

STORIES

PULSE OF PEACE
IN DONBAS 

**“Those who have a
'why' to live, can bear
with almost any 'how'”:
Stanislav Aseev’s Rules
of Life**

Does philosophy make it easier to survive imprisonment, how to run to Lisbon while living in Kyiv, and what new goals in life appear after you get out from the captivity? We present a new format within the CivilMPlus newsletter the Pulse of Peace in Donbas. It is opening with a story of Stanislav Aseev.

A writer and philosopher from Donetsk, now a contributor to Radio Liberty and an expert of the Ukrainian Institute of the Future, Stanislav Aseev spent 2.5 years in captivity in occupied Donetsk. And for the larger part of this term he was kept in the territory of the former factory and later art-center “Izolyatsia”. Stanislav describes the details of his term in “Izolyatsia” in his book [“The Shining Path” – Story of a Concentration Camp](#)”, and in his book of essays [“In Izolyatsia”](#), which recently won him the prestigious Shevchenko award in Ukraine. This prison also recently became the focus of one of the sections of the newest [report](#) by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Today I ran past a guy on the embankment who played a trumpet to the sounds of guns. This is why I am still here.

For three weeks I have not communicated with anybody. The circle is complete. The exception is cashiers who ask if I need a plastic bag. Donetsk became a solitary confinement cell, or a monastery cell.

From the diaries of Stanislav Aseev, 2016.

My life became undividable with this status – a former prisoner. I probably don't exist outside of this wording. I recently said in an [interview](#) that on the one hand it became a necessity for me, since I am a journalist and there is more attention to me from the press, I have more opportunities to talk about it. I can't even imagine how my life would have turned out if it had not been for this term.

In the colony getting books was easier, because there is a whole library, and you could get a parcel from outside. But in the basements and in "Izolyatsia", this is really difficult. It was Victor Frankl's book "Man's Search for Meaning" that was worth like gold in "Izolyatsia". This was the first book I got from the other prisoners. It was kept under a pillow and given to all new arrivals to read, although the administration knew very well that the book was there. I said that I had already read it, but they forced me anyway, they said "here, read it again - it will come in handy." It was the first day at "Izolyatsia", and I just didn't understand yet where I ended up. It seemed that this was an ordinary prison, although already on the very first day it became clear that something was wrong.

On account of this phrase by Frankl – "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'" – I even once wrote this line in a note for my mother, when I was still allowed to meet her. This quote is really amazing. 'Why' is the cornerstone for people who get into this system [get into captivity – ed.]. If you don't have this 'why', anything may happen to you. Once there was a man in our cell who had just received a parcel with food from his wife, and there was a small note inside. Just a few words, but that was not the point. The whole note was in her kisses, lipstick marks. This man just beamed, and he didn't care what was happening around him.

The second important book from captivity is the Weiner brothers' "A Loop and a Stone in the Green Grass." I even used a quote from this book as an epigraph to mine – if I am not mistaken, it sounds like this: "the smoke of the Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz furnaces settles on the ice of Magadan and Kolyma." This is also a very powerful book, although the title is rather strange and long, but nevertheless I would advise everyone to read it.

What is worth reading about Donbas now, perhaps, is a book by Denys Kazansky, who just recently wrote about how Ukraine was losing Donbass. And Serhii Zhadan with his "Voroshilovgrad", published before the war. And from the movies I would like to mention "Atlanti" by Valentin Vasyanovich, another winner of the Shevchenko Prize in the field of cinematography. The movie was made in a very specific way: it looks like a feature film, and it creates a feeling of complete reality of events on the screen.

One woman wrote to me that she had been reading my book all night. And when she finished reading, she cried for the rest of the night. This has probably impressed me the most. But those people who start reading it at night always say they finish it in one go, do not postpone it and, in general, do not even go to bed. Although, of course, I would not recommend reading such a book at night, because this is a kind of masochism.

I immediately told the publishing house that the first recipient of my book was Russia. It is obvious. Not only because it is written in Russian, but also because, in general, "Izolyatsia" and the "DPR" 'ministry of state security', of course, are completely controlled by the Federal Security Service. And no one knows what is happening there, also to the citizens of Russia who came there to fight for the "Russian world." After all, the Russians were also kept there. And they continue to be detained. Both in "Izolyatsia" and in pre-trial detention centers.

Russians mostly do not understand what is happening in Donbas. Even in liberal circles. Therefore, I would still advise all of them to read this book, and then talk. From the feedback that I receive, it seems to me that it makes, above all, a strong emotional impression. A reader is changing, perhaps not ideologically, but emotionally. Through the prism of events that happened to people there, you just start sympathizing without any ideological assessments. It does not matter if people are "ukrops", Russians, civilians – - everyone gets destroyed there. Human dignity gets destroyed as it is.

Once a man who supported the so-called "DPR" was placed in our cell. He was a local businessman. The guards took him out of the cell and interrogated him right in the corridor, asking in general about his political views. He said that he was a patriot of the "DPR", and the whole corridor was just laughing. And people from "Izolyatsia" administration were laughing. And they told him: "you're just an idiot. You don't understand anything at all." But those who tortured us understood very well how everything worked, and they know that tomorrow they themselves may be in our place. And this irrationality of evil is what gave me a very strong impulse to survive. I wanted to experience all this and at least tell this story to everyone.

My plea to the civil society of western countries is to mention the word "Izolyatsia" in any discourse that is related to human rights violations, so it can be heard everywhere and always. For myself, I see just such an algorithm - to make "Izolyatsia" a proper name known to everyone. Unfortunately, this topic has not yet reached the level of Russia's top politicians, but in the future, it will bring a huge shadow on Russia's international image.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most people faced self-"Izolyatsia" [word play, as 'izolyatsia' means isolation – ed]. But for me, of course, for a person who has just left prison, to be in his own apartment with a TV, Internet, and the possibility of

going to supermarkets, etc., for me this is not a problem. In general, I have one recipe for myself which is running. I've always jogged when my mental state gets worse, and I continue to do it. Running has become a fairly good habit, a tradition. Maybe running is just what I would advise to people who have a hard time in all the Covid times.

The experience of “Izolyatsiya” and the prison teaches that one should artificially search for this ‘why?’. After all, this applies not only to walls 2 by 2 meters where you move from wall to wall. In fact, even in an ordinary free life, if you don't have this ‘why?’ – why to live – you will fall into depression. Therefore, I artificially push myself in the neck, forcing myself to create some kind of projects. For example, there is an idea to run to Lisbon. It would seem so absurd. What for? Why exactly to Lisbon? There is no rational answer. You can just as well run to Lviv or Paris. You know, my mind is like this: if you take from Kyiv – this is the extreme point of Western Europe, and I really want to see the ocean.