



The morning of February 24 woke us up with the sounds of explosions. From 5 o'clock in the morning Ukrainian air defense systems fought for Chornobayivka airport. That evening the invaders approached Kherson, and my daughter, my mum and I spent the first night of the full-scale invasion in the cellar because the city was shelled. From February 24 to March 1, there were fights for the city of Kherson.

Those who had their personal vehicles could leave on the first day of the war. The others were taken hostage, since all intercity trains and coaches stopped running that evening. People who stayed in the city started buying out all remaining foods and medicines. I was not an exception. Today, I realize that it was the right strategy as it helped us to last the whole month of March, when the stores were either closed or empty (with no food and non-food products), pharmacies were empty, too.

I understood that the city was occupied in the early hours of March 1. Our neighbors and we stayed in the cellar of our apartment block, as the city was shelled from Grad multiple rocket launchers and artillery. We already knew that we were encircled and Russians' appearance in the city was a matter of time. One of the neighbors got a call to learn that a convoy of tanks and armored vehicles was moving towards the center of the city in Perekopska Street. I was shocked and the only thought that crossed my mind was how to live and what to do now. I started quickly removing my photo from Facebook, my profile, deleting some "friends". But it was astounding, pushing

to panic, my hands were trembling.

For the first time, I saw invaders on March 1. My building is in the city center. At about 11.00, I could see 2 armored vehicles moving down the street from my window, armed Russians were sitting on them. One armored vehicle stopped at the junction, while the other pulled up opposite my house. The armed Russians got off and started clearing the street and knocking on neighbors' windows. One of them, with a grenade launcher on his shoulder, was standing right beneath my window. I was looking at them, standing still because of fear of being shot while moving. When they moved on, I quickly closed the curtains so that we could not be seen. There were three of us at home: my daughter, mother and I. It was later that I found out that my daughter had managed to make a short video with the gunmen. It was highly risky, since the invaders could easily arrest for these videos.

Although some time has passed, while dreaming, I still see that armored vehicle and the armed men looking into my window.

Street protests in Kherson started along with its occupation and are still there, though the invaders' pressure has been intensifying. My activism started on February 26. The fights were already ongoing around Kherson, people in different districts were cut off each other as no public transport was running. Therefore, every morning I would go to Svobody Square and take a photo of our flag in the square and on the building of Kherson regional state administration. And then I posted those photos in Facebook.

I did it every day. It turned out that the photo of the Ukrainian flag was very important for the Kherson citizens and for my friends from other cities.

There were also some forms of verbal resistance at the beginning of March. Women and men of different age would come up to the invaders and would tell them where the invaders had to go. I saw a woman come to a military truck with the Russian military men and cry at them: "When will you finally leave, we are sick and tired of you!" Further, in various areas of the Kherson, dwellers would turn on the national anthem of Ukraine at the maximum volume. In early March, the locals largely refused and did not accept the so-called "humanitarian aid" from the enemy, which was another manifestation of resistance. Currently, the situation forces those in need and poverty to agree and take this "aid", since they just have no food and money to live on.

At the beginning of March, pro-Ukrainian meetings in the Kherson central square of liberty (Svobody square). I also joined the protesters because I carried on the activities with photographing the flag. My daughter accompanied me at those meetings. Perhaps it was too risky and incorrect. But I could not keep her away and prohibit. For Daryna, it was also important to go and express her opinion, as well as to be beside me.

Those peaceful meetings were daily in March. And even on May 9, there was an attempt to get together for a pro-Ukrainian meeting, but it was suppressed by the militants.

On March 21, the Russian troops broke up the pro-Ukrainian meeting for the first time. And on March 22, I could see the meeting being dispersed since I was on the square myself, too. The procedure of breakup was the same – at first the invaders, through the speakers, ordered the protesters to leave, because their meeting was "illegal", since "the military commandant" had banned any meetings. Then they would shoot at people with tear gas and flash-bang grenades. After that, they would walk in a chain towards the pro-Ukrainian activists, starting to shoot in the air and then shooting them in the legs. A flash-bang grenade exploded near me. And a young man ran past me crying that people were being grabbed and arrested. I got afraid of being detained and escaped.

AFTER EACH MASS PROTEST OF THE KIND PEOPLE WOULD BE TAKEN TO HOSPITALS WITH GUNSHOT INJURIES, INTOXICATION AND EFFECTS OF BEATINGS.

Additionally, Russian military men kept kidnapping protesters and taking them away.

Some of the meeting participants were visited by the Russian Security Service in their homes. Those officers would grab them there or after the meetings, when the activists were going back home.

Some detained people could be released the next day, while others would be kept

in custody for several days or would not be released at all. Therefore, at the end of March pro-Ukrainian meetings shrank and became very dangerous for their participants. Kherson citizens still tried to get together in their neighborhoods, but all those attempts were severely suppressed.

I was also afraid of being arrested, so I had to stay in another apartment for over a week. Another newly adopted habit was clearing the phone of all text messages and going outside with an old phone only, so that there are no messengers at all. It would be necessary in case of being detained or if the documents were checked. That way the invaders could not identify my friends and contacts.

Today the resistance is still there in the city, but it has changed its format. Currently, these are leaflets and painting the city in the Ukrainian national flag colors, hanging stripes and state flags.

One of these examples was the other day, when the Ukrainian flag was installed on the building of the railway station. This fact was confirmed by the local dwellers, who have stayed in the occupied city. There is also more and more information about the guerrilla movement in Kherson region.

THE BRUTALITY OF THE
OCCUPATION REGIME HAS
BEEN GROWING, **WITH AN
INCREASED PRESSURE
AND THE RISK OF
KIDNAPPING LOCAL
CITIZENS.**

Some of my good contacts, former colleagues have been grabbed and are still missing.

Unfortunately, Kherson is continuously closed and isolated. There have been severe problems with the delivery of humanitarian aid and medicines from the area controlled by Ukraine. These deliveries are provided by volunteers using their own resources and cars.

Kherson has managed to survive owing to volunteers and volunteer movement. For example, it is volunteers who help to leave Kherson for Mykolayiv or Odessa. On their way back they bring medicines (the situation with these supplies is catastrophic). Some volunteers have been killed or taken prisoners.

Voluntary group "Kotyky patriotyky (literally, patriotic cats) find pharmaceutical products and give them away to the locals. In addition, the groups of volunteers buy foods and give them away to those in need. For example, the Kherson regional association of cooks obtains foods, and cook 200 portions of hot dishes daily.

Moreover, there are volunteers who carry foods and personal care products from Kherson to the countryside, to those settlements that are near the frontline (Oleksandrivka, Stanislav, Chornobayivka etc.)

Along with humanitarian problems, Kherson has been suffering from the access to information and access to the internet. Invaders regularly disconnect or jam internet connection, mobile communication keeps being disrupted, too.

Kherson citizens use the word of mouth to spread information and try to reach those areas where the connection has been preserved on foot or by transport.

In the city center, where I live, mobile communications are jammed nearly every day from morning till night. Only at night connection appears and it is possible to get access to the internet. To get Ukrainian news, I used all possible resources. There were days when we could listen to Ukrainian news only via Diia from my mobile application.

My daughter is 16 years old and she is a school leaver. This year she was supposed to take final secondary school tests and enter a university. But the war changed everything for her. From the start of the occupation children in Kherson had online schooling and could write final academic year tests and studied according to the Ukrainian curriculum. My daughter has received her marks in the electronic format. Certificates were ordered but children will not be able to receive them because it is impossible to deliver supply them to Kherson. The school year finished on April 27, since on April 25, the invaders occupied the building of the Kherson city council.

In order to take the multitest, school leavers have to arrive in the area controlled by Ukraine. It is highly dangerous now. Furthermore, the invaders regularly close the city and do not anybody in. Therefore, the school leavers, staying in Kherson, have faced a challenge of how to get to the territory controlled by Ukraine.

It was actually one of the reasons why my daughter and I left Kherson. I want her to have an opportunity to take the multitest and enter a Ukrainian higher educational institution. Daryna is good at arts, so we are planning to enter Lviv Academy of Arts.

OVERALL, THOSE TWO MONTHS OF LIVING UNDER OCCUPATION WERE FULL OF FEAR ABOUT MY DAUGHTER'S PHYSICAL SAFETY FROM THE INVADERS. **AFTER THE CRIMES COMMITTED IN BUCHA AND IRPIN I WAS INDEED HORRIFIED.**

Therefore, I did not let my daughter go out by herself during those two months. She either stayed at home or went out with me. Actually, during the occupation, my daughter was deprived of the freedom of movement. I know that our parents would act in the same way.

There has been no formal evacuation from Kherson. Leaving is a way across the front line at our own peril and risk. It is an absolute toss-up.

I could not leave the city in February. Even on February 24, no trains were running, buses were cancelled, and I had no car myself. Then the city was encircled and clocked, combatting was ongoing non-stop. It was impossible to leave. That situation lasted till the middle of March. In Kherson, the authorities were not able to organize evacuation for the local population.

No "green corridor" has been organized over the occupation period (since the invaders have been against it). In March, volunteers managed to find a way to cross the frontline and dwellers started trying to leave in their own vehicles.

In March and April, I was still waiting for the Ukrainian army offensive, and that Kherson was going to be liberated very soon. However, in April, it became dangerous for me to stay in the city, because I took part in the pro-Ukrainian meetings and posted photos from the meetings on my webpage. Many friends and colleagues of mine have already been kidnapped and kept prisoners. Therefore, a colleague and I decided to flee from Kherson.

We were able to leave from the third attempt, because the invaders kept blocking the city in April, and would not let anybody go.

We took the longest way, via Berislav and Davydiv Brid. We passed over 30 invaders' checkpoints. Fortunately, we were not searched, and we did not get under shelling. However, I saw some young men being searched at a checkpoint, where they were forced to strip to the waist (the Russians looked for bruises and tattoos).

Just a couple of days later a convoy of cars that were trying to leave Kherson via Davydiv Brid was attacked and shelled from multiple rocket launchers. There were a lot of casualties, but that information was concealed by the occupation authorities. Those killed were buried in the field while the injured were taken to the occupied villages nearby. The same day, on another road (toward Mykolayiv) a sniper shot a car with the

volunteer who was taking women and children away.

situation in the city made it dangerous to show one's belonging to Ukraine and to say that a person was Ukrainian. It was dangerous to speak Ukrainian, have any Ukrainian national symbols, and have patriotic expressions in your phone, as well as photos. It was dangerous to express one's own social activism and say that Kherson is Ukraine.

It was especially evident while crossing the frontline. You have to fully conceal your Ukrainian identity and any Ukrainian manifestations.

I had to leave at home my embroidered vyshyvanka, my daughter's reference book on Ukrainian, a T-shirt with the Ukrainian flag, the daughter had to clear her phone and speak Russian. It was mandatory to survive and protect myself and my daughter. If the invaders had not liked something, they could have beaten, taken us "to the cellar"... some men on that way were humiliated and beaten. Kadyrivtsi kept women and girls under the threat of raping.

On May 10, my daughter and I came to Ivano-Frankivsk. We are going to stay here, and I have started working. Daryna is preparing for the multitest.

I feel pain about my mother staying in Kherson. And our cat Baton protects and supports her. We agreed that she will wait for us to come back. And we will go back as soon as Kherson is liberated.

Olha Zhukova, a social activist
Kherson, spent in occupation 62 days