

I HEAR YOU:

A LETTER TO A PEER IN THE OCCUPATION

A selection of essays by laureates
of the All-Ukrainian Student Essay Competition



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Editors: Oleh Okhredko, Anastasiia Konoshuk, Anastasiia Klymenko

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MINISTRY
OF EDUCATION AND
SCIENCE OF UKRAINE



Center for Civic Education “Almenda” (CCE “Almenda”) is a public organization which was registered in Yalta in 2022. Before 2014, the priority direction of the organization's activities was education in the area of human rights. In 2014, due to the occupation of Crimea, the organization was forced to relocate to Kyiv. As of now, the priority directions of the organization's activities are to ensure the systematic collection of accurate, timely, verified data on brutal violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict.

More about the Center for Civic Education «Almenda»:

<http://almenda.org>

Contacts for comments and suggestions:

info@almenda.org

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Foreword

In 2014, the Russian Federation launched an armed aggression against Ukraine, occupying the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In 2022, Russia moved to a full-scale invasion, as a result of which the entire territory of Ukraine came under fire, parts of the territories of Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions were occupied, and the zone of active hostilities expanded significantly.

Russian aggression has led to the destruction of the lives of millions of Ukrainians, including children. Some of them live in danger due to ongoing shelling by Russia, some are in danger due to active hostilities in the areas where they live, and some are under occupation, where Russia is introducing a system of re-education and erasure of children's Ukrainian identity.

As of 2024, more than one million six hundred thousand children remain in the temporarily occupied territories of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions.

Children fell under the pressure of Russian propaganda, betrayal and distrust, fear and hatred. However, they have remained themselves, and they need our support, primarily moral, they must know that they are remembered, heard, and waited for.

That is why in June-August 2024, the public organization "Center for Civic Education «Almenda» held the All-Ukrainian Student Essay Competition «I Hear You: A Letter to a Peer in the Occupation», which was held with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine as part of the project «Childhood Unchained: Standing Against Occupation's Impact», which is implemented with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic as part of the Transition Promotion Program.

The purpose of the competition is to support children who live under occupation by creating an empathic wave in Ukrainian society and disseminating information about the realities of children's lives in the temporarily occupied territories.

241 pupils of 8-11 grades of general secondary, professional pre-higher, vocational and technical education institutions took part in the competition. In their works, the children expressed their empathy, feelings, and hope for the end of the war and the restoration of destroyed cities and villages. And most

importantly, they not only supported those who remained in the occupied territory, but as if they stood next to them, shared the pain and fear felt by their peers in the occupation.

According to the results of the work of the jury, which consisted of representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, public organizations, teachers and the media, 30 works were selected to become laureates of the competition, among which the winners were chosen.

This selection contains the works of laureates and winners. It will be useful for teachers, public organizations, government officials who work with the problems of the protection of children's rights in armed conflict, as well as for the media.

The selection is illustrated with children's drawings from the exhibition «Images of the Future». In their works, the children represented their vision of the world and Ukraine after the victory. The exhibition was organized as part of the tenth International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival “Docudays UA”, which took place in the city of Chornomorsk in November 2023.

Hang in there, friend!

Valeriia Aheienko, 10-G grade,
Horokhivske Lyceum in Horokhivske Village Hromada, Bashtanka Raion,
Mykolaiv Oblast

Good day, my friend!

A peer is writing you this letter - Valeriia Aheienko from the small village in Mykolaiv region. I know that you are currently in temporarily occupied territory. I perfectly understand your feelings and emotions, your mood, because I myself lived under the occupation in 2022, and then left it with my parents through a bunch of checkpoints, leaving my native home behind.

I know what it is like to listen to every sound and be afraid that Ruscists will break into your home with searches. I know what it is like to live with no electricity and Internet, without connection and news...

I understand what you are feeling now, because I myself suffered from the fact that my usual life was destroyed: you cannot go out anywhere, you cannot communicate with your friends, you need to do something with your studies, you cannot say what you have on your mind, you have to "look closely" to people you used to know your entire life... It is scary...

Fortunately, our village was liberated in November 2022, and my family was able to return home. That is why I am sure that soon your territories will also be de-occupied! Do not lose hope, you hear me, believe in the fact that the Armed Forces of Ukraine will certainly clear the Ukrainian lands from the occupiers!

Take care of yourself, my friend! After all, it is extremely dangerous to live under occupation. You are my hero, because you stand firm and withstand the terrible and difficult tests of life, which not all adults can handle. Distract yourself: plant flowers, read Ukrainian books, listen to Ukrainian radio (if possible), speak, talk to people you trust, keep a diary, write, draw. My friends, who survived nine months of the occupation told me that it is how they saved themselves from the bad mood and gloomy thoughts, from depression.

And also – do not believe in what the occupiers say!!! The Ruscist propaganda tries to intimidate, sow seeds of hopelessness and despair, and then convince you that Ukraine has forgotten you, that it is the Ukrainian army who is shooting at the civilian population... Do not believe in that!!! Do you hear me? Ruscists are terrible liars and manipulators, so do not give in!!! Everything will be fine; I am sure of it.

Dream! Dream about what you will do when the Armed Forces of Ukraine liberate your village or city! Create your map of dreams – and everything will definitely come true!

Let us believe in victory, in the Armed Forces of Ukraine!!!

You are a part of Ukraine's future

Yasmina Al-Mahmoud, 8-A grade,
Zvenyhorodka Hub School of general
secondary education named after T. Shevchenko
Zvenyhorodka City Council
Zvenyhorodka Raion, Cherkasy Oblast

Dear friend!

I hope that this letter finds you safe and sound. Today, your homeland is in a state of war, which was unleashed by another country. I am sorry that it is you who is forced to live now under the conditions of occupation. Life under occupation is a big challenge, especially for young people, but I would like to share some of my thoughts and support with you.

Of course, I understand that you were still a child, when this all started. And maybe you do not quite understand what exactly is happening in your life but trust me – soon everything will change for the better! False information or other beliefs can affect your worldview. Therefore, I ask you not to dwell on one opinion – explore several views on certain events, and only then draw conclusions.

They are now creating a world for you, where there is no better country than the “Russian world” and hostile people are trying to eradicate everything related to your ancestors, your culture and native land from you. This makes my heart heavy because there are a lot of people like you.

I know that you had to go through a lot of pain: losing your home, maybe even friends or relatives. Sometimes, you may feel hopeless or fear for your life and the lives of your loved ones. But this should not destroy your understanding of belonging to a wise, strong-spirited nation, which has longed to live freely since ancient times. You realize that history can be re-written in textbooks, as the Russian government is trying to do, but it cannot be eradicated from people's memory.

The Russian government has been trying to assimilate Ukrainians for centuries, and its methods often go beyond humanism. Just think about it: for some reason, Russia's policy regarding children in the occupied territories is criticized by the international community! Yes, they seek to destroy the Ukrainian identity of the residents of the occupied territories. Now the Russian government is cre-

ating a perfectly thought-out system, in which every child receives a certain dose of propaganda, and in the future, this will be a new generation of those who are ready to fight against Ukraine, because the Russian-Ukrainian war is the existential fight, not the fight for territories. Unfortunately, many citizens of Ukraine simply ended up as hostages of the Russian occupation authorities, so often, in order to save their lives, they cannot oppose their criminal actions.

Yes, it is a tough time, and I understand that it may feel like the world around you is getting darker. However, it is important to remember that you are not alone. We are all together, even if we distance and circumstances separate us. Your strength, courage and resilience are extremely important during this period.

Despite all the difficulties, try to keep hope. Find small moments of joy in everyday life: talk with friends, read your favorite books, or listen to music. By the way, modern Ukrainian songs sound in a new way, and I personally now listen only to Ukrainian musicians. Stay connected with those who are dear to you and do not be afraid to ask for help if you need it. After all, we Ukrainians never leave our people in trouble. We do not forget about the importance of life, because all people have the right to be free in their thoughts, actions, or beliefs, if all this does not pose a threat to society.

I believe that you will always remember that war is evil, pain of losses, mutilation of bodies and souls, death and ruins, and by no means is it the victory of any ideology. Human life is the greatest value in the Universe, and we must cherish this gift.

Remember that this situation is temporary. We all dream about the day when our streets will be free again, and we will be able to live peacefully and happily. You are a part of our future, an important part of a big Ukrainian family, and your courage, endurance and common sense now make this future possible.

Take care of yourself and be strong. We will get through this together.

Sincerely, Yasmina.

The number is not answering," but I can hear you!

Sofiia Bazai, 10th grade

Lozova Lyceum No.1

Lozova City Council, Kharkiv Oblast,

Winner, 3rd place

We all were children, and we all grew up in an instant. I remember my childhood before the start of the war in Ukraine. It was a time of serenity when I could calmly dream about the future. My family and I gathered together, celebrated holidays and travelled around our native country. I especially remember the vacation of the last peaceful summer...

Mariupol. August 2021.

Our August vacation was coming to an end. It was a bit sad. Tomorrow, we return home and today... Today I asked my parents to go to the sea for the last time. I love the sea. It is endless, just like my dreams. I headed to the pier. There I let the salty wind touch my face, closed my eyes, and felt like a bird!

But today I saw another dreamer in my "favorite" place. Just like me, she was smiling, looking into the distance.

Empathy overcame my shyness, and I walked over and sat next to her. The girl looked at me, smiled, and said as if to an old friend:

- Hi.
- Hi.

She paused, and then added:

- I am Sofiia.
- Me too!

We suddenly burst out laughing.

We talked until dusk. What can you talk about with a stranger? About anything! About school, music, plans for the future...

Sofiia was local. She saw the sea every day and also could not stop looking at it. She came here every day to dream.

She dreamt of entering our Kharkiv Pedagogical University named after Hryhorii Skovoroda.

I have also been dreaming about it ever since... I was not sure before meeting her, but after getting to know her, I realized that it is cool to be a teacher!

Sofiia and I exchanged phone numbers, so we do not lose such an unexpect-



Hanna Volodymirova, 14 years old.
"In my garden"

ed friendship, hugged and... parted ways.

Back then, I could not even imagine that soon our life would drastically change.

Since February 2022, Sofii's number was not answering... I do not know what happened to her, but I want to believe that she is alive. That is why I say a “prayer” every evening and I sincerely believe in its power!

Lozova. July 2024.

My dear Ukrainian friend, I know that you are currently in difficult conditions, and I want to express my support and share my thoughts.

Every day the war makes itself felt, and I think about you and all the children of Ukraine, who found themselves in such a situation. You are children-heroes, children-knights, children-warriors!

I would like to give you something. Or rather, make a spiritual exchange! How?! It is quite simple.

We cannot see each other, but you can feel me with your heart.

We will take a special trip together at the same time.

Look, this is a forest. Many trees used to grow here. And in this meadow children used to play. Let us stop here and make the first exchange.

You will give me FEAR. Your fear for yourself and your loved ones, for your life and health, fear of not being able to learn new things. Fear that nothing will be like before. Fear for the future of our country.

I will give you LIGHT! Hope for the future. Light in the soul to face the enemy, to believe in victory, to drive away the feat step by step!

Let us keep going...

Look, there is a golden steppe spread over there. It bends under the summer breeze and gives shelter to the animals. Nature holds on, just like we do, in tough times. Let us stop here...

Give me your LONELINESS. You are not alone. We will fight for freedom together. Your family and loved ones will be by your side. We will overcome all obstacles on our way to the Victory!

In return, I will give you STRENGTH! The strength to find joy even in the darkest of times. The strength to endure the long fight. The Strength to not forget about your culture, language, and traditions! The strength to dream and to learn! This is what inspires us all.

Let us make the last stop near your native sea. There are almost no people

here. There used to be a lot of them. We hear the sea waves, enjoy the sunset...

Give me your DOUBTS. We believe in our people! We know that we are fighting for the independence the past generations fought for and future generations will fight for. Despite all the difficulties, we believe that our country will definitely be rebuilt. We will restore destroyed cities, return to our homes, and build a peaceful life. It will be a long and hard path, but we are ready to it, because we know that the best future awaits us in the end!

My last gift would have to be special. I will not give you COMPASSION because it will not help in the fight. I will not give you SERENITY, because it is not eternal. I will give you JUSTICE! I know that the day will come when everything will be real, honest, and sincere! The enemy will be punished for the stolen childhood, terrible losses, and memories. I believe that our children will grow up in the free Ukraine, which will prosper every day! They will be able to calmly go to school, seek their purpose and fulfill their dreams. This is what inspires us to fight for a better “tomorrow” and gives us faith that our efforts are not in vain.

My invincible sunshine, our encounter is coming to an end. I am grateful to you for our special trip and the most precious exchange of gifts. I hope you will save my gifts. But I will say goodbye to yours... I will throw it over my shoulder as people say.

Sofiia, I know that it is difficult for you right now. The war has changed our lives forever, but we cannot let the enemy break us! Now more than ever it is important to stick together. The joint fight for the freedom and independence of Ukraine unites us! By supporting each other we can overcome any obstacles and restore the peaceful life in our country!

P.S. Our life paths have parted, but I believe that they will cross in the future peaceful land ...

Your Sofiia.



Dmytro Selediv, 8 years old

Group: "Creative Arts"

Teacher: Halyna Mykhailivna Dmytryshchuk

Viktoriia Baiduzh, 11-B grade,
Velyki Kopani Lyceum
Velyki Kopani rural hromada
Kherson Raion, Kherson Oblast

Good day, my dear friend Polina!

Your closest neighbor and childhood friend Viktoriia is writing you this letter. I am afraid to even ask you about your current life because I understand how difficult it is for you. But do not be sad, we will definitely meet in the Kherson region, in our Ukrainian Velyki Kopani. Definitely! Every day, thousands of men and women who defend us do everything possible and impossible to destroy the damned enemies in our land. Millions of people help the army, volunteers do their bright and useful job.

Polina, do not lose hope, do not get upset, be strong and prudent. Remember that enemies are cruel and insidious. They do not only destroy Ukrainians with weapons, but also inflict a moral blow. They, like eagles, dig into the subconscious with their claws, willing to destroy everything that our ancestors acquired: faith, language, history. They are bloody criminals!

I imagine how disgusting it is for you to go to our lyceum, which now has enemy flags hung on it, how disgusting it is to look into the eyes of yesterday's “teachers,” who have become traitors today. I think that our real teachers are heroes. They are waiting for you every day at distance lessons. Can you imagine how brave they are! They were not afraid to say “no” to the occupiers, they left their homes, their relatives, and now they continue to teach us. They support their students in difficult moments, even if things are not so good for them. Our teachers have become the only thread that holds the Left Bank together with the Motherland.

I am fine. I also study remotely at our lyceum because I do not want to lose touch with the small Motherland, and our teachers are the best. I continued to dance. Here, in Odesa, there are many different choreography classes. I often remember our village dance team, our regular performances and competitions, our Larysa Viktorivna. In addition, I signed up for the volleyball team. I also miss my home and my mother. I miss her very much, although my brother does his best to support me.

I hope and believe that in the near future this horror will end, and I will come back home (as soon as there is an opportunity). All the best, my best advisor! Kisses! Big hugs! See you in Velyki Kopani!

July 2024.
Your friend Viktoriia

A letter of support

Viktoriia Bozhko, 11-B grade,
Oleksandrivka Lyceum named after T. Shevchenko
Oleksandrivka settlement hromada Voznesensk Raion, Mykolaiv Oblast

My dear peer!

I am writing to you from the picturesque Mykolaiv region, where the Southern Buh River carries its waters all the way to the Black Sea, where the steep rocks that are visible from the ground in some places remember the times of the Cossacks. Yes, it is an incredibly beautiful region! People who live here are caring owners, polite and hospitable, they work tirelessly to hasten the Victory so that all Ukrainians could return to their homes as soon as possible.

I fell in love with this region where I found shelter and support, because I myself am from the city of Hola Prystan, in the Kherson region.

Do not think that I forgot my city. Every night I see it in my dreams. My native school, friendly and kind teachers, beautiful cozy streets and parks – everything so native appears in my imagination. It is unbearable to think that the enemy is ruling there now. I managed to leave with my grandmother to a safer region, but my neighbors, friends, classmates remained in my home city.

I remember with horror the morning when I woke up to the sound of rumbling and saw through the window that tanks marked with letter "Z" were driving down the street. At first, I thought that it was a dream, but my grandmother entered the room and said with a trembling voice that there was no need to go to school that day. I was surprised because I never skipped classes before. My grandmother tried to calm me down, saying that it was only one day, but then there was another and another...

The unbearable days of occupation were dragging by. I was sitting in a cramped storeroom among a pile of things and could hardly breathe when strangers entered the house and asked if any children lived here to take them to the so-called "rehabilitation." The grandmother said that neighbors' girl Irynka, who was 12 years old at that time, was taken away from her family. To this day, there is no news about this joyful, always smiling neighbor girl.

A year of occupation passed in constant tension. But one day, my grandmother told me to take the most necessary things, and we set off on a long dangerous road.

I will forever be grateful to our relatives who sheltered us and surrounded us with attention and care. However, nothing can erase the memories of a happy childhood in the picturesque Kherson region.

I was warmly welcomed by new teachers and classmates, but I hope they forgive me for saying that most of all I would like to be at home now, in my city, and wake up from this terrible dream.

My dear friend! I told you my story so that you could understand how close your pain is to me. I could also be in your situation, but a lucky accident helped: we managed to escape from hell itself. Know that today we are all suffering together every minute of the unbearable occupation.

Recently, it was reported in the news that enemies force Ukrainian children to learn foreign language, imposes a foreign culture, distorts the facts of history.

I understand how difficult it is to withstand intense pressure. But remember that you are a son or a daughter of the great people, who more than once had to fight for freedom in an uphill battle, to pay too high a price for the right to live and work freely in their own land, to communicate in their own language. Our people will prevail this time too because brave warriors fight the enemy every day to liberate our lands. Remember the words of wisdom written by Taras Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka, Vasyl Symonenko, Vasyl Stus and many more sons and daughters of our invincible Ukraine, who had to fight for the will of the people in different periods of history. Let them become for you an example of courage and invincibility, faith in your strength and in your people. Let your mother's advice, your native language become a guardian for you.

"Evil will perish, and truth will overcome!" - says our brilliant contemporary Lina Kostenko. Let us believe that peace will surely come, because after a terrible storm, the sun shines the brightest.

Just do not forget that in your veins runs the blood of courageous Ukrainians, who are capable of standing against the enemy until their last breath. Remember that the customs and traditions of our nation, its heroic history is a healing source that will give you strength to persevere and not break under the pressure of the information system.

Our land is going to be liberated, and then you will be able to freely communicate in your native language, listen to Ukrainian songs, watch movies in Ukrainian language, read. It will definitely happen, but you have to wait a little. The main thing is not to lose the treasures that your parents and teachers planted in your soul from an early age. Let faith in Victory, hope for our Armed Forces live in your heart. Together with you, I will be waiting for a bright day, when the word "Victory!" will sound over the entire world. Let us believe in a bright future because we are Ukrainians which means we are unbreakable. Glory to Ukraine! Glory to heroes!

Sincerely, Viktoriia.



Hanna Mitova, 6 years old

Group: "Creative Arts"

Teacher: Halyna Mykhailivna Dmytryshchuk

After the rain always comes the rainbow

Yelyzaveta Brizhak, 9 grade,
Zolote Lyceum No.5, Hirske Urban Hromada,
Sievierodonetsk Raion of Luhansk Oblast,
Winner, 1st place

Hello, Mykhailo, my old friend!

How have you been? Yesterday I learned from my parents, that there was an air strike in the city center. They say that a store and several residential buildings were affected... I sympathize with you. Hope that everyone is safe and sound! I

asked my mom if you were all right, but she pretended not to hear anything. I could not sleep... It seemed that my worry would just eat me from the inside, so I decided to finally write to you.

I really miss you and our native city Zolote so much. When all this horror called “war” was just beginning, I had no idea that everything would take this long. The death toll, photos of destroyed cities, the cries of children who were left without parents because of this damn war – I see them in my nightmares. I always feel a kind of emptiness in my chest because I left my hometown, I left you, I left my past. The life goes on, but the real us remained somewhere where the sun shines, shines differently, where people did not wake up because of air raid alerts, where it was always warm at heart. I would like to come back home very much, walk with you in the field as we used to, and share my feelings that have piled up over all these years... But it is impossible, at least now.

I remember all our classmates, compatriots. I wonder how their lives turned out. I am deeply sorry that our city is occupied, or as some residents say – “liberated.” If you think about it: liberated from what? From civilized life?! After all, there was everything: water, electricity, gas, the city was becoming better... It is worth mentioning our school – beautiful, renovated, modern. It was equipped with new computers, interactive boards, a 3D printer etc. Not every school of the so-called capital of the LPR – the city of Luhansk had such gadgets... People say that as soon as Zolote was occupied, everything was taken to Luhansk with the words “In such a village – such equipment.” And what gym we had: various exercise machines, sports equipment... Unfortunately, all this was destroyed, stolen.

I also remember how we all decided with our class teacher to plant 25 bushes of roses by the end of the 9th grade (in memory of our friendly class) – exactly as many as there were students in our class. In the fall of 2021, we managed to plant only 8... But I believe that we will come back home and finished what we started!

I understand that many people remained under the occupation for several reasons - some have old and infirm parents, some simply did not have time, and some had no money... And children had no choice at all – they stayed with their parents, and now they study in schools where they are taught to hate everything related to Ukraine. But there are parents and children who believe that Zolote is Ukraine! These words were on the main square of our town on a mural created by a border guard from Vinnytsia, Unfortunately, he died in 2023... We have students from the occupied territory studying in our class. How hard it is for them to be there! Poor connection, lack of opportunity to study together with everyone, and also constant fear: what if someone finds out that you study in your native Ukrainian school, that you learn the poem “Love Ukraine” by V. Sosiura by heart. I really

root for them! I root for you, may the God keep your family alive and give faith that “everything will be Ukraine!”

It hurts me when I remember all our plans for the future: small and large, insignificant and important. It annoys me when I realize that there is nothing I can do to help you. It is maddening that I am not where I should be. But I do not lose hope. People say that we choose our own lives. I chose to be happy – to live in Ukraine! Actually, I am not feeling very well right now, but we have a future. Nobody knows what will happen next, but we all have hope. Everyone is trying to help and make it, our future, happy for everyone. Our dear defenders, whom we all appreciate and support, do especially magnificent work. We will win! I believe in it! No matter how and when, but we will defeat the “orcs,” and we will definitely meet again. Of course, we will not be the same children as we used to be, because time goes by, and we grow as it goes. Life gives us challenges, which you and I pass with dignity. I promise that we will meet again and give each other smiles that will signify the end of the horror called the terrible word – “war.” I believe that after that there will be a beginning of the new life. Everything will be Ukraine!

See you, Mykhailo.

With respect and best wishes, your friend Liza.

P. S. And we will still plant those roses, no matter what! After the rain always comes the rainbow ...

July 01, 2024.

I hear you and I hug you

Anastasiia Butova, 11 grade,
“Kharkiv Sanatorium School No. 9”
Kharkiv Regional Council

Hello, my friend!

How are you? How is your family? How are friends?

I miss you all so much. I often flip through the photo album, watch the videos we filmed and dream of our meeting. I am deeply sorry that we cannot see each other this summer. Maybe the next one?

And how many photos are saved in my phone?! You cannot even imagine. Photos of us at the rollercoasters in Central Park, at the “Nemo” dolphinarium, and at the “Crystal” in Shevchenko Garden. Do you remember that? I think about you so often, even in my sleep. One night I had a dream that I was visiting you again. I hugged you tightly. And the blue sea on the horizon. When I close my eyes I hear it rustling, how happy the vacationers are, how people invite you to ride a jet ski, to taste delicacies. I hug you and the warm sea hugs us. I hear your laughter, the sound of seagulls overhead...

Air alarm! The sound of siren. Threat of use of ballistics! Threat of use of aircraft weapons! Again. Need to go to a safe place! I thought I would never get used to it. But I did. Maybe you did too? It turns out that people are capable of more than they think about themselves. There are many people in the shelter, they are talking all the time. It is reassuring. I know that in order to calm down, you need to imagine that anxiety is just a picture in a book that just lies on your lap. It feels better this way. And also, you can breathe deeply. There is something for everyone to do in the shelter: children draw or watch cartoons, elderly women talk about gardening and preservation, and the graduates of the neighboring school, who will soon make up the NMT (National Multi-subject Test), whisper to each other. Everyone tries not to succumb to emotions of uncertainty and fear. Just like in that song. Remember:

Together we are many, they won't overcome us...

I am writing you this letter with an understanding of your condition, your current life, I sincerely support you and hope, hope, hope. Please know that you are not alone. You have me. And together we will be strong, all of us, because we are Ukrainians. And Lina Kostenko's words are the weapon that inspires and supports us all:

We're warriors, not lazy, not at rest.

Our cause is righteous, holy in its quest.

*For others fight for power or for gain,
But we for freedom—that's our weight and pain.*

Hang in there, friend! I know that under the occupation no one can voice what they really think. Especially when the information space is blocked. But I want you to know:

*Through path of hardships, we should go
To reach the future big and bright
All gonna be Ukraine*

Keep hope, my friend! Hope is the light that always overcomes darkness, despite pain and losses. As it happened on November 11, 2022, when the Armed Forces of Ukraine liberated Kherson from the Russian occupiers. For almost nine months, the city had lived under the flag of the terrorist country. Remember, the main task of civilians living under occupation is to survive. Let me tell you the words of child and family psychologist Nataliia Antonenko:

“On November 11, we realized that we no longer have electricity, everything was bombed, most likely, the Russians left, and therefore our guys will come. We were sitting in the house and heard car horns. For Kherson during the occupation, sounds of car horns were something unbelievable. My son and I went out and saw cars with our flags drive by. Afterwards, we went to the Svobody Square. And we saw the first soldiers who drove there on quad bikes. It was an incredible feeling! It was not a fiction or a dream. We are free. We can walk down the streets. We should not hide the phones anymore. We do not have to delete videos from pro-Ukrainian rallies.”

My dear friend, take care of yourself, remember the past, live, believe, draw strength from memories, talk and dream about the future, imagine it. This will give you inspiration and strength to pass the trials of life...

End of air alarm! I leave the shelter. I thank the Armed Forces! Take care of yourself! We are close! I send you hugs!

*I know the day will come
The war will come to end...
Hug me please, oh hug me please, of hug me please.
So tenderly and hold me tight...
Hug me please, oh hug me please, of hug me please.
I hope, for you the spring arrives.*

Okean Elzy

June 28, 2024
Your faithful friend.

I am on your side

Mariia Buianova, 11-A grade,
Lyceum No. 16 of the Melitopol City Council
Zaporizhzhia Oblast

Hello, my peer.

How sad it is to write a letter on such an occasion. Today, you may again be overcome with a thought that in the entire universe there is no single person who would understand you. But here I appear, who went through something similar, having lived two years under the occupation. And I do understand you. Just as it is difficult to leave your home, it is equally difficult to stay there, to live without recognizing native streets, to put up with the fact that occupiers appropriate the achievements of our country, with their policies, rules, restrictions.

No matter what you are feeling right now – it is normal. I remember how unbearable the last weeks I spent in Melitopol were. I hated my own city, I wanted to leave as soon as possible, to forget the language of the enemy, unfamiliar faces of various nationalities, expensive cars with tinted windows. And now I am incredibly sad. The worst thing I felt after leaving the city was the incomprehension of people in the Ukraine-controlled territories: “What is so bad and difficult about living under the occupation?” You will be surprised how many adults, seemingly conscious people, do not understand such simple things. Never be ashamed to talk about what you are going through, about your strength. Everyone should know what the youth of Ukraine is going through.

Occupation is not just a change of government; it is a limitation of your freedom. You no longer have your own opinion, you better not make eye contact with suspicious people, you should not show interest in any activity in the city and, God forbid, quarrel with someone or spoil a relationship. It is morally difficult. Living like this is an everyday challenge.

I am deeply sorry if you are forced to go to Russian school, listen to their national anthem, forget what civic position and identity are. Studying online is potentially life-threatening there, but you might as well tirelessly do that. In such conditions, antisociality appears, memories about the past school years seem so distant. True friends stay behind, you lose your circle of communication and become withdrawn. It was difficult for me to say goodbye to everyone back then, but now we learned to communicate across the distance. I know you miss it there. Getting through it is way more difficult if the discord starts within the family. How many times have you heard: “Get used to it, you need to adapt,” “they do not like awaiters here”?

I wish you didn't have to feel so much fear, waking up at night to new, mystical explosions that no one is talking about. And what if it is even worse in your city? What if the occupiers go from house to house, not just evicting people, but killing, raping and maiming them? Maybe the city is shelled every day, and nobody ignores the air alarms anymore? It must be unbearable to wake up every day with the thought that your life depends on the wheel of fortune, a shooting star and where a missile hits. The only thing on your mind is you're your city is going to be liberated and if you will be able to see this moment. You ask yourself what did you do to deserve all this? Why should you inherit the mistakes of adults of past generations? Unfortunately, I do not know the answer.

But I want you to remember that your feelings do not have to match someone else's. You may feel guilty for not leaving and adjusting, or the opposite. But never forget that the war is not your fault. Live your life as full as you can. The main thing is your safety.

I hope this letter will help you feel that here, in the distance, there is me, who is on your side, by default. If you lose the meaning of life, remember that you still have to celebrate the victory as loud as you can. No matter what happens, take care of your own “self.” Even when due to being surrounded with constant propaganda, the boundaries of common sense are blurred, and doubts appear about everything. Because you are the future of this country, a part of the Ukrainian people. A bright life awaits you as a free person who loudly expresses own thoughts, defends own boundaries and does not hide who he or she is. We will be by your side when we come back. Whatever you have to do for your safety – do it no matter what. I will be there if anyone dares to judge a child.

With all support,
Mariia.

One day of my life

Yefrosiniia Hlukhova, 9-A grade,
Lyceum No. 15 of Pavlohrad City Council
Dnipropetrovsk Oblast

Hello my new friend!

My name is Yefrosiniia. From Greek it is translated as “joyful.” And indeed, being with me, my friends are never sad. Maybe I can dispel your sadness a little too?

Do not think, I am also familiar with the feelings of sadness, loneliness and hopelessness. But they paint my life black and white and prevent me from moving forward. I am sad when my friends go abroad, I feel lonely when I am not being understood. But the worst thing is when your loved ones go into eternity. You will never talk, laugh or drink a cup of tea with them. It is true. But these people always stay by your side, protect and support you. This happens as long as you remember the,, as long as they remain in your happy memories.

Oh, I hear the air alarm! I am very afraid; I am hiding in the shelter. I will continue to write you this letter from here. And what are you afraid of? How do you deal with your fears? For example, I start drawing. For this I need a pen, a notebook, and, of course, a flashlight. Cannot draw well? This is not a problem. Close your eyes and let us start the process. The imaginary drawing always turns out perfect: colorful, with clear and straight lines. Do you want me to teach you how to draw? I go to Pavlohrad Arts School. Although our city is close to the frontlines, classes are still held. So, let us begin! The hand hangs in the air. We draw two ovals – this is a head and a body. Next, two triangles – these are ears. We draw small cunning eyes, a pink nose, long whiskers. Not it is the turn of four paws with sharp claws. We finish our drawing with a fluffy tail. I even hear the “Meow!” somewhere next to the basement door. Did my drawing come to life? No! My cat Musia came to me. Very kind, gray and white, with intelligent green eyes. She always helps me calm down with her steady purring. Do you like animals? Do you have any pets?

Finally, the air alarm is over. I come out of my hiding place. The sun shines brightly into my eyes. There is not a single cloud in the sky, and it is very hot. I head to our local beach. The Vovcha River runs through my city. On the way I enter the park. Trees give me a pleasant coolness. I stop for a moment to listen to the birds. Do you like walks in the park? Personally, I love it. You never feel alone here. The trees hospitably wave their leaves at you, various insects fly bathing in sun rays that make their way through the treetops. And here is a ladybug landing on my hand to say hi. It is a little red bug with black dots. And here is a daisy nodding

its head to me among the think grass. Let us read the fortune! I tear off the first petal: "We will stay connected with you," I tear off the next one: "We will not stay connected." Finally, the last petal: "We will stay connected." Hooray! How do we do it? Very simple.

I have already approached the river. Its waves play tag, trying to catch each other. I find a flat pebble. I throw it. It jumps like a kind of a "frog." The pebble bounces twice on the waves, leaving two equal circles. This is me asking you "How are you?" When you are near the pond, you must also throw a pebble to answer my question. We can talk in the evening too when the sky is full of stars. Fing the Ursa Minor constellation. There is the brightest star in it - the North Star. Look at it and tell me about everything: how you are doing, how your day was, what dreams or plans for the future you have. I will also look at this star and tell you my news.

I will finish writing; my friends are calling me. They are inviting me to swim. I invite you to visit our wonderful city of Pavlohrad. I will definitely introduce you to my friends!

See you soon, my new friend!



Karina Trofimova, 13 years old

"Parents' house"

I hear

Yevhenii Hohin, 10-B grade,
Kherson Physical and Technical Lyceum,
Kherson City Council,
Winner, 3rd place

Hello my friend!

You know, I cannot help the feeling that I am listening for something. As if I was trying to hear you through distance and time. And it seems that sometimes I really hear you.

I hear you sigh when you wake up in the morning and forget for a moment where you are and what is happening around you. And then reality hits you, and you take a deep breath getting ready for a new day.

I hear your footsteps – careful and balanced. I imagine how you walk down the streets of our city, so familiar and at the same time so foreign now. Maybe you walk past our old school or our favorite coffee shop. I wonder if they are still standing.

Sometimes I think that I hear your laugh. Remember how we used to laugh to tears at stupid jokes? That infectious laugh of yours that was irresistible. I cherish these memories as my greatest treasure.

I hear your silence. That tense silence when you hold back words and swallow your emotions. I know how hard it is to remain silent when you want to scream. But I hear even the things that you do not say.

Sometimes it seems that I hear your voice in the crowd. I turn around, but of course, that is not you. However, for a moment, my heart freezes with hope.

I hear how you are trying to stay strong. How you force yourself to wake up every morning, to go forward, not to give up. Your fortitude is something incredible.

Sometimes I hear your anger – hollow, suppressed, but so righteous. This anger is like a bridge between us, it unites us despite everything.

I also hear your dreams. The ones we talked about at night sitting on the roof and looking at the stars. They did not disappear anywhere, my friend. They are waiting for their time to come.

I hear your questions – the ones to which there are no answers. Why did this happen to us? When will it all end? What will happen next? I also ask myself these questions every day.

Sometimes I hear your sadness. It comes in waves, I know. And I want you to know – I am sad together with you. Sad about our past, the lost time, and everything that could happen.

I hear your hope. Quiet, careful, but alive. It is like a delicate flower that breaks through the asphalt. Cherish it, my friend.

You know, sometimes I even hear your night dreams. I imagine how you dream of the sea, or the forest, or just the free sky above your head. I hope these dreams give you strength.

I hear how your heart beats – strongly, confidently, against all odds. It reminds me that you are alive, that you are fighting, that you have not given up.

And I want you to hear me too. Hear how much I believe in you. How proud I am of your courage. How I look forward to meeting you.

Because I heard, unwittingly. I heard you during warm June evenings, when I was in Kherson under the occupation. I heard the footsteps of patrols on the streets, I heard the rumble of machinery at night, I heard fear in neighbors' voices. But you know what was the loudest thing I heard? I heard support. I heard how people from the free Ukraine send hope to us through radio waves, through messages, through songs. I heard their faith in us, and that gave me strength to hold on. I am free now, but a part of me is still there, with you. Now it is my turn to become the voice of hope that once supported me.

One day we will hear each other again in reality. But meanwhile I hear you with my heart. And I know that you can hear me too.

Hang in there my friend. I always hear you.

A white light of hope

Anastasiia Horbach, 8-B grade,
Konotop Lyceum No. 13 of Konotop City Council
Sumy Oblast

My dear peer!

I thought for a long time about how to start this letter. From time to time, bright lights of inspiration and joy sparkled in my soul, trying to suggest the right words. Sometimes, in their place, thick blue flowers of sadness and pain grew, which pierced every part of my soul with their sharp thorns. But despite this, I continued to write, because you, like no one else, need to hear warm words of support.

My name is Nastia. On my way, as well as on yours, the burden of war has fallen. But despite this, it was the war that changed me: I began to speak Ukrainian, became more interested in our history and culture, volunteer and support our Defenders. Every day with my family and friends has now become the most valuable gift for me. After all, these moments become our warmest memories that help us fight despair in such a difficult time.

Perhaps, the thought crept in your heart that you and other children were forgotten in the background of all these events. But it is not like that. This letter is an example of the fact that this is not true, do not let doubt take over you. Every part of my heart passionately cheers for you not to give up and continue to fight. I am well aware that now it is extremely difficult to draw dreams and plan for the future. Everything seems so gray, distant and impossible. It is so difficult to take your courage in both hands and overcome the prickly thorns of disappointment and sadness.

During the full-scale invasion, we witnessed the horrific crimes committed by the Russians. These memories will forever remain a part of us, they will come to our minds again and again, and unfortunately, it will be impossible to get rid of them. After each mention of them, the heart will respond with a dull pain. But it makes us stronger, teaches us not to repeat the mistakes of the past. As much as we would like to, there is no specific cure for this knifing pain. But there is a white light of hope that does not allow you to fall. Take care of it and never lose it, heal the innermost wounds of your heart with it and illuminate this world.

The victory will definitely come. Our Defenders are courageously fighting for every piece of our native land. May their brave deeds inspire hope in your heart.

Do not lose hope! We will return all territories, and our Motherland will flourish like never before!

We have become an unconquered generation. Despite all the obstacles, we must survive, because the future of Ukraine is only in our hands. After the Victory, it is up to us to protect the independence of our country, to rebuild the ruins in which it found itself, to work for development and good changes. The peaceful life of future generations depends on us. Who, if not us, should bring good into this evil world? Who will do it if not us?

I sincerely believe that this letter has become a support and motivation for you. Remember: you are not alone, there is much more power in you than you think! Take care of yourself and love Ukraine.

Sincerely,
Nastia

Yaroslav Horovyi, 9-A grade,
Nizhyn Gymnasium No. 9
Nizhyn City Council of Chernihiv Oblast

Good day, my friend!

I am a student of the 8th grade, Yaroslav Horovyi, I am writing you a letter to chat and make friends. I am an ordinary guy, I think, not special. People say, on the contrary, I am diffident. I like Math, Physics and Chemistry, as well as boxing. I am an excellent student and a "nerd" (that is what they call me). And here I am writing this letter because my teacher made me do it. Just kidding, I wanted to do it. I do not have many friends. It is cool when you have a friend, especially from the occupation. It sounds stupid. I am sorry. It is cool to have a friend.

So, about boxing.

My idol is Usyk. I watched all his fights. He is a patriot and so are you. We are Ukrainians. Strong in spirit and body. I am with you. I think about you. Hang in there. Occupation is not a sentence. It will not last long. The main thing is to hold out. Believe in your strength and my support. I want to send you a piece of my soul to make it easier for you, that is why I am sending you a hand. I enchanted it and it has amazing power. Press your hand against mine, make a wish – it will definitely come true. Know how to wait and believe. This will make you patient and strong.

I do not know if I should say that the enemy killed my father. I am already kind of over it. I became fearless and brave. I am now my family's pillar. That is what my mother says.

You should know that I honestly think about you and my mother prays for you. Let us write letters to each other. Exactly. In this way we will become true friends. Soon there will be peace and we will be happy.

Goodbye.

I can hear you: a letter to a peer in the occupation

Karyna Hryzliuk, 9th grade,
Municipal Institution «Lyceum of Natural Sciences»
of the Kropyvnytskyi City Council
Winner, 2nd place

My dear Aryna!

It has been almost two months since I heard from you. I know that it is difficult in Rubizhne, but you promised me... to stay alive. You remember, don't you? You wrote me that you will come, that you will get out of that place, and we will go for a walk in the city. And I will finally see the adorable cat that likes to bite you so much, while you write me letters back... My mother calls you a “crane with broken wings” and always asks how you are and if you managed to leave? How should I explain to her that the missiles fell next to your house, and in the photos in the news I noticed that the windows on your floor are no longer there? I want to believe that you are going to be fine, however with every new post about the new air strikes in Luhansk region, I start to fear more and more. My body fills with excruciating pain, my heart begins to pound wildly in my chest, and my thoughts get overflowed with expectation of the worst.

I watch news and remember how you and I used to laugh two years ago. We were such children! And then I remember that I have not heard your voice for several months, have not seen your messages for several weeks, and it has been few days since I forgot your smile. It is impossible to write you a letter while the tears are flowing from my eyes, and I have to endure and swallow them hoping that you will receive this letter. I see the news, I hear them, but I do not want to accept them – how will I live without my friend?

How did this world allow that 13-year-old children like you tremble under the rubble, count seconds after they hear the sounds of the airplanes and hope that it is not a missile? How can we close our eyes to this chaos, to thousands of dead bodies, to the lack of people's basic freedom?

My dear Aryna, do not forget that despite of hundreds of kilometers, explosions, destroyed houses – I am near. I am next to you in letters, in short messages that you write when you have connection. I will always be your friend, your support, regardless of the distance that separates us. I am waiting for your answer. I am waiting for you alive. I am waiting for victory and liberation of the entire Luhansk region. I pray for you and for Ukraine, my dear!

With much love – your best friend.

P.S. As you have probably understood, reader, this letter is addressed to my friend from the occupied city of Rubizhne, Luhansk region. Since May 12, 2022, the city shared the fate of Mariupol. Rubizhne was completely destroyed, almost no houses survived. Occupation. Such an incomprehensible, strange word for Aryna, who was 13 back then, and for me. I was able to exchange messages with my friend only after they crossed the border of Luhansk region and left the occupied territory in the end of September. Her bravery and unshakeable faith in Ukraine inspired me to write many essays, photos of her destroyed house – to draw pictures, and she herself – awakened by readiness to show all the beauty of this world without war. This little crane with broken wings has overcome hell for her own freedom.

Thank you, Ukraine, for the opportunity to see the smile on my friend's face after all the pain she experienced! Thanks to all the defenders who fight for our freedom! Thank you for life!

Kherson region is Ukraine!

Daniela Derkunska, 8 grade,
Kherson Multidisciplinary Lyceum No. 20
Kherson City Council

Hello friend!

HOW ARE YOU? Ukrainians have been starting their day with this short but extremely profound phrase for more than two years, replacing the usual greeting. Let us start with me, a person who cares about you and who, as a peer with some experience, is able to understand and support you.

I am an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl, who lives near the frontline, in the hero city of Kherson, not far from you, on the other side of the river Dnipro. So, geography was discussed, as for my postponed letter – unfortunately, it is not able to cover this short distance yet...

What am I, the author of this letter, like? Of course, you cannot call me a child because our generation had to grow up prematurely. February 24 was a day that changed my worldview, brushing aside childish quirks and whims, for example, new gadgets, fashionable clothes, status on social networks. In an instant, it all became unimportant – instead, there was a need to preserve our lives, by distinguishing between the sounds of “incoming” and “outgoing” missiles, to respond to “Air Raid” signals, to help the loved ones, the desire to defend our state, language, history – everything that makes us Ukrainians.

Perhaps it sounds too pretentious? Not really. I began studying more diligently, started being interested in the whirlwind of history, speaking Ukrainian more perfectly, using it both in everyday life and in social networks. But most importantly my family and I joined the volunteer movement. I would like to tell you so many stories about the occupation, the liberation of Kherson, the blowing up of Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, the rescue of animals, the incredible unity of people... But it is not the right time, because FOR NOW you are in the Ukrainian territory temporarily occupied by Russia, as if in that dark looking glass, the world of inverted truths, distorted by the modern horde.

But know that you are not alone. So, I want to give you some advice, which is called the newfangled word “life hack,” or “trick,” or “loophole” in our native language.

As you know, the truth lies in simple things. So, do you have a safe place, an island in the world of chaos, where you can be yourself, cry, scream, or in other words – vent your emotions without fear of judgement? Or old toys with which

you played so happily or fell asleep sweetly as a child? Even teenagers feel safe hugging them, you should try it. Are there any old paints or even colored pencils in your desk or closet? If you find them – start drawing! Draw everything you dream of – with bright colors, and with black – everything you hate and want to squeeze out of your soul.

Later, look around again: here are your loved ones who, despite the fear and pressure of the occupiers, protect you with love and hope like an apple of an eye. In fact, you can help your relatives – you can preserve the spiritual unity of your family with a kind word, joint household chores or even gentle care of flowers, without which it is impossible to imagine a homestead in Ukraine.

You will say that this is a mini world, torn off like a small piece and forgotten by God? That you cannot spread your wings in it? Believe that it is FOR THE TIME BEING! Your home stands on the Ukrainian land and has deep spiritual roots, which is indestructible, which can be nourished by Faith, Hope, Love, Steadfastness, which are genetically embedded in us. Let them become that invisible barrier that reliably protects against despair, the rattling of weapons, and the empty poisonous slogans of the horde.

Like a mantra, repeat: “Ukraine,” “matinka” (“mother”), “liubystok” (“love”), “mriia” (“dream”), “kolyskova” (“lullaby”), “oberih” (“amulet”), “blavat” (“cornflower”), “palianytsia” (“loaf”) and “polunytsia” (“strawberry”) – and many other words that nurture our hearts. And also, if you have a good imagination, you can fantasize about how the “battle geese” prepare for the assault! Now you are smiling, I hope...

My friend, save yourself in every sense, because we have a lot of work ahead of us – to rebuild Ukraine after the liberation of all territories and Victory! We are the future of the country, so our mission is great. LIVE, STUDY IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE, DRAW, DANCE, CARE, GROW, BLOOM, WAIT, DO NOT GIVE UP! The Cossack bloodline will never perish! Our guardian angels, the Armed Forces of Ukraine, will return the temporarily captured to the bosom of the native country. Glory to Ukraine!

Hope to meet you
(and have a joint vacation in the Ukrainian Crimea),
Your friend from Kherson

I hear you: A Letter to a Peer on the Other Side of the Frontline

Zoriana Zobenko, 8 grade,
Veremiivka Gymnasium of the Irkliiv Rural Hromada
Zolotonosha Raion, Cherkasy Oblast

Dear friend, my peer, my fellow citizen!

I am writing you a letter to express my support during this challenging time for all of us. I'm not sure you will receive it, but I really hope so. Maybe you will stumble across it by accident while surfing the wide expanses of the Internet, and then you will know that I exist, and even though you and I do not know each other at all, I do care about your fate. We are divided by the front line, but not by beliefs, because no matter how hard our enemies try to impose their views and their values on us, nothing will change the fact that we were born Ukrainians, and we have the right to be Ukrainians! Strangers cannot fathom this...

I understand that I am in better circumstances: despite the fact that the Russian murderous weapon reaches us, I am on the free side, and at least I do not have to breathe the same air with the murderers. I cannot even imagine what you had to go through and what you have to go through every day, but, believe me, it hurts me, I am just «torn» by the injustice, cruelty and meaninglessness of this world. It is extremely difficult and scary for me; I am afraid not to see our Victory. And you know what keeps me going? A dream. An ordinary little child's dream. I «scroll» it in my head every day. This is a dream of Ukraine – peaceful, flourishing, successful, the only place on earth, my home and yours too. I am going to share my dream with you now.

Imagine that you and I have grown up a little and met. Where? At my place or at yours – it does not matter where, because it is in Ukraine. And now the guns have already died down, everyone has returned to their homes, and there is not a single «Russian» with his disgusting «Z's», not a single one! The sky is peaceful and clear again, and the people kinder and smiling. Finally, everyone is united by a common goal – the development of a strong independent Ukraine. And not just united but began to act: to rebuild destroyed cities and villages, restore historical monuments, take care of the cleanliness of the environment, develop the economy, culture, and education. And sowing bread – which is something that our ancestors did from time immemorial, it is like a connection between generations. You and I admire the wheat field that stretches to the horizon – this is a symbol of

our Motherland, the best and the largest flag! And pride envelops our hearts. And gratitude spreads in our souls to the living and fallen heroes-knights who have preserved Ukraine for future generations!

And I also dream that the world will come to its senses and will find a way to stop all wars on earth, so that people do not die, so that children have a childhood, so that humanity has a future.

Dear friend, hold on to this dream too. Just hold on. Survive.

See you in peaceful Ukraine!

Zoriana

Know that I am waiting for you!

Yelyzaveta Iziumska,
Student of the second course of study (11 grade),
Lozova Center for Vocational Education of Kharkiv Oblast

Hello Olenka!

As I am writing you this letter, I am overwhelmed with emotions, because only now I have realized many things that I had not thought about before.

I am incredibly sad that you were torn away from your home, got your childhood stolen, our childhood, which, unfortunately, we will never be able to get back. I am deeply sorry that we, children, had to grow up so quickly. I am sure that now you and I are overwhelmed by the same emotions: sadness, fear, a sense of brokenness, unwillingness to perceive the war for reality.

You know, it is only now that I am beginning to understand the meaning of the word «occupation.» And it is scary.

Olenka, you should know that I am proud of you because you are strong. I do not remember who exactly said these words, but they were deeply embedded in my soul: «One month in mother's arms is so little time, and one month under occupation is so much.» After hearing these words, I seriously thought about this and began to appreciate every day I lived, because tomorrow may not come. I understand how scared you are of losing the feeling of control over your own life, but at the same time you hold on, do not give up, live, because your faith in a just future is stronger than any fear.

Olenka, I am also sometimes gripped by a violent fear – fear of the sound of a siren, danger, hopelessness... It has become a nightmare for me, it scares me.

There is a Ukrainian saying: «Even in the sky you miss your native land.» It is so pertinent in your situation, and I know that the memories of our Motherland are preserved in your big heart. As long as these memories live in you, you still have the faith to return home. So be it! To return to the place where your loved ones are waiting for you, and I am among them! Isn't it true what they say that the walls heal at home? You have to take care of yourself now, in such a challenging time, realize that perhaps the return «home» will not happen as soon as we want it to happen. Understand that our defenders are doing their best to bring Victory closer as soon as possible!

Remember, everything in our world is relative. What I mean by that is that the circumstances are not the best for us right now, but tomorrow everything can change. It all depends on us, on how we perceive a particular situation. I will give you an example from my own life: do you remember, I wrote to you about my fear – the sound of a siren? At first glance, the siren scares me, I feel danger. But on the other hand, it is only a sound that wants to warn me to hide in a safe place and save my life.

As you can see, I try to find the «advantages», to convince myself that there are things that help us. Our enemy wants to break us, but we, Ukrainians, are strong and invincible. Remember, you have not been forgotten, you have not been put on hold. Olenka, live no matter what!

I also want to share a story with you about people whose lives were changed forever by the war, just like ours. Recently, a family came to our village: a mother, a father and two children. They left their village when the defenders liberated it from the occupation. They did not want to leave, but they had to, because only ruins remained of their house. They came to an unfamiliar place, completely alien to them. Children were only seven or eight years old, and in their eyes there was already pain, confusion and fear. Their peers discussed among themselves that they were somehow strange – «wild», and they simply did not want to communicate, because a person who did not see that horror would probably not be able to fully understand all the pain of children who were under occupation.

You know, Olenka, I saw how those children reacted to the sounds of explosions coming from afar. This was the first time I have seen this. There was no screaming, they were not running away, it was just a daze, it was as if they had lost their own peace, and it seemed easier for them to die than to start living again.

I looked at them and almost lost faith, but a miracle happened – the support of their relatives, friends and fellow villagers was able to pull them out of lingering despair and rebuild their lives. But after a while, trouble knocked on their door again – the sad news came about the death of their father, who went to defend the country. I remember the day when the sad song «Hey, plyve kacha po Tysyni» ("Hey, a Duckling Swims in the Tisza") sounded throughout the village, the meaning of which I remembered for the rest of my life. Then all the villagers came to pay tribute to the Hero, people knelt and cried as if for their own son, his father was also there. His eyes were no longer crying, there were no more tears, he ran out of them. This is a pain that cannot be consoled with anything. And I thought about these children again, what will happen to them now. But then a miracle happened a second time. These children saw how their mother suffered, and apparently decided that now it was their turn to save her from grief, to be her guardian angels. They are always with her, full of hope, they are together – and this is the main thing!

You see, when a person needs support, there are always people nearby who will help them return to life.

Therefore, my dear Olenka, I know that you will be fine, you are incredibly strong, you are an example of a person who will never lose hope, and I will support you, because you miss home, and I miss you.

Know that I am waiting for you!

With faith in my heart

Ruslan Marakhovski, 8-A grade,
Secondary school of I-III degrees No. 1
Horishni Plavni City Council
Kremenchuk Raion, Poltava Oblast

I walk up the steep stairs from the gloomy shelter, and the first thing I see is the sun. Bright, warm, dear. It instantly gives warmth to the body which cooled off in the basement and to the soul disturbed by danger. Childhood and life are coming back to me again. To the class! To the lesson! And you will not believe it, for some reason it is so joyful to sit down at the desk, see the familiar faces of friends and classmates, listen to the simple and understandable words of the teacher. Life returned to normal. And suddenly, the thought burns my soul: what about you my peer under occupation? How do you live and what do you feel? With no childhood, no joy, no freedom? I watch videos on the Internet with horror, I listen to the news, so I understand how difficult it is for you, my friend, how scary and dangerous it is. You are at gunpoint of enemy weapons every day. Sleep at gunpoint. Books at gunpoint. The house is at gunpoint. Life at gunpoint. I know that the damned orcs force Ukrainian children to go to their schools, where they impose everything alien and distant on the sons and daughters of suffering Ukraine. They persecute children for the desire to speak their native language, they promote the ideas of the superiority of the Russian nation and culture, they teach distorted and false history. Where do you get the strength to endure all this, my peer? Where do you hide when the despised occupier steps on the threshold of your home with his dirty boot? How do you control your anger when he insults your mother or sister? Where do you get the strength to not break down, to live in defiance of your enemies, to wait for liberation and our victory? I can only imagine how you want to rush at the armed «liberator», to cling to his throat with your hands and teeth. For all the pain of all mothers and girls, for children's tears, for crippled destinies, for destroyed villages and cities, for our native Ukraine. But be patient, my friend, do not give up! Let our enemies know that even our children have enormous strength, which is multiplied by the desire to live in a free, independent European state. A strength that feeds not on hatred, but on love for people, for its native land, for the river that has been bathing them in its healing waters since childhood, for willow and viburnum at the gate, for the storks that once again built a nest over the house in the spring and returned home despite the war, despite the explosions and the whistling of missiles. That is why keep believing, do not

let doubt into your heart for a moment. Ukraine will win! It cannot be any other way, otherwise where is God's and universal justice? Do you remember what Pavlo Tychyna said:

I am the People, strong in Truth and will!

No foe has ever crushed my might.

What plague or sorrow sought my strength to kill it,

Yet once again, I rise, and I will fight.

To live — I ask no right from any hand.

To live — I'll break each chain anew.

I stand, I rise, I take my stand, for I live true.

And you should live, my friend, please know that you have not been forgotten, Ukraine is waiting for its children from everywhere and is fighting for them. Our hero soldiers destroy the enemy every day, shedding their blood on every meter of our native land. These are the true descendants of the Zaporozhian Cossacks — strong, fearless, brave. Neither the second nor the first armies of the world can break them. Besides, the whole Europe, the United States of America, Canada - the entire progressive world stands with us. Those who know the price of freedom, who defend peace and democracy. Believe me, my peer, that a little more time will pass, and you will see not Moscow, but Ukrainian planes in the sky, you will hear shells exploding in the ruscist trenches. And then there will be silence. Unusual, desired. And the tired, so dear soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine will come to your city or village. The best flag in the world so dear to a heart will fly at the highest place. Ours, yellow and blue, the color of clear sky and golden wheat, the flag of peace. So be it! And then we, children from various parts of Ukraine, will gather in one city. Maybe it will be Kyiv, or Lviv, or Kharkiv, or maybe Mariupol or Bakhmut. We will shake hands tightly, share pain and joy, and take a sacred oath that we will never again let the damn war on our land! And you and I will be among these messengers of peace, my peer from the occupation. Perhaps we will not recognize each other, but it does not matter, because every Ukrainian child who did not experience occupation thinks just like I do, and all those who have suffered the terrible scourge of enslavement feel what you feel today. And all our people are united by one dream and hope: peace and happiness to live in an independent united Ukraine, from the Crimean Mountains to the Chernihiv forests, from the Sea of Azov to the Carpathians. And this dream, prayed to all the gods of the world by millions of people, is so strong that it will definitely come true! To the victory, my friend! Glory to Ukraine!



Dmytro Selediv, 8 years old

Group: "Creative Arts"

Teacher: Halyna Mykhailivna Dmytryshchuk

We are together

Uliana Melnichenko, 8 grade,

Kniazha Gymnasium with a pre-school department

Zvenyhorod City Council

Zvenyhorod Raion, Cherkasy Oblast

Dear friend,

I don't know about you, but I wake up every day with a new hope for change. The occupation is trying to swallow up our days, but we will not allow it to take away our faith in the future. We are stronger than the darkness that surrounds us.

No matter how hard it is, we have each other. Our memories of freedom, our dreams of the future are what hold us together. Let us not allow fear and helplessness to prevail over our hearts.

Please remember that even in the darkest hour, you are not alone. We are in this together. Let us stick together, support each other and believe in a better future. This fight is not our ultimate destiny, but only a test of our strength.

Take care of yourself and stay strong.

Best regards, ,
Uliana

Oleksandra Moshenets, 11-C grade,
Hub institution “Reshetylivka Lyceum named after Ivan Oliinyk
of Reshetylivka City Council”
Poltava Oblast

My dear friend Valeriia!

I am writing you a letter for the umpteenth time, although I know that you will not be able to receive it now. But I still write: it makes living in separation from you easier for me. I imagine your always-smiling face, thinking about what you would answer to this or that question of mine, what advice you would give me to solve my problem. It is as if I feel your friendly shoulder next to me, and then I remember, remember...

Here we are walking along the street of my hometown, here we are playing in the rays of the gentle sun on the seacoast of your native Kyrylivka. We joke, we laugh, we eat ice cream, we eat grapes... And, it would seem, there will be no end to this cloudless, carefree childhood...

But fate decided otherwise. And now I felt that I had become more mature, and, can you imagine, Lera, I do not even remember the last time I laughed. It is hard... But I understand that the hardest thing for you is to live under occupation. After reading numerous articles about how children describe their lives in the occupied territories, I feel more and more overwhelmed by anxiety, sadness and incredible anger for the fact that you now have to see everything that is happening there with your own eyes. To live in fear for yourself and your loved ones, in imposed propaganda, unable to speak your native language freely and breathe deeply. I can only imagine the pain you are feeling now and what you had to go through during these tough times for you. But I know you are strong. Lera, I beg you, just stay strong, remember that you are Ukrainian, keep that flame of hope in your heart and do not let anyone extinguish it, no matter how difficult it is. And remember: I am always there for you.

My dear friend, now I live only by faith and hope that the war will end soon. As soon as the valiant warriors finally clear our land from the enemy invasion because our soldiers are true patriots. And then, in the nearest future, blue and yellow flags will fly throughout Ukraine, from west to east, as a symbol of victory, a symbol of invincibility and valor of our people.

Exactly in one year, we will graduate from high school. And, as we once dreamed, we will enter the same university, we will study together, we will live together in the same dormitory room. And in our free time, we will talk, talk, to

catch up on all the time when we were apart. They say friendship grows stronger at a distance, and it is true.

My father wants me to go to study abroad, and I prefer to stay in Ukraine. If you remember, there is a proverb: «Where you are born is where you will be needed most.» That is how I am. I love Ukraine very much — it is in my native land that I want to live, study, and work. I want our families to be friends in the future. Everything will be fine with us, dear Lera, we will always walk through life together, only we will choose different guys. (Of course, this is a joke; I just wanted you to smile.) And one day our families will gather together and read my unsent letters to you, and then, years later, they will probably seem so naive and childish to us, yet very sincere.

I will be wrapping up here: it is time for me to pick up my little brother from the bomb shelter. During the air alarm, they are taken to a shelter in the kindergarten. He is still there because the air alarm is not over yet...

I will write to you again tomorrow. Hold on, my dear! Let us believe in victory, let us believe in Ukraine, let us believe in a happy future...

Your faithful friend Oleksandra



Alisa Matyashchuk, 8 years old

Group: "Creative Arts"

Teacher: Fedorova Zinaida Valentynivna

“Hold on Yevhen!”

Ellina Nefiodova, 10-B grade,
Lyman Lyceum No. 2
Lyman City Council, Donetsk Oblast

Good day, Zhenia.

Since you moved to another village in the Kharkiv region, as families with children were ordered to leave, and this was almost three months ago, we have not communicated, because you have almost no mobile connection. But almost every day I think about our native village of Nove, which is located not far from the Luhansk and Kharkiv regions, although it belongs to the Donetsk region. That is why it suffered heavy destruction in the first months of the war, other villages of the Lyman Raion and the city of Lyman itself - the gates to Donbas, were also affected.

I am writing this letter to express what is in my heart, to support you.

My family left the village and home almost in the first days of the war. We hoped that it would not last long. And you stayed with your mother, sister and sick grandmother.

I live near the Dnipro River, but, unfortunately, I have never swum in it, although I have visited the monuments of wonderful Kyiv. My Grandmother, Father and Mother say hello to you. From time to time, we hear explosions and see black smoke from the window of the fifth floor. How is life treating you in a strange village, what do you do there, do you have friends?

Zhenia, how good life was for us before the war. Do you remember how my friends and I swam in the pond, and in the evenings we ate stolen, juicy apples, which lured not only us with their beauty and aroma? And there were enough apple trees of different varieties in every yard! Even now, when I remember it, I feel the fragrant smell of matthiola near the house of our first teacher Kateryna Vasylivna, when we were sitting on a bench, joked, laughed. Sometimes loudly, then the husband of our favorite teacher, who was sleeping under a walnut tree in the fresh air, was chasing us away, and we, ashamed, were going to another place.

We have already finished the 10th grade. Our class teacher Oleksandr Serhiiovych respects you, Zhenia, because you have always been honest, courageous, independent and a true helper in the family. I sympathize with you, because it is extremely difficult to live in the frontline zone for so long. I understand that you did not want to leave your old sick grandmother, who did not want to go anywhere, as well as your new spacious house, which your father built, but unfortunately died soon after.

When the Russians were advancing, you were hiding in the cellar. Zhenia, you said that you arranged something like a bed in it, put blankets and pillows, but still, I can imagine how scared you were. The earth shook, above you there was whistling, rumbling, crashing.

It was you who told us that our large and beautiful house was hit by a missile, only black walls remained, and it seemed as if there was nothing inside. Everything, everything burned down. You sent photos and videos of the house, and our roses, as if to spite the enemies, were still blooming. Red, white, purple, yellow...

Our two-story native school was damaged, it seemed to have lost its cheerful friendly smile and acquired a distorted appearance. Our classroom was left without windows, and the wind blew the curtains, the pieces of plaster covered the overturned desks. I cried when I looked at the photo of the school you sent me. And you, Yevhen, saw all this in reality. Later there were two more hits on the school, and now there is a large pile of bricks in its place. It was from you that I learned that not far from our house there was a missile hit, which killed our neighbors, and half of Uncle Sasha's head was cut off by shrapnel. I sympathize with you with all my heart because you had to see this... I live among civilians, it's clean and beautiful here.

The occupiers captured the village. And you watched how they destroyed fences with tanks, entering the yard, how they rummaged and robbed abandoned houses, took away the belongings of your fellow villagers acquired over the years by cars. Hatred, pain, anger raged in your heart. Frightened people were lurking, your mother was even afraid to go outside, everything was on you, Zhenia. You said that you were disgusted with the Russian language, and listening to the foreign language of the occupiers, you believed that our troops would soon liberate the village.

And the crickets, against all odds, in unison with your thoughts, sang as before, foretelling that their native land would be liberated from uninvited strangers. When the occupiers summoned all the people and began to say that they had come forever, that everyone would live well, you did not believe their words. Weel done. I am proud of you, Yevhen!

But then our troops went on the offensive, and the enemies began to flee with all their might. From your short messages, I learned that the soldiers were stationed in abandoned houses, and they were willingly sharing food. Humanitarian aid began to be delivered often, and doctors from the district came once a week. It got more cheerful all around, you continued to study remotely.

Zhenia, I know that you are waiting for our army to push the Russians further, and you could return home. I believe it will happen soon. I think that you are amazing, because, just like me, you do not lose hope for the victory of Ukraine and the reconstruction of the village. I am sure that the school will also be built in the same place, and it will be the same two-story, bright and with large windows, and your sister will study there. I remember that after the eleventh grade, you dreamed of getting a blue-collar profession to provide for your family.

Our classmate Serhii, our chatterbox and prankster, spoke about your family with the disgusting word «awaiters». I forgave him everything, but not this! It is difficult for him to understand you because he lives in a wealthy family, but our family understands you. My Grandmother used to say that you would make a real man, that your father was hardworking, compassionate and courageous. I remember that when I was drowning in the pond, you were the first to rush to help me.

Zhenia, please remember that I will not forget you, I often think about you, I am proud of you. You are indeed strong, courageous, and kind; you chopped firewood selflessly for old women who were left alone, you helped them. I believe that I will see you again, as well as our friends. And once again, our village will delight us with the sweet aroma of ripe apples, acacia, linden and lilac.

Vasia Buriak recently called me. He is still in Germany, he said that he often dreams of his house, yard and steppe with fragrant herbs stretching out behind the house. He says hi to you, he wants to go home. His mother was not cured abroad. They want to bury her ashes in her native land. He lives with his father and studies well. He believes that peace will soon come to our country, Ukraine will definitely win, and he also realized that there is no better state in the entire world.

Yevhen, the enemies may have destroyed many houses, a church, a school, but they will never erase our memory.

Call me when you can an opportunity, I am always glad to hear from you, say hello to your mother and grandmother from our family.

Let us hold on and do not forget each other!

See you, Zhenia.

July 14, 2024

Best regards

Your classmate Polina.

PS. Zhenya, you loved the Ukrainian language and literature, wrote beautiful essays, I hope that after the war you will write memoirs about your life under occupation and what people who lived in the frontline zone felt.

Vladislava Popova, group INIF-34,
The Municipal Institution «Poltava City Multidisciplinary Lyceum No. 1
named after Ivan Kotliarevsky.»

Hello Mariia!

It has been a long time since y last letter to you. Anyways, a lot has changed for both of us in these two months. You know, we have not seen each other in two years, although I still remember you vividly. Sometimes, some things from a «past life» or re-reading your touching letters remind me of our moments together – and it warms my soul.

Mariia, we have changed. Even though we have not seen each other for a long time, our letters still remain a way of supporting each other. Topics and moods change, but that is fine, we are growing up. Although it is sad to realize that we do not know how much everything is uncontrollably changing in us in reality. Words on paper can express a lot of feelings and emotions, but not the intonation or facial expressions. Remember, you are my friend, and in grim times, I will be the one who will do everything possible to make you feel better. That is what friends are for.

I saw the news from our city. It is hard to imagine how difficult it is to be there, to see how everything withers, and not to be able to get at least something back. Once, among those houses, our youth burned in the cold. There are no longer those places where you get a sense of calmness and memories as you take every step. This city already has a dead soul.

A lot has changed, and it will change even more, but please do not lose yourself in the midst of all these events. Some people may feel pessimistic but hope lives forever. I understand how difficult it is to keep the feelings to yourself so as not to upset others. Neither I nor anyone else can understand all of your feelings, but these words were not said frivolously. Of course, it would be better, instead of writing a letter, to communicate with you here and now. Well, there is plenty of sadness around. I will be glad to receive at least a little news from you! I am sure that we will meet soon!

I miss you very much!
Vlada

From one soul to another

Bohdan Prus, 11 grade,
Klynove lyceum of Sataniv Village Council
Khmelnyskyi Raion, Khmelnytskyi Oblast

Hello! Yes, yes, I am talking to you, a serious girl with despair in her eyes, and to you, a broad-shouldered young man of my age...

The July heat drove me inside the house. Scrolling the Facebook pages, I saw that my free time can be spent usefully by writing you a letter. And I was incredibly happy, because since the beginning of the war, such an anxious corner of the uncertainty has been constantly sitting in my heart, in which rhetorical questions have been circulating for the second year in a row: how do you live there, in the occupied territory? How do you sleep when a brutal war is raging nearby, destroying human lives with its bloody blade?

I know that it hurts you to answer these questions, but you should know that we care about you with all our being and wish only the best for you. We also unite here like never before. Each of us selflessly fights on our own front for our native country: volunteers, supports financially, sees off parents, brothers, relatives to a bloody battle against the dragon of ruscism.

Seven defenders from my small village already came back home on a shield, three have gone missing. It is indescribably painful to watch an old mother cry for her only son, whom she will never see again, how a little boy does not understand why his father sleeps and does not smile at him, why he does not play with him and does not talk...

You know, my friend, when educational events were held in our lyceum, after a minute of silence, the National Anthem of Ukraine sounded. With my hand firmly pressed to my heart, with not-so-good vocal ability, I sang it so loud, and I also sang it for you, because I knew that you were deprived of it at school.

I improved my Ukrainian, making maximum efforts, realizing with pain in my heart that the occupiers forbade you to do this. My life has also changed forever, and those calm and carefree days are left in the past. More than once, I had to hold my breath and listen to the loud rolling sounds in the sky and pray to God that it was thunder, not a missile.

I know that no matter what, I have had far fewer such disturbing moments than you have. That is why I admire your willpower, endurance and patience. You know, I believe that we will definitely meet. In the nightingale-like Ukrainian, you will passionately tell me how the damn tricolor on the building of your educational institution has changed to the painfully familiar blue and yellow Ukrainian flag,

how our courageous soldiers drove the ruscists out of your city and village, and how majestically Ukrainian atmosphere reigned in every corner of your settlement.

In a few days, I, Bohdan Prus, a graduate of the 11th grade, will be choosing my future profession and the educational institution where I will acquire. I really want both you and I to be able to do it. I know that Ukrainians do not know how to be obediently silent, therefore, dancing our last school waltz at the prom to the sirens of air raid sirens, we once again challenged our sworn enemy. I am convinced and I want to assure you that support and unity in dark times will help us overcome great difficulties.

I worry about you with every cell of my body because it is exceedingly difficult for you right now. I hold you in my prayers and sincerely believe that everything will be fine with you. I do not know what lies ahead for me, but when you are having a tough time I really want you to feel my comfort and support, even if it is distant, but real and sincere.

Hang in there! Take care of yourself! Remember: the distance from one soul to another is the shortest, so know that I am always there, despite hundreds of kilometers...

See you soon! Yes, yes, I was not mistaken, we will definitely meet ...

With respect, support and understanding, your peer Bohdan.

A letter to "our people there"

Vladyslava Svetashova, 9-A grade,
Zaporizhzhia Gymnasium «Osnova»
Zaporizhzhia City Council

Hello friend!

You do not know me, but I met you (all of you) recently. The war has been going on for more than two years, during two of which I divided the world into «there» and «here». Everything was clear: there – there were bad people, strangers, and here – there are our people. But everything changed with the arrival of a new girl to our class. She came from the occupied territory. It turned out that there were still «our people» there. You may ask, why did I not know about the occupied territories before? I did know about the territories, but I never thought about people.

The new girl Lesia (her name was changed for safety reasons) did not talk much about herself at first, and then her stories became more and more specific and frank. According to her, you were there. I plunged into your world. It is hard. It is so hard to imagine, that walking down the street (even at home!) and talking about ordinary things in your native language is dangerous. Saying that you love your country is risky...

I ask each of you to take care of yourself! There is a nation as long as there are people, not a territory. Lands can be captured, but souls are a personal matter. Save yourself and your faith in victory.

I know that you are forced to go to strange schools. Hang in there. Learn the sciences not for someone else, but for yourself. Simply learn the facts and formulas, just do not let strange words into your soul.

Just close your eyes and feel in your heart that we are waiting to meet you. It may not be easy, but we will definitely find words of understanding, because Ukrainian blood runs in our veins, and it will speak. You will see that we have become even closer because grief unites. We will tell each other about everything – sincerely, frankly, simply. The paths will cross and shape the history of our people.

Ukrainians... It is not just a word; it is our magical power that our enemies are so afraid of. And you are our Ukrainians, «our people there», the ones we are waiting for.

Friends! As you read these lines, look at the sky: along with the clouds, I am sending you greetings, a smile and support, because «those who have wings do not need the ground», «if there is no field, there will be freedom» (You and I know who wrote this). See you soon! Sending you a thousand hugs!

Your Vlada

How are you friend?

Ivan Sevastianov, 9 grade,

“UVENES” lyceum of the city of Sievierodonetsk Luhansk Oblast

Greetings friend! We have not seen each other for almost two and a half years. How are you? I remember your face, your figure, jokes and fantasies that you are such an expert in. I can imagine how much you have grown up and changed during this time. I remember our shenanigans and adventures in my native Sievierodonetsk. Now, that past life seems like a dream, but the memory tries to preserve every little detail of that happy dream.

I know that you stayed in our city, and now it is called by the abbreviation I hate – «TOT» (“Temporarily Occupied Territories”). I think you go to a school where you are taught to love the conquerors and to be infinitely grateful for the destruction of the city and the loss of your usual life. I know everything, my friend. It hurts me too. But I am holding on, because I know that the time will come to return home, and we will definitely walk around Gogol Square, go to Chistukha, visit «Fiesta», will loudly sing at the “OE” concert: “... And things will be okay for every of us!» (Do you remember?). All this will happen, you just need to be patient, wait, hold out.

But we should not simply waste our time waiting. I will share my own experience with you. Now I study frantically and stubbornly (hard to believe it, isn't it?), I go to the karate section, I am mastering new skills (for example, knotting, IT, etc.), I am genuinely concerned about a healthy lifestyle. You may ask, what is all this for? My friend, after the de-occupation of our city (and it is coming soon, believe me, our Armed Forces are working on this every day), our strength, knowledge, and skills will come in handy. We have to restore our city and build it even better than it was. We WILL HAVE to live a full, happy, joyful life, even better than before... We will turn Sievierodonetsk into a city of happy people. It will happen. Therefore, let is not waste our time and prepare.

Take care of yourself, my friend. Now that we have utterly understood the value of human life, having experienced its fragility, it would be foolish to treat it irresponsibly. There are many events and accomplishments lying ahead, we must be ready for them.

Hang in there, my friend. Tell your parents I said hi. We will meet soon, and then we will talk as much as we want. In the meantime,... do not believe those who say that «rAssia is here forever.» It will not be like that. We are free people, and we always be like that, no matter what they plan in their dreams.

Hugs, my friend. I know it is hard, but we, the Ukrainians, the descendants of the glorious Cossacks, will survive. The day will come, and just like before, I will call you on the phone and invite you to meet near the Ice Palace, «at the fountains». SEE YOU SOON.

To you

Viktoriia Semiokhina, 9-V grade,
Odesa lyceum No. 62 of Odesa City Council

Do not be jealous of me. Do not be jealous because I am scared and embarrassed. I do not know and will never know what to say. You speak.

I promise you to listen carefully, watch, and not interrupt. I promise to remember. I promise to write a book about You.

Most importantly is that you speak. Do not stop. I promise to hear the sadness, the breath, the smile, and the angry words. I promise to hear abandoned secrets.

Now I promise, not just trying. That is all I can do. Only in this way will I be able to fill the gap that has been created between You and me. The abyss that takes away my words and your desire to speak.

I will not apologize or pretend to understand what I have heard. One can promise anything, but not understanding, despite all the desire. This is a bitter truth, because there are things for which words and tears are not enough, which happen to some and do not happen to others. «WHY? WHY AM I THE ONE GOING THROUGH ALL THIS AND NOT THE EMBODIMENT OF CYNICISM ON THE OTHER SIDE OF BEAUTIFUL DOTS TYPED IN Times New Roman FONT?»

Injustice. A real injustice!

Is there really something in the World, in our Ukraine, in my city, on my street, in my yard that I will never understand?! Why wasn't I born the daughter of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army soldier, and therefore will not understand the world of the Ukrainian resistance? Why am I not a Jew from the time of Nazism and cannot understand their feelings? Am I doomed to the misfortune of living next to each other and not understanding... not having any memories, not speaking about it, having no idea!

And You have. I do not envy you, because you will tell me about it...

Just one thing. I will not feel any pain. I will not feel suffering. You know, sitting for the third day without electricity, I thought it would never end. Of course, there will be something to tell; there will be something to remember, but now I JUST WANT TO TAKE A HOT SHOWER! But they, people in the house across the street, have electricity! ... As the Bible says, there are no trials that we cannot overcome. Therefore, stronger people face more difficult trials.

How do we know about the GULAG? Thanks to Those stronger than us, who knew that pain and suffering always come to an end. As you can see, promises are kept...

You know, I miss you so much

Anhelina Sushko, 11-A grade,
Lyceum No. 16 of Melitopol City Council
Zaporizhzhia Oblast

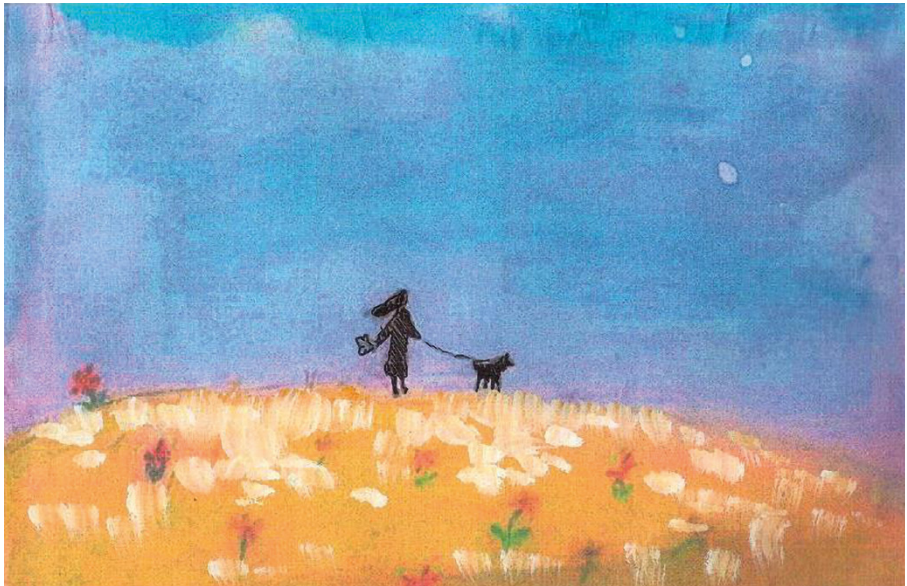
Hello Nastia! I am sorry I have not written to you for a long time, you know, getting ready for exams and things like that. I miss you so much, although more than two years have passed since I left Melitopol. Sometimes it seems to me that I am still there, and this is all a dream that is about to end, and I will find myself in my room, at home, and in the evening I will go to your place to drink tea with you, and we will spend hours talking about everything in the world. Maybe I did die while leaving? Maybe our car was shot back then? I will probably never find out... After all, when the Russian military dragged the man out of the car next to ours and took him in the unknown direction, the thought immediately flashed through my head that someone from our car could be next. The memory of that day is very inconsistent, so I cannot be sure that my present is not a dream, not a delusion that my brain creates before I die.

The first months in Europe felt like a utopia, a parallel world where there never was a war. People live their lives: they go to work, children continue their studies, there is no shortage of food in stores, and the soldiers with weapons do not walk around the city. And the most important thing that surprised me was that there was no curfew. I remember how we went to visit friends, and it was already evening, and I asked my mother what time the curfew would begin, because we had to get home in time. Mom, of course, laughed then, but now I realize that it was not funny at all. The realization of how much those two months have affected me, that I am still afraid of loud noises, really scares me.

Although the fact that I complain about my problems, sitting in safety, here in Germany, sometimes seems wrong to me, because compared to what you have to go through every day being there - it cannot be compared to my petty difficulties. I vividly remember the two months I spent in under occupation, which I will probably never forget. After all, it is really difficult to erase from memory how my friend and I, who were 14 years old, had to run away from drunken Russian soldiers with assault rifles. It is difficult and scary for me to imagine what it is like to go to a «Russian» school and constantly listen about the «new history». How difficult it is not to lose your sanity when you are constantly under the influence of propaganda and surrounded by traitors. And I am so happy for you because, despite what is happening in our city now, you have found new friends and continue to live. I would never be able to do that...

It saddens me to realize that most likely we will not see each other very soon, but it does not matter. The main thing is that, despite the two thousand kilometers between us, we still remain close to each other.

I dedicate this essay to my best friend Nastia, who, unfortunately, remained in Melitopol. I have not seen her for more than two years and I miss her so much.



Shcherbakova Hanna, 10 years old
«A walk around the city»

Valeriia Terentieva, 9-C grade,
Yampil Secondary School of I-III degrees No. 2
Yampil City Council, Sumy Oblast

Hello Vitalik!

This is Lera, we met at the “Mriya” camp in Berdiansk in 2020. Although we have not talked for a long time, I hope you have not forgotten me. How are you doing? I hope everything is more or less all right. I am fine. But, of course, now is an exceedingly difficult time for all of us. The place where I live is Yampil Hromada, located 25 kilometers from the enemy border. Fortunately, it was not occupied, but explosions can be heard almost every day. Few people left our village, but a lot of internally displaced persons came, almost all of them are from the border settlements, which are under shelling every day. There are a lot of children among IDPs: both young and teenagers. Coming to us, people started a new life, with new dreams and hopes for the future.

I remember that back in the camp you talked about your dream of becoming a construction worker, I hope that the war did not ruin your plans, especially since after the victory there will be a very high demand for this profession, as we will need to rebuild and restore the country. My uncle is a construction worker, and he often shares his impressions of the construction of entire neighborhoods, with infrastructure, kindergartens and beautiful green lawns. They can spend decades building one neighborhood, because they are exceptionally large. It is interesting to observe how a new life seems to appear in the wasteland, with its own stories and future. Have you already decided at which educational institution you will study? My dream is to become a Ukrainian history teacher. I really want to bring knowledge to the future generation about our complex and indomitable history. I plan to enter the Sumy Pedagogical University. I believe that Berdiansk will soon be de-occupied, and we will meet again in the camp, in our Ukrainian land.

Do not lose faith in yourself and in our future. We have the right to a happy life, and we are capable of making it better. I want you to remember that you are not alone, and you are not forgotten. The occupied territories are, were and will be Ukrainian. We must stay strong and stick together to overcome all the obstacles and rebuild our free country. We will win!

Sincerely, your friend Lera



Kotelevska Kseniia, 11 years old

Group: "Creative Arts"

Teacher: Halyna Mykhailivna Dmytryshchuk

Marharyta Trostnichkova, 9 grade,
Druzheliubivka branch of the Hub Educational Institution
“Matviivka educational complex of general education “Vsesvit”
Matviivka Village Council, Vilniansk Raion
Zaporizhzhia Oblast

My dear peer!

I decided to write to you with words of support in such a challenging time for all of us. My name is Marharyta, I study at a beautiful rural school in Ukraine. My village is located thirty to forty kilometers from the front line. Fierce battles are taking place in the Orikhiv direction, but just like all my classmates, I believe in the strength of our defenders. I am convinced that the phrase «Everything will be Ukraine» will soon become the most anticipated reality. I have the opportunity to study, but unfortunately online. I hope that on the first of September I will meet my dear teachers at my school, me and my classmates will sit down at our desks and the lesson I am looking forward to so much will begin.

I am writing you this letter and I want to hope that you are also studying at a Ukrainian school, that you have relatives, parents, and friends by your side. I follow the news very closely, because I want to know how you live in the occupied territories. I really want you to be taught not by those «under-teachers», but by our teachers who really «sow reasonable, good, eternal» in our souls. No matter how difficult it is, you should believe that you are not forgotten, our defenders are doing everything possible to liberate our territories where you currently live.

I can imagine how difficult it is when you hear that intrusive language nearby, those false statements about their invincibility, but although there are fewer of us, we are more united, we are defending our territory, our home.

Together with my teachers and peers, we are doing everything possible to bring the happiest moment of our victory closer: we knit camouflage nets, cook goodies, and draw illustrations to support our soldiers. Do you have such an opportunity? We all really want the occupied territories to be liberated as soon as possible, so that you, my dear peer, could come to visit your relatives, because I am sure that you also have relatives in Zaporizhzhia. Oh, how I want to go to the sea, relax and gain health, strength, and energy to sit down at the desk in peaceful Ukraine. I want you all to be safe, although we also do not always feel safe, but we are in our native land, among our people, and we do not hear their propaganda close by.

I am firmly convinced that everything has changed in your lives, but remember - you are not alone, we are there, we will always support you. Do not lose hope, do not believe the false words of the “katsaps,” remember what our teachers have always taught us during the lessons of Ukrainian literature and history, about the testament of Yaroslav the Wise, Volodymyr Monomakh since the times of RUS-UKRAINE: «Only in unity is our strength.»

I believe that everything will end soon, but, unfortunately, today there is still a threat, so the most important thing for all of us is safety, the shoulders of family and friends. Everything comes to an end someday, and this damn war will also go into eternity. We will return to a happy, peaceful life, but, unfortunately, no one will return these three years of childhood to us. I am convinced that they will temper us, we will become even more faithful daughters and sons of our invincible Ukraine.

After darkness, the sun will always shine, a bright rainbow will appear. Believe that it will happen. And now we must continue to live with faith in victory. As our Ukrainian poetess Nataliia Horodchuk wrote:

*“The day will come, all things will change for good,
And peace will reign the way it always should.
The sky will once again be calm and clear,
And all the tyrants will just disappear.*

*The day will come, all things will change and last,
The cornflowers will smile in fields so vast.
The truth will rise, victorious and strong,
And doves will glide in skies where they belong.*

*The day will come, all things will change around,
The tears of moms and children won't be found.
Hope'll bring the wings to lift the people's might,
And foes will vanish like the morning light.*

And do not forget, if you need support, be sure to contact me, I am always ready to help.

With respect and understanding, your Marharyta.
July 30, 2024



Anhelyna Filipenko, 10 years old
Group: "Creative Arts"
Teacher: Halyna Mykhailivna Dmytryshchuk

I believe that you are stronger than me!

Dariia Ushkanova, 10-A grade,
Velykodolynske Lyceum No. 2
Velykodolynske Village Council
Odesa Raion, Odesa Oblast

Hello, my dear friend! My name is Dasha, I would like to get to know you. I am 15 years old, and I am from Odesa. I do not know who will receive this letter. Who are you? A boy or a girl? How old are you? Where are you from? What are your favorite movies or books? What were your dreams before the war? But I know for sure that now everyone has the same dream!

I can tell you about my city. The hallmark of Odesa is the Black Sea and the Opera House. I have never been to this theater before, but I am sure it is incredibly beautiful there. I like to walk by the sea in the evening. It is the time when

you can enjoy not only the sea, but also the views of Odesa. Everything seems to come to life.

I really want to believe that your future will be bright, filled with joy and love. You know, before the terrible date of February 24, 2022, I did not quite understand a lot of things. Now I evaluate everything through the prism of hostilities and terrible events! Although the war has been going on for more than 10 years, it was the events of the full-scale war that turned my life upside down. I am scared to imagine how you feel about all this. Could you tell me about your city or village? It would be interesting to learn about it! I am sure that it is incredibly beautiful and special. I understand that it is not easy for you, that you worry, but I believe that you are stronger than me! I believe that when the war is over, you will be able to return to your normal life.

I will tell you a little about my interests and hobbies. I play the drums. Yes, it is very unusual when a girl plays such a musical instrument. Sometimes people react to this with curiosity, others are surprised. And there are also stereotypes that a girl cannot master such a musical instrument. But yes, I play the drums. Maybe you also have a hobby? Favorite books, games, interests, or movies. It is really interesting to find out!

I hope that there will be such an opportunity, and you will tell me about your dreams, and probably it will be our encounter in Odesa. When the war is over, your town will be rebuilt. It will be the most beautiful of all! I will definitely come to visit you.

And while we are waiting for victory, at the same time we are making plans for the future. For a brighter future. In two years, I will be a graduate of the 11th grade. My little sister is going to the fifth grade. She does not understand many things right now, but in time I will tell her everything: how it really was. How we supported each other and waited for that day, for those words: «We won! The war is over!” And these words will be remembered not only by Ukrainians, but also by all people who support good. We will be able to survive all this, we will not give up and we will not break down. There was a time when we could not even imagine that for only one word – “peace” – would have so much meaning, emotions and joy for us.

I understand that it will be very difficult to get over and forget everything that you had to see and feel, but I really want you to only dream and rejoice, so that everything that is happening now will pass, and we will all live as before. You know, I am writing all this now and crying. I am crying because we cannot live the way we want. But everything will be fine. Mmm, you know, now I feel like I am writing using my mother’s expressions. And in the past, her teachings annoyed me. Probably, there is a time for everything. Finally, we have matured, suddenly and not as our

parents would like (((I am really looking forward for your response. And I am also waiting for you to visit Odesa. As people say here: “Oh, come on now, everything’s gonna be fine!”

I know that things are difficult for you now, and I hope that you are all right. I am sure we will be friends! The main thing is to remember, my dear friend, that everything will definitely end, and we will all celebrate the victory! You and your family will go to Crimea to the sea, or to Lviv to drink delicious coffee. And I will definitely be waiting for you in my city. You and I will finally go to the opera house for a ballet or a performance.

Take care of yourself!

Dariia Ushkanova

Artem Khomenko, 10-A grade,
Velyki Kopani Lyceum
Velyki Kopani Village Council
Kherson Raion. Kherson Oblast

Hello friend! Your classmate and best friend, Artem Khomenko, is writing you this letter.

Maksym, how are you doing? How is your life? Although I understand that it is difficult... However, keep your chin up, do not be upset, have patience, and everything will work out for us. Our heroes from the Armed Forces of Ukraine work every day on the Left Bank, destroying the occupiers. Our guys are as strong as steel and indescribably brave. They are similar to the Cossacks who defended our homeland from attackers in the distant past. I remember how you were fascinated by history lessons and loved Ukrainian literature, where teachers told us about the past of our people. And it was quite difficult. Today, the soldiers of the Ukrainian army are writing a new history of Ukraine with blood and sweat, where there will no longer be a place for bloody Russia. Our country is going through quite challenging times of war, but the moment will come when the dirty boots of the occupiers will leave our territories and they will no longer look in our direction, even in their thoughts. And we, young and full of energy, conscious citizens of Ukraine, will restore the state devastated by the enemy. We will rebuild our cities and villages, our glorious Antonivka bridge, which has become a symbol of the unity of the Left Bank and the Right Bank of Kherson region. Our Tavriisk will become the pearl of Europe. Tourists will come to us to taste the sweetest watermelons at the market in Velyki Kopany, to ride through the dunes of Oleshky Sands, to swim in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Maksym, believe me, this time will come! Ukraine has not abandoned its citizens, has not turned away, but is fighting for the liberation of the entire Kherson region.

I also miss my home, my classmates, and my friends. I am incredibly happy to see them at our distance lessons. I am grateful to our teachers for giving us the opportunity to continue studying according to the Ukrainian curriculum.

If you feel sad, you should definitely write to me. I will always support you. Remember: we are of the Cossack family, and the Cossacks do not give up! We will withstand! See you in Velyki Kopani, where the most beautiful blue and yellow flag in the world flies. Give my regards to your family!

July 19, 2024,
Your friend Artem

