

RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine

Episode 1: "I Am a Soldier Now"

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Transcript

(0:00)

Artem: *My name is Artem Otio. I am a soldier now. I am 32. Before the war I was a journalist.*

(0:20)

V/O: Before the war, Artem's job was to fact-check Russian propaganda and to debunk fake news for a local non profit. Now he's manning a military checkpoint in Kyiv. Checkpoints are everywhere in Ukraine, and they've all popped up almost overnight. They always have a makeshift feel to them. This one has concrete blocks and sandbags to force cars to slow down, and freshly dug trenches in the dirt next to the road. The soldiers are all in camo, but everyone's gear is different and kind of improvised. On the morning of February 24th, the day Russia launched its full-scale invasion, Artem was filing a report at the office. By that evening, he had joined Ukraine's armed forces.

(1:10)

V/O: This is Resistance: Stories from Ukraine. I'm Laurel Chor, a photojournalist from Hong Kong. I've reported on social issues all over the world and I've always wished that people could hear the voices of those I photograph. In this series, I'll be sharing personal stories of resistance that have emerged everywhere in Ukraine.

(1:35)

PART 1: ARTEM

Laurel: *At what point did you decide, like, what did you have to quit? Did you have to send an email? Did you call someone? How did this work?*

Artem: *I call only for my friends. And I did a call to my mother...*

(1:50)

V/O: Artem told his mom that he'd volunteer for five days at first, but he's been here for much longer.

Artem: *Who will do it if not all guys, all my friends? It's our city, our our land, our country.*

Laurel: *What about your job?*

Artem: *I miss my job. And sometimes I hated my job. Now I miss my job. But I think that they are waiting, my colleagues continue working and writing different fact checking for the Russian propaganda.*

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(2:20)

V/O: As far as I could tell, he had already been part of the war effort. For eight years, he had been fighting Russia on the internet. So I asked, why become a soldier?

Artem: *Sometimes you have another choice. You should you must take a gun. Yes for save your land. Because if everybody will working on the internet or with his laptops, Ukraine will not win.*

(2:50)

V/O: His daily routine went from going to the office and working at a computer, to sleeping in barracks. He said he misses the mundane things. The comfort of his bed, a steamy shower at night. But most of all he misses going out for drinks with his friends.

Artem: *So we are waiting for a win here. And after that, we'll go to the bar. (laughs)*

(3:15)

V/O: People like Artem are everywhere in Ukraine. Whatever they may have been before – journalists, students, lawyers, drag queens – they've dropped everything to join the armed forces. We drove out to the suburbs of Kyiv to meet some of them.

(3:30)

PART 2: VLADIMIR

V/O: Our first stop was a farm outside Borodyanka, a commuter town northwest of Kyiv heavily damaged by shelling. Just a 10 minute drive from the utter destruction of the town, we found peace and quiet in the countryside. There, we met a war veteran named Vladimir.

Laurel: *We're entering his farm...*

(3:50)

V/O: In peacetime, Vladimir teaches PE. In wartime, he's a soldier. When Pro-Russian separatists seized the eastern region of Donbas in 2014, he and his cousin joined a volunteer brigade made up of ultra-nationalists called the Azov Battalion. It's a controversial group that's promoted far-right ideology and has been accused of war crimes, but in Ukraine, they're also known as fierce fighters and defenders of the country. About a year after joining the fight, Vladimir came back with shrapnel in his leg. His cousin didn't make it. Like many combat veterans, Vladimir carries the psychological trauma of war. He found that spending time in nature, and riding horses, helped him to heal. And he wanted to help others do the same. So he bought some land and built a

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farm with his own two hands, where children, veterans, and their families could recover and find peace. A sanctuary. He called it Sunny Valley. But in 2022, the war came to his farm...

(4:50)

Laurel: ...two big dogs greeting us... oh one's hurt...

V/O: On the first day of the invasion, Vladimir once again donned his military uniform. This time, he was defending his home city. While he was fighting at the frontlines, the Russians came to his farm, and destroyed it. All that's left of his two-story barn is a skeletal frame. There are shell casings everywhere on the ground, scorched wood, scraps of metal, and animal carcasses...

Laurel: two Belgian shepherds and one is bleeding... Oh, poor thing, and limping...

(5:25)

V/O: When we visited him, in early April, Borodyanka had just been liberated. The town of just 15,000 people lay in ruins. Several apartment buildings had been shelled so badly they had collapsed altogether.

Laurel: Did the Russian soldiers shoot your dog?

Interpreter: Yeah, yes, yes.

Laurel: Were they trying to shoot it?

Vladimir: Da, da...

Interpreter:...They shoot a lot of horses, they shoot a lot of animals which were here, they do all this because he was in soldiers of Azov, and the main target was to destroy everything they see in this piece of land because they know that he lives here.

(6:05)

V/O: When Vladimir's neighbors told him what happened, he didn't believe it at first. He was at the hospital at the time, getting treated for his injuries

Vladimir: [speaking Ukrainian]

Interpreter: But then when people start to said like it's real and he said and he understood he tried to believe that it's not the Russians did it and this is the maybe the ours Ukrainian artillery or hit the enemy's tank based in this location. But he's realized you understood that this is a war.

(6:45)

V/O: Vladimir doesn't know what happened to all of his horses. Some had escaped in the midst of the chaos. Others were later found dead. The charred remains of a donkey are still on the ground, left to decay. Vladimir is still looking for the rest of his horses. His

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wife, who's fled Ukraine, loves horses. One they did find alive is Tarzan, a 25-year-old horse from Mariupol. When we meet him, Tarzan is badly injured and trembling from the pain. An equine vet named Zhenya is tending to his wounds in a dark, empty stable.

(7:15)

Zhenya: Three injuries from... two from bullets, and one I'm not sure what.

Laurel: Have you operated on a lot of animals that have been hurt in the war?

Zhenya: Yes. Unfortunately, yes. A lot of us work with small animals like dogs and cats. But we have a lot of injured horses so I have to operate every day.

(7:45)

V/O: That's the sound of Zhenya using her scalpel to shave off a patch of Tarzan's coat around his wound. Vladimir is watching from the side, a pained look on his face.

Zhenya: I hope the scapula is not injured was not injured. So, but we will see we have to open and see...

(8:00)

V/O: If his scapula was hit, Tarzan would have to be put down. A shattered shoulder bone can't support a 400-kilo horse. Gunshot wounds are not exactly something Zhenya is used to treating.

Zhenya: Usually I do the some orthopaedic examination or something with the teeth or something with vaccinations, but our life was changed.

(8:25)

V/O: But she's used to this kind of work now. Since the war broke out, veterinarians like her have been busy treating animals with bullet or shrapnel wounds, or who have been traumatized by the fighting.

Zhenya: When the some stable burns, the horses usually run away and the muzzle was under the...

Laurel: on their face... yeah... So the smoke stayed in their eyes? Or they ran in...

Zhenya: No not the smoke, fire.

Laurel: Fire. Oh I see. So their eyes get burnt. That must be hard for you to see as a vet.

Zhenya: It's... I have no words to say how...

(9:05)

V/O: The vet sedates Tarzan and injects an anesthetic normally used on soldiers that supposedly takes the pain away in ten seconds. She then slices open the wound and pokes her finger inside. She's looking for shrapnel lodged inside Tarzan's shoulder.

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Laurel: Did you find something?

Zhenya: No, it's just really deep.

Laurel: Oh gosh, like your whole fingers in there.

Zhenya: It's more than one finger.

Laurel: Oh geez. So it's like the hole was quite small but actually the wound is really deep... poor thing... you can't even reach the end?

Zhenya: I need to think about this

(9:50)

Laurel: How many horses do you have to operate on today?

Zhenya: Twelve, I think.

Laurel: Twelve.

V/O: And to her, they're not just horses.

Zhenya: You know, they like children. It's a 400 kilo child, so...

Laurel: (laughs)

(10:05)

V/O: I've never been to a country that loves animals as much as Ukraine. I've met people who fled with their pet rats, chinchillas, even snails. When soldiers deliver aid to liberated towns, they make sure to bring cat and dog food. So there is a certain cruelty to what the Russian soldiers did to Vladimir, the way they slaughtered his animals in cold blood.

(10:35)

V/O: Vladimir grabs his lighter and heats up a pair of tweezers. The vet uses them to cauterize the horse's artery. Brutal to watch, but simple and effective.

Zhenya: Some bleeding from artery so need to, have to remove

Laurel: do you do that in normal times?

Zhenya: Usually no.

Laurel: so this is a wartime thing.

Zhenya: Yes.

(10:55)

V/O: Vladimir was injured again while fighting – in the same spot on his leg. But – he says he got incredibly lucky. Somehow, the new injury has helped him to regain mobility he lost due to his old injury. Now, for the first time in years, he can wiggle his toe again.

Laurel: How would you describe war to people who don't know what it's like?

Vladimir: [speaking Ukrainian]

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Interpreter: When the war starts we was unprepared for all this hard thing, what we see right now, because this is the totally different, but still, right now, we used to it and we can fight with our new power what we get. But how would describe the war? What's going on right now? It's totally massacre.

(11:45)

PART 3: OLEKSANDR

V/O: Back at the checkpoint outside of Kyiv, We meet Oleksandr. He's a corporate lawyer. He's usually in a suit, representing companies, but now he's wearing combat boots and a balaclava, with an AK-47 in his hands. The courts aren't open anyway.

Laurel: I just can't imagine going from being a lawyer to a soldier.

Oleksandr: I just do what I am obliged. According to our Constitution, we are obliged to protect our country.

(12:15)

V/O: Article 17 of the Ukrainian Constitution says that protecting "the sovereignty and territorial indivisibility of Ukraine... are a matter of concern for all the Ukrainian people." As a lawyer, Oleksandr is very aware of his constitutional responsibilities. He also loves to sing.

Oleksandr: It's like medicine to protect your soul from negative emotions.

Laurel: Can you sing something for us? Is there a patriotic song or any song? What's your favorite song?

Oleksandr: My Funny Valentine.

(12:50)

V/O: My Funny Valentine.

Oleksandr: My funny Valentine... Sweet comic valentine... You make me smile with my heart...

(13:10)

V/O: Oleksandr lives on a base now. But he made sure to bring his guitar with him, and stills sings for an hour a day.

(13:25)

PART 4: ARTUR

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V/O: Ukraine is one of the world's top exporters of honey, with beekeeping somewhat of a national pastime. One of these beekeepers is Artur, who we meet near Kyiv. He's an ecologist and forest ranger, with a PhD in biological sciences. Beekeeping is a hobby he got into 8 years ago. He started off with just five bee hives, and kept adding more and more. Now he has 120 hives – with 12 million bees buzzing inside them. He used to sell his honey as a side hustle. Now, he donates it to the military.

(13:55)

V/O: Artur shows us around the property, where he also grows organic produce. He has less time to spend on his farm though, now that he's volunteered to join-the military administration.

Laurel: *Why did you decide when the war started to join the military?*

Artur: *[speaks Ukrainian]*

(14:15)

V/O: He says that-when Russian rocket fire started landing in Kyiv, most of his friends left for western Ukraine. But Artur wanted to stay and help. He ended up being stationed in Bucha, a small town outside of Kyiv of just 37,000 people. It had been occupied by Russian forces for weeks.

Laurel: *What were you doing in Bucha?*

Artur: *[speaks Ukrainian]*

V/O: He tells me he's been building wooden coffins and transporting them to where they're needed.

Laurel: *How many coffins did you have to bring?*

Artur: *[speaks Ukrainian]*

(14:45)

V/O: 450 coffins. He said it wasn't hard for him physically, but that emotionally, it was difficult. Now, the name Bucha has become synonymous with mass graves and war crimes. It seems impossible to fully comprehend the horrors that were inflicted there – the scale, the lack of reason, the randomness. You would never guess from meeting Artur, who's so calm and reserved, that he had borne witness to such things. But – there's many things about him that you wouldn't be able to tell from the surface.

(15:15)

V/O: When Artur was a young boy, he liked to act in plays. He always chose to play female roles, and before long, he started to come up with his own characters. He was just making things up as he went along, and it never occurred to him that it was a

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“thing”. But three years ago, he watched the hit reality show RuPaul’s Drag Race. And that’s when he realized – he wasn’t alone.

Laurel: Does your drag queen have a name?

Artur: AuRa... [speaks Ukrainian]

(15:45)

V/O: AuRa... In Latin, aura means breeze, a breath of air. That’s what performing drag is like for Artur, taking a breath of fresh air. He performs at Kyiv’s biggest gay club called Lift. But drag isn’t so common in Ukraine. Our interpreter didn’t know what it was, and didn’t know how to translate it – turns out, they just say “drag queen”, too.

Interpreter: How do you say...

Laurel: Drag. Performing drag? Drag queen.

Interpreter: ...ukrainski Drag Queen

Laurel: Drag queen. Drag queen.

Interpreter: Drag queen....

(16:15)

V/O: Artur, still dressed in military uniform, brought me some of the makeup he uses to transform himself into AuRa. It was all meticulously organized, as one might expect from a beekeeping scientist turned soldier. There were contouring and eyeshadow palettes, brush sets, false eyelashes, and acrylic nails. In some photos, he’s utterly unrecognizable. He learned his skills by watching makeup tutorials on YouTube. But makeup can only go so far – he’s also got hip and butt pads, and a 3-kilo chest prosthetic made of silicone for an eye-catching decolletage. But most important are the wigs. Without the hair, there is no AuRa.

(16:55)

Laurel: How many wigs do you have?

Artur: uhhh....

Laurel: That's a long pause... (laugh) He knew exactly how many bees are in each hive and how exactly how far they go to forage but he doesn't know how many wigs he has

Artur: [speaks Ukrainian]

(17:20)

V/O: He says he has eleven wigs, of all different colors and lengths. His favorite is baby pink. Others are auburn with tight curls, or wavy with brown roots and blonde ends. They’re all luscious and glamorous. He tells me he feels like a different person when wearing one of his wigs, which he styles and cares for with utmost attention. But Artur hasn’t been out of his soldier uniform in a month now, and he says AuRa isn’t here right now.

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Artur: [speaks Ukrainian]

(17:50)

V/O: He tells people that for the moment, AuRa is a refugee. And she's found safety in the Canary Islands. Artur's been there a couple of times and it's his favorite place. But when the war is over, he says, AuRa will be back.

(18:15)

V/O: For those of us lucky enough to have only known peace in our home countries, it's hard to imagine what it would be like to have your life upended by war, or what kind of choices you'd have to make. Whether to stay, or to flee. To leave your life behind, or to pick up guns. Talking to Ukrainians from all walks of life who decided to fight has been humbling, to say the least. They didn't ask for war, but they chose to confront it – head on.

(18:45)

V/O: That's it for today. Next, we'll meet those fighting back... with the weapons we all carry in our pockets...our smart phones.

Anastasiya: *I want to show the world the truth, that terrible thing is happening. That's why I film it and I take a picture and it's not easy for me but I understand that it's important. It's war crimes that we need to capture, because we want justice*

(19:15)

Laurel 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. Rowan Slaney, Soobin Kim, and Clair Urbahn produced this episode, with associate producing from Giulia Franchi and Francesca Gilardi Quadrio Curzio. Our Story Consultant was Susie Armitage. Cover Design by Ryan Ho. For PRX, Jason Saldanha and Julie Shapiro. And a special thanks to Alex Guzenko, Anna-Maria Valchuk, Jody Bragger, Michelle Sanders, Ana Adlerstein, Neha Wadekar, Siddhartha Mahanta, Lucy Woods, and Megan Dean.

VO: For more of our reporting, visit projectbrazen.com/resistance

(20:14)

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