

## Chapter One

### **Lilia**

I am Lilia Andruschchenko, fifty years old, a heart surgeon at the Ohmatdyt Children's Hospital in Kyiv. As directing physician in the Children's Cardiology and Cardio-Surgery Center, my job is to keep those little hearts beating, so that a sick child might one day be able to go outside and play with healthy children in the sunshine.

In February of 2022, I was working at the hospital—a modern, well-equipped facility with an excellent staff—when Russian military forces invaded my country and tried to capture Kyiv, the capital city of Ukraine. Because of the shelling and bombing throughout the city, we set up beds in the basement of the hospital and moved the children to where we hoped they would be safe. Our children's hospital soon became a war hospital, for we took in patients of all ages: people with shrapnel wounds, people with bomb concussion wounds, people who had been buried in rubble, people who had been shot by snipers.

The sudden transition in my life was not only professional, but also personal. I am married to a wonderful man; together we have two grown children, a daughter of twenty and a son of eighteen. (Because of my career, I did not have my first child until I was thirty. The second at thirty-two.) In January of 2022, when we celebrated Orthodox Christmas, we were a normal, flourishing family in Ukraine.

My husband, Valeriy, was a journalist and editor-in-chief at a prominent newspaper, as well as a professor of journalism at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. He tells his students that above all, they must research the subject until they find “the truth,” and then write about the gathered facts with clarity and courage.

My daughter, Larysa, named after my mother who lives with us, was a medical student at the University. Since she was a little girl, she has wanted to be a doctor, just like her mother. Her mother is deeply grateful and deeply proud.

My son, Krystiyan, still in high school, was (and is) a fervent apostle of Greta Thunberg in Sweden, absolutely determined “to cleanse the Earth from the scourge of oil” (Krystiyan has the soul of a poet) “so that the wheat fields of Ukraine shall forever flourish.” He organized a Fridays For Future group at his school, and is always the most forceful speaker (I have heard him) at their demonstrations.

My mother, Larysa, was born in April of 1945, just before the war ended. She was eight years old when Stalin died in 1953, and she can still remember the strange atmosphere in her family: something of enormous importance had happened in the big country next door. She was eighteen years old when Nikita Khrushchev shook his nuclear fist at the American president . . . and the American president shook *his* nuclear fist back at Khrushchev . . . until the Soviet Union removed its missiles from Cuba.

My mother can remember Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Afghanistan in 1979, Solidarnosc in Poland in 1981 (I was nine years old and clearly remember pictures of the red and white flag waving over huge crowds). And of course, my mother remembers the opening of the Wall in Berlin in 1989. (I was seventeen, watching country after country in Eastern Europe declare its independence . . . until we did too, on December 1, 1991.)

From the year 988, when Vladimir the Great brought Christianity to Kyiv, to Independence at last, in 1991, a thousand years later: *that* was the turbulent history on which I stood as a teenage girl of seventeen.

Today, in June of 2022, when Ukraine is once again under siege, my mother, seventy-seven years old, “Larysa the Cossack” as she calls herself, refuses to get on a train and head west to the safety of some country under the protection of NATO. She will stand her ground, as she tells me, “with a kitchen knife, if necessary.”

Yes, on Orthodox Christmas in January of 2022, we were a normal, vibrant, hopeful Ukrainian family. Today, we have all put on the uniform of resistance. My husband works day and night with a delegation from the European Union who are investigating potential war crimes in Ukraine. Valeriy saw the bodies on the streets of Bucha. He is gathering the facts; he is gathering the evidence. He will help to tell the truth.

Krystiyan is fighting in the eastern regions of Ukraine (his exact location remains a secret, even from his mother) where he and his fellow volunteers fire an American Howitzer toward kids his age, who are firing at him.

Larysa, the medical student who loved to listen through her stethoscope to somebody’s heart (she practiced on her entire family) is now one of a substantial number of female snipers who move with infantry wherever they are needed.

Yes, this is a part of the Ukrainian reality today. Our young women do not organize conferences about equal rights or a “glass ceiling”; our young women put the crosshairs of the scope on the chest of the target and pull the trigger.

Her grandmother is very proud.

And me, I am still the chief physician at the Children’s Cardiology and Cardio-Surgery Center, maintaining a heavy schedule despite my exhaustion, trying to keep my thoughts clear and focused despite my outrage.

I have, however, begun to do something which I had once done in grade school, and then in high school, and at the university, until the intensive demands of a medical education and the growing number of hours on the wards of a hospital forced me to put away my notebook and pen. My adolescent poems came to a halt.

But with my husband gone most days and nights, and with both my daughter and son somewhere in a war zone, from which they may or may not come home, I began to lay awake at night thinking and thinking and thinking . . . until I got out of bed and went into the kitchen and turned on the light and opened one of Larysa’s notebooks—nearly empty, with lecture notes from January and February on the first few pages—and began to write a poem.

My mother saw the light on, got out of bed, came into the kitchen and asked me, “Are you all right?”

My pen poised over a half-written line, I was a bit irritated at the interruption, but I told her with a calm voice, “I’m writing a poem.”

“Ah,” she said with full understanding. “It’s about time. I still have,” she gestured toward her bedroom, “all of your schoolgirl poems, safe in a cabinet.”

She had always encouraged me. Despite the restrictions at school, she insisted that I write in Ukrainian, never in Russian.

She made a cup of tea for me, then went back to bed.

I understood that I needed a quiet place to write, and was drawn instinctively to a place where my mother had taken me many times as a child, Saint Sophia Cathedral, in the heart of Kyiv. The cornerstone had been laid by Vladimir the Great in the year 1011, “one hundred and fifty-two years,” as my mother liked to say, “before the cornerstone of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was laid in 1163.”

Because of the Cathedral’s complex history, which has led to a battle between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, a remnant of Polish rule—and various factions within those two denominations—as to whom the

Cathedral belongs, the ancient edifice is now a museum. There are no regular services. Before the war, most of the visitors were tourists who were intrigued by the abundance of mosaics and frescos which adorned the walls and arches and domes soon after the building was constructed, and are thus nearly a thousand years old. Today, with artillery roaring in the distance and bombs crashing randomly around the city day and night, the tourists are gone, but the parishioners have returned, in need of a quiet place where they can say a desperate prayer.

I managed to find a shop where I could buy a notebook—I returned Larysa’s notebook to her desk in her bedroom—and even managed to find a simple aluminum folding chair, the sort of chair one might take on a picnic, so that I would have a place to sit while I wrote—as I hoped—a poem. The museum had no chairs for the public. But the curator knew me, for I had attended to her child some years ago, and I thought she would not mind if I sat in some obscure corner beside an ancient fresco of a saint, and penned my thoughts about our embattled world today.

With my notebook in an old leather satchel in one hand, and the folded blue chair in the other, I stepped out the door of the Children’s Cardiology Center at the end of a twelve-hour shift, and felt the cool fresh air on my face—the delightful air of springtime in early May—very pleasant after hours in the damp basement where many children breathed the poorly circulated air.

I was exhausted, but I was also determined that I would at least make this first trip to a sanctuary within the city, greet the guards, set up my chair, and write perhaps nothing more than “I am here,” with a notation of place, date, and time. That would be a start.

The Cathedral was about three and a half kilometers from the hospital. I traveled by bus—they were running again, now that the Russian Horde had given up their siege and moved into the eastern parts of the country—for about half an hour. Yes, some remnants of normal life still remained, here in our bizarre war zone.

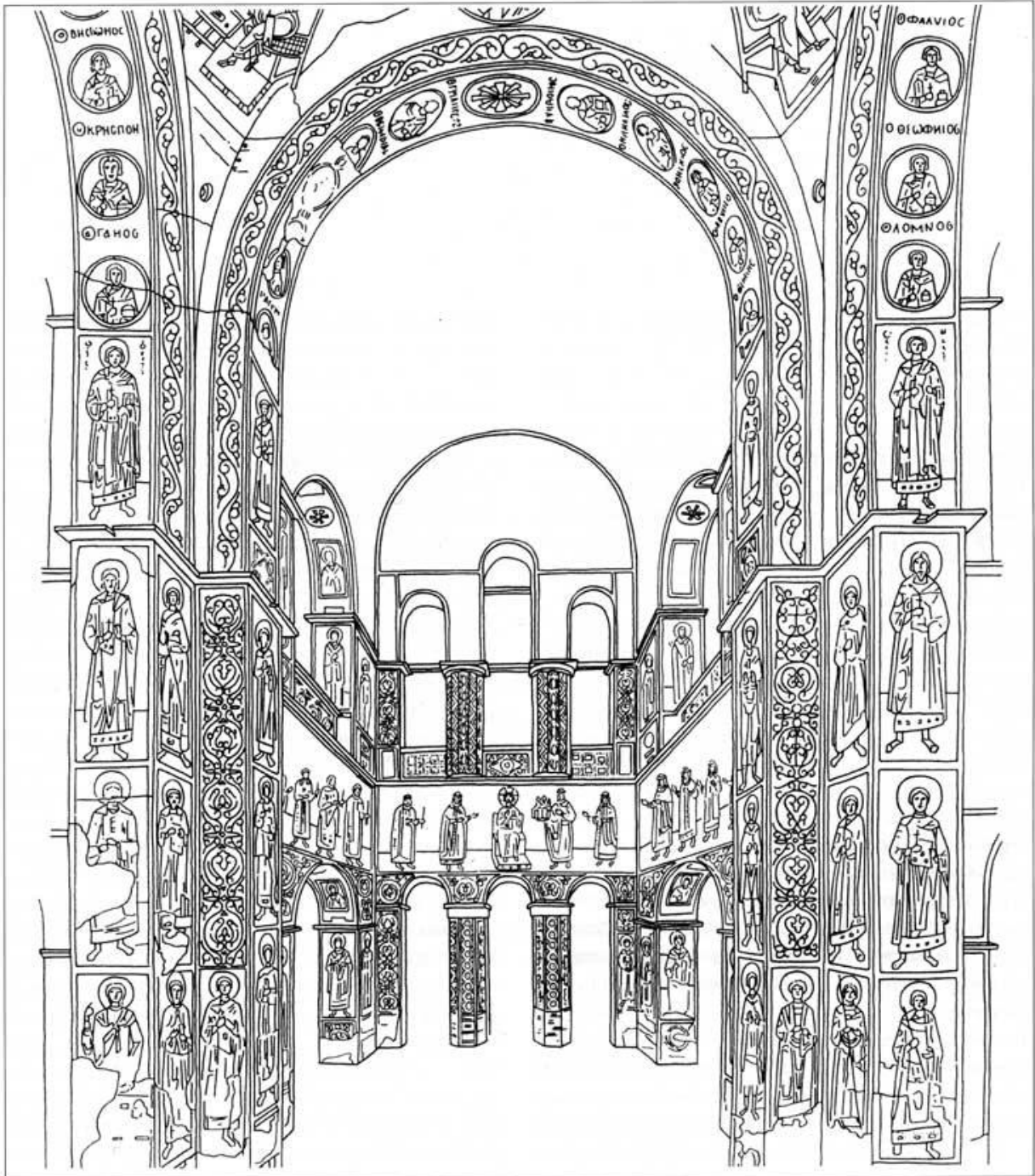
I walked from the bus stop toward the white Cathedral with its green and gold cupolas, and felt, despite my tiredness, a measure of peace. By good fortune, I met a guard inside the door who knew me and who readily told me that I was welcome to sit in my chair wherever I wished.

“We know about your work at the hospital,” she said with a quiet smile. “One day,” she pointed up at a faded fresco, “we will paint your picture up there with the saints.”

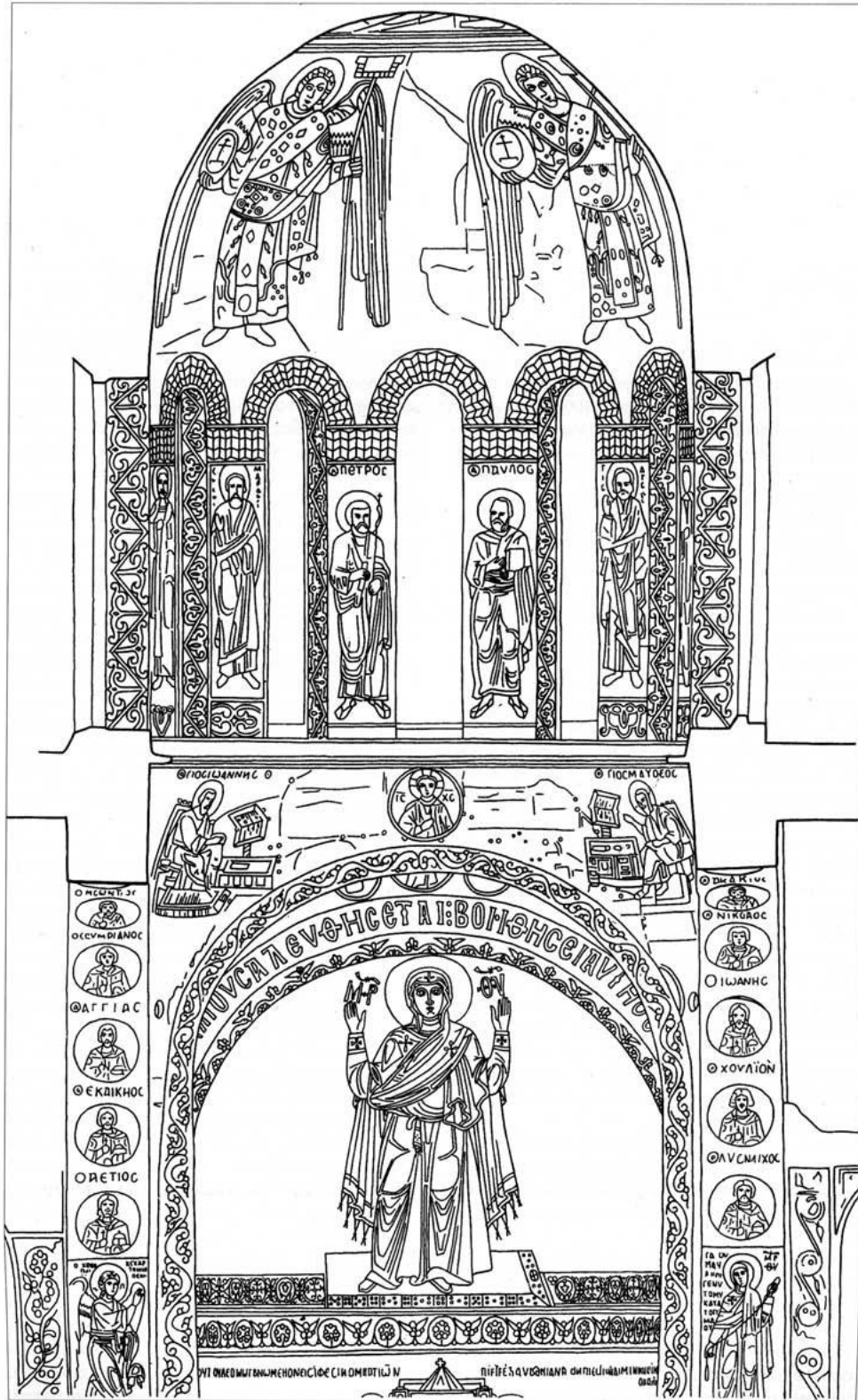
I laughed—a quiet smile, a quiet laugh, the most we could muster during wartime—and told her, “Paint the children. My dear little angels.”



Saint Sophia Cathedral  
Kyiv, Ukraine



Interior of Saint Sophia Cathedral



Interior of Saint Sophia Cathedral  
with the Virgin Mary, saints and angels.

I followed the long hallway between pillars and arches and alcoves to the central hall beneath the great dome, where I peered straight up at a mosaic of Christ looking down at me, blessing me with two fingers. He looked old and weary; I felt old and weary. I was in good company.

I lowered my gaze to the Virgin Mary, beneath an arch below the dome, her open hands spread toward me as she bestowed her abundant blessing. She wore a golden shawl crisscrossed over her ample blue robe, as befit the Mother of God.

My own mother had pointed out to me, when I was a girl, the embroidered white handkerchief which was folded over Mary's belt. "She uses that handkerchief," my mother explained, "to wipe away our tears when we come to visit her."

How many tears, how many Ukrainian tears of grief, during the past thousand years?

As always, I stared up at Mary's dark eyes, fashioned in the Byzantine style—for the architects and artists had come from Constantinople all those years ago—strong eyes which stared steadfastly with enduring faith. She had seen it all, during those brief thirty-three years which had ended with her son nailed to a cross, and during all the years since, when his message of peace seemed to have been blown away in the wind.

I looked at the faces of a few favorite saints on the walls and flat-sided pillars around me, old friends who had heard the roar of artillery before, many times, many times.

Then I looked up at two figures above the arch that wrapped over Mary. To the left was the Evangelist John, seated on a chair and writing with his pen on a piece of parchment. To the right was the Evangelist Mark, seated on a chair and holding a piece of parchment, with all of his writing implements spread on a table beside him.

Encouraged by these two writers, I found a spot where I would not disturb the few other people who moved quietly around me in our shared sanctuary. I opened the blue chair, sat down in the protective embrace of Mother Ukraine, felt a deepening peace within me, opened the leather satchel and took out the notebook (my own piece of parchment), took a pen from the pocket of my blue hospital shirt—the same pen which I had used to write wound descriptions and surgical reports throughout the day—and then I paused to listen for whatever words might speak to me.

They came, brutal and honest. They spoke of a thousand years of invasion, conquest, massive murders, transport in cattle cars to gulags in Siberia, Nazi firing squads, torture in prisons, carefully planned starvation, the surging of armies, the



shooting of prisoners, the bombing of hospitals, the bombing of schools, the land mines left in gardens, in playgrounds, in fields where wheat is grown . . . and of the people who again and again had to fight back, with Howitzers, with crosshairs on the chest of the enemy. Everyone's knife, everyone's knife, was red with blood.

Who?

Tell me, where in the Sacred Book does it say:

“Thou shalt kill each other in war after war after war,  
Generation after generation,  
Century after century,  
Millennium after millennium,  
Until the Earth, Cradle of Life,  
Becomes a Coffin of Death.

Behold, thou shalt slaughter and cripple and starve each other,  
Unto the last day of human time.”

Who has spoken this commandment?

Us.

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