



Season 3  
Episode 7 Transcript

## Saved from the Nazis, Rescued from Ukraine

**Torah Kachur:**

February 23rd, 2022. 17-year-old Alex Bogancha is at home in Kharkiv, Ukraine, hanging out with friends.

**Alex Bogancha:**

We were just sitting and talking about everything.

**Torah Kachur:**

But this isn't your average teenage discussion.

**Alex Bogancha:**

We were talking about it. Really, it can be tomorrow because they're saying that Russian soldiers are just 30 kilometers from the border. Our city is around 50, maybe, kilometers from the Russian border. So if the war will happen, it will be just near us.

**Torah Kachur:**

Alex goes to sleep knowing his life may look very different tomorrow.

**Alex Bogancha:**

At 5:00 a.m., we heard the first missiles, the first bombings, the first sounds of the war. Of course, nobody could believe in it. How the war can happen in 21st century is awful.

**Torah Kachur:**

Alex, his younger sister, and his parents are in shock, but they make a decision quickly.

**Alex Bogancha:**

We were preparing for leave just about 15 minutes. We packed some basic stuff, brought our dog with us, and left our house.

**Torah Kachur:**

They join thousands of others driving out of Kharkiv, but they're hopeful.

**Alex Bogancha:**

Maybe it will come to an end soon. Maybe two weeks. It was just fantasies.

**Torah Kachur:**

Alex and his family go from Ukraine to Germany and then to Austria. His parents struggle to find work. They want Alex to return to university. The war drags on. Then someone they've never met offers to help.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

Immediately, I thought, "What can we do for Bogancha now?" This is our turn.

**Torah Kachur:**

Marina Orlovetsky is also from Ukraine, now living in the United States. She's never met the Bogancha family in person, but helping them is about more than aiding fellow Ukrainians.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

It was like all the pieces of the puzzle, they came together.

**Torah Kachur:**

This is an incredible story that takes place across nearly 80 years, two wars, and many generations. You'll hear how an act of kindness in 1941 comes full circle in 2023 with the help of many caring strangers.

**Alex Bogancha:**

My ancestors helped them, and now they're helping us. How it can be possible? I can see it only in movies. If not this story, it wouldn't happen.

**Torah Kachur:**

I'm Torah Kachur. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day. Before we head back into this story, part of it does take place during the Holocaust. Please, take care while listening.

In every complicated puzzle, there's a point where you find the piece that makes it all come together, that unlocks it. In this story, that puzzle piece is Marina.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

One of the reasons I decided to pursue a career in psychology, despite my accent and everything, because I do care. I love helping people. And as much as I know about somebody, I like to dig in their stories. I like to help. Again, as I said, I like to care.

**Torah Kachur:**

Marina also grew up in Kharkiv, Ukraine. She has very happy memories of her life there. But ...

**Marina Orlovetsky**

I felt the pressure of being Jewish. We decided it will be best if we will leave the country.

**Torah Kachur:**

Marina moved to the United States in 1988, eventually settling in California. Years later, in 2013, a friend gives Marina a book, a biography titled *Hiding in the Spotlight: A Musical Prodigy's Story of Survival*.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

She said, "Have you heard this name, Zhanna Arshanskaya, as she is from the same city as you are, Kharkiv?" I said, "No, never heard."

**Torah Kachur:**

Marina is intrigued. It's the story of Zhanna Arshanskaya, a young Jewish girl living in Kharkiv, Ukraine, at the beginning of the Holocaust.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

The story itself went through all my body, through my veins, through my brain. I read it in one sitting. I couldn't stop.

**Torah Kachur:**

It's this book that eventually connects Marina to Alex Bogancha. In 1941, Zhanna was a fearless and brilliant 14-year-old pianist. She and her younger sister Frina were the only children given scholarships to the local music conservatory, where they played often.

**Greg Dawson:**

Her father, he was the dreamer in the family. He wanted them to be pianists. He revered the German musical culture, which is why he'd never believed the rumors that the Nazis were coming and that they were going to kill all the Jews.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's Greg Dawson, Zhanna's son. He wrote the book and knows how one winter day his grandfather's dream falls apart. In December 1941, German soldiers rounded up all the Jewish people living in Kharkiv and marched them out of town.

**Greg Dawson:**

It was a bitterly cold day, but it was sunny. There was snow on the ground. She remembers looking down and the snow glittering like diamonds.

**Torah Kachur:**

They're told they're going to a labor camp. It's a long march. At one point, they're held in an empty factory for two weeks with hardly any food and no heat.

**Greg Dawson:**

On the final day, they got to a fork in the road. Instead of turning towards the town where they said they were being taken, they turned the other way. Her father, Dimitri, knew that wasn't the correct way. That's when it dawned on him that they were being taken somewhere else, somewhere terrible. He went through his pockets. He had managed to hide a gold watch. So he turned to the guard at one point and said, "If you turn your head long enough for my daughter to run out of line, you can have this watch."

**Torah Kachur:**

The guard took the watch and looked away. Zhanna's father turned to her.

**Greg Dawson:**

He said, "I don't care what you do. Just live." That's all there was time for. She didn't even have time to say goodbye to everybody.

**Torah Kachur:**

Zhanna runs out of the line and hides. She never sees her parents or grandparents again. They're marched to a ravine, Drobytsky Yar, that becomes a mass grave for over 16,000 Jews.

Reading Zhanna's story impacts Marina in ways she can't shake.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

I never heard about what happened in Drobytsky Yar. For me, it was a discovery. It was something new. I was shocked. I was in state of shock. Personally, when I read about this story, I just visualized. I saw myself in this cold day, walking, holding my parents, knowing that this is the last moment I can hold my parents' hand.

**Torah Kachur:**

But Marina can't stop reading now. She must know what happens to Zhanna.

**Greg Dawson:**

She went back to Kharkiv. She needed somebody to shelter her. She knocked on the doors of two families that she knew. Both families closed the door on her face because the Nazis had let it be known that anybody who was caught harboring Jews would be murdered along with those Jews.

**Torah Kachur:**

Zhanna turns to a house on her own street. Here's where our two stories come together, where the timelines cross. The house belongs to the Bogancha family. The woman who answers the door is Alex Bogancha's great-great-grandmother.

**Greg Dawson:**

My mother said, "I'm Zhanna." She said, "I know who you are. Come in." She pulled her in. There were never any questions. The Boganchas, who were not Jewish, they sheltered my mother for two weeks because the city was crawling with Nazis. They were looking for all the Jews they could find. So they were her saviors, I mean, literally.

**Alex Bogancha:**

My ancestors helped them, and now they're helping us.

**Torah Kachur:**

A few days later, Frina, Zhanna's sister, shows up at the door. She never explains how she escaped. Now the Bogancha family is hiding two very well-known Jewish sisters. They know this can't last. They come up with a plan. The girls are Russian orphans. The Boganchas find fake identity documents and



direct them to an orphanage a few towns away, where they hope they won't be recognized. The orphanage is simple. Meals are sparse. But there's a piano. Impressed by their playing, the director of the orphanage decides to get it tuned. When the tuner hears Zhanna play, he's astounded and demands that she come with him to the closest German army base.

**Greg Dawson:**

"There's a troop of entertainers there. They need a pianist. You have to come." So they felt they had to go because not to go might have drawn attention to them.

**Torah Kachur:**

For years, Zhanna and Frina give concerts for German soldiers, the same forces that rounded up and killed their family and friends.

**Greg Dawson:**

People who hear this story say, "How could she play and perform for the same people who had murdered her family?" It's a fair question. I asked her that. She said, "I wasn't playing for them. I was playing for my mother and my father and my grandparents. I was playing for the music. I was playing for Chopin and Beethoven. That's who I was playing for. I wasn't playing for the Germans." She fell back on her musical etiquette she had been taught by her father, and more importantly, those final words, "I don't care what you do. Just live. Just live."

**Torah Kachur:**

For four years, Zhanna and her sister live in fear of being found out until the war finally ends. The sisters are now 18 and 16 and living in a displaced person's camp. That's where they're discovered by an American officer, Larry Dawson.

**Greg Dawson:**

He heard them playing on an old dilapidated piano. He was a music lover from Virginia. So he approached them and insisted that he was going to bring them to America to go to Juilliard.

**Torah Kachur:**

Larry gets the sisters on the first boat of Holocaust survivors leaving for the US. Zhanna and Frina do attend Juilliard. Both go on to musical careers. Eventually, Zhanna marries Larry's brother, David Dawson, also a musician. They have two children, Greg and his brother, Bill. It's a whole new start. Zhanna doesn't look back.

**Greg Dawson:**

Her break with her past had been so complete, in her mind and also in the minds of those still in Ukraine, where she was presumed to be dead. It just never occurred to her to try to reach out and find them, so she never had any contact with them. It's too bad because the Boganchas themselves, the parents, they didn't live long enough to know that the girls had survived, that they had actually managed to put together a strategy that would indeed save their lives.

**Torah Kachur:**

When Marina finishes the book, her curiosity goes into overdrive.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

What's next? What happened to Zhanna? What happened to her? I Googled her name, and it just came with the full phone number. I called her. That's how our friendship began.

**Torah Kachur:**

When Marina made that call out of the blue, Zhanna is 86.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

Very witty. Very playful. Great sense of humor. You will never tell how old she was. Like a child inside. Very smart. Sharp mind.

**Torah Kachur:**

They hit it off immediately. Two Jewish women from Kharkiv, Ukraine, both living in America, connected by a book.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

Mostly, she went back, and she talk about the past. As she talk, you could just sense her desire to be alive.

**Torah Kachur:**

But knowing Zhanna just makes Marina more curious about the family that saved her, the Boganchas. On Facebook one day, Marina notices an Andre Bogancha still living in Ukraine. She sends off a message: "Are you related to the Bogancha family that rescued two Jewish girls in 1941?"

**Marina Orlovetsky**

Andre answer me, "Yes."

**Torah Kachur:**

Andre Bogancha's son is Alex, the young man we heard at the beginning of this story. Alex remembers Marina getting in touch with his father. The story of the Jewish sisters was part of the family history.

**Alex Bogancha:**

She wanted just to ask a lot of questions about his story. From at that time they were communicating, they had pretty good relationship online.

**Torah Kachur:**

For Marina, being in contact with the descendants of the people who saved her friend, it means a lot.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

I texted him, "I'm very grateful from all of us what they've done." He said, "It's not me. It's them who helped the girls." But for me, it didn't matter. It's still somebody who opened their heart. That was successful story of survival only because somebody opened the door and let you in.

**Torah Kachur:**

Over the years, Marina stays in touch with the Boganchas and Zhanna and Greg, filling in the missing pieces of the puzzle on both sides.

**Alex Bogancha:**

When the war started, she texted to us and asked about how are we doing.

**Torah Kachur:**

At this point, Alex and his family are not in immediate danger, but they're in limbo wondering if they will ever go home.

**Alex Bogancha:**

When you just move there as refugees and you're just wondering about what's going to happen next, it's scary.

**Torah Kachur:**

So when Marina asks —

**Marina Orlovetsky**

“What can I do for you? It's my turn. Now what can I do for you now?”

**Torah Kachur:**

Alex's father has one request: “Help my son.”

**Alex Bogancha:**

My father said that I'm studying business, and I don't know where to go.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

Then I started searching how I can help the boy to enter maybe some school. Then the whole thing started.

**Torah Kachur:**

By this time, Zhanna was 95 and suffering from dementia. Frina had passed away in 2019. Marina turned to Zhanna's son, Greg.

**Greg Dawson:**

Marina asked us if we had any way that we could help. Again, this is quite a moment of full circle, of paying it forward or paying it back. We happen to be working with an organization called Ukrainian Mothers and Children Transport that provides free legal advice to Ukrainians who had wanted to come to this country after fleeing the war.

**Alex Bogancha:**

One of my biggest dreams in childhood was to visit LA, really. When I firstly heard about this opportunity, I was excited. I was excited both about the opportunity to come to Los Angeles and study here, and because of amazing people who want to provide help for others.

**Torah Kachur:**

Working with this organization, Marina leads a massive group effort to get Alex into a college in Los Angeles. They find him a sponsor, housing. Greg, who lives in Florida, pays for his flight, arriving January 14th, 2023.

**Alex Boganča:**

My first emotions, it was 10 minutes before the landing, and I was like, "Wow. It is real right now."

**Torah Kachur:**

A big group of people are waiting outside the airport arrival doors. Legal scholars who volunteered to process his paperwork, his official sponsor, all of them have played a role in getting him here. The most excited person is Marina.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

As soon as we learned the airplane landed, we all screamed and waited until he will go through customs. We couldn't wait this last minute.

**Alex Boganča:**

I was coming there with my bags and see that a lot of people are just staying there and waiting for me, and they're waving their hands, yes, and Ukrainian and US flags. It felt just like I met other part of my family.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

That was the feeling when you hug and see his face. I was crying like everybody did. Everybody cried tears of happiness and joy that we achieved it, and we paid something back to this amazing family.

**Torah Kachur:**

But there was someone important missing from this reunion. Zhanna Arshanskaya Dawson died just a few days before Alex arrived.

**Greg Dawson:**

She would be thrilled. I mean, she would be thrilled. She would've been the first in line to help in any way that she could.

**Torah Kachur:**

In June, a few months after Alex, the rest of the Boganča family arrived in Los Angeles, starting over just like Zhanna did 77 years ago.

**Alex Boganča:**

It feels unreal for me still because I don't know. I feel myself as a movie hero who had experienced something unusual, something fantastic.

**Greg Dawson:**

When you start trying to make a chart of the things that had to happen, the serendipitous things, the fortunate things, the lucky things, it's pretty mind-boggling.



**Alex Boganča:**

One woman read this story, read this book, and she was very amazed by this story. This woman's name is Marina. Now Marina is like part of our family.

**Marina Orlovetsky**

I should say Alex is like my third child. When people showered Alex and the family with love, all of those people, they are descendants of those who perished during the Holocaust. This is our turn to do some ... not even repay. It sound very primitive. It's not even repay. Something that we can help them with to feel what it can be to be alive and to be saved.

**Torah Kachur:**

For Greg, this happy ending is a good reminder that even the smallest actions can ripple out across time and space.

**Greg Dawson:**

You never know when that opportunity might arise, when you can do something to help. It makes you stop and think about your own life and think that, "Wow. I'm so happy that I was here to be able to be part of making this kind of difference in somebody's life."

**Torah Kachur:**

Alex is now studying business at Santa Monica College. His parents and sister are getting settled in Los Angeles with Marina's help, of course. Greg Dawson and his family are planning to travel from Florida to meet up with them soon. The Boganča and Dawson families would like to acknowledge the legal support from Chapman University law professor Michael Bazyler and his students, especially Iliana Castaneda.

To understand how anyone can step up to help refugees, I spoke with Una Bilic. She's a deputy director with the International Rescue Committee, based in Florida. Una came to the United States as a refugee herself, evacuated from Bosnia in 1994 with shrapnel injuries when she was just 10 years old. I started by asking her about the biggest hurdles refugees face when they arrive in a new country.

**Una Bilic:**

Two things. You come with trauma, trauma from your homeland or trauma from the country that you escaped to when you first escaped your homeland. That's still very much engraved in you, and you're still battling that. But then you come to your new home, for here being the United States, and then you have to integrate. You have to get a job really fast. You have to learn the language. You have to learn the culture, but you're still battling the trauma you left behind.

**Torah Kachur:**

And you're busy when you first get here. Can you paint a picture of everything a refugee has to do when you first land in a totally different country, on a totally different continent, often?

**Una Bilic:**

Oh, my goodness. When refugees come to the United States, they go through the process, through the State Department, and they are matched with a resettlement agency such as the International Rescue Committee. When a refugee first arrives, we pick them up at the airport. We take them to their brand new home, fully furnished, stocked up with food. Then the appointments start. We have to enroll the kids into school. We have to enroll the parents into English classes. We have to enroll the parents into employment classes. We have to make sure that all the documentation is obtained, such as your Social Security card, state ID card. You have to make sure that there's cultural orientation classes, making sure that this family understands the new culture in an environment that they are now a part of. You have to do job readiness classes. What is a resume? What is an application? What is an interview?

**Torah Kachur:**

It sounds incredibly overwhelming. What do refugees usually need the most when they arrive?

**Una Bilic:**

They need us to provide them the mechanisms and tools to help them in achieving this thing we call self-sufficiency, so that when the federal funds are exhausted, and they're very limited, how do they survive on their own? How do they pay this apartment that I found for them on their own? How do they pay for their kids' school supplies on their own? How do they buy the food that they need on their own? They need somebody to really help guide them through this process.

**Torah Kachur:**

Well, in terms of donations, besides the obvious, money, what's the most useful?

**Una Bilic:**

We always say, "You can give your money, but you can also give your time." Every office has such different volunteer opportunities. Here in the United States, we're really, really pushing sponsorship models where local community groups get very involved in the refugee cases' integration process and help do some of the services, help take clients to the doctors, help take clients on job interviews, help prepare them, help them learn English. It's like this co-sponsorship model, working with a local resettlement agency and a local community group. But then there's other one-time things that community members can do. Can you help us set up a home for a refugee? Can you help us gather donations? Hey, do you have that used couch in your garage that's just collecting dust but is in really good shape? Give it to us. We need it.

**Torah Kachur:**

Have you seen the community that you work in support refugees?

**Una Bilic:**

Yeah. Very much so. In the different communities I work with, they have always been really supportive of refugees. One of the big law offices in Tallahassee contacted me and said, "Hey, we want to get involved. Sure, I'll donate money, but how can I donate time?" They came up with an idea saying, "We at the law office really love running, and we're part of a local running club. How about we create a youth program where your refugee youth come and run with us?" This law office set this all up, bought the kids all running shoes, had different running classes like middle school, high school, elementary school. The elementary school kiddos, Torah, would play Duck, Duck, Goose. That was their running activities. But the high schoolers would run for miles around the track and the park.

It was one of my favorite ways that a community member stepped up. It involved very limited language, very limited in resources, but it was probably one of the best things we were able to get done for the families. So sometimes it's contacting your local resettlement agency and really having an idea of how you can best support, instead of saying like, "Hey, Una, what do you need? What do you want me to do?" I really think the collaborative approach always works best for the community, for the resettlement agency, and almost most definitely for the client.

**Torah Kachur:**

Una, thank you for your work, and thank you for your time today.

**Una Bilic:**

I really appreciate it. Thank you, Torah.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's it for this episode of OnStar's *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. If you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for a link at [onstar.com](http://onstar.com). Or, if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q&A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small. While you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

---

*Find more episodes of Tell Me What Happened at [OnStar.com/podcast](http://OnStar.com/podcast).*