

LEFT: After the invasion began, the Zolochevskiys went to their building's basement. Nataliia's bed consisted of a mat and a pillow. "For us, it felt like a week," Nataliia said. "We couldn't eat anything. You were just drinking water."

BELOW: Nataliia and Iurii Zolochevskiy sit in chairs with friends. They made makeshift areas to wait out the bombing. "We went to the basement," Nataliia said. "We talked to people, some of them were our neighbors, but most of the people we didn't know at all."

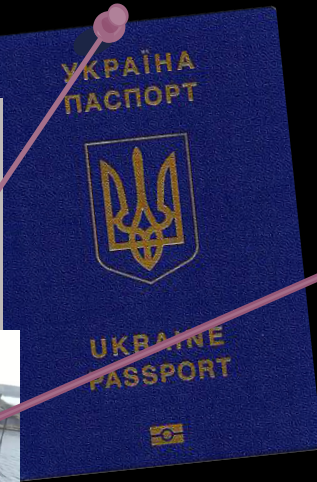


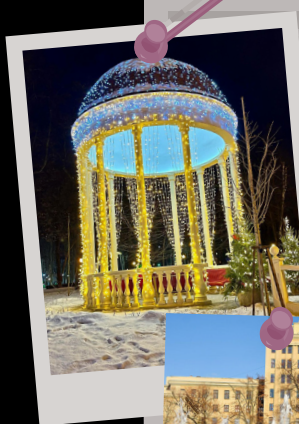
illustration by | RILEY COATES & ALLEN YOU

Torn from home

Відірваний від дому

Sophomore Oleksandr Zolochevskiy's journey from Ukraine to St. Louis

photo illustration by | SYDNEY COLLINGER

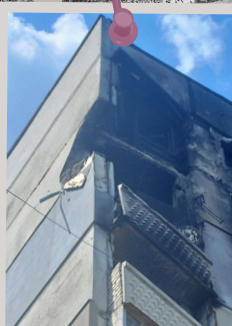


TOP LEFT: Decorative lights illuminate a Kharkiv park pavilion. Ukrainian cities are much more walkable than American ones. "The most surprising thing is that people use cars a lot," Oleksandr said. "As a European, we walk a lot. We don't use cars. We mostly use public transport."

BOTTOM LEFT: A university stands behind fountains in Kharkiv. Ukraine schools differs a lot from the U.S. "The biggest difference, firstly, is just the buildings themselves," Oleksandr said. "You have two gyms [and] a pool. My [Ukrainian] school wasn't really big."



LEFT & RIGHT: Apartment buildings in Kharkiv collapse in certain parts due to heavy artillery. Luckily, the Zolochevskiys' apartment made it through Russian shelling. "I thought that I would not see my house again," Oleksandr said. "I thought that it would be destroyed really fast because when you see Russian troops a few kilometers from your house, it's definitely not the best sign." (photos courtesy of the Zolochevskiys)



by Allen You
editor in chief

Gunshots pop. Blink. Missiles whistle, then crash. Flinch. Okay, breathe. Breathe because it wasn't him today, not his whole family that got gunned down in a car, like the one he saw in the news. But who knows what could happen next? A rocket could hit his building, and he would meet the same fate as the building right outside his window. Crumpled, like paper. Every jet's scream is death's whisper.

Oleksandr Zolochevskiy, his father, Iurii, and his mother, Nataliia Zolochevska loved to travel. Dubai, St. Louis, Kyiv and the rest of Europe were green pastures, but there was no place like home: Kharkiv, Ukraine. Walk in any direction, and there's something to see and something to do. Besides the new fountains, a zoo was under construction.

The family's apartment lies 60 kilometers (37.3 miles) from the Russian border. The city's limits reside a mere 30 km away. Russian citizens regularly come to enjoy its parks, food and entertainment. But one night, Russian soldiers crossed their border while Kharkiv slumbered. And they shook the earth.

"Feb. 24, early in the morning, we heard a lot of explosions and gunshots and we just couldn't believe that this was happening," Nataliia said. "We were just running all over our flat thinking about what to do. We heard that something is flying, whistles of the rockets, and we heard that something is exploding, moving, a lot of different noises."

False alarm?

The impossible had happened, and they were among the first to realize it. Before that day, the Ukrainian government had successfully convinced the population that war with Russia was extremely unlikely. After all, their economies were intertwined, and Russia wouldn't risk an all out war with other world powers, like NATO, just to annex Ukraine. Putin was just posturing.

"At first, I thought that maybe it was training, a drill, in case it would actually happen, because everybody was really nervous about it," Oleksandr, 16, said. "I thought that it was just a false alarm. But then I heard a few explosions near my house, and I saw flashlights in the sky. And I understood that, yeah, it's actually happening."

In a race against time, the family grabbed whatever they needed and hunkered in the basement of their building, as advised by the government.

"In case of an emergency, I packed a small bag and put in it some documents, jewelry, money and medical records of our family," Nataliia said. "It was just laying on the floor for a week. So when all this started, the first thing we took was this bag. We also took some pillows and something to cover ourselves when we went to the basement."

And they waited. "So the first hours of the first day, we thought that maybe it would be over in a few days or something," Oleksandr said. "Maybe they will stop or they will just [annex] the whole of Ukraine — because it's Russia, right?"

It didn't stop. Bombing after bombing rained despair on the vibrant city.

"The first, the second day, it felt like a month or two months because there's so many events happening, and you have no idea what to do," Oleksandr said. "You can't eat, you can't do anything. I understand that my city, my country that I love is in real danger. And I can't really do anything about it. I can't fight for it. I can't do anything."

A tough choice

The family, with no guarantee of tomorrow, had to choose between abandoning home or weathering the storm. But the Russians were advancing fast, and there was only a tiny window of time to leave without getting shot or blown up. Hesitate, stay at home or bunker in the

underground subway for another day, and their chance might fade.

"We didn't really have a lot of time to think about it," Iurii said. "Of course, there was a short period of time where we understood that we'll probably leave our flat, our city forever. But our main concern was just to save ourselves. Still, your brain just doesn't want to accept the idea that you have to leave everything and that it will never be the same again. So it was the most difficult part of it all, that it's time to accept this thought that you have to start a new life."

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Oleksandr Zolochevskiy, sophomore

It was decided. They packed everything they could and gave away everything else to those who decided to stay. By taking a minor road towards the south of Kharkiv, they were able to evade Russian violence.

"A minute after we left, they started to shell the city," Oleksandr said. "So while we're here we can hear that there's explosions behind us. We just drive and you can see flashlights in the sky, something is exploding and that these missiles hit something. But luckily, we haven't seen any Russians."

The family made it, but the city didn't. "You have this thing when you're actually alive and you're out of the city," Oleksandr said. "We're out of the shelling and you see how other people suffer. And you can't really do anything because you feel some kind of guilt that you didn't stay there and that you have left these people."

From Kharkiv, the family headed to Kremenchuk, the only safe crossing along the Dniro River. They slept on the floor of a kindergarten for a night. They then kept going southeast before turning north towards Ternopil, where they stayed with friends for another night. From Ternopil, the family continued to Chop, one of three border checkpoints between Ukraine and Slovakia, where the Zolochevskiy's first son, Alexey, studied architecture in Bratislava. After 70 total hours of driving, they finally escaped the war. But while Nataliia and Oleksandr

were ready to head to Alexey, Iurii took a different route.

“When we’re crossing the border to Slovakia, I got the paper that I was invited to the military office so they could do some medical examinations of me and decide if I would go to the army or not,” Iurii said. “But because of my health and age, they decided that I would not go to the army. So I just stayed in Ternopil and volunteered a lot.”

Safe, at last

Nataliia and Oleksandr both made it to Bratislava on Feb. 30 and stayed with Alexey’s boss’s family for a month. March 30, they took a short trip to Vienna, Austria and then a long flight to Chicago. At Chicago, former neighbors Galina and Vitaly Sergach picked them up and drove them to Creve Coeur, Missouri. Galina and Vitaly, who’ve lived in the U.S. since 2014, offered to house them, and they stayed at the Sergach’s until June, when they decided to find their own place.

In August, Nataliia and Oleksandr received two years of Temporary Protection Status, making them legal residents of the U.S. They had finally integrated, and they decided to stay as long as the war raged. And finding their footing in the U.S. was easy, as years of traveling to St. Louis made them well equipped to live in the foreign country.

“When we came here we had an understanding of what the U.S. is,” Nataliia said. “We have a lot of friends here. And we also have a small business. So when we came here, we knew what we would do here and how we’re going to live here. That’s basically why we chose the U.S. because we’ve been coming here every year since 2015.”

In early September, the Ukrainian forces began their counteroffensive. And the first breakthrough region sparked major hope in the family. It was Kharkiv.

“My day starts with taking my phone, and the first thing I’ll do is I’ll start with all the news,” Oleksandr said. “Every day, I read the news. Every day, you’re checking all the information, checking the map. Always. And last month, the news was really good. I’m just so excited about it, that we actually [took back] everything, that

our army’s really strong and that Russia is just not as powerful as it [seems].”

A new beginning

With Ukraine on the upper hand, Iurii left Ternopil and came to St. Louis to work on their small business, a real estate venture. And when the family had time, they attended a Ukrainian Greek-Orthodox church to connect with the Ukrainian community of St. Louis.

“So [Vitaly and Gelina] introduced us to the Ukrainian community,” Iurii said. “We celebrate New Year here; what Christmas [is for you], for us is New Year. We also met a lot of people there. Of course, we talked with people that were also affected by the invasion. Everyone was affected, somehow. And every person, every family has their own story about how they survived the invasion and what they were doing in the first days.”

Settled, Oleksandr considered returning to school.

“We started to look at what kind of high schools they have here,” Oleksandr said. “And we found Ladue. We started to research it a bit more. And we find [out] that this school is really good. We were looking for apartments in the Ladue School District because we really liked the school. Even though I only saw all the photos and I hadn’t been inside, I really liked it. We were like, ‘I have to go there.’”

So he did. In August, Oleksandr began his sophomore year at Ladue. His main struggles now: advanced chemistry and math analysis. As for how long he’ll stay in St. Louis, well, it kind of depends. But he’s been enjoying school. He can breathe. Breathe because it could be him one day walking those familiar streets, beginning to piece back together the life he once had.

“Of course, I would like to go back to Kharkiv because we like the city and we know it’s good,” Oleksandr said. “But it’s not the same as it was before the 24th. I’ll go to school here and finish it. What will happen next? I don’t know. I hope that the war will be over when I finish school. But the American government gave us a permit to live here for two years. So afterwards, we’ll see what we’ll do.” ☐



Oleksandr Zolocheskiy sips tea from a mug. When he takes time to relax, he likes to talk to his friends from Ukraine. “Everyone is pretty much settled where they are, so I talk a lot with my friends,” Oleksandr said. “It’s really interesting, too, because they’re living all around the world. Someone’s in Denmark, someone’s in Germany, someone’s in Italy and even France.”



Iurii Zolocheskiy watches a video of a collapsed Ukrainian bridge. Russian troops constantly bombarded highways, making car travel unsafe. “The most difficult and dangerous part of the whole trip was the first 5200 kilometers,” Iurii said. “Because we live in Kharkiv, which is on the eastern border of Russia, there were a lot of Russian troops.”



Nataliia, Oleksandr and Iurii Zolocheskiy lounge with their Pomeranian, Daisy, who endured the entire trip from Kharkiv to St. Louis with the family. Pets accompanied many displaced Ukrainians. “Most people thought that nobody would take their animals with them,” Nataliia said. “But when we came to the border, we saw so many people with their animals. We saw turtles, parrots and dogs. Most people tried to save their animals.” (photos by Sydney Collinger)



CENTER LEFT: Oleksandr Zolocheskiy sits in a patio chair. The Zolocheskiys’ new patio consists of a grill and homegrown veggies. “Fruits and vegetables are tastier because Ukraine is an agricultural country,” Iurii said. “It’s just more organic. For example, here, you have special shops where you have organic food. In Ukraine, everything is organic.”

ABOVE: Nataliia and Oleksandr Zolocheskiy pet Daisy in the kitchen. Nataliia does a lot of cooking, prepping recipes popular in Ukraine. “We have a national dish, which is a soup called borscht,” Nataliia said. “Also in Ukraine, Italian cuisine is really popular, like pasta. And Georgian food, it’s so good.”

LEFT: Pineapple cake rests on the counter. Nataliia Zolocheskiy experienced a striking difference of food products when arriving in the U.S. “We have really good Ukrainian cuisine,” Nataliia said. “[Ukrainians] have absolutely different bread. It’s better.”

