

## A Ukrainian Refugee Family in Russia

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It all started with a social network post asking for help – calling attention to a family who had to escape from Ukraine when their house was destroyed and their child killed. When too many con artists have appealed to the kind and compassionate only to steal their money, the poster knew she needed to persuade the network users that the story was real, so she offered to give their phone numbers to anyone compassionate and brave enough to help. That is how I got to know the Bobrishev family and their story – a story so tragic, it makes one reevaluate all their perceived hardships and give thanks for what he or she has. A few months after contacting the family, I was in Moscow and had a chance to meet them, so I called Vladimir and asked his permission to visit. Both he and his wife Tamara were very kind and invited me to stop by. They were living in a decommissioned hospital, turned hostel/dormitory, together with several other families who escaped Eastern Ukraine under similar circumstances.

We met by the gate to the building complex. I saw their son Misha riding around the yard on his bike and, trying to make conversation, said, "It is amazing how much your son looks like you." The response was good-natured, but so disturbing that it was difficult to continue small talk:

"Both of my sons used to look like me."

Inside, I saw that their room was light, clean, and fairly big. It would have been fine as a hospital ward or a hotel room, but living in a place that size, with two adults and an 8-year-old was clearly challenging, although Vladimir and Tamara seemed to stay positive. They warmed up some tea and put some snacks on the table. We drank tea and talked.

Vladimir, Tamara, 7-year old Misha, and 4-year old Artem lived their entire lives in the city of Donetsk in the east of Ukraine. Vladimir worked a good job as an industrial electrician. Tamara was taking care of their home and raising two rambunctious boys. In 2013-2014, as their country was going through yet another revolution, they didn't get involved. While they weren't too happy with the government, they did not participate in the protests that deposed the president, replaced the government, and deeply shook the country as they tried to live a normal life and concentrate on the daily responsibilities, work, and providing for their family. They did not necessarily approve of the revolution either and were unhappy that the country seemed to have been taken over by mob rule, when the "revolutionaries" decided what was going to happen by a live vote in the central square of the capital without proper elections and without considering the opinions and interests of the eastern part of the country. When the Donetsk and Luhansk regions refused to accept the results of the revolution in Kiev, and the people rebelled and refused to submit to the rule of the new government they weren't invited to vote on, the Bobrishev family still did not join the action. They felt they shared the sentiment of the majority of their region who rejected the changes, but they weren't radicals or troublemakers. They were family people - with work and responsibilities, and with two little kids to feed. Who can afford the time to stage tent protests, marches, and demonstrations? Definitely not parents of young children!

Still, the situation was getting rougher, and more dangerous. The self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" was soon shelled by the

Ukrainian army. News of another person killed, another house blown up became a daily occurrence, and the town received its scars from the bombings by the new "revolutionary government" in Kiev. Social networks exploded with images of killed, maimed, and wounded people. Pictures of people who died in their own yards were being compared with photos from WWII, and the actions of the new "revolutionary government" in Kiev were being compared to what the Nazis did in occupied Ukraine 75 years prior.

The Bobrishevs became accustomed to the sound of air raids and artillery pounding the city. A house nearby was destroyed by an aerial bomb dropped from a government airplane. Co-workers told a horror story of a family killed in their own home. Some acquaintances joined the "self-defense" units and took up arms while the Bobrishevs still concentrated on continuing their lives and preserving the last remnants of normalcy they could grasp. January of 2015 brought the news of peace negotiations and a hope for improvement.

Instead of peace came tragedy.

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Tamara was home with Misha and Artem. Vladimir was on his way home from work when the Ukrainian army subjected the city to shelling in its signature checker-board pattern, targeting every other house. A shell hit their house right in front of his eyes. What they had lovingly built and maintained for years was destroyed in a fraction of a second. The explosion shocked and disoriented Tamara who couldn't understand what happened at first. The house collapsed and crushed everybody inside under bricks, boards, ceiling beams, and pieces of plaster. To this day, Tamara is haunted by the panic and helplessness she felt while screaming in terror, trying to get out and reach her boys. Minutes seemed like hours; it felt like eternity before help arrived.

Vladimir ran into the house and found Misha in the rubble right by the entrance to the house. He dug him out, wrapped him in his jacket and

carried him to the cellar because the shelling never stopped and any minute they could have been hit again. He ran back into the ruins of the house and dug out Tamara, who was crying that Artem was still breathing – he was still under all the rubble, alive. Vladimir started digging out his younger son, but it was much too late. When he finally freed Artem from under the heavy debris, the little boy was gone, leaving only a shell for his parents and brother mourn. Tamara's leg was turned to mangled mess, Misha had several shrapnel wounds, his face was split open with the nose hanging to the side, one of the eye balls exposed, with streams of blood pouring down.



**Photo.** Aleksandr Gayuk, used with permission

They waited for the ambulance, but it never came; it simply couldn't navigate through the city while it was still being shelled. A group of "self-defense" rebels came and drove them to the hospital in a utility truck. They tried to revive Artem, attempting CPR, but to no avail.

Vladimir lost control when he held little Artem's lifeless body. He yelled and screamed saying he had to go to the front line to avenge his child, that he was joining the rebels. He had to get to the murderers of his baby boy. He even tried to grab one of the rebels' guns. He says they had to knock him out by hitting him on the head with a rifle butt. There is no offence or anger in his words when he describes it; he doesn't blame them: "Who knows what I could have done at that time?"



**Photo.** curtesy of Vladimir and Tamara Bobrishev

Tamara returns to the same point over and over again: Artem didn't even have anything cut or broken, he just choked in the rubble. She can't let go of the thought that if help, which had to be nearby, had arrived just a few minutes earlier, her boy could have made it, her son could have survived. Her inability to move prevented her from saving her precious child: she was powerless to dig him from under the rubble.

Tamara's leg had to be amputated. Donetsk doctors did it. They also

stitched Misha's face back together, though the wound left a telling scar from one corner of the face to the other. A Russian charity led by Elizaveta Glinka, "Doctor Liza", helped the Bobrishevs to evacuate from their homeland to Russia. Misha was treated in a cutting-edge pediatric hospital. His vision is unaffected, and his disposition seems to have returned to his normal cheerful self.

They received a temporary asylum and later a refugee status, and that's when the new wave of difficulties rolled over them. A kind-hearted person could host Ukrainian refugees for a few days, weeks, or even for several months. But sooner or later, the refugees are expected to start taking care of themselves and move on, which is easier said than done. Where are they supposed to find good, well-paying jobs that would allow them to support their families when even the locals are struggling to find such positions? It is estimated that the conflict in Ukraine resulted in almost a million Ukrainians escaping to Russia and receiving a refugee or an immigrant status. How many had to find shelter there without going through the official channels is unknown and impossible to calculate. What pressure this influx put on the labor market is anyone's guess.

Having 'transplanted' from one country to another made the search for employment challenging. Work permits, registration, identification... Where does a person get them? What documents does one need to get other documents? Which agency is in charge of which piece of paper? What are the fees? Where do they go to pay them? Where are they going to get money to pay those fees without a job? Imagine, just for a moment, attempting to muddle through bureaucratic trenches, hundreds of miles from what was once home, with no friends or relatives near you for emotional support - all while mourning the death of your small child.

Vladimir was lucky: a friend recommended him for a job which fit his qualifications. He is relieved that he is able to provide for his family. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of standing on one's own feet and bringing home money that wasn't given to you as charity, but was

earned as compensation for hard work. Tamara has received the medical attention she needed, including a prosthetic leg, and even though it is not easy and problem-free, she is learning to get around with what she has. She is focusing on taking care of herself and of her family. Her place is spotlessly clean, her husband and son are well cared for, and she keeps a close watch on Misha's homework. Misha has started school in Moscow and has made some new friends.

Life seems to be improving for the Bobrishev family even though it will never be the same. The Bobrishev will forever miss living in a place where all is familiar from childhood and having a network of friends, colleagues, neighbors, relatives nearby and ready to help with a problem, answer a question, offer a sympathetic shoulder to cry on, give advice (solicited or not!), and simply *be there*. Unfortunately, the natural affection for their homeland that once filled their hearts has been replaced by the pain, bitterness, and the hatred toward the people associated with the violence that caused the death of their son.



**Photo.** courtesy of Vladimir and Tamara Bobrishev

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As with the other estimated 800,000 Ukrainian refugees in Russia, the Bobrishevs are safe, self-sustaining, and adjusting to a new life. What they will never be is whole again.