

Max: Things changed in a second. We woke up on the 24th of February and it's a different time. Different situation, yeah different challenges.

Meghan: *That was Maxym Oliferovski, who works for an MCC partner in Ukraine.*

In the early hours of February 24th, Russian military forces began invading Ukraine by land, sea and air. Missiles have struck major cities in Ukraine, including the capital city Kyiv and casualties continue to grow.

I'm producer Meghan Mast and you're listening to a bonus episode of Relief, Development and Podcast, a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Today, we're bringing you an update from Ukraine.

Maxym Oliferovski is the program director for an MCC partner in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

Over the weekend, Linda Espenshade spoke with Max to get an update on what things were like there.

Here's that conversation.

Linda: So, so Max, I have some questions I want to ask you, but I just want to ask first of all, are you okay? Are you safe enough?

Max: Yes. Yeah, we're in the safe place. We do hear some explosions. But they're far. Yeah. But it's a, it's a quiet safe place here.

Linda: When you first heard that the Russian troops had invaded, what went through your mind?

Max: I couldn't believe it. You know, for several weeks, the whole world was talking about the Russian troops on the border -- now in Russia, but on the border with Ukraine. Huge numbers. And we, we were ready for that to happen. But when it happened, we just couldn't believe it. We said no, this is not possible. This is crazy. It's 21st century; this can't happen. So you know, as usually when there are traumatized events, people, the first thing is denial. Yeah this can't happen.

Linda: Yeah, so what was the first thing you did, after you learned?

Max: Well, events happened in the morning, around four or five a.m. as I remember. I woke up 6:30. I got a phone call from a friend who knows for sure. And he said, "Max, this just began, tell your relatives; tell everybody." And that's what we began doing. We began calling other people and said, "Hey, this, this happened. What we hope wouldn't happen, happened. So please, if you have plans to evacuate, do that now."

Linda: You said that you are planning to stay as long as it is safe? Why have you made that choice to stay, rather than to go as you're recommending that other people do?

Max: Well, first, we don't have small kids with us. Our only daughter just happened to be in Germany on a mission trip there. And even if she wanted to come back, we would say to her, please stay there. And the planes don't fly. So we know she's safe. And we've been helping many people with my wife, Anya, you know, with New Hope Center and church and we thought, okay, we, we can afford, you know, to stay

here as long as we can, just to encourage people, support them and help others. So we were kind of motivated by two factors, our close one is in a safe place, and we want to serve others as long as we can.

Linda: Were you able to have a church service this morning?

Max: What our church service is in the evening, as has happened historically, we're a new church. So we're making some new traditions. So I'm looking forward, actually, to connect with the church. We will use Zoom to do that. We're a small church, and people can share and pray together. So I'm looking forward to do that in actually three hours.

Linda: If you are the pastor of that church, what words do you have prepared to share with them?

Max: Well, at any rate, we all now encourage one another, as the scripture says, yeah, not just leaders and pastors. We encourage one another with words of hope that truth will overcome, you know, lie. And then the good will win the evil.

Linda: Tell us what you have been doing over the last couple of days? As the news of the war broke out, how have you been, you and New Hope been working with the community that you serve?

Max: Yeah, well, we've been helping, last actually several years, a number of years as an organization we have been helping families in crisis. That's usually families that have some sort of crisis. And usually the kids suffer. So we'll have sessions for parents, for the kids, to help them overcome their challenges, whatever they are. And we've been doing that till the 24th of February. We woke up, we heard the news, we couldn't believe them. And that's how everything began.

Personally, my wife and I, we decided that we would stay in Zaporizhzhia as long as it's possible. And those people who kind of made decisions ahead of time to leave, they were, they were leaving. So the first wave left. And the next two days, were not easy, because our apartment is located downtown, you know, very close to strategic things and locations. And it's been hard to get adjusted to the new life. You hear sirens. You see the neighbors, you know, going up and down into a bomb shelter. You hear all the news. But at the same time, we were thinking, okay, how can we help the families, our neighbors, you know, church members. So, we purchased some food ahead of time. And we made food kits. So, the first day, we distributed the food kits because we don't know how long the stores would work. Yeah, by the way, the first day, huge lines, the gas stations, ATMs, grocery stores, you know, huge lines. The second day, not, not as huge, but then the further you go, the less supplies you have, right? So, first day, we distributed the food kits, then we shelter at our place. A missionary, she is actually from the United States, And she lives here in the Zaporizhzhia with us, but she was by herself. A young lady, she called us and said, "Can I stay with you because of this all of this situation?"

We said, "Sure, yeah." So, we helped her to stay overnight, and then the next day we sent her with our friends to western Ukraine to a safe place.

Linda: Your work before this has been a lot with trauma, if I understand correctly, and helping people who have dealt with trauma from the last Russian incursion or other things, can you tell me about the trauma people are experiencing now?

Max: Everybody in Ukraine to a certain degree is experiencing the traumatization. The thing is people need to learn how to deal with it. They need to talk to someone; they need to hear encouraging words, because if they listen [to] only news, they would hear about the fights, about people dying. That's not the best thing to do, but it's not helping them; it's not helping the soldiers. So, we encourage, we send messages to people who work with our church members to really do some things they can that would help

them, not just watching TV and listening to the bad news, but call one another. Weep or cry with one another. Do some activities if they can because it's really hard. And I'm sure, as all of this is over, hopefully soon, there will be lots of work to do here in terms of helping people overcome their traumas and traumatic situations.

Linda: That makes a lot of sense that you would all be traumatized at this point. And here you are traumatized and trying to help other people deal with their own. That's the reality of living in war I suppose.

Max: Yeah, well Linda I would add here about trauma one more thing. You know, everybody who has small kids, we encourage them right away, just if it's possible and if you have a car or you can go with someone, please leave. Because the kids, they get traumatized the most. We adults can cope with it, more or less, but the kids really can't. So we encouraged everybody who have kids, from church, if you can leave, please leave. So many of our friends now left the first or the second day, especially with the kids, just to save them from this traumatic situation that can, you know, ruin their future lives.

Linda: You said the other day that you were spending most of your time helping people to evacuate. What does that look like?

Max: Well, first people need transportation, right? And you don't want to go by yourself because the roads are packed with cars, like traffic jams and everything. So you want to go with someone. Like two or three cars together. So we tried to coordinate people, you know, going with someone.

We called people and we asked them, especially those who have small kids, and we asked them do you have a way to get evacuated? And so, many people need some encouragement because even if they have a car, they aren't sure. Shall we stay? Shall we leave? And we say, "It's up to you, but this is what we advise you to do." And we try to support them because they have feelings of guilt, you know, we leave everything, we leave churches, we leave other people, how can we go?

And we say, "Well it's up to you. You decide, but this is what you need to do for your family, for your children." If you have a means, have someone, take someone with you. So another friend left, taken two other people with them, their car, and they left yesterday.

There are evacuation trains here, from Zaporizhzhia from other cities. So we tell people that they have this opportunity, as well, to go to the train station. You don't know whether you can succeed or not. But at least you can try. Get on the train. So, some of our relatives yesterday got on the train, and then now they are going western Ukraine to a more safe location.

Linda: So, are most of the people who are evacuating going to safer places within Ukraine? Or are they leaving the country?

Max: Well, most people I know, plan to settle in western Ukraine, which is 1,000 kilometres from here.

Yeah, they can get the missiles there. But there are no tanks and no troops, military troops there. And there are many locations who, that can, that can accept people like retreat centres, churches, and other places, houses. So, so many people from Ukraine from here, where we live in East, South, they just go to Western Ukraine hoping this will end soon and they can come back.

Linda: Right. What do you, if you can speak...

Max: I want to I want to show you the sky here.

Linda: Yes.

Max: I want to show you the sky here. I hope I can do that. See this blue sky?

Linda: I do.

Max: I'm outside now. So usually, I can stand here, I can see it as well. So usually, you know the blue sky is a sign of peace. They say peaceful sky. And it's, and it's not peace yet. But it's a sign of hope for us that you know peace will come, the war will end and the sky will be really peaceful. I need to relocate because otherwise my dog will keep barking.

Linda: Okay. When you think about the Russians, who, it's a Russian government that has made this happen, yeah. How do you find, how do you deal with the feelings toward, or I don't know, your attitudes, your feelings toward people in Russia?

Max: Oh, yeah, yeah right. It's governments who are fighting. Most people, they're just people. They have passports, Russian passport, Ukrainian passport. So we pray for them. We're praying for Russian government, you know, so God can stop this in whatever way, you know, he chooses. And we pray for the Russian population, you know, those who support Ukrainians there. We have friends in Russia who support Ukrainians. And you probably on the news, you've seen that there are protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg. So we pray that they can be strong enough and share that this is, you know, craziness. This needs to stop.

But for the rest of people, we pray that God would open their eyes.

Linda: Amen.

Max: Amen.

Linda: All right. Well, thank you, Max, if you have given me a lot of encouragement, and I wish to give you the same encouragement back. I will go to church this morning and speak of you and ask people to remember you in prayer. So thank you for making time to make this happen.

Max: Just keep keep, just keep praying for peace. That will stop the evil. That's what we're asking. Oh, thank you for, for praying for encouraging. Yeah. for being with us. Thank you. Yes. Okay.

Linda: Thank you. Bye bye.

Meghan: *That was Max Olfierovski, speaking to Linda Espenshade. The situation in Ukraine is changing minute by minute. The day after what you just heard, we got another update from Max. He says the front line is moving and is now less than 100km from him and his wife. Here's Max.*

Max: Last night, was the first time we really heard and felt physically, the explosions. They were very close. The windows didn't break. It was in the evening. The heart begins to pound. That's just how the body reacts to it. And we thought that's how we would spend the night. But the night was calm. We were able to sleep. Praise God.

It's hard to learn how to deal with this new circumstances and the stress level. So pray for safety definitely. As we're going from downtown today, we saw one of the missiles just started in, flying over us. First time in life. You know, you can't really get prepared for that. But the heart begins to react, respond to that. We don't know where it went. It was in the sky. So, and when you hear all this explosives and shootings, even if you're a safe location, like nothing's happening next, next to your door it's still hard. So pray for safety. Pray for health. Pray for wise decisions. As I said, we decided to stay here to just

keep helping the families, the church. There's probably a level to which extent we can do that. Depending on the situation, we'll need to make another decision. How long shall we stay here? Right now? It's definitely yes, things can change tomorrow, so pray for wisdom. But as we stay here, pray that we will be helpful, really, and can provide help to our church, leadership to our church, help to families, help to communities, whatever is needed. Yeah, pray for strength and that we can continue the ministry in the circumstances. Thank you.

Meghan: *That was Maxym Oliferovski.*

He works for New Hope Centre, an MCC partner organization in Ukraine.

MCC first started work in Ukraine over 100 years ago.

Since the beginning of the conflict in east Ukraine, MCC has worked with partners to assist internally displaced people (IDPs) and build peace.

And of course, we are accepting donations for our response in Ukraine.

We'll be scaling up existing programs that support people made vulnerable by the situation and will be extending those services to internally displaced populations.

The long-term response will likely include psychosocial support and trauma healing, temporary emergency housing and emergency distributions of locally purchased supplies.

MCC advocacy offices continue to press Canadian and U.S. governments for non-military support for peacebuilding in Ukraine and around the world.

That's it for this episode. Thank you to Max Oliferovski for speaking with us.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded by Linda Espenshade and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

We'll be back later this month with another episode.

Take good care.

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Show notes:

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