

WUR PhD student shares house with two refugees from Ukraine

UNEXPECTED HOUSEMATES

More than three million people have fled Ukraine since the war began. Among them, Anna (20) and her 'sister-in-law' Vira (17), who hurriedly packed some things, joined the queue at the border and arrived in Wageningen after a long journey. And so PhD student Miriam Kuspiel unexpectedly gained two housemates. 'Luckily I can afford to pay the rent on my own.'



Text Coretta Jongeling

Of course, they were following the news and had seen that tensions were rising between Russia and Ukraine. But Anna and Vira had never imagined that it would really come to a war and that there would be so much violence. Anna: 'It felt like I was in a film. When I woke up on 24 February, I had a huge number of messages from friends on my phone. Everyone was saying that the war had started. I couldn't believe it. I called my brother and it was only when he said it was true that the news hit me.'

Tanks

'The first few days were very stressful. Friends from Charkov sent photos of tanks and soldiers. We live in Chernivtsi near the Romanian border, quite a long way from there. But we had no idea what the Russian army would do and how far they would get. It felt so unreal. My birthday was two days before the war started. One moment I was making plans for my birthday party, the next I was helping refugees who had come to our city.' 'My first thought was: we have to get out of here. Then I realized that I would have to be a long way away from my boyfriend and all my friends. And my grandmother, who has no passport, can't leave the country. Never-

theless, we decided to leave fairly quickly. The situation was very unpredictable. Friends were in air-raid shelters in the cold. There were news reports about girls being raped and killed.'

They made the decision at nine in the evening and left at six the next morning. Anna and Vira, Anna's boyfriend's sister, would travel together, without their parents, who wanted to stay behind for the rest of the family.

Anna: 'The journey was not easy. At the border there were queues that took hours. It was freezing, and there were lots of babies and young children crying constantly. When we arrived at customs, they refused to let us through. Priority was given to mothers with children. Only after long negotiations did they let us through, but then we didn't have time to give our mothers a hug. We said goodbye through the fence.'

Final destination Wageningen

They took the bus to Bucharest, where their flight would go from. The bus arrived just in time, but once again, immigration officials did not cooperate. Vira: 'According to Romanian law, I am not allowed to travel alone as a minor. We had written permission from my parents,



From the left: Anna, Vira and Miriam • Photo Guy Ackermans

but that didn't help.' Long story short: they missed their flight, were able to fly the next day after a lot of talking, and finally arrived in Wageningen after a diversion via Vienna and Frankfurt. It was a logical final destination, because Anna's brother Andriy lives here and is doing a PhD at Wageningen University.

They lived with Andriy and his two housemates for the first few days, five of them in a small flat. Anna: 'When we were making dumplings for the fundraiser for Ukraine, my brother called on their neighbour, Miriam, to borrow a rolling pin. They got talking about our situation and

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Miriam told them she had a spare room in her flat.'

Miriam: 'It was an easy decision. I had planned to rent the room out to guest researchers, but fortunately I can afford to pay the rent on my own too. Many people want to do something to help, and this is what I can do.'

Madmen

The girls can stay with Miriam least at least until the end of March. What happens after that is still very uncertain. Vira: 'I would prefer to go back as soon as I am 18. I find it very hard to be here, far from family and friends. But everything depends on how the war goes. Nobody knows how things will go, or what to expect.

Nobody expected that some madman would start a war.'

Anna: 'At first I also wanted to go back and help people there. But now I realize that it's better to help from here. Here we can collect money and send it to people who need it in Ukraine.'

Meanwhile, life is starting to go back to normal. Anna: 'The head of our university told us we should just pick up our studies again. We are used to working online because of the pandemic, he says. We call him madman the second. Because who can concentrate on homework now? Studying was always the most important thing for me. I always got good grades. Now I can't imagine why I was so preoccupied with that. There are more important things in life now.' ■