



Three days in Ukraine

Friday 20th May 2022.

When we told the receptionist of the Teatro Hotel in Warsaw that we were en route to Ukraine, she said “Aren’t you scared?” and I had to admit that we were, very.

You may think it somewhat counter intuitive to be actively driving into a country at war. However three days previously I’d received a message on the Museums for Ukraine WhatsApp group, from the writer and curator, Gianluigi Ricuparati, and it read-
We want to organise a trip to Ukraine, with stops in Lviv, Kyiv and the area of Bucha. This happens in the context of Milano XX111 Triennale Ukrainian Pavilion which is entitled Planeta Ukrain. The trip would be co organised by the Ukrainian authorities for culture and all safety measures will be put in place, considering that 100% safety is not possible now in the country. We were to make a tour of Ukraine’s Museums and meet the brave people protecting the country’s cultural heritage. How could I say no?

For this is a cultural war, Putin and his henchmen know all too well that they can only claw back Ukraine’s lands by destroying the country’s identity and this is rooted not only in its own language and history but in its music, films, architecture, art, poetry and literature. We were there not only to bear witness but to offer support and share connections that would help in the country’s plight.

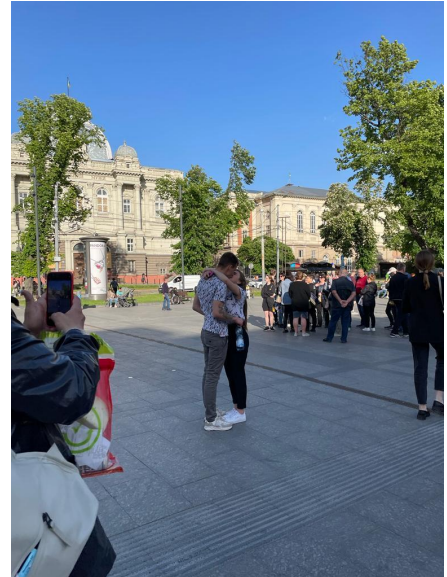
Saturday 21st May

The group was beautifully organised by the Ukrainian pianist Anastasia Stovbyr, now living in Milan, and included the curator Masha Isserlis, Ukrainian born but now living in Berlin, the celebrated architect Alberto Zontone of Studio Urquiolo, and the Italian photographer Gabriele Abbruzzese who was to document the trip. At the last minute my great friend and 'body guard' Stephen Navin agreed to join us. Our party was complete.

Before setting off for the long drive, four hours from Warsaw to the border, an expected three hours to exit Poland, another one to enter Ukraine and thirty minutes on to Lviv, we were instructed to download an air raid warning app. The notion that we were soon to enter a country at war suddenly felt real.

As fuel is in short supply in Ukraine we stopped to fill up at the last petrol station in Poland. We guzzled hot dogs and chips as if they were to be our last meal and washed our hands. The Italians have a saying for everything.

"Chi non piscia in compagnia o è un ladro o è una spia," said Gabriele as he and Stephen return from the bathroom. *He who cannot piss in company is either a thief or a spy.*



"No jokes. Be serious as you pass through border control," said Oleg, our driver. But it was hard not to laugh, for laughter was fast becoming our default reaction to everything that was said.

The 20 kilometre line of trucks waiting to enter Ukraine from Poland was mirrored by the line waiting to cross into Poland from Ukraine— 40 kilometres of stationary trucks all queuing to have their paperwork stamped. This is war, surely bureaucracy could be lifted in the face of global starvation! I was soon to learn that there are too many causes to fight for. Now was the time to surrender to the coming days and all they were about to reveal.

Once on her home ground Stasia began to sing "Oj Tam Na Hori" (There on the Mountain), a charming Ukrainian folk song and Navin, the enthusiastic linguist and singer that he is, joined in. Entering the leafy city of Lviv, accompanied by their lyrical singing, both calmed and moved our band of travellers. The knowledge that beauty is under threat and could be lost at any moment makes it achingly precious.

Another Anastasia, from the Lviv Cultural Ministry, welcomed us and walked us through a large tree lined square filled with buskers, playing children and embracing lovers to the town hall where we were to leave our luggage.

"Who are all these photos of?" I asked looking at the portraits of young men lining the walls. *"They were killed defending Crimea,"* Anastasia told me without a backward glance, *"now let's go to the restaurant."*

I should have done some more homework before embarking on this trip. Of course this war didn't begin on February 24nd 2022. It was in March 2014 when Putin's Russia annexed Crimea and began pouring fuel on the Donbas, Luhansk and Donetsk regions.

Dinner was delicious and we made it to the station within minutes of the mighty sleeper train's departure. Four berths to a cabin and spacious enough for the seven of us to gather and talk of the day ahead as the train trundled, all the lights switched off due to blackout rules, out of Lviv towards the dark Ukraine countryside and Kyiv beyond.

Sunday 22nd May

A cameraman and sound assistant were there to capture our sorry state as we clambered off the train onto the empty Kyiv platform on Sunday morning. Those of us who hadn't switched off our mobiles were woken through the night by sirens warning of missile attacks in town 200 kilometres away. Stephen asked them what they were doing.

"We shoot docs," they said.

Dogs?" said Stephen

"No, we shoot Docs."

It was 6.30 am and grey. The contrast to Lviv was immediate, all ground floor windows were sand-bagged, many windows boarded up. Keen soldiers in checkpoints built of yet more sand bags, cross metal anti-tank 'Hedgehogs' and barbed wire, stopped us at various points on our route, preventing us from driving directly to Hotel Kyiv, strict security as it was sited directly next door to President Zelensky's residence.

A shower, a surprisingly good omelette and coffee later and we were on our way. First stop, National Oleksandr Dovzhenko Film Center, the state film archive and a cultural centre of Kyiv. The gentle director Olena Goncharuk had packed her daughters, 13 and 18, on to a crowded train at the outbreak of war and for next two weeks, as the 40 kilometre convoy of Russian tanks, aiming missiles at the city centre, inched its way closer to Kyiv, Olena slept in the basement to protect her precious archive. Her husband, an accountant, meanwhile studied YouTube films on first aid and self-defence, bought his own equipment and along with some twenty friends, joined the army and went to the front.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine voted for independence and began writing themselves into history focusing on their distinctive culture. In the 1920s the country had played a prominent role in the Modernist movement, a role the Soviets had been at pains to erase. Without a doubt this collection of many hundreds of films kept in the centre of town would be a number one target. One missile had flown directly over the building hitting an apartment block nearby. The windows of the lecture hall had been shattered but the archive stored in a room protected by only an extra sheet of metal was untouched.

There is no money. In real time, one person is digitising the archive film by film.

Next the Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum and a tour with Olga Melnyk, head of development, and Olesya Ostrovska, Director of the Contemporary Art Centre. Here all art forms are showcased including The International Book Festival, last year's title, *Scepticism and Optimism*. They say



that the architect of this magnificent vaulted space had conceived it to be a gallery after its original use as a munitions factory. But now not a work of art could be seen, everything had been carefully wrapped and stored away in a secret location.

As we walked through the children's play area, in unison our phones sounded their sirens and we scuttled down a spiral staircase into a basement lit by one bare light bulb. Sitting in a circle, our knees protected from the damp chill air by blankets and discussing the role of the arts and the contemporary art scene in Kyiv felt perfect. Time was taking on a different dimension, I hadn't felt this present, this focused for years. There was nothing else, no existential climate emergency, no emails to answer, only this moment. Olga said that in Kyiv no one spoke of dates and months any longer, only the number of days since the war began.

Initially artists in Kyiv had two options - to become refugees or live in basements. Many left but last week was the first week in the three months since the invasion that there were more artists returning to town than leaving. No men of fighting age are permitted to leave the country but artists are given special dispensation to travel abroad for exhibitions.

Now a girl has to have a little retail therapy when she is in a new town and leaving the others to order lunch for us, Masha and I dashed into Vsi.Svoi, a shop selling clothes by Ukrainian designers, and in less than ten minutes we managed to buy two blue and yellow silk shirts, some saucy slips for Masha and a stunning red, could only be a Ukrainian, dress for me. Nothing in Ukraine is expensive- if only we had longer.

We lunch at ZigZag and as the food arrives on the table the sirens wail, not one of us or any of the hipsters around us take any notice. It took us just four hours to become accustomed to the threat. We had become locals.

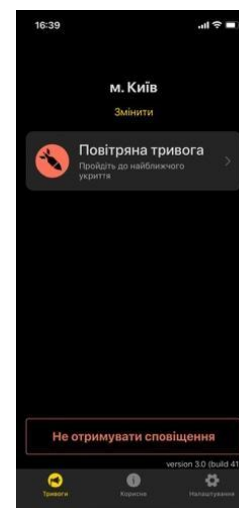
With its fine, fresh ingredients, Ukrainian food is excellent. Looking around we could have been in any cool restaurant in the centre of any Western town except in this war-prepared city everyone is, without exception, young, polite and kind.

In many ways our mission was fast becoming a version of paradise, a world filled with beautiful, healthy, cultured, young optimists all working for a common goal. The elegant streets full of bird song and spring flowers and yet and yet...

After our salads, to The Khanenko Museum, two grand town houses joined together by their owners 150 years previously. They had no heirs and thus left their magnificent collection to the country. Over their long lifetimes they amassed thousands of priceless paintings and objects. We walked through these ghostly mansions, at times lit only by our mobiles for all that remained on show were walls of picture hooks and empty display cases, their glass doors a lattice work of cellotape to prevent flying shards in the event of an explosion.

I wanted to hug Yuliia Vaganova. She talked of the collection with such affection, as if she were describing her family. I'd place bets on the fact that she is also an excellent cook.

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Dressed in a khaki hoodie, Oleksandr Tkachenko, the Minister of Culture and Information policy looked somewhat incongruous standing in his lofty Soviet built office. He gestured us towards an enormous table and sat humbly amongst us and then quietly began to speak of his country's plight. Its primary needs he said are

1. To be accepted into the EU
2. More arms
3. To shore up their cultural presence worldwide.
- 4.

Putin has been sabre-rattling for years the actual invasion had taken everyone by surprise.

He then listened as, one by one we explained how we could support his country. Gianluigi explained that the once Russian Federation Pavilion at the Triennale had now become the Ukrainian Pavilion and that we were making a documentary about our trip and the symposium to screen there. Ours was the first cultural tour of the country since the start of the war. We told him of our expertise and offered to help by amplifying Ukraine's cultural voice and introducing as many as we could to the it's undoubted strengths. Alberto could help with his architectural connections, Misha with the world of museums and important institutions. I shared my experience of founding the Marrakech Biennale encouraging him to invite as many great international artists, as would, have the courage, to visit during the war and in its aftermath.

He is all too well aware that artistic exchange breeds creativity, connections and respect, but my thoughts are that cultural capital will be raised by aiming for Ukrainian artists to be included in exhibitions alongside other international artists rather than ghettoised in shows of their own.

As we left Oleksandr handed me an empty envelope. I thought it must be some sort of conceptual gesture but then I looked inside again and there was a precious 1st edition 'Fuck you Russia' Stamp.

At the beginning of the invasion, 15 soldiers defending Snake Island in the Black Sea were approached. "I am a Russian Military Ship," rang the transmission, "I repeat, I am a Russian Military Ship. I suggest that you lay down your weapons and surrender to avoid bloodshed and needless casualties – otherwise you will be bombed. I repeat, lay down your arms. Acknowledge...."

"Russian warship, go fuck yourself."

And on to The Naked Room and Planeta Ukraine – the live broadcasted symposium organised by Gianluigi and his Triennale team. We were invited to speak one by one. Olena's words were simple and moving. "Never before have I felt more alive," she said, "for the first fortnight of the invasion I sat in the basement and wrote as fluently as is possible. To recreate that feeling now, I place a blanket over my head while working on my laptop."

No one cries in Kyiv, all emotions are contained.

The city is black on our return to our hotel. Lights make for useful targets. I begin to wonder why, being the only guests staying here that we are given rooms on the 13th floor.



Monday 23rd May

An unexploded missile stuck comically into the tarmac marked where we should turn off for Nikita Kadan's studio. It was wrapped in plastic and on it was painted 'no photo'. Nikita told us that a column of Russians had marched up this road expecting to be welcomed by the people of Kyiv. They clearly had had no access to Ukrainian news channels, only their own country's propaganda for they didn't receive the welcome they'd expected.

Today we were visiting not museums but the suburb of Hostomel. I didn't know what to expect as we drove through the forests and into the village. Of course I'd listened to reports on BBC Radio 4, with Lise Doucet's voice cracking, attempting to describe the vision of hell before her. To convey the suffering that the innocent families in this region had experienced, one has to imagine the horror and seeing the houses, each one blown apart or set on fire (in many cases to destroy evidence of the atrocities that had occurred within) and not a pane of glass intact, made the imagining all too easy. For two interminable months this area was occupied by swarms of pumped up men, trained on nothing but call of action and drunk on power, ignorance and envy.



On first seeing the burned-out houses and bullet-riddled cars I took photos but soon stopped. There were simply too many, it felt disrespectful, almost akin to making a snuff video. And in any case, I would never forget the sight of this small town that was once visited by the devil.

Mile after mile of wreckage. This devastation was not an act of God, instead wrought by individuals who for some reason or other had become nothing more than brutalised psychopaths.

"It's not every day you meet a real life hero," I said, on meeting the man who had bravely driven busses of Hostomel's inhabitants to safety while under fire. "In Ukraine everyone is a hero," was his reply.

We heard stories of families forced to live without water or food in their basements for weeks with Russian occupiers living in their homes above them. These unwelcome lodgers defecating in the very sitting rooms they were also living in. They raped the women and girls as young as 8 forcing the rest of the family to watch. Over 800 women and girls. We passed a wall where these chilling Russian words were scrawled *Better a terrible end than a terror with no end.*

"Will these monsters ever have to answer for their crimes?" I asked Pavel, a businessman now liaison officer. "Are you kidding Vanessa?" he said. "This is the 21st century, we know the name of each one of them."

On approaching the Junior School, we were rendered dumb, for here the Russians had set up their headquarters. The contrast of a place of learning and innocence to the mindless destruction on show was too extreme to absorb



immediately. We crunched through glass and debris up the broken steps and through the doors hanging off their hinges. Aleksandr Filonenko, the Philosophy Professor, accompanying us, was studying the graffiti-daubed walls in an attempt to understand the minds of the soldiers. "They used the stage in the assembly hall as a place to defecate," he said. "A sort of ritualistic performance," he speculated, "perhaps this is basic envy." "Since 1991 Ukrainians have worked their butts off to make the country prosperous leaving Russia and its old-style Soviet methods behind, these guys were just livid." Russian graffiti 'Better a terrible end than a terror with no end.'

With our heads still swimming and the stench of burning and rotting clinging to our clothes we return to Kyiv city centre and visit Kyiv Volunteers. Initially set up by a few cooks and restaurants to serve food for those in need and now over 500 volunteers strong. "Each person is discovering a role in the war by finding their own front," one told us. "There are 40 million people in the Ukrainian army.'

During a walk around a bombed-out glass factory in Hostomel, Pavel had explained that the Ukraine government were doing an excellent job in communicating the needs of the country to the outside world but was not so good at running the country itself. Here it dawned on me that this country suffered the same fate as Russia during the break-up of the Soviet Union. Ukrainian oligarchs were handed enormous wealth and power and still had close contacts with their Russian equivalents. "It's complicated to break old ties and its hard work too to eradicate corruption. There is much to do," he told me.

Maidan Nezalezhnosti (maidan meaning square in Ukrainian) was our next stop. Quietly speaking Albert told us of the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. He told us of how at first some students had gathered in response to, the then president, Viktor Yanukovich's sudden decision not to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the EU instead choosing closer ties to Russia. Some scuffles broke out with the students. The police returned in force and cracked down with such brutality that, rather than disperse the crowd, parents arrived to join the protest.

"They positioned themselves up there on the top floor of that building," said Albert pointing "and that one there and that hotel there and began shooting randomly into the crowd. And yet more people arrived and yet more were shot. Some of the wounded in ambulances were intersected on the way to the hospital and simply disappeared," Albert continued, "I placed my laptop in my backpack in the hope it would offer some sort of protection." I looked at the surrounding buildings imagining the students, unarmed sitting ducks before the snipers. "Have you any idea how many students were killed?" I asked. "Over 120," he said. "At some point someone stood up on the stage and stated that the protest would never be quashed. Yanukovich fled to Russia that night taking a truck load of cash with him."

We listened in silence as Stephen and Anastasia sang "Oj Tam Na Hori" once more before belting out "Shche ne vmerla Ukrainy i slava, i volia", the Ukrainian National anthem, followed by even heartier renditions of "Oj u luzi chervona kalyna", a song that has become a symbol of the war, a number of times during dinner in the ambiguously named 'A Hundred Years Ahead' Restaurant. I went out for some air, walking around a peaceful nearby park, traces of Ukraine's traumatic history everywhere to see, the onion bulb domes of Saint Sophia Cathedral softly silhouetted against the blackened city below. I returned to find Stephen prostrate on the pavement conducting a crowd singing "Mamma Mia".

To the Lviv train once more. Kyiv station dark and wonderous as we joined a peaceful procession of the displaced and replaced heading to platform ten. Our songs that night, although fuelled by the odd glass of red wine, were more soulful. War-time trains don't leave on time in order to fool the enemy. These trundling beasts make too easier a target for those hoping to bag an easy win.



Tuesday 24th May

Lviv is literally a breath of fresh air after yesterday. We hadn't had an opportunity to shower since our visit to Gostomel and the reek of death, of burning buildings and rubbish and of trauma and pure evil still clung to my clothes and under my nails. And so to Albert's nest, his studio flat, a lucky find for him as not a room remains available to rent in the town which now houses 300 thousand internal refugees.

No rest in Albert's nest for next on the itinerary was the Lviv Municipality Arts Centre. Here we discussed all we had experienced in Ukraine, the organisers keen and open to our ideas. I broke down for the first and last time when I asked Ljana Mytsko, the Centre's Director, who the photographs lining the walls on one of the rooms were. "These are some of the Lviv writers and poets murdered by the Soviets during 1930's," she said before adding, "we had many mothers and children sleeping on the floor here at the beginning of the invasion." Oh my God these people have suffered. Momentarily unable to fathom my emotions, be they incredulity or sadness, I swayed in a faint then spluttered a cry of rage.

Two more private spaces followed, Ya Gallery, owned and run by the former Ukrainian Rockstar, Pavlo Gudimov, who is playing a major role in expanding the contemporary art scene in Lviv and the utterly breathtaking Diogenes Gallery.

The final visit before our long drive home was to the town hall to meet Andriy Sadovyj, Lviv's much loved and three times elected Mayor. This bear of a man welcomed us onto his expansive first floor balcony with offers of 'the best in the world' hot chocolate and stories of previous visitors – "Tom Cruise sat at that table over there." "As the west of the country is safe for now, we are expecting to host up to fifty thousand civilians who will need medical care, prosthetic limbs and psychological

rehabilitation.” He marvelled at the statistics he was reeling off. “Four million people passed through our town in the first fortnight, you have no idea how many people that is! You know,” he continued, “the Opera House is full every night now with refugees hungry for escape and culture.”

He gave us a copy of *The Gates of Europe* by Serhii Plokyh before handing out lapel pins of the Ukrainian flag. Stephen and Anastasia sang a now perfect rendition of “Oj Tam Na Hori” and as we left I said “Andrij, I bet Tom Cruise didn’t do that!” We laughed and hugged and we all walked down the steps of the Town Hall in the happy knowledge that Lviv was in excellent hands.

End.



Vanessa Branson is an arts activist and hotelier. Her memoir *One Hundred Summers* was published in 2020. For more information, please see www.vanessabranson.co.uk