



## From the Very Heart of Mariupol

*This article by Tymur Kosymbekov won first prize in the recent writing contest in Ukraine, “My War Story,” of which MAI was a co-sponsor. “The judges of the competition received 38 entries,” said author Serhii Solohub of the contest organizing team. “Each of the works proclaimed once again that God continues to care for people even in the midst of pain and suffering.”*



**I was placed against the wall** with a machine gun pointed at me. I didn’t know if I was going to be alive the next minute. Later, sitting in the basement, I stared at the gunshot marks on the wall: there remained human blood and chunks of flesh.

On February 24, I was awakened by loud explosions a few kilometers away from my house. The clock showed about 4 in the morning. Mariupol. One would think that here, in Donetsk province, over the last 8 years we should have already gotten used to the war. In fact, we didn’t yet know that that morning would divide our lives into “before” and “after.”

The doors of our church had been open for anyone since the first day of shelling. The Sunday school classrooms had been turned into a dormitory. They became living quarters for those whose houses were damaged by heavy shelling. Our utility facilities which were supply warehouses became a bomb shelter — floors were covered with bags of clothes. When a new round of shelling would start, everyone went down there to hide. The whole neighborhood where we lived, including my house, was one of the first to come under fire. At that moment, my sisters with their husbands and children were already in the church, and I sent my mother there, as well. But my father and I stayed home to take care of the farm because abandoning the livestock wasn’t an option.

Because I had been a youth leader in my church for many years, every evening I would go there to meet the youth, encourage them, and simply pray together. Every morning I returned home to take care of the animals. The shelling intensified daily, so the number of people in the church increased with every passing hour. Under the flying bullets, the brothers drove around and gathered church members, as well as others who simply needed shelter. The Russians were encircling the city. Unfortunately, our food supplies began to run out, there was very little food, and something had to be done.

We realized that Mariupol would soon be completely occupied. After much doubt and long discussions, we decided to try to relocate women and children to the area of the city of Chernivtsi<sup>1</sup>. On our cars, we placed big signs that read “Children”, and we covered the windows with pieces of white sheets. And then we wept and prayed fervently, sending them off goodbyes. Only God knew whether they would manage to pass through the military roadblocks, as we sent them away under constant fire.

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1 A city in western Ukraine.

On March 2, the first motorcade left.

The situation worsened by the day, with shelling of the city never stopping for more than half an hour. Then there was no electricity, running water, or gas. Eventually, the moment came when leaving the basement meant almost certain death. But we continued to help people as much as it was possible — drawing water from the well in the yard next door and delivering it to house basements where people hid, as well as to the maternity hospital, and doing everything else that we could to help people survive.

Every morning I would go back to our farm to feed the animals, milk the cows, and then deliver the milk to mothers with young children. Finally, when all the roads were ruined, I switched to a motorcycle. On my way back home I would see dead bodies being eaten by dogs. People were afraid to leave their shelters to bury the bodies.

The flow of people coming to the church was only increasing, with more and more of them added daily. There were injured and sick, and we provided medical care as much as it was possible. One of the men had cancer and needed urgent surgery, so I gathered enough courage to ask for it at the military headquarters. This is how I ended up in captivity of one of the DPR<sup>2</sup> units. They put me against the execution wall, saying that I was a scout and that if they let me go, I would report their whereabouts, so I wasn't going back alive....

### **Expecting to die**

They locked me in a basement under the supervision of a soldier. Close-range combat was going on nearby, so the soldier was told not to waste time on me and just shoot me. In those moments, I reflected on my life and how I had lived it — happy that I had devoted it to God. I prayed for my father to get saved. After some time, they put another man in the same basement where I was. He cried, yelled, and writhed in hysterics. But in my heart, there was peace.

Later, they took us to a nearby village, put us on our knees, and pressed their machine guns against our backs. I was ready to die, but God had other plans. Someone from the DPR Prosecutor's Office arrived and they checked my phone and documents. Finding pictures on my phone from my mission trip to Uganda, they let me go. It was around 4 p.m., and at 5 p.m. the curfew would begin. I ran as fast as I could to get home, not knowing that the whole church was praying for me.

The next motorcade of women and children left the city, but more and more people were coming to the church. Going outside was becoming increasingly dangerous. In the church building was a long length of black fabric which had previously been used to decorate the stage for youth evangelism meetings. Women from our church used that fabric to sew a clerical robe for our pastor, so there was at least a slight chance that he wouldn't be shot when militants saw him on the street.

One day, when I arrived at the church, I saw Russian soldiers there. Some civilians remained in the basements, and others were in the building, but no one could go out, even to go to the bathroom. There was an armed fight going on in the churchyard. Many were wounded and killed, and they were left to lie there. Among us was a young woman who studied at a medical college. Russian soldiers ordered her to go and bandage the wounded — all the while under fire. The pastor placed his hand on her shoulder and said, "I am praying for you, go ahead and fear nothing!"

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2 Donetsk People's Republic, the occupation puppet regime established by the Russian Federation in the occupied territory of the Donetsk oblast of Ukraine. It is a terrorist quasi-state entity recognized only by the Russian Federation, Syria, and North Korea.

During the time that we spent in Mariupol from February 24 to March 16, I witnessed much. Much terror, pain, and death... But God's miracles I saw even more. Every day I prayed that God would prepare my heart to meet Him, but with each new day, I also wanted to continue being useful.

We have truly experienced many miracles being in the very epicenter of the war. When the cell connectivity disappeared in the whole city, it was there, in one of the corners of our church where for some reason one could get a signal and even connect to the Internet. So there was the possibility of writing to our families.

When there was no running water in the whole city, we used a well that had been drilled in our churchyard just a few weeks before the war. The water was salty, but there was no other water at all. Every day hundreds of people came for this water, and we never missed an opportunity to testify to them about God.

None of those who were in the church was killed! Even when the missiles hit the sanctuary where people constantly tried to get the cell signal. Even when an artillery round hit the bathroom where one of the boys had gone, but stepped out just in time to go back to the basement where he had left something.

One time I felt led to go visit the pastor of one of the Pentecostal churches with whom we have been friends for many years. By that time, many had already managed to leave the city. However, some people stayed because they couldn't tell what was more dangerous: to flee the city under fire or to stay home. When I arrived, my friends told me that they hadn't dared to leave, and so they were praying that God would send them an angel as a sign... this was when I knocked on their door. They decided to go, and God kept them safe.

#### **"We too decided to leave"**

After our church was directly hit once again, we too decided to leave. There was no cell connection, so I didn't know how to inform my father (who was staying on the farm all the time). But God Himself directed him to us. My father simply left the house and walked to the church. Normally, walking that distance would take around 40 minutes. My father still wonders how he got there alive, being under constant fire, and how God protected him.

We knew that on the road that leads from the church property, there were many unexploded shells, and we knew about it. Right next to us there was a mine in the middle of the road. Before departing, we reminded ourselves that we needed to go around it, but due to the excitement and nervousness, all of us forgot about it as soon as we started the engines. A motorcade of 15 cars drove directly over that mine and, by God's mercy, it never exploded!

One terrible image still remains before my eyes: a young man with despair in his eyes, under fire, running from one bomb shelter to another in search of baby food and never finding it. Remembering everything we went through, I see God's mercy that covered me as a shield. I don't want to stop looking for God's will for my life. Perhaps He brought me out of that horrendous darkness so that one day I might return with renewed strength to carry His Light to Mariupol.

I am Tymur. A little man with a Great God. And this is my war story.

*Tymur Kosymbekov was born and raised in Mariupol in a family of farmers. He served in youth ministry for 15 years and is now preparing for missionary work in Uganda. Informed that his article won first place, he wrote, "Glory to God! The main goal of my story is to proclaim to young people, 'Live so that you are not afraid to die and that the expectation of meeting Christ fills your heart with joy and light.'" (Article translated from Ukrainian to English by Kos Ivantsov)*