

What was life like before the conflict?

What changed in it when the war came?

Chapter 1. If it were not for the war...

Does one have to regret all the events?

Things that are impossible to forget

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I can remember very well how my mother was crying sitting in the kitchen in other people's flat. It was then that I realized that I could not return home again. Those long months, full of fear, worries, uncertainty, that summer which was spent in a strange land (although in the native state), will become a point of no return, after which it will never be like before.

If it were not for the war, I would never understand the difference between real patriotism and populism. Just then I realized for the first time that not such a person who is wearing an embroidered shirt and waving national flags should be called a patriot, but a person working daily for the well-being of the country without asking for reward. Is it possible to call a patriot such a person who has his/her volunteer activities covered in media while sending presents to military men at Christmas or Easter and on the days of confrontation, when the city had just been liberated and there was no communication, and shops were not working, who was selling bread twice more expensive, making big profits? And it was happening when the food was being brought from the neighboring city and given free of charge to people.

Unfortunately, today patriotism is defined by the photo in Facebook, by the number of the received honorary diplomas or yellow and blue ribbons on clothes. But isn't patriotism, first of all, the state of soul? Because if not, it means that one could put the soul in a frame under glass and be proud: "Look, I'm a Ukrainian! I was born here!"?

If it were not for the war, I would never learn the price of freedom and independence. I would not learn to find joy in such daily things as the endless sky over the native Dinets', the fog which rises above the river early in the morning and slowly lies on the pavements, catching the feet of the first passers-by. The lights of the neighboring city which is situated on the other side of Dinets, with which in the evening it winks friendly at its friend. I would not learn to appreciate the moment: here and now.

I can remember how teachers came to school in embroidered shirts for the exams of the ninth-grade students and how students without previous notice came to exams in embroidered shirts (June bloomed outside and over some buildings not Ukrainian flags have been hoisted, passers-by in the streets kept aloof and lowered their eyes). I can remember how some people broke into the school and, threatening with weapons, demanded to organize a polling station at school. And the teachers took children from the school summer camp through the gym and took them to their homes.

If it were not for the war, I would never feel that a friend in need is a friend indeed. Because some of the relatives living far from my city, have not

called us just once, and some of them constantly offered their help. Some of them were afraid of sharing the food, and others gave away the last parts of food...

If it were not for the war, I would never lose friends, whom destiny threw all over Ukraine, and some of them found themselves outside the state. But, on the other hand, I would not find new friends. And would not receive from them the main lesson: life goes on disregarding everything. Those people who had to start their lives from scratch, did not lower their wings, did not lose optimism and now with their example, their striving for life inspire others.

If it were not for the war, I would never learn to love the Motherland SO much. There are many various "ifs"... But I understood one thing: it is important always to remain a person loyal to one's Motherland.

How I became an adult

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Grey morning. It was June on the calendar, and it was raining – like a wall of rain – outside. And it was not a summer rain bringing the long-awaited coolness, those were grey cold torrents of water pouring from the sky on the people gathered under a short supermarket roof. Right from this place the buses, which are taking people far from “the Russian world”, start. Here my parents and me were standing. We managed to reserve the last 3 tickets for our family consisting of 4 people. We were able to squeeze ourselves in these seats somehow.

It is hard to define the date, from which one could start counting the events which changed my life into “before” and “after” the war. And not my life itself, but thoughts, habits, values. In any case, our life is prone to transform with time, age and experience. These alterations take place slowly, gradually and in most cases are desirable. And abrupt changes of destiny make one either to adapt to new conditions or to become a participant of the transformations. The understanding of the fact that careless childhood had passed and the adult life is firmly holding me by the hand came just on that day when parents were taking me and my sister from Kramatorsk which was occupied by the illegal military formations.

For the first time in a long period we were leaving the city. We felt uncertainty and confusion. Until that day my future was clear to me: the 10-11th grades, pedagogical institute. At that time the documents about the graduation from the 9th grade together with other documents were in my bag, and where the new academic year would start for me was unknown... My childhood was torn into pieces. One of them was left in the cellar of the school, from which our parents urgently took me and my younger sister who was crying during the shelling. The other was stuck to dirty fingers of “the rebel” who checked our documents at the check point outside the city. With the last of them I dried my tears when my parents, having left us with our granny, returned to the place where the shelling went on. I became an adult.

The first habit which I developed was to start my morning not with tea or cocoa, but with the news. It was an endless number of mornings which started with pages of the forum “Kramatorsk info”. The main demand to the posts was the statement of facts: briefly, meaningfully and only description without any comments. So, it was the second habit: only facts, conclusions were made exclusively independently.

And I also had my dreams. Of course, the main my wish was to return home. But I dreamt not only of crossing the threshold of my own home and

hugging my loved ones. The main aspiration was to clear the city from dirt, burnt tyres, “republican” symbols.

On the July, 5 the destiny turned around, as so many people awaited ardently. My city was freed from occupants, from cowardly clowns-Cosacks like Babai. Some of them were leaving hurriedly, others lost their insolence and self-assuredness without weapons. We were coming back home not through the fields, but by the customary route via Sloviansk. We could see the remains of the vehicles from the convoy of Girkin-Strelkov defeated during the military clash on the motorway. All the way me and my sister waved from the bus window to the Ukrainian military men and gladly showed our documents for the check-up. It was the feeling of real happiness.

The time came to make our dreams come true. Many people dreamt of freeing the city from rubbish. So, one did not have to wait long for the first “subotnik”. It was organized just by that local forum. Our team had to tidy up the electricity posts along the motorway in order to get them ready for painting. The work brought us great joy, as just by this route the military vehicles were passing to the east through the city. Just then the feeling of pride in our country joined our sincere joy. And some offensive calls from the windows of cars passing by could not silence these feelings. I was born in Ukraine and became a Ukrianian just then.

An old car “Zhiguli” stopped at our side during the cleaning. The military man who got out of it, was smiling to us frankly. For the first time we had an occasion for communication. The main question which all people there had was:

– You won’t leave us, will you?

– No, of course, not.

People were asking many questions, and told him not less. They told how they collected costs for helping the blocked airport, how painted the Ukrainian flag on the buildings at nights and waited. The military man was listening attentively and putting down everything into his old, a little shabby notepad. Later I would learn his name – corporal Valentyn Mykolayovych Fedychiev, at that time the deputy head of the Anti-Terrorist Operation headquarters.

I did not return to my former school. Because I had another dream – to speak fluently my native language. So, I decided to continue my education in the Ukrainian gymnasium.

To adapt to circumstances is no longer the motto of my life. The sense of life is to be an active participant of it. The wish to tell the whole country that really in the east people are patriots not less, but sometimes even more than in other parts of the country grew more. Among the necessary things right then were – the assistance to local people, especially children, after the aggressive information influence of the Russian media, not to be afraid to trust people in military uniforms. In order to achieve that aim, a number of events were organized – including the visits to kindergartens by the group of

military men who were based on the Kramatorsk airport and the students of the last grades of gymnasium. The program of the visits was diligently prepared and every meeting was tried to be made different from the previous one. Our defenders learnt to do so many things: to paint, to model from plasticine, to stick applied ornaments and even to embroider. It was very pleasant to observe when children's eyes, prickly like small hedgehogs, at the end of the visit shone with joy and children got on the laps of military men and tugged at their chevrons. The biggest impression we had from visiting the camp of the resettlers in Sviatohirsk. It was the most difficult to communicate with children there. Frightened, constrained by the recollections about the recent shellings, many of them started crying while looking at military uniforms. They were like tied into a knot. But a great and sincere wish to help achieved its aim. "Soldiers of light, soldiers of good" – so they called our defenders. We really made friends with them. I found my best friends right then.

In the breaks between the visits to kindergartens and the school studies we visited the ambulance department of the city hospital. Just here the first medical aid was provided to the wounded soldiers before their transporting to the hospital. In my memory stayed the tankman Mykhaylo. His legs were burnt above his knees. The soldier worried only about two things: new boots, because his old ones had burnt together with his legs, and his return to the frontline.

In my thoughts I often returned to recollections about the old notepad of Valentyn Mykolayovych. The realization, that struggle is needed not only on the frontline, but also in the information space, grew stronger every day. The choice of my future profession perplexed my parents, but did not surprise them. In the priority list for entering a higher education institution the number one was given to the Military institute of Kyiv T.Shevchenko National University, specialty "Military journalism". On the September 3, 2016, among the first-year students, I took the loyalty oath to the Ukrainian people.

Yes, the war changed my life. It taught me that independence is not only a word or a day-off in August. The destiny of our country depends on everyone. And the war is still going on: on the zero border, on the check points to the uncontrolled territory, in the heads of common citizens. So much is still left to be done...

My teacher named War...

Khrystyna Pikulytska
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When Maidan started, I was 17: although I hadn't yet been disillusioned in the ideals given to me by my family, school, Church (and those were mostly the same people), I already realized that everything worked not the way it was declared. It is forbidden to lie, but the truth revolts people. It is forbidden to steal, but copying from your neighbor is forgiven. God is merciful when one gives away the last things, but a priest cannot come to the mass by public transportation, because he has his status.

When the War started, I was 18. I was no longer so sure that I understand fully the concepts of the truth, friendship, love and faith, but I knew only one thing – those who are not with us are against us. Maidan gave us the thinking at the scale of the country, cancelling the role of a single person. The idea that the state comes first, and only later – you. I lost my friends. They blamed me for my choice to go and cook for Maidan participants instead of getting ready for seminars and walking in the city centre. And I blamed them for their indifference to the shed blood. My circle of communication was narrowed to those people who did not moan how difficult life was, but tried to fill every moment with some sense (disregarding what kind of sense it was).

And then my brother went to the military enlistment office to receive his draft notice without telling us. At that time I was having rest at the festival, and our parents were busy working in the household in the village. And after the train started for Kryvyi Rih he phoned the mother and told about his deed.

Heroism fled from my head quite fast. Animal fear appeared. MY BROTHER MIGHT BE KILLED! Momentarily the changes in legislation, struggle with corruption, the shot down plane Boeing-777 became unimportant for me. What have I to do with whimpering of my friends over the unremitted love, the problems of self-fulfillment and employment of my friends, imperfect system of education at the university if MY BROTHER MIGHT BE KILLED?! How should I comfort my parents? How could I help? What is better – winter boots or autumn ones? Because winters in the east are cold, but dry.

A year and two months my brother was at war. And so this period of my life will be called – “A year and two months my brother was at War”. Only grey colour and eternal prayer have been left in my memory. My mother started going to church almost daily, and I stopped going at all. “Too much of hypocrisy for a square meter, and God can hear me even in a mini-bus”, - thought I. I did not have any more interests besides studies – it was the only thing I could do unemotionally. When we heard a question: “Is he a fool?”

Couldn't he pay a bribe and not receive his draft notice?", we told clearly and to the person's face who this person is and where he/she should go". I remember that my own uncle told in March 2015 that the soldiers in the East do nothing, only "go on the booze", and they do not shoot there, that was journalists' exaggeration. It was followed by my first hysterics. Thank God, he changed the citizenship, because such male persons are not needed in Ukraine. And Christmas... The carol "Sad Holy evening" which earlier was associated with stories of great-grandmother, now made me tremble with whole my body.

So we survived that one year and two months. No friends have been left. Most of relatives disowned us, because they could not look us in the eye, hiding their husbands under the skirts. Everywhere was panic – this man received the draft notice, then the other one. My friends phoned me and told that they were frightened for their fathers, beloved, searched for support. And I was sorry for them. I said: "Yes, the men are needed at the frontline, but I would never wish you to send there your father!" But inside I felt so offended as if someone slapped me on the face.

Then, in the end, my brother was demobilized. He met a good girl and went to live with her. In my soul I felt relief. I felt such lightness, as if the War ended. Life was again here! I went to parties, travelled, had an interesting job, volunteered on mass events. But something was wrong. I felt that I was reading news from the frontline sometimes with indifference and the other time – with feelings of guilt and shame. I avoided talks about the assistance to the army, because I did not do anything after the brother's demobilization. I was like lumpen of the worst kind. All my achievements in Maidan and the War – it was all in the past. It was shameful even to tell. Those "friends" whom I lost during the events on Maidan and the War again started entering my circle of communication. Compromise, tolerance, understanding.

Now I am 22. The foreign land helped me to return to the War. Thanks to spending 3 months in a distant peaceful state I understood three important things: I am Ukrainian and everything concerning my state concerns me personally; I'm not indifferent, but I am scared – neither school, nor family, nor Church taught me to live in the conditions of War, that is why helplessness and fear called for the defense reaction – indifference; who is not with us is against us. Together with my friend we started interviewing our defenders. At first I felt shame before the soldiers for our passivity, for the inertness of my family. And then I understood that there is no time for that – one should start working, and not reflecting.

If it were not for the War, I would never learn what the truth, friendship, love, faith were. The truth consists in the fact that we are all people and we can make mistakes, but if we do not correct them here and now, death will do it instead of us. Friendship is one can of stewed beef for the two of you. Love is a beloved woman who does not ask about anything, who waits and believes in

her husband. Faith is the thought: “Will I not offend my neighbor by that?” before every deed. The only thing which I really regret is that the War was needed in order to bring Ukraine to senses.

How I came to light

Asia Rad'ko

Lviv

War is a thing which is too difficult for perception when one has not looked it right in the eye. Many people do not feel its presence, but it is every day with us. This woman full of bloodthirst is wandering somewhere about, waiting for a favourable moment, in order to open the door into one's life with her foot and change it forever.

The first thing coming to my mind when I hear the phrase "If only it was not for the war" – are people. The people whom I would never have met if one day this scary word had not been inscribed in my memory. You know, war really brings with it many sufferings, but there is also another side of it – that reflecting light and hope for the future. However trite it could sound, but there is no light without darkness. If a person does not pass through darkness, he or she would never come to light, to future. A thorny way always forseees a reward. The question is whether you will be able to reach it?

Maybe, my excessive optimism really helped me to move ahead. And people... I remember many good people who were left behind the frontline. When I'm telling these words, I recall several days which I spent in the air-raid shelter. You know, just that time has united the majority of us. My recollections are not about everyone, but about several people, the meeting with whom created the mosaic of that period of my life...

Volodymyr Zemliadenko was responsible for the people in the shelter which was situated in the "ATB" shop. It is such a supermarkets network that is more popular in the central and eastern Ukraine. But it is not so important as the fact of his indifference to each of us.

You know, his smile always cured pain in the eyes of the majority of people who had possibility to communicate with him at least for five minutes. And I was lucky to speak to him almost every night out of those seven which I spent in the shelter.

Maybe, my interest in this person turned into courage, which helped me to find a common language and learn many interesting things. I will not lie: now I cannot remember anything except for two stories told by him. But back then I could quote almost every his word.

At those nights Volodymyr and me usually were sitting on the chairs beside the walls of the mentioned shop. It was on the same side where the marked cars stopped and the ATB workers unloaded the goods. Right there I spent my evenings and nights. I can remember that in one of such evenings Volodymyr told me about an interesting case that happened to him in children's home. Many years ago in our city a girl was found who had been brought up for a long time by dogs. As she did not have an example of human

behavior, she went on behaving like a little animal even in the children's home. Other children were always afraid of this girl, because she really reminded of a small puppy – sometimes aggressive, as she was driven into a corner. It is strange, but even such things happen. So, what I'm trying to tell... It can characterize my hero as a man written with the capital letter. He was the only one who could reach her heart and influence her in such a way that human atmosphere stopped being for her wild and strange.

You know, when there is the war outside, when people are afraid to say: "Glory to Ukraine" – and it certainly was so... such stories help distracting from all troubles. And perhaps Volodymyr knew it. He knew that I needed moral support and a shoulder to lean on. People usually judge others by their deeds. Because everyone can wag his tongue. Principally, it is so, but providing moral support consisting of words which one would like to hear – it's also a great deed which needs time. I would like to believe that it was interesting for Volodymyr to speak to me in those evenings, because it was really important for me.

But not everything was so rosy, as it seems. Nevertheless, the war has its own atmosphere, and one can feel its breath near. I also felt it. Every evening the "rebels" came to the shelter. Every their visit was accompanied by the feeling of danger. There was an impression that the latter came to the shelter door right from their cars. First times I wanted to go down to my mother, to the ground floor of the ATB, but Volodymyr stopped me. He advised me to be afraid of nothing and continue sitting by him. It was strange, but several times I stayed there and due to that I had possibility to see those boys who defected to the side of separatists. Unfortunately, also those people who were forced to go over to the local government, having no wish to fight against Ukraine, found themselves among them. But what could one do? Sometimes when I woke up in the morning, the shelter was almost empty – because at night the rebels took away the young boys in order to pull them to their side by means of threats and force. Because of that my classmate stopped visiting the shelter and said: I would better hear the glass trembling from waves of shelling on the fourth floor than I would be taken by the rebels. Fortunately, Oleksiy (this classmate), is now in Kharkiv and although the war remained as a heavy burden on his soul, it is better to remember about it from distant places than to see it in front of oneself every day. The war was every day with us – it was inside us.

Beverages also had their special taste for me – a taste of memories. When I recall coffee, some moments with cheerful boys who lived in the neighbouring yard come to my memory. On the ground floor of the shop there was a narrow corridor with a small dark room with a kettle. Besides playing cards with the above-mentioned boys, we also had possibility to drink tea in the supermarket. It is interesting that in such moments one stops perceiving war as a war. One unites with the people, with whom one has never talked

before and stops feeling oneself in danger. One can feel a home atmosphere and even does not want to return to one's flat. And I could feel danger only when I went out of the shelter. It was not because I could hear the shellings – no, I almost did not hear them. It was because I could smell war. Maybe someone would say that smell of war is ash, fires, the metal taste of blood on your lips. No. War is the tension, it is not knowing who is for you and who is against you. War means meeting one's acquaintance with whom one has been friendly for many years and being afraid to say: "Glory to Ukraine" – to your own country, because one does not know what are her views. It was frightening to see the calm empty streets without people, the empty school, where earlier there always sounded children's laughter and strict tones in teachers' voices. It was frightening to see the sacks against shellings on the main city square and to be afraid to come there, even with a friend. It was frightening to go into the private area in order to release a balloon on the Day of commemoration of the favourite singer, and then to turn around abruptly and almost run in any direction one sees.. And do you know why? Because one has noticed a man in the military uniform and one does not know to which army he belongs, because it is impossible to see the chevron on his sleeve with the flag of a certain country from such a distance.

Scary means the constant feeling of tension. I was lucky almost not to hear the shellings, but the subconscious fright was permanently felt. That is why personally for me the war has two sides – positive and negative. The positive side means the people whom I happened to meet in my city and after the resettling. The negative side is the constant feeling of fear that something bad might happen and the tension in the air which did not let go for a moment.

I heard the shellings only once – when we crossed the threshold of the shelter for the first time. I was very worried for my mother, since she had left in the flat because of some affairs. There is no worse moment, perhaps, than not to control the situation fully. Uncertainty always scares, and it scared me too. Frightening noises sounded around us and people hurried to the shelter. We did not see the shellings, but we heard something similar, something terrible. Then I asked the father of my classmate to drop into my flat to see my mother, to knock at the door and ask her to hurry, as I was worried for her. He refused me. He said he could not do it, because he ran to bring his wife, but still he did something else for me. My mother told me later about it: she was at home when he was knocking on the door loudly. Fortunately, everything was all right with her, and it was a comfort for me. But that moment was printed in my mind as one of the loudest and the most frightening in the war time. Based on all my recollections, a question arises...

Is war so unambiguous? Having left the darkness behind me, I was able to come to light. One needs only time and strength in order to do it. My life did not change for the worse. Simply sometimes, in order to wake up and go

further, we need a cause to rethink our life. I hope that priorities were changed not only for me during this time. Because destiny is an interesting thing, she will take you along a thorny path and only if you are strong enough to go by it – you will come to Olympus.

And what is interesting: I do not put a full stop, as I know that everything is only beginning...