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Elderly Ukrainian couple “carry the pain” of war as they resettle in Palo Alto

Jewish retirement community sponsors the couple for a year to “pay it forward”

By **JULIA PRODIS SULEK** | jsulek@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA – JULY 27: Anatolii, left, and Mariia Maslianchuk recount what they experienced in their home country of Ukraine before they fled to the United States in their apartment at the Moldaw Residences in Palo Alto, Calif., on Wednesday, July 27, 2022. (Wangyuxuan Xu/Bay Area News Group)

When the retired doctor and his wife fled their home in Ukraine, they took only the most precious things with them – a white linen tablecloth with pink edges hand stitched by her great great grandmother and a spoonful of dirt from her garden she keeps in a heart-shaped box.

Anatolii and Mariia Maslianchuk are in their 70s and hold on to hope that they will return to the home they shared for 50 years, the one they opened for days and weeks at a time

to refugees from the eastern part of the country needing shelter from the worst of the war.

Now they, too, are refugees, resettling in Palo Alto as guests of the Moldaw Family Residences, a retirement community with Jewish roots that is sponsoring them with free housing and meals.



Mariia Maslianchuk packed this heart-shaped box with holy water and bread and a spoonful of earth from her garden before she and her husband, Anatolii, fled their home in a Ukrainian village in April 2022. The Moldaw retirement community in Palo Alto is giving them free housing for a year. (Photo courtesy of the Maslianchuk Family)

“Most of us have been impacted by war,” said Elyse Gerson, whose grandparents fled Nazi Germany. “There are residents here who are Holocaust survivors. My grandparents – I – wouldn’t be here without the kindness of strangers.”

Since the couple arrived at Moldaw three weeks ago, after a circuitous journey that took them through Turkey and Mexico, separated them for a time and hospitalized them for stress, neighbors have welcomed them with cards and well wishes. The Maslianchuks greet guests with the traditional loaf of bread and salt and place it gingerly on the spotless linen tablecloth to share. They don’t speak English, so what they can’t express in words, they show in hugs and smiles.

But, as Mariia says, “I carry the pain with me.”

In an interview this week at the upscale retirement community, translated through their daughter, Oksana, who has lived in the U.S. for eight years, Mariia and Anatolii explained what they have endured.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February, they and their neighbors opened their homes in western Ukraine to those fleeing from the war-torn east. Some would stay just overnight, along their sojourn to refuge in the nearby countries of Poland, Romania and Hungary. Others stayed for weeks or months.

It's the image of an 11-year-old boy named Artem that haunts Mariia most. His grandparents explained that they had dodged bombs and watched soldiers die as they fled from their home in Donetsk. Children and the elderly were encouraged to leave first, so the boy's parents stayed behind. When Artem arrived at their door, he was so traumatized, he couldn't speak. He lived with the Maslianchuks and their neighbors for nearly three months, and still his eyes were filled with fear.

"I gave him candy and tried to introduce him to my neighbors' children and make them play together to take out that stress," Mariia, 70, said. "I would say these boys want to play with you, but it was difficult. Always, the boy was scared."

Anatolii, 73, had seen that kind of fear before. When he was a young doctor, he rode in an ambulance evacuating terrified families from the villages around Chernobyl after the nuclear reactor explosion in northern Ukraine in 1986. Most of his colleagues who were exposed to radiation like he was have died, he said. Anatolii is being treated for throat cancer.

After his exposure, he and his wife, whose daughter is their only child, decided not to have any more children. He didn't know how long he would live to raise them.



PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA - JULY 27: Maslianchuk Mariia tears up while telling the story of the Ukraine war in their new apartment at the Moldaw Residences Wednesday, July 27, 2022. (Wangyuxuan Xu/Bay Area News Group)

From the start of the war, Oksana begged her parents to come to the United States. A cousin had nearly lost his life in eastern Ukraine, but survived for two weeks in an underground shelter. Although the fighting was mostly centered miles away along the eastern borders, sirens often sounded in the Maslianchuks' village to the west, terrifying the boy every time. Danger always seemed close.

Oksana, a licensed radiologist in Ukraine, moved here in 2014, the last time the Russians invaded Ukraine, taking the Crimea region. While she is trying to reestablish her medical credentials, she has been working as a live-in caregiver. She had no home of her own to take in her parents. But she promised she would find them something.

Oksana's friends took them into their homes in Redwood City and San Francisco when they first arrived in April, and at times could only accommodate one parent or another. At different times, each was hospitalized, for Mariia's heart problems and Anatolii's cancer and other ailments exacerbated by stress.

Oksana finally contacted Jewish Family and Children's Services, a Bay Area human services charity that has been in business since the Gold Rush when they first helped widows and orphans. The organization's fundamental values, of welcoming strangers and "repairing the world," led it to provide numerous services, including helping displaced families like the Maslianchuks. It has helped settle and seek benefits for 200 Ukrainians since the war began.

When the director of the Moldaw retirement community called offering a one-bedroom apartment for an elderly Ukrainian couple in need, they recommended the Maslianchuks, who are Ukrainian Orthodox Christians.



