

My journey from Ukraine to Japan - A wish for peace that I want to convey now -

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Part 2.

My name is Anna. I joined Plan International Japan in December 2022.

I was born and lived all my life in the city of Mariupol in Ukraine. But I had to leave my home because it, like my city, was destroyed because of the war in Ukraine.

In the second part of the blog, I will tell you about the war that changed my life, my new life and plans in Japan, and my aspirations and dreams I hope to realize here.

How the war changed my whole life

On the morning 24 of February 2022 year, changed my life forever. Waking up to regularly repeated reports about a beginning full-scale war Ukraine, we could not yet realize how great a tragedy was coming.

My husband, older sister, and I decided to stay in the Mariupol, because we thought it might be safer, as we had been living in a state of frozen war for 8 years. However, day by day the situation in the city was getting worse. The explosions were very powerful and were heard closer every day. The shops were getting empty and there was nothing to fill shops. People quickly smashed the closed shops and thus there was only one store in the city that worked 3 hours a day. From early morning to this shop for foods were endless lines under the shelling. But in the middle of March, this store was also looted. The result is that the city of 500,000 people (so many people were at the beginning of the full-scale war) was left without a single store.

The electricity and heating were gradually cut off, and on the day on which our home was destroyed by artillery shelling, also cut off the gas supply. We had no one connection at all with the outside world, as mobile communication was blocked in the whole city. Just only a couple of times we managed to catch a signal on a high-rise building across the sea and in the city center. We were able to write to our sister to say we were alive.

A shell hit our apartment on March 6, my husband, my older sister and I miraculously managed to run out to the hallway. However, everything in the apartment collapsed from a powerful explosion. Looking for the cat, a fire broke out. The neighbors helped us put it out with their last water supplies. However, immediately after that, the next artillery shelling began (because our house was opposite the regional police station). We managed to hide in the basement, and when we came out, the house was already on fire, and it was impossible to put it out. After that, we stayed in the basement (like shelter) of the house across the street and the next day we went to my friend's house, whose big family sincerely accepted us and supported us until we left.

This city was no longer recognizable. It was cold, gray, with bombed buildings and smashed shops and confusion all around. Continuous random explosions and people cooking on fires outside their homes. And then the planes started flying constantly and dropping super-powerful bombs that nothing could save them from. The sirens hadn't been sounding since the first days of the war, because there was nothing left and there was no need for them because of the danger at every moment. Back then, Mariupol seemed abandoned and hopeless.

The school where my husband and I worked was also has strong damaged by the avia-bombing. It was about to undergo major repairs, which the students, their parents, and teachers had been waiting for so long. The school was already almost completely renovated, but the war destroyed not only the building, and also the warm and pleasant memories of the children and teachers.

It was possible to leave Mariupol either in the first days of the war or only from March 14, when way from city was free. Then the city was once again brought into the circle and after that it was very difficult to leave the city.

We managed to leave the city on March 16, three weeks after the start of the full-scale war. But this period of life seemed to last for an eternity and as if in a separate reality. I felt that impossible to leave the city at that time, and every day we lived was like a new birthday. We dared to take the risk and leave because we realized

that if we stayed, there would not be enough water and food for the family that supported us. They were going to stay in the city, so we decided to leave on our own. We knew what a big risk it was, but we wanted to leave the city as soon as possible. Because every moment could be the last and we did not know what can the next happened in the city. Another family helped us to leave, as an airplane bomb had landed near their house at night.

The road was very long, difficult and dangerous. We passed many checkpoints and stood in lines. We were traveling in a whole conglomeration of cars and heard the sounds of shelling. It took about three days to get to the territory of Ukraine, because we still had to stay in another city which in controlled by Russia. Leaving my hometown, I was glad to have a chance to go in safe place. However, the feeling of sadness and pain from what is happening in the city and when I saw Mariupol for the last time so destroyed will remain in my memory forever.

Starting a new life in Japan

After evacuating from Mariupol and before arriving in Japan in May 2022, my husband and I spent more than two months in different places. First in a refugee camp and then temporarily staying with a colleague in Poland, with whom we were writing a Polish-Ukrainian youth exchange project. We finalized it in the first days of the war, while we still had the opportunity, but we never managed to implement it in the planned format.

At the same time, while participating in international projects and traveling, we tried to choose a country where we could find shelter and support. Since we were able to leave quite late, almost all countries were already overcrowded with refugees from Ukraine. We had seen information that Japan was accepting refugees from Ukraine, but it seemed unrealistic to get here. However, one day, passing by the Japanese Embassy in Poland, we decided to go in and ask. A week later, we arrived in Japan.

We chose this country because we were very interested in its culture and history, as well as its mentality and way of life. We were fascinated by movies, food, and the language, which were difficult for us to learn. Japan welcomed us very warmly. They helped us with all the paperwork, accommodation, housing, and benefits. People treated us sincerely and tried to help us. Gradually, we found friends and places where we are welcome. We often attend meetings of Ukrainians organized by the Himawari Support Center. And now we are also implementing another project to provide financial support to Ukraine and Ukrainians - shooting a video with Ukrainians on the topic of peace.

Working for Plan International has made one of my dreams come true

When I came to Japan, I wasn't sure I would be able to find a job I liked. I just wanted my work to be of some use and help Ukraine. Gradually adapting to Japan, I attended one of the events organized by the NGO WELgee to help refugees find work. After that, we kept in touch with each other and at one of the meetings I told them about my aspirations and desires. The next day, I received a message from them that Plan International Japan was looking for a Ukrainian to join their team to help them communicate with Ukrainians to help Ukraine. And they offered me to try to get this position.

I had long dreamed of working for an international charitable organization. But here I was almost sure it would be impossible, but I decided to try. WELgee members supported me every step of the way - from improving my CV, to passing interviews, and even now. And one of my dreams, which seemed impossible, came true.

Now I work in the warm and friendly team of Plan International Japan in the Advocacy group. At the moment, I am mainly engaged in searching for and collecting information about the situation in Ukraine and Ukrainians who are in need of help. I am starting to prepare a series of presentations for the organization's members about the history of Ukraine and its relations with Russia, about the educational system of Ukraine and challenges in education for children abroad, about the problems of refugee adaptation and the situation of girls in Ukraine, and so on. And, of course, about the lives and hard work of Ukrainians who evacuated to Japan. To get to know the real voices of people, I will interview Ukrainians and disseminate these stories in the media. Based on my past experience, I plan to organize workshops on tolerance and democracy.

Alongside my work, I am currently studying Japanese at a language school. My colleagues even help me with my Japanese studies. Learning Japanese is very difficult for me because it is completely different from my native language. But I will gradually try and do my best to speak Japanese.

Now, I really want to support Ukraine and Ukrainians and tell the world about war and situation in Ukraine by every possible way. Even though it will be a small support, I want to join all initiatives and proposals - be it humanitarian, financial, educational or any other. I want to help with the integration and adaptation of children evacuated to different countries.

My dreams and hopes for the future

I greatly admire Japan, the country that sheltered me and supported me in everything during a difficult period of my life. Of course, I miss Ukraine very much, and especially my hometown, which is no longer recognizable through the war. I realize that the life I had there before the full-scale war can't be returned. But I believe that I will be able to support Ukrainians and my home country, even while I am in Japan.

It is very painful that so many people have already died in this war, as well as children whose lives will never be restored. Many more have been wounded and injured, and some children have been orphaned by the war.

I hope that the children who had to face the horrors of war will soon live in a free and independent Ukraine in peace. Children are our hope for a brighter future, but now they need help and support.

I believe that the dreams of each of us will come true. And if we dream together and strive with all our might for peace in Ukraine, it will certainly come true very soon! After all, Ukraine is now supported by so many countries and their citizens, who are also making efforts for it.