

Our Children

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My family today is in occupied Kherson. My dad, my uncle, my sister and my three children. Matvei is the eldest, the youngest are Herman and Tihon.

Kherson was occupied by the fascist Rashists on the first day of the war. Battles came to us by way of Crimea. Battles came to us from Mikolaiv. Tanks crossed the Pontonovsky Bridge and the first rockets and bombs hit the suburbs of Kherson. The Russian fascists took Oleshki, Kahovka, and the village of Tiaginka where my youngest Tihon was born, and they seized the city of Kherson.

Two weeks before that my ex-husband had written to me. He asked for permission to take our children abroad. Like all of us, he feared Russia's military build-up on the Ukrainian border. We talked about that, and I found out that permission was not necessary. His plan was to go to Poland, then the Czech Republic, by car. Aside from my youngest boys, he would go with his wife and their 5 year-old son Lukas.

I called Herman, who had just turned 13 in January, a month before bombs began falling all over Ukraine. I asked if they had left yet. Herman said that Lukas woke him at 5 a.m. and told him to pack his things, they were getting ready to go. They spent a lot of time and energy getting ready... In short, I don't know what went wrong, and I'm not going to ask, but the boys' father decided it was too dangerous to go, so they stayed home.

That was a very bad decision. A very, very bad decision. All these days I keep wondering why he made that decision. Because on that first day it was still possible to leave by car. My friend Maryna got her son out to Uzhgorod. She had a car. Trains that day were not coming to Kherson.

My eldest Matvei, who lives with his aunt, my sister, was also in Kherson. That day he called several times, and gave me some good advice. "Mom, grab all your valuables, documents, and money in a sack, and carry it with you at all times. If you go out without a backpack, when they bomb the house you'll have no documents." He wasn't planning on leaving. Because he was liable to be mobilized because of his age. He was very happy. He said the explosions were far away from him. He didn't hear any sirens in his area. The basement in their building had been fixed up. He had already sealed up the windows. Okay. I'm very happy that his character is so easy-going. And that he has matured so that he can give me such excellent advice. I know that his friends from Donbas were probably the ones who advised him.

It's hellish horrible to think about advice like that. Why should our children have knowledge like this?

Sirens howled all the time in Kyiv where I was at that time. The basement was horrible and they were killing people wherever they could. I stood in line for medicine and called my friend Dima. Dima was in a positive frame of mind, too. He said he'd been waiting for war a long time, and that Ukraine would win, that Russia had signed its own death warrant, and would fall apart in a few years, and that he had food for the next two months, and he would share with Matvei. That made me feel better.

Not for long, though. Maybe it was that same day when I acquired the habit of checking to see if Matvei was online, or if my younger sons were online.

Matvei wrote that his aunt was very worried, but he was not. He heard several explosions and the house shook. He wrote that the basement was a good place to be. Although it's bad that there's only one exit. Still, he thinks they'll dig him out if something happens. He wrote this as if it wasn't the first war in his life, but the thirty-first.

I constantly watched the news and saw that tanks were headed for Kherson. I called my youngest son, my 10 year-old Tihon. He calmly said he could hear explosions. I asked if he was scared. He said, "Why should I be scared?"

How good it is that he doesn't know that one should fear explosions. How I would love it if he never had to learn that.

That evening they wrote on the internet that the Russians were trying to seize the Chernobyl atomic station. I wrote about that to Matvei. My son said there was no radiation there and that he was going to bed.

I thought: It's so good he is so positive and carefree, and that he can sleep.

But it's not all that simple. The next night Matvei wrote me that the news was saying Kyiv would be bombed at 3 a.m., and that I should go down to the basement. And that he had heard lots of explosions, but they were far away, so he wasn't going to go to the basement. I did, though. Because the siren howled and the explosions were nearby.

The next day, after a sleepless night in the basement, I telephoned my children but couldn't get through. Not to any of them. I called their father. He didn't answer either. I began to worry and I decided to wait out the next siren in the bathroom. Just as I called my children, my mother called from abroad. I got the impression she was more worried than I was.