



BORSCHT AND PEROGIES

Leaving Ukrainian Village

BY ELISA SHOENBERGER • JANUARY 26, 2018



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The headline read: “[Why a 19th century neighborhood in Chicago was just named the hottest in the US for 2016.](#)”

That clinched it. We would not be able to buy a house in the neighborhood we had been living in for over five years. We were going to have to move elsewhere if we wanted to own a home.

My husband and I had been living together in in Ukrainian Village, a neighborhood in the West Town area of Chicago. It's a sleepy neighborhood due west of the famed Michigan Avenue or Magnificent Mile. It isn't easy to get to; the Blue Line misses it by over a mile in either direction. The only way in and out is through long bus or car rides. It's a quiet neighborhood, a little removed from the increasingly popular Wicker Park.

But it was our quiet neighborhood. It had been settled by Ukrainian immigrants at the turn of the century with many Ukrainian churches and restaurants. St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Cathedral and its 13 domes (one for each Apostle and Jesus Christ) is the heart of the neighborhood. We once came home at midnight to discover a Christmas processional. On Easter morning, we were awoken at 5 a.m. to a brass band and people on horseback. We loved it.

I had lived in Chicago my entire life, but Ukrainian Village truly felt like home.

In addition to the glorious churches, we had our favorite Ukrainian and Polish food establishments. We lived blocks away from Kasia's Deli, serving the finest borscht and a wondrous variety of perogies. Across the street was Ann's Bakery with delicious paczkis. (I always brought a box to work for Paczki Day.) These became staples in my diet.

But things weren't going to stay the same indefinitely. We had already moved once, to a larger apartment in the same neighborhood. Now we were only a half-mile from Kasia's and Ann's but it seemed like we were in different worlds. Houses were getting torn down and turned into massive modern condos. The discount shops of Chicago Avenue became empty shops and then boutiques and fitness clubs.

And then the I saw the article. Ukrainian Village had been discovered! Which meant the prices of houses (and rents) would shoot up. The market was skyrocketing because Ukrainian Village was safe, nice, and felt like a neighborhood. Exactly why we wanted to live there. If we wanted to stay, we'd have to get much better paying jobs, settle for a lower quality of living, or go into more debt. The options weren't looking good.

After several years of foot-dragging on my part, my husband convinced me it was time to consider owning a home. We found a reliable Realtor who did a bang-up job with listings. The very first listing he showed us was three blocks west of our apartment. It was a condo with less than 1,000 square feet, but it was in our price range. My husband and I knew within minutes of seeing the place that this would not do. It was a smart move on our Realtor's part because it really showed us what we could afford and what we would have to sacrifice. Space was critical to us.

After two outings with the Realtor, we quickly found a house that could work. It was located in the neighborhood of Avondale, another sleepy neighborhood next to the hot-shot cocktail land of Logan Square. The townhouse was in our price range and wouldn't require a huge mortgage. Plus it meant we could put more money down. It was also about \$20,000 more than the condo in Ukrainian Village — but that \$20,000 was a shockingly small price compared to what we were getting. In contrast to that tiny condo, this place was spacious with two decks. It had open spaces with great light and it had a garage. The first deck overlooked a park with a playground. But it was really far west. Farther than Ukrainian Village. And where would I get my borscht and perogies?

My husband pointed out that we were 10 minutes from the Blue Line stop, near the highway but not too near, and the neighborhood had both Polish and Mexico immigrants. There were places that would serve my precious soup and perogies, and I would also have access to so much Mexican food. Later I would discover a Korean supermarket.

With a deep breath, we decided to make the dive into a new neighborhood and the new world of homeownership. We made an offer within a day of seeing the place, had it accepted the following day, and closed about a month-and-a-half later. And then we moved in after two weeks.

It's been about six months and I've come to love our new home and the neighborhood. It was an adjustment. I had to learn that I had needed to budget more time to get work or saxophone practice because we were so far west. Cabs weren't something that I could easily find near my house. I missed all of my old haunts like my favorite restaurant or my friend's shop

around the corner. Wicker Park was just a short train ride away, but it wasn't the same.

But I've come to appreciate Avondale more and more. We do have delightful places to eat. Our local borscht seller, Kurowski's Sausage Factory, has barrels of pickles and herring — and a wall of sausages, of course. (Granted, the borscht had a tendency to sell out if we were too late in getting there.) Mexican food became my new comfort food.

At Halloween and Christmas, I was impressed by the staggering holiday displays. People went all out. Before Christmas, my husband and I took the dog out for a walk to see the lights. One house had massive inflatable characters and brightly colored trees turning on every floor of the house. In my not-biased opinion, the Avondale Christmas lights were the best neighborhood lights I had ever seen.

And then there were the two decks. When we moved in June, I spent the entire summer trying to use the outdoor decks as much as possible. There is nothing quite as glorious as drinking sparkling wine outside when it's slightly too hot.

I miss Ukrainian Village, to be sure. I miss the streets that I knew for five years. My food. My shops. But we wouldn't have been able to stay in Ukrainian Village, not with the real estate market the way it is now. Avondale made it possible for us to own a home; to explore new restaurants, make new memories, and drink wine on our very own deck. I'm still learning to love my neighborhood in the way I loved Ukie Village. I'll get there someday.

At least I still have my borscht.

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