

Shadows of war: Memories from a stolen childhood

I remember the long winter nights, when we would gather around the fireplace and my grandpa would start telling us all about the hardships he faced. His voice was soft, but his eyes revealed the deep emotion that was rooted in his soul. He said that the war was like a black shadow that slowly descended itself upon the village, changing everyone's lives in the process.

When he was a child, his world revolved around the green fields, the dusty lanes and the sunny days when people would go on about their day. However, one day, things started to change. Soldiers marched through the village, the elders whispering about the events going on in the world. Nobody knew for sure what was going to happen, but they felt a lingering pressure in the air.

Afterwards, the recruiting began. Many of the young men were sent to war. The women and children stayed at home, watching how their brothers, fathers and sons walked towards the terrifying unknown. "I remember how the mothers cried outside the church's door, how elders nodded their heads and accepted that not everyone will come back. Once the war came, so did the losses. Food became more and more hard to find, and people were starving in their homes." My grandpa was telling us how his mother learned how to make bread out of corn and crushed tree bark, how some days they would only have one boiled potato to split between siblings. The fortunate ones still had a few animals left in their backyards, but they were also being taken away by the soldiers.

"I remember a day where a group of soldiers came to the village and took away all the chickens and the cows. We weren't allowed to say anything. My mother was crying, my dad was clenching his fists, but he knew that if he were to protest, he would be shot dead in the next second. One of the most horrifying moments was the night of a bombardment. The village wasn't part of the war settlements, but it was close to a road used by the German army. During one cold winter night, the sky was swarmed with planes, the sound of the explosions shaking the ground beneath our feet. The people ran towards the first places they could think of, hiding in cellars and forests. There were children who lost their parents in the middle of the chaos, elders who couldn't run and remained still in their homes, hoping they would be spared.

I was just a child, but I'll never forget the red light that filled the sky. Houses were burning, animals screamed, and people yelled one after another in the dark. When the morning arrived and I emerged from the cellar, our village was not the same. Some houses were completely destroyed, others had their windows broken and roofs damaged. Some of the villagers died that night, some were injured and never received proper medical help. Apart from the bombardments, the danger also came from the soldiers. The village was occupied by Germans and then by Russians. Both of the sides requested food, shelter and also people for forced manual labour. When the soldiers arrived, we had to hide. My mother would hide us under the bed or in the cellar and told us not to make a sound. I saw people taken away by them that never returned.

One time, a group of Russian soldiers entered our house and started looking for supplies. They knocked over the table, broke the vases and took everything they could find. My mother was shaking, but did not dare to say a word. If she even thought of doing so, I do not know what would have happened to her. That night, we went to bed hungry. Another moment of terror was when some of the villagers were taken away by the German soldiers to a place far away. Nobody ever heard back from them. The people were talking about concentration camps, about prisoners that would never come back, but they were not sure of what was happening.

The years went by, and one day, the war ended. People went out of their homes, trying to rebuild their lives. But the village was not the same anymore. Most of the youth did not come

back, the houses were in shambles and the memories remained deep inside the victims. A slow rebuilding period started, full of loss and hardships, where people tried their hardest to rebuild what was lost.”

My grandpa said that the hardest moment was not going through the war, but living with the memories. Every year, during Heroes Day, he went to the graveyard, where he would light a candle and remember his friends that never returned. “War is not only about soldiers and fighting. It's about simple people, about the mothers who lose their sons, about the children that grow up in fear and about the families that remain with nothing left. We, who lived through those times, do not need to be told how precious peace is. We learned that the hard way.”

Today when I listen to these stories, I understand how lucky we are to live in a world without bombings and famine. But grandpa's stories must be brought forwards, so that nobody forgets what the true meaning of war is.