

Our Home is in Heaven

Refugees Find New Freedoms

Her eyes were unblinking against the cooled late-September air circulating through Calvary Baptist's auditorium-sized reception hall. With only three hours of sleep, Olga Lebed's face was as still as a porcelain doll's. She had spent hours perfecting the details: layers of hair spray hold coffee-colored ringlets in a pile under her beaded veil, hours of ironing have smoothed wrinkles from yards of wedding-white crinoline and satin, sky blue and white helium balloons bounce in the center of round reception tables filled with plates of food. It has taken 40 days to prepare; the details had to be perfect.

Now, after the two-hour Russian Pentecostal wedding and three hours of the reception, Olga and her husband, Mikhail, sat at a long table full of tuxedoed groomsmen and bridesmaids dressed in homemade blue and white gowns. From the stage, they could see each face of the hundreds of Ukrainian and Moldovan relatives that came to the reception, and nearly every one had climbed the reception hall's stage stairs to pray and to sing in Russian to pre-recorded synthesizer beats. Every time, she and Mikhail stood in honor, to say a silent thank you.

She had a lot to be thankful for. She is the first in her family to be married in the United States. It's a day her family—all religious refugees—has waited years to see.

From the center of the reception hall, Olga's grandfather, Petr Dariy, walked slowly among tables crowded with teenagers dressed in suits and long dresses and gangs of squealing grandchildren bouncing deflated balloons. He passed his grown children who sat eating colorful Moldovan, Romanian and Russian dishes—fragile cookies, savory meat cakes, bowls of potatoes and shredded beets—from dozens of Styrofoam dishes.

Crossing the stage, Petr reached the microphone and turned to speak to hundreds of relatives in broken Russian, the only common language between his Moldovan family and Mikhail's Ukrainian family. Olga and Mikhail stood as he spoke, and her eyes barely left his face. Among the first in their family to flee generations of persecution, Olga, her parents, and her nine siblings ran from Moldova, a small Eastern European republic bordered by Romania and the Ukraine. They landed in Asheville on April 29, 1999. Mikhail's family, who fled the Ukraine in 1998, first settled in Seattle. Mikhail's family arrived in Asheville on June 6, 2001. He and Olga met at the community college where Olga was taking classes, and a little more than a year later, Mikhail proposed.

They waited for most of Olga's family, including Petr—the patriarch of 11 children, 103 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren—to come to Asheville before they married. And though it took Petr only seconds to cross the stage, he waited over two years to escape from Moldova and to reach the freedom the stage represents.

At 19, Olga has started a family in this American town. She, and the rest of her family, now must decide how—or whether—to adjust to life in this small city tucked into the bowl of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Negotiating their Moldovan culture and new economic and social demands, Olga and her family—more than 130 people—are learning what it means to build a new life as religious refugees in the United States.

The rise and fall of the Iron Curtain

Like the rest of North Carolina, Asheville has seen a dramatic growth in the immigrant community over the last ten years, particularly in the Latino community. But a sizable community of immigrants from Russia and the former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR)—including Belarus, Moldova and the Ukraine—has also made Asheville home with the

protection of the United Nations and the welcome of U.S. immigration officials. According to Marlene Myers, refugee coordinator for the N.C. Department of Social Services, American officials opened the country's borders in the 1990s to people fleeing communism.

“Unlike an immigrant who does everything in their power to get into this country, refugees don't,” Myers said. “They just can't go home. Our country was always interested in people fleeing communism and communist regimes.”

Moldova gained its official independence in 1992 when the Soviet Union granted independence to the SSRs. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees, a private organization that tracks refugees worldwide, Moldova did not move smoothly from Russian control to independence. Moldova is the most populated former Russian state, with 4.4 million people residing inside a country only the size of Maryland. In 1992, along with independence, a civil war swept through the country torn by its loyalties to Russia and to Romania. In the Transdniestria region of Moldova, a Slavic separatist organization declared its independence from the rest of the country; the battle over the Pridnestrovie Moldovan Republic, or PMR, made the region unstable, and each side reportedly used landmines.

According to the Committee for Refugees, 5,169 Moldovans sought asylum in countries outside the former Soviet Union and many more were uprooted within the country. The organization estimated that 15 percent of the country's entire population was living and working outside the country by the end of 2001. Some went to other European countries, but many arrived in the United States with the help of the U.S. State Department and national church-based resettlement agencies. Local advocates estimate that over 4,000 Russian and former-Soviet refugees have settled in Asheville alone, while more than 35,000 of North Carolina's residents claimed Russian or Ukrainian ancestry in the 2000 census.

But according to Myers, the borders are closing. Two years ago, the U.S. immigration program that admitted the Russian refugees closed. Now, people seeking religious or political protections must rely on family members for help. And because recent elections in Moldova placed communist candidates in powerful positions, no one is sure what will happen next.

“They are kind of afraid of their future for them and their children,” said Janna Kozel, coordinator of the Interpreter Resource Project, which provides interpretation services to the Asheville Russian community.

The price of faith

In Moldova, religion can be deadly.

“The Communist system will not allow you to build your own system, to believe in God,” said Elena Dariy, Olga’s aunt who arrived with Petr in July, through an interpreter.

She said that after the birth of one of her children, her doctors gave her an I.U.D. without her consent. It wasn’t until she became pregnant again that she discovered the device, and local authorities threatened to place her children in an orphanage, she said.

“They will tell you who to believe,” she said. “(We were) threatened to be put in prison many times.”

Even if the local Christian church met at 6 a.m., the authorities were waiting to arrest members of the congregation, Petr added. Religious ceremonies took place under the protection of nightfall, and by refusing to become a part of the communist system, Petr’s and his family were kept in low-paying jobs and denied an education in Moldovan universities.

But despite the intolerance, Moldova may always be the family’s home. The closest thing to home they’ve found in the U.S. is church, Olga said, and nearly every night there are services held at different churches across Asheville. Olga’s church, led by pastor Oganés Unanyan, an

Armenian religious refugee, is the second largest of Asheville's three Russian-led Baptist and Pentecostal congregations. Though members from the congregation are from different countries and cultures, the Russian language unites them.

"It was so hard (going to a church that was in Russian)," Olga said. "We were like crying almost every night and missing Moldova. But now we got used to it, and it's like (we've been here) since a long time ago. But still, sometimes, when you look at pictures—you want to go home to visit."

Our home is only in heaven

On one warm September night, children ran through the parking lot and front lawns of Ledgewood Village Apartments. Men stooped under car hoods while women sat on front steps. Outside of Elena's apartment, dozens of shoes mobbed the stoop. Black palm-sized patent leather shoes, worn and cracked, teetered next to adult versions. Inside, piles of shoes lined the foyer walls and trailed under the too-small kitchen table. A single Bible sat on the table, next to a vase of artificial silk flowers. Despite the cramped quarters and the constant activity, the house was immaculate.

Asheville, a tourist-heavy city with a population of 69,000, is a big change from Taraklia, the small farming village where seven of Petr's children and their families lived. Taraklia's one school taught all the children, and only the richest people in the village had cars. Everyone else walked the dirt roads to the village's one food store and clothing store. Most everyone—including Olga's family—lived on what they could grow and raise on area farms.

"Asheville is like a huge city," Petr said through an interpreter.

Though their families risked everything, leaving Moldova has been a mixed blessing.

“We were kind of happy, but at the same time sad,” Olga said. “You’re going but you can’t imagine that you won’t be able to come back. You’re just going but you don’t know where you’re going. Everybody was crying.”

But nearly everyone has come; only three of Olga’s cousins are waiting to find out when they can leave Moldova and come to Asheville.

“The first thing we tell (our children), we are going to America,” Elena said through an interpreter. “In the village where we lived—lots of mud. The children were dirty every single day. We have to wash clothes (every day). Kids were asking, ‘Mom, how much longer until we go to America?’”

Now that they’re here in American, Elena said her children complain, “Ma, we cannot speak this language. How much longer?”

Learning to speak and read English—and finding a house to call their own—are the keys to making a life in this country, Olga said.

“If you start to speak English, it’s much better,” Olga said. Without it, she said, everyone feels unsettled and out of sorts. Learning English can help families get better jobs, but in the slumping local economy, finding good-paying work is difficult even for Americans.

“It will not be true if I tell you that America feels like our homes,” said Oganese, Olga’s minister, through an interpreter.

“But we need to tell the truth. I can tell you America gave us a lot, a lot. But our home (is) only (in) heaven.”

Settling down

With the help of World Relief Services, most of the Moldovan family moved into eight apartments at Ledgewood Village in Oakley, a working class neighborhood near the eastern edge

of the city. With an official partnership with the U.S. State Department, World Relief, a private, church-based organization headquartered in Baltimore, is one of seven resettlement agencies in North Carolina. Wayne Wingfield, World Relief's North Carolina director, estimated that the organization has resettled 2,000 religious refugees from the former Soviet Union in Asheville since the first Ukrainian refugee came in 1989. To keep in close contact with the community, World Relief opened a sub-office at Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Asheville during the last year.

"They were persecuted, imprisoned, killed, sent to Siberia for worshipping, just simply worshipping, and not declaring they were atheists and that there was no God," Wingfield said. "They could have done that and gone on. Every time I go to church, I weep because I am free to worship without persecution."

While all of North Carolina's resettling agencies are church-based, refugees may or may not be seeking religious freedoms when they enter the country. But all receive assistance with accessing U.S. healthcare, education and public assistance services from these organizations. Besides helping refugees process the mountainous amounts of paperwork, World Relief also helps new residents with finding housing and work.

"The whole goal is that within 30 days, they would become self-supporting," Wingfield said. "There's no free lunch for the refugee."

But adjusting to a new home doesn't follow anyone's timeline. Finding work while learning a new language is difficult. And people are often suspicious of immigrants, said Kristy Dodd, World Relief's Asheville caseworker.

"Not a lot of people know what a refugee is and how they are different from immigrants," Kristy said. "They're fleeing, not just coming here to take jobs, (which is) what people assume."

But Wingfield also points out the economic gains the larger community gains by the presence of the refugees.

“We have a lot of blue collar workers, professionals, and very successful private business people (who are refugees),” he said. “They’ve been good for the economy, good for our nation. (People) complain about them being here, but they’re filling a role Americans won’t take.”

For the Russian community, these jobs include housekeeping positions at Mission-St. Joseph’s Hospital, office building cleaners, newspaper delivery people and fast-food workers—all low-paying jobs with few, if any, benefits.

“For a big family, you have to have a big income for a big family,” Olga said. She and two of her sisters work at McDonald’s to help the family with its expenses, though she quit her job at McDonald’s to get ready for the wedding.

“It’s impossible to have a big income (here).”

A new life

Olga and Mikhail’s new apartment at Spruce Hill Apartments is filled with wedding gifts: stacks of china in deep brown cabinets that match a new bedroom suit, artificial ficus trees, a new crock-pot and microwave. Pairs of plastic swans—left over wedding favors—sit behind the glass doors of the cabinet. Though they live alone, the apartment is regularly packed with Olga’s sisters and cousins. They come to sprawl out on the floor and new couches to watch videos and eat oranges and Russian candy.

Olga has begun her new job as an interpreter with the Interpreter Resource Project, and she spends hours in doctor’s offices explaining to other refugees the details of American medical and dental examinations. Now that the wedding is over, she said she will continue work on passing her last GED exam, and Mikhail has started looking for work.

But even in freedom, there are no crucifixes on the walls of the one-bedroom apartment. The only sign of their faith are two Bibles that sit on the stereo system in the cabinets.

“People used to laugh and say that in America, they used to wash the roads with shampoo—and when we came, it wasn’t right,” she says, sitting cross-legged on her bedroom floor. “But it’s almost like Moldova.”