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Tanya's Sister Was Trapped in Mariupol. This Is Their Story.

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**By Farah Stockman**

Ms. Stockman is a member of the editorial board. She recently returned from a trip to Poland, where she interviewed people affected by t

KORCZOWA, Poland — On the second day of the war, Tanya quit her job as a tax accountant in Massachusetts and told her husband that she had to go home to Ukraine. Her sister and her sister's two teenage sons were holed up in the bathroom of their home in Mariupol, a seaside city that was getting shelled. Tanya got a text from her: "We're so scared."

By the sixth day of the war, her sister's water had been cut. They couldn't even flush the toilet. "We'll use the cat litter box," her sister wrote. Go to a bomb shelter, Tanya urged. Then, suddenly, the text messages stopped.

Tanya sobbed, imagining them dead. But her father, who lives in the pro-Russian city of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, didn't believe that Russian troops would hurt them. He called it fake news, dismissing the images of destruction. He sent her video of Russian soldiers saying: "Don't be afraid. We just came here to free you."

Tanya cursed him out and blocked him on her messaging app. The next day, she caught a flight to Poland.

An apartment building on fire after shelling in Mariupol. Evgeniy Maloletka/Associated Press

I met Tanya in Boston's airport on March 2, as we waited for a flight to Warsaw. I saw her Ukrainian passport and her eyes, puffy from crying, and asked her to tell me her story. I ended up traveling with her to the Ukrainian border and have kept in touch with her ever since. Tanya is a nickname — she didn't want to use her real name, to protect her parents, who she feared might face retaliation in Donetsk for her choices.

The war in Ukraine is often portrayed as a battle between autocracy and democracy; the East against the West. Tanya's story reveals that, for many families, it can also feel like a civil war, pitting the old against the young. Tanya's parents support Russia, even now. "We are Russian," her father told her. Old people in Donetsk, like Tanya's parents, are nostalgic about the Soviet Union, she told me. They are the welcoming committee that Vladimir Putin told Russians to expect when he ordered this invasion.

But Tanya, like so many Russian speakers of her generation, sided with Ukraine. "People my age or younger," she said, "they don't want to go back."

Every Ukrainian I interviewed who grew up speaking Russian at home had a story like Tanya's. Russian speakers, who make up roughly a quarter of Ukraine's population, were favored during the Soviet era. But Tanya's generation came of age as communism crumbled. They became Ukrainian in a way their parents never did. Volodymyr Zelensky — a Russian speaker young enough to be Mr. Putin's son — is a prime example of this. He was elected Ukraine's president with a wide majority, and many of his supporters wanted him to stop Russia from meddling in Ukraine's affairs. He did so more boldly than any previous Ukrainian president had dared.

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Tanya was born in Volnovakha, a town outside Donetsk, in 1978. She turned 11 the year the Berlin Wall fell and was 13 when Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly to break away from the Soviet Union. She says she was the first in her class to resign from the Pioneers, a Communist version of the Girl Scouts. She'd always hated the propaganda about "Grandpa Lenin" and the expectation that she should never let her brightness show. Back then, panties came in one color: beige. "If you wanted it black, you had to dye it," she told me. The dye stained her mother's midriff. Somehow, Tanya knew that better underwear was out there, even if she'd never seen it.

She learned the Ukrainian language in college when she was 20. She'd always been told that it was the tongue of country bumpkins; educated people spoke Russian. Nonetheless, Tanya fell in love with it.

But she didn't actually feel Ukrainian until 2013 — at age 35 — when protests in Kyiv swept President Viktor Yanukovich from power after he backed out of a trade deal with the European Union. Tanya agreed with the protesters, but her parents were outraged that Mr. Yanukovich — a president they'd voted for — had been chased away by an unruly mob. They dismissed it as a coup that had been financed by the United States. They joined a protest in the city square. "Putin, come and help us," they chanted.

In 2014, her parents voted to break away from Ukraine and form the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, and the war in that region began. "I call it the Donetsk *Retired* People's Republic," Tanya told me, rolling her eyes. Pro-Russian separatists had been battling the Ukrainian Army over the city for months, when Tanya packed her car and moved to "Free Ukraine," like nearly every other young person she knew. She eventually settled in Mariupol, a charming city by the sea that was home to some 400,000 people.

Tanya fell in love with an American she'd met online and moved to the United States in 2020. Her sister took over her rented apartment. Then Tanya helped her buy a cozy house in the center of Mariupol, a block from City Hall. Tanya kept in close touch with her parents, too, although she avoided talking to them about politics. During the pandemic, her parents sent her videos from Donetsk, of their rooster and the apple trees, at the house where windows had once been shattered by a mine explosion during the years of conflict. The war over Donetsk seemed endless. Tanya's parents blamed Ukraine, complaining that it was trying to kill them to avoid paying for their retirement.

Nobody Tanya knew in Mariupol expected Russia to invade. They all thought the Russian troops amassing on the borders were a bluff. Tanya urged her sister to stock up on food, just in case. She watched the mayor of Mariupol encourage city residents to stand strong, as the Russians attacked. She heard from friends in Kyiv who were signing up to fight. She decided that she had to do something, so she collected supplies for Ukraine. A group called Sunflower of Peace gave her medicine. She bought more with her own money. She filled three huge suitcases with drone parts, insulin, painkillers, tourniquets and a brand of coagulant called BleedStop.

Demonstrators in Donetsk in 2014. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

We landed in Warsaw on the eighth day of the war. A Polish man Tanya knew had agreed to drive her to the Ukrainian border, where she planned to hand off the supplies to a friend of a friend who would take them deeper into Ukraine. I wanted to go to the border, too, so I caught a ride.

During the five-hour drive, Tanya sat in the back seat, lost in thought. She'd gotten a text from her sister, who had finally made it to a bomb shelter. But the shelter had no electricity and almost no food or water. Tanya's sister and her sons had tried to leave to look for food, but a mine exploded right in front of them,

forcing them to run back inside. One of the sons had hurt his leg. A few days later, Russian airstrikes destroyed a hospital maternity ward and, the following week, a theater where hundreds had taken shelter. A bomb left a giant crater near Tanya's sister's house. Mariupol was becoming a death trap.

Tanya's sister's phone fell silent again. But Tanya's parents still refused to blame Russia. Instead, they echoed Russian propaganda and said "Ukrainian Nazis" were killing their own people to whip up hatred against Russia.

During the drive to the border, Tanya's Polish friend told me that Mr. Putin was like a cornered rat — a dangerous thing.

He conceded that Ukrainians had made some mistakes. They probably shouldn't have passed a divisive law that reinforced Ukrainian as the sole state language. That had inflamed Russian speakers like Tanya's parents. And for too long, Ukrainian nationalism had rested on the likes of Stepan Bandera, a nationalist leader who tried to get Ukraine out from the grip of the Soviet Union by collaborating with Nazi Germany. A statue of Bandera had been erected in Lviv, fueling Russian propaganda that casts Ukraine's government as "Nazis." It didn't help, either, that the Azov Battalion, a regiment with far-right fighters and origins, is among the defenders of Mariupol.

But now, Ukrainians are more focused on their survival. Before the war, Tanya told me, about half of her friends could have lived happily under either Russia or Ukraine. Now, she said, none of them want Russia. Ukraine is solidifying as a country, even as it is being destroyed.

We arrived at the Polish border town of Korczowa and searched for Oksana, the wife of a border guard, who made daily trips ferrying supplies from Poland into Ukraine. We waited for her at a shopping mall that had been turned into a welcome center for refugees. It was a surreal scene. Mannequins in fashionable clothes presided over rows of cots crowded with women who had fled with nothing but backpacks, children and pets. Tanya walked through the mall and burst into tears, thinking about her sister.

Oksana arrived. She hugged Tanya and lit a cigarette with manicured nails.

"Everything is OK," she told Tanya, smiling. "They are fighting." Kyiv was holding strong.

Oksana thanked Tanya for the supplies. Then she listed other items that Ukrainians needed: flak jackets, walkie-talkies, thermal vision goggles, generators.

Oksana, right, with Tanya, picking up supplies to take to Ukraine. Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

That night, Tanya and I parted ways. I went to another border checkpoint. She returned to Warsaw to find more supplies. She made three more trips to the border. Then she crossed over into Ukraine. I kept in touch with her and asked about her sister. Day after day, she had no word. The last she had heard was that her sister had joined a humanitarian convoy, but it had been turned back because of shooting.

Tanya spoke with bitterness about city officials of Mariupol who posted sad-faced messages on Facebook from safe havens outside the country. I wondered how long the city could hold on.

"To end this war, are there any compromises you would be willing to make?" I asked her in a text. "Should Zelensky give up Mariupol?"

"Nope," she replied. "If we compromise, we lose our sovereignty." The war would only be postponed. This has "got to be our final battle," she wrote back.

On the 20th day of the war, Tanya finally got through on the phone to a man in Mariupol who was staying with her sister's neighbor. She'd heard there would be a pause in the fighting to allow a humanitarian convoy out of the city. "Today is a good chance to escape," Tanya told him. She asked him to tell her sister to leave right away. "Save their lives," she pleaded.

Tanya's sister crammed her sons, her cat and another family from the bomb shelter into her Kia Ceed. Five days later, they arrived in western Ukraine, at a place that Tanya had arranged. Tanya hadn't spoken to her parents in weeks. But on their mother's birthday, she called home.

"This is your birthday gift," Tanya told her mother. "Your daughter and your grandsons survived."

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