



#WARDIARY 4: DARKNESS AND BOMB SHELTERS

Posted on 21. März 2022 by Lina Zalitok

In ihrem vierten Eintrag des #WarDiary schreibt Lina Zalitok an Tag 17 des Kriegs Russlands gegen die Ukraine darüber, die Bombenkeller plötzlich zu einem (unerwarteten) Alltag geworden sind.

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17th day of war. Since the first day of war we have been always accompanied by darkness. The war started for me in Kyiv at approximately 6 a.m. when it was still dark. I didn't hear explosions. it was my mother's call that woke me up. It was sweet to hear about the war beginning from my mother and not from the news which I avoided as much as I could in those days. It was even sweeter to hear that she was not panicking. As the day begun, the dark sky turned grey and was filled with silence and croaking of crows till the very evening. Only several times this cemetery silence was torn with the sound of sirens. I could hardly hear the sirens in my apartment because of closed windows, but I heard them clearly outside as I decided to take a walk and look for the closest bomb shelters. It was after one friend from my dance class Katja (I changed her name, just in case) sent me a map with bomb shelters and asked me twice if I found one. Now Google maps are always showing you bomb shelters, but I don't think it was the case on the first day of war. Any way, I had no idea how to find bomb shelters until Katja sent me a message. Actually first she asked me if I knew where bomb shelters were in my residential area, as her friend also lived there. But I didn't know, so a bit later she sent me the answer to her question which I also needed to answer for myself. It was already 2 p.m. or so and I was still working and pretending that everything was Ok. My friend's perseverance made me think and do something about my survival.

Before that day, I heard sirens only once in my life: in some German museum about the Second World War. I don't remember which one, as I visited plenty of them, also a big one in France near Strasbourg. Maybe it was Karlshorst museum in Berlin or some exposition in Hamburg... Any way, in one of the expositions I visited in the past, there was an audio of sirens. German sirens in Germany. So the sound of sirens was familiar to me. However, I didn't know what

this sound meant (good illustration of my zero preparation for the war). I still remembered, that in this German museum they said, that it was a signal to go to bomb shelters and there were pictures of people in bomb shelters. Now I also remember that I was wondering at the museum back then: why had those women and children to go through this? Because their country started war? Why did Americans deem it necessary to bomb those beautiful historic buildings in German cities? Although I had somehow expected a big war started by Russians sooner or later, I had thought, that bomb shelters belonged to the past. For whatever reason...

I exited my building and saw two women in the age of 60 or so near another entrance. I came up to them and asked about bomb shelters. One woman told me with enthusiasm that they had just done a tour visiting all the bomb shelters nearby. All of them were different, but the best one is across the street, she told me. There is also a good toilet there. I was surprised that you could choose a bomb shelter to your taste and that there was a toilet in one of them. I had never been to bomb shelters, but that sounded good. Then I remembered, that once I had applied for a job as a guide at one Berlin bunker in Kurfürstendamm (The Story of Berlin) and that there were even multiple toilets there. I spent several hours there and even learnt a text by heart about all the facilities in order to do a test guided tour. However, I got too nervous speaking German before a group of German schoolchildren, so I didn't get the job. It was a smashing experience, because I badly needed a job and because it was hard for me to deal with job refusals back then. So smashing that I had to google the name of this bunker and what was it about, as I managed to erase it from my memory. It is a bunker prepared during the Cold War for the possible nuclear warfare.

So I started my solo tour of bomb shelters in Kyiv centre, only to find out that all bomb shelters near and in my house were closed and there were locks hanging on their doors. Near one of the bomb shelters I saw a rich looking young couple exiting their building with bags and going to a car. They were dressed like people going to mountain camping. When I asked them if they knew who could open the door to the bomb shelter, they answered angrily "Bomb shelters don't make any sense. They won't save you if they use chemical weapons". I got angry and thought "Stupid rich people". Later I found an open bomb shelter in the building next to mine. It was full of litter and old stuff. But there were also nice people there ([here](#) you can see some videos of it). One man had a list of several bomb shelters with phone numbers of people who had keys to those locks on the doors.

I called the number of the person allegedly responsible for the bomb shelter in my building. A man answered to me that I should go to flat X entrance Y and ask for a key. I got quite irritated. Shouldn't bomb shelters be always available? A rather chilled woman opened the door of flat X and accompanied me to the bomb shelter in another entrance of the house. She opened the lock and showed me the place. There was a non-functioning dirty toilet, one chair and a socket extender. I asked her not to close the lock any more. She agreed and went away. I was alone in that bomb shelter. I sat there for some 10 minutes until an old woman came down. She said to me that a KGB man told her that Kyiv was going to be bombed. She seemed to be desperate and chilled at the same time. I exited the bomb shelter together with her and we went to our respective apartments after wishing each other all the best. I don't remember this conversation, but I remember that she had started to complain and I didn't want to hear anybody complain at that moment, so I somehow managed to get out of the conversation.

On my way to my apartment I met another woman at the children's playground. She looked 40 something years old, nice, but somewhat bizarre. She told me that there were almost no original inhabitants in these buildings. She was the only one in her part of the building who was an original inhabitant. People who bought these apartments were not

from Kyiv, never spoke to each other and already left for their villages and regions. Indeed our residential area looked devastated. She told me, that she was afraid of looters and was looking for bricks to make a kind of oven on the balcony out of them. While listening to her, I remembered my mother's words that we had some wood at our datcha. I thought about all the vast nature of my town which seemed even vaster compared to the image of an improvised brick oven on a balcony in Kyiv centre. And I felt how suffocating and cold-hearted this city was. I was no exception, because this first day of war was the first time that I talked to people who lived next to me.

With crows continuously croaking above almost empty silent streets in Kyiv centre, the grey sky seemed to be an ominous sign. I associated this croaking with future people's deaths which this war was sure to bring. I wasn't sure if I was going to be among those dead people, so it made me change my decision to wait for several days till the panic abates and roads get less busy. I decided to leave immediately. Moreover, my mother started to panick on the phone and to repeat that I was alone and far away from her, so I felt clearly that I preferred to minimise her panic and experience it in person. But first of all, I felt lonely. I packed my bag so quickly as I could, very slowly actually, because I was constantly interrupted with work and private messages and had to look inside every cabinet and on every shelf to ensure that I didn't forget something important (another example of my zero preparation for the war). I wasn't sure that I wouldn't have to walk all the way on feet, so I took only the most necessary things. At the same time, I didn't know if I would ever come back and see this apartment and my belongings again. So it wasn't easy to decide what was not necessary.

I left my apartment at 6 p.m. I knew that I had to leave Kyiv before 9 p.m., with curfew starting at 10 p.m. and ending at 7:00 a.m., or just go back to my lonely apartment in Kyiv centre where only few people remained and where looters could come. I walked to the metro. The atmosphere there was so much warmer than in my residential area. Without any problems I arrived to the terminal station. I used to travel to my home town by hitchhiking before, but this time it was a different experience. Normally it takes me two-three minutes to get into a car, but now I was standing some half an hour and it wasn't getting earlier. I was happy to see that cars were moving quickly, even much quicker than in pre-war times. On other roads there were still horrible traffic jams as I heard. Every car seemed to hurry up leaving the capital. They were flying past us, people, who like me wanted to get home, and stood on the road trying to stop them. People always stand like this at this place, but this evening there was a higher risk to be knocked down, especially for such distracted people like myself, I suppose. The cars seemed not to care that we were standing there. On the other side in the direction to the city suddenly a tank appeared and covered all the sounds with its roaring noise. Fortunately, I have already seen tanks at the Independence Day parade, so I didn't get scared.

I tried to book a BlaBlaCar, but both bookings were rejected. Then I decided to take a taxi which stood nearby. The driver wanted me to pay 1000 UAH for the trip (a bus costs normally 100 UAH). But after he tried to put 4 people including me in the back of the car and asked me to sit on a man's lap to fit in (among passengers there were also two rather dubiously looking men..), I flipped out and left the car. Just in time to see a minivan with a kind family going a little bit further than my home town. We went several hours through villages avoiding traffic jams on the highway. As we got closer to my town, they were kind enough to make a little detour from the highway to bring me closer to my home.

I still had to walk 2,5 km, some 1 km in total darkness. I never experienced such darkness before and I was alone. I arrived after checking points were already closed, so my cousin was not allowed to leave the town and pick me up

with his car. This first 1 km in darkness past fields and checking points, where nobody stood, didn't feel scary as one might expect. For whatever reason there were still cars going out and into the town on full speed. I tried to stop some cars, but nobody was going to stop. The way was not long, so I thought, it was for the better. I didn't want to have to do with strangers any more.

There was hardly a road. I constantly stumbled upon pieces of earth. So I had to stop for a moment, put my bag down on the earth and take out my torch. At some point I was so distracted with looking to the ground and finding my way that I was almost on the road. For a second when I saw the headlamps of several cars heading towards me, I was scared that I wouldn't be able to escape them in time. At that moment, I remembered that some hours ago in the morning I wrote to one dear person to me "We will fight if necessary". That was not how people fight, that looked rather like a stupid death. My head didn't work properly, but I put myself together and got out of the way. Some ten minutes later I found a pavement and then saw the first buildings of the town which I know so well. A little bit later I met my father walking towards me. All in all, these 3 km were a joke compared to 130 km which was the distance I covered by car.

After that first day, there were many gloomy days, but among them we also enjoyed several days of sun. There were also several days when everything unexpectedly got white with snow. The earth was innocent white. Still, every single day ended with thick darkness, because of the so called light camouflage, when even the light of a phone screen stands out against the dark surrounding of a multistorey building.

I thought that one might interpret this darkness like the symbol of our condition right now. Instead, I enjoy it: this thick darkness feels like a balsam for my eyes after hours of staring into the screen of my phone, also during pre-war times. Now it's time to recover. I also regard this darkness from the perspective of the current superpower discourse in Ukraine: It is an opportunity to develop skills of orienting in the darkness. I am getting much better in it now. I can find my way to the kitchen and bathroom without lightening my phone and without stumbling upon things. I can brush my teeth in the total darkness. It feels really good after in the first days I couldn't find my clothes as I heard bomb alarm at 3 a.m. At the beginning, I also forgot where I put my things and felt almost helpless trying to find them. Now I can also find my cat by the sound of his meowing. I know where certain things are and if I don't know, I ask my parents something like "Can you describe where did you see bread last time so I can find it more quickly?"

I am still a night person though. As we didn't find a good way to camouflage our flat yet, I am writing this text under blanket on my phone and spoiling my eyes (I hope not too much). Today I also ate my supper in total darkness. It is my second time and it felt quite bizarre. Sometimes we also "watch" TV covered with a blanket. Once I heard that they showed Russian captives and couldn't help peeping under the blanket to see their faces. It felt so funny. One evening, just a minute later after I put my glasses to watch some TV news and see them better (I am short-sighted), my father covered TV with a blanket. "Is it already time?" - I asked. "Yes" - my parents answered in duo. Sometimes I forget to take off my glasses and wear them in the darkness. Do glasses help to see better in the darkness? I still have to check that.

For several days there have been no sirens and we haven't gone to the bomb shelter, but we continue hiding ourselves under the shelter of darkness.

Bildquelle: © Lina Zalitok, 2022. Blick aus dem in die schneebedeckte Heimatstadt der Autorin.

