

Ukrainian club a lively hub three years after Russian invasion

It is now three years since President Putin invaded Ukraine. In Edinburgh that has meant a huge upturn in activity at the Association of Ukrainians Great Britain in Edinburgh (AUGB Edinburgh), something which is readily acknowledged by the three volunteers at the heart of the organisation – Hannah Beaton-Hawryluk, Linda Allison and Senia Brykajlo Urquhart- as both a good and a bad thing.

Edinburgh's Ukrainian Club has transformed from a "dwindling backstreet members' club" into a vibrant cultural and support hub serving thousands of displaced Ukrainians. It is part of a larger network in the UK which has 36 branches, three in Scotland.



Hannah Beaton-Hawryluk, Senia Brykajlo Urquhart and Linda Allison from AUGB Edinburgh

Located in a building on Royal Terrace which the organisation owns, the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain (AUGB) Edinburgh branch has evolved dramatically since February 2022. What began as an emergency humanitarian aid centre is now a thriving community space offering daily programmes ranging from language classes to cultural activities.

All three women are proud daughters of Ukrainian fathers who came to Scotland in 1947. During our interview they repeatedly praised these fathers for their foresight in buying the building on Royal Terrace (and also the Ukrainian church in Leith).

Hannah said: "Before February 2022 we were trying to preserve a legacy our fathers left us. When the invasion happened, we ceased all normal operations and became a collection hub for humanitarian aid. Within ten days, we had filled seven storage units throughout Edinburgh."

She is also thankful for the other organisations which have helped such as The City of Edinburgh Council, Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council (EVOC) and Volunteer Edinburgh.

The Scottish Government's super sponsor scheme led to 34,000 Ukrainians applying with 26,000 of those successful in coming to Scotland. Edinburgh set up a welcome hub at the airport where they processed more than 11,000 people.

The club now has a packed weekly schedule including English classes, mental health support sessions, children's activities, a food bank, cooking and cultural programmes. The Ukrainian Saturday School, which started as a small homework club, has 70 children attending. These children are coached in English and Ukrainian both written and verbal. And there are two choirs one for adults and one for children, and dance groups to keep musical and cultural traditions alive.



MS Victoria docked in Leith PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter
In the first place the Association offered a welcome and information. Some Ukrainians were housed on the ship in Leith where it was relatively easy to gather all the information and information providers together in one place. Now the Ukrainian club has employed three members of staff to help get vital information across to those who need it. Hannah agreed that the ship was a good start as it created a community very much like the way Ukrainians live – in an intergenerational way with a central focus on family.

But the Ukrainian Club has stepped up. Hannah explained: “With the love and support that the old diaspora and the volunteers in the community have given people arriving here, they found their feet and the community centre’s here seven days a week now.”

Uncertainty over the war and the country’s future means that the Ukrainians who have settled here have no idea how long they might be away from home – or if they can ever return home.

This Hannah, Senia and Linda agreed is a key difference from the fate of their own fathers who could not return home after the Second World War. Their fathers came to Scotland, settled and “got on with it”. Hannah’s father opened a fish and chip shop in Dunbar, using the potatoes he grew on his smallholding. Senia’s father became a miner and married a Scot, settling in Lasswade.

By contrast, the Ukrainians who have come to Scotland in the last three years are in limbo.

But despite the revived membership and activity, sustainability is still a challenge, and Hannah said: “We could not have done this without the help of so many people, but unfortunately it all boils down to money.”

AUGB Edinburgh applied to Leith Choices, the community grants

fund which allocates money according to public vote using a method called participatory budgeting.

They outlined plans to stage an outdoor festival Unity with the Community on 23 August in Leith Links celebrating all the diverse cultures alive in Leith today as well as their own Ukrainian culture, and this weekend AUGB has found out they were successful in their application.

Commemorations will be held in Edinburgh on Monday to mark the third anniversary.

















