

» RYCHAGOV

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in American territory. We began to cry.”

It was, finally, a beginning to the end of their journey.

When Pavel and his family arrived in Mexico from Russia, they tried for the first time to cross the border and seek asylum in the United States. They immediately were turned back, told to get an exit stamp from Mexican authorities and then get in line behind everyone else seeking asylum.

They were told it could take three months for their application to be considered — and then everything came to a halt. As COVID raged, the border was closed.

Pavel rented the family an apartment just across the border from Laredo, Texas. But with no work permit, their money rapidly dwindled. Alla began busking in a park, playing guitar for donations. They tried to learn English and some Spanish. They moved a couple of times. But they were warned not to leave their apartment because Viktoriia could be kidnapped by criminals.

After more than eight months of waiting, running out of money and growing increasingly desperate — Pavel had a badly infected tooth, on top of everything else — they turned for help to the very criminals they feared.

Coyotes told them they could get the family into America if Pavel gave them all their remaining money.

With only a couple of backpacks loaded with documents, a small laptop computer and a child's porta-potty for Viktoriia, they slipped through a barbed-wire fence at the Mexican border and into no-man's land at the Arizona border.

“The most precious thing we could bring was the little bracelet Vikka had and her hat, from when she was born,” Pavel said.

That was Sept. 29, 2020. The family was taken to a small detention center, where they formally applied for asylum. They were shown photos of suspected coyotes, in attempts to identify them, but “they were wearing masks, and we were afraid to even look them in the eyes. How do you look in the eyes of someone who can do this, take all our money and send us through the fence? We didn't know if we are making the right choice, but it was our only choice.”

‘New country, new life’

After four or five days, they and other asylum-seekers were put on a plane and taken to a larger facility in Texas. They were nearing the end of a two-year flight for their lives.

“We cried and cried,” Pavel said. “I had the feeling we were safe. I began to believe in God again. We were just joyful because we went through so much pain and grief.”

The family landed in Houston — the same city where Allison was communicating with Meierotto and Lake Superior Bridge-Builders. “I remember, I saw the helmet of Neil Armstrong in the airport there,” Pavel said.

At first, authorities tried to speak to the family in Spanish. Once they figured out they were Russian, authorities called translators and began the lengthy legal process of applying for asylum. And purely by chance, Allison spoke Russian, too.

Pavel, giddy with excitement, halted his interview with a reporter and ran to his bedroom, returning with a pair of sweat-pants — the first new clothing he was given in America.

Finally, an aid worker came to the family and told them that after they went through a two-week quarantine period, they would be sent to a sponsor in Wisconsin.

“She said, ‘Now you are freedom, guys,’” Pavel said in English. “No more detention. I said, ‘Is this true? Freedom, right? No more prison?’ She said something about islands and cold and snow, and I said, ‘We are ready. We know what is snow.’”

On Oct. 24, 2020, they flew into Duluth and were met by Meierotto and other



Mary Meierotto, the now-retired minister who led the relocation effort, in the Rychagovs' apartment with the sign she carried to meet the family when they landed in Duluth. (Peter J. Wasson/Staff photo)

volunteers from Lake Superior Bridge Builders.

“We picked them up in Duluth, and as we were driving into Bayfield, it began to snow,” Meierotto said. “Alla just began smiling when she saw the snow. The next day, we took them for a walk around town and found out Oliver had the best English. We knew his name was Oleg, but he wanted to change it to Oliver. We asked him why and he said, ‘New life, new country, new name.’”

Lake Superior Bridge Builders had good hearts, but no experience in resettling refugees. For more than a month, the family lived at the Seagull Bay Motel, where the owner gave them a break on rent as the tourist season wound down.

“Then a gentleman in Bayfield who flips houses, he was redoing a house but not working on it until the spring. So he said, ‘I can let your family live there until April and charged us \$600 rent, but at the end he returned it all — and they were there past April.’”

Housing in Bayfield is notoriously scarce and prohibitively expensive. Someone had the idea of turning Bethesda's basement, which had been used for day care and classes in the past, into an apartment.

“We took it to the congregation for a vote, at our annual meeting in 2021, and the vote was 75% to go ahead with the apartment,” Meierotto said. “The church had some extra money they would allow us to use to build the apartment but through the donations from community members, we had the money raised before we even started building. We didn't have to borrow any from the church.”

Still awaiting work permits, the family helped out around the church as best they could.

“Viktoriia was the first to get her work permit — which was kind of funny,” Meierotto said. “She was 3 at the time. Pavel got his in March and got a job as a housekeeper at the Bayfield Inn. He started in April. Oliver began working after school at the marina. They both came back at the end of the season with high recommendations.”

Setting boundaries

Meierotto and other members of the church and LSBB went into the project with a very clear purpose — and an awareness of the harm done to minorities and others during the age of colonialism and Indian boarding schools.

“We have to keep reminding ourselves that we're not here to help them or do for them, we're here to walk alongside them so they can live their lives to the fullest,” she said. “We have to really be careful about not pushing them. That's what I learned in a lot of my immersion training. The church is starting to get away from the missions, going onto reservations and painting buildings and things, instead walking with the people, learning about them, learning why they are where they are, and just being there for them.”

Pavel said he and his family initially



Oleg, who changed his name to Oliver when he came to America, celebrated his 18th birthday with pizza. He hopes to pursue a career in music, and is eager to explore the United States. (Contributed photo)

were shocked at how helpful not just the church, but everyone in town was to them. As people became aware of the Russians in their midst, they donated — furniture, money, kind words. When the family would walk through down or down the aisles of the grocery store, people would greet them as neighbors.

“We felt responsibility, because these people believe in us. They told us, ‘Now you are safe.’ Alla kept saying, ‘Is this real? It's not a dream?’ Alla asks why people are doing this for us, and I said, ‘Maybe because we were victims in Russia. Maybe God said we suffered enough. I'm not religious, but I did think maybe God is helping us.’”

If he was, it was through Meierotto and LSBB. The group has taken the family to several court dates in Chicago and meetings with immigration officers in Milwaukee. They've hired an American lawyer who is working with a lawyer back in Russia to document everything that happened to the family there. When Alla became pregnant with Melissa, who just turned 1, they helped get her prenatal care through North-Lakes Clinic.

When Alla became pregnant, talk began immediately that they did it on purpose (to have a so-called anchor baby),” Meierotto said. “I just let people talk. Alla is in her 30s. If she wants to have a family, she has to do it now. Who are we to tell them they have to wait? Again, we can't control their lives. We walk with them.”

The group also hired a local translator, Alex Breslav, who interpreted for this story and has both become the family's friend and advocate.

“There have been times when (immigration officers) have gone after Pavel, gotten aggressive with him when they question him, and I have had to push back,” Breslav said. “He has no one else to stand up for him.”

Not only has Breslav translated for LSBB, he also has helped them understand the psychology involved — the inherent fear of authority that Russians have, especially those with experiences like Pavel's, Meierotto said.

Looking to the future

Through all their travels and time to-

gether, Meierotto gradually learned about the family's past in Russia, and what led them to flee the country. As part of her training, she never asked, but waited for Pavel and Alla to tell their stories when they were ready.

I'm just trying to grasp why someone — a whole family — would leave their country and the rest of their family and everything they owned, is something beyond what I can imagine,” Meierotto said. “Some of their history, it just didn't matter. We knew they had been allowed into the country legally. I actually saw on an asylum document that someone had checked a box that said, ‘Credible fear of persecution or torture.’ I thought that if they believed that at the border and allowed them into the country, I have nothing more to say. They have reason to be here. That's all I needed to know.”

They're here legally, but that could change at any moment. Their case is scheduled for a hearing on March 14, but four hearings already have been postponed, one lasted 2 minutes, and no one is sure how the asylum petition will turn out.

Meanwhile Pavel, who last worked as a technician for medical equipment in Russia, lost his job at the hotel at the end of tourist season. But this week, he started a new job in Ashland as a machine operator at Deltco Plastics. Alla, who designed fire-safety systems for factories in Russia, is concentrating now on raising Viktoriia and Melissa. Oliver, who is 18, still has another year to go in high school where he sings in the choir, and already has set his sights on a career in music.

In many ways, the entire process has gone so well that it's hard for Meierotto not to see divine will at work.

“The thing that happened that was really weird from the beginning was it was all just really a fluke,” she said. “A man who was flipping houses offered a house to us. A member of the group had a friend from years ago who became an immigration lawyer. She contacted her and just by chance, she spoke Russian. Alex kind of fell into our laps. We had a lot of ah-hah moments where it was like, we're on the right path. We were supposed to do this.”

Where that path will end, no one knows.

When asked what his dream outcome would be, Pavel pauses and thinks for several seconds before the words come pouring out. A stable job and maybe a house. Alla — who declined to be interviewed for this story — chasing her dream of teaching folk and modern dance. Oliver happy and working as a musician. Seeing more of America.

But over and over he returns to one thing: An end to his fear.

“Russia, Russia is not my home,” he said in English. “It is just where I was born. Russia is to me a torture chamber.”

When I see what is happening in Ukraine, I don't know their pain. I know the pain of desperation. Pain is like a scream to me.”

Even now, Pavel is convinced Russian agents are watching him online, where he tries to share his experiences and turn others against the country. And he is grateful for whatever peace he has found.

“We are all here and alive,” he said. “I am not sitting in a trench, and my son doesn't have to worry about being drafted to war in Ukraine and getting killed for the same government that victimized him. When there is certainty in our future, then I can relax. The fight is over and I can hang my sword and shield on the wall and they can rust there.”



Melissa was born in Ashland and recently celebrated her first birthday in the family's apartment in the basement of a Bayfield church. (Contributed photo)



A giant mound of snow awaits kids during Ashland's Winter Market on Vaughn, set for Feb. 18. (Tom Stankard/Staff photo)

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crafts,” Findlay said.

The Local Bar and Grille will fuel racers with tater tots, onion rings and cheese curds, and the Friends of the Vaughn Library will be selling beer and wine to wash it down.

“We're excited to have Book Across the Bay start and end in Ashland and wanted to join in on the fun. We're excited to support the town and hopefully start a new tradition in Ashland,” said The Local owner Natalie Skinnis.

The shift in the race, which organizers said was forced by Washburn's request that the organization pay to defray more than \$4,000 in costs associated with the crowds it draws, has been controversial. The race began 25 years ago as a fundraiser for the

Washburn library — thus the “book” in its name — and has grown to involve hundreds of volunteers who do everything from craft the luminaries that light the course to provide rest stations and clean up trash.

Until this year, the trek ended with a giant chili feed and party on the streets of Washburn — a celebration that now moves to Ashland.

The confluence of visitors and locals all in Ashland offers a great chance to bring people together in the waning days of winter, Beadle and Findlay said.

Ashland Area Chamber of Commerce Director Mary McPhetridge said that after the controversy between race organizers and Washburn, the most important thing is that the race still is happening and still will draw people downtown.

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“There is a connection by marriage — that's pretty troubling,” Cross said. “I was wondering why they replaced Lavoisier with a younger male with less experience and why it had to be done so urgently.”

While at the jail, Lavoisier had a nearly spotless record with one reprimand in 2003, she said. She

was promoted to the top administrative position in May of 2021 when the previous administrator, Lt.

Tony Jones, died while under investigation regarding tens of thousands of dollars missing from jail accounts.

If Lavoisier's case goes to a hearing, it will be closed to the public. In the end, she told the Daily Press that she just wants

to go back to work.

“I miss my job. I thought I did a good job and I miss it,” she said.