

Tokyo restaurant offers a slice of home to Ukrainians

Owner Takane Ezeo felt that employment was one area in which she could help evacuees

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As evacuees from Ukraine try to carve out a niche in their adopted home of Japan, a Tokyo restaurant offering dishes from the Eastern European country is also hoping to serve up a little slice of home to its mainly Ukrainian staff.

Natalia Gylgalo, 44, came to Japan in April last year, shortly after Russia launched its invasion of her homeland the previous February. She wanted to work in an environment where she could be with her compatriots and speak her own language, and found the restaurant through a Ukrainian community network on Facebook.

The restaurant was opened last September in Tokyo's Shinjimbashi business district by artist Takane Ezeo, who had been looking for ways to help fleeing Ukrainians by providing them with jobs after reading about their plight.

Her main business is a Tokyo-based art and design company, but she thought that work opportunities there were too limited to make an impact.

"It seemed more effective to use a business that can hire many Ukrainians at once," she said in explaining why she decided to open a restaurant. She hired nine Ukrainians, of whom seven are evacuees.

Ezeo, who has lived in Europe but has no personal connection to Ukraine, said that while the central government, local governments and nongovernment organizations are assisting the evacuees with many needs including housing, employment was one area where she could offer real help.

Japan has often been criticized for lagging behind in accepting those fleeing from other countries, but in a rare move in March 2022 it decided to open its doors to Ukrainians fleeing their homeland.

As of Feb. 22, 21,899 such Ukrainians were staying in Japan, of whom 2,009 had been issued a "designated activities" visa that allows them to work for up to a year, according to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan.

Government data also showed that Tokyo topped the list of prefectures home to fleeing Ukrainians, who have been accepted in Japan under special provisions as evacuees rather than as refugees under the Refugee Convention.

As most Ukrainian evacuees arriving in Japan lack Japanese-language skills, they face limited employment opportunities.

Ezeo said that, bearing this in mind, she wanted to provide a place where Ukrainians could feel at home and interact with other people. The restaurant's name, Smachnogo, means "to have a tasty meal" in Ukrainian, and its walls are partly adorned in yellow and blue, the colors of Ukraine's national flag.

The restaurant has a cozy atmosphere that allows customers and staff to interact. It serves a fusion of Japanese food and Ukrainian cuisine, with dishes cooked by Ukrainian evacuees also served. Customers can read laminated notes introducing the staff and their thoughts on the ongoing war in their tables.

"While the restaurant is, of course, for customers, it is also a place that was created for the Ukrainian staff," Ezeo said, adding she wanted to support their mental and health



Takane Ezeo (second from left) and some of her staff at Smachnogo, a Tokyo restaurant where some Ukrainian evacuees work, on Feb. 2. KYODO

let them know they are "welcomed and supported by Japan."

Gylgalo, who is from Cherkasy, a city in central Ukraine, said it still breaks her heart when she recalls her journey to flee Ukraine around the time Russian forces occupied a nuclear complex in the country. "Time for me stopped on Feb. 24," she said.

But the former economics teacher said

that support from the staff and customers has helped her get through tough times, including the demands of learning Japanese and adjusting to work she was not accustomed to.

When she reads news about the travails of her homeland, "I don't feel as bad now as I felt before," said Gylgalo.

For other Ukrainian evacuees still searching for work, the Tokyo Employment Service

Takao Ogaki, director of the center, said their staff and Hello Work have put particular effort into helping Ukrainian evacuees. Currently, some companies specifically recruit them and are being accommodating toward their situations.

Given that language skills are a hurdle for most of them, the government is set to begin a six-month course to teach business-level Japanese and work culture to Ukrainian evacuees.

The center also helps them fill out resumes in the Japanese format and prepare for interviews.

An online survey conducted in November and December by the Nippon Foundation found that among the 750 Ukrainian evacuees who responded, 60.9% said they were unemployed.

Yulia Naumenko, 30, is among those who visited the center searching for work. Having been in Japan since March last year, she hopes to land a job using English, as she finds Japanese "hard."

Until September, she worked online as a manager in an outsourcing company. Following that, she got a scholarship offered in Japan to Ukrainian evacuees to learn about web development and pick up technical skills.

Her future remains uncertain amid the volatile situation back home. "I really don't know what my future will be. Even if the war ends and I go back, will my home be there? Will there still be jobs for me and my mother?"

Like Naumenko, Gylgalo eventually wants to return to Ukraine with her junior high school-age daughter and reunite with her husband and son, who remain in the country. But safety is an overwhelming concern.

Some of Gylgalo's colleagues at the restaurant have started considering staying in Japan for the foreseeable future.

Whatever their decision, Ezeo hopes that in the meantime, "the restaurant can be a catalyst in inspiring others to take some action in helping Ukrainian evacuees."

Son revives mountain trail to fulfill father's dying wish

RIKIU NISHIO
TOYAMA
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Kei Ito, who ruins a mountain villa in Toyama

After World War II, Ito's father became fascinated by the Karube River headwaters and wild natural scenery in the surrounding area and bought a run-down mountain lodge, which he later turned into Misusima-

volcano, and by around 1983 the path was near impassable.

Ito, who grew up going back and forth between his home in Tokyo and the Northern Alps, was a freshman in

His ambitious project created a stir on the internet. Nearly ¥13.6 million (\$103,000) was collected from close to 1,000 people, far exceeding the target amount. By October, he had completed three suspen-

