

# ‘There is no more Mariupol, nothing’: Ukrainian refugees in Sydney speak of ‘apocalypse’



By [Latika Bourke](#), Sydney Morning Herald/The Age, April 4, 2022

Leaving Ukraine was not on Mariia Ruban’s mind the day Putin’s war began. That day she woke at 5am to the sound of explosions.

Not wanting to be alone, she and her eight-year-old daughter, Margo, moved to Mariupol’s city centre to be with family.

Family was what had brought Ruban, 37, and Margo to Mariupol in the first place. When the pandemic struck, the pair moved to the seaside city to join up with the more than 20 members of her extended family already living there and to enjoy the fresh air and waters of the Sea of Azov.



*Mariia Ruban with her daughter, Margo, pictured in happier times in Mariupol last year.*

Looking back on her pre-war life, she describes Mariupol as a “city of happiness”, home to Russians, Greeks, Armenians, Belarusians, Jews and Turks. Ruban remembers her time there as “happy, normal and beautiful,” centred around her daughter’s school, ballroom dancing and painting classes, swimming in the sea after school, big family gatherings on the weekends and planning for the future, including a trip to Egypt.

Little did they know they would soon become refugees, fleeing one of living memory’s most brutal sieges as power, communications and food were cut off, and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s bombs got closer and closer.



*Mariia Ruban says she wants the world to know what survivors in Mariupol have been through.*

Ruban and her family, who speak both Russian and Ukrainian, shared their journey with *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* through a family friend, Tatiana, who translated.

“She is shocked, and has to live it again and again,” Tatiana says.

But Ruban wants the world to know the hell the survivors of Mariupol have been through and what those still trapped in the besieged city, now largely destroyed, still suffer.

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Five days after the war began, power, water and telecommunications were cut and shops closed. The daily task of getting water from a nearby public fountain became potentially deadly, as residents darted from house to house, hiding from bombs along the way.

The family slept in their jackets and shoes in the corridors at night but after the balcony and windows from the apartment next door were blasted off, they moved into an underground bomb shelter.

They gathered enough food supplies to last two weeks, rationing their meals to a piece of cheese for breakfast, a vegetable soup for lunch and a pancake made from flour and water cooked over a homemade fire.

But even preparing food became life and death. As the bombings got closer and became more frequent it became more and more dangerous to venture outside to scour for wood to get a fire going.

Ruban recalls, with a laugh, the thoughts that dominated her mind during this dark time, a dream that her big sister Vita would rescue her.

“My dream was that Vita in Sydney would send a helicopter – Vita was my one hope,” she says.

By March 15, some who had been able to get to higher points, like the tops of buildings, to establish a phone connection began to spread the message that everyone needed to get out as the Russian assault was about to get even worse.



*Mariia Ruban (right) with her 8-year old daughter Margo and her sister Vita. Mother and daughter arrived in Sydney last week after leaving Mariupol with little more than the clothes on their backs. CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*

But news had also got out that the Russians had been targeting and killing civilians trying to escape through the so-called “green corridors”.

So Ruban decided to stay in the Mariupol bomb shelter “until the end”.

But when a neighbour came and said he had three spots in his car and was leaving the city that day, Ruban says a spirit-like force told her to go.

“I had a strange feeling, some kind of god, some kind of spirit, not from this world was pushing me into the car, and without thinking I walked into the car.”

She left the city with nothing but the clothes on her back and a children’s backpack carrying little more than their passports.

Driving out of Mariupol was the first time she saw the scale of destruction.

“There were tanks, the buildings were destroyed – it was like an apocalypse. I think it’s like a dream, a terrible nightmare, and that I will wake up one day and that it’s not true, that it never happened,” she said.

“I just hope this nightmare will finish, I still can’t believe it.”

The 84-kilometre drive to Berdyansk took 13 hours and required them to pass through five Russian checkpoints.

“I was very scared and every minute I prayed,” she says. There they finally managed to squeeze on to a bus, standing for the 12-hour journey to Zaporizhzhia, as they passed through 10 more Russian checkpoints.

She was finally able to reconnect to Vita, who immediately began organising a way to get her sister and niece to Australia. With great relief, Ruban and Margo flew via Poland, Helsinki and Bangkok before landing in Australia last week.

Ruban and Margo are two of 10.5 million Ukrainians, according to the UNHCR, who have been displaced by Putin's war. But while she has found refuge in Australia the trauma is near.

Ruban's toes are swollen and numb. She has not been able to feel them since spending nights in the freezing cold without heating in Mariupol. She has not slept through a single night since the war began and keeps waking up to air-raid sirens that do not sound but pierce her mind.

Her parents will not leave Ukraine. But there is a scene that keeps replaying in her mind.

When she and Margo were leaving Mariupol, Ruban's cousin Marina swapped herself out and at the last minute pushed her elderly mother into the car.

"She sacrificed herself to save her old mum. Every day, every minute I replay this over and over in my head and in my head I change the situation, I force her to get into the car, it doesn't matter if there's space or not. I'm in shock because I didn't do that on the spot, I couldn't think at the time," she says.

With no communications in Mariupol, Ruban has not heard from Marina or her parents since.

This dark silence clouds her every thought. "Every second and every minute I think about them, how are they? What's happening with them?"

Ruban doesn't know how long she will stay in Australia. "There is no more Mariupol, nothing. I am hoping to go back but for now I am too scared to go back to Ukraine. It is not safe."

Margo is a little different. Ruban recalls her incredible strength throughout their ordeal, saying she never cried once during their time in Mariupol, even through the freezing nights when she slept on her mother's lap.

"She didn't create any trouble, played with the other children and provided huge support for me," says Ruban.

But Margo dreams of seeing her grandparents Vitalik and Lyudmila very soon.

When I ask Margo if she has any message she would like to give, her response is as instant as it is defiant.

"Slava Ukraini [glory to Ukraine]," she says. "We will win and we will rebuild, and it will be better than before."