

FOR THE SAKE OF THE LETTER
an exhibition in support of Ukrainian prisoners of war

STORIES OF UKRAINIAN FAMILIES

Organized by [@myministryofculture](#), under the patronage of [CUTOUT](#).

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Anna Mushtukova | Husband

My husband and I were at work. Before the full-scale invasion, our grandson was born. When the full-scale invasion began, he was two months old. We asked the owners we were working for if we could take our children and grandson with us, because we could not leave, we could not leave the estate where we were working.

On 28 February 2022, my husband received a phone call from his brother, who said that he could not get home because the bridges had been blown up. They agreed that my brother would come from Lutezh, and my Ivan would come from Dymer, and they would walk along the shore of the Kyiv Sea and meet somewhere on the shore. I asked my husband not to go anywhere, because it was dangerous, there was a war. But he did not listen to me. His brother Ilya was not a local, he knew only the transport road, and my Ivan wanted to meet him so that he would not get lost. I couldn't go with him because I had a small child at home, there was no electricity, I had to chop wood, cook food, and look for water somewhere.



My husband left alone. And he did not return. We waited for him, I went looking for him every day for 12 kilometres. I brought milk for the child, found some food. Because we lived in a country house with strangers. There was nothing nearby. We had to go somewhere, look for something. I went to Dymer as well. I thought my husband was hiding

somewhere. I left him a note at the door of our house in Dymer. I wrote that we were there, that we hadn't gone anywhere, and that he should come to us as soon as possible.

There were a lot of checkpoints around. I was constantly passing through them, they undressed me and searched me. They saw that I was holding baby nappies. I explained that I had a small child and I had to go back and forth because my child constantly needed something. The Russian soldiers let me pass, but told me to come back before 4pm, while they were on shift, because the next shift were **Buryats**, and who knows how they would behave. I saw young men being undressed at these checkpoints and checked their tattoos. **And I walked like that for almost a month.**

On 30 March, our village was de-occupied. And on 5 April, the Ukrainian police came to our house and I reported that my husband had disappeared. And then I met an acquaintance and he told me what happened to my Ivan. On the same day, 28 February, this friend was walking home to Vyshhorod. It was already getting dark, it was around 5pm. He saw my Ivan and they walked together. Then they heard someone shout from the bushes: 'Stop!'. My Ivan thought it was our Ukrainian territorial defence and shouted: 'Don't shoot! We are our own! Glory to Ukraine!'. But Ivan was mistaken, it was Russian soldiers, and they were both taken away. Ivan was questioned for a long time. Ivan has never served, he has nothing to do with military service, he is a simple civilian. This acquaintance told me that he was kept in one hangar and Ivan in another. They were taken out for interrogation from time to time.

He would lose consciousness from torture and be thrown back into the hangar. Then they were transferred to "Viknaland" (window making company base), because a lot of our guys were held there. And he cannot say exactly what date Ivan was taken and taken somewhere. There, 10-15 people were taken somewhere from time to time. They said that they were taking them to Gastomel for interrogation and then they would release them. This friend of mine saw Ivan and 10 other guys being put into an APC and taken away. And then, when I heard that someone had returned from captivity, I went straight away, took Ivan's photo with me, and asked if anyone had seen him. One man said that he had seen Ivan in Belarus at a switchboard. He said that he might have been taken to the Tula region.

But later I found out that Ivan was in the Bryansk region in Novozybkov. And on 26 April 2022, I received a call from the NIBU and was informed that the aggressor state had confirmed through the International Red Cross that my husband was on the territory of the Russian Federation. On 7 September 22nd, I received a letter from Ivan, which was also sent through the International Red Cross. The last information I received from the released prisoner was in June 2023. Then I was told that Ivan was sent from Novozybkov to the Tula region. **This is all I know about my husband today.**

Valentyna Platonova | Son

On 20 March 2022, according to residents of the village of Tolokun, it is known that around 14-15 pm, Russian soldiers arrived at the Eco Space recreation centre where my son worked and took my son and two other boys who also worked there. They took them away and put them in the centre of the village, blindfolded and handcuffed. In total, there were **seven such tied-up boys in the centre of the village**. And then they were all taken away in an unknown direction.

From that time until 10 April, nothing was known. On 10 April, an exchange took place and two volunteers who had been held captive with my son returned. They were initially held in “Viknaland” (window making company base) in the village of Dymer. Then they were transferred to Belarus. And later, this volunteer, Volodymyr Kharkun, was held in the same cell with my son in Novozybkov, Bryansk region.

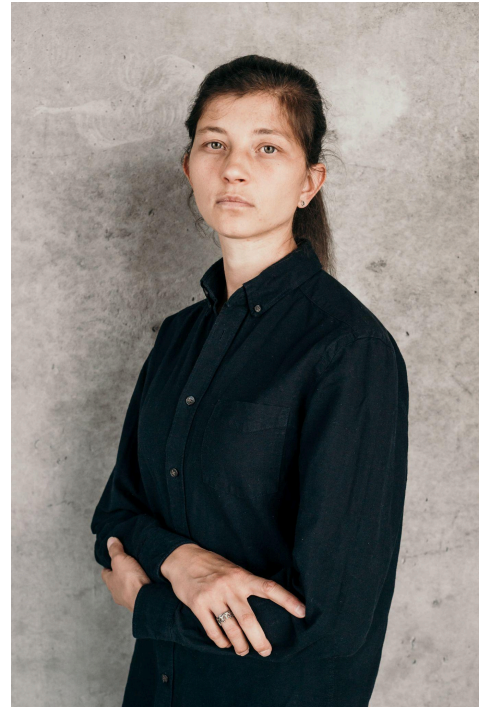


On 26 April 2022, I received a call from the Red Cross informing me that the Russian Federation had confirmed that my son was in their custody. Then, in the first half of May, the NIS called and said the same thing. In July, I received a short letter from my son. And later, from the wife of a returned prisoner, I learned that my son was alive, that he had something to eat and was doing sports. The prisoner himself could not talk to me, he asked his wife to pass on the information, and she said it briefly, just so I wouldn't worry, probably. Because later I found out that it was **not a sport, but abuse, they demanded to stand, squat, and do push-ups all day long**. And they gave them very little to eat, just porridge and boiling water or some kind of liquid soup, bread and tea without sugar.

In August 2023, I also received a call from the NIS, who again informed me that my son was in captivity in Russia. In January 2024, there was an exchange, and the returned prisoners also said that they had been with my son in the Vladimir correctional colony. I asked about his health, but they didn't tell me anything specific. They said that the guys were holding up, some of them were even working. **And since then, I have not received any more information at all.**

Ilona Slyva

My husband Artem and I lived in Nova Kakhovka, Kherson region. Our town was occupied at the beginning of the war. In the middle of summer 2022, we wanted to leave the occupation. Our friend was leaving and had one place in his car. We decided that I would go, because **I needed constant medical procedures, and Nova Kakhovka had already run out of medicines.** I left, and a week later I received a call from Artem's mother saying that he had been taken away. It happened on the 13th of August 2022 at night. On 14th of August, he was brought to his mother because he was registered as a gun holder and the Russians wanted to take this weapon. The weapon was taken away. **His mother was told that Artem was accused of treason.** As if he was a gunner. On 13th of September 2022, I returned to Nova Kakhovka. On the 14th, I went to the department where Ukrainian prisoners were held.



I managed to see my husband. He was brought to the interrogation room and we talked for half an hour. **My husband told me that he was beaten and tortured with electric shock. He had handcuff scars on his hands. There was fungus between his fingers due to unsanitary conditions.** In the basement where they were held, it was very hot and stuffy, they were not allowed to wash or brush their teeth, they were not taken outside, and there was no place to sleep.

In October, my husband was transferred to the Black Sea Fleet Detention Centre in Sevastopol. **Artem's parents went straight to Sevastopol and hired a lawyer.** In April 2023, they received a letter from Artem, which he was able to pass on through the lawyer, who visited the guy he was in jail with. It turned out that he was already in SIZO No. 1 in Rostov-on-Don. And on the same day, a response came from this detention centre saying that he had been held there since 14th of February 2023, that criminal proceedings had been opened against him for espionage, and that a pre-trial investigation was underway. In May 2023, Artem's mother contacted the investigator and he gave permission for a two-hour visit. In January 2024, Artem's mother died of stress.

On 8th of February 2024, Artem was sentenced to 10 years and 6 months in a maximum security prison. At the end of March, he was sent to penal colony No. 15 in Bataysk, Rostov Region. Artem's father is trying to get permission to meet with him through his lawyers. Artem is waiting for the exchange. In the Russian Federation, our prisoners are considered military, while in Ukraine they are considered civilians.

Inna Dobrovolska | Son

On 22 March 2022, my son Yaroslav and his friend Roman decided to go to see military equipment and generally see what was going on. This is the village of Krasiatychi, Vyshhorod district, Kyiv region. The three of them went, not just the two of them, but the three of them. They did not return for two hours. I started to stress, wondering what had happened. I started looking for them. **There was no contact with them anymore.** They went to the border between the villages of Krasiatychi and Termakhivka. This place is called the Border, and all the young people used to gather there. And there were Russian soldiers at that place. They took them away somewhere. The guys thought there was no one there.



One guy escaped and called me at about six in the evening and said that my son and his friend had been taken by the Russian military. He did not know what happened to them. He was running away through the trenches. And in the evening, they took this boy too. But a month later he was returned **and the only thing he said was that they were alive.** And this was confirmed by another prisoner who returned.

And then I started contacting the Red Cross, the coordination headquarters. We started to create a group. But the first place I went to on 2 April 2022 was our district police. In late August and early September, I received letters from my son and his friend, dated 14 April 2022.

I learned most of the information about the boys in February 2023. The boy came back from captivity again and told me about my son, that he was alive, that he and his friend Roman were very thin but safe. **They say that my son is very worried about me, about his daughter.** They are constantly being moved from one place to another. On 24 February 2022, the Russians destroyed a church in our neighbourhood and wanted to blame it on my son Yaroslav and Roman. But the boys were not even in our village that day. They are trying to accuse them of being spotters.

In the summer of 2023, there was another exchange and several more guys returned and told us that civilian prisoners were treated very badly in these prisons. The military are treated less badly, but civilians are treated terribly. **They are beaten very badly, so badly that they cannot walk, and they are brought to their cells all beaten. It's all very hard to realise.**

Iryna Gatsun | Son

My youngest son Vlad joined the army in 2020. He chose contract service. He passed the selection and got into the marines. And at the age of 18, he went to serve, dropping out of his studies at the University of Trade and Economics. It was his decision. He was an athlete. He confronted us with the fact. We had no idea that he was training and preparing for military service. He just said that the military enlistment office would come to us today. And he left for contract service in Mykolaiv.

For a year, he underwent regular military training. Then he was transferred to air reconnaissance. In September 2021, he was sent to Zhytomyr for an internship. And on October 28, 2021, he was sent for a rotation to Mariupol.

The full-scale invasion caught them in Mariupol. The entire Marine Corps was stationed at the *Ilyich* plant. But we found out about it after they were captured. When the invasion began, we did not know where they were exactly. Until March 30, 2022, we had constant contact with our son. In April, the communication became less frequent. **Every time my son got in touch, he asked if there was any information that help was being sent to them.**



On April 6, my son got in touch and it became clear to me that their situation was critical, that everything was very bad, there was little food and ammunition, many people were sick and wounded, explosions were heard, my son's voice was agitated, and Mariupol was occupied. **On April 12, everyone was taken captive.**

My son had a phone, which he and many other boys used to call home. My younger son called my older son and told him that they were being taken captive. And he managed to make a list of the guys who were taken away. And we began to call other parents using this list, started to unite, and created groups on social networks.

On October 31, 2022, we learned about my son's whereabouts from a released prisoner. We received the latest information on January 3, 2024. My son was in the city of Galich, Kostroma region. I don't know exactly where he is now, because prisoners are constantly being moved. I know that my son received my letter, which I sent through the Red Cross. The released prisoner said that my letter brought my son back to life and inspired him. He realized that they were looking for him. **But unfortunately, the guys from the Mariupol garrison are almost never exchanged. The guys do not have enough food, they lose a lot of weight.**

Iryna's son received freedom in October after an exhibition in Paris.

Liudmyla and Angelina Repyk | Husband, Father

The occupation of the village of Demydiv, which is located in the Vyzhhorod district of the Kyiv region, began on 24 February 2022. My husband came home from work in the afternoon. Everything was fine. On 25 February, the bridge was blown up, and before that my husband went to work. And it so happened that the car on this blown-up bridge collapsed. My father helped my husband pull the car out.

On 02 March 2022, my husband and I had a big fight. And he left somewhere. My aunt met him, he was at the very end of the village and was driving towards Andriivka, where his mother Natalia Viktorivna Tymoshenko lived. My husband said he was going to get his mother and sister, and that was it. In Kozarovychi, he was stopped by Russian soldiers. They started shooting at his car at high speed. I learned about this from people from that village who saw it.

On 15 April 2022, one guy was released from captivity and a month later, on 15 May 2022, he came to our house in person. He told us about my husband. He said that **he was alive, in captivity, in poor health because he had been beaten badly**. On 30 August 2022, I received a call from the Red Cross saying that my husband was in captivity in Crimea, there was a letter from him, and they asked me where to send it. **Today, I only know that he is in Kaminsko-Shakhtynsk near Rostov-on-Don.**



Natalia Yavtushenko | Brother

My brother is a marine. He signed a contract in 2021, he really wanted to be in the military. He was very proud to become a marine because it is considered elite. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, my brother was near Mariupol. Then they all went to Mariupol to the Ilyich plant. **And in April, most of the marines were captured.**

We found out that my brother was captured in May from the Red Cross. But the Red Cross gave us information from the lists made by the Russians. At first, I did not believe that my brother was alive. I started looking for him. I searched through various telegram channels, looking for people who had been released from captivity. **For two years I was looking for my brother because no one had seen him.** I started going to meetings at the coordination headquarters, trying to find out at least something.



But it was all in vain. I did not receive any information. Only when the exchange took place **on 3 January 2024 did I receive the news that my brother was indeed alive and in captivity.** The guy who came out found me on his own. He had been in the same cell with my brother since April 2022. All this time, they were in a detention centre in Vyazma, Smolensk region. From the beginning of their captivity, they were in Olenivka and in April they were transferred to Vyazma.

The conditions of detention in Vyazma are terrible. **All the guys who came out of Vyazma say that it is a very terrible place.** The food there is very poor. Very small portions, 2-3 spoons each. Instead of onions and potatoes, they give you husks. You can't feed a person that, because it's not food, it's waste. It's disgusting for a normal person to eat. It's just a mockery.

Olena Fokova | Husband

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, my husband Sergiy, my 13-year-old daughter and I were in our house in Bucha. A few days later, my husband sent me and my daughter to evacuate to Europe, while he stayed at home in Bucha.

On 9 March 2022, my husband stopped contacting me. I started looking for him, filed a police report, checked the lists of prisoners that began to appear on the Internet. On 28 April 2022, I received confirmation from the Red Cross that my husband was in captivity.

On 2 May, I received a message on my messenger from Borys, a man who had been released from captivity and was with my husband in Gostomel. In May 2023, I was found by another man who had been released from captivity and he informed me that they had initially been sent from Gostomel to SIZO No. 2 in Novozybkiv, Bryansk Oblast, and that my husband was still there as of May 2023.

Since then, I have no further information about my husband's whereabouts or health. I know that there are no more Ukrainian prisoners in the Novozybkiv detention centre, they have all been transferred to other places. I continue to search and write appeals to various authorities dealing with prisoners of war.



Olena Tsyhyra | Husband

Serhii was abducted on 12 March 2022 during his volunteer activities in Nova Kakhovka, Kherson region. He combined both volunteering and information activities. On his Facebook page, he covered all the events that took place during the occupation. He also took part in the pro-Ukrainian rally 'Nova Kakhovka is Ukraine', which took place on 6 March in Nova Kakhovka. It was after the rally that Serhii was warned that he was being hunted and could be taken away. He was hiding with his friends for some time, and then stopped hiding. My friends asked me why he stopped hiding. I don't know for sure, but I think it was because he realised that if there was an open hunt for him, they would still be looking for him. And of course, first of all, at his relatives, at his mother, who is almost 80 years old, or at his daughter, who has three children, or at our home, where I am with my son.



He didn't want us all to be frightened. He did not want searches to be conducted, anything to be confiscated, etc. That's why he stopped hiding and continued to do volunteer work. He just couldn't imagine his life without volunteer work, because he is a journalist, a writer. He was retired for the last six months, but continued to work as a freelancer, writing articles and making publications. Of course, when the war broke out and Nova Kakhovka was occupied, he turned his information and analytical skills into a project he called 'Information Self-Defence Nova Kakhovka'.

And it was on 12 March that he left Nova Kakhovka for the city of Tavriysk. These are two small towns separated by the North Crimean Canal. There was a checkpoint there. He and I passed this checkpoint many times when we were bringing food and medicine to people. They checked our documents, but it was more of a formality than a real check. It usually took a minute or less. We would take the food and medicine and return home the same way. But on 12 March, he left alone because we didn't have many orders. I went to the grocery store to queue up and buy something, and he went to Tavriysk. He had to go to my mum's house because we always went to visit her. An hour later, my mum called me and told me that Serhiy was still missing, although he was supposed to be there. Then she called again later because Serhiy still hadn't come. I knew that Serhiy was also planning to meet his friend Volodymyr, who had bought a new car before the war. And when the war started, he was driving that car one day, and they stopped him to check his documents, but in fact they just threw him out of the car and drove his car somewhere. They must

have driven until they ran out of petrol, because later he found his car on the road. My Serhii wanted to talk to Volodymyr to cover this event. But I know they didn't meet. I didn't worry about Serhii at first, I didn't tell his relatives that he didn't come home that day, because I hoped that if he was detained, the Russians would 'educate' him (threaten him, beat him) and release him.

The next day, I saw a Facebook post by the wife of journalist Oleg Baturin, who said that Oleg had gone to meet Serhii the day before and had not returned home. I also posted a message on Facebook asking for information if anyone had seen Serhii. Three people responded to my advert at once, calling and saying that they had seen him at the checkpoint of the North Crimean Canal. Serhii was being examined and searched by the military. These people gave different times: 10:35, 10:45 and 11:15. So I understood that he was held there for quite a long time.

I suspect that they saw his Facebook page on his phone, looked at it, read it and detained him. After 8-9 days, Oleg Baturin was released, and I know from his Facebook post that they were taken together to the Kherson detention centre at first, and then Oleg was released. And on 19 April, one of my friends sent me a video, she filmed Russian news on her phone. **With this video, the Russians tried to discredit Serhii's reputation, to destroy him as a pro-Ukrainian leader, writer, journalist.** He was forced to say that in Bucha, all the bodies that were found on the streets after the de-occupation, that all this was specially edited, edited to show the Russian Federation in such a negative light. He said all this in this video. But if you analyse it, Bucha was de-occupied at the end of March, and he was abducted on 12 March, so he didn't know what was happening in Bucha at all. **This means that he was given a text, forced to study it and talk about it off camera.**

I have witnesses who are now in a safe place in Europe, who were with Serhii in Crimea. On 16 March, Serhii was already taken to Crimea with a man, who later told me all this. He told me that Serhii was threatened with reprisals against his family if he refused to say this text on camera. They said that they would bring the whole family and torture them in front of him, and he would still do whatever they wanted. And we were all still under occupation at the time, so Serhii did everything he was asked to do. **Now Serhii has already been sentenced to 13 years for espionage and opposition to the AFU.** He has already been taken out of Simferopol, transferred, and has not yet reached his final destination. His lawyer said earlier that it was the Ryazan region, but we do not know the exact destination yet. I am covering all this as best I can, communicating with journalists and human rights activists, telling the story of Serhii's abduction, trying to draw the attention of the international community to the issue of the return of civilian prisoners. By my own example, I try to show other families that they need to tell such stories so that the world community learns about Russia's crimes.

Olga Kayova | Husband

When the full-scale invasion began, my husband and I decided to stay at home. For some reason, we thought that we could solve something and show some resistance. We went to rallies, left our children at home, left our phones at home, because we had already been told that they were being checked, that we could not subscribe to Ukrainian news, Ukrainian telegram channels, etc. This all happened in Kherson. **We had just built our house, we had just started living there, enjoying it**, and we hadn't even lived in it for a year and a half.

My husband was constantly trying to help his hometown. He wanted to go to the territory controlled by Ukraine, realising that it was dangerous, that it had certain risks. But he wanted to go anyway. And when my dad left the occupied territory, he was travelling with the Red Cross convoy and gave the contacts of the head to my husband, saying, 'Maybe you can be useful. And my husband really wanted to be useful. They agreed that my Yura would be a driver in this convoy. Then they could not leave for about a month, almost the whole of April.



And in May, when the passage through Vasylivka was opened (Snigurivka was closed, Vasylivka had not yet opened). But when Vasylivka opened, they were the first to leave. Yura looked at all these checkpoints, it was all very difficult, of course, but they brought a lot of medicine to hospitals, humanitarian aid, which we went to unload at the Red Cross. We had a Red Cross branch on Moskovska Street, which, by the way, arrived after the de-occupation. **And after the third ride, my husband said: 'You have to leave! Leave with the children! You don't understand, we are sitting here, we don't see anything, and there is a different life in Ukraine than here under occupation. You will understand this when you get there.'** I really did not want to leave, but he took me almost by force. He said: 'You are going, and that's it, don't even ask.' He took us to Zaporizhzhia. But he did not want to leave with us. He said he would continue to make volunteer rides between two cities, Kherson-Zaporizhzhia. And we would be able to see each other several days a week.

He continued to take people, things, parcels out of the occupation and bring humanitarian aid and medicines to Kherson. I received orders for medicines, I went to

pharmacies in Zaporizhzhia, bought what was ordered, and my husband took it to Kherson. It was such a help to his native village. He was detained on one of these rides. It was his car that was searched, and his house in Kherson was also searched, and the shop was searched, everything was turned over. They did not explain why he was detained. He was detained by Russian military units of the FSB.

He was detained near Vasylivka on his way to Zaporizhzhia. I was already waiting for him, he had talked to our daughter on the phone the night before, she asked him to bring her guitar. They were travelling in a convoy, several cars. But it was him and the convoy leader who were taken for something, the other drivers were let through. The other drivers had people in their cars, and my husband had these people's belongings because he has a truck.

Russians twisted their arms and took them away, and no one told us where they were going. My friend called me and told me all about it. My husband's car was later found in another occupied city because it had been resold. It is not known what happened to the things that were in the car. But these things are not important when people are constantly disappearing or dying. **Later I had information that one guy who was in the torture chamber with my husband was tortured to death.** I have evidence of torture that I received later, in January 2023, when some time had passed.

People who managed to escape from captivity told horrific stories about their time in captivity. It was all very difficult. I went to the commandant's offices, looking for my husband. His parents also called all the commandant's offices in Melitopol, because they were told at the checkpoint that he and other detainees had been taken for interrogation in Melitopol. But later I found out that the detainees were held in Kherson. I found out about this when my house was searched on 13-14 August 2022, and my dad's car disappeared.

A guy I know came to my house to feed the dog, and he called me and asked if any of my relatives had driven my father's car somewhere. I told him no. And he said: 'The car is gone.' I started looking for traces and wrote to him. I asked if anyone in the village had seen the car. From March to August, this car was parked in our yard, with a dead battery. **Then a neighbour called me and told me that our house had been searched,** the door was opened with the keys, so I suspected that Yura was being held somewhere in Kherson.

During the search, they took out the carrier and tried to start the car, the alarm went off several times, but in the end they defeated it and drove away in the car. Since then, no one has seen the car again. They also took some things from the house, but left the toilets behind. A neighbour described these 'searchers' as 'plainclothes Buryats'. Who really was there, who knows.

After the referendum was held, my husband was taken to Simferopol, where **he was provided with a lawyer who handed him some papers and told him that he had better sign them, because otherwise he is not responsible for his condition.** No one can guarantee you anything. He then wrote me a letter and told me that he was already in such a state that he was ready to sign anything. He wasn't allowed to talk to me on the phone, but he was allowed to write several letters. While he was in Lifortovo, he had the opportunity to call his lawyer. When he was transferred to Rostov, it was a different story. Even the correspondence there is limited, because, as the lawyer explained to me, it is for the Ukrainians.

There is no medical care in Rostov, they are not taken out for walks. Although, after the visit of the Turkish ombudsman Sherif Malkovich to the Rostov detention centre, the guys from the neighbouring cell wrote to their relatives that they were taken out for walks and to the bath. But my husband wrote that the conditions of detention were very terrible, he wrote that at least in the Kherson basements it was not damp. I'm trying to raise money and send it to the Rostov detention centre so that they can buy my husband at least some food, bars, mina, porridge, something to keep him physically fit. There are 12 people in the cell, and they all share everything with each other. He said that the guys in Simferopol shared food with him. Because when he got there, he said that it stank very badly. There was no way to wash, shave or brush his teeth.

His lawyer also told me to pack him a parcel with his belongings, because he was detained in the summer in shorts and a T-shirt, and when he was transferred to Simferopol, it was already October.

And the charge that was brought against the man was an attempted murder of Stenousov. He is a citizen of Ukraine, but a collaborator, and he has already been killed.

I do not understand how this can be legally justified. Under torture, they demand to sign some documents, torture him with electricity, do not feed him, do not take him to the toilet, handcuff him to the bars and beat him. I know a man who was in a cell with my husband, saw it all, felt it on his own skin.

Olga, Mykyta, Polina Manukhina | Husband, Father and Oldest Son, Brother

On 10.03.2022, soldiers of the Russian Federation came to our village and began to conduct searches. This is the Vyshgorod district. Our village is located 3 kilometres from the town of Dymy. The first time they came on the 8th of the third month, they just walked around the village. On the 10th, they started searching yards. **At 10 o'clock in the morning, they jumped over the fence.** There were six of them, all with machine guns, dressed in military uniforms with St George's ribbons and bulletproof vests. They started opening all the rooms and looking everywhere. They forced me to open the car because they saw that there were video recorders. They said we could not film. They went into the house, checked all the rooms, and asked who else lived with us. We live with my husband, my mother and sister. Then they asked to check the phones. They checked all the phones we had. They didn't find anything in my husband's phone, and neither did they find anything in mine.



Mykyta's phone had a photo of reeds and bushes taken through binoculars. We explained that the child had just bought a phone recently, he was interested in experimenting, so he took such photos. There were about 10 such photos. The soldier asked Mykyta to delete the photos. We immediately deleted them in front of him and went outside. My eldest son Danechka was standing on the street and 5 other soldiers were standing next to him. My son has a tattoo on his body. The soldiers told him to show the tattoo. My son showed them. He has a multi-coloured jaw on his leg, an inscription in runes on his ribs that says 'Loyalty', a laurel wreath around his nipple and a smiley face somewhere else. They also took my son's phone to check it. There was some kind of text message. I don't know what kind of text message.

They said they were taking him for interrogation. They immediately took the phone from him. My husband ran into the house to get a chicken and a hat for my son, because he was very lightly dressed. He told me to take a needle to get the SIM card out of the phone. When I went to get the needle, I came out and my husband's hands were already tied behind his back. And they put the ties on my son's hands as well. I immediately started crying, screaming, falling on my knees, shouting that they shouldn't take him away.

The soldiers told me not to worry, that they would return my husband and son, they would only take them for interrogation, and in two hours they would return them.

I shouted that I didn't believe them, that they would kill them. And the soldiers said: 'We are not animals.' And that was it. They took them away. And they didn't return them. According to rumours, they were supposedly Kadyrovites. But life experience shows that the Kadyrovites are really animals. **The next day, 11.03.2022, my children and I left our village on foot, out of the occupation.** We walked about 10 kilometres to the bridge in Demidov. And there, volunteers picked up and ferried people further. The bridge was dilapidated, we were walking on the masonry. The day before, the water had risen and people were walking in waist-deep water. And on the 12th, there was a shelling and this bridge was bombed again. And people had to crawl across like scouts. We went to our godfather in Kyiv. Then my godfather found us an apartment, and we lived in Kyiv for two months. We returned home after 9 May.

I learnt from the prisoners who were released that my husband and son were in the Rostov region. They are together. **My husband is in a very serious condition, he had a high temperature for six months, and a purulent wound on his leg.** Later, I learned from another prisoner that my husband was on the mend, his temperature was normal. I received several notes from my husband. He wrote that he and his son were always together. At first they were in Crimea, then they were sent to Russia. **Danylo was 20 years old when they were taken away.**

Tamara Ryzhkova | Brother

I myself am from Kharkov. All my relatives are in Kharkov, including my older brother, we all lived and worked there. When the full-scale invasion began, namely 24.02.2022 my brother was in his country house with his wife and her parents. He could not leave there immediately, because firstly, his parents are elderly, secondly, he loves animals, he has three dogs and cats. So he stayed there. This is the settlement of Malye Prokhody, Kharkov region.

From the first hours of the war this settlement was under occupation. And my relatives somehow survived there in their private house with their vegetable garden. 01.07.2022, all were on the street in the vegetable garden, suddenly the shelling began. My brother and his wife managed to run into the house, and my parents stayed outside. When the shelling was over, they went outside and saw that my dad was up and my mum was lying down.

Mom had suffered very severe shrapnel wounds to her abdomen and hip joint. My brother ran to the commandant's office of the Russian Federation to ask for help, military medics came, they loaded dad and mum into a car and took them to Belgorod, which is Russia.



My brother and his wife stayed at home and the same day they went to the same commandant's office to ask to be released, because my parents were seriously wounded and needed to be taken care of. The commandant's office promised that they would give them permission. The next day, 02.07.2022, the Russian Federation military came to their home, more than 10 people. But they came not to release my brother and his wife, but to detain them. **Using foul language and threats, they put bags over my brother's and his wife's heads, wrapped them in duct tape and loaded them into a military vehicle.** They brought them first to a shop in a nearby village. They spent twenty-four hours together, and the wife heard her brother being taken away for so-called interrogation. Clearly she heard the sounds of beatings, screams. She was in such shock that she lost track of time and could not understand how long it all lasted. It was horrible morally to hear all this. After this interrogation my brother was taken to another place, and his wife continued to sit in this basement. It was a local shop and there were different numbers of people there every day, someone was brought in, someone was taken away, both women and men. And the women were quite elderly, and 70 years old.

They were all locals who had nothing to do with the military, there was no logic or reason for their detentions. My brother's wife spent fifteen days in this basement, she almost didn't eat, because they gave her some horrible stinky stuff. When she was released, she managed to get home. And she learnt from local residents that some men were being held in the village of Strelechy near Belgorod in the basement of the local school.

On 05.09.2022 my brother and several other prisoners were taken from this cellar, to which they never returned. I received this information from a man who lived in Kharkiv region and also got into this cellar, but he was lucky, he came out of this cellar during the de-occupation with all the other people, whom the Russian military had not managed to take out of this cellar at that time. All these people had got to know each other over the course of a few months, they found out that they had common acquaintances in freedom and they all promised each other that if someone managed to escape from captivity, they would find their relatives and tell them what had happened there. And thus this man found me and told me all this. We communicated in November 2022. This man is the only one who saw my brother, he said that he was taken somewhere and that's all. At the end of November 2022, I received a letter from my brother through the Ministry of Reintegration. It was written on the envelope that it was Russian mail. The letter was addressed to our mum at her address in Kharkiv.

It was just a note: ***Mum, alive, healthy, wait, I will be home soon.*** The note was written in his handwriting. But in this letter there was no information about what was wrong with him, where he was, not even the date when he wrote the note. That letter breathed life into us. There was hope.

His wife went to the commandant's office in the summer, asking for her husband to be released. **They promised her that he would be released, but they never let him go.** She realised that she could not achieve anything and decided to go to Belgorod to her parents. She bought her mum a wheelchair and took her parents from the hospital. And through Russia they travelled together to Latvia and then to Switzerland. In Switzerland mom was operated on again, because in Belgorod the operation was done badly, mom could not walk, there were terrible pains. When mom was treated, they returned to Kharkiv, it was in May 2023.

The settlement, where a country house was all destroyed, is de-occupied, but not suitable for life. **All kinds of weapons are launched daily from Belgorod and most of the Kharkiv region is destroyed,** there is no water, no electricity, there are unexploded shells, it is dangerous to even walk there, not to mention to live.

Angelina Tovkach | Father

As known, my father saw the beginning of a full-scale war in Mariupol. He is a contract marine in the 36th Brigade, a staff sergeant in the brigade. There, they were among the first to meet the enemy and held the line until they were captured. The number of the enemy outnumbered our defenders. My father rarely got in touch. When he did, he would say: "Everything is fine! Don't worry!" My father never burdened his family with his problems and worries.

Around April 7, he disappeared for 3-4 days. **On April 11, 2022, he wrote a message to his mother, friends, and relatives: "I love you! Sorry for everything! Take care of the baby! We have no more food, no more ammunition, many people are sick."**

He said goodbye to all of us at that moment. He wrote to me simply: "Kisses, love!"

We knew from the news that it was very difficult for them, because at the same time there was an attack on Kyiv and all resources were directed to preserving the main positions. And in Mariupol, they were holding back a huge flow. But the city was surrounded and it was already obvious that they would not be able to get out of there. **There were no other ways out.** Only evacuation helicopters were able to take away a small part of the people, bringing some food and ammunition. On April 17, 2022, I received a call from a Russian number on Viber. It was my father. He was given the opportunity to call by a Russian journalist. He was in Donetsk at the time at the military commandant's office. He told me everything, said that he had been captured and burst into tears. I started crying too.

It was a traumatic experience for me. This is the moment when you don't know what to do and how to proceed. My father only said that he was not wounded. That was our last conversation. And then I saw the news on a Russian TV channel, where my father reported what was happening at the Ilyich plant. That they were left without food, without ammunition, without weapons. He looked very upset. Even before the full-scale



invasion, my father told me that captivity was death for him. And now he was captured and I realize that it was very difficult for him. In the fall, we received a letter from my father, but the letter had no date, no location.

It was the last news from my father. **Since then, we have not received any more information about him.** Those guys who returned from captivity did not see my father or hear about him. In 2023, the Red Cross reported that my father was in captivity. But they did not visit the colony, did not see my father. It was a confirmation from the Russian Federation's lists. They don't know his health or whereabouts. **Every day we monitor all the telegram channels, looking for my father or people who might know something about him, and make appeals to various authorities in Ukraine and Europe.**

Ilona Skutelnyk | Husband

For three years now, I have been waiting for my husband Maksym to return from captivity. We are from Berdyansk. In 2022, we left the occupation and now live with our son in Kyiv. **My husband was taken prisoner in Mariupol.** He is a member of the 36th Marine Brigade, 501st separate battalion. At that time, 276 marines were captured at once. Since then, only about 25 have been returned. **My son and I are waiting for our dad.**

During all this time, we received only one letter from him after 5 months of captivity. It was very short: he is alive, I love him, I kiss him. That's all, we didn't receive anything else from him. There was a period when we received news from the exchanged people. But it was in 2023. The guys who returned said that the man was constantly thinking about us. Before he goes to bed, he dreams about his son. **He is waiting for the exchange.** But then he was transferred to another colony and for the last nine months there has been no news from him at all.

There have been exchanges from the colony where he is supposed to be, but no one has seen my husband. This is a colony in Staryi Askol. I don't even know for sure if he is there. He was supposed to be taken there, but I don't know if he was taken there.

Those who returned said that they were held in barracks in groups of about 120 people. And it was better than in cells, because they saw each other and could pass the news when they were released to many relatives. And when the guys are in cells of 6 people, they can only pass the news to five relatives. Because they do not see people from other cells. They can only hear the name.

They are not taken outside at all. They are fed with balanda, which is brought to the barrack or to the cell. They are not taken to the dining room. **The guys lose 20, 40 kilograms of weight.** The conditions improved a bit when the Red Cross was supposed to come to the colonies. They started painting the walls to hide the stains. They started to feed them a little better. But it was only for two weeks. **My husband's weight before captivity was 68 kg. I can't even imagine what he will look like after the exchange.**

I know that he had kidney problems and was given some pills. I don't know whether he was cured or not. When he was in Oleksiyivka in the Belogorodsk region, he seemed to be working in a sewing shop. **I communicate with many families to be able to get at least some news.**

