

# Freedom

By Michael Fine

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All Svetlana thought about was the border and the instructions she carried from Oleg, who had stayed behind to watch over the house and cars, and, if and when they came for him, to fight. He'd go on working if he could. He was a man. They weren't going to let him across the border anyway. He had a uniform and a gun and military equipment. He went out with the fighters during the day and came home at midnight to sleep in the cellar with Svetlana, Anna, and Raisa and Natalia most nights. Bombs fell. Artillery shells whizzed and then the earth shook, like a chair thrown against the wall, one chair after another after the next, the wall and the earth pushed out and then somehow rebounding, shock and aftershock, the earth trembling more than it was still. They destroyed the public buildings and the apartment blocks. All rubble now, all blackened shells. Missiles whined overhead, sometimes ten or fifteen a day. The earth shuddered. This can't last forever, Svetlana thought. Someone will come to stop it, to make the world rational. To open the schools. Or the earth itself will give out.

They talked about leaving. Lviv was a thousand kilometers west. More than six hundred miles. At least two days drive. Perhaps three or four now, with bridges out, check points, and the roads narrowed in places by tank barriers, the metal crosses as high as a man is tall welded out of car parts and girders, placed halfway across the road on one side, and then a few meters later, halfway across the road on the other side, so cars and trucks had to weave left and then right to get around them, and could only pass one at a time. Wrecked cars, trucks and tanks, pushed out of the way, just enough so traffic could pass. Very slowly, the cars and trucks headed

west backing up for kilometers in places. There were sandbag machinegun emplacements at junctions and turnings, of course, but they were mostly empty, waiting. The fighters would come to those emplacements when the time came, if the Russians advanced in one district, and use the emplacements to fight off the invaders or slow their columns, so others could hit the tanks and armored personal carriers from stands of trees and houses off to the side of the road.

Oleg made some of those tank barriers in his shop, working at night in the studio where he used to make art, used to make great works of rebar and plate steel, where he would weld and grind iron and steel to show the way curves and light could spring from cold metal, how the human imagination could find freedom in the darkest recesses of the earth, how hope springs even from the forge and the hammer, from rock and lava and thunder, from places where there is no forgiveness and no life. He had time for iron. But for no one else.

Raisa, Oleg's mother, had bad knees. Oleg had his studio and his work. People were breaking into houses that were vacant, looking for food and valuables, and leaving those houses trashed. Surely this insanity could not last. Svetlana worked in the garden and swept and cleaned the house all day long as she always did because there was no place else to go. Nothing else for her to do.

Her work. Her life. Teach and clean. Oleg came and went. He ate and drank. They slept in the cellar, all together so Oleg left Svetlana alone, for once. At last. He moved about, fixing cars and welding tank barriers instead of making art. This life was different and not different from their old life, both at the same time.

Then there were tanks surrounding Mariupol. And just driving off west became impossible.

Electricity disappeared. The shelves emptied. Svetlana went every other day to the school. Not to teach, now. Not to bring or receive children. Only to get rations from the Russian soldiers. Rations. From Russians. Stale bread. Potatoes. Pasta. Cheese. Canned tomatoes, the cans bent and old. Nothing else. Enough for two days. For six people. Soldiers in black uniforms. Speaking only Russian. People crowded together, took their boxes of food and retreated. No one looked up. Slava Ukraini. Someday, perhaps. Not now.

A week of promises. Then another week. Then, the buses.

Stay in Lviv, Oleg said. Or Truskavets. Or Lutsk. Inside Ukraine. So you can return. They can find you an empty farmhouse. Make a garden. And wait. This war can't last forever. Don't go to Poland. They won't let me cross. Stay in Ukraine. Stay where I can easily come. When I'm ready. When I want. What I want. And when the time is right, you will come back and life will return to what it always was. Which was exactly what Svetlana feared most.

They got on the bus. Families and old people, on the bus to Zaporizhzhia. And crippled men. One with a hand drawn up to his chest and contracted, a useless claw, his face scared and puffy who sat alone outside whenever the bus stopped. Sometimes he squatted, smoking. Another with one leg cut off above the knee and lacking an eye. Who knew whether these were new wounds or old wounds from 2014, or even wounds from a car crash or a tractor accident on a farm? Who knew? Some of the old women wore babushkas and had gnarled hands. Others had their hair cut short and wore half-glasses which had chains which wound around their necks,

bank tellers or accountants or librarians. Three pregnant girls, eighteen or nineteen, one perhaps sixteen, sitting with their mothers. And four or five women like Svetlana, traveling with three or four children, the children wide-eyed and quiet, the women on edge. Their men at home, fighting and in range of the artillery fire. None of the women knew if they'd ever sleep again. Sixty people crowded together. Who knew where they'd end up? Who knew if the bus would be destroyed by a bomb or a heat-seeking missile. Humanitarian corridors are just ideas, dreams of men and women in government, who never see or experience what the people who they make decisions for see and live. Ideas on paper. In an email. On a text. Ideas also created hydrogen bombs. In the bus, Svetlana could almost hear those bombs whistling.

Ten hours to go two hundred kilometers. One hundred and twenty miles. The lead cars, one a white SUV with UN markings. One with white flags flapping in the wind. It was spring and the cherry trees were in bloom: white blossoms against the black earth. Tulips were up in spite of themselves and the war: yellow and red blooms in the gardens of destroyed houses, the earth covered with rubble. Svetlana did not believe they would survive the trip. She cringed, sunk into her seat as the bus lurched forward, stopped at a check point, as voices shouted, on edge, until somehow the bus rolled forward again. The roads lined with burnt-out tanks and the shells of what used to be cars and trucks, crushed by tanks. An overturned hay-wagon, the hay spilled on the street, the body of the horse still in harness, the dead horse bloated, its eyes pecked out by crows. The road covered with broken glass and shrapnel. An artillery shell here. A spent missile there. And everywhere destruction.

And then Zaporizhzhia. Beautiful, battle-scarred Zaporizhzhia. The roadway lined by fighters and their vehicles. The jets screaming overhead, coming back safely, thanks to God, to land at the airport after a sortie.

Oleg was behind her now. Like Mariupol itself.

They took a train from Zaporizhzhia to Lviv, in the west, where only a few bombs and missiles were falling, far from the conflict zone where artillery shells fell all day and night. The Russians had bombed the train station in Lviv but the trains kept coming.

A man in the train station in Lviv said he could help them find a place to stay in schools near the border with Poland, because all the schools were closed now, and on distance learning. Which was exactly what Oleg wanted them to do. You could stay in a school for a month and from there the municipal authorities might find you an empty house, in a village, where life went on as life had been forever, a village where everyone made a garden of the black earth, where the houses were painted blue white and green, where chickens, ducks and geese bobbed and pecked at the earth, scattering when a car drove down a dirt road, where there were ponds for carp and a green for cows, goats and horses to graze. The snow had melted, giving way to mud. It was time to work the earth. To prepare the soil for seed.

But Svetlana walked past the blue and yellow banner of the municipal authorities. People were sleeping in the station, on benches and curled on the ground in corners. A man in a red vest brought a wheelchair for Raisa, who was so glad to sit that she asked no questions. Then they went out of the train station to the small park across the street where volunteers in blue slickers were serving soup and sandwiches. Pizza for the kids.

There was a bus. It went to Mosciska, closer to the border itself, and then to Shegeyni, on the border itself. Raisa climbed onto the bus slowly and did not ask questions then either.

Stay in Ukraine, Oleg said. So I can continue to beat you, Svetlana heard when he said that.

The walk to border control on the Ukrainian side was downhill and a few hundred yards. The pathway was made of poured concrete to look like pavers or bricks, small sections, longitudinally arranged with grooves between them to let the water run off. The wheels on their suitcases rattled as they walked, like the sound railcars make on train-tracks, like the rolling of a drumbeat that never changes in tempo. Raisa walked slowly, leaning on her cane, never complaining about the pain from her misshapen back and knees. The children were quiet, for once. Not frightened. But cautious, not knowing what to expect. Only Natalia was Oleg's child. They walked through the two large empty tents of IOM and UNHCR. They were there to provide shelter from the rain and the wind.

People queued at the Ukrainian border, standing on the poured concrete, some leaning against the green woven wire fence -- the hungry, the frightened, the lonely, the tired and the poor, perhaps a thousand, perhaps two thousand.

They waited for hours.

Inside the border station were men and women in green uniforms, sitting in white booths with glass fronts and a narrow window for documents under fluorescent lights. Dobry den, the people in uniforms said, over and over again. Dobry den. They examined the documents of the refugees, one at a time, looking from picture to person and picture to person again and again, making sure the person in the picture and described by the document was the person standing on the other side of the glass. Then they stamped the document and nodded, unless the person was a man. Every man was sent back. Unless they were old and broken down. Dyakuru, each of them

said as their passport was stamped, and then they walked forward through the automatic glass door into no-man's land. Dyakuru tobi.

Then they walked, again downhill, next to more green woven wire fencing. Some people were walking up the hill, from Poland, toward the Ukraine. Some of those people looked like Svetlana and her children and mother-in-law looked. Other people, volunteers, in blue, yellow or red vests, some carrying bright red bags of medicine and medical supplies, were walking into Ukraine. Some people walking into Ukraine were fighters in uniforms – Ukrainian fighters, coming home after being trained on the latest weaponry. Others in black boots and camouflage, international volunteers from many countries, headed east.

Raisa stumbled slowly forward, leaning on her canes, holding a plastic shopping bag in each hand.

Border control coming into Poland felt like a cage. The queue was just as long but people were packed together, and the green woven wire fences were narrower. There was a glass door with a light that was red but would sometimes flash green, and then the door would open for a moment to admit a few people. Well dressed people went through a queue to the left where there was no wait. Svetlana, Anna, Natalia and Raisa waited, inching forward whenever the door opened.

Then they were inside. People crowded into an anteroom. The Polish border police sat in booths that faced the crowd, who came forward, one at a time. The Border Police and would speak harshly in Polish to anyone who came forward too soon. Alcohol? Cigarettes? said a border policeman, who wore a blue hat and a blue uniform.



He did not look at the documents or at Svetlana or Raisa or the children. He motioned to a table behind him. Svetlana lifted their suitcases and Raisa's bags and then the man turned and stood so he could paw through their things. Then he gestured to a woman in a green uniform behind him, who sat in another glass-fronted booth.

The woman took their documents and barely looked up.

"Sister. In Toronto," Svetlana said, in English, lying. The woman asked no questions. There were thousands of women like Svetlana. Women with children. Who had a mother or a mother-in-law, or sometimes two parents, hobbling along behind them. Hundreds of thousands. Millions now. The woman in the green uniform stamped the passports and gestured to her left, pressed a button, and a steel gate opened for Svetlana, Anna, Natalia, and Raisa to pass through.

They passed though one more automatic glass door.

Then they were outside again, in Poland, on the same path of poured concrete made to look like pavers, walking down a slight incline. A volunteer in a red vest came with a wheelchair for Raisa, who sat in it, looking like a queen.

They walked down the poured concrete path, surrounded on both sides by the tents of volunteers from all over, handing out diapers and pizza, chai and coffee, sim cards and offers of housing or transport, their suitcase wheels rattling on the path.

To freedom.

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