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translated from the Ukrainian by Yulia Lyubka and Kate Tsurkan

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## An Excerpt from *Bakhmut* by Myroslav Laiuk

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*The following is a translated excerpt from Myroslav Laiuk's book Bakhmut, which Ukrainer released at the end of 2023. During the most intense fighting in Bakhmut in winter 2022 and in March 2023, author Myroslav Laiuk and photographer Danylo Pavlov lived day and night with Ukrainian infantrymen and artillerymen, medics and chaplains, rescuers and children in the city and its surroundings, under artillery shelling and amid street battles. The result of those trips is a book of reports and essays about life during wartime, irreparable losses, the history of Bakhmut, and the phenomenon of memory and forgetting.*

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Bakhmut, December 31, 2022. Mrs. Oleksandra, resembling those secondary characters from crowded canvases that are somehow more memorable than the central heroes, showed me her passport and a volunteer service medal while standing in the yard near the partially burned city center. The eighty-six-year-old woman always took those two items with her when she had to step out onto the street during the shelling.

Nine years ago, there was a war in Bakhmut with “separatists” who managed to hoist the enemy flag, attempted to seize the Ukrainian military unit with the help of a Russian tank, and disrupted the presidential elections. Mrs. Oleksandra used to go to the city center for daily one-woman protests that would last several hours.

Once, a woman approached her during the protest and spat. It was a teacher from one of the schools in Bakhmut. Some townspeople intimidated Mrs. Oleksandra and then beat her, but she would always go back out again.

Mrs. Oleksandra once embroidered a portrait of Dmytro Cherniavskyi, originally from Khromove, a suburb of Bakhmut. On March 13, 2014, when the EuroMaidan Revolution turned into the Russo-Ukrainian war, the young man was killed by pro-Russian militants during a rally for Ukrainian unity in Donetsk. He became, in essence, the first victim of this war.

Pro-Ukrainian individuals supported Mrs. Oleksandra and prepared posters for her, but they never dared to stand beside her. When the woman was beaten so severely that her injuries had to be documented, a police officer was assigned to guard her.

Photographer Danylo Pavlov and I found ourselves in Bakhmut on New Year's Eve. A reader of *Reporters Magazine* living in Canada recognized her mother, Mrs. Oleksandra, in one of the pictures on the website. She wrote to the editorial office and kindly asked me if I would try to get her out if I go to Bakhmut again. Mrs. Oleksandra's son, who lived in Kyiv, had much less hope that his mother would want to leave. He'd fled the city while his mother staunchly refused to abandon her home. She seemed to embody the Ukrainian spirit of the city—the first in the Donetsk region where, incidentally, in 1917, after the February Revolution, they'd raised the blue and yellow flag.

When I visited the Kyiv apartment where Mrs. Oleksandra's son lived, he showed me photographs of his mother's other embroidered works, including *rushnyky*—embroidered, decorative towels—and portraits. The man appeared frail at first glance—he was in the final stage of cancer. He had traveled out of the city on his motorcycle back in June 2022. Near Pavlohrad, he had a fall and broke several ribs but still managed to reach the

capital. He forbade me to use his illness as an argument to persuade Mrs. Oleksandra to leave the city. He feared that his mother's heart wouldn't be able to withstand it. The man handed over a bag of medicine for her, asked me to wait a bit, sat down at the table, took out a pen and paper, and started writing her a letter.

When the name of a war-torn city continues to dominate the headlines of global media, it is entirely possible that this city will be inscribed in history, much like Stalingrad, Dresden, Guernica . . . It's a diverse array, yet a somewhat strained association, perhaps more noticeable only now in the absence of a temporal perspective. According to various sources, the number of casualties and wounded in Bakhmut since the beginning of the war ranges from tens to possibly hundreds of thousands.

Hoping that the experts were wrong again, I read a news headline before heading back to the city: "Will Russian forces take Bakhmut today?"

### MRS. OLEKSANDRA'S MONOLOGUE

Nearly all the buildings have been destroyed in Bakhmut. You wouldn't recognize the city—even after your previous visit on New Year's. Everything is destroyed. Those in the center, including the two buildings in the semicircle. And the building where my son lived . . .

Every day, I had to somehow make my way from the apartment to the building's front doorstep that had gotten covered with shattered glass and bricks. Every day, I swept it away. I took the broom from the neighboring building, whose side façade abuts ours. When I carried that broom to put it back in place, they would shoot in a way that, for a moment, you could hear the projectile flying. A man stood near the building. He cautiously and slowly moved to take cover, and I followed him. That was when the shrapnel hit me in the back . . .

Wounded, I descended to the basement. A family of doctors was hiding there. The general practitioner treated the wound and said, "Oleksandra Mykhailivna, I don't know much about injuries, but it's swollen, and there's a significant amount of bleeding. Go to the military doctor." So, I went since it was just across the road. The paramedic there looked at it and bandaged it

up for me. But the bleeding was severe. My fur coat was covered in blood . . .

Just as the field ambulance was leaving, they said: "Get in with us." Standing there bewildered, I still hoped that there was no need to go anywhere . . . At the first responder station, they threw away all my clothes—everything was bloody and looked horrific. I dried the fur coat. I didn't clean it, though. How can you wash a fur coat in the hospital?

Only one store was still operating in Bakhmut. That poor saleswoman, taking risks like that! Yet she got those products from somewhere. I purchased pallets from her—they were made from recycled industrial waste material, compressed and used for heating. I carried them in small pieces in a bag. It cost three hundred hryvnias. Sometimes, there was milk in the store.

They gave me the humanitarian aid "for the eighty-year-olds," which is slightly different from the ones they gave out to others. But it was still the same old rice, pasta, and canned goods. Obviously, it was always the same. I bought myself a small potbellied stove for three and a half thousand hryvnias. We mostly cooked food in the yard. There was no water, no electricity.

During World War II, my mother exchanged *rushnyky* made by my grandmother for food. I dedicated my main *rushnyk* to my grandmother, which has our family tree embroidered on it. It is now in Bakhmut. This grandmother, who lived near Rubizhne, in the Luhansk region, lost a child during the Holodomor.

I was named after her late daughter. In the family, they called me Shura, a shortened version of Oleksandra. Grandma remembered how she herself had been taken to the cemetery in a cart that was used for transporting corpses. Somehow, she showed signs of life there. They took her off that cart and brought her to the hospital, where they saved her. They fed her at the hospital for a while and then released her to go home. Later, when spring heralded the growth of herbs, her stomach became clogged with the grass she had eaten to survive. Shura—that was her younger one, she was thirteen. And my mother, who was older—sixteen or seventeen—somehow survived.

My mother left me with my grandmother during the war while she traveled from Donbas to central Ukraine by herself. Then, she would bring back corn and a handful of wheat just to somehow survive, because it was a terrible famine.

I remember the taste of these flatbreads made from acorns. I ate those acorns—my goodness, they tasted so repulsive. We also ate potato peelings.

There were many partisans hiding out in the forest nearby. They would come because our house was located at the edge of the forest. I even remember something cooking on the stove for them. In 1943, my mother told my grandmother, “Let’s go, let’s leave everything in the hamlet.” But Grandma said, “I won’t leave this house for anything.”

You see, history repeats itself!

I also had a younger brother. My mother took the two of us and left. At the train station, a platform stretched out, with red bricks seamlessly lining up along the platform’s edges. On it stood a cannon. There was dust from the red bricks, and my mother was holding us. It seemed to me that the wind would blow us away. The train would speed by with such velocity that it became frightening, and then it would stop and remain still for a long time.

We were heading to the Kirovohrad region, where my mother had traded this grain before. Then, they took us on a cart. There were gaps between the boards, and I looked down at the ground and I saw corn grains scattered on the road! Back at the hamlet, we had to eat soup that contained a grain here and a grain there, a crumb here and a crumb there, while the rest was water. And on the road, I see spilled grains of corn! Oh, how I started shouting at the man who was giving us a ride. I tried to address him, but he didn’t understand anything. We spoke like *katsaps*—in Russian—and here they spoke Ukrainian. I tried to explain that we needed to pick up this corn! And he laughed.

In memory of my grandmother, I embroidered a sampler—a decorative piece of cloth. Previously, there were no magazines with such examples, so all grandmothers made such patterns on scraps, on various rags, for their grandchildren. My granddaughter, who lives in America, doesn’t sew, but she never lets go of a book. She is very intelligent. Well, maybe someday she will start sewing too.

I felt comfortable living in Bakhmut. I had acquaintances—good, educated people. They behaved decently and lived a dignified life.

When we were sitting in the basements, those who remained were talking nonsense. They didn’t want to figure out or understand what was happening there. And there was a very small fraction of those who understood that Ukraine must be an independent country and it was necessary to live normally. I saw that there was no point in entering into a debate anymore. They were so illiterate, so indifferent to everything . . .

My neighbor, like me, comes from a Cossack family. We exchanged gifts: I gave her a beautiful wool blanket, and she gave me one of her mother’s head scarfs. I have never worn hats in my life, only headscarves. Her son took her away to somewhere in Kharkiv in October. She had hidden that blanket in our bomb shelter, where we’d brought our valuables. Then, when I left, she called and said: “Tell them to give you that blanket back because you need it more.” By that time, our building was already on fire, and everything in the basement was gone.

My neighbor didn’t want to leave. There are many such people. If I hadn’t been wounded, I wouldn’t have left either. If you had been at my home, you would understand why. It was not just a place where I lived, cooked, washed, or ironed. My home embodied the ideals by which I raised my children. There were *rushnyky*, photographs, poems, embroidered stories.

I had patterns made for embroidery on my computer, the ones I wanted. One of them was a self-portrait of Taras Shevchenko from when he was still young, before his exile. The poet is sitting, writing poems, and holding a candle over himself—he knows his fate in advance.

As for Ukraine, I am confident that everything will be fine. The plans of scoundrels like Putin will never be realized. Never. No matter what happens. Evil never prevails. Even the greatest military leaders faced failure, and their achievements were meaningless.

I’m a bit superstitious. I didn’t take down that *rushnyk* dedicated to my grandmother. It is so valuable and dear to me . . . I used all available methods to tie the fate of my family to it. The *rushnyk* is large—it’s three meters

long—and covered with embroidery. Not just some little drawings but symbols. A splinter from the window pierced it, but it remained in place. And beneath it were all my family members: my grandmother, grandfather, father, mother, mother-in-law, and my first husband—their portraits were below this *rushnyk*. Portraits of those who are no longer with us should always be kept under a *rushnyk*.

Everything is still there. Those looters will surely mock my home as soon as they enter it!

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### About the authors

*Myroslav Laiuk* was born in the Carpathian Mountains in 1990 and currently resides in Kyiv. He is the author of three novels and three books of poetry. He holds a PhD and is a lecturer at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Since 2022, he has been a war journalist and essayist, and his work has been published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Eurozine*, *LitHub*, and a number of other publications.

*Yulia Lyubka* is a Ukrainian-English translator based in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. She made her debut in 2016 with translations of four books by Etan Boritzer, published by The Black Sheep Publishing House. Shortly thereafter, her translation of *Z: The Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* by Therese Anne Fowler was published by 21-Publishers. She then went on to translate *The Stolen Child* and *Making Bombs for Hitler* by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, also for 21-Publishers. In addition, Lyubka has been involved in various projects for PEN Ukraine, the Ukrainian Book Institute, the Ukrainian-Jewish Encounter, and others. Her translations have appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, *Apofenie*, *Krytyka*, and *New Eastern Europe*. In collaboration with Kate Tsurkan, she translated *State of War* (Meridian Czernowitz, 2023), which is composed of thirty-five texts by contemporary Ukrainian writers about the Russian-Ukrainian war in the print version and one hundred texts by Ukrainian authors in the online version.

*Kate Tsurkan* is a writer, editor, and translator. She works as a reporter for *The Kyiv Independent* where she writes mainly about culture. Her work has also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harpers*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and elsewhere. She is the founding editor of *Apofenie Magazine*. Her co-translations (with Dmytro Kyyan) of *77 Days of February: Living and Dying in Ukraine* was published by Scribd in 2023 and Oleh Sentsov's *Diary of a Hunger Striker* by Deep Vellum in 2024.