

CHRONICLE

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ISOLATION

SECRET PRISONS OF DONBAS
IN THE STORIES BY PEOPLE
SAVED FROM TORTURE AND DEATH

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PREFACE

On December 29, 2019, the so-called “Big” exchange of prisoners 80 (76) for 124 took place. It was called the “Big One”, because this was a long-awaited and not at all ordinary event for Ukraine. The preliminary exchange in the same format took place exactly two years before, on December 27, 2017. Ukraine was able to release dozens of its citizens who were held captive by terrorist organizations supported by Russia in the occupied part of the Donbas.

We knew almost nothing about the people, who were going to be exchanged on December 29, until the exchange took place. On that day, in the evening, the Security Service of Ukraine officially published the lists: 12 POWs and 68 civilian prisoners (four of whom decided to remain on the territory of the temporarily occupied and uncontrolled territories). It was only then that journalists, bloggers and society were able to find information about the released Ukrainians. And if the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) military returnees was not questioned, with civilians the things were different. Many of them were suspected of working not for the Ukrainian forces, but of helping the militants. Some were openly called enemies: “militants”, “separatists”, and “vatnyks”¹.

There were many disputes: the joy for some returnees intertwined with the discontent for others. Even more outrage was caused by who was turned in to the hybrid forces for Ukrainian

¹ “Vatnyk” is a Ukrainian slang for someone who collaborates with an enemy occupying force (Translator’s note).

prisoners. This refers to, in particular, five “berkutivetses”¹ who had been accused of shooting the Heavenly Hundred during The Revolution of Dignity²; about three accused of undermining a peaceful demonstration in Kharkiv on February 22, 2015 (they also allegedly participated in the “Anti-Maidan” actions and clashes in the Mariiivskiy Park in the winter of 2014); those involved in the “tragedy of May 2” in Odesa in 2014; participants of the storm of the city police department in Mariupol in May 2014; and the militants within the “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republic” (“LDPR”) armed groups. In the end, officially the names of the persons transferred to the militants were never announced; their identification was carried out through public and media efforts. Thence a rhetorical question for the Ukrainian society is as follows: was it so rewarding to give away the real murderers of Ukrainians for the said returnees.

This book contains 22 stories related by the former prisoners of the “LDPR” and presented in the form of adapted monologues (without the author’s comments of journalists, except for reference clarifications marked “A/N”); therefore, these are the authentic stories of the ex-prisoners about their life during the war and during captivity. While looking for and analyzing information, we focused on the AFU military and people who worked for the benefit of the Ukrainian forces, which has been confirmed by local residents of the Donbas, Ukrainian agencies, journalists and our personal sources. In opposition to this, there are stories of people whose past raises many questions, but somehow they ended up in “LDPR” jails and were released and returned to Ukraine. At the same time, the relevant authorities in Ukraine should be concerned with the outright enemies who collaborated with the terrorist administrations of secret jails in the Donbas.

It is difficult to assess and analyze who the released prisoners really are (this refers to the civilian ex-prisoners). After all, everyone has his own story. And the reader, based on these stories and available open sources, can draw his own conclusion.

¹ “Berkutivets” stands for a member of the former “Berkut”, Ukrainian system of riot police of the Ukrainian militia within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (T/n).

² The 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, it is also known as the Revolution of Dignity (Ed.).

We have deliberately brought out the first and separate section containing stories of the POWs, our guys who had been captured by militants during combat and survived 5 years of hell and abuse. But they have stuck it out, survived, returned to their families and do not mind continuing to serve in the AFU.

Each of the civilian ex-prisoners explains “her/his struggle” for the benefit of Ukraine in her/his own way: someone pasted leaflets in the occupied cities, someone published notes and photos from the occupied territory discrediting militants, in someone’s apartment or car the militants found explosives, someone prepared subversive actions, someone else passed information about the militants and equipment of the occupants to the Ukrainian forces. Depending on the harm caused to the militants, the prisoners were subjected to various tortures in secret jails in the Donbas. And everyone admits that “I found out the hard way everything about the “Russian world”.

It is difficult to understand and accept the stories of the returnees. Some facts will probably come out in detail over time. Among the storytellers of this book, many a man admit that this is only a small portion of the atrocities committed in the basements of the Donetsk and Luhansk “MGB”¹, in the so-called Donetsk “isbushka”, infamous prison “Isolation”, in secret jails, pre-trial detention centers and colonies of the occupied Donbas. Someone recounted the tortures in detail, someone with horror and weepingly could barely speak, someone described everything with complete calm in his voice, and someone bravely, with soldierly endurance, withstood the captivity.

We do not intend to draw attention to a particular person, to emphasize someone’s feat (except servicemen of AFU), but we only acquaint the reader with the real situation in the occupied territories and what sacrifices can people make when their land is invaded, about the choice and responsibility of each person, and that the “disguise in the air” will not work, though the responsibility remains. We tell about how furious and cruel the enemy is, and that there are still Ukrainians in the jails of Donbas — military and

¹ MGB (*rus.* МГБ — Министерство госбезопасности) — Ministry of State Security (Ed.)

civilian — those for whom Ukraine is not just a place of residence, but something for which one has to endure inhuman tortures.

It is within our power to remind the society that the Russian-Ukrainian war continues, and Ukrainians are still suffering in jails and basements in the occupied territories.

Iryna Vovk and Daria Bura

BOHDAN PANTIUSHENKO

conscripted volunteer of the AFU, the 1st separate tank brigade
born in 1984

Bohdan Pantiushenko used to work as a programmer. In August 2013 he got married to Viktoriia and later moved together with his wife to Kyiv. They joined Euromaidan protests and took part in the Revolution of Dignity.

In September 2014 thirty years old Bohdan became a volunteer and went to war. He was conscripted to the First separate tank brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. His unit's training and drills took place in Goncharivske, and on January 1, 2015, Bohdan was appointed a tank commander, received a code-name "Armor" and was sent to Donetsk airport. His first significant battle was on January 18, 2015, during the operation of lifting the blockade of Donetsk airport. That battle became his first and his last one, as the entire crew of the "Armor's" tank was taken captive by the militants near the village of Spartak.

First Bohdan was held by the so-called "cossacks" who treated captives brutally. Later he was taken to the so-called "isbushka", which was the former premises of SBU¹ in Donetsk. Then Bohdan was held in a few other locations that were unknown to him, after he was finally brought to the 97th prison colony and pre-trial detention center. Ukrainian soldier was sentenced there to eighteen years in the maximum-security prison based on charges of "terrorist activities" that included creating a terrorist organization, sabotage, and an attempt to take the power of the "Donetsk People's Republic" ("DPR"). He was also accused of an alleged blowing up of Putylyivskiy Bridge that was used by the terrorists to transport weapons and ammunition to Donetsk airport. Then Bohdan was transferred to the 32nd prison colony in Makiivka.

Bohdan spent five years in captivity in Donbas, and his wife Viktoriia was doing everything possible to make her beloved a part of the prisoners' exchange. She took part in the protests and demonstrations and appealed to the President and various country authorities. Finally, she succeeded: on January 29, 2019, Bohdan Pantiushenko along with other prisoners including eleven Ukrainian military men were exchanged at "Maiorsk"

¹ SBU (укр. СБУ — Служба безпеки України) — Security Service of Ukraine (Ed.).

checkpoint. Bohdan says he is ready to defend his country again, yet now he would like to try to return to the IT field.

“IT WAS A GENERAL STAFF’S OPERATION. WE’VE REACHED PUTYLIVSKY BRIDGE, BUT THE BACKUP FORCES HAVEN’T SHOWN UP”

Before the war I worked in an IT field for a few years, which means I had nothing to do with the army. I wasn’t a career officer and not even an enlisted soldier. I was only a military conscript once. By the way, when I was a conscript I qualified as a tank operator and a gunner. Right before Euromaidan protests started, three months before it, we got married to Viktoriia and moved to Kyiv (*Bohdan was born and raised in Bila Tserkva, in Kyiv region.* —A/N). My father and I participated in the Revolution of Dignity; Viktoriia was very active as well. However, nobody could even imagine back then that the events would unfold so quickly.

After Crimea was occupied I was summoned to the military, two times. Both times I would come to the recruiting station, but both times I was told to “wait”. And I’ve been waiting. In August 2014 I was summoned for the third time, and this time I was conscripted. On September 5 I was transferred from the recruiting station to my



Bohdan Pantiusenko and his wife Viktoriia
on the day of mobilization 09/05/14

brigade’s unit. It was in the town of Goncharivske, in Chernihiv region. The first armored brigade. Military training and drills lasted for four months there. On New Year I was still together with my wife, and at the beginning of 2015 I went off to the frontline. We’ve been transported with the troop trains and arrived somewhere near Volnovakha. That was how my military service and how my war started. We stood over a week near Volnovakha, and then we

were deployed to Donetsk airport. There was heavy fighting there already, the last battles for the airport.

A military operation planned by the General Staff was scheduled for January 18. It was an operation to raise the blockade of Donetsk airport. Our forces had to be divided into three groups and approach Donetsk airport, to lift the siege, to disperse separatists, and to take up a strategic position. However, as it often happens in real life here... they've planned in the General Staff to use in an operation a particular number of people and a particular amount of weapons and equipment. Commanding officers confirmed some of those plans, maybe, but in reality there was significantly fewer personnel taking part in an operation. Meanwhile, the separatists' numbers turned out to be unexpectedly high. I can assure you that where my unit was there were noticeably more of them than the intelligence reported earlier. When we passed the village of Spartak we obviously knew that the enemy was there, but we thought there were just about ten-fifteen people there. But when we arrived and started an operation it turned out that there were at least fifty of them there. In general, there were four or five of their units in our direction.

When I was held captive I had an opportunity to talk with different people who directly participated in the fighting near Donetsk airport and in the area. The bottom line was that I was also really interested to see everything from a different perspective as well. That's why I was asking as many questions as possible. And with the help of those little and seemingly insignificant questions I got the picture of what was actually going on near Donetsk airport on the separatists' side. During my time as a prisoner of war I already knew how many of them were in Spartak back then, and how many of them were near Putyliyivskyi Bridge. I am often asked about the strategies, but I'm only a tank commander, so I had absolutely no idea what the General Staff was planning to implement. I had a particular task, that's all, we didn't know about the general plan, on the global scale, so to say. We had an order to move from one location to another one, they told us about the possible obstacles on our way and ordered us to take up positions at the set location, near Putyliyivskyi Bridge. "Wait!", "Observe!", "Open fire!" — those were the orders for us.

Thus, on January 18 we set out en-route “Zenith — Spartak”. We knew there was some shooting in that area, and there was a separatist checkpoint at the mine and the first tank’s crew had to attack this checkpoint. And we did it. But when we arrived in Spartak, there was already an ambush there. Although... It is really hard to actually call it an “ambush”. I think that separatists themselves didn’t assume that we could attack them. But they had an obvious advantage, they had stable positions. When they saw us they started firing at us from all the weapons they had: from guns, from machine guns, and even from hand mortars. They provided an intense fire. It was a miracle that we made it through the first line of fire. Then there was a real battle near Putyliyevsky Bridge. After about an hour of this battle, the bridge finally fell. But it wasn’t our work, even though “DPR” later “charged” me with it.

**“WE LEFT BLOOD TRACES ON THE SNOW AFTER OURSELVES,
SO THE SEPARATISTS FOUND US EASILY”**



Bohdan Pantiushenko near his T-64 tank

The operation didn’t go as planned, and we found ourselves beyond the separation line without any backup. For some reason the paratroopers didn’t cover us, and infantry was cut from our tanks. There was only one way under these circumstances — to withdraw. The group commander made this decision as well, so we started to retreat, moving through Spartak towards Zenith. But separatists managed to hit our tank with

a hand mortar (*they destroyed one of the rear tracks of Bohdan's T-64 tank. — A/N*), so the tank was off-the-road. Moreover, their tank, T-72, started advancing to attack us. The worst thing was that we were behind the enemy's lines, and there was way too far from our forces. In addition to that, my firing pointer Ivan Liasa had a head injury, and it was just a miracle that he was still alive.

After a moment's consideration we ran and hid in some barn nearby. I remember thinking back then that when our forces would be moving we would be able to fight and try to reach them, and if not then we would just wait in this barn till dark and attempt to find our positions in the night. Of course, we could try to reach the road where our destroyed tank was, but this way was a live-fire zone for many meters. We could also try to reach our positions through the field, but the field was open, and in the broad daylight we would be too visible there. There was a high fence across from that barn, that fence was taller than I. We wouldn't be able to jump over it with wounded Ivan with us. And what was behind that fence anyway? Unfortunately, we didn't take into consideration that Ivan's injury left blood traces on the snow, so the separatists found us quickly. In about ten minutes the militants have already stormed the barn where we were hiding and waiting for darkness. It was a group of the so-called "cossacks" and a few people from the "East" battalion. It was the people who took me captive. By the way, later, near Putylivskiy Bridge, there were also some militants from the "Somalia" group, it was that "Givi" and an air defence battery with the gun trucks. It was quite a big group. But I think that if we had a backup near Spartak our forces would be able to defeat this group as the separatists seemed to be ready to abandon their positions there.

But let me come back to that barn... I understood that it was impossible to offer any resistance in that space that was just two to two meters, especially that we had a seriously wounded person with us. It would be the same as to just die there right away. I remember I thought about that big prisoners' exchange in 2014 at that moment. I thought, "Well, I guess there were 150 against 200 people... Well, we will be taken captive now most likely, so we will have to endure it from the separatists for some time, to spend some time in captivity, and then they would eventually exchange us." And it was the only one option I've been thinking about at that

moment, as none of us wanted to die in that barn... At the end of the day, nobody actually asked us about our plans for the future. There were about a dozen militants who stormed the barn with the screams and shooting. When they stormed the barn they broke my nose immediately, while the others started to drag injured Ivan. I was under the impression that at the beginning they didn't even know what to do with us, so they dragged us to the dog kennel of the house nearby and started calling somebody. I think that they were told not to kill us, so they started beating us, forcing us on our knees, they would put the knives to our throats and then stabbed us, our backs, hands, arms. These guys also wanted to burn my "cossack chupryna", but they didn't succeed. Then they tried to force me to show our forces positions on the map. I already understood quite well that they would not execute us there, that we were taken prisoners.

"THE 'COSSACKS' WOULD COME TO THE CELL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND WOULD BEAT US, KICKING US WITH THEIR FEET AND THE GUN BUTT-STOCKS, AND STABBED US WITH KNIVES"

We could hear peal and rattle above our heads, so we understood that there was a mortar attack. They got us in the car quickly and took us to Budyonivsky district of Donetsk, to 66 Travneva Street. They used to call this place "the bathhouse", although before the war it was one of the "New Post" branches which were simply taken by the "cossacks". This building's basement was the first and the scariest place of my detention. I spent three and a half months there. There was a cell about six to five meters, and there was nothing in this cell, there were no windows, only the door, and the cold walls. There was glazed tile on the floor, and there were some coasters instead of the bed, filled with some old and ragged cloth. We didn't have a toilet, we had two buckets instead, and they would take them away once a day. There were no clothes to change, that's why I spent all these three and a half months there in the same clothes I've been wearing when they've captured me. They would bring us some water in a five-liter bottle, they would feed us some cheap and often undercooked food twice a day. There was only Ivan and me in that cell. Our mechanical engineer Dima Kostetskyi was taken to Zakharchenko (*Oleksandr Zakharchenko was a former leader and*

the head of the so-called “Ministry Council” of the self-proclaimed “DPR”, was killed on August 31, 2018. — A/N) right away.

By the way, Ivan who had a head injury was first sent to Kalinin hospital in Donetsk. I think they performed craniotomy for him and removed two shell fragments. But as soon as he woke up after the surgery and anesthetic they dragged Ivan from the hospital bed, with the sewed head, and threw him to my cell in the basement. There were two others with us in that cell. One of them was Edward Cope, a UK citizen (*Bohdan remembered that Edward claimed to be a descendant of John Hughes who was considered to be a founder of Donetsk; at some point, Edward was transferred somewhere to the border with Russia, and his trace was lost. — A/N*). Another one was Serhii Dmytruk who was captured in autumn 2014 and already exchanged in 2015.

My wife found out that I was held captive on the same day. We agreed with her that we would call each other regularly, in the morning and the evening. But that night I was already taken prisoner, and we’ve been taken to their “leader”, kind of an “ataman” Safonenko. The “cossacks” used to call this bastard “Father”. So this “Father” actually called Viktoriia, introduced himself as a “leader of Don Army” and told her that I was taken captive. Then he gave the phone to me and I confirmed it all to my wife and also added



Bohdan Pantiusenko in captivity

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