

The Babusi (The Grandmothers)
By Roo Moody

CHERNIHIV, Ukraine – It's a cold, wet summer day as Baba Katya peels potatoes on her kitchen floor. Although the foreign volunteers across the street are not here for her, she takes care of them like they are. She calls herself the “watchdog” of the village.

Baba Katya takes a break from peeling potatoes to check on the fire. She makes sure it's going strong so the volunteers can come in to warm up while she prepares lunch for them.

As she returns to peeling, she talks about her life now that her country has been at war for over a year. Baba Katya, or Grandmother Katya, lives in the Chernihiv region of Ukraine, where Russia launched its northern invasion. The region was occupied by Russian troops in the first few months of the war, before Ukrainians regained the area. On every street, evidence of the occupation is apparent through war-torn houses, along with craters where missiles struck.

Baba Katya's neighbor, Baba Zoya, watches under the remnants of her home as the volunteers struggle in the rain and wind to build her a new roof. Baba Zoya lives all alone now. The war has stolen her husband, her home, and now her daughter and granddaughter have moved to the capital to find work.

Baba Zoya is devastated over the childhoods lost to war. Her granddaughter resumed her schooling online after the war started but has since discontinued her studies to find a full-time job.

“Children need to study, but they can't because they are hiding in the shelter. Beautiful sleep of babies is interrupted to go into hiding. Why do children have to suffer?” she asks.

Baba Katya and Zoya's stories are not unique in this region. Most of their village is survived by the grandmothers, or the “babusi” in Ukrainian. Their husbands have died, they've lost brothers and sons, and now they find themselves as providers for their surviving children and grandchildren in a land that is marked by war. But they are not alone. The babusi stick together – they take care of their own.

Baba Katya glances up at her ceiling; it's been redone after a missile landed in her garden, shredding the roof and more than half of her home. Now, the ceiling has Ukrainian writing on it. It's repurposed from military crates that carried ammo to the front lines, serving as a physical reminder of everything she's survived.

Each of the babusi carry these reminders. For Baba Zoya, it's the bullet holes going through her fridge that take her back to when the war first reached her home. On March 22, 2022, Baba Zoya, who had fled her village to shelter in Chernihiv, received a call

from her neighbor who told her that a missile had struck her house. Baba Zoya was unable to return home because the bridge connecting the villages had been destroyed.

When she was finally able to return home in late April, the destruction was worse than she expected. Official inspectors determined that her entire house had been damaged by the explosion.

She shrank to the ground and sobbed. "I don't want anything. Don't bother cleaning it up," she told her daughter.

Baba Zoya's home meant everything to her; she was raised in it, she raised her kids in it and then raised her grandchildren. When she saw it was gone, she knew that nothing was going to come close to replacing it.

Baba Zoya's garden is all she has left, and she tends to it relentlessly. It's become her lifeline; it's how she supports herself.

Natalya Mattinson, a Ukrainian translator working with the nonprofit Youth with a Mission (YWAM), spent weeks translating the needs of residents in this village for humanitarian aid teams offering relief.

While the obvious solution may be to relocate the displaced grandmothers to nursing homes or to live in cities with relatives, Ukrainians view the situation differently. Mattinson believes Baba Katya and Zoya are right where they should be.

It's not just a matter of having shelter; the babusi need the fellowship and community they've long had in the northern villages. "People look after each other. It's community," Mattinson said. "When you remove her and take it away from her, she will die."

The fellowship of the babusi remained steadfast while the rest of society fell apart.

"The world just stopped for us," said Yulia Oleksandrivna, the mayor of the Chernihiv region.

One afternoon, her community was living life normally, and the next morning, they woke up in a war zone. As the region began to host soldiers and refugees, it quickly became overpopulated. They ran out of food, water, medicine and fuel within the first month of occupation. The banks closed, there were no pensions and no escape. Russian troops had surrounded them.

As Russian air raids demolished entire villages, the bodies began to pile up. Not being able to bury loved ones according to Ukrainian Orthodox customs robbed Ukrainians of the bitter comfort a funeral brings.

"Nature does heal, but the void inside of our hearts is still there," said Oleksandrivna.

Despite neighborhoods becoming war zones overnight, Oleksandrivna says most of the deaths happened because of fear.

One night Baba Zoya and her husband were having dinner when air raid sirens went off. She ducked under the table for cover and saw her husband's legs still dangling against his chair. He had a heart attack. A few months later, her husband recovered and was riding his bike through the village when the sirens went off again. He fell off his bike after suffering another heart attack caused by a mixture of stress, anxiety and fear, but this time did not survive.

Baba Katya's daughter, Latasha Vasylivna, recalls the same fear. On Feb. 24, 2022, at 7 a.m., the Russian invasion began. "We didn't expect it. We'd heard the rumors, but we didn't believe them. We couldn't comprehend why they would do that," Vasylivna said.

That day, civilians began to flee, but others stayed hopeful. Prior to the invasion, many Ukrainians thought of the Russians as their brothers and sisters. Vasylivna said they still had hope that when the Russians came, they would see the Ukrainians were friendly and not a threat and would leave.

On March 7, the Russians reached Baba Katya's neighboring village. Her village became Ukraine's northern front line as soldiers fought to keep Russian troops from advancing.

"They targeted anything. It didn't matter if the buildings had people or children. The entire earth was shaking. My daughter looked at me with tears in her eyes and begged me to save her, but you don't know how to respond because you don't know what will happen in the next minute," Vasylivna said.

On March 11, Russian troops were less than half a kilometer from Baba Katya's house. They had no choice but to flee. When Baba Katya, her daughter and her granddaughter returned, there was a hole where their roof used to be, and the walls were destroyed from the shelling and bombing. With no running water or electricity, they covered the remaining windows with plastic, layered their clothes, and huddled under blankets to stay dry and keep from freezing to death.

"It was so scary you didn't know if you were shaking from the cold or from fear," said Vasylivna.

The weeks spent living under Russian occupation still haunt Vasylivna. She will never forget huddling with her mother and 5-year-old daughter in the small cellar where they stored fruit preserves. She had heard the horror stories, and she knew what would happen when the Russians reached her street. But there was nothing she could do besides wait for the Ukrainian soldiers to liberate them.

As the war dragged on, the days began to blend together. Baba Katya and Vasylivna struggled to keep track of time and were constantly on alert. At any moment, they might need to rush back to the cellar.

Baba Katya gathered water from the village well and fed her family vegetables she had preserved from her garden. They never changed clothes because they always had to be ready to run for cover. Vasylivna never took off her shoes because the one time she did, she ended up sprinting shoeless to the cellar.

Fortunately for Baba Katya and her family, the Ukrainian soldiers never abandoned her village. She praises God for every soldier, because her village would be destroyed if they weren't there defending her home.

After 44 days of constantly being under attack, Ukrainian troops pushed the Russians back, and Baba Katya and her family were able to rest. But the war was not over, and other Ukrainian cities were still under Russian occupation. Vasylivna knows what they are experiencing, and she pities anyone who must live through it.

Vasylivna wakes up every day thinking of her mother and little girl – her family is the only thing that motivates her to keep going. She wants to see them living in a free country. She's confident Ukraine will come out victorious and her country will be rebuilt, but she knows they can't defeat Russia alone.

Baba Katya and Zoya have a message for everyone watching the war unfold. People are dying. Children are dying. This is much larger than Ukraine. We never were ready for this war, and we need help because we need to stay.

“Please don't close your eyes to our pain,” Baba Zoya says.