Those Who Stayed

Iuliia Skubytska on Interviewing in the Kharkiv Region

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Iuliia Skubytska (Iu. S.): I am a scholar, a historian. Before the full-scale war, I spent several years working in the civil society sector. I'm from Kharkiv, and I became even more clearly aware of this during the invasion. When the city was heavily bombed, I realized that no place affects me as deeply as Kharkiv. So, this year, I eagerly took on a project in my hometown because of that connection.

I lead a project called *Those Who Remained: Stories of the Residents of the Kharkiv Region*, which is organized in collaboration with the Center for Urban History in Lviv. We use similar methodology to document the experiences of internally displaced people. I am not working alone on this project, and that's very important. I bring my perspective as someone who lived in Kharkiv until I was 17, and though I later lived in other cities, I always kept returning to Kharkiv. I even wrote my first dissertation about the city. When the full-scale invasion began, I was living in Kyiv, and I left the country relatively quickly. But my team—comprising three other scholars: Viktoriia Nesterenko, Olha Chystotina, and Yaroslav Shkabura—are all from Kharkiv. More than that, they survived a year and a half of full-scale invasion in the city.

I truly value the dynamics of our team: I contribute by sharing knowledge and methodologies, while my colleagues bring invaluable insights from their lived experience of war. This has made me realize more and more how difficult it is to communicate the experience of war. I felt this intensely back in 2014, when the war began while I was in the United States. It was an overwhelming feeling of isolation:

living in a state of constant "horror mode," while everyone around you is in "normal mode." It's impossible to explain that disconnect.

That's why it was so crucial for me that my team consisted of people who remained in Kharkiv and, in a way, held onto the city throughout this time. They not only have a deeper understanding due to their lived experience, but they also bring a reflective, scholarly perspective and respect for others who have made similar decisions. This respect is essential when conducting interviews, as we aim to create a space where people can express their own agency and tell their stories.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** If you try to explain to yourself why you chose to take on this work in such difficult circumstances, I understand that part of the motivation is directly tied to Kharkiv and its significance in your life story. But could you elaborate on this question: why did you decide to do it?

■ **Iu. S.:** I thought a lot about it. For me, the "why" is an entirely emotional decision. When I do this work, I feel like I'm in the right place, doing something meaningful. I think the war has raised a lot of questions about how to be honest with yourself—how to balance your "private self" and your identity as a "citizen of Ukraine," especially when, at some point, the private self seems to disappear. Against this backdrop, there are countless discussions, or even real fights, about how to be a "good citizen." Added to that is the typical challenge faced by those who leave: you constantly feel like you're not doing enough, not contributing enough, and it makes you feel powerless.

Another challenge is convincing an institution that has invested significant effort and resources in protecting you that you should go back to Ukraine. When you're as far away as the United States, you're in a place where, logically, you shouldn't leave for a zone where missiles are flying. But, strangely, returning to Ukraine gives you a sense of strength and restores your sense of agency. It's a very odd feeling, but you never feel as connected to your land as you do during a war.

■ **N. O.:** A recurring theme in the conversations I've had is the idea of professional re-education in wartime, especially for people in the humanities and social sectors—those who work with words and ideas and who don't see the immediate, tangible results of their efforts, unlike, say, the work of volunteers. How did you build your professional identity? And what knowledge or skills did you acquire before February 24, 2022, that have helped you reclaim your professional self in these conditions?

■ **Iu. S.:** I've been on an interesting journey with my professional identity. I defended my thesis in 2018, but I felt that I couldn't express the ideas I needed to articulate. The year 2014 had a profound impact on me; it was a time when I had to reinvent myself. When I defended my dissertation, I realized I was too exhausted by academic life. I looked around and realized that, during the six years I spent writing my dissertation, I had only spent one year in Ukraine, the rest of the time was in the United States. Yet it was in Ukraine that I found many of the things that helped me move forward. So, I returned and decided to transition into the civil society sector.

When I became the head of the War Childhood Museum, I was starting a new project from scratch and had no time to think about academia. I entered 2022 as a full-time administrator who no longer considered an academic career, even though museums do research work. I was very comfortable in this role, and I enjoyed it. But then 2022 came: I quit my job, and my academic career was reset. It was during the war that I finally began to articulate the ideas I had been struggling with. It's still hard to say why it took the war for me to express these ideas and why I couldn't do that before.

Since 2015, I have been working in the field of oral history. The first set of interviews I conducted was in 2015-16 in Kharkiv, against the backdrop of the ongoing war, which was very tangible there. So, in a way, I was prepared for this kind of work, having been involved in war-related research since 2015. But I had no experience writing about a war that just exploded right in front of me. That's why, in the first months of the full-scale invasion, while I was still running the museum, we decided to pause. I didn't know how to approach the task methodologically. So, I focused on my writing and also on strengthening my knowledge about transitional justice and how scholars can be involved in these processes.

Almost a year later, my colleagues from the Center for Urban History approached me about the *Those Who Remained* project. I think it was very timely, because now is the time when it is possible to write oral history interviews, and I know how to do that. People's stories about the war have already taken shape, but at the same time, we're working in a very delicate space. These stories exist, but the trauma exists as well. Many people are still in trauma, and this affects the way the interviews are conducted significantly.

■ **N. O.:** Could you tell me more about the challenges of working in such an open, uncertain moment? How did you and your team come up with the idea for this project?

Iu. S.: One of the key issues we had to address from the start was the creation of a questionnaire. We decided to take the questionnaire from the Center for Urban History's *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War* initiative, and I also asked my colleagues from Kharkiv to suggest questions they felt should be included. By that point, they had already had some unpleasant experiences during interviews with people who came from a different frame of reference and couldn't always listen without prejudice. So, we sat down and combined the tools used by the Center with our own ideas. Some of the questions from the Center seemed like they wouldn't be relevant, but we found that they worked surprisingly well, like those about the perception of time. Interestingly, they resonated in both the small towns in the region and in Kharkiv itself. People found it easier to answer these questions than those about their perceptions of their own city.

I'm really glad we're working as a team. We set a goal of recording at least 50 interviews to start with, and we began in June 2023. A special feature of this work is that people are quite eager to participate—something that was not the case with my previous research, including the research I supervised for the War Childhood Museum. Another unique aspect is that more than one person conducts the interviews. This makes the work very collaborative. We've had several semi-formal meetings where we shared observations, and we also had two field trips to the region. We went to areas that we did not know very well because of the danger of landmines, but this experience really brought us together. It also created an opportunity to talk on the road. You get a lot of energy from this work. The stories we hear are charged with it. Yet this energy needs to flow, it should be exchanged.

We recruited participants using the snowball method. We started with friends, then their friends. We avoided open recruitment because it was important for me to avoid a situation in which we would need to reject potential participants because they were too late, we had already finished our work. We wanted to avoid giving anyone the feeling that their experiences were not being valued. When we approach someone, we do so with respect and a clear message that any type of war experience matters. This more controlled method of communication has enabled us to create a diverse sample, comprising individuals of various ages, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations.

In terms of practical challenges, there are almost no places in Kharkiv where we can record interviews. Coffee shops are unsuitable because of the loud music. We conduct a lot of interviews at people's workplaces. In the summer we also recorded in parks. We've had

some very unusual situations, like when we conducted an interview in a car during one of our field trips. Still, I have to emphasize that during field trips we always work in pairs because we don't know the city and the people, and the safety of female interviewers is important to us.

Working in the Kharkiv region, particularly in the de-occupied areas, is very dangerous. Mines and "petals"[1] are everywhere, so you need someone with you who understands how to navigate these risks. I was fortunate because two of my team members had taken first aid courses. During our trips to the region, we had a tourniquet with us. Also, our driver was a veteran of the Israeli army who, after the start of the invasion, became a volunteer driving people out of the city. It was much easier for me to feel safe traveling with him because I was with someone who understood these conditions.

For me, the uniqueness of this project also lies in the fact that I've found myself in some unusual interview situations, where people give responses that are very powerful in both emotion and meaning. You ask them a question, and they respond with a strong, coherent story. Often, after hearing their story, I sit there and wonder if it's even worth asking the next question, because sometimes it feels like a superfluous kind of question. Not every interview has been like this, but many of my conversations have been. It feels like, for the first time, I'm intuitively and emotionally aware that my interviewees know exactly what they want to tell me. And often, when they share their story, I sit there and think, "Should I continue with the questions?" On the one hand, there is the project framework, but on the other hand, the presence of the narrator is so powerful that I don't want to impose my own perspective.

■ **N. O.:** I can really relate to this experience, as it's somewhat similar to ours. One part of our approach was to send a list of topics in advance to the people who volunteered to share their stories. This way, they knew what we were going to discuss. In the documentation initiative *24/02/22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War* there were instances when I didn't ask any questions at all. The person had already fully formed their story before we even met, so I simply listened. In the context of war, I believe this approach is effective—being present in the moment of interaction, without interference.

1 A "petal" (Ukr. «peliustka») refers to the PFM-1, a type of scatterable high-explosive anti-personnel land mine, commonly known by this folk name (translator's note).

However, I also see a risk in this. After the interview, these deeply personal interactions, the trust and the intimate experience of the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, are transformed into an audio recording, which then becomes a transcript and, eventually, just another set of "data." This raises a question: how can we convey the sensitivity of that relationship when the nature of the interaction shifts, and a unique conversation becomes just one of many in a collection? I don't have an answer yet, but I feel this tension and the need to find a solution.

■ **Iu. S.:** I strongly felt that, at least at this stage, only the people who conducted the interviews should be working with this data. Without experience in the field, it's easy to overlook the subtleties. That's why I emphasized to my colleagues the importance of writing research notes to capture what isn't immediately apparent in the recordings.

My perspective is rooted in oral history, so data, in my view, holds slightly less weight compared to, for example, analyzing how people in an interview setting search for their own agency, how they regain an active role, and what situations strip them of it. I also believe it's crucial to produce some form of knowledge at this stage, because in a year, we'll look at these materials in a very different way.

■ **N. O.:** These conversations demand a significant emotional investment. So, my natural question is: how do you take care of yourself and your team under these circumstances?

■ **Iu. S.:** Since I began working at the museum, I've always stressed to my colleagues the importance of self-care. For this project, we brought a psychologist on board and went through training with her. The interviewers had the option to work with her individually. We also made sure the interviewees had access to her services, as well as information about other free psychological support services available in Kharkiv. We talked a lot about staying connected with ourselves and making the interview process as comfortable as possible for our participants.

Another important aspect is how to foster good relationships within the team. At this level, I try to show as much respect, admiration, and support as possible. I continually emphasize that we shouldn't push ourselves too hard because we are our own working tools. If someone agrees to immerse themselves in such a challenging experience with us, what we can bring to that meeting is our full attention. So, in order to be effective in these conversations, we need to manage our resources carefully. For example, I made it clear that recording two interviews in a single day is simply not an option.

■ **N. O.:** How do you envision the future of these stories? Will they become part of an archive, or take on some other form of storytelling, preservation, or dissemination? The next question is: how do we create narratives from these stories? How do we theorize our experiences in the present moment?

■ **Iu. S.:** We are still in the middle of the process, but I can already see some potential paths for what we can do. We are creating an archive, which feels both timely and important because we are walking a fine line: people haven't fully recovered from the intense phase of the war, but they have started to recover a bit, and the region is still in the very early stages of recovery. I believe that if we conduct these interviews in six months or a year, the stories people share will be different. Ultimately, I hope to write a book based on this archive.

It is also crucial to me that we continue to communicate and discuss these experiences, to stay connected to the process of interviewing. It's about creating meaning and finding ways to communicate that meaning through different methods. For example, Olha Chystotina, a wonderful photographer, made a striking visual representation of one of our interviewee's comments, which inspired the idea of creating some kind of visual component for the project. This could be a participatory collaboration between photographers and storytellers to create a visual series. If we are talking about experience and how to communicate it, I think it's important to experiment with different media to rethink the message, to highlight various aspects, and to make it "resonate."

Looking ahead, it is vital for me to continue working with the team. I want to contribute to supporting the scholarly community and young researchers in Kharkiv, as they are in an incredibly vulnerable situation. I want to help those who wish to remain in the profession and give them the opportunity to develop. I also want to amplify the voice of Kharkiv. For many people currently living in the city and the region, it's important to see that they have done something meaningful and that they can continue to make a difference. My approach is that place matters. The place from which we speak is important.

■ **N. O.:** If we return to the concept of an archive, what should its structure look like? Should it be focused solely on this project, or, looking ahead, could it evolve into a single archive encompassing all the documentation of the war in Ukraine since 2014? Alternatively, might it take the form of a network of institutions dedicated to preserving and sharing these stories?

■ **Iu. S.:** I view this project as one key component of a larger archive currently being developed by the Center for Urban History. However, what stands out in these interviews with people who endured the first year and a half of the full-scale invasion in Kharkiv is a deep, local connection to the land. I suspect that something similar will emerge in other regions as well. For that reason, this future joint archive could serve as a model for the entire collection, as the place and time of the recording are essential to the narrative.

One aspect I'd like to further explore in our work is the idea of uniting and building connections among those who made the conscious decision to stay. They share certain values, and as we move into processes of recovery and reconstruction in these areas, it is often a challenging journey for many. It would be beneficial for them to have a support system to rely on, as they already lean on one another in times of difficulty. This support is crucial, as enduring the intense phase of war and the trauma of deoccupation is an incredibly difficult experience. One thing that has quickly become apparent to me is that Ukrainian resilience, while powerful, doesn't leave much room for grieving—grieving for the personal losses that people have faced. I believe it's important to create spaces for this kind of grief, as the need for them is very much felt. We need to find a way to address this.

■ **N. O.:** If you could offer any advice to those planning to undertake similar work as your team is doing, what would it be?

■ **Iu. S.:** It seems to me that, at the very least, you shouldn't approach this with the mindset of "reinventing the wheel." I've always advocated for collegial collaboration, and a lot has already been done in this regard. It's much easier to dive into this kind of work when you can consult with colleagues who have experience in the field. We built our practices, approaches, and methodology based on the work already done by our colleagues at the Center for Urban History, and this has been incredibly helpful. Some of the solutions we didn't expect to work turned out to be very successful.

It's also crucial that we continue the conversation around how to conduct participatory research and think about how we involve people in understanding its results. While I'm eager to write and publish a book, it would be even more exciting to create a collaborative, co-creative product.

Lastly, I believe that, on a larger scale, Ukraine needs solidarity within the scholarly community to strengthen our voices and institutions.