

'You're not expecting to be a refugee': Ukrainian woman shares her story

Shannon Kelly
Dec 24, 2022

On the morning of Feb. 24, Mariia Zhyvotova awoke to the sound of an explosion.

Then she heard a second.

Then a third.

Walking out onto her apartment balcony in Dnipro, Ukraine, Zhyvotova saw flashes in the distance accompanying the noise.

It had started with rumors, swirling whispers: neighboring Russia was potentially mounting an invasion of Ukraine to bring war. But Russia always had been a volatile neighbor; like many other Ukrainians, Zhyvotova had erred on the side of skepticism when the gossip started. She did not really believe Russia would carry out the threat. She hoped it wouldn't.

"I remember in January, my friend from Sweden call me, and they say, 'We see this news, and we don't think that staying in Ukraine is safe.' And I was like, 'Oh, never mind. I stay here, and I don't think anything happen,'" Zhyvotova said.

Uncertain as to what she was seeing outside — maybe some trouble at the factory, Zhyvotova thought — she hopped in the shower to start her day, and found her phone blown up with messages when she got out. War, they said. It really happened. Zhyvotova was not to come to work today, to be safe.

"I was paralyzed," Zhyvotova said. "You're like, 'Should I go out?' I couldn't go out. 'Is it tank already outside, or not? What's happening? Should I go and restock my fridge, or should I keep my money? Should I go? Should I stay? What to do?'"

Like most of her fellow citizens, Zhyvotova had put together an emergency go-bag, or "urgent bag," in the event she had to evacuate. And like all of them, she hoped she wouldn't have to use it. She'd packed a sleeping bag; ropes; sweats and a hoodie; matches for fire.

When she went to the store later that day, still feeling in shock at the surreal situation, Zhyvotova said people were buying everything off the shelves. All the stores were a mess, she said, even gas stations.

She bought "a little bit of everything," then went home to try to figure out what to do. So much still was unknown.

Zhyvotova's sister in Kharkiv, who has children, heard more than distant explosions. When Zhyvotova checked in with her, there was gunfire in the streets, Russian tanks already there. People in her town were cramming into frigid bomb shelters, taking

cover.

“I say, ‘Get out. Get out of there and go at least to my city.’ But they couldn’t. They don’t have car, and subway was already packed with people using bomb shelters,” Zhyvotova said.

Meanwhile, Zhyvotova still was trying to decide what she would do. Her grandmother was here, her father, her mother. Her Swedish friends reached out again, offering to have her come stay with them.

When word of Russian soldiers brutalizing women and children reached her city, Zhyvotova’s mayor urged all women and children to evacuate immediately.

“After this, news start popping up, ‘They’re raping the women. They’re raping mothers in front of kids, kids in front of mothers.’ They just do everything inhuman,” Zhyvotova said. “Our mayor, he like, ‘I don’t want to panic, but if you are children or women, get out. Get out of the city if you could. Get out.’”

Zhyvotova caught a minibus driven by two friends and crossed the border into Romania.

“You sit there, and you are just thinking, ‘At least I know that missile will not come here for sure. For sure, I am now in safe place,’” she said.

From Romania, Zhyvotova found a flight to Sweden amid skyrocketing ticket prices. She stayed there from March through September 2022 with her friend, a connection she’d made when she worked as an au pair years before.

While in Sweden, Zhyvotova maintained remote work at her IT job, and sent home money to support her family who remained in Ukraine. She, like everyone, held their breath, waiting to see how the war would turn.

“I was in waiting position,” Zhyvotova said. “We all believed a couple weeks, and something we will know. After three months, you realize that you don’t know how long it will be, and you don’t know how long it take. It could take years, and you couldn’t be in waiting position for years. You need to make your life.”

In May, another friend of Zhyvotova’s in the United States reached out to invite her to come to Lynchburg.

There was a program, United for Ukraine, that helped sponsor refugees to come to the U.S.

It was an agonizingly difficult decision that Zhyvotova, a Christian, prayed over. In Sweden, she said, she felt at least a little connected to her home. The time zones were closer, the geography was closer; everything was physically closer to her loved ones, and her homeland. She also was able to keep her job by working remotely. The U.S. was extremely far away, and vastly different. She would have to give up her career, not only due to distance, but government and laws.

In the end, Zhyvotova accepted the invitation from her American friend, and registered with the program. They took care of the required paperwork, and Zhyvotova arrived in Lynchburg in September.

Although she is thankful to be in a safe place, Zhyvotova said being grateful is not the same as being happy. The circumstances that brought her here forced the move in a cruel way.

“It was very strange for me, because a lot of Ukrainians — be honest — want to move to U.S.,” Zhyvotova said. “Some people say, ‘Oh, it’s a great opportunity!’ But ... Not when cost of this opportunity is too high.”

Even well-meaning people have not always reacted appropriately to Zhyvotova’s situation.

“Sometimes it’s hard,” she said. “In beginning, I remember I really wanted to share with people, because people are like, ‘Oh, you’re from Ukraine?’ But I was very offended when people are like, ‘Are you glad to be here?’ And you’re like, ‘What are you talking about? What do you mean, am I glad to be here? My city just survived from missile attack.’”

Whether she will one day return to Ukraine is a big question mark, Zhyvotova said. As much as she loves her country and is homesick, she also knows that Russia is volatile, and even when the current war ends in what she is confident will be a Ukrainian victory, there is no assurance something like this would not happen again.

She also wonders, what will there be to go back to? So much is in ruins, she said.

“My third and main concern that if you look back in history, even if — I believe Ukraine will win — but the question is, when it will be repeated,” Zhyvotova said. As she considers settling down in the U.S. and maybe starting a family one day, she is also thinking of future children. “I don’t want to finish up with my kids running again.”

Zhyvotova said she struggles with feelings of guilt.

“You’re not expecting to be a refugee,” she said.

Questions arise constantly: should she enjoy a cup of coffee? Good food? Nice clothes? Is it right to accept these things when so many others are not in a safe or comfortable position?

“You’re like, ‘Why me? Why I? I am not the best Christian. It’s a lot of great people dying,’” she said tearfully.