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## Ukrainian mother, grandmother, safe in Orinda, worries about family at home

By Sora O'Doherty



Victoria Babich and grandson Ruslan in Orinda.  
Photo Sora O'Doherty

Victoria Babich flew in from Ukraine to visit her son and his family in Orinda on Feb. 12, little knowing that when the end of her month-long visit arrived, she would be unable to return home. As the world now knows, Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. And so, the Ukrainian forensic psychiatrist remains in Orinda, separated from the rest of her family, including her husband, sister and mother, who, at 86, is unable to leave the country.

Victoria's only son, Kirill Babich, has lived in the U.S. since 2014, when he arrived here for work. He is married with two sons, one of whom was born here. His wife's family is also still in Ukraine.

Babich's family lives in Zaporizhzhya, a city in southeast Ukraine about 20 miles from the conflict and about 100 miles from the sea. Ukraine actually borders two seas, the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Victoria is able to speak with her family every morning; there is a 10-hour time difference. In Zaporizhzhya, they can hear the sounds of war, of missiles landing.

Victoria finds it terribly difficult to watch the news on television. She is affected by the "incredible cruelty of the Russian soldiers," she says. "A lot of buildings are destroyed, and there are people under the destroyed buildings, but the Russian soldiers won't help them. I live in a state of fear every day. I don't know what will be the future of my country."

Still, she is grateful to have new friends in Orinda and Moraga who support her. This is her fourth trip to the Bay Area. Kirill and his family were in Ukraine last summer, when his oldest son, Ruslan, went to camp to improve his language and social skills, he says. Ruslan, who attends Sleepy Hollow Elementary School, speaks better Russian than Ukrainian. His younger brother, Tyler, born in California, is also learning Russian, although he is only 3. Ruslan says that his classmates learned about the situation in Ukraine and made sunflowers, the Ukrainian national flower, but don't discuss politics.

What Victoria wanted most to emphasize is her support for and appreciation of Ukraine president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who was elected to a five-year term two and a half years ago. "I approve of him," she said, "because he stays in the capital and he talks to the people a lot. He raises their spirits. He was a comedian, but now he is a great president."

Since Feb. 24, over 3.5 million people have fled the war in Ukraine. About two million of those are in Poland. "Poland gives them a place to live, food, some money, and classes in Polish," which, Victoria explains is about 50% the same as Ukrainian. Ukrainian was always spoken in some areas of Ukraine, but Russian was more common in the south and east of the country. However, the national language is even more commonly used since the Orange Revolution. In school, everyone learned Russian, she says, but that all changed in 2014. Ukraine wants to be a democracy, Victoria says.

Kirill works for Grammarly, a company founded in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. The company employs about 700 people, and, before the war, about 300 of them were in Ukraine. At work, Kirill is doing what he can to help those in Ukraine, and the company is endeavoring to support both those in Ukraine and also refugees. Kirill is in daily contact with his colleagues in Ukraine. As Corporate Controller, he is working on financial issues, housing, visas, and any problems he can address.

"Everyone has their own individual circumstances," he explained. "I am grateful to have my mother with me," he says, "but it is so hard to hear what people are going through, particularly in areas under attack. My wife's sister and her family were able to evacuate to Poland. However, her other family members (uncle, aunt and cousins) remain in Ukraine and live in fear," he said, adding, "Kids are being killed, women raped and killed, and they are civilians."

Grammarly is donating \$5 million to provide relief for Ukraine. Although Kirill advises anyone who wishes to help to follow their heart in choosing how to donate, for those who would like to help, Grammarly has a page on its website with links to some of the agencies working on Ukraine relief now. You can find

information about the company's efforts at [www.grammarly.com/stand-with-ukraine](http://www.grammarly.com/stand-with-ukraine)

Reach the reporter at: [sora@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sora@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

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