

From the Sea to Sky to

Kharkiv, a ray of hope



Ukrainian-
born Squamish
woman offers
lifeline to her
hometown

BY BRANDON BARRETT

On Feb. 24, as news of Vladimir Putin's cruel and brazen invasion of Ukraine shocked the world, Dasha Axelsson watched in horror as footage of Russian missiles raining down and tanks rolling into sovereign territory began flooding her TV.

But for the 44-year-old Squamish resident, the scenes of devastation evoked an even deeper feeling in her, difficult to describe but overwhelming nonetheless. It was something she hadn't felt in years, something she likely didn't know was still inside her. But there it was.

"You know, I moved here as a teenager, so my life here, hardly anything reminds me of my life there. But then all of a sudden, I was almost transported," she remembers. "My heart, that part that was asleep, just became alive. It was quite intense and it was immediate."

Born in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, when the industrial, cultural, educational and scientific hub still flew the red and gold sickled flag of the Soviet Union, Dasha, like so many modern Ukrainians, grew up straddling two distinct yet closely connected worlds. She understands both Ukrainian and Russian and counts numerous Russian friends and family, some of whom she has stopped speaking to since the war broke out, yet another example of how Putin's propaganda machine has torn families and loved ones apart. But, on that day, there was not even a shred of doubt as to who she was—still is: a proud Ukrainian and native Kharkivchani.

Some of the Kharkiv residents Stas Vishnevsky has delivered goods to during Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

PHOTOS BY STAS VISHNEVSKY

"That was the biggest thing, just realizing that was my home," she says.

Almost instantly, Dasha began reconnecting with old friends back home, people she hadn't spoken to in years.

"All of a sudden I was on WhatsApp, on Skype, checking in, trying to figure out if they're gonna stay, if they're gonna go," she says. "All of a sudden those connections just exploded."

She watched news of the war obsessively and started following dozens of Ukrainians on social media to better understand the situation.

From her vantage point in Canada, Dasha discovered she was well equipped to coordinate logistics for Ukrainians on the ground, many of whom didn't have access to timely or accurate information in their rush to flee the conflict.

"The chat got super busy because it was that coordination of trying to connect people with different resources," she explains. "My cousin lives in Germany, who knew some people who knew, for example, an evacuation [centre] and said, 'Oh, that person is going to help them if they reach this city.' So then I would relay that information to somebody else. So all of these phone numbers and evacuations were almost, in some ways, better managed abroad."

A public health nurse in Squamish, it's clear Dasha has an inherent desire to help others. And that pull grew even stronger as the war waged on. As Russian troops advanced on Kharkiv and shelling became a regular part of life in Ukraine's second largest city, she would look for any sight of her old neighbourhood or buildings she recognized that had been destroyed.

It wasn't long before Dasha knew she had to do more.

'Now all Ukrainians have become a single organism'

One of the people Dasha has talked with regularly throughout the war is Kyiv resident Inna Petrikova, 40, an old family friend and communications specialist, who initially escaped to Poland with her seven-year-old disabled son, Luka.

With a little help from Dasha (and Google Translate), Inna answered a few of my questions, describing the incredible resilience of her fellow Ukrainians, how it felt watching from afar as her home was being bombed to rubble, and why she made the decision to return.

When the reality set in that Russia was actually invading, Inna, like hundreds of thousands of others, headed for the Polish border, where some Ukrainians stood in line for hours, if not days, for a chance at safety.

"Strictly speaking, the very process of leaving Ukraine for Poland in a private car was hampered only by the lack of sufficient fuel—and a very large number of people who wanted to cross the border," she relays.

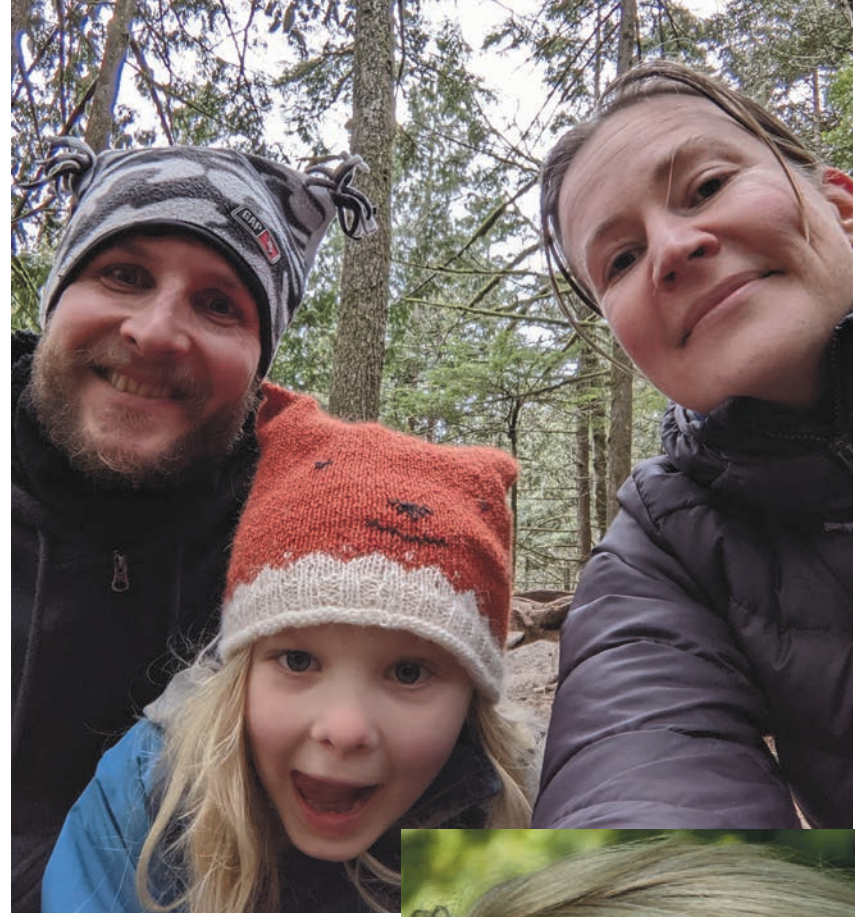
The evacuation was further complicated by the fact trains in major urban centres such as Kyiv, Kharkiv and Sumy were nearly always full. People took turns sitting, including children, who slept in shifts because there weren't enough seats. The Russian military has also taken the unimaginably callous step of bombing railways and train stations, often packed with civilians, so trains rarely run at night, only adding to the congestion.

The Polish people, memories of Nazi Germany's cataclysmic blitzkrieg at the



“It was unbearable to read the news in Poland. Tears and anger. Fear for those in Ukraine. And thoughts on the future of Ukraine.”

INNA PETRIKOVA



dawn of the Second World War no doubt still top of mind, have welcomed Ukrainian refugees with open arms, and Inna has nothing but positive things to say about her reception there.

“Everyone helped the Ukrainians, especially those who crossed the border on foot. Volunteers gave hot tea, fed and sent us to places where you can spend the night,” she recalls.

That extended to her child, who attended an inclusive Kindergarten and worked with rehabilitation specialists for his condition throughout their short stay. (Dasha also contacted U.S. company TheraTogs, which agreed to send Inna’s son a full-body orthotic undergarment for children with complex neuromotor disorders free of charge.)

“Poland provided the maximum opportunities for my child,” Inna says. “On the whole, Poland has become a ‘way of life’ for Ukrainians.”

Inna is a former military journalist who covered Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine,

so suffice to say she has witnessed her fair share of atrocities. But as she admits, “in principle, reading the news is harder than doing it.

“When you are in a situation, it is clear what is happening,” she adds. “It is difficult to read the news. It was unbearable to read the news in Poland. Tears and anger. Fear for those in Ukraine. And thoughts on the future of Ukraine.”

As a fellow journalist, I was curious what Inna thought of Putin’s blatantly false narrative of the invasion—endlessly parroted by state media—as a peacekeeping mission to liberate ethnic Russians, particularly in the eastern parts of Ukraine, and free them from the neo-Nazi government in Kyiv, a tactic the Russian president has leaned on before.

In spite of pockets of Russian sympathy, especially among older generations of Ukrainians who came of age in an era of Soviet expansionism, Inna says there are very few who still believe Putin’s propaganda.

“Those people who are in places that war has not touched directly can read the news, they help refugees, volunteer, help armed forces in whichever way they can and they know exactly that we are attacked by Russians, led by this despot, Putin,” she says. “The whole world saw images of destruction by Russian shelling, Kharkiv, Nikolaev, Kyiv, Mariupol—images of atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, places where they shot civilians after tying them up and left their bodies in the street. The world knows about children who were raped and killed. They raped boys and girls, they raped and killed the elderly. This is some kind of inhuman behaviour. Even animals don’t do that.”

Understandably, Inna says most Ukrainians aren’t too concerned with Russian falsehoods these days. They have much bigger things to worry about.

“Our mission is to protect our homeland, protect the world from what we call ‘Russicism,’” she says. “After our victory,



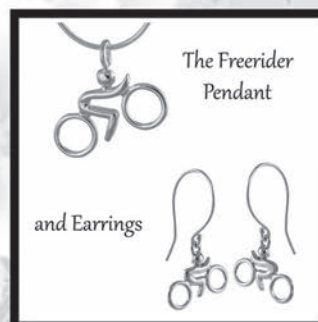
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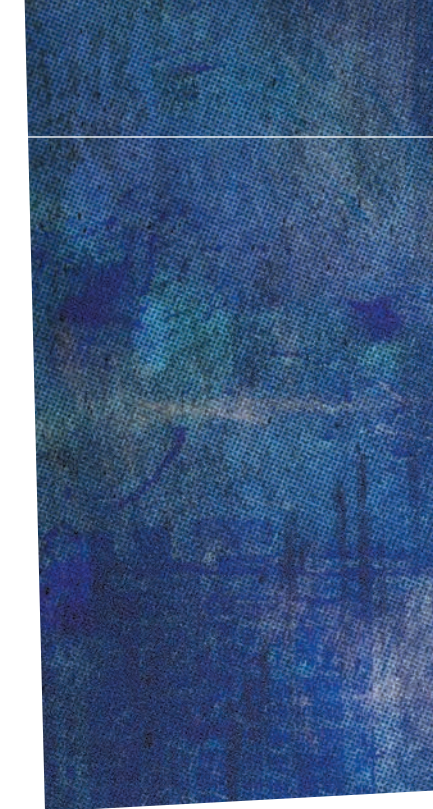


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LEFT: Dasha Axelsson, right, with her husband Tobi and daughter Edie.

BELOW: Inna Petrikova with her son, Luka.

PHOTOS SUBMITTED



the Hague tribunal awaits. We know that after World War Two there were many trials and propaganda was used and many claimed they did not know what was going on. I hope justice will put everything in its proper place.”

After several weeks in Poland, Inna understood her proper place was back in her homeland, and she returned to Kyiv with her son last month. You would think the decision to re-enter an active warzone would come with at least some consternation, but in what I’ve learned is a resolve typical of Ukrainians, Inna says the choice was an easy one.

“It is very difficult for me to be out of context. For me, I feel much better to be inside a situation. Because this is my home. My country. My husband, my friends and colleagues are fighting for her independence. I’m back to help as best I can,” she says. “Now all Ukrainians have become a single organism, which is doing everything possible to resist the military aggression of the crazy dictator Putin and his fascist Russia against our homeland.”

Now that she’s back, Inna says a typical day for her is the same as it is for most Ukrainians who aren’t fighting on the frontlines. She works when she can and spends virtually every waking moment outside of that volunteering, supporting in whatever way she’s able. On the way to work, she might pick up a parcel, whether it’s thermal imagers, tactical equipment, batteries for walkie-talkies—whatever is needed for the fight. On breaks at work, she contacts people like Dasha around the world to arrange for more supplies to be sent. Then she rushes off to send the parcel she picked up that morning. Back at home, she does more of the same, writing post after post online pleading for help.

“My day is simple,” she says.

‘Am I ready to die? I didn’t even think about it’

In those first few heartwrenching days of the invasion, Dasha donated to major aid organizations like the Red Cross that were

helping on the ground.

Then, through her friend Inna, Dasha started hearing stories of a restaurateur in her hometown of Kharkiv who was delivering desperately needed supplies directly to other Ukrainians, many of whom are elderly and unable—or unwilling—to leave the city.

Members of Dasha’s own family fell into this category, refusing to evacuate even after their loved ones’ repeated urgings.

“I thought, which 90-year-old person is going to be able to do that?” she says. “I guess a lot of them don’t have family abroad, or don’t have family in the same city.

They’ve been living there their whole lives. And then it just clicked to me that pain, that there are these seniors there that were either World War Two vets themselves, or they were children of the war, and now they have to end their life like that? That completely destroyed me.”

So when Stas Vishneksky, an Israeli-Ukrainian businessman, reached out directly to Dasha for support, she jumped at the chance. Prior to the war, the 44-year-old owned a chain of pizzerias, but since Feb. 24, he has spent every day—save for Easter, which he took off to spend with his mom—connecting with Ukrainians across the region to drop off pretty much anything they need. He has even dipped into his own savings and delivers everything from crucial medication, groceries and prepared meals (“You have no idea how many potatoes I’ve peeled,” he told Dasha one day) to kids’ toys and washing machines. He even converted the basement of one of his restaurants into a makeshift shelter for people with nowhere else to go.

“People like that are really hard to find,” Dasha says. “To find somebody who does this at that kind of level, I don’t know anybody like that. So I felt like if he can do that, then I can try to promote him and support him.”

Stas’ commitment to the cause has put him in some precarious situations. Some of the areas he travels through are plagued by fighting, with only a small number of volunteers venturing there. Dasha tells me he sent her a video one day that was interrupted by the boom of an artillery shell striking a nearby building. Stas wasn’t fazed.

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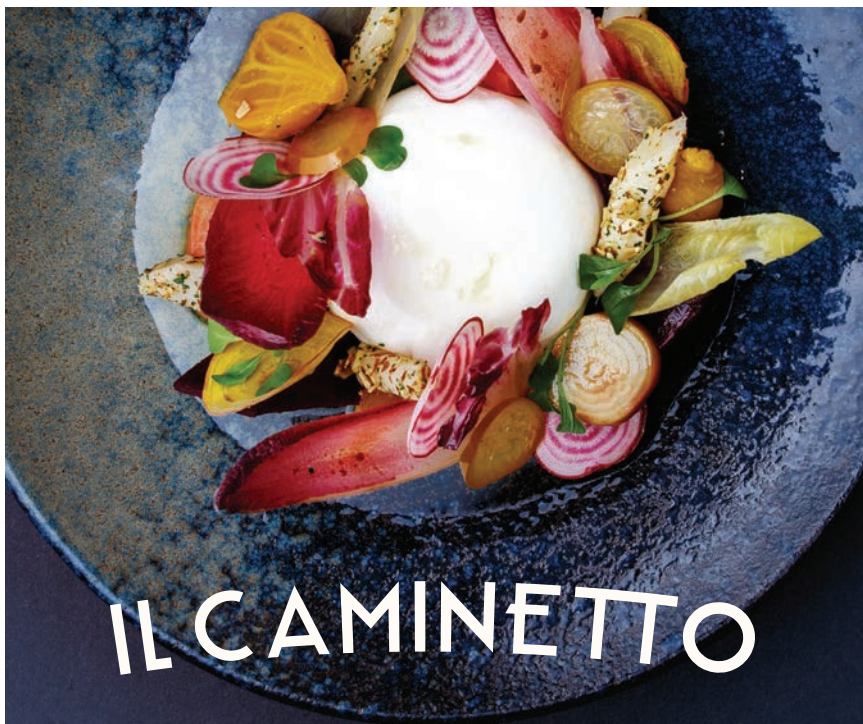


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“Ordinary life ended on February 24. Since February 24, all days pass like a nightmare; without two sleeping pills, I can’t sleep.

STAS VISHNEFSKY



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I put a question to him I don't think I've ever asked in my decade as a journalist: Are you prepared to die for this? It's as if he hadn't even considered the possibility.

"Am I ready to die? I didn't even think about it and don't think about it. All the will of the Lord," he says.

An Israeli citizen, Stas could have left when the invasion began, but wanted to stay and help. He tells me he dreams of the war every night, images of death and carnage filling his sleep. And yet, relatively speaking, he knows he's lucky.

"Compared to the grief and loss of other people, I'm generally fine. Physical and mental health is normal with emotional problems," he says. "Ordinary life ended on February 24. Since February 24, all days pass like a nightmare; without two sleeping pills, I can't sleep."

What keeps him going is the reaction he gets from the people he helps, the sweet, old babusyas he delivers medication to, the kids in the children's ward, injured from shelling, whose eyes lit up when they saw the toys he brought them.

"The main motivator [to] not stop and move on were the tears of people from gratitude for my work," he says. "Sometimes the number of those in need and the inability to help everyone [made me want to] give up, but I take a deep breath and move on. When I see the sincere tears of old people from gratitude for my help, when I hear the laughter and smile of a child for the sweets and toys that I bring, then of course I feel peace and understanding that I risk my life not in vain."

In many ways, the work that Stas is doing is nearly impossible for large NGOs, which lack the mobility and, let's face it, reckless abandon that Stas possesses. Oftentimes, aid organizations will only operate in warzones if there is an established humanitarian corridor, which Russia has notoriously

disrespected, making it difficult for them to reach the same embattled areas that people like Stas do. Then there's the trust factor. Average Ukrainians have been wary of volunteers that seem to materialize out of the ether. Without naming names, Stas told Dasha about a high-profile organization that swooped in to Ukraine for a week, cooked some meals for citizens, did the mandatory photoshoot for their socials, and then left. Certain areas have also been closed off to aid groups—but not to Stas.

"Many bloggers entering neighbourhoods doing PR ... got upset when I was passing a checkpoint, but the soldiers told them, 'This man has been coming here since early March and you just showed up today,'" Stas relayed to Dasha.

Trust seems to be equally important to Stas himself. Although Dasha has told him he no longer has to do this, he still sends her a daily report of how the money she helped raise is being spent—replete with photos of grateful Ukrainians receiving their goods.

"I report to Dasha every day because I understand that people who transfer money should know exactly what they are going for. Although Dasha does not ask for this, it is so right for me," says Stas. "I would be very happy to work with charitable organizations but in my experience and [from] my appeals to them, there is a lot of theft."

So far, Dasha has raised about \$12,000 for Stas, mostly from friends, family and local Squamoleans who have kindly opened their wallets. She has been astonished at the generosity so far, but knows that she needs to scale up if the support is to continue.

"Our circle is now dry so taking it wide is really the only way to keep going," she says. Dasha is also aware of the potential for trepidation in what she's doing. As opposed to using crowdfunding platforms, which commonly take a fee and require a long-term funding target, she sends Stas the money she's raised on a weekly basis directly through PayPal or e-transfer. That's why she sends out regular newsletters telling funders and anyone interested what Stas has been doing, and says she's willing to talk with anyone who may have questions or concerns.

"It's just me. I wanted to make sure that it's built on trust," she says.

"I haven't really reached out to anybody except for friends. And I don't know how to do that because [Stas is] not a registered organization, so you're not going to get any tax receipts, so it seems like it just has to be based on trust, really."

For anyone interested, Dasha can be reached via email at HelpStasUkraine@axelsson.ca. Or you can donate to Stas directly at his website: kharkiv.help-me.in.ua.

The Sea to Sky Ukrainians group on Facebook is also a great way to stay up to date on other local efforts to support Ukraine. ■

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