



#WARDIARY 5: FROM KYIV WITH SUNLIGHT

Posted on 21. März 2022 by Lina Zalitok

In ihrem heutigen Eintrag ins #WarDiary schreibt die Übersetzerin und Literaturwissenschaftlerin Lina Zalitok über ihre Reise nach Kyjiw unter den veränderten Umständen des Krieges.

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24th day of war escalation (my friend's wording seems to me more appropriate than "war start", as the war started in 2014). I have been intending to write this text for several days already and now finally I am writing it. I entered into the freeze modus of the known "fight, freeze or flight" reaction to stress. Maybe all my adrenaline was used or I just got tired of being alert, but now I am sleepy most of the time and do rather few coordination tasks. Also, I realized that sometimes it is more reasonable not to do anything in order not to amplify the existing chaos as my friend put it one day. Volunteering and bringing people, offering and asking for help, together efficiently is another topic I hope to address in the nearest time.

I am not even thinking about bomb alarms any more. There was only one or two and I missed them because of sleep during last days. I wake up more rarely at night because of a sudden feeling that our flat is being bombed or going to be bombed right now. Like my friend in Lviv, I am not afraid of being bombed to death, especially while sleeping. I need sleep so badly that I don't care about rockets or bombs. My biggest fear is not death, I suppose. My biggest fears are losing connection, torture, hunger and being heavily injured. I am naming them to get rid of them. Let's see if it works.

Another reason draining my energy were my discussions with some friends and reading media materials about what is actually happening, why and who can stop this. As a person who internalised in philosophy lectures at my Berlin university that you should always doubt and never be sure about certain ideas, I have put everything I learned, believed and heard or read under a big question mark. Standing in this self-destructive position, it was impossible to write anything. I put myself on the brink of an abyss, in the dark world where most of people are either mean or stupid or greedy. Then I decided to step back and give myself at least some bottom lines. Even if they are wrong. I

cannot allow myself to doubt everything in the time of war. Otherwise I won't survive. Primarily because in this case I wouldn't want to survive. Desperate people is not what Ukraine needs now.

This day was darkened by the death of a bus driver whom my family knows very well. I went several times to Kyiv with him when I was a student. All the day we heard from different people the details about his death and in the evening my father brought us the final verified version coming from the driver's friends. He was shot by a young Ukrainian defender while passing in the darkness in an empty schoolbus a checking point. As shortly before that, there was an explosion in that town, the guy thought, when seeing the lights of the car, that it was a vehicle of enemies and shot into the bus window immediately. We don't blame him for this, as we heard a lot of stories about cars passing checking points and shooting all the defenders there. But it is not less tragic because of that. The bus driver was a good-hearted man. It was his third day when he had been evacuating people without having proper sleep. He has two children and a wife. Tomorrow we will go to his funeral.

Before today, I wanted to tell about another more cheerful evacuation though. On the 17th day of war escalation, I suddenly had a strong gut feeling that I should go to Kyiv and save some of necessary (like documents, notebooks and USB sticks with files) and dear things (like presents by my friends). This feeling got stronger as I read a post on the Facebook page of Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan about his decision to evacuate a painting by Oleksandr Rojtburd (who died shortly before the war escalation) from his apartment and hide it in a safe place. I don't have any art pieces, but I have Pandino (Italian word for "little panda") and Stork (or Storch as I call him in German) who accompanied me when I moved from Berlin to Brussels, back to Berlin and then from Berlin to Kyiv. They have always been my island where I escaped banality of everyday life and anchor in times of fear and sorrow. From time to time with my best friend I write in WhatsApp fictional chats about what Pandino or Storch would say, think and do in a certain situation. I also wrote three Christmas stories about them and would like to continue to show the world from their perspective. So it was important to evacuate them from Kyiv.

I had a feeling that there was an opportunity window to go to Kyiv as there was still transport from my town there. The news showed almost no reportages about the situation in Kyiv, my friends in Kyiv started to feel anxiety because of the absence of explosions, so it was indeed quiet. I suddenly started to worry that someone could break into my Kyiv apartment or has already done so. Apart from that, I don't own this apartment, so I wanted to take my necessary and dear things from the place which doesn't belong to me.

I still decided to wait until Monday. On Sunday's evening when my mother confirmed to me that there was a transfer in the morning which I could take, I unexpectedly felt relieved and full of enthusiasm and love. As I walked joyfully to the bus station on Monday morning in my town, suddenly the silence was broken by a rather strong explosion. I shuddered. Some people turned back for a second, but then continued walking. Near the police station men with guns smiled and discussed what that might be. I continued walking and hoped hard that it was nothing serious which could bring me away from my resolute decision to evacuate Pandino and Storch. In some ten minutes I reached the station. Everything looked usual, there was a bus as promised and I entered it. Inside I noticed with relief that there were also women and a couple with a little kid among passengers. If there are other women and even kids going to Kyiv, then I am a reasonable person and the risk is not too high, I thought.

As I got off the bus, Kyiv welcomed me with lots of sunlight and a sound of three explosions. As I saw Kyiv buildings, kiosks and few people passing by, I felt lots of love to this city. I said an Italian common bad word in order to react to

those explosions in some way and ordered a taxi with an app. It arrived almost immediately and cost me 200 UAH. In usual times it would cost some 130 UAH or even 200 UAH with traffic jams. There were no traffic jams, but there were several checking points. Everywhere one could see concrete blocks with inscription "Attention! Landmines" in Ukrainian. On one of the blocks at the entrance to the city the inscription was in German "Achtung! Minen". I cannot explain why. The city was deserted, only at three places I saw long lines near supermarkets. At several checkpoints there were individuals, also women and old men, walking with dogs. I had never seen so much sunlight in Kyiv. Conversations with taxi drivers are a genre en soi in Ukrainian Facebook. But nowadays they are much more interesting than ever. My taxi driver was a man of some 60 years old, looking a bit bizarre, nice, but also telling bizarre and contradictory things. I was cheerful and full of love to Kyiv and every part of it, especially people. He was rather irritated and dull, but ready to talk.

We stopped several times at checkpoints. The men there asked him to show his passport. A bit later he said to me:

- Look at my passport!
- Huh?
- Look how shabby it became! Soon one won't even see my photo! I cannot stand them! They controlled me already 200 times today!
- Oh... And how is the situation in the part of the city, where you live?
- I live in Vyshneve (south of Kyiv). I cannot sleep. They have been shooting all the time there.
- Did Russians hit any buildings there?
- Come on! Show me what they hit. Everybody is saying they hit this and that. I drive through the city everyday. I didn't see anything which was hit.

I remembered the message of my friend in Berlin whose parents in Crimea told her that "They didn't bomb peaceful cities". Can it be true? For a moment, I thought, I entered in a different reality.

- Mmm...but my friends who live in Kyiv now, told me that there were explosions. - I also remembered the messages of a firefighter from my dance class chat, who told us that they had been putting out fire all the time.
- They told in the news that a rocket was thrown at the hospital Okhmadyt. I was driving there. Only the door exploded. I served in rocket forces. If a rocket had fallen there, there would be nothing in the radius of 2 kilometres there.

Indeed I saw no ruins from the car window. I was happy and worried about that. But we were driving only in one part of Kyiv, close to the city centre.

- Hmm...So it is safe here, isn't it?
- Nowhere is safe. It doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't make any sense to flee anywhere. You will be attacked any way, sooner or later.

We reached my building. The yard was full of sun. I thought that I had been living in a nice city corner. In spite of everything I thought and felt on the first day of war escalation. A young woman walked past me. It was a good sign. So it was more or less safe. I entered my apartment. It was also full of sunlight. I have never seen this apartment like this before (I moved in in October). It looked so lovely. On the first day of war escalation I thought that I hated this apartment.

Anyway I didn't want to stay there for the night alone. It was 11:50 a.m. The last bus to my home was at 02:30 p.m. I

had some two hours to turn off water, the fridge and to pack everything. So I started to make all the flat upside down in search for the important things. I felt like an amateur looter, because I didn't get enough sleep the night before and the time was flying too quickly.

I just threw everything on a big heap near my suitcase which I bought for my first emigration to Berlin in 2013. I asked my mother on the phone if I should take also a package of rice (yes) and laundry detergent (yes, there are almost no laundry detergents in the stores in our town). In WhatsApp I asked my Italian friend if I should take Hanna Arendts books (yes, they will be useful), which I managed to bring from Berlin during last trip, and Machiavellis book in Ukrainian which I bought shortly before the war escalation (yes, if possible). Shall I bring that nice evening dress I bought in Isernia?...and my dance shoes?... All of this felt surrealistic. It was still much less stressful than in spring 2019 when I had to free my Berlin apartment from the staff I gathered in 6 years, when shortly before my flight I was still packing and cleaning. There in Berlin I couldn't order a taxi because it is unspeakably expensive, so I had to carry everything in my hands walking to the bus and then to S-Bahn.

I ordered a taxi, but I knew already that I was running late. In the last moment I discovered a bag with my university diplomas, so I just took it without trying to pack everything properly. The taxi driver was a grey-haired man wearing a cap and looking like an Armenian or Georgian (I am not good in people's faces). He was sorry that he couldn't help me to lift my suitcase, because he was "a war invalid". When in taxi, I called the bus driver and asked if he might wait a little bit. The taxi driver said slowly that we needed 30 minutes. The bus driver said: "No, I cannot wait half an hour with people in the bus". I agreed and thanked him. Last hour my mother had been calling me all the time to make sure that I would make it in time. Although the night before and in the morning she didn't believe I would. Me neither. She was very angry to know on the phone that she was right. I was also disappointed. The taxi driver was talking a lot and explaining me that I should avoid deserted places, I should stand near groups of people, it is war, you know, you never know, it is dangerous, I shouldn't worry, maybe, there is still a car, if I don't make it until 6 p.m., I should go back to my apartment, because later there are fewer taxis...I tried to listen to his words, but my disappointment let me hear only some of them. Explaining all of that, he was driving even more slowly. I felt even more helpless. We arrived 16 minutes later. There was no bus any more. Later I knew that the bus driver had waited for 15 minutes for me. I wanted to take my suitcase out of the car's trunk, but the taxi driver said, he would help me. "But.." - I said. "It's Ok" - he answered. I felt bad, because he was very nice and attentive to me, and I was so cold-hearted with him. I hardly said a word when being in the car.

So here I was, again on the exit of the city hitchhiking in war time, but this time in daylight, with lots of sunlight and lots of bags. There were no people hitchhiking like me in contrast to the last time. Only a little bit later there was one man. At the bus stop there were several families with suitcases, but they didn't go on the road to stop cars like me. I wondered why. But then a bus came and all of them went towards it. Me too. Only to find out that it was a marshrutka heading to a town close to Kyiv. Then I spotted a minibus behind the bus stop. I asked a man standing near the bus, where it was going and if there was place for me. They were going to Lviv. Ok, not my direction. Yes, there was place... I went back to the road and lifted my arm to stop cars. Nobody stopped and there were fewer cars than ever. Standing there, I was wondering, maybe I should spontaneously go to Lviv...But I wasn't sure that I didn't leave some important things in my parents' town...Lviv and maybe then Berlin...

One taxi app was also offering to book trips for longer distances. It cost some 1200 UAH. But maybe I should go back

with all these bags and stay in my apartment for the night... then it makes 400 UAH for taxis back and forth. Ok, maybe I should book a taxi to my town. The price changed to 1700 UAH... Suddenly a car stopped. "Where are you going?" "To city X". When I heard that before, I used to say "No, thanks, I need to go much further ". This time I also said that automatically, but I was also talking on the phone with my mother who heard that and said "No, go!". The young guy driving that car was nice and I felt safe in his car. He picked up also another man, in military clothes. The latter was telling lots of things without a pause. They were talking and I was happy to have my peace and searched how I could get home from city X.

The sun was shining. Later the man in military clothes got off the car, but managed to infect the car driver with his talkativeness before. The car driver didn't want to take any money (which never happened to me before). He told me that he and his friend heard powerful explosions while drinking coffee in the morning one day. I don't remember why, but it sounded funny the way he told that. We laughed. It was also so good to hear about the situation in his city from its inhabitant. Before I heard about these explosions only in the news. It was also lovely to hear that the city continued it's usual life. I wanted to know more, but then he suggested talking about the coming spring rather than about explosions and shootings.

In the meantime my mother found a man in our town who would drive from our town to city X and pick me up on the highway next to it. The car driver told me that he would drive me home if I paid for petrol. I had been too shy to ask for that before and my mother was too quick to find another solution. So I wished him all the best and got off the car in city X.

I had to wait for some ten minutes on the highway. I recognized the bus stop very well, although it was bizarre to see it without inscription "City X". All the road signs had been eliminated in order to make the Russian barbarians get lost. I looked at Pandino and Storch in the beautiful sunlight. I have never seen such sunlight before and it reminded me of my friend's photos from Oman which he sent me in February. So Oman, huh? I didn't become a tree. I still love traveling.

A police car with two men stopped near me.

- Why are you standing here?- they looked at Pandino and Storch
- I am waiting for my friend to pick me up.
- Ah ok, sorry. We just wondered, if you needed help.

I have never had to do with police and I heard a lot of mean jokes about them. But now I love our police.

My "friend" (recently all of us, Ukrainians, have so many friends of friends of friends...some of them we have never seen in person) came with his wife. As I wanted to use a seatbelt, she told me "Don't do that, you need to be mobile and be able to get quickly out of the car if there is a shooting". She told me about her friend's family who was shot in car while trying to flee Irpin. The first car managed to escape, but not the second. Then she told that the house of her uncle in some village was shot or attacked with some rockets (I didn't learn all the names of weapons yet). Then her husband turned on some songs about war in Russian language which I never heard before. I hadn't listened to music since the war escalation, but it felt great to hear those harsh words about fighting while driving in a car with "friends" in the light of the evening sun. I hope these were Ukrainian music bands...

As I arrived home, the most difficult part of that day's mission awaited me. We had a big family conflict about my being late for the bus and about the fact that it might have been reasonable to stay in Kyiv for the night and go by bus

the following day. As if Russians in the country were not enough. Suddenly I wanted badly to "evacuate" to Lviv or Berlin. Fortunately, the next day we made peace, so I am staying. My friend told me that she was happy to hear that my parents and me were quarrelling. It implied, that the situation was still good.

As for the explosion in the morning, it was a rocket hitting our radio tower. My neighbor who works there, was going to drive there 20 minutes before the explosion, but for some reason he didn't. The tower was repaired that very day. The neighbor told my father about "golden details" of that "beautiful rocket". It is already the third one in our town, but the first to fall. In the first days of war escalation my father saw two "beautiful" winged missiles flying past him somewhere further. This reminds me about a woman from Charkiv staying with her child for several days at my friend's place in Berlin, who told her that one day "they saw from their flat window a beautiful huge fire as they show in films". Maybe that's the same beauty as the one meant by the recently done mural on a school in Naples depicting Dostoyevsky and saying "Beauty saves the world" in Russian? I cannot wait to be saved.

The following day I learnt from my friend that a building next to her flat was ruined by a rocket in Kyiv. The day after that the authorities in Kyiv and Kyiv region announced a curfew for two days.

Bildquelle: © Lina Zalitok, 2022. Blick aus dem Autofenster am Weg nach Kyjiw.