

I am Matej Skalicki and this is Czech Radio News Podcast, Vinohradská dvanáct.
For a month they lived in a captivity in a basement.
People from Yahidne, Svitlana Oslavská wrote a story about them and one day it might be read by the criminal tribunal.
Svitlana arrived in Prague to participate in the Media and Ukraine conference, organized by Czech Radio.
It's Sunday, July 23rd.
Hello, thank you very much for joining us here in the studio in Czech Radio in Prague.
Hi, thank you for inviting me.
Svitlana, tell me, do you consider yourself a story collector?
As a journalist who is working with the long-form text formats, definitely I am a story collector.
But not in some technical term that you collect something and store it and keep it for something.
But yes, of course, all the time you are looking for some story.
The thing is that in this time of the full-scale war you almost don't need to look for a story because there are so many things that are going on around.
So you don't look for a story now, you just pick one of them?
I'm still looking for something which will be more interesting to tell.
But the truth is that so much things that we couldn't imagine before, you know, February 24th, 2022, so much things are happening now that you cannot think about.
Starting with the fact of the full-scale war, this thing was unimaginable.
And one of the main emotions of the Ukrainians in the beginning was this shock.
Not only of the fact that Russia is attacking Ukraine,
but of the fact that people see on the streets in the sky such weapons,
they have seen them in the movies about Second World War.
And now they felt, many people told me this and I felt this too.
Like, come on, it's 21st century, it's impossible.
And now we are, like, back in time in this Second World War time because all these weapons, they really looked like that.
How to ask people to get their testimonies in the perspective of the things they've seen in the movies and now they are reality for them?
Sometimes, of course, they compare what they saw in reality and they can remember some movie.
But mostly what you ask, doesn't matter if the person compares this to something or not, is just you ask based on the facts.
And when you record a testimony, not just an interview for media, but a testimony that is going to be a testimony in court that you have to ask very fact-based questions.
And you need, as every journalist, you need to ask people about what happened, when it happened, how it happened, and in all the details how exactly it happened and what was done.
And the difference from the normal journalism story or just the normal standard journalism interview would be is that you ask for more details.
And also the difference is when we record the testimonies of witnesses of war crimes,

that means that something, some war crime happened.
And as in every crime, there is some perpetrator
and we are talking to a witness or a victim.
And then you ask this witness that also can be simultaneously a victim,
you ask him or her about all the details of the event and about the perpetrator.
Then to be able in future to define who did that.
By the way, how do you balance that between the questions that you want to get the story
but also the hard facts for the future courts?
The case is that you don't publish the whole interview that you record as a testimony.
You can have 20 pages of this text when you transcribe it,
but of course you don't publish it as it is.
You have many questions that you don't need for a journalism story,
but what's important, and this was the idea behind the Reckoning Project,
is that quite often the journalism stories about war, about different wars,
they were interesting and good and important stories,
but they couldn't serve as a testimony in the court
because they lacked some details and because the questions that were asked by journalists
were not maybe asked in the proper way, in an unbiased way.
What kind of details, by the way?
Every detail about the Russians who did that.
For example, when I talked to a person who was kidnapped and kept for 76 days
and came in a cell, in a dark cell for no reason, and the reason was not provided to him.
So this is one of the war crimes and this is the real story.
Then I should ask, on every stage of this event, from the beginning when in the morning
a group of men in military, in fatigue, came to his house, asked for his passport
and said to him, let's go with us, and he had to go,
and when he entered their car, they put a bag on his hand and he couldn't see anymore.
But to this moment, when he could see those people,
he had to describe how their uniforms looked like,
the chevrons, what were the faces, were they in balaclavas, it's often the case.
But even when there is a bag on his face and he doesn't see these people,
he has to describe their voices and everything.
And of course, as a journalist who collects testimony for the court,
you cannot ask a person, so tell me how these Russians did look like,
because you don't know, you suppose you don't know the Russians, yes?
And you ask how these people look like, how did they talk, what were their accent,
what did they tell about themselves, and this is the difference also.
What was the most touching story you've collected?
It's a hard one, I know.
It's a hard one, and it's always asked in such interviews,
because you need to tell some good story.
For me, of course, the biggest story was the story of a basement in a village that's called Yahidna.
And this is the story I was working most of the time, I mean, the longest time on it,
and that's why it's in my memory more.

How long, for months?

For several months.

Oh.

Yeah, so to tell very shortly what happened,

it's a tiny village of up to 400 people,

and almost all of them found themselves taken to a school basement of this village by Russians who entered the village on March 3, 2022.

So they entered the village on military vehicles,

and they forcefully took people to the school basement, saying this is for your safety.

But of course, it was not for their safety,

because what Russians did in that school on the first and second floor was their headquarters.

So the commanders lived there, and all around the school it was like a military base, let's say, because there were the tanks and everything.

This was the headquarters, yeah?

And when you have military headquarters and you have civilians in the basement under it, that means you're creating a human shield.

And to protect yourself, to protect your commanders and soldiers from shellings, from Ukrainian arms.

And of course, this is something that definitely cannot be done even in the war,

because when we're talking about what is a war crime,

we have some customs of war, and then you have violation of this custom of war.

And this means all violence or treatment of civilians,

or killing of civilians, abduction of civilians, enslavement,

all the inhuman treatment that a military force can apply to innocent civilian people.

And it was done in Yahidna as a result.

368 people were in that basement for almost a month.

And the youngest one was a month and a half, baby.

And the oldest were 90, something, and 10 people died in the basement

because of lack of the fresh air, basically the lack of oxygen,

because there was no ventilation and the basement was so, so overcrowded

that every person had half a square meter space, like the chair.

And this was a space that was available for a person to sleep or to sit during the day.

And that's why people were sleeping, sitting.

It wasn't impossible to lie down.

So the conditions were absolutely inhuman.

And by doing this, by taking people to the basement,

Russians did not provide anything for them necessary to survive.

No food, no water.

Like food, they didn't provide food.

Food was cooked by the people from the basement.

They made some fire and cooked the food.

Luckily, Russians allowed them to cook food.

With no ventilation in the basement?

Yes, no ventilation and people are telling this horrific story how these 10 people who died, most of them were older people. But they felt quite okay before. But then in the basement without the oxygen, something started to happen with their mind. And they became mentally unhealthy and unstable. So they get mad to say it in some rude words and then died. And this is very tragic when it's hard to describe and hard to imagine. But you have this whole village and you see your neighbors are dying. And then when people died, if somebody died in the evening or at night, the body was staying in the basement until morning because Russians allowed people to go out of the basement to the toilet only in the morning. And for night, they closed the door and they closed it in a way that people cannot open it from the inside. So in the morning, they allowed them to bury them, to bury their neighbors? No, not to bury them. They allowed them to take this dead person from the basement to some small building in the schoolyard. But for several days, they did not allow to bury people. But people asked them, you know, again and again, we need to do this thing for our dead relatives. And finally, they allowed. But what happened at the cemetery? There were five persons and the Russians didn't give time to bury them. Just two hours they gave and they said, if you will be back later, we'll start shooting every second or every third man in the basement. So they just dig two graves for five persons. Some other graves? Yeah, and later when the village was liberated, there was exclamation and proper graves. But then when people were at the cemetery, the cemetery was shelled. And several people got wounded. And this is the detail that people were brought to the cemetery on a wheelbarrow, just that is used in everyday life in the village. And then the wounded people were taken back to the basement in the same wheelbarrow as dead people. So this Yahidna story and this basement has so much details, horrific details. And it happened in the first month of the war. Now it seems quite a long time ago, but still this is one of the most horrific stories that I worked on. Are you still in contact with the people from Yahidna? Yes, recently this year in April, I came back to this village to see how it lives, how people are feeling, because I know many journalists are coming to them and they are maybe quite tired of this.

But what is special about those people that they understand?

Though they may be tired of journalist visits,

but they feel they are responsible to share this story and tell it again and again.

Maybe even they don't want to remember this anymore,

but they feel this responsibility to tell the story.

Have you came across any story like that from your hometown, Sever Donetsk?

No.

This town is in Luhansk region on the east of Ukraine

and it's occupied for a year now since June last year.

But I really don't know much about what's going on there

because what Russians do on the occupied territories,

they cut connection mobile and that's why it's very hard to reach the people.

Yes, and that means that you don't get so many news from this town.

But even when we talk that not such a big atrocity happened there as in Yahid,

but still when you have a city of 100,000 people,

the life completely changes.

I mean, it's shelt every day, several times a day,

and it's going on, people are leaving this city

and as a result you have destroyed city that was full of life

and now life was sucked out of it.

And this doesn't seem like such a big atrocity after what we have seen in Bucha, for example,

but now it seems like just shelling, yeah?

But in fact, it's not normal even this.

It's like the war is not normal at all

and this is the thing that shouldn't exist, of course, in the world.

But all of the information you have from the media, what's going on in Sever Donetsk?

Yes, from media, I mean not the mainstream media,

but from some channels in messengers where I can people publish some photos.

For example, there are groups in Viber messenger, groups of people who lived in some quarters of the city,

like a group of people from my mother's street,

and sometimes they write something or publish some photos or some video.

So there is an internet connection?

In the city, no, but you can record a video, then go to some other place

because in some villages, several dozen kilometers away from the city, there is connection.

So you can record or take a photo and then you go there.

So there is some information, but I don't have anyone who I know,

like all my friends are not there.

I don't know if any of my friends is in the city.

So probably yes, but everyone I know, I think they left.

Because it's hard to imagine how you can exist, how you can live in the city.

There is no running water, for example, and in some parts there is electricity and some parts not.

So it's just, even if you don't think about ideology, even if you like Russia, yes,

but still how you can live in such conditions, it's almost impossible.

But still some people live in it because either they don't have a place to go, I don't know their choices.

The population was 100,000 people before war.

And in June last year, the city officials told that it's just 10,000 left.

Okay.

It was 100,000 and 10% left in the city.

So in the beginning of the interview, I ask you if you're a story collector.

Every story you collect is for the recurring project, right?

Mostly.

Yeah.

And the recurring project connects the journalism with the justice because all of the stories you collect,

you want the details in the stories to provide it to courts after the war, right?

Right.

So the stories include war crimes like murders, rapes, tortures.

These kind of stories because when you look at the definition of a war crime,

you see the list of the war crimes and we have incidents for every type of let's say war crime or even it may be a crime against humanity if we're talking about Yahidna or even genocide.

But everything has to have proofs, yes, to say such strong words.

But yes, the recurring project has up to 300 incidents now about different events, tortures, kidnapping of children.

As we know, this arrest warrant for Putin and Lvova-Belova was issued for this, for children.

Also this shelling of civilian areas.

These stories are not so loud, let's say, but for example, there was a story in April last year when a train station was shelled with the cluster bombs that are prohibited

because the cluster bombs are bombs that intended to kill people, to say basically.

They cannot destroy infrastructure, but they destroy human body.

And there were mostly women and children at the train station and more than 50 people died there and it was terrible because lots of people were outside of the train station when this bomb came and this is a horrific story and it's just when we think about torture, we can imagine that this is something really bad,

or murder, and when we think about shelling of civilian areas, it doesn't sound maybe so hard, but it is.

So yes, such stories.

And the practice is that you record the story from people who witnessed it?

Yes, definitely.

And then you take pictures, videos, what kind of media you use?

I use sometimes video recording, sometimes I record the entry on the video, but mostly on audio.

We, in the record project, there are different journalists and some of them are more used to work with video,

medium and some are more used to work with audio, so it depends.

The most important is to have this testimony, the most full as it possible.

And of course, we don't go just one time to the witness, we can go more times to have these details.

And yeah, this is basically the idea that these testimonies, they can be used to produce a journalism

stories

and this is what we are doing too, because on the basis of this interview, you can make different journalism stories.

And we as a team for international media, also because it's important for them to tell the story to understand.

And a lot of them go to the archive and then legal experts are working with this and they define what can be a court case,

what is more strong, what has more possibility to go in court.

What kind of reactions from the world audience you get to your stories?

Shocked or tired of war after one and a half year since the full-scale invasion began?

The thing is that our brain cannot follow all the atrocities happening in the world.

That's true. And we cannot follow all the wars that are happening.

The task of us as journalists is to tell the story in such a way that any reader will somehow identify with the characters.

That's what we need to have in the story.

And when you have a human story, it's easier for a reader or a viewer to identify and to feel, to understand.

Because such human stories can last for 50 or 100 years.

Because now we can still read some personal stories written after the Second World War.

And still we can find something in them for ourselves.

This can be a story that tells what happened with the person in the concentration camp.

But at the same time, this is a story that tells us about the human strengths or human weakness, about who we are as humans.

And are there people who write you? Thank you very much for sharing this. It's horrifying.

Everybody needs to see that or read that.

Yes, there are people who write. Thank you for sharing.

But that doesn't change my work even if they don't or if they do. It doesn't change my work.

Because you want to do that for justice purposes.

Yes, first of all, because it's my job to collect these stories and make them heard.

And of course, for justice purposes.

And for people who survived some horrific events, that's also important that their story is told.

And for them, when they tell their story in the interview, they can feel that they somehow have this, you know, when they verbalized it.

They sometimes feel relieved too, because it's a story, you know, and it lives its life.

And they can look at it from a distance even.

So, yeah.

Okay. So thank you very much for sharing not only the stories, but also your expertise here.

Thank you.

And that's all for today.

I spoke to Svitlana Oslavska, a Ukrainian journalist and a researcher with the Recording Project.

Thank you for listening.