

IF IT FALLS, IT FALLS

KDYŽ TO SPADNE, TAK TO SPADNE

Zdeněk Chaloupka

Czech Radio

00:00

Zdeněk (voice over)

I am entering Prague's Main Railway Station from the adjacent, dark park. Next to the departure board, there is a huge, glaring advertisement for the *Christmas Miracle* musical, subtitled *Promises Should Be Kept at Christmas*. On the next floor, Czech Railways is trying to attract passengers to take the train to Christmas markets with a sign saying "Destination: Christmas Atmosphere." I have a train ticket on my smartphone as well, but it's a ticket to Ukraine. I check my email to read again what Ukrainian Railways wrote to me:

"Thank you for choosing our train! The same choice was recently made by Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron and Justin Trudeau. By the way, they all appreciated the new tea menu of Ukrainian Railways, so do not miss the opportunity to have some fruit tea, like the Ukrainian President, or thyme tea, like the President of the USA. Let us say just a few words about Ukrainian railroad workers working hard on timely arrivals despite the enemy's activities. We take high-level safety precautions, monitoring every train's route. Please, be aware that you may have to go through security control at train stations. Unfortunately, we have had to pay for our determination: over 400 Ukrainian railroad workers have been killed in this war, so we will appreciate if you consider a donation to support their families."

I walk through the corridor and get on my train, which soon starts going east.

01:49

If It Falls, It Falls

A documentary about how easily one gets used to war

Zdeněk (voice over)

I am travelling to Ukraine. I don't even remember how many times I've been there before. My name is Zdeněk Chaloupka and I started making radio documentaries on the war in Donbas in 2015. Hardly anyone was interested at that time. The world had begun to deal with the European migrant crisis and there was no time to think of some gunfight somewhere in the east.

I continued visiting the front-line villages for another four years and I could see how quickly one can get used to war. You simply accept it as something normal, an everyday thing which you don't need to think about too much. And the world soon averts its eyes from it because there are other, more important things to do.

After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the world's attention turned back to it. Ukraine was everywhere, which was right. However, the front-line soon got stuck and I started feeling that everything was getting back into the rut. The largest European war disappeared from the headlines and the world got used to it.

03:04

Karina

Yes, I think people eventually learn how to live with it. And people in Ukraine have already learned to manage their everyday lives in the war.

Zdeněk (voice over)

I am sitting in a compartment with Karina, a young woman returning to Ukraine for a few days to see her parents and friends. She had fled from the war to Prague.

Karina

Yeah, I decided to leave for the Czech Republic. Everyone was scared at first, including myself. And it was the best way for me to save my life, so I decided to leave. But I think that if I had stayed there, I would have adapted to those conditions as well, unfortunately... That's human nature.

If you live in a place where something may hit your head any time, you just get used to it and behave normally.

Zdeněk (voice over)

Karina used to live in Kremenchuk. Although this city is situated more than 200 kilometres away from the front-line, one of its supermarkets was hit by a Russian missile in June 2022. Twenty people were killed and sixty were injured. Isn't Karina scared to return to Ukraine?

Karina

Yes, I am scared... You know what happened in Kremenchuk. You're going shopping and if you get to the supermarket just a bit earlier or later... Your life is permanently under threat in Ukraine. And that's terrible.

05:07

Zdeněk (voice over)

I am in Lviv, in the west of Ukraine. As soon as I sit down on my bed in a hostel in the city centre, there is an air-raid alert. At first I hear the sirens behind the windows and then I hear the alarm in a smartphone app warning me about a potential threat.

All regions in the map are red, so the alarm has been raised in the whole country. There is a young Ukrainian called Yura with me in the room. I ask him whether we shouldn't go to the air-raid shelter. After all, it is recommended by the app, which refers to our over-confidence as a weakness.

Yura explains, that if the enemy's MIG capable of carrying long-range missiles takes off, an alert is raised country-wide. But Lviv is safe, he says.

I went to see one of the shelters in the cellar of the house across the street, but there was nobody in it – just a few beds and empty water bottles. So I went for a walk in the city centre

and I passed by a lot of people wrapped in their winter jackets because it had just started snowing heavily. In spite of that, until the end of the alert I was a bit worried that a piece of a missile might land on my head instead of a snowflake.

When I later learned from several disinformers on the internet that there was no war in the west of Ukraine, I took a taxi to an unfortunately famous place in Lviv. I would undoubtedly see what such a “no-war” looks like.

07:05

Oleksiy

I was asleep and a loud bang woke me up. As if someone upstairs above me had dropped something heavy. I woke up, the dog started barking but I was so sleepy that it didn't dawn on me what had happened and I went back to sleep.

Zdeněk (*voice over*)

Taxi driver Oleksiy tells me about the Russian missile that hit a residential block close to the centre of Lviv in July 2023. Only one and a half kilometres from his flat.

Oleksiy

I would go to the shelter for the first half a year. But now I don't because... how to put it... you just get used to the danger. We have a saying in Ukraine: “You only seek shelter once lightning strikes.” People in the streets don't care. They say: “If it falls, it falls...”

Zdeněk

But there is still danger...?

Oleksiy

Of course. Because you don't know where it's flying to and if it is a big missile, it can be shot down and its pieces can fall just anywhere.

Zdeněk

Is there a difference between the day and the night?

Oleksiy

They mostly shoot at night, when you are sleeping.

Zdeněk

And you don't want to get up...

Oleksiy

No, I don't want to get up and run... But we have underground garages in our house and some people still go to hide there, especially those with children. They've been doing that for two years.

08:47

Zdeněk (*voice over*)

We are approaching the place from which the explosion was heard that July night, waking up my taxi driver. We stop near a block of four-storey houses.

I can see children making a snowman next to wooden climbing frames while the windows of the house behind them are beginning to turn orange. However, the house on the right has no windows. Some of them are covered by boards while through some other ones you can see the other side. Some workmen are preparing beams for a new roof in front of the entrance.

There is a sign near them, with ten black and white portraits, saying: "In memory of those who died during the Russian shelling of Lviv." I spend some time looking at the faces of those for whom that July night was the last. The oldest, Svetlana, was 70, the youngest, Anastazia, 32.

09:45

Zdeněk (*voice over*)

I take a night train to Mykolaiv, a port in southern Ukraine. Only seventy kilometres east lies Kherson, which was occupied by the Russian army for several months. Mykolaiv was going to be occupied next, so it didn't escape massive shelling. The battlefield is still relatively close.

Shortly after I've had breakfast in a café in Mykolaiv, sirens start wailing in the city. However, nobody seems to be worried. Workmen in the main street are laying tarmac on the road and people on the pavements keep walking without any haste. There is a small air-raid shelter, made from concrete panels, near the bus stop. I enter it. There is a screen on the wall showing what is happening outside but there is nothing else in it. Nothing and nobody.

Even though the alert is still on, I walk outside and still with a persisting strange feeling of uncertainty I go to see the city centre. Crowds are flowing through the main pedestrian zone, a street sweeper vehicle is going along the pavement and a trumpeter is playing folk songs on the opposite side of the street. He introduces himself as Volodymyr and says his favourite songs are Ukrainian love songs.

Suddenly, Volodymyr turns serious. Although I haven't asked him about anything, he starts talking about the bad guy who "has caused us so much misery! Not just to us, but to the whole world!" Even a harmless conversation about music eventually turns to the war.

I go running in the afternoon. I prefer running in the countryside, but that is not the best idea in this place as there may be mines or unexploded ammunition in the forests outside town. So, I plan a route through the city. It won't be the most beautiful, but it will definitely be the safest. Well, it depends... In the first park I run through, I am chased by some stray dogs. There are a lot of animals that have been left without their masters, at the mercy of fate.

12:10

In the streets near the waterfront, the city suddenly changes. The sumptuous four-storey building near the shipyard has only black holes instead of windows. The formerly six-storey Ingul Hotel now has only four storeys; the rest is concrete debris.

There is a line of charred remains of Russian military vehicles in the main square: infantry combat vehicles, a self-propelled howitzer, lorries and jeeps. Some people take selfies with them but the majority are not very interested in this outdoor exhibition.

An elderly couple take a photo of a nearby grammar school, whose front is gone, and one can see the staircase, a blue and grey door and even notice boards from the street. They are going to send the pictures to their granddaughter, who used to study there. Now she is at university in Poland.

I encounter the subject of education in the war again soon.

13:20

I start a conversation with a seven-year-old girl called Polina in front of a destroyed house near the centre. She says that she only attends school online. Her mother, Olena, explains what it means for them.

Olena

Polina is in her second year. The war began in February, when she was six, so she had to register for school. So, she started learning online. But because the war isn't over, she has now been learning online for two years. That's not good because the children have no face-to-face contact with their classmates. They can't perceive the emotions of others as much as during personal contact.

Zdeněk (voice over)

The war starts to remind me slightly of the Covid-19 pandemic when children didn't go to school either and while some people were dying, others were publicly proclaiming that there was no pandemic at all. Some people helped as volunteers while others accepted the situation and waited for it to solve itself. But there is no vaccine against war. And the people here are reminded of the fighting every day – or every night.

Air raid alert

Zdeněk

Sirens began to sound behind the windows and at first I thought I would ignore them like everybody else. But they really made me sit up. It is midnight and I was going to bed because I was quite tired. But this has somehow pumped adrenaline into my body, so I'm not feeling sleepy and I don't want to lie in bed. So, I am now in the bathroom, which means that at least I stick to the rule of two walls. But it's not an exciting place to be in.

Air alert over

15:42

OK, it's half past twelve, so it lasted half an hour. That wasn't very long. I managed to read some news and I'm going to bed. Hopefully, I won't be waken up again at night.

Air raid alert

It's half past two in the morning and there's another alert. But honestly, I don't feel like hiding anywhere. It has roused me from my dream.

Air alert over

It's not even three o'clock, so that was a short alert again. But it is annoying. I'm going back to bed.

Air alert

OK, it's 3:21 a.m., so after less than half an hour there's another alert. Well, I don't know...

Air alert over

It's 8 a.m. There were four alerts during the night. I hid during the first one and then it was useless. In any case, the sirens always wake you up and it is strange. I wouldn't want to live in it for a long time.

17:35

Zdeněk

After the sleepless night I went to Kyiv. The capital, thoroughly protected by anti-aircraft defence, was more peaceful. In a park near the railway station I met Nazar, who had spent a few years in the war. Not as a soldier but as a producer and translator for foreign journalists. So, he had closely watched the way people's reaction to the war changed.

Nazar

People are strange creatures and they get used to everything. During the first days and weeks, we were shocked. Nobody knew what to do. Kyiv was under fire. That strange situation, when the city was empty, lasted about a month. But as days and weeks had gone by, people started returning and now the life in the city is normal.

On the one hand, it's right, but on the other hand it's not. People are living normal lives but they have totally forgotten that the war is here and now, which is wrong. Because nothing has changed.

Hundreds of heavily armed people from the Russian side are killing our people every day. They keep destroying our villages and towns every day. And I think that's exactly Russia's strategy: wait for the world to get tired and to stop paying attention to the war. And that's a plus for them but a minus for us.

And I can see the same happening to some Ukrainians. They will tell you they are tired of the war and that we should negotiate and give Russia a part of our territory. That's a really

terrible attitude. The Russians would just stop the war for a year and then “hello, here we are again. This time we want this and that.” We can all remember Hitler and other tyrants – they never get tired.

19:52

Zdeněk (*voice over*)

In the evening I meet a journalist, Lena, in a café. She used to work for the *Kyiv Independent* and now she is a freelancer. When I tell her I am making a documentary, she offers to talk about the impact of the war on mental health.

Lena

We definitely can't compare what we, civilians, have to go through with what the soldiers or people on the front line have to go through. Our situation is much easier but it is still affecting us. In May there were air-raids almost every night. I am not scared but I can't sleep because it's loud. And if you haven't slept for a long time, it's a disaster. You start arguing with others, you are bad-tempered, you start crying... And if the same is happening to everyone around you, it's crazy. We are coping but imagine a city where there are millions of people and none of them can sleep.

Zdeněk

As I learn later, apart from sleep deprivation, Lena also suffered from a sense of guilt.

Lena

I had problems because of feeling guilty. I would wake up with that feeling without knowing why. I thought it was because I wasn't doing enough. But then I read Facebook posts by people who spent all their time doing voluntary work and they also mentioned feeling guilty. So, I found out that everybody wanted to do anything they could for the war to end but it is impossible. Neither individuals nor any organisations can do that. It's simply a much bigger thing.

22:17

Zdeněk (*voice over*)

I am standing in Maidan, the main square in the centre of Kyiv. I can hear the mournful song “Plyve kacha po Tysyny” (A Duckling Swims in the Tisza), which became a symbol of the 2013 revolution. The demonstrations then lasted a few months and culminated by shooting into the crowd from the roof of the Ukrayina Hotel. Over a hundred people were killed. Shortly after that, Russia annexed Crimea and the war in Donbas started, which the world quickly forgot about.

A train of vehicles enters the square. A sad song is being played over and over in one of the cars, followed by a black van and several military jeeps.

The van stops in the middle, the driver opens the back door and a coffin can be seen inside. The soldiers stand next to it and put their right fists on their hearts.

A few dozens of passers-by stop to listen to speeches given by the fallen soldier's comrades-in-arms and by his father.

The door of the van is eventually closed and the vehicles leave for the cemetery. Two women kneel down on the edge of the road, watching the leaving cars and crying. A few minutes later, the square is the same as before – at least seemingly, on the face of it.

24:14

Zdeněk (*voice over*)

On the train back to the Czech Republic I read that the war in Ukraine has cost over eleven thousand lives of civilians and eighteen thousand others have been injured. The numbers of killed and wounded soldiers are much higher: they are estimated at tens of thousands.

Walking through the Main Railway Station in Prague, passing the musical and Advent market ads, I hear the sound of the mobile app that I have forgotten to turn off. A MIG has just taken off in Russia and nobody knows where it's flying to and what it's going to shoot at. I hear John Lennon's song from somewhere, saying that "war is over if you want it." I keep walking through Christmas-time Prague for some time. Then the application sounds again.

The air alert is over. May the force be with you.

The radio documentary *If It Falls, It Falls* was recorded by Zdeněk Horáček. The dramaturg was Jakub Horáček, the sound designer was Radim Dlesk. Czech voiceovers by Daniel Bambas, Lukáš Král, Lucie Pernetová and Anežka Šťastná.