



BOMBARDED: Ruins at Mariupol's steel works where Azovstal fighters fought until they dropped

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft 

DESPITE their harrowing experience, Lieutenant Arsenii Fedosiuk and his wife Yuliia consider themselves lucky. Having been captured by the Russians in May 2022, Arsenii was finally released after seven months as a prisoner of war and the couple were reunited. The courageous Ukrainian soldier's freedom, however, came with a heavy price. As a decorated hero of the siege of Mariupol and a member of the famous Azov Brigade, he still bears the physical and mental scars of imprisonment after being beaten and tortured for days on end by his Russian captors. This week, Arsenii and Yuliia Fedosiuk, both 31, are visiting London as part of a six-person delegation to champion the cause of Ukrainian POWs, particularly Azov fighters, still being held by Russia in the most appalling conditions.

Over the past two years Yuliia and Kateryna Prokopenko, another wife of a former POW and part of the delegation, have become public symbols for the struggle of Ukrainian prisoners to be given better rights and, eventually, their freedom.

The two women have travelled to the US, Israel and all over Europe representing the Association of Azovstal Defenders' Families, which they founded in the spring of 2022.

"Our main goal now is to support our prisoners of war: more than 900 Azov fighters are still being held in Russian prisons," says Yuliia in an exclusive interview.

"I know how bad the conditions are because of what happened to my husband. In fact, when I saw him for the first time after his release, I did not recognise him. He looked awful, like a skeleton, after losing more than 30lbs in weight."

The all-out war in Ukraine, which started with Russia's invasion of its neighbour on February 24, 2022, has borne countless tragedies but the treatment of Ukrainian POWs remains one of the most shameful consequences of the 27-month conflict. Today there are more than 10,000 Ukrainian POWs in Russian custody, some of whom have been held captive for more than two years.

An estimated 3,000 Ukrainian POWs, including 200 Azov soldiers, have been released from Russia in prisoner exchanges since the war began. Most return with stories of brutality at the hands of their captors.

As Ukraine's war with Russia reaches a critical stage, Arsenii and Yuliia hope to rally international support for the POWs and, eventually, to help amass evidence for charges of war crimes against their Russian captors.

The couple's personal story from the past decade is both inspiration and a triumph over adversity. Arsenii was a 21-year-old student when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and other areas of eastern Ukraine in 2014.

He initially joined a volunteer battalion in July 2014 to defend his country, before being recruited into the Azov Brigade in 2016.

"I was prepared to sacrifice a period of my life to Ukraine's struggle," he tells me.

The following year he "met" Yuliia over Instagram, before they started chatting and,

Even after seven months of torture and starvation,

I'M ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES...

Lieutenant Arsenii Fedosiuk and his wife Yuliia, who has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of POWs, share horrifying details of his ordeal with Lord Ashcroft as they demand urgent assistance for the estimated 10,000 Ukrainians held captive by Russia

Pictures: ARSENI FEDIOSIUK; AFP

later, dating. The couple were married in May 2018. When Mariupol was attacked in February 2022, Arsenii was serving in the rank of sergeant and he was determined to defend the city that lies in the south-east of Ukraine, close to the border with Russia.

By late April, he had become one of the courageous soldiers trapped inside the Azovstal steel plant. By this point, too, he had been wounded by shrapnel from an artillery shell that, to this day, remains in his right leg – he describes it as a "souvenir" of his time defending Mariupol.

Arsenii became convinced he would die as the Russian forces bombarded the steel plant. "It was like a scene from the film *Apocalypse Now*. I felt we had no chance to win and no chance to save ourselves," he says.

It was in May 2022 that his wife and Kateryna, the wife of Colonel Denys Prokopenko, the commander of the Azov Brigade, began their global campaign to

highlight the plight of the Azovstal defenders, including travelling to Rome to meet the Pope. By this point, some 3,000 men were trapped in the steelworks as the last pocket of resistance. Some 600 were wounded, many seriously.

Then, on May 20, 2022, Colonel Prokopenko surrendered after stating in a final video message: "The higher military command has given the order to save the lives of the soldiers of our garrison and to stop defending the city." All the Mariupol defenders were taken as POWs.

Yuliia still feared for her husband's safety, even after he became a POW. "I knew the Russians hated Azov soldiers so much because they are true patriots and brave men who will fight to the end," she says today. "I knew his captivity would be very difficult."

Her fears were not misplaced. For the first four months, Arsenii was held at a prison in

Olenivka, close to the city of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. He was held in a small cell with seven other prisoners in the most basic conditions. With two meagre meals a day, he lost weight quickly.

HOWEVER, Arsenii's treatment became far worse when he was transferred to a Russian prison in the port of Taganrog in September 2022. Between around 10am and 6pm for days on end, Arsenii was interrogated and brutally tortured.

"I can tell you that the worst days in the Mariupol steel plant were still better than the best days in captivity," Arsenii tells me.

Arsenii, who is 6ft with fair hair and a beard, says he was beaten by several men when he gave answers that his interrogator



LOVING UNION: Arsenii and Yuliia Fedosiuk, main. Right, a young Arsenii back in 2014



PLEA FOR HELP: Kateryna Prokopenko and Yuliia visit Vatican in May 2022 to appeal for assistance from the Pope for the trapped defenders of Mariupol

in this game." Although Yuliia hopes one day Russia's war crimes will be punished, she accepts this is not realistic at present.

"The only justice we can have for now is on the battlefield. International law is not working as it should," she says.

The treatment of Ukrainian POWs has alarmed not just Ukraine but also the international community. There have undoubtedly been constant breaches of the Geneva Convention.

PRISONERS have been beaten and electrocuted, while many have received broken bones and had their teeth knocked out. There have been widespread allegations of mock executions, waterboarding and other mistreatment. Many badly injured prisoners had not received proper medical treatment.

Even worse, dozens of Ukrainian soldiers are believed to have been murdered after surrendering. After Ukraine surrendered the eastern city of Avdiivka in February this year, it was reported that at least six soldiers had been executed by Russian forces after they laid down their guns.

Similarly, in the same month, it was reported that nine Ukrainian POWs had been executed near Bakhmut.

Ukraine has allowed human rights groups access to Russian POWs – whereas similar access to Ukrainian POWs is denied in Russia. There is no doubt that Russian POWs are generally treated far better than their Ukrainian counterparts.

Arsenii and Yuliia Fedosiuk hope eventually that the war will end with a Ukrainian victory and the release of all Ukrainian POWs. (Kateryna's husband, Denys, was released from Russian captivity in September 2022.)

From a personal viewpoint, they hope, for the first time, that they can then enjoy a normal married life with shared adventures.

Yuliia will perhaps return to her pre-war job as the assistant to an MP and they hope to start a family.

"For the first time, we can relax," Yuliia says.

At present, however, their future remains on hold. Arsenii combines his role campaigning for POWs with commanding a sniper unit that is operating close to the frontline city of Lyman.

"For now, it is hard for me to make plans for more than one week ahead. For now, my priority is to ensure Ukraine continues as a sovereign, independent state."

● *Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft. Anyone wishing to donate to the Association of Azovstal Defenders' Families should visit azovstalfamilies.com/en/donate*

