

War is a terrifying and devastating experience for anyone, and it becomes even more challenging when children are caught in the midst of it. My name is Victoriia, and I am a 12-year-old girl who was born and raised in Ukraine. I never could have imagined that war would come to our country and disrupt our peaceful lives.

Before the war, my family lived in the tranquil village of Vyshevychi, nestled in the Zhytomyr region. I had a loving family, with my younger brother Denis, my mother Anna, and my father Pavlo. We led ordinary lives, attending school and cherishing the simple joys of our rural surroundings. In school, we were educated about the grim realities of war. We learned about how to protect ourselves during shelling, where to seek shelter, and what essentials to pack if war were to break out. We were even taught to sew our name, surname, address, and phone number onto our clothes. Little did I know that these lessons would soon become vital for our survival.

The day that shattered our peaceful existence was February 24th. I was awakened by a deafening explosion. My mother rushed in, desperately trying to calm us down. It was in that moment that we learned the harsh truth - war had overtaken our land. Thankfully, our home had a basement, and we quickly sought refuge there, spending eight agonizing hours hiding from the dangers above. We spent the night in the basement, engulfed by fear and uncertainty. The Russian military was a mere 15 kilometers away, and the sounds of rockets, shells, and tanks filled our ears.

Our once-idyllic village transformed into a battleground. Rockets flew over our house, explosions rattled nearby, and tanks rumbled through the streets. Fear gripped our hearts, and we were too afraid to venture beyond the safety of our yard due to the presence of saboteurs in the village. Our brave men took it upon themselves to protect our community, while the women banded together, cooking and providing sustenance to our valiant soldiers. Life in the basement was a struggle. Cut off from the outside world, we endured cold and discomfort. As time passed, food shortages plagued our village, and we realized that we had to leave.

Adapting to the harsh realities of war was a tremendous challenge for us all. In our darkest hour, our friends suggested that we seek assistance from Toledo Helps Ukraine, an organization that had previously aided them in their journey to America. Filled with hope, we submitted our application and anxiously awaited a response. The news arrived, and it brought us relief and gratitude - we were offered shelter in America. The thought of no longer sleeping in the basement, enduring the cold, and hearing constant explosions filled me with joy. Upon our arrival in America, we were greeted by Mechelle Zarou, our sponsor, and the Sisters of St. Francis.

Their warm welcome and continued support eased our transition into a new life. I am especially grateful to Alona Matchenko, the founder of Toledo Helps Ukraine, for her tireless efforts in assisting Ukrainians during these trying times. Now, I find myself filled with endless happiness as I have the opportunity to pursue my passion for sports with Starlings Volleyball as part of the Ukrainian refugee team. We have an incredible coach, and my teammates have become my closest friends. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all those who have provided us with safety and assistance. Thank you, America, for opening your doors and offering us a chance at a secure future.

War may have disrupted our lives, but with the support of compassionate individuals and organizations, we are rebuilding our lives, one step at a time.