

# Kostemko from front

There were times when Kostemko thought she was not going to make it safely to this country or even be able to obtain a visa.

In early March, she fled Ukraine along with other refugees to Poland – normally, an eight-hour journey by car. However, because Russian soldiers were posted on every road leaving the country, it took four days to get to Poland, and the last 18 hours were traversed by foot.

Their refugee convoy was stopped seven times as the Russians searched every bag and pocket they had with them. The goal, Kostemko said, was intimidation.

“I couldn’t believe it was really a war,” Kostemko said. “You hear the bombs and everything, but it was hard for me to really believe what was going on. Every day was more dangerous and less safe, and (we saw) death after death after death.”

Kostemko and Svihel were in contact regularly at the outset of the war and as she fled to Poland. There were times when Kostemko could not finish the conversation because air-raid sirens warned of incoming attacks. Svihel was concerned for Kostemko’s well-being and encouraged her departure from her home country.

During the interview between Kostemko and a Benton County News reporter May 9, a tornado siren rang. Kostemko instantly became flush and tearful as she associated the noise with the death and destruction that shortly followed that same sound when she was in Ukraine.

After arriving in Poland, Kostemko was relieved to



The war-torn city of Sumy, Ukraine, features many dilapidated buildings and structures after Russians made their way through the city in March and April. The destruction, said Tania Kostemko, can be seen from anywhere in the city.

PHOTOS SUBMITTED

find open arms both from the government and the citizens. She was given shelter, nourishment, clothes, transportation and anything else she needed to get back on her feet, and her gratefulness exceeded her sorrow – even if briefly.

But her memories of her last few weeks in Ukraine are inescapable, even from thousands of miles away in Foley. Kostemko’s work visa expires six months from now, Nov. 1. Because it is impossible to know what the situation in Ukraine will be like six months from now, for the first time ever, her return ticket is not taking her home. She plans on heading back to Poland when her visa expires.

“I’m proud of my country and my people,” Kostemko said. “For example, if a Russian soldier comes to the hospital and asks for help, we always help them. We always do, not like them, who kill children and women and everyone. But my country, I’m really proud that I was born in Ukraine.”

“We will win the war. For sure. We won’t give up, especially now, of course not. ... This is our land. These are our homes. We will win. Ukraine will win.” – **Tania Kostemko**

Part of the reason why Ukrainians are willing to help Russian soldiers is because, in Kostemko’s case and many others, they have family members in Russia. Their sympathy is with Russians who have been propagandized to believe the war is a peace-keeping mission, and especially those who know what is going on but cannot say anything out of fear.

“Unfortunately, we can’t talk or even stay in contact (with Russian family members) because they’re afraid to even text message,” Kostemko said. “They’re afraid to even ask, ‘How are you?’”

Russians are afraid to say something that might be censored or monitored. If they send a text message that contains the word war, they might face retribution from their own government, Kostemko said.

Despite the ongoing war and the massive levels of carnage in Ukraine, Kostemko has no doubts about the future of her country.

“We will win the war,” Kostemko said. “For sure. We won’t give up, especially now, of course not. ... This is our land. These are our

homes. We will win. Ukraine will win.”

Kostemko, now hard at work on Svihel’s farm, also said she is grateful for the support Ukrainians are receiving around the world. She hopes, in the course of victory, that her home city will not endure the same fate that cities like Mariupol did – which has been almost entirely demolished by Russian forces. For that to happen, it is critical that aid and resources continue to pour into Ukraine.

“I’m thankful for everyone,” Kostemko said. “This is the biggest support I’ve experienced in all my life. ... I’m thankful to Poland, I’m thankful to the United States, and I hope everything will be done soon. There’s nothing else we can do but believe and hope.”



Tania Kostemko works at a farmers market in August 2021. Kostemko, now in her ninth season at Svihel Vegetable Farm, said she loves the work she does in the United States.

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# WHAT'S HAPPENING

Tuesday, May 24, 9:45-10:30 a.m. – **Author Appearance: Featuring Kevin Lovegreen.** Lovegreen shares experiences of writing and illustrating children books and ends the session with an animal call guessing game. Great River Regional Library-Foley, 251 Fourth Ave. N., Foley.

Tuesday, May 24, 1:30-2:30 p.m. – **Fun and Fitness for Seniors.** For adults age 60 and older. Must be vaccinated for COVID-19 to attend. Dewey Place Community Room, 455 Dewey St., Foley. For more information, call CARE at 320-968-7848.

Tuesday, May 24, 7 p.m. – **Free Grace Recovery Meeting.** Hosted by Free Grace United. All are welcome; everyone struggles with something. Food and fellowship beginning at 6:30 p.m. The ROC, 141 Fourth Ave. N., Foley. For more information or support, call 612-512-4745.

Thursday, May 26, 1:30-2:30 p.m. – **Fun and Fitness for Seniors.** For adults age 60 and older. Must be vaccinated for COVID-19 to attend. Dewey Place Community Room, 455 Dewey St., Foley. For more information, call CARE at 320-968-7848.

Saturday, May 28, 11 a.m. to noon – **Author Appearance: Lorna Landvik.** Landvik talks about her life as a writer and performer. For adults. Great River Regional Library-Foley, 251 Fourth Ave. N., Foley.

Monday, May 30 – **Memorial Day.**

Monday, May 30, 9:30 a.m. – **Memorial Day Program.** Hosted by the Foley American Legion Post 298. Foley High School auditorium, 621 Penn St., Foley.

Tuesday, May 31, 1:30-2:30 p.m. – **Fun and Fitness for Seniors.** For adults age 60 and older. Must be vaccinated for COVID-19 to attend. Dewey Place Community Room, 455 Dewey St., Foley. For more information, call CARE at 320-968-7848.

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