

## **Vera Tytova describes her experience of the first three days of the invasion of Ukraine.**

I work for a Telecom company and I'm an account manager, it's a good job, I have a degree for that, and in the last years I did get everything I wanted, like doing some sport, going to fitness and I have a lot of friends. We did have picnics and visiting each other and I did start climbing, mountain climbing, just one year ago, and, yeah, I did my first 5,000 metre mountain, so I was very much looking forward to develop this. Also, I had plans for this spring and the summer, Mont Blanc would have been my second mountain, that is big, and I was training for that. And we did hear of the talks and we knew something was going on with Russia and Ukraine but on February 24<sup>th</sup> it was, like, shock for all of us...

At the moment my husband, Max, is in Ukraine and he is doing volunteering job and the men are staying in Ukraine, they are not leaving the country. And they are not allowed to leave the country... Because he is a mountain guide and he was in Carpathian, Ukrainian mountains at this time, just two days before February 24<sup>th</sup>, and went to work.

He went away and Denis was visiting his grandmother so I was alone at home and the evening before I went to fitness and I saw a friend of mine and we were discussing our plans for the weekend... Nobody believed that it would be real, that real. So, I stayed up late, because I watched some series, and I switched off the phone, because I did not have meetings in the morning... So when I was wake up, I was shocked by the number of messages and the missed calls...

I called to Max and I asked him whether he was going back and he said he was already on the train and he said, *"No way, I'm going back home and to collect you and to take you to a safe place."* And I called Grandmother to ask her what about Denis and she said, *"Oh come to us and stay with us and we'll see what to do next."*

The first day, at first you don't realise, I started to work even, you know, to get my work done and in the middle of the day sirens went off and I didn't understand that this, it's not normal anymore. I cannot stay like this and do some work and sending emails so I stopped. I called my manager and to ask what to do. She said, *"Do what you think is best for your family and for yourself. Just go."* And I went to collect Denis, and I wanted to take him back home and his grandmother told me, *"Oh, let us calm down a little bit. Let us have dinner, you know, and then maybe you can sleep over at my place and the next day you will decide that Max will go back and you will decide where to go and what to do."*

I agreed that first night, because I could hear the explosions in the other part of Kyiv. I did not sleep properly, I was listening, I was listening and, at the moment, I heard the explosions. Because you don't have the experience and, at that point of time, I didn't understand how far it is or how close it is. But when you hear the explosions, you don't understand and I was thinking, shall I wake up everybody, Grandma and Denis, and go away? Shall we go to the basement? Shall we run? What to do? So I stayed, not sleeping, listening the whole night and in the morning, first thing, seven o'clock in the morning, I said, *"We go, we go"* and Grandmother said *"Well, maybe calm down, better have breakfast"*. *"No, no, we just go home and we'll decide what to do."*

And we left by Underground, and by the time we reached our station the Underground was closed for exit because there were sirens all around the city, and I could read in the news that the station which we started from, close to our grandmother's place, was closed... and then there are Russian troops in that part of the city... And that's when panic just went over me because the news were like, Russian troops entering Kyiv and I didn't know how quick it will be, what next? When it was possible, we left the Underground and got home and then somebody, a friend of mine, called me and she said, *"Get together and come to our place, it's 15 kilometres from Kyiv and if Kyiv is in danger, then we will be safe."* It is a house outside Kyiv in a small village, just outside the village...

It took us, I don't know, three hours to get to their place because their roads were packed and traffic was so heavy. We had to walk and then somebody, because we don't have the car, so then somebody from our friends picked us up and when we reached their house, we were very happy because it's been ten people of us and we were together. That was somehow reassuring.