

Vahur Laiapea

Diaries from Ukraine

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DIARIES FROM UKRAINE

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Our War in Ukraine

The legend of the Holy Grail speaks of a paraplegic king. Parzifal did not ask a single question about the procession that was passing him. Nor did he ask about the woman carrying a vessel at the front of the procession. He saw but didn't ask. And because he failed to ask, women could not give birth, trees couldn't bear fruit, cows didn't give milk and the king became paralyzed. All because he had been taught to politely remain silent.

According to Russian writer Artur Solomonov, a priest from St. Petersburg has been arrested for claiming that Russian soldiers who die in Ukraine will not go straight to heaven. The paragraph under which he was charged deals with spreading false information about the army.

There can be various reasons for remaining silent. Comfort. Fear. Malice. Maybe it doesn't affect me. Maybe it will pass. Maybe someone else will deal with it.

It will affect us sooner or later. It won't pass if we don't intervene. We live in the vicinity of Russia, which is attacking Ukraine. We could be next. Or the ones after the next. It makes no difference. Our neighbour is a people who have lost their moral compass. A people whose chosen leaders have thoroughly trained them to hate us, prepared them to destroy us. Among them there are undoubtedly people who do not wish for this. But most of them remain silent. Maybe it will pass?

The texts in this book are written in Ukraine and Estonia between May 2022 and June 2023. In my written accounts I have tried to give a face to the people who continue to be ravaged by this hideous war.

Vahur Laiapea
In Suurupi on June 25, 2023

The Images and Smell of War in Ukraine

I have some mental images from the war in Ukraine that keep coming back to me time and time again. They are not images of the dead, but of the living. Images of people living in the midst of indescribable brutality.

An older bearded woman in the basement of an apartment building in Chernihiv. She had been living in a dark basement for a month and a half. After the Russian forces had left and the bombings had stopped, it took another week before she dared to come out from underground. I first saw her in that basement a week after the war had started. She was a well-groomed older lady in nice clothes who spoke intelligently. The next time I saw her was in April. She had grown a sparse white beard, some longer strands up to ten centimetres long. She was wearing a dirty quilted jacket and her clothes had turned into rags. She smelled so bad that it was impossible to stand next to her. Her speech was so confusing that it made no sense to talk to her.

In a month and a half, constant bombings and the fear associated with it had turned the intelligent lady into a mad recluse. Her bearded and crazed face remains etched in my memory.

There's a Ukrainian officer I know near Avdiivka in Donetsk Oblast, where brutal battles had been raging for months. We drink coffee together at his command post and talk about what has happened in our lives in the meantime. He laughs as he talks about his life. Suddenly, a younger officer enters, calls him aside and tells him something. My acquaintance comes back and says that of the unit's sixteen soldiers who had gone out the day before, only nine returned. He resumes our conversation, laughing again after two minutes.

That was the moment I realised how calmly Ukrainian officers and soldiers accept death. Death is as common in their lives as coffee in the morning is to us. They all have accepted that any day could be their last.

The same officer was killed a month later. A shell had directly hit the bunker where he had been with three other fighters. The

memory of him ever so calmly stating that seven out of sixteen soldiers had died still plays in my head.

There's a family with a disabled son living in Toretsk (another city in eastern Ukraine in the vicinity of battles that have been going on for months) in a five-story apartment building, the top two floors of which had collapsed during a missile strike. They live on the ground floor, the only family still living in that particular stairwell.

The mother holds her son, who is suffering from muscle atrophy, and says to him, "Oh God, how I love you!" They don't want to leave because they have nowhere to go. The son receives no aid, as there is no one to bring assistance. They live solely off love. This is my mental image of a mother's love.

No photo or video can truly capture the full brutality of the war in Ukraine. I have come to understand that the brutality of war often lies in those details that are difficult to convey. For example, war has a specific smell. It's a mixture of rotting flesh, dirt, urine, burnt things, and many other odours.

It seems to me that the best way to convey the brutality of the war in Ukraine is through the stories of ordinary people.

This is what Vahur Laiapea does with his stories. In addition, these accounts also answer the question of where Ukrainians find the strength to withstand all this brutality.

Jaanus Piirsalu
Journalist



Saving Maria

Myhhail and Lyubov. Thirty-eight and thirty-eight. Workers at a factory in Mariupol, named Illichivsk. Lyubov is a crane operator, Myhhail a welder. Their daughter Maria is in her first year at Kharkiv University.

All three names have been changed. I don't take photos. Myhhail's mother and sister were left behind in Mariupol. His mother went insane due to the bombings, says Myhhail. He hopes to go back for them, to bring his mother and sister out of there. If they're still alive.

I'm used to listening. It always takes a lot of strength. Listening to Myhhail is hard. What he's experienced bursts out of him. He talks for three hours straight. Sometimes I can interrupt him and steer the conversation back to the "main theme". Stories have a way of branching out like apple tree branches. Sometimes they need to be pruned back.

Mariupol, the City of Maria. The Mother of God, after whom the Greeks arriving from Crimea named the city, hasn't been able to protect her city.

On March 10, 2022, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the leader of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, who visited Mariupol, said that Russian aggressors had turned the city into a graveyard. Two months later, it can no longer be called a graveyard. The dead are neither collected nor buried. They decompose in this onset of summer. Collecting the dead would cause too many new deaths.

Myhhail and Lyubov lived in the death-filled Mariupol until April 25. They made the decision to survive so that their daughter could survive. So that they could bring their daughter out of Kharkiv, where she lived under bombardment. We had a PLAN, says the father Myhhail. Death wasn't an option.

On February 24, Maria calls from Kharkiv. We're being bombed! As of February 24, work at the Illichivsk factory in Mariupol is still in full swing. Lyuba is sitting in the crane cab, Myhhail is welding. The city government reassures people: no need to panic.

The war will be over by Monday. No need to leave the city. On February 25, the factory is no longer functioning. The war won't be over by Monday. Not even by Tuesday. The war has only just begun. Only the VIPs could leave, Myhhail claims.

On March 2, the electricity in the city goes out. The same night, looters start raiding shops. Grocery stores are emptied. There is no water supply.

Myhhail and Lyubov live in a house in the factory district. The area is under constant bombardment. Tanks battle a hundred metres from their home. "When a tank fires a hundred metres away from you, the shock wave is so strong that you can't breathe," says Myhhail. Ahead lie two months of survival.

It's winter. There's a need for heat, water and food. There's a need to survive. There's a need to help neighbours, those single ladies next door as well. Neighbours also need water, firewood and food. How to gather all these things? Myhhail has a good bow saw. Almost every day, he goes to the park about a kilometre and a half away. In half an hour, he cuts down a tree, saws it into logs, loads the logs onto a cart, and brings them home. Then he goes back for more. The neighbours need firewood as well. The incoming missiles occasionally interrupt his sawing. Myhhail then lies down and waits. An explosion. He survives. He can continue working. Many people are cutting down trees in the park. Trees, damp trees, need to be split. For the neighbours as well. Only then can they be put in the stove. The room then becomes warmer and they can boil water over the stove to make tea. No water? Then you have to go to the river, where there's a spring. It's not like you can just go and collect water. There's a two-hour queue at the spring. Meanwhile rockets and shells are exploding in the vicinity. In eight weeks, there hasn't been a single trip during which missiles and shells haven't been exploding. The neighbours need water as well. Water needs to be fetched every day. You have to wash yourself, even if only as little as possible. One must maintain ritual hygiene habits to preserve human dignity. Survival is vital in order to ensure the rescue of their daughter.

How to bring the logs home? How to bring water? You need a cart for that. Where to get one? After a big air strike, you need to