

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: IT'S PERSONAL

Russia attacks Ukraine, and my heart breaks. My wife and I trace our lineage back to the region. Her mom tells the story of her great-grandparents' courage, escaping the pogroms in the late 19th century, carrying nothing, seeking everything. She sits next to me now only because they made that decision at that time. My children exist only because of that decision. But the attacks are personal not only to us. They're personal to all of us at the Holocaust Center. This week, Russian missiles struck near Babyn Yar, the site where nearly 34,000 Jews were massacred by German Nazi forces over two days in 1941. Surely our relatives are among that number, surely our great grandparents would have been, too.

But as much as I, and all of us connected with the Holocaust Center, are heartbroken by what's happening in Ukraine, I at least know my family is safe. This isn't true for everyone in our community. Yesterday, I reached out to my dear friend, Amy Schwartz Kimlat, who has been a leader in our Jewish community since her days at UCF and her long stint at the Roth Family Jewish Community Center. Amy's husband, Kostya, and his family emigrated from Ukraine when he was a child. He still has family there. This is her story:

On my first date with Kostya Kimlat, I asked:

Is it Ukraine or "the" Ukraine?

(Answer: No "the," please.)

Do Ukrainians speak Russian? Or...Ukrainian?

(Answer: Ukrainian is the national and primary language; Russian was spoken in the Soviet days but still known by most citizens.)

Like most Americans, I knew very little about the nascent democratic country located on Russia's western border. I already knew, thanks to Google, my dinner date was a magician who had emigrated with his family from Kyiv to Maitland as a Jewish refugee after the fall of the Soviet Union. I knew at least some of my ancestors came from Ukraine. But that was it.

I was lucky enough to learn more about Ukraine from my soon-to-be husband back in 2013, and I've learned more and more about it in the years since, from Kostya's parents, sister, grandmother, cousins, aunts, uncles, and in-laws.

It's a beautiful, highly modernized country. And now the world knows that, too. But even more so, the world knows its strength.

It knows Ukraine's bravery as computer programmers take up arms to protect.

It knows Ukraine's love as new mothers are cared for in underground bunkers.

It knows Ukraine's resolve to fight for freedom.

It knows Ukrainians like my local brother-in-law's younger sister, who stood freezing in line for 14 hours, without being able to sit or use a bathroom, surrounded by crying children and mothers, in order to cross to safety in Poland, leaving her husband behind.

It knows Ukrainians like my husband's young niece, who can't go to school while heavy fighting takes place along the major highway by her home.

It knows Ukrainians like my father-in-law's longtime friend, who sits alone in her normally comfortable apartment, yet sleeps in her bathtub in case an explosion sprays glass into her home.

And it knows Ukrainians like the approximately 33,731 Jews who were gunned down naked in just two days at Kyiv's Babyn Yar in 1941, whose memories were desecrated by missiles in the area yesterday, killing at least five people.

The last seven days have been a nightmare from which it feels impossible to wake up. But we are grateful that the world has awoken.

When I asked Kostya what he would want to convey to the community, he answered, without hesitation, "*Never again.*"

Kostya talked about the lessons he learned here in school about the importance of standing up in the face of evil and injustice, even when there are costs.

As Ukraine's Jewish leader, President Volodymyr Zelensky, shared in a tweet, "What is the point of saying 'never again' for 80 years, if the world stays silent when a bomb drops on the same site of Babyn Yar?"

And so we stand up. We stand up for democracy, freedom, love, family, and friendship.

We stand for hope.

We stand for humanity.