



Sherith Israel-St. Mary's NEAT members celebrate with Kate and Alex.

GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS SOMETIMES THROUGH AN ATTORNEY

In travels that would have challenged Odysseus, Kateryna Holub and Oleksandr (Alex) Zemliachenko, two displaced Ukrainians originally from Kharkiv, arrived in San Francisco on May 1, 2022. Through the support of St. Mary's Nueva Esperanza Accompaniment Team (NEAT) partnership with Congregation Sherith Israel, Kate and Alex found an apartment and made San Francisco their new home.

Both Alex and Kate hold Ph.D.'s from Ukraine's National Aerospace University and work as IT specialists, and Alex has received letters of intent from Silicon Valley tech companies. In December 2022, Kate and Alex's *pro-bono* attorney (and St. Mary's parishioner) Phil Albert filed an application of over 500 pages for an O1-A visa that would allow Alex to work in the U.S. In March 2023 the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) approved that application--with a hitch. They would have to leave the country and have their passports stamped abroad in order to return to the United States.

In full trust, Alex and Kate flew to Europe as instructed and turned over their passports to the American Consulate in Frankfurt, Germany. The expected two-week response then turned into seven months. No matter what they did or who they asked, the Consulate was obdurate. Meanwhile, Phil Albert and the NEAT support team frantically called every Congressional office with which we had contact. Even they could not get the Consulate to act.

While stuck in Europe, Alex and Kate couldn't work or secure inexpensive, long-term housing. After originally staying in Germany, where their parents lived in exile, they eventually moved to Poland, where it was much cheaper. They also had intermittent stays in other countries and even secured a Portuguese visa, which allowed them to stay legally in the European Union while their American visas languished in Frankfurt.

Eventually Phil Albert initiated an action that was obvious only to him: He sued the State Department. Amazingly, what he predicted came true. The U.S. Attorney's Office was not about to waste time—and money—defending the indefensible in court. As the due date approached for the U.S. Attorney's answer to the lawsuit, the Consulate started a flurry of activity, changing the status of the visas to "Approved" and asking Alex and Kate to hurry to Frankfurt for their stamps. On October 17th, parishioners Greer Hopkins and David Crosson paced nervously for two hours at SFO until Kate and Alex finally walked through the gate out of customs, officially and legally "home."

Attorneys are not often accused of doing God's work. But, in this case, there is no question that without Phil Albert's wisdom and pure moxie, this promising young couple, who had already lost their home through war in Ukraine and whose families have been displaced and constantly on the move throughout Europe, would still be stranded and stateless because of bureaucratic complacency. Matthew's Gospel quotes Jesus explicitly: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." There is no question that God's work is being done here . . . even through an attorney.