

Izium: Facing the Hell of the Russian Invasion

By ANNE WHITE

Greenwich's new sister city, Izium, is considered the gateway to Donbas region, a Russian-speaking area whose complete capture has been Russia's key war aim since the beginning of the conflict. It is considered a passage to the Black Sea, and thus referred to as the Izium passage by the Russians. Liberated on September 10th after months of Russian occupation, it remains a concentration of war crimes, the subject of in-depth investigations by international human rights organizations.

As reported by the *Vatican News* after a visit

to Izium, while some cities like Kharkiv have seen rapid reconstruction, Izium still bears the scars of war. The gutted buildings, gaping chasms in the streets, and homes left with only their facades standing serve as constant reminders of the horrors they have endured.

The toll of the conflict is evident not only in the city's infrastructure but also in the lives lost, horrors endured.

Innocent children, such as the eight and three-year-old killed in a blast, were among 51 casualties in Izium, their bodies were discovered under the rubble

The city's dark underground revealed even

more disturbing details of the occupation. Police chief Dmytro Hrachak unveiled a site where civilian prisoners were held and tortured in eleven cells, two beds each, held over a hundred prisoners using sinks as toilets. Civilians were subjected to unspeakable violence with evidence of the repeated rape of six women.

Beyond the physical evidence of torture, the city is haunted by the makeshift cemetery on Shakespeare Street, where 425 civilians and 22 soldiers were buried, Catholics and Orthodox. These graves, marked by wooden crosses, were laced with mines by the Russians presumably to demoralize and prevent family from making

proper burials. They have since been de-mined and the bodies removed.

Despite the devastation, there are locals are eager to rebuild their city and welcome back those who were forced to flee.

A symbolic mural painted by two boys in the town square depicts the "Cossack," a legendary hero from the 15th-16th centuries and a popular Ukrainian cartoon character in the 1960s and 1970s. This mural represents the resilience and determination of the people of Izium to reconstruct not only their city but also their nation's identity.

idea, the current situation in Izium, and the resilience of its people.

The idea of establishing a sister city relationship between Greenwich and a Ukrainian city was inspired by a similar program between Westport, CT, and Lyman, Ukraine. Olga said, "I thought the town of Greenwich should be doing something like this and being proud of our community and all the things that we continuously do to help each other and our ability to be able to help others." Izium was chosen because of its similarities in population, geography, and history to Greenwich. Moreover, both cities have a population filled with knowledgeable and sophisticated people living just outside a large city.

Life in Izium remains challenging, however, Olga is inspired by the strength and resilience of the people. She said, "They don't give up. They just keep going and they want to come back, and they want to rebuild, and they want to have their community and homes back and be able to have their children go back to school, to play and smile."

Despite the ongoing conflict and devastation, the residents of Izium continue to display determination and hope. Children attend school through mobile apps, and families move around to find safer locations. The establishment of a sister city relationship with Greenwich helps inspire hope in Izium and its people.

Olga sees the sister city program as an opportunity for cultural exchange and a symbol of solidarity between the two communities. "This announcement is particularly special because it was just over a year ago when this all started, we got together and we showed that we were standing with Ukraine, and now we're solidifying that solidarity even more so by having a twin city (or a sister city), and forever we'll be able to have these cultural exchanges and knowledge and a home in Ukraine and vice versa," she said.

This partnership marks an important step towards rebuilding and restoring the community of Izium. Through collaboration and partnership, the sister city program between Greenwich and Izium aims to make a lasting impact on the lives of the people who call these cities their homes.

Olga envisions both short-term and long-term goals for the sister city program. In the short term, fundraising efforts will help restore and rebuild Izium, including schools, hospitals, and homes. The long-term goal is to establish deep cultural and educational exchanges between Greenwich and Izium, allowing for high school students and cultural institutions to connect and learn from each other.

In the interview, Litvinenko explained her hopes for the sister city program, stating that her short-term goal is to fundraise and rebuild Izium with the help of the Greenwich community, while her long-term goal is to establish a deep cultural and educational exchange between Greenwich and Izium. This could include regular communication between high school students, artistic collaborations, and even exchanges of students for summer camp programs or high school symphony performances.

"Long term," she explained, "it's just really having this deep

Support from Local Organizations and Elected Officials

In attendance to show support for the effort were representatives from the Greenwich Rotary, State Senator Ryan Fazio, State Representatives Hector Arzeno and Rachel Khanna, Town Clerk Jackie Budkins, Town Tax Collector Heather Smeriglio, and others.

Sally Parris, of the Greenwich Rotary, said that several weeks ago Olga Litvinenko spoke at the Greenwich Rotary Club and they "were very impressed with her endeavors."

"In fact," Parris went on to explain, "we've been following her processes over the last several months, and the Rotary, we're trying to get all the Rotary clubs in our district to collaborate to get a matching grant from our clubs to support Olga's efforts in the Ukraine, and we are here today to support her collaboration with the town of Greenwich and her incredible efforts."

State Rep. Hector Arzeno said he shared Litvinenko's enthusiasm for the sister city relationship, stating, "I participate at the Christ Church food drives that we have for Ukraine and today I am a proud citizen of Greenwich. Seeing this with Izium and that we will be there for them and ready to support them all the way to the end, I'm sure we will win."

The sentiment was echoed by State Rep. Rachel Khanna, who expressed her excitement for the potential cultural exchanges and collaborations between the two cities. She said, "It's important because we need to show that we're standing with them in their quest for peace and justice and hopefully we will. That will bring further collaboration and exchanges and information and ideas and that's important for both Izium and Greenwich."

State Senator Ryan Fazio lent his support to the new partnership, emphasizing the importance of standing in solidarity with the people of Izium and Ukraine as they face a "horrible invasion." He lauded the efforts of the Ukrainian American community in Greenwich and Stamford, particularly Litvinenko and Lazar, who have been "unbelievable leaders in our community and for their countrymen and in Ukraine as well."

And we support their charitable efforts, which have been phenomenal, raising tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid for the people of Ukraine who are under siege. There are so many reasons to support this relationship and I'm very proud of Greenwich and Izium for the new friendship and partnership."

As plans for a fundraiser to support Izium are being finalized, the people of Greenwich and their counterparts in Ukraine stand united, their sister city relationship a shining example of the power of human connection, compassion, and resilience in the face of adversity.

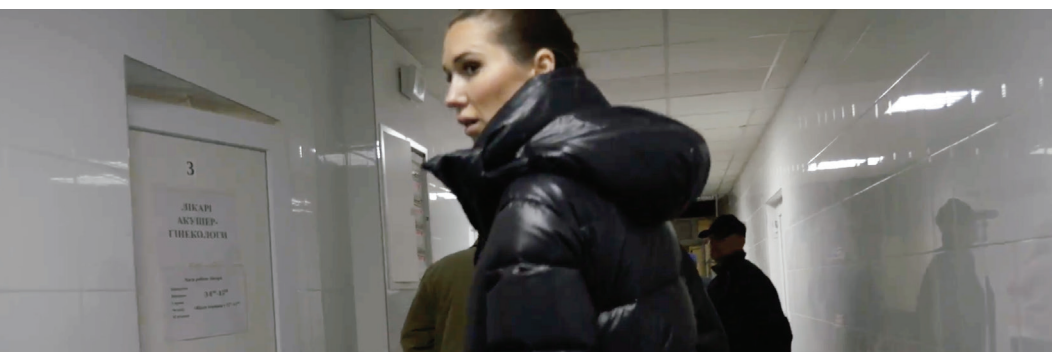
USA for Ukraine, the organization founded by Lazar and Litvinenko, will continue to raise funds and collect donations to help those affected by the war in Ukraine.

An Exclusive Interview with Olga Litvinenko

In a recent interview, Olga Litvinenko discussed the origins of the



Above: Images from a video produced by USA for Ukraine show life in Izium before the attack. A festival takes place in a town square "very similar to Greenwich Avenue" according to Litvinenko.



Top: images from a video produced by USA for Ukraine show the same square after the brief occupation by Russian forces.
Above: Olga Litvinenko tours the hospital in Izium, only part of which is still usable.
Below: Izium's cross and statue of Our Lady still stand although damaged.



Olga tours a school in Izium which is still mostly functional needing new flooring and new windows but with a sound structure overall. Repairs of the school are one of the main priorities so that children in Izium can resume school and a sense of community.

relationship and knowledge, a share of knowledge and share of cultural experiences." Short term, USA for Ukraine is putting on a fundraiser and we may even do multiple fundraisers to facilitate the Greenwich community and companies who are based in Greenwich help rebuild Izium. "I think that'll be really, really special to be able to say that we, the town of Greenwich are standing with Izium, and not only that, but we've helped them come back and helped the families come back and help the community come together. That's my hope."

Litvinenko continued, "It's a lot of funding because there was a lot of damage, but even if we start with something - rebuilding the school, the hospital, some of the homes. We can focus on the exteriors, the windows and getting essential items to families, helping with essential heating as well. Then slowly, but surely, the families and the community is able to come home and start living their life and how they used to live before the physical war. My hope is to restore, rebuild, get them back on their feet, help them, and then long term, it's to really to have this great relationship between the two."

To achieve these goals, Litvinenko urges people to donate to USA for Ukraine. The organization will be working directly with the Mayor of Izium and certified construction companies, as well as logistics providers to prioritize and rebuild the city. Through these efforts, the sister city program aims to not only provide essential support to Izium but also foster a lasting relationship between the two cities that transcends borders and enriches both communities.

Poignant Video

In a moving visual tour, Litvinenko takes us on an immersive journey through the city of Izium, providing a unique perspective on its schools, hospitals, and daily challenges faced by its residents. To gain a deeper understanding of Izium's resilience and spirit, watch the video here: <https://youtu.be/ZHSIIQAq9I> or on USA for Ukraine's homepage at www.usaforukr.org.

PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, The Town of Greenwich, Connecticut has established sister city relationships in multiple countries; and

WHEREAS, the city of Izium, Ukraine has suffered terribly since the beginning of the war more than a year ago and is a place much like Greenwich close to a major population center and filled with a diverse population; and

WHEREAS, We want to show our support for Ukraine during this terrible time of war and violence as we continue to hope for peace; and

WHEREAS, a sister city relationship with Izium would not only show Greenwich's kinship with everyone suffering in Ukraine but also establish an everlasting connection with this city as we hope it can thrive again; and

WHEREAS, We look forward to the day when the war has ended and we can all meet together in celebration of this special relationship between our homes through the exchange of culture, knowledge and experiences; and

WHEREAS, the people of Izium and Ukraine as a whole will always find a warm welcome for them here in Greenwich just as we know the people of Greenwich will always be welcome there.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, FRED CAMILLO, FIRST SELECTMAN OF THE TOWN OF GREENWICH, do hereby proclaim Monday, April 17, 2023 that we have officially begun a sister city relationship with IZUM, UKRAINE and urge all members of our community to join me in showing our support for this country during the war and embracing an everlasting solidarity with the people of our new sister city.

Izium Mayor Requests Equipment, Infrastructure, and Support for City's Reconstruction

Mayor Valeriy Marchenko of Izium, Ukraine, sent a heartfelt letter to the First Selectman Fred Camillo, detailing the extensive damage inflicted upon the city during the Russian-Ukrainian war and appealing for humanitarian assistance.

The letter highlights the large-scale destruction of infrastructure, civilian casualties, looting, and destruction of municipal equipment in Izium during Russia's hostilities and six-month occupation. As the warm season approaches, local residents have started returning to their homes, with more expected to follow suit. However, the city faces a dire shortage of financial and logistical resources.

Mayor Marchenko's letter outlines a comprehensive list of needs to restore Izium's housing stock, rebuild social and critical infrastructure, and provide necessary utilities to the population. Among the requested items are specialized municipal equipment such as garbage trucks, loader cranes, graders, and police vehicles, as well as support for reconstructing schools, kindergartens, and housing.

The appeal also includes the restoration of the pedestrian bridge over the Siverskyi Donets River, repairing the street lighting network, restoring water and heating supply systems in apartment buildings, and providing office equipment for social services and administrative centers.

As the city continues to recover, Mayor Marchenko expressed gratitude in advance for Greenwich's consideration of their request. He emphasized that the aid would expedite Ukraine's reconstruction efforts and bring the nation closer to victory.



Olga Wears Ukrainian designer, Katya Silchenko

Litvinenko also chose to make a statement at the announcement event by donning an outfit designed by renowned Ukrainian designer, Katya Silchenko.

Silchenko, the founder of the prêt-à-porter womens-wear brand "The Coat," established her company in 2014 amidst the challenging times of revolution in Ukraine. Through her tenacity and adaptability, Silchenko's designs have found a loyal following both in Ukraine and around the world. Her collections, known for their color blocking, sustainability, and custom tailoring, are inspired by strong, passionate women.

In a poignant nod to her homeland, Silchenko's Spring-Summer 2023 collection was created while Ukraine defended its independence and struggled to preserve its legacy. The collection, rich with the brand's signature color codes and traditional Ukrainian silhouettes, prints, and embroidery, was showcased in Pyrohiv, an open-air national museum of folk architecture and life.

Silchenko's commitment to showcasing Ukrainian culture and representing her country with pride is evident in her work. As Litvinenko took to the stage in a custom piece by Silchenko, she showcased the work of those in Ukraine that are continuing on with their lives, businesses, and careers in the face of great adversity.

To make a donation go to www.usaforukr.org.



Above: Dr. Inna Lazar and Olga Litvinenko facilitate the official announcement of Greenwich and Izium becoming sister cities on April 17, 2023 at the Greenwich Town Hall.
Right: Olga Litvinenko wears a Ukrainian designer.
Below: Selectwoman Lauren Rabin, Olga Litvinenko, First Selectman Fred Camillo, Dr. Inna Lazar, and Selectwoman Janet Stone McGuigan present the official proclamation.

