

Speaker - Ruslan Kuvanyshv Wordsmith - Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh

My name is Ruslan. I don't speak my mother tongue. At least not as well as I would like.

I speak Russian. I was educated Soviet Union style. I grew up with Russian propaganda.

I think that is why I was a restless kid. I was angry and frustrated. The Soviet system is a closed mindset, no encouragement to find your passion, the things that brings meaning to your life... I knew I wasn't Russian but unsure who I was. I started getting into trouble. I was expelled from schools and was going nowhere...

But I got lucky, I met a teacher Mr Hassan Djeebet when I was 18. He understood me, cared about me and spent time with me. Mr Hassan Djeebet supported me to learn and stopped me becoming a hooligan. I found water polo, I loved swimming and martial arts, so it was the perfect sport and it kept me off the streets. But I wanted to roam far from the streets of my hometown.

I left to study in Spain. I am a curious person and knew it was a way to see the world. In Marbella, I got lucky a second time. I met a beautiful Ukrainian girl Kateryna. The night Kateryna and I met in the club I scared all other men away, especially one annoying guy - my best friend. I pushed the drink he bought her away. And she danced with me. We looked into each other's eyes all night, without touching, and danced and danced and danced. We were engaged two months later, and I was the happiest man in the world. For me, it is love.

We moved to Kyiv, my wife's homeland in Ukraine. My wife got a job, and we got a cat called Shelby. Nice name for a dirty cat. We even thought we could have a child. I was learning Ukrainian, which is more like Polish than Russian, so not easy for me, but I was trying.



Speaker - Ruslan Kuvanyshv **Wordsmith - Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh**

Then our lives changed completely. Russia invaded Ukraine. Overnight we became refugees.

On February 24th, we woke up to the sound of the Russians bombing Kyiv airport, two miles from our apartment. No one knew where the bombs would fall. It's Russia attacking, so there was no reason to think they would only attack military targets. Terrified, we drove to Kateryna's parent's house, miles away. Kateryna's dad was leaving to fight. Kateryna was stressed. She stopped speaking Russian. She refused to speak and I understood why. It was awful. It brought back all the Soviet Union style teachings from childhood. It made me reflect on my heritage, as I struggled to communicate with my wife in a mix of Ukrainian, English and a little Spanish.

In the rush to escape, I'd forgotten my passport, papers, and Shelby our cat. I had to go back for my documents and for him. I wanted to fight. But there was pressure not to from my family. If I was captured by the Russian I'd be killed, no question. A traitor. Even though I'm not a Russian.

With war everywhere, Kateryna and I escaped Kyiv.

Over 14 million people are displaced, 7 million in Ukraine and 7 million internationally. The largest refugee crisis this century. In the UK over 140,000 refugees have been granted visas. Refugees were matched with sponsors who house them for six months. Kateryna and I are one of these couples.

Most Ukrainian refugees are women and children, as a law recently passed that Ukrainian men are banned from leaving. I still feel guilty. I am trying my best to think about what I can do, here in Salisbury.

I believe language is important. I want to teach young Ukrainian children English. In the same way I was helped by my teacher Mr Hassan Djeebt, I can help young children start a new life here, while they are still grieving their old life.



Speaker - Ruslan Kuvanyshv **Wordsmith - Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh**

I have a job as the school aid here in Salisbury now. And I feel like myself when I speak English. My new mother tongue for my new country.

During this winter, it will get harder for refugees in the UK. As government support reduces and good-will fades, it places stress on people who already hold so much stress. Remember, we are displaced not by choice. The war continues. Many people are caught between worlds. And this continues around the world, not just in Ukraine.

There have been times in my past when I have thought that I can't keep going. Stay strong. Stay powerful. Keep your hearts open.

Kateryna's Dad has returned from the front line and is looking after our cat Shelby. Kateryna and I still dance together in our new home here in Salisbury. And one day, we will have a child and their mother tongue will be Ukrainian and English.

Finally, I want to thank my host family. And thank you for listening. Glory to Ukraine.

