

"Starting life anew": The story of Olena and her son Nazar

Current description of Nazar and Olena in Berlin

11-year-old Nazar still often goes to school in Berlin (Germany) wrapped in a blanket, just like back in the spring of 2022, when he and his mother Olena were escaping from their hometown of Mariupol, which was being ruthlessly destroyed by Russian forces. Only now does Olena catch herself thinking that she finally feels at home, comfortable, and safe, and realizes that she must begin to rebuild her life from scratch.

The effect of kindness on Olena's experience

During two and a half years of forced evacuation, they encountered many kind people. It was this kindness that became their support and gave them the strength to endure all the trials.

Olena's initial reaction to the war

At the beginning of 2022, neither Olena nor her husband believed in the possibility of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even on February 24, when Russian forces attacked Ukraine's major cities with missiles, invaded Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Mykolaiv regions, and advanced in Donetsk, they thought it wouldn't last long. Olena assumed she could wait out the attacks in a shelter for "a few days" with her son Nazar, who has autism, until the shelling stopped. So, she quickly packed their documents and essential items into a small suitcase, and they went down to an old basement that served as a shelter.

The harsh reality of war and the decision to flee

"A few days" stretched into three and a half weeks. Throughout that time, neither Olena nor Nazar went outside, not wanting to risk it, as there was not a single hour without enemy shelling. Due to the lack of proper conditions in the shelter, the absence of clean water and food, and the unsanitary conditions, the children who were with them started getting sick, and soon the adults as well. Their only hope was an evacuation corridor. One day, Olena and Nazar managed to leave. They were first taken to occupied Berdiansk, and from there, with volunteers on a bus, they traveled to Zaporizhzhia. After spending several days in Zaporizhzhia and Lviv, Olena decided to take her son abroad.

Description of Olena's and Nazar's life in Berlin

In Berlin, they were lucky to stay in the apartment of a kind family. Nazar now has his own room with a collection of his favorite toys. He happily attends a local school and is learning German. To replace their seaside walks, Olena and Nazar now visit the lakes and rivers nearby.

Olena´s inner tribulations

And everything seems fine... Yet Olena is sometimes struck by vivid memories of Mariupol, of their home destroyed by enemy bombings, of her work she once loved and poured her heart into... These memories feel like shadows from another life that she can't shake off. And she can't hide from them under her son's blanket...

Teaser for the video about Olena and Nazar

Watch the video to learn more about how Olena and Nazar escaped Mariupol and what their life in Berlin is like now.