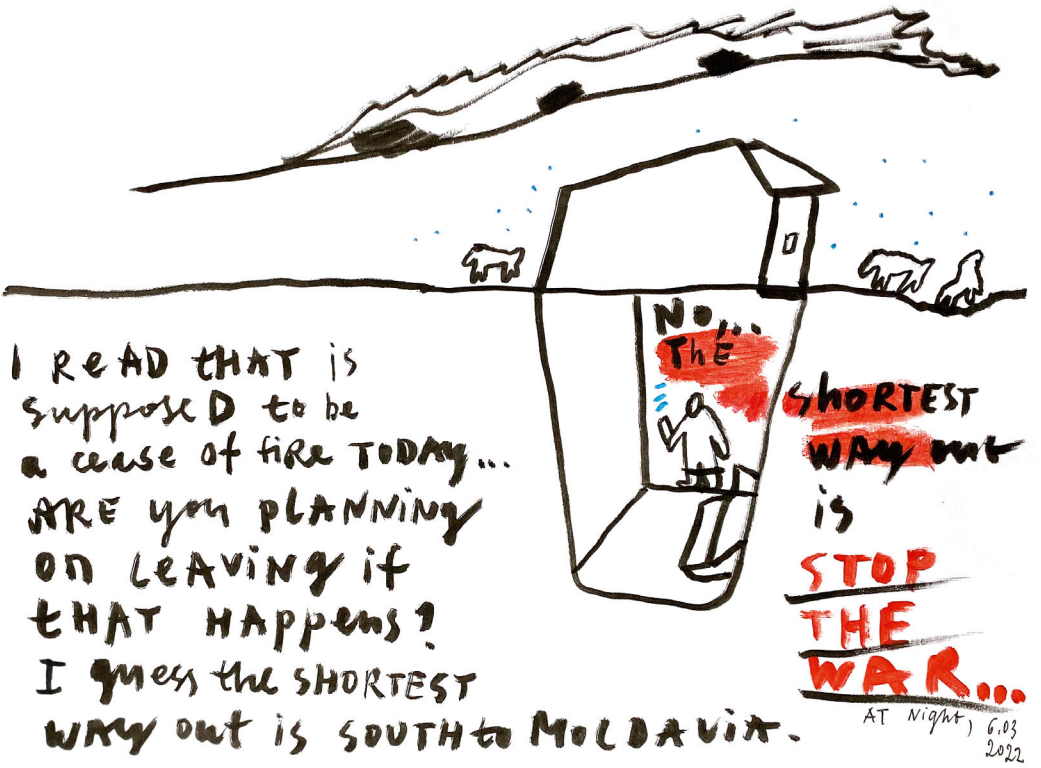
Chapter 2

Forced Displacement



24.02. Life After

Andrii Usach and Anna Yatsenko on Recording the Stories of Internally Displaced People in Lviv

The conversation was recorded at the Center for Urban History on May 24, 2023

Andrii Usach (A. U.): We co-founded the non-governmental organization "After Silence" in early 2021 to document Ukraine's painful 20th-century history and to develop public history projects based on these experiences. Our work involves recording oral history interviews with people who remember the events of the 1930s through the 1950s, as well as digitizing their personal archives. Among those who share their stories with us are survivors of the Holodomor, World War II, the Holocaust, forced labor in Nazi Germany, imprisonment in Gulag camps, and Soviet mass deportations. We strive to bring their stories to a broader audience through documentaries, exhibitions, podcasts, comics, and other formats.

Anna Yatsenko (A. Ya.): When the war began, we were in shock—unsure whether to continue at all. But then friends, friends of friends, and even acquaintances of acquaintances started coming to us, sharing their experiences of evacuation, describing what they had been through, and how they had lived during those early days of the war. We realized that this experience needed to be documented. Our first conversations were with friends and acquaintances who had evacuated from different cities. For some, it was their second evacuation: first from Donetsk to Kyiv, and now from Kyiv to Lviv. We called these recordings "conversations" because we simply listened to what people wanted to share in that moment—without probing questions or extra details—just what they were feeling.

■ **A. U.:** In March 2022, there was much more uncertainty than now—no one knew how things would end. Russian troops were actively advancing, occupying areas that are now back under Ukrainian control. We were documenting in real time, as events were unfolding, with no clear outcome in sight. Our goal was to capture how people processed what was happening to them at that very moment, knowing that a year later, they would likely tell very different stories. Having worked with oral histories from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, we understand that what we record is not so much reality itself as it is each person's interpretation of it.

In the early days of the full-scale war, filming was challenging. Our idea was to capture stories in the city, which we thought might require a permit to film. So, we partnered with Lviv Media and received journalists' credentials, which weren't necessary in the end. Through this collaboration, we also created several stories based on our recordings. This meant we weren't only documenting; we were also sharing these stories publicly, which required additional coordination with participants. We obtained informed consent from everyone, and before releasing any videos, we double-checked with each person. For example, one man agreed to share his story but requested that we alter his voice, obscure his face, and withhold his real name.

■ **A. Ya.:** A young woman who evacuated from Bucha in the early days mentioned that if she were to tell her story again, she'd tell it differently. When we recorded her in Lviv, she still didn't know everything that had happened back in Bucha.

■ **A. U.:** We asked if we could make her initial story public, and she agreed, but she also noted that her perspective would be different now.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** So, it sounds like you recognized that this period of uncertainty offered multiple interpretations, and it was vital to capture stories as they emerged, before familiar ways of narrating them took shape. You drew on your past experience, but also acknowledged that the current circumstances were entirely unique. I'd be curious to know: what aspects of your previous approach proved effective, and what required adaptation?

■ **A. U.:** From the start, we envisioned creating a video project. Our team of five worked on every aspect—managing the project, finding people willing to share their stories, coordinating interviews, and handling technical preparation. We filmed each conversation with two cameras, professional lighting, and high-quality audio; from a technical perspective, it was all very well-executed. In the past, we

only approached this level of production quality for documentary projects. Perhaps we harbored documentary ambitions from the beginning, even if they weren't fully formed. But as we worked, we realized the direction this project should take. What we've completed so far is just the first stage. The second stage will come after we win the war—whenever that may be.

What sets our work apart is that we don't call this an oral history project; instead, it's a series of conversations, a documentation of lived experiences. We didn't use a formal questionnaire. As the interviewer, I'd ask people to introduce themselves, then, "How did you come to be in Lviv?" since the project focuses on those who came to Lviv because of the full-scale invasion. We had only a few questions at the end of each conversation to tie the stories together. These questions were shaped by our previous experience.

■ **A. Ya.:** Those questions were: "Did your family ever talk about their experiences during World War II and how they survived it?"; "What did you take with you, or what didn't you take with you?"; "Do you feel like your home is lost?"; "What do you value most?"; "Why did you come to Lviv?"; And finally, "What are your plans for the future?"

■ **A. U.:** Why did we ask about personal belongings? We had previously interviewed many people who survived forced relocations or evacuations during and after World War II, and these individuals often spoke about the things they still had from home—a toy, an embroidered shirt, anything with sentimental value. In a foreign environment, these items took on symbolic meaning. One of our interviewees deeply regretted not taking a family photo—a large portrait of her relatives from the turn of the twentieth century. She simply couldn't bring it with her.

We also encouraged people to share family stories, asking, "What did they tell you at home about World War II?" Many responded with, "Grandma used to tell us how she hid in the basement, and now we're hiding too." However, we deliberately avoid making direct comparisons with World War II; each extreme situation brings unique features, and we don't want to equate the current situation with the past.

The distinct aspect of our current work is that we don't press for topics or specific questions. If someone doesn't want to discuss something, we respect that boundary.

■ **A. Ya.:** This is also the first time we've considered conducting follow-up interviews to explore how memory shifts over time. We want to see what people will say about their experiences once the story is more settled for them. We haven't conducted many interviews,

though; in June, we paused because many people began to downplay their stories, saying, "What did we go through? Others had it worse—we saw it on TV." We realized there was a "media layer" influencing people's accounts, with some sharing what they had seen or read rather than their own experiences. We're also considering making a documentary out of this project. We still haven't decided whether to focus on a single protagonist or to weave together multiple stories. That's a decision we'll make after the war.

■ A. U.: Some people have even started recording their own experiences and observations, which is very different from past conflicts. Now, it's not just researchers documenting events—people themselves have much more capacity to record everything happening around them. In a way, this is even more interesting because it reflects what people want to preserve. This didn't happen before.

■ N. O.: The field of documentation is indeed becoming democratized. Scientists no longer hold a monopoly on "the truth," which introduces new challenges. Our roles are also intertwined here—we aren't detached from the situation but are experiencing the war alongside our narrators. How much of your own experience is present in the work you're doing? Are there safeguards you've put in place to protect yourselves emotionally, psychologically, or physically, given your involvement?

■ A. U.: We thought about conducting interviews with each other once the war ends. While our experiences may not be as traumatic as those of the people we interview—there were many things they witnessed. And we didn't even set out to look for any of the horrors of war, you know. Unlike human rights organizations, which specialize in documenting evidence for courts or investigations, we weren't looking for any specific type of account. Such organizations ask detailed questions, like, "Where were you standing when the shell hit your house?" For us, that level of detail doesn't matter. If someone's home was destroyed and they choose not to mention it, we won't press them on it. What matters to us is simply what each person feels ready to share.

In the beginning, this was actually quite challenging. Many initiatives, especially foreign ones, offered us money with the vague directive, "Just do it for us." No one really understood what was happening here. After Bucha, this approach began to diminish, perhaps because people started to grasp the complexity of the situation. Before that, it was less clear. Resisting the temptation of easy funding was difficult, but we wanted support that wouldn't impose restrictions on us. So we started working without any financial backing—we simply

picked up our cameras and used our own equipment to film. Midway through the project, we secured some funding, which allowed us to buy hard drives for storing the large files and to pay the people transcribing interviews. Later, we received a slightly larger grant to help us complete the project by June 2022.

■ **A. Ya.:** One of our main concerns was the safety of the people we recorded. Before interviews, we'd advise them that anything they shared could later be adjusted or edited out if necessary to protect them. In past projects, people would sign a consent form, and we tried to keep in contact with them, but in principle, we had their consent, the person told their story, that story was about the past, already thought through and made sense of; here we understood that people might say something that could put them at risk. This was a frequent topic of conversation among our team.

■ **N. O.:** Yes, we are all adjusting our approach along the way. Like our narrators, we're constantly reevaluating decisions, deciding what to let go of and what we can carry forward. Personally, I find inspiration in the methodology of the history of the present—the challenges historians face in documenting events without knowing their full consequences. Historians usually speak confidently, with the benefit of hindsight: "I know how it all ended." But when you're so close to unfolding events, that certainty disappears. Maybe it's good for us to allow this uncertainty, to accept that things can evolve in unexpected ways.

Another influence is narrativism and the idea that the end of a story gives it meaning. Right now, we don't have that ending, and the notion of "after the victory" has become an imaginary milestone that shapes our present perspectives. Even completing an interview, when a person has the chance to share their experiences without judgment from journalists, lawyers, doctors, or therapists, provides validation—a moment of affirming their story for something larger.

Generally, I believe in a procedural approach to this work; it's about remaining flexible, ethical, and process-oriented, rather than relying on a fixed formula.

■ **A. U.:** Now we're more prepared for situations like power cuts, for instance. We might plan an interview, travel to a city, and arrive only to find there's no electricity—and it won't be back for the entire day. We're used to the reality that there may be no power, no internet, no way to charge our phones, even when we need them most. We've adapted to this, just as we're adjusting to the reality of modern warfare. Even people living in much harsher conditions now discuss these challenges as

part of everyday life. This really illustrates how memory works: people start to construct their stories, filtering out certain details, normalizing experiences that once felt extreme. Through our project, we hope to offer insight into this process—how individuals shape their narratives, what they choose to leave out, and how they gradually begin to speak more routinely about events that initially felt unimaginable.

■ **N. O.:** So, how do you see the future of this project as an archive? In terms of preservation, access—who do you envision will work with it?

■ **A. U.:** This collection will be distinct from our interviews on other historical events, set aside as its own archive. Some of it has been made public with the interviewees' permission, and we can provide access on request, but it's not yet meant for widespread dissemination. Currently, we think it's best to keep it more controlled; perhaps in a few centuries, these recordings will be available for wider archival use. For now, if we move forward with a documentary, it's unlikely we'll release everything right away. Our responsibility lies in how we handle these stories and how we protect the people who shared them with us.

We have an archive, and we're actively building it. Last year, we started organizing it properly because so many state archival collections have already been destroyed or looted, and there's no way to know how many family archives have been lost. Much of our work revolves around preserving these personal histories. We realized that a thorough approach was needed, so we began creating a detailed database with comprehensive descriptions. These interviews will eventually contribute to a database documenting the full-scale war, though we're not ready to make it public just yet. Our goal is to ensure everything is carefully preserved, but any future publication or research use will be thoughtfully considered on a case-by-case basis.

We're very aware that there's a lot being written about Ukraine right now, including by people who have little understanding of the realities here. They may take an interview, pull out a single phrase, and present it as "proof" of their own arguments. That's why we need to be careful about who will access and work with these materials. While we can't dictate the conclusions others draw, we want to be certain that our work won't be used in a harmful way. Archiving and preserving these records is essential—that's our first responsibility. Sometimes you read about a project and think, "Wow, look at all that's been done!" But then you try to find the records, and they're simply gone.

■ **A. Ya.:** My main worry is the vastness of it all. The scale of documentation is overwhelming, and it's easy to feel lost or fear missing something crucial. When researching, there's this constant anxiety of

whether I've captured everything I need to know or if there's something critical I've overlooked. It's incredibly difficult to grasp just how much has been documented and how much remains unrecorded—and that uncertainty is unsettling. There's also the question of how we'll approach stories after the war, especially those that challenge us or make us uncomfortable.

■ **N. O.:** This work demands a great deal of sensitivity—much more than people might realize. But if we return to the idea of "completion," I think a lot about it myself. Completion isn't something that's simply handed to us; it's something we create. And for different groups, that sense of completion looks very different. We can talk about the end of individual stories, the end of the war, or a victory, but for some reason, we often view this ending as something external. In reality, it's also about how we imagine and conceptualize it. These stories, for me, are about how we close certain narratives, how we create those full stops or commas between them. Finally, if you had the chance, based on your experiences and the path you've taken, would you offer any advice to others doing similar work or hoping to start it?

■ **A. U.:** The first thing is respect for those you're speaking with and whose stories you wish to hear. Along with that comes the responsibility you take on, as well as the need for empathetic communication. It shouldn't be just a transactional relationship where we do our job and move on. When someone shares their most important life experience with us, it's because it's all they have—their story is all they possess. This calls for deep respect, both for the person and for their story.

■ **A. Ya.:** The second thing is that no idea exists in a vacuum. If it's just in your head and you haven't shared it with anyone or discussed it, then it's better not to act on it. To carry out a project, you need like-minded people or at least people you can consult. There are things you might overlook, but to others, they're obvious.

■ **A. U.:** There are no people who have been taught how to record wartime stories. That's nonsense. Sure, there are people with this experience who can share it with you, but no one can teach you how to do it. You have to learn these skills through practice and build them over time. Between when we started the first interview and when we completed the last one, we gained a lot of experience in asking the right questions, knowing when to stay silent, and when to give the person space to open up. We learned a lot during this process. No courses, no special programs, no schools could have taught us this—we had to watch and learn on our own.

- **A. Ya.:** On the other hand, others can show you things you might not know.
- **A. U.:** You also need to be ready to respond to the various challenges that arise. If you're not agile enough, you'll struggle to succeed. It's important to divide roles within the project: there are people responsible for filming, lighting, management, organizing arrangements with storytellers, communicating, and conducting interviews. Equally important is knowing not to take on tasks that aren't your responsibility, not to deceive people, and not to attempt things you're fundamentally incapable of doing. And lastly, it's crucial to consider who you're working with, both in Ukraine and abroad.