

Olesya Khromeychuk

A Loss:

The Story of a Dead Soldier Told by His Sister

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In memory of Volodymyr Pavliv (1974-2017)

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Foreword

My generation believed war in Europe was over. We had read of it in distant lands, including the proxy wars fought by leaders in the name of our security. We had experienced local acts of murderous violence, characterized as terror, like The Troubles in Northern Ireland, or the attacks of September 11th, a day on which I happened to be in New York. We had watched the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. But the horror of a full-scale war – of armies on the march, of international borders crossed by tanks, of blockades and aerial bombardments, of prisoners taken and militants executed? No. That, we believed, was a matter of history.

Then Ukraine entered my life. A decade ago, I received an invitation to deliver a lecture in Lviv, at the historic law school. One thing led to another – new encounters, research on the origins of genocide and crimes against humanity, a search for the house where my grandfather Leon Buchholz was born. I find it, on Sheptyts'kykh Street, close to St George's Cathedral, and I am able to imagine a life, his parents and siblings, his departure from Lviv in the summer of 1914. I will learn that his beloved older brother Emil stayed behind, enlisted as an infantryman in the army of the Austro-Hungarians, likely involved in the 'most colossal battle' near Lviv that involved over a million and a half men, described by *The New York Times* at the time as a 'thousandfold, cosmic destruction and wrecking of human life, the most appalling holocaust history had ever known'.

One of the casualties was my Emil, killed in action before he reached his twentieth birthday. 'What was a single murder,' Stefan Zweig asked, within 'the cosmic, thousandfold guilt, the most terrible mass destruction and mass annihilation yet known to history?' My grandfather was never able to talk to me of this loss, not even once.

This tale and others catalyses me into a greater involvement in the life of the city, a place where the lives of my forebears connected with my own work. To delve into the archives, I retain the assistance of two remarkable Ukrainian doctoral students of law, Ihor and Ivan. And then in 2014, war comes to Ukraine. Ihor is called up, sent to the east. The reality of war draws closer. On visits to Lviv, I will see many young men on the streets, in the uniform of active military engagement. I worry about Ihor, my research assistant. Reports of fighting in the east of Ukraine become more acute, so does the rising death toll. War approaches.

The years pass, the fighting in the east continues. Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea, Syria. The lines connect. In the autumn of 2021, I am invited to Kyiv, to deliver a lecture at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, to donate an artefact from my grandfather's meagre possessions. And then a few weeks later, Russian troops mass on the borders. A full-scale invasion seems impossible to imagine, and then, yes, it happens. Europe is once more at war, in the very places that saw mayhem and death in the times of my grandfather and his brother.

This is the personal context in which I read Olesya Khromeychuk's remarkable, intimate memoir. It is the account my grandfather never was able to write. Not history, but now. Not distant, but proximate. Not imaginary, but real. Here is an account of love and loss, one that is intimate and personal, that transcends time and place, that is brutal and universal, and raises the only question that remains: why?

Philippe Sands

June 2022