

Last year, she was fleeing rockets in Kyiv. Now, she's class captain in Kew

By [Carolyn Webb](#) and [Sherryn Groch](#), The Age/SMH, February 21, 2023

Almost a year ago, she was fleeing rockets as Russians invaded Ukraine. Now, seven-year-old Leza Solovei has been elected captain of her class in a Melbourne school.

"We're safe, we're together," said her mother, Svetlana, who is grateful for the support offered to refugees like herself and her family, who flew to Australia last April.



Leza Solovei (centre) fled Ukraine last April and has been welcomed by students at Sacred Heart Primary School in Kew. *CREDIT: JOE ARMAO/THE AGE*

But their thoughts are with relatives in Ukraine, which remains under attack from Russian forces.

The family still sends money and food, and contacts relatives in Ukraine including Svetlana's brother, uncles and aunts every day.

Often in Ukraine, people don't have electricity or water and children go to school in bunkers. "This war is not finished yet. It's terrible," Svetlana says. "We don't know when we can go back."

On Friday, the Solovei family will join other refugees and supporters to mark one year since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

At 6pm there will be a prayer service, at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in North Melbourne followed at 7.30pm by a Ukraine Undeclared candlelight vigil at Federation Square.

Leza's mother, Svetlana, is proud of how Leza has adjusted to life here. A month ago, Leza started dance lessons, having been a keen ballroom dancer in Kyiv.

Svetlana is proud that Leza's classmates at Sacred Heart Primary School in Kew, in Melbourne's east, elected her class captain.

School principal Ed Weekes, said Leza was a bright and friendly girl. "She's so happy and so giving to other people. She has that spirit. That smile never leaves her face."

Svetlana says: "We have so many friends. A new start to life."



Leza with her mum, Svetlana Solovei. *CREDIT: JOE ARMAO/THE AGE*

It's a far cry from almost a year ago when the train in which the family was fleeing Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, headed for Poland, narrowly missed being hit by Russians rockets.

The family, including Svetlana's mother and Leza's sister, had spent the 10 previous days living in a bomb shelter below a school in Kyiv as Russian rockets pummelled the country.

After a month in Warsaw, Poland, most of the group secured humanitarian visas and flew to Melbourne. Svetlana's husband, Vasil, arrived here four months ago.

Svetlana said the Kew school had been a big support since Leza enrolled in April: her school fees were waived, she got English lessons and a free uniform.



Leza Solovei in a bunker in Kyiv after the Russian invasion.

For two months, classmates gave Leza presents such as toys and books every day. Leza gave the teachers and students blue and yellow ribbon brooches and taught them Ukrainian words.

"It's a very good community," Svetlana said.

It's a lesson for her daughter. "I say, please remember Leza, maybe one day people will say, 'I have problem, maybe you'll help me' and you'll say, "yes of course I'll help you."

Stefan Romaniw, co-chair of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations, said a year after the invasion, Ukrainians here were feeling uncertain about the future, miss loved ones and hoped for an end of the war. Remembering being in the war zone would be traumatic, he said.

"Friday will be when many of them will remember that day, when the shelling started, everything started to shake. So it's going to be a traumatic experience for them, going back to what was."