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After 562 days of brutal torture, a soldier wasn't prepared for what was waiting at Sydney Airport

By Kate Geraghty and Michael Ruffles

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Oleksandr Sinytskyi, who was detained by Russian forces for 562 days, reveals a scar caused by his captors. The tattoo translates to "live for love". KATE GERAGHTY

T he children did not know that their father was coming. Their grandparents made them tidy their rooms, gave the house a good clean and made excuses.

Yaroslava, at 14, was a bit suspicious; there were weeks to go before Christmas. Her brother Nikita, 9, was oblivious.

The grandparents bundled them into the car for the long drive from Sydney's north-western suburbs to the airport on a Tuesday evening in early November, and they grudgingly complied.

When Oleksandr Sinytskyi walked through the arrival doors with his partner, Anna, he looked a little lost. But when his parents and children found him, their hearts swelled.

"It was the same feeling as it was back in the hospital when they were born," Sinytskyi says of seeing his children again. "It's a second birth."

Ukrainian soldier Oleksandr Sinytskyi reunites with daughter Yaroslava and son Nikita after being detained by Russian forces for more than 18 months. KATE GERAGHTY

This was no ordinary family reunion. Sinytskyi, 34, was a Ukrainian soldier who spent 562 days as a prisoner of war, enduring torture and privation at the hands of Russia.

He was released in February in a prisoner swap, his knee ruined from beatings and carrying other scars, weighing 45 kilograms. Sinytskyi's father, Alex senior, holds his pinky in the air and says: "He looked like this."

He kept the secret from his grandchildren "until the very last moment" to maximise the joy they would get. "I was worried someone was going to have a heart attack from the overflow of emotion," he says, glancing over his shoulder at wife Evgenia. "But everything went fine."

Sinytskyi's parents have been permanent residents for more than a decade and took in Yaroslava and Nikita shortly after Vladimir Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Sinytskyi, who relies on his father to translate, is in Sydney on a visitor visa. His father is adamant: "We can't imagine sending him back."

R ussia's ground and air attack began at dawn on February 24, 2022. Sinytskyi had been working in Kyiv in IT, but the day of the invasion he and a group of childhood friends

enlisted in the Territorial Defence Forces. After three weeks of training, Sinytskyi was assigned to help liberate Bucha. The TDF was absorbed into the Ukrainian defence force and he was deployed on multiple missions to Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city and close to the Russian border, where fighting was intense.

During a troop rotation three months into the battle for Kharkiv, Sinytskyi and four others from his unit were walking by themselves when they heard screams.

"They tried to fight them back for an hour and a half, couldn't do anything," Alex translates. "It was all in the dark and the Russians just tied them and put them in a truck."

After two hours of being held alongside civilians, they were taken to Russian-controlled territory, where they spent three months in a camp. From there, he was transported across the border for 11 days in a "real jail" then on to a facility in Galich, north-east of Moscow, where he spent more than a year.

"The first five days when they got there it was hell on earth, because the Russian bureau FSB [the Federal Security Service] have been beating them, torturing them, putting the wet napkin on the face simulating drowning," Alex says. "This is all against all conventions. It's a bloody nightmare."

"My heart is in Ukraine because it is my motherland, but my head is here," Sinytskyi says. KATE GERAGHTY

Sinytskyi said: "When we got to real prison, every day in the morning and the evening we were beaten, with the clubs, electroshocked, and they pushed dogs on us."

His cell was designed for four but held nine. They were forced to sleep on schedule and stay on their feet the rest of the time. In winter, anyone who asked for a sweater was told to perform

1500 squats. They were repeatedly subjected to the Russian anthem and Soviet-era propaganda songs.

"That I know of, a couple were beaten to death, and some were taken somewhere but no one knows where," he says.

Alex says his son was psychologically broken down. "He can't sleep. Any noise from above he's expecting something to fall," he says.

"He was tortured there in jail. He used to have a ponytail like mine, they cut it with a knife [taking] a piece of skin."

The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has detailed widespread and systematic torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war at the hands of Russian captors, including "severe beatings, electric shocks, sexual violence, suffocation, prolonged stress positions, forced excessive exercise, sleep deprivation, mock executions, threats of violence, and humiliation". It located 76 official facilities for holding Ukrainian prisoners of war, 31 of which were within the Russian Federation.

Russia's ambassador to Australia, Alexey Pavlovsky, told the ABC on November 25 he did not accept that the use of torture in Ukraine was "a yes or no question".

The guards justified their behaviour to Sinytskyi and his fellow prisoners by saying the Russians were the parent which had to teach the Ukrainians how to love the motherland. There were Ukrainian civilians locked up with the soldiers everywhere he was detained.

Sinytskyi says he was sustained in prison by a strong sense the situation would end soon, having books to read, "and the fact that mum and dad were waiting".

In Australia, Alex and Evgenia faced a black hole of information that stretched nearly two years. The only communication from their son was a few sentences scrawled on a scrap of paper and delivered to an aunt; to get past censors the message contained nothing beyond banal pleasantries.

"Relief is the wrong word, but at least we knew he was alive," Alex says.
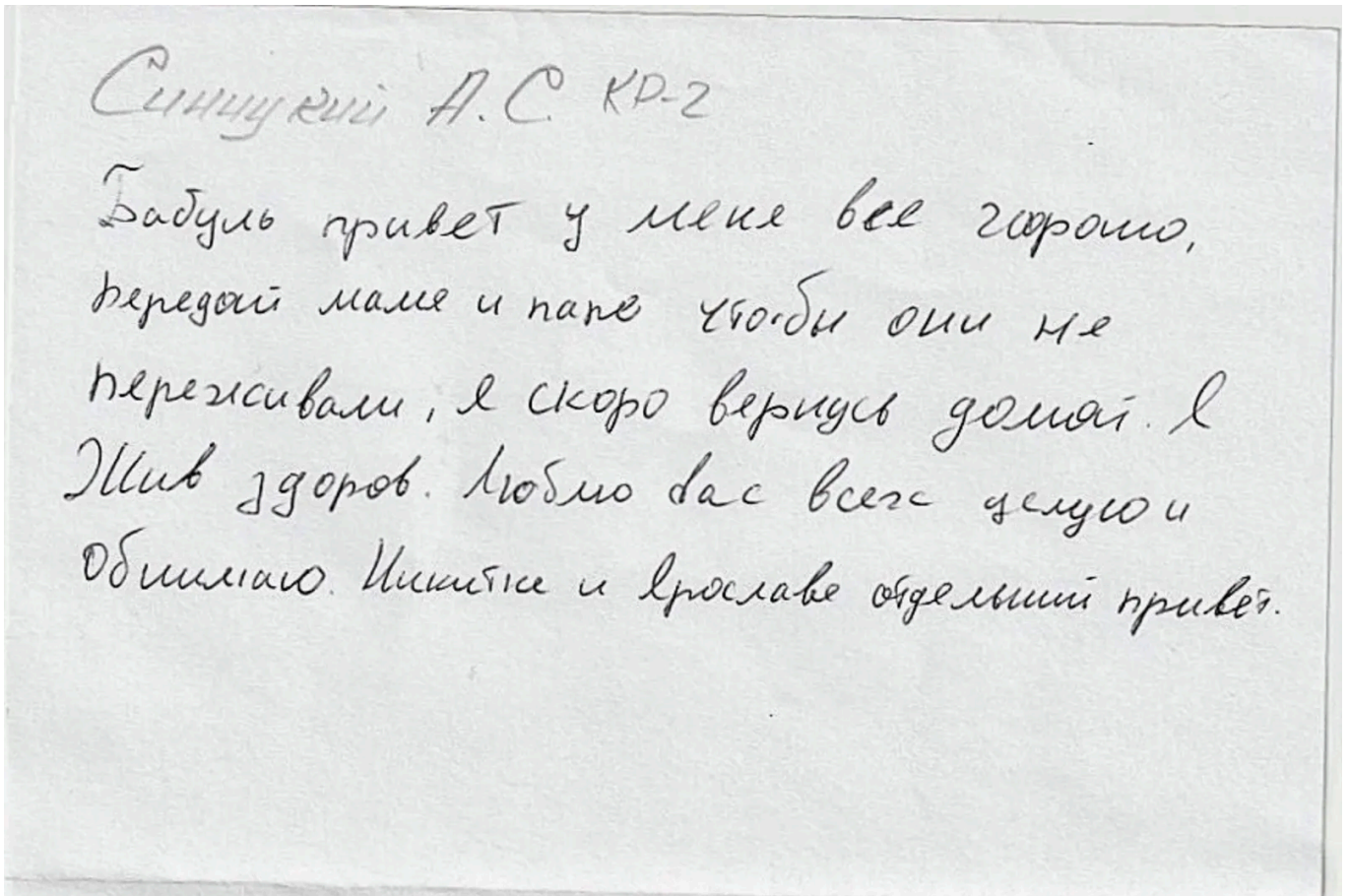
A copy of the letter Sinytskyi wrote while in prison. "Hi grandma, everything's all right. Please tell mum and dad not to worry, I will be back soon. I'm OK, health is fine. Love you all. Big hugs and kisses to Yaroslava and Nikita."

The standard response whenever Alex and Evgenia asked Ukrainian authorities for an update was that their son was "on a list".

In February, the silence broke. "Someone called us and said 'turn on the TV'." They watched the prisoner swap on the news.

Sinytskyi also had no clue he was about to be freed. The guards gave nothing away as the prisoners were loaded onto buses for a 12-hour drive to an airport. They were then blindfolded and squashed into a cargo plane. To this day, he does not know where in Russia they landed, and from there they were driven to a remote part of the border with Ukraine. Of more than 200 prisoners exchanged that day, he was No. 126.

Sinytskyi needed a knee replacement and months of rehabilitation after his release. Reunited with Anna, life in Kyiv continued to be fraught. They were renting an apartment 300 metres from the capital's main children's hospital, which was badly damaged in a deadly air strike in July.

The Economist calculates that between 60,000 and 100,000 Ukrainian troops have died since the February 2022 invasion, along with 106,000-140,000 Russian soldiers. Up to 400,000 are, like Sinytskyi, too injured to fight on. Civilian deaths are estimated in the tens of thousands.

Oleksandr and Anna Sinytskyi were living near the Okhmatdyt children's hospital in Kyiv when it was struck by Russian missiles in July. AP

Months passed before Sinytskyi was discharged from the armed forces, and he then needed permission to leave Ukraine. The delay left Alex dismayed. "He's a hero."

Being reunited in Sydney has left the family with feelings they all struggle to put into words.

"It's not just a joy that someone comes to you to celebrate Christmas, these are feelings of a very different category," Alex says. "Relief, satisfaction and more relief."

Yaroslava and Nikita have taken naturally to Sydney, getting used to spiders and lizards and the routine of school. Evgenia grumbles at Nikita leaving his socks in the middle of the floor; "Smell them," he taunts before running off to the laundry.

Oleksandr Sinytskyi, partner Anna, son Nikita and daughter Yaroslava in suburban Sydney. KATE GERAGHTY

Anna worries for them, as well as the future generations in Ukraine. "The children have no childhood, the children of war," she says. "It's very hard. It's not supposed to be like this."

Sinytskyi's haunted look lifts as he shares a family hug in the backyard.

"My heart is in Ukraine because it is my motherland, but my head is here because I can live here, and sleep, and my family is here," he says.

Alex watches on, and there is sadness in his own blue eyes seeing the changes war has inflicted on his boy.

"He is broken."

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