

KSENIA'S JOURNEY

Teenage Ukrainian refugee Ksenia Yakutina and her family are still in Poland waiting for visas. But in her column this week she reflects on a feeling of safety, and the people who have helped them all achieve that, after such a challenging time fleeing their former home. The 17-year-old bravely recounts some of the harrowing things she, her parents, and her three younger brothers have seen and experienced since Russia invaded her beautiful country in February. Meanwhile UK-based charity Theotrust is working hard on speeding up the visa applications and preparing a house for her in Ashbourne, so they have a base from which they can start to get their lives back on track.

DAYS seemed to be going really slowly. On the fifth day of war we felt like it had already been three months.

Every day we had air sirens, sometimes for two to four hours or more. We prepared our basement for living there in case they get to our city.

When we were in the basement for the first time, we were there for only 30 minutes. I couldn't understand how people sit there for days... It was SO cold. Once we went out I couldn't get myself warm.

From the 24th of February in our house we had 12 people living with us. Refugees from Kharkiv, families with 10 month and one-month-old children.

Also in the beginning of the war our neighbours, who are the gypsies, called us and asked to come to our basement if the air raid warning started.

They did not have any shelter for this case. These people had huge families, sometimes 10 children or more, so once we had air sirens again more than 40 people came to our house.

Also, our church did so much work. We went to knit camouflage nets, help soldiers in the hospitals, refugees who came without anything, just documents and so on.

My brothers and dad went to build block-posts in our village and near the city. In the night we heard drones flying.

Also it was really hard to get food. As we had lots of people in our house, my dad was responsible for finding the food.

It took so much time and strength. He had to go to every shop we knew to find something.

We could barely find medicine and essentials.

Huge queues for the gas station and it was really expensive.

No buses, you can only use your car if you have it.



Homes destroyed in a Ukrainian city



Ksenia and her family



On the Polish border we were met really nicely. People there were smiling at us!

They gave us sandwiches, juice and some sweets. I was so surprised by their attitude. It was nearly 12 at night and they were still helping people and smiling.

They helped us to get to the helping centre where we had the opportunity to register for a train, get a few hours of sleep before it and have some food.

When I saw this huge sports hall with a huge amount of people I was shocked. I saw all Ukrainians. Some of them did not have a home any more – it is destroyed. Lots of them lost friends, husbands and relatives.

We were safe now. Russians cannot start shooting now and I can sleep peacefully. Although, it was hard to sleep. With my brain I understood that I am safe but every sound made me twitch and scared.

When the time came we went on the train. In Wroclaw some really nice people met us. We were exhausted. But I'm happy.

They gave us food and water, some pyjamas, as we didn't have any clothes with us, and drove us to the house.

We are so thankful to Theo Trust, and the Polish lady – Paulina and her gorgeous team who cared for us.

They gave us food, bought some things we needed and found a really great flat. We were so surprised at how kind they are.

Now we are still in Poland. We are waiting for visas to arrive. We applied on March 18 but the visas haven't come yet. It is hard to be in limbo but the good thing is that we know we are not going to be left alone with nothing.

We know that so many people are helping. And we are grateful for that. Sadly, we are not the only ones with stories like that. Millions of Ukrainians were forced to leave everything they had and go into nowhere.

And I just want to say thanks to each of you. Thanks to the United Kingdom, Europe, USA and all the others for the help you are giving us.

But it's not the end. We have to stop Putin. We have to stop Russia.

They destroyed our home, they killed our friends but they will not destroy the world. #STOPTHEWAR.

We have to stop Putin, we have to stop Russia



Saying goodbye to friends

My dad is a hero. He managed to find something to eat every day – and I know how hard it is.

My mum had to cook for so many people. She's a hero, too. Emotionally, we were REALLY tired. Because you have to just wait and you do not know what is going to happen at the moment.

I have a friend who was in Okhtyrka. Nothing can compare with the feeling when your close friends are sitting in the basement and in few metres from there, Russians shoot missiles and bombs. You forget all the arguments you had before and just pray that your friends stay alive.

Friends from Kiev were writing to our "church chat", that they had been sitting in the underground station for three days and are in a lack of food.

My friends who travelled to the border were in huge queues of cars travelling on the road. They could be bombarded any time.

I couldn't stop reading news. Kharkov, which my friend and I bought tickets to in February, was completely destroyed.

In all occupied cities Russians raped women and little girls. They were killing innocent people in the towns.

People did not have electricity, water, food, medicine and chance to get out of the city.

Russians shoot parents in front of children's eyes, they

were stealing all the food and things from the houses and posted them to Russia.

Even if the humanitarian corridor was allowed they disobeyed the rules and shot the buses and cars with little children and adults.

Meanwhile, in our city we received more, and more refugees coming. At that point we understood that, sadly, the war was becoming more and more dangerous and it would be too late to leave if they started bombarding our city – we decided to leave.

It was hard. In two days we gave all our savings of food, clothes and valuable things to people who needed it, which meant to give all we had. We

went. Into nowhere.

Eighteen hours we spent in a minibus which had kind of holes in it and really cold air was going through.

We saw the fighter aircraft flying right above us while the air raid siren was going on. Many tanks and mines.

We had to change our planned way, because some roads were shot by Russians.

Once we got to the border, we were standing in weather of -10C for nearly two hours. And this is not a lot. Some people did it much longer.

We were really scared – what if they didn't let my dad come through? But they did. He has four children, so rules allow this.