness experienced significant déboires there. Maybe that's why she couldn't withstand staying there for long and always returned home.

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Ninel was an excellent specialist, and in the early nineties, with Ukraine gaining independence, she was one of the first who actively began transitioning to the Ukrainian language, both in daily life and, which was especially difficult, in work. She learned Ukrainian on her own. She read a lot in Ukrainian and then, at the end of the nineties and early two-thousands, began writing books and educational manuals on the history of Ukrainian literature for some provincial publisher.

Later our paths diverged. I periodically lost sight of her for quite lengthy periods, but then she would return. Our mutual acquaintances and former colleagues from the publishing house would tell me about her.

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But you know what I can tell you. In her character, as perhaps in the character of each genuinely lonely person, there was always a glimpse of something poignant, pure, and naive. It’s hard to find the exact word for it. Perhaps sometimes in her, you could sense the pure and unblemished soul of a child who was never loved by anyone. At these moments, it became painfully clear that her condescension and narcissism were only the outer side of horrendous solitude, inconsolable and incurable. Which so befittingly matched her learned and so late-acquired Ukrainian identity.

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For a long time, I was sure that in 2014, after the war began, Nelly left the city, but suddenly it turned out that she didn’t leave and, literally, lives under shelling.

A mutual acquaintance told me a little about her life and about how our Ninel has significantly changed. Maybe due to what she’s managed to see and live through these years: the destruction of residential buildings, the deceased civilians (she found herself under shelling at a public transport stop), the devastation Russian forces brought to the streets of her hometown.

She still resides in Donetsk in an area that has been periodically "hit" since 2014, from the start of the Russian occupation. Her apartment has had windows blown out multiple times. Gas supply has been disrupted. Her apartment, luckily, hasn’t been hit, but the houses nearby have sustained serious damage. The panel multi-story building she lives in periodically shakes like a ship in open sea. And who knows how long it’ll hold out.

The issue lies also in that in 2014, some pensioners who remained in the occupied territories and had no family support found themselves on the verge of death. They literally died of starvation.

Ninel, at the beginning of the war, had significant savings, and in this situation, she suddenly started caring for these people. She bought food and essential items for them. Without her, they would have surely died because to the collaborating administration, the local residents, whom they supposedly came to protect, are of no interest at all.

In the end, Ninel gave away all her assets to others. Everything she earned and still earns is spent on the elderly living nearby, in the same building with her.

It’s supposedly a completely different Ninel, and who knows how this transformation occurred. Her relatives constantly call her to Crimea. They made a special entrance to their large house so that with her character she could live "as if separately" and not cross paths with other families unless necessary.

But she still doesn’t go.

She will remain there until the very end.

"They will come, find me, and I will be naked..."

In Eastern Ukraine, not far from my native Donetsk, there’s a city called Khartsyzk. In a way, it can be perceived simply as a distant district of our shared city. But of course, officially, it’s the administrative center of the Khartsyzk city community. Founded in 1869. As of 2014, it had a population of 58,641.

On April 13, 2014, Khartsyzk came under the control of pro-Russian terrorist groups. Armed militants removed the Ukrainian flags from the building and hung the flag of the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic." How many people currently live in the city is known only to God. The museum, musical, art, and sports schools, the "Sylur" and "Trubnyky" hotels, two hospitals, nine schools, a metallurgical college, a technical university, a palace of culture, and a pioneer palace—that’s all Khartsyzk.

For me, the main thing there is my friend Lenočka, a truly close and dear person to me. We moved to Kyiv with my family back in 2014, but she remained in Khartsyzk. Ultimately, the residents of this small industrial city, situated almost adjacent to Donetsk, were fortunate. Neither in 2014 nor now, in 2023, after nearly a year and a half of a full-scale Russian military invasion, has the city suffered major destruction or losses. The male part of the city suffers the most—men are forcibly and illegally, completely coercively "mobilized" into Russian armed groups operating in the region.

And the women, well, they live. At least Lenočka holds on. Despite being over fifty, she always and in everything feels herself as a woman. The feeling of her own femininity, the need to love and the ability to truly love, the attempt to be beautiful at any time and in any circumstances—that is Lenočka.

She is incredibly attractive and sensual. Love is the main thing in her life. Or at least that’s what she holds herself to. Since her youth, all the men who found themselves near her, so to speak, in the zone of direct contact, fell in love with her. She still retains that ineffable energy of female attractiveness, which is called feminine charm.

Several times over the past ten years, she came to us in Kyiv for leisure and shopping. Even if she didn't have money, she took joy in the opportunity just to see new and beautiful things, try them on, dream about how beautiful she would look in this or that dress.

She rejoices in life because she became accustomed to the lack of money long ago and learned to exist poorly but honestly. She hasn’t received a salary for half a year, but if she manages to earn some money somewhere, she definitely spends part of it on new clothes. It might be cheap, but it's still new. Every such renewal lifts Lenočka above the ground, and she flies home from the dirty Khartsyzk market like a butterfly, incapable of noticing either this dirt or the overall neglect of the city. Or, indeed, her transparently semi-starved poverty that permeates all her life in recent years. She is a butterfly that never gets full. There’s no one to take care of her. She is cared for by God.

She has a son, but for some reason, he doesn’t help. Whether he is busy with his own family or unwilling to spare money, I can’t know for sure. She has a granddaughter, whom she rejoices over at any opportunity, but my Lenočka is a deeply alone person. Even before the war, she divorced after twenty-five years of marriage because her husband started resorting to violence lately, especially under the influence of alcohol, which hadn’t happened before. The situation was progressively worsening, and after one time when he nearly killed her, she finally parted with him, though there’s still no one else in her life to replace him.

Her ex-husband lives in Kyiv and has a new family. But Lenočka continues to love him. She loves as only a woman can in such circumstances—strong and hopelessly. Small, thin. Constantly laughing, inexplicably always joyful. Even though there’s nothing to be happy about. The shelling around intensifies, and it's already clear that in the near future, a branch of hell will be opened here.

She doesn’t talk politics with anyone. She consciously rejects the interpretation of reality offered by Russian and pro-Russian media. She is a woman, and femininity is her shield and weapon. That’s the space in which she can exist at least in this town, with its people, under these circumstances.

Why doesn’t she leave? Why, earlier when there was a possibility, didn’t she move to Ukraine? There is no answer. She talks to me on the phone and increasingly asks: do you hear, do you hear the banging? And I say no, I can’t hear anything over this side of the line. And we continue to talk.

"Can you imagine," Lenočka says, "it's so hot here. I went to bed naked last night. And just as I started to drift off, the whole sky lit up. It became brighter than daylight. Bright white light changed to piercing blue. It got very scary. But, you know what I first thought?"

She laughs.

"What was it?" I ask.

"What if the whole house collapses? In the morning, people will come to sort through the rubble, find me, and I'll be lying there naked. So I got up and put on a new nightdress."