



# Берегиня

Voices from the  
Ukrainian Conflict

Edited By Leah Tabakh

Art credits (from top left to bottom right): Iryna Kalyuzhna,  
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# Берегиня (Berehynya)

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Conflict

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To my parents for always pushing me to be my best self.

To Dr. Guzmán who showed me the importance of empathetic storytelling.

## Editor's Letter

To forget is a privilege. It is a privilege to move on. For many of us, moving on comes easily, especially with the hundreds of national and international news stories competing for our attention. But that is not the case for everyone. While the Western world seems to have moved on, some live with reminders of their pain every day.

Many will never be able to forget the Ukrainian conflict. As a child of a Ukrainian immigrant, I will never forget the night Russia invaded Ukraine. In my grandparent's house, thousands of miles away, the conflict still felt so close. It's seared in my memory, texting my mom in the middle of the night, stuck in the social media cycle trying to find information that could explain what seemed impossible; it felt like a nightmare. The weeks that followed were ones of unexplainable grief and bitterness. Watching my mom grieve for her home as I grieved for a home I never got to see, I couldn't help but feel hopeless. I found myself growing bitter, it felt like nobody understood. I couldn't stand the constant questioning, pitying, and tokenizing. As I grew to understand how bitter I had become, I realized I was wasting my energy, the only thing my bitterness was accomplishing was turning me into a mean person nobody recognized.

Taking an oral history class opened me up to a more productive place to use my bitter energy. In this class, I learned about the power of a story. The power of learning about history from its witnesses. Oral history forces us to see the personal within the painful. It reminds us of the humanity within every statistic. Reading a first-person narrative also pushes us to understand narratives so different from our own.

Reading about war on the news can make all that violence seem fictitious, almost as if it is happening in another world. But hearing those first-hand experiences not only makes those stories feel more real but also forces us to understand that these atrocities of war are not as separate from us as we'd like them to be. Ukraine is not as far as we'd like to think.

Along with my ethnicity, my age played a role in inspiring me to create this collection. Before the invasion of Ukraine, war felt like something that only happened in my grandparent's generation or in the books that I read. And then a major land invasion occurred, in the 2020s. Who could've expected that? Certainly not fifteen-year-old me.

Being only fifteen when Ukraine was invaded only added to my feelings of shock and hopelessness. Those feelings even creep up now. I'm only seventeen years old, how could I possibly make a difference? This feeling of hopelessness is slowly diminished through my study of oral history. Oral history removes all the elitism and pretentiousness from history. In oral history, all stories have value, even those documented by people who are only seniors in high school.

When creating this collection, each interview I conducted brought me new insight. My interview with Dan taught me the importance of staying positive, Nazar displayed the importance of staying rooted in home and family, Olena demonstrated the intense sacrifices a mother makes for her children in times of hardship, and Arina's story taught me about the importance of perseverance and courage. I admire each of the narrators immensely, not only have they gone through the unimaginable, but they also had the courage to share their stories. Hopefully, by reading this collection, you can learn as much from these narrators as I have.

I hope this collection impacts at least one person to take action. Whether that be by just continuing to educate themselves on the conflict or by donating, I hope this collection is inspiring to someone. If this collection inspires you to donate, I'd recommend donating to Caritas Ukraine, Help Ukraine. Center, or Voices of Children. All of these organizations impact Ukraine directly by providing aid and resources to Ukrainians around the world.

By speaking to Ukrainian refugees and saving their stories in this collection I hope to create a reminder of the pain that we seem to have moved on from. I hope to emphasize the humanity within tragedy and amplify the experiences of those who continue to be undermined. I hope that this collection ages poorly, I hope it grows obsolete. I hope one day this collection is read and the readers only feel grateful that the Ukrainian conflict ended so quickly. I hope one day this collection becomes one of ancient history, one that feels unnecessary: "Why do we have to read a collection about a conflict that ended after only two years? Russia left Ukraine alone years ago."

If that is not the case, however, and you are reading this collection as violence rages on across the ocean, I hope this collection teaches you about perseverance, family, and finding joy in times of hardship. I hope you are reminded to read each statistic with empathy, to value every story you hear, and to ask others about their experiences. Because who knows? You could learn something life-changing.

# Nazar Matveyev

Born in Kyiv in 2010, Nazar spent most of his childhood in Ukraine. Then, quickly after the start of the war in 2022, Nazar and his family fled Kyiv and moved to a small village in Western Ukraine. After a few months, Nazar and his family took a bus to Italy and stayed with family until they flew to Portugal. From Portugal, they flew into the US. This journey took around two weeks in total. Nazar has now lived in the US for a year and six months and is currently finishing up eighth grade. He will be starting high school in the fall of 2024.

## I'm Never Bored

My name is Nazar Matveyev. I was born, at night, in Kyiv, Ukraine in 2010. Growing up in Kyiv was nice. It's an active and very cheerful city. Always lit up, always awake. To me, it seemed like there were no bad people there. And there weren't many dangerous neighborhoods either. It was all good.

Some things I liked about Kyiv were that school was close, my best friends were nearby, I could go talk to and play with them at any time, and I could use public transportation to get anywhere I wanted. I never had to leave the city, everything I needed was there.

For most of my childhood, it was just me and my mom. Then my little sister Marta was born in 2017. She was born on December 14. And my little brother was born a year later but also in December. On December 11, 2018. A year and three days apart, what are the chances of that?

I saw them for the first time a few weeks after they were born when my mom came back from the hospital. They were so small that they could fit in my hand. Little, cute, babies. Now Marta is 6 and Mischa is 5. Mischa is very big and strong, (as strong and big as a five-year-old can be, really).

I love that I can play with my siblings and it's always fun. I'm never bored. Well, that is, with siblings you can play games that you need multiple people for. They definitely keep things interesting. One thing I don't like though is how loud they are. I mean, it's probably because of their age. But they scream very loudly nowadays and boy do they love to scream. And sometimes their loud yelling is really distracting and can be a distraction from homework. But besides that, they're great.

## Before We Can Go Home Again

The war started four days before my birthday. Great timing, I know. It was all so scary. Hearing the bombs so close to us. It was really scary. It was always so loud, you could hear all the bombing all the time. It was very scary in the early days. But then, I guess, I got used to it. It took maybe around three months for all of it to become normal, as normal as war can be, I guess. The bombs just became background noise.

We left a year after the war started, in the spring. We left because they [the Russians] started bombing power plants and the lights would go out. They also threatened to bomb the nuclear power plant. The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant is the largest in Europe. And they threatened us and said that if we were to continue campaigning and defending ourselves, they would bomb it. But the problem is that if they bomb the power plant all of Europe will be affected not just Ukraine. It would be really dangerous if they did that. So we ended up having to leave.

Half of my class fled Ukraine as well but they all went to other countries in Europe, I'm the only one who ended up in America. They also all left much earlier and ended up, eventually, coming back. Some of my friends went to neighboring Ukrainian cities and never left Ukraine. Many went to Poland for about a year but then came back and are still in Ukraine now. They came back to Ukraine right as we were leaving.

My mom had talked to me about needing to leave Ukraine for six months before we actually ended up leaving. She told me we'd probably have to go to another country where it was safe. For a long time, we were deciding between Germany and America. But we ended up deciding to go to America because we have connections and friends here, and knowing English is also very important. At first, I didn't really want to leave Ukraine. It was my home. But it wasn't safe to stay, so we left.

My siblings were very excited at first. I don't think they fully understood that we were leaving on such uncertain terms. But they had never been on a plane before so they were excited about flying.

We first left our car behind in Kyiv with friends and then we borrowed a friend's car and used it to drive through Western Ukraine, through the mountains. We then left the car there and took a bus to Italy. We stayed in Italy with friends for a little while and then flew to Portugal. Then from, Portugal, we flew into America. It was funny, on the flight my siblings were so excited that they tried to talk to other travelers in



Ukrainian. Obviously, no one understood them but it was funny anyway. The whole journey took us two weeks.

I stay in close contact with all of my Ukrainian friends, I mean I have to, we have been friends for over seven years now. I miss them so much. We all became friends in first grade, basically on the second day of school. And we rarely fight. We might have small arguments but it all gets resolved in a few hours at most.

We originally planned to live in America for six months, then we stayed for a year. Now we've been here for around a year and a half. It'll probably be a while before we can go home again.

## Memories I Had Made There

When I first got to America, it was all so interesting to me. I loved San Francisco. Then, after the first six months, I got really homesick and wanted to go back to Ukraine. I couldn't forget the memories I had made there. I was also really nervous about starting school. I thought that since I didn't speak English it would be hard and I wouldn't be able to make friends. I just really wanted to go back.

But then, I was pleasantly surprised. After a while, I got used to it, made a lot of friends at school, and started playing basketball at school. I liked it again. It's been up and down but right now I love it. My friends have helped me improve my English and I learn a lot at school.

My siblings' feelings changed similarly to mine. They started out very excited about being in a new place and meeting new friends. But then, around a year after we moved here, my siblings really wanted to go back. I think they probably missed their dad. Their dad is still in Ukraine, fighting in the Ukrainian military. But now, it seems like they're excited again. They like their school, they have friends, and they have started to speak English. But, it's not as if they don't miss Ukraine. They like it here but they also miss home.

## Completely New Place

When I started going to school here, History and English were really hard for me. History is much better now, I actually have one of the top grades in my history class. English class is still really hard. Writing is difficult for me and I spend a long time on all the writing homework.

My history class right now is American History. I've learned a lot about American history. Earlier in the year we learned about World War II. I also learned about WWII in Ukraine but in Ukraine, we only talked about Europe but here we talked a lot more about how America was involved.

School here is slightly different from Ukraine. The biggest difference is in math. Math in Ukraine is much harder and you have to really try to do well. But here, it feels like you can be pretty passive in your math class and still do well. If I could change anything about American schools I would probably make math harder. But I like most of it.

Besides math, the biggest difference is science. In Ukraine it's divided into biology, physics, and chemistry; in some grades, there's also astronomy. Here, it's all just called science and it's separated into units. It's like each unit is a new subject. This year we started with an astronomy unit and now we're in a chemistry unit. This also happened in math. We started the year with a geometry unit and now we're in an algebra unit.

I'm starting at a new school for high school next year. I'm a little worried because it's a completely new place and my high school is really big. It'll all be different. I have one friend from middle school who's going to high school with me but most of my friends are going to a different school. All new classes, all new people. On the one hand, I'm excited. On the other hand, I'm a little worried.

To complete the language requirement I will probably take Chinese since it'll challenge me. It's also really important to know Chinese. First, you need English to communicate. We all need to know it. But there are a lot of Chinese people who speak Chinese. And to communicate and do business in the future, I would ideally also speak Chinese.

## Peace Everywhere

I haven't thought about university too much since I haven't even started high school yet. But even if I were to move back to Ukraine I think I would still go to college in the US. The US has a lot of very good universities. Ukraine has universities but the ones in America are a lot better.

I've thought a little bit about what kind of job I would want but I'm not sure. I've been thinking about maybe being a programmer because if I were a programmer I could work from home. You could even travel and work at the same time, you wouldn't have to take time off. A kind of job where you can work from home would be good.

Getting a high-paying job is important to me, I want to make a lot of money. I'd like to make money and use it to help my mom. I could maybe buy her something big like a car or take her on a vacation. We could maybe drive around America together. It's a big country and I would like to travel around it. I want to go to LA, specifically. I've also always wanted to go to New Zealand. I've seen a lot of movies filmed there, heard lots of stories and seen some pictures and videos and it looks really cool so I'd want to go there.

Becoming successful is very important to me. It's also important that my brother and sister are very successful. I hope that if I become successful I can help my mom and siblings.

I hope all the conflicts in the world don't turn into a world war. There's the war in Ukraine, the Israeli conflict, and the American and Chinese tension. I really hope all of these conflicts end and there are no more wars.

I just want peace. That's all. No more wars, peace everywhere.

# Arina Sekret

Born in 1977, Arina spent most of her life in Kyiv. As a child, she witnessed the tremendous way Ukraine was affected by both the Chernobyl disaster and the Soviet collapse. She then continued to witness moments of political unrest and remembers the Russian invasion of 2014 vividly. None of these historical moments, however, have hit her as close to home as the war beginning in 2022. This conflict forced Arina to flee Ukraine with her three children while her husband stayed behind, enlisting in the military and fighting for Ukrainian freedom.

*Editor's Note: Arina's story contains violent imagery, including discussions of sexual violence. Be advised before reading.*

## My Best Memories

My name is Arina Sekret. I was born in Ukraine, in Kyiv, in 1977. Kyiv is where I made all of my best memories. I had a really good childhood there. My dad was very attentive. He took us to museums and was very involved in our education. I did a lot of sewing and embroidering. It was interesting for me because I needed clothes for my dolls and there wasn't much to buy, so I decided to make them myself.

I liked school. In the early grades, a lot depends on the first teacher and how they instill a love for learning and remove your fear. Because when you start school you transition into a more adult world where you have responsibilities like doing homework, going to school, and packing your backpack. So your teacher needs to help you to not be afraid while also teaching you. Good teachers explain that you can find knowledge not only in the books provided by the library but elsewhere too. We had the best teacher in the world, Anna Pavlovna. I was very lucky. She was a teacher sent from God, in my opinion.

I also attended music school where I learned to play the piano and learned music history. We attended concerts, performed piano pieces, and we'd travel to boarding schools and perform for the students there. These children weren't orphans, but they spent very little time with their parents because their parents either worked a lot or were otherwise occupied. These children lived in the boarding school five days a week. They not only studied there but also slept and ate there, returning home only on weekends. Over time, as I grew older, performing became less interesting to me but it's still good memories.

As a child, I spent the summer at my grandmother's. Summer there was wonderful. For some reason, when you're very little, summer feels endless. But when you grow up, everything passes very quickly, even in summer. You barely start, and it's already over. Even though this year in America has been very eventful, I look back, and it flew by so quickly. And you wonder where the summer went.

I spent the summers with my grandmother when I was very young, before the Chernobyl accident. After the Chernobyl accident, my grandmother passed away. Just six months later. And we couldn't go to my grandmother's for the summer anymore. So, we started going to the Mykolaiv region to visit our relatives. We hadn't been very close before the accident, but afterward, we started to communicate more and spend

summers there. It's a completely different city. Mykolaiv is a city of shipbuilders. It was a closed city where foreigners weren't allowed because they built ships there, including military ones, hence the city's closed nature.

It felt like, for me, there was life before the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and life after. Before, I saw my grandma every summer, and after, I never saw her and went to Mykolaiv in the summers instead.

## No Longer Locked in a Cage

I was 14 when the USSR collapsed. We were in Crimea as the collapse was coming. As children, we only read about it and saw the frightened adults surrounding us. That fear kind of transferred to us, but we weren't as affected as others. Those in the city experienced it more directly. At that time, we were on vacation in the Mykolaiv region. It didn't affect us much.

But once the collapse officially happened, we were affected, especially by all the unemployment. Parents had no money. There were empty shelves, as there had been in the Soviet Union, but at least now we could fill up those shelves without standing in lines. But this isn't my story, this is my parents' story. They're the ones who stood in line, I was a little kid. A positive of the collapse was that the borders opened, and many opportunities came from that.

Many would travel to Poland to make money. They would take cigarettes and vodka, sell them to the Poles, and then buy clothes to bring back home. Funny, right? All our post-Soviet people brought all the alcohol to the markets. The Poles bought it all, possibly drank it themselves. What did they do with so much vodka? But then the Soviets bought clothes for themselves and their children. There were these clothing markets where you could buy things, and some people bought in bulk and made a lot of money from it.

Consequently, after the collapse of the Union, you could buy apartments, not wait in line... Of course, there were cooperatives where you could buy an apartment for money without waiting, earning somehow, and getting it somewhere... But right after the collapse, there was an issue because the rubles disappeared and our hryvnias didn't appear immediately. At first, there were these coupons that were very confusing and I didn't understand. Overall, it was terribly difficult. Then, hryvnias appeared: a very beautiful currency.

In Ukraine, gradually life started to improve. It was nice that now we could travel. We were no longer locked in a cage. I was in university as Ukraine grew more and more independent. In Kyiv, universities gradually switched to the Ukrainian language while I was still studying. They asked us which language we would prefer for lectures, Ukrainian or Russian. Naturally, we picked Russian because all the previous terms were only in Russian. We had only one subject taught in Ukrainian.



As Ukraine became independent, my dad got involved in politics. He went to protests at the Verkhovna Rada, and he even took me once. I didn't see anything dangerous in it. People just came to the Verkhovna Rada with some banners. I don't remember them chanting anything. It was all peaceful. I remember Viacheslav Chernovol came out to speak to us once. We wanted him to be our president, but, unfortunately, he was killed. And many say that if he had become our president, we would be a completely different country now, flourishing and wealthy. Ukraine is a rich country, it has a lot of potential. But, unfortunately, those people who were in power, so to speak, were indifferent to it. They only grow to power to enrich themselves, to line their pockets from the pockets of their friends.

I, of course, remember a lot from the Orange Revolution. I supported it. I wanted Yanukovich to be ousted. The revolution was set off by the corruption of the 2004 Ukrainian election and it led to massive protests and public demonstrations. I thought the action was great but I didn't quite support the elite then, who were at the head of this revolution. I saw the same oligarchs who just wanted, again, to take Ukraine to increase their financial resources.

## Slowly Sucking Our Blood, Slowly Trying to Kill Us

I remember 2014 very well. Technically the conflict started in late 2013 but the violence started in February of 2014. It was terrible when those little green men came in. Nobody knew who the green men even were. We originally didn't know they came from Russia.

I had a lot of questions. Why us?

Well, of course, we had a revolution that the Russians took advantage of, and it was hard for all of us. They knew we were in an unstable period and took advantage of it to take us by surprise. We had a president who had promised to help us join the EU while being secretly pro-Russia and so we revolted. And Russia used this revolution as a way to distract us from their attacks. And then the fact that the president did nothing was awful.

Then Crimea was sold, right? They talked about how inaction was a tactic they used to, not shed blood, to save lives. But this is a sign of weakness, which I think led to the current conflict. Therefore, I believe every country has the right to an army. This army would make other countries afraid to stick their nose in other countries' business. But I think that this armament is only needed for defense. Not for aggression, only for defense.

So when they started bombing Donbas, it just didn't make sense to me how they could come in with these KAMAZ trucks, these tanks, and just destroy everything. And when I saw completely destroyed houses, and we just had no army at all, I felt hopeless. We had no army at all. At all. But, thanks to the volunteers, we were able to give some resistance to Russia. Our people are wonderful, but it seems like the president was not one of us, even though technically he was. It was like he was Ukrainian but didn't care about Ukrainians at all. He was Ukrainian and yet somehow acted against us. Yes, I understand that there are external factors, but if the country trusts you, you have to act in their interest. We're not some tiny country. There were 40 million of us. In Soviet times, there were 50 million. And I believe that these 40 million, if you act in their interest, they will support you. And you need to follow the interests of the people and not the interests of some distant countries.

In 2014, it all seemed to freeze. Some went to fight, some came back, some didn't. And since '14 every day at least up to ten soldiers would die. It

doesn't seem like a lot but every day we lost our people, little by little. They were slowly sucking our blood, slowly trying to kill us.

## We Called them Orcs

Both 2014 and 2022 were awful but the conflict in 2014 felt so much farther away from us. Technically the conflict has been continuous since 2014 but the violence that began in 2022 was different from what was happening in 2014. Yes, in 2014, it was bad and we felt some changes but it wasn't the same.

When they start shooting right in your city, and you hear all these explosions and the horror. I mean, the horror. And you realize you're living in it now, this war is your life. It's easy to give advice, move on, or distract yourself when you're not in an active war zone. But when you're sitting under the shooting, it's completely different.

When I was a child, I watched a lot of movies about war, mostly black and white. And I've read a lot of books about war. I was well aware of the horrors war can bring. But then we started reading about what was happening in the occupied areas in Ukraine. How these rapists raped these 14-year-old girls, how they had raped a three-month-old boy. The baby died because of that. Or when these 2-year-old twin boys were raped in front of their mother. And there are a lot of stories like these: boys and girls raped in front of their mothers, and then mothers raped in front of the children. Parents murdered in front of their children. Children murdered in the arms of their mothers. It's just, I don't know.

Calling them animals would be offensive to animals. So then, we started calling them orcs. You know what orcs are, right? So we called them orcs.

The day before it officially began our acquaintance came to us and said tomorrow there will be war. There were rumors about what day they would invade. Many thought it would be the 23rd because that day is a Russian holiday. But I always said no, they won't invade. Putin was already on the cover of every newspaper. I thought he had already achieved his goal, everyone was talking about him. But then when we woke up at night from explosions, I realized I was wrong. I had just wanted to stay in my rose-colored glasses.

When it started, I looked out the window, and some immediately took their suitcases and left. Huge lines formed at gas stations, gigantic lines, and there was no more gasoline anywhere, no matter how much we needed it. People still went to the border, their cars stopped, and they

abandoned them, right by the road because they were out of gas, and with little suitcases, they walked to the border just on foot.

The first Russian sabotage groups were already in Kyiv, they waited for the right moment and set off the explosions. That is, gunfire was heard in Kyiv from these automatic queues. You couldn't go outside, it was too scary. I won't even mention that we couldn't go out to get food or anything.

Some people prepared with food. Canned food, possibly. But I didn't because I thought it would stop. I still didn't believe it. I was still in these rose-colored glasses and I thought well, maybe Putin just wanted to persuade us to do something and would quickly leave us alone. And the Western governments, including America, had promised some kind of response. I thought there would really be some kind of response, right? Well?

Before the war even started my husband, Borislav, came up to me and said, Arina, we need to plan what we will do if a war happens. Just in case, we talked. He said if war started he wanted me to immediately take the kids and leave. Anywhere. And he said he'd immediately join the army. Immediately.

If there was going to be a war he didn't want to sit back and do nothing, he wanted to help. He's not the kind of person who will just sit and wait for them to come to him. He wanted to go where he'd be useful.

I honestly envied him. I also wanted to learn how to defend myself. I wanted to help. But I couldn't, because of my little kids, I was tied up.

When we heard all these constant explosions, we knew we needed to leave. Many of our acquaintances left, and we stayed alone. We ran into the underground parking lot when the alarm went off, the alarm didn't sound so loudly yet, we only heard it on the phone. And then? We decided to go to Western Ukraine, closer to the European border. And if the Russians would go further, then we would run to Europe.

We first went by train. At first, we decided to stick to the plan, so we went west. I called my brother, he had an empty house in Western Ukraine. I asked him, if a war happens, can we live in your house? And he said yes, of course. Well anyway, on the third day of the war, we decided we would go west. Leaving Kyiv, I was a mess. Everyone left. The whole city left. And here we are, well, it's February, and the sky is gray, and it's cold. And we're driving. You know, it's this feeling when you leave your home, not yet by compulsion, not by your will, but because you have no choice. It feels like

you, a rat, are fleeing the ship, instead of defending your ship, you're just abandoning it. It feels as though you're just asking the invaders to take the city. Please take it, we've all left it here for you.

So I just started to cry. And I realized I couldn't go to my brother's. So we turned around and headed to my mom's. She lives on the Left Bank near Kyiv.

Well, then, after a while, I ended up deciding to go West. It was very difficult since we moved to the left bank we needed to cross the Dnipro River. But we had to go, the explosions were getting closer and closer. They were getting so close I realized they could drop a bomb right in our yard. There's no way we could sit and just wait for something like that to happen, especially with children.

## Chewing Her Hair

We stayed in Western Ukraine for a while before I decided we had to leave. We would sit in the house, with our flashlights, day in and day out. I just didn't see any prospects for the children. And it was so hard for me. It was just me and three kids. There was no support. And I just wanted us not to waste this time. I wanted my children to learn and grow.

At first, I considered England. But moving to England alone with three kids would've been hard. We didn't know anyone there. I wanted to go somewhere where I had family, friends, or at least acquaintances. I'm alone with the children and if I got a random sponsor he could be some sort of maniac, he could put my kids in danger. I was very scared of that. So then a childhood friend of mine who lives in America told me we should come to America. She said she'd sponsor us. I told Borislav I wanted to go. Naturally, he wasn't against us going but he was also a little worried. He was worried because there was a wave of Ukrainian women going to America and 95% of them would never return. And if they do return, they don't return to their husbands. It's true. So Borislav was afraid we wouldn't return.

So he told me I could go, but like a vacation. He said, "You'll be there for a little and then come back." But he didn't understand. He wasn't with the kids every day. He didn't see how the war was affecting them. He didn't see how his daughter would start chewing her hair out of nervousness. He didn't see how both of his kids were always so nervous, well, almost on the edge. And well I didn't want them to grow up nervous and unhappy. I didn't want that.

## A Second Chance

Now I've been in America for a year. I like everything here, it's very nice. My kids are learning a lot in school, I'm working as an engineer, and everything here is good. There are lots of opportunities here for my kids. I have many hopes for the future. I hope that one day the war can end. I hope my country wins. It seems as though most people think we'll lose but I hope we'll win.

Right now I want to both stay here and go back. Here I know there are more opportunities for my kids and life for them here is good. But at the same time, I know we could go back. My dad is back there and he needs help, he's growing old. My husband, Borislav, is there. It'd be stupid to leave and go back into a war zone but at the same time...

Chances don't present themselves often, but maybe we could get a second chance. Maybe one day we'd be able to go back.



# Olena Kucherenko

Olena was born in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Slovyansk in 1986.

Olena spent most of her life in Slovyansk, spending some time in Kyiv as well. Olena is a single mother of two and loves to bake. She remembers the invasions of 2014 and 2022 and in both, she remembers feeling shocked and frightened. After the start of the war in 2022 Olena took her sons to a friend's home in a small Ukrainian village, to Germany, and then finally to America. Olena now works at the bakery in a Whole Foods in San Fransisco and hopes to one day open her own bakery.

## It Was My Home

My name is Olena Kucherenko. I was born in Ukraine, Slovyansk, Donetsk region, in 1986. Slovyansk is a small, beautiful, and peaceful city. In Slovyansk, there was a forest where you could go pick mushrooms and berries and take pretty pictures. Our fields are beautiful. We grow sunflowers and corn. So when it all grows, it's very beautiful. Everyone there is also so friendly. Honestly, I've concluded that the smaller the city, the kinder the people.

As a teenager, however, I wanted to break out of my small city. I wanted to move to a bigger city like Kharkiv or Kyiv. There was no development happening in Slovyansk. There were no prospects for young people. For people after 40, the city is beautiful and peaceful, but there isn't anything interesting for young people. So, I lived in Kyiv for a while, but as I grew older I was drawn to go back home because I missed the quiet and peaceful city and all my friends were there. Slovyansk as a city may not be the most interesting or unique but it was my home.

I was a young child when the USSR collapsed. Throughout my life, I have never been too interested in politics. My father was very involved, he participated in elections and helped out, like a sort of assistant. He attended all kinds of meetings, went to rallies, and delivered brochures. He was involved in our Democratic Party. This was in, maybe, around 1997. He would watch the news all the time but the most interesting thing to me on the news was the weather. I still don't delve into politics, it's all so complicated.

I never loved studying but I liked going to school because I was very social and had a lot of friends. Although I didn't like studying, there were some subjects I liked because they had good teachers who found an approach and were able to get the students interested in their subject. Other teachers would just expect us to sit still and read books. Those were the teachers I didn't like. My educational journey is an interesting one but I did end up graduating from university. Right after I finished school I went to a medical university. I studied there for three years but then ended up dropping out in June. Then, in July, I was accepted to another institute. I studied there for a year until I found out I was pregnant with my first son. So, I originally just meant to take maternity leave but I was in Kyiv all alone, without my family. There was nobody to help me there. So I decided to transfer to an institute back in Slovyansk. I studied in the management

department there. I ended up graduating from the management department with a degree in organization management. What organization managing means I'm honestly not sure since I never ended up pursuing it but hey, at least I finally managed to graduate from university.

## Our Windows Shook and the Ground Vibrated

When the 2014 Crimean crisis happened, I was living in Kyiv. I was working in the very center. I mean, well, I didn't go to the square, of course, but I saw the burning city, the center of Kyiv, in all its horror. That was just awful.

I still don't really understand what the goal of any of that was because at the time I didn't really pay attention to politics. But, at first, I was more or less satisfied with our president's decision-making because it meant there was some kind of stability. The stability was very poor, but from November 2013 to April 2014, well in Kyiv, at least there was stability.

As it went on, it just got worse. I decided I wanted to move back home and out of Kyiv. So I returned home in April. Then, in May, we have a Ukrainian holiday, like the American Labor Day, on May 1st and 2nd. It's such a fun holiday to celebrate, on May 1st we had a lot of fun. And then, on May 2nd, we woke up to the sound of explosions. Suddenly it wasn't fun anymore.

So the conflict really started, for me, on May 2nd. That was the day a Ukrainian helicopter was blown up. In Slovyansk, there were separatists so they called in militia. They were trying to force the separatists out. It was a lot. The city was guarded on the roads where military men were sitting with weapons so that Ukrainians could not enter. It was so scary. Planes were hit every day. Our windows shook and the ground vibrated.

My family and I ended up having to hide in our basement a couple of times. Every day we were worried the Russians would seize our city. So, we left our city. It was very scary to leave. The bus we took was searched, all our suitcases were searched, and all our stuff was flipped upside down. Well, at a moment like that, you don't worry about yourself, you worry about your child. You worry about how all of this will affect him. My son was only eight then.

We ended up in Kharkiv. My dad immediately took us to a park so my son could play. A little bit later, a passenger plane flew by, and my son, immediately, as if out of habit, jumped to the ground and clutched his head. It was so scary seeing him like that.

## Leaving On a One-Way Road

In my opinion, the things that happened in 2014 led directly to the invasion in 2022. For me, it's like a snowball that has been growing since 2014. Or like a volcano waiting to erupt. And how did it end up erupting? Well, it turned into a war.

Just like in 2014, in 2022 I was awoken by the sound of explosions. We heard explosions at 5 am. Well, I couldn't believe it was happening again. So I started texting my friends. My friend in a neighboring city confirmed to me that it was true, it was really happening again. I then wrote to my friends in Khrarkiv and they all understood what had happened. We were all in shock. My younger child's father is in the military. I texted him and he confirmed to me that we really were in a war. He was not in shock. He already knew. I think they [the military] had known this was coming for a long time. He actually wrote to me a little before the invasion actually happened and told me to take the child and hide somewhere. He warned me, early on. They knew something was coming. Everyone knew except for the civilians, I guess.

Even though my city is closer to Russia than Kyiv, for example, I feel like all of Ukraine was impacted by the invasion in the same way. Because even though we might border with Russia, Kyiv is close to the border with Belarus and at this point, we can count on Belarus to be with Russia. You know now that Lukashenka and Putin are allies. So, as it turns out, Ukraine had been surrounded. And they hit almost all of Ukraine at exactly the same time.

I just remember being in shock. I was shaking. It felt like I was back in 2014, everything was shaking and vibrating again. It was so scary because I had children with me, I had a family. I was more scared, and at the same time, more mobile, because of my children. I knew I needed to act, and quickly, for the safety of my sons. Dan, my older son, did not believe we were at war for a long time. He didn't understand the situation, he didn't want it to be real. My heart broke for him. My dad also didn't fully understand the situation but since my ex-husband was in the military and kept reaching out to me I was forced to understand. But still, my dad didn't believe it. Even one time, we all ran into the basement after the alarm but my dad just stayed in the room and looked out the window. He couldn't believe it. I think this was just how shocked he was. None of us could

believe something like this could happen in 2021. It felt like maybe it was just some big, sick, joke.

Trying to explain all of this to my younger son was very hard. He was only three when it all started. So I decided to keep it simple. I just told him that some mean and angry men had come but his dad was going to stop them and protect us. Even as we were leaving Ukraine he didn't really get it. He is still too young to fully understand, he's only five. My older son understood though. We both cried. As we were driving away from Slovyansk Dan cried the entire car trip. It was so hard for him to say goodbye to his friends, his room, his home. All of us were saying goodbye. But none of us knew we were leaving on a one-way road.

## A Decision Made Through Snot and Tears

We decided to leave Ukraine pretty spontaneously. My ex-husband is a military man and he is very short-tempered, so for two full days he pestered me about leaving Ukraine with the kids. I didn't know if we should go because nothing that terrible had really happened in our city yet. But he kept telling me we should leave, so I packed my things and in just two hours we were at the train station. The three of us left with two small suitcases. We only really had time to pack a few pairs of underpants and some T-shirts. That's it. Well, the most important thing is that I took my documents with me. I decided to leave very abruptly. It wasn't a decision I had time to think through. It was a decision made through snot and tears.

After we left Ukraine, we stayed in Germany for two weeks until my sister told me that the Mexican border had been opened. There were Ukrainian volunteers who set up the corridor system and talked with the authorities. And for two weeks, the hallway was open for us. It was still very scary though, crossing the border.

## Before the Sun Rises

When we first moved to America it was very hard. I was upset a lot. I felt stupid when people would say hi to me and ask me how I was doing and I wouldn't be able to understand what they were saying. Things are also so different here. I would go into the grocery store and have no idea which groceries to get. It can be frustrating trying to get used to everything. Things started to improve after I went to an organization in Oakland. They told me where to go to get the things I needed and helped me understand how things work here. And they're still guiding me. They didn't close my case and if I need help, they help me.

We've been in America for two years now and I think it would be stupid to move back home now. The economy is destroyed, and there's no medicine or education. Many factories have been destroyed and there are better opportunities here for my kids.

Seeing all the people moving back to Ukraine now I think it's because of their high expectations for America. It's like the American dream, they have this idea in their head of everything being easy here. But when they come here many people are disappointed because life here is still hard. I wasn't disappointed, however, since I didn't have any expectations or really know anything about America. But, in the beginning, I really wanted to be home. I honestly think if I didn't have anyone here I would've probably moved back. It's very difficult here. But my sister has been in America since 2012 so she helped a lot. So now I'm adapting pretty well. I think I fully settled in America about four months ago. So it took me around a year and a half to settle. And now I can safely say, I like it in America.

I work now in the bakery section of a Whole Foods store in San Francisco. And I just love it. I love to bake. The store is in such a beautiful neighborhood. I work very early in the morning so I get to San Francisco very early. And I love walking by the beautiful homes as the fog sits in the sky before the sun rises. It's still dark out and it feels so cool and mysterious. I love it.

I also have some new friends here. I made friends with these two women on Facebook and they were so nice, they set off an entire day to give me a tour around San Francisco. We went to the Coit Tower, the piers, to downtown, and rode a trolley car. We also went to a restaurant in the Hilton Hotel where the view was gorgeous, of course. I also made friends



with a family from Ukraine who've been living in SF for ten years now. The parents are divorced and I help the dad with the kids sometimes. The kids are nine and eleven years old. I pick them up from school sometimes and take them to their other activities. Sometimes I even take the younger one to the pool. They live in such a pretty area, I love walking around there.

I really like San Francisco. Sometimes I'll walk up these hills and just see the prettiest views or just walk around and see the prettiest houses. It's extremely beautiful. I like it a lot.

There are some things I don't like about America, though. I don't like the pre-university education here. Well, I do like the elementary schools here. My younger son Vanya already knows a lot of English letters and can count to 30 in English. I think that's pretty good since he's only 5. But for my older son, I feel like the education isn't as good. They don't give enough homework. I also don't like how every class is a different group of people. In Ukraine, you stay with the same students for all eleven years. It's like you finally get used to your teachers and classmates and then all of a sudden they throw you into a new environment. Maybe, in the long run, this is a good thing because it makes you adaptable but I don't really like it.

## Tasty, Sweet, and Beautiful Treats

I've got a dream for my future. I love baking so much and I just really want to open a coffee shop or bakery one day. I want to bake eclairs in my own store. I don't know if I'll be able to do it but I'm going to try! I want to own my own small business and I want it to be something unique. Unusual and delicious.

I hope all of our people come to my bakery. Well, by 'our people' I guess I mean Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking people. Despite the war, for me, everyone who speaks Russian and Ukrainian is my own. You know there are Russians who support Ukraine and Ukrainians who support Russia. There are also people not from either country who speak Russian. It's a big group of people and to me, I think I can get along with all of them. And hopefully, all of them will be customers in my bakery. And if the food is tasty, everyone will come, even Americans. Everyone loves tasty, sweet, and beautiful treats.

All of this is just a dream for now. But I'm taking slow steps towards my goal. I have already been researching what it takes to open a small business, it'll just take some time. But I'll open it one day.

# Dan Kucherenko

Dan was born in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Slovyansk in 2008. Then, only two weeks after the war began, Dan and his family fled their city. First going to a smaller Ukrainian village, and then moving to Germany for a while. Dan's journey then concluded when he flew into Tijuana, Mexico where he met up with family and drove to California. He has lived in California for 2 years now and is a sophomore at an American high school where he is involved in leadership and plays on the basketball team.

*Editor's Note: Unlike the other narrators, Dan's story is not translated as he chose to tell his story in English.*

## Best Part of My Life, I Guess

My name is Dan Kucherenko. I was born in a small city, Slovyansk, in 2008. As a kid, I would go to the playground, play with kids, make friends for the day, and then leave the park and never like talk to them again. But I mean, it is what it is. My childhood was really fun. There weren't really any iPads, tablets, phones, any of that. I would just like to go out and play for the entire day.

Also, as a kid, if I was good for the entire week and there were no problems at school me and my mom would go to the candy store together. And at the store, she was buying me a lot of those gummy bears. It was the best part of my life, I guess. And then if I was good for a full month my grandma would buy me a Lego set that I could build. That was the best. My grandma's the GOAT (greatest of all time).

My younger brother is like 10 years younger than me. He's five and I'm sixteen. I feel like it's cool, being an older brother. As he grows up he's going to have questions and I'm going to be the one dude who can answer every question for him. I could be a mentor for him. He already had some problems with making friends at school since he didn't speak English and nobody would talk to him. So my job was to help him a little with his English. I helped him and now his English is much better and he even has some friends at his school.

## I Couldn't Believe It

I remember it was a school day. I remember it exactly. I was in eighth grade. I was just watching TV or doing homework, just chilling after school and my mom came to me and told me to pack my things. She said we needed to go right now. I was literally so shocked. She told me that a war had started. I couldn't believe it. But on February 24th, the war officially started.

We didn't leave the house right away but she told us to pack so we'd be ready to go. My mom's ex-husband is in the military so he was the one who told us a war had started. I was so nervous. I just remember it was such a shock for me. It felt so random. I was like, dude there's no way. It didn't feel real.

We left two weeks after the war started. We moved to a small city, three hours away from Slovyansk. It was so much smaller and further away from Slovyansk. And we were living there for like two, maybe three weeks. And after that, we moved to Germany. It all still felt so weird. So random.

Living in Germany was awesome. I liked it there because I really like nature. In Germany, we lived in a small village. But the village wasn't, like, old-fashioned. There was Wi-Fi and stuff like that. And, of course, there was beer. There were also farms with cows in each village. Around the village, there was a huge forest and it was so beautiful. And sometimes you could see animals in the forest, so that was cool. It was really chill, I loved the smell of the trees. I wish I could go back to visit.

After living in Germany for a few weeks my aunt who lives in America told my mom that the Mexican border was open. So we flew into Tijuana. I was kind of scared, not going to lie.

After we flew into Mexico, my aunt and grandpa picked us up and drove us to California. It was a long drive. We left at 8 in the morning and then got there around 10 pm. But the drive was fun because I hadn't seen my aunt since she moved to America so I got to catch up with her. It was cool, talking to her the whole day.

Some of my Ukrainian friends left earlier, some left later. Almost all of my friends are coming back now though. My original friend group, our whole gang, is going back to Slovyansk now. Some of my other friends are in Italy now too. I'm the only one who's in the United States. Some people are going back now because they think it's calmed down. But I don't know, I still think it's dangerous.

## Everything Was New and Kind of Scary

I've been in America for two years now. And, well, what can I say? I love America. It's very cool and chill here. And I've met a lot of cool people that I've learned a lot from. Last year I became close with a senior named Gabe. He's literally like my older brother. He's taught me so much. He just kind of made my life easier. Last year, when I started school here, I was really caring about what other people thought of me. I was like kind of scared to talk to people, I just cared a lot about what other people thought. So then I remember Gabe told me, dude you gotta be more open, be friendly with everyone, and just be you. It doesn't matter what other people think of you. So now I'm just friendly with everyone and everyone just knows me as a cool, chill dude.

I think the biggest difference between Ukrainian and American schools is the teachers. The teachers here are just nicer. So like in Ukraine if you don't do your homework once your grade could drop from like a B to an F, for example. And here, that doesn't really happen. Here teachers let you make things up later if you need to. Here most of the teachers I have are pretty chill. But in Ukraine maybe like 20% of my teachers were chill.

In Ukraine there also wasn't a middle or high school, you just stayed in the same school for all 11 years. Also in America, you have different people in each class but in Ukraine, it's the same people in each class. So coming to high school in America was definitely something new for me. It was hard for me because it was a new country and a new school. I honestly think my freshman year was probably the hardest year of high school for me, not because of school or anything but because everything was new for me and it was kind of scary. It was hard to make friends and stuff. Especially for me since I didn't know literally anyone. But now things are good, I have a lot of friends.

## Dude, I Need to Go There

I really want to travel to some other states like Washington or Arizona. Maybe Boston too. For college, though I'll probably just stay in California, I like it here. I haven't thought too much about college. I know about three colleges that I like but they're all really competitive. My friend Gabe goes to Grinnell and it seems cool. They have a good community. I also like Duke because of basketball. I'm going to be on the Varsity basketball team next year and I really love it. I watched March Madness this year and really liked Duke, especially Jared McCain. I also like UCLA but I don't know, all of those schools are really competitive.

Next year will be my junior year. I'm going to take a few AP classes, I'll be on the varsity basketball team and I'm going to be doing leadership too. It should be fun. Hopefully, it will help me get into a college I like. I don't really have a dream job though. I just want to do something I enjoy. One day when my kids ask me why I picked the job I did, I don't want the answer to be because they paid me a lot. I want to choose a job I like.

I really want to travel. I want to go to Italy, Paris, and England. One of my friends went to England recently. She sent me a lot of photos and I was like dude I need to go there. I also would want to go to Japan. I'm a car guy and Japan has some really cool cars so I'd want to go see that. So yeah, for me, I'd really want to go to Japan, Italy, France, and England.

## The Rollercoaster is Going Up

When we first came here my mom thought we'd only be here for a little bit and then we'd go back home. Because, back then, we still had hope. Like oh yeah, it's going to be over soon. But now it's been two years and we understand that we just have to move on. I mean, I've already moved on. It wasn't too hard for me but it was hard for my mom, of course, because she spent her whole life in Ukraine. All her friends were there and her house was there. And she just left it all. I mean she talks to her friends on the phone but it's still hard. It's also hard for other people to understand. But now I know I'm not going to go back. I'm probably not going to be able to come back to Ukraine for at least another five years because we still don't know what could happen with the war. That's just how it is over there.

Now that I'm in America, I try not to think about the war so I don't really follow that sort of news. I mean I talk to my friends who are there but I don't really follow the news or the war or anything. I'm not really trying to think about it because there's nothing I can do. I mean, I'm not the president. So, I'm trying to move on.

I'm the kind of person who tries to enjoy everything. I'm trying to enjoy my life. Even when I do my homework, I'm trying to enjoy it. I want to go enjoy my life. I don't know, I've felt hopeless in the past and I don't want to feel hopeless anymore. I just want to enjoy everything. I want to have fun.

I want to just find my person, that one girl. I'd want to marry her and have a family. I want to keep being friendly with everyone and teach my kids to be friendly as well.

I really hope the Ukraine war stops. I mean it'll definitely stop one day but I hope it stops soon. I don't know, I guess that's kind of boring, but it's what I want.

I think I started actually enjoying life because I just realized, well, life is literally just a roller coaster. Sometimes it's going down, sometimes it's going up, sometimes it goes straight. In my life, it's been up and down but right now I think the rollercoaster is going up.

You just need to enjoy your life. Once you start trying to enjoy your life and are nice to everyone you'll be great. Just enjoy it.





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