

My name is Iryna Kushnir, it's May 22, 2003, and this online interview is with Marina Rusanova. This interview is part of the project "Ukrainian migrants in the English Higher Education sector".

Marina, do you give your consent for this interview?

Yes.

Okay. Please tell us in brief about yourself.

Oh, that's not that easy. My name is Maryna Rusanova. I am an associate professor at the Department of Political Science and Law at the Luhansk National University. This is where the difficulties begin, since we were, you know, located in Luhansk until 2014. In 2014, we were evacuated to... a small town in the Luhansk region called Starobilsk. Because there was a very large (I want to say department) faculty there. There was a Starobilsk faculty, so there was infrastructure. So we had no need to build dormitories or look for lecture halls. But in 2022, Starobilsk was also occupied. And now my university is located in the city of Poltava. But apart from that, I also... Because, obviously, teaching in evacuation is not a very, let's say, paid job, so I found another job in Kyiv, because my husband was living in Kyiv, and I found a job at the National Center "Small Academy of Sciences". I'm doing something different from what I was doing at the university, I'm dealing with awards. But (I'll tell you later) I had an idea, as I really like the Small Academy and the team, I wanted to do something else. And by the way, the project I'm involved in now, and why I'm involved, I think it will help me do something else in Ukraine.

Thank you. Please tell us a little bit more about this award. What is it about?

It was an award department that I was in charge of. We are, of course, the KNEU (Kyiv National Economic University), maybe you've heard of it. This is an organization that cooperates with schools all over Ukraine. And I was hired to maintain the database and deal with the paperwork related to awards all over Ukraine. Apart from the staff of the Small Academy, all those who cooperate with the Small Academy, including many universities, schools, and lyceums, as they are actually working with students as a part of its activities. This is a scientific organization promoting science among schoolchildren.

I see. Could you please tell us a few words about what life was like when the full-scale war started in 2022, when your university was located near Luhansk?

Well, yes, what can I say? You know, we were somewhere... The first years of evacuation after 2014, it was very difficult because we didn't have that many students, so I found another job, that is, the workload was not very high. But somewhere in 2018, not sure when exactly, my director asked me if I wanted to work full-time at the Small Academy, and I said, "You know, I can't leave my students." I don't know where they came from in Starobilsk, since it is a small town. But they were so wonderful, my God! It's even better than in Luhansk. Maybe that's because it was a balanced choice for them. They were all smart, interested in science. We also had a book club. Whenever I visited, I always bought some new books in Kyiv as we had our own library. It was really interesting, but that's also why I still communicate with them now, as we all keep in touch with each other. And my graduates, of course, since 2018, some of them have graduated and continue their studies in Kyiv, since some of them went to Kyiv Mohyla Academy or to graduate schools in Kyiv. And we all miss this life very much, because we are indeed colleagues. It was a balanced choice for students. And for colleagues too since it felt like... I really don't know, not a fan club, but a kind of gang. Because we all really wanted our university to survive. I mean, for instance, at the History Department, where I work, we have very interesting historical traditions. There are archaeological excavations, we hold various student evenings with professors. These are the traditions that have been around for many years. And of course, we have revived all of this, and what we have now... We have to revive it from scratch in a new place. When was the university relocated to Poltava, for the second time? In 2022, in the summer, a year ago.

And how did the education process look like before the university was relocated in that summer?

The studies were held in person. There were lots of students who came to Starobilsk. And everyone settled down. It's all kind of, well, you know, life goes on, so you have to live on. Well, now they have to live in dormitories. And I was commuting, I mean, I had a job there, of course, I said, so I worked, for example, in a small academy, only part-time, because I said I was a teacher, I worked at a university, and I wanted to work, and I couldn't do my job.

Thank you. So what made you think about moving to the UK?

Well, that first week I was in Kyiv, and we were hiding out there. My husband, by the way, is in the army, and he worked with the territorial defense forces for a long time. Back in 2014, he decided that he could not perform any functions... like a manager in a company or something. He is an athlete, he has always been a teacher of martial arts. And he and his friends developed a program, and at that time they trained in Kyiv all those who wanted to attend. It was not related to territorial defense forces, but there were some classes for people who wanted to defend the country. To learn something. And he... well, I last saw him in 2022. Now I'm fleeing. Yes, we keep in touch every day. But I just have multiple sclerosis. I am disabled, I have multiple sclerosis. And when it all started, on the 24th, my friend took me to her place, but she lives in Pozniaky, and there are high-rise buildings there. And my husband told us to stay away from high-rise buildings. Because it's right around Boryspil, not far from the airport. At night, the bomb fell on Bucha, and her husband is the secretary of the Small Academy, and she had a summer house near Bucha. She said, "Please come, Maryna, we have a basement and everything you need here," and then Maryna Mykolayivna somehow got out a month later. I mean, all that time we were sitting in the basement. But my friend told me... well, at that time there was a really heavy traffic jam in Kyiv. But my friend told me... well, at that time there was a really heavy traffic jam in Kyiv. She had an acquaintance who had a house. Goodness, I didn't even know that there was any such private sector in Kyiv, it was somewhere near Pozniaky. And we stayed there for a week because there was a basement there, too. And all my friends had already evacuated, because they lived in Obolon, and there was a breakthrough there for a while. There were tanks there. They left and yelled at us to leave too. Then my friend literally told us that we had to leave. Another acquaintance of ours lived in Hostomel and a missile hit her garden. She packed her things and we left in a small column of three cars. We were on our way. Of course, I understand that taking the bus to Lviv and Warsaw took only a night, if I got on the bus there, because there is customs clearance there. But we were traveling for five days. There was a day when we... I... This is the first time in my life when I regretted not driving a car. My friend had been driving for 25 hours. That's because the traffic conditions were so bad that you could actually cover the distance on foot. It was so slow, so slow. So we arrived in Warsaw because we decided to do so. Our colleague had an acquaintance who provided us with accommodation. He had an apartment in the downtown Warsaw. It was an apartment of his mother, who had died. And he told us, "It's empty, go ahead and live there." But we all knew that it was, well, he said that it was until May, and I realized that there were some kind of... I don't remember now... It was possible to live there only for a few months, and then something had to be changed, and something didn't feel right for the owners. In fact, I left because... There is one more reason - I sent... documents. At that point, the University of Munich was offering a kind of scholarship for those who were engaged in the study of the Holocaust and generally of this area. But it turned out that they said, "Ok, fine, you have a scholarship, you may leave." I work at the Department of Political Science. But then they sent me a letter saying, "You are not a suitable historian for us." They sent my documents to the political science department, and said, "You have a scholarship, hold on, wait for a week." But I never really got that scholarship or a response. Then my niece came from Kharkiv. At first she didn't want to leave, but then it was really noisy in Kharkiv, where my sister and mother live, it's called Kholodna Hora. There is a tank school there, which they bombed. The shells were detonating there. It was a nightmare. And Olya finally left, she moved to my place. We decided that we would leave. My friend left for Portugal right away. She's a girl who's very, well... She's a travel agent, she has a very good command of English. So she moved to Portugal because it was always her favorite country. Initially, she found a few apartments where she actually lived free of charge in Lisbon. Later on, since she had a job there, she even arranged for some kind of accommodation and rented it for a year. And she found us a dwelling in the suburbs of Lisbon. It's a town or a village called Baixa da Bandeira. There was a very nice Chinese woman, Celestina, actually Portuguese, who gave us a place to stay. And we lived there. It was her

other apartment, she sheltered us. We lived there, and at that time we had an agreement. I had already applied for several scholarships, and I got a response that there was a project at the University of Birmingham that I could participate in. We agreed that while I was getting a visa, while the documents were being processed, I would be living in Portugal, and then I would come here.

Could you tell us more about this project? Was there anyone looking for partners to work with?

Yes. This project belongs to an international organization, the MSA, which is engaged in the study of the history of the Holocaust. Actually, it is located in Europe. But they recruit staff based on specific projects. And I happened to be working on the history of Great Britain. I wanted to work on the history of the Holocaust, but they told me, "You won't be able to, don't bother, you won't be in Ukraine." That was earlier, now there are opportunities. So I chose the topic "British Policy in Palestine." After all, there are a lot of documents, such as parliamentary debates in the UK, which are publicly available, including memoirs and newspapers. It can all be found, and it was easier for me. And since I had been studying British history, I was offered a project in Britain.

What was your relocation experience like?

It took us a long time to finalize the documents, because at first it was suggested that there would be a visa, but the matter is... We discussed the visa issue almost until September. But everything became more complicated by the fact that I was with my niece. And while I was on a student visa, it was not clear to her what to open and how to do it. So it was at the last moment... There is a wonderful woman named Ruth who is also here, I believe she is the program moderator, because she dealt with technical issues. She was looking for accommodations, she was advising on the best ways to get there, all these aspects. She offered this particular scheme for Ukrainians from Ukraine. And she even contacted her friends who had a place to stay in Birmingham, and in fact they acted as sponsors. So we moved in, but of course we didn't live with them. And if we did, it was literally the first days, because there was a dormitory, and the rent came into effect, it was, it was actually September. But everything got complicated by the fact that I broke my elbow in Portugal. I had a surgical operation and had to stay there while things were healing, for as long as I needed. Initially, I was supposed to be there in early September, but then the date shifted to early October. If we had arrived earlier, we would have stayed until October 10. When we arrived, exactly at the time when we had to move in, we went straight to the dormitory.

Was it a student dormitory affiliated with the University of Birmingham?

Well, I don't think it's a student dormitory, as far as I know, it's a kind of PhD house. Because everyone here has a PhD or a master's degree... No, it seems that we all have a PhD.

I see. So what were your expectations?

I just... The interview about my expectations and my stay at the university will be very complementary. I mean, you know, if you've always spent time reading, studying, and you're finally where you want to be. I really associate the University of Birmingham with this tower with a clock face. I was told here that a Tolkien movie was filmed near this clock. It's all like Disneyland for me. I realized that the level of teaching in English universities is very high just as I expected it to be. I am absolutely amazed. I would like to note that I am not a student or a PhD here, I am participating in a project. That is, I don't study here, but I still get to learn, because firstly, there are free courses for students, magistrands or PhDs who write projects or dissertations. English classes are free and it's really interesting, just amazing. And secondly, this project moderator, Ruth, made arrangements and I went, because the semester is ending now, I started attending this semester, not the first one, this group, a group of magistrands and foreigners for English learners, but a general one, and I'm really excited because it's such an exciting approach to learning the language, when here (I don't know if it was somehow coincidental or maybe specifically for me) we learned the language, we worked on a project about... There is also an archive here. There's this project, and there's also an archive of Neville Chamberlain's personal letters. And when I saw his letters to Churchill or Churchill's letters to him, I was truly shocked. I took lots of photos. I am a historian, and this was the first time in my

life that I ever held a letter written by Winston Churchill. So I sent the following messages to everyone: "Look, look!" My goodness, there is so much writing and so many books by and about Churchill, and this was really the first time I ever held this letter in my hands. Moreover, last Wednesday I took a written exam here. First, we had a graduation. It was an oral exam, but there was also a written exam. I walked out, smiling with happiness at first, in fact, I was laughing. Then I burst into tears. Then I burst into tears. And then I told everyone that it had been so interesting, it had really been so. I said, "Let's do more of this, I'm ready to work."

Yes, alright. So how is your English now, what about your pronunciation?

Well, what can I say... I should say it could be better, but I have this problem (I told you) that I haven't communicated every day since October. October. I think when I talked to this Ruth, I told her, "You know, after three months in England, I feel like I've forgotten my English, I haven't improved it in any way." But I realize that I'm correcting mistakes, I've made a few friends here, and I realize that I need to socialize, gain knowledge, go out for a cup of coffee, go to meetings - that's what it takes to really work on my English.

What does your job involve now?

I'm currently involved in a project researching the level of anti-Semitism among migrants from Europe. I knew that my English was imperfect, and here I worked on a literature review. There was also an interview, but I don't have a good grasp of it. Although now I regret not participating and saying, "I don't know how to do this, but can I watch, at least passively participate somehow?" So I read that there is a research on the level of employees' engagement in social networks. And by the way, it was a study that explained the method of researching Twitter. So I studied it and tried to apply it. I made some progress, got some results. And by the way, we are having an MSA conference in Nottingham - it will be held from July 3 to 7. We will participate, the team will participate, and we will present the results of this study there. And I also told our director of the Small Academy that I want to work in such areas as Holocaust Education. Because in England, this is one of the most developed areas of education, while in Ukraine it is present, but not on a nationwide level. There are Crimean Tatar studies at the Small Academy. So I asked the director if I could do something like that, because I'm actually taking courses on the subject here, since there is the Holocaust Trust Education, or the Center for Holocaust Education, and they have open lectures, and I would record all of them. I really wanted to do that, and at first I was even supposed to work on the continuation of this project. Initially, it was planned to start in February, but there is only one problem: it takes quite a long time to get these projects approved. Then it was postponed until April. It has only now been approved, and from June 1, I will officially start working 5 hours a week on this project. I was even provided with assistants. These are the students who will be doing their internships under this project. These will be young girls who will help me.

Do you have a supervisor?

Yes, sure, there is a professor who is in charge of this project. She was the one who chose and offered me this opportunity. This project is run by Professor Ferra Jones.

I see. How did your Birmingham University experience meet your expectations? They were highly optimistic, weren't they?

Yes, they were. Not all of them were met. Maybe I envisioned my stay here in a slightly different way, because I understand that everyone is busy doing their own thing. And they are all helpful, they are all sweetness and light, as I told you. For example, they say... Everyone came up to me, they asked me how I was doing, they said, "Come in, my office is so-and-so, come over for coffee." But I'm so not used to it, first of all, I feel the difference, my lack of knowledge of English. And maybe it's because I expected to communicate more. After all, I work more with documents, with Twitter, that kind of stuff. But I'm very grateful because they noticed that I don't know English perfectly. When we started communicating during the interview, when the project was being formalized, everything was clear, but nonetheless they gave me this project to work on.

What opportunities did you see and do you still see in your work?

I said that I was going through this period here, because my... Previous fellowship. Well, it ended in early January. And I was paid at the end of November. For some time, I saved everything I could possibly save. I did not really have any idea how I was supposed to pay for the dormitory. After all, I pay for the dormitory. There was a point when I spent all my savings here. But I was aware that this was such a great opportunity, because I really want to work on this Holocaust Education. So I was offered some help. Initially, the project did not even provide for this I mean, later on, Sarah was like, "Oh, let's turn it into a continuation of this project. Both of us, based on the conclusions we have about the study of anti-Semitism, will continue this project. If there is a research topic on anti-Semitism, then let's create a program that will educate schoolchildren." This is exactly what the Holocaust Education project is all about. It's a great opportunity, and I'm very grateful for it.

And is this a temporary contract?

Yes.

As long as it is, that's great. What challenges do you face on your way? Also, how did you get yourself integrated in the new settings?

Well, first of all, I'm actually involved in something I've never done before. It's something different, totally different. I mean, learning Twitter. It took me a while to get the hang of it, to understand how it works. I have tortured all of my friends who work in IT. It is indeed difficult, but also exciting. I knew it was difficult, and that I didn't really have a clear understanding of what was going to happen to my university. So I had to think about myself, about my future life. I really want to be involved in it. Also, it is challenging, since I realize that there are different standards in terms of creating curricula. That is, I was engaged in a completely different type of activity in Ukraine. And it's difficult, and I'm a bit scared, because I feel that it's a responsibility. However, it's actually an opportunity, and I want to take advantage of it.

And what about publishing? Are you supposed to be involved in any co-authorship?

Yes, absolutely. Of course, there will be a publication based on the results of the conference, and the results of the study.

As for the problems that you face on your way, maybe there is something else that is not necessarily related to your work at the university? It could be something more general that you also find to be affecting the smoothness of your work.

The only thing that really bothers me is that my dormitory fees are very high. The price is the only problem, it's the price. I realize that even now I cannot afford to relocate. First of all, it's hard for me because as I said, I have multiple sclerosis, and it got worse during the war. I started limping more, so I don't want to live far from the university. And this, of course, is just... I guess the reason is that it costs so much. And I understand that... Well, I don't really have a clear picture of my financial situation yet. I mean, I'm not really going to get paid much for this. And then there's a kind of... I live with my niece, who also lost her job, she works in IT. She used to work for a Ukrainian company, and at first it was very good, and then when the blackouts started, they lost some of their clients, and they had lots of clients. It was a company that usually worked with foreign clients. They lost clients and said, "We're cutting back on our projects for now, but when everything gets going again, we'll invite you back". And so now she is searching for a job. And it would seem that the IT field is quite prestigious, but she can't find a job yet, so she applied for the Universal Credit to pay her rent somehow. But she found out that if we want to rent an apartment on our own, we need to have a certain fixed level of income, otherwise they won't give us an apartment. And that's our biggest problem. Moreover, I mentioned that I have a dog. I mean, we have another circumstance - and not all accommodation options are suitable for us, or rather, we are not allowed to live in some of them.

Is there any support, either from the university or outside of it? Did you get any advice on how best to proceed?

Yes, I got some support from the university, by the way, I also received a Fellowship at the Faculty of History, to be more precise, the Institute of Romance Studies. They even gave me a temporary one-time financial aid to cover my accommodation costs. For instance, there is, I don't know how to put it, a dean of the history department. I don't really understand how it correlates with what we have in Ukraine. He offered me a temporary job that involved selecting literature, because he is a specialist in the history of Ukraine, and he offered me assistance. And I really liked it, in fact, I tell everyone here. I somehow got here. They hold various workshops, conferences, and seminars on the situation in Ukraine. And there was a report presented by my director, in which he said that there is indeed a certain trend – all the occupied territories are Russian-speaking territories. The majority of the population there is Russian. As if they had some kind of right to the territories they occupy. This suggests that it is a natural conclusion. I was like, well... Then, of course, I wrote at the workshop. I wrote the following, "You are wrong, I understand that I am Russian, but this is mainly because my grandmother was from St. Petersburg. She was simply sent to Luhansk to increase productivity there. And Luhansk was a big industrial city. And all the neighboring towns were Ukrainian-speaking. I looked up the census of the population of the Russian Empire, and as of 1927, if you look at the indicators, the majority of local residents are Ukrainians." He said, "Maybe you can help me." And I was glad to do it, because I realize that I can present those books, those views that I think are correct.

Do you know any other Ukrainians in a similar situation?

Well, by the way, in another project that Sarah also runs, which by the way is about Ukrainian refugees in the UK, there is also Natalia Kohut, and maybe you contacted her as well. As far as I remember, she also left Ukraine in the first days of the war, and she's from Kyiv. She is involved in another project that is also run by Sarah.

Do you look for any support from people like her who face the same problems and have to solve the same issues?

Not really. Since I have a limp, I don't feel like going anywhere when I come home from university. Besides, I do have support. I have lots of friends. We all happened to leave, but all of us went to different cities. I have five friends. One of them went to Norway, one to Georgia, one to Lisbon, and one to Munich. Practically every day, someone calls me on the messenger and everyone talks about their problems, so I know more about the international aspect of what is going on in those countries.

Maryna, so what are your plans for the future?

I mentioned before. I'm very grateful for this opportunity, I want to make the most of it, because I want to work on the Holocaust Education project, I want to create this program for Ukraine and the Small Academy, and I want to succeed.

Yes, absolutely. And as for employment in the UK or in Ukraine, of course, no one knows how the situation will develop.

So, you know, when I left, everyone was making fun of me. Indeed, when I left, I thought that in a month it would be over. And then I would come back for the May holidays. And then I would come back in the summer. Later, when this project emerged, I knew that I had to complete my degree in January. I was going to get back in January, and then it all dragged on for a while, so I'm afraid to make plans. I'm just holding on to this opportunity because I'm really grateful.

Given your experience with all that you've achieved, all these obstacles that you've overcome, knowing what other Ukrainians in your situation are facing now, what other support do you think could be introduced at different levels? Maybe at the university or government level, or maybe at the level of some other organizations supporting with accommodation or employment.

Maybe the problem, as I said, that my niece faced, was that she lost her job, so she was exploring the options for studying in the UK. There is certainly some kind of a program here. She told me that the costs were covered somehow. However, maybe there is still some option available to attend universities as an external student, for example, open access, because I understand that it would be a fantastic experience to learn about UK standards. Just like going to school, attending classes, just like that. It would be great if there was an opportunity for all those who are interested, say, for students or specialists, to submit some kind of application so that they could attend university lectures in the cities where they live.

So that in the end they could get a certificate?

Of course, not a diploma, but rather some kind of an attendance certificate, right.

Is there anything else? Maybe there is some other type of university support for employees, or some kind of psycho-emotional or material assistance?

No, but as for the options... I understand that I was just dealing with the situation, somehow, I didn't need it. But I understand that I would have received some kind of psycho-emotional support if I had asked for it. But I just... Well, I didn't have a need for that. At least for now, that's because I have a psychologist. I had only one remark..

Alright, Marina, thank you very much. And these are all my questions. Is there anything else that we haven't discussed or touched upon that you think would be worth mentioning?

I really cannot remember anything more.

Actually, I would like to ask you one more question, if I may. As far as I understand, by doing what you're doing in Birmingham now, you want to make some kind of contribution to the Ukrainian system of higher education. So do you currently have any connection with the Ukrainian system of higher education? Is there anything specific that you are doing right now?

Well, of course, I was at the university and I am currently working at the Small Academy. This is neither higher nor pre-school education, but... This is exactly what I want to do.

So you work there online as well?

Yes.

Do you manage to combine both?

Well, for the time being, yes, I do.

I guess it takes quite a lot of time. Well, thank you very much, Maryna. Thank you so much, it's a really informative discussion, and it's a great and much needed contribution to the project. So thank you very much again. Thank you.