

Vera describes leaving Ukraine and finding safety in a small French village.

So we decided to go to Vinnytsia and then to decide whether to go abroad or stay in Ukraine... We were not discussing much, you know. Under that circumstances what you want to do is just run away, you don't want to stay in the same place, you don't realise, it's not like a cold mind-made plan, you just run and to the next safest place. Vinnytsia from Kyiv is about 300 km. It took us twelve hours to go there, yeah, but we made it...

On my way I was calling anybody, somebody who may have relatives, anybody to help just overnight, somewhere place to sleep. It was a colleague of mine who called me back and she said to me, *"Come over, we have place"*... People were helping each other a lot. The level of this was just unbelievable because you would be given food, clothes, place to sleep, money, whatever, it did not count, anything on each other.

There were buses going to Poland and we knew already that in Poland you can have the refugee shelter, you can cross the border and they're helping a lot... We took the bus, another 24 hours to go to Krakow and then from Krakow, on train, to Warsaw, I don't know, five hours probably. Then we stayed a night in Warsaw and then the next day we went to France!

But we did not choose the country. Everybody tried to come together, because it was fourteen of us, fourteen people... They are not direct relatives but just relatives and friends, it was a group of us... and somebody had a distant relative in France in a small village, Nogent-le-Phaye, and she was invited to go to stay with them but then she said, *"Look, I have many people with me!"* And those people in Nogent-le-Phaye, they just decided to help and have us over. And another 24 hours and then we were in Nogent-le-Phaye.

I was overwhelmed by the number of people willing to help and what they were able and willing to share with us. In Poland in the bus station, I wanted to get something to eat for Denis and for myself and I was trying to find the shop, a little shop or something but there was a lot of points where they were just asking *"Ukrainian?"*. I said *"Yes"* and they said, *"Have some soup"* and I was like, *"I can take it?"* They said, *"Yes, have some soup, have soup"*. And then they'd say, *"How many sandwiches?"* I'd say, *"Two, for my son and me"*. And they'd say, *"No, No, four!, six, take six."* And I'd say, *"No, it's too many for us"*. And they say, *"No, no, take!", just in case for the future"*. So, everybody was like this, everybody. And these French people they started to bring clothes and food... and they were saying *"How are you? We are supporting you."*

Even now it is hard and sometimes you are living an independent life and you are grown up and sometimes it is difficult to accept help because you can do something on your own but at that point it was wonderful to be cared about, to be cared for, to be looked after because those two months we could not think straight. We could not do anything properly because half the day we would watch the news and cry, the other half of the day we took care of children. And I did not stop working remotely because I am still working for a Ukrainian company, which is Telecom company, and they are providing the service, the voice and calls service, so it is important.