

Ukraine  
March 15, 2022

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the lives of many Ukrainians are at risk. On the 24th of February, 2022, many people woke up to sounds of explosions; peaceful cities were bombed. It was shocking!

Even though the invasion was forecast by US intelligence, millions of Ukrainians could not believe that it was happening. My family is not an exception. My family resided in a small town not far from Kharkiv (the second-largest city in Ukraine with a population of almost 1.5 million people - Calgary would be comparable in size). Kharkiv is located 50 km away from the border with Russia, so my family had to act fast as the Russian army was on the way to attack the city.

My father (49 years old) and my sister (24 years old), with no clear plan in mind, collected necessities and went to pick up my grandmother (76 years old) and my great-grandmother (90 years old) to drive somewhere safe. Both my grandmother and great-grandmother absolutely refused to leave their homes and insisted on staying no matter the outcome. There was no way to convince them to leave, so my father bought them as many groceries and other necessities as he could and left with my sister.

My father and sister were ready to leave, but since my grandmothers refused to go, they decided to offer the remaining seats in the car to Dad's friend and his family (this friend and his wife are both 30 years old and have a 6-month-old baby). They decided to drive to Lviv, in Western Ukraine (Lviv is located 100 km away from the border with Poland). Western Ukraine was (and still remains) safer than Eastern Ukraine mainly because it does not border Russia (it is still occasionally bombed, but not as much as East, North and South).

The drive was 1000 km long and it took more than 2 days to get there (traffic was terrible since millions of people were headed West at the same time). They did not stop to sleep or rest and drove for 50 hours straight (switching drivers every few hours) with short stops to get gas, to eat, and to use a washroom. In Lviv, my family and their friends – the young couple with a baby - were hosted by local volunteers. They stayed overnight and since western Ukraine was flooded with refugees, more and more people were still coming.

They decided to relocate to Poland, and to cross the border into Poland they waited in line for 3 days. It was a long 3 days, with 4 adults and a 6-month-old baby in 1 car with no room to sleep or opportunity to shower. Local people who are living in small villages not far from the border checkpoints bordering Poland were cooking meals at home and serving them for free to those waiting in line. People were extremely helpful and supportive to each other.

Most of the refugees in line were women and children since men 18 – 65 years old were not and are still not allowed to leave the country due to the declared state of war (regardless of a man's background they can be mobilized to join the army). My father was one of the few exceptions, and due to his poor vision, he could not be mobilized. He is one of the very few men who were allowed to leave the country.

Now my father and sister are in Poland. They are staying in Wroclaw with a Polish family. They have no idea what to do next, and both of them are waiting for this nightmare to be over so they can go back home. The couple with the baby was invited to Ireland by a local organization and they are now settling there.

My grandmother and great-grandmother are still at home. I call them twice a day (every morning and evening). They have enough food and necessary medications. My town stands. Occasionally, it is being hit by artillery. In case of such an event, there is a siren to inform people that they must go hide in basements or cellars.

Kharkiv is being destroyed. It was severely damaged during WWII, but this time it is even worse (you can google pictures). Many have died already. Despite this, many people are still staying in Kharkiv and my town - they refuse to leave their native land. Everyone is praying for the war to be over soon.