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# GETTING OUT

The Ukrainian Cricket Team's Last Stand  
on the Front Lines of War

Foreword by Serhiy Rebrov



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## Chapter One

# LAST MAN IN

‘AT NIGHT it was incredibly scary. The whole huge building was like a ghost town. Many nights I was lying there crying. I knew if they hit the building, I’m gone. How will we die? I often thought about that. I always just prayed that it’s instant: one big explosion, and then we’re gone.’

As Kobus Olivier relives the first days of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in a series of gently spoken voice-notes, he describes the destruction of a country that had unexpectedly become a part of his life. And before the horrors of February 2022 he had also become an unexpected part of Ukrainian life, as the driving force behind Kyiv’s junior cricket scene.

The onset of the war came as a sickening twist to a previously charmed life. For three decades Olivier, originally from South Africa, had combined a restless

soul with a level three coaching badge to travel the world as a nomadic player and coach. Leaving Cape Town in 1985 to explore the northern hemisphere, Olivier lived in six countries across Europe, Africa and the Middle East, before arriving in Ukraine in 2018, in his late fifties, to be the principal and teach English at the Astor private school in Kyiv.

The move to Eastern Europe was supposed to signal a break from cricket. Ukraine, where the parks are dotted with coffee kiosks, not sets of stumps, seemed like the perfect place for the exhausted Olivier to recover from the burnout of endless nets. But one day in 2018 the cricket bug found him again. For one PE lesson, instead of bringing a football into the sports hall he brought a plastic bat and a tennis ball. His pupils were instantly hooked; before long the children were asking him to play cricket most days. His life began to revolve around the game again. From his seventh-floor apartment in the gritty district of Nyvky, on the western edge of Kyiv, he set about introducing cricket throughout Ukraine, beginning in other private schools.

Ukraine's young cricketers had an influential early supporter. In 2019 Olivier had a chance meeting with Vitali Klitchko, the former world heavyweight boxing champion, and showed him some videos of the children batting and bowling in the school sports hall. Klitchko,

now the popular mayor of Kyiv, was impressed with the new game, and arranged for the students to showcase their skills at the city's upcoming summer Festival of Sport.

Throughout the summer festival, Klitchko's department for youth and sport gave the cricketers some space in Syretskiy Park, a big green area in the west of the capital, to play their matches. By 2020, thanks to Olivier's enthusiasm and charisma – and the free English lessons he would give at every practice session – about 2,000 Ukrainians were playing cricket regularly.

By 2021 cricket had made so much progress in Ukraine that Olivier applied for the country to become a member of the International Cricket Council (ICC), the sport's governing body. While only 12 nations play Test matches as ICC Full Members, almost a hundred other countries receive annual funding as Associates, and play international fixtures under the ICC's umbrella. Kobus Olivier's intrepid group of students, bolstered by some older players and expats from cricketing countries, were about to become the world's 108th national cricket team.

Then the Russian missiles came.

The Kremlin's war in Ukraine didn't begin in 2022. At the time when the early cricket games were being played at Astor School and in Syretskiy Park, Russia

was already occupying large parts of the country. In 2014 Moscow took control of Crimea, the peninsula on the Black Sea in the south of Ukraine, by holding an unlawful referendum. Soon after a Russian leader was installed in Crimea, Russia's president Vladimir Putin sent troops into the east of Ukraine, to also bring the industrial heartland of Donbas – where more than five million Ukrainians lived in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions – under the control of puppet governments answering to the Kremlin.

Ukraine was in turmoil when, in September 2020, its leader Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the comic actor who was elected president the year before, announced that the country would be entering into a partnership with NATO to ensure its security. The Kremlin reacted by sending tens of thousands of Russian soldiers to military bases close to its border with Ukraine. At the beginning of February 2022 many more troops were sent to these bases, bringing the Russian military presence on Ukraine's border to over 200,000.

Before dawn on the morning of 24 February 2022 the Russian army crossed into Ukraine, and moved in the direction of its largest cities.

Settling into a new home against this backdrop was a far cry from Olivier's previous world. But as our conversations flitted between his past jobs in cricket

and the bombings in his neighbourhood, from his love of yoga to his younger days moonlighting as a swimwear model, it becomes clear that he is a man who lives in the moment and doesn't worry too much about tomorrow.

It was inevitable that Olivier would find himself coaching cricket again, even in a place seemingly as removed from the game as Ukraine. The sport was his first love. An opening batter not quite good enough to do it for a living – some matches fielding as 12th man for Western Province, Derbyshire and Kent in the 1980s were the only first-class games he experienced – his energy and patience made him a sought-after coach for youth sides. Lacking the technical skills to coach professional teams, Olivier instead showed a talent for helping children to feel more confident playing the game.

During stints playing league cricket in England and Scotland he became a teacher in the mould of his own mentor, the great coach Bob Woolmer, who was his opening partner for several seasons in club cricket in Cape Town. Later, as the director of cricket at the University of Cape Town, Olivier offered an unknown schoolboy called Graeme Smith a scholarship, and his first captaincy role in senior cricket.

He moved to the Netherlands in 2000 on an invitation from the Dutch Cricket Association to coach the country's youth squads. In two years in Amsterdam



he took Dutch junior sides to play in tournaments across northern Europe.

In 2013 Olivier went back to Africa to become the chief executive of Cricket Kenya. The job in Nairobi had him doing everything from preparing the national squad for ICC tournaments to taking cricket to rural schools. But he left after a year to be a coach again, this time at a private school in Dubai.

His salary from the school afforded him a luxury apartment in a glamorous part of Dubai. But by 2018 his feet were itching again. An offer came to go back to East Africa, to Uganda this time, as the CEO of the country's ambitious cricket federation. The post in Kampala would have brought no less prestige, with Uganda's men's team becoming one of the strongest Associate sides in Africa. But after four years in Dubai Olivier couldn't stand the thought of any more heat – or, he had come to realise, any more cricket. His heart was set on a sabbatical in Europe when the offer came to teach at the school in Kyiv.

As much of a culture shock as Ukraine would be for Olivier, a move there wasn't a complete step into the unknown. He had been to Kyiv a few times before, for holidays during his time in Dubai.

As a younger man Kobus had also spent time in Russia. His father's younger brother was South Africa's

first ambassador to Russia after the fall of the USSR. Posted to Moscow in the early 1990s, Gerrit Olivier was an advisor to Boris Yeltsin and Nelson Mandela, strengthening ties between a Russia barely functioning under capitalism and a South Africa only starting to dismantle apartheid.

A few months after taking up the job at Astor School in Kyiv came the lesson that changed everything. 'It was getting really difficult', Olivier says in another voice-note, explaining that he was failing as an English teacher. 'The kids weren't paying attention; it was difficult to find new topics that would interest them. We'd done their favourite countries, their pets, their favourite movies ... We were getting bored of each other. Almost in desperation I started talking to them about cricket.'

He took out his phone and showed the class a video on YouTube of one of his favourite players. Seeing a cricketer for the first time, a fielder diving for catches with his right hand outstretched, the Ukrainian children thought he looked like a superhero. They called him 'Batman'. To the students he may have been Batman, but to Olivier, Jonty Rhodes – the world's best fielder in the 1990s – was an old opponent in South Africa. The two had kept in touch, and gone to the gym together whenever Rhodes stayed in Dubai.

The next morning he came to school with a plastic cricket set that he had brought from Dubai. He took his pupils to the indoor sports hall to try cricket for themselves.

The YouTube video left an impression on the new cricketers. ‘The guys were unbelievable,’ Olivier says. ‘In every other country I’d ever coached in, everybody wanted to bat. And these Ukrainian kids didn’t want to bat and didn’t want to bowl. They just wanted to field like Jonty Rhodes.’

In the following weeks he moved his English lessons from the classroom to the sports hall. He would hit high catches for the students, and they would answer his questions while diving around the gymnasium.

Eventually Olivier managed to persuade the children to bat and bowl as well. ‘After a while they started understanding the batting – getting the feel of hitting the ball, the ball flying out of the park. But it was always about fielding for them: they couldn’t stop talking about “Batman”.’

The success of Vitali Klitchko’s Festival of Sport that summer, and the sight of teenagers playing cricket in Syretskiy Park, encouraged other private schools in Kyiv to put cricket on their sports curriculum. By the next year around 2,000 boys and girls were playing cricket in the capital every week.

Klitschko's city department for youth and sport also arranged for Olivier to teach cricket at children's camps, which many young Ukrainians go to during their school holidays. At these camps children stay in hostels and play sports like football, basketball, tennis and volleyball – but from 2019 some of them began to offer cricket lessons as well. During the summer holidays kids batted on the centre circle of football pitches; in winter there were soft-ball games in school sports halls.

But at the beginning of 2022 normal life in Ukraine stopped. Kyiv had been Kobus Olivier's home for four years when the Russian troops began to amass along Ukraine's borders. This show of hostility caused foreign observers to fear that an invasion was imminent.

Olivier's Ukrainian friends, however, were blasé about the threat. In local media the tanks and military units were mostly dismissed as an intimidatory tactic by the Kremlin.

But Olivier, knowing barely a word of the country's languages of Ukrainian and Russian, watched the international news channels, which broadcast images of the troops camping metres away from Ukrainian territory. Tens of thousands of them were in bases only a couple of hours from Kyiv, in the south of Belarus, a close ally of Russia. He was sure that the invasion was going to happen.

In his voice-notes Olivier speaks poignantly about the weeks of anxiety before the terror began. Instead of his usual after-work routine, planning the next day's cricket practice in a cafe behind Independence Square, he began to panic-buy food.

'I knew it was going to happen,' he says. 'I started stocking up two weeks before. Every day I went to the supermarket. I started buying provisions: dry nuts, dry fruit, biscuits; canned food that I could eat cold, like tuna. And I stocked up on litres and litres of water.'

The fields in Belarus where many of the Russian military units were stationed were only 50km (31 miles) north of Kyiv. Looking at maps on his phone, Olivier worked out that their tanks wouldn't be on his TV screen for long: they would soon be in his neighbourhood.

If the artillery heading for the capital were to break through the commuter towns of Irpin and Bucha, their next target would be Nyvky, the district where he lived. Nyvky was only 15km (9 miles) away from Irpin; his building stood next to Peremohy Avenue, the wide boulevard that the tanks would be certain to take as they advanced towards Independence Square in the centre.

He withdrew all of his Ukrainian hryvnia from the bank and changed them into dollars. In his apartment he bundled together his cash, passport and a few

possessions, ready to make a quick escape. Then he barricaded himself inside.

‘I took my mattress off my bed and put it against the wall, right next to the window,’ he tells me. ‘The plan was, immediately when the war started and when the first shots came, I was going to put that mattress in front of the window, in case of a missile attack. Flying glass usually causes most of the damage.’

As a batter in South Africa Olivier used to suffer from severe pre-match nerves. He believes that this vulnerability cost him the chance to make a career as a cricketer. But 40 years later in Ukraine, as he realised that he would soon be standing in the middle of a war zone, it was his experience of taking guard against the fast bowlers of Western Cape that helped him to prepare for the inevitable. ‘My nerves were in pieces’, he says about the wait for the artillery to appear. ‘At night I didn’t sleep, waiting for explosions. In a way I was relieved that it started, because I knew it was going to happen.’

‘It was a bit like in my cricket days, when I opened the batting and faced Brian McMillan with a new ball. I used to be scared the day before, and all week I’m building up to Saturday. And then when the Saturday comes I’m actually out there, and he’s running in to bowl, and it’s almost like “I can deal with it – it’s here,

it's reality, I have to face it." But the waiting absolutely killed me.'

When the invasion finally did become reality, it didn't take the Russian forces long to reach Irpin. 'On the morning of the 24th when I went for a walk at four in the morning, I heard the first of nine huge explosions right next to my apartment block. I went up to my apartment immediately and put the mattress up. I had a studio apartment. My little lounge and kitchen was all open, so the bathroom was the only room with a door and four walls. I thought I'll lock myself in there.

'It took me ten minutes to get my money, my passport, my documents into the bathroom. And I stayed there for ten days. I literally lived in the bathroom.'

In the coming days marauding Russian soldiers would commit atrocities in Ukrainian towns. Their assault began in the towns outside Kyiv, as well as in the Donbas region in the east of the country. The invaders, many of them teenaged conscripts from deprived regions in Siberia, were told that ethnic Russians living in Ukraine were being repressed by a government controlled by anti-Russian nationalists. In line with the Kremlin's order for the Russian forces to 'liberate Ukraine from Nazis', the young men killed thousands of people during the first wave of the invasion. Most

of the victims were unarmed civilians. Hundreds of children lost their lives.

Huddled under blankets in his bathtub, Olivier watched as the orange glow of bombs lit up Kyiv's skyline. 'Irpın was so close to me. I heard huge explosions non-stop during the night, during the day. I heard machine guns – at times there was machine-gun fire right under my balcony. It was a war zone. This wasn't a movie. This was it. This was war.'

Mercifully, the world of professional cricket has not come into contact with war for many decades. Since the end of the Second World War, which took the lives of 139 first-class players, perhaps the only prominent cricketers to be caught in an armed conflict were the Sri Lankan Test team during a tour of Pakistan in 2009. In the middle of a match in Lahore their bus was fired upon by members of the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. Eight people were killed in the attack, and many of those involved in the Test match suffered bullet and shrapnel wounds. Sri Lankan players Thilan Samaraweera and Tharanga Paranavitana suffered the worst injuries, while their English coach Paul Farbrace and one of the umpires, Ahsan Raza from Pakistan, were also badly wounded.

In the same year as the Lahore bus attack the Afghanistan cricket team played its first international



matches. Many of their first generation of players were born in refugee camps in Pakistan, after their families were displaced by the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s.

As Olivier watched television footage of the bombings from his bathroom, the world of sport vanished. Two days before the invasion began, Olivier's class had asked him if they could play another game of cricket together outside on the school's grounds. Now, as the communities on the outskirts of Kyiv came under attack from Russian missiles, the children of Astor School – like millions of Ukrainians – fled with their families over the borders to Poland and Moldova.

Men of fighting age, between 18 and 50, were not permitted to leave Ukraine. Millions of those who couldn't get out of the country tried to travel west, to the cities of Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv, which the Russian forces had not yet reached. Ukrainians who had no way out of Kyiv resisted the invaders any way they could. From his balcony in Nyvky, Olivier saw old ladies, Ukraine's indestructible *babusi*, striding towards machine-gun-holding soldiers and hurling Molotov cocktails at them.

At night, the complex of eight apartment blocks where Olivier lived was completely empty. Every single resident who had not left the city would run to sleep

in one of the city's underground metro stations, which were now being used as bomb shelters.

But Kobus stayed in the building. Protecting himself from the bombings would have meant leaving his four dogs in the apartment alone. Only people were allowed in the bomb shelters, and the crossbreed terriers who had come from Dubai with him, seven-year-old Tiekie and her offspring Ollie, Kaya and Jessie, were his only family.

In the weeks before 24 February he had stocked up on dog food as well. Leaving the four dogs behind was never an option, and the start of the war only strengthened his resolve. 'I told myself: this is it,' he says. 'I'm not leaving my dogs. I'm staying with them, and the reality is we most probably are going to die. I was literally waiting to die. This could be my last hour. It could be our last day together. In a way I had made my peace. I'm going with my dogs. They are my life. We came here together and we'll end this together, whichever way it happens.'

With explosions rocking the neighbourhood, and the apartment block all but empty, Olivier distracted himself during the day by speaking on the phone with the ICC's head of European cricket. Ukraine was four months away from joining the governing body; only the last few boxes needed to be ticked before the next

ICC meeting in July. At night he only had his dogs and some music for company. Olivier played an album by the Croatian cellist Stjepan Hauser to soften the sound of Russian shells outside.

The assault around Irpin intensified in the first week of March. Time was running out: if Kobus didn't leave Kyiv they were certain to die. On 3 March he found a neighbour willing to drive them the 600km (370 miles) west to Ivano-Frankivsk. They spent the next five nights sleeping in the gymnasium of a school that had been turned into a makeshift refugee camp.

On 8 March, as the war spread further, Olivier found a way out of Ukraine. They travelled north-west from Ivano-Frankivsk to cross the border into Poland. A distant acquaintance owned a cottage in the small town of Głowno, in the countryside outside the industrial city of Łódź. He arranged to take refuge there until it was safe to go back to Kyiv.

A new chapter in Poland it would be. But as over two million Ukrainians arrived in Poland in the first weeks of the war, the overwhelmed Polish authorities changed the country's immigration rules so that only Ukrainian citizens could stay there without a residence permit. Olivier had a week to find another country to stay in.

Calming his nerves listening to the Stjepan Hauser album one night, the answer came to him; he would

be able to settle in Croatia. Olivier's voice-notes have been coming from Zagreb, the Croatian capital, a full 1,500km (930 miles) to the west of Kyiv.

To make sure that all of his dogs could travel with him, Olivier bought an old Audi Avant, and drove the 1,000km from Głowno to Zagreb. The route took them through Slovakia and Hungary, where they spent two freezing nights sleeping in their lime green car on the Hungary–Croatia border. Eventually, three weeks after leaving Kyiv, they arrived in Zagreb. A little apartment close to the central Zrinjevac Park was mercifully easy to find.

Unpacking his few possessions in Zrinjevac, Kobus Olivier set about applying for a humanitarian visa, and trying to let go of the trauma of the last month. Ten days later, he was playing cricket again.

'The second Saturday I went for a walk in the big park here. I saw these five boys playing football. They were speaking Russian. I went to them and asked if they were from Ukraine by any chance? They said *ja*, they're from Kharkiv, and they were refugees here. I had a little plastic cricket bat that I brought with me from Kyiv, to hit the ball for the dogs. I hit them some catches, let them all have a bat, and they threw the ball to each other. The next time I saw them there were about 12 of them, with their moms, all wanting to play.'

The neighbourhood around Zrinjevac Park, it turned out, was a new home for quite a few other people who had escaped from Ukraine. While Croatia received only a tiny fraction of those who left the country at the start of the war, several hundred Ukrainian mothers and their children arrived in Zagreb during February and March 2022. Some of them came with elderly relatives; almost all of them found themselves staying in the spare rooms of host families. Usually, they had no common language with their hosts. The displaced families were desperate for a chance to socialise, and soothe their aching minds and bodies.

Word soon spread of the bat-and-ball game that some of the Ukrainian children were starting to play in the middle of Zrinjevac Park. Olivier began to arrange cricket practice there three evenings a week, teaching the children and some of their mothers the basics of the game. Knowing that many of the families were struggling to eat enough hot food, after every cricket session at Zrinjevac he would buy three pizzas from a Domino's in one corner of the park.

Before long there were too many children to keep involved with only one bat and one ball. Olivier remembered that while teaching cricket in Ukraine he had made contact with the Lord's Taverners charity in London, which sends cricket equipment to children who

wouldn't otherwise be able to play. The Taverners had shipped eight boxes of cricket kit to Kyiv, but because of a problem with the customs paperwork the boxes had got stuck in a warehouse somewhere in Lithuania. Olivier had the bats, balls and other equipment sent to Zagreb instead.

By May 2022 there were over 13,000 Ukrainian refugees in Croatia. Throughout the summer over 150 Ukrainian children were playing soft-ball cricket games in Zrinjevac Park every other afternoon, running around in Sussex CCC beanie hats and wearing Slazenger wicketkeeping gloves.

'Of course it wasn't just cricket,' says Olivier in another voice-note. 'It was trauma treatment for the kids. Most of them were from Mariupol, Kharkiv, Severodonetsk, those areas [that came under the most intense bombing]. Later on we had quite a few from Kyiv. They had seen the worst of the war. Their fathers were all stuck in Ukraine. They couldn't leave the country, because they were fighting age. These kids and their moms were terribly traumatised. So it became like a support group for the mothers.'

Not all of the mothers stayed on the boundary to watch their children. Olivier adds: 'While the kids were playing cricket a lot of the moms helped. One of our success stories was that one of the mothers, Anna,

went online and completed the whole ICC Foundation coaching course. She did everything herself, without telling me or anyone else. When she got her certificate, she became the first ICC-certified coach from Ukraine.'

As the eighth chapter of a nomadic life, perhaps it was inevitable that Olivier would find himself teaching cricket in Croatia, just as it had been four years earlier in Ukraine. 'I can't escape cricket,' he said one evening, as his newest pupils finished their pizza in the park. 'And cricket can't escape me'.