



'First occupation and now floods – it's another nightmare'

View from Ukraine



Daniel McLaughlin
in Snihurivka

Southeast Ukraine has suffered war, occupation and now flood, as the Inhulets river swallows houses and roads after the Kakhovka dam was destroyed

Russia's invasion of Ukraine destroyed Oksana Kuzmynskaya's house, drove her family from their hometown of Snihurivka, and then turned even her beloved Inhulets river into a threat.

Through the empty window frames of her ruined home, which was hit by the blast wave of a Russian airstrike 15 months ago, she can see the Inhulets gleaming beyond the wrecked family car, the garden where she reared ducks and chickens and the wildflowers now running riot on the land she used to tend.

But now the Inhulets is 1km wide – where before barely 50 metres separated its banks – and only the tops of traffic signs and the crowns of trees show where roads and bridges were swallowed up by swirling floodwaters.

"First occupation and now this – it's another nightmare for the town." Kuzmynskaya says of Snihurivka, where the water level rose by six metres in the hours after the Russian-controlled Kakhovka dam on the Dnipro river was destroyed last week, sending some 18 billion cubic metres of water surging towards the Black Sea and up the Inhulets, a tributary of the Dnipro.

The flood is feared to have killed dozens of people and has displaced thousands in areas liberated by Ukraine last November and in territory on the eastern bank of the Dnipro that is still held by Russia, which denies responsibility for the disaster despite very strong indications that its troops blew up the dam or caused its collapse through incompetence.

The worst damage was across Kherson region, but in Snihurivka and surrounding villages in the neighbouring Mykolaiv province, the flood damaged more than 360 houses, forced more than 650 people from their homes, cut power supplies, inundated wells for drinking water and a major pumping station, and drowned fields, gardens and allotments where locals grow fruit and vegetables to help see them through the winter.

It puts huge strain on a district where more than 1,500 buildings have been damaged in fighting and on the 12,000 people now living here – some 4,000 more than were here during occupation, but

still only about half the pre-war population.

Kuzmynskaya now has no gas or electricity in the house she rents with her husband and two children and says she still feels unsafe in Snihurivka, which is now about 50km from the front line as Ukraine's forces mount their counter-offensive to retake more territory.

"There was an air raid siren this morning and my daughter and I dashed straight for the basement," she says, as she steps from the shade of the grocery shop where she works into the bright sunshine of the street and sets off towards her old house. "I still get the shivers when I talk about what happened last year."

Kuzmynskaya (45) and her family were at home when a Russian bomb fell on their street, tearing off the roof, shattering the windows and ripping through the walls of her house.

"There was a huge explosion and plaster fell on us and I thought the ceiling was going to come down. Thankfully it held and we weren't hurt, though my husband was on crutches at the time after an operation," she recalls.

"We spent a month living in a basement with about 350 others, including elderly people and families with little children. There was bombing every single night. It was horrendous."

Like Kuzmynskaya, Iryna Kravets finally fled from Snihurivka to a safer part of Ukraine, and returned home when the town was liberated.

"It was a tragic sight when I came back. There was so much damage to the town and my own house had been burned down," says Kravets (24), holding 10-month-old daughter Eva in her arms.

"We were given a house, and it's okay. But now there's no water because of the flooding. I don't know what the Russians are thinking, just destroying everything. It's madness," she adds. "Look at the size of the river now, how much land it has covered up. It was so narrow before – I swam across it when I was a teenager."

On the river, members of Ukraine's state emergency service guide boats past electricity pylons and road signs, under power lines and over submerged bridges

to deliver food and other essentials to flood-bound villages. At the height of the flood, they carried vulnerable people to safety on higher ground, and are now taking some evacuees home.

In the village of Novovasylivka, local men and boys wait by flooded riverside buildings to transfer deliveries from the boat into a waiting trailer, which then bounces away behind a blue Soviet-era tractor to a school that has been turned into an aid distribution centre.

Inside, sporting a bright yellow T-shirt and leopard-print headscarf, village head Vita Bardizh takes a stream of calls from residents and officials in neighbouring communities, while organising volunteers as they arrange piles of clothes, hygiene products, food and other supplies donated by Ukrainians and aid organisations.

"We had no idea what was coming on the morning of the flood. We just got up as usual and checked our phones and the news and Facebook," she recalls.

"Some said the floodwater won't reach here and not to worry, but by about mid-morning the water was starting to rise and a few people began to panic. In the end it rose by about six metres. We knew which areas were in danger and offered to help people leave, but some didn't want to go. In the end, 64 buildings in our village were flooded, some partially and some right up to the roof."

She does not know whether the district's recently rebuilt bridges will emerge intact when the water recedes, or what will be left on the land, amid warnings that the torrent swept up chemicals and waste from industry, households and farmland, mines and other explosives from current and former front-line areas, and countless animals that could not escape the danger



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We went to Snihurivka and surrounding villages delivering water, food, water pumps and filters, life jackets and inflatable boats. Oleh Kulakevych of Odesa-based charity New Dawn

zone. "People's kitchen gardens have been flooded and a lot of pasture for animal grazing, too. It will make life hard here if that land is ruined," says Bardizh, who was born in Novovasylivka and stayed during the occupation.

"The Russians mined the bridges and mostly stuck there. Sometimes they came into the village on patrol and searched our houses. They took some people to Snihurivka and beat them. My cousin was detained and beaten for two days because his brothers serve in our armed forces, and the Russians wanted to know the locations of their positions."

Bardizh was most worried for her son, who at 17 was just a year short of being eligible for the Ukrainian army.

"The Russians kept asking how old he was. I told him to go out as little as possible, and for the first couple of months [of occupation] we barely left the house," she recalls.

"The Russians tried to take my car but I told them there was no way I would let them, because I have two children and elderly parents to look after. And they left me alone. But they stole lots of people's cars and drove away in them when they retreated from here."

As with many people in Snihurivka and surrounding villages, the thrill and relief of liberation are still palpable, as Bardizh recalls the foggy November day when Ukrainian soldiers emerged from the gloom and told them the Russians had gone: "Honestly, when we saw they were our lads, we kissed their hands and feet," she says.

In the nearby village of Yevhenivka, Sveta Mironenko shares similar memories.

"Liberation was an indescribable feeling. It immediately felt easier to breathe, the air itself seemed different," says Mironenko, whose husband signed up to rejoin the army on the morning of February 24th last year, just hours after Russia's full-scale invasion began.

However, she claims that – as in other occupied areas – Ukraine's return was not welcomed as warmly by all her neighbours, nor were the Russians universally despised here.

"Some people here seemed to get on fine with the Russians. And some local people stole things from the houses of those who had left the village," Mironenko recalls.

"I never took food packages or anything else from the Russians, but some did. And some of them are here now, taking help from people who are helping Ukraine," she says, as workers from Odesa-based charity New Dawn hand out food parcels

■ Clockwise from main: Rescue workers deliver aid in areas flooded by the Inhulets river; Vita Bardizh, head of Novovasylivka village; Iryna Kravets and daughter Eva in Snihurivka; Oksana Kuzmynskaya in Snihurivka. Inset: Ivan Kukhta, head of Snihurivka town; Sveta Mironenko lived through eight months of Russian occupation in Yevhenivka village.

PHOTOGRAPHS: DANIEL MCLAUGHLIN



to dozens of villagers. Oleh Kulakevych, executive director of New Dawn, says many major aid groups and volunteers headed immediately for the city of Kherson on the Dnipro river when the flood began, so his team ventured up the Inhulets and found local authorities in need of help.

"We went to Snihurivka and surrounding villages delivering water, food, water pumps and filters, life jackets and inflatable boats," says Kulakevych, who as a trained electrician also managed to isolate a major power line while working from a boat on the rising floodwater. The group is also co-ordinating the drilling of new wells in the area after existing water sources were flooded.

Beneath a portrait of Taras Shevchenko, Ukraine's national poet, Ivan Kukhta sits at his desk and lists his main worries as the head of Snihurivka's military administration.

"Practically all of Snihurivka is without running water, because five of our six pumping wells are flooded. We've opened water distribution points, but that just covers the minimum of people's needs," he says. "There are 13 communities in our district and most have no power or water. Then we have to think about the destruction of homes and gardens, roads and bridges – which we rebuilt after they were blown up during occupation. These are big problems," he adds.

Kuzmynskaya gladly returned to her job in a grocery store when Snihurivka was liberated, but she rejected an offer of housing from the authorities.

"I don't want some prefabricated house. I want to rebuild here, in the place I had my family. I want to have my garden back again, and my ducks and chickens and my view of the river," she says.

Kuzmynskaya, whose fingernails are painted in the blue and yellow colours of Ukraine, is standing in her shattered living room, where swallows have made a nest high in one corner.

One of them swoops in through an empty window frame, knives through the shadows and curves back out into the sunshine.

"I want life to be calm and peaceful here," she says.

"And for Ukraine to win the war."

Ukraine claims further progress in counter-attack

Ukrainian fighter pilots are being trained to fly F-16 jets, Nato's secretary general has revealed, as Kyiv claimed further incremental progress in its counter-offensive against Russian forces in the east and south of Ukraine.

Nato allies have yet to agree on delivering the so-called fourth-generation US fighters to Ukraine, but Jens Stoltenberg said the training of Ukrainian personnel was under way.

"The fact that training has started provides us with the option to also decide to deliver the planes and then the pilots will be ready to fly them," the former prime minister of Norway said as he arrived at a meeting of Nato defence ministers in Brussels.

The development follows months of internal debate in Washington over the risks of Ukraine deploying F-16s to attack targets on Russian territory and potentially escalating the conflict. The US has control

over the jets' re-export from any country that has them in its arsenal.

As recently as February, US president Joe Biden declined Ukrainian requests for the lightweight fighter aircraft.

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy is understood to have subsequently given firm commitments that the planes would be used only to target Russian forces within Ukraine.

It will still take months to train Ukraine's pilots, who will have previously flown mainly in Soviet-standard aircraft. Ukraine does not yet even have runways suitable for F-16s should Nato allies agree to provide the hardware.

Kyiv has in recent days warned that its long-anticipated counteroffensive is running into Russia's air and artillery superiority.

Despite those challenges, Brig Gen Oleksii Hromov said yesterday that progress in its



■ Municipal workers clear debris from homes in the aftermath of a Russian attack on Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine. PHOTOGRAPH: ANATOLI STEPANOV/AFP/GETTY

counteroffensive was being made, with Ukraine regaining control over about 100 sq km since the weekend.

Gen Hromov told journalists his troops had benefited from the provision of MiG-29 planes from Poland and Slovakia and

claimed, without providing evidence, that Russian soldiers were deliberately inflicting wounds upon themselves to avoid battle.

"The Ukrainian army has gained considerable experience and skill on the battlefield

this year, and we are ready and will continue to fight until the complete liberation of our own territories, even with our bare hands. With heavy weapons from our allies, this will happen faster."

Steady advance

Ukraine's army is said to have advanced 3km near the village of Mala Tokmachka in the Zaporizhzhia region and by up to 6km near a village south of Velyka Novosilka in Donetsk.

The Ukrainian deputy defence minister Hanna Maliar said: "There is a gradual but steady advance of the armed forces. At the same time, the enemy is putting up powerful resistance [on the southern front]. The enemy is pulling up additional reserves and is trying with all its might to prevent the advance of Ukrainian forces."

Moscow has widely disseminated video footage of US Bradley armoured vehicles and Ger-

man-made Leopard tanks being hit by Russian fire.

US defence secretary Lloyd Austin said Ukraine retained sufficient firepower for the battle to come. "I think the Russians have shown us that same five vehicles about 1,000 times from 10 different angles," he said. "But quite frankly, the Ukrainians still have a lot of combat capability, combat power."

"This will continue to be a tough fight, as we anticipate it, and I believe that the element that does the best in terms of sustainment will probably have the advantage at the end of the day."

The US chair of the joint chiefs of staff, Gen Mark Milley, said it was too early "to put any estimates" on how long the Ukrainian counteroffensive would last. "This is a very difficult fight; it is a very violent fight and it will likely take a considerable amount of time and at high cost," he said. – Guardian

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Saturday, October 8th, 2022 Editor Mary Minihan Phone 01-6758000 email weekend@irishtimes.com



Out of the shadows

Huge strides made, but echoes of stigma for single mothers in Ireland still resonate. Page 6



FIVE UKRAINIAN FRIENDS PAY PRICE OF WAR

A group of civilian friends joined the military when Russia invaded Ukraine. Two are dead and one is missing but their comrades say 'blood is the price of freedom'



When Russia invaded their homeland with full force in February, five friends decided to sign up for the Ukrainian military together, said farewell to civilian life by sharing half a bottle of Hennessy cognac and agreed to drink the rest after the war to celebrate victory.

Now two of them are dead, one is missing and two are involved in a remarkable counterattack that is raising Ukraine's hopes of eventual triumph, while also taking a heavy toll on the people doing the fighting and on those who wait for them to come home.

Maksym Mayevskiy, Oleh Kurskiy, Marian Stefankiv, Volodymyr Lazor and a fifth man who can only be identified by his military call sign "Molot" (Hammer), joined the army in the western city of Lviv, and their friendship revolved around this historic stronghold of Ukrainian culture and identity.

Maksym grew up in Zhmerynka in central Ukraine and then moved to the capital, Kyiv, where he learned English and studied business and economics while working at a bank to fund his tuition.

He was 25 years old when thousands of protesters demanding an end to corruption and pro-Kremlin rule occupied Kyiv's Maidan square throughout a freezing winter, until police loyal to Ukraine's then Russian-backed president, Viktor Yanukovich, shot dozens of them dead in February 2014.

As Yanukovich and his cronies fled to Moscow, the Kremlin annexed Crimea from Ukraine and then created, financed and armed militia groups that seized swathes of the country's eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions and declared their intention to join Russia.

Maksym did not live in the protest camp on Maidan but was one of huge numbers of Ukrainians who joined rallies on the square. He saw his father, Volodymyr, first delivering supplies to the demonstrators and later to the frontline in the east, where Ukraine's then ragtag army relied on volunteer fighters and helpers to hold back the Russian-led militants.

"In 2017 Maksym told me he wanted to join a volunteer battalion to defend Ukraine," Volodymyr recalls.

"He'd never been interested in things like that before – though I had a licensed gun he hadn't even wanted to come to the shooting range – but I didn't oppose his decision. My wife and I discussed it and said we'd raised our children to be able to make such decisions for themselves. In fact, I was proud of him and saw his potential to be a good soldier."

Beer and paintball

Maksym fought for about a year, mostly near the then government-held port of Mariupol on the Azov Sea – a dangerous area even during that smaller-scale phase of the conflict – before the Aratta battalion was withdrawn from the front line and he returned to civilian life, taking a job with an educational software firm and moving to Lviv with his girlfriend.

It was there that the five friends grew close, thirtysomethings who liked to have a beer and play paintball and who were inspired – like many of their peers – by the fight to protect Ukraine's independence from Russia and make it a fairer and less corrupt place.

"We went to the pub together, hung around with each other a lot, we were friends with each other's families," Marian Stefankiv says of the five, who founded a volunteer group called Kolo Chesti or Circle of Honour.

The NGO took on projects ranging from environmental protection to animal welfare to leading the largest-ever group of blind and partially sighted Ukrainians to the top of their country's highest mountain, 2,000-metre Hoverla in the Carpathian range south of Lviv.

For Oleh Kurskiy, it was a long way from his birthplace, 1,150km to the east in Donetsk, a mostly Russian-speaking rust-belt city of mines and heavy industry that he fled in 2014 when it was seized by Moscow-armed militia and fell under the Kremlin's de facto control.

"Oleh joked that when he saw McDonalld's shut down in Donetsk he knew that it was over – the place was occupied and the civilised world had left," Marian says.

"But his parents stayed behind and nev-

er left occupied territory. We talked about them a bit but it was a sensitive topic for him. They had different views but he still felt very close to his mother, as long as they didn't talk about politics or the war," he recalls.

"He wanted to go back and rebuild Donetsk, no matter how much destruction there may be during its liberation. He wanted to tell the world about Ukrainian Donetsk, about how people lived there under occupation and about those who left. He had big plans for life after the war."

Ulyana Taras is married to one of the friends, Lazor, but got to know Oleh well as an administrator at Lviv's Znesinnya park, where he volunteered and then worked as an inspector on patrol for illegal logging and forest fires.

"He had been an accountant in Donetsk but absolutely loved nature and especially the Carpathian mountains. It was more than a job for him," she says.

"He rented a small house in Lviv and really wanted to marry and have a family with a woman from this region, Halychyna, where he loved the culture and food and traditions. And though he was from Donetsk he spoke perfect Ukrainian – a bookish Ukrainian, without the Polish slang that we use here," she explains.

"Oleh didn't have many belongings except for books and he loved to read. He



“My wife and I discussed it and said we'd raised our children to be able to make such decisions for themselves. In fact, I was proud of him”
– Volodymyr Mayevskiy

started a project to send books to soldiers in the east and to children living there near the frontline. And Donetsk is called the "city of roses" and so he planted beds of roses here as well, to have a piece of Donetsk in Lviv."

When Russia attacked in the early hours of February 24th, firing cruise missiles at Ukraine's main cities and sending troops, tanks and warplanes over the border, the five friends agreed to join the army's 24th Mechanised Brigade based at the Yavoriv training ground outside Lviv; only Oleh had no military experience, though he may have led the recruiting officer to believe otherwise.

"I asked Maksym to wait for a few days, so we could talk to people we know in the military and make sure he joined a battalion that we trusted," says his father Volodymyr, taking time to compose himself as he remembers. "But Maksym said there was no time for that – if we wait then the enemy will come to our door or be in the Carpathian mountains."

Maksym and "Molot" were trained at Yavoriv to fire the US-supplied Javelin portable anti-tank missiles that Ukraine has used to great effect, and in mid-March they were deployed to Popasna, a town in the eastern Luhansk region where fighting was fierce.

"Maksym sent a message at about midnight on March 19th saying that everything was fine. Then there was no more contact," Volodymyr recalls.

Russian breakthrough

Later, he found out that Maksym and Molot had volunteered to help try to halt a Russian breakthrough at Novooleskandrivka on the edge of Popasna. Only one soldier returned to base, wounded, from that area, and on April 5th Maksym's parents were informed that he and Molot were missing in action.

A fortnight later, Molot's wife found that a website run by the occupation authorities in Luhansk had published the surnames and photos of several dead Ukrainian soldiers.

"The name Mayevskiy was there and there was a body that resembled Maksym. The face was blurred but I thought it could be him," Volodymyr says.

It took three more weeks for Ukraine to arrange an exchange of fallen troops with the Russians and their local collaborators in Luhansk, and on May 9th the bodies of 20 soldiers were brought to the city of Dnipro in government-held eastern Ukraine.

More images of one of the bodies all but convinced Volodymyr that it was Maksym; then he remembered that his son's wisdom teeth had been removed shortly before the war, and after the doctors checked for tell-tale scars they said it was "100 per cent" him.

Ukraine posthumously awarded Maksym (33) an Order of Bravery medal and he

■ The grave of Maksym Mayevskiy (33) in Lviv, western Ukraine. Above: Maksym Mayevskiy and his father, Volodymyr; Maksym Mayevskiy, Marian Stefankiv, 'Molot' and Oleh Kurskiy with the flags of Ukraine and the NGO Kolo Chesti (Circle of Honour), which they founded in Lviv; and Ukrainian army shells painted with the national colours and the message 'Revenge for Maksym Mayevskiy'. PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF VOLODYMYR MAYEVSKIY

was buried in Lviv's historic Lychakiv cemetery, where the date of death engraved on his tombstone is March 28th.

"It's not clear when Maksym was killed. The death certificate said April, but I chose March 28th because my wife and I both dreamt about him that night, when I was in Kyiv and she was in Bukovel in the Carpathian mountains," Volodymyr explains.

"I dreamt that Maksym came home and was standing in the corridor dressed all in white. I asked him why he hadn't called, and he said it had been very tough there, but now everything was all right. It was so real that I got out of bed and went into the corridor to check," he says, holding back tears. "The dream gave me hope that he was still alive."

Officially missing

Six months on, it is still not known what happened to Molot on the mission that was Maksym's last. He is still officially missing, and his friends cling to a remote chance that he is in captivity, so they do not want his name to be published here.

"There is only a faint hope that Molot is alive," Volodymyr explains, "because they agreed when they went into combat that they wouldn't be taken prisoner, and they each rigged a hand grenade so that even if they were wounded they could detonate it."

When Maksym was killed and Molot went missing, Russia's troops were still in the suburbs of Kyiv, the nation's second city of Kharkiv was under direct threat and fears remained of an assault by land or sea on the major Black Sea port of Odesa.

Through spring and summer, however, the invaders were driven back from Kyiv and Kharkiv, made little progress at high cost in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and saw key supply lines in the south smashed by modern artillery supplied by Ukraine's western allies.

By September, the Russians were on the run from Kharkiv region, abandoning strategic towns such as Izyum, leaving behind scores of armoured vehicles and huge stores of ammunition during a chaotic retreat, as Ukraine retook an area as big as Cyprus in just a few weeks.

In the south, a slower Ukrainian counter-



'I SHED A TEAR FOR MY BOOKSHOP'

Two years after opening his Brilliant Bookshop in Dún Laoghaire, Kevin Gildea looks back at a fabulous adventure as he prepares to shut up shop for the final time

Kevin Gildea

In October 2020, I opened a second-hand bookshop, just four and a half days before I had to close it for a lockdown. The shop is called Kevin Gildeas Brilliant Bookshop and is in Dún Laoghaire, Co Dublin; it is soon to close for good.

At the end of August just gone, I was given one month's notice because the building is being sold. I asked for an extension, however, and managed to get until the beginning of January 2023. So if you want to buy second-hand books, or a building, do pop in before then!

The opening would not have been possible without the help of many friends – a "community", if you will (thank you Jaime, Malachy, Jane, Thiago and Tracy). Which is quite apt, because a second-hand bookshop, whilst being a business, is also more: it is a community and cultural resource. It is sort of a library, a meeting hub and a refuge for culture.

Like a cat or dog shelter, I took in books with no homes to go to, from people clearing out houses because of death or downsizing; books that would otherwise go to the dump. Most of those who brought books felt that they didn't want to throw

the books away because it was somehow immoral to sentence books to such an end. Yes, I sold books – so it had the arc of a shop, a business – but many came in and searched and found a book, or books, much as someone would go to a refuge and rescue a cat or a dog. They would find one that was for them – one that would become part of them.

The journey to find a specific volume is a journey from A to B – a very modern journey of wish fulfillment and efficiency. Yet the real pleasure of the second-hand bookshop is finding the book that you didn't know you wanted. It's not an A to Z you need, but a treasure map and a journey as unexpected as the one in *The Hobbit*. There's an element of discovery that pushes the boundaries of our worlds of today, where we have instant access to all that we think we know we want – the consolidation of worlds that can become more and more like gated communities of the self.

I spent years on these journeys, but now people brought me boxes of second-hand books. I could do my rummaging for books without having to travel. The search came to me.

Recently, I found an old plan on paper for the layout of the shop – where the counter would be, the shelves and the path around the shop. It's a wonder that, at one time, the shop only existed as this tentative

map. Time erases memory of the jeopardy of the past. The existent presents as the normal, the habit, the taken for granted, and often erases the beginning: the very real possibility that it would never happen, never be born, never become. Thus the importance of revisiting the past via anniversary – watchtowers of the beginnings.

I look from this paper plan – rough pencil sketchings – to the cliffs of books, sometimes precariously tottering, over the narrow paths redolent of some mini Lord of the Rings. Books have grown in number, mimicking the structure of the building, and giving the impression of replacing the building to the point that one could imagine the building as a scaffold ready to be removed, or a cast that could now be smashed, revealing the true Kevin Gildeas Brilliant Bookshop – composed entirely of second-hand books.

I sink into the chair hidden away in books, behind books; there are the odd small avalanches as a tiny tower of tomes collapses, as the books express themselves in a desire to escape or embrace chaos. Recently, a customer enquired about a book entitled *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz. The book came to mind after I wrote the beginning of this paragraph, which seems to share some of Schulz's evocations of fetid ecosystems of the inanimate becoming conscious. It is many years since I read Schulz, but books remain with us long after the reading – so they become part of us.

Challenges

Four and a half days opened, and then lockdown until December – the one month to make all the money. I opened the first day and it was great. A happy day. I went in the second day and a quarter of the ceiling had fallen down – thick lime plaster. There was a giant fan in the ceiling and every time I put any of the sockets on, it went on too, creating a very chilly room. I got a friend (an ex-electrician) to try to sort my problem, which he decided to do by yanking on the fan and, well...

At the time, I had had a few years of personal challenges – the endings of many things. It had got like when you are out in the lashing rain and you get so wet that it doesn't matter any more: you've reached peak wetness, saturation. More rain is water off a duck's back. I had developed acceptance expressed by my new mantra: "It's okay." But this ceiling falling in felt like a metaphor for everything in my life

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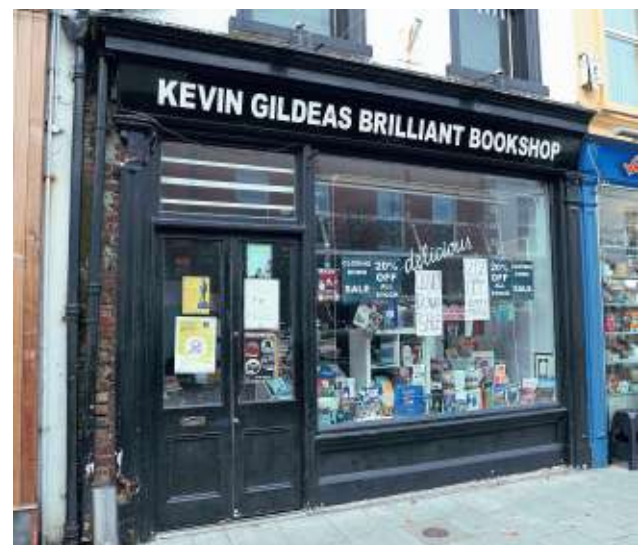
This last year has been financially challenging and I think that, given the magic of what a second-hand bookshop is, there should be grants for what is more than just a business

for half a day. Then I got it fixed and I was open for the last half of December, minus the day I had to go into hospital for tests (which turned out okay).

This last year has been financially challenging and I think that, given the magic of what a second-hand bookshop is, there should be grants for what is more than just a business – it is an important cultural institution. I think every town should have a second-hand bookshop.

I became part of the community George's Street Lower – whether the gaggle of dear Dub characters – Frances, Mary and the gang, or the people from the other businesses like CK, Richard, Joe and Marty from Frewen & Aylward (particularly Marty, whose friendship and advice helped me through many a challenge), Selina and the gang from Fred's, Jovche, Yres and Faruk from the Natural Bakery and Errol from the Value Store next door. And Eddie. Dave from Book Deals. And of course John and Roz, who helped in the shop. And Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (DLR) County Council for all its assistance. And Jaime and Stephen, for all the lifts to collect books. And of course Ronan, without whose help I would definitely not have been able to open at all. And all the fabulous people who shopped with me – too numerous to mention. I was part of a community.

When DLR pedestrianised George's Street Lower in the summer of 2021, it provided an architecture for this community.



Towards the end of this temporary experiment, you could feel the nature of the place change for the better, and when they eventually pedestrianise it permanently it will become a go-to place, joining the seafront and the People's Park. I very much didn't miss the loading bay in front of my shop, so often full of vehicles neither loading nor at bay.

Fish shop

Before the shop opened back in 2020, I spent a manic weekend alone trying to remove the fish smell from the premises, as it had been a fish shop for decades before. It was possibly my greatest achievement because I wasn't sure if it was possible. I remember at lam on a Friday night I was tossing cornflower all over the walls of the empty room, I had bowls of coffee grounds all over the floor along with half lemons and half onions and I remember somebody looking in the window mouthing the words: "What the f**k are you doing?" I looked like a mad artist or somebody trying to create the crappiest winter wonderland of all time. "If I can't remove the smell," I thought, "I'll have to sell three mackerel every day to excuse it."

So, for me, it began as an empty room which I filled up. Soon it will return to an empty room again. Such is the passage of life.

One of the most beautiful moments was the day when the sign went up: Kevin Gildeas Brilliant Bookshop. (The lack of an apostrophe was an aesthetic choice over a grammatical one.) I had explained what I wanted to a lovely guy called Ivor. People have ideas in their heads, and then when the version is rendered by another, there is often a time of accommodation, as you try to deal with the fact that it is not quite what you had wanted but grow to love what is real. Here, there was no such process – the sign was exactly what I had imagined. Exactly. It is a beautiful thing to see what you saw in your mind's eye manifest itself.

So it comes to an end. The end of this story. But, as long as there is life, there will be a new story. As Elvis Costello sang back in 1983: "Everyday I write the book." It is time for me to do more comedy and start writing again.

Thank you to everybody who supported the shop. It was one of my favourite adventures. And do remember to support your local second-hand bookshop.

I'll stop now to shed a wee tear.

■ Kevin Gildea, who opened Kevin Gildeas Brilliant Bookshop in October 2020: 'It was one of my favourite adventures. And do remember to support your local second-hand bookshop.'

PHOTOGRAPHS: NICK BRADSHAW

Five Ukrainian friends pay price of war

From page 1

offensive was liberating villages in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Mykolaiv regions, but the fighting was harder against Russian units that were better trained and equipped than their hapless comrades in Kharkiv.

"Oleh and I fought in Popasna, Lysychansk, Severodonetsk and villages around there," Marian says, listing places in Luhansk that were devastated by some of the fiercest battles of the war. "And later we were in Kherson region and Mykolaiv a bit."

"He always said he was a bad soldier because he had no experience, but I can tell you Oleh was a great soldier. He never refused a task or failed to complete it," Marian recalls.

"It was important to him to fight for our independence, and he was glad he could

do it. And I'm glad he got to hear about the success of our counteroffensive in Kharkiv."

'Died instantly'

Shortly after midday on September 12th, while using a drone to help Ukrainian artillery target enemy positions in Kherson region, Oleh was killed when a Russian 152mm shell landed a few metres from him.

"There was no way to save him," says Marian, who was in Kyiv for training that day. "The only positive thing I can say – because he's not the first friend I've lost – is that he died instantly, without suffering."

Oleh (35) was buried a week later in the same Lviv cemetery as Maksym, after a funeral at the same garrison church in the historic heart of the city, which happens to be just around the corner from a pub that was the five friends' favourite place to



■ Oleh Kurskyi, Volodymyr Lazor and Marian Stefankiv, who with two other friends joined the Ukrainian army this year to fight Russia's all-out invasion.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF MARIAN STEFANKIV

drink. "It might seem weird to a civilian but we used to joke about war and death, about where we'd be buried or what flowers people would bring. It's a way of coping, and the only thing you really worry about is what will happen to your relatives if you die," Marian says.

"But we weren't ready for Maksym's death and I wasn't ready for Oleh's death."

Kyiv and Moscow claim to have killed tens of thousands of each other's troops, but neither discloses credible figures for their own losses. It is clear, however, that just as Russia's disastrous invasion has cost it a huge amount in blood and treasure, so the victories of Ukraine's defence and current counterattack have come at a huge human price.

"It's very hard," says Ulyana, whose husband Volodymyr, like his friend Marian, is still fighting with the 24th Mechanised Brigade.

"History shows that the losses in a counteroffensive are very high – that's the price of liberated land. But despite the pain and the losses, it's much worse to live with millions of your people under occupation, when we see how they are being mistreated and tortured and killed. We have an obligation to free our citizens from this."

At 26, Marian was the youngest of the five friends, and he spoke to *The Irish Times* as he prepared to return to the front after training with a new type of drone.

"Oleh was my best friend. If I needed something, I would call him and he would call me, so this is a very big loss for me. Unfortunately, this blood is the price of our freedom," he explains.

"I'm sorry he couldn't invite me to Donetsk like he wanted. But I hope I'll live long enough to put Ukraine's flag above his house and Oleh will see that Donetsk is ours."

Irish-funded heart surgeons and Ukraine's 'miracle kid'

Cork-based Chernobyl Children International gives children a 'fighting chance of survival'



Iryna Sidor (4) travelled with relatives from Odesa to Lviv to have major heart surgery performed by a team funded by Cork-based Chernobyl Children International (CCI). After receiving life-saving - but temporary - treatment as a three-month-old, she had disappeared. US heart surgeon Bill Novick calls her the "miracle kid". Photograph by Petro Chekal on behalf of CCI



[Daniel McLaughlin](#) in Lviv
Fri Dec 16 2022 - 21:16

In a hospital office overlooking Lviv suburbs swept by snow and wartime blackouts, US heart surgeon Bill Novick wonders at how he crossed paths for a second time with a Ukrainian girl he calls the "miracle kid".

He first met Iryna Sidor in Kyiv in 2018, when she was barely three months old and needed what he calls "an emergency save-my-life operation" that took 15 hours. She was too weak for surgery to fully correct her severe heart problems, so his team fitted devices that stabilised her but were only intended to be temporary.

Between then and now, Memphis-based Novick visited Ukraine several times a year with funding from Cork-based Chernobyl Children International (CCI) and

treated dozens of children with life-threatening heart disease. But there was no sign of Iryna.

“She just disappeared, we never heard from them again,” says Novick (68), describing how after the kind of surgery Iryna underwent in 2018 “you’d remove [the devices] and fix everything fully in three or six months – not four-and-a-half years later!”

This week Iryna reappeared, brought by her mother and grandmother to Lviv from the Black Sea port of Odesa, showing no signs that the baby-sized stent in her heart had impeded her development.

“This is unheard of. We looked at each other and said this is a case report, we have to publish this in the medical literature,” Novick says. “We were all completely shocked. I call her the ‘miracle kid’.”



Iryna Sidor (4) travelled with relatives from Odesa to Lviv to have major heart surgery performed by a team funded by Cork-based Chernobyl Children International. Photograph by Petro Chekal on behalf of CCI. Dan McLaughlin

His 12-strong team – working with local medics – have treated about 14 children during their current, nearly two-week visit to Lviv’s St Panteleimon hospital, and from about noon on Tuesday into the early of hours of Wednesday they operated again on Iryna.

“She was asleep for 13-14 hours, our [surgical] part was about 11 ½ hours. She comes back to the intensive care unit (ICU) as stable as a rock, all indicators

perfect. She was hooked up at around 3am in the ICU and extubated before noon. The tubes came out and she sits up and talks to her mum,” says Novick. “We did not expect that at all,” Roslyn Rivera, an ICU nurse co-ordinator from UCLA Mattel children’s hospital in Los Angeles, says of the speed of her recovery.



Halya Sidor and Maria Ivaniv from Odesa, mother and grandmother of Iryna Sidor, a four-year-old girl who underwent major heart surgery in Lviv, performed by a medical team funded by Cork-based Chernobyl Children International. Photograph by Daniel McLaughlin

Down the corridor, Iryna’s mother Halya Sidor and grandmother Maria Ivaniv are waiting for her to be released from ICU to a general ward.

“When Iryna was born she spent 2 ½ months in intensive care ... and the doctors at a hospital in Kyiv said they couldn’t fix her heart problem. It was too complicated,” Sidor says.

“They said that if we had lots of money then we might be able to find a way and the child might live, but without it there wasn’t much chance.”

Ivaniv says they “went to lots of hospitals and knocked on all the doors looking for help” before finding out about the missions of the Novick Cardiac Alliance to Ukraine, which have taken place several times a year since 2008 with funding from CCI.

“We’re just so grateful that they’re coming to Ukraine to do these operations and save our children,” she adds.

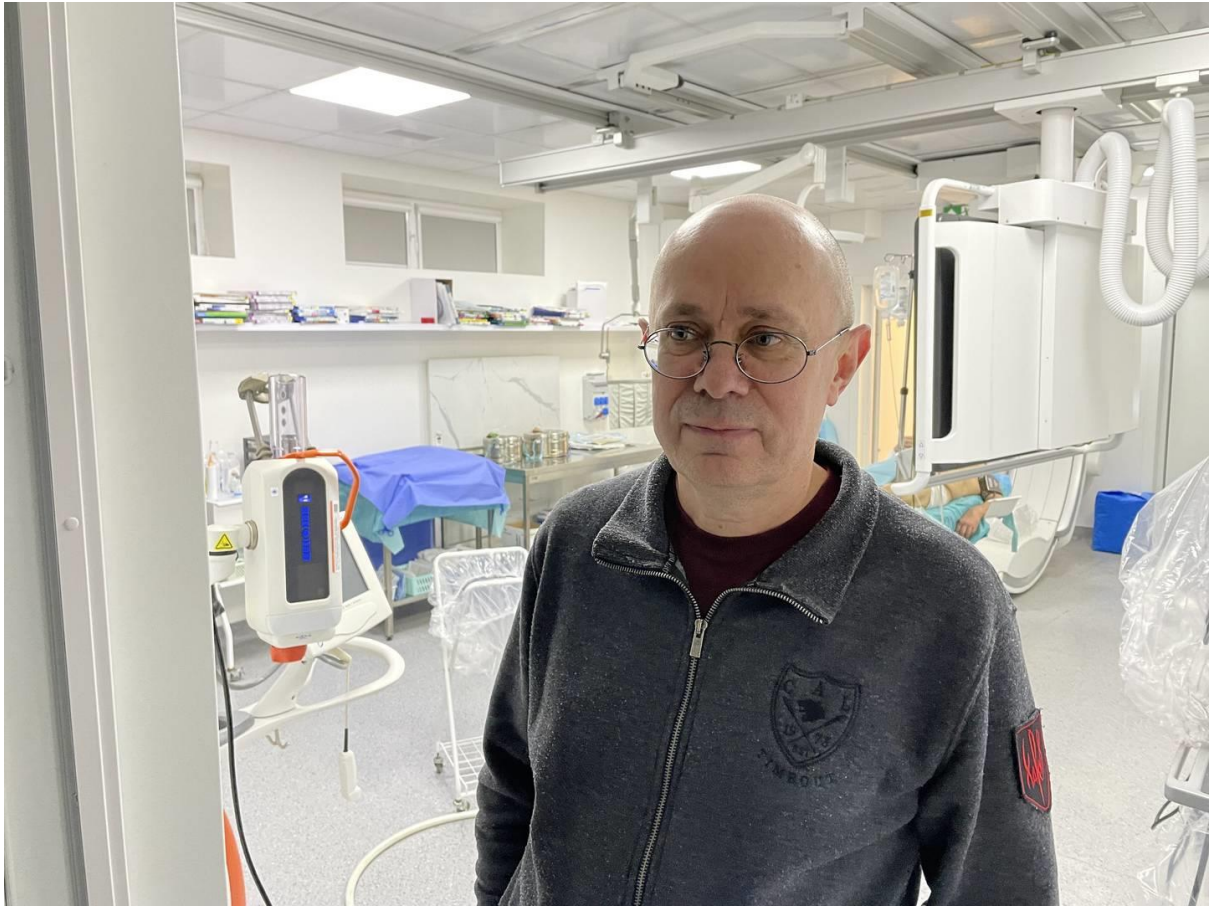
“We hope this is Iryna’s last surgery. It’s more than fantastic that she’s been able to have this treatment,” Sidor says. “We’ll go back to Odesa as soon as possible, as soon as it’s safe for Iryna for travel.”



US cardiac surgeon Bill Novick leads a medical team funded by Cork-based Chernobyl Children International that is now performing major heart surgery in Lviv on children from around Ukraine. Photograph : Petro Chekal on behalf of CCI.

Nowhere is entirely safe in Ukraine 10 months into Russia’s all-out invasion, and Odesa has suffered major blackouts due to repeated missile and drone strikes on civilian infrastructure that have destroyed or badly damaged a third of the national grid.

Hospitals have priority for Ukraine’s scarce electricity, and power has stayed on at St Panteleimon during Novick’s current visit, though a previous trip was disrupted by security fears when Russia bombed a maternity hospital in the southeastern city of Mariupol and hit Lviv airport with cruise missiles when a cardiac mission was working in the city.



Ihor Polivenok, a heart specialist working in Lviv with a medical team funded by Cork-based Chernobyl Children International.

Yet Lviv, near the Polish border, has been a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing fighting and intense shelling in eastern and southern regions, including the wife and children of heart specialist Ihor Polivenok (54).

He now divides his time between Lviv and his hometown of Kharkiv, after the nearby village of Ruski Tyshky where he lived with his family – just 20km from the Russian border – was occupied in the first hours of full-scale war.

“Explosions woke us up at 5.15am on February 24th and I don’t expect to forget it for as long as I live. The electricity was off in surrounding villages and from the big windows in our house, which looked north towards Russia, we saw rockets being launched into the black sky,” he recalls.

“We grabbed a backpack with our documents that we had prepared just in case, grabbed the dog and the cat and jumped into the car and got away.”

Polivenok had moved his children to Lviv before the invasion, and he and his wife spent the first week of war in Kharkiv city during “terrible, continuous shelling by tanks and artillery, and attacks by aircraft that flew really low and dropped bombs.

“My colleagues and I lived in the hospital that week. The authorities told people not to go on the streets because you could be killed by the Russians or

accidentally by our forces. The hospital wasn't hit directly but the windows were smashed by explosions nearby. After a week a friend took my wife to Lviv and I joined them later.”



Heart specialist Ihor Polivenok's family home in Ruski Tyshky, a village outside Kharkiv that is just 20km from the Ukraine-Russia border. It was occupied for several months by Russian troops who looted his house. Now he divides his time between Kharkiv city and Lviv in western Ukraine. Photograph courtesy of Ihor Polivenok

Ruski Tyshky found itself on the frontline when Ukrainian forces retook it in May but Russian troops remained in neighbouring villages, until most of Kharkiv region was liberated in September.

“Our village was under constant shelling. We finally went back three weeks ago and found the house destroyed ... The Russians lived there and stole everything, even clothes and underwear. Of course all the appliances and electronics were gone,” says Polivenok.

“The military warn you that unexploded mines are everywhere ... No one is living there, but a neighbour who visited from Kharkiv told us two people from the village had already been blown up by mines.”

Polivenok worked with Novick on CCI-funded missions that visited Kharkiv several times a year between 2008-2018, transforming cardiac treatment for children at the city’s Zaitsev institute of general and emergency surgery, where he leads a department.

“It changed dramatically, completely. In the beginning we had no equipment, no skills or knowledge as a team, and we were not able to operate on any children except very few, very simple cases ... But by the end of the programme we could fix every lesion, maybe with the exclusion of performing a heart transplant,” he recalls.

“I want to express my gratitude to Irish people specifically: you’re such a small country, but you’ve made such a difference for myself and my field of work and for kids with heart disease in Ukraine – such a big difference, in Kharkiv, Kyiv and now in Lviv.”

CCI has invested more than €107 million in Ukraine and neighbouring Belarus since 1986 – the year of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster north of Kyiv – and says its cardiac programme has saved the lives of more than 4,000 children.

The charity has sent €90,000 of aid to Ukraine this year, ranging from food and bedding to house-repair materials, to help it cope with what CCI founder Adi Roche calls a “humanitarian crisis”.

“It is inspiring to witness the true heroism of the doctors and nurses who are braving the perils of the war to save the lives of babies,” she told The Irish Times.

“Now, thanks to the bravery of this international team and the generosity of the people of Ireland, they have a fighting chance of survival.”



Adi Roche, founder of Cork-based charity Chernobyl Children International, visiting one of its cardiac surgery missions in Ukraine. Photograph courtesy of Chernobyl Children International

Novick remembers how his team took responsibility for 95 per cent of patients' care during the first visits to Kharkiv, and how that fell to just two per cent by year eight as Polivenok and colleagues acquired the necessary skills.

"They will get there here in Lviv too ... Now we're at about 50/50," says Novick, who has led cardiac missions to 36 countries and this year also worked in Lebanon, Iraq, Ecuador, Libya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Another wave of Russian missiles hit Ukrainian cities and power infrastructure on Friday, and after months of violent upheaval Polivenok no longer looks too far ahead.

"We can't plan for the future, it's too unpredictable ... Many things I never could imagine are the new normal for us. People have changed – all of us – because of this war. But I think and hope that most changes are for the good," he says.

"I'm pretty sure we will overcome what will probably be the most difficult winter in our history. And it is thanks to western support," Polivenok adds. "The intention of Russia is to break us in our resistance, but the result is the opposite. So you want us to work without electricity? Okay, we will do this – but we will never give up."