



Ukrainian mother, daughter fled bombs in Kyiv and ended up in Wilton Manors. A look at the chaos of their journey, and what lies ahead.

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David Lyons

Like their fellow Ukrainians, Dasha and Vita Shareyko Dagayeva had heard of the impending Russian invasion, but when their house shook from the shockwaves of explosives detonating at a nearby airfield, it all became painfully real.

The women decided to flee Ukraine just a day after Russian bombs began dropping on their hometown of Kyiv, the nation's capital.

"We were not ready to leave for Europe or the United States," Vita said. Just days before, they had been going about life as usual — Dasha had managed to take some time away from work to see "Spider Man" for the third time ("I am obsessed with Marvel"), and her mother was selling her homemade dumplings.

"We didn't expect anything," Dasha said. "There was no indication that the war was going to be serious."

But when hostilities broke out, they quickly threw what they could in their car and headed for Turkey via Romania and Bulgaria. "Once we started to get away from Ukraine we had a thought of going to the United States. It was far away from the horrors we witnessed."

The story of how they ended up in Wilton Manors is one of luck, generosity and immigration chaos that leaves them in limbo for the time being.



Dasha, 21, and her mother, Vita, 52, arrived in South Florida from their war-torn country on March 9, and are now staying at the home of, James and Robert Moon, a Wilton Manors couple who offered them shelter.

One of the critical questions they must resolve: how will they sustain themselves and remain here for the duration of the hostilities while the U.S. government develops a program to accommodate them?

Thus far, the women are among the 700 or more Ukrainians who have arrived on U.S. soil since the Russians invaded the Eastern European nation in late February, according to U.S. State Department estimates. At this point, it appears that many assistance efforts are both nascent and ad hoc while the Biden administration attempts to create avenues for the 100,000 it is willing to accept. In the meantime, the small numbers of people entering the tri-county region are reliant on the generosity and empathy of South Floridians.

Leaving Family

When Dasha and Vita fled Ukraine, they came alone, leaving other family members behind.

Dasha's brother and sister-in-law had to stay because they had a child, now two weeks old, shortly after the invasion. But they now live in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, which is on the western end of the country, away from the heaviest fighting in the east.

Her father, a military contractor, is working with the army. All men are forbidden by the government from leaving, so they can be available to help defend the country.

Dasha's maternal grandfather is a Russian citizen who lives in Moscow. His birthday was Friday. "We still haven't called him," Dasha said. "We're not sure what to say. I might call him on my own."

And a grandmother, 80, elected to stay in Kyiv instead of joining the exodus of millions who are leaving the country. She'd already bought a cemetery plot for herself, she told Dasha and Vita.

"She was hysterical," Dasha recalled. "It's her home. She doesn't want to move; she



doesn't want to leave."

And the grandmother told them: "I have a place in the cemetery, just leave me here."

So the two women packed their Kia sports utility vehicle and headed for the Romanian border, where for days they waited in a seemingly endless queue to cross over to safety. During the wait, they accepted several passengers — three women and a child. They were family members of a Ukrainian border officer who knocked on one of their car windows and asked Dasha and Vita to take them in.

They did. And finally, after food and water had run out and exhaustion had set in, they cleared the frontier and headed for Bulgaria, which took a day to drive through on their way to Turkey. Their passengers ended up in Italy.

Immigration questions

The story of the women's arrival in Florida betrays the unorganized and chaotic process people fleeing the war face if they elect to leave Europe for the U.S.

Most Ukrainians have taken up residence in Poland and other countries neighboring Ukraine such as Moldova, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia.

At a daily State Department briefing this week, spokesman Ned Price said the government is looking at a variety of ways to set up avenues into the country.

"We are going to look at the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, we're going to look at family reunification programs, we're going to look at parole, we are going to look at all legal authorities," Price said, according to a transcript of the briefing. "So, we'll have more details on this before too long."

In the interim, South Florida immigration experts agree, there is no plan in place.

"There is no way to apply or to know how this is going to happen," said William Gerstein, an immigration lawyer with Gerstein & Gerstein P.A. in Fort Lauderdale. "I'm hearing a lot of people are showing up on the border in Tijuana and asking to be paroled into the United States on an emergency basis."

Under parole, people are allowed to temporarily stay in the U.S. for humanitarian purposes. "It is helpful to be able to show there is going to be some kind of economic



support” by someone already in the country, Gerstein said.

David Abraham, professor of law emeritus at the University of Miami School of Law, said the president is empowered to make emergency declarations that trigger a process for accepting and settling new groups trying to escape warfare.

“The question is about on-the-ground arrangements for interviewing people and organizing their movement,” Abraham said.

For Dasha and Vita, their keys to the country were tourist visas they acquired two years ago under more peaceful circumstances. The documents allow them to stay up to 180 days. They’ve got 120 days left. Beyond that, their long-term settlement plans are decidedly murky.

How they found their way to Wilton Manors

While they were in Istanbul, the administrator of a recently organized grassroots Facebook group to aid Ukrainians fleeing the war connected Dasha and Vita with Moon.

“We knew was going to be flying into Miami within a few days,” said David Hughes, a Central Florida resident and member of a newly formed volunteer group called North America for Ukraine. “While they were in transit, we tried to make sure there were accommodations.

“They already had tickets to Miami, Moon recalled, as a family had agreed to host them. But the unidentified family, he says, “ghosted them at the last minute.”

It was between “the countdown to their flight” and takeoff that Moon and his husband, Robert, contacted them.

When the women touched down at Miami International Airport, they had little more than carry-on luggage. When Moon arrived to pick them up, he encountered a veritable celebration that included Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava. But the embrace was not for Dasha and Vita. It was for a dozen other Ukrainians who were aboard the same plane from Istanbul.

What life has been like in South Florida



Life in South Florida has been one of a bit of culture shock, but also small surprises, even though, as Dasha says, they came because the United States is a place where they feel the most comfortable.

“We didn’t know each other,” Moon said. “It caused a little friction between my husband and I. We didn’t know what kind of people they were. We all took a whole leap of faith.

But the effort has been worth it, the men say.

“If you are proactively applying for humanitarian parole, you show there is some kind of financial backup available to the person,” James Moon said.

If their quest for a long-term residency works out, both women would like to resume what they did back home: Vita as a pasta shop owner and Dasha as a slot machine game designer.

Moon says Vita has cooked her hosts amazing meals including borscht, the national Ukrainian dish, and handmade cuttlefish pasta with shrimp.

Shortly after their arrival, Moon took them to visit the Seminole Hard Rock Café and Casino in Hollywood.

“There are several slot machines they operate from our company” Dasha said. “I found one that I did myself. It was a surreal experience. If it were not for the war I would not have seen that. It was the first time I got to actually touch it.”

Last week, Dasha attended her first Pride parade, in Miami.

“We have those in Ukraine,” she said. “But it never ends up good for anyone involved.”

Dasha said pro-Ukrainian nationalists mix it up with marchers in clashes that are inevitably broken up by police. “It’s a mess all over the place,” she said.

The Miami parade was different. Thanks to Moon’s connections as chair of the SAVE Foundation, which advocates for LGBTQ rights, Dasha was able to ride aboard a float filled with dignitaries, including Congressman and former Florida Gov. Charlie Crist.



“We are not sure how long the war is going to take,” she said during a dining room table interview at the Moons’ home this week. “We were thinking for the long term. It’s much better English is universal and we have a tourist visa here. We could have stayed in Europe, which was partially our option. But there were already too many people in Europe and we didn’t feel safe there.”

In the meantime, [James Moon](#), an attorney for a large law firm in Miami, has passionately set about raising money for the two women through a GoFundMe page.

“Dasha and Vita are not statistics, they are warm, kind, funny (considering the circumstances),” he wrote on his post. “They do not want to impose, so it has been very hard getting them to accept that it is okay for us to help them. They are a proud people, these Ukrainians — and while they do not need or seek our pity, they do need help — even if getting them to admit that is hard sometimes.”

The target is \$20,000. As of this past week, they had raised \$8,600.

“They’re probably the best ambassadors for Ukraine you can imagine,” Moon said. “They landed with us, which I think is a wonderful thing.”

A local gym gave Dasha and Vita three-month memberships. And a local immigration lawyer is working pro bono except for costs to process their applications for political asylum. But the women are reserving their legal options until Washington decides on a course for all inbound Ukrainians, according to Moon.

“It’s been great so far,” Dasha said. “We do feel like a little family now.”

Read more at:

<https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-ne-ukraine-mother-daughter-face-uncertain-future-20220417-5e2fxw7jqbhhxfivp3iqu5ydk4-story.html>.