



Story of Us.
Ukrainians

Chapter 1. Shades of Me

Every person is more than the place they come from. We are made of colours, sounds, memories, and dreams – the small details that make each life unique.

Think for a moment about your own shades – the little details that make you, YOU. Maybe it's the sound of your favourite song, the smell of your granny's cooking, or the colour you always reach for in clothes.

Ukrainians in Ireland also carry such shades within them. In these pages, you'll meet people not through big labels, but through the small, vivid details that paint their true portraits.



MY BLUES

Ocean
Sky
Bluebird
Peace
Hair

If I were a colour I'd be blue,
If I were a tree I'd be a full moon maple,
If I were a season I'd be autumn,
If I were a feeling I'd be a strong one...

ME poem

Curiosity
Music
Loud silence
I remember foxes and hares from my childhood.
I wish to be happy more often as an adult.

“

Many people know me as a girl who changes colour of her hair. My first colour in Ireland was blue. It reminds me of a bluebird – a symbol of hope
Viktoriya Hostievska

”



PILLOW

Peace can be found
In your
Love of the
Land
Or in love of art and nature –
Which is the whole world for me!



*I have a little pillow
that reminds me
of my hometown.*
Olend Shevchenko



MY GREENS

If you ask me about green,
I will tell you what it is for me.
This is color of my eyes,
This is colour of my plants,
Colour of the living things
And the colour of my thoughts.
But the only problem is
That it's also a colour of war

My life in three sounds

I love the sound of silence in the forest.
I remember the morning sounds in my countryside
house back home...
And there is one sound that accompanies me every day
– it's a sound of my children growing...
Hanna Solomon

SOUNDS OF HOME

sounds of thunderstorms
my babies saying "tatko" (daddy)
sound of the river, waves hushing me to sleep
singing of the birds
Sounds of the train...
Ihor Solomon

ME poem

Love
Laugh
Free spirit
I remember the first time I saw my children.
I wish they found what their hearts desire.
Hanna Solomon

If I were a colour I'd be emerald,
If I were a tree, I'd be a blossoming cherry,
If I were a season, I'd be soft autumn,
If I were a weather I'd be Irish...
Hanna Solomon



*Some days for me are green.
It's a favourite colour of my
sons - they like dinosaurs and
turtles. I also like this colour, for
me it's about peace, protection,
innocence and wonder. Back in
Ukraine the colour of my days
was red – bright, full of events
and energy. Now it's more yellow
and green. Sometimes I wish
I had more red back in my life.*
Hanna



*I feel yellow today because it's
a sunny day and I feel happy –
I am with my family.*
Ihor



Chapter 2. Silent Keepsakes

If you had to leave your home in a hurry, what would stay with you? Maybe an object you carried in your pocket – a key, a shell, a photo? Or maybe it's something you couldn't pack at all – the sound of a forest, the smell of your kitchen, the memory of a window view.

In this chapter, keepsakes take many forms. Some fit in a hand, others live only in the heart, but all of them tell stories of belonging, loss, and hope.

A PILLOW

Objects, like people, have their own fate.

The war pushed me out of my home, and I had to pack in a hurry. My eyes landed on a small pillow that barely fit into my backpack. It travelled with me across several countries before I finally reached Ireland. That little pillow helped me overcome stress – for a long time I placed it on top of the hotel pillows, rested my head on it, and let my thoughts wander in prayers for my friends and loved ones who were still in Ukraine. It was a tiny fragment of home's warmth and comfort, now so far away from me.

And it has a donkey on it – like a sign that it was supposed to end up in Ireland after all.

Olena Shevchenko



A CHESS PIECE

Ihor turned the small chess piece in his hand. It reminded him of afternoons with his grandmother, sitting at the kitchen table, playing game after game. She was a strong player, a winner of many local tournaments, and it was never easy to beat her. But every match was full of laughter, stories, and her gentle advice.

In fact, his grandmother Natalia and grandfather Lyubomyr had both been exceptional chess players. Back in the 1960s, they were champions of the Lviv region and earned high-ranking sports titles. His grandfather even became an international master of sport. His grandmother once won the USSR correspondence chess championship – a competition where dozens of masters from across the Soviet Union mailed each move to one another. When she was awarded the prize, she turned out to be the only woman among all the men.

Ihor never met his grandfather, who passed away before he was born, but his grandmother taught him how to play. He often stayed at her house, and the game quickly became a passion. He never managed to win a single match against her – only achieving some hard-fought draws. Still, chess became his favorite hobby.

She passed away long ago, but Ihor still carried her lessons – about thinking ahead, staying calm, and enjoying time together. He looked at his two little sons; they were too young for chess now, but one day he would teach them. Holding the chess piece, he smiled. It was more than just part of a game – it was a piece of family history, waiting to be passed on.



A HARE

When Viktoria was a child, some of her happiest days were trips to the forest lake. Back then, foxes and rabbits seemed to appear everywhere, as if they were part of the landscape itself. And here in Ireland, it feels like those childhood moments have found her again. In Longford, a fox stepped out of the bushes just as she was testing the light for a photo – an unplanned, perfect shot. And to her surprise, the very first thing she saw after walking out of Dublin Airport was a hare!

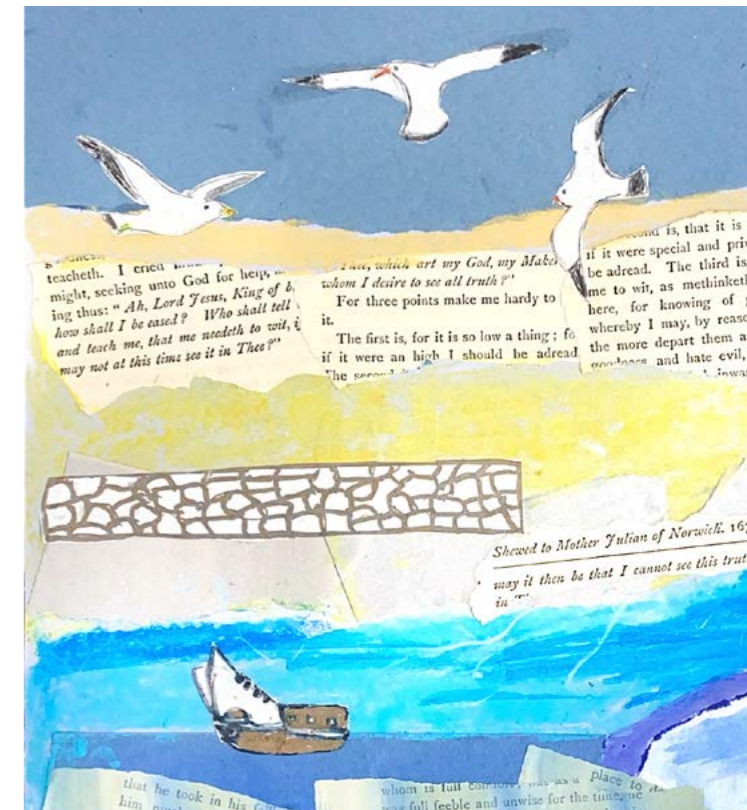
Her life has always been full of animals, thanks to her mother. Over the years, her mom has rescued so many cats and dogs that the house became their kingdom. Even now, with her hometown under occupation, her mother refuses to leave because she will not abandon them. The cats – Martina, Masiania, and Marsianin seem to rule the place. Martina especially acts like a tiny queen with a pink nose and whiskers, always looking down on her subjects.



A SHELL

When Hanna was a child, she loved collecting shells. Her father would bring them to her from different places, all the way to their home in Ternopil. Some she found herself, walking along the beaches of Odesa and Mykolaiv. Her collection stayed behind in Ukraine, and here, in Ireland, she doesn't feel like starting a new one. The shells belong to that place, that time.

The shell also brings back Olena's memories. Before occupation she used to walk along the white sands of Kinburn Spit and beautiful beaches of Crimea looking for the most beautiful and unusual shells. She placed them near her plants in her summer house, or "dacha", in the village of Pisky, Mykolaiv oblast. Since childhood, she liked decorating her home with natural objects. She loved looking for unusual roots and stumps – she saw different shapes in them, different figures, animals, stories... For her, every piece – a shell, a root, or even a little stump – carries its own story.





A KEY

Iryna held two keepsakes close: a pinecone and a key.

The cone reminded her of Ukraine's forests – the tall pines, the scent of resin, the quiet joy of hiking beneath green branches. She missed those walks, the open air, the familiar scenery that always gave her strength.

The key was heavier, full of meaning. It was the one she used to lock the door of her apartment in Kharkiv. To her, it symbolized both endings and beginnings: the life she left behind, the new place she must now call home, and the promise that one day she would return.

What she longed for most were not grand things, but the simple rhythms of daily life in her city – the routines, the habits, the comfort of the ordinary. The cone and the key carried those memories for her, and the hope of coming back.



A CAT

Olena's cat, Vasya, is a 14-year-old red tomcat with a big personality. Olena misses her Vasya very much and says he is a super cat! He spent six years living in an apartment in Mykolaiv and then moved with Olena to the summer house. At first, he was scared of everything, hiding under the juniper bushes, but soon he adapted and proudly began catching mice.

When the bombarding started and Olena had to leave, Vasya stayed with friends, moving from one family to another. Now he lives with people who have completely fallen in love with him – and they joke that they won't give him back when Olena returns to Ukraine after the war.



A BOOK

When Viktoria came to Ireland, she brought a few special things with her. One was a children's book – Armstrong, about a little mouse who dreams of going to the moon for cheese. The mouse builds a rocket, and in the story, people soon decide to go there too. Viktoria first saw the book at her stepsister's place and loved it so much that she bought her own copy.

She also brought three rubber ducks, gifts from friends. Since then, her flock has grown to eleven. On her bookshelf, the ducks sit alongside the mouse's adventure, a small, colourful reminder that dreams can be packed in a suitcase and carried to a new home.





A SPINNING TOY

Oleksandr picked up the little spinning toy from the table, and it instantly reminded him of a toy he had as a child. He grew up in Odesa, a city where every place felt special – but the Fountain district along the coast was closest to his heart. He was born at the 6th station of the Fountain and, since 1965, lived near the railway station on Pyrohivska Street. That was his home for most of his life.

When the war began, he went to fight alongside his son, Oleksandr Junior, to defend their country. Later, he had to leave for France but couldn't stay away and returned to Odesa. Under constant shelling, living there became impossible, and he left again – this time for Ireland, where he reunited with his family. From Ukraine, he brought a treasured “peace pipe”, a lighter gifted by his son and his fishing rods – he’s a fisherman at heart. But here, he did more than hold on to his old hobbies – he learned to ride a scooter for the first time in his life at the age of 65!



A CROSS

When Viktoriia first came to Ireland with a friend, fleeing from the war, they travelled together to Dublin. At the station, they struggled with the ticket machine – it wouldn't take their cards, and this was the last train to Longford, their destination place. An elderly Irish couple noticed their concern and asked, “Is everything okay?” Moments later, they bought two tickets for them, no more questions asked.

On the train, the husband found Viktoriia again. In his hand was a small cross. He said it could protect them and pressed it into her palm. It was a brief encounter, but one she has never forgotten. She still keeps the cross, a quiet reminder of unexpected kindness in a new land.



A PHOTO

When the full-scale invasion began, Ihor joined the army to defend Ukraine from the Russian occupiers. During his military training, he received an ultrasound photo from his wife, Anna. She was five months pregnant, and they were both expecting a baby – or so they thought. What they didn't expect was to discover, at that very stage, that there were actually two babies – two wonderful twins!

Chapter 3. Through the Magic Mirror

Imagine standing in front of a mirror that doesn't just show your face – it shows your hidden self. Your fears, your passions, the dreams you hardly dare to say aloud. What would your reflection reveal?

In these stories, Ukrainians share what their “magic mirrors” might show: the secret rhythm of a dance, the weight of unspoken worries, the spark of a long-buried dream. Step closer – the mirror might remind you of your own hidden side too.

Between Two Worlds

Olena has been in Ireland for three years. Back home she used to be a businesswoman, now she finds joy in walking through forests, where leaves whisper in the wind, in learning English, in watching films, in drawing, and in capturing fleeting moments with her camera. People see her as creative, determined, and honest. They notice her love for animals and how the colour green – like



her eyes – seems to follow her everywhere. They know she will always help, like when she cycles or walks 5 km each way to volunteer as an art teacher at the Ukrainian school in Longford.

But if Olena had a magic mirror, it would reveal something deeper. Behind her smile and busy days, she thinks about the war in Ukraine every single day. Her heart is always with her loved ones, with her cat, at her favourite dacha, and with the beautiful view from her window–now destroyed by the Russians.

The Language of Care



Here in Ireland, Alla is a mother of a young child, with little English and many worries about the future. But a magic mirror would reveal another self – the one who once held a very important role. She began working in neuro-intensive care when she was only twenty. It was hard, often heartbreaking work, but she never regretted it. The task was simple and impossible at the same time: to do everything possible so a patient survived. Some did. Many did not. In the ward they often said, “God is taking them home. We are only guests here.”

The skills she learned became part of her – to act quickly, to stay calm, to always put the patient first. Years later, those instincts helped her save her own mother when she fainted from low blood pressure. Until the ambulance arrived, she did everything she knew. By the time the doctor came, her mother was already stabilizing.

During the war, her training was tested again. She noticed a young man sitting on a flowerbed. People walked past, assuming he was drunk. But something in her knew better. He was sweating heavily though the day was cool, and soon his body began to shake in seizures. With a friend, she laid him down to keep him safe until the ambulance arrived. He was a soldier, suffering from concussion. To others he looked like a stranger to avoid. To her, he looked like someone who needed help.

The Music Within

Hanna is a mother of twins, and a devoted wife. Her home is always full of delicious cooking smells and lively noise – children’s laughter, quick footsteps, and the bustle of everyday life. People know her as the heart of her busy family.

But if Hanna had a magic mirror, it would reveal something that feels as if it belongs to another world right now – her love for dancing, especially the fire and rhythm of Latin dances. It would also show the rebel in her, her hunger to learn, to try, to experience. Yet the mirror would also reflect her quiet fears: of deep water, of flying. She never lets them show, knowing she must be brave for her little children, to set the right example. And tucked deep in her heart is a wish – that one day she’ll finally get her driver’s license, and with it, the freedom she dreams of.



Chapter 4. Escaping the Darkness

Close your eyes and picture your hometown – the streets you know, the places that feel safe. Now imagine waking up to explosions, windows shaking, and the rush to decide: stay or run?

For many Ukrainians, leaving wasn't a choice but survival. These stories are not just about escape – they are about courage, faith, and the hope that even in the darkest night the dawn will come.

Three Miracles

Maybe my story will become a small inspiration, helping someone else spread their wings and find healing in their soul and heart. Because war, and living under occupation, is a terrifying confrontation with the cruelest sides of humanity. In those moments, you feel with every cell of your body the true value of freedom and peaceful skies.

But my trials began even before the war. In 2021, I was diagnosed with cancer, and so began my fight for life. First there was surgery, then chemotherapy. I was lying in a clinic in Kyiv when, early one morning, we were woken by dreadful news: the war had begun. They discharged us in haste. Kyiv was eerily empty. I looked at people's faces in the underground and saw only panic, fear, uncertainty in their eyes.



When I tried to make my way home to Bucha, the metro had already stopped, there were no taxis, and cars clogged the roads, fleeing the city. So, I walked. Columns of people were streaming out of Kyiv beside me. It was a dreadful sight, and I was exhausted. Evening was falling, and I didn't know how I would reach my family. I began to pray, asking for a miracle. Near the Warsaw highway, I met a man walking behind a car. He asked where I was going, and when I said Bucha, he answered: "Me too." That was the **first miracle** – he gave me a way home to my husband, my daughter, and my mother.

But we had no time to escape. The very next day, hell began. A group of Kadyrov soldiers entered our neighborhood. From my window I saw them storm into houses. I fell to my knees and begged God not to let them into ours, where my 11-year-old daughter was hiding. Fifteen of them came to our gate. One kicked at it with his boot – and then, suddenly, they turned and went away. They passed us by. That was my **second miracle**.

It was then I knew we had to find a way out of this nightmare. People began to organize, waiting for the right moment to flee. After three weeks of occupation, a call came in the night: there would be a chance to leave at 5 a.m. We managed to escape. And that was my **third miracle**. But what my eyes saw on that road – I still do not have the strength to put into words.

Friends in Lviv gave us an apartment. We stayed there for a month until even Lviv came under attack. The fear was unbearable. I understood then that this war would not end quickly, and I made the decision to leave Ukraine.

When I fled the occupation, I carried with me an old icon and a Bible from my great-grandmother. They were my truest keepsakes. So, I believe: miracles do happen. And they have carried me this far.

Olha





Whispers of the Southern Buh

Mykolaiv is a city of shipbuilding and leisure, nestled between two rivers – the Ingul and the Southern Buh. These rivers embrace the city before flowing into the Dnipro-Buh estuary and then the Black Sea... and beyond, the shores of Turkey.

It's a cozy, green city where people simply want to live and be happy, to raise their children, to love, and to build ships. The city is rich in theatre – from the puppet theatre, whose director was tragically killed by a Russian missile, to the drama theatre, the Ukrainian musical drama theatre, and others that Mykolaiv residents love to visit in any season. Performances are even staged outdoors, under the open sky.

We have a yacht club on the banks of the Southern Buh, where regattas are often held, and you can even take a ride on a river tram, gliding along the riverbanks and watching the sunset. Seagulls are the main bird and symbol of the city, as the Black Sea is so close. Nearby lies the Kinburn Spit, a national reserve with rare species of flora and fauna, lakes where swans, pelicans, and herons once nested, forests, white sands, and a breathtaking sky above the sea.

All of this, we have now lost. The island has been destroyed, burned, and irreparably damaged ecologically. It is under occupation.

Olona



Day One

Thirty-eight kilometers from the Russian border.

4:30 in the morning. I woke to muffled explosions.

Could it be war? No – impossible. Another blast. And another. And another. I found myself counting them. The roar of planes followed, flying so low that the windows trembled.

A colleague wrote in our work chat: “There are Russian tanks on my street.”

So soon? I couldn’t believe it. I typed back: “Whose tanks? Are you sure?” My mind resisted the obvious. But it was true. This was no history book, no educational TV programme. It was happening, here and now.

The war has started.

Despair. Rage. Disgust.

I got out of bed, dressed quickly, and stuffed documents, water, and a first-aid kit into a small backpack. Then I sat down, phone in hand, and read the news. The Russians are shelling apartment blocks in Pivnichna Saltivka (the closest district of Kharkiv to Russian border) – just for amusement. Civilians are fleeing. Cars shot at on the roads out. The metro is closed, filled with people using it as shelter. Whole families with nowhere else to go. Buses have stopped. Taxi fares are sky-high. The railway station is bursting with people, desperate to escape. Elderly, women, children. Dogs, cats, parrots, hamsters... Shouts, cries, fear everywhere.

I made a decision: I will stay. What will be, will be.

And then came thirty days under bombardment. Every day the same: another explosion, another fire, another death. The fear for loved ones. The endless nights in basements.

Eventually, I managed to leave Kharkiv. And now, almost two years later, I have found myself in Ireland – a place of welcome, safety, and kindness.

But Kharkiv, my city, still lives inside me.

Iryna



Chapter 5. Faces of Kindness

Think of a moment when someone helped you unexpectedly – a lift when you were stranded, a warm meal when you needed it most, a smile that arrived at just the right time. Such gestures can change everything, especially in difficult times.

Starting life in a new country is never easy – everything feels unfamiliar, from the roads and rules to the simplest daily routines. What makes the difference are people: the ones who smile first, who offer a hand, who treat newcomers not as outsiders but as neighbours.

In this chapter you'll meet those faces of kindness – Irish and Ukrainian – whose warmth helped turn uncertainty into belonging.



A Light in the Rain

When Oleksandr's family arrived in Ireland with their little baby, their first day quickly turned into an obstacle course. They missed the bus to the refugee center, lost their suitcase, and by evening realised no one was coming for them. Through a chain of calls, they reached Larysa – a Ukrainian from Kyiv who had lived here for twenty years. The war had touched the hearts of all Ukrainians, even those who had left home long ago.

A total stranger, Larysa couldn't leave her fellow Ukrainians in such a desperate situation. She got in her car, drove to pick them up, and took them to the refugee center – only to find the doors closed, as it was too late. Outside, the rain poured down, and the baby shivered in their arms. Instead of letting them spend the night in the airport, she drove them to a hotel, making sure they were warm, safe, and fed.

For Oleksandr's family, she will always be the person who turned their hardest first day into a story of kindness.

The Gift of Belonging

When Olena arrived in Ireland after her evacuation from Mykolaiv, she stayed in a hotel in Ballymahon. Two Ukrainians, Mark and Valentyn, who had been living in Ireland for many years, came as volunteers to help the newcomers. They even organised a trip to the Cliffs of Moher – a chance to breathe, to see beauty again, and to be distracted, if only for a while, from the horrors of war.

Later, Olena moved next door to an Irish family with four children, from school age up to seventeen, all of them passionate about football. They are more than friends now – they are like family. It's very precious feeling – have this connection with a "found" family.



I love my Irish family! They are amazing! They all work together like busy bees in a hive, taking care of their home, which is always neat and welcoming. Everyone works and studies, and they are all active in sports. The parents play volleyball and football with their children and always take part in seasonal games and competitions. Their four children are so attentive and well-mannered! We are grateful to fate for bringing us together and for the chance to live alongside them. They have supported us so much. May God protect Ireland and bless this wonderful, kind-hearted family!





Double Trouble

When Hanna's family first arrived in Ireland, they were placed in a sports hall. With small twins, it was hard – especially because it was so cold. The owners of the gym were kind people and were just as surprised as Anna that a family with such young children had been sent there. They did everything they could and even fixed the heating. It turned out that both Rachel and her husband came from families of twins – a small, unexpected connection that made them feel closer.

“Double trouble.” – someone said. And Anna smiled back, realizing those might have been the very first words she learned in English.

Soon Rachel arranged for the family to be moved into proper housing. For Hanna, it felt like life's way of whispering: when the journey begins in hardship, sometimes it sends you a double blessing – kindness, and a reminder that hope always finds a way.

Lessons Beyond English

For Ihor there were two special people on his Irish journey. These were two English teachers – one from the USA and one from Great Britain. John, the American from New York, was full of energy and humor. His lessons were lively, always filled with questions about Ukraine, its language, and the war. He was amazed to learn that “John” is the English form of the Ukrainian name “Ivan,” and from that day on he proudly introduced himself to everyone as Ivan. He shared tales about life in the United States, and surprised everyone with his personal story – he had lived with his partner for over thirty years before finally marrying her by the ocean at the age of seventy!

After John came Peter, the Englishman who had lived in Ireland for forty years. He was a strict teacher, demanding precise pronunciation, but his lessons were truly memorable. Peter came from a wealthy family: his son owned one of the largest real estate agencies in London, and his daughter managed several hotels in Ireland. His son had once given him a yacht, and Peter would sail it to Spain several times a year. He often talked about how he was trying to get an Irish passport – laughing that it would let him travel to more countries.

During those eight months in a small hotel in Ballyvaughan, County Clare, Ihor and his family learned not just English, but stories of life from two very different men – both of whom, in their own way, left a mark on his journey.



An Irish Godfather



Sometimes life gives you more than a friend – it gives you family. For me and my children, that gift came in the form of someone we lovingly call “our Irish Godfather”. With him, we’ve shared many adventures, moments so dear that I, as a writer, was inspired to capture them in a book – **A Magical Summer in Tír na nÓg.**

When he was diagnosed with cancer and his health began to decline, we wanted to surround him with the same care he had shown us. My mother Oksana, who is still in Ukraine, decided to create a gift that would carry our gratitude across borders. She embroidered a towel (rushnyk) used to adorn an icon. It took 119 hours of work.

The choice of ornament was no accident. She used the UNESCO-recognized Obukhiv “stitched” tradition, whose design is built around the Tree of Life. Its branches symbolize the past (the roots and lower branches), the present (the trunk and side branches), and the future (the upper branches and the flower, joined by infinity loops).

Most Obukhiv rushnyks were embroidered in thick red thread using many different techniques, so that the designs look almost painted. The Obukhiv style has no true equivalent anywhere in the world. These rushnyks could reach up to three or even five meters in length, often finished with three to five tassels at the bottom – a unique detail not found in any other regional tradition.

This was the design my mother chose. Each stitch carried love, gratitude, and protection. For my Irish friend – our “Godfather” – it was not only a gift of beauty, but a blessing from our family, and a bridge between Ukraine and Ireland.

Halyna



Chapter 6. Tastes and Traditions

Tradition is not only food or clothing – it is the rhythm of songs, the rituals of holidays, the patterns embroidered in fabric, and the stories passed down through generations. For Ukrainians, these traditions are living threads that tie the past to the present, just as Irish songs and dances connect families here.

Ukraine is one of the world's youngest independent countries, born in 1991, but it is also a proud descendant of Kyiv Rus, founded in 882 AD. This ancient heritage has given Ukraine a rich cultural background, shaped over more than a thousand years of history.

Yet for decades, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, during which its unique culture, its bond with nature, and its folk traditions were deliberately suppressed. The Ukrainian language was banned, Ukrainian books were burned. Today, Russia once again tries to erase Ukrainian identity. But now more than ever, it's being cherished and rediscovered by Ukrainians.

In this chapter, you are invited to step inside Ukrainian traditions in all their forms to see how memory, faith, and joy are woven into the fabric of life, and why these treasures are impossible to destroy.



*"Christmas in Ukraine is celebrated with family and carol singing. We had a very large family – my father alone had twelve brothers and sisters! As children, we would gather in huge groups and visit every relative! On New Year's Eve, it was also a tradition for groups of children to go from house to house, offering blessings and scattering grain ("**siyaty**") for good luck.*

*"At Christmas, the table was always prepared with care. First, hay and coins were placed underneath the tablecloth, a symbol of prosperity and blessing, and then twelve dishes were set out. The very first dish to taste was always **kutia**, a sweet grain pudding. Children would go caroling around the village, receiving small gifts or treats. In the evening, a large cross made of straw, called a **didukh**, was burned in the yard, and while it blazed, everyone sang carols."*

There was also the **shopka** (sometimes called **vertep**), a traditional traveling play. It included angels, soldiers, singers, and even mischievous characters representing evil spirits. They would visit every home, offering blessings and carols, while the "evil" ones played tricks and jokes, always rewarded with a little payment.





“We also celebrate **Epiphany**, when those who wish take a dip in icy water. According to local legend, no one can catch a cold on that day because the water is said to be healing.”



A unique tradition in Bukovyna is the celebration of **Malanka**, from January 13 to 14, in all Ukrainian-speaking villages. The largest and most famous Malanka takes place in the town of Vashkivtsi. In Romanian-speaking villages, Malanka is celebrated on New Year's Eve, from December 31 to January 1, with the most colorful one held in Krasnoyilsk. We often visited these festivities as guests. Shopka is part of Malanka festivities. These performances blend tradition with imagination, bringing to life not only

shepherds and angels but also fantastic creatures. One of the most striking is the winged bear – a traditional costume made entirely of straw, covering the person from head to toe. In local tradition, the bear symbolises strength and the power of nature, while the wings carry wishes for freedom and good fortune in the new year.



“In spring comes **Easter**, when every family prepares an Easter basket to be blessed in church. The contents depend on each family's means, but dyed eggs “**pysanky**” and the traditional Easter bread, **Paska**, are always essential. I wish I could go back and show all these traditions to my sons one day!”

“On the third Thursday of May, people all across Ukraine celebrate **Vyshyvanka Day**, when everyone dresses in traditional embroidered shirts. Social media fills with photos of people proudly wearing their vyshyvankas, turning the day into a nationwide flash mob. The holiday began in 2006, when students of Chernivtsi National University agreed to come to classes dressed in vyshyvankas – and the tradition quickly spread across the country.”





In Ternopil region, the most recognized style is the **Borshchiv embroidery**, known for its striking use of black thread to create large ornaments on both men's and women's shirts. According to legend, this style emerged as a symbol of mourning for fallen men. More broadly, Podillia embroidery, which encompasses the Ternopil area, is celebrated for its incredible variety of techniques and patterns. It combines methods such as satin stitch, cross-stitch, openwork, and more, and features a rich palette of colors and compositions."

Honey Spas (14 August) marks the beginning of the harvest season. Families in Ukraine bake flatbreads and drizzle them with honey - an essential dish on the festive table. In the morning, people bring apples, honey, water, and other foods to church for blessing. **Apple Spas** (19 August) follows soon after. Again, flatbreads are baked in a frying pan from firm dough rolled out to fit the pan. They are served with sweet toppings - most often grated poppy seeds with sugar water or honey. Both holidays combine food, faith, and the joy of gathering, reminding Ukrainians of the sweetness of God's gifts.



"On the **night of Ivana Kupala**, people lit bonfires, searched for the mythical fern flower, and practiced fortune-telling to glimpse their future spouses."



"**Weddings** were especially rich in tradition. They began with the **divych-vechir** (a girls' gathering for the bride), the baking of the wedding bread (**korovai**), and the gathering of barvinok (periwinkle) to weave into the bride's wreath. There were invitations to relatives, the ceremonial covering of the bride's head, playful "sales" of the bride, the breaking and sharing of the korovai, and finally, the church wedding itself, surrounded by countless customs and games.

One tradition that stands out in my memory is the **bride's wreath**. Before she put on her veil, the wreath was tied with many colorful ribbons. Children had the honor of untying them one by one. Every ribbon had to be untied - this symbolized happiness and long life. Afterwards, the wreath was tied to the chandelier in the couple's new home, a bright reminder of blessings and family tradition."



*“On **St. Andrew’s Day**, which falls on 30th of November, village life was filled with playful mischief and fortune-telling. The boys would sneak around to the girls’ houses at night, taking the gates off their hinges and hiding them, only to return them later in exchange for a small “ransom.” Meanwhile, the girls spent the evening trying to divine the future, especially to learn who their destined husbands might be.*

One fortune-telling ritual I remember best was both hilarious and unforgettable. At midnight, girls would go to a well standing at a crossroads, scoop water into their mouths, and carry it home without swallowing or spilling a drop. Imagine it: the freezing night air, the snow crunching underfoot, and a group of giggling girls trying to keep their mouths shut tight while stumbling along icy paths. More often than not, someone would spill the water and have to run back for more, making the whole thing even funnier.

Once the water finally made it home, it was poured into a bowl and used to knead dough. Each girl shaped a dumpling from the dough, and together they cooked them. The final step was to place the dumplings before a dog. Whichever dumpling the dog ate first would reveal the girl destined to marry first.



*Another playful tradition is baking a special round bread called **kalyta**. It is pierced with a thread and hung from the ceiling. One by one, people try to bite a piece of it, saying “I’ll take a bite.” Beside them stands someone with a pot of soot and a brush, waiting for the moment to smear their face while joking back, “And give you a swipe!”*

*“My favourite traditional dish is **varenyky** with sour cherries. In Ireland, I can only find sweet cherries in regular shops, but sometimes I spot frozen sour cherries in a Polish store and make dumplings just like my grandmother did. My grandmother had eight children, and I was the first granddaughter. The kitchen was always full of family, laughter, and the smell of delicious cooking. Myself and my husband have been together for more than ten years, and before the war, we ran a restaurant in Ukraine. Cooking varenyky now feels like bringing a piece of that life back to the table.”*



Chapter 7. New beginnings

Every new chapter in life starts with uncertainty. Moving to a new country means learning other ways of living, finding new friends, and slowly building a sense of belonging.

For Ukrainians, Ireland became not only a place of safety but also a place of discovery – of kindness, of community, and of moments of peace under unfamiliar skies. In this chapter, you'll hear voices of gratitude and hope and see how new beginnings can grow even from the hardest of circumstances.

"The fact that Longford has blue and yellow on its flag – just like Ukraine – felt like a good sign"

"Longford is a very nice place, it's not too big not too small, with good transport connection. Clean, cosy and safe."

"I find Longford a very safe town, there is no violence on the streets and people are very tolerant and cheerful."

"I like Longford because there are no drones and military planes over our heads."



"At first we lived in a coastal town and we are so happy we moved to Longford – there are more sunny days here and less rain."

"Even without much English I feel that I understand local people. They are very friendly – always smiling, always trying to help. My soul is peaceful here in Longford."

"People in Longford are amazing, very kind and supportive. You can feel here that all nationalities are accepted in Ireland."

"We like the parks of this quiet town – a perfect place for walking with kids, hiking and cycling."



"Ballymahon is the best town on the planet. I like walking in the forest. I've just found out that plants don't stop growing in Ireland throughout the year. They don't "sleep" in winter. Life goes on. That's why we can see here so many bright colours. And even on a grey day – I still enjoy every moment of peace. I like walking in the rain listening to the music in my headphones."



"It's quiet and safe – what else would I wish for my life with my family?"

"I like visiting St. Mel's Cathedral and listening to the chamber music – its story is very inspiring. On Christmas morning 2009, a fire devastated the interior of St. Mel's Cathedral in Longford. Miraculously, a 19th-century painting of the Holy Family on a highly flammable cotton canvas survived with barely a mark! It brings hope to my heart that our lives will be rebuilt too."



The Island of Hope

It was a beautiful Irish morning. My daughter woke up and ran to watch her favourite cartoon about a little girl who likes exploring everything. Today's episode was about a treasure hunt, where Dora and her friend, a little talking monkey, were searching for a hidden pirate treasure chest. They found a bottle with a map of the island leading them to a secret spot.

I feel sometimes like this girl, looking for something. But unfortunately, I don't have a map.

Alla

Dear Ireland,
When I first met you, it was night. First thing I saw coming out of the airport was a hare - it reminded me of home.
I like your low sky and beautiful nature.
I wonder what the weather will be like in 5 minutes?
I'm grateful I came here.
Love,
Viles

Dream Garden

One fine day I fell asleep with my children when they were having midday nap. I had a strange dream. In my dream I saw a beautiful garden and heard sounds of a magical harp playing by itself. Deep in my heart I knew this place - it was a secret garden where all the dreams come true. It was so sunny, warm and colourful, full of beautiful objects and people.

When I woke up, I felt that my two little twins were hugging me. I realised that dreams really do come true.

Hanna

Dear Ireland,

When I first met you, it was a sunny day. I saw your outline through the airplane window. I felt your warmth and I liked you right away.

Three things about you that I love are:

- daffodils in February - we have them in April in Ukraine.
- Ancient Catholic chapels and majestic cathedrals (like St.Mel's Cathedral in Longford)
- Your friendly people.

I have one question for you: why do I hardly meet people speaking Irish?

What you need to understand about me is that I'm very grateful for supporting me and giving me and Ukrainian people a shelter in the times of hardship.

With love,
Iryna



Dear Future Me,

Always remember who you are and where your roots lie. Never lose sight of the mirror of your actions, for life reflects back the kindness you give – though often in new and unexpected forms. Hold on to the strength within yourself. Nurture your body, your mind, and your soul, and never stop growing. It does not matter how many times you fall – what matters is how many times you rise again.

You once set out on this journey for two reasons: your daughter's dream to study English deeply, in the land of its native speakers, and your own need for a gentler climate for your health. Ireland became more than a destination; it became a green fairy tale where time seemed to slow.

Remember how its landscapes calmed your soul: the wind over the Atlantic, the soft light on the hills, the feeling that nature here is both alive and wise. Remember the people – warm, kind, open. Strangers who greeted you on the street, bartenders who spoke as if you were an old friend, and elderly people who always smiled. Ireland carries its own quiet magic, even in the rain, which paints the days with a special mood.

Do not forget the little treasures: the ease of breathing, the scent of grass after the rain, a cup of tea by the fire in a pub, the sound of flutes and fiddles. Here, traditions are alive, the language is cherished, and even modern life speaks with the accent of ancestors.

Carry all this with you, wherever you go. Let it remind you that you are part of many worlds now – rooted in Ukraine, but forever touched by Ireland's gentle magic.

With love and hope,
Olha





That's How We Speak

A few words and phrases to remember

English

Ukrainian

Hello!

Привіт! /pryvit/

How are you?

Як справи? /yak spravy?/

Thank you!

Дякую! /diakuyu/

Please!

Будь ласка! /bud' laska/

Great!

Чудово! /chudovo/

Family

Родина /rodyna/

Home

Дім /dim/

Love

Кохання /kohannia/

Goodbye!

Бувай! /buvai/

Good luck!

Щастя! /shchasty/



Stories of Us: A Community Collaboration

Longford Community Resources clg (LCRL), in collaboration with the Employment Development and Information Centre (EDI Centre) Longford, is proud to publish Stories of Us.

We are grateful to the Ukrainian community in Longford who took part with such openness and creativity, sharing their personal stories and creating the beautiful artwork, and to a local publishing house Little Beetle Press that brings this book to life.

Our thanks also go to the EDI Centre for their partnership, and to SICAP Ukrainian Support workers, and the Longford Roma and New Communities CDP (LRNC) project staff who developed the idea for this book and supported the facilitation of the storytelling and art workshops. The process of creating this book was collaborative and participative, with Ukrainian people sharing their lived experiences, heritage, and traditions. We would especially like to thank Halyna Budilova and Alla Shmygovska for their skilled and creative facilitation of the workshops.

The idea for Stories of Us came directly from the Ukrainian community in Longford. With support from the staff, this project provided a platform to celebrate Ukrainian identity, highlight journeys from Ukraine to Ireland, promote literacy, and amplify the voices of a community navigating both challenges and resilience.

Created in the shadow of the war of Russian against Ukraine, these stories reflect the strength of people who were forced to leave their homes yet continue find light in the darkest times of their lives. Through shared storytelling, this book fosters connection, strengthens understanding, and builds a collective narrative rooted in culture, belonging, and hope.



Story of Us. Ukrainians

This book is a creative project developed during community workshops facilitated by **Halyna Budilova** and **Alla Shmygovska**.

Developed in partnership with Longford Community Resources CLG and the EDI Centre, Longford, as part of a community storytelling initiative supported by Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Collaboration and Innovation Fund 2025 funded by SOLAS. Adult Literacy is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union.

The collages presented here were made by participants using various materials, including fragments from magazines and other printed sources. They are shown as authentic outcomes of the artistic process and are not intended for commercial reproduction of the original images. All rights to individual images used in the collages remain with their respective copyright holders.

The book is published for **educational, cultural, and community purposes and is not intended for commercial resale or reproduction** beyond this edition.

Text editing, art direction, and compilation **Halyna Budilova**

Design **Vitalii Shostak**

Photographs from the personal collections of the participants. Photo on page 31 by Polina Hoch, photographer, kindly shared from her personal collection. Photo of the wreath on page 35 by Dana Vitkovska, master of traditional wax wreaths, kindly shared from her personal collection. Some photographs are used under license from Envato Elements.

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