

What does it mean to live through the war as an artist, scholar, a person whose city gets occupied overnight? Here you can read a reflection on a journey of discovering one's new identity, new sense in life, new connections and new love for one's home in an essay by a young Ukrainian scholar and photographer **Olha Chystotina**.

Traces of War: Stories from Izyum, Ukraine

By **Olha Chystotina**.

Land ruined by war is a profoundly disturbing sight. When you see familiar places in ruins, a strange mixture of emotions overwhelms you. Grief is only one shade in the palette of austere and tragic beauty of such places. **Izyum**, in the Kharkiv Region, is one of the liberated cities that has suffered the most. But for me, the city has become a symbol of fortitude, hospitality, and sincerity.



Izyum, 10.30.22

Izyum came under heavy fire from the earliest days of the full-scale war and was then captured, remaining under Russian occupation for more than six months. When the city was liberated in September 2022, the awful scale of destruction revealed itself: the infrastructure was completely destroyed, and residential buildings were either very damaged or completely decimated. Throughout most of the city there was no water, electricity, or gas. Winter was approaching. To have any chance of heat in buildings where it was technically feasible, all broken windows had to be repaired or at the very least, sealed. The number of working hands was catastrophically inadequate. Volunteers, who first came together to clean rubble from destroyed buildings in Kharkiv (and who formed the movement “UaDopomaga” to aid suffering districts in the region,) set off to Izyum.



**Izyum,
10.29.22**

My very first impression of Izyum is a moment burned into my memory - and was the catalyst that motivated me to record the stories of its residents.

Having just arrived in the city, we were crowded around waiting for more work. Nearby, residents stood in line for a hot meal. For several of us, it was the first time we had set foot on liberated territory and came into contact with people who had survived the horrors of occupation. Feeling awkward, not knowing what to say, we stood around silently. Suddenly, a woman in line said with resentment: "*Why won't you talk to us? You are our people!*" Over the next two days, I witnessed experienced volunteers measuring frames, sawing plywood, and repairing windows. For the most part, the men did not send me to work. I focused on two projects: feeding stray dogs and listening to the stories of the city's residents.

Izyum,
11.05.22



The hospitality with which people received us was incredible. Residents who had recently almost starved brought us candy, preserves that had

somehow survived the occupation and were carefully saved and set aside for a special moment—and hot tea. Those who were able, heated water so we could wash our hands in the cold. This care and sharing to the last bit touched us to tears. And, they told their stories—quietly, almost matter-of-factly.

I was acutely aware of our different experiences—after all, the experience of a bombed and partially encircled city, and that of an occupied city are so completely different that I was speechless, but I was ready to listen to everything the residents were willing to relate. There were stories that made our hair stand on end and words catch in our throats. All the stories I heard later seemed somehow calmer than those first stories that burned themselves into my memory. I returned home, holding these stories, not knowing how to live with them.

When I received an offer to participate in the Center for Urban History’s oral history project recording testimony of people living through the war, there was no doubt: this was exactly what I wanted to do. Participating in “*Those Who Stayed: Stories of the Residents of Kharkiv Region*,” gave me a chance to witness history unfolding before my eyes —sometimes with tears, sometimes with laughter—and, most importantly, to preserve these important stories.

Almost a year after my first visit to liberated Izyum, I returned. I was now in the formal role of Project Investigator, armed with a voice recorder and an informed consent waiver, to conduct my first official interviews - and preserve the voices of residents who survived the occupation. Outwardly, little had changed, except that now on the empty main square, echoes from a loudspeaker playing the national news marathon reverberated between fractured buildings, creating a post apocalyptic atmosphere. And, now, the fountains were working.



**Izyum,
08.05.23**

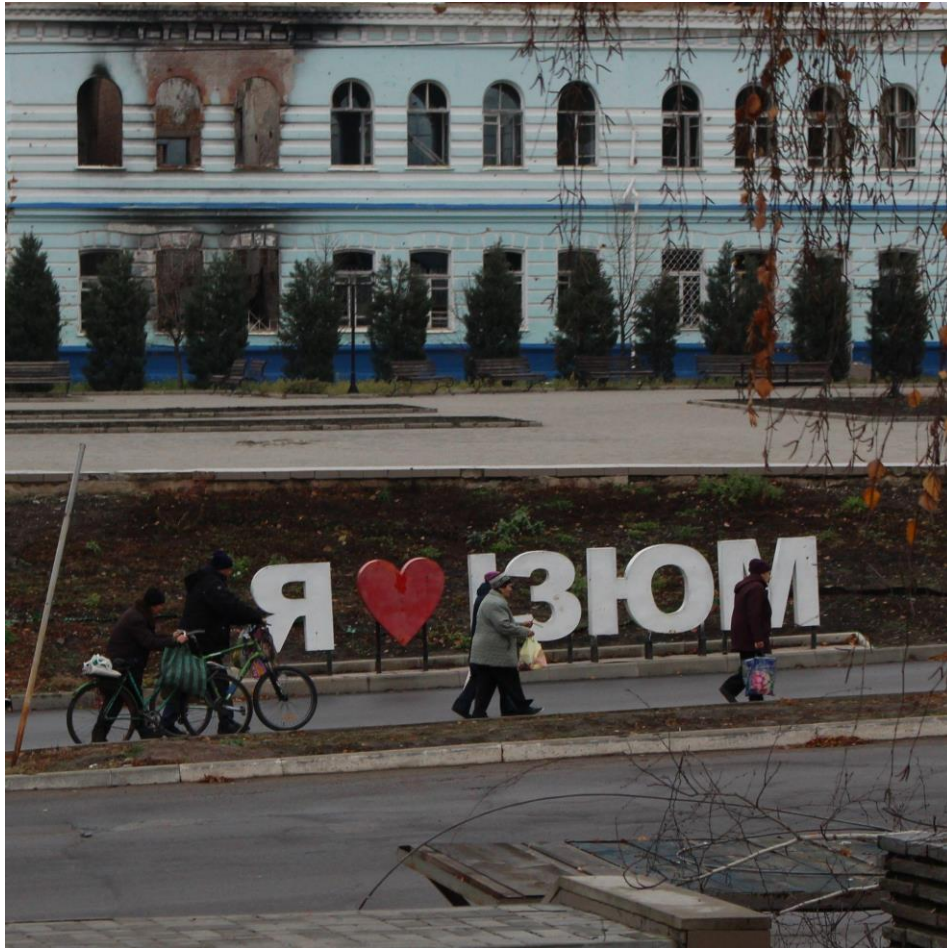
While I
had
rarely
gone to
or
thought
about
Izyum
before
the war -
it had
become a
city

especially important to me. I read on social media the reminiscences of a young woman sharing her life in occupied Izyum. I decided to request an interview—and went to her place, quaking with nerves. I worried the entire six-hour drive; after five hours of conversation, I felt bottomless gratitude for the genuine meeting that had taken place. It felt like being with a very old acquaintance, authenticity and closeness born of dialogue.

I visited the residents of a notorious, half-demolished five-floor apartment building. We talked over coffee in a gazebo in a tiny, cozy garden covered in flowers. This man made floral paradise was cleared from a thick layer of rubble and concrete slabs; and above it rose the two halves of the severed building. My host's apartment was in the yawning gap between them. The contrast of heartfelt hospitality and the horrors described and evident to the naked eye, made my head spin.

Over coffee with sugar, they told me about the delayed identification of bodies; yet on the body of this bloody, tragic city rose a fragile beauty of carefully nurtured comfort. They plant roses on explosion craters, they launch fountains near ruins, they treat others when not long ago they themselves starved, and they warm others, even when they have no heating—this is what I saw in Izyum. They gave me sweets for the road and asked me to come again.

Izium, 11.05.22



Olha Chystotina is a researcher, photographer, and volunteer in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine. She received her PhD from Karazin Kharkiv National University. In 2022, she interviewed and photographed residents of Kharkiv for “*Those Who Stayed: Stories of the Residents of Kharkiv Region*” a project of visual and emotional reflections on the

war in Ukraine, organized by the Center for Urban History (Lviv, Ukraine.)

In 2022, Izium had a population of approximately 44,979, and is the second-most populous city in Kharkiv Oblast, behind Kharkiv proper.

