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First day as a Ukrainian refugee: Warm bed, guilt and cursing Putin

By [Chico Harlan](#)

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After hours of traffic, and hours of walking, Ukrainians Ira Ivanitskaia, left, and Anya Yavorksaia cross into Palanca, Moldova, with their children. (Gianmarco Maraviglia for The Washington Post)

ON THE UKRAINE-MOLDOVA BORDER — Her body was shaking as she crossed the border, a mix of cold and fear and everything she was running from. She had scarcely slept in six days. She hadn't eaten in two. But now finally, amid the snow and chaos of volunteers, Ira Ivanitskaia and her son were safe.

They could be counted among the [1 million people](#) who had fled Ukraine into neighboring countries in the span of a week.

"Tatiana? Tatiana?" Ira kept saying, repeating a code word as she walked through the late afternoon crowd, looking for somebody she didn't know, in a country she'd never been to, with who-knows-what lying ahead.

She had spent the previous seven days focused on escaping the war, on getting away from the rockets she'd heard howling at night. But the cost of the conflict was about to become apparent in new ways.

"A dividing line between my old life and new," Ira, 46, would later call it. On the new side, all she had were muddy duffel bags of clothes, a few tools she needed as a hairdresser, and two unfamiliar men flagging her down.

The volunteer drivers. The men sent by her friend Tatiana.

Ira started to sob.

[In photos: More than 1 million refugees have fled Ukraine](#)

"Come with me," one of the men said, leading Ira and her son, along with a friend and child who'd come with them, toward a van and farther away still from Ukraine.

Just seven nights earlier, Ira, a single mother, had worked a full shift at the salon in Odessa — clients coming in until 6 p.m., none of them seeming to suspect that Russian troops were hours away from launching their attack on Ukraine.



A family crosses the border from Ukraine into Palanca, Moldova, on March 2.



The night before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ira Ivanitskaia worked an uneventful evening at a hair salon in Odessa.

Her 20-year-old daughter fled first, taking a friend's offer to escape to Turkey.

Ira and her son, 7-year-old Roman, spent the nights looking out at the sky, telling one another to think positive thoughts, but nonetheless returning to the idea of a rocket hitting a building in their neighborhood, or even their own home.

Ira's co-worker Anya Yavorksaia, 40, moved in along with her 9-year-old son, Demian, terrified because they lived next to a military site. Ira had one panic attack, then two. Roman started saying things like, "I don't want to die." When they did try to sleep, they stayed fully dressed. What if they had to run? When Ira put her hand on her son's heart, she felt it racing.

In leaving Odessa, she'd left behind her parents. She'd dropped off her dog with a relative and said goodbye to her apartment near the water where she'd lived for 15 years. She left her friendships — her reputation as a host who threw annual springtime parties with vodka and barbecue.

One week into the war, she felt any new place would be better than what she had.

"I might not see Ukraine again for another 10 years," she said just before getting into the van.

Her new home — a very temporary one — was an hour's drive into one of Europe's poorest countries, in a village with muck caking the unpaved roads. Set amid brown farmland was a green-painted house. Ira, Anya and their children went through the gate.

Inside the house were barking dogs, pink walls and framed photos of someone else's family. There were also thick blankets and warm showers. In the kitchen, Ludmila Iavorschi, 55, was cooking borscht and meat. She told the women they'd made the right decision to leave, for the sake of their children.

[As trains of Ukrainian refugees arrive in Berlin, E.U. offers warm but 'temporary' welcome](#)

Ira sobbed in a way she couldn't have imagined.

"A total release," she said.



Demian and Roman spend their first night as refugees at a home in Moldova.



Tatiana, who arrived from Ukraine a few days earlier, hugs Ira in Ursoaia, Moldova, on March 2.

After dinner, Ira and Anya walked down the street to where another family was housing Ukrainians — including Tatiana, her friend from Odessa who’d fled by car in the first hours of the war.

All of a sudden, the rectangular table became crowded with Moldovans offering homemade wine and Ukrainian refugees drinking and talking about war.

“He attacked us at 4 a.m. as if he was Hitler,” Ira said of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“He is psychologically ill,” said Tatiana, who, because of safety concerns, asked that her last name not be used.

There was more wine. More fury at Putin. People pulled out their phones and talked about the terrible news, the messages they were getting, the Russian propaganda, and relatives who believed Putin’s war was justified.

“I am just so angry,” Ira said.

But still, she could feel at least some of her tension releasing. There’d been times over the past week, she said, when she felt like she couldn’t exhale, like she was being “strangled from the inside.” Even approaching Ukraine’s border with Moldova, she’d thought to herself that what she really needed was 50 milliliters of vodka. What she got instead was red wine poured from a pitcher in a village home, and when she returned down the road to Ludmila’s house, she went to sleep easily for the first time in seven nights.

There was nothing to stay on alert for in the skies over rural Moldova.



The view from a house sheltering Ukrainian refugees in Moldova.

Ira had a short-term plan, kind of. It involved spending a few days in Moldova, resting and sleeping. And after that, going by bus to Romania, through Hungary, and eventually on to Germany, where Anya's sibling already lived. Ira had brought her brushes and scissors. Maybe she could work.

But when she woke in the morning, she first needed to find a place to spend the night. A group of 12 Ukrainians with connections to Ludmila's son were about to cross into Moldova. Ira, Anya and their children needed to give others a turn with the blankets and warm showers.

[Through a mountain pass, Poles frantically rebuild a rail link to Ukraine to help refugees](#)

Their best hope were messages that went out on Facebook: two women and two children, seeking a place to stay. They were refugees. Or had been for all of 19 hours.

Ira took some medicine to help with her blood pressure. Sitting on a guest bed in Ludmila's house, she started thinking again about the line that had divided her life. Behind her was not just the war, but also the people who were still at its mercy. The friends in Kharkiv, a city being destroyed. Her friends in Odessa, sending messages about air raid sirens the previous night. Her family.

"How could I leave my parents?" she said.



Ludmila lavorschi in her kitchen in Ursoaia.



Ira shows Tatiana videos shot in Odessa.

Then there was the matter of what was ahead. New belongings. New acquaintances. A new language. New everything. She didn't even have a functioning SIM card for her phone.

"It's the feeling that you have left your whole life behind, and you have a long way ahead," Ira said.

Ludmila entered the room and offered Ira her hand. They were both crying.

Ludmila said she'd wanted to open her home to Ukrainians because she, too, had once felt like a victim of war. It was a much smaller conflict — a war in the early 1990s between Moldova and a breakaway Russian area of Transnistria — and she never had to flee her home. But the fighting came within six miles of her house. And she said she could still vividly remember many of the crucial moments. Like saying goodbye to her husband as he was leaving for the front lines. Like receiving the news of a neighbor killed in battle. Like seeing her husband come home, just 31 years old, his hair suddenly gray.

It was almost lunchtime. Ludmila had to get ready for the next guests, and Anya and Ira still didn't know where they might go. Day No. 2 as refugees was just beginning.

Ludmila looked at her guests.

"It will be impossible to forget this period," she said.

Viorel Barbanoua contributed to this report.



The border with Ukraine as seen from Moldova on March 2.