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Second Family

As war rages in her home country of Ukraine, seventeen-year-old Yeva-Mariya Hayko '26 finds a home away from home at Southwestern.

BY MEILEE D. BRIDGES



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SECOND FAMILY

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ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022, just seven days after submitting her application for admission to Southwestern University, 16-year-old Yeva-Mariya Hayko '26 woke to her mother saying she and her two younger sisters would not be attending school. "I asked her whether it was because of COVID," Hayko recalls. To the eleventh grader's surprise, her mother responded that the war had started—and then promptly left the room.

LIFE DISRUPTED

Just hours before, Vladimir Putin had announced that he was ordering Russian troops to invade Ukraine, launching the largest attack on a European country since World War II. News audiences across the globe watched in horror as Russian missiles rained down throughout the country.

Back in her family's apartment in the city of Cherkasy, Hayko was stunned. In the weeks leading up to the invasion, she reveals, "I was not even thinking about war. It was mentioned that it might start, but nobody took it [seriously] in Ukraine. Everybody was thinking that no one would really start a war in the 21st century!"

TODD WHITE



During that first day, Hayko’s family frantically discussed what they should do. Leaving the country was an option, but they didn’t want to leave behind their home, business, and relatives. So they prepared their apartment, taping windows in case the glass shattered from the impact of nearby bombs. They packed the car should they need to evacuate quickly. That night, they slept uncomfortably in their winter clothes

as an added precaution.

Many people would panic in such a situation. But, Hayko says, “I was just making sure that all the family was ready in case anything happened.”

The following day, as the Russian army continued its assault, Hayko, her parents, and her sisters crowded into the car with their parrot and two cats and drove to her grandmother’s small village. They spent nearly two months there, eating fruits and vegetables from the garden as disrupted supply chains resulted in food shortages across Ukraine.

As the weeks wore on, explosions reverberated through the forest surrounding her grandmother’s house. “It was getting scarier and scarier because it was maybe 100 miles from there, but you could still hear that,” she describes. “It was stressful, but usually, since I was the oldest one of my sisters, I could not share my emotions . . . and just needed to calm down.”

PERSISTENCE AND GRATITUDE

In the midst of it all, Hayko was still concerned about finishing school strong. A high achiever, she sometimes spent hours on algebra homework just to distract herself. She was also determined not to let the war derail her ambitions of attending a liberal arts college in the US. Unfortunately, internet in the village is spotty, so waiting for admission decisions was especially nerve-racking. “Sometimes,” she recalls, “I just stayed up at night, waiting outside for emails from universities because inside the house, you cannot do anything. It



Top, Hayko holds a photo of her family in Ukraine: mother Olena Andriyenko, father Oleh Hayko, and sisters Zlata and Marta Hayko. Bottom, the village home of Hayko’s grandmother, where the family sought refuge from Russian advances.

was [below freezing] when it was snowing, so I just wore warm clothes, trying to connect.”

On March 8, Hayko reached out to SU Director of Enrollment Operations Bob Baldwin. International students are required to record a brief interview, but given her unreliable internet, Hayko was concerned she wouldn’t be able to submit it on time.

for Southwestern,” she recalls. “They said, ‘You’ll feel as if they’re your second family!’ The way people communicated with me, even before I was accepted—I had never gotten so much support from any other university.”

As her intention to attend solidified, however, another obstacle emerged: power and water outages had shut down her family’s business, a hotel and restaurant in the



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Baldwin recalls being surprised by her heartfelt email: “She felt so bad that she was asking for this exception about the video, and I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re worried about *that*?’” He then reviewed her application, which was beyond impressive: Hayko speaks multiple languages, had earned international prizes as a dancer and pianist, sported As in every subject, and had written a flawless essay. “She’s remarkable in every sense!” he realized. The video was easily waived, and 18 days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Hayko received her official acceptance letter from Southwestern.

“THE RIGHT THING TO DO”

Baldwin and Hayko continued exchanging multiple emails. As a recruiter, Baldwin wanted to persuade such an exemplary candidate to choose SU. “But I was also thinking, *I really want you to be safe. I want you to find your fit. I want you to just live your life and be your best self*,” he shares.

Their correspondence ultimately sealed Hayko’s decision. “My whole family was voting

town of Zolotonosha. At that point, her parents couldn’t have even afforded Hayko’s airfare to the US. Compelled by her merits, harrowing situation, and financial hardships, Baldwin consulted Vice President for Strategic Recruitment and Enrollment Tom Delahunt. Without skipping a beat, Delahunt granted the necessary aid. “I just thought, *Whatever it takes, with what is happening in the world, this is the right thing to do*,” he says.



Director of Enrollment Operations Bob Baldwin and Hayko catch up over coffee in The Cove.

Delahunt sought out Vice President for University Relations Paul Secord. The war had put Hayko in dire financial need; how could Southwestern support her? Secord immediately thought of the Emergency Scholarship Fund.

“We don’t raise scholarships for specific students. By law, we can’t,” Secord explains. “So every year, we raise money for the Emergency Scholarship Fund.” Originally established in 2017 to support those affected by Hurricane Harvey, the fund helps students whose families have experienced significant financial setbacks. “It’s not free money for everybody,” Secord adds, “but if something has changed and \$1,000, \$2,000 is the difference between you coming back and having to drop out, let us work with you.”

Eleven days after her acceptance, late on another freezing night, Hayko learned she’d be receiving an emergency scholarship. She woke her parents. She was ecstatic; they were incredulous. “I never saw them so happy!” she remembers. “In war, a lot of things get negative, but when I said that, my family was really happy.”



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A CRUCIAL INVITATION

The Emergency Scholarship Fund was not the only way Southwestern supported Hayko. Concerned about safety, Hayko’s mother wanted to accompany the then-16-year-old as she traveled the 6,000-plus miles from Cherkasy to Georgetown.

“In non-wartime, it’s relatively easy for a parent of an incoming first-year student to get a visa to travel with them here. But the American Embassy in Ukraine was closed,” says Secord. “So we were able to issue a letter of invitation to her mother, congratulating her on her daughter’s acceptance and requesting that she come to campus for first-year orientation.” That official document expedited the visa.

In August 2022, mother and daughter embarked on their first trip to the US. The grueling voyage involved harried border crossings and multiple modes of transportation; just arriving in Georgetown was a triumph over myriad obstacles. But participating in Southwestern’s Matriculation felt like another reward: Months earlier, Hayko and her mother had missed her high school graduation because they were in Prague getting their visas. To finally have her mother hear her achievements announced was “very exciting,” she says.

A HOME FAR AWAY FROM HOME

As one would expect, the young Ukrainian has wasted no time in her first months at the University. She’s pursuing her dream of studying multiple fields, declaring a business major and minors in theater and data science, and is a member of



Left, Hayko cheering on the Pirates football team last fall; below, Hayko with her mother, Olena Andriyenko, during an August 2022 visit to the Southwestern campus.



the Business Club and cheerleading team. “I really try to use each opportunity to show that I deserve [the scholarship] Southwestern gave to me,” she explains. She’s also deeply thankful that her work-study position in the registrar’s office enables her to send money back home. “I just want to help my family in [any] way I can,” she says.

Delahunt is delighted to see her thriving even as the war at home weighs heavily on her mind. From his perspective, providing emergency aid to such a deserving student has been well worth it. “It’s a lot of money for one student,” he says. “But I would do it all over again.”

Understandably, Hayko continues to worry about her family. Contact with her parents is sometimes intermittent because a missile strike destroyed their regional electric station. Her younger sisters are unable to play with their friends because it’s too dangerous to go out. And even when the planes fly low in Georgetown, Hayko flashes back to Ukrainian aircraft buzzing the rooftops to evade Russian radar detection.

Yet she still recognizes that her family’s experience cannot compare with that of fellow Ukrainians who’ve lost their homes or lives. She also finds solace in the

messages sent by her 8- and 13-year-old sisters, who are always asking how her exams are going. “So I feel like I have support and my family is near,” she says lovingly.

Hayko hopes for stability and an end to the atrocities in her homeland. After graduation, she wants to live and work in both her native and adopted countries. In the meantime, Hayko plans to make the most of her next three years at SU. “I try to join everything that I was dreaming of when I was in Ukraine. It makes me feel like I’m in the right place. It’s also for my parents to feel that I’m safe, that I’m doing a lot of things that might be useful for them, [and] that I’m happy and developing,” she says excitedly. “Still, I have a lot of things to explore!” 

“While few stories are quite as of the moment,” says Secord, “emergency financial aid is an ongoing need for all of our students, and it’s all made possible by donors. The more gifts that come into that [fund], the more students we’re able to lift up and help.” If you would like to support students like Yeva-Mariya Hayko, please visit southwestern.edu/makeagift and designate the SU Emergency Scholarship Fund.