

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

5 Russian Bullets Dashed an Opera Singer's Dreams. Then He Reclaimed His Voice.

While on a rescue mission in Ukraine, Sergiy Ivanchuk was shot in the lungs, apparently ending his chance at opera stardom. His recovery is a marvel of medicine, chance and his own spirit.



By Erika Solomon

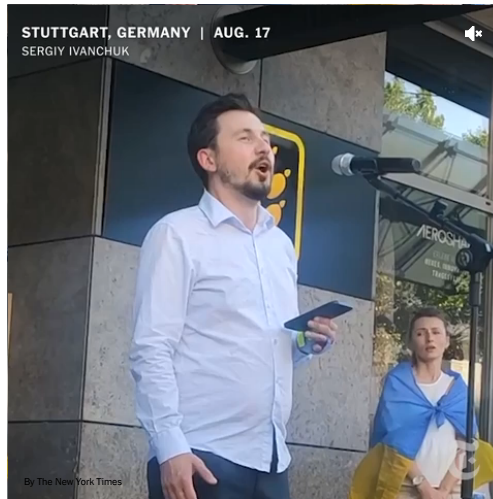
Sept. 15, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

Sign up for the **Russia-Ukraine War Briefing**. Every evening, we'll send you a summary of the day's biggest news. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

To hear more audio stories from publications like *The New York Times*, download *Audm* for iPhone or Android.

ULM, Germany — It was the most pivotal performance of his 29 years. There were no costumes, no stage, no orchestra pit. Instead, a lone pianist hunched expectantly over her instrument. For an audience, a handful of doctors and nurses watched from a cool white hospital lobby.

Sergiy Ivanchuk — his face patched with bandages, legs trembling beneath his trousers — began hesitantly. But as his deep baritone held, confidence grew. By the time he finished with a Ukrainian folk tune, his song soared with the passion of a man brought back from the dead, a man reveling in a voice reclaimed.



"For three months, I thought I would die," he told those assembled. "And now, I can sing again."

Not long before, Mr. Ivanchuk had believed he was on his deathbed, his lungs punctured by bullets, his body attached to a tangle of tubes.

On March 10, Mr. Ivanchuk, an aspiring opera singer, had been working with humanitarian volunteers helping civilians flee the besieged Ukrainian city of Kharkiv when Russian forces attacked, and he was shot. Even if he managed to survive, he remembered thinking, surely his singing days were over.

But a string of chance encounters, committed doctors and the love of a mother all led to that unexpected performance in a German military hospital this summer, giving Mr. Ivanchuk a chance to transform a tragedy into an opportunity to salvage his longtime dream of opera stardom.

"So many different circumstances had to happen," said Mr. Ivanchuk, wondering if science and his own spirit were the only factors in his recovery. "There is something. God or an angel saved me. There is something there."



"For three months, I thought I would die," said Mr. Ivanchuk, shown in his room at a military hospital in Ulm, Germany. Lena Mucha for The New York Times

In 2020, Mr. Ivanchuk was studying opera in Italy, and he had big ambitions: to perform on the stages of the Metropolitan in New York and La Scala in Milan.

Then the pandemic closed borders around the globe. His music school was closed, and Mr. Ivanchuk was stuck in Ukraine, struggling with severe depression.

Two years later, as the world began reopening, Russia invaded, and Mr. Ivanchuk found himself trapped in Ukraine once more: Men of fighting age were banned from leaving the country.

His dream was rapidly fading — opera singers should complete their training by their early 30s. No one could guess when the war would end.

Yet like so many of his compatriots, Mr. Ivanchuk wanted to join the fight. Not on the front lines — “I’d be useless for that,” he joked — but by using his 30-year-old blue Lada sedan to drive civilians out of Kharkiv, the embattled city in eastern Ukraine, a few hours from his hometown, Poltava, where he had grown up in a musical family.

It was a grueling routine. Every morning at 6, he drove to Kharkiv, laden with medicine and groceries for those still inside. Every night, he picked up residents fleeing the siege, who could not afford a taxi out. He slept a few hours at home with his parents, then started again.

His mother, Olena Ivanchuk, awaited his return each night in silent torment. But on the morning of March 10, his mother had to speak: While dusting, she noticed the family’s religious icons had all fallen from the table, which she perceived as a dark omen.

“When I told him, his face fell,” she said. “For the first time in my life, I told him: ‘My son, I fear maybe this time you won’t return.’”

He left for Kharkiv anyway.



Mr. Ivanchuk chose to aid the war effort by helping residents flee from Kharkiv. He was shot three weeks into the war. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

That night, Mr. Ivanchuk and his passengers packed his Lada to the brim with suitcases and pets. It was pitch black as they made their way out of town. Through the darkness, bullets suddenly whizzed past.

In a terrifying game of cat and mouse, Mr. Ivanchuk sped along, trying to find the protection of a Ukrainian military checkpoint. But the Russian forces soon found their mark: 30 bullets hit the car. Five hit Mr. Ivanchuk.

“I felt each and every bullet. First it hit one leg, then the leg once more. Then I saw my fingers destroyed,” he said. “After that, I felt a bullet in my side and back.”

Four people and two cats were inside the car. Yet only Mr. Ivanchuk had been shot.

He likely would not have survived if not for one of his passengers, Viktoria Fostorina — a doctor. With the help of the others in the car, she bandaged the wounds on his chest and back, preventing a collapsed lung.

“At first, I was the one saving them,” he said. “But as it turned out, in the end, they saved me.”

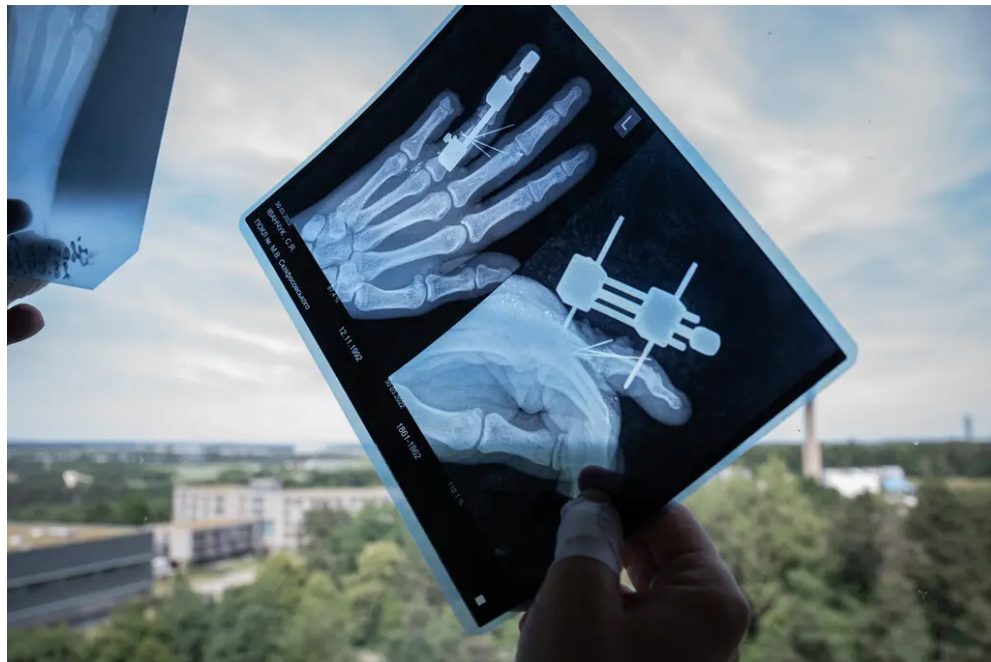
Somehow, he managed to drive the car to a Ukrainian military checkpoint before collapsing.

The war was three weeks old; Mr. Ivanchuk had already rescued 100 people. As he felt himself losing consciousness in the hospital later, he prayed to God, and prepared to die.

“I was thinking, ‘You’re only 29, and you’re dying,’” he said, recalling his thoughts. “‘I could have lived longer. But I tried to help people, so maybe it’s a good thing.’”

After searching for Mr. Ivanchuk for nearly two days, his mother found him at the Kharkiv hospital, where doctors warned he might not survive. She forced back tears, entering the room of her unconscious son with a smile.

“I said, ‘Please, son, open your eyes.’ I told him: ‘One hundred percent, you’ll survive. You will live.’ I told him that several times.”



An X-ray showing Mr. Ivanchuk's hand injuries. Lena Mucha for The New York Times

Mr. Ivanchuk remembers awakening to her smiling face. But he couldn't speak: Tubes were coming out of his mouth. His body was in such pain, he could communicate only by twitching one finger.

Ms. Ivanchuk recalled her son's crying from the pain of his early operations. Later, his tears came from his realization he might never perform again.

But fate stepped in once more.

Mr. Ivanchuk's story spread on social media, and a prominent Ukrainian opera singer convinced a talented surgeon in the country to operate on him. His lungs and liver began to heal.

Though his recovery had begun, a dark struggle was still ahead, one he almost lost.

For weeks, he lay among shellshocked young soldiers who sometimes jumped out of bed at night, throwing imaginary grenades, screaming at comrades to take cover.

Mr. Ivanchuk grew paranoid that Russian spies lurked behind every door. And he grappled with the idea that rescuing people had cost him his dream.

"It was a marathon of pain and psychological torment," he said.

He faced down those thoughts, thanks in part by drawing on lessons from his past struggle with depression. Psychotherapy during the pandemic had taught him to see his thoughts as brain chemistry, not his inner self. And he began to accept that faith alone could not heal him: "I still believe in the Creator — but a lot depends on us."



Mr. Ivanchuk playing the organ in the church hospital. The movement helps exercise his injured fingers. Lena Mucha for The New York Times

Keeping his goals confined to his hospital room, Mr. Ivanchuk and his mother celebrated even the tiniest step toward recovery. Taking life day by day, and forgetting his big ambitions, he was surprised to discover he felt more content than before the attack.

"I used to think that without a dream, it was impossible to be a happy person," he said. "But now, I see that happiness is actually just to live."

Once stable enough for travel, Mr. Ivanchuk was sent to Ulm, Germany, for advanced surgeries at a German military hospital.

As a musician, he wanted to restore as much dexterity as possible to his mutilated fingers — he has played the bandura, a Ukrainian stringed folk instrument, since childhood.

He tried not to think about opera until one night, on his third week in Ulm, when he began to sing in the shower. He chose Valentin's aria from "Faust" — and was astounded to hear his old voice.

Mr. Ivanchuk soon realized that not only were his dreams still possible — but that, in a wholly unanticipated twist to his nearly fatal injury, he was now better placed to pursue them.

If not for the attack, he would have remained stuck in Ukraine. Moreover, he had landed in Germany, the best place in the world for a budding opera singer. Thanks to its subsidies for the arts, Germany has over 80 full-time opera houses.

By late June, he was well enough to perform for the hospital staff.



Mr. Ivanchuk greeting the hospital staff after he performed for the first time since he was wounded. Lena Mucha for The New York Times

First, he sang "Ave Maria," for its spirituality. Then, an aria from "The Magic Flute," by Mozart, to honor his German caretakers. The third song could only be Ukrainian and a tribute to the woman devoted to his survival — "My Own Mother."

She cried as he began. "I did not expect he could sing that loudly," she said. "It is because he was doing it with his heart."

That evening, he was discharged.

"He was extremely positive, he didn't complain at all about his situation," said Dr. Benedikt Friemert, the head orthopedic surgeon at the hospital, describing his patient's recovery. "Quite the opposite: He was convinced that what he had done was right. He was unlucky and got injured, but he said: 'Never mind, I'll get better so that I can do what's important to me.' In other words: singing."

Mr. Ivanchuk, with a slight limp, a missing finger and a body peppered with bullet fragments, still faces a difficult journey. He has more physiotherapy ahead.

He now rents an apartment in Ulm with his mother, and he has started receiving lessons from a Ukrainian opera singer, Maryna Zubko, who works at the local theater. One day, they hope to sing together there.

"He has a beautiful voice," said Ms. Zubko, who first encountered her pupil when a heavily bandaged man threw flowers at her feet after a local performance.

Her hope for Mr. Ivanchuk is to spend a year recovering with her help then use his talent, and his story, to earn a place at a prestigious program in Europe or the United States to finish his training.

He is dreaming again of the Met and La Scala. "I think in five years, I could make it onto one of those stages," Mr. Ivanchuk said. "As long as no one else shoots me."