

Moving stories

Your tales from up and down the property ladder

'We fled Ukraine for Oxfordshire'

My grandparents are trapped in their home on the top floor in a block of flats [says 16-year-old Anastasia Shpot, who fled war-torn Ukraine with her mother, Natalia, 42, and two sisters Viktoria, 9, and Yuliia, 17] and I haven't seen them since we escaped to the Polish border.

Our home, in Pershotravensk, is only about 150km to the west of Donetsk, which is under siege. However, the region isn't a stranger to the threat of Russian conflict. In March 2014, just after Crimea had fallen, pro-Russian separatists sought to control the Donbas. Our government forces had no choice but to fight back and my dad, Viktor, 57, who is a chaplain, has been fighting on the front line ever since.

Since he started fighting eight years ago, he has warned that we must be prepared to move quickly if the fighting ever reached Donetsk. He would visit as often as possible and every Christmas we would take presents to our school, which would deliver them to the front line. My dad used to be a psychologist and specialised in helping people with drug and alcohol addictions. When the war broke out he wanted to help people cope with the mental toll of warfare. He started off as a volunteer and has since turned into a fighter. He's a bit like Superman in that way.

Even though we were warned about the war it was such a shock when the Russians came. We were woken at 4am on February 24 to our dad telling us that the Russian military was close. It all became very real when we heard gunfire and then saw the fighting in our neighbourhood. Through tears my parents discussed what we were going to

do and after two days of lying low in our first-floor apartment, I hugged my best friend, Sophia, goodbye and we left. Because my dad is in the military we would have been killed if we stayed. I am still very scared for my grandparents, who were unable to travel because my grandfather, Nikolay, has a kidney condition and my grandma, Ludmila, who also has a health condition, is caring for him.

Dad came with us as we drove across the country to get as close to the Polish border as possible. One day we stopped at a café in Melnytsya, a rural settlement in the western Ternopil Oblast region, to recharge and get some food. My parents, two sisters and I had been sleeping in our car and we were exhausted, cold and hungry. The café had been serving tea to about one hundred refugees when, suddenly, shooting started.

It was a close call. At one point we had to cross a bridge that had been demolished by Russian bombing to get to the border. By this point the Russians were nearly in Kyiv, so my dad had to leave us to return to the front line.

When we reached the border on February 28, it was freezing cold and we were met by volunteers who gave us hot soup. We slept in a local school with other refugees for three days while we were waiting to get into Poland. While there I made friends with a 12-year-old boy who was there with his mother. We were different ages but we were living the same experience. Once we got over the border my new friend went to stay

with his sister, while my family and I made our way to a one-bedroom apartment in Warsaw where we lived with a five-person family. We took the bedroom while they slept out in the hallway. I didn't know what was happening. It was like living in a nightmare and it was so hard trying to

stay positive when living with so many people in such a small space.

Two weeks went by and with the help of a volunteer British couple, Gary Silver and his wife, Sandra, we were able to move into a hostel that had more space. I told them our story and they helped us every step of the way. Gary [a senior partner at the Dorchester Regeneration Group, a housebuilder] told us that he would like to be our sponsor and on May 26 we flew to the UK, where they welcomed us in our new neighbourhood in the Heyford Park development, near Bicester, in Oxfordshire. We have been in our four-bedroom house for just over two months and enjoy having our own garden. There are other Ukrainian families living in the development and I've already made friends with two others, but I miss my old life. My best friend is still in Ukraine.

While the internet connection is patchy, we try to keep in touch with our family who are still in Ukraine. I miss everyone so much and I just want the war to end so I can go back home.

Interview by Georgia Lambert

Have your say

Would you like to share your moving story?
Email carol.lewis@thetimes.co.uk



**Anastasia Shpot, 16,
with her mother, Natalia**