



Olga and her two daughters, Lera and Vlada, fly home

There's no place like home

OLGA STEFANYSHYNA

We are sitting around a large table, my friends, family and our children, all celebrating New Year. In Ukraine, New Year is the most important holiday. Delicious dishes are on the table, glasses of champagne are in our hands. We all dream about victory in the New Year and a peaceful sky... Immediately after the clock strikes midnight, we hear loud explosions and they seem to be very close. My friend notices something shining through the window. These are the shahids (Iranian drones). Russia launched them at peaceful Ukrainian cities to terrorise us all even on New Year's Eve. While they are being shot down by our air defence in front of our eyes, we shout loudly: "Children, everyone, go to the shelter!"

But despite all, Ukraine lives. Ukraine stands. There are more people living in Kyiv than before this war started. Many of them moved from other cities, where it is more dangerous, where everything is destroyed. People leave their homes, places where they were born, grew up, built happy lives – for safety. But often the war catches up with them there as well. Like a family from Mariupol who moved to Dnipro city, escaping from Russian shells. 19-year-old Liana, her grandmother and mother were in their new home in Dnipro city on January 14th. Liana was cleaning the house, her grandmother was baking cakes and her mother, who wasn't feeling too well, was lying in bed. At that very moment, their house was bombed by a Russian missile. They all died.

To live in Kyiv today is to live in a state of constant anxiety and complete uncertainty: you never know what will happen tomorrow. You never know, what could happen in five minutes. You can plan your day, make an appointment with the doctor or arrange to go for a manicure, plan to go to school or work. But you suddenly hear a shrill sound: it's a siren warning you of danger, Russian missiles are flying towards us from Belarus, and you must immediately go to the shelter. Your whole day is a mess, your plans are ruined. And most worrying of all, you are afraid that a missile might hit your house. Might kill you, your relatives or your friends.

To live in Kyiv today is to choose a school for your children, not only based on providing a good education, but also that the school has a comfortable bomb shelter and a generator in the event of power cuts in the city. This happens several times a day in the Winter. Sometimes there is no heat or light for 20 hours in a row and the Internet and cell phone connections are cut off.

To live in Kyiv today is to voluntarily give half of your salary to the army so you can be among people you love, support and mutually understand.

To live in Kyiv today means not being able to cook your favourite dishes at home, whenever you like, because of the frequent power cuts. But you can always choose to go to a restaurant nearby and invite friends to have a lovely dinner with candles – because this restaurant works on

a generator and bakes the best Khachapuri in the city. And then you have to wake up at 5am because there's electricity and you need to wash your clothes or hair.

To live in Kyiv today is to live with your own people. To walk through its streets and realise how much you love them, simply because they are yours. Cafés and restaurants are open, shops have all the necessary food, yet, sometimes you won't be able to buy even basic medicines in the pharmacy because of a power cut. So you start on a quest of finding a pharmacy that works on a generator. Finding a pharmacy that runs on a generator and has exactly the medicine your child needs. Then, as soon as you find one, you realise you can't pay by card because there is no electricity. Desperate, you look for cash in your pockets, almost crying because there is none. And at that very moment a kind man behind you says: "Take it, I have money," and just gives you the medicine because you need it. Because to live in Kyiv today is to feel incredible support from fellow citizens. Warmth and care. Because we are all in the same boat and we must hold on for the sake of our victory.

Many people say Ukrainians are unusual emigrants because they are united by an incomprehensible strength in their desire to finally return home. The kindness of people in London is amazing. Good conditions, comfort and safety, excellent education. But you still pack your bags and go home. The journey can take up to 30 hours – by plane, train and car. But it doesn't matter. Because you hear your children say "Mum, I want to see my grandmother. Mum, I miss my friends." And you see your new London acquaintances look at you when you tell them you are going back to Kyiv, asking that silent question: "Why are you taking your children back there to the bombs?"

And I answer "Because there is my home."

Editors' note: Olga and her two daughters, Vlada and Lera, came to stay in the Suburb under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and Margaret Harris interviewed Olga in the Winter issue of Suburb News. Since writing this article, Olga made the difficult decision to go back to Ukraine with her daughters. They left for Kyiv on February 14th.

With the passing of the one year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we return to Olga and her family's story, and their decision to return to Kyiv



"We are sitting around a large table..."

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On the 24th of February 2022 Russia started its 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Putin assumed that the 'operation' would be short and decisive but he underestimated the strength and bravery of Ukraine which has fought back courageously.

There have been devastating consequences to the war, both humanitarian and economic, not least in the millions of Ukrainians displaced both in their country and beyond.

The war has demonstrated how fragile peace is and how important it is for freedom-loving people to find ways to support Ukraine at this time.

If you want to help you can donate through trusted charities and aid organisations like DEC (Disaster Emergency Committee), UNICEF, and The Red Cross. You could also apply to be a sponsor for Ukrainians through Homes for Ukraine www.gov.uk/register-interest-homes-ukraine.

Marie-Christine O'Callaghan