

# Yeva Skalietska:

## *“You Don’t Know What War Is.”*

**O**n 24th February, 12-year old Yeva Skalietska’s life would change forever after she was abruptly awoken by the sound of missile explosions. What occurred during the following 12 days would alter her life forever. Sam McMurdock recently met Yeva, who fled war-torn Ukraine and now resides in Dublin with her grandmother.

Twelve-year-old Yeva sits down and tucks a stray chestnut curl behind her ear. Shy, yet quietly confident, joyful, with simmering sadness just beneath the surface, Yeva’s paradoxical life at present is observed, not least by herself when I ask if she’s happy and she tells me, “Yes, in ways, but also, how can I be happy when my friends are back there [in Ukraine] ... do you know what I mean?”

Yeva Skalietska, for those unaware is a refugee from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Her diary, which begins with her 12th birthday, shortly before the Russians attacked on 24th February was part of a seven-way auction (won by Bloomsbury) and is named ‘You Don’t Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl From Ukraine’.

Yeva, whose parents separated when she was a baby had been living in Kharkiv, a city in the northeast with her grandmother who has raised her when the bombing started. Holding tight to her granny, Iryna, the pair ran, from their apartment block, trying hard to avoid the missile attacks into a local, now heavily crowded basement. As the missiles pounded overhead, Yeva’s grandmother

feared for their lives and they made their way to a friend’s house in another city but the conflict worsened so they

were forced to make the arduous decision to move towards Western Ukraine, where they sought refuge in a makeshift shelter that was set up in a local school assembly hall. There, Yeva, who’s been writing a detailed diary since the war began, peaks the interest of a handful of journalists from the UK, who swiftly write pieces on this “striking account” and help her and her grandmother cross the border to Hungary - and then assisted them in locating a host in a new country. Several countries refused to take Yeva and her grandmother in but eventually France and Ireland offered refuge. Yeva immediately chose Ireland, “As you speak English there”. This is understandable as Yeva’s English is impeccable and her vocabulary impressive. When Yeva and her granny arrived in Dublin, they were taken in by secondary school teachers Catherine Flannagan and Gary Abrahamian, from Glasnevin after spotting them on the Channel 4



**Until you’ve been there, you don’t know what war is.**

news,

“I teach English and I was taken by the fact that she was writing a diary... we thought ‘wow this girl is like Anne Frank’ and how terrible its now 2022, but isn’t it wonderful that she is writing a story that needs to be told,” Gary said.

More than 7 million refugees have been recorded across Europe due to the war in Ukraine and according to the United Nations, two-thirds of those who’ve left are children - but sadly, their stories seldom make the world news. Yeva is actually one of the ‘lucky’ ones

Yeva’s diary is compelling, it captures the moment candidly as each entry is punctuated with personal photos she took during her journey as well as text messages between her and her friends, documenting their fears.

Like Anne Frank, Yeva’s diary affords us the opportunity to view war through the eyes of a child.

**Your diary had me emerged, front and centre in each moment as I read it.**

“Thank you. I wanted people to see that you may know the word war, but do you understand what it really means. Until you’ve been there, you don’t know what war is.”

**This would have been difficult for anyone, I can’t imagine being 12 and experiencing it.**

“That’s why I began writing, to help me cope with my painful feelings and to write down my experiences so that years from now I can remember how my childhood was destroyed by war.”

**Your diary is published in 12 languages, but it was discovered quite by chance.**

“When I was in the shelter [in Western Ukraine], a man was behind me and I thought he was German as he said ‘Hallo’ so I turned round as I know little bit from school

and said ‘Hallo’ but he was English [a journalist] and wanted me to talk. I told him I felt unable to talk as I was in shock and I really needed to slow down and think

and understand what was happening ... everything felt in a rush in my head. My grandmother, [laughs] I don’t know how as we speak Russian, explained that I’m writing a diary since the first day of the war and they became interested and did a report for the news [Channel 4]. I still don’t know how they understood her.”

**You’ve done a lot of living this year?**

“[Sighs] I’ve lived through an awful lot [silence]. I’ve had to grow up.... My childhood seems gone.”

**Thinking of your experiences is still very difficult for you, I can see you’re upset and I know that you’ve experienced panic attacks.**

“It’s difficult for people to know this feeling. I know it. It’s scary. Knowing everything I know is gone. Everything is new [in Dublin].... someday, maybe I will go back and see my city but there’s is no future there because university, schools, everything is destroyed .... [sighs].”

**Reaching safety in Hungary must have brought a sense of peace, if only for a short time.**

“I wanted so much to be safe, to feel safe. Does anyone know what its like to feel you’ll never feel safety ever again? My only hope was to be far away from war and no bombings. It was really scary. In that situation I asked myself, ‘What will be next?’ I was so frightened.... I felt everything I knew and felt safe in was disappearing.”

**You’re safe in Ireland now.**

“We moved to our host initially and now we live at Sophie’s Bar residence and it’s so close to school, just seven minutes walk but we then have to move on on 18th



Yeva with grandmother

**I feel shame that I’ve lost my home, that I have no home...**

November and Catherine created a fund so we will see what we need to do next.”

**Speaking of Catherine, how do you feel about people like her and her partner who opened their doors?**

“She is so kind to people and she is so kind to us. I would really like to thank her. She’s lovely.”

**When you and your grandmother find a permanent home, will you feel safer and happier?**

“We are safe, but happier? The war in Ukraine, I see it on my telephone. It’s nice and quiet here in Ireland and life is normal, most people don’t know what’s happening there. I’m so sad about the non-stop bombings in my city, it still upsets me. I can’t say I’m happy .... How can I be happy when my friends are there and I worry about them and their safety? I am safe, yes, but I can’t be happy when this is happening to people I love.”

**I believe you never wrote a diary before this?**

“I got this diary for a gift in the year 2020 but I just put it on my shelf and it was lying there two years and I didn’t think of it at all ... but then I just wanted to write. I needed to write and I lifted the diary down and started. Writing it down helped me. I love writing. I now write about living in Ireland, the people I meet, going to school ... I’m continuing my diary because I’ve learned that I can write things I can’t discuss with people, I can write about my pain and that helps me....[sighs] ... I don’t know if people will ever really know what war does to you.”

**You and your friends, despite the fear during explosions tried to remain upbeat via text messages.**

“[Laughs] Yes, they would text me jokes to make me laugh and we did everything we could to think of fun things instead of what was happening outside. Communication is important because without it

we would keep everything in our heads and that is not good.”

**You hate the word refugee and won’t allow your grandmother to describe you as one, why is that?**

“It’s hard for me. I’ve lost my home. Things will never be like they were before. My city is destroyed. I can’t help it but I feel shame that I’ve lost my home, that I have no home, that I had nowhere to go [becomes tearful].”

**Granny is keeping herself busy whilst we chat. Do you think she feels**

“In some ways. It’s so important to me that we have a house, a house someday that is ours - our own house, one that isn’t rented, one we don’t have to move on from in a short period.”

**Many readers may not be aware that Russian is your first language; do you find it ironic that Russian is your mother tongue yet Russia is at war with Ukraine?**

“Yes. My relatives are there. My father lives in Russia, my great-grandmother and grandmother live in Russia, so yes, it seems strange to me. Of course I also speak Ukrainian but Russian is my language, so yes, it feels strange to me that they would invade when I speak their language and my family and friends live there.”

**How do Irish schools differ from Ukrainian**



Keira Knightley narrated the book

**How can I be happy when my friends are there and I worry about them and their safety?**

**schools?**

“I would like to say the obvious thing - language [laughs]. Irish school is easier than in Ukraine because back home education is very complicated, we study a lot and and we do lots of subjects and are marked on each but here we will just get a pass or a percentage.”

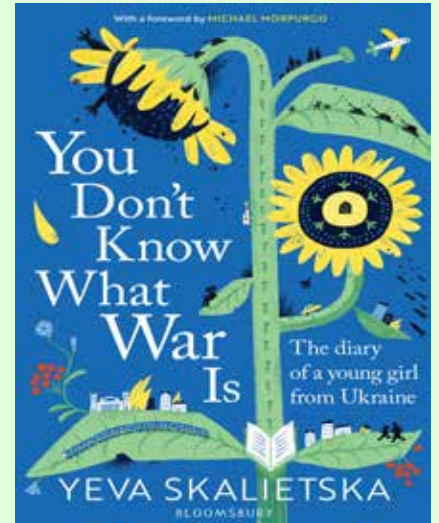
**What would you like to do in the future?**

“I’d really like to study here and I’d like to be a journalist reporting on war-torn areas. I would like to show people how cruel, how upsetting, how war can’t possibly be understood unless you’ve lived in it. Let’s see in the future if I maybe get a chance to be a writer.”

**I don’t think you realise - you ARE a successful writer already. You’re published by the company that publish the Harry Potter books. That’s a**

**huge achievement. You’re pals with Keira Knightley - she’s narrating your book.... I don’t think you realise how important your book is.**

“[Laughs] I am a writer .... I still think of it as just my diary ..... I AM a writer, you’re right [laughs].”



**\* ‘You Don’t Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl From Ukraine’ by Yeva Skalietska (Bloomsbury) is available now and highly recommended. Also available on Audible, narrated by Keira Knightley**

Christmas can be a tough time for many people, but talking can help

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The image is a promotional graphic for IACP. It features a festive background of a Christmas tree branch with green needles, red berries, and white snowflakes. In the upper right corner, there is a white logo for the 40th anniversary of IACP, with the text '40th @iacp' and '1981-2021' below it. The main text is centered and reads: 'Christmas can be a tough time for many people, but talking can help'. Below this is the call to action 'PLEASE VISIT IACP.IE' in large, bold, white capital letters. At the bottom, it says 'We have over 2,700 trained and accredited members on our nationwide directory.'