

The New City of Igor Kozlovsky

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Albert Schweitzer set it as a goal to make his life the argument for his philosophy. Igor Kozlovsky, Ukrainian philosopher, historian, student of religions, and prisoner of conscience, who fell asleep on September 6, drew his philosophy of life from personal experience and shared its arguments with everyone who knew him, read him, listened to him, loved him. . . .

“Only the thoughts by which we live have any value”—by quoting these words of Hermann Hesse in his lectures, Igor Kozlovsky clearly explained what responsibility anyone who utters them takes upon himself. To realize the depth of this responsibility is the starting point of the path towards freedom from cynical manipulation with words that do not correspond to the actions of those who utter them, who have made such manipulation a norm. From this starting point grow the values in the soul of each person as well as in the ideologies of whole countries.

The war within which we all live today has brought the problem of banal human hypocrisy to the level of a global tragedy of mankind. Lies kill. Technologies of propaganda provide fake news to the media on an industrial basis, thereby destroying all correspondence between facts and uttered words. Some trust them by half or by one third, and with time the level of

trust in society falls lower and lower. Or it does not fall; this was the case in Russia. Citations from sacred texts were manipulated during the whole long path of the war of Russia on Ukraine, ever since 2014. Kozlovsky opposed it on the highest intellectual level, sharing the truth contained in history, religion, and the culture of mankind with everyone who wanted to hear it.

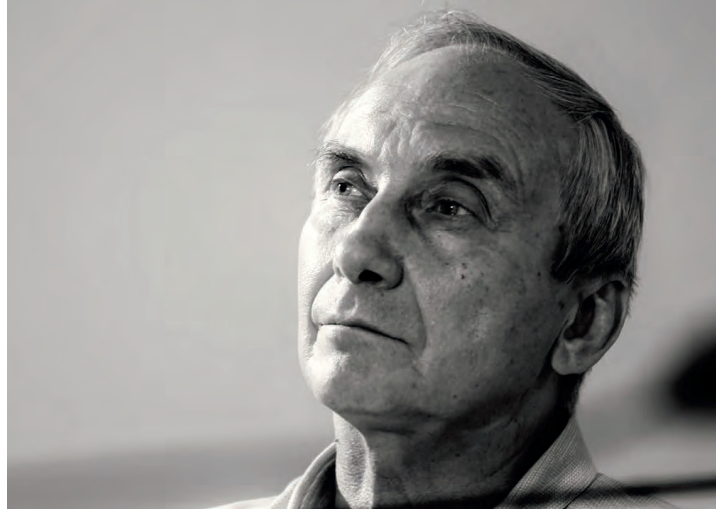
In the spring of 2014, in Russia-occupied Donetsk, Igor Kozlovsky, together with representatives of various professions and religions, participated in regular prayers for peace in the center of the city. Among the participants in these dangerous meetings were many of his former students and others who had known him as an outstanding scholar of religion whose words never conflicted with deeds.

After the occupying authorities prohibited this public activity, Igor Kozlovsky did not leave Donetsk. He remained in his home city with his son, who needed medical, psychological and simply human support. In the time before his arrest Igor Kozlovsky tirelessly reminded his students and everyone who would listen, that human dignity is a field we work on in our inner world. It is precisely such practical philosophy that helps overcome the most terrible trials.

Igor Kozlovsky fully justified his words when he became a prisoner of conscience. On January 27, 2016, the occupants of Donetsk put him in prison for his pro-Ukrainian position. The scholar was interrogated by officers of the FSB [the Russian Federal Security Service] and underwent harsh torture. He spent almost two years—700 days—in captivity. Ukraine, together with many world organizations, fought for his release. At the interrogations, his torturers cynically told the scholar that they no longer hoped to extract any necessary information from him but were retaining him as a bargaining chip. On December 27, 2017 Igor Kozlovsky was in fact exchanged and released from jail.

I have seen people who committed suicide in prison cells, I saw people go mad from inner pain. Because when there is no escaping outside, many try to escape inside and create an inner construct for hiding. One evades contact. This often happens because a person lacks inner space and enters a state of existential vacuum, he implodes, he suffocates. . . . To work with such a person is difficult, but it is possible. You need to show him the meaning. And any meaning has only one name— love. Meaning is a spiritual notion, not a material one. I say that it was meaningful for me to survive. I wanted to survive because I love life. Without that it is impossible to survive.¹

After his release Igor Kozlovsky lived in a rented apartment in Kyiv and worked as a senior research worker in the Department of Religious Studies of the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukraine. He traveled indefatigably and gave extraordinary talks at world forums,



having become the voice of Ukrainian prisoners, the ambassador of solidarity with those persecuted for the truth.

Igor Kozlovsky.
Author's personal
archive.

In his profound interviews, in his lectures filled with genuine wisdom, in personal conversations, Igor Kozlovsky developed a key leitmotif. Not only with his words but with his whole being he freed us from fear of the worst things, of absolute evil. His candid testimony to the ability of a human being to go through hell and not to break, to preserve one's dignity, had an unforgettable influence on me personally and on many of our contemporaries. The presence of such a man in our life, the openness of our life to his vision and his testimony became a source of courage. His terrible experience and the courage and wisdom he showed in response made Igor Kozlovsky absolutely unique among the people I have met in my life.

In September 2021, I recorded an hour-and-a-half-long dialogue with Kozlovsky pondering the theme of dignity in the life of people and society. I saw in him the living continuation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thought about two main issues of our time: the deepening of inner life and righteous acts of solidarity with those who have

¹ Igor Kozlovsky, video interview, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-qMYve5DzYE>.

acute need of it. Igor Kozlovsky said at the time:

Dignity is truthfulness, inner as well as external. . . . Truth is when you are responsible on all levels, when you have an answer to the questions “Who are you?” and “For the sake of what are you?” Truth reminds you about the way your inner nature ought to correspond to your actions and your words. The initial moment of any spiritual practice, any spiritual life consists in observing yourself so as not to betray this truthfulness. In one way or another we instinctively, by nature, want to respond not to ourselves, but to circumstances, to mass culture, to the demands of society. And very often we are capable of forgetting about ourselves, about our own inner truth, our own non-accidental presence in this world, our movement toward realizing the mission related to this non-accidentalness. It is the system of values that shapes precisely this truthful inner horizon that you are working on.²

He saw the cornerstone for reflection in the practice mentioned in the Gospel of St. Luke: “Take heed to yourselves!” (Luke 17:3). Constant inner watchfulness and self-observation formed the link with which he pulled

the whole chain of tradition out of the shadow of inertia and routine, to say nothing of distortion.

I invited Igor Kozlovsky to take part in the Summer Institute [the Kyiv Summer Theological Institute] in August 2019 in Kyiv. Among his grateful listeners was Marguerite Lena, a French philosopher and the author of the book *The Spirit of Education*. She particularly noticed Igor Kozlovsky’s profound thought: “Dignity, maturity, freedom, humaneness are called to transform education and become the key features of the new period in the life of our country.”

If there is any hope our thought may lean on despite the ongoing darkness of the present, it is this simple certitude: we live in the epoch of Igor Kozlovsky. (I imagine how sincerely amused he would be if I had hinted at it to him earlier: his genuine modesty would not have allowed such thought.) But we have been given a chance to accept and make our own the real experience of our contemporary who responded to the fundamental challenges of this war. This man’s insights will remain with us for a long time.

Igor Kozlovsky’s early death on September 6 was a shock for us all. He had never said a word about the

² Igor Kozlovsky interviewed by Konstantin Sigov, July 9, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVov-FaavkRw>

Kozlovsky and Sigov with students. Author’s personal archive.





consequences the tortures in prison had for his heart. What price did he pay for not concealing and betraying his convictions when he found himself in the hands of the experts in crippling and breaking “the enemy”? He looked into the eyes of those who were destroying his native city, who brought uricide to Donetsk. He helped as best as he could his fellow citizens who became his fellow inmates.

After the evening torture by electric shocks, the morning wake-up call in prison was the Russian-Soviet hymn blaring from the loudspeaker. Thrown into solitary confinement for a protest, Igor Kozlovsky stood up alone and sang the hymn of his free country. In response came the foul language of GULAG. But he did not admit even an echo of his torturers’ curses into his language. He allowed none of it, even by way of parody.

It is amazing how free he could be there, in this den of inhumanity. Once freed, he, without any note of heroism, with inimitable simplicity, composure, and humor, shared with us that which has now turned out to be vital: “The human being exists when humaneness exists. We should not imitate the beastly actions of the enemy.

We should give examples of humaneness, serving as volunteers, as chaplains, and so forth. The duty of love has no bounds: it can be bestowed wherever you are at any given moment. To say a kind word, to give simple human warmth to someone who needs it. This allows you to live, gives you strength.”

His words felt as natural as a handshake, they held you up in life, prevented you from stumbling, from betraying humaneness.

Not only Kozlovsky’s students, but people of our age and even older became his disciples, often without being aware of it. By unexpectedly and appropriately citing a line from haiku or a psalm, he transformed the mechanical elements of the educational process. With his truly encyclopedic knowledge he never crushed others; he included one, weaved one into a friendly conversation. As a pedagogue, he preserved friendly relations with his students for many years, and whatever lands their destiny took them to, they always remained within his field of vision. And during his captivity the voices of his friends rang out throughout the whole world. They spoke about *philia*—love-friendship—which revealed a human dimension in gestures and actions.

He inspired new listeners in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities by his boundless friendliness, the friendliness of an open and generous man (in whom his prison torturers saw a mere enemy, as they tried through torture to instill in him their own view of the world). His smile spoke better than any dogmatic formula: You need no longer fear death, just like the one who went through death and is now speaking with you.

Kozlovsky and
Konstantin Sigov.
Author’s personal
archive

It was precisely my conversations with Igor Kozlovsky that I recalled on the night of February 24, 2022, on the eve of the first bombardment of Kyiv and the attempt of the Russian army to take control of our city. We knew that, along with Russian tanks, lists of names were coming of persons to be arrested, in order to decapitate the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian civil society. Kyiv was to share the fate of Donetsk, and the name of Igor Kozlovsky was certainly on those lists. The scholar was threatened with the already familiar hell of captivity, yet he did not leave Kyiv.

On March 18, 2022, he and I together took part in a business discussion, and his insightful observations supported the spirit of the participants. Igor Kozlovsky never abandoned any city that he loved; in some sense he created a New City which he filled with his friends.

Igor Kozlovsky generously gave us the chance to live in his time and in the space of his friendship. This space has no bounds. Our society and our world need the thoughts and the voice of such a man as much as they need air. May the news from his New City reach the homes wounded by the war. ❀



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