

EXCLUSIVE

U.S. NEWS

'Even in Russia, they don't treat children like this': A family's nightmare in ICE detention

A Russian couple and their children sought asylum in the U.S. In a Texas detention center, they say they endured worms in the food and hourslong waits for medicine.



— Nikita and Oksana take a selfie with their children at Red Square in Moscow before fleeing Russia in 2024. Courtesy of family

Feb. 13, 2026, 9:18 AM AKST

By Mike Hixenbaugh

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Nikita and his wife, Oksana, fled Russia in desperation two years ago, believing America was their only hope of giving their three children a life free of fear and oppression.



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Instead, those children are growing up behind the razor-wire fences of a South Texas detention center, among hundreds of other families swept up in President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown.

Over their four months at the Dilley Immigration Processing Center – a [remote, prisonlike facility](#) that has drawn mounting scrutiny over what human rights advocates [describe as inhumane conditions](#) – Nikita and Oksana say their children have endured indignities they never imagined possible in the United States.

Worms in their food. Guards shouting orders and snatching toys from small hands. Restless nights under fluorescent lights that never fully go dark. Hours in line for a single pill.

“We left one tyranny and came to another kind of tyranny,” Nikita said in Russian. “Even in Russia, they don't treat children like this.”

NBC News spoke with the family over Zoom this week and reviewed their lawyer's request for their release, as well as dozens of pages of medical records. For an hour and a half on the video call, Nikita, an engineer, and Oksana, a nurse, described how their months at Dilley have worn down their children – physically, emotionally and academically. Their two oldest sat behind them in a drab conference room, doodling or staring blankly at the screen. The preschooler wandered the room, swinging a thin plastic rod from a set of window blinds like a toy sword.

The couple asked to be identified only by their first names because they fear retaliation if deported back to Russia, where Nikita says he spoke out against President Vladimir Putin's regime.



— Nikita, left, and Oksana hoped their family would find safety in the United States. *Courtesy of family*

Their story offers a glimpse of what children are enduring in prolonged confinement as the Trump administration expands family detention.

Kirill, 13, who once taught himself to play piano and attended music school, spends most days withdrawn, waking at night with anxiety and panic attacks, his parents said.

Konstantin, 4, a sociable boy, is often frightened by loud noises and guards, his parents said. He once cried for hours after a small toy airplane was confiscated.

Kamilla, 12 – a dancer who loved to perform – now has partial hearing loss in one ear after what her parents say was a poorly treated infection. For weeks, she counted down the days until her birthday, telling NBC News she had only one wish.

“To get out of here,” she said.

On Monday, the family's attorney, Elora Mukherjee, filed a request for their immediate release on medical grounds. In the letter, Mukherjee, a Columbia Law School professor and director of its Immigrants' Rights Clinic, wrote that the children had been detained for more than 120 days, more than six times the 20-day limit set in a [federal court agreement governing the detention of minors](#). She argued that their health has deteriorated as a result.

"Kamilla should not be spending her birthday in prison," Mukherjee said. "She has done nothing wrong."

In a statement, the Department of Homeland Security defended holding the family while their asylum case is pending. It said the Dilley facility "is retrofitted for families" to ensure children's well-being and accused the media of "peddling hoaxes" about poor conditions in immigrant detention centers.

"The Trump administration is not going to ignore the rule of law or release unvetted illegal aliens into the country," the statement said. "All of their claims will be heard by an immigration judge and they will receive full due process."

CoreCivic, the company that operates Dilley under a federal contract, has deferred questions about the facility to DHS and said in statements that the health and safety of detainees is its top priority.

The family's detention comes as Trump immigration officials revive and expand large-scale family confinement. Past presidents used family detention in limited circumstances, and the Biden administration largely halted the practice, releasing most asylum-seeking families while their cases moved forward. Under Trump, authorities are sending families to Dilley in significant numbers and reportedly holding them for weeks or months.

Federal judge orders release of 5-year-old boy from detention facility

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The facility drew widespread national attention last month after a photograph of [5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos](#), wearing a blue bunny hat as he was led away by officers, spread online, renewing concerns about conditions inside Dilley. Since last spring, lawyers and advocates have complained of inadequate medical care, contaminated food and minimal schooling for children held there.

DHS has said family detention is necessary to keep families together while it works to deport them.

Nikita and Oksana's journey to Dilley began in October. After fleeing Russia in 2024 and spending more than a year in Mexico trying to determine the best path to safety in the U.S., Nikita drove his family to the Otay Mesa port of entry and requested asylum, telling an agent that his activism against the Russian government had put them at risk. An asylum officer later found the family had a credible fear of persecution, according to Mukherjee. But rather than being released into the U.S. while their case moved forward, they were taken into custody.

After five days in frigid federal holding cells – where the family says the children slept under foil blankets on thin mats – they were transferred to Dilley, expecting to wait there for a couple weeks at most.

Their plight reflects what advocates describe as an impossible choice facing many Russian asylum-seekers. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, anti-war activists, online critics and military draft resisters fled the country by the tens of thousands, fearing imprisonment or worse. With Europe largely closed to Russian nationals, many turned to the U.S. southern border as one of the few remaining paths to protection, believing America would be "a safe harbor for those who strive for freedom and democracy," said Dmitry Valuev, president of Russian America for Democracy in Russia, a group that has advocated for Russians trapped in U.S. immigration centers.

Instead, Valuev said, some now find themselves detained indefinitely.

"And they don't understand what for, because they are not criminals," Valuev said. "They came to the United States to contribute to society, to their new home. They don't want to become illegal immigrants. They want to obey the law."

Inside Dilley, Nikita and Oksana said, the days blur together.



— The Trump administration reopened the Dilley Immigration Processing Center, shown here in 2019.

Eric Gay / AP file

They wake at 6 a.m. for morning routines and breakfast. After that, there is little to do. Time is measured in lines – lines for food, the medical window and the library.

The children compete for markers. Each child can have only two at a time, the couple said, and parents must show their IDs to borrow them. While one child draws, others must wait. In the library, they said, there are only four children's books in Russian: "The Wizard of the Emerald City," "Alice in Wonderland," "Pushkin's Fairy Tales" and poems by Korney Chukovsky. With that limited selection and little education beyond word searches, the children have effectively stopped reading.

If adults or children manage to get computer time, it is tightly restricted. Most websites are blocked. Email is limited. News is often inaccessible. YouTube has been banned.

When someone falls ill, the daily routine can become grueling. Nikita and Oksana described standing outside for hours – sometimes in rain, wind or cold – waiting for a worker to dispense medicine. Before leaving, they said, children are required to open their mouths so staff can confirm the medication has been swallowed.

"This place is not intended for the prolonged stay of children," Oksana said.

Nikita nodded.

"Every day you think it could not be worse," he said. "And then the next day something else happens."

Food is among the biggest struggles, they said, echoing complaints registered in dozens of sworn declarations filed in federal court on behalf of detained parents and children.

Meals are greasy, spicy and repetitive, the couple said – the same limited options for adults and children alike. The couple described finding mold and worms in vegetables. After one such incident, they said, several children vomited.

On Nov. 16, a mental health counselor recorded in Kamilla's medical records that her mother reported the girl had lost her appetite after being "served food that contained worms."

A week later, the couple said, children were told to gather in the gym for what they believed would be a Thanksgiving celebration. Excitement spread as families saw tables set with turkey, sandwiches, pastries and pies, they said. The children waited expectantly. But when a parent

asked when the celebration would begin, Oksana said, staff told them the holiday meal was for employees, not detainees.

The children, she said, watched despondently as the feast was packed away.

DHS didn't comment on the alleged incident but said in the statement that dieticians evaluate meals served at Dilley to ensure quality.

Sometimes workers make light of their misery, Nikita said. He recalled showing an officer a piece of moldy cabbage. The guard, he said, put it in his mouth and declared it fine – before gagging and spitting it out.

Another time, when Nikita asked why his family was being held beyond the 20-day limit, he said a guard told him the long-standing federal settlement setting minimum standards for detaining immigrant children had been overturned. Only later did he learn that wasn't true.

“In Russia, police tell us, ‘We are the law, as we say goes,’” Nikita said. “We came here, and they tell us exactly the same thing.”

Kamilla's earache and hearing troubles have been among their biggest concerns.

The girl had a history of right ear blockages and infections, Oksana reported, but inside Dilley, she said, it was far harder to treat. In November, she brought Kamilla to the medical room complaining of discomfort and fever. The pain worsened at night and her daughter's ear eventually began oozing pus, Oksana said. She said they returned again and again to the medical room, seeking help.



— Detainees at the Dilley Immigration Processing Center wave signs during a demonstration on Jan. 24.

Brenda Bazán / AP

Some of those visits are documented in medical records provided to the family and reviewed by NBC News. The forms, which at times identify Kamilla as an “inmate,” note redness and irritation in her right ear and prescriptions for drops and antibiotics. But Oksana said the records are incomplete and omit numerous visits as she requested specialized care but only saw nurses and nurse practitioners.

The girl’s pain persisted for weeks, she said.

Her recovery was complicated by the routine obstacles that govern all aspects of life at Dilley. When Kamilla’s earache flared or fever spiked, her mother said, they had to wait outside for hours in the “pill line” for her medicine.

After Oksana cut the top off an undersized beanie to fashion a headband to shield her daughter’s inflamed ear from the biting wind, she said workers repeatedly removed it, calling it prohibited contraband. Each time, Kamilla cried.

During one medical visit, on Dec. 15, Oksana said she pleaded with a nurse to grant her daughter special permission to wear the modified beanie. The nurse said the makeshift headband was not permitted “for safety reasons,” the records show, and instead offered to prescribe more ear drops and a steroid.

Frustrated and unwilling to continue waiting in the outdoor line for each dose of medicine, Oksana said she refused the treatment. The family eventually stopped visiting the clinic altogether, she said, instead treating Kamilla’s pain with ibuprofen purchased at the commissary.

The earache has faded, Oksana said. The partial hearing loss remains.

In a statement, DHS noted the medications provided to Kamilla and her mother’s refusal of additional medicines. The agency said it provides “comprehensive medical care from the moment an alien enters ICE custody.”



— A self-portrait Kamilla made while her parents spoke to NBC News. Courtesy of family

As her parents spoke over Zoom on Wednesday, Kamilla sat behind them, quietly drawing. She was sketching herself near the lone tree that stands on the detention center's grounds, butterflies fluttering around it – one of the few places, her mother said, where children sometimes see something alive and colorful.

The next day would be her 12th birthday.

There would be no cake. No presents. No party with friends.

Instead, on their 131st day in federal custody, her parents planned to buy her a pack of M&Ms – among the only sweets available – and pray that their daughter's birthday wish for freedom might come true.



Mike Hixenbaugh

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