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A new life in Lamorinda:

By Vera Kochan



The Shkolniy family, from left: Tatyana, Tanya, Denis, Tim, Konstantin and Nadia at Moraga Commons Park. Photo Vera Kochan

Over 100 days of the Russian war in and against Ukraine, and refugees are continuing to make their way to safer ground, albeit in less numbers. Nearly 7 million citizens have fled their homeland that once held a population of over 44 million. Ukrainians underwent this type of large-scale devastation not so long ago during World War II - and even as recently as 2014, with Crimea and the Donbas region.

Families and friends are separated, not knowing if they will ever see each other again; homes are abandoned; all possessions are left behind except whatever can be worn or packed into suitcases; even beloved pets must be left to fend for themselves. However, the one thing that Ukrainians do not leave behind is their courage and resiliency. Many have said they will return "home" once the war is over. Others have decided to make a go of it wherever they've put their suitcases down.

The Shkolniy family is lucky enough to have a sister, Tatyana, living in Moraga, but the escape route

was nothing short of exhausting, dangerous, disappointing and full of red tape.

Tatyana's brother Konstantin (40), sister-in-law Tanya (36), their sons Denis (13), Tim (2 1/2), and mother Nadia (71) spent over six weeks trying to leave Ukraine and another two weeks trying to reach the United States once they did; finally arriving on April 20.

Konstantin was a construction worker in Ukraine, having recently sunk much of his savings into opening his own business when the Russians invaded on Feb. 24. The family lived in Kyiv, just 15 minutes from Bucha where atrocities against civilians have been reported. His wife, Tanya, was an accountant in the health care industry. Denis attended middle school and was beginning to learn English, while little Tim spent his days playing under the watchful eye of his grandmother, Nadia. Their idyllic life ended when on Feb. 26, Konstantin cleared out their bank account and made the decision to take his family to safety during the shelling of Kyiv.

Packing what they could into the family's car they first headed south to a cousin's house in Illintsi (Vinnytsia Oblast). The normal four-hour trip became nine due to heavy traffic from others fleeing the war. They stayed for a week but when they realized Ukraine was in it for the long haul, they headed for Moldova. The three-hour drive became six, and the family was met with disappointment when they discovered that Ukraine issued a martial law whereby males between the ages of 18-60 were required to stay in case additional manpower was needed to back up Ukrainian troops (the Shkolniys have since learned that their cousin enlisted to fight and another has signed up for volunteer-work).

Having come this far, they pressed their luck (after two nights of sleeping on church benches) and drove another six hours to the Romanian border only to again learn that Konstantin would not be allowed to cross the border. He was now the family of five's sole support not to mention having been his mother's caregiver for 15 years (she suffers from Addison's disease - a rare but serious adrenal gland disorder).

Hearing that Poland was accepting a large number of refugees, the family drove 10 hours to Lviv in the hope of catching a train to Warsaw. After standing in line for five hours in the freezing rain, rumors circulated that there was no longer any room on the train. As Tim came down with a fever, the family trudged over to a church shelter and slept on the floor for three nights before heading back to their cousin's house in Illintsi.

The Shkolniys began to research various laws for a loophole that would allow Konstantin to leave Ukraine with the rest of the family. They found an exception to the martial law that allowed a male to leave if he is "engaged in constant care for persons in need." Luckily, before they left home, they had the presence of mind to bring all of Nadia's medical records which proved that she suffered from a life-threatening illness and that her son was her legal caregiver.

Setting out for Romania again, with the sounds of bombing ringing in their ears, the family was able to cross the border intact. Having run through their savings, they became dependent on sister Tatyana's ability to wire cash to them at various intervals in order to buy airline tickets or rent rooms. They had to lay over in Romania for 10 days before they could arrange to take a 3.5-hour flight to Spain.

Inching closer to America, from Spain they connected onto a 10-hour flight to Medellin, Colombia. Once again, they waited for 10 hours before catching a 4.5-hour flight to Mexico City where they were detained for two hours and nearly missed their flight to Tijuana. Once in Tijuana they were admitted to the U.S. Days later they heard the border was closed to Ukrainian refugees until further notice.

After crossing the border, they contacted a family friend in San Diego who brought them over to spend the night. Knowing that they were finally safe in the United States, Tatyana drove down from Moraga to bring them home with her.

Tatyana's marketing business suffered during the pandemic, but she emptied her savings account in order to pay for her family's long journey to America. They managed to stay with her for two weeks, but

space was very limited. Moraga resident Paige Dunn arranged for neighbors to take turns bringing over complete dinners and make cash donations.

Four days after their arrival in Moraga, Nadia suffered a health crisis that was exacerbated due to exhaustion, dehydration and anxiety. She ended up in the hospital overnight for observation, and returned 10 days later with a relapse. The family is in the process of acquiring health insurance.

Through the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, host family Sue and Al Farmer opened their home to the Shkolniys where they are currently staying.

The family's strong faith has kept them going, through all of the hardships they've endured. They are emotionally overwhelmed by all of the generosity coming from the Lamorinda community. From the meals, to clothing and even toys for the kids they are surprised that so many people want to help complete strangers; and they wish to express their sincere thanks.

Having been in the states for over a month, they have noticed significant cultural differences from their homeland. Nadia feels that American women are lucky to have so many electrical appliances (dish washers and clothes dryers) to help them with their housework. She assumes that's why American women are always smiling.

Konstantin couldn't believe that people gave them so many clothes and how kind and friendly everyone is, while Tanya noticed that women drive cars and that going to a restaurant is a common occurrence rather than a luxury.

Although Denis is missing his friends back home, he was pleasantly surprised to find that American kids come up to him in the park and ask him to play with them. He has managed to continue his studies online and hopes to enter the eighth grade in the fall.

The adults are in the process of learning to speak English by attending special classes while they are waiting for work visas. They are hoping that anyone with an extra, used car in good condition might be interested in donating it to them. If so, send an email to: vabizcon@gmail.com or phone (650) 797-2211. In the meantime, Tatyana has set up: www.gofundme.com/f/orinda to help the family get back on their feet.

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