

GRAĐANI KIJEVA / *CITIZENS OF KYIV*, 2022.

Čekmenjov je počeo portretirati stanovnika Kijeva, glavnog grada Ukrajine, prošlog ožujka kada je opasnost od ruskog napada na grad postala neminovna. Fotografirao je umirovljenike, ljude koji su se sklonili na stanice podzemne željeznice tijekom zračnih napada, te mlade pripadnike teritorijalne obrane koji su prvi put u životu uzeli oružje u ruke. Ovaj kolektivni portret građana opkoljenog grada odražavao je i odlučnost i očaj, patnju i hrabrost koji su se očitovali tijekom prvih tjedana rata.

Chekmenyov started to make portraits of the people of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, last March when the danger of the Russian attack on the city looked imminent. He photographed pensioners, people finding shelter at the metro stations during the air raids, and young members of the territorial defence force who took arms in their hands for the first Time in their life. This collective portrait of the citizens of the besieged city reflected both resolve and despair, suffering and bravery manifested during the first weeks of the war.

DONBAS / DONBASS, 1994. – 2011.

Rudarstvo je u Ukrajini postalo zanat. Gdje god je ugljen došao blizu površine, seljaci su jednostavno kopali rupu u zemlji ili koristili napuštena rudarska okna. Kao i prije stotinu godina, čekić i dljeto postali su primarni instrumenti rudara, zabijajući se u zemlju gdje god nađe mrvicu ugljena. Mreža improviziranih podzemnih rudnika ugljena obavija regiju Donbasa poput paukove mreže, provlačeći se ispod željezničnih tračnica, stambenih zgrada, grobalja, trgovina i javnih zgrada. Promijenili su krajolik, promijenili su i živote. Ilegalna rudarska industrija potaknula je spontani procvat poduzetništva u lokalnim selima. Kanta krumpira košta tri kante ugljena; boca domaćeg pića— vreću. Amatersko iskopavanje ugljena u Donbasu postaje sve profesionalnije. Rudnici se privatiziraju i dijele dozvole za istraživanje novih nalazišta, a količina ugljena koji se ilegalno iskopava dostiže industrijske razine. Raznovrsna infrastruktura je u procvatu, uključujući prijevoz, maloprodaju i zaštitare, koji čuvaju rudnike i kamenolome. Također sam svjedočio mnogima koji su odlučili napustiti rudarska naselja u potrazi za boljim životom, obećavši sebi da se više nikada neće vratiti tom mučnom i opasnom radu pod zemljom. Neki su ostali vjerni sebi, ali većina se vratila. Rečeno mi je da je rudnik poput magneta koji privlači rudare k sebi i ne pušta ih. Uostalom, za rudare ugljen nije samo mineral: to je crno zlato koje leži zakopano pod njihovim nogama.

Mining became an artisanal labour in Ukraine. Wherever the coal came close to the surface, the villagers simply dug a hole in the ground or used the abandoned mining shafts. Like a hundred years ago, the hammer and chisel became the primary instruments of the miner, clawing himself into the ground wherever he finds a modicum of coal. A network of improvised underground coal mines envelops the Donbass region like a spider web, running beneath railway lines, residential houses, cemeteries, shops and administrative buildings. They have changed the landscape, and they have changed lives. The illegal mining industry has sparked a spontaneous boom in enterprise in the local villages. A bucket of potatoes costs three buckets of coal; a bottle of homemade liquor— a sack. Amateur coal mining in the Donbass is becoming increasingly professional. Mines are being privatized and licenses for the exploration of new deposits handed out, while the amount of coal excavated illegally is reaching industrial levels. A diversified infrastructure is booming, including transport, retail and security contractors, who guard the mines and quarries. I also witnessed many who decided to leave the mining settlements in search of a better life, promising themselves never to return to that arduous and dangerous labour underground. Some stayed true to themselves, but most came back. I was told that the mine is like a magnet that draws the miners to it and doesn't let them go. After all, for the miners coal is not just a mineral: it is black gold lying buried beneath their feet.

PUTOVNICA / *PASSPORT*, 1995.

Snažna ruka države: fotografije za putovnicu Aleksandra Čekmenjeva nakon stjecanja nezavisnosti Ukrajine; Simon Shuster, TIME, 13. svibnja 2014

Godine 1994. lokalna uprava u gradu Luhansku, u istočnoj Ukrajini, našla se u potrebi za fotografom. Sovjetski Savez se upravo raspao nekoliko godina ranije, i kao i sve njegove nove neovisne države, Ukrajina je morala proći kroz proces izdavanja novih putovnica svim svojim građanima, njih otprilike 50 milijuna. Kao da to nije dovoljan problem, mnogi od tih građana bili su zatvoreni, stari i prikovani za krevet, a da bi im se slikala putovnica netko je morao obilaziti kuće s kamerom. U Luhansku je jedan od dužnosnika poznao tipa koji je poznao tipa koji je radio u lokalnom foto studiju. Zvao se Alexander Chekmenev. Dakle, to je taj tko je dobio posao.

Da je ga je dobio neki drugi kandidat, rezultat vjerojatno ne bi bio ništa više od hrpe sićušnih portreta, monokromatskih i praznih kao prijenosna pozadina na kojoj su snimljeni. Ali c, koji je tada imao 25 godina, pretvorio je projekt u studiju života i smrti u Sovjetskom Savezu.

Tijekom sljedeće godine, on i nekoliko socijalnih radnika obišli su šangajsku četvrt Luhanska, skupinu istrošenih starih koliba izgrađenih na brzinu tijekom Drugog svjetskog rata, i fotografirali starije ljude koji su tamo živjeli. Većina njih rođena je otprilike u isto vrijeme kad i Boljševička revolucija 1917., tako da su njihovi životi obuhvatili cijeli komunistički eksperiment i bili su, na mnogo načina, odraz njegovog ishoda. Ono što je Čekmenjov uhvatio bio je život koji su ti ljudi završili kad je eksperiment propao.

Seriju koju je nazvao Passport zna biti teško gledati, čak i bolno. Bijeda ovih prostorija i ljudi koji u njima žive, okruženi svime što posjeduju, izaziva poriv za isprikom i okretanjem, kao da je gledatelj naletio na nešto što je jednostavno previše tužno i privatno za oči stranaca. To je reakcija koju je Čekmenjov htio osporiti.

“U Sovjetskom Savezu je postojalo pravilo da stvarne uvjete života treba skrivati, kao da su nešto sramotno”, kaže. “Ono što su se prikazivala u javnosti bila su našminkana lica dužnosnika i poznatih osoba ili nasmijane mase na paradi. Ali to nije bila stvarnost u kojoj smo živjeli.”

U sovjetskoj dogmi ideja žrtve bila je najvažnija, ali patnja koju je uzrokovala bila je tabu. Od sovjetskih se građana tražilo da vjeruju da će na kraju svanuti komunistička utopija, možda za pet godina, možda za pedeset, i ublažiti sve teškoće. Ali do tada su trebali ustrajati – “jednaki u siromaštvu”, govorila je izreka – sa službenim naglaskom na činjenicu da su jednaki, a ne na činjenicu da su siromašni.

Ljudi su, uglavnom, bili svjesni što im nedostaje. Shvatili su da nestašica toaletnog papira nije znak održive ekonomije i da trpanje tri obitelji u zajedničkom stanu nije razuman način života. Homo Sovieticus nije bio rasa budala. Ali nitko nije osjetio posebnu želju skrenuti pozornost na te istine, a kamoli ih uhvatiti u nizu fotografija, jer bi to značilo suočiti se s činjenicom da eksperiment nije uspio i da su sve ove godine neimaštine bile uzalud. Neki ljudi u Sovjetskom Savezu imali su hrabrosti to priznati, barem sebi. Čekmenjov je to želio dokumentirati.

Cijelog života gledao je svog oca kako svaki dan odlazi na posao u istu tvornicu – tvornicu streljiva Lenjin u Luhansku, koja je proizvodila metke – a nakon umirovljenja nije imao gotovo ništa za pokazati. “Takav je bio dogovor”, kaže Čekmenjev. “Pustiš državu da ti isiše sav život, a onda ti na kraju ostavi apsolutni minimum, malo kruha, malo mlijeka, neke tablete za tvoje bolove. To je vaša konačna nagrada.”

Dakle, na osobnoj razini, Putovnica je bila zamišljena kao odbacivanje sustava koji je samljeo Čekmenjovljeva oca kao i milijune drugih koji su bili uhvaćeni u njegovu vrtlogu. Bila je to izjava odbijanja da slijedi očev put, a prenosi tu poruku poput udarca u trbuh. Ali fotografije u ovoj seriji daleko nadilaze tu političku dimenziju. Perspektiva koju nude na smrt i način na koji se svaki pojedinac nosi s njenom blizinom, uspijeva nadići društveni i povijesni kontekst u kojem su ove fotografije snimljene.

To je upravo ono što su ljudi radili, a kao rođeni Luhansk, Čekmenjov je odrastao u ovom svijetu. Ono što se čini neobičnim jest njegova sposobnost da iskorači izvan toga i primijeti apsurdne koje bi njegovi vršnjaci zanemarili kao rutinu.

Strong Arm of the State: Alexander Chekmenev's Post-Independence Ukraine Passport Photos, Simon Shuster, TIME, May 13, 2014

In 1994, the local government in the city of Luhansk, in eastern Ukraine, found itself in need of a photographer. The Soviet Union had just collapsed a few years earlier, and like all of its newly independent states, Ukraine had to go through the process of issuing new passports to all of its citizens, roughly 50 million of them. As if that wasn't enough of a problem, many of those citizens were shut-ins, elderly and bedridden, and in order to take their passport pictures someone had to go around making house calls with a camera. In Luhansk, one of the officials knew a guy who knew a guy who worked at a local photo studio. His name was Alexander Chekmenev. So that's who got the job.

Had it gone to another candidate, the result would probably have been nothing more than a stack of tiny portraits, monochromatic and blank as the portable background against which they were taken. But Chekmenev, who was 25 at the time, turned the project into a study of life and death in the Soviet Union.

Over the course of the following year, he and a couple of social workers went around the Shanghai neighborhood of Luhansk, a cluster of weathered old cabins built in haste during World War II, and photographed the elderly people who lived there. Most of them had been born at roughly the same time as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, so their lives had spanned the course of the entire communist experiment and were, in many ways, a reflection of its outcome. What Chekmenev captured was the life these people ended up with when that experiment failed.

The series, which he titled Passport, can be difficult to look at, even painful. The squalor of these rooms and the people who inhabit them, surrounded by everything they own, provokes the urge to apologize and turn away, as if the viewer had stumbled onto

something that was just too sad and private for the eyes of strangers. That is the reaction Chekmenev wanted to challenge.

“There was this rule in the Soviet Union that the actual conditions of life should be kept hidden, like they were something shameful,” he says. “What was shown in public were the made-up faces of officials and celebrities, or the smiling masses on parade. But that was not the reality of where we lived.”

In Soviet dogma, the idea of sacrifice was paramount, but the suffering it caused was taboo. Soviet citizens were asked to believe that eventually a communist utopia would dawn, maybe in five years, maybe in fifty, and alleviate all hardship. But until then, they were supposed to persevere – “equal in poverty,” the saying went – with official emphasis on the fact that they were equal and not the fact that they were poor.

People were, for the most part, aware of what they lacked. They understood that toilet paper shortages are not the mark of a viable economy, and that cramming three families into a communal apartment is not a reasonable way to live. Homo Sovieticus was not a race of fools. But no one felt any particular desire to draw attention to these truths, let alone capture them in a series of photographs, because to do so would mean confronting the fact that the experiment had failed and all these years of deprivation were for nothing. Some people in the Soviet Union had the courage to admit that, at least to themselves. Chekmenev wanted to document it.

For all of his life, he had watched his father go to work each day in the same factory – the Lenin Ammunition Plant in Luhansk, which produced bullets – and after retirement he had almost nothing to show for it. “That was the deal,” says Chekmenev. “You let the state suck all the life out of you, and then it leaves you at the end with the absolute minimum, some bread, some milk, some pills for your pain. That is your final reward.”

So on a personal level, Passport was meant as a repudiation of the system that had ground up Chekmenev’s father like the millions of others who’d been caught in its gears. It was a statement of refusal to follow his father’s path, and it delivers that message like a punch to the gut. But the photographs in this series go well beyond that political dimension. The perspective they offer on death, and the way each individual deals with its proximity, manages to transcend the social and historical context in which these photos were taken.

That is just what people did, and as a native of Luhansk, Chekmenev grew up inside this world. What seems uncanny is his ability to step outside of it and notice the absurdities that his peers would ignore as routine.

RAT U DONBASU / *WAR IN DONBASS*, 2014. – 2016.

Dana 14. travnja 2014. naoružani maskirni ljudi, predvođeni umirovljenim ruskim pukovnikom, upali su u gradsku vijećnicu, sjedište policije i ured državne sigurnosti u gradu Sloviansku. Sljedećeg dana počeli su okršaji s ukrajinskim snagama diljem regije. Tako je započeo rat na Istoku, koji traje do danas. Ljudski danak ovog rata još nije dobro izračunat. Nisu samo borci s obje strane izgubili živote; civili u regiji bili su prve žrtve neprijateljstava koje podupire Rusija. Chekmenev je posjetio različite gradove i sela u Donjeckoj regiji, fotografirajući ljude u ruševinama njihovih kuća uništenih u ratu.

On April 14, 2014, armed men in camouflage, led by a retired Russian colonel, stormed the city hall, police headquarters and office of state security in the town of Sloviansk. The next day, skirmishes with Ukrainian forces began around the region. Thus began the war in the East, which continues to this day. The human toll of this war has not yet been properly calculated. Not only combatants on the two sides have lost their lives; the region's civilians have been the primary victims of the Russian-backed hostilities. Chekmenev visited different towns and villages in the Donetsk region, photographing people in the ruins of their houses destroyed in the war.

POBJEDNICI / *VICTORS*, 2002. – 2012.

Veterani Drugog svjetskog rata u svojim domovima, Ukrajina.

Veterans of the Second World War in their homes, Ukraine.

LJILJANI / LILIES, 1999.

Psihijatrijska klinika, Ukrajina, 1999. Na prvom putovanju snimio sam reportažu o životu pacijenata i medicinskog osoblja. Snimio više od dva tuceta 35 mm filmova u boji. Noć smo proveli u istoj zgradi u kojoj žive pacijenti, ali na posebnom odjelu. Ujutro sam se iznenadio da smo i pacijenti i osoblje i mi slični jedni drugima. Smijali smo se sami sebi, jer u odjelu smo svi bili jednaki. Medicinski brat bez bijele kute nije se uvrijedio, a nije se ni iznenadio kad sam ga pobrkao s luđakom. Ujutro ponovno snimanje suvremenom automatskom elektroničkom kamerom na neshvatljive pacijente. Odjednom sam na hladnjaku ugledao umjetno cvijeće i odmah shvatio što bi serija trebala biti. Iz torbe sam izvadio stari mehanički Rolleiflex s crno-bijelim filmom. Posjeo sam svakog pacijenta kraj prozora, pružio buket umjetnih bijelih ljiljana i zamolio "osmijeh molim". Tada sam naišao na veliki problem - nisu se svi bolesni ljudi mogli nasmiješiti. Ali pokušao sam sve nasmijati. Čak su i najteži pacijenti željeli dobiti kiticu cvijeća i pogledati u kameru. Ovim ljudima treba vrlo malo, slatkiši, kutija cigareta, isto cvijeće, ili barem naš osmijeh. Svaku novu osobu upoznaju kao što djeca upoznaju svoje roditelje koje dugo nisu vidjeli. Ostaju kao djeca koja nikada neće odrasti. Čekaju našu pozornost. U njima nema trika, nema zavisti, ne znaju izdati ni prevariti, može se reći da žive po Božjim zapovijedima. Gotovo su isti kao mi, samo bolji.

P. S. Kasnije sam 100 crno-bijelih fotografija prenio u kliniku za uspomenu.

Psychiatric clinic, Ukraine, 1999. On the first trip, I filmed a report about the life of patients and medical staff. Filmed more than two dozen color 35 mm films. We spent the night in the same building where the patients live, but in a separate ward. In the morning I was surprised that both patients and service personnel and we were similar to each other. We laughed at ourselves, because in the department we were all equal. A nurse without a white robe was not offended and was not even surprised when I confused him with a madman. In the morning, shooting again with a modern automatic electronic camera at uncomprehending patients. Suddenly, on the fridge, I saw artificial flowers and immediately understood what a series should be. I got an old mechanical Rolleiflex with a black and white film out of the bag. I seated each patient by the window, handed a bouquet of artificial white lilies and asked "smile please". Then I ran into a big problem - not all sick people could smile. But I tried to make everyone laugh. Even the most difficult patients wanted to get a bunch of flowers and look into the camera. These people need very little, candy, a pack of cigarettes, the same flowers, or at least our smiles. They meet every new person as the children meet their parents, whom they have not seen for a long time. They remain as children who will never grow up. They are waiting for our attention. There is no trick in them, there is no envy, they cannot betray or deceive, it can be said that they live according to God's commandments. They are almost the same as we, only better.

P.S. Later I transferred 100 black and white photos to the clinic for memory.

IZBRISANI / DELETED, 2018-2020

Čekmenjev je dvije godine snimao portrete beskućnika grada Kijeva. Prema službenim statistikama, više od 10.000 ljudi u glavnom gradu Ukrajine nema gdje živjeti i moraju se oslanjati na potporu države i dobrotvornih organizacija. Ali ova statistika nije precizna. Samo osobe s osobnom iskaznicom ispunjavaju uvjete za socijalnu skrb, a mnogi beskućnici nemaju potrebne dokumente. Situacija se pogoršala nakon početka rata na Istoku. Više od 1,5 milijuna izbjeglica pobjeglo je iz ratne zone. Neki od njih izgubili su sve i nisu imali drugog izbora nego živjeti na ulici. Oko 20 posto beskućnika starije je od 50 godina i treba im liječnička pomoć.

Prema vladinim podacima, u zemlji ima 35.000 beskućnika. Neslužbene procjene puno su pesimističnije, dosežu 200.000 ljudi. Državni programi socijalne skrbi pokazali su se vrlo neučinkovitima. Ljudi koji se nađu na ulici uglavnom se moraju oslanjati na pomoć nevladinih i dobrotvornih organizacija.

P. S.

U prosincu 2018. umrlo je 7 beskućnika koje sam osobno poznao.

For two years, Chekmenev shot portraits of the homeless inhabitants of the city of Kyiv. According to official statistics, more than 10,000 people in Ukraine's capital have no place to live and must rely on support from the state and charity organizations. But these statistics are not precise. Only people with ID cards qualify for social welfare and many homeless people lack the necessary documents. The situation worsened after the beginning of the war in the East. More than 1.5 million refugees fled the war zone. Some of them lost everything and had no other choice than to live on the streets.

Around 20 percent of the homeless are over 50 years old and need medical help.

According to government data, there are 35,000 homeless people in the country. Unofficial estimates are much more pessimistic, reaching 200,000 people. State welfare programs have proven highly inefficient. People who find themselves on the streets have to rely mainly on the help of NGOs and charities.

P.S.

In December 2018, 7 homeless people died, whom I personally knew.

Lidia Sobkevič, rođena 1938., Kijev, beskućnica. Otišla je živjeti na ulicu nakon što ju je sin jedinac odlučio smjestiti u psihijatrijsku bolnicu. Kijev, 2018.

Lydia Sobkevich, born 1938, Kyiv, homeless. She went to live on the street after her only son decided to commit her to a psychiatric hospital. Kyiv, 2018.

Valera Dermanskij, 57, beskućnik. Studirao je i radio u Kijevu; po struci je ekonomist. Ima sina od 34 i kćer od 26, ali s njima dugo ne razgovara, svi žive svoj život.

Valera Dermansky, 57, homeless. He studied and worked in Kyiv; his profession is an economist. Has a son, 34, and daughter 26, but he hasn't talked with them for a long time, they all live their own lives.

Volodimir Kočetkov, 1952., rođen je u Murmansku. Odrastao je bez oca. Majka mu je imala problema s alkoholom i dala ga je u sirotište. Svim rođacima je rekla da je dijete umrlo. 11 godina kasnije njegov djed je saznao tu činjenicu i vratio ga iz sirotišta u Kazahstan. Volodymyr je odslužio tri kazne u zatvoru do 1989. Posljednjih 15 godina živi i radi u raznim samostanima. Danas je jako bolestan i zamolio ga je da mu pomogne da povрати dokumente kako bi imao priliku otići u starački dom. Kijev, 2019.

Kochetkov Volodymyr, 1952, was born in Murmansk. He grew up without father. His mother had problems with alcohol and put him to the orphanage. She told to all her relatives that the child had died. 11 years later his grandfather found out this fact and took him back from the orphanage to Kazakhstan. Volodymyr served three terms in prison until 1989. Last 15 years he has been living and working at the various monasteries. Nowadays he is very ill and asked to help him to recover his documents to have a chance to go to the old people house. Kyiv, 2019.

Bezsmertnij Stepan, 50 godina, rodom iz sela Shershintsy, regija Odesa. Radio je na gradilištu dok nije dobio kilu. Iskoristio je sav svoj novac za liječenje. Tada mu je odbijen daljnji tretman i objavljen je iz bolnice. Nije mogao raditi i postao je beskućnik. Stepan je preminuo 2018. Kijev, 2018.

Bezsmertny Stepan, 50, native of Shershintsy village, Odessa region. Worked at a construction until got the hernia. Used all his money for treatment. Then he was refused the further treatment and was checked out of the hospital. He could not work and became homeless. Stepan passed away in 2018. Kyiv, 2018.

Volodimir Čečel je siročić, 1966. Ime je dobio po Lenjinu - Volodimir Iljič. Prošle zime, Volodimiyi je prosio na ulazu u Kontraktovu metro stanicu. Želio je zimi otići u centar za odvikavanje, ali nije bilo mjesta. Živio je u "kući mrtvih", trošnoj kući na Podilu iz koje je više od deset beskućnika izneseno mrtvih. Mjesec dana kasnije, 26. veljače 2019., Volodja je umro. Kijev, 2018.

Volodymyr Chechel is an orphan, 1966. He was named after Lenin - Volodymyr Ilyich. Last winter, Volodymyr asked for alms at the entrance to Kontraktova Metro. He wanted to get to a rehab center in the winter, but there was no room. He lived in the "house of the dead", a dilapidated house in Podil, from which more than ten homeless people were carried out dead. A month later, February 26, 2019, Volodya died. Kyiv, 2018.