Larissa Babij

A Kind of Refugee

The Story of an American Who Refused to Leave Ukraine

With a foreword by Vladislav Davidzon

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Printed in the EU

To my grandmothers
“Busia” Irena and “Babtsia” Maria

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Foreword
By Vladislav Davidzon

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.
—Saul Bellow, ***The Adventures of Augie March***

Larissa Babij is Ukrainian, American born in Manchester, Connecticut, which despite its historic silk factories was dully suburban. Like Augie March she would make her own idiosyncratic way and record, freestyle—recursively returning to her ancestral lands. Abandoning the new world for the old, Babij would send the word back to the new. Thus spake Bellow of the character of the hero in Heraclitus—his point being, perhaps, that ultimately every such hero is a priori a critic. The book that you are holding in your hands, *A Kind of Refugee*, is a collection of writings that first began as wartime dispatches and occasional salvos to concerned friends and relatives. They are—as the reader will doubtless find—absolutely gripping. This book constitutes an important addition to the literature of primary documents and diaries recounting the first year of the full-scale war that Russia liberally unleashed in Ukraine in 2022. It offers—from the pen of a literate and fluid Ukrainian-cultured native writer of English—one of the very best and most humane accounts of what we felt and experienced during those first months of unspeakable violence.

Larissa and I were first introduced in 2017, in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv (once the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet republic) by a mutual friend. That friend was Yevgeniy Fiks, a Russian-born American artist whom I knew from my New York days, with whom Babij had co-curated the exhibition "In Edenia, a City of the Future," featuring an international group of renowned contemporary artists. The exhibition at the Yermilov Art Center took its name and inspiration from Yiddish author Kalman

Zingman's 1918 utopian novella, which was published in Kharkiv in the midst of the Russian Empire's dissolution into revolution and war; the short-lived Ukrainian republic's declaration of national autonomy for Jews, Russians, and Poles; and the looming establishment of a Bolshevik Communist USSR. The Yiddish writer's work prophesied an idealistic, multicultural, and futurist fantasia of ethnic comity (a worthy precedent for the cultural activists—of whom Babij was one—who were working to reshape Ukraine, after the 2013–2014 Maidan protests, into a vibrant political nation).

Zingman's novel was set in the far-off future of 1943, which—as we all now know—would not turn out to be a year particularly renowned for its spirit of liberal ethnic comity. That same year, incidentally, Babij's Ukrainian grandparents would have to abandon their homes in the country's west, setting them on the path to becoming refugees. The exhibition sparked viewers to meditate on utopia—whether with forlorn nostalgia or with the vision of a dream curdled into a nightmare. Larissa and I would eventually become close friends—may all of your own friends, dear reader, be as generous and loyal in that art form as is Babij.

Larissa's path is noteworthy in that she left her original Ukrainian diaspora habitat to return to the land of her ancestors. Her depiction of the fabric of daily life as an ordinary citizen in wartime Ukraine is as deeply felt as it is intelligent. Unsurprisingly for a dancer and performer, Babij channels and processes information through her body. Her sensibility is syncretic—at once cerebral, sensual, and poetic.

Babij is also a culture worker par excellence: she has engaged in writing, translating, editing, curating, criticism, and teaching over nearly two decades in Ukraine. She was one of the most valued editorial staff members of the literary journal *The Odessa Review*, which I edited together with my wife Regina Maryanovska-Davidzon in the years after the Maidan. In February 2014, when the Maidan revolution succeeded in removing Ukraine's authoritarian presidential administration from power (and the war began with Russia's insidious invasion of Crimea), Babij and other change-oriented culture workers occupied the basement of the Ministry of Culture. Their protest against that monument of ossified Soviet

stagnation was a distillation of the values of the Maidan. That "pragmatically utopian" attempt to liquidate the ministry has yet to achieve its goal.

When Babij posits that she is "a Kind of Refugee," this is a characteristically thoughtful and wry assertion. The sobriquet intimates that there exists a wide variety and great teeming typology of refugees. Long before she was forced to abandon her Kyiv apartment by the rain of Russian missiles and approaching tanks and troops, her grandparents had been refugees after World War II. Two of them spent time in the limbo of a DP (displaced persons) camp, while two made their own way through chaotic postwar Europe—all of them eventually making it to immigrant heaven. That is, to America. Growing up in Connecticut, Larissa was faced with the traditional choice demanded by American assimilation—to embrace or to efface. Ukraine would pull her back. This book is written from the perspective of an eternal insider outsider, and Babij is continually reliving her grandparents' displacement. Doing so, she has a deep sense that to be a Ukrainian (even one who was born into the comforts of North American life) is to understand how all present-day Ukrainians bear deep scars of intergenerational trauma. Indeed, her thoughtful reflections on what her grandparents lived through form the narrative spine of the book and constitute its moral and historical core. Her epistles, which offer a sense of the extraordinary recent past, are as remarkably astute as they are clever and witty.

It should be noted that Babij's background is in Ukrainian avant-garde theater. And she writes about it from a historically literate perspective, being one of Ukraine's most sensitive and penetrating theater critics. Her writing is always lyrical, passionate, and convincing. Some of her long-form theater criticism appeared in the culture section of *The Odessa Review* (and nothing makes an editor more thrilled than to publish a critic of her acuity and powers of observation). Her later interest in the Feldenkrais method, a movement practice that fosters a holistic recognition of the connections between the mind and body, should come as no surprise. It is part and parcel of her commitment to understanding reality and history through the movements of the body.

A Kind of Refugee is very much redolent of Larissa's real life spirit and voice. The text is suffused with what we routinely think of as particularly American traits—warm openness, directness, curiosity, nonjudgmental generosity, and gumption. The story is related in the unadorned and colloquial register of thought, and her effervescent positivity can be felt everywhere throughout the work. Reading Larissa's charged epistles from Mykolaiv or Lviv or her home in Kyiv, it is obvious that one is in the presence of a historically aware, sensitive, and canny observer of the textures of social relations and everyday life. If Babij also observes that the Ukrainians are not a philosophical nation—as opposed to other European nations who have contributed greatly to the history of Western philosophy—she means that Ukrainians are more practical and action-oriented. Perhaps certain historical conditions are necessary for a nation to develop an inclination to philosophize. Could centuries of repression and suffering dull the capacity for thought? Larissa Babij's first book categorically negates that thesis. While serving as an excellent guide to these horrific times, it is a deeply important work of philosophic candor and observation by an incredibly perceptive critic.

Introduction

It is summer 2023 and I am at home in Kyiv. Ukraine has been at war against Russia's unilateral full-scale invasion for over 500 days. Really, the invasion began in 2014, when Russia sent its "little green men" to take over Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Now darkness has violently flooded into the heart of Europe, threatening to extinguish the life of the Ukrainian nation. It will keep expanding its reach as long as it is allowed.

This book is an invitation to revisit the recent past, when Russia was bombing Ukrainian civilians sheltering in their own cities, attacking evacuation corridors, striking public squares in bustling daytime hours with missiles, and committing war crimes in Ukraine. Remember Russia's contemptuous and cynical motivations for its violations of international law? What about your own agitation while following the news of the war and wondering how Ukrainians were fighting and surviving? I remember Western people emanating an impervious confidence that they ultimately have everything under control, no matter their position toward Ukraine or the suffering of its people. And I remember having the distinct sense that the outcome of the war depends on what I do.

I no longer remember what it feels like for the power to go out unexpectedly when I'm in the middle of replying to an email; or how the air in my apartment feels at 12°C; or the newness of sounds of explosions (intentional military ones) several blocks away. Recalling the most difficult and darkest moments of your history requires working against your own nature, which favors the recollection of pleasant sensations. The past is always in danger of receding into darkness (from where it threatens to take over the future). But I should not need to be an active participant in a 21st-century war to begin to make sense of what my grandparents endured during World War II. I should not need to be the target of enemy missiles to discover my own power to fight against evil. What did you and I—and all of us together—not learn from the history of the 20th century?

Life is sharper and vision more acute when pressed up against death. This is a story of approaching the past through present-day

experience. It is also a story of being swept up in historic events without getting carried away. It is a testament to the power of adhering to what is important to you without knowing what's going to happen next. War puts you face-to-face with decisions that affect more than your personal well-being and survival. Your actions and decisions drive the further course of events and the destiny of your grandchildren, your country, and the whole world.

***

I grew up in the United States in the late 20th century, the grandchild of Ukrainians who left their homes under life-threatening pressure during World War II. My parents, sister, and I lived in a house in the suburbs with a yard, two cars, and a pet cat. My grandparents presided over holidays, babysat when my parents went out, and saved money to send their grandchildren to prestigious US universities.

My grandmother "Busya" Irena lived to be 92; "Babtsya" Maria has made it past 96. I got to know them in their kitchens. The culture of their homeland seeped into me through the language we spoke, through the smells and flavors of their respective borschts, through the rituals of weekly church-going, obedience, and reverence for one's elders.

When Babtsya Maria and I made traditional Easter bread in her kitchen, I'd ask about her life before. How many times, while kneading dough, did I hear the story about the group of young people, a mix of Poles and Ukrainians, who moved west through Germany after the war, looking for food and medical care, while avoiding the Soviet authorities looking to "repatriate" their citizens? Maria got married in a displaced persons (DP) camp at age 19. Her dress was made of parachute silk.

Disparate images and incomplete stories offered glimpses into a world that had no analogue in the suburban US approaching the turn of the millennium. I was vexed by the sense that I knew something deep in my bones, cells, psyche—let's call it the experience of war—which I could not have learned in my immediate surroundings.

My grandparents came from Halychyna, a region in Ukraine's west that was ruled by Austria-Hungary, then Poland. When the Soviets invaded in 1939, Maria was a 12-year-old schoolgirl in a rural village. Irena, a schoolteacher, was married and pregnant with her first child. Two years later, the Nazis arrived. In 1943, they took all the able-bodied youth from Maria's village to Germany as forced laborers. That year Irena's husband was targeted for assassination by Polish insurgents, and the couple fled westward with their young son. I will never know what my grandparents experienced during those abrupt departures and in the turbulent war years before my parents were born.[1] But I can say from experience that war changes you irreversibly.

The vibrant Ukrainian diaspora community provided a living connection to a lost world I had never seen. My childhood was a kaleidoscope of activities aimed at keeping my Ukrainian heritage alive: Saturday school, church, scouts, folk dancing . . . The community largely comprised post-WWII immigrants, many of whom had passed through the DP camps[2] (which had their own lively cultural and educational life). Relationships forged in wartime intensity were renewed on the North American continent; my grandparents also maintained lifelong friendships with Ukrainians who'd resettled in Australia and England. The Ukrainian diaspora was committed to preserving the language, culture, and identity of its homeland, which was being ruthlessly plundered and suppressed by the Communist Soviet regime. We took great pride in this mission.

1 My parents were born in Europe just after the war. They grew up in the US as immigrants and met decades later at a Ukrainian diaspora New Year's dance.

2 After the war, Europe was flooded with displaced persons (DPs), including millions from regions of Eastern Europe that by 1945 were controlled by the Soviet Union. The USSR was eager to repatriate the people it claimed as its citizens, especially Ukrainians. Hundreds of thousands of repatriates were executed upon arrival in the USSR and over 2 million were sent to labor camps, where only half of those imprisoned survived their terms. This was punishment for the alleged crime of aiding the Nazis, no matter that millions of these "assistants" were taken to Germany by force (as Ostarbeiters) or as prisoners of war. Some DPs chose suicide over returning to the Soviet "motherland." See https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CR%5CE%5CRepatriation.htm.

Membership in this community—with its language and traditions and the ephemeral knowledge of mass violence—made me strange in the eyes of my American classmates. My family spoke Ukrainian, a language my neighbors told me was the same as Russian. We celebrated Christmas Eve with twelve dishes with untranslatable names that were nothing like American cuisine. At Ukrainian scout camp we would sing around the bonfire. Images of dashing Cossack freedom fighters helping maidens hoist water from the well emanated romance through lyric verses set to haunting melodies. But at home I got my water from the tap, and the guys in my high school were busy playing video games.

My grandparents were hard-working and self-reliant in a way that seemed redundant in the consumer culture of the late 20th-century US. Poring through clothing, furniture, and travel catalogues, I'd imagine myself inhabiting the scenes on every page. But there was a disconnect between me and all that glittering promise. Sensing that the Hollywood movies I watched could tell me nothing about my grandparents' wartime experience, I began to doubt whether I could trust that the world around me was real. But the colorful lands of the folk songs I loved were also a fantasy world, detached from the cars and wall-to-wall carpets that were indisputably present in the American suburbs.

The dream of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union became reality in 1991, when I was 11 years old. It happened without bloodshed. On August 24, Ukraine's parliament declared independence, and in December it was ratified by nationwide referendum, with support from over 90% of the country's population.

The land of stories and songs that I had grown up imagining was now a country with the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal and a population whose savings became worthless overnight. When my family visited Ukraine in 1997, as we walked through the village where my relatives lived, the kids picked ripe plums off the dirt road, wiped them off, and ate them. Gross! Driving between cities, we passed endless fields of sunflowers, just as I had imagined, and billboards advertising Coca-Cola—which complicated my romantic vision of Ukraine.

My best friends in college in New York City were Russian Jews who had emigrated just after the USSR collapsed. It was awkward when I invited them home for Ukrainian holidays. My grandparents remembered the Russians as mortal enemies (and were casually disdainful of Jews), but I was determined to see past old prejudices—we were all American compatriots now. By that time I was aware of the enormous gap between the imaginary Ukraine I had grown to love through my patriotic diaspora upbringing and the actual present-day post-Soviet country Ukraine, which I knew next to nothing about.

***

In 2005, on a wave of optimism after the 2004 Orange Revolution, I arrived in Ukraine's capital Kyiv, curious and clueless. It was the summer after some one million Ukrainians had demonstrated on Kyiv's central Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in sub-freezing temperatures to protest the results of a rigged presidential election. The non-violent protesters demanded a re-vote to ensure a fair chance for opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, who had been poisoned by his Kremlin-friendly opponent in the run-up, which permanently disfigured his face. Yushchenko represented a Europe- and NATO-oriented course for Ukraine, in contrast to the previous administration's support for the Kremlin and its methods for eliminating opposition.[3] Ukraine's Supreme Court ordered another election—this time, closely monitored by domestic and international observers—where Yushchenko won by a significant margin.

3 In 2000, while Leonid Kuchma was president, Georgiy Gongadze, a Ukrainian journalist known for investigating government corruption and for championing free speech, was kidnapped and murdered. While the murder investigation ordered by the president stalled, tape recordings surfaced that implicated Kuchma in the journalist's disappearance, sparking mass protests in the center of Kyiv (December 2000–March 2001) demanding his resignation. Kuchma served out his term until 2004, but did not succeed in getting his chosen successor into office. He has never been officially charged in relation to Gongadze's murder. In 2014 and 2015, he served as Ukraine's representative in the Trilateral Contact Group that signed the Minsk agreements.

Fourteen years independent, Ukraine was a teenager. To me it seemed like there was so much space for building, for transformation, for contributing to the construction of a new democratic society. Yushchenko's presidency, colored by inflated expectations and constant infighting within the administration, was too chaotic even for the change-oriented public that elected him. In 2010, disappointed and yearning for stability, in a moment where life is stranger than fiction, Ukrainians legitimately elected Yushchenko's former opponent Viktor Yanukovych[4] to the highest office. Through democratic procedure, Ukrainians chose the stability and familiarity of a government that would rule through repression, corruption, and pleasing the Kremlin, with its members primarily working to increase their personal wealth. Freedom, after all, is insecure, unpredictable, and ultimately uncomfortable.

I spent those years living in Kyiv, working with the experimental performing artists of TanzLaboratorium and immersing myself in the ferment of the budding contemporary art scene—first as a translator, then reviewing exhibitions, then working together with the artists to organize public events, exhibitions, and publications. Working in the contemporary arts in Ukraine, with its entrenched Soviet legacy of art serving the reigning ideology (enshrined in the Ministry of Culture), involved reimagining the infrastructure to support our art. This meant reforming existing institutions, experimenting with forms of working together, and making our work visible in the international art world. Activism just went with the territory.

So when journalist Mustafa Nayyem wrote his famous Facebook post[5] on November 21, 2013, calling all Ukrainians who cared about their country's future and were dismayed about President

4 Yanukovych, originally selected to succeed Kuchma, was known for his criminal background in his native Donetsk region and for his pro-Russian foreign policy. His public image and campaign were shaped by a savvy American political consultant named Paul J. Manafort, who would later manage Donald Trump's campaign for US president. In 2017 Manafort was indicted in the US probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

5 At the time Afghani-Ukrainian Mustafa Nayyem was an investigative journalist and activist. He ended his post calling for people to come to Maidan with the phrase: "Likes don't count."

Yanukovych's refusal to sign an association agreement between Ukraine and the EU to go to Kyiv's central square, I headed for Maidan Nezalezhnosti. Most Ukrainians, especially the younger generations, imagined their future in Europe and felt betrayed by the president's abrupt shift of the national course toward Russia. The modest demonstrations continued until the night of November 30, when riot police were ordered to clear the square; they violently attacked the protesters, mostly students, injuring dozens. The following day, several hundred thousand people filled the center of Kyiv to protest their government's abuse of police power and brutality toward its citizens. By the winter of 2013–2014 it was time to grow up.

The dramatic and deadly Maidan protests (also known as the Revolution of Dignity) were live-streamed, so people around the world watched in real time as a mass of black-suited riot police pressed in on the crowd on the night of December 10. People kept coming from all over Ukraine to the center of Kyiv: for three winter months Maidan was crowded with tents, movement, and arguments. Warming themselves around fires in oil drums on the street, people who had previously never crossed paths began to discuss their visions of the country they wanted to live in. Refusing to cower before the government's threats, Ukrainian protesters positioned themselves in public space to demand that the country's politicians respect and serve the citizens' political needs.

By February 20, 2014, regime-friendly and Kremlin-backed snipers had killed around a hundred protesters. These deaths were recorded on camera, and the protesters' funerals were broadcast too. Only Yanukovych's abdication and flight to Russia the following evening happened in the shadows. Ukrainians succeeded in ousting their corrupt, authoritarian government, which was subservient to Russia, and demonstrated to the world that they were ready to fight and shed blood to make their country their own.

Then in late February, "little green men" (Russian forces in military gear, but without insignia) appeared in Ukraine's autonomous republic of Crimea, quietly launching Russia's invasion that continues to this day. In March, people who spoke Russian with a different accent than the locals appeared on the streets of Donetsk

and in other cities in Ukraine's eastern regions. The "separatist" movement, fomented by Russia and bolstered by the participation of Russian citizens,[6] used violent force to take over local government buildings across Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions and proclaim the establishment of "people's republics."

The Ukrainian government declared an anti-terrorist operation (ATO) to reclaim its cities and lands. Many of the protesters that had come to Kyiv's Maidan immediately went east, becoming the volunteer forces fighting the undeclared Russian invasion and supplying those forces with whatever they could. In 2014, Ukraine's official military had just over a hundred thousand troops, having grown feeble during the years since independence.[7] The interim government hastily reinstated the National Guard and called on regional governments to form and equip battalions to bolster Ukraine's armed forces. Bloody battles, fought largely by volunteer battalions equipped by Ukrainian businessmen and civic activists, continued intensely through 2015.

Ukraine's present-day valiant defense is rooted in this early trial by fire. Many members of the Armed Forces who hold leadership roles today received their combat education in the ATO's first years—in lessons learned through huge losses. Ukrainians' success in ousting their pro-Russian government in 2014 gives power and legitimacy to their ongoing fight against Russian domination.

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Maidan remained occupied until August 2014. The activists who remained in Kyiv formed groups aimed at government oversight and policy reform. In fall 2014 I bought an apartment in Kyiv. My commitment was to artistic reflection, institutional reform in culture, and supporting my Ukrainian colleagues who understood that at the heart of the violent conflict that had materialized in

6 https://kyivindependent.com/the-origins-of-the-2014-war-in-donbas/.

7 After 1991, Ukraine pursued a course of nuclear disarmament (transferring the arsenal it inherited after the collapse of the USSR to Russia); flirted with forms of military alliance with other former Soviet republics; and—under Yanukovych—adopted non-aligned status.

Ukraine's east lay the unresolved question of how contemporary Ukraine must deal with its Soviet past.

It was not enough for Ukrainians to claim to be victims of the Communist party of the USSR, even when Soviet policy had intentionally killed millions of Ukrainians (for instance, in the 1932–1933 Holodomor famine, and in the purges of artistic and intellectual elites that climaxed in 1937). A victim is always in need of an aggressor. Ukrainians had to acknowledge and account for their own instrumental participation in establishing the USSR in 1922, in the latter's systemic murder of tens of millions of its own citizens, through to its 1991 collapse. Artists whose brilliance we celebrate today—like Ukrainian theater director Les Kurbas, who was executed by the Soviet regime in 1937—were intimately involved in building the Soviet Ukrainian state, where arts and ideology were deeply entwined.

By 2014, addressing the Soviet legacy in Ukrainian art production had left the realm of theoretical debate. In the basement of the Ministry of Culture, now occupied by culture activists, we practiced group decision-making via assembly and called for the liquidation of the outdated institute that reproduced a Soviet approach to culture in independent Ukraine. The Ministry was good for supporting corruption schemes and imitating artistic activity, but terrible for encouraging the production of innovative, thought-provoking culture that would invite, encourage, and inspire audiences to think independently.

Here I was, an American-born and -educated translator and art curator, in a room full of Soviet- and Ukrainian-born artists and activists. Energized by the Maidan protests and driven by the urgency of the sudden Russian invasion, we were trying to rebuild an entire system. We had to change Ukraine. But we couldn't even discuss a concept like "institution" without understanding where an institution comes from. This meant beginning to address our vastly different political backgrounds. And learning how to speak to one another.

Finding myself trying to collectively draft a national cultural policy with my Ukrainian colleagues—none of us with appropriate professional qualifications, but each sensing the immediate need

for change—I got a taste of how much hard work democracy really requires. This was nothing like what I had learned growing up in the US, where it was clear what avenues were available for citizen participation. The rules and traditions for voicing your opinion were set, along with who has the authority to make decisions in the large machine that seemed to run mostly on its own inertia.

***

In March of 2014, just after Russia invaded Crimea, the senator from my home state met privately with a handful of American citizens in Kyiv. He and his aide were just a bit older than me. All of us were scarred by the experience of the US's reckless invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the false pretext that the country was harboring weapons of mass destruction. The American officials were clear: we do not want to repeat the experience of entering into an overseas war that we later regret.

But what about historical responsibility? In 1994, the US—together with the UK and Russia—signed the Budapest Memorandum, welcoming the accession of Ukraine to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The document obliged the signatories to refrain from threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine. In fact the US had pressed Ukraine to give up the nuclear arms it inherited after the fall of the USSR—to Russia!

Twenty years later, in 2014, Russia had outright invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and annexed it illegally while the other Budapest Memorandum signatories looked on uncomfortably. The US imposed sanctions on a dozen individuals associated with the Russian government and the EU followed suit. It took over a week following the Russian Federation's illegal annexation of Crimea for the United Nations General Assembly to adopt a resolution "calling on States, international organizations and specialized agencies not to recognize any change in the status of Crimea or the Black Sea port city of Sevastopol."[8] It also called on states (as if

8 https://press.un.org/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm.

retroactively) to "desist and refrain from actions aimed at disrupting Ukraine's national unity and territorial integrity, including by modifying its borders through the threat or use of force."[9]

This was the beginning of the West's murky Ukraine policy of mixing indignant speech with ultimate appeasement of Russia. No UN member state was willing to act decisively—politically or militarily—to stop Russia from taking whatever pieces of Ukraine that it wanted, as long as Ukraine was unable to withstand such incursions.

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With Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine now de facto controlled by Russia or its proxies, the people who lived there had to decide with whom they belonged. Ukrainian citizens, such as filmmaker turned political prisoner Oleh Sentsov,[10] faced persecution and the threat of unlawful detention in their home cities, simply for their pro-Ukrainian political position. The Indigenous Crimean Tatars have been subject to systematic repression and human rights abuses, leading the activist and current political prisoner Nariman Dzhelal to compare Crimea to "a concentration camp."[11] In Donetsk, the occupation authorities turned the Izolyatsia contemporary art center into a prison camp, where they imprisoned Stanislav Aseyev, who had reported on life in the "DPR" using a pen name. Just acting like a free citizen of Ukraine was not allowed by the new "authorities."

Parts of Ukraine—which millions of Ukrainian citizens had called home—were now a territory with an ambiguous status—neither fully under Ukrainian government control, nor self-governing as their declared "people's republic" names would suggest, nor

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9 Ibid.

10 Oleh Sentsov was arrested in his native Simferopol, Crimea, by Russian authorities in May 2014. Detained on false charges, he was taken to Russia and in 2015 was sentenced by a Russian court to 20 years in prison. His unlawful imprisonment, during which he went on a hunger strike, garnered worldwide attention. He was released in a prisoner swap and returned to Ukraine in 2019. As of 2023, he was fighting in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

11 https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/02/27/7326286/.

de jure ruled by Russia though de facto that was close to the truth. Kyiv and other cities throughout Ukraine began filling with internally displaced persons (IDPs). A promising contemporary dancer from Donetsk became my roommate. She made a point of speaking Ukrainian in public; established an innovative dance school for kids in Kyiv; and periodically, unbeknownst to me, suffered debilitating panic attacks. The people who had fled or fought against Russian occupation faced the challenge of assimilating into communities where the war seemed distant. New government programs and international funding initiatives were launched in Ukraine to provide support to IDPs and veterans of the ATO. Meanwhile Ukrainians and the world at large were beginning to assimilate the idea that a sizable swath of the country was now an obscure region beyond the pale of international agreements or law or justice.

Minsk I, Minsk II, and the "contact line" separating the eastern regions of Ukraine into government-controlled and non-government-controlled territory stabilized.[12] By 2016, the fighting in the east looked like a "frozen conflict," with a few Ukrainian soldiers being killed each day but no shifts in territorial control. Russian forces, still claiming to be "separatists," refused to move their military equipment and continued to shoot across the contact line at Ukrainian soldiers. These soldiers, under orders not to return fire (as required by the Minsk agreements), remained in position to

12 The Minsk agreements, drafted by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine (with one representative each from Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—and mediated by the leaders of France and Germany), were signed in September 2014 and February 2015. The leaders of the self-proclaimed and internationally unrecognized "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic" also signed the documents without being parties to the agreement. The measures to be implemented included an immediate ceasefire; withdrawal of heavy weapons and the creation of a demilitarized security zone; release of all hostages and prisoners; restoration of state border control to the Ukrainian government; pullout of all foreign armed formations and military equipment; and alteration of Ukraine's constitution to grant special status to particular areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Russia maintained that it was not a party to the agreements, and they were never implemented in full by either side. See also Duncan Allan's 2020 analysis in "The Minsk Conundrum": https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine.

protect their country, while people in their country, living further from the contact line, began to adjust to the status quo.

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In this context of legalized ambiguity I began studying the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education. Learning to listen to my physical sensations in movement; to discern the difference between what I am really doing and what I want to be doing; and to direct the movement of my attention was a profoundly therapeutic gift. I spent a few years traveling between the US and Kyiv, attending professional Feldenkrais teacher training sessions several times a year in New York City.

In Ukraine there was a growing need to help combat veterans transition to civilian life and to help people from the country's war-torn eastern regions recover from or continue living with the stress of ongoing shelling from Russia-backed separatists. Letting go of unnecessary physical tension, learning to regulate how much effort you put into a task, reminding your body of its natural rhythms—all this can be very helpful for people in situations of extreme stress or who have lived through traumatic experiences. I translated for American somatics practitioners training Ukrainian psychologists and social workers whose clients—and often they themselves—lived close to the contact line between Ukrainian and non-government-controlled territory. We practiced ways of encouraging people to turn more attention to their physical sensations, to their breath, to where they are in space.

Moshe Feldenkrais, who invented the method I was studying, reminded his students, "We cannot function satisfactorily if our thinking, senses, and feelings do not affect our acts or responses."[13] It sounds like common sense. But I was so accustomed to making decisions based on what I imagined might happen or what I thought others expected from me that this was a revelation.

Beginning to rediscover and repair the connections between my own sensing, feeling, thinking, and doing seemed like a

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13 Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Elusive Obvious*, 1981, p. 37.

prerequisite to genuine participation in political life. After years of activism directed toward Ukrainian cultural institutions, I could not ignore my responsibility for the consequences of myself and my American compatriots taking democracy for granted for decades. Meanwhile Ukrainians—still entangled in their Soviet heritage—were constructing their democracy from the ground up in the midst of an undeclared Russian invasion. When I started teaching "Awareness Through Movement" classes based on the Feldenkrais Method, I thought helping people learn to sense what they were actually doing—as opposed to what they thought or hoped they were doing—might help prepare individuals for taking responsibility for their democracies.

Well, you have to start with yourself.

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Living abroad gives you a vantage point from which to see the culture that has formed you. If I came to Ukraine drawn by a desire to encounter that precious quality that my grandparents were so heartbroken to leave behind, then in Ukraine I learned to see and value the firm principles upon which American democracy was founded (hard to see beneath the contentious jockeying that substitutes for American political life today). Ukrainians showed me through their gaze that I walk through the world with a sense of freedom as given, the gift of my American upbringing.

At the end of 2021, I took a trip to the US to visit family. There was no question that I would return to Ukraine for New Year's Eve as planned, despite the Russian troops massing ominously at Ukraine's borders. I had a dance to go to. I had learned to dance the Lindy Hop in Kyiv and joined the vibrant local community of swing dancers who cherished big band jazz music. Growing up in the US, I'd gone to zabavas—social dances with live bands organized by Ukrainian diaspora communities—where we'd dance the polka and the waltz and a simplified tango, sharing the dance floor with our grandparents. Communities sustain our connection to those who came before us and to those who will follow. They're

enlivened by those who are present, while holding space for those who aren't.

Home is more than the apartment where I sleep and wash and eat and work. It's the city of Kyiv, where I often run into people I know, even if we haven't spoken in years. And it is the invisible web of personal relationships, built upon hours and years of my life shared with specific people over the decades. My communities today are not organized or founded on identity (how we name ourselves or what other people call us) but through doing things together and through repeated encounters. Being seen, recognized, receiving affirmation that you exist in somebody else's vision is incredibly nourishing and perhaps necessary to feel like a human being. These chance encounters—a sign that when each of us is doing our own thing, our actions, interests, and principles still bring us to the same place—tell me I am home.

By mid-February 2022, US citizens like me were being urged to leave Ukraine. I'd heard numerous public statements, received emails from the US State Department, and even gotten a personal phone call. My Ukrainian friends were carrying on undaunted. We'd been at war for eight years already. Unwilling to flee preemptively, I wrote a Facebook post expressing my commitment to staying in my home city of Kyiv: "There is a certain power in standing your ground. There is certainly power in exercising your own wits, intuition and curiosity; while giving up the basic (and ever-challenging) practice of standing up for what's yours is a pretty sure path to capitulation."

I had no idea what was coming.

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After Russia invaded Ukraine full-force on February 24, 2022, sending a hundred cruise missiles into cities around the country, I received a flood of messages from people abroad—close friends and family and people I hadn't spoken to in decades who remembered I'm Ukrainian and suddenly found me on the Internet. There was no time to answer every single one individually to assure them that I am, if not exactly safe, then okay.

So during an air raid alarm, soon after I arrived in Lviv in late February, I began writing my first letter as "a kind of refugee" to everyone abroad who might care.[14] Each of the dispatches in this book was written under pressure, while sleep-deprived, in between countless other urgent activities, and sent off right away. War forces you to be strict with priorities: whatever you don't do now may forever remain undone. You have no idea what the next hour (let alone tomorrow) may bring, so better pull yourself together and write it and post it now. That way, your message will be out in the world and publicly accessible, no matter where you will be.

The situation around me was changing, and with every event, with every challenge met, with every devastating blow, I too was changing. At first I was just fleeing, surviving, doing what needed to be done in response to a situation that was continuously new (and terrifying). But then my mind started to change. I started to see and realize things. Tiredness sets in. You get used to living under attack, surviving your own decisions, enduring the losses wrought by war and as a result of your own decisions. I don't know exactly what is happening to me as I am transformed by the war.

I've edited my dispatches only lightly (for the sake of clarity), adding footnotes where additional information is needed. Sometimes the letters refer to current events that would have been clear to readers following the news in the moment. I've added "scene summaries" describing some of what was going on in Ukraine as I was writing these letters (with no intention of producing a comprehensive chronicle of the war's events). The talented Lisa Biletska, Ukrainian artist and writer, made illustrations from my personal photos.

The book concludes with three essays on theater in Ukraine that I published between 2015 and 2018. The Ukrainian artists with whom I consorted then, particularly the performers of TanzLaboratorium, profoundly influenced how I think about politics, civic

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14 The letters collected in this book were first published in real time on Substack, where I continue to post dispatches from Ukraine at war at "a Kind of Refugee." See akindofrefugee2022.substack.com.

responsibility, and the power each person has to shape the world we all live in.

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Today's war is being played out in real time in view of the entire world.

Should it be a surprise that Ukraine's president Zelensky, a comedian and actor by profession, has stepped up to the task of leading his country and being the visible figurehead of a millions-strong citizen resistance? In performance—and comedians know this best—timing matters. In war it means the difference between success and failure, between life and death.

Military people and performers know that your life (the authenticity of your art) depends on what you pay attention to and on what you do. That will define the unpredictable situation you are in. You don't sit there wishing everything were different. You look and assess, you step in, you send out different kinds of signals, and you see what the response is. And *you* decide whether or not to engage and how and when to shift your approach. The performer, the fighter, or the mature adult knows that you always have several possibilities for action. There is an art in the choosing—and only after the fact can you begin to see more fully what that choice meant.

When the US government offered to evacuate Zelensky from Kyiv, as Russian forces quickly headed for the capital after February 24, he responded, "I need ammunition, not a ride." We remember his words only because he stayed, together with millions of Ukrainians who took up arms to defend Ukraine from the advancing Russian army.

I am still in Ukraine, writing from my apartment in Kyiv. As the grandchild of immigrants forced to leave their homeland under duress, I used to think that you are formed by what happens to you. After living in a country that's been at war for nearly 10 years, I've realized that you are formed by *how you respond* to what happens to you.

No person—or political nation—is wholly formed or completely doomed as long as they are alive. The decisions that ordinary people make every day—the way they respond to what happens to them—change or reinforce the structures of the world we share. Ukrainians are waging war against the Soviet system, while Russia is fighting to perpetuate that system's power throughout the world. Democratic citizens know that only your action and speech—your direct, messy participation—can keep the system from controlling you. Ukraine's spirited resistance, which means nothing without the simultaneous efforts of Ukrainians to build sturdy political structures to protect their own lives, proves that it is still possible today to act on principle, and that in your principles lies your power.