



# “For the second time, we lost everything”

## Tetiana Rozhkova describes journey from Ukraine

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Just over a year ago, Tetiana Rozhkova lost her home in Ukraine for a second time.

The first time was in 2014 when Russia seized Crimea and backed a violent separatist movement in the Donbas region. Rozhkova had been walking her dog with her then-fiancé Oleksandr in Donetsk (a city in the Donbas) when an angry militant aimed a rifle at them, threatening to shoot them if he ever saw them there again.

Rozhkova and Oleksandr fled their home with little more than a backpack's worth of possessions. Months later, they found work and a home in Poland. Eventually, they married, bought a farm in Oleksandr's home village of Bondareve, and made plans to move there to grow sunflowers and wheat.

They were set to fly to their new home on Feb. 24, 2022, when they got the news Russia had invaded Ukraine. Bondareve, some 43 kilometres from the Russian border, was now occupied territory.

“For the first two days, it was frustrating. We didn't know what to do,” said Rozhkova, who now lives in St. Albert.

“For the second time, we lost everything.”

### A search for peace

Rozhkova is one of the roughly 21,000 Ukrainian newcomers who have come to Alberta since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, data from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress suggests. Around 440 of them have settled in St. Albert, estimated Cheryl Dumont of the St. Albert Further Education Centre, based on the number of Ukrainian families the centre's Newcomer Connection program has worked with since the invasion started. (Her estimate did not include Ukrainians who did not seek help from the centre.)

“We are the fourth-largest centre for receiving Ukrainians,” Dumont said of the St. Albert and Sturgeon County region, citing data from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, coming in behind Red Deer, Edmonton, and Calgary.

Too stressed to eat or sleep, Rozhkova said she and Oleksandr spent all day scrolling through the news when the 2022 invasion started, calling everyone they knew to encourage them to flee to Poland. A former soldier and police officer, Oleksandr volunteered to come home to fight, but was told by army officials to stay abroad as he was not yet needed.

Rozhkova said she and her husband pooled their savings with others to donate five carloads of medical supplies plus an ambulance to Ukraine. They also gathered clothes to give to refugees waiting



KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

Tetiana Rozhkova and Oleksandr Rozhkov kiss their six-month old son Jason in their St. Albert home on Feb. 26. They are among the roughly 21,000 Ukrainian newcomers who have come to Alberta in the year since Russia invaded Ukraine.

in line for days to cross the border into Poland.

Pregnant with her first child, Rozhkova realized she and her husband would soon be forced out of Poland — they needed to renew their government documents to stay, and the only place they could do so was in occupied Ukraine.

“It was a dark corner for us,” she said.

### A new home

At that point, Canada had started its Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel program to let Ukrainians quickly get visitor visas to live and work in Canada. Seeking a better future for their child, Rozhkova and Oleksandr applied for the visa and reached out to David Benjestorf for help.

Benjestorf, a lawyer and vice chair of the Edmonton Food Bank, lives just outside St. Albert in Sturgeon County.

“When the first Russian tank crossed that Ukrainian border, I knew what atrocities were about to happen,” he said — he had been in Chechnya as a student

and saw first-hand what happened when Russian troops invaded.

Benjestorf reached out through Facebook and the I Can Help Host website to help as many Ukrainians as possible. Using his connections, he has so far helped host 34 families, which often involved paying for air fare, finding local homes, collecting donations, and assisting with paperwork.

“I promised my wife we would stop at 10, but they just kept coming faster and faster,” he said.

Benjestorf said he got a message from Rozhkova online a few weeks before she and her husband arrived in Canada last May. He helped them find a home, food, clothes, furniture, and jobs, and still keeps in touch with them, along with every other Ukrainian he's helped.

“I really do look at them as family,” he said.

Rozhkova said she and her husband moved to St. Albert because it was safe, green, and quiet. Now, they have a small apartment with a computer, couch, and a

stuffed elephant for their six-month old son, Jason.

Oleksandr's mother joined them in February 2023, having fled Bondareve after Russian troops threatened to torture her for information, Rozhkova said. Jets with rockets now roar overhead twice a day in that village, where the streets are now clogged with concrete barriers and checkpoints.

While she was saddened to see the war still going on after a year, Rozhkova said she was proud of how the war had brought Ukrainians together.

“We're working as one nation for our country.”

Rozhkova said she hopes to tell her son about why they came to Canada when he grows up, and to have him learn about Ukraine's language and history. For now, she and her husband have no plans to go back to Ukraine.

“We would like to live the common life as everybody (does): to have a home, to raise a child, and to have a job,” she said. ■



# St. Albert, Sturgeon County 'super-hosts' welcome Ukrainian newcomers

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Anne Stalzer had a busy Feb. 24. The Morinville woman marked the one-year anniversary of the war in Ukraine by welcoming another group of Ukrainian newcomers into her home — the sixth time she's done so since the war began. It's a task that involves countless hours of shopping, cooking, driving, and translating, all to help complete strangers find a new life in Canada.

"Because I can," she replied, when asked why she does it.

"I've got the room. Why wouldn't I do it?"

Stalzer, 61, is one of a growing number of super-hosts in the St. Albert and Sturgeon County region who have gone to extraordinary lengths to help newcomers from Ukraine.

The St. Albert and Sturgeon County region has hosted a disproportionate number of Ukrainian newcomers, being the fourth most common destination for them in Alberta, said Cheryl Dumont, executive director of the St. Albert and District Further Education Association (which has worked with many of those newcomers through its Newcomer Connection program). Some area residents have hosted three or four families in a row.

"We were on the ground very early," Dumont said, with community organizations and the local Ukrainian community stepping up to co-ordinate relief efforts.

## Hosts in demand

Demand for hosts in the Edmonton region has doubled or tripled since Christmas because of a surge in Ukrainians arriving in Canada, said Cherilyn Michaels, the St. Albert resident who founded Edmonton Hosts Ukrainians.

She and other area host groups suspect the surge is related to the one-year anniversary of the war, which prompted fears of a spike in attacks by Russian forces, and the potential end to the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel (CUAET) program, which will expire March 31 unless renewed.

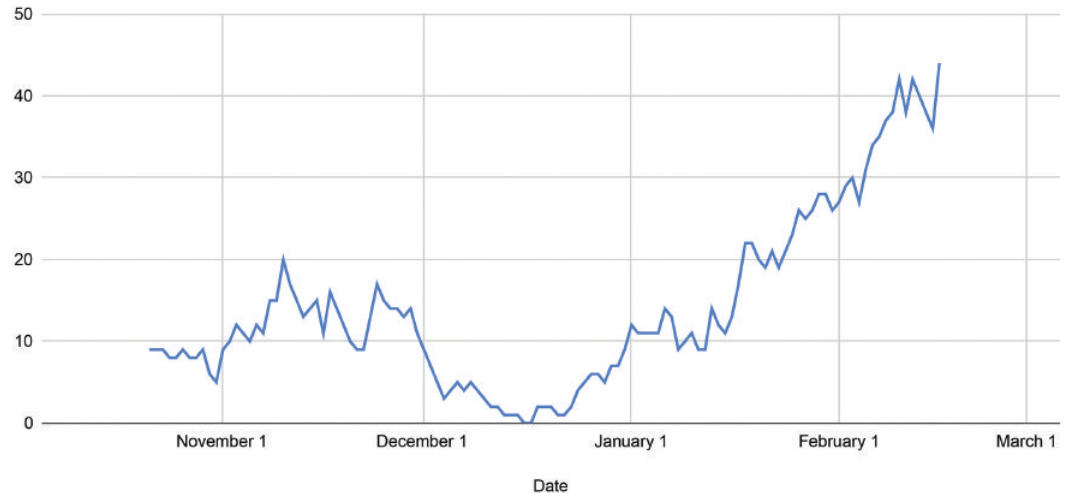
Michael said she has been working seven days a week since April to find hosts for newcomers across the greater Edmonton region, with about 300 families placed so far.

"Today was a record," she said on Feb. 16, with some 144 new families requesting help.

Roughly 700 Ukrainian newcomers were arriving in Alberta each week as of Feb. 22 compared to the pre-Christmas level of 650, said Orysia Boychuk, president of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress Alberta Provincial Council. About 80 per cent of these newcomers have no family here to support them, and need the help of host families on arrival.

Hosting those newcomers is easier now

Load -- Families Requesting Hosting with Edmonton Hosts Ukrainians Next 21 Days



CHERYLYN MICHAELS/Data

This chart shows the number of families that have requested hosting in the next 21 days through Edmonton Hosts Ukrainians since November 2022. Group organizer Cherilyn Michaels said there had been a vast increase in the number of families seeking hosts since the start of 2023.

with the rise of organized supports, said Janet Bertsch, who runs the St. Albert Hosts Ukrainians Facebook group. Ukrainians can get a one-time payment of \$3,000 from the federal government, for example, while institutions such as the Free Store for Ukrainian Newcomers have popped up to offer free clothes and household items. Instead of needing months, as most hosts expected earlier in the war, most newcomers have been able to find their own places to live after a few weeks. What is needed now is more hosts.

"There definitely is a very urgent need for people to help out," Bertsch said.

## How to host

Stalzer has set up three rooms in her house for newcomers and stocks each with a basket of toiletries prior to their arrival — a practice she said she learned from her parents. Her shelves, closets, garage, and den are all crammed with clothes, chairs, tables, couches, mattresses, and other items donated by Morinville residents for her incoming guests.

Stalzer said she typically chats with incoming families online before they come to Canada. When they arrive, there are hugs all around.

"They're so thrilled to be in Canada," she said.

Stalzer said the families she has hosted have stayed with her anywhere from a few weeks to a month. Many arrived with little more than carry-on luggage.

Stalzer said she typically spends five to eight hours a day driving newcomers to appointments to find jobs, homes, schools, driver's licences, and bank accounts, often communicating with them through Google Translate. Her cats and dogs help too, lavishing her guests with affection.

"Every time they come, my animals,

they abandon me!" she joked.

Stalzer said the families she has hosted have been amazing guests. One family insisted on cleaning her house top to bottom every week, while another gave her a handcrafted plate. She had fond memories of seeing one family scoop out a pumpkin and dress up to trick-or-treat during their first Halloween, and the screams of amazement another made as they went for a wintertime swim in her backyard hot tub.

Even though she keeps in touch with the families she hosts, Stalzer said it feels like seeing the kids off to college again every time one of them leaves.

"You just wish them well and hope for

the best."

With some 560,000 visas approved under CUAET and just 180,000 Ukrainians having arrived in Canada since January 2022, Michaels said Alberta would likely see many more newcomers in need of hosts in the months to come.

"Fundamentally, this is going to keep on going until the situation in Ukraine changes."

Stalzer encouraged anyone with the room and time to host Ukrainian newcomers to do so.

"If you have the time and money available, why would you not do it for people coming and fleeing from a war-torn country?" ■



KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette  
Anne Stalzer shows off one of the welcome baskets she has ready for Ukrainian newcomers in her Morinville home Feb. 16, 2023. Stalzer was hosting her sixth Ukrainian family as of Feb. 24.





# Newcomers helping newcomers

## Ukrainians lead volunteer effort

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Lilia Vovk knew it was time to get out of Ukraine when the bombs started falling on a nearby town.

"When the war started in our country, we were scared about their future," she said of her three children.

"We didn't know what was going on and what would go on after."

She and her family fled to Poland three days after the start of the war in February 2022.

Now, she's a dedicated volunteer at the Ukrainian Newcomer Furniture Warehouse and the Free Store For Ukrainian Newcomers in Edmonton — two of the many institutions that have sprung up in the last year to help those fleeing the war in Ukraine. In many cases, the people running these institutions are themselves Ukrainians.

"This help is very needed," Vovk said, when asked why she volunteers.

"We want to also be helpful for other families."

## Warehouses and free stores

Most Ukrainian newcomers in the St. Albert and Sturgeon County region have at some point visited the Furniture Warehouse and the Free Store. Each serves as a clearing house for donations to help Ukrainians get the basics for their first home.

The Ukrainian Canadian Congress — Alberta Provincial Council started the Furniture Warehouse in April 2022 to collect and distribute donated furniture for newcomers, said council president Orysia Boychuk. The warehouse is located in a space donated by the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Lodge Local 146.

The warehouse looks like a cross between an Ikea and a tank factory. Rows of couches and sofas lounge near giant steel pressure vessels. Customers peruse tables and shelves crowded with glasses and ceramic kittens set up by racks of iron chains and huge metal valves.

The warehouse is meant to set families up with the basics for a home, Boychuk said: beds, tables, dressers, dishes, and especially mattresses. Some 350 newcomer families visit it each month, helped by about 35 volunteers.

Most Ukrainian newcomers did not come to Canada by choice and were not prepared to start life over in a new country, Vovk said. Few have the cash on hand to furnish an apartment on arrival.

"People come here with nothing. We come here, we have only three bags of clothing," she said.

Ukrainian newcomers can come to the warehouse to get whatever they need for their first home, said warehouse custom-



KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

Volunteer Roman Kucher attaches posts to a donated couch at the Ukrainian Newcomer Furniture Warehouse Feb. 19. The warehouse is housed in a space owned by the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Lodge Local 146, hence the big green tank in the background.

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LILIA VOVK, VOLUNTEER AT THE UKRAINIAN  
NEWCOMER FURNITURE WAREHOUSE

er service co-ordinator Sofia Hrynevch, who arrived from Ukraine eight months ago. Volunteers help customers strap jumbles of furniture to truck beds and unload the three to 10 carloads of donations that pour in each day.

"We need volunteers every day," Hrynevch said, particularly to move heavy items and to advise customers on what items to get.

Free Store co-founder Janice Krissa-Moore said she started collecting donations soon after the Feb. 24 invasion to help relatives in Ukraine — her sister-in-law had to flee the country with one pair of underwear. She soon had way more stuff than she needed, and established the Free Store last April to give the donations away.

Initially located on 104th Street, the Free Store moved to its current, bigger location just north of MacEwan University in February 2023. Inside, the store is jammed wall-to-wall with coats, shirts, shoes, mugs, plates, microwaves, and more. Step sideways, and you can barely

squeeze between the racks of clothes and the 30-plus customers and volunteers. Check out the walls as you shop — they're covered in colourful murals painted by Ukrainian volunteers.

Some 160 families check out the store each week, Krissa-Moore said. Most are single mothers or others in high-need situations.

"Just look around your house and imagine leaving all that behind. They get all of that at the Free Store."

## Community effort

Krissa-Moore said about 90 per cent of the store's staff are newcomers from Ukraine. About 80 per cent of people who come to the store offer to volunteer until they find jobs.

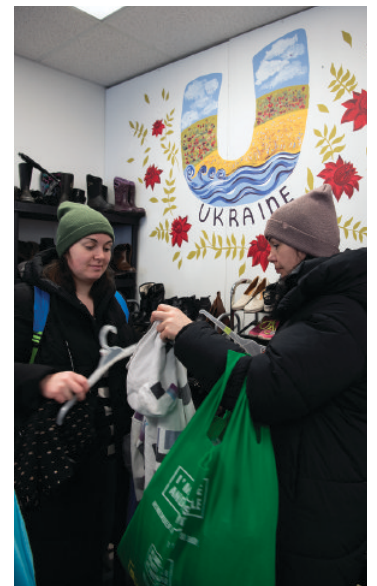
"It's lonely to come here alone and not be able to speak your native language," she said, when asked why so many newcomers come out as volunteers.

Volunteering at places like the Free Store takes people's minds off the war and gives them a sense of community, she continued. Volunteering helps people feel like they've accomplished something, and can lead to lasting friendships.

"It's all about helping each other."

St. Albert Ukrainian newcomer Tetiana Rozhkova said she got help from the Free Store when she arrived in Alberta last May, and started volunteering there while she was looking for a job. Now she's donating strollers and diapers back to the store, and plans to resume volunteering there as soon as she finds a daycare for her newborn son.

"It's a very good thing to do this for this



KEVIN MA/St. Albert Gazette

Two customers examine clothes by a mural at the Free Store for Ukrainian Newcomers in Edmonton on Feb. 25. About 160 families visit the store each week.

community and for Ukrainians as well," she said.

"This is the right thing (to do). If you have the time, you can donate it."

Vovk said places like the warehouse offer not just material goods, but opportunities for newcomers to make friends. It also gives them the knowledge that others out there want to help.

"I feel that I'm not alone," she said. ■