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The blasts came: Medical student Anastasiia had 15 minutes to pack. Now she's here

*Прогриміли вибухи: у студентки медичного факультету Анастасії було 15 хвилин, щоб зібрати речі. Тепер вона тут*

*В Австралії проживають тисячі біженців з України, що втекли від російських військ.*

*Видання описує історії кількох з них.*

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-blasts-came-medical-student-anastasiia-had-15-minutes-to-pack-now-she-s-here-20221205-p5c3rq.html>

They left husbands and fathers, grandparents and friends, good jobs and exciting career prospects. Lives they loved. Few spoke much English when they arrived here in the first half of 2022, having left Ukraine in an almighty rush following Russia's invasion a year ago this month. Most of the eight million who fled went elsewhere in Europe but more than 4500 came to Australia, in large part because they had a family member here already. Nearly half of those settled in Sydney. They are mainly women and children; with limited exceptions, martial law in Ukraine prohibits men aged between 18 and 60 from leaving.

How do you go about remaking your life in those circumstances? Where do you even start? Helping many of them make the transition are two fellow Ukrainians, Natalia Borodina and Marta Artemenko, who manage the Ukrainian Helping Hand Project, a venture between the not-for-profit Sydney Community Foundation and the Ukrainian Council of NSW.

Based until recently at the Ukrainian Youth Association in western Sydney's Lidcombe, which became something of a drop-in centre for socialising on Saturdays, Borodina and Artemenko help new arrivals find accommodation, work, schools and childcare. They connect them to Centrelink, help them to access medical and other advice, arrange social activities and distribute donated clothes and other goods. With similar backgrounds and escape stories to those they're helping, they're on hand day and night should anyone need them.

Good Weekend asked four women who left Ukraine last year to tell us their stories; of life before the war and since arriving in Australia. They did so with translation help by Svitlana Yakovenko. I was born in Donetsk in eastern Ukraine and spent my early childhood there. My parents divorced when I was six. I am in year five of a six-year medical degree at the university of Vinnytsia in west-central Ukraine.

In 2014, when I was 13, the Russians invaded Donetsk. That was a terrible shock, as I grew up speaking Russian and always saw it as a sister country. One day, when I was in the school yard with my friends, a car pulled up and masked men carrying guns got out. They said, "If you don't get out of here in two minutes we'll start shooting." I remember running away, terrified as they started shooting at us.

Two weeks later, the Russians started bombing. My grandmother put me on the train to Kyiv, where my dad, who was a software engineer, and his new family were living. Dad met me at the station and told me the Russians had bombed the train station and airport in Donetsk so I was in the last group to get out. I started school and it was very tough as they spoke only Ukrainian, which I couldn't speak. The other kids called me a separatist because I was from Donetsk and spoke Russian. I hated that.

My mum was still living in Donetsk, and when I telephoned her I could hear bomb blasts in the background. I was terrified for her. Later, she moved to Kyiv, where she met an Australian man who she married. They moved to Australia in 2018; my stepfather is a software engineer, my mum doesn't work.

In 2018, I started studying medicine in Vinnytsia. When war broke out, I was living in a flat with other students. My girlfriend called and said, "The war has started." I said, "What war?" Ten minutes later, the Russians bombed a military camp nearby – I heard the blast and knew that I had

to leave. I only had 15 minutes to pack. I left to stay with a uni friend and his family just outside Vinnytsia.

My stepfather bought me an air ticket from Warsaw to Sydney, so I had to get a bus to Poland. When my bus arrived in Lviv, close to the Polish border, the bus shelter had just been bombed. We could see all the damage; it was very scary. When we crossed the Polish border in the middle of the night it was a huge relief. Polish people were waiting there, giving us food and SIM cards and other supplies. I am so grateful to them.

A few days later, I flew to Sydney, arriving on May 2. My mum and stepdad met me at the airport. I realised then that my life in Ukraine was over.

It was very difficult at first. I lived with my mum and stepdad in a one-bedroom unit in Miranda; I slept on the sofa in the lounge room. For the first month I just cried. I couldn't believe that I had to restart my life a second time. I had panic attacks and couldn't breathe – I would sit, fully clothed, in the shower, trying to calm down as the cold water ran over me. I thought I was going to die.

Things began to improve in mid-June. My stepfather took me to a psychologist and on Saturdays I started visiting the Ukraine Youth Association at Lidcombe, where I met other Ukrainians my age.

We started to socialise: going on picnics, visiting museums and the beach. I have met some Australian people through my local Catholic church. They are very friendly; we read the Bible and talk about Australian culture and share tea and biscuits.

We are now in a two-bedroom unit so I have my own room. I attend group psychological support with STARTTS, a not-for-profit that helps torture and trauma survivors, for three hours every Sunday and that's helping me.

I am finishing my medical degree online. Sometimes there's a bomb alert and the class stops because they all have to take refuge in bomb shelters. My classmates carry iodine tablets and a small bag of personal belongings at all times in case of a nuclear attack. In July, a shopping centre in Vinnytsia was bombed and one of my friends lost her hand.

I do not want to go back to Ukraine. I want permanent residency in Australia. My life's dream is to be a doctor. I would like to be an oncologist or an ear, nose and throat specialist.

I am happy because I am alive and all of my limbs are intact. I am full of strength to go on.

I am from Dnipro in eastern Ukraine. I speak Russian and Ukrainian, but mainly Russian with family and friends. My husband, Sergei, 32, is a software engineer. We've been together for 10 years and married for seven, and we have a two-year-old daughter, Milana. I have an economics degree and I used to work in the audit section of a pharmaceutical firm. When war broke out, I'd been on maternity leave for two years and was planning to return to work in 2023.

From her NSW coastal home, Liz saw the Russian invasion. And launched a battle plan

Sergei and I decided that Milana and I should leave Ukraine. It was a difficult decision because Sergei and I have never been apart, but we did it for Milana's sake. We decided to come to Australia because Sergei's sister had been living here for 10 years. She invited us to come and paid for our airfares.

I left by evacuation train from Dnipro to Lviv on March 2 with Milana, my now 69-year-old mother, my 59-year-old mother-in-law and my grandmother-in-law, who is 82. It was very sad; as well as Sergei, I left behind my stepbrother, stepsister and my father-in-law. In Lviv, we all bought bus tickets for Warsaw. When we arrived at the Polish border it was chaotic, with people everywhere, escaping by bus and train and many on foot. We stayed in Poland for three weeks with a young couple.

We flew as a group from Warsaw to Sydney, via Dubai, and arrived in Sydney on March 31. At first we stayed with friends of my sister-in-law, then she rented a house in Strathfield and we all live there now, including her and her partner. It was difficult at first. I missed Sergei and I would call him on FaceTime every night so that Milana and he could see each other. My limited English was a problem; I had taught myself a little, but not much, and I can't understand a lot of Australians as they speak so fast and don't pronounce words distinctly.

I got a job as a cleaner four days a week, but that was a mistake, as it didn't help my English. I started doing online TAFE English classes two nights a week and my English started to improve. I also did free online computer classes to improve my IT skills. I left the cleaning job and now work full-time for a Japanese company, Yokogawa. I'm in finance support; I do invoices and work with contracts. It was the first job I applied for and I was nervous, as I had two interviews, both in English. I'm lucky that I work with a woman from Odessa who has been at the company for 20 years. She helps explain things to me and translates when I don't understand.

Milana has started childcare three days a week, near where we live. She is learning how to sing in English. Her favourites are Heads and Shoulders, Knees and Toes, Happy Birthday and Rain, Rain, Go Away. It is wonderful to see her so happy.

We missed Sergei a lot but he arrived here in October, which is wonderful. I have a humanitarian visa which allows me to stay for three years but they stopped issuing those on July 31, so he's here on a visitor visa, which is only for three months and means he can't work or access Centrelink payments. He's applied for a protection visa – and is on a bridging visa in the meantime – so that he can find a job and we can move into our own home.

I'm starting to make friends through work and through my sister-in-law. I love meeting Australians; everyone here is so friendly. I have also met other Ukrainians on Saturdays at the Ukrainian Youth Association.

When I speak to my friends in Dnipro, they're all very scared about the war. We are lucky: I have a job, Milana is in childcare, Sergei is here. I am happy. I hope to stay in Australia for a while, though maybe not forever. I don't know.

I am a psychologist, a widow and a great-grandmother. I have two daughters, both in Sydney, and a son. One daughter came here with her family 15 years ago for work, the other came just before me in March last year.

My father is Ukrainian and my mother is Russian. I speak both languages. I was born in Russia and lived there until I was 10, when we moved to Vinnytsia. I've lived there since then, except when I was at university in St Petersburg studying psychology for five years. I often travelled to Russia for work. Russia is my motherland. I love the Russian people, the culture and science and I have many friends, relatives and colleagues there. I combine both Russia and Ukraine in my heart – now my heart is broken.

One beautiful day, my daughter in Ukraine called me and said one word: "War." It was such a shock. I never expected it. I still can't understand it.

My daughter in Sydney insisted that I come here immediately. It took me a while to make the decision. I had doubts about leaving my house with its own orchard, my friends, my work, my belongings. Eventually I decided to leave. It was a tough decision, but the correct one.

My daughter here arranged everything: she bought the air ticket from Budapest, then arranged for different people – some friends, some volunteers – to drive me there, which took 20 hours. I still can't believe I lived through it. I have high blood pressure when I'm stressed and I was worried I might not make it. It was difficult to leave.

When I arrived here, I had mixed feelings. I'd never been to Australia before. I was happy to see my daughter and her family, who I hadn't seen for three years due to the pandemic. I was also relieved to feel safe. But I felt and continue to feel deep sadness about my country, which is at war. When I think about that, I cry.

I liked this magical country straight away. I love the nature and wildlife, and that everything is so clean: the air, the water. The Australian people I've met have been kind, friendly and always ready to help. Even getting here today, an Australian woman at the bus stop who found out I was Ukrainian helped me. Things like that keep happening. From my first day, I have felt this compassion and it warms me.

I am learning English at TAFE – I want to learn to speak fluently so I can be accredited to work here as a psychologist. I would also like to do some volunteer work to thank Australia for its hospitality.

One challenge is my health. I am entitled under my humanitarian visa to Medicare but that doesn't cover specialists, which are expensive. Another challenge is learning to adapt to living with my daughter and her family after living alone for many years; many generations under one roof is difficult sometimes. It's also difficult for mature people like me, with life experience, knowledge and skills, to feel for the first time that we're not needed because our English is poor. You need to have a strong character. Many refugees my age here are not adapting well and want to return to Ukraine.

I now feel I have three motherlands: Ukraine, Russia and Australia. My heart is in two parts: one half is happy to be here, the other half is unhappy because of the war. My daughters have put their roots down here but I don't know if I'll stay. We're all waiting for the war to end to see what the future will bring.

I am from Lviv and I am married to Petro, who is 39 and a priest. We have been married since 2006 and have two sons, Andriy, who is 15, and Luka, 9. Luka is on the autism spectrum.

I learnt a little English at school. After school, I worked at a teachers' training college, then started studying to be a vet online. I kept up those studies after Andriy was born in 2007 but stopped when I had Luka in 2013.

When Luka was one, he accidentally spilt hot tea on himself. He had to have surgery and it was very traumatic. When he still wasn't talking at two, we thought it was because of that. When he was six and still not able to have a dialogue, we took him to the doctors and he was diagnosed as being on the spectrum. In Ukraine, Luka went to a normal school and I had to go with him each day.

After the war started, we stayed in Lviv for a month because we thought it would be over quickly. There were regular bomb alerts, which scared Luka, and we couldn't take him to bomb shelters as he couldn't cope with the damp, confined space. We had to stay in our home, which was very stressful. Our unit was near a tank factory – when we heard on the news that Russia was going to bomb it, we decided to leave. I did some research and we chose Australia because it seemed to be a pioneer in working with children on the spectrum. Petro knew some priests here, but they weren't close friends. We basically knew no one.

'I'm trying to keep my @\*#% together': Being a surrogate mum in Ukraine

Russia bombed the tank factory on Saturday and we were on a train to Poland on Tuesday. We packed quickly, taking the bare minimum: two rucksacks, mainly kids' clothes. Luka's behaviour is unpredictable, so we needed to be able to move quickly. We didn't even take iPhones and iPads, although Luka loves technology. We received visitor visas – Petro was allowed to leave because of Luka's condition – and flew to Sydney, arriving on April 7.

We stayed for three weeks with an Australian woman in Pendle Hill, whom a priest connected us with. Then SSI [Settlement Services International] found us an apartment in Bella Vista. In late June, we rented our own apartment in Chatswood. We now all have humanitarian visas.

In September, I started working four days a week at McDonald's, Beacon Hill. Before that, I was doing TAFE English classes during the day, but now I do them online, two nights a week, and my English is gradually improving. Petro has no English and he is doing the TAFE classes, too. He is not working. Andriy is at school in St Ives, and Luka has just been accepted into the Aspect Vern Barnett School at Forestville, a special school for children on the spectrum. He's been assessed for the NDIS. He is showing some improvements: he speaks more, and recognises his way home and the local shops.

As difficult as it was to come to Australia, it would have been more frightening to remain in Ukraine. Our main aim was to take our children somewhere safe. We still have friends in Lviv; many families stayed there because the women didn't want to leave their husbands behind. There is great fear there. Kids can't play outside, there is no electricity. Normal life as we knew it doesn't exist.

'I used to be emotional': The Millennial media owners taking on Putin

The best thing about Australia for me is the ease of life. People don't worry about insignificant things, and there are more opportunities here to live the life you want: to study, learn new skills,

try new jobs. The biggest challenges are learning English and getting to know the system: health, schools, banks. I miss the seasons in Ukraine, especially the snow during Christmas holidays. But the main thing is that we are safe, we have a home and food for our children, and I have work. We hope to stay in Australia, for Luka's sake, because of what it offers children like him. Almost everything our family does is for Luka.