

# ‘They were sadists’: safe in Sydney but haunted by memories of Ukraine

By [Matthew Knott](#), Sydney Morning Herald/The Age, July 31, 2022

The note might look like a mere scrap of paper, but to Anna-Mariia Mykytiuk it is a sacred text. The Ukrainian veterinarian had to leave so much behind when she fled her home town of Bucha for Australia in May. Her home. Her husband and parents. The animals she cared for at her clinic. Almost all her belongings.

But for as long as she lives, she plans to hold on to the letter her best friend, Tatiana, sent her just days before a Russian soldier shot her dead.



*Anna-Mariia Mykytiuk holds a letter from her friend, Tatiana, a maths teacher shot dead by a Russian sniper. CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY*

“This is the most important thing for me now,” Mykytiuk says, clutching Tatiana’s letter. She is sitting in the living room of a modest flat in Gordon, on Sydney’s north shore, where she lives with her two children: a son, aged 10, and daughter, 13. All three share a single bedroom.

In the letter, Tatiana assured her friend that she was alive and well, signing off with a smiley face. A week after pushing the letter under Mykytiuk’s door, Tatiana was walking down the street with her teenage daughter on one side and husband on the other.

According to her daughter and husband, a Russian sniper shot Tatiana directly in the temple, killing her almost instantly. No one knows why the mathematics teacher was targeted for murder in a flagrant breach of the Geneva Conventions.

“I want to ask that soldier, ‘Why did you have to kill her?’ She was a good person,” Mykytiuk says, breaking down in tears. She wants the soldier who shot her friend to be brought to justice and punished.



*Tatiana, Anna-Mariia Mykytiuk's late best friend.*

Prosecutors from International Criminal Court are examining Tatiana's murder as part of their investigation into Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

Mykytiuk says Tatiana's death is emblematic of the reign of terror the Russians inflicted on innocent civilians during their month-long occupation of Bucha, a previously tranquil city of almost 40,000 people on the outskirts of the capital, Kyiv.

"They thought they could act like wild animals and do anything they wanted with us," she says. "It was beastly, inhuman behaviour. They felt no pity for children, for adults. We lived for 33 days in hell."

In a report on the occupation of Bucha released in April, Human Rights Watch detailed evidence of summary executions, other unlawful killings, enforced disappearances and torture, all of which would constitute war crimes and potential crimes against humanity.

Mykytiuk, 37, experienced the Russian soldiers' cruelty while tending to animals at her shelter. When a group of soldiers came to inspect the property and her pet dog ran towards them, they promptly shot the animal. When Mykytiuk protested, the soldier hit her with the butt of his rifle and kicked her in the stomach after she fell to the ground.



*Anna-Mariia Mykytiuk cares for a dog in the basement of her veterinarian hospital during an artillery attack in the Russian occupation of Bucha*

“I understood at that point: these people were sadists,” she says, the anger in her voice rising. “They hated us as a nation, as a people.”

Although she finds it painful to recount her experiences, Mykytiuk wants to make sure Australians don’t forget about the plight of Ukraine as the war grinds into its sixth month with no end in sight.

“It’s very important to me that what happened in Bucha is brought to light and the people responsible are punished,” she says.

“After the second world war, people gathered and said ‘never again’. Now history is repeating itself.”



*Having arrived in Sydney recently, Anna-Mariia Mykytiuk says her heart is in Ukraine, where her husband and parents remain. CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY*

Mykytiuk says rape was an ever-present threat to the women in Bucha after the Russians invaded. She says if occupying soldiers saw a woman they wanted to assault while conducting their inspections, they would tie a white ribbon to the front gate. They would drink alcohol at night and return to the houses with white ribbons to rape the women.

She says a Chechen soldier aged in his 30s or 40s tried to sexually assault her during an inspection at her animal shelter (the only one in the area dedicated to wild animals). Luckily, his fellow soldiers discovered weapons in a nearby building and told him to stop terrorising her.

“He was so big, I was thinking, ‘if he rapes me, I won’t survive’,” she says. “They came to kill and to rape us, and they knew there would be no punishment. They came like they were hunting, like they were on an adventure.

“There were no consequences, they thought they could do anything they wanted.”



*Now living in Sydney, Anna-Mariia Mykytiuk holds the fragment of a cluster bomb that flew past her head. CREDIT: KATE GERAGHTY*

As well as the letter from her late friend, Mykytiuk brought a piece of shrapnel with her on the journey to Australia to remind her of home. The memento is a fragment of a cluster bomb that exploded just 100 metres away from her on the third day of the occupation. It's a reminder of how easily she could not be alive today.

Nadia Mencinsky, a spokeswoman for the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations, says many of the estimated 3800 displaced Ukrainians in Australia are highly traumatised by their experiences. Some lived in their basements for weeks, being allowed to go to the street only once a day to cook in the freezing cold.

While grateful to the Australian government for the humanitarian visa that allowed her and her children to escape Ukraine, Mykytiuk feels disoriented by life on the other side of the world. "At home, I was like a flower in a vase," she said. "I was nurtured, I had parents who loved me and looked after me. I knew all my neighbours. I knew who I was. Now I feel like a plant that has been ripped out at the roots and turned upside down. I don't really know what I'm doing or who I am anymore."

On the couch beside her is a pile of pieces of yellow material cut into petal shapes. To occupy his mind, her son Kyrylo is making a bunch of fabric sunflowers (the sunflower is the national flower of Ukraine and has become a symbol of resistance). "His thoughts always turn to Ukraine," Mykytiuk says.

She knows that so much of the Bucha she knew and loved has been destroyed, smashed into rubble. Still, she plans to return to Ukraine when possible to reunite with her parents and husband, Evgenii, who is fighting in the Ukrainian army.

Until then, she wants to use her voice to ensure governments around the world, including Australia's, demand a comprehensive investigation into war crimes against Ukrainian civilians.

"If the world does not hold Russia and its soldiers to account for what they've done, I despair for civilisation," she says.