Olena Bogatyrenko (ed.)

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Foreword

Olena Bogatyrenko

It would have been better if this book had never been written. But here it is. It is our memory and our documentary evidence that the last Russian-Ukrainian war began in 2014, with the occupation of Crimea.

It will end only when all the authors of this book—and not them alone—can return to Crimea. Home, to mothers, fathers, friends. When they can see the sea, the steppe, the mountains, the North Crimean Canal, the Salgir[1], Bakhchysarai, and Kerch.

As for me, I want to go to Dzhankoy[2], where at the intersection of Bandera and Shukhevych[3] Streets (formerly Moskovska and Lenina), I will eat Bakhchysarai peaches and drink Massandra wine with my friends.

1 The Salgir is the longest river in Crimea.

2 Dzhankoy is a small railway-junction town in the flat steppe of northern Crimea, about sixty miles north of Simferopol.

3 Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych were leaders of the Ukrainian independence movement. The renaming of these streets—from Moskovska (Moscow) and Lenina (Lenin)—symbolizes the reversal of Russian and Soviet rule in Crimea.

Strangers to This House

Lina from Crimea

I fell in love with Kyiv, embarrassing as it is to admit, arriving on the Moscow–Chisinau train. The twelve-hour journey was hardly pleasant, of course, but it was worth it—I was traveling to meet the man I had fallen for through our letters. At the time, I was studying at a university in Moscow. The occupation meant I had no Ukrainian documents, so I could not enroll in Kyiv.

When they found out I was from Crimea, the first thing Russians asked was, "Well, aren't you better off with us?" The question was rhetorical—they were sure of the answer, and they smiled smugly, expecting a *chelobitye*, a feudal supplication, complete with kissing the ground they had deigned to walk upon. Even those supposedly against the occupation were genuinely surprised when I said things had not improved.

"Yes, they annexed it—perhaps illegally—but you provincials should be grateful for all the opportunities we've opened up for you," they said condescendingly. If anything annoyed them even more, it was my guttural g—the soft, throaty Ukrainian pronunciation that marked me, unmistakably, as not one of them.

At the time, the only thing I had in common with the Russians was a shared fear of honestly looking at history and answering questions that required us to search our consciences. I believe I inherited this from my parents—once energetic teenagers who had grown into sad, exhausted, and cowed *homo soveticus*[1]. From them I also inherited an inferiority complex, one that had grown alongside me over many long years.

It was my mother I came to feel especially sorry for, later on. She was a Crimean Tatar who had recited Yesenin[2]'s *Anna Snegina*

1 A person shaped by Soviet ideology—passive, fearful, conditioned to conformity. The author uses the informal spelling deliberately.

2 Sergei Yesenin (1895–1925), a celebrated Russian poet. The irony is that the narrator's Crimean Tatar mother revered a poet whose compatriots were responsible for the persecution of her own people.

to me when I was a child and was fascinated by the history of the Romanov family. At the time, I did not see what was wrong with that. Only years later did I ask myself: Did she also know by heart the poems of those shot in Simferopol prison in April 1938—shot by Yesenin's own compatriots? How often did she think about the fate of her ancestors, who had fled to the Ottoman Empire after the first Russian annexation of Crimea in 1783, to escape Romanov persecution? What had her life been like before I was born, when she had to conceal her identity?

Thanks to my boyfriend—the man I had been writing to—I decided to obtain Ukrainian documents. He never told me directly what to do, but he always asked the right questions, the kind that made me think, Google, and face unpleasant truths about myself and my decisions.

As my studies neared their end, I realized I did not want to stay in Russia. Yet I was also certain I had no right to live in Ukraine, much as I wanted to. After all, I had spent four years in the aggressor country after the occupation began, enabled by those around me and by my family. Would anyone be glad to see me in Ukraine after that? Adrift in the Russian information space, weighed down by an inferiority complex, with no clear sense of who I was—guilt and shame consumed me.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to change the world for the better. I had many interests and ambitions, and I longed to be useful, to belong to a community that needed me. Perhaps that would have helped me find myself...

Still undecided about what to do after graduation, I continued to visit Ukraine every six months during the winter or summer holidays. My boyfriend and I celebrated the new year 2020 together in Lviv.

At that time, I just seized every opportunity to hear the Ukrainian language, so I wasn't particularly interested in watching the president's New Year's address. I had loved it as a school subject, competing in academic competitions and literary contests. Once, when I was about ten, I decided to start speaking Ukrainian exclusively. After school one day, I went to a shop and excitedly asked for *morozyvo*—ice cream—in Ukrainian. The saleswoman

asked if I was right in the head. From then on, I only spoke Ukrainian in class. After the occupation, it was dropped from the curriculum, and I often worried I would forget it.

So that New Year's Eve in Lviv, I wasn't particularly interested in the president's address itself—I was simply seizing every chance to hear the language. But a video from the broadcast went viral: the meme "Who am I?" It resonated deeply. I heard important words that spoke directly to my fear of being rejected:

"Who convinced us that our differences matter? What if it's not so?"

I thought about those words for a long time. I kept seeing social media comments accusing Crimean residents and Crimean Tatars of being occupiers. I think they are the same people now writing, "There was already autonomy[3]; you've had your fun. Enough! Just a region!" But I also remembered the kind words of support from the woman at the Kyiv Administrative Services Center who had rooted for me throughout the process of obtaining my documents.

So am I a traitor, or just a teenager who couldn't make a different choice?

What I had been missing, in all the years after 2014, was precisely this kind of message from Ukraine: We accept you, we are waiting for you, you are ours.

Perhaps its absence is what keeps young people in the occupied territories from leaving now—in their imagination, Ukraine is angry and offended by them, and this myth is only fueled by an environment steeped in Russian propaganda.

Of course, if I had been born in Kyiv instead of Crimea, I would have taken part in the Revolution of Dignity[4]—those are my values. If I had grown up in Volyn, I would not speak Russian. If it

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3 A reference to the debate over Crimea's status within Ukraine. Some Ukrainians argue that Crimea's autonomous status should be revoked after de-occupation—a position that feels like a second betrayal to many Crimeans.

4 The official Ukrainian name for the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv, which led to the ousting of President Yanukovych. The protests were met with lethal force; approximately one hundred protesters were killed—a group now known as the Heavenly Hundred.

weren't for the occupation, I would never have gone to Russia in my life; it never appealed to me... All those ifs had seemed enormous until that New Year's Eve, but they fell away the moment I realized that I would actually be welcome in Ukraine. Realizing I was accepted, that I was not a traitor in the eyes of Ukrainians, I felt such gratitude and joy.

In the end, thanks to the support of my online community and long conversations with my boyfriend, I realized something simple for the first time: I am a citizen of Ukraine. My choices, my mistakes, the language I speak, where I got my degree—none of it changes that. I am still welcome here. It's not too late to change your life!

About a month later, I told my only Russian friend in the dormitory that I was moving to Ukraine after graduation. As she was against the occupation of Crimea and had liberal views, I thought she would understand.

"Well, it's because of your boyfriend, right?" She did not sound surprised.

"Not only that," I replied, embarrassed. "I'm a Ukrainian citizen; I just want to live there."

My friend gave me a serious look, now filled with reproach and incomprehension.

"But Russia has given you so much…" She was starting to get angry. "You studied for four years at public expense, and now you want to leave? Don't you think you owe them something in return?"

I didn't know how to respond. Where was I supposed to study if Crimean diplomas weren't recognized anywhere? At that moment, my friend seemed no better than the con artist on the Yalta embankment who pretended to take photos for free but charged eighty hryvnias for the presence of tame pigeons in the shot. Of course, you only find out after the fact.

And again, that sticky feeling of guilt crept in, and those what-ifs filled my thoughts. If the Russians had not occupied Crimea, I would have enrolled at a university in Kyiv. If my parents had had a different circle of friends, perhaps they would have been convinced to send their children to unoccupied territory back in 2014.

If I had been smarter and braver, perhaps I would have found a way to live in Ukraine after graduating from school.

These thoughts were not pleasant, but they did not make me feel hopeless. On the contrary, I felt that this was my second chance, an opportunity to make the right choice.

I owe nothing to the Russians who decided that oppressed peoples and occupied territories should be grateful to them for the "Russian world." I am not indebted to them for my bachelor's degree from Moscow University—I would never have studied there if I could have gotten Ukrainian documents in Crimea. I did not ask for occupation, the tricolor, or ten years of feeling that my homeland was no longer mine.

My friend and I fell out, of course. None of my old friends approved of my decision to move to Ukraine, but I didn't need their approval. In fact, I didn't even tell my parents until the very last moment. But I was certain my life would change for the better from that moment on.

* * *

The question of which city to move to didn't arise—it had to be Kyiv. It was where I first got to know Ukraine, on the other side of the Perekop. It was where I shed tears for the Heavenly Hundred when I stood on the Maidan for the first time in 2018. It was where I delighted in the Ukrainian language, which here rang with dialects and local speech alike.

When Ukrainians found out I was from Crimea, the first thing they asked was, "Is your family still there? How are they? Are they safe?" I could feel their concern and sincere sympathy. Thankfully, I didn't have to explain to many people why my family was there, or why I would never have the moral right to suggest they leave Crimea—not after the 1944 deportation and decades of struggle for the right to live in their homeland.

When asked which university I attended, I would sigh deeply and begin my answer with the words, "I'll say right away, I'm not proud of it." Although I considered myself entitled to live in Ukraine and call myself Ukrainian, I was ashamed of where I had

lived for four years. Sometimes, when I told new acquaintances about the university, I wanted them to judge me, so that my feelings of guilt and self-condemnation would be reflected in their reactions. I believed that I deserved it.

It was Ukrainians who encouraged me to discover my identity.

“Are you a Crimean Tatar?” my new acquaintances asked when I told them about my parents’ origins.

“No way…” I felt ashamed again when I remembered how my older relatives on my mother’s side had spoken to me in Crimean Tatar and I hadn’t understood them. “I don’t know the language. I haven’t experienced many of the traditions, and I don’t believe in God. If I tell anyone that I consider myself a Crimean Tatar, they’ll laugh at me.”

“Why should anyone else determine who you are?” they asked seriously. I didn’t know what to say. So, am I a Crimean Tatar? Is that how I want to identify myself? But how can I prove it, even to myself? Culturally, I didn’t feel Ukrainian either—I had lived in a Russified environment, consumed Russian media, and spent the last few years of my life in Russia. But I’m definitely not Russian—I had no affinity with them whatsoever. In fact, I clearly remember the fear that overwhelmed me one morning in spring 2014 when I realized that, in someone’s eyes, we were now Russians.

I never held pro-Russian views, but did I have a strong Ukrainian or Crimean Tatar identity?

At that time, Anastasia Levkova, a Ukrainian novelist, perfectly described my feelings with the words of the main character in *There Is Land Beyond the Perekop*: "I’m latching on.” I understood her then—I was latching on, too. I switched to Ukrainian, but it was a conscious act—as if I were standing in solidarity with those for whom this language was a mother tongue.

When the activist Serhiy Sternenko was on trial for self-defense, I started going to rallies outside the courts—and again, I felt I was attaching myself to a movement where everyone had known each other for years and I was the newcomer.