

MILITARY DIARIES

VALERIIA 'NAVA' SUBOTINA

AZOVSTAL

**PRESS SERVICE MADE
FROM STEEL**

**KHARKIV
FOLIO
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*Dedicated to all media professionals,
whose voices have been taken away by the enemy,
and to my Friend who is still in captivity.*

#FREEAZOVSTALDEFENDERS

FOREWORD

When the helicopter missions to *Azovstal* Plant were being arranged, I served as the commander of a special operations military unit under the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine's Ministry of Defense.

We knew that above four thousand service members of the Mariupol garrison were valiantly defending a city home to more than half a million residents.

By then, their ammunition was running out, they were short on anti-armor weaponry, and there were not enough medical supplies or communications gear. They also lacked adequate means to counter aerial attacks. The defenders' fatigue was becoming increasingly evident.

The special operation to fly into *Azovstal* was exceedingly risky, given that Mariupol was completely encircled. The situation was critical both around and inside the city, yet we had no choice but to proceed. Our duty was to take this perilous step to support the garrison: to deliver essential supplies, deploy reinforcements, and evacuate the wounded.

At that time, I spoke directly with the *Azov* commander, though he did not know who I truly was. Each time we prepared the helicopters, we had to decide carefully what to load, as their cargo capacity was limited.

Back then, we thought of the Mariupol garrison as one whole entity, without focusing on any individual names or faces. Only later, after the command to cease Mariupol's

defense was issued—and after I had been taken captive by the enemy—did I meet Lera*.

She joined the Special Operations Forces with a fierce temperament and a demeanor unlike that of a standard soldier. You either had to accept her as she was or not enlist her at all, for it was hard to imagine her changing or adapting to anyone else.

It was likely that helicopter mission, and the trust that grew from it, that laid the groundwork for our friendship, because after captivity, trusting anyone can be a struggle.

I know she lost those closest to her, and that most of her dearest friends remain in captivity. I also know that, though she's surrounded by many people, she speaks to very few, and not everyone truly knows who she is.

Her writing style provides a fully realized view of a person. She speaks in her texts as though she completely understands others, yet it seems unlikely anyone truly understands her in return.

We live in a time when people are tested quickly—there are countless critical moments that show who is who.

It is vital that she continues to find the strength to speak and write. Waging battles with words and stories is something she does remarkably well.

*Commander of the Special Operations Command
in 2022-2023
Major General Viktor KHORENKO*

* Lera — short for Valeriia.

THE END

The river is pitch-black. You only realize it's right here, under your feet, by the sound of the waves lapping. You can't see a thing. But I need to get across to the other shore. I'm waiting for the ferryman. What was his name again? Charon? He's supposed to carry me across. Only, the river is lit by headlights. And actually, it's not a river at all—it's a road. A car pulls up. At the wheel is 'Taksyst'. "Hop in!" he says. And I suddenly understand—we're not heading to the other shore, but continuing our journey. My journey. Because he can't go too far with me. 'Taksyst' died at *Azovstal*. He loved speed, risk, and extremes. So do I. '



Lera with 'Taksyst'

Coming back to *Azov* meant coming back to myself, and the events I'll describe here will stay as close to the truth as possible. Why only "as close as possible" and not entirely factual? Because everything I write will reflect my personal perception. Even people will look the way I remember them.

I will tell you the truth—the truth about the information warriors who changed the course of the war. About the brave souls who said, "We're not afraid," even though in reality, they were afraid and fought on a battlefield that had no other weapons besides the truth.

The call signs of many of my brothers are altered here because, at the time of writing, they are still in enemy captivity, and I can't ask their permission to use their names. Some characters here are composites, to convey the personalities of people who stood by me then and who will remain dearest to me for the rest of my life.

The dialogues, of course, are approximate, except for those that were recorded in writing and can thus be quoted word for word.

Helping me write this book is the single correspondence from *Azovstal* that I managed to keep—messages exchanged with someone who forever became family to me, my younger brother, 'Orest', who inspired me then and continues to inspire me with his astonishing light.

BEFORE THE INVASION

It was late February 2022. Outside, it was still quite frosty. And yet, in our yard, it was as if spring had arrived. Tulips began to poke through the still-frozen soil, revealing their green leaves to the world. The fallen leaves from the previous year's fruit trees in our little garden were in their way, so I needed to rake up what hadn't been cleared before winter.

It's not that I was keeping a vigilant eye on my small garden—quite the opposite, perhaps. I'd had enough of that in childhood. A mining settlement—an apartment on the top floor of a three-story “high-rise” in town. Near the building, residents had their own little dug-up plots.

The soil there, in Donbas, is special. My grandmother used to say it was the way it was because of the emptiness underneath—tunnels dug in search of coal. “Special how?” you might ask. As a child, I imagined it as hardened halva. You'd drive a shovel into it like a knife into halva that had been sitting too long in the store and then on the kitchen table. It cracks and breaks off. Completely devoid of moisture, with no softness at all. Difficult to dig.

Water was only available a few hours a day. Apartments and houses didn't have running water, so you had to haul it in buckets up to the third floor—to bathe and flush the toilet, and also for the garden. You'd dump a bucket out, and the earth would greedily soak up every drop, then almost instantly seem just as dry again.

It felt as though we never harvested more potatoes than we planted. But for some reason, that never stopped us. We spent so much time each day on that garden plot.

It wasn't even that big, yet it took so much effort. On the other hand, it did reward us with some things—cherries so ripe they turned almost black-red and tasted very sweet, huge gooseberry bushes, green sweet peas, strawberries... And the tastiest—wild strawberries and apricots—grew on the neighbor's plot.

All of this literally kept me alive, helping feed me. But the memory of the grueling labor in those gardens never went away, killing any desire to garden again. Except maybe planting some arugula or spinach. And, of course, flowers that added a sense of coziness.

The air smelled of spring, yet the war lingered in the background. By then, everybody was talking about it, but what could possibly scare us here in the East, where the war had been ongoing since 2014?

Friends would message me, asking if they should leave Mariupol. It annoyed me. How could anyone think of leaving this city? I couldn't even imagine the possibility that I myself might leave.

At that point, I had been in the reserves for a year, working in the press service of the State Emergency Service, steadfastly saying: I'm not going anywhere.

Others were leaving. Military units were being pulled back. My *Azov* stayed put, reinforcing my belief that everything would be fine.

The President had come to town recently with business leaders. They strolled through the city, smiling, looking calm. "He must know if something truly terrible is going to happen, right?" I thought. Everything's going to be fine, everything's going to be fine...

Andriy rakes leaves, meanwhile building a small fire to cook some meat. In our work chat, they ask who wants to evacuate their relatives. I know my grandmother—she won't leave. Just in case, I ask her anyway, but even the question irritates her.

We didn't leave Mariupol for a single day in 2014. Why should now be any different?

We tidy up the yard of the house we're renting. Padding around our feet is the best cat in the world, Barsik. He sprawls on the warming ground under the sun, squinting his green eyes. His whiskers are broken, his ears torn—a chunk missing from one of them. Yet he's a terribly charismatic "guy." Sometimes, because he's missing teeth, his little tongue sticks out, and we laugh while he snuggles up. He's always snuggling. My whole life, I'd had moody, half-crazy cats, and this one, even if you tug on his tail, will just purr. With his whole feline heart, he shows such incredible love and devotion.

Back at Andriy's place, there's a new toy I gave him—a little ant farm. He and some guys from work were playing some phone game about running an ant colony, so when I gave him the actual farm, he was thrilled. We loved surprising each other. Emotions—that was the main thing we had. Memories—the main thing that mattered. It's good that we somehow always recognized that, not just when time started slipping away all too fast.

We tidy the house, then head to the store for soil and flower pots, carefully repotting them. We're not planning to die—we're planning to keep living, and living well...

I'd never had much luck with flowers. Grandmother had a whole collection of violets, money trees, Japanese roses, Christmas cacti... As for me, even succulents were

a disaster. One cactus rotted because I overwatered it; another dried out for lack of moisture.

But here, we'd gotten a house filled with flowers. I watered them diligently, at least trying not to kill someone else's plants. But there were also ours, the important ones. We'd inherited them from the previous renters of the apartment we'd lived in before. Two tiny shoots of a money tree in a plastic sour cream cup—one bigger, one smaller. Andriy said the two were "us," and felt sad when I transplanted them into separate pots.

But it was cramped in just one pot. And yet now, standing side by side on the windowsill, they kept leaning toward each other, growing fast—finally not drying out or getting sick.

The day before, Andriy came home from work somewhat nervous and worried.

"You need to pack your things," he says decisively.

"What things?" I ask. I'm lying on the couch in a cozy back room watching some random movie.

"Whatever you'd like to take. Everyone is sending their wives and children out of the city. Sending them urgently. Clearly, there's a reason."

"I'm not going anywhere—you know that..." I feel sad and, honestly, kind of hurt that he thinks I could leave...

"Try to understand. Once it starts, I don't want to have to worry about you on top of everything else!"

"And you won't need to worry about me!" I snap. Relationships are complicated for me. Since childhood, I've been used to belonging only to myself and being solely responsible for my actions. So what does he have to do with it? I'm my own universe. And war can't possibly scare me; I've been on this frontline from the start.

“But you’re not in the military now! Where will you go?”

“I’ll go to my own people,” I shrug. “The *Azov* fighters.”

“Pack your things,” he says, leaving the room and heading to the store.

I get up from the bed. I can’t accept this reality where I feel I’m losing everything. And by “everything,” I don’t mean material possessions or people. “Everything” is my everyday way of life—the life I’ve come to love with all my heart, completely and entirely mine, and I don’t want it any other way.

I spent too long reaching this life. As a child and teenager, I could only dream of it—a real family, my own cozy space, my personal comfort zone in every sense. Though I barely even dared to dream. I never thought I deserved anything of the sort!

Yes, precisely—I don’t deserve it. In my view, formed since childhood by my close environment, love must be earned. You must be better than everyone else. You must always fight and always push yourself. But on the other hand, no matter how hard you try, you were still born not good enough, not beautiful enough, not successful enough. In the wrong place, among the wrong people, the wrong person.

Despair and resentment grew in my soul, along with the idea that one day, for all these hardships, this pain and loss, I might at least receive some reward in the form of someone who would love me, never hurt me, and take care of me.

But I somehow failed to notice that in my effort to be “better” at something, I’d accomplished so much. I became so self-sufficient that I no longer needed anyone’s care or help.

This constant battle against the world—for myself and my survival—did forge strength and character, but it never created an inner understanding of loving myself

unconditionally. It blinded me to the people who already loved and appreciated me, saw me in ways I couldn't see myself.

Andriy appeared in my life not because of my best qualities but despite my distrust and despair. He simply came and stood by me at a time when I had everything—everything except warmth and care, which aren't material but spiritual. Something I'd always valued but deemed inaccessible to someone like me.

And now it's all collapsing—even without a genuine threat or reliable facts. It's happening out of sheer tension, out of fear. But I lost the ability to be afraid a long time ago. I'd only been afraid as a small child, when I realized there was no way I could protect myself, when I understood I didn't belong to myself and none of the “big adults” would protect me—whether they were unwilling or unable didn't really matter. I lived in constant fear. I didn't know how long my thin little body would last. Would I even reach adulthood? Would I ever be strong?

Back then, I was always dreaming of strength, yet at the same time wanting to remain as small and nearly invisible as possible—not to draw attention, not to be noticed, not to be touched.

But adulthood changed everything. 2014 changed everything. I don't know where this brashness, lack of restraint, and faith in my own invincibility came from.

They blossomed like those flowers that barely grew in my house—ambiguous traits I couldn't always control but could at least enjoy.

And now what, run away? Seriously? Why should I leave at all?

At thirty-three, I finally have everything I wanted, everything I dreamed of. Andriy. My everything. Our

normal life. This year, for the first time, we managed to plan a summer vacation in July. Our birthdays—his on the 19th and mine on the 20th—would finally be spent traveling somewhere. Probably Paris. If it worked out, we'd bring Andriy's daughter along. We would talk to her there about wanting to get married.

Very soon, we were planning to move to Kyiv, though we had grown to love Mariupol.

The thought of moving to the capital was initially terrifying to me, but I understood that my husband is from Kyiv and wants to be closer to his parents.

I'd almost come to terms with it, but now that we suddenly and nearly forcibly have to leave, I feel intense resistance swelling inside me. I hate being forced to do anything—it's against my nature!

I pack my bag. He comes back.

"Did you pack?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer quietly.

"Show me what you put in."

I open it. Inside is my old *Azov* uniform, thermal underwear, my combat boots. Also, my laptops and jewelry—because, well, I love my jewelry.

He understands immediately. In fact, it seems that's exactly what he expected.

Later, I kept thinking about what I would have packed in that bag I took to *Azovstal* if I'd known all that was coming. Yes, I would have packed different things...

First and foremost, food. I would have grabbed all kinds of grains and pasta. It would have been good to have more at home. But back then, the stores were open 24/7, fully stocked. We only ever really cooked rice, occasionally buckwheat.

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