

FAR FROM HOME

**How former K-State
tennis standout and her
family took in Ukrainian
refugees**



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A woman and her five kids, refugees from Ukraine, were taken in by a former K-State tennis player and her family, who live in the Czech Republic.

- Courtesy photo



Eva and David Novakova and their son, Nicolas, at home in the Czech Republic. Eva (then Novotna) was a standout on the K-State tennis team in the early 2000s.

After seeing a post or two on social media from my longtime friend Eva (Novotna) Novakova, I thought I would reach out to her to tell this story.

Eva played tennis for K-State from 1997 to 2001 and was successful particularly in Big 12 doubles when teamed up with my friend Alena (Jecminkova) Weiler, who played from 1997 to 2002.

Many Manhattanites may remember Eva during her time here as fans or tennis players at old Cottonwood Raquet Club, or as a host family like I was.

Eva and her husband David saw Ukrainian refugees coming into their country, the Czech Republic, especially in Prague, and then into their city just north and east of Prague, called Pardubice.

Her father was connected to the Czech National Event Center in Pardubice, which has been a long time pipeline for tennis players to K-State especially during the Steve Bietau (K-state coach for 35 years) era. Bietau used to travel to this club for tournaments to recruit players, many of whom wore purple. Now Eva and her husband David, who met at this same club, organize a men's professional tournament. They have a 12-year-old son, Nicolas, who is a major sports fanatic, which is pretty much understandable having parents who have been in sports all their lives.

"We have been obviously affected with the worldwide pandemic for the past couple of years but things were starting to get back to normal really," Eva said. "Then, the Russian invasion happened and our lives changed forever."

These are the Novakova's guests:

"We have two sisters, Anna (38) and Lillia (43) and their five kids staying in our apartment."

David and Eva are also in the real estate business and have a home they typically would rent that was available at just the right time.

“We are currently building a few apartments in the Czech mountains and have other real estate projects,” she said. “We live in a separate house. We provided them our old apartment we used to live in before and are currently paying for all the bills. We were also happy to get them enrolled in school pretty fast so they can be with other kids, which is crucial for their mental state at this moment.”

Novakova said she’s not sure how long they will sustain hosting.

“We are taking it a day at a time and we will see how the whole situation evolves,” she said. “Anna has three children: daughters Kateryna (I call her Katia) (4), Solomia (10) and son Andrii (14). Lillia has two sons: Ivan (17) and Nazar (12). They are both from Kyiv. They have been very, very thankful that they can keep their kids safe here in our home.”

According to Eva, their husbands and fathers stayed back to fight for their country. Even though Anna’s husband could go with them because he has three children, he refused because he felt the need to help others to protect their country.

The women and children had a long journey to reach their destination.

“They walked and traveled for five days before they came to safety here in the Czech Republic,” Novakova said.

Ivan, the 17-year-old, who’s best able to communicate through the language barriers, told her, “At the beginning of our journey, as we were running away from Kyiv, we stopped for the night and there was a battle for the Gostomel airport. Fighting aircraft flew over us, and within a radius of 3 kilometers (less than 2 miles) artillery (fired back). This was really scary, when shells fly over your head.”

In a video shared online, Ivan describes the families evacuating Kyiv on the night of Feb. 24 at 4 a.m. and going to a family country home in western Ukraine and hiding in

the basement for five days. Since then they have traveled by any means through six countries to arrive at the home of David and Eva.

“We are grateful to Eva and David to live safe and to have a shower” Ivan said.

While they’re still able to communicate with their families, they are worried to death about their husbands and parents they had to leave behind. The kids, according to Eva, have been in touch with their friends and classmates who are all over Europe, but some are still hiding in Ukraine.

The Czech Republic has been very responsive and has helped all refugees. Several sources, including the local Czech newspapers, about 300,000 Ukrainian refugees have been taken in so far.

Additionally, Eva said, “Around a quarter of refugees have gone to the capital Prague but the city authorities there needed to temporarily shut the city’s refugee assistance center due to capacity issues. Most of them have already received special visas, with more than half of them being children.”

Luckily, because of the international relationships and friendships of many Europeans, some refugees who have arrived in Central Europe so far had places to go.

Eva didn’t know her guests in advance, however, and just like many of her neighbors, they took these ladies and their children in.

“They are so, so desperate to return home,” Eva said. “They are truly great people. The kids are smart and amazing. My son Nicolas loves playing football (soccer) and basketball with the boys. They have been doing exceptionally well in school. I feel like they were meant to come into our lives and we are happy we can help them in those tough times.”

Eva mentioned that Ivan had a birthday to remember.

“It was Ivan’s 17th birthday yesterday, and all he wanted for his birthday was to return home and see his dad and friends,” she said. “But instead we had a little party for him and they smiled lots and that makes my heart full to see them happy for a little while and to forget about all the horrors for a bit.”

Despite all the efforts by the Novakovas to create normalcy for their guests, “They all still cry lots though,” she said.

Eva gets emotional when thinking about how this all started.

“There were moms with young kids in a desperate need and it was pretty much a no-brainer,” she said. “We knew right away that we would do all we could to help them. Hearing the horrific stories and seeing the terrified and traumatized moms and children was and is still very hard, but there are good days, too, now as we are trying to help more and more families, get children involved in activities and seeing them smile again is very rewarding.”

The Novakovas are helping in other ways, too.

Eva noticed immediately that there would be a major need to raise money quickly to help pay for food, diapers, school lunches, etc., as well as psychologists for the children who have nightmares and can’t sleep.

“I still have great friends especially in the U.S. where I studied, and I created a fundraising page to raise fund to help the refugees in my home town of Pardubice,” she said. “I have a great friend, Sherry Barklage, a friend from KSU, who now lives in Kansas City, who has been helping me loads with the fundraiser on her end. We have more than 50 people who have supported us and we are not stopping.”

Novakova is passing 100% of the dollars raised to the cause, organized completely on her own. She makes an update on the families being helped, where monies are being

allocated and general information about the Ukraine refugee situation on her Facebook page.

Eva added that all the people who originally donated and are still giving are truly making a huge difference in peoples lives — especially kids' lives. She has been so successful that she was able to meet with a local Ukrainian priest, Marian Kurylo, to present him with a check for 100,000 Czech crown, which is approximately \$4,500.

“And I already know that we will be able to donate more,” she said.

Novokova said it will be tough for refugees who want to relocate permanently to the Czech Republic, as they don't really speak English or Czech. So even if so they would have to learn a new language first, but she said, “They are hoping to be home before that happens.”

https://themercury.com/news/how-former-k-state-tennis-standout-and-her-family-took-in-ukrainian-refugees/article_61abddf1-36b0-5ff0-8558-1ba991000eb9.html