

UDC 930 (477)

*Olga Saraieva,  
Pryazovskyi State Technical University (Dnipro)  
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5305-6751  
Maria Saraieva,  
10th grade student of the Mariupol City Lyceum (Kyiv)*

## Mariupol: the Heart of Fire and Hope

The war in our native city of Mariupol began very suddenly. On February 25, as usual, I went to school and my Mom to work at the university, not knowing that soon our peaceful life would end. In the morning, on the news on TV, we heard the phrase that turned our lives upside down: “The war has begun”. No one believed that this could happen to us.



**Multi-apartment multi-storey buildings of Mariupol after February 24, 2022. Reuters.**  
<https://www.rferl.org/a/mariupol-evacuation-bus-convoy/31779305.html> (Revised: 10.07.2024)

Firstly, there were huge queues in shops. People bought the last products; there was almost no bread, household chemicals, cereals, and water left. The shelves were emptied; we were in fear and panic because it became known that we were surrounded “in a ring”. After a while, it was impossible to withdraw money or pay by card, and all the shops were empty.

Two days later, we lost electricity and Internet completely. I remember how we tried to find at least some signal on the ninth floor to read the news, but we did not make it. From now on, we were isolated from the rest of the world, and all we had to do was sit and wait.

We did not understand what was happening in the country and the world. The products began to spoil, but at least we could cook them on the stove. After some time, the gas also disappeared. We put the stove right on the street near the entrance. Under the explosions, we tried to heat at least rainwater or cook some cereal. We cut the branches directly from the trees with our hands to keep the fire going, and when they ran out, we took the furniture out of our homes.

After the gas was cut off, they soon stopped taking out garbage. All utilities stopped working, so we were left completely alone, without any help, and could rely only on ourselves. The city plunged into darkness. In the evenings without electricity, it was creepy and scary. We sat in the corridor with a candle, and prayed to the sounds of rockets, that the war would end and we would remain alive.



**The cooking stove at the entrance of my house. Mariupol, March 2022. Photo by Maria Saraieva.**

Due to hunger and thirst, people took the last products from broken and abandoned pharmacies and shops. My mother went to the rocket-damaged store to find something, but all the products were dismantled and we were desperate.

At the beginning of March, it snowed, but we did not admire it as usual, at the Christmas fair in Mariupol. We collected it in vessels to have at least some water.

It would seem that a whole bowl of water was worth our efforts, but when we melted the snow, there was very little water left at the very bottom. We shared and drank it with our neighbors, even though it was dirty and with tree branches.

Around March 4, our pets died. The fish were the first; they simply did not have enough oxygen. After a while, there was no more food for the parrots, although they were our faithful friends and even entertained small children in the basement. We had to just let them go because we could not watch them starve to death.

My mother and I lived together. My father died in November, so we had no support. We were very afraid, and the explosions were increasing and were even louder, so we moved to the

corridor with a neighbor and her 2-year-old daughter. We put a few chairs there and brought pillows and blankets, and some books. Yes, we sat in the dark with a flashlight. We sat all night, wrapped in blankets from the cold and shivering from the constant explosions because the glass on the windows was long gone. We hardly entered the apartment, because the doors and windows were broken.

On March 8, on Girls' and Women's Day, we had the opportunity to go up to the apartments for at least one day. The men from our porch collected snowdrops and tulips for us, to at least somehow lift our spirits, to feel happy again in this fear and war.



**Consequences of shelling by russian troops on a children's hospital and maternity hospital in Mariupol. March 9, 2022. Reuters. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61179093> (Revised: 10.07.2024)**

However, our joy ended so quickly, because, on the same night, russian troops used aviation for the first time against us. That day we went to the apartment because we were very sick, and even risking our lives, we could not sit in the cold corridor.

Around two o'clock in the morning, we heard a terrible rumble, and our apartment and the whole house began to shake. Suddenly, all the doors in the rooms and the entrance slammed shut, and a burning red glow became visible in the window. Everything around was burning, and people were running out of their houses. We realized that this was exactly what they were: aerial bombs.

We ran to the corridor, trying to somehow hold the door, but another shock wave knocked it down. We tried to go down to the floor below, but as soon as I passed the first flight, another explosion was heard in the empty windows, and we were thrown against the wall. We were bombed until six in the morning. Back then, we thought it would never end. The plane fell silent, but a few minutes later, it returned, and the horror repeated itself.

After the night, people gradually came out of the burnt houses. They tried to wrap the dead in blankets and take them out into the street, while some were burned alive. There was a huge chasm in the house opposite us, where the bomb hit. A whole family with seven children burned there. People just stood and watched as their homes, where they were born and raised, burned to

the ground, along with all their belongings, photos, and memories. Moreover, worst of all, there was nothing we could do or change.



**The stairs that collapsed from the aerial bombardment in the corridor of my house. Mariupol. March 2022. Photo by Maria Saraieva.**

We got together with our neighbors and decided to live in the basement. The whole house together pulled mattresses, boards, and pillows there so that we could at least somehow survive there. They hung lights from the ceiling, and lit candles so that there was at least some light. It was cold and damp in the basement, rats and cockroaches were running around, and there were many inscriptions left by teenagers. We drew a prayer and a cross, and every time the explosions were unbearable, we prayed.

We spent six days in the basement. We hardly went out to cook; people were killed just under the entrances. We fell ill with purulent tonsillitis, it was almost impossible to talk. There was no medicine, no hot water, and no food either. We just did not know what to do.

Our grandparents moved to us. A rocket hit their apartment on the ninth floor. Everything burned down, there was no ceiling, and they had nowhere to live. Being together, we somehow supported each other.

Later we learned that our great-grandmother, to whom we tried to bring at least some food on foot, had burned alive in her apartment in the city center. This event broke us even more.



A high-rise building in Mariupol came under fire by Russian shells. March, 2022. Author: Alexander Ermochenko. Copyright holder: REUTERS. Copyright: Alexander Ermochenko. <https://www.pictures.reuters.com> (Revised: 10.07.2024)

We tried to tune the old radio to hear that it was okay, that we were not forgotten, and that there would be a “green corridor”, but the radio was silent, and we were losing hope more and more. Even when we tried to sleep, we did not take off our clothes or shoes, because we were afraid that if a rocket came and we fell asleep, we simply would not have time to surface.

We heard from our neighbors that people from other areas tried to leave, but the convoys were shot, so no one even tried to leave, risking their lives. We no longer had any strength or hope. People waited for starvation in the basements. Some simply could not stand it and ended their lives by suicide. We already wanted to walk to the neighboring village, but as soon as we left the basement and saw that bombs and shells were falling, we immediately turned back.

Later, the Ukrainian military entered our quarter. They inspected the basement and apartments. There were loaded tanks on the street. We were told that we had ten minutes before the battle began, and if we did not try now to go at our peril, we would most likely all die.

We did not pack anything. We did not even go home one last time to see our apartment. When we went outside for the first time in a long time, tears welled up in our eyes. There were burnt ruins all around, the native school was destroyed, and a huge tank stood in the middle of the playground.

Thirteen of us left in a shot-up car without windows, propping up with pillows, under the shells, and onto the mined road.



Residents of Mariupol sit on a bench near a residential building destroyed by russian troops. March 30, 2022.  
REUTERS/Alexander Ermochenko.

<https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/in-pictures-russias-victory-in-mariupol-idUSRTS7DDTJ/> (Revised: 10.07.2024)



The Azovstal plant during the siege. April 26, 2022. Author: <https://www.armyinform.com.ua>

Source <https://armyinform.com.ua/2022/04/26/ochilnyk-rf-pogodyvsya-na-uchast-oon-v-evakuacziyi-czivilnogo-naseleण्या-z-azovstali-oon/> (Revised: 10.07.2024)

We did not recognize our native city: it was simply destroyed, was gone. Missiles, bodies, and debris lay everywhere, everything was crushed. It was as if the end of the world, for us leaving home was just like that.

That evening, having nowhere to go, we stopped in a village near Mariupol. An elderly woman sheltered and fed us. We saw water, light again for the first time, and ate fresh food.

All night long, we shuddered at the explosions that thundered in Mariupol, and thought about what to do next, having nothing.

This is how our new life began, having lost everything, having a residence permit in Mariupol, and no longer having a home there... .

I want to share with you how beautiful my hometown was before this brutal war. In 2012, Mariupol was recognized by the government of Ukraine as one of the most comfortable cities in the country to live in....



**Water tower and New Year's Mariupol. December 19, 2020. Night view of Mariupol in 2020.**

<https://www.Mrpl.travel> - Own work. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariupol#/media/File:Вежа\\_взимку.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariupol#/media/File:Вежа_взимку.jpg)  
(Revised: 10.07.2024)



Center of Mariupol before February 24, 2022. <https://www.Mrpl.travel> - Own work.  
<https://ui.org.ua/en/postcard/mariupol/> (Revised: 10.07.2024)



Center of Mariupol and Mariupol regional drama theatre. May 2, 2021. Author: Oleksandr Malyon.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Донецький\\_академічний\\_обласний\\_драматичний\\_театр\\_4.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Донецький_академічний_обласний_драматичний_театр_4.jpg)  
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**Belosarai spit of the Mariupol district is a place of recreation for the people of Mariupol. 2021.** <http://www.urzuf.com>  
<https://mistomariupol.com.ua/uk/vidpochynok-pid-mariupolem-aktualna-informacziya-na-lito/> (Revised: 10.07.2024)