

## Foreword

by Wladimir Klitschko

I will always remember my meeting with Yuri. How could I forget the look in his eyes? That expression of absolute uncertainty that his movements conveyed. Yuri radiated a natural aura, a certain calm. His eyes reflected wisdom and experience. And yet, one fact did not fit: Yuri was only ten years old. Yuri looked like someone who had seen too much. In March 2023, a year after 'russia' invaded my country, I met other children. All these children looked like twenty-year-old adults. They had lost all confidence in themselves. These children had lost their purity, joy, and childhood. I realized that Russia was not attacking the north of Ukraine to reach our capital, the east or the south. It was, above all, attacking our future. russia wants to wipe Ukraine off the map. To do that, it must destroy Ukraine's future and its youth. These crimes against Ukrainian children are an offense against all humankind. These crimes are part of a more comprehensive series: torture, murder, and the deportation of POWs; the torture and massacre of civilians; and targeted attacks on infrastructure. The Center for Civil Liberties (Центр громадянських свобод), a Ukrainian NGO and 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has listed over 26,000 atrocities. I write "Russia" to emphasize that a "great power" that denies Ukraine's right to exist and has attacked and threatened others does not deserve a capital "R."

This war is not against the Ukrainian military. It is also a direct and deliberate attack on Ukrainian civilians. Moreover, this war is being waged not only by Vladimir Putin but by the whole of russia. I condemn this. Polls show that most people support russia's policy in this area. Protests are entirely suppressed. Still, the truth is that there are opponents, but they remain in the minority. russia has lost all moral compasses in this war. It believes it is at war against the "forces of decadence." Some of them go so far as to equate the West with Satan. The Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill express messianic and eschatological echoes. It is the idea that Russia is fighting a holy war in Ukraine. This ideology has a precise, public war aim: to deny Ukraine's right to exist as a nation and a sovereign state.

The damage of this madness is terrible for my country and the whole world. We have tens of thousands of civilians killed. Women and children are not spared by the Russian military. Neither hospitals, schools, houses, museums, or buildings are safe. The human losses and damage are considerable, as well as the material damage. Experts estimate the latter at over 50 billion US dollars. Over 3,000 hectares of burnt forests, contaminated rivers, and soil exist. russia is trying to carry out not only genocide but also ecocide.

This war is a total war waged against the Ukrainian people. People say that the truth is the first casualty of war. This is especially true in Russia's war, as it used propaganda and misinformation. But I would like to add that the most unbearable victims of war are the children. Russia has waged war against Ukrainian children. It has a precise plan for mass deportations and forced adoptions.

The documentation shows that in wars, combatants often victimize civilians, including children. In Argentina's civil war (1976-1983), a military dictatorship abducted the children of political opponents. They called this the "case of the stolen babies." But Russia is using a detailed state policy to erase Ukrainian youth. This is why international justice has made this policy its main accusation. Russia is attacking Ukrainian children to kill Ukraine. It also wants to save Russia, which has a low birth rate. The life expectancy of men aged 15 today has fallen by five years to the level of Haiti. The Russian population continues to decline.

Also, the low public health care and endemic alcoholism have worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years. Hundreds of thousands of young people, primarily those with the highest levels of education, left the country before the war. Russia, a permanent UN Security Council member, tramples on international law. Civilized nations should ban it from their ranks. The aggression against Ukraine no longer has anything to do with civilization. The beginning of this war marked the end of civilization for our country. The international community can no longer tolerate this.

This war is sheer madness. The international community must denounce these crimes. We must save the Ukrainian children and the future of world peace. Ukraine is fighting for international law and the freedom of people and countries. I will fight to the end. My brothers will fight to the end. The entire Ukrainian people will fight to the end. Because, for us, the price of servitude is much higher than the price of war.

In this fight, the international community has acted. It is supporting Ukraine in this existential test. I thank all our allies for their support. They are sending us supplies and weapons. They help us defend our shared principles and values. Germany also displayed its greatness during this war. It has made them a brother nation to the Ukrainians forever. I also want to honor those who rescued and repatriated the deported Ukrainian children. They are heroes and rescuers and give us back our trust in humanity. This book also pays tribute to them.

Read this book. Learn more about these children and their families. What they experienced, and how they survived. These stories are also about you and our shared humanity. Don't let the sadness overwhelm you. Draw the will to uphold the colors of humanism and freedom from the situation! Help us to push back the invaders and regain our dignity. Help us help Ukrainian children who have grown up too fast. Help us to give them a little joy and a little bit of a future. Help us to end this imperialist war of aggression that has lasted far too long already.

Long live the Ukrainian children! Long live a free and sovereign Ukraine!

Slava Ukraini! Glory to Ukraine!

## Foreword

by Tatjana Kiel

Heroiam slava! Glory to the heroes!

The scene occurred on February 23, 2023, in Moscow at the Luzhniki Stadium. A "patriotic concert" is there to honor Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. A group of children appears on stage, accompanied by a soldier, as if they have just arrived. Anna Naumienko introduces herself as she takes the microphone. "Thank you, Uncle Yuri, for rescuing me and my sister from Mariupol, like hundreds of thousands of other children too ... I've forgotten a little ...," she said.

The girl doesn't seem to remember her lines. The presenter tries to retake control of the situation: "Come on, little Anna, don't be afraid. You can go to him and hug him." The children then circle "Uncle Yuri" (sic), their supposed savior.

This scene is a perfect example of the narrative that the Russian regime is trying to spread. In this scene, tragedy is combined with absurdity. Russia doesn't see Ukrainian children as spoils of war. But it uses them in its propaganda.

Everything about this scene is wrong—even the girl's name. A presidential decree on May 30, 2022, began this common practice. It aimed to speed up and shorten the adoption process for Ukrainian children to 24 hours. The word "adoption" is also misused: it is simply a case of abduction. The decree allows changes to the date of birth, place of birth, and the children's name. The goal is clear: to make it impossible for Ukrainian parents to find their children. Russia not only wants to erase the family past of these children but also their national past.

They want to 'Russify' them and teach them the Russian language and culture. Many testimonies describe the long hours the children spent watching propaganda films in the camps. Real brainwashing. Films about the "beauty" of Moscow and sometimes even films about the "Great Patriotic War." For children who survived bombing raids, watching war films was a real challenge. Russia forced them to do it. Russia does not recognize state borders, and it has no moral borders.

This war, triggered by Russia on February 22, 2022, shocked the world and froze Europe. I remember every detail of that day. My heart felt unexpected heaviness. Everything was in slow motion. Cold sweat ran down my back. The war broke out on our doorstep that day. Not in our country, but here, in Europe. For me, war is the defeat of human civilization. An anachronism. An abomination. My country, Germany, has rebuilt itself around the idea of pacifism. The rockets filling the sky and the tanks at Kyiv's gates are all a waking nightmare. It began on Thursday, 24th February 2022. A nightmare that continues to this day.

Last December, Wladimir decided to move in with his brother, Vitali. "I can't do anything else." Of course, he could have stayed in Germany or the United States. It would have been easy for both of them to flee, but that wasn't an option, not even a thought. The logical consequence was facing up to the situation. This strength, this courage, and this attitude showed me the value of inner

conviction. I have known the two brothers for 17 years. I helped organize their fights. But I sensed this fight was different. It was and is about their people's freedom and their families' future. I immediately recognized the iron will that characterized them in the boxing ring. This war will be long, but endurance will overcome defeat, tragedy, and drama.

There will be plenty of tragedy and drama in this war. Russia soon recognized that its army couldn't defeat Ukraine on the ground. So, it chose a strategy of terror by bombing civilians. And then, there is the war within the war that is carried out against women, and violence is used as a weapon of war. Rape is a tool of war to break the souls of women and to break the will of the people.

Since Wladimir and Vitali were in Kyiv, I didn't ask myself any questions. I wanted to act too, with my means, from Hamburg, from Germany. Their strength of will and moral example have impressed me over the years. Helping them and the victims of the war was a huge challenge and, at the same time, a straightforward matter of course. A simple question was at the end: "What do you need?" The assignment of tasks was self-explanatory. They were in the front line and the heart of the institution. So, they had a precise view of its needs. I thus focused on compiling the material and humanitarian aid and its distribution. I also set up a platform for supply and demand: #WAAU "We Are All Ukrainians" was born.

I was not born Ukrainian. I became one. I activated the partner network we had with Wladimir in Germany. They established and maintained it for years. I wanted to alert the German people and economy to the tragic fate of Ukrainian civilian victims. We did not realize that it was possible to transport so many relief supplies. But we did it. We were so effective that some ministries and NGOs asked for our methods. A great team, a precise process, and a perfect balance of supply and demand are only part of the answer. The honest answer is in the strong solidarity of the German people. They have shown and continue to show it. It also lies in the willingness of our companies to get involved in social commitment—a little comfort in this ocean of tragedy.

And amid this unleashed catastrophe lies the fate of the children. This is the subject of this book. War is a tragedy. It is hell on earth. Young soldiers die. An intolerable waste of people. It's a waste of force and talent. We will need them for future reconstruction. You could say that they are doing their duty to defend their country. But when civilians become the target, that is an offense. Systematic rape of women is a terrible crime. Rapists who violently attack children in front of their parents are guilty of an immeasurable crime. It is a crime beyond measure to take children from their parents and deport them to Russia. It is unforgivable.

It is not a question of grading these crimes, but simply to say that children are special innocent victims and, therefore, the tragedies they suffer are also extraordinary. A child is purely innocent. A child is pure. Children have pure hope and potential. It is a future that has yet to develop. And that is what the Russian invaders are destroying by attacking children. This crime is stealing Ukraine's future.

Russia is not ashamed of these cruel crimes. Even proud, as we have seen, Russia uses these deportations to feed its propaganda machine. Russia is not waging war in Ukraine but a "special operation." In this sense, Russia is not stealing children but "rescuing" them. A woman appears on TV next to Vladimir Putin. This is at the announcement of May 30, 2022, presidential decree. Mariya Lvova-Belova, the Russian Children's Rights

The Commissioner says, "The children in Donbas are experiencing significant suffering." The 'rescue' is going well." She emphasized that she had "adopted" a 15-year-old boy from Mariupol. After that, Putin said that "love is important." Welcome to "Absurdistan," the country of despotism. And the best: This woman plans to create a platform for matching children and parents. It makes me sick. In short, she's planning a kind of #WAAU for child abduction. WAAK, "We are all kidnapers." Russia is making a public commitment to this policy of forced adoption. The goal is clear: it is a comprehensive policy to destroy Ukrainian identity. Anyone who steals children from a society tries to destroy it.

But how many children are we talking about? It is difficult to give an exact answer, but Russia uses this figure as propaganda. At the beginning of the conflict, official Russian agencies spoke of 500,000 children. Russia is inflating this figure, without a doubt. It tries to prove its power. It says this figure shows support from the civilians, who seek to acknowledge Russia as the mother country.

In Ukraine, the National Information Bureau reports 19,592 missing children. It has complete files with their names, ages, and locations. The total number of abductions is likely significantly higher. The situation varies—for example, children from bombed-out cities whose parents are dead. The Russian army took children from their parents in conquered areas and sent them to Russia. Children whose parents sent them to holiday camps to escape the war. And children placed in orphanages.

Everything indicates that Russia has no intention of returning these children. It wants to make it almost impossible to identify the children in the future. It has spread them to over 57 regions in Russia, sometimes thousands of kilometers from Ukraine.

The international community has finally recognized the extent and gravity of the crime. On March 17, 2023, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, and Commissioner Mariya Lvova-Belova. Yes, this woman appeared on state TV to announce a vile presidential decree on May 20, 2022. This decree is a moral disgrace. Over a year ago, the ICC began an investigation into Vladimir Putin as a "war criminal." The investigation relates to the bombing of civilians in urban areas. Twelve months later, the ICC issued a record-speed arrest warrant for the Russian president. It was for "the illegal deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories to the Russian Federation."

Beyond the numbers, human dramas are unfolding. The road to international justice is long. In this book, we have tried to tell some of these stories: broken destinies and stolen lives. Sometimes, the parents and children recount it. Other times, great people do. These include private individuals and

those in institutions as they fought to bring the children back. Some stories end well, but the damage is already done. Some stories have not yet finished. There is hope that the children will return to their relatives, parents, and grandparents.

One fate has touched me, and I would like to dedicate this foreword to a woman of great strength. It is the story of Oksana, a soldier. Her brother brought her daughter to Russia, but Oksana did not know for months. She had not seen her daughter for months and suffered severe injuries in the hospital. Bringing this girl back was a challenge. Her mother was a soldier and couldn't pick her up from Russia.

Upon hearing that the retrieval was successful, I saw a photo. It showed a girl's face, half-hidden in her mother's embrace, with a tear on her cheek. Relief overcame me as if she were my child. That was when I felt the need to write this book. Through some stories, it should show how war steals the future of many children and adults. And yet, we see again and again how worthwhile it is to fight. It is worth giving everything, even if it is not your child. It is valuable because it provides hope in an unmanageable situation. We must prove solidarity, show attitude, and learn courage because we can all do it.

PS: The girl's name is Ewa, and she's on our cover. We would have loved to have her as a story in this book. Unfortunately, the contact broke off.

Sabine Oelmann conducted and wrote the conversations in this book. To protect them, we have changed or modified the names and photos of people and some locations. We recorded and translated their experiences to the best of our knowledge.

If we made any errors, we apologize for any inaccuracies.

### **Serhii, 16 years old**

*Home: The family comes from Kherson.*

*Stay in camps: October 2022 to May 2023*

The boy was in the "Druzhba" and "Luchystyj" camps, and he was also sent to a "college" in Henichesk to study.

Serhii's mother has a physical disability that makes it difficult for her to get her son back by herself. Save Ukraine released him from the camp using a power of attorney.

### **Prophylactic conversations**

"My name is Serhii. I am 16 years old. I was born in the beautiful city of Kherson. As they say, I am an ordinary boy—at least I was before the war. I like playing football with my friends. We always hang out, and I have no criminal energy. I have never stolen or cheated, I've never been in a fight, and I've never been mean to other people. My friends and my family would likely describe me as peaceful.

I don't go to school at the moment, but I want to finish school because that wasn't possible for me due to 'the circumstances.' I want to study or learn something useful, but that won't happen. When I finish school, I want to join the Ukrainian army. My parents don't know anything about my plans yet and will not feel thrilled. But I must do something for my country. That matters most to me, above all else.

My deportation story began when they told me that they would take me to a summer camp in Crimea for two weeks. 'Deportations' - when I hear that. I thought that word didn't exist anymore and was no longer used. And above all, I never thought deportation still existed. And then it happened to me. I agreed to go to a camp. I thought we were going to a summer camp. I was even a bit happy at the start. It had been a long time since I was in Crimea. I looked forward to the change. I often went there with my family and only fondly remembered Crimea.

Anyway, the headmaster of my school called my mum and suggested this to her. She didn't agree at first, but he convinced her. My mum and I trusted him, of course, because he was the headmaster of my school. But he worked with the Russians. Looking back, it turned out that the guy who had taught me for years was a collaborator. What a disappointment. Someone asked me if I would ever again trust a teacher or a 'person of respect.' I have thought about it a lot. And no, I will never be able to trust anyone again except for my mum and a few friends. A group of eight sporty young people from my school, including me, was going to Crimea. The headmaster had done a great job. We trusted him because someone told us it would be safer and better if we left the city. We traveled by car to a harbor on the Dnipro, and from there, they took us by ship to a town in the Crimea. Then we drove onwards by bus to the so-called summer camp. Nobody told us exactly where we were going. At some point, we saw signs for Yevpatoriya. Until we got there, they allowed us to keep our mobile phones.

I was still with my friends at this point, which provided us all a bit more security. Once we got there, we felt like we were at a holiday camp. It was nice. Yet, we stayed for two months instead of two weeks. Then they reallocated us. They sent me to a camp that wasn't far from the first one, but the conditions changed. I wasn't too worried. I didn't like the change. I didn't understand why I was somewhere else. Above all, nobody told me when I would be coming home again.

In the second camp, the situation changed dramatically; it became terrible. We didn't have any free time at all. We weren't allowed to move around without restrictions. They forced us to sing the Russian national anthem - and other Russian songs - as soon as we got up. If we didn't sing along, they punished us. They threatened to take us to a torture cellar as punishment. As nobody wanted that, we agreed to have 'conversations' with them at some point. They called it 'prophylactic conversations'. They told us what would happen if we didn't do as they wanted. I no longer wish to talk about what they threatened us with. But, since nothing happened initially, we didn't believe they'd act. So, we started to skip these 'talks'. We were pretty worn out and indifferent. We were almost numb after all the 'talks.'

I was starting to get the feeling that I would never come home again. I missed my family and feared this could be my 'final destination.' Rumors always suggested that someone would take us to an orphanage or place us with a Russian family. I felt a deep fear of that. I also wondered what my people at home were doing to get me out of this situation. I was sometimes afraid that they had forgotten about me. After all, they told us day in and day out that they wouldn't miss us anyway and that we would be better off in Russia.

In the meantime, my mum was not at all inactive. Of course, she tried to find out who could help her get me back. That wasn't easy because she no longer knew who she could trust. Another child was rescued, and I contacted Save Ukraine. I passed the details on to my mum so that she could organize everything. Surprisingly, I still had my mobile phone.

I ended up in a third camp, where someone searched for my mobile phone. But apart from that, I didn't notice anything unusual. Another mum who came for her daughter picked me up. My mother is not entirely healthy, so she gave the other woman a power of attorney, which sounds easier than it is. The thought of finally seeing my mum, little brother, and dogs again overjoyed me. Very often, only the thought of my family saved me when I was in the camp. I couldn't think about anything else but when I saw them all again.

The first camp had good food and accommodation. But then, everything got worse. In my second camp, I faced threats and blackmail, and the food decreased, likely intended to exhaust us. In the third camp, situated in occupied territory, the military posed a persistent threat to us. The food was not only poor, but the beds were also disgusting.

Someone was always telling us to forget our homeland and switch sides. Someone informed us that nobody in Ukraine showed interest in us. We would be much better off in Russia if we obeyed what they told us. They tried to turn us into Russians, and they gave us Russian passports. Someone threatened us that they would put us up for adoption.

I have no idea what would have happened if someone hadn't picked me up. I'm filled with happiness to be home again. It's my free home, where I can think and say what I want. But I know it will take time to lead an everyday life again. For now, I want peace. I love my country and will do everything possible to ensure it becomes a free country again.

Serhii is shy, but he articulates his thoughts with clarity. He knows exactly what he wants. He will go his own way because he is strong. He hasn't allowed himself to bend, even though he seems very sensitive. He must be open to seeking help when he needs it.

**Maria, 18, and Artem, 11 years old, half-siblings**

*Home: The children come from Volchansk, a small town in the Kharkiv region. The enemy occupied Volchansk from the start of the war. Ukrainian forces liberated it in September 2022.*

*Stay in camps: August 2022 to May 2023.*

The boy was in a camp called "Medvezhonok" (this name means "bear cub" - what an evil irony) in Krasnodar, southern Russia. The girl was in Schebekino, the Russian region of Belgorod. His foster mother sent the boy to the camp "for the holidays." The sister was "advised" to attend school in Shebekino. After Voltschansk was freed, the pro-Russian foster mother refused to take back the siblings. Someone told Maria that it would be better if they stayed where they were. And if Russians adopted her brother, it would be best for him. At some point, the little boy contacted his sister and told her where he was. The girl and the boy have the same mother but different fathers. They were placed with a foster family because the mother lost custody. The children were not together in the camp. The older sister organized the release of her younger brother. As she is now full age, she is trying to get guardianship of the eleven-year-old.

### **A young heroin rescues her little brother.**

"My name is Maria. I recently turned 18. I had to behave like an adult even though I was still a child—the whole of last year, to be precise. I wish I'd already had custody of my little brother.

We grew up in Kharkiv. Two years ago, our mother lost custody of my brother and me, complicating our childhood. We are half-siblings; we don't have the same father. Above all, neither of us has a father who shows interest in us and who deserves the name. A foster family in the neighborhood of Charkiw placed us together, fortunately. Still, it was terrible. I know too well that it can always be worse. A woman cared for us and other children, but she did so poorly. I assume this woman did it for the money. So, she had six other children in her care who were not her own. As it turned out, our foster mother had completely different plans for us.

I've finished school; my little brother is in 7th grade. But, since the area was occupied, we kept to ourselves. The six other kids, the foster mother, and her mother mostly stayed in the cellar. Living in a basement means you don't exist. You hide. Getting food, medical help, or any other aid is hard when needed. And if you did, then this 'help' was that of the Russian occupiers. So, all in all, it was a challenging situation.

Last year, my foster mum urged me to go to a school in Russia. I should learn to be a hairdresser there, she said. I never wanted to be a hairdresser; I wanted to stay with my brother, but that didn't work out. I had to go to school in Russia, leaving my brother behind. While I was away, soldiers took him and some kids to a camp in Russia.

Our family situation was problematic from the start, but it got worse. Since my brother and I were on Russian territory, albeit separately, I had no legal way of looking after him, even though I had come out of full age in the meantime. I had imagined my 18th birthday differently. I contacted the authorities in Ukraine to apply for guardianship for my brother. Luckily, after an eternity, I found out where he was. We both still had our mobile phones.

I know my story is like a sinister fairy tale. It's about a girl with a foster mother. I learned that my foster mother cared more about helping the Russians than about the children she was to care for. I

still hope for a happy ending! At least I have a happy ending: my brother and I are now together again, thanks to Save Ukraine.

There was no way I was ever going to leave my little brother, but I was forced to go to this school in Russian territory. The whole time, I was trying to bring my brother back to me, whatever the cost, but circumstances prevented me from doing so. There were times when I couldn't get in touch with him at all. That was terrible because I had always imagined how he felt; he was so small and abandoned. I could never rely on the support of my family; I was entirely on my own in my fight to get Artem back. We're both timid, and I know that as he gets older, I'll need to give him more space. I won't always be able to speak to him. Even though we're together again now, he's still shy. He did not experience violence--at least not of a physical nature. It's daily routine to exert psychological pressure on children in these camps. Artem was told to stay in Russia. It would be safer. They would do their best to improve their life, for example, by finding him another family where he would be better off than ever before. My biggest fear was that my brother could be gone forever. He might receive a new name, undergo brainwashing, and forget me. This pressure is particularly hideous if you consider the situation we come from. Eventually, they would have managed to 'turn him round.' What did he have to lose? A non-existent family and a sister who couldn't look after him.

The thought of never seeing my brother again filled me with suffering. I blamed myself because I couldn't solve the 'problem' alone. For Artem, the situation was more of an adventure. He felt pretty safe and was at least with other children in the same situation as him. I, however, was utterly alone. I didn't know anyone in Russia, so who could I trust? The thought of losing my brother to an adoptive family in Russia demoralized me.

I also had to ask myself many times how to survive this situation and free myself from it. The idea that my eleven-year-old brother lived in a camp with 600 children was challenging. I still wonder what happened to the children who didn't return. But the most important thing for me was: Would I ever see Artem again? I am his only family. When I talk about it, I have to pull myself together and not cry every time.

Someone recently told me I was a heroine, but I never gave up. I couldn't do anything but look for my brother and pick him up. I am strong; I stood up to our foster mum. With the help of the authorities in Kharkiv and Save Ukraine, I finally managed to free Artem. When we finally got the documents, I needed to pick him up in Russia. After agonizing months, I was able to leave one day. It was an incredible feeling to hug my little brother again finally!

I expect to get his guardianship soon. Then, I will find us a home, a school, and a job. And live! Raise him and help him to forget all this. I will never forget it all. And I will do everything to pave the way for my brother and me in the future. No one will ever take Artem away from me again. I only look to the future. Because everything that comes is better than what was."

*Maria is the absolute heroine: a strong girl, not only for herself but also for her little brother. Only because of her is the boy no longer in camp. And because of her, he can lead an everyday life with the support of his big sister, who will always be at his side as a counselor and friend. We wish for Maria that she thinks of herself too!*

### **Viktor, 15 years old**

*Home: The family comes from Kherson.*

*Stay in camps: November 2022 to May 2023*

The boy was at a Ukrainian naval academy. Then, they sent him to the "Druzhba" and "Lutschistyj" camps and an "academy" in the occupied Lasurne region.

The young man's mother was present during the interview with him. She brought him home with the support of Save Ukraine. During the interview, both of them are in a Hope & Healing Centre. These facilities were set up in close collaboration with and support of #WAAU. When we wrote this book, Kyiv was facing heavy attacks from Russia. Viktor has fought tooth and nail against the brainwashing in the camps. For that, he had to endure days of isolation. In the first camp, he couldn't reach his mother for months to tell her where he was. When he was finally able to speak to her on the phone at the second station, he heard that bombs were falling in Kherson.

### **Bomb alert**

My contact person from Save Ukraine is sitting in a café in Kyiv. We have arranged a video call. My contact is about to call in 15-year-old Viktor and his mother. Viktor has agreed to tell me about his experiences at the "camp." His mum seems nervous but wants to appear calm. Given the family's situation, that is understandable. The boy has been back in Ukraine for only a few days. That was a miracle, like the miracles that all families feel when their kids come home.

Viktor looks good: very short hair, sporty, and a smile that should make girls his age nervous. He seems self-confident, but that is likely part of a teenager's routine. He doesn't want everyone to know what he has been through.

Listening to our conversation with headphones, I heard a drumming noise. It showed how nervous Viktor was. Are his fingers tapping on the table? A tick? Other teenagers do that, too, but this is a different tapping than the one I know from teenagers. No wonder Kyiv is on air raid alert; anyone would be nervous. My contact person is also more nervous than usual.

When I'm honest - my contact person is never usually nervous. She is confident, efficient, and focused every time we talk on the phone. Today, she says that there is an alarm in Kyiv, rocket attacks. "But our defense is strong," she emphasizes. I tell her to be safe and leave the café. "Not yet," she laughs at me during the video call. "Everything is still okay, Sabine!"

I'm nervous; I can't concentrate on the conversation. Viktor and his mum take turns. The boy recovers from his ordeal at the Hope & Healing Centre of Save Ukraine. His mum is also receiving care; she's on a path that doesn't deserve to be called a journey.

Hundreds of children are often stolen from schools and sent on buses, trains, or ships to Russia. It must be like a departure. In Viktor's case, Russians had infiltrated his school. That is why Russians took the children away without resistance. "We didn't even get to tell our parents. "They took our phones right away," he said.

It was October 8, 2022. "A couple of men in military uniforms came into the school and asked us to follow them immediately. Of course, we said no and asked where we were being taken. No answer. "They made it clear there would be no discussions. Viktor hesitates for a moment. "The teachers encouraged us. We believed them. We were then handed over to others who accompanied us to Crimea."

### **Like so many children, someone took Viktor to the "Druzhba" camp.**

The word "Druzhba" means "friendship." The more stories we hear from children, the more it seems an utter mockery. For a whole month, Viktor's mother didn't know where her son was. The boy couldn't tell his family how he was doing for a month. He could imagine that his mother would go mad if she soon didn't find out where her son was. It is cruel mental torture, a form of decomposition. The teachers play the Russian national anthem to the children in the morning. At the same time, someone tells them that nobody in their home country would care for them.

"It's much better in Russia; a golden future awaits your young people here. Ukraine will go down anyway," whispers through the corridors of the camp. Viktor spent two weeks in "Druzhba" and two weeks in another camp. Everything was acceptable in the first camp according to all the children we spoke to. They could have believed they were on holiday. Some parents have since told us that, before the war, children were sent to camps for recreation. They were brought back after two weeks. So why should this time be any different?

The food was quite acceptable at first, says Viktor. There are a few leisure activities, lessons to distract them, and sports. It was all good, a break from the war. But there's nothing good to say about the beds. Still, that's nothing compared to what was still to come for the children. They took Viktor to another camp. The conditions worsened. There was more shouting, more threats, and more punishment. He was still as close to home, but his situation was taking a turn for the worse. At least at some point, he told his mum he was still alive. After his second "camp," they took Viktor to an "academy."

The gaze of my contact person, I'll call her K., kept looking up at the sky during our video call. "Go," I say, "make sure you get into a cellar or an underground station!". 'K' smiles and stays seated. I didn't expect anything else; I was more nervous than her. I felt like a coward.

I look around my flat. I must rethink my first day of this cruel, unspeakable war. It took me by surprise despite all the warnings. What would I take if I had to flee?

In my family, our grandparents and parents survived World War II. So, when we heard unexpected knocking, we'd say, "The Russians are at the door." The grandmother on my father's side was the only one who didn't laugh. We were convinced the Russians would never overstep their bounds again. What a mistake!

Viktor tells how he resisted singing the Russian national anthem in the morning. The other kids admired him for articulating "no" clearly, but it became a huge problem. Still, he refused to sing it and continued to play his pranks. In the end, they punished him by locking him in an isolated room in the basement for a few days. But even that couldn't break his will not to sing the anthem of the enemy. The phrases "solitary confinement," "isolation," and "destroy self-identity" ran through my head, making me shudder. I am a 15-year-old child who is in physical and mental development. Barbaric! "A few days." A few days, but they will leave an indelible mark on this child's life. Alone in a cell, wearing only underwear, as Viktor notes. "Those few days will remain etched in the child's memory." "Not singing alone was not even the biggest problem," says Viktor. But the fact that he was one of those who wouldn't give in at any cost made the supervisors nervous and annoyed.

At some point, even Viktor was afraid. He wondered if he'd escape this cell, this camp, whether he would see his family and friends again. Or whether they would now train him as a soldier who would have to shoot his fellow citizens soon. At some point, after he was no longer in the "solitary cell," he lost track of how many days it had been. Viktor managed to get a mobile phone. But his first thought after he was happy about the phone was that it might be too dangerous for his friends to call him. So, he didn't make the call. He knew well that this was precisely what his guards wanted to achieve. He managed to send messages to his mother, ensuring she knew his location. In his cell were a bed, a table, a pen, and a notepad. His cell had a narrow window to communicate with his friends.

You can imagine that a young man like Viktor does not want to give in and does not want to submit. "What was the worst thing?" I ask him. "They threatened to put me in a straitjacket if I didn't cooperate." They also said they would give me psychotropic drugs if I didn't keep quiet." The eyes of my contact person who brought me with Viktor look up into the sky.

With her laptop in hand, she walks outside the café. In the background of all my conversation partners, it is getting turbulent. I don't need to understand Ukrainian to realize that "K" has to get to safety now and that Viktor and his mum must get up, too. "I have to go to the underground or a cellar," says "K" in a calm voice. "There are rockets in the sky."

The Ukrainian Air Force reported that six Kinschal missiles, six cruise missiles, and two drones hit Kyiv. Kyiv authorities reported casualties but no deaths or significant damage. Mayor Vitali Klitschko confirmed this after reporting explosions in the Podil district. An African delegation

sought shelter. It included Cyril Ramaphosa and Macky Sall, South African and Senegal presidents. After the air alert ended, the South African presidential office tweeted a defiant message. The delegation was in Kyiv to meet President Volodymyr Zelensky. The next day, the delegation planned to visit Moscow to negotiate with Vladimir Putin. Yet, it is known that the peaceful intentions came to nothing. A few hours later, I learned that "K," Vicktor, and his mum survived the attack. I burst into tears of relief.

*This story gave us goosebumps all the time. It makes clear that the sirens meant "air raid." It shows how calm our contact person remained and how usual the horror in the Ukrainian capital is. We take our hats off to you!*

### **Myroslava Kharchenko, lawyer**

She has a family and works for Save Ukraine to ensure they manage all "cases" properly and legally.

### **The children's advocate**

We have spoken to children, parents, grandmothers, and godmothers. Now, we want to learn about the work of those who ensure that children return home.

*Myroslava, please tell us about your job.*

I spent the whole day on the phone and in front of the computer. I communicate with my colleagues regularly and aim to ensure clarity in each case. I aim to do my best because it's the best thing we have: our children.

*Do you also speak to the children's parents?*

Oh yes, that's very important and very emotional. Relatives have tough times; often, they have had no contact with their children for weeks. And I also speak with the children when I can. On the one hand, I try to reassure everyone and, above all, get as much clarity as possible. My phone rings nonstop because everyone seeks my advice. Many ask me, "What would you do if you were in my shoes?" But this is the most challenging question since every response I give matters and can never be simple because *it's a matter of life, death, prison, or freedom.*

Yes, if authorities interrogate a mother at a checkpoint for three days, she can break down. When the families set off to get their child back, it's a journey that they may have to pay with their lives. They often travel on foot in the countryside and fields. You never know who you will meet. Watch out for unexploded bombs and so on. The situation changes all the time. And all of a sudden, you have to make a new decision. I weigh what's best for both sides, the families and the children, and Save Ukraine.

*That sounds extraordinarily stressful and responsible.*

Yes, but that comes with a lawyer's job (laughs). That should always be the case, even when there is no war.

*Do you also take care of the documents needed to get your child out of a camp?*

I'm the one who tries to complete everything in the shortest time possible. I'm the "speed" in the whole process. The paperwork comes from the authorities, and I try to get everything to the right place at the right time. At Save Ukraine, we follow a standard list. But nothing here works to standards. I've worked long enough as a lawyer in government offices. I know exactly how they work. And you probably know about their work in Germany. It is always understaffed and often works in emergencies. I try to fill in all the gaps and get all the missing papers to ensure the process runs without complications. I can speed up the processes through my contacts. I won't offend anyone, but I'll subtly encourage them.

*Before you started working for Save Ukraine, where were you working?*

I've been a lawyer since 2009. I've worked with children and young people since then. That was in the offices I've already mentioned and in a "Youth Service." I got to know Mykola Kuleba, the founder of Save Ukraine when he was my boss. 2012, I began working in the president's office, assisting him. He was the government ombudsman for children's rights from 2014 to 2021. He left his job in 2021 to find Save Ukraine, which took up all his attention and time. I then followed him there.

*What are the biggest obstacles in your job? Which walls are the hardest to break down?*

The hardest thing is making a final decision. When my colleagues call me, they want good, solid advice. They trust me. I often speak with Mykola, but I usually have to decide myself. I have to weigh up all the risks and possible consequences.

*For example?*

For example, whether it's good to cross a border now, in two hours, or two days. Or to leave it entirely or only for the time being. Sometimes, it's one step, but I know it can have fatal consequences. I don't act for myself; I act for others, and they trust me. If I tell people to cross a checkpoint at a particular time and get caught, they may face days of interrogation. I was talking to a mother with whom I decided. It was about whether it was better to stay in Belarus for a while or to cross the border into Russia immediately. Now and then, I confide in ombudsmen and ombudswomen. They might have updates that I don't. It is sometimes a matter of minutes.

*It must be hard to make these decisions, and it's admirable how you still do it daily.*

Thank you very much, but as I said, this is my job; I chose it, and I am happy about every child being saved.

*But you're not a lawyer; you're also a friend, aunt, sister, daughter, and mother. How do you cope with this position of responsibility in a war and remain a person with hope?*

*When you were studying law, you surely never dreamed that you would have to fulfill the task you are doing now.*

Honestly, my work helps me endure this madness to a certain extent. The stories I hear are cruel; I've never heard, experienced, or known anything like it before. I know I'm still privileged. I've never faced anything as wrong as what the families of deported children endure. That is the worst nightmare that can happen to anyone—both the child and the parents. I am distracted from the cruel thoughts of focusing on my work. Every day, we save people or at least help them deal with awful situations. I'm well. My parents are alive. My sister and daughter are safe.

*You and the Save Ukraine staff rescue children daily. But many are still missing. How many deported children and young people are we talking about?*

The official portal is called "Children of War," and the figures vary. Some statistics show that there are 19,600 children. The same portal has a section where the National Information Bureau publishes its stats. And they speak of 700,000 children. (At the time of the interview, the figure mentioned was 744,000 children.) This info comes from so-called open sources. Analysts examine all statements from Russia and the media.

*In other words, these are Russian figures.*

Yes, they are proud of every child they take away from the Ukrainians. And that's why someone is spreading it around. So, these figures are wrong. The truth is that between 19,000 and 700,000 deported children.

*There is considerable discrepancy, and every single child is one too many.*

The number of deported children is increasing either way at the moment. I will also tell you why: at the moment, Ukraine is liberating some areas. And everywhere the Ukrainian army goes, we are dealing with new facts. In plain language, this means that we are hearing stories for the first time. Parents can only discuss it at their liberation. There was no chance to do so before. Only then can they register their missing child with the Ukrainian authorities. Russian media reports daily on children from Zaporizhzhya and Donetsk. Russians take children to camps that are primarily in Crimea.

It may be naive. But the ordinary imagination cannot grasp how, at times, hundreds of children are moved from A to B and then to C and D. What an incredible, perverse, and secret organization that works in that process!

Specific duplications inflate the figure of 700,000. A realistic estimate is approximately 250,000 to 300,000 children, which remains immensely high.

The caregivers take the children away in large groups rather than one by one. So, it is all about whole schools, boarding schools, colleges, and sports groups. An example from Mariupol may help. A year ago, severe military actions took place there. The Russians began to "evacuate"

children on a large scale. But it affected not only children. They moved entire apartment blocks, houses, streets, and neighborhoods. Sometimes, they even relocated entire villages. There were no more so-called green corridors into Ukraine. People could not return to their homes. And where there were corridors, there was fierce fighting and bombing.

That is unimaginable. But it gets worse. Sometimes, Russians publicized the green corridors. In other words, people say that, at certain times, you can pass through some areas. For example, someone would say, "Meet me at 9:30 a.m." People would show up at 9:30 a.m. only to find the corridor closed again at 10:00 a.m. due to the bombing. In other words, it was impossible to use these corridors. We are now talking about forced evacuations or deportations.

However, not all children travel alone. Some are still with their families in Russia or occupied territories. And they have no possibility of going back. Because they either can't communicate, have no money, or can't get their money. That leads us to another kind of crime. We can't ensure these people can return home on reasonable terms. So, let's be clear: genocide is taking place here.

*What a treacherous form of psychological warfare.*

Yes, you can't call it anything else. "Genocide" means a country forces people from another to move to Russia. Russians take their identity cards away and receive a Russian passport. They lose their identity, their self-determination, their freedom of choice. Ultimately, their dignity.

*What can we—the rest of the world do?*

You can spread information about Save Ukraine and our work as the first thing. This way, we can help ensure that news reaches as many people as possible. For example, if relatives fled abroad and lost their homes, our team would help them to reunite. Some Ukrainians in Europe have no idea what has happened to their family members. "People who must be held accountable when the war ends," Myroslava said. The people in the world must understand what Russia is doing.

It is hard to believe that many cannot imagine the cruel methods employed by the Russian Army and its commanders.

The international community must exert pressure; it must rise and make demands. We must label the entire situation as genocide to understand better understand what is occurring in the heart of Europe. It would benefit other international aid organizations to learn from these reports. That would enhance collaboration with the Ukrainian government and Save Ukraine to bring all deported children home. Not even Ukrainians can understand this. It is beyond normal comprehension.

*One last example.*

We have a case where a mother and father have not seen their son for a year. In times of war, parents may be forced to flee while someone takes their children to a camp. Both parents, once very professionally successful, lost their jobs. Their home gets evacuated. They have been living

with their parents and in-laws in Kherson, on the left bank of the Dnipro River. They live off what they grow themselves. After the father was offered a job on the other side of the city, he returned home, and his wife went with him. After the father was offered a job on the other side of the town, he returned home, and his wife went with him. They moved back to the part of the city that was still occupied. Their teenager stayed with his grandparents. Kherson was then liberated, but not where the grandparents and grandchildren lived. The Russians had destroyed the bridge that connected the neighborhoods. That meant they could not see their son, even though he lived only 80 kilometers away.

Leaving the boy with his grandparents became increasingly dangerous because Russians are explicitly targeting children who are "parentless," even if their parents are nearby. To reach her son, the mother—convinced that her phone was tapped—had to travel halfway across Ukraine and Europe. She journeyed through Finland, crossed Russia, and entered the occupied territory of Kherson, all to embrace him at least one more time. All they have left now are phone or video calls, where they mostly just cry and connect, at least for a moment. Open communication is not possible.

*These descriptions leave us speechless—but only for a short time. Save Ukraine will continue to speak about the remarkable actions and transgressions of the Russians.*

*Russian aggressors are committing crimes in their neighboring country. If anyone needs a lawyer in Ukraine, Myroslava would be our first choice. She is not only competent but also warm and funny.*

Kateryna ensures that all the children return safely. She knows each case, every child, and every parent. She is both a lawyer and a bearer of hope. She hopes that the Ukrainian defense missiles will continue to function efficiently. She wants every child who has been deported to be reunited with their parents. She doesn't want to put her family in danger. Above all, she hopes to see Ukraine rebuilt and be able to sit in a café sharing funnier stories.

## **Genocide**

No one can get past Kateryna. Everyone values Kateryna, as she is the focal point for those wanting to reunite with their children through Save Ukraine. All the conversations documented in this book are cases from Kateryna's desk.

They are not the only children sent to a supposed holiday camp or deported from the classroom. Sometimes, they are children lost in the turmoil of war.

Kateryna is a trained lawyer assisting Ukrainian children from the Russian Federation and the occupied territories. She fully understands the situation faced by her team: "It's like David versus Goliath." "But there is no alternative," Kateryna says.

Save Ukraine has now returned 123 children; each child is a profound inspiration to reunite the remaining children with their families. "It's not just a number; it's 123 lives, 123 souls, and 123

fates," says Kateryna. One hundred twenty-three children, 123 smiles, 123 mothers who can embrace their sons and daughters again. "I know every single story of every single child," says the young lawyer. When I know, these children will return to their families and hopefully lead an everyday life again, I truly understand why I'm doing this." She adds: "These children are our hope, our future. Without them, we are nothing." If these children do not return, it often means they are not just living "on the other side"; it can also imply that they have to fight for that side." "This situation is incredibly stressful for me; I truly want to reunite the children with their parents," says Kateryna. In the camps, children are brainwashed. However, all the children we have spoken to thus far have retained their will and pride.

When the children return, Kateryna emphasizes that more children—123—will be allowed to speak Ukrainian again instead of Russian. "It simply means they are free," says Kateryna, who began at Save Ukraine immediately after university and wouldn't trade her job for anything. Still, the hope remains that this job does not become a never-ending story.

This war started back in 2014. The "great invasion" took place in 2022, but Crimea and parts of Luhansk and Donetsk had been under occupation for eight years already. At that time, concerns often centered on "missing children." Nobody would listen or believe it was genocide. Since September 2022, Kateryna has been working at Save Ukraine to rescue deported children. This opportunity arose when an acquaintance asked her to help a family whose child had gone missing. They needed legal advice but also reassurance. They sought comfort in knowing the situation was not hopeless, along with legal assistance to avoid jeopardizing the child's return due to a formal error.

What does Kateryna think of the term genocide? She seems very cautious and thoughtful, not at all as if she were falling for a mere headline. But let's first define genocide. Beyond the emotional aspect, the situation with Ukrainian children is genocide. For some outsiders, it may be easier to recognize that the ongoing events just a few kilometers away constitute genocide.

### ***Definition of genocide***

The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as a crime in both war and peace. Genocide targets a nation, people, race, or religious group entirely or partially. This can be achieved through psychological or physical violence and can extend to murder. For example, children who are removed from their groups are raised to forget everything that once connected them to their relatives.

Emotionally, Kateryna views the actions of the Russians as genocide because, once children are torn away from their parents or original lives, they are subjected to re-education. Their identity is erased, and a Russian identity is imposed. The children can no longer express themselves freely or move about as they wish. They are forbidden from speaking Ukrainian, owning anything that resembles the Ukrainian flag or its colors, creating pictures related to Ukraine, or singing songs from their homeland. They are "reset." "If ten- or twelve-year-old children object because they

have learned that they have the right to express their thoughts and feelings—saying things like, 'You can't do that to me!' and when children complain or cry—then you can be sure that their Russian educators will try even harder to break them," explains Kateryna.

Russians threaten children by placing them in psychiatric clinics. They often threaten to put them in the 'basement' and then tell the children they would be much better off here with them. In Russia, the children would be cared for, loved, educated, and raised correctly. They are told that nobody is waiting for them at home, and instead, they learn that they have been forgotten. What a tragedy! How deeply can we wound the souls of children? How long will it take to heal and rebuild them?

As the children express disbelief that their parents have forgotten them, they reveal their longing to return home and share cherished school memories. Children's pleas to go back prompt increasingly strict measures against them. Some children speak Russian at home with their parents due to family customs, but when they return outside, they only speak Ukrainian, even though their Ukrainian may not be as fluent as Russian. They cry with happiness when they hold the Ukrainian flag in their hands," adds Kateryna. You can hardly imagine that in our part of the world.

You cause someone's death in this way without physically harming them. Nothing else is what is being done for these children. They are to be growing people with new personalities. They are to follow an ideology that makes them turn against their fellow citizens. They are to be turned into killers, into fighting machines.

Anyone who thought that all this improved with the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Iron Curtain and that it disappeared due to a rapprochement of the countries is entirely mistaken.

*Is the assessment correct that most deported children are teenagers? However, the very young ones are not taken. If so, why is that? Can toddlers not be shaped more effectively than rebellious teenagers?*

*Couldn't toddlers be much better for adoption and, thus, also for brainwashing?*

Kateryna can explain: "Yes, they consist mainly of teenagers." In theory, it's not that difficult to brainwash a teenager. You want to turn them from the inside out, from left to right. The intention behind it: These kids should fight against their former compatriots at some point." The Russian thinks to himself: "Why burn my people when I can also get Ukrainians who kill Ukrainians?" "Yes, it's a diabolical system."

But younger children are also taken away; they are stolen. And yes, a lot of children are taken from orphanages. But that's a different story. These children have no parents who miss them or care to get them back. Only relatives are allowed to pick up their children; staff from the orphanage cannot do so. "It's a very complicated legal situation," Kateryna explains. "The children, who are still quite young, are often in their parents' care, which makes it more challenging to take them out somewhere." Many families have small children at home who may not necessarily attend nursery school.

In contrast, older children prefer to spend time with their friends, play, and engage in sports, so they are not at home as much as younger children. After corona, the older children were happy to return to school and lead an everyday life. The fact that in some cases they were also pleased about a summer camp is all too easy to understand.

Some young people have put up with going to Russian-run schools to learn anything at all. These children are then easier to deport. Kateryna explains that teenagers typically desire what their friends have. "If their friends are allowed to go to summer camp with the sports club, other children want that too; it's normal." Of course, they could not know what they would have to face. The deceitful aspect is that the Russians create a scenario for young people, making it evident and ultimately more accessible for them to choose the holiday camp. That means nothing but ensuring that there is as much panic, pressure, fear, and uncertainty as possible. "There are rumors that 'street fights' may occur in the area, and it would be better if the children weren't present, as they might even be abducted."

Kateryna understands that they attempt to intimidate people by instilling fear. They pretend to be soldiers approaching the city gates, creating a sense of danger. Their goal is to make parents believe it would be safer for their children to camp in Crimea or anywhere else, just not at home.

Another reason parents agree to let their child go to a "camp" is straightforward: they have nothing to eat. Some parents think that at least someone will look after them. "We must recognize the isolation faced by individuals and entire populations living in occupied zones," Kateryna explains to clarify the parents' actions. "They have no contact, no opportunities to get information from outside. Sometimes, they no longer trust their closest relatives because anyone could be a collaborator or a traitor, and some focus on themselves first.

Conversely, a wave of willingness to help swept through the shaken country—people are assisting each other more than before and uniting wherever possible. In their greatest need, people are being put under almost unimaginable pressure. For example, when you tell a mother whose older child is already fighting in the Ukrainian army: "Come on, we'll take your younger child to a camp where they can be properly care for. But you need to say yes and pack a few things. Tomorrow, we will no longer be accepting applications," this puts immense pressure on her. Many such mothers say, "Yes, take my child with you. Anywhere is better than here, where we have nothing to eat." Only to realize a few days later that they had made the biggest mistake of their lives.

We would like to know how many people are involved with Save Ukraine, which is working on 300,000 cases of stolen children. There are only five. These five do not work only on child deportations. They have other tasks that align with Save Ukraine's mission.

In other words, are five people trying to save the whole world? Even Kateryna, who seems serious and focused for the most part, has to laugh. "If you like, yes. We can't even be more; we must be cautious about what we do and who we work with. We have to be able to trust each other." Mothers have faced deportation. Relatives have gone to clinics. The FSB has interrogated them for days, or

they have "disappeared" after trying to free their children. "There are already special units hunting down the mothers," emphasizes Kateryna.

The documents must be handled in the utmost secrecy; every action should remain discreet for as long as possible. If word got out about the best time and place to cross a specific border, it wouldn't stay confidential for long among a large group, putting everyone involved at incredible risk.

How unsafe does she feel? Initially, she wasn't afraid, but that only came later. She knew she was doing the right thing. She was working to bring children back to their mothers. What could be wrong with that? But what about her safety? She knows she is on a "list"; the FSB is naturally "interested" in people like Kateryna. Mothers who were interrogated and shown photos told her that her photo was among those shown to the frightened women. That frightens her, of course. But it makes her even angrier. But most of all, it confirms her: If the FSB is interested in you, if they are collecting your photos, your data, and your personal information, then you must be doing something right. Kateryna feels safe in Ukraine, which sounds absurd when you consider that she lives in a country that is at war with its giant neighbor.

"The sirens, the bomb alarms - you almost get used to it. It's never easy to hear parents crying for help, feeling lost because their child is gone. They urgently want to bring them home but don't know how. The doubt and fear that a child might have vanished forever weigh heavily on Kateryna. She sees the heart-wrenching cries of parents who often don't know where their child is. These emotions compel her to push through her fears and carry on. She moves between two poles: the lawyer in her does everything according to the rules. When she hears the sirens, she goes to the cellar. But the helper in her would prefer to stay on the phone so that she can make as many calls as possible.

But she can no longer go home, which would be her greatest wish. She comes from a town on the Russian border. She has known the stories of flight and persecution since 2014. She has family there that she cannot see. She can't go there; the others can't leave there. She doesn't want to endanger anyone, nor do her friends.

We, and the age-independent EasyJet generation, moan about rising flight costs. Others can't even travel home for their grandparents' funerals. We hope our work conveys the situation: parents do not send their children to the Russians. That nobody here is stupid. "Why do they give away their children without hesitation?" People have asked me time and again. Of course, that's why I do not like that! Nobody gives their children away without careful consideration! No, it is a life situation, a tremendous stress that those unaffected can hardly imagine. The panic of wanting to do the right thing for the country, the family, and the children's safety must be immense. When the Russians stage "street fights," who wouldn't want to get their child to safety? We've learned from the kids we've spoken to that the desire to Russify them doesn't work. Ukrainian children can't be "turned round," as the aggressor imagines.