

Evacuation from Mariupol during the Russian invasion.

# A BRIEF DIARY OF A WITNESS

by **Viacheslav Kudlai**

**S**ince the previous cycle of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Mariupol was one of the most important places which hosted refugees from the occupied territories of the Donetsk region and Crimea. Mariupol warmly welcomed residents of Donetsk, Makiivka, Yenakiieve, Horlivka, Novoazovsk, and other cities. The atmosphere of fear spread after the shelling of residential areas in Mariupol on January 24, 2015 – this tragedy marked the start of displacement from our city to central and western regions of Ukraine. During the last eight years we have become used to living near the line of fire and the feeling of danger has been lowered: but everything changed the early morning on February 24, 2022. That day the first Russian rockets destroyed Mariupol's anti-aircraft weapons and next day we observed civilian casualties in the eastern part of the city.

Electricity and water disappeared in all the houses in our city on February 28. The electricity supply was restored on March 1 for several hours, but after that it was cut off again and it has not been possible to fix it since. In the evening of March 6, the gas in Mariupol was cut off as well, so after that day it was only possible to cook in the yard, where fragments of shells regularly flew so everybody was in danger, not only because of hunger. It was unsafe to stay at home and it was even more dangerous to go outside to boil water or cook something: Every moment could be the last moment of life. Since that day, the feeling of despair hasn't left me. It was clear that every person in Mariupol will be unsafe for a long time but nevertheless sparks of hope tried to

welcome my mind, so I prayed like never before for me, my family, and my friends to survive that hell.

**F**rom the first days of March, fighting was going on in the western area of Mariupol near my house. In particular, a rocket-propelled grenade fired at school #67 blew up windows in neighboring houses, as well as damaging the second floor of our building. More and more fragments of ammunition appeared lying around our yard. On March 9, at about 10:00 pm, a piece of shrapnel flew into our apartment through the balcony window and our living room was damaged. After that accident, my body started to tremble uncontrollably each time I heard the sound of weapon strikes near me. On March 10, we were cleaning the apartment after the damage and around 11:00 we heard the sound of an airplane; then the bomb hit the neighboring house corner (Hrushevskoho Street, 14). The air strike knocked out all the windows and frames in our building, as well as the front doors of many apartments, including ours. The entire apartment was littered with pieces of concrete, glass, wood, and dust. All this destruction, cold weather, the lack of water, and the absence of gas and electricity in the apartment meant that it became impossible to live. My parents and I started to pick warm clothes, packing our bags with the most important things and while we did that the second air wave struck us and we were thrown to the ground again. Momently we checked each other and moved through broken doors, the glass that lay all around, to the first floor of our building. For three hours



Square of Freedom – Center of Mariupol, March 13, 2022.

PHOTO: OLEH KUDLAI

from 11:00 till 14:00 we could not leave the house due to heavy shelling. At about 14:00 on March 10, we couldn't wait any longer and moved to a private house of my mother's friend in the seventeenth district of Mariupol (Dokuchaeva Lane). The whole way to the new place was horrifying. Everything around was broken and on fire, there were bomb craters all around and while we walked new craters appeared pretty near us. But we couldn't go back or stop; we moved forward because we naively believed that it would be safer in a new place.

**E**arly in the morning on March 12, a powerful bomb blasted and erupted near the house where we were staying. As a result of this explosion, the ceiling in the house fell on the floor and only the rafters and the roof covering remained. Everything in the house was covered with plaster and fragments of brick blocks. My first thought after I got out of the stones and dust was about others; I was afraid that someone was hurt or killed, and it was a real miracle to me that everyone was still alive, including the housewife's 90-year-old mother. We cleaned the house as much as possible, tried to fix the windows with boards and spent the night on the floor. The night was restless; active shelling was constantly heard. That night we couldn't sleep: We heard the strikes and we shivered. On March 13, around 10:00 am, an air bomb was dropped on a nearby house, which damaged several houses. Pieces of earth and fragments flew into the house from

**“That night we couldn't sleep: We heard the strikes and we shivered.”**

this blow and the blast wave. On the same day, we again tried to fix the windows and covered them with carpets, but the next air strike tore them apart. It was a shock for me to see a dead neighbor and to realize that I had been talking to him just a few hours before. Going outside at about 17:00 on March 13, we saw terrifying damage to the surrounding houses and saw dead bodies of three victims on the road. Our family walked along roads covered with dead bodies, earth, stones, glass, wires but nothing could stop us; we still wanted to survive so we came to the center of the city where it seemed calmer.

From March 13, we went to live in the shelter called Cube near the volunteer center Khalabuda, where Mariupol residents were fed from prepared warehouses. Electric generators and the satellite Ukrainian TV channel *Dom* worked here. We joined with other families like ours; we worked together, so it was a kind of relief to be there – but not for long. On March 19, a bomb fell on the warehouse of the volunteer center; the entrance and the warehouse were damaged. The next day Russian soldiers were based in our location, and for the first time I was checked by the occupiers for tattoos on my body, photos on my mobile phone, and entries in my military ID. It was very humiliating and frightening to communicate with occupiers; they acted unpredictably and one of the guys from the shelter got a bullet in his hand because he couldn't carry out one of the soldiers' orders. We lived here until March



Map of March 8, 2022.

23, when we realized that it was too dangerous to stay there.

On the morning of March 23, our family gathered and walked together with other families towards Zaporizhzhya Highway. As this part of the city was occupied at that time, there were many representatives of the so-called "Donetsk people's republic" (dpr) troops who stopped us, examined our bodies for tattoos and checked documents. It was especially painful to walk through the shattered buildings of the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy and the Department of Philology and Mass Communications of Mariupol State University, where I worked. Arriving at the ANP gas station (Zaporizhzhya Highway 53), we boarded a bus that took Mariupol residents to the village of Nikol'ske, which was controlled by Russians and representatives of the so-called dpr. In the village of Nikol'ske, residents from Mariupol gathered in the school building No 2, where we spent the night sitting on chairs. For three days we were looking for transport to reach Berdyansk and then, along a humanitarian "green corridor", to Zaporizhzhya. On March 24, representatives of the so-called Donetsk people's republic, including Denis Pushylin, visited this school. They lied to the displaced people from Mariupol and said that going towards Berdyansk was dangerous; we needed to go eastwards to Novoazovsk, and then to Donetsk or Russian cities. Those who registered for the evacuation buses in the direction of Novoazovsk were put through the procedure of filtering men with the verification of documents and fingerprinting by representatives of the so-called dpr. On

March 25, 2022, dpr representatives began to detain volunteers who organized the departure of people to Berdyansk. People began to protest and defend the detainees, but the occupiers began threatening to detain everyone who spoke out. I started to think that we were caught in a trap and doomed to be taken to Russia.

That Friday we managed to find a driver who helped us to leave from Nikol'ske to Berdyansk. So again, I felt some hope of getting out of the war zone. We drove on detour roads and in front of Berdyansk we were stopped at a checkpoint near the village Azovs'ke. There were several representatives of the so-called dpr armed with the guns at the checkpoint. They did not check on elderly men and women. I and another young man were taken out of the van, forced to expose body parts to check for tattoos, as well as for bruises on shoulders from machine guns. These people also checked all the things in our bags and examined everything carefully. At this checkpoint, my phone was checked for photos of destroyed homes or checkpoints. After that we were stopped again at the next checkpoint at the gas station Caravan before the village Azovs'ke. A car marked Z appeared, from which so-called Cossacks in caps got out with machine guns pointing at us. All the bus passengers had their documents checked. We were stopped by the Russian military once again on the bridge over the Kutsa Berdyanka River on P37 highway. Documents, bags, and mobile phones were checked again. One of occupiers wanted to take away my mobile phone

after checking it but returned it on my request. Russian soldiers also had some kind of propaganda conversation based on these that we should go to Russia, where life seems to be better so we would definitely get rich there. We arrived in Berdyansk on March 25, at 16:00, where we felt safer. There was no shelling, mobile communication was working, there was electricity and a water supply. On March 26, we registered in a free dormitory (Berdyansk, 80 Kirova Street). On this day we went to the sports complex in Berdyansk, where we registered on buses to Zaporizhzhya. We were lost and confused and didn't know what to do next to get safer place.

We decided to move closer to the village Azovs'ke and spent the night in the Fakel camp. On this day, March 26, the mobile connection disappeared so now we could not clarify details about where the evacuation buses would arrive. On March 27, we returned to the sports complex, but could not get information about the evacuation. On the morning of March 28, we went to the checkpoint in the village of Azovs'ke to find evacuation buses, but we did not see them, so we returned to the camp.

There was no point in staying in the camp without communication, and on March 28, we moved to Berdyansk sports complex. On March 29, we found a man who took us to the P37 highway in the village of Azov, where we joined other people who were waiting for evacuation buses to Zaporizhzhya. We waited there all day, but the buses didn't arrive. A feeling of frustration did not leave me.

At about 18:00 we tried to spend the night at the nearest gas station and one Russian military man let us stay in the Prime Group gas station motel (Azovs'ke, 78 Kosmichna Street). The motel was crushed, windows were partly without glass, walls were marked with symbols of the occupiers (Z, dpr, Donetsk etc.). The night was restless, and we felt frozen in the morning. On March 30 at 6 am, we went on the road again, but that day there were no vehicles for evacuation, and we spent the night at the same gas station. On March 31, we waited all day again and returned to the gas station in the evening, but by chance saw the evacuation buses arriving. We lined up and waited to board the buses. We were so happy to get on the bus and it was not so important to know what the next moment would bring; at that point it seemed like a dream coming true. That evening the buses went to the village Dmytrivka, where we spent the night. In the morning of April 1, we returned to Azovs'ke village to pick up all the people who were waiting for evacuation and at about 12:00 we left for the city of Zaporizhzhya.

All the way we were checked at checkpoints – phones, body for tattoos etc. At the penultimate checkpoint, many people's mobile phones were confiscated (four people from our bus alone were robbed by occupiers). It was a long road of humiliation and mockery; many people shouted, made crazy demands to our drivers (to go ahead and not stop at checkpoints), children vomited, old people lost consciousness. In the village of Vasylivka, we saw that the Russian military did not allow private vehicles

to drive to Zaporizhzhya. In fact, after Vasylivka, we could drive much faster. In the city of Zaporizhzhya we were dropped off near the Epicenter shopping center, where we were checked by the police and then we were housed in a kindergarten No 135 (Korishchenko Street, 11) where we spent the night. On April 2, we boarded the Zaporizhzhya – L'viv bus and arrived in L'viv on April 3. Here we started to get used to a life like that we had in Mariupol before the declaration of this unprovoked war.

The inhuman attitude of the occupiers towards Ukrainians and, in particular, Mariupol residents which we experienced, as well as the rhetoric of the Russian media that civilians and civilian objects are not attacked, very loudly demonstrates that the aggressor does not consider us as people; our life has no value for them, we are just enemies, we need to be removed from the territory. It is tragic that the events of the 1930s are repeated in

**“There was no point in staying in the camp without communication.”**

the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just as the Nazis exterminated Jewish people during World War II, Russians are exterminating people in Ukraine today. As President Volodymyr Zelensky said, Ukraine is: “defending the ability of a person to live in the modern world” by fighting off Russian invaders. We can see that this is true,

that Russia made this tragic step back in time to bloody war like in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This “traveling in time” possibly brought to Mariupol much greater losses than the events of the World War II. The chronology of events described in this text is nothing unusual for each and every resident of Mariupol. Each person from Mariupol has a personal dramatic story, and, unfortunately, many of them did not have such a positive finale with evacuation to a safer place. Many families lost loved ones – sometimes forever. If the world lets the aggressor continue this war, we will witness more and more dramatic stories from different parts of Ukraine, and I am not sure that Russia will stop in Ukraine.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my colleagues, president and members of the Ukrainian Educational Research Association (UERA), who offered me and my family shelter in L'viv after the evacuation from Mariupol and provided substantial psychological and moral support. This is an excellent example of the solidarity of Ukrainian people. I got great support and inspiration from the UERA team to continue to work for Ukrainian university education at Mariupol State University and to reunite with my colleagues and students. As a citizen of Ukraine I also feel strong support from all over the world. Such synergy, in particular, of educators and scientists, gives hope that even in these hard times for our country this light of human unity will stop this cruel war and prove that human life is the highest democratic value, and it is impossible to forget this fact in contemporary world! ✖

Viacheslav Kudlai, PhD in Social Communications,  
Associate Professor, Information Activity Department,  
Mariupol State University.