

# Ukrainian refugee looks back a year

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Iryna Pustyakova is from Mykolaiv in the southern Ukraine. It's shown toward the bottom of this map, located near the Black Sea just northeast of Odesa. Pustyakova and her friend fled southwest into Romania, and then circled through Hungary and Slovakia before ending in Poland. Pustyakova would fly to Mexico from there. -Contributed

stay with them. "I grabbed my cats and my devices and my papers, and I ran to her," Pustyakova said. "My only thought was to get out."

The mayor of Mykolaiv told citizens to stay put and not move around at all. Mykolaiv, an important shipbuilding city located on the Black Sea, was a prime target for the Russians. Not only that, but it was also seen as a strategically important stepping-stone for the Russian invasion of Odesa. Odesa is a major Ukrainian seaport and transport hub, also located on the Black Sea.

"There was alarm that they were really going to invade," Pustyakova says.

There was no invasion that day, but Pustyakova and her friends endured a night of bombs and shelling along with the rest of the city.

"It was scary. Very scary."

"The next day, when it was quiet in the morning, we were trying to get back to my apartment. We couldn't, because transportation had stopped," she says. They finally found a taxi after two hours. At her apartment, she grabbed a backpack with necessities like a change of clothing—not much, because she couldn't imagine not being able to return home soon.

"That was the last day I was ever back in my apartment," she says.

That was Feb. 25. Pustyakova stayed with her friend for about a week, enduring conditions few people in America have ever known.

"You have two or three hours where there was silence," she says. That was when people rushed out to stock up on food and other supplies. By the first day, the stores were already half empty.

"Everybody ran to pharmacies and tried to buy as many medicines as they could," she says.

"While I was in Ukraine, there was a store, and the Russians targeted it. They didn't destroy it entirely, but they did some damage to it. I remember."

She says they spent the first three days shaking with fear.

"At the beginning we were hiding in Marina's apartment between two walls," says Pustyakova.

They then moved into the building's central hall to have more walls between them and incoming bombs. She says they didn't hide in the basement because, "If the building crashed, it's a death sentence."

They heard missiles and helicopters day and night.

"We didn't know if it's Ukrainian, if it's Russian. Will it bomb? Will it not?"

"We constantly were discussing what to do," she says. After a couple of days, she says they started to joke to relieve the stress.

"We were basically sitting and hiding already in the apartment, and we started joking. Just a little

bit. Just to go through this night," Pustyakova says.

She recalls one time when a friend outside of the Ukraine called to check on her.

"I couldn't focus on anything. She's trying to say something, and it didn't help.

"I can't describe this level of fear. It freezes you. You can't function," she adds. "I would never, ever wish anybody to be in that situation."

During the afternoon of Feb. 26, 12 Russian tanks managed to break through in Kakhovka on the Dnieper and began heading towards Mykolaiv. By that night, they were in the city.

"At the beginning, they really tried not to touch civilians," Pustyakova says. Later, when they saw that they were losing, they started targeting civilian structures. Even now, with Russian forces pushed back and the city no longer under direct threat, life is far from normal.

Russia continues to pound infrastructure. Hospitals, schools and transportation continue to be targets, and utilities like electricity, water and internet are sporadic at best.

"They (Russia) are trying to turn the population against the war. They're trying to turn the people against the government," says Pustyakova. "It hurts. It hurts."

Meanwhile, Stephen Wrecsics of Irrigon was watching the situation helplessly from the U.S. and was urging Pustyakova to get out of the Ukraine. The two had met and formed a friendship online about six months before. Wrecsics had actually been planning to visit before the invasion. As former military, he had also been watching the situation with growing concern even before Feb. 24.

"Things were just aligning in my head. Things felt off," says Wrecsics. He says he's no expert on military maneuvers, but an invasion seemed like the next logical step for Russia. "They were putting too many pieces in place for it to be a military exercise."

"Stephen told me it would happen, but I didn't believe it would happen," Pustyakova admits. "Ukrainians never thought it would happen. They thought it was just hysteria from the west."

"We always had good relations. We always looked to them like friends. We speak the same language."

With the invasion underway, Wrecsics says he wanted to get Pustyakova out of the country, but he also realized he might be putting himself in danger if he tried to get to the Ukraine.

"They had closed the borders to military-aged men," he said. "Would they let me leave?"

Through messaging, Pustyakova realized how conflicted he was, and says she was afraid he would try to get to the Ukraine and get her.

"I don't want anything to happen to him," she says.

"That's when I started messaging everyone I know."

By this point, bus stations had stopped selling tickets because people were too scared to travel. Trains couldn't get through because the Russians had bombed the railways. She started looking at web forums, where people with transportation offered to help get others out of the country—for a price.

"I was calling. A lot of them just didn't respond. At the same time, I was messaging to all my friends and relatives if they were going to stay or go, if they had cars."

A friend, Olga, messaged that she had decided to go. It was 2 a.m. on a morning in March, but Pustyakova started packing. She said she couldn't eat, couldn't sleep.

"There was so much adrenaline in my system. I felt like I was on drugs," she says.

She left her cats with Marina. Even now, she chokes up when talking about leaving them behind, but says at least she didn't have to abandon them on the street. This way, she has a hope of seeing them again someday.

Olga worked for a company out of the Netherlands, and her colleagues outside the country were going to monitor the situation and guide her on the safest way to go.

Against the popular trend, they told her not to go straight to Poland. Instead, Olga, her 12-year-old son and Pustyakova headed for Odesa and beyond that, the Romanian border. The Ukraine military didn't even stop them, she says, because they saw two women and child.

"They were all, 'Faster, faster, go, go, go,'" she says. "They were interested in us to leave."

The normally short trip to Odesa took a whole day because of the line of cars evacuating the city.

"There was one time when we were in line and there was a (cruise) missile targeted toward Odessa," Pustyakova recalls. "So we all kind of freaked out."

Despite that, the road to Romania turned out to be the right call. Ukrainians who flocked to the Polish border had to wait an average of three to four days to cross into Poland. After 10 hours at the Romanian border, Pustyakova and her friends were in. They made the ferry crossing across the Danube the night of March 4.

"That was the first time I felt relief, only when we crossed the border," says Pustyakova. She says they were greeted with offers of food and clothing. "When we crossed, all the volunteers ran to the cars. That's the very first help that you can get."

Once in Romania, Olga found a colleague who directed her toward a hotel where they were able to stay for three or four days. They were safe, but still on edge.

"In Romania, every

sound made us jump and look for a place to hide," says Pustyakova. "In Romania, cars washing pavement sounded like air alerts."

Their goal was Poland, because Olga's company had a large office there, so Olga had a job waiting for her. Their route remained circuitous, though.

"We didn't go straight to Poland. We had to do this circle," Pustyakova says. "We basically had to travel around the Ukraine to get to Poland."

Their route took them from Romania, through Hungary and Slovakia, and finally into Poland. They found a place to stay in a complex that held a lot of Ukrainian refugees. Even then, though, Wrecsics urged Pustyakova to seek asylum in the U.S. To do that, she knew she needed to be on American soil. She says she saw a blog post about U.S. border guards allowing Ukrainians to cross into America from Mexico, and she started researching that route.

"That's what we decided to do," she said.

She got a plane ticket from Poland to Mexico City. She took a bus from Hermosillo to a friend who lives in Puerto Penasco. Her friend drove her to the border near Lukeville, AZ. From there, she took a shuttle to Phoenix. She stayed there briefly before beginning the final leg of her journey, a flight from Phoenix to the Pasco Airport in the Tri-Cities. There, Wrecsics met her.

"She's the one who took all the risk," says Wrecsics. "I felt bad because there was no risk on my end. The biggest risk I took was driving to the Tri-Cities and dealing with Washington drivers."

Pustyakova has been in Morrow County for nearly a year now. She teaches English to Russian speakers, and she searches for a kind of normalcy in life.

"Right now I'm fine, but at the beginning I wasn't," says Pustyakova. "Small things are different. I was afraid of everything. I was afraid of small things because I didn't want to look stupid."

For instance, Wrecsics says she wasn't used to being able to drink water from the tap. Nor did she know how to drive.

"For me, I have to drive everywhere," says Wrecsics, who works for the Morrow County Planning Department. "The whole process of trying to normalize and trying to get her stuff that she can call her own, has been a struggle."

She also struggles with a form of survivor's guilt, knowing what those who stayed in the Ukraine have been going through since she left. Friends who stayed behind have already gone through military training to join the fight. Already, a divide is forming between those who stayed and those who left, making it hard for Pustyakova to know if she could ever fit back into life in the Ukraine.

"You cannot judge. I know what they're going through," she says. "It hurts me. I'm trying to watch less news. It didn't help. It made it worse."

All the same, she is still Ukrainian, and she says she feels the pain her country is enduring. All it takes is a news item to bring back the nightmares.

"It's over, it's going to happen right now to me," she says of that feeling. "Every time something happens there, it puts me back in the 24<sup>th</sup> of February."

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# Heppner council

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Rite. The striping consists of about \$20,000 of the original contract.

Kraig Cutsforth asked the council to cut the retainage by half.

"I think that's a little steep for a \$20,000 hole," said Cutsforth, referring to the \$200,000 retainage. "It seems like an awful lot to hold from a small business. Two hundred thousand is still owed to them, regardless of this 20."

High questioned whether Premier had asked for the money. Cutsforth said they had not.

"But they will," he added. He said Premier expected the job to be closed out and was not aware the city was asking for an extension from ODOT, "unless they read it in the paper."

"So they are under the impression that they're finished," said High.

"Yes, except for the striping," said Cutsforth.

"So, it sounds like we need to communicate with them," said Sweeney.

"That's why I'm trying to," said Cutsforth, adding that he was looking for direction from the council regarding that conversation.

The consensus of the council seemed to be to keep the current retainage, but Sweeney told Cutsforth the council would discuss the subject of striping further at its Feb. 17 work session.

Heppner Fire Chief Steve Rhea told the council that activity in January had slowed from what it was in November and December. He reported four lift assists for the month of January, as well as one secure landing zone, one structure fire in the city, one EMS call to assist with CPR, one body removal assist, one tree fire in the city and one controlled burn not called in.

Rhea also reported that he wrote two grants for community wildfire risk reduction with the Oregon State Fire Marshal. One grant for city protection is \$40,000 for an application of a new herbicide called Rejuvra that will take out the annual grasses and leave the perennials.

"Our plan is to do about 100 acres of treatment. That would be about a 200-foot swath around the perimeter of the city to take out rye, cheat, foxtail," said Rhea. "There might be some broadleaf control, which would take out mustard, tarweed, things of that nature."

The other grant would be to rent a chipper to do some fuels reduction at Blake Ranch this spring.

Morrow County Sheriff's Office also reported a slower January. The number of deputy hours was higher than normal at 408 deputy work hours because new deputy Brandon Royal is riding along with deputy Daniel Thomas. Total Heppner work hours were 505. Calls for service in January were down a little bit. There were 10 traffic stops, one stop with a citation, and four dog calls. MCSO made one felony arrest and a total of two arrests in January.

Public Works Director Chad Doherty asked the council's permission to pursue upgrades to the Heppner City Park play area. He said he had spoken with Kim Cutsforth about help getting grants from Willow Creek Valley Economic Development Group and possibly the Wildhorse Foundation, and he thought the city had some extra funds.

"It's not in any dire straits right now as it is, but it's older, it's fading, parts are breaking," he said. When asked about estimated cost to the city, he replied, "It depends on what Kim can get, and maybe we can't afford it. It's just a deep dive in to see if we can."

The council gave Doherty permission to proceed, and Mayor Sweeney said they would discuss more details at the council work session.

In his report, Kraig Cutsforth said he had a Zoom meeting with a security camera company regarding replacing older cameras and installing some new ones. He also continued to look for a street sweeper without success.

"Haven't found the right one yet, but I'll keep looking," he said.

Regarding the water system update, he said Anderson & Perry would work on that when they were finished with the sewer project updates.

Chad Doherty added that he understood that as soon as they finished the recycled water plan and the biosolids management plan, Anderson & Perry would deep dive into the sewer plan and get that going. He wasn't sure when they would be able to return to the water system.

Heppner resident Justin Hoefl raised concerns about a residence on Cowins Street that he said was getting "out of control."

"All hours of the night there are people out there that I don't recognize, and I've lived in Heppner 11 years," he said.

Finally, the council unanimously passed a resolution to adopt the following list of city council goals for 2023:

1. Focus on various grants for the years, to include sewer and water, downtown enhancement and playground equipment.
2. Continue to work on the sewer project, including land acquisition, bid plans and a clear view of pond or retention lagoon needs.
3. Implement plans for future circuit court facilities to remain in Heppner; work closely with the board of commissioners.
4. Start quarterly work session meetings to tackle upcoming projects and problem areas.
5. Purchase new servers for the city.
6. Fill the inevitable city manager vacancy, with a possible job description update.
7. Crack seal the city streets and follow up with chip seal projects.
8. Bring back regular scheduled city committee meetings.
9. Purchase modern street sweeper by fall 2023.
10. Complete shop door project for public works.

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