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DONETSK

My childhood memories of Donetsk are not merely pictures archived in my head, nor are they simply scenes from a movie I once watched. They are tactile experiences – real feelings and smells that live in my memory. When I close my eyes and travel back to the age of seven, grand historical events or political maps do not define my world; my world was defined by the smell of warm asphalt. Donetsk had a specific summer rhythm. After the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of bruised purple and burnt orange, the concrete streets and wide avenues acted like giant storage batteries, keeping the intense heat of the day long into the twilight. That smell – mineral, dusty, and radiating an almost living warmth – was incredibly comforting. It was the smell of freedom, of the hours between dinner and bedtime when the city belonged to us children.

I remember the alleys of roses with an almost overwhelming clarity. In a city, famously known for its heavy industry, for the plumes of smoke rising from massive metallurgical plants, these flowers seemed like a beautiful defiance of logic. There were thousands of them. They lined the boulevards, climbed the trellises in public parks, and surrounded the grand, Soviet-era theaters. They made our industrial city look like a giant, meticulously maintained greenhouse. These roses were not wild accidents of nature; they were planted on purpose, tended by municipal workers whose silent labor showed that the people of Donetsk cared deeply about beauty, even in a city built on coal, iron, and sweat. The contrast was our identity: we were children of steel and flowers.

In those days, I operated under the blissful, universal illusion of childhood: I thought my life would never change. Home was not just a physical structure of brick and mortar; it was a safe place, an emotional fortress built on the pillars of family, the predictable changing of the seasons, and a deep, unshakeable feeling of belonging. My childhood in Donetsk was perfectly safe, wrapped in a cocoon of normalcy. I remember the yellow streetlights that hummed softly as evening settled over the neighborhoods. Their amber glow felt like a warm hug from the city itself, keeping the darkness at bay.

Walking with my mother in the city center was a peaceful daily routine that I took for granted. We would walk down Artema Street, the main artery of the city, bustling with life. I knew the exact sound of the trolleybus wheels grinding against the steel tracks — a high-pitched, rhythmic squeal punctuated by the sparking of the overhead cables. I knew the specific, earthy smell of the local park after the automatic sprinklers had done their work in the early morning. I loved the bright, almost gaudy colors of the city fountains at night – the "Glass Fountain" with its mosaic bowls catching the light, the water dancing to classical music. Life was calm, predictable, and beautifully ordinary. The city was alive, breathing in sync with its inhabitants, and I was an integral part of its

body. I had no concept of fragility. I did not know how easily that peace could be broken, how thin the ice of civilization actually was.

Everything changed suddenly, with a violence that shattered the mirror of my childhood. There was no gradual warning, no slow fade from peace to conflict. It started with a sound that had never been part of our city's symphony: the loud, aggressive roar of military airplanes flying alarmingly low. The sky, which had always been a canvas for stars and kites, suddenly became a domain of terror.

May 26, 2014, is the date that surgically cut my life into two separate hemispheres: "before" and "after." On that day, the sound of fighter jets screaming over the Sergei Prokofiev International Airport became the soundtrack of my loss. The airport was not just a building; it was the modern face of Donetsk, the place where we went to greet relatives, the place that connected our isolated industrial hub to the rest of the world. Hearing it becomes a military target was incomprehensible to my seven-year-old mind. I did not understand the complex web of politics, geopolitics, or hybrid warfare. Nevertheless, I understood something much more primal: the air itself felt different. It became heavy, oppressive, and scary, as if it were carrying the weight of impending doom.

The most terrifying change was not in the sky, but in the eyes of the adults around me. Adults are supposed to be the anchors of a child's reality; they are supposed to be invincible. But suddenly, my mom, my neighbors, and my teachers started talking quietly. Their voices lost their casual volume. Conversations happened behind closed doors, accompanied by the continuous, nervous clicking of TV remotes as they cycled through news channels. Their eyes, which used to look at me with warmth or mild irritation, were constantly darting upward, looking at the sky through the windows, scanning the horizon for threats. They tried desperately to act normal for my sake. They forced smiles and maintained our routines, but I was a child attuned to their micro-expressions. I could smell their fear, just as clearly as I had smelled the warm asphalt days before.

The city itself underwent a horrifying metamorphosis. Overnight, the place that felt vast and full of possibilities felt small, claustrophobic, and deeply dangerous. The wide, tree-lined streets I had walked so confidently with my mother now felt exposed and hostile. I began to study the faces of my neighbors, and I watched them change in real-time. A hard mask of fear, suspicion, and exhaustion rapidly replaced happy, open, relaxed looks. People no longer strolled; they walked with a specific purpose, faster, with their heads down, trying to make themselves invisible.

The joyful, chaotic sound of children playing in the playgrounds disappeared completely. It was replaced by a terrifying, suffocating silence. This silence was occasionally shattered by the harsh, mechanical roar of military trucks rolling through the streets, carrying armed men whose faces were hidden behind balaclavas. That was when I learned the harshest lesson of my life: safety is an illusion. I learned that a home, a deeply loved and established home, could be invaded and taken over by dark, faceless forces that you cannot control or reason with. The cocoon had been ripped open, and I was exposed to the cold wind of history.

To truly understand the tragedy of what happened to my city – and what continues to happen – we must violently tear down the Russian myth about the "Donbas." For decades, leading up to the invasion, Russian state media and propaganda machines carefully painted our home with a very specific, cynical brush. They depicted Donetsk as a grey, depressed, strictly utilitarian industrial zone. They pushed a narrative that the people there were simple, heavily Russified factory workers

who only wanted to live in a romanticized Soviet past, safely tucked under moscow's protective wing.

This was not just a misunderstanding; it was a calculated lie, and it functioned as a weapon of war long before the first tanks crossed the border. By reducing Donetsk to a monolithic "worker's city," russia attempted to systematically erase our art, our intelligence, our middle class, and our European spirit. This propaganda was designed to do one thing: to make it seem as though Donetsk was naturally, genetically russian, and that it had no interest in a democratic, independent Ukrainian future. If moscow could convince the world that Donetsk was not truly Ukrainian, then taking it would not look like an invasion; it would look like a "reunification."

The prominent Ukrainian historian Olena Stiazhkina, who herself is from Donetsk and lived through the occupation, perfectly dissects this in her work. She argues that the very word "Donbas"— an abbreviation for Donetsky Basin – is essentially a tool used to erase our complex identity. It is a geographic, geological, and industrial term, not a cultural or national one. By focusing exclusively on coal and iron, russia treated the millions of people living there as a faceless, interchangeable workforce – cogs in a machine that existed only to generate resources for an empire. We were dehumanized by terminology.

But the reality of Donetsk's foundation and development tells a completely different story. Donetsk has a rich history of entrepreneurship, commerce, and international connections. It was not founded by a russian tsar, but by a Welshman, John Hughes, in 1869. He brought not just metallurgical expertise, but British engineers, managers, and architectural ideas. The city, originally named Yuzovka in his honor, was built with a distinct British urban planning philosophy: wide, straight streets designed for ventilation, green spaces, parks, and solid brick houses. From its very first days, it was an international, Western-oriented project planted on Ukrainian soil. It was never just a bleak soviet city; it was a place of new ideas, a melting pot of different nationalities working together.

If you listened to russian propaganda, you would assume Donetsk was a cultural wasteland, a place where high art went to die. However, the reality leading up to 2014 was entirely different. Before the war, Donetsk was rapidly transforming into a modern, forward-looking European city. We witnessed a construction boom of new business centers, modern shopping districts, and cozy European-style cafes. We hosted massive international events, most notably the 2012 UEFA European Football Championship. The Donbass Arena, with its gleaming glass and steel, was not just a stadium; it was a physical manifestation of our city's ambition to be seen as part of the developed world. We had a thriving, underground art scene, independent theaters, and a growing middle class that valued European standards of living and governance.

To understand the true soul of Donetsk, you only need to look at my family, which was entirely representative of the city's silent majority. My grandfather spent his entire working life inside the belly of a massive metallurgical factory. He was the very image of the "Donbas worker" that russian propaganda loved to romanticize. Nevertheless, russian propaganda left out one crucial detail: what that worker thought about when he came home. At night, with grease washed from his hands, my grandfather did not read soviet newspapers or dream of the russian Empire. He read poetry. He revered the words of Taras Shevchenko and Vasyl Stus.

Speaking of Vasyl Stus – one of the greatest Ukrainian poets and a legendary dissident who died in a soviet labor camp – he actually studied at Donetsk University. This fact alone shatters the russian narrative. One of Ukraine's most fierce, intelligent, and anti-imperialist voices was forged in the libraries and lecture halls of Donetsk. The city was not a swamp of russian imperial thinking; it was a crucible of Ukrainian resistance.

Being Ukrainian in Donetsk in those days was not a loud, performative, or fake spectacle. We did not need to wear vyshyankas (traditional embroidered shirts) every day to prove our identity. It was a quiet, normal, unshakeable truth. People spoke Ukrainian freely in universities, in schools and in the offices of the new businesses. In addition, here is the most important nuance that outsiders often miss: even the people who spoke russian in their daily lives – people like my family – knew with absolute certainty that they were not russian.

We felt a deep, cultural and civic connection to a democratic, independent, and European Ukraine. When we traveled to Kyiv or Lviv, we did not feel like we were visiting a foreign country; we felt like we were moving through different rooms of our own home. The idea that Donetsk was "not Ukrainian" is an insult not just to geography, but also to the buildings, the institutions, and the real lives of millions of people who always felt infinitely closer to the democratic ideals of Kyiv and Europe than to the authoritarian grip of moscow.

Today, looking at the ruins of my hometown through the analytical lens of a historian, I do not just call what happened an occupation or a physical destruction. I call it "memocide." We must understand this term if we are to grasp the full scale of the tragedy. Memocide is not merely about bombing buildings into rubble or tearing down the Ukrainian flag to raise a donetsk people's republic one. Physical destruction is terrible, but it can theoretically be rebuilt. Memocide is far more sinister: it is the planned, systematic killing of a city's memory. It is a calculated method to erase people's culture, history, and sense of self, leaving behind only a hollow shell that can be filled with the occupier's ideology.

Olena Stiazhkina perfectly captures this process when she compares the occupied city of Donetsk to a raped woman whose voice has been stolen. The enemy did not just take our houses, our parks, or our factories; they took our history. They hijacked our past. The goal of memocide is to induce a profound societal amnesia. They wanted to make the entire region doubt its own past, to make people question their own lived experiences. They wanted the residents of Donetsk to believe that their Ukrainian identity was an anomaly, a recent lie invented by politicians in Kyiv, rather than the organic truth of their lives.

When an empire steals your voice, it forces you to speak its language, both literally and metaphorically. If you control the narrative of the past, you control the future. By erasing the memory of John Hughes, the memory of Vasyl Stus, the memory of Euro 2012, and the memory of those quiet evenings reading Shevchenko, the occupiers attempted to create a blank slate. They wanted to erase the evidence that Donetsk was ever anything other than a gray, obedient russian outpost. Memocide is the ultimate form of imperialism: it does not just conquer your land; it conquers your mind, making you a passive participant in the erasure of your own existence.

The way the occupiers executed this memocide was deeply evil, highly organized, and terrifyingly bureaucratic. It was not a chaotic byproduct of war; it was a deliberate policy. They understood that to conquer the city permanently, they had to starve the minds of its residents. The

first step was the systematic purification of our libraries. Armed men, accompanied by local collaborators, entered the quiet sanctuaries of our city. They combed through the shelves, pulling out Ukrainian history books, Ukrainian literature, and any texts that contradicted the Russian imperial narrative. These books were not merely hidden; in many cases, they were publicly burned or dumped like trash. The smell of burning paper in Donetsk was no longer the smell of autumn leaves; it was the smell of our intellectual heritage going up in smoke.

Then came the rewriting of the future, disguised as the rewriting of the past. They completely overhauled the school curriculum. The textbooks were changed. Children who had previously learned about the Holodomor, the Ukrainian liberation struggles, and the democratic history of Europe were suddenly forced to study from books that claimed Donetsk had always been an inseparable part of Russia, a loyal province that had tragically fallen under the influence of Western fascists. They were weaponizing education, aiming to raise a generation of Ukrainians who would not even know they were Ukrainian.

To enforce this new reality, they constructed an atmosphere of suffocating terror. It was a terror of the mundane. You did not need to carry a weapon to be a threat; you just needed to wear the wrong color. Just wearing a blue and yellow ribbon on your jacket, or humming a Ukrainian song under your breath in a public square, could result in being dragged away by the "ministry of state security." People disappeared into basements turned into torture chambers. They tried to surgically cut out our identity without any care for the psychological pain, the trauma, and the fractured families they left in their wake.

They wanted to turn Donetsk into a blank, gray space, a perfect canvas for Russian lies. But in their arrogance, they forgot one fundamental truth about human nature: you cannot easily destroy memory. They can burn the books, but they cannot burn the neurons in the brain where the words are stored. They can change the street names, but they cannot erase the mental maps of the people who walked them. Memory is portable. By forcing us out, they accidentally scattered the true memory of Donetsk across the rest of Ukraine and the world.

Leaving Donetsk was not a relocation; it was an amputation. It felt like losing a vital organ, a part of my childhood that I could not live without but could no longer reach. At the age of seven, I was handed a heavy, invisible label: "refugee". It is a cold, dehumanizing word that fails to capture the absolute shattering of a universe. In the new, safer parts of Ukraine, I lived in two worlds simultaneously, trapped in a state of severe cognitive dissonance.

I lived in the physical, real world – going to a new school, learning to navigate a new neighborhood, trying to make new friends. But in my heart and in my dreams, I was living in the past, endlessly mourning my lost home. For years, I suffered from a psychological phantom limb. I felt like the real Donetsk was still there, frozen in time, waiting for me just behind a thick, invisible mirror. I harbored an irrational, childlike belief: if I could just find the right angle, if I could just hit the glass hard enough, I could break the mirror, step through, and be back on my street. I could smell the warm asphalt, hear the trolleybus, and watch the fountains dance.

However, the truth was brutal, and it arrived slowly through news reports, conversations between adults, and photos sent by acquaintances who were still trapped there. The mirror was not intact. It had been shattered into millions of jagged, irreparable pieces. Each piece was a ruined building, a closed school, a park turned into a military position, or a lost friend whose family had

been forced to accept russian passports. The city I loved was being physically altered to match their lies, and I was powerless to stop it.

Starting a new life in another part of Ukraine was an incredibly lonely and painful process. I carried a trauma that I could not explain to anyone outside of my situation. Other kids my age in Kyiv or Lviv thought the war in the east was just something that happened on TV. For them, a distant news segment ended when they changed the channel. For me, it was the agonizing death of my entire world.

At first, I stayed completely silent about my past. How do you explain to a stranger, let alone a child, what it feels like to have your hometown stolen? How do you describe the specific flavor of grief that comes from knowing your house is still standing, but an enemy who hates everything your family stood for has occupied it? I realized that words like "occupation" and "war" were too small to hold my pain. Therefore, I wrapped my memories in silence, protecting them like a fragile flame; waiting for the day, I would finally know how to use them.

That long period of silence eventually broke, but it did not break from weakness; it broke because I found my weapon. Today, my work as a historian is not just a profession or an academic pursuit – it is my life's mission, my absolute duty. I do not study dictatorship, propaganda, and the mechanics of war as abstract ideas hidden safely within the pages of a library book. I study them because they physically destroyed my life. I am not an outside observer; I am evidence.

Because I lived through the opening chapters of the occupation, I know exactly how the "russian world" actually functions on the ground. I do not need to read theoretical papers about how authoritarianism suppresses a population; I watched it happen in real-time. I saw how the intoxicating mix of fear, propaganda, and economic desperation worked to turn my childhood streets into a dark, paranoid place. I watched intelligent, good people learn to look down at their shoes, to lower their voices, and to stay quiet just to survive, to put food on their tables, to keep their children safe from the basement torture chambers.

I study this dark machinery because I fiercely refuse to let the enemy write the history of my home. The russians understand that whoever controls the narrative of the past controls the future. If I remain silent, if my generation does not document our experiences, the occupiers will fill the vacuum. In fifty years, they will claim Donetsk was always russian, that the roses never existed, that we were always miserable until they "saved" us. Writing is my weapon. I want to save the truth that russia is trying so desperately to strangle. Every academic paper I write, every memory I record is a bullet fired back at the empire that tried to erase me.

Nevertheless, winning the physical war and liberating our land is only the very first step on a much longer, much harder road. We cannot simply take the city back with tanks and pretend the last twelve years of darkness did not happen. If we only rebuild the broken walls but leave the minds of the people under occupation, the victory will be hollow. We need a massive, generational process to heal the memory of Donetsk.

This will be incredibly difficult. We will have to face the reality that millions of people have been fed a strict diet of russian lies for a decade. We have to figure out how to help them detoxify, how to de-program their minds without alienating them. We must teach the next generation of children in Donetsk that being Ukrainian is their inherent human right, their cultural

heritage, not a political idea forced upon them by the government in Kyiv. We must meticulously reconnect the city to its true past, its European roots, and its Welsh founder.

I believe that protecting and restoring memory is a civic duty, exactly like protecting the environment. Just as we must clean a toxic river to make the water safe for life again, we must clean our collective minds with the truth. The ideology of the "russian world" is like a highly aggressive weed. It spreads quickly, it chokes the native flora, and it poisons the soil so that nothing else can grow. Pulling it out by the roots takes immense time, patience, and stubborn effort.

We have to become the gardeners of our collective memory. We have to get our hands dirty. We have to gently but firmly pull out the lies, root and branch, and plant the seeds of truth. We have to water them with our stories, our archives, and our unwavering belief in who we are. It is grueling work, but it is the only way to ensure the soil of Donetsk is fertile for freedom again.

We are getting ready to return. Not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but we are preparing our hearts and our minds for the day the occupation ends. Moreover, I want to make one thing perfectly clear: we are not returning for revenge. Revenge is a dark, destructive force that belongs to the "russian world," not to us. We are returning for the truth. We are returning to reclaim what is ours.

When the occupation will finally end, the heavy, terrifying silence that fell over my city in 2014 will break. It will be shattered by the voices of people who can finally speak freely, by the sound of children running in the playgrounds again, and by the rhythmic squeal of trolleybus wheels on the tracks. The physical scars of war will take decades to heal, the rubble will take years to clear, but I know, with absolute certainty, that the smell of roses will eventually cover the smell of gunpowder and burning books.

I know this because I remember the streets I walked. I carry the map of the real Donetsk in my DNA. We are the builders of the new Donetsk. We are the generation that was forced into exile, but we used that exile to educate ourselves, to understand our enemy, and to forge an unbreakable identity. We carry the truth in our hearts like a sacred fire. We kept the city's spirit alive during these long, dark years, ensuring that the city existed beyond its physical borders, living inside us.

We remember the trolleybuses, the fountains, the poetry of Stus, the hard work of our grandfathers, and the quiet, European dreams of our parents. We remember the warm asphalt and the thousands of roses. Because we remember, the city is not lost. It was never lost. It is just waiting, patient and enduring, for us to cross the threshold and bring its true history home.