

Christmas Stories From Kherson

Collection of short stories and essay

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Saint Nicholas from Oleshky

Oleg V.Kharchenko

(short story)



The steady sound of train wheels moving from Kyiv to Lviv served as a meditative motif leading to relaxation. A young woman in her early thirties, looking like a firm femme fatale, caressed the curly hair of her two kids sleeping nearby.

The seven-year-old boy and his five-year-old sister had chirped like cheery sparrows for almost two hours and got tired at long last lying on their mother's lap.

“Are you from Kherson?” Looking away from the mobile phone, I glanced at the steel eyes of the silent mom.

The brunette woman with a militant bun hairstyle looked surprised, “I haven't said a word, and you know that I'm from Kherson. Are you an extrasensory man or a spy?”

“Neither one, nor the other, I just heard your children mention ‘Suric’ – a Kherson slang word meaning Suvorov street and ‘Voyenka’ – an old city outskirts...”

“You are a sharp-witted man who has lived in Kherson for some time, right?” The smart eyes of the young woman sparkled with slight curiosity.

“Right, I spent all my childhood there and even youth. After some period of life adventures, I dropped my anchor in Kyiv... By the way, my name is Oleg. Glad to meet you.”

“Katherine. So am I.”

“So you flee away from daily shelling of all Kherson districts...I have just monitored all the information from Kherson region... The good news is that the electricity is restored in more than 60% of households.”

“The bad news is that the artillery firing from the left-bank Oleshky goes around-the-clock... Russian troops don’t sleep either day or night and keep on shooting at their favorite targets – the high-rise houses of our civilians. ” Unexpectedly, the shrewd eyes of Katherine filled with tears. “Excuse me,” she took a snow-white handkerchief and wiped her long eyelashes.

“You lost somebody in Oleshky, didn’t you?” I asked politely.

“You should work as a police detective, how did you determine it?” The young woman frowned a bit.

“You pronounced ‘Oleshky’ with such warmth in your voice that...”

“I see. There lived an old man whom I called ‘Saint Nicolas’ because he gave me the second birth in childhood, A week ago he turned into the war statistics, into one more killed civilian,” Katherine started crying silently.

Not knowing what to do, I went to a train conductor and brought her a cup of hot tea.

After the first sip of strong tea, Katherine calmed down, “When I was five years old, my parents did not know what to do with me. I suffered from some strange disease called ‘food allergy,’ and I could eat nothing except mashed potatoes made of potatoes boiled three times in different water. I looked like a skeleton with wrinkled skin covered with dark blue blurs. All the other food led to the scattering of red spots from my forehead to my feet. Together with my Mother and Grandma, we visited all possible and impossible doctors in Kherson and even went to some Professor in Kyiv. The verdict was unanimous – this odd disease could be treated only abroad, somewhere in Europe... One well-respected doctor even said to my mom that she should accept my ‘afterlife’ and give birth to another child...

However, my Mom was a hard-nut to crack. She heard that in Oleshky lived a folk medicine man, a specialist in homeopathy, who helped a lot of people suffering from a smorgasbord of strange sicknesses... In spite of the strong opposition of my grandmother who trusted just only official medicine, we went to this oldie because he was the last-straw-man to my salvation... We did not have money for foreign high-class clinics,” Katherine made a pause and suddenly smiled...

“He was a funny man, right?”

“Yeah. When we came to his house, he smirked, smashing his nose like an old pirate and frightening me with two moving fingers. Not knowing why, I started laughing... Then he listened to the long speeches of my mom and grandma and went away to bring some packs with healing herbs in a while... On his table, there was a large saucepan with sunny strawberries I could not take my eyes off. It was so juicy and ripe...I had never eaten it before because of my illness...” Katherine plunged in her thoughts and fell silent into her memories.

“Um, I guess he brewed some broth for you soon, right?” I could not stand the long silence and broke it.’

“Yeah. He gave me half a glass of some potion and looked at my reaction. To my surprise, I felt better soon and asked for permission to taste the terrific berry... Without any words, he pushed the saucepan with strawberry to me. My Mom and Grandma rushed to prevent it, however, he asked them to leave his house for some time... As for me, I had never been so happy, eating one strawberry after another, one berry, another berry and one more berry...I felt like the energy of the spring sunshine streamed through all my legs, arms and fingers... My folks stood at a window and cried, looking at my happy face... ”

“Have you visited your life savior anymore?” I got interested.

“Yeah, we went to him several more times just to check my general state of health. We dropped in even on New Year’s Eve with our favorite Kyiv cake...”

“With the layers of hazelnuts, chocolate glaze and buttercream, I like it too...”

“Yeah. That day he dressed like Saint Nicolas and gifted me a female doll in traditional Ukrainian clothes. Since that time, I have called him ‘Saint Nicolas from Oleshky.’ One year ago I went to him again; my daughter suffered from asthmatic coughing... He helped once more with some healing herbs...” Katherine started sobbing bitterly, awakening her sleeping kids.

I went to the train conductor once again. This time I brought four cups of tea – three for Katherine and her kids, and one for me. Looking at the still weeping wet eyes of Katherine, I was ready to join her... However, I remembered on time that men never cry... War is a cruel beast crashing everything in its way and paying no attention to casual civilians...

Saint Nicholas From Antonivka

(Christmas story)

Oleg V.Kharchenko



“Where...am... I? Am I alive or dead?” Maria, a 20-year-old blonde girl dressed in a German loden woolcoat in charcoal, gray lambswool polo sweater, onyx tapered pants and black Hannover tall boots, was lying under a scrap-heap of bricks, shelves and broken conservation jars. She looked up and down, right and left, focused on her hands covered with black and blue bruises crossed by thin bleeding cuts. Her whole body was under the wreckage of her Granny's basement. “I am still alive...I feel pain... My right leg hurts horribly... They say that after death people feel relief and fly away through a bright tunnel... I don't fly anywhere... I am still alive.”

A soft call switched the wandering thoughts of Maria. She looked around and noticed her half-broken and hardly blinking smartphone. She stretched out her hand and, straining her last force, touched it with her fingertips. “Wait, wait, wait! Don't scroll it down! You otta know that you are a good person! Just concentrate and go ahead! Beyond the horizons, the great life opens its doors for you! ”

“I pressed some social network button and I still have a chance.” A flash of hope twinkled in the eyes of a wounded girl. She took her phone and tried to dial her parents. However, in a while the screen of her smartphone subsided and squealed.

“A-A-A-h-h-h!” The scream of despair filled the ruined basement of the private house of her Granddad and Grandmom. “It was a mistake, a real mistake, a stupid mistake. Why the heck did I have to come here from Germany? To take the documents my grandparents forgot during the hurry-scurry evacuation? To celebrate Christmas together with them in Odessa the next day? Or to die here on the outskirts of Kherson, after unexpected Russian artillery shelling?”

“To die being 20...” Maria lost consciousness and, in a state of deep despair, her mind scrolled through all the Christmas celebrations their family had in this lovely house of her Grandma Helya and her Grandpa Hrysha. Her grandfather was a great fisherman, and their Christmas table was always full of various fish dishes. However, the stuffed pike and coated herring, cooked by her grandmother, belonged to her favorite ones... Not knowing why, she laughed a lot, being in this house, where all the cracks and corners were filled with her childish memories...

Now, unable to get out of the construction rubble, Maria came to her senses for several minutes and, after a series of desperate screams for help, she lost consciousness again.

Gradually, in a state of some sort of fever and hallucinations, Maria lost the track of time. It stretched and shrank like a spiral cord of her childish yo-yo toy. She made several more attempts to attract the attention of rescuers with her fading ‘Help’ screams, and after that, again and again, she got short and long blackouts.

Suddenly, she felt some warm hands, touching her forehead and hands. Being afraid to open her eyes, she asked almost silently, “Who are you?”

“Saint Nicolas from Antonivka,” a cracked crisp voice rang out in her right ear.

Maria opened her eyes slightly. “Antonivka? Five kilometers from here... Though, if you are Saint Nicolas, why is your beard black and dirty?”

“Because I forgot to put on a white beard, to dress in a Christmas coat, and to take a shower before the meeting with you, Princess,” said a stern man in his early thirties dressed in a helmet and some uniform.

After digging up the whole body of the injured girl, the man in a helmet took her outdoors and called the ambulance.

Maria kept silence, moaning from time to time, and feeling awkward being touched and grabbed like a sack of potatoes by some unknown to her man.

At last, she dared to keep on with their small talk, “Could you tell me what your name is?”

“Saint Nicolas,” the bearded man smiled and started smoking.

“I know it, but what is your real name?” she asked shyly.

“Mykola, and yours?”

“Maria,” she tried to sit straight, but suddenly felt an awful pain.

“I do recommend not moving, you broke your shin,” on reflection, Mykola took her leg and started splinting it and treating the bone fracture with some medicine materials.

“Ouch! It hurts!” Maria yelled out.

“Grit your teeth and be courageous, Maria, the ambulance can delay for ten or fifteen minutes. The wartime is unpredictable,” Mykola gave her a once-over. “You look like a German Frau, what are you doing here?”

“Long story short, together with my parents, after the beginning of the war, as refugees, we fled to Germany, and now we live in Bielefeld. A week ago, my grandparents were convinced to leave their house and to go to Odessa. You see, these day-and-night artillery shelling is a dangerous thing,” Maria made a pause.

“I see,” Mykola took a white bandage and finished the bone fracture treating procedure.

“However, in this rush, they forgot all their documents...”

“And you decided to play the role of Mother Teresa and to die heroically under the ruins of their house,” Mykola lit the second cigarette.

“I dunno, yes or no, but I saved all the documents. In our family, we have love and hate relations with bureaucracy. Sometimes, it functions as a black hole, sucking all our forces. I can't imagine how they would live without any documents.”

The long-awaited ambulance pulled up and in a sec Maria was in it. “By the way, will you call me?” She raised her head and threw her worried glance at Mykola, “You saved my life...”

“I will come to see you in the hospital, Princess...”

“When?” Maria's eyes sparkled like two lonely candles in a dark room.

“Tonight, in two or three hours. Today is Christmas, and I am Saint Nicolas from Antonivka, you know. How can I not come?” Mykola smiled tiredly and gave her his visiting card. “Before the war I was a manager...”

“I will be there...”

Subterranean Saints

(Christmas story)

Oleg V.Kharchenko



Part 1.

This year Christmas was marked by Anna, a voguish Ukrainian woman in her early thirties, in wartime Kherson, more precisely, in a dim dungeon or as they called it, in an untroubled underground of a multi-story house in the center of this bloodshed-stricken city.

The festive table was covered with kutya, a traditional wheat dish with honey gravy, dotted with poppy seeds, varenyky or stuffed dumplings with cabbage, pickled mushrooms, fried carp, covered herring, and uzvar or a soft drink from dried fruits. Homemade red wine, in two-liter plastic bottles, with several open conservation cans around them, were the last strokes of this subterranean Christmas Eve supper.

“As for the Lenten borscht, pampushky, and other Christmas dishes, do forgive me, Anna, but these artillery explosions RUINED almost all our shopping plans. For God’s sake, we have what we have now,” Svetlana, the university-mate of Anna, seeming 10 years older than her female friend, with a strand of gray hair on her forehead, and a sparkle of sadness in her eyes, glanced at the well-outlined long bob haircut and the well-groomed hands of Anna with attractive blue-and-yellow manicure who had just arrived with Polish volunteers and their humanitarian aid from Warsaw.

“It’s a trifle, I mean your shopping plans, you aren’t RUINED, you are alive. That’s the key result of this hard year,” Anna looked around at all those who got together at the holiday table. Except for Svetlana, a professional doctor, working in Kherson Oblast Hospital, there were her parents, Volodymyr and Halya, in their early seventies, her 10-

year-old son, Pasha, playing with some video game, and Maria, a former actress of the Kherson Dramatic Theater, a sixty-five years-old elegant lady, smoking a thin cigarette and keeping two fluffy cats in her hands.

All of them were the only residents of the same multi-story house entryway. There was one more tenant, a young police officer; however, he was called to night duty.

All of them looked different, but some subtle thing united these people together – their eyes...childishly kind, clean and silent, sad and sparkling.

“Sveta, I don’t know either I am right or wrong, but your eyes look alike. You have the eyes of Saints...” Anna made a pause, seeking the right words and simultaneously shrugging her shoulders from the sound of another artillery explosion.

“Yeah,” Svetlana smiled sluggishly, looking at her ringing smartphone. “Now you will see our immortals, pizza delivery guys. Two hours ago, I ordered two Calzone pizzas. You’ll see, they always come on time. Come shells or high water, hurricane or flying bombs, they are permanently punctual and prompt.”

“Business is business and war is war. Money goes to and fro...” Volodymyr smirked at the corners of his lips.

A cheery looking girl in a dark yellow uniform appeared at the door of their underground shelter. In her hands, there were two big cardboard packages of spicy-smelling pizza with scents of salami, ham and mozzarella. After getting money, the girl pronounced pleasantly, “Merry Christmas!” and disappeared as quickly as a snowflake falling on a camping bonfire.

Anna rubbed her face with open hands, “Just unbelievable. Mortar mines, smashed streets and pricey pizza...By the way, do you have a candle or two, to light our festive table?”

“Why not,” Volodymyr pulled out from his pocket a candle made of 14.5 mm heavy machine gun cartridge and placed it solemnly on the table. “The 57th caliber suits the best for this year's Christmas.”

“Amen,” added Maria, asking her neighbor with a gesture to pour wine in their glasses.

While looking at the red wine streaming slowly in the old faceted glasses brought by Halya, feeling nostalgia for the pre-war Kherson and retro-style crockery, Svetlana thanked Ann for the “gorgeous Christmas gift,” a fueled travel gas stove with 5L oil tank. “I have never thought that I will be the owner of such a splendid thing. They say that it works for the whole month and just after that needs refueling.”

“The Polish volunteers don’t sleep, and I try not to sleep either, helping them as I can do. You see, to sit idly in Warsaw and watch as you and Pasha suffer here is not for me. I need some action. I understand that you should do your daughter’s duty and your doctor’s duty. That is your right and responsibility. I have nothing against it. But long ago, your son should have been taken from this dangerous place to my aunt in Kyiv. I told you about it a dozen times. She has a large three-room apartment there, in a safe district, with good neighbors and good air defense. Why do you keep him here? Waiting for what? He is the future of your family and this future depends on the choices you make today not tomorrow... Russian bombs spare nobody, neither old men and women, nor adults and kids.”

“You are right. At long last, I convinced him, myself and my parents that it would be the best choice. In a day, there will be an evacuation train to Kyiv, so you are welcome. You can take him to your auntie’s apartment, but I won’t go to see you off at the train station, it would just break my heart. My parents will stay at home too,” Svetlana was ready to burst out crying, stretching her hands to her only son.

“Wait, wait, wait! Everything will be OK! I promise you,” Anna hugged her university friend, trying to calm her down, and wipe out the first tears in her tired eyes. In a while, Ann raised her glass of red wine. “I think it’s time to say ‘Merry Christmas’ and to drink to all good things!”

“We’ll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne!” The eyes of Svetlana sparkled for a sec when she raised her glass too, “Do you remember our University Prof-Boff teaching English and the lecture when we sang this Christmas song together?”

“Surely, a funny man...Let’s drink to Merry Christmas, our friends, and a cup of kindness...” Anna hugged Svetlana again.

“To our families, folks and left-bank fazendas,” Halya smiled.

“To our Kherson, picturesque riverbanks and wonderful watermelons,” Volodymyr added.

“To our hopes. I believe that one day I will stop living like a mole in a hole and will walk freely to our Dramatic Theater, where I spent all my best years,” Maria looked dreamily somewhere far and up, not forgetting to pet her purring cats.

“To our victorious spirit!” Pasha drew the Christmas line with a firm voice.

Part 2.

One day after, Anna, with a cheery Christmas smile on her face, dressed in a classy black blanket coat with a built-in scarf flowing over her shoulders and red block-heel

knee boots, together with pessimistically-looking Pasha in a casual black bomber jacket and faded boots of unspecified color, walked along the platform of the Kherson railway station. The sunny day with a frosty wind promised them a terrific trip to Kyiv, the capital city of Ukraine, with its shiny Christmas fir-tree in front of Saint Sophia Cathedral and its festive Ferris wheel with dizzy dancing images of the snowy tops of the city center. All these amazing things Anna had already described to Pasha, adding curious details and funny memories connected to these splendid sightseeing sites. However, Pasha kept silence and carefully examined the silhouettes of two hundred passengers, with a lot of police officers around them, waiting for the evacuation train Kherson-Kyiv, seeking the familiar faces in the crowd.

After another slice-of-life story told by Anna with sparkles of light-hearted humor, Pasha made a cautious comment, “My Granddad always says that you should not say ‘hop’ before you jump.”

Anna turned off the tap of her memories, not knowing what to say, “What ‘hop’ do you mean, Pasha?”

“I mean that we are in Kherson, we are not in Kyiv, and right now I have bad premonitions...” Pasha looked around and noticed the inscription ‘Bomb shelter.’ “You’d better think about how to flash fast to that place in your high-heeled boots, instead of thinking about festive ‘Ferris Wheel’ and the best shopping spots with Christmas toys in Kyiv.”

“Pasha, you speak like an adult bore. I just feel the Christmas mood and...” Anna smiled as if she had asked him to forgive her.

“And I have a smack of metal in my mouth which says that in a while there will be a lot of falling artillery shells...My premonitions have never let me down. I think that we should be closer to the bomb shelter entrance...” Pasha made a move towards the dignified building of the Kherson railway station, constructed somewhere in the early XXth century. However, he was stopped by Anna, keeping his hand firmly.

“Nobody goes there. Just look around, there is neither an alarm signal, nor any announcements... Besides, we should stick together and support each other...without spreading panic and respecting Mother...” Anna rhymed the words to distract Pasha. “Don’t you see that in case of any anxiety or agitation we can lose each other and your Mom will be deeply disappointed? Think about it...”

Though, Anna failed to finish her speech. The atrocious alarm siren hushed her words down, forcing the crowd of passengers to rush to the railway station basement. Almost immediately, appeared the first Russian Grad rockets exploding with horrible blasts and

harsh fragments. Pasha was right; she stumbled on the first parapet, losing her balance and consciousness as well as the hand of the boy, drawn by the flow of fiercely wailing people, rushing away with their backpacks and suitcases, briefcases and packages, children and pets, to the only 'holy place' of the railway station – the safe and spacious bomb shelter...

When Ann came to her senses, she felt something heavy lying on her body, causing her to feel stiff and tight. The alarm system kept on roaring and the artillery shells kept on raving. A split-second thought sparkled in her mind, "It's time to open the eyes." To her surprise, a young policeman was lying on her body, covering his head with intertwined fingers.

"Who are you?" Anna asked with astonishment.

"Yaroslav, a senior lieutenant of the Kherson police," the young man flared up with a Viking's smile.

"What are you doing on me?" Anna was shocked by such...unusual behavior of a law enforcement officer.

"Saving your life, Anna, you are too heavy for me to bring you to the bomb shelter. Besides, it's too dangerous to run away from here right now. Moreover, my left forearm is wounded by a rocket splinter intended for you, a high-heeled beauty with a Paris Match hairstyle..."

"You are too hefty too..." Anna blushed suddenly, which happened too seldom.

"Try to get accustomed to it... As for Pasha, he is waiting for you at the bomb shelter entrance with my partner, Boris."

At first, Anna did not know what to say, then, she found the words to express her...indignation. "You are the man I met for the first time, the man who knows my name and the name of my boy, the man who is saving my life while lying on me with a smiling face of a satisfied stallion... Yaroslav, who are you? I ask you again. Are you a freaky fella or a fortune-teller in the police uniform?"

"I am just a manly man, a neighbor of Svetlana from the same house..."

"Ouch! A macho neighbor of Svetlana, I heard about you..."

"Yeah, a macho neighbor with a big gun... At least, she thinks so. Well, and now, are you ready to stand up sharply and to speed off to the basement? There is a break in Grad shelling; we are to take this chance."

Seeing the determined look of Anna, Yaroslav jumped up and helped Anna to stand on her high heels and to streak swiftly to the bomb shelter in a crouched way.

Fortunately, for Anna and almost all passengers, almost nobody was injured that day, except one policeman who covered a senior woman too, but was not as lucky as Yaroslav.

After catching her breath and meeting Pasha, Anna calmed down a bit and bandaged the wounded arm of Yaroslav, who turned out to be a reliable partner, offering to give her a ride to Mykolaiv, a big city, located 54 km away from Kherson.

“It’s a bad sign to return, let’s go there right now, if your boss has nothing against it,” Anna and Pasha agreed to leave the heavily wounded railway station as quickly as possible.

All the way to Mykolaiv, covered with ruins of small country houses, she was silent as a cool fish. Yaroslav tried to entertain her with some wartime jokes, like “Don’t you know that this year Saint Nicholas is in shock. 50% of Ukrainians living in Kherson asked for a sniper rifle... Besides, this year we asked this Saint man to take away his deer with unwashed hooves from our lands...”

Behind the cheery chatter of Yaroslav, she heard the sounds of sharp pain in his soul. Svetlana said that two or three months ago his mother had passed away under the debris of her private dwelling and his wife had fled to Spain and found a new man there...

In Mykolaiv, Yaroslav gave her the suitcase and looked awkwardly in her eyes, “Maybe, I should say ‘Sorry,’ for being too straightforward... You look like my former wife. The same hairstyle and the same voice...”

“No need to apologize. Who knows, maybe you saved my life. Besides,” Anna suddenly smiled, “I feel some sort of sympathy for macho men. In a month, I will come back with Polish volunteers to check on you and to determine whether you are a mooch or a he-man. Just stay alive, Lieutenant. I know where to seek you... Bye-bye.”

Kherson Halloween and Bloody Aurora Borealis

(essay)

Oleg V.Kharchenko



They say in Kherson, “We don’t celebrate Halloween, we live in it.”

After heavy artillery shelling by Russians, they go to put down the fire on the 8th or 9th floor of multistory houses, flooding all the apartments down the tower stairs to the first floor. Since then, they switch off lights, water and gas, spreading fungus and dampness everywhere, saving two apartments and spoiling thirty six apartments at the same time. But what will you do? Halloween goes on and life under bombs and mines does not end.

Tortured trees and torn to pieces fountains, maimed monuments and mutilated mansions, looking like concentration camp convicts thrown out of Gulag, stare with empty eyes at a following bus with wounded and shot dead passengers...

“What for?” request school ruins.

“What for?” blubbers a burnt bird.

“What for?” whispers a weeping willow.

“Because we like our city...live on our land...and dream about our future?”

However, the rainbow ray of hope flared under the deluge of drizzle! Pronto-fronto! Wow, right now! Ukrainian marines are attacking the left-bank Krynyk and Kozachi Laheri, the villages of Oleshky hromada!

The whole Kherson buzzes like a beehive – we succeed and step on, and they retreat and run away! No! It is they who run away and retreat. As for us, we step on and succeed! All our dachas and summer cottages will be liberated, step by step, by and by!

God will help us! Besides, don't you know that almost all Ukraine is under the Bloody Aurora Borealis! It is an amazing auspice, good for us and bad for them! It's a sign of our soon salvation from shells, mines, and bombs!

Like the majority of Kherson people, I feel ants in my pants...I believe in God, I believe in Oleshky, and I believe in Ukrainian marines too.

Four Horsemen of Apocalypses, Kherson

(essay)

Oleg V.Kharchenko



After more than one thousand days of the large-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, many townspeople look differently at one of the most famous symbols of the Kherson region – ‘Legendary Tachanka,’ an 18-meter-long and 8-meter-high monument set up in the horizonless steppes of Tavria, in the late 1960s and devoted to the Red Army victories.

In the 2000s, this monument, as a symbol of the Soviet era, was going to be rooted out or renamed as ‘Tachanka of Bat’ko Makhno,’ an anarchist revolutionary leader, who invented this kind of military vehicle, armed with a high-caliber fully automatic machine gun ‘Maxim.’ There was an idea to arrange a museum of totalitarian regime not far from this monument too. However, these plans were doomed not to be realized.

In the war realities of nowadays, on social networks, some Kherson inhabitants start calling this monument as ‘Four Horsemen of Apocalypses,’ or the ‘Road to Hell’ squadron from Anticrist, War, Famine and Death, taking into account the cruelty of the

war and the ‘Satanic Stars’ on the Red Army helmet-shaped hats of the riders, called ‘Budienovkas...’

After celebrating Christmas, under the ‘festive cannonade’ of atrocious adversary artillery, one of my friends came from this war-torn city and told me how the local people stood up against the fierce war games of the Four Riders and what inspired them to stay in this Ukrainian hot spot despite the daily artillery and mine shelling of the enemy.

Taxi driver, Peter, a 50-year-old man, said, “On the present day, the most annoying thing in Kherson is the daily attacks of drones. However, God helps me and ‘Tzucarok’ (‘Sugar lump’) too. You have never seen Tzucarok, right? That is a small electronic radio device, not more than a box of matches, with two tiny antennas, detecting almost all drones flying over your head... Thanks to it, I can work practically at any time. Come hell or high water.”

Mass Media Specialist, Grisha, a 40-year-old man, remarked, “Four Horsemen? Unfortunately, they attack from up and down, from any possible and impossible directions. Though, my smartness helps me, the so-called 6th feeling. While going to work, I run from one tree to another, from one house to the second; I look thoroughly under my feet, bypassing all big and small land mines, all suspicious and non-suspicious objects. That's why my typical pre-war 8 minute long walking route turns into half an hour adventure. ”

Homemaker, Viktoria, a 65-year-old woman, shared her thoughts, “I stay at home and cook two or three hundred potato pies for Ukrainian soldiers. I feel that while working as a volunteer I do a good job... I believe that one day Ukrainian guys will liberate the whole of our multi-suffering region...”

High-rank lawyer, Galina, a 62-year-old woman, admitted, “Though I could resign at any moment, I will keep on staying and working here. Kherson gave me a lot, now I am just obliged to give my judicial and civil services back. Do you remember the words of John Kennedy, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country’ ”? Now it is my turn to reiterate these words to Kherson...”

Editor, Natalia, a 49-year-old woman, confessed, “Kherson, for me, is the call of ancestors. My grand-grandparents worked, loved and lived here; my grandparents; my Dad; my Mom; my kids. The city of my first love, my best memories, this horrible war... That's our land and I won't leave it under any circumstances. No matter what comes, fire or brimstone, rain or shine, we will be working, living and protecting our city here, as much as we can...”

Bartender, Anna, a-35-year old woman, “Our café is one of the best in Kherson, with its airy atmosphere, fragrant flair, crisp coffee. That is not only my opinion but the opinion of all our neighbors... How can I leave it? And how can I take a small sparkle of joy from all our customers who can give up their souls to God at any moment? You see, artillery shelling doesn't stop here at all. ”

Different people, different views, different destinies, however, all of them shape one ‘Flaming Fire of Hope’ that one day the war will be over and Kherson, Ukrainian Kherson, will revive from war ruins as Phoenix, an ancient bird of immortality.

Halloween, Hellebrene or Hellescream?

One House Drowned, One House Burned

(short story about Kherson realities)

Oleg V.Kharchenko



Lidiia Mychailivna, an 81-year-old woman, a refugee from Kherson Region, was sitting on a wooden bench in a small Ukrainian village not far from Kyiv. She looked exhausted and out of sorts.

“Afternoon! Why do you look so sad?” I got closer to inspire her a bit.

“I have just called the former head of our Dacha cooperative ‘Mriia’ (Dream), which is not far from Oleshky, Oleh, and he completely disappointed me. ”

“He is in Kherson now, right?”

“Yeah. I knew that after the inundation caused by the explosion of Kachovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, one of my small houses was destroyed by the horrible wave of water. The walls of it were too flimsy to withstand this hard hit. It cracked like a house of cards. The second house made of shell rock bricks survived. But today I found out that my second house was burnt by Russian soldiers. Oleh affirmed that all the houses of our dacha cooperative were charred to ashes, the same happened to the nearest ‘Lira’ dacha cooperative...”

“Did they leave at least something after them?” I got interested.

“Just only Russian flags...”

Suddenly, Lidiia Mychailivna grinned with a sparkle of gloat, “To my surprise, the houses of two local collaborators helping Russian soldiers were burnt too. Their brownnosing did not help them. ”

So the picturesque places for family weekends and holidays, with cozy houses, green gardens, numerous lakes full of healing water with hundreds of healthy microelements and schools of fish, all of it turned into a dead dessert, a post-apocalyptic wasteland with skeletal trees, crumbled ruins and the acrid scent of ashes ...

“Did Oleh add anything else?”

“Yeah, the last couple of people from the nearest village, Solontsy, a 90-year-old man and his aged wife, were driven out of their folk-style house, made of clay and cane. In spite of their begging, they were given 10 minutes to take all the necessary things to get away... Then their house with all its sheds and barns was poured with gasoline and set on fire...”

“For these senior people, their house could be the house of their dream where they spent all their life... On the other hand, the old people are lucky because they stayed alive.”

“War is cruel,” Lidiia Mychailivna sighed and covered her face with her hands.

“They came to liberate us. From what? From our land, from our property, from our lives...”

“Yeah, gradually, the life of Kherson Region residents turns into the eternal Hellebrene or Hellescream...”