

Winnipegger Andrea Shalay Flees Ukraine

HANNAH FOULGER



Photo: Karollyne Hubert

In August of 2020, Andrea Shalay relocated to Zaporizhia, Ukraine to begin a new position with Mennonite Central Committee as their new Peace Engagement Coordinator for Europe. At the time, the country seemed relatively stable, but also a good location to set out on new adventures. Little did she know, a mere six months later, she would have to flee her new home in the wake of an impending attack by the Russian army.

On March 10, 2022, I spoke with Shalay about her experiences, her spiritual journey and the needs she sees at this time. Zoom connected us from across the world. I was in Toronto, Ontario and Shalay was in Hollywood, Ireland for a brief stay before moving onto Berlin for a peace summit.

—Hannah Foulger, RLN Reporter at Large

Foulger: What were you doing with MCC in Ukraine?

Shalay: Last August, I started a three-year service worker position with Mennonite Central Committee. My title is peace engagement coordinator for Europe. A big core aspect of my work is centred around connecting different peace organizations and Mennonite peace organizations across Europe and building up those relationships and building up their capacity for peace-related programming.

Foulger: Where were you living and how were you settling in?

Shalay: I was in Ukraine about six months

before I left. I spent the first about four months staying with a host family and then I just got settled into an apartment. I was in the apartment for about two months before I had to leave all that behind.

Foulger: And what were you working on up until the most recent events?

Shalay: We were organizing an event at the end of March in Berlin that's still going ahead. Delegates from a bunch of different Mennonite peace organizations from across Europe will be attending. I was also putting together training for my colleagues in conflict resolution. I was still in the process of settling into my position. I was doing a lot of learning, meeting contacts and getting to know them so that I can then have a better sense of how to best connect them with each other.

Foulger: And at what point did you decide that you needed to leave?

Shalay: We left on February 13. MCC has a process where we consult with our various partners and contacts within a context (to decide) whether we stay or leave a particular location.

Foulger: And how much time did you have between getting told that you needed to leave and the time that you had to leave?

Shalay: I was informed on Saturday morning, and we left Sunday evening. On Saturday, I tried to go about my normal routine as much as possible. I didn't find out until later on Saturday specifically when we were leaving.

While I was packing, I wasn't sure at that time whether I would be back. I was preparing for a return in a couple of weeks.

Foulger: There was a little while when you couldn't disclose on social media where you were after leaving Ukraine. When did you arrive in Ireland and why Ireland?

Shalay: I arrived in Ireland a week ago. It was already actually on my itinerary before I left Ukraine. We have some connections there that relate to peace work and MCC has a long-standing relationship with these organizations.

Foulger: Now, this is kind of a ridiculous question, but I feel like it needs to be asked. So if you are working in peace relations, why leave a warzone?

Shalay: That's not the level of peacebuilding that I do. And, it's a priority for Mennonite Central Committee not to put any of their staff or volunteers in harm's way.

Foulger: At the moment, who and what are you worried about?

Shalay: At the top of my list are my colleagues who are still in Ukraine. So I pray for them a lot. And I'm also on the communication list for the church I was attending in Ukraine. So I get regular updates from the community there, which are both worrying but also deeply heartening. They had a service on Sunday in the church building. And they've been doing outreach to seniors, giving words of encouragement to each other. Being witness to their faithfulness in such extreme circumstances has been incredibly powerful. It astounds me on a regular basis.

Foulger: I know that you are of Ukrainian descent, so how are you managing in watching this country that you not only have come to make your own home, but is also where your ancestors came from?

Shalay: One of the things that surprised me was how personal it felt. This wasn't something that was happening somewhere else, you know, or even to another country, it felt like it was being done to me. I've had to sit with this and be aware of how all of this has been impacting me. That has been very integral in my role as a

peacebuilder, that I give myself enough time and place to process my own thoughts and feelings so that I can be in the best position to be a support for others.

Foulger: What are your plans for the future?

Shalay: My work hasn't changed too much yet but I am already thinking about long term strategies, how we could be helping build peace once things settle down. What might be needed. What kind of resources we need to put in place now so that we can work towards peace even at the grassroots level, once it's safe enough for us to get into certain areas.

Foulger: How do you feel called to pray and process at this time?

Shalay: The whole conflict started around the same time as Lent. I was planning a fast for Lent. When the conflict actually began, I actually decided not to fast. I realized that my life was a fast, in a way.

I don't actually have a set place to live for the next while. It's also been a process of giving up things and letting go. All my personal possessions are still in Ukraine. I didn't take anything with me other than just two weeks' worth of clothing and toiletries.

I packed clothes appropriate for Jordan (where I stayed after leaving Ukraine). I didn't bring any personal items. And that made it harder to go through so much change and transition, without anchors. Having the opportunity to connect with good community-oriented people has, I think, helped a fair bit, too, especially being here in Ireland, and with people who have been through peacebuilding processes before, but I've been in hard times, like the troubles.

Recently I visited the [Corrymeela Community](#), which is on the north coast of Northern Ireland, and I attended a worship session that incorporated Taize. That was the first time in about two months that I genuinely felt peace. So I think one of the things I'm going to be doing moving forward is trying to be better at making time for stillness, or silence and for simplicity.