Old Vilcha, in Polissia region. PHOTO: VIKTORIA NAUMENKO

Remembering **Vilcha**

by **Viktoria Naumenko**

A twice abandoned village

Tetiana S.: My mum is 88 years old, and I still haven't told her that there's nothing left there [at the cemetery]. […] She keeps saying, 'Bury me there.'
Viktoria N. (interviewer): In Polissia?
Tetiana S.: No, here – in Vilcha of the Kharkiv region (crying).[1]

This clarifying question frequently arises in conversations with residents of Vilcha. The reason is that there are two settlements with the same name in Ukraine. The first Vilcha is located in the Polissia region of Kyiv Oblast, on the border with Belarus. The second is in the Sloboda region of Kharkiv Oblast, on the border with Russia. What do these two settlements have in common?

Their shared history is one of forced rupture and continuation. The history of the first Vilcha, located approximately 40 kilometers from the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, effectively ended ten years after the 1986 accident, when its entire population was resettled. At the same time, the history of the second Vilcha began precisely because of these resettlers – a new village was built for them in the Kharkiv region.[2] The first Vilcha was abandoned due to radioactive contamination. The second Vilcha

abstract

This essay examines the fate of Vilcha, a village that was forcibly abandoned twice within a single generation. Originally located in Polissia, the village was evacuated after the Chornobyl disaster. Its inhabitants were resettled to a newly built village in the Kharkiv region. This second village of Vilcha was occupied and subsequently destroyed during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Based on three waves of oral interviews conducted between 2016 and 2025, this essay explores the experiences of forced displacement, memory, and loss. Vilcha emerges as a poignant example of repeated forced migration caused by both technological disaster and war.

KEYWORDS: Vilcha, forced displacement, repeated resettlement, Chornobyl disaster, Russian-Ukrainian War, oral history, memory.

New Vilcha, in Kharkiv region.

PHOTO: COURTESEY OF MYKOLA LIRSKII, COUNCIL OF VILCHA

The location of the two Vilcha villages in Ukraine.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

was almost completely destroyed as a result of the war. In both settlements, cemeteries were severely damaged during the hostilities of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Today, life in both villages has ceased – they have both turned into ghost towns.

Yet there are still people whose life stories are inseparably connected to both Vilchas. This essay is about these people and their experience of double forced resettlement over the course of thirty years.[3] This is a generation that has been forced to leave their homes twice in their lifetime. They spent their childhood and youth in the first village, where they started families and had children. They spent the second half of their lives in the second village: their children grew up there, their grandchildren were born there, and they retired there. Their story is one of loss and discovery, pain and solidarity, despair and hope.

Vilcha was founded in Polissia at the beginning of the 20th century from two forest farmsteads. For decades, it remained a small but stable settlement with its own infrastructure and industry. The construction of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and the city of Prypiat turned Vilcha into an important transport hub in the region and gave its residents a sense of a predictable future. The disaster of 1986 radically altered the trajectory of the village's development and the fate of its inhabitants. Classified as a zone of mandatory resettlement,[4] Polissia's Vilcha lost its last resident in 1996. Since then, the only possibility of a symbolic return has been the annual memorial trips to the abandoned settlement.

Polissia Vilcha as a space of memory

As if I had flown here on wings[...].[5]

My acquaintance with the people of Vilcha began with a journey to the cemeteries of Polissia Vilcha. In Ukrainian tradition, there is a custom of commemorating deceased relatives in the period after Easter – the so-called *Hrobky* or *Provody*. During these days, people visit burial sites, tidy up graves and the surrounding area after winter, and honor the dead at a shared table.

In May 2016, I joined one such trip to an abandoned settlement in the Kyiv region.[6] The purpose of my accompaniment was to conduct semi-structured interviews about the participants' expectations for the journey and the impact of the disaster on

their lives. Despite my research interest, I felt anxious. My interlocutors had lost their homes more than twenty years earlier and were now returning to the restricted zone to see the ruins of their former lives and to visit the graves of relatives and friends.

As soon as the bus entered the territory of the former Polissia district, memories began to come alive. Fifty people, all from Vilcha, first fell silent and pressed their faces to the windows, trying to make out familiar landscapes and recognize what was "their own". Gradually, the silence gave way to excitement: voices grew louder, and memories became more emotional. They recalled their lives before the disaster and their youth in Polissia Vilcha: school pranks, skating on homemade ice rinks in winter, and trips to the forest to gather blueberries and mushrooms. The space of the former settlement gradually turned into a space of memory – and, significantly, one filled mostly with bright and life-affirming recollections.

UPON ARRIVING in the village, the visitors first walked through the streets of Vilcha, which had been almost completely reclaimed by the forest. They were drawn to the places where their family homes had once stood, places saturated with so many memories. Here and there, the remains of buildings were still visible. On some of them, the name of the street – Oleksiivska – could still be read. Most of the houses, however, had been entirely destroyed; only wild fruit trees testified that people had once lived there.

The next important moment of the trip was the tidying up and care of family graves in two local cemeteries. The cemetery resembled an anthill, filled with people absorbed in their work. Some cleared graves overgrown with weeds, others painted memorial crosses and repaired fences, and some even installed new monuments. Afterwards, a communal meal began – everyone set the tables near the graves. People moved from one table to another, talking, reminiscing about the past, and laughing together.

The importance of this trip for the people of Vilcha in 2016 cannot be overestimated. For many of them, it would be their last visit to their Polissia home. On the way back – already returning to their settled lives in the Kharkiv region – they felt relief and elation. The passengers were radiant, smiling, and animatedly discussing what they had seen and whom they had met from other villages. If tears appeared in the eyes of the Vilcha's residents on the way there, they returned filled with joy. My anxious expectations did not come true. Yes, there was a lot of sadness when the residents of Vilcha could not even find traces of their former homes. Yet the overall mood remained bright and uplifted. "I feel recharged for the whole year now."[7]

Creating a New Vilcha

It's Not Ours.[8]

The 2016 journey to Vilcha in the Chornobyl zone both began and ended in another Vilcha – in the Kharkiv region. This village, built on the site of a former collective farm field near the town of Vovchansk, was intended to become a new home for displaced persons and, above all, to protect them from the harmful effects of radiation.

Old Vilcha. PHOTO: VIKTORIA NAUMENKO

The residents of Polissia Vilcha were not evacuated immediately after the disaster in 1986. On the contrary, they were actively involved in the "liquidation" (as Soviet authorities called it) of the consequences of the catastrophe: a temporary hospital for irradiated soldiers was set up in the school, contaminated equipment was washed and unloaded at the railway station, and bread was baked for those mobilized to work in the affected area. Vilcha became one of the reception points for the first evacuees from the ten-kilometre zone around the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

IN THE FOLLOWING years, the need to resettle the population of Vilcha became increasingly clear, as it was evident that the land would remain unsafe for a long time. Gradually, the familiar sense of security eroded, and everyday life became defined by prohibitions: it was forbidden to keep livestock, eat homegrown fruits and vegetables, or gather mushrooms and berries in the surrounding forests. These restrictions undoubtedly caused anxiety, yet stable employment and centralized food supplies kept people from deciding to move. Only when children began to fall ill and previously healthy young people started to die suddenly did the "invisible" radiation become a tangible and very real threat. At that moment, the danger took on concrete form, and the decision to resettle became inevitable.

"EVEN IN THIS NEW SPACE, THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT OFFERED A SENSE OF HOME — THEIR OWN PEOPLE."

Most people perceived the forced move to a new village in another, eastern part of the country as one of the greatest tragedies in their lives. For a long time, the pain of losing their homes and the realization that they could never return hindered their ability to settle in the new place. The situation was further complicated by a nationwide socio-economic crisis: there was a lack of work, the hastily built houses needed repairs, and the economy had to be rebuilt from scratch in unfamiliar climatic conditions. Tensions were also heightened by the wary attitude of local residents, who were envious of the new houses and compensation payments.

Even in this new space, there was something that offered a

PHOTO: VIKTORIA NAUMENKO

New Vilcha.

PHOTO ANASTASIIA HRIAZNOVA

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sense of home – their own people. Because the resettlement was carried out compactly, the community remained together: entire streets and extended families moved as a group. During this difficult period, it was precisely this unity and mutual support that became the main resource for the survival and moral resilience of the people of Vilcha.

OVER TIME, the second Vilcha became a true home for the displaced community. Children grew up here, grandchildren were born, gardens and vegetable plots appeared, and new social ties were formed. Carrying memories of their lost homeland and hopes for a safer future, Vilcha inhabitants gradually took root in their new surroundings, preserving symbolic continuity through the name Vilcha. As one of the residents put it:

> **Vilcha is our history. I still see the old village in my dreams. With my eyes closed, I can describe every path, every house, every broken branch. But fate has turned this settlement into our home. We truly want to see it thrive, and we believe in a happy future here, in the new Vilcha.**[9]

Vilcha before the full-scale invasion: Life between two catastrophes

As a researcher, I visited Vilcha in the Kharkiv region several times, most recently in the spring of 2018. Unlike my 2016 journey to the abandoned village in Polissia, this encounter was no longer a journey into the realm of memory. It was an encounter with the life that continued.

Blooming gardens and open courtyards with low fences, through which flower beds were visible, created a sense not of isolation, but of trust in the world. Yet what struck me most was not the outward orderliness, but the human hospitality – the readiness to share one's space, one's time, and one's experience of losing and finding a home.

By that time, Vilcha had already become a refuge for new forced migrants from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, who had fled the war after 2014.[10] The residents of Vilcha supported them not only with food and basic necessities, but also with their own stories of disaster and displacement. They tried to pass on what had once sustained them: faith in the possibility of putting down roots again, rebuilding everyday lives, and learning to call a new place home.

The residents of Vilcha willingly showed their homes, gardens, and flower beds, as if to prove that home is not merely a geographical location, but a state of being that can be cultivated even on unfamiliar soil. Their words still echoed with pain for Polissia, yet at the same time it was clear that the new village was where they had taken root. At that moment, it seemed that this Vilcha was final – that despite the war, the fate of forced resettlement would not be repeated here.

Occupation and the loss of home once again

This settlement was also devastated by a new catastrophe – Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Located just eleven kilometers from the Russian border, Vilcha was occupied in the first hours of the invasion in February 2022. The following six months became a period of severe ordeal marked by fear, uncertainty, and moral exhaustion.

The residents of the village vividly remember the beginning of the shelling, the arrival of the occupying forces, searches, brutal beatings, detentions, and disappearances. The village lay on the route of Russian missiles and fighter jets heading toward Kharkiv where many inhabitants had relatives. Numerous families found themselves divided between the occupied and free territories. The absence of communication, shortages of water and electricity, and the lack of food and medicine became part of everyday life.

DESPITE THIS, the community once again rallied together. People supported one another with food, medicine, and information, and helped displaced persons from neighboring villages. Maia Yr. recalled:

> **We had no mobile connection at all, and it was in my garden, near that table, where people could catch an internet signal. [...] So there were always people in my garden – always. Even when I wasn't there, when I was at work. [...] We always had tea and our homemade treats, made from our own homemade flour.**[11]

Some residents were forced to leave the village to escape persecution by the occupying authorities. Others, mainly elderly people, chose to stay "until the very end", fearing that they would lose their homes for a second time.

The liberation of Vilcha in September 2022 was one of the happiest days in the lives of many residents.[12] After months of occupation, the return of Ukrainian authority was met with hope that normal life could be restored. Over the next two years, people worked tirelessly to rebuild their everyday existence. They planted gardens, reconstructed heating systems, and sought alternative energy sources, preparing for winter under the constant threat of renewed attacks. The determination not to lose their living space a second time was overwhelming.

Yet in the spring of 2024, a new Russian offensive brought this fragile recovery to an abrupt halt. Vilcha once again found itself on the front line, and its residents were forced to leave their homes. Even when the war ends, the prospects of return remain deeply uncertain. The scale of destruction is compounded by the geographical proximity to the Russian border and the likelihood of this territory being turned into a "buffer zone". For many families, this does not mean temporary evacuation, but a second and final loss of homes. Vilcha has once again been turned into a wasteland – a kind of "ghost town" that tragically repeats the fate of its Polissia predecessor.

When there is nowhere to return to

> **I am already making plans for what I will do there: I need to mow the grass and clean up.**[13]

When I met with the residents of Vilcha in 2025, I listened to their stories of losing their homes for the second time. The most difficult question concerned the future. For many, it is now connected not to a place, but to people – their children and grandchildren. At the same time, a paradox repeatedly arose in our conversations: they recognize that the return is impossible, but at the same time they continue to talk about it. Between the recognition of final loss and the hope of return, a tense space of memory takes shape.

THE PEOPLE OF VILCHA now gather in Kharkiv and the Kyiv region. They remain in contact through chat groups, exchange photographs of their destroyed houses, and share news about the front line approaching their village. In this way, Vilcha continues to exist – not as a physical settlement, but as a community of people bound by the shared experience of two catastrophes.

Within a single generation, Vilcha has been forcibly abandoned twice. Its residents have been displaced twice – first by a man-made disaster, and then by war. Their story is not only a chronicle of loss, but also a testament to their capacity to recreate a sense of home even when it no longer has a geographical address.

Vilcha's fate has mirrored the major Ukrainian traumas of recent decades – from the technological catastrophe of the late USSR to Russia's war of aggression. Yet one constant remains in this tragic cycle – people who choose life together again and again. The residents of Vilcha have lost two physical addresses, but they have not lost their community or sense of belonging. Their experience shows that home is not a fixed point on a map, but a process of mutual care and solidarity that endures even when only ruins remain where familiar streets once stood.

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references

1 Interview with Tetiana S., February 7, 2025. The age mentioned in the quote has been altered to ensure the anonymity of the interviewee. Collection "Double Displacement: Vilcha, Ukraine", Author's private archive.

2 Vilcha (Polissia District, Kyiv Region) was officially removed from the register of settlements in August 1999; Vilcha (Vovchansky District, Kharkiv Region) was founded in June 1993.

3 The empirical basis of the essay includes three sets of oral history interviews with residents of Vilcha: 17 short structured interviews conducted during a research trip to the abandoned village in the Chornobyl exclusion zone (2016); 30 interviews from the project "Vilcha – a Resettled Village" (2017); and 26 interviews from the collection "Double Displacement: Vilcha, Ukraine" (2025), conducted within the framework of the "Documenting Ukraine" grant (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, Vienna).

4 Following the Chornobyl accident, four zones were established according to levels of radioactive contamination: the exclusion zone, the zone of mandatory resettlement, the zone of guaranteed voluntary resettlement, and the zone of enhanced radioecological control. In 1986, only the thirty-kilometer exclusion zone was subject to mandatory evacuation. As information about the scale of the disaster became public, further resettlement followed.

5 Interview with Anzhela M., May 6, 2016. Author's private archive.

6 The trip was organized by the Chornobyl History Workshop (Kharkiv) with financial support from the International Education Center Dortmund (IBB Dortmund) and the Renovabis Charitable Foundation.

7 Interview with Raisa P., May 6, 2016. Author's private archive.

8 Interview with Anatolij G., Mai 6, 2016. Author's private archive.

9 Ivan Kel, quoted in: Mariia Sokolchuk and Ivar Matern, "Ivan Kel's Story," in *Vilcha – pereselene selo* [*Vilcha – a Resettled Village*], ed. Gelinada Grinchenko, Viktoriia Naumenko, and Svitlana Telukha (Kharkiv: Madrid, 2018), 124.

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12 The liberation of Vilcha in September 2022 formed part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine's counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region. On September 13, official sources confirmed the restoration of control over border communities. See: "Vilcha. Stantsiia Derzhprom no.6" [radio report], Radio Nakypilo, October 27, 2022. Accessed May 31, 2024. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCmb_sG2ED4

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