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My Friend Oppenheimer

Ilya Kharkow

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There's something barbaric in talking about death while stuffing yourself with éclairs. But since I'm going to talk about my own death, I'll take a double serving, please!

But let me start by saying that recently, I saw the movie "Oppenheimer". It doesn't matter to me at all that this film received an Oscar and popular support. I watched it for two other reasons.

Reason #1: Recently, a publishing house sent me a review of my novel, THE MINING BOYS. The editor compared my manuscript to 20th-century modernists, the beat generation, and, quite unexpectedly, to the film "Oppenheimer." However, the comparison wasn't about the plot or characters but rather the narrative style.

Lots of information covered very quickly. This isn't surprising, as my story is about a person whose psyche was shaken by the impossibility of leaving a country at war. Therefore, the editor likened the novel's narrative to the effects of ecstasy and once again to the film "Oppenheimer."

Reason #2: On May 9, 2023, I died as a result of a nuclear strike. Now I'll dwell on this in more detail.

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<https://theleftberlin.com/my-friend-oppenheimer/>

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It all started when, during the first 2.5 months of the war, I was hiding in Lviv. I hadn't planned to do so, but I literally became a hostage of my own state.

My initial plan was to go to Poland and wait for a couple of weeks until the war ended. In those days, most people were confident that the war would last a maximum of 2-3 weeks. But on the very first day, the borders were closed to guys like me. I mean (literally) the male population aged 18 to 60.

The horrors I had to endure in western Ukraine are described in THE MINING BOYS, so here I'll just provide some context.

Coming from the eastern part of Ukraine, my native language is not Ukrainian but Russian. Typically, residents of the East were interested in Ukrainian culture, but those in Western Ukraine were hostile to anything Russian. They concealed this hostility from tourists, to an extent. Hatred towards anything Russian in Western Ukraine is part of the culture. This is why residents of the East cannot fully embrace this culture, although the war helps people to accept the hatred. So, that's the whole conflict, essentially.

For 30 years, Ukraine existed under such conditions. Politics also divided along east-west lines, and the cultural pendulum swung back and forth, depending on the elected president.

For much of its independence, Russian culture and language predominated in Ukraine, but with the start of the war in 2014, the situation changed and has now reached a climax.

Is Ukraine heading towards victory? No, it isn't. One of its two parts finds itself suppressed. Ukraine can only have a chance at a future if it acknowledges and embraces its diversity. Today, the opposite process is underway.

In all of the 30 years, there hasn't been a single political party that has attempted to unite the two halves of the country. Would there have been a war if that had happened? That's a good question. But could the two parts of the country really have been united? Yep. I'm an example of that.

From the first day of the war, Ukraine declared this to the men. So, the men ended up being hostages. And it seems like nobody cares.

What if the atomic bomb really falls? Then what? Radiation contamination. Instant casualties. Infrastructure annihilated. Psychological fallout. Environmental impact. Burns. Radiation sickness. Cancer. Leukemia. Mass death. Loss of loved ones. Loss of livelihood. I thought about it and bought a ticket from Lviv to Kyiv specifically for May 9th. I was ready to die from an atomic blast just to escape from the Lviv hellhole where I spent 2.5 months.

I was surprised when I saw the length of the list of psychological illnesses that could be cured simply by trying to understand a person. It's been 2 years since the beginning of the war. So far, I haven't heard a single person from western Ukraine say, "I'm sorry you had to go through this." Instead, I've received enough reproaches for lack of patriotism, which flatters me.

If I had to choose between returning to Lviv and death by atomic bomb, I would choose the second option again. In this story, the bastard Robert Oppenheimer is my friend. He thought he created the death of worlds, but it turns out there is something scarier than death.

By the way, those éclairs were wonderful! My damn radioactive éclairs.

Half of my family is from Ukraine, and the other half is from Russia. I was born and raised in Ukraine. This mix is typical of the East. And for 30 years, I lived free of internal struggle over this matter. This indicates that there was a chance, but it was missed.

Why wasn't this opportunity seized? Because the principle *divide and conquer* turned out to be convenient. Linguistic disputes distract not only from corruption but also from the destruction of democracy in times of war. There is little aesthetics in politics, so I had to look for it in a split atom.

Why am I even talking about the language issue and *Oppenheimer*? Because the language issue and the threat of atomic war – this was my reality not so long ago.

Robert Oppenheimer created the atomic bomb. At the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine, there was active discussion about whether Russia would use nuclear weapons or not. This topic was so vigorously discussed that journalists even set the date for the strike on the Ukrainian capital – May 9th.

On May 9th, both Ukraine and Russia commemorate the victory in World War II. Veterans, politicians, businessmen, and ordinary spectators gather on the main squares of Kyiv and Moscow. Military equipment and soldiers demonstrate national combat power for television cameras.

At some point, Ukrainian journalists concluded that symbolism was inherent to the leadership of the Russian army. By this, they convinced many that on May 9, 2023, there would definitely be a nuclear strike on Kyiv.

For 2.5 months, I lived in Lviv. I lived in an office with transparent walls. While ordinary people in Europe were letting Ukrainians into their homes for free, in Lviv, rental prices for apartments equaled those in Paris.

I could have gone to the shelters set up in school gymnasiums. But the military regularly came there, and they took all the men who had come from the East to the war. At night, there was a curfew. If you didn't find shelter before it started, by morning your

body would be wrapped in a military uniform. And during the day, journalists kindly explained to the public that the guys went to war voluntarily.

I speak Ukrainian with a terrible accent, so in 2.5 months, I went out onto the street only a few times. But even on those few occasions, I encountered soldiers who didn't miss the opportunity to wield their sudden power, which I also wrote about in the novel.

In the office, there was no kitchen. No shower. There was a patriotic security guard who wondered why I wasn't going to defend my homeland. He talked about it so casually, as if risking his own life was no harder for him than drinking a glass of milk that had been sitting on the sunny windowsill all day. Anyway, he didn't rush to join the army.

From time to time, the privileged came to the office – the locals. They were also afraid of being caught, but they knew that someone from the East was more likely to be sent to war. Would they betray me? They not only knew my location but also had a key to that damn office. So, I felt as defenseless as if I woke up naked every morning in a brothel for seniors and was obliged to serve anyone who entered the transparent room.

Meanwhile, the Russian army was occupying more and more territory. And so, my hometown fell under occupation. The neighboring town was bombed in an attempt to save it. But for me, the captured town was preferable to being destroyed, simply because there were still people there.

At first, we believed that the war would end in 2-3 weeks. Then we thought it would happen within a month. And finally, journalists were pushing us toward a new reality – the war would end with a nuclear bomb dropped on Kyiv on May 9th.

I didn't trust the military. I didn't trust those who came to the office. I didn't trust the guard who asked me again, "Why aren't you going to defend your homeland?" I couldn't even bathe. And at the same time, I watched online as bombs destroyed places where my relatives lived, places I used to visit and would never visit again.

But if the military were destroying cities in battle, the residents of western Ukraine took up destroying culture. From all sides, I heard how bad the Russian language was and how stupid Russian writers were. But at the same time, it was my language and my writers. Culture doesn't belong to the army, the weapons, or the president. But it's unlikely you can explain that to someone who looked at you with hostility even before the war, while the war became proof of their righteousness.

War intensifies national symbols. The country's coat of arms suddenly becomes more than just a coat of arms, acquiring a sacred significance. The same happens with songs and movies. However, a culture whose foundation is vengeance and hatred is far from what is called high culture.

Moreover, taking pride in national culture means building a fence between your culture and the cultures of other countries. If we start taking pride in the achievements of culture as a whole, then we wouldn't easily give up on books that changed our world yesterday, deeming them unacceptable because of politicians' actions today.

But even if each country builds such a cultural fence around itself, easily sacrificing the achievements of other countries, such a world can still be destroyed by an atomic bomb.

The atomic bomb doesn't care whether it devastates a city of Ukrainians or Japanese. It doesn't care how captivating a film about its creator turned out to be. The atomic bomb has no concern for whether Robert Oppenheimer's conscience tormented him after realizing what he had created. The bomb simply fulfills its function – it explodes when commanded to do so. You wanted a world without culture? Here it is! Enjoy...

"It's good weather! Why didn't you go to defend the homeland this morning?" the damn guard asks me again.

I'm a writer, and if I say that my work is more important than me, I'll say it with pride. But if someone else says that my work is more important than my life, then I'll look at them with hostility.