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VICTIMS OF TORTURE IN EAST UKRAINE

"I begged him not to mutilate me"

By Sabine Adler

Oleksandr Hryshchenko, veterinarian from Lugansk, was tortured by separatists and now lives as a refugee in Kiev. (Sabine Adler)

Veterinarian Oleksandr Hryshchenko's hobby is photography. In June 2014, he was arrested in Lugansk, part of the region occupied by separatists. Because there were pictures of pro-Ukrainian demonstrations on his camera, he was considered a spy. That was the beginning of a savage martyrdom.

A romantic couple prance to the metro entrance. Passers-by smile. Oleksandr Hryshchenko doesn't even glance their way. The 55-year old man seems serious and reserved. Dressed and coiffed fastidiously, his style is quite formal. That is the corset that supports him, one that comes undone after a few minutes of conversation. His memory transports him from a summer day in Kiev back to one June day in 2014. Lugansk was already occupied by the separatists and the fighting meant nobody went to work anymore. But he was the city veterinary officer, and he was worried about the office aquarium; he wanted to at least feed the fish. Not a soul was around except for him. He realized too late that he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Armed men arrested him in front of his office building and threw him into jail.

"It was damp in the cellar. There were perhaps ten people in the room. One was on crutches, one had deep lacerations on his face, near the right ear. One was unconscious and had marks of strangulation on his neck."

"Virtually anyone can become a victim," says our Eastern Europe correspondent Sabine Adler to amplify her report on Deutschlandradio Kultur. People are arbitrarily arrested at checkpoints, or picked up at home or at work. The reasons are more than arbitrary. It's enough to have a color photograph instead of a black-and-white one in your passport.

The brutal violence comes directly from the current ruling powers in East Ukraine. Adler states that even the prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic has participated in torture, saying he smashed somebody's index finger with a hammer.

According to Adler, there is also documentation of Russian citizens participating in barbarous practices. A coalition of 17 human rights organizations has collected witness statements and other data. Adler criticizes the fact that the Ukrainian authorities have left the evidence gathering to the human rights organizations, saying "they say it's not their job." And help for torture victims after the fact is also apparently the domain of private organizations – the Ukrainian government is, she says, simply unable to cope.

Illegal Prison at Lugansk University

The building that Oleksandr Hryshchenko knew as the mechanical engineering institute of Lugansk university had been turned into an illegal prison. The commander of the unit was Alexander Alexandrovich Bednov, better known as “Batman.” His aides rolled up their sleeves and went to work.

“One called himself ‘Maniac.’ He kicked me in the chest with full force. I fell down. Another one, called ‘Janek,’ shocked me with electric current.”

Oleksandr Hryshchenko took photographs at a pro-Ukrainian demonstration. The separatists tortured him especially because of those photos. (Oleksandr Hryshchenko)

The municipal veterinarian’s hobby was photography. On his way to the office one last time, he wanted to capture what was happening on the streets of Lugansk, where there was complete turmoil. Now, his camera was in the hands of the separatists, who saw the photos of the pro-Ukrainian demonstration and decided he was a spy.

“I had to strip naked. One of them cut pieces of twine and looped it around my wrists. I was told to lie face down on a table. The one called Maniac beat me with a plastic pipe on the heels, hips, and back. Thankfully, the table I was lying on suddenly collapsed. Maniac showed me surgical instruments. He explained what each one was and told me he was going to use the bone saw to cut my fingers off bit by bit. He placed the saw between my ring finger and my pinkie. This is the scar. It was horrible. Painful. I begged him not to mutilate me.”

They broke his ribs with kicks. Bleeding, in handcuffs, and still naked, he was thrown back into a cell shared by men and women. For three days he was kept naked and subjected to beatings by the tormentor called Maniac. Another one jumped up and down on his upper body or hit him with a rubber hammer. Later x-rays show that his breastbone and ribs were broken. As the former civil servant describes in detail what was done to him, his hands flutter and tears often spring to his eyes.

Victims of torture display the marks of their abuse (Dmitry Kluger)

Torture scars on a victim’s wrist (Dmitry Kluger)

Human rights organizations have identified at least 79 torture prisons like the one at Lugansk university. All of them are in the so-called people’s republics of Lugansk and Donetsk. In 28 different cities and towns.

Prison, Torture, and Forced Labor

During his four months in the torture cellar, Hryshchenko encountered hundreds of other prisoners and asked them why they had been arrested. One said because his passport had a color photo, another because his passport picture was black-and-white; one because he bought a beer – the separatists claim to be fighting alcoholism – another because he got home five minutes after curfew. Most of them were not only arrested and tortured, but also pressed into forced labor.

“Many of them were arrested on specious pretexts, so they could fill sandbags, put up barricades, load or unload trucks, or repair military equipment. They needed free labor.”

Saved by a Smuggled Mobile Phone

One day a prisoner managed to smuggle a mobile phone into the cell and the outside world was told about what was happening. A rumor made the rounds that the OSCE wanted to inspect the university and its torture cellars. With lightening speed, the prisoners were carted off to an industrial wasteland, where they were found on November 13th by the Lugansk People's Republic's so-called police. But they still weren't released. They were pressed to testify because "prime minister" Igor Plotnitsky planned to bring "Batman" to trial. As yet, that hasn't happened, but the prisoners were still detained, from then on in Lugansk's internal revenue office. Until December 29th.

"I really would have liked to run. But I held back because I was afraid they'd hunt me down. There was snow on the ground and I was still wearing my summer clothes; I had no money, no telephone, no house keys, no passport. I looked like a homeless man. My hair hadn't been cut in months, I was unwashed, my clothing dirty. I asked passers-by to let me use their mobile phones, and finally the fifth one let me. I stayed with acquaintances; I couldn't go back to my apartment. Apart from anything else, I would have had to break down the door and I would no doubt then have been arrested again."

A cellar in Lisichansk where civilians and members of the Ukrainian army were allegedly held prisoner and tortured. (Coalition of organizations "Justice for Peace in Donbas")

Documentation of Mass Human Rights Violations

Seventeen Ukrainian human rights organizations are gathering witness statements, such as Oleksandr Hryshchenko's, and plan to turn them over to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. The human rights violations are of a massive scale, says Oleksandra Matviychuk of the Center for Civil Liberties.

"We've questioned 165 people who have gone through a similar hell. We can prove that last summer, 4000 people were held hostage. The real figure is probably much higher, because the hostage-taking continues. Relatives don't come to our aid organization, because they assume we won't be able to help. And they don't turn to the Ukrainian security forces, because they don't trust them and they're afraid."

Oleksandr Hryshchenko was given to understand in Lugansk that he should not testify. He fled to Kiev, where he lives with 30 other people in an apartment. The former municipal vet is looking for work, but what he needs above all is psychological counseling.

Surviving Hell – A documentation of human rights violations and illegal prisons in East Ukraine [http://www.hfhr.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/SURVIVING-HELL_eng_web.pdf], is made available online by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.