

## RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine

### Episode 7: "Kharkiv Under Attack, Part 2"

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Transcript

(0:00)

**Laurel:** *They're carrying her out. There's like eight men involved in this. Going through a narrow hallway. We're on the fifth floor.*

**Man:** *[speaking Russian]*

**V/O:** I'm with a team of volunteers in Kharkiv, a city in eastern Ukraine that Russia has been brutally attacking since February. The men are evacuating a woman named Larisa from her apartment in Saltivka. It's the worst hit neighborhood in the city. She can't walk, so they're carrying her downstairs on a stretcher. Since we got here, the shelling has been non-stop.

(0:55)

**Laurel:** *They're navigating the turns with her. Going down, going down, navigating one turn [boom] oh that one was loud that actually shook the doors.*

**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 two of our reporting on life under constant shelling in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, just 30 miles from the Russian border.

#### PART 1: Larisa's Apartment

(1:45)

**Man:** *[speaking Russian]*

**Laurel:** *Couple more floors to go... She looks very calm, all things considered. [boom] Oh that's loud... seems to be getting closer.*

**V/O:** In our last episode, we met Larisa, who has multiple sclerosis and is paralyzed from the waist down. She hasn't left her apartment in years due to her disability,

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and it's become far too dangerous for her to be here. There's no elevator, so a middle-aged man named Vitaliy is directing the other men as they move Larisa down five flights of stairs. They work carefully but quickly. That's the sound of my camera as I take photos following behind them.

(2:35)

**Laurel:** *Carrying her out, we made it, one, we have to go past the double doors and the main door.*

**Man:** *[speaking Russian]*

**V/O:** The volunteers carry Larisa into the van and put the stretcher down gently. Vitaliy tucks a pink polka dot blanket around her. Next, Larisa needs to get to the train station, on the other side of the city, where she will begin a long trip west to Lviv and then on to Poland. Her cat, Katya, is coming with her.

**Laurel:** *Where did the cat go? The cats in the... box? There's loud rumbling [boom] Oh, that's close.*

(3:40)

## PART 2: Vladimir & Tatiana & Ivan

**V/O:** Not everyone in Kharkiv can leave. And the risks of staying are clear when we visit the Zaitsev surgical hospital in the north of the city. Ivan, a 26-year-old medical resident here, gives us disposable shoe covers and protective aprons to put on. It looks like he's had a fresh haircut. He smiles sheepishly, and tells us one of the hospital staff gave all the men the same look—shaved close on the sides, with longer hair up top. He guides us to a recovery ward, where we'll meet patients injured in the war.

**Laurel:** *We're walking down the hallway. It's pretty dark. Only a couple of lights are working. It's very Soviet... smells like soup actually...*

**Ivan:** *It's a typical hospital borsch, like a cheaper...*

**Laurel:** *(laughs) hospital borsch...*

**Ivan:** *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, it's a cheaper one. It looks the same.*

(4:35)

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V/O: Borsch is a traditional dish in Ukraine. It's a pinkish-red soup that owes its color to beetroot and is usually served with a dollop of sour cream. But here, workers are carrying metal canisters of borsch that look like they could be full of gas.

*Laurel: Now we're heading up the stairs...*

V/O: Ivan shows us into the recovery room, where large windows let in soft sunlight.

*Laurel: Smells very sanitized, sterile... Hi, hello. Hello, hi...*

(5:20)

V/O: The first patient we meet is Vladimir, a man in his late 50s, with gray stubble and a kind smile. He's a videographer by profession, and since the war started, he began volunteering with the Creative Forces of Ukraine—a Telegram group where artists offer their talents to support the war effort. His arm is in a sling, and there are bandages along his collarbone and rib cage. He says his house was destroyed by two large missiles.

*Vladimir: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: He tells me he was home when the strike hit. He first heard a loud noise—the sound of metal crashing. And he remembers feeling a profound heaviness. And then... nothing. The blast killed his brother-in-law instantly. His mother was badly wounded. The whole family had to be pulled from the rubble. Ten days later, his mother died from her injuries.

(6:35)

*Vladimir: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: She was 88 years old and had survived World War II. The hardest thing for him, Vladimir says, is that his family of five is now three.

*Laurel: How much longer do you have to stay in the hospital?*

*Vladimir: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: We shall see, he says.

*Vladimir: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: Despite everything he's been through, Vladimir tries to stay light-hearted. He jokes that "Shells don't hit the same target twice" ... and his shell already came.

*Laurel: How do you think you'll go on after you get out of the hospital?*

*Vladimir: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: He hopes to regain mobility in his hand and to go back to his job making videos.

*Vladimir: [speaking Russian]*

(7:25)

V/O: Life will be good, he says. Sitting next to Vladimir is Tatiana. She is thin and frail and is clearly in pain. There are bandages all over her upper body.

*Laurel: What were you doing? Before the war?*

*Tatiana: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: She's 37 years old and lives in a village near Kharkiv with her mother and sister. She worked at a local factory before the war.

*Laurel: How did you get injured?*

*Tatiana: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: Tatiana was outside when cluster bombs began to fall. She tried to run away but couldn't take cover in time. Shrapnel pierced her lungs, making her lose a lot of blood. All of her ribs were fractured, and some had to be removed. She has a long road to recovery ahead.

(8:30)

V/O: I ask Ivan, the young surgical resident showing us around, about the day the war broke out.

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: At 4:30 in the morning, he was woken up by the sound of explosions nearby. Bombs were dropping from the sky. Ivan lives in a dorm with other medical students, and people started to panic. They didn't know what to do.

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: Ivan stuffed his backpack with some cash and his IDs.

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: He ran outside and found complete chaos as people began to flee. But Ivan knew exactly where to go—the hospital.

(9:25)

*Laurel: Why did you decide to come to work?*

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: In wartime, surgery and anesthesiology are of utmost importance, he says.

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: When he arrived, most of the hospital staff were already here. They were deciding whether to go ahead with the scheduled operations. In the end, they postponed all surgeries and discharged as many patients as they could. They wanted to be ready for an influx of people injured by the bombs.

*Laurel: What has been the hardest thing for you?*

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

(10:05)

V/O: Ivan says that war robs you of mental clarity. With the constant shelling, it's hard to focus. At any moment, someone could barge into the emergency room with life-threatening injuries and his decision-making in those first few seconds is critical.

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: It's not uncommon for hospital staff to have mental breakdowns these days. But Ivan says every time he feels like quitting, he thinks about the soldiers on the front lines.

*Laurel: Has this experience changed your plans for your career?*

*Ivan: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: It hasn't. but Ivan hopes that soon, he will be able to work in peace.

(11:00)

## PART 3: Larisa Travels Across Kharkiv

V/O: Back in Saltivka, Larisa's evacuation continues. She's lying on her stretcher in the van. Next to her are her belongings, packed into a few pink and white plastic bags, as well as the cardboard box containing her gray cat Katya, who's keeping quiet for now. Larisa is upbeat, and chatty.

*Laurel: Can you explain to us what is happening right now? [boom]*

*Larisa: [speaks Russian]*

V/O: She says she's on her way to join her relatives, who have already fled to Poland. There, she's going to live in a specialized refugee center for injured or disabled people.

*Larisa: [speaks Russian]*

(11:45)

V/O: I'm kind of taken by surprise by what she says next. She wants to set the record straight. She insists she's not leaving because of the war. She says she's

going abroad in order to get better medical care. At first I assume she's saying this as an act of resistance against the invaders, but then, I wonder if she's just in denial.

*Laurel: Why is it important for you to say that you're not fleeing the war?*

*Larisa: [speaks Russian]*

**V/O:** I'm used to war now, she tells me. Though, she admits it's been scary, staying in her apartment all alone. Artillery shells, grad rockets, phosphorus bombs, ballistic missiles, cluster bombs on parachutes... they've all fallen on Kharkiv, she says. I ask her how she was able to get food and supplies for herself throughout all of this.

(12:50)

*Larisa: [speaks Russian]*

**V/O:** Larisa says that unlike a lot of the elderly in her building, she has a smartphone. So she was able to join a Telegram channel to order supplies for herself and her older neighbors too.

*Larisa: [speaks Russian]*

**V/O:** She wants to say she's really grateful for the volunteers—those who brought her food, and those evacuating her. Despite the risks, and the fear, the people of Kharkiv pulled together and helped each other survive.

(13:30)

## PART 4 - Violeta and Bogdan

**V/O:** You feel this sense of community all over Kharkiv... even underground. Thousands have taken shelter in the city's metro system, which was built after the Second World War and was designed to withstand a nuclear attack. At the entrance to the Constitution Square metro station, in the historic part of Kharkiv, we meet a 19-year-old woman named Violeta. Her long blonde hair is in a high ponytail, and she's wearing a christmas sweater, pink pajama pants, and lime-green crocs. She offers to take us down to the platform that's been her home for weeks.

(14:25)

*Laurel: We are walking down into the metro or walking past an underground mall of sorts, a bunch of little shops that have all been shuttered.*

**V/O:** Violeta is a new mom. She went into labor on the 25th of February, the day after the invasion began. When her water broke, she had already been sheltering in the metro station. She was rushed to a hospital, where she gave birth to her son. She named him Bogdan. We take a long, long escalator down towards the platform. The air is damp and cold.

*Laurel: There's a civilian checkpoint of sorts asking for press cards.*

(15:15)

**V/O:** Next to the subway tracks, people have set up mattresses, camping tents, laptop stands and stacks of supplies like water jugs. The train cars are parked at the platform, and they've been turned into bedrooms. From the outside, you can see toiletries and drinking cups lining the windows.

*Laurel: She's just pulled open the door. Going onto the train. There's a dog of course there's a dog. Hello. It's a cocker spaniel. Hi. Very friendly cocker spaniel.*

(15:50)

**V/O:** The seats are now beds, with blankets neatly folded away for the day. People have claimed little corners for themselves, their clothing hanging from the railings and their belongings—like hot plates and slippers—carefully organized on the ground. We follow Violeta to the end of the car, where she's set up an air mattress. Her baby products are on the seats to one side, and on the opposite seats, she keeps a small pantry of non-perishable food. Violeta's pasted an assortment of flyers to the windows for some privacy. It's dark in here, so she turns on a small table lamp.

(16:35)

*Laurel: How long have you been sleeping here?*

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: Two months. She came here on the first day of the war and returned after giving birth to Bogdan.

*Laurel: Is your home not safe?*

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: Absolutely not, she says. She could hear the shelling, and it seemed to be landing in her yard. She's too afraid to go back.

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: But she doesn't want to flee and leave everything behind... including her husband. He's fighting in the war.

*Laurel: Do you know where her husband is right now?*

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

(17:15)

V/O: She doesn't know. She hasn't seen him in two weeks, but they text every day. He's barely been able to spend time with their newborn.

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: But at least she isn't alone. Her parents live in the compartment next to hers. Her mother is a street cleaner, and still goes to work every day. Her father used to run a store, but it was destroyed

*Laurel: It must be hard being a new mom living in a subway carriage...*

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

(17:50)

V/O: She says the hardest thing is bathing her son. She has to heat up water in an electric kettle then mix it with cold water to get the right temperature. And while she does this, someone needs to watch the baby.

*Laurel: How is your baby doing?*

*Violeta: [speaking Russian]*

V/O: She says he's fine. Healthy. They already have a daily routine. They wake up and eat breakfast. Then she puts Bogdan in the pram, and they take a stroll around the platform, passing by her neighbors. They come back to the carriage, and Bogdan naps throughout the day. Violeta scrolls on her phone and checks in on her husband. Later, they take a bath, and go to bed. There is not much to do. But even down here, life goes on.

V/O: We'll be right back.

(18:55)

## PART 5: Larisa at the Train Station

V/O: Back with Larisa, we've just reached Kharkiv train station. It's a huge, palatial-looking building with grand marble columns. Larisa will be traveling with a man named Viktor, who's agreed to take care of her during the cross-country trip, despite being nearly 90 years old himself. It feels like a small win to have gotten this far, but the atmosphere at the station is tense. Just a few days before, 57 people were killed in a Russian strike on the train station in Kramatorsk, about 120 miles southeast of here. The station had been full of civilians trying to flee west.

(19:40)

*Laurel: Are you worried about the journey? It's going to be a long journey ahead...*

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: I worry about our trip because... There are a lot of shelling...when the shelling goes, we stops. The train stops...*

*Laurel: When's the last time you left your house?*

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: 13 years ago.*

*Laurel: Is it weird being out of the house?*

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: Yes it's, uh, strange to leave the house for me, but I see no future here.*

V/O: Larisa has traveled before, though. When she was younger, she lived in several cities across Russia and in Crimea and remembers her time there fondly.

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

*Interpreter: I have a lot of friends in Russia.... A lot of people that don't like the politics of Putin. Not all Russian people are bad. There are some good people.*

*Angry woman: [speaking foreign language]*

*Laurel: The lady just tell her to shut up?*

*Interpreter: Because she tried to support some Russian people and these guys don't want to hear... This is the typical Kharkiv.*

*Laurel: It's a sensitive topic around here.*

(21:05)

*V/O: Historically, Kharkiv has had very close ties to Russia. But war, and the ruthless shelling here, has severed this bond for a lot of people... though clearly not everyone. Thankfully, the bickering stops when Viktor arrives. He's smartly dressed, wearing a white collared shirt and a black trench coat.*

*Laurel: Viktor Modestovic, nice to meet you. Strong handshake!*

*Viktor: [speaking Russian]*

(21:40)

*V/O. Viktor is 87. He's from a neighborhood in northern Kharkiv that's known for its Institute of Physics and Technology. He spent his career as a nuclear physicist there. But now, he's been forced to leave. His home was destroyed in the shelling. But he's still offered to care for Larisa on the journey to Lviv. He was a marathon runner back in the day and is sprightly for a man of his age, still making time for a daily walk. With Viktor here, it's time to make our way to the train.*

*Laurel: Carrying all her stuff, her cat who's just in a cardboard box. And they're carrying her, four men to the stretcher... And this looks like this might be the train. They've put her down in front of the train car as people are leaving—people with dogs. Ukrainians and never leave their pets behind. If I've learned one thing it's that.*

(22:40)

*V/O: The train carriages are painted blue and yellow. A small crowd of people carrying bags and suitcases are waiting to board. They let Larisa go first, with*

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volunteer Vitaliy directing the team as they pull the stretcher up the steep steps and onto the train.

*Laurel: It's kind of hectic... Oh, they're going up. The old man's going up. They're about to lift her up. There's one two three four guys lifting her up... Now they're kind of loading her stuff onto the train. All her plastic bags, her cat. They've got her cane. It's a lot of stuff.*

(23:30)

**V/O:** I hop on to see the small sleeper compartment where Larisa and Viktor will spend the next 24 hours. The train cars are narrow. It's hard enough to carry bags down the aisle, let alone a woman on a stretcher. The young volunteer Kirill, follows behind. He has Larisa's belongings and stows them on the overhead racks.

*Laurel: This must be her compartment. All her stuff is here, her cat is here, the old man who's going to be watching her is here. Are you comfortable? Are you ready?*

*Larisa: [speaking Russian]*

*Laurel: Okay, okay. Yeah they need to go. Okay. Bye!*

(24:30)

**V/O:** I leave them, slightly worried about how a nearly 90-year-old physicist is going to take care of a paraplegic, and her cat, on a cross-country train ride. All I can do is hope for their safe arrival.

(24:55)

**V/O:** We checked in with Larisa and Viktor a month after saying goodbye on the train. Larisa ended up in Germany, where she has found the medical care she needs. Her cat Katya was sent to an animal shelter at first, but a German family eventually took her in. Viktor settled in the same place as Larisa, and they've become close friends, grateful for each other's company. In Kharkiv, the Ukrainian forces are clawing back territory. By mid-May, the military had driven the Russian troops away from the city. There's now a sense of relative peace. Those who fled have started to return. The mayor is encouraging those who were living underground, like Violeta, to move out of the shelters so the trains can run again. The war isn't over, but for now at least, the people of Kharkiv can begin to rebuild.

That's it for today. Next, we'll finish this season of reporting with a conversation with Tom Wright, the co-founder of Project Brazen.

(26:25)

## CREDITS

**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, Soobin Kim, and Clair Urbahn produced this episode. Sound design by Alex Portfelix. 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 Alex Guzenko, Anna-Maria Valchuk, Jody Bragger, Michelle Sanders, Stanislav Strillets, Wolfgang Schwan, Hanna Fedorishyna, Eugene Khimichuk, Rowan Slaney, Neha Wadekar, Siddhartha Mahanta, and Lucy Woods.

We would also like to thank the Volunteer 68 group for letting us follow their evacuation of Larisa. You can find them on Instagram at [VOLONTER 68](#).

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

(27:57)

*-END OF EPISODE-*