

## **RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine**

### **Episode 8: "After Action with Tom Wright"**

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Transcript

(0:00)

**Tom:** I'm Tom Wright, host of the Fat Leonard podcast and co-founder of Project Brazen. Today, we want to bring you something a bit different. I'm joined by Laurel Chor, a host of RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine, a new podcast charting how ordinary Ukrainians have reacted to Russia's invasion. Over the past several weeks we followed Laurel as she traveled through Ukraine, talking to hackers, militia members, hip hop artists and more. Project Brazen also put out a short documentary on YouTube. Jorie Graham, one of America's most celebrated poets, said watching the documentary was the first time she completely identified as a human being with what is happening in Ukraine. So welcome, Laurel.

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**Laurel:** Thanks for having me.

**Tom:** So that kind of comment from such a prestigious person, you know, saying that this podcast really brought home the human element of the war to people. Is that what inspired you to go to Ukraine?

(1:00)

**Laurel:** I think so. I think as a journalist and as a storyteller, that's sort of what I do is trying to make these big abstract issues or news events seem like something that is happening to real people that we can relate to

**Tom:** People often when they watch reporting in a warzone, they expect victims. And one of the things that really came out of this podcast for me was that they aren't really victims. They are victims. But they're also they're showing great resilience. It's

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resistance. That's why we called it that. So tell us a bit about how that surprised you, the kind of people you met and how they're dealing with war.

(1:40)

**Laurel:** Yeah. I mean, I think a lot of people when I came back, they asked me how it was. And of course, it's hard to encapsulate the whole experience in a few sentences. But, you know, overall, despite all the terrible things that we saw and all the terrible things that the people we met went through, it was still a positive experience for me because the people we met were just so incredible. I mean, it's probably the first time I've been to in an environment where everyone was working together towards the same thing that they felt like was bigger than themselves. There's a real sense of solidarity, a real sense of selflessness, of dedicating yourself to a cause that they felt like was bigger than themselves, you know, towards these values and towards the greater community. So it was really amazing to meet all these Ukrainians, you know, whether it was a grandmother who had survived Russian occupation by working with her neighbors and they had made holes in their fences so that they could travel between houses without going in the street where, you know, Russian soldiers were roaming or, you know, if it was teenage hackers who were resisting in their own questionable ways, that, you know, I don't know if it was really effective, to for example, threaten Russians with sending their private pictures to their whole contact list. But it was their form of resistance. So, I mean, it was just so inspiring and really just I felt so much awe being there.

(3:10)

**Tom:** There obviously is huge sorrow and personal trauma. We don't want to diminish that. Right. Like, you know, there are people living in basements. As you know, we've seen whole buildings with children in them get flattened and thousands of deaths. And so I want to preface what I'm about to say with that. But, you know, people after the blitz in London, in the Second World War, you know, people missed the camaraderie when the Second World War was over. It seems like what you what you witnessed there was something palpable, almost, of a community that's really coming together to create a name which, you know, in modern world doesn't really happen very often.

(3:45)

**Laurel:** Exactly. I mean, it made me think if this is what people are capable of, if this is what humanity is able to do when it really comes together for something they really believe in, in the face of this threat, then who knows what we're capable of? Everyone was so warm, so welcoming, so open. There is a sense that if you're in their country, then they were happy for you to be there. And they were glad that you were sort of there to see what it was like to live in Ukraine and this war. And people really came together. You know, things happened so quickly. Connections happened so quickly. Everyone's willing to help. So, yeah, it really was remarkable. And I think the last time I had really witnessed that myself was during the Hong Kong protests, when you saw this mass of people working together for the same thing.

(4:35)

**Tom:** So you see some comparisons in that community spirit with the Hong Kong protests against some of the rules that China has put in place there.

**Laurel:** I do actually, you know, for myself, being from Hong Kong, I had an interest in Ukraine because during the 2019, 2020 protests in Hong Kong, a lot of the protesters drew inspiration from the Maidan revolution in Ukraine. The documentary "Winter on Fire" was very influential. People in Hong Kong were actively trying to learn from the tactics of the Ukrainian protesters in the Ukrainian revolution. So there had always been a sort of kinship between the Hong Kong protesters and the Ukrainians, whether or not the Ukrainians were aware of it. And being in Ukraine, I think there was some recognition from Ukrainians that I was from Hong Kong, there was some sort of understanding that I came from somewhere that had gone through a struggle against authoritarianism as well. So for sure, I saw a lot of parallels, a lot of the same digital tactics, a lot of the same grassroots tactics, the way they used humor and the Internet also reminded me of each other. So for me, it was it was a really interesting experience in that sense.

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*Tom:* And I guess one difference between the two experiences is Ukraine have been successful in pushing Russians back, whereas obviously your home place, Hong Kong has had to settle for a failure.

*Laurel:* Yeah, there's definitely one big difference, although, you know, in Ukraine remains to be seen. And of course, it's an entirely different situation in that Ukraine is facing a physical invasion of their own sovereign nation by another country. And it's extremely violent and it's war. And whereas in Hong Kong, the decline of the institutions in Hong Kong is much more abstract and in many ways not visible. So that's also a big difference.

(6:25)

*Tom:* So people have got to know you through this podcast. So let's talk a bit more about you. I know, I know as a great journalist you don't like to do that, but people will probably be interested to find out your background. You're an international rugby player for Hong Kong. You're a photojournalist, a Nat-Geo explorer. You are currently studying for a masters in biodiversity, at the University of Oxford, and you're a freelance journalist and an award winning journalist. What made you want to go to Ukraine and how did this project come about?

(6:55)

*Laurel:* I think being in the UK, it was something that was happening relatively close and it felt like something historic. And, I was talking to some friends and colleagues, and we realized we all sort of felt like this was something really important happening that wasn't that far away. And we had a set of skills and experiences that would allow us to hopefully contribute as journalists, as storytellers there. I was talking to my colleague Arman Dzidzovic, I'd worked with him before when we were both at VICE and he's Bosnian himself, he as a six year old, he was a refugee from Bosnia and was forced to hop around countries before he eventually settled in in the US. So I think for him it also felt relatively personal and yeah, we went there and while we were there, Bradley reached out, saw that we were in Ukraine and asked if we'd be willing to just record some things to maybe make a podcast episode. And then it turns out there was

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just such incredible material to be gathered in Ukraine that this whole project came out of it.

(8:05)

**Tom:** And had you been to Ukraine, for starters?

**Laurel:** I hadn't. It was my first time.

**Tom:** So how do you go about a foreign journalist? Don't speak the language, has never been there. How does one go about creating a podcast like this, getting the information that you need and finding out what's going on?

(8:20)

**Laurel:** We were definitely very conscious of the fact that we didn't have a background in this area. We didn't know the language. So we sort of went in very gingerly, if you will. We, you know, tried to reach out to as many people as possible while being aware that, of course, they're in the middle of a war. And we didn't want to be a burden. But, you know, all it took was a few connections, friends of friends. And they were so incredibly helpful and welcoming and they were really eager to have people in Ukraine telling their story. But one connection led to the next. And we were super lucky to meet Andryi Kalashnikov, who ended up as our local producer. He's a mountain guide. Normally he lives in the Carpathian Mountains with his wife, and they run wellness retreats and they pick wild herbs and sell them. So it's not usually what he does, but he was just perfect, he had the perfect van that he uses to guide tourists around. He spoke great English. He had this natural curiosity. I mean, he really wasn't a natural journalist. So between him, Arman and myself, we just became a really solid team. And Andryi was just as eager as us to find these stories, to tell them. And we just worked as a team of over several weeks, just meeting people, asking them if they were willing to let us tag along or meeting them in the field and asking them if we could record their story. And people were always so open and so welcoming, despite often, you know, we were meeting them at some of the worst moments of their lives. So I will always be really grateful for that.

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(10:05)

**Tom:** There's a very powerful moment in the short documentary that you produced that's on YouTube, and it has got a lot of views now where you are traveling outside of Kyiv and you meet a family that are shell shocked and so obviously shell shocked in the video. You know, they're trying to get a lift back to their home, which they haven't been back. They don't know who's alive or who's dead. And you take them in. And I wanted to ask you, how do you balance in your job reporting on a war, the sensitivity you need to have with people who are going through something like that, but you're sort of inner drive to tell that story because I guess you want to get that out to the world? And do you find that those people also want to get it out to the world?

(10:50)

**Laurel:** I think, you know, as a journalist, your first priority is to always make sure that your subjects are okay and that you're not causing more harm than good and that they're comfortable. And I think what was so remarkable about this couple that we met and honestly most Ukrainians, was that it was so natural for them to tell their story, to have foreigners or outsiders there witnessing what they had gone through. I don't know if I've ever encountered that before, where people were so naturally telling their story, so naturally having cameras and microphones in their faces. And I think, unfortunately, in a lot of, you know, crises that I've covered, there are sometimes a sense of shame amongst victims of any sort of crisis, whether it's a war or a natural disaster, which of course as an outsider, I don't think they need to feel shame. But in this case, I felt like the Ukrainians had no shame. They wanted the world to know the injustice that had been done against them. And they're so proud. And I think in that video, there's just small moments where you can really see that come through. You know, part of that is maybe Ukrainian or Eastern European, stoic-ness. But, you know, when the husband tells his poor wife, who's crying as she looks out the window of the car, you know, tells her to keep it together or, you know, when he himself is tearing up and trying to hold it together, but also, you know, thinks to tell us, like, if you want to pass by, you know, the graves of our friends who were buried while we were gone, you know, if you're interested in seeing that, we can pass that. So just this incredible courage and openness and this real sense that they want their story to be told.

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(12:40)

**Tom:** What he tells her, to keep it together. But in his own eyes, you can see the deep, deep shock that he's feeling. And it's a very powerful moment. If you haven't if you haven't watched the video, go to YouTube and you can find it there under Resistance Project Brazen. You know, I've been a journalist for many years and many people we know photographers, we know that they put themselves in the harshest conditions because you have to get up close to take those photos. And I know you were on assignment as well while you're out there taking photos. Tell us a little bit about how photographers stay safe and how in general reporters stay safe in a war zone.

(13:15)

**Laurel:** The war has been particularly deadly for journalists. Sadly, many journalists have lost their lives in Ukraine. A French journalist was just killed a couple of days ago. And two friends of mine who are actually also from Hong Kong were targeted with by Russian artillery also a couple of days ago. And they're still recovering from that. I mean, it's been an exceptionally dangerous war. To be honest, we didn't go that close to the front line. This war hasn't frankly been particularly open to journalists on the front lines. Ukraine has been quite tight in terms of information coming on the frontline and who gets access to the front lines. So while we've been close, you know, we were in Kyiv when it was surrounded and we were in Kharkiv, when it was still being shelled. And in those situations, I mean, certainly there's an element of luck. You hope that you just don't get shelled. But at the same time, there are certain areas that are more targeted than others. When you do go to those areas, for example, in Kharkiv, we went to Saltivka and we followed an evacuation of a woman who was disabled. And it's the most shelled neighborhood of Kharkiv. And Kharkiv was one of the most shelled cities. So, I mean, all you can really do in that situation besides wear your protective equipment is to just not stay a very long time. And I think while you know you're putting yourself at risk, you also know that you're only there for a few hours, a few days versus people who live there and have lived there throughout the entire war. And when you see the kind of courage and risks they're facing, it kind of puts your own into perspective. So, yeah, you just have to be smart and be very aware and keep track of what's happening. And thankfully, Ukraine is such a high tech war in that it's very

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digital, very plugged in, and there's so much information that's being broadcast in real time. So you can stay up to date pretty well.

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**Tom:** I hate to say it, I feel like the world's attention is drifting away from Ukraine a little bit. This is the nature of media, especially in 2022. Things just move so fast. There's always a new attention. Having been there yourself, how does that make you feel? How has it made you change your view of the world and how do you feel now looking back on what happened?

(15:30)

**Laurel:** Yeah. I can definitely sense that attention shifting, I think. I mean, to be honest, I think for the first month of the conflict, Ukraine had sort of unprecedented attention and solidarity from the rest of the world. So there was a lot of talk at the beginning of of, you know, whether Ukraine was getting disproportionate attention compared to other world crises. And that's always going to be a debate in the media and in news coverage. But, yeah, right now, as you feel the tension sort of waning, I think it is frustrating. I mean I think what's cool is you do still see Ukrainian flags everywhere. You know, I've been traveling and you see them in almost any country, at least in in Europe or North America, people are still posting up flags that you don't necessarily see with other crises. But yeah, I think it was inevitable. I think Ukrainians knew this was going to happen, and I think that's partially why they were so open about sharing early on. I think they knew that they wanted to get the attention while they could still get it. I think there is the question now is Russia going to get away with this? If there isn't enough attention, then they might just get away with it. And that that's scary. And for me as a journalist, I think now that I'm not in Ukraine, all I can really do is keep trying to get people to watch what we made or listen to the podcast. And I am planning on going back, so we'll see.

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**Tom:** So we'll look out for more bonus episodes from you. Congratulations on a wonderful podcast and a wonderful job.

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*Laurel:* Thank you.

(17:15)

*Tom:* That's it for RESISTANCE: Stories from Ukraine. Stay tuned for more series from Project Brazen in the months to come. And, as always, you can follow our latest reporting on our newsletter, Whale Hunting. Thanks for listening and more soon.

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