

ЄВРОВАІКНО

yevrovikno

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Names and places have been changed to protect everyone’s identity.

***B**efore I lived in Ukraine, I did not see the differences, I didn’t realize it. But after living for some time in Finland and going back, I noticed that.*

These are Oksana’s words. She is a deaf Ukrainian asylum seeker living under temporary protection in Finland since 2022. These words came out of a research interview about deaf refugees’ perceptions and feelings of “home” after forced displacement. We were having a conversation about what it means to “feel at home”—literally and figuratively—while she was also showing me around her apartment in Helsinki.

There are many things Oksana dislikes about living in Finland. At the root of everything is the fact that she had never intended to live here, to leave Ukraine: she was helping her relatives escape the Russian invasion, and suddenly crossing the borders back to Ukraine became impossible for her, she was stuck in Finland. Along with other deaf Ukrainians, she was luckily able to receive help from the Finnish deaf community in the form of, among other things, accommodation arrangements that saved many of them from being sent to random reception centers anywhere in the country.¹ After moving through a

few subsidized apartments, Oksana has now been living in the same one for a year, and it will possibly be the last one for a while. If there is one thing she likes about living in Finland, it’s her glazed balcony in this apartment.

[As a migrant myself here in Finland, glazed balconies were a totally new entity for me. I wasn’t used to the idea of a balcony being closed off with walls all the way to the roof, albeit made of glass. Balconies here are almost an extension of the house, as if they were additional rooms. For me, the balcony is where you go when you want some fresh air, when you want to feel like you’re outside, with the luxury of not having to actually leave the house. And to be honest, balconies are truly a luxury: since I moved out of my parents’ home in Italy years ago, I’ve never had a balcony anymore, glazed or not. But I digress.]

Oksana was really adamant about showing me and the interpreter her balcony, how she had furnished and decorated it, where these decorations came from, how much she enjoys the view and the sunlight, how she spends her time here: “I was just reading here, and sitting, and watching around... it’s very nice to see when the sun is going down”. I asked Oksana if

¹ Nina Sivunen’s (2023) PhD dissertation “Deaf asylum seekers’ experiences, multimodal interaction and transformation of language beliefs in the Finnish asylum process” for an excellent study on deaf refugees’s experiences of being scattered throughout the country during the 2015 so-called “refugee crisis”.

What does it mean to forcibly leave and to live home, to embody displacement, to feel (at) home?

balconies look like this in Ukraine, since I personally saw them for the first time in Finland. I got the answer I was expecting: “No, we don’t have them”, referring to the glazed glass panes that enclose her balcony. And then Oksana continued with her aesthetic inspection, her visual epiphany of balconies and windows and their differences between Ukraine and Finland: “I like this [glazed balcony], it’s very nice. When I came back to Ukraine, I realized that, in the same houses, balconies and windows are different, it’s like, not the same. In Finland, all the houses are the same. Have you seen any pictures from the war in Ukraine?”

The balconies are different, and it’s not so nice. Every person does it in their own way”. I don’t know how much thought Oksana had put into this prior to our conversation, or if the interview on the balcony was the prompt for this game of “spot the difference” between homes in her countries of origin and arrival. Regardless, what was clear is that Oksana’s experience of displacement matches what Sara Ahmed (1999) calls “a spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self: a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied. Hence the experience of moving often to a new home is most felt through

the surprises in sensation". The embodiment of movement and of the perception of home emerge through the sensorial differences between the homes before and after, and how both homes influence each other simultaneously. Ahmed writes: "When we came to Australia, what I first remember is all the dust, and how it made me sneeze and my eyes itch. When I returned to England, I felt the cold pinching my skin". Just like Ahmed could feel the cleanliness and coldness of the air in her homeland only after leaving it, so did Oksana realize what "home" looks like in Ukraine only after being displaced to Finland. But Oksana's perceptions of home did not stop at the visual level: "In *yevrovikno* (євровікно), the European standard of windows," Oksana shows me on her phone, "the isolation is very good, there are no spaces between the glass panes. They're supposed to be warm, but still they're not so warm. In Finland it's warmer, and it's nice that there is some space between the glass and you can see outside. And it's very easy to wash them. In these Ukrainian ones it's quite difficult. It's a difficult construction, there are many places where dust can go inside".²

Oksana's sensorial perception of home manifests itself not only as the visual differences between homes in Ukraine and Finland, but also on how the space is invaded by the cold, the dust, like in Ahmed's recollection of home after the experience of migration. Displacement is embodied, felt in the flesh, how the body reacts to the cold, how the dust settles in the home/body. Home is perceived through the eyes, through our human capacity to scan and be aware of and live the space that surrounds us.

Oksana is aware of these home perceptions and how they affect her life after displacement, and she processes these feelings during our conversation: In Ukraine doors are different, people make them as they please, while in Finland they're the same for everyone. In Ukraine the post boxes are different, in Finland they're the same. In Ukraine doorbells are different, in Finland they're the same. "Do you prefer it in Finland, where everything is similar?" I ask Oksana. "Yes, it's nice. It's easier". I hone in on this last component of home, the doorbell, to ask her more, given that she installed a flashing one to be alerted when someone is at her door. When I came in, Oksana's door was the only different one in the building because of this addition.

ME: Because everything here is the same, do people realize that they have to use the light doorbell? Or do people use the sound one?

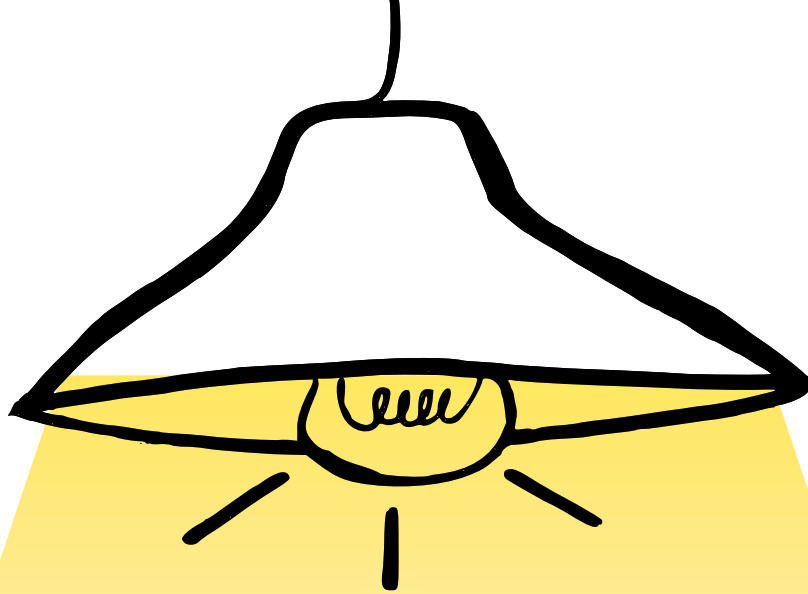
OKSANA: I don't know.

ME: Is it normal for people to see two doorbells, or-

OKSANA: I don't know this. In Ukraine it's different, there's only one doorbell. It's connected with a microchip you put inside the ceiling lamps. When someone is calling at the door, the lamp starts to blink. But in Finland they don't put it inside any lamps, they get a different one. It's more comfortable".


I don't know what I was trying to find out by asking about the doorbells that Oksana has in her Finnish apartment. Maybe I was trying to understand if her preference of Finnish housing

² I'm not an expert in window construction or design, though I know Oksana was pointing out the differences between the windows in Ukraine with visible, bulky frames (like those I'm familiar with in Italy) and the Finnish slick-looking glass panes in the balconies, rather than with the double-paned windows that look directly outside. Oksana's apartment has both, but her framed windows open on the balcony.



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was due to a repetition of patterns and symmetries processed as more appealing, calming even, and the possible discomfort caused by her different doorbells. Maybe, as a hearing person, I was exoticizing the home devices that assist deaf people. Maybe I didn't know what else to ask, and I tried to keep the conversation on home materiality going. In any case, I accomplished the opposite, I confused the interpreter and possibly embarrassed Oksana by putting the spotlight on her and her different doorbell, after she explicitly told me how she prefers all homes to look the same. Anyways, the interview got back on track soon after.

As Ahmed³ puts it, “homes do not stay the same as the space which is simply the familiar. There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation”. What does it mean to forcibly leave and to live home, to embody displacement, to feel (at) home? There is no right answer, no real solution the question of home, which definitely does not end within the confined materiality of its walls. But at least we can rest and watch the sunset from the comfort of our glazed balcony. 

³Ahmed, Sara. (1999). Home and away: Narratives of migration and estrangement. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(3), 329–347