

UKRAINE, DENMARK, SWEDEN, FRANCE
2024, 95 MIN

SONGS OF SLOW BURNING EARTH

A film by OLHA ZHURBA

World premiere



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024
Official Selection

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 [SongsOfSlowBurningEarth](#)

 [slowburningearth.film](#)

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LOGLINE

Reflective observations of Ukraine in wartime are interwoven with eye-witness accounts to contemplate the ultimate tragedy: the normalisation of war.

SYNOPSIS

Landscapes, occasional conversations and encounters, and sounds that weave in and out of the frame compose **SONGS OF SLOW BURNING EARTH**. Captured in varying proximities to the frontline over two years, the audiovisual diary of Ukraine's immersion into the abyss of total war traces the subtle changes in Ukrainian society. The ragged chords of panic and horror of the first weeks of the Russian invasion slowly morph into the numb stillness of the acceptance of death and destruction, which eventually becomes the tragic normality for the local population, but just an afterthought for the rest of the world. Against the backdrop of the (meta)physical landscape of collective disaster, a new generation of Ukrainians aspires to imagine the future.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

“When they ask me what war is I'll answer without hesitation: it's names.”

‘A thread of sky’ from the book **Poems from the Loophole** by Maksym ‘Dali’ Kryvtsov, a Ukrainian poet and soldier, who was killed on a battlefield on January 7th, 2024. He was 33 years old.



INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR OLHA ZHURBA

by Savina Petkova, August 2024

I WANT US TO START UNPACKING THE FILM THROUGH THE EDITING. YOU WORK AS AN EDITOR ON OTHER PROJECTS AS WELL, BUT WITH DOCUMENTS OF WAR LIKE SONGS OF SLOW BURNING EARTH, IT'S ONE THING TO SHOOT THE FOOTAGE AND ANOTHER TO REVIEW IT AGAIN AND AGAIN WHEN EDITING. WHAT WAS THAT PROCESS LIKE?

Firstly, as a professional filmmaker, I've learned to build up enough distance between the material and myself personally, especially when I work in the editing room. Each time I review the footage, again and again, I'm watching it as a viewer would. But yes, this film features some scenes that were very hard to watch—both mentally and emotionally—repeatedly, even for our experienced editing team. Secondly, my way of working with documentary films involves starting the editing process as soon as possible: for example, when I have 50-60% of the material shot, I usually start to edit by myself or with another editor. Personally, I see documentary editing as a re-drafting of your script, because as documentarians, we are always pulling [material] from reality. So, when you start to edit in the middle of shooting, that's already a way of figuring out what you want to do with the film, what the next stage of development of the film should be, and what you may need more footage of. It also helps me figure out what kind of scenes this film may be missing, in order to be a completed, multi-layered story. I love editing nonfiction films, because I see that process as one that's closer to script-writing than anything else.

IS THERE A MORE BROADLY CONCEPTUAL WAY YOU APPROACH EDITING IN GENERAL THAT FEEDS INTO YOUR WORK ON THIS FILM?

We were shooting with the edit in mind. That is, when we shoot, I immediately think about what is happening, about the scene and how we need to capture those moments so we could edit it in the language of the film. I am always considering how and what to put together so that these things would give us more layers and more ways to read the film. I think of it as an emotional-logic rebus so the viewer could think on their own and draw their own conclusions. In the editing, I like to propose a direction for one's thoughts and questions, but also to give enough space for the viewer to find answers by themselves.

CONSIDERING THE FILM DOCUMENTS THE WAR FROM THE BEGINNING OF RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE, IT'S ALSO INTERESTING TO LEARN HOW THE DECISION TO START EDITING IN THE MIDDLE OF SHOOTING AFFECTED SONGS OF SLOW BURNING EARTH AND THE REST OF THE FILMING.

From the very beginning I was trying to find the core topic of the film, because as you can imagine, at the beginning of the war the process of shooting was very chaotic. In the first months of the invasion, everything felt dangerous and unpredictable and you didn't know where you could get access to film. The rules of reality had changed; it was all danger and chaos everywhere. I'd say I found the film's essence when the chaos of war calmed down slightly; when you found yourself amidst a society that has already started to adapt to war, including yourself. I understood that I wanted to transform this very experience of adjusting to a horrible reality—one you didn't choose yourself but have to accept nevertheless—into images. Also, when you're starting to edit, you need something concrete: there was this desire to keep and to show this transformation that I also have been part of as we [Ukrainians] try to cut the bonds with the Soviet past. There is one scene in the film that shows it visually, through a statue, but I don't want to spoil it. It's one example of how editing has helped me to translate a particular idea into visuals, in the ways of cinema.

THREE CINEMATOGRAPHERS SHOT THE FOOTAGE, RIGHT? CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT THEIR INPUT AND WHETHER IT WAS CHRONOLOGICAL?

We started filming at the very beginning of the full-scale invasion. Those were very chaotic times and most of us didn't know what to do. A lot of people were, of course, trying to save their families—which I would probably also have done, if I had kids—and not overthink it as much as possible. I was freer in that sense. At that time Viacheslav Tsvietkov, one of the best Ukrainian documentary cinematographers, was also able to join me for two months or so before he switched to another project. My friend Volodymyr Usyk, the cinematographer with whom I used to work on previous films, was outside of Ukraine at that time, at the beginning of the war. When he came back we started shooting straight away. Sometimes, though, he couldn't join on a shooting day, and then I invited another cinematographer Misha Lubarsky, who is also very talented. We actually have a lot of really great Ukrainian cinematographers and I really liked working with them. I'm glad that they joined this project.

IN THESE PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES OF WAR, HOW DO YOU SEE THE POSITION OF THE CAMERAPERSON? SOMEONE WHO'S DOCUMENTING FOR POSTERITY, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

I personally knew from the start that I was filming for future generations. Even before there was a film there, there was an attempt to collect and keep this footage, and to pass it on to the future. This was my initial motivation.

When the Russian full-scale invasion started in 2022, none of us knew whether we would be alive in a day, or a week, or a month, so I felt motivated to do something. All of us just wanted to do something, anything. And I'm not a person for military work, I'm bad at other things, but I was good at documenting. Then I thought that maybe I would start to collect evidence and record what was happening, without the idea of making a film out of it. I'm not a war journalist, but I was trying to keep a record because maybe this footage would help in the future. Even if we all died and Ukraine was completely occupied, I

felt this need to archive that present. That was the case for two or three months, every single moment felt charged and apocalyptic. Of course, it was heartbreaking to stand behind the camera and to witness all this pain in front of you. I kept telling myself, "Okay, I'm here because I know how to do this [filming], and I will cope with it." I strongly believe that archive footage is very important, so I had to cope with my emotions and work. Being behind the camera gives you the opportunity to see how another person with emotional distance would, but not as a witness to the war. It prevents you from going crazy. It was the illusion of doing something worthwhile that kept us going, while so many people in those months were trying to get out, to evacuate from occupied territories—the towns and villages that became the frontline—and to help each other.

PERHAPS SHOOTING HELPED YOU TO CHANNEL SOMETHING FROM YOUR OWN EMOTIONS DURING A TIME OF RADICAL UNCERTAINTY?

Yes, for me, certainly. As we see and already know, the war is still going on and we have started to get used to it, to adapt, while I found myself filming, still. At that point, I thought it [the footage] should have some form, and when the producer Darya Bassel came on board, I realised I needed to write a treatment. Not only that, but I had to figure out what the film was going to be about. I came to the conclusion that I wanted to make it [feel] as I felt it: as a part of an ongoing transformation. We [Ukraine] are still in transformation mode, and it's very hard to find the right words for it since we don't know where it will all lead.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT IDEA OF AN ONGOING TRANSFORMATION?

A transformation is not made up only of drama and violence, there are some positive things in these dark times and the changes are happening on many levels: historical, mental, social. It's a collective endeavour, not confined to a single individual. It's also important to note that I think the first stage of this transformation is over. In fact, it helped us end the filming process because I felt like we were already in the next stage of this transformation. At first, you found yourself in the middle of an apocalypse, and then you adjusted yourself to it. Yes, the camera

helped me to gain a little bit of distance and perhaps to track these transformations—not in their fullest form because I'm not God, you know—but I wanted to see as much as possible, to learn and capture a lot of things around the act of filming itself.

DOES THAT MEAN YOU DID EXTRA RESEARCH AS WELL?

Yes, I spent a lot of time reading articles, researching, and speaking to not only the Ukrainian side, but also the Russian side. I was tracking a lot of Russian channels and many so-called anti-war Russian channels, because for me, as a documentary filmmaker, it was important to try to see the situation from that side also. Whoever sees the film will see that I touched upon that arc as well, as I was trying not to be selective about the information I analysed. Unlike my previous film, this one demanded a more multi-faceted approach towards research; the situation is evolving, and there are many experts speaking on just one side, so you need to take them all into account in order to try to find a golden truth, and then transfer it into a cinematic image. So yes, filming and editing was a big part of the work on this film, but also navigating new knowledge in this ocean of information was another part of it: not to stick to one's own bubble and become blind to the wider picture of what's happening.

YOU WORKED WITH THE DANISH EDITOR MICHAEL AAGLUND ON THE EDIT. WHAT WAS THAT LIKE, IN THE CONTEXT OF ALL THIS YOU JUST SHARED?

Yes, so I was travelling [to Denmark] back and forth for a year or so as we were editing, and I experienced it as if I travelled to another universe, I should say, and then coming back [to Ukrainian reality] it also had a big impact on how the film looks now. I was trying to understand how the rest of the world was thinking. What really helped was the conversations I had with the editor—who's also a great person, not just a great editor—about the project and how people in Denmark and the rest of Europe perceive the situation. For me, this observation of a 'peaceful world' that is not at war, and reflecting on morality and the danger which people 'outside' weren't feeling—even though they should—also helped a

lot [to bring the film to where it is now]. In some sense I tried to include a warning in the film, and I hope that somebody from that 'other' world—I say "other" because it's still considered 'at peace'—would feel that this danger is not just our danger [for Ukrainians], but a bigger one for the world. This is my main reason for opting for this kind of editing and this particular ending, because for me it's crucial to make not just cinema, art, and memories for our people, but to use this art as a warning. That's why I hope somebody will read that warning.

IF WE READ SONGS OF SLOW BURNING EARTH AS A SORT OF DIARY OF THAT PERIOD BETWEEN 2022-24, IT BRINGS UP SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT ABOUT THE FORMAT ITSELF. A DIARY IS A PERSONAL ACCOUNT, BUT YOUR FILM FEELS VERY MUCH A COLLECTIVE ACCOUNT. YET IT RETAINS A DIARISTIC APPROACH IN THE WAYS IT RECORDS TIME: THERE ARE THE NORMALISED RHYTHMS OF LIFE, TIME PASSES, AND VIOLENCE BECOMES A NORMALISED PART OF IT. CAN YOU SAY MORE ABOUT THE FILM'S RELATIONSHIP TO TIME?

It's a good point that the film has these normalising episodes and scenes that include war as something that has already happened. But through all these scenes and episodes that I wanted to keep in the film, I was trying – through these two years, that stage of the war – to think how it will be read in the future.

IN THE FILM, IT FEELS LIKE WAR IS IN THE PRESENT, IN THE PAST, AND IN THE FUTURE AT ALL TIMES. DID YOU EVER CONCEPTUALISE HOW THESE THREE TENSES WILL COEXIST IN THE FILM? I'M THINKING ABOUT THAT SCENE WHERE THE TEENAGERS ARE BEING ASKED ABOUT HOW FAR IN THE FUTURE THEY CAN SEE THEMSELVES IN.

I hope that there is some sort of universalism in these episodes which could make it even more important to relate to the future. So yes, I think you may have already felt it, judging by how you phrased your question, I believe that I was making it, for the

rest of the world in the present tense, and for the people who live in Ukraine in the future tense. I hope this film will remain after my generation disappears, for the people who won't experience the war, who will be born after it, but will need to understand that time.

SOMETIMES THAT'S HOW MEMORY WORKS.

Yes. So it can be a journal for the future generations that will try to put together the puzzle of this war. And I hope that *Songs of Slow Burning Earth* will be one of these small jigsaw pieces that helps people better understand what happened, and to know the consequences of this war that will reach their future. Of course, [we should] understand that it will reach many decades into the future, and that's already affecting our present. And even if the war were to end, we will be faced with another set of difficulties and challenges. That's another reason we need to keep this evidence, as well as the reflections of the war in literature and poetry, and in art, so it will reverberate in the future.

UNFORTUNATELY, IT SEEMS LIKE WE CAN ONLY MAKE SENSE OF SUCH LARGE-SCALE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN RETROSPECT, IN A FEW GENERATIONS' TIME, IF WE'RE LUCKY. BUT THEN IT BECOMES ANOTHER GENERATION'S SECOND-HAND TRAUMA...

Yes, and since now historians are being asked about the end of the war, when it will end, and so on, and they all have only one answer. They say: "We can't say while it's still going on." So yes, we can draw some conclusions after the fact, and they can too, because that's their job: to analyse and to study the past, not the future.

IN TERMS OF THE FILM'S FORM, MOST OF THE TIME THERE IS VOICEOVER, BUT IT'S COMING FROM THE OFF-SCREEN SPACE. WE DON'T ALWAYS GET TO SEE THE SPEAKER AT ALL, AND THAT CREATES A JUXTAPOSITION. WHY DID YOU OPT FOR THAT KIND OF ASYNCHRONOUS EDITING?

You know, when people are in so much pain, when they are traumatised like that, it feels impossible to just turn the camera on and ask questions. So I often found myself recording audio only: sometimes I'd speak with people and ask questions, but sometimes I wouldn't. Instead, they would take the initiative and share their experiences and what they went through. For example, in the occupied territories, a lot of people wanted to share—they even didn't realise when they had started sharing—the stories would always be very fresh and bloody, you know, like a fresh wound. In those cases, I couldn't imagine I would just turn on the camera and start recording them. It has to do with ethics. Also, I find that when you only record audio, people usually feel more comfortable, and they have this very lively intonation and cadence that calms down whenever you turn on the camera.

IT'S NOT AN ARTISTIC CHOICE, BUT AN ETHICAL ONE...

No, it's not an artistic decision. I actually didn't conceive of any artistic decisions—even if some now exist in the finished film—at the beginning of the shooting, because I didn't think about the footage as part of the film, but more as material for future archives. That's why all the choices that we now call 'artistic' came from this motivation to just capture historical moments. It all came from reality, including the static camera set-up and the long takes. I just didn't want to be drawn in by the chaos of the first days of the war, so we understood early on that we just needed to stay still and keep the tripod still. As for the long takes, it felt important not to interrupt the recording and to make sure the future viewer could see all the details of what was happening. In the end, the editing was a process of creating a cinematic experience [that is] deeply rooted in reality.



ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

OLHA ZHURBA

Olha Zhurba is a Ukrainian film director, editor and screenwriter. Her short fiction film *DAD'S SNEAKERS* (2021) premiered at the Locarno FF and later won awards at many international festivals. *DAD'S SNEAKERS* was a candidate for a nomination at the European Film Awards 2022. *OUTSIDE* (2022) is her debut documentary, which premiered at CPH:DOX and *HOT DOGS* and won the Willy Brandt award at the Human Rights Film Festival Berlin and later the Japan Prize Award of Honor. She was also the editor of the festival hits and award-winning documentary films *THIS RAIN WILL NEVER STOP* (2021) and *HOME GAMES* (2018).

FILMOGRAPHY

Songs of Slow Burning Earth, documentary film, 95', 2024

Ukrainian Factory, documentary film, 25', 2024

Outside, documentary film, 79', 2022

Dad's Sneakers, fiction film, 20', 2021

ABOUT PRODUCERS

DARYA BASSEL | PRODUCER

Darya is an internationally acclaimed Ukrainian film producer. Darya began creating movies as a professional in 2013. She worked as a production manager or line producer on such titles as SICKFUCKPEOPLE (directed by Jury Rechinsky, best documentary at Sarajevo IFF 2014), UGLY (directed by Jury Rechinsky, Rotterdam IFF 2017), and VOLCANO (directed by Roman Bondarchuk, Karlovy Vary 2018). She worked as an associate producer and festival agent on MY FATHER IS MY MOTHER'S BROTHER, directed by Vadym Ilkov, which won the award for most innovative feature film at Visions du Réel in 2018. In 2019, Darya established the Moon Man production company with Vika Khomenko. Together they have produced and co-produced a number of award-winning documentary and fiction films. In 2022 Darya produced BUTTERFLY VISION (directed by Maksym Nakonechnyi) for Tabor Production, which premiered in the Un Certain Regard programme at Cannes 2022.

ANNE KÖHNCKE | CO-PRODUCER

Anne is a Norwegian born producer, based in Denmark since 1997, where in 2009 she co-founded the six-time Oscar®-nominated production company Final Cut for Real together with Signe Byrge Sørensen. In 2019 she established Final Cut for Real Norway. She divides her time between Scandinavia and France, and works with Nordic and international directors. Prior to producing, she worked as a commissioning editor of documentaries at the Danish public broadcaster DR2 and as a sales executive at TV2 World. She holds an MA in film from the University of Copenhagen, is a graduate of EAVE, and a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She has produced a number of award-winning creative documentaries which have played at festivals like Sundance, Berlinale, Telluride, TIFF, Rotterdam, Sheffield, IDFA, Hotdocs and CPH:DOX.

KERSTIN ÜBELACKER | CO-PRODUCER

Kerstin Übelacker is a film producer based in Sweden. She has produced and directed several films which have been screened at Locarno, GIFF, CPH:DOX and Tempo, and has also been nominated for a Guldbagge. Kerstin started her career as a producer at Momento Film in Stockholm and WG Film in Malmö. Today she runs the company We Have a Plan, which specialises in film production and post production with grading, sound design and VFX. Kerstin has attended Eurodoc, Twelve For the Future and Impact Producers Lab, and between 2017 and 2023 she was the Swedish representative on the Nordisk Panorama board. Between 2008 and 2012, Kerstin built up the Doc Lounge documentary screening network from a single venue to one which spans 14 cities in four different Scandinavian countries. Kerstin has studied film in Australia, and also has a masters' degree in film from Gothenburg University.

ABOUT PRODUCTION COMPANIES

MOON MAN PRODUCTION (UKRAINE)

Moon Man was founded in 2019 by multidisciplinary professionals experienced in both film production and cultural management & festival distribution. The company focuses on creative documentary and fiction films with a strong authorial approach and the distinctive nerve of reality. The first Moon Man title was the documentary feature *OUTSIDE*, directed by Olha Zhurba (selected festivals: CPH:DOX, Hot Docs, Millenium Docs Against Gravity, Sheffield Doc/Fest). Moon Man co-produced the award-winning, Oscar-nominated documentary *A HOUSE MADE OF SPLINTERS* (directed by Simon Lereng Wilmont) and the highly acclaimed *INTERCEPTED* by Oksana Karpovych (Ecumenical Jury Special Mention at Berlinale 2024, *SILVER HORN* at the Krakow Film Festival 2024, Best International Documentary at the Galway Film Fleadh 2024). In 2024 Moon Man premiered the political satire *THE EDITORIAL OFFICE* directed by Roman Bondarchuk at the Berlinale.

Currently, Moon Man is developing several fiction and documentary titles by award-winning filmmakers including Iryna Tsilyk, Kateryna Gornostai, Roman Bondarchuk, and Vadym Ilkov.

FINAL CUT FOR REAL (DENMARK)

Final Cut for Real is a six-time Oscar® nominated production company based in Copenhagen, Denmark, which producers Signe Byrge Sørensen and Anne Köhncke founded in 2009. The company is dedicated to producing high-end, creative documentaries and fiction for the international market.

FCfR works with young directors as well as established talent to create a productive mixture of experience and innovative approaches to filmmaking. Its titles include *A HOUSE MADE OF SPLINTERS* by Simon Lereng Wilmont (Oscar® nominated 2023, Best Directing Award at Sundance 2022), *FLEE* (2021) by Jonas Poher Rasmussen (3 Oscar® nominations, 3 European Film Awards et al.), *THE DISTANT BARKING OF DOGS* (2017) by Simon Lereng Wilmont (IDFA Best First Appearance Award), the Oscar®-nominated *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* (2014) and the Oscar®-nominated *THE ACT OF KILLING* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer.

WE HAVE A PLAN (SWEDEN)

We Have a Plan is a production company based in Sweden which started in 2020. The company consists of two departments: Kerstin Übelacker heads the production department producing documentaries, fiction shorts and animation, and Michael Cavanagh runs the post-production part that offers grading, audio, VFX, mastering and deliveries. In 2023 our first films premiered at numerous film festivals, got a special mention at Locarno, and was nominated for a Guldbagge.

ORIGINAL TITLE: Пісні землі, що повільно горить /
Pisni zemli, shcho povilno horyt'

INTERNATIONAL TITLE: Songs of Slow Burning Earth

COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION: Ukraine, Denmark,
Sweden, France

RELEASE: Venice IFF 2024

RUNNING TIME: 95 min

FORMAT: DCP

LANGUAGE: Ukrainian, Russian

SUBTITLES: English, Italian

PRODUCTION: Moon Man in co-production
with Final Cut for Real, We Have a Plan, Arte France
and Film i Skåne

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Europe, the Swedish Film Institute, Chicken &
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CREDITS

DIRECTOR AND WRITER Olha Zhurba

CINEMATOGRAPHERS Volodymyr Usyk,
Viacheslav Tsvietkov, Misha Lubarsky

EDITOR Michael Aaglund

MUSIC Yaroslav Tatarchenko (BUNHT)

SOUND Pavlo Melnyk

PRODUCER Darya Bassel (Moon Man / Ukraine)

CO-PRODUCERS Anne Köhncke
(Final Cut for Real / Denmark),
Kerstin Übelacker (We Have a Plan / Sweden)

ABOUT THE FILM'S PROTAGONISTS

attending the world premiere



HANNA VASYK
(37 YEARS OLD, KYIV)

Arts manager, Master of Political Science, and Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophical Anthropology and Cultural Philosophy, Junior Sergeant in the Armed Forces of Ukraine

Before the full-scale war, she worked as a top manager in the creative industries, leading the largest Ukrainian projects in contemporary art and electronic music over the past 10 years.

In June 2023, she joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a combat medic in an evacuation team of the 78th Special Forces Regiment «Hertz» of the Air Assault Troops. Currently, she is responsible for recruitment for the Armed Forces of Ukraine at the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.



MYKHAILO PURYSHEV
(38 YEARS OLD, MARIUPOL)

A businessman from Mariupol and father of four children.

Before the full-scale war, he owned the EVO Game restaurant. After the full-scale invasion, he evacuated his family to Ivano-Frankivsk but returned to temporarily occupied Mariupol, where he started

volunteering by delivering food and medicine under shelling.

He became the first volunteer to obtain permission from the Russians to enter the occupied Mariupol city. During six trips in March-April 2022, he helped thousands of Ukrainians escape from occupation.

Currently, together with his team, he continues to work in frontline areas, establishing «Points of Invincibility» which are support centers to aid civilians and the military. It's places where people can access heat, water, electricity, mobile communication, the internet, rest areas, first aid kits, and receive free food and water, as well as services like showering, charging devices, and doing laundry.



MYKOLA HRADNOV-SAVYTSKYI,
CALLSIGN «ALFI» (30 YEARS OLD, KYIV)

A war veteran and fighter of The 12th Special Operations Brigade «Azov» of the National Guard of Ukraine, actor and director.

Before the full-scale war, Mykola was an actor and director, working at the «Wild Theatre» and the «DAKH» Contemporary Art Center, and producing films.

In 2022, he joined the National Guard of Ukraine as a UAV operator. In March 2024, while performing combat missions in the Donetsk direction, he sustained severe injuries, namely a complete traumatic amputation of both legs. He is currently undergoing rehabilitation and prosthetics at the Superhumans Center with the support of the Patronage Service «Angels of Azov.» Together with his wife, he continues to actively raise funds for his Azov brigade.