

SAFE HAVEN

Ukrainian Refugee Dogs Find New Homes in Oklahoma

by David Gallant



At Lviv, Ukraine, Tatyana Pikalova's granddaughters and two crates of Chinese Crested dogs take a break in their journey out of war-torn Ukraine.

Photo courtesy of Tatyana Pikalova.

Since February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, about 14 million people have fled their homes. The United Nations has reported that of the estimated six million-plus dogs and cats left behind, only several hundred thousand animals have crossed the borders safely to pet-friendly countries such as Poland, Romania, Hungary, France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Ireland.

Evacuation trains are accessible to civilians, but they charge exorbitant fees for animals. Many people who traveled long distances learned of the costs only after arriving at transportation centers. Their only option was to leave their pets behind in makeshift kennels near the stations with a note, hoping other people who passed through would take care of them.

Firsthand accounts and imagery of the war are terrifying; people and their pets, sometimes whole kennels of dogs, hid in bombed-out basements while Russia destroyed their cities. The underground hideouts lacked electricity, food, and safe drinking water. Finding dog food was impossible, and many owners resorted to boiling mash to keep their pets alive.

Finding a Way Out

Tatyana Pikalova's family, including her young granddaughters and dogs, were forced into underground hideouts while she arranged transportation out of Ukraine. As a breeder of Chinese



Chinese Crested dogs rescued from Ukraine snuggle with Nicole Lanphear of Oklahoma City. Photo courtesy of Nicole Lanphear.

Crested dogs, she owned 11 canines. The dogs meant the world to her. They were beloved family members, companions that would add love and joy to the families chosen to adopt them.

Behind the scenes, when war broke out, the Chinese Crested community rallied together to help with the needs of Ukrainian dog owners. Hearing of their plight through social media, Nicole Lanphear of

Oklahoma City contacted Darcy Smith, DVM, in Crescent, Oklahoma, importer of Eastern European Chinese Crested dogs. Lanphear offered to foster four of the refugee dogs. She and Dr. Smith reached out to other breeders, handlers, and owners through social media to help the Pikalova family escape with their dogs.

In Europe, the public transportation system is robust, and many people do not

need vehicles. So arranging transportation became nearly impossible as millions of people tried to leave the country. It took most dog breeders a few months to save money for transport out of Ukraine because taxi (bus) costs had increased to more than 25 times prewar prices.

Pikalova scraped together enough money to arrange transportation from Ukraine to Poland. Finding safe passage in a vehi-



These Chinese Crested dogs are ready to leave Lviv, Ukraine, after a stop in their rapid journey to escape the war in Ukraine.
Photo courtesy of Tatyana Pikalova.



This Chinese Crested dog belonging to Ukrainian breeder Tatyana Pikalova is grateful for care at a veterinary clinic in Crescent, Oklahoma. Photo courtesy of Nicole Lanphear.

cle large enough to move Pikalova, three family members, and 11 dogs swiftly out of Ukraine was complicated. Many drivers were con artists who would take clients' money and leave them stranded or dead on the roadside. Pikalova had to place immense trust in friends' referrals and contacts, never knowing until reaching her destination whether she could trust the drivers.

She carried her dogs in two wire crates, which was all the room the driver could spare for the 36-hour ride from the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv to Poland. Leaving Kharkiv, the driver traveled bumpy back roads to avoid being discovered by Russian patrols, which could mean kidnapping, imprisonment, or death. Along the way, the travelers encountered Ukrainian military checkpoints. Some were under fire, but others provided a temporary respite for people to catch their breath, stretch their legs, and walk the

dogs. The longer the refugees drove, the more the reality of reaching Poland alive sank in.

During the days it took to travel to Poland, Russia relentlessly unleashed hundreds of rockets daily on Kharkiv, Pikalova's once peaceful city of 1.4 million people, famous for its substantial old poplars and chestnut trees along the central streets. A metropolis once populated with exotic restaurants and Western fast-food eateries such as KFC and McDonald's was quickly turning into piles of rubble. Burning ash from the exploding rockets darkened the beautiful sky, which once had provided a picturesque background to a modern city.

Arriving in Poland, Pikalova was surprised that many of her clients and social-media friends were there to greet her and help with fostering some dogs. Many veterinarians in Poland treated the refugee animals for free.

The family arrived with little more than the pets and suitcases. Because of the long wait to achieve refugee status in Poland, they had no choice but to continue their journey to Germany. For entry, Germany required the dogs to have passports, which caused additional stress and costs.

Once in Germany, the four pups to be fostered by Lanphear were ready for transport to the United States. Lanphear had hired a broker in Houston, Texas, to help with customs. The dogs flew from Germany to Amsterdam, where they spent a night at a pet hotel because of bad weather before traveling to Houston.

Starting a New Life

"On September 1, we picked them up from a cargo hangar in Houston," says Lanphear. "They smelled horrible, didn't have collars, and were terrified. One was so excited to see people that she came bounding



An Oklahoma City family has adopted Ukrainian refugee dog Persik.

Photo courtesy of Nicole Lanphear.



Ukrainian refugee dog Roo now has a new name — Carl Wayne — and looks forward to a forever family.

Photo courtesy of Nicole Lanphear.

out of the crate. Another wanted to run away. One stood like a statue, while the other was snapping and biting. They didn't understand English commands, so we were afraid to let them get too far from us. So we gave them baths before starting the trip back to OKC — I held the freshly bathed and tired dogs all the way home."

Because of having been exposed to ceaseless bombing, crowded living conditions, constant relocation, lack of food, and contaminated water, the dogs had developed skin issues. They had been left untreated because there was no room to pack shampoos, conditioners, and medications when the family escaped Ukraine.

Today, the Ukrainian dogs are adjusting to life in Oklahoma. One dog, Persik, found his forever home in Oklahoma City with an experienced dog-training family. Lanphear receives pictures and updates almost daily about how Persik is doing. The

dogs that are still with Lanphear received new names because "I call their names, but I don't have a Ukrainian accent, so it sounds completely different and unfamiliar to the dogs," Lanphear says. So Roo is now Carl Wayne, Lady is Lola, and Foxy is Puffy.

The dogs are learning basic skills such as walking on a leash, sitting on command, going outside, downing, and other essential manners. The dogs learned to respond to doggie treats quickly. Socialization skills for the dogs are a challenge. They had never seen a big dog, so Lanphear had to introduce her big dog slowly.

The Ukrainian canines now go to classes with Lanphear's other dogs to gain exposure to group environments. One pup has severe anxiety that manifests in uncontrollable crying when he is not being held. He is temporarily on medication. The dogs are attending group manners classes to prepare

them for adoption. Lanphear has become very attached to the Ukrainian dogs; it will be bittersweet when they find their forever homes.

Facing the Unknown

As for Pikalova and her family and the remaining dogs, they are living in Germany. However, it is costly to be a refugee because of taxes imposed on animals. Now that many of Pikalova's beloved dogs have found homes, the unique tax situation forces her to consider returning to western Ukraine. With fewer dogs, she hopes the family could bug out more easily if fighting erupts closer to where they would be living.

Pikalova, her daughter, and her granddaughters live in fear of the unknown. It is a daily struggle for survival. The decision to stay in one place or to move could make the difference between life and death. 🐾