

Iryna Beschetnova

Monologues of Ukrainian refugees

Liusia

I am faced with a choice. In a store full of all sorts of things, I'm interested in the coffee department. Not that coffee is my favorite drink, but sometimes it really saves the day. And more importantly, here I can dream that maybe one day I will have a home again, and friends who will come over for a cup of coffee. On the shelves there are many packages of different sizes and colors, from bright and golden to all shades of brown. Words from some commercial about Arabica and Robusta pop into my head. For me, they sound like the names of girls from distant countries (I have never figured out what the point and difference is). One lady is confidently taking a large pack, it's Lavazza, and is looking for a second one. I think she's a coffee addict. On the right, a man is pinching his eyebrows thoughtfully and suddenly he's asking me: Excuse me, do you know if Arabica is better? I just shrug and make round eyes. After some hesitating, the man takes a pack that is just bigger. I look at people taking large packs of coffee and think: I'm sure these people have homes. Where they can drink coffee calmly and slowly, with a stable perspective, so it makes sense to stock up. Because such large packs of coffee are not bought by people who live here today and who-knows-where tomorrow. Like me. No, I have a home. I just can't go back there yet. But I think it will be soon. Yes, probably soon. Yeah, I hope... So, in the meantime, I'll take a small pack...

Iryna

- (maybe about how I lived in the metro in Kharkiv for 10 days and 10 nights)
- (or perhaps how I walked to the train station along the sleepers of the underground tunnel)
- (maybe how it was unclear whether the evacuation train would want to open the doors in Poltava, where my daughter was waiting, and in general, where that train was going)
- (maybe about one dude who drove me for free from the Poltava train station, and I was afraid he was a maniac, but he gave me money and cried; his name was Edyk)
- (or maybe how we were waiting for trains in Poltava talking to an unknown woman, and when the train has arrived, it did not want to open the doors for so many people, and that woman, she said that we were her relatives (daughter and granddaughter), and then

together we climbed into the vestibule, to be there for 17 hours, and people were lying just in the aisle, and everyone stepped over a tired soldier, and there was no light in the toilet, and there was no light at all, because of the light camouflage against shelling; her name was Svitlana)

- (and maybe how people were afraid of the sound of passing trains, thinking it was a missile)

- (or maybe better about a woman in the next carriage started to give birth, and an ambulance was waiting for her at the town of Zdolbuniv train station, and I was glad that we were arriving 9 hours earlier than I thought, because it was very uncomfortable to sleep sitting on the floor near the toilet: we had to get up all the time because in the morning everyone went to the toilet, and there was no other place to sit, and we changed our place already cause we were sitting in the vestibule under the door, but water was running down the door and everything was wet under us, and I was afraid that the glass of the door could be shot through)

- (or how in Lviv we stayed with a stranger, on the advice of a woman we hardly knew)

- (and maybe how in safe city of Lviv it was weird to walk slowly and not have to duck, and learn not being afraid of various loud sounds)

- (and how I burst into tears in a cafe because I was in the cafe and others were there, in Kharkiv, stayed, and couldn't do so)

- (and maybe how we were driving through mountains and checkpoints, and the driver told us about predictions he heard: the end of the war will come in 3 weeks)

- (or, for example, how in Slovakia, I finally bought jeans because I had only a backpack with one blanket, and I was traveling in the same huge, ugly pants that I lived in day and night at the metro station in Kharkiv)

- (and then maybe, how we were leaving for Bratislava the next day, and three Slovak women were traveling with us on the train, we spoke in a mixture of languages, and they did not believe that we were refugees and that there was a war going on in my country, and our photos of our destroyed house, they have already seen it, it's not real, it's from 2014, and if there is something, it's not Putin, it's all the Bandera's people, and approaching the city of Poprad, they happily showed their cute little house near the station)

- (or maybe how by chance we met my ex-English teacher, who came from Manchester to volunteer; his name was Bryan)

- (or perhaps it's better to tell, how in Vienna they demanded wearing anti-covid masks everywhere, and it was strange, because the war postponed all that stuff, and when in one restaurant they were very strict and severe, but we told we were refugees, and so this Filipina immediately softened and started crying because she was a refugee also)

- (and at the end, maybe how we arrived to Graz, and we were met by our friends...)

No, sorry, I have nothing to tell you today...

Tania

I am ashamed that I feel bad. I can't feel bad when there are such good people around. I can't have uterine bleeding when the people here are so nice.

Nicolas gave us a room in his Belgian house. He filled with us the emptiness of his big cold home and his loneliness. I am very grateful to him. Chorus: We are very grateful to him! We had the kitchen, the toilet, and almost complete freedom. But it cannot be said that it was completely free. We paid with our support of polite conversations on topics that we were not interested in, in French, which we hardly knew. Even when we didn't want to. Even when we were not in the mood. Even when I felt bad. It cannot be said that there was complete freedom, no, communication was mandatory.

Nikolas is a scientist, I am a performer, unfortunately. Unfortunately, because we have no interest in each other. And one more thing: I want to talk about our war, but I listen because Nikolas also has something to say about it, and his French is perfect. He is really very kind to us. And I, We are very grateful to him. He is delicate, he doesn't force us, but the rules are as follows: sweets for breakfast, dinner around 9 p.m. Normally I don't like sweets, I don't eat dinner so late, but I eat a sweet breakfast, I eat dinner at 9 p.m., I say Thank you, I don't say I feel bad. He tries to entertain us with traveling. The Eiffel Tower, etc. I don't feel like traveling now, I'm not in the mood because in my country... But I don't say because Nikolas will be upset. So off we go. It's beautiful there, and we don't need it at all.

Nicolas invites some guests. They have little children, and they want to talk about little children. Nicolas wants to talk about science. I want to talk about our war. We need a compromise. So we talk first about children, then about science, then Nicolas talks about our war, and the guests interrupt - everyone has something to say about it. But the people are really very nice. They ask how we like it in Belgium, whether I drink horilka (they say in russian - vodka), because in Ukraine everyone drinks it. I don't drink vodka, I'm not interested in this conversation, I want to cry and talk about our war. But I listen about science, children, interesting travels, new expensive watch, our war, the terrible Belgian inflation of 3 percent, I try to say something in French, I don't understand well, I smile politely, I drink French wine, I listen to music...

Then I get uterine bleeding. Now I don't have to go on a trip, now I don't have to listen about science, now I can sit in my room and cry. Now I can say that I feel bad. Now everyone understands: she has war, look, she is bleeding from that, you see, don't touch her, let her rest.

People are really very nice.

Natasha

We fled in March of '22. There was a large influx, and the countries were not yet particularly well prepared for this.

In Germany, the whole pregnancy was spent in refugee camps. Berlin, the old Tegel airport, it was our first camp, to be honest, pretty shitty... A hangar with a bunch of bunk beds, the food was a crap. I was pregnant and hadn't eaten for almost 3 days. I lived on bread and butter because when we came, the food hadn't been delivered there yet. The conditions were also not 5 stars: we bathed outside in trailers, and at least it was spring already, but it was still cold anyway.

But as for me, nothing compares to the camp in Giessen: an old nursing home building with rats the size of chickens and tattered walls, foldable beds only for women and children, everyone else slept on thin carimats on the floor. The toilets were terrible, the food was in plastic bags and the portions were as for children. We lived there for 2 weeks, many of us went back home. But when there is nowhere to go back to, you endure...

Then the camp in Dautpfetal. It seemed like paradise after Tegel and Giessen: a gym with tents for 12 people, foldable bags again, but this time for everyone, and the food, those sandwiches seemed almost luxurious, though for the first two weeks. Then I started to get toxicosis, so I ate only bread and tea for a month. And we bathed outside again, but it was already summer.

Our next camp was in Pfungstadt, an old office, but the conditions were better than in the other three camps: we shared a room with African refugees, ate sandwiches and sometimes normal food, and bathed as always outside.

The summer passed, we were transferred to Babenhausen, and only there we started living normally: an apartment was for 3 families, but we had our own room. It was such a joy to be able to close up and do our own stuff, without constantly coping with others...

And the state finally started to help us with some money, because during all that time in the camps we hadn't received a single penny, 7 months without money...

We came from the Kherson region, not far from the village Tchernobaïvka, which was occupied by the Russians. You can imagine what kind of hell it was. So we were happy to receive even such a welcome in Germany.

Katia

(maybe: Katia speaks with an accent telling her past, and without an accent when she is telling about her present (to be decided by the director))

Hello, my name is Katia. I'm from Kharkiv, Ukraine.

The topic of the test is: My home.

In Kharkiv, we lived in our own house. My father built it himself. It was a large one-storey house. It had four rooms: a living room, two bedrooms, an office, a kitchen and a bathroom.

Since April 2022, we've been living in a rented apartment in France: me, my husband, 67 years old, disabled with cancer; my son, 17 y.o., a schoolboy; and my brother, 63 y.o. My brother's mental development is now that of a 10-year-old child; also he suffered a stroke in Ukraine. We rented an apartment here because my son is studying at the local school, with one year left to go.

The living room was the largest room in our house, measuring 45 m². We had a sitting area with a leather sofa. In the center was a round table. To the left was a cupboard. The floor was covered with a carpet.

Now our apartment is very small and very expensive for us (670 euros + electricity). It's damp, cold and moldy. There's a studio with a kitchen and a bedroom. Our apartment looks like a train compartment. My brother sleeps in the toilet, because there's not enough space. During the day, we take turns lying down.

Each room had large, comfortable beds. There were mirrors, a floor lamp and shelves by the window.

I contacted the town hall, I contacted associations. With no result. We've been on the waiting list for social housing for 8 months already. They've set us one condition: I have to find a permanent contract, then they'll maybe look for other opportunities. But because of my husband's illness, I have to accompany him to the hospital where he is being prepared for a liver transplant. We have six appointments during a month. This makes it very difficult for me to find a permanent job. Please tell me, is the situation at an impasse?

The kitchen was spacious. There was a large table in the right-hand corner. There were chairs around the table covered with a tablecloth. Also there was a sideboard with dishes against the wall.

I wrote to the prefecture to ask for at least one more room. But there is no answer.

I want to go home, in conditions worthy of human beings... But then I tell myself that Jesus was also a refugee. And that's how we live and endure.

Our house was very comfortable. All my family used to gather there.