

YEVHENIIA PODOBNA

HEROIC CITIES OF BUCHA, IRPIN, HOSTOMEL

Kharkiv
«Folio»
2023

*To the dead and alive, and unborn...
Residents of Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel.
To all those, thanks to whom cities of Ukraine
Returned to be under the yellow-and-blue banner.*

VADIM

“All we know, we know only from the words of witnesses, because my mother and I were evacuated, and he did not want to evacuate. He said he would be in his garage. We have a garage cooperative in Sklozavodska neighborhood, in Bucha; and there were many people, even with young children. Dad in the garage had a “burzhuika” (small makeshift stove); there was everything needed to live there, and he said he would go there. My mother, my grandmother and myself we decided to stay in our apartment. Witnesses said it was March 3. They saw him go to the store (others claimed that he went to find firewood). At that time, Russian troops began to come into Bucha. He returned to the garages and was noticed by the Russian military at this moment. He knocked on one woman’s garage door to hide there, he apparently decided not to go to his own garage, it didn’t have much sense though. He was let in. People who hid in neighboring garages said they heard well what had happened. One of the military (and they put their tanks there, near the garage cooperatives) came out of the tank and knocked on the gate of that garage. In addition to the owner and my father, there were four more: total of six people. And this Russian military got out of the tank, went to that garage and knocked. The woman refused to open, saying that she was very afraid and could not open. Then one of the soldiers threw

a grenade into that garage through the ventilation, and the gates were closed from the outside. That is, the people could not go out. And the garage caught fire. They burned there for three days. Subsequently, the woman's body was found there sitting in a chair... And my father was in a pit that for repairing cars. He burned, from him only one fragment the left extremity was left.

At first, they said very differently. It was said that he was shot at 144, Yablunska Street. They sent us various videos from there, and my mom seemed to recognize someone who looked like him. But dead people... They change so much... Many may seem like the one. Then they said other things, then even the other. And then there was a man who saw him. Next to this limb were his documents, with that limb the police found jeans, bankcards and documents, the certificate of the Antonov Plant where he worked. By the way, people from Antonov came just one of these days; they were looking for him, because he was still in their staff. Officially, he is still missing. By the way, he worked on the construction of Mriya airplane, which the Russians destroyed in Hostomel.

I want to bury that limb. I know where it is now, but it is not given to me. If it was not him, so much time has passed... he died in March, and it's June now, he would show up, he would be found. They say it is in such a state that it is impossible to recognize it, and in order to pick it up it is necessary to prove that you are a relative. Despite the fact that there were documents near him. I gave DNA and in the near future, as they say, this question would be resolved, I will be given that limb and I will bury it.

The Russians obviously stole his phone because he was killed on March 3, and on March 11, my mother and I were notified that this number appeared on the network in Telegram. And he never used Telegram. He only bought himself a phone, and in general, he was far from it, he was into screwing bolts and repairing motorcycles... I set his phone. I wrote to him, "Dad, hello! What's up?" I was constantly checking the messenger, the connection was no longer there. After some 20-30 minutes, I was blocked and the chat was removed.

I understand that nothing can be back. And that my life goes on. I am getting much help at classes with psychologists. And yet,

while searching for my father, I began to help others, to those who were in the same situation as I am, looking for the bodies of their relatives. My father was 42. His name was Oleksii Yevdokymov.”

(Bucha, June 2022)

Vadim is 17 years old; he is very stylishly dressed, his childish good smile is very dissociated with what he does and tells about. Prior to the start of a full-scale invasion, Vadim was a student and worked as a stylist in Kyiv in parallel with his studies. Now his life has changed dramatically, he is one of those who helps people look and recognize the bodies of tortured and killed in Bucha. With his help, more than a dozen families found their dear ones.

The same garage where the tragedy happened is known by almost all the inhabitants of Sklozavodska neighborhood of Bucha. On September 3, 2022, the police came again to this garage with green gates at 12, Sklozavodska Street, which had been burned from the inside, and where Vadim's father was seen last. Human remains and physical evidence were found at the site of the tragedy again.

And then a small white bag was put in the coffin. It has an inscription in a black marker that is difficult to disassemble: number, “unknown”, “Yevdokymov”. The remains probably belong to the father of Vadim, Oleksii Yevdokymov, and they will only be buried in half a year after his death, in September 2022, in Bucha.

This book definitely had to begin in a different manner. Apparently, it would have begun logically on February 24, with the Russian helicopters that couldn't be counted, and the first battle for the Hostomel airfield. The same airfield, on which stood Mriya plane in the hangar, in the construction of which the father of Vadim Oleksii Yevdokymov played his small role. A battle that became a point of non-return for the residents of Hostomel, Bucha and Irpin.

More precisely, not. There shouldn't be this book at all. Because there shouldn't have been this war at all. But on February 24, Ukraine woke up at dawn from the sounds of

explosions, and a column of Russian automotive equipment crashed our past life with their grousers. The war has become our new reality, and air alarms — our everyday life. Bucha and Irpin have ceased to be associated with forests, sanatoriums and children's summer camps, with a hasteless life of the outskirts of the capital. Now, the very names of these cities are nailing with pain all those who have never even been there.

These cities felt the war on the very first day of the full-scale invasion. Then they were waiting for a hellish month of shelling, fighting and occupation (Bucha was occupied by the Russians completely, Irpin partially). All this time we prayed and waited for their complete liberation from the Russians. But when it happened and the occupiers with great losses were poured by heels, the expected joy did not come — not only all Ukraine but the whole world froze from the horror because of what was seen in the liberated cities. People who were shot to death with their hands tied at the back; mass tombs, crushed to the base neighborhoods by Russian shells and bombs, burned houses, streets, covered with bodies, some of which will remain unknown — it is impossible to recognize them ever.

The Russian army has performed in the area around Irpin all possible military crimes: murder, rape, abduction and torture, forced migration, looting. Cases were registered when they used civilians as a living shield. They also dressed the Ukrainian uniform and signs of distinction. They approached Ukrainian positions with white flags and opened fire. They even mined the bodies of the people killed by them. But at the same time, along with evil and pain, through all the days of war in these frozen, frightened and bloody cities there lived unprecedented heroism — military, doctors, rescuers, Territorial Defense fighters, townpeople — all those who helped, defended, rescued, and evacuated.

Bucha and Irpin are relatively young cities; they are a little more than a hundred years old. They are the children of the railway, the main circulatory artery of which was the railway track of the Kyiv—Kovel railroad, laid here in the early twentieth century. Small settlements around the railroad grew

into summer towns for recreation of wealthy Kievans, and later on they grew into modern and at the same time cozy cities. They are like Siamese twins that cannot be divided (sometimes for the locals it is difficult to point out where Bucha ends on a particular street and Irpin begins). Together they shared the pain of war and occupation. Therefore, in this book they will be together.

This book is chaotic, like the war itself. It has neither a clear genre nor a clear line, it is like an album with newspaper clippings and random photos. It has passed too little time to write in detail, and most importantly, to write about fighting in these cities, both because of the striking scale of battles, and because of the giant amount of information that needs to be analyzed and verified, and because witnesses and participants of those events scattered throughout the globe. Some of the information is still classified, and some of the names cannot be mentioned yet. Therefore, the course of the fighting and the feat of military and Territorial Defense fighters in the area will be the subject for books still to come.

Occupation and fighting for Hostomel, Bucha and Irpin lasted about a month. But to describe everything that happened during this month, it will take decades, volumes and the work of many people. This is only the first line in the story of the Great Tragedy and the Great Heroism of Two Ukrainian Cities. Under this cover, only a small part of the stories that must be told, which should be known and remembered not only by Bucha and Irpin, but everyone has to know them.

Ihor SEREDA,
Ritual service employee, volunteer exhumator

Ptomaines. Putrescine, cadaverine, neurin... it seems so. These compounds are the cause of this terrible smell, the smell of death. As long as I try to remember what we were once told in university lectures back in the School of Biology, two guys in white suits and respirators are pulling the remains of a human body from a freshly dug hole in high rubber boots. They step aside. Criminal Police officers are taking over the case.

This is a man, his age is approximately 40–50 years. His hands are tied and a car cover is on his head. Even without an examination, it is clear: this death is violent. Journalists from different parts of the world stand around the place fenced off with a white and red ribbon, covering their noses from time to time. Everyone is asked not to walk far from the place of exhumation and to return from the forest along a strictly trodden path, without turning even a meter to the side. After all, here, in this pine forest on the outskirts of the village of Zdvizhivka, everything around has been overrun by Russians, the occupiers have set up trenches for prone firing among the trees. In addition to them, mines could also be left behind, so before the exhumation begins, the sappers first inspect the territory, and during it, the body as well. In the small village of Zdvizhivka, this is already the 17th victim of the Russians. During the occupation, local residents were kidnapped on the streets or directly from their homes, and some of them were considered missing for a long time. A few days ago, the body of one of the tortured was found here, today, September 1, 2022; a local forester came across another one.

A forensic medical expert I know once said that this smell cannot be confused with anything and will never be forgotten. He was right. It instantly makes the throat sore and hurts somewhere in the lungs. It seems that it is our nature to fear him. But the smell does not seem to frighten both the policemen and the exhumation boys at all: they work calmly and with concentration, meticulously performing all the necessary

procedures. One of the guys in white suits, blond, blue-eyed and very young, stops, takes off his gloves and leaves. He returns in a minute with a large white package. He puts on a new pair of gloves. The remains of the body of an unknown man are carefully placed in a bag. The separated bone is attached. Today they will start looking for his relatives by DNA analysis and things, the same rubber boots, dark pants, jacket and Japanese Seiko watch. This fact simply explodes the brain: the boots survived, the watch survived, and almost nothing remained of the person after some six months. Men with all their achievements, flights into outer space, proving of extremely complex theorems and nanotechnology, or more precisely, their life is the most fragile thing in the world. In a few more minutes, the exhumation boys load the body into the car. They take off their suits. The same blond and blue-eyed young man gets behind the wheel. His name is Ihor Sereda.

His partner and he bring the unknown man to the morgue in Bucha, unload him on a gurney, and hand the body over to the employees. Journalists often mention Ihor as Bucha's resident in their articles, but this is not true. Ihor is from the



Ihor Sereda during the exhumation in the village of Zdvizhivka, Buchansky District, Kyiv Region.

village of Nemishaeve, which is some 15 kilometers away from Bucha. One day he woke up famous, his photo in a refrigerator wearing the same white suit and standing next to a pile of black bags with the bodies of dead residents of Bucha flew around the world.

“For some reason, everyone thinks I was crying in that photo. But it is not so. We had a lot of work that day. It was necessary to load about 60 bodies. It is very difficult physically: a person’s weight can be 60 kilograms, or it can be 100. The suits we work in do not “breathe”, they do not let air through at all. Plus a respirator. In addition, there is no fresh air in the refrigerator, there are many bodies, and the stench is very terrible. At that moment, I just finished work, took off my respirator and tried to get some fresh air. And it seemed that I was crying. I don’t know at all what it was like for journalists to work there then. The bodies were in different states... Sometimes the bags would tear and the head would fall out or some other part of the body would fall out...” Ihor recalls the beginning of April in Bucha.

Ihor is now 24 years old. Once he was a Tax Academy cadet and studied in Irpin. But after the death of his father, the head of the ritual service in Nemishaevo, the boy decided to continue his work. Since then, Ihor transferred to the Academy’s correspondence course and started managing funeral ceremonies. In the first days of the full-scale invasion, Ihor and his friends went to the local self-defense force —together they patrolled their town. When the Russians advanced deep into the Kyiv Region and started shelling, he helped deliver medicine and food. A few days after the start of the Great War, convoys of Russian vehicles entered Nemishaeve. The town was under occupation. And then Ihor went to a neighboring village to a farm to get pigs. The shops were no longer open, so, despite constant artillery shelling and the real threat of being shot at any moment just on the street, he delivered meat from there to his fellow countrymen. In addition, he buried the killed and the dead in his town and in neighboring villages. Once, in nearby Myrotske Village, he had to dig a hole and literally bury the deceased under the muzzles of machine guns. After the

deoccupation of Bucha, Ihor went as a volunteer to collect the bodies of those killed around the city.

“We knew that after the occupation many people died here. Well, someone had to do it... And we are a funeral ritual service, who else but us... I don’t remember exactly how we contacted the Bucha authorities and agreed that we would work. The police distributed addresses among those who collected bodies around the city: we received our list for the day and went to pick up the dead. There were times when people called and said where the body was still lying; there were times when they shouted on the street and pointed out. There were problems with the diesel, the gas stations were not working yet. I don’t even know approximately how many bodies we took away. In a day there could be 16–20 bodies at the same time. And you understand... killed people, many of those we took away, they had gunshot wounds, often in the head... Such a body is not easy to take away, it is difficult to put it into a bag and not smear it with blood, and if there are up to 20 such bodies per day, you are covered in blood, the whole car is covered in blood...”

There were those whom we found right in their apartments. Many were buried in the backyards or near the houses; if it was a high-rise building, then in the courtyards. There was a situation: we also deal with monuments and once a man ordered a monument from us. And he calls on the phone: “A person was killed here, I just pulled him out of the car, dragged him to my house in the yard and buried him there.” He had no other options.”

So Ihor worked for about two weeks in a row without rest. Early in the morning, he would receive the list and go to the addresses. In addition to the lack of fuel, there was also another problem — signs were removed from some houses in order to confuse the occupants, there were still problems with communication, so sometimes it took a long time to search for one body.

Ihor took the most bodies from Yablunska Street, it was literally littered with the bodies of shot citizens. We drive exactly along it and turn to the side, to Ostap Vyshny Street. Here, among the trees, is the old Bucha cemetery. Not reaching a few

meters to the first graves, Ihor turns off the path and points to a shallow hole in the tall grass, pretending to be garbage:

“There was a mass grave here. When we were called here, there were four or five bodies here, I don’t remember for sure... already decomposed... They were local people: a grandmother, a young man born in 1990s, we found a passport in his pocket; two more, I don’t know who they were. The investigator who worked here felt sick, not everyone can stand the sight of bodies and the smell...”

He walks away a little, goes to the other side of the path, and there, not far from the railway track, lies another body. The dogs had already bitten off the head, the skull was lying on its side, probably a meter away from him. Due to the weather, most of the people we took away were still in such a condition that they could be recognized, if it was not a wound in the head, but these dead people were already in such a condition that they could not be recognized.”

Once upon a time in Bosnia, which, like Ukraine, experienced a terrible bloody war, I saw a terrible photo: a hand in a medical rubber glove, and on it — the hand of a recently exhumed man. He was one of those killed during the Srebrenica genocide, where about 8,000 people were killed in a few days back in July 1995. A terrible photo: a living person who extended a helping hand to a dead person. The last thing he could do for him was to return his body to his family and give him a chance to be recognized and buried with dignity. It is this photo from the gallery in Sarajevo that stands in front of our eyes as we drive to the next point, to the area of Vodoprovodna Street. There were also occupiers on this street. Ihor parks in the yard, has a quick smoke break and leads us between the houses. He stops near a two-story building — there were two graves at once, each containing two people. He points to an apple tree, under it is a barely noticeable hollow, into which two dozen apples have rolled.

“There were two men in this grave. One young man seemed to have some kind of tattoo, I tried not to look. The other is a little older. Who are they? I didn’t know. I didn’t know about any of

those we took out. I wasn't interested in who it was, how exactly he died, what his name was and who he was. I generally tried not to think about it while working. I just did it and that was it. If you delve into the history of each person, if you sieve every death through yourself, you can simply go crazy. And so you understand that these people should live and live, but here they just come and kill them, without any reason. You know what's surprising? I'm giving an interview, and during it the Russians come and write: "It's still unknown who killed them, maybe it was yours!", "It's still unknown who bombed, maybe it was Ukrainian shells." But from what I saw, almost all of them were gunshot wounds, not shrapnel wounds. And the Ukrainian military was not there, Bucha was all under occupation. And how many journalists were here, from all over the world, they constantly filmed everything, saw everything with their own eyes: how can they say that it did not happen?"

A week after I met Ihor Sereda, I completely accidentally found information about one of the men who was buried near the same apple tree. His name was also Ihor and he was 30 years



Ihor Sereda. Bucha, April 2022. Photo from the home archive of I. Sereda

old. He was shot by the Russians while carrying food to his parents.

Now Ihor Sereda and his colleagues continue to work with the victims of Russians, even half a year later, the tortured bodies of those who went missing during the occupation are found time and again in the Kyiv Region. Ihor and his friends do their terrible work for free, they don't even charge for fuel. He says that he is ready to go to the front line to collect the bodies of fallen soldiers, because after what he has experienced, he is no longer afraid of anything. He is studying what kind of ammunition he should buy if he has to work in the liberated Mariupol or Siverodonetsk. He has no doubt that they will be released soon.

Taras VYAZOVCHENKO,
resident of Irpin, volunteer

“Bucha was still occupied, and Irpin was already beginning to collect its dead. It all started like this: Irpin had just been liberated and we drove into the city with a friend, to Mechnikov Street, to evacuate people and find out if anyone here needed any help. They saw two men, one of them was shaking: “My best man was killed. I can't even bury him,” he says. I understood that it was necessary to record it immediately: where the bodies lie, who these people are and all the details of what happened. There is no communication in the city yet. The only thing he had with him was his phone. “Write down, sweetie,” I ask him, “everything you can tell.” He is shaken, he tells...

The entire Mechnikova Street was destroyed: shrapnel everywhere, mines. There was a Russian checkpoint on it and the Russians shot people from it. Farther down the street, we were able to drive a short distance by car, we asked the man to show where the body of his best man was. We drove with him to his yard. We ask if he knows where else the bodies of the dead could be, he nods and continues. There was a fallen tree in the middle of the street, there were two other dead people there, when exactly they died he

didn't know, but he said it was a long time ago. Morally, we were ready to see the dead... There was a moment when a breakthrough occurred, the realization came that you could be killed, it was somewhere on the second or third day of the war in Irpin, we brought medicines to the polyclinic, and there I saw the body of the deceased... We were ready to see it, but we knew that everything happened, there were cases when the Russians mined bodies, so we decided to go one by one. There were two people near the fallen tree: grandfather and grandmother. They lived nearby when the shelling started; they just didn't have time to cross the street and hide, because they were weak walkers. They had been lying there for a long time. The woman no longer had a foot.

Spring has already begun, it is so beautiful in the yards; we walk farther down the street and look around. A small fence near one of the houses. The primroses are growing. And our "guide" says: "See? Over there: one, two, three. Three bodies were dug up a little." And now I have a reaction to primroses... It's just... These are cemetery flowers for me now... Although, it turned out later that there were no bodies there. But again it broke me down very strongly...

We didn't have many body bags, they have to be of special kind. There isn't much time to get them somewhere, the dead had to be collected quickly, they can't lie in the open for a long time, they will have to be identified later, every day the chances of that are getting less and less. And now they call us and ask: "What kind of humanitarian aid should you bring?" And we ask for body bags. People are shocked. They gave us bags. Not everyone can drive around the city, not everyone can do this job. Well, first the corpse should be examined by the law enforcement officers: they record everything and perform the necessary procedures. We took a map of the city and began to mark on it the places where the bodies of the dead were definitely located, or where they could theoretically be buried.

At the same time, we started interviewing the neighbors to gather more information, and they say: "Those who buried the dead were then killed themselves, so no one knows where they buried the bodies." There were also strange situations, for example,

there was a cross at the intersection of Kyivska and Lysenko Streets. And it is not clear whether someone died there and his body is lying there, or whether it was simply placed by someone, such places must be investigated (at the time of the recording of the interview, the cross was already missing. — A.N.).

There were very difficult situations... There was a shell “arrival” on Heroiv Street; a woman died, but her mother was no longer in herself because of what she had experienced; she did not allow the body to be taken away. There were cases when a person, at first glance, died a seemingly non-violent death, but when we collected evidence, it turned out that it was still a war crime. In Bucha, there was a case: a man committed suicide. And then it turned out that the Russians came to his house and said that now they would rape his wife in front of him. He went to another floor and hanged himself. Therefore, it is not suicide, it is a war crime, because it was the Russians who made him do it. Elderly people, bedridden patients remained in the city. If possible, they were cared for by relatives or acquaintances, but due to circumstances, lack of medicine and food, they died. Although indirectly, the Russians killed them.

At first, the bodies of the dead were collected in Irpin and Bucha. And then work began directly in the morgue in Bucha. There were so many killed that it was impossible to accommodate them in the morgue. Refrigerators were brought. That was our work in the most difficult days: three refrigerators, with bodies in them. They had to be loaded onto gurneys and taken to the morgue. We were told that today forensic experts are ready to process this or that number of bodies. There were only two tables, so the bodies were taken to regional morgues. For example, a police representative tells us: “10 bodies need to be transported to that morgue.” And we ship again as many as we are told. When the refrigerator door was opened, it was immediately clear who could not work here and who could. The smell was very terrible.

Everyone was working: special services, doctors, and social volunteers. The volunteers were different, each had their own moral limit for such work: some worked with the bodies for a day

and understood that they could no longer do it, and some held on for a long time. We had two Americans who came here and said they wanted to fight for us. And we explain to them that we still have such a problem, we really don't have enough hands. And they helped us a lot, they worked long and selflessly. None of us could ever even imagine that we would have to do this. But they learned everything very quickly. They had to.

There was a moment when we ran out of fuel, and volunteers found and brought it to refuel the refrigerators. At some point, one of them started to turn off and we had to figure it out and learn how to turn it on by ourselves. I never thought that I would have to master such a thing. But we managed it.

Then someone brought a tent, and people started coming and looking for their relatives. People joined who started helping with the search. It was necessary to record testimonies, to collect as much information as possible: who they were looking for, under what circumstances he or she died, the date of death, where he or she was, what special features they had. And you understand the kind stories these people had...

One volunteer girl said that she would listen to them, hug them, and then go somewhere aside and cry. She would dry her tears to go back to work. And the work began to move: information provided by people was compared and which of the unidentified bodies or remains could be their relatives. Then the volunteers took photos of the found dead, they offered grieving relatives to have a look at the pictures. Some refused. It's too difficult, look through hundreds of photos, and you understand what was there: some bodies were lying under the open sky for a month. Later, psychologists joined the work. The dead were analyzed at autopsy, some could only be identified by DNA. And with relatives, the procedure is quite complicated. One day it was decided to gather everyone in one place and take the tests in an organized manner. The French gendarmerie helped with the DNA analysis.

And, sometimes, you go to another city to take bodies there to the morgue. Here, in Bila Tserkva, for example, the car has the plate "Vantazh 200" (Cargo 200), and at the rear checkpoint the guys demand to show that we are taking it. And we warn them



Taras Vyazovchenko against the background of destroyed Russian equipment

that this is a bad idea, yet they insist. We opened it and they felt sick, both from the smell and from what they saw...

In that morgue in Bucha, there were dead even before the invasion. For example, a request from relatives: there was an elderly man, he died on February 22 or 23 in Vorzel, they brought him to this morgue and that's it. The war began, and from the 24th of February people were no longer buried. And then the lights went out in the city and refrigerators stopped working, people had to be buried urgently.

How to live with all this? I'm working it out. Including a psychologist. And there was a moment when I simply called my friends: "That's it, I can't go on. Take me somewhere for a week." And I was sent to Lviv to hold meetings with humanitarian organizations. I left, I look out of the window — and there the houses are all intact! After Irpin, where it seems that not a single whole window was left, it was just some abnormal picture for me. But the psychologist said that this is a normal, it is a protective reaction, that it will pass in a few days. And it passed. I recovered, "got restarted" and now continue to work.

Most of the bodies have now been identified. But the work is not finished, there is a lot of manual mechanical work. We collect all the information, it comes to us from various sources: from the police, from relatives, from witnesses, from those who found it. And we record everything about each person, where he died, where he was found, data about this person. In the same charts, we record that the body was taken away by relatives. But this is not the end. We have to bury everyone who was killed by the Russians, as it should be, according to our traditions. Before we go on, we must bury our dead. And the main line in these charts for me is the last one, where we record whether a person is buried or not. And now, when this column says "yes", then you can let this person go, they are identified and buried; so we did everything we could do for them."

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