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The Advice Led to Hell

Ilya Kharkow

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I wrote about how difficult it was to get from Kyiv to Lviv on the first day of a full-scale war in the novel THE MINING BOYS. But when I finally got there, it only got worse.

The people who sheltered me sincerely did not understand why I did not want to defend the country with weapons in my hands. My hope to go to Europe seemed like a betrayal to them. At the same time, I had to hide from them not only my fear, but also my culture and my orientation.

These same people advised me to voluntarily join the territorial defense. Their acquaintances, who also didn't want to fight, deliberately signed up there so they wouldn't be taken to war. They said that I would be given a weapon and sent to patrol the city. They said the war would last a couple of weeks. If you don't want to kill anyone, they said, I need to join the territorial defense.

I liked the idea of leaving more. In the novel, I skipped the moment of meeting my old friend who was interested in history. It was he who told me that the safest place in Ukraine at the beginning of the war was Uzhhorod. This city is located on the border with Hungary. NATO troops are stationed at the border. That's why it's safe there.

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<https://actionweek.noblogs.org/post/2024/05/16/rady-vedou-do-pekla-ilya-kharkow/#more-1104>

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His stories about the safe Uzhhorod sounded logical. Moreover, there were two border checkpoints nearby, through which I could try to leave the country. So, when I saw a half-empty bus to Uzhhorod, I hurried to take a seat in it.

Back then, I didn't know that my enemy wasn't just missiles, but also Ukrainian military, police, and locals who were upset that I wanted to save my life rather than the country. They mocked my desire to preserve my life. They laugh at it even now. My unwillingness to fight angers them, and they aggressively try to steer me onto the 'right' path. In their opinion, in wartime, there's only one 'right' path – with weapons in hands.

It's necessary to acknowledge that our situation is dire not only because there's a war but also because today, we have to explain things like why killing is wrong. We can't demand that another person sacrifice their life. We can't condemn anyone for not overthrowing the regime. All of these things can only be demanded of oneself, not of others.

I got on the bus, but soon Ukrainian soldiers stopped it. They pulled all the guys out onto the road. I refused to get off. They beat me. Uzhhorod wasn't as safe as it seemed. It's a big city, that's why I stood out as a stranger there. The increased patrols may have protected women, the elderly, and kids, but they were dangerous for me.

I had to return to Lviv, where for 2.5 months, I lived in the office. I slept under the table in the conference room with glass walls. Every day, I heard stories about how another Russian-speaking guy in Lviv was forcibly sent to war. But few believed it because the official media talked about endless lines of volunteers. And I hid from all this horror in the damned glass room.

Soon, those same media outlets announced the news – territorial defenders would be allowed to go to the war. Allowed. Allowed! But initially, I was suggested to sign up there with the opposite goal – to protect myself from the war, not to get permission to participate in it.

Good advice can indeed be deadly. Advice given not out of malice but from a pure heart. Just moments ago, you wanted to escape the war to democratic Europe, and now you're in military uniform. Soon, you find yourself having to kill the first person. Not out of malice, but in self-defense. Then they kill you. The war didn't end in 2 weeks. You're dead, but where are those who gave you advice?