

## **RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine**

### **Episode 6: "Kharkiv Under Attack – Part 1"**

*(Published: May 24, 2022)*

Transcript

(0:00)

*Laurel: We just got to this place downtown that just got shelled pretty heavily. There's big plumes of black smoke, you can still see the flames coming out of the building. There's at least one, two, three, four fire trucks. It looks like the roof of this four-story building just collapsed... Do you know what happened here?*

*Soldier: It was bomb attack, from the Russian troops. There was no military object, no military facilities, just civilian house.*

**V/O:** This is Resistance: Stories from Ukraine. I'm Laurel Chor, a photojournalist from Hong Kong. In this series, I'm sharing personal stories of resistance that have emerged everywhere in Ukraine. Today, part one of our reporting on life under constant shelling in a city so close to the Russian border – and the stories of those fighting to survive.

(1:24)

#### **PART 1: RESIDENTIAL SHELLING**

*Laurel: From the outside, you can see that a lot of the windows are blown out. From reports, we know that one person was killed, several people injured. But we're just going up the stairs right now to talk to people.*

**V/O:** I'm in Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine. It's the country's second largest city, and it's just 30 miles from Russia. Since the full-scale war began, Russia has ravaged Kharkiv with brutal shelling. There's still no definitive figure on casualties here, but the governor estimates that more than 500 civilians have been killed, and many more injured. Thousands have fled the city. But a lot of people have stayed, too.

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(2:14)

*Laurel: This one, right?*

**V/O:** I've come to the home of a 70-year-old woman named Alexandra. She lives on the top floor of a Soviet-style apartment building, where she has her own room and shares a bathroom and kitchen with other families who live on the same floor. Right in front of the building, there's a *huge* crater, about four feet across and a foot deep. The blast must have been incredibly violent. Her daughter Irina, son-in-law Igor, and teenage grandson, Vlad, are here too. They rushed over as soon as they heard her apartment had been hit.

(2:54)

*Laurel: They're putting out a big tarp in the room where the windows got blown out... They're going to cover the windows.*

**V/O:** Vlad shines his cell phone light as his father nails the tarp into place. Alexandra's room is sparsely decorated, with not much more than a bed, a table, and a wardrobe. I'm not sure the tarp will keep the cold out, and it's dark without any sunlight, but it's better than nothing. Her family seem tired, almost resigned.

(3:31)

*Laurel: Have you guys done this before? It seems like you knew exactly what to do.*

*Vlad: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: Yeah. We have an experience in this way because we've already repair one more window on our second grandmother.*

*Laurel: So both grandmothers have had their windows blown out because of shelling?*

**V/O:** Irina has already swept away all of the glass and debris on the floor and has a sad, faraway look on her face. We can hear the sound of shelling in the distance.

(4:09)

*Laurel: Do you think this might happen again?*

*Irina: [speaking Russian]*

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*Interpreter: Only God knows... but she thinks it could happen because the location is not so safe.*

*V/O: Alexandra sits in the kitchen with a blanket around her. She's tiny and frail. Her grandson is comforting her, gently holding her hands and trying to feed her tea and biscuits. She's clearly in shock.*

(4:46)

*Laurel: Is your mother going to keep staying here?*

*Irina: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: We don't know yet, but we want to think about it and find some place where we can move her.*

*V/O: The whole family lives in the neighborhood, too. Irina says her older son's flat was also destroyed by shelling, so he, his wife, and dog have moved in with her. It's a tight squeeze.*

(5:17)

*Laurel: So practically your whole family have had their homes hit with shelling?*

*Interpreter: Yeah, yes.*

*Irina: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: The children, the grandmothers. Everybody lost their homes.*

*V/O: I leave the family to let them clean up. This building is just one of over 2,000 in the city that have been damaged by shelling.*

(5:52)

*Laurel: This is happening every day in Kharkiv, every day. All day, And it's random. It's civilian targets. It's residential buildings. There goes another explosion. There's really no predicting. And it seems like in Kharkiv people have decided to just go on with their lives and take their chances.*

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## PART 2: SERGEI

V/O: It's Sunday morning here in Kharkiv and I'm heading to a local church. It's the first time they're holding mass in person since the war broke out. They're gathering in a small theatre inside a huge, Soviet-era arts center in the middle of the city.

(6:38)

**Pastor:** *[speaking Russian]*

V/O: I've come to see Sergei, a youth pastor here. He tells me that since the war started about a month and a half ago, the church has been trying to give the community some semblance of normalcy.

(7:11)

**Sergei:** *People are getting used to war already and we're just trying to make life more comfortable a little bit - like it don't look like a war, you know, because people are terrified, and we tried to create a hope for them, you know.*

**Laurel:** *At what point did you realize that you'd have to get used to war?*

**Sergei:** *The first day, you don't understand anything and any sound of the shooting you running down to the basement.*

V/O: Now, Sergei tells me, he's able to tell the difference between artillery that's going in, and going out, just by the sound. Sergei's daughter was born a month before the Russian invasion began.

(7:54)

**Sergei:** *She was born 27 of January, the war started 24th of February, so she was less than a month.*

**Laurel:** *That must have been terrifying for you.*

**Sergei:** *It was crazy time when my wife was with child here. It was scary about them and it was impossible, like even to have a normal sleep for a child. She just fall asleep, it's bombed and we were running to the basement.*

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V/O: His wife and baby are safely in Germany now, so Sergei can focus on his work helping others here. He shows me around the giant building they've taken over since the war started– it's a maze. They've set up a canteen, where women are busy making platters of sandwiches and cookies. It's remarkably homey.

(8:37)

*Laurel: This eating area is so nice. You've got tablecloths, every table has its own bowl of sugar. It's all so well organized.*

V/O: The building's hallways are full of dried goods, vegetables, and medical supplies that will be sent to people all over the city and surrounding regions.

(8:55)

*Laurel: Why are these doors so big?*

*Sergei: It's the Soviet buildings had, like, basement basements for bombing, real shelters, yes. So that's why the doors are so huge.*

*Laurel: It's a real, proper bomb shelter.*

V/O: We walk into the first of several basement shelters. This first one is the backstage of a huge theater.

(9:18)

*Laurel: Immediately more cramped, really thick walls. So this used to be where they kept all the costumes and now people have hung up curtains. There's like sleeping bags on the ground underneath racks of poofy dresses.*

V/O: People have tried to give themselves a rare bit of privacy, hanging spare fabric and costumes between beds.

(9:39)

*Laurel: Yeah, I like that people put up curtains, I guess because there were theaters here, so there's lots of like drapes and curtains they can use.*

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V/O: Like everywhere I've been in Ukraine, the church welcomes non-human friends, too. I walk into a dance-studio-turned-shelter and find something unexpected

(9:57)

*Laurel: Chinchillas! Oh my gosh, it's one chinchilla, two chinchillas.*

V/O: A man had brought his pet chinchillas. They're these round, furry things that look like a cross between a guinea pig and a rabbit.

(10:14)

*Laurel: This is a big cage... How did you get – it's like 3 feet high.*

*Man: With help of a bicycle.*

*Laurel: Wait, you put the cage on a bicycle?*

*Man: Yes.*

*Laurel: I've never held a chinchilla before. Oh, it's crawling into my bullet proof vest.*

*Don't do that!*

V/O: These pets provide much-needed levity and comfort when you're sleeping underground and there's shelling every day.

(10:41)

*Sergei: Yesterday, they bombed next to our building and the windows in our building crashed. We don't know where the bomb will come down.*

V/O: I ask him why people choose to stay in Kharkiv, despite the danger.

(10:58)

*Sergei: A lot of old people are staying in Kharkiv because, as they say: "It's like my apartment. I bought it, it's my place. I can't leave it. If I will die, I will die, but I will stay in my apartment."*

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V/O: Other people feel like they have nowhere to go, since they don't have relatives in western Ukraine or elsewhere in Europe. Some can't afford the costs of fleeing, including food, shelter and transport – especially with no income right now.

(11:30)

*Laurel: Why did you stay?*

*Sergei: My father, my brother and me, we decided to stay here to help people. We have a team of boys, men that decided to stay here, and every day we receiving new phone calls, people asking for food. So we can't leave. You know, we feel that we must be here.*

## PART 3: CALL CENTER

V/O: Across town, I'm heading to another volunteer-run aid center, this time based out of a primary school. We let ourselves through the front gates and park next to the playground. We can't disclose the location because the volunteers fear it will be targeted by the Russians. Just yesterday, a different center was hit by shelling.

(12:17)

*Laurel: All of the halls are just filled with flour, baby food, medical supplies, water, vegetables. Potatoes, onions, diapers...*

V/O: Right as you enter the building, there's a command center of sorts – a line of desks with a couple of computers manned by volunteers. They've set up a hotline and are taking calls from people who need help. Galina, a blonde woman in her late 40s, is in charge. Before the war, she helped to run a construction company. She set up this center just a few weeks ago and is now overseeing a team of more than 20 volunteers.

(12:57)

*Laurel: This is the mastermind, this lady.*

*Galina: [speaking Russian]*

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*Interpreter:* Yeah this is my main idea, and I collect all these people, try to find their strong sides. Because some people can speak on the phone, some people can make deliveries, some people do a lot of different things.

*Laurel:* Yeah, yeah, you're the CEO.

*Galina:* [speaking Russian]

*Interpreter:* Yeah, the brain.

*Laurel:* So how many calls a day do you get?

*Galina:* [speaking Russian]

*Interpreter:* One person receives more than 100 calls. We have five people who are receiving calls, so it's more than 500.

*Laurel:* Wow. So if we sit here and wait, someone will call.

*Interpreter:* Yeah, it's like a call center. Already she has a call, right now.

*V/O:* As calls come in, men march in and out of the room carrying boxes of goods. Supply routes into the city are compromised and most shops are shut, along with public transportation. So the hotline is essential for people to survive. Vanya, a volunteer, explains how the system works. He's 34, and before the war, he was the manager of a second-hand clothing store. When someone calls, he tells me, they record their details onto a big spreadsheet.

(14:32)

*Laurel:* What's the color coding in the spreadsheet?

*Vanya:* [speaking Russian]

*Interpreter:* Red color, we mark the people who left Kharkiv.

*Vanya:* [speaking Russian]

*Interpreter:* This color, it's the...

*Laurel:* Purple?

*Interpreter:* It's the people who are waiting for deliveries and the people who right now they're collecting the deliveries.

*Laurel:* So I see a lot of red. A lot of people have left.

*V/O:* In addition to delivering food and medical supplies, the center provides another vital service – helping people escape. Many of those who remain in Kharkiv are the

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most vulnerable, including the elderly and disabled. One evacuation request they received was for a woman named Larisa. She has advanced multiple sclerosis and is paralyzed from the waist down. The volunteers agree to let us follow along. When we come back the next morning, they've just finished loading a rudimentary stretcher onto a beat-up white van.

(15:40)

*Laurel: We're following the van from the volunteer center to where they're going, the neighborhood of Saltivka, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Kharkiv in terms of the amount of shelling it gets. From what we've heard, it's relentless. We just heard a few really loud booms and no one really reacted, which tells us a lot about what the city has gone through.*

**V/O:** The volunteers are hoping to get Larisa onto a train to Lviv, in the far west of Ukraine, by the end of the morning, then onwards to Poland. It'll be a long, exhausting journey, and will probably take about 24 hours. But first, the volunteers need to get Larisa out of her apartment. It's on the fifth floor of an old building with no elevator. But they have the stretcher, and 6 strong men.

**V/O:** We'll be right back.

(16:52)

## **PART 4: THE EVACUATION BEGINS**

*Laurel: It looks like we've arrived. Starting to see signs of shelling, there's apartments that are completely blackened, windows blown out. We're in a big residential complex. A lot of identical looking buildings.*

(17:13)

**V/O:** Larisa hasn't left her apartment in 13 years. In the past, she relied on social workers and friends to bring her what she needed, but most people have fled, and her

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neighborhood is too dangerous for most to come to now. So that's why this crew of volunteers, led by Galina's husband Vitaliy, is here to get her out.

*Volunteer: Hello? ...*

*Volunteer 2: [speaking Russian]*

*Laurel: Looks like we're going up. They're bringing out the stretcher. More shelling. It's just constant. There's two young kids bringing the stretcher up. They can't be older than 20 these kids... Going up stairs... and here we are.*

(18:30)

**V/O:** We all cram into her small apartment. Her whole life is in this living room. Kirill, who's just 17, and his dad Sergiy, are helping to pack everything up into a few boxes and bags. Next to the bed, books and magazines are piled on a table, along with the remote control for the TV.

*Laurel: Hello*

*Larisa: Hello*

*Laurel: Hello*

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

(18:59)

**V/O:** Larisa is in good spirits. She jokes that the only English word she learnt in school was hello. Vitaliy and Sergiy help Larisa get dressed for the journey, and then slide a blanket underneath her. They hold the corners of the blanket and move her onto the stretcher.

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

(19:21)

**V/O:** From the bed and then the stretcher, Larisa is rattling off orders to the men: what she needs to bring, like her cane, where to hide her keys, how to turn off the water and gas... She doesn't know when – or if – she'll ever be back.

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*Laurel: Are they bringing her cat? Yep, they're bringing the cat too. Yeah. That's what the cat food was for. They're going to catch that cat now.*

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

(19:50)

**V/O:** Larisa tells me it's been terrifying, living under constant shelling. The night the full-scale invasion began, even the cat – whose name is Katya and who usually refuses to sleep in her bed – crawled in next to her. Sergei scoops up the cat. It's grey, fluffy and grumpy. He plops it into a cardboard box and tapes it up. Don't worry, they've poked holes.

*Laurel: You can tell they've done this before. You have to keep in mind these aren't medical workers. These are just regular people who have now done almost 40 evacuations. More shelling. The shelling is getting louder and more frequent. All the time. Boom. Boom.*

(20:42)

**V/O:** No one wants to stay in Saltivka longer than they have to. The men bend down and lift up the stretcher. That's it for today. Next, we follow the crew of volunteers as they rush to get Larisa down the stairs and across town to the train station. Stay with us.

**V/O:** Resistance: Stories from Ukraine is a production of Project Brazen in partnership with PRX. It's hosted by me, Laurel Chor. I've been reporting from the field with Arman Dzidzovic and Andrii Kalashnikov. Bradley Hope, Tom Wright and Nicholas Brennan are executive producers. Megan Dean, Clair Urbahn, Rowan Slaney, and Soobin Kim produced this episode, with associate producing from Giulia Franchi, Adam Drake, and Francesca Gilardi Quadrio Curzio. Susie Armitage is our Story Editor. Cover Design by Ryan Ho. For PRX, Jason Saldanha and Julie Shapiro. Special thanks to Eugene Khimichuk, Alex Guzenko, Anna-Maria Valchuk, Jody Bragger, Michelle Sanders, Hanna Fedorishyna, Neha Wadekar, Siddhartha Mahanta, and Lucy Woods.

**V/O:** For more of our reporting, and a transcript of this episode, visit [projectbrazen.com/resistance](https://projectbrazen.com/resistance)

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(22:29)

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