

Saint Rose communications alum safely out of Ukraine but not powerless

MAY 11, 2022 · 2022

NAVIGATION



Olena Sadovnik G'14 and her daughter six days before the war in Ukraine
(Courtesy Olena Sadovnik G'14)

When Russia first attacked Ukraine in February, Kyiv was quickly overwhelmed by shelling "like a bad movie," says Olena Sadovnik G'14. Against the explosions and air sirens, she, her husband, toddler, and mother were stuck in their apartment in the capital city.

"You have all these invitations to go to Germany, or Australia, or California," she explained in a call on what she noted as Day 62 of the war. "And you couldn't get out of Kyiv."

On March 5, following several failed attempts and a harrowing five-day journey, Sadovnik and her 3-year-old daughter Melania arrived in Frankfurt, Germany. Today, they are safe, as their family remains home and under siege.

As she cares for Melania and thinks about next steps, she uses her extensive contacts to help other Ukrainian women find housing. Sadovnik, a communications professional who earned a Saint Rose master's in communications as a Fulbright Scholar, is also putting her media savvy to work.

In interviews in the European press, she dispels misinformation and encourages military support for Ukraine, in hopes of keeping Russia from taking over and growing still more powerful. Associates from around the world, including Saint Rose, read the stories she posts about the war, and her reaction to them.

"I want to scream as loud as I can. If miracles ever happen, it's time for them," read her post attached to a story about the March 16 bombing of a Mariupol theater where "children" was written on the roof.

Despite weeks of warnings, when Russia ultimately invaded, Sadovnik was shocked. She, her husband, Volodymyr Galamon, their daughter, and her mother were trapped in their eighth-story apartment for six days as bombs fell ever closer.

Without a car, they were unable to flee quickly. And with no basement to take cover in, they propped mattresses against windows, stayed in interior rooms, and slept in a wardrobe. But unlike thousands of others, they had both electricity and an internet connection that enabled them to plan their exit.

Tapping into their network of friends and colleagues, they arranged a ride to western Ukraine. They soon learned, though, that Russian troops had blocked the bridge they needed to get out of Kyiv. Their next plan failed as well when they found out Russian forces had blown up a bridge and killed civilians who were not fortunate enough to keep ahead of events.

"They were just escaping a war zone with their families," Sadovnik noted. "How were they a danger to anyone?"

On the morning of March 1, they tried once more, this time via a southern road they understood was clear. Sadovnik, her husband, and her daughter closed their apartment door, leaving her mother, who was unable to travel. They started the 10-minute walk to meet their ride. Air sirens sounded, then explosions.

"If we turned back, we knew we might have no such opportunity again," she said. "We thought, 'Let's walk and pray nothing happens.'"

They made it, beginning a journey in ice and snow, through mountains and around blown-up and blocked roads. It took three days to reach Slovakia, just 600 miles away. Sadovnik's husband then turned back to get their mothers to safety. She and her daughter got a ride to Vienna, then caught a train to Frankfurt.

First, they stayed with a family Sadovnik had lived with as an au pair. Soon, they moved into the apartment of a man who was willing to stay with extended family to help them out.

These days they Facetime with Melania's father and grandparents daily, and Sadovnik explains that they will be together when the monsters at home leave. They stand on lines alongside hundreds of other Ukrainians trying to get their children into kindergarten. She tries to stay positive for her daughter.

But it is not easy she learns of people at home killed just trying to stay safe in a train station or theater.

"When I first got here, I'd be sitting along the sidewalk enjoying the sun, and I couldn't believe in Ukraine people had to hide in their basements and cover their windows," she said. "It breaks my heart into pieces every day."

But she is hardly one to sit back and let events unfold. Born in the western Ukraine city of Rivne, she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in international relations. Sadovnik came to Saint Rose in 2012, as a Fulbright Scholar, to study for her master's degree in communications. While here, she co-founded the International Student Organization, took part in the Saint Rose Model United Nations, wrote for the student newspaper, and volunteered with refugees.

"Olena easily bonded with her classmates from everywhere," recalls Paul Conti, her broadcast professor, now retired, who follows Sadovnik's social media feeds. "She was serious about journalism and proud of her country."

Among other things, Sadovnik said Saint Rose taught her the standards, role, and power of a press that serves citizens, not government. After graduating, she applied her education to Ukrainian media, which was still accustomed to Soviet control. She was now also equipped to use digital platforms.

"Before, I was holding administrative positions. But the diploma enabled me to move into managerial and professional positions," she explained. "I was inviting journalists, photographers from The New York Times and Reuters to share their expertise with our local media."

Sadovnik worked in development for the United Nations, Danish Refugee Council, and Thomson Foundation. Ultimately, she found her passion helping Ukrainian media secure international grants.

Today, 1,000 miles from home, she tells her global community what is happening there. Many victims of attacks and displacement, she said, cannot communicate for themselves because they are without electricity or internet.

"I got out. But these are people who are in cities occupied by Russia," she noted. "We cannot be there for them physically but they should not be forgotten. I have to spread the word."

Her Fulbright associates organized a fundraiser for Savodnik and her daughter, who had left home with just a backpack and small suitcase. Members of the Saint Rose community contributed, including Thomas Gorman of the Saint Rose Career Center, who has remained in touch with Savodnik nearly every week.

She said her American community is especially important now because her future is so uncertain.

"Of course, most of all, I want to go home," she explained. "But if hostilities continue, I might stay in Germany. I might apply for refugee status in the U.S., and if I do, I am likely to come to New York State, where I am familiar with everything. I volunteered at the International Committee for Refugees for Albany in 2013, and now I am one."