

The unfathomable Ukraine refugee crisis

By Tamar Jacoby

March 26, 2022



LUBLIN, POLAND — President Biden’s announcement this week that the United States will accept 100,000 Ukrainian refugees is an important first step. But even that number, large as it is in comparison to recent U.S. refugee quotas, may not be enough in the long run.

What we’re witnessing in Europe isn’t just another refugee crisis. The exodus of Ukrainians is on track to produce one of the great diasporas of history.

Some 10 million Ukrainians have been displaced by Russian bombardment, and 3.6 million of them have fled Ukraine. To understand the magnitude, compare that to 19th-century Ireland. Between 1840 and 1900, 6 million people left Ireland and scattered around the world. If the trends of the last month hold up, it won’t take long for the Ukrainian diaspora to rival or even exceed the Irish diaspora.

Compelled to try to help in whatever way I could, I flew to Warsaw last week. Although I’d been told that many Ukrainians were sleeping in the train station, nothing could have prepared me for what I found there: dozens, maybe scores, of people lying on makeshift mats and benches. There were children scampering playfully among the mattresses. But many of the adults, most of them women — fighting-age men are not allowed to leave Ukraine — had a different look: dazed and often staring into space, their minds clearly elsewhere.

What I saw the next day helped me understand why. I traveled with a group of Jewish organizational leaders to visit a refugee center in the city of Lublin, several hours closer to the border. Here too, all the refugees were women and children or older men, and their minds were indeed elsewhere — clearly still reliving the horror they had experienced in Ukraine.

The two elderly couples in the group we met with managed to mask their emotions with formal manners. Not so the other women, most in their 40s and early 50s. One wept quietly throughout our meeting; others worked to suppress welling tears. One woman who gave her name as Irina started by saying she couldn't talk about the war. It was too painful, she said, and she was in "bad shape psychologically." But then her story spilled out, agonizing detail after detail.

All the refugees were women and children or older men, and their minds were elsewhere — still reliving the horror they had experienced in Ukraine.

At home in Kyiv when the bombardment started, she decided to seek shelter in a basement. But when she and her 15-year-old daughter went out into the street, they found themselves caught in a crowd — "children, parents, grandparents, running from basement to basement with their suitcases. But all the public shelters were locked."

Finally, someone broke a lock, and the group of more than a hundred people collapsed in a few dark rooms, no electricity, no running water, no toilets and, on the first crowded night, not enough room to stretch out on the floor.

When Irina broke off, unable to continue, others in the room picked up the collective story. One man's wife had jumped from a burning building with nothing but her cell phone. A middle-aged woman had traveled 10 hours to reach the border. Several had waited for more than a day in the freezing cold to cross into Poland.

The pain in the room seemed almost unbearable when Irina's daughter Sofia spoke up quietly. She was an aspiring artist, an animator, and had brought her paints with her in the small suitcase she carried across the border. For the first week in the Lublin shelter, she didn't touch them, her mother said; she could do little but eat and sleep. But then, the dam broke, and Sofia began to draw again. Now, she had an illustration to show us.

"It's a child," the solemn teenager said, "hugging a teddy bear. The children want to play and laugh, like ordinary children, and they don't understand why they can't. But because they don't understand the war, they're also hopeful — these lines are waves of hope and energy."

Poland has opened its arms to Ukrainian refugees and is providing a generous array of social benefits. The EU has waived restrictions on international travel and the right to work, and several women in the group mentioned cities where they had friends or relatives: Vienna, Copenhagen, Tel Aviv. Yet as staff at the Lublin shelter explained, "Everyone has left something behind — a husband, a brother, an uncle, elderly parents, a home they pray is still standing. People want to stay close to the border."

How many will try to stay in Poland? How many will disperse throughout the world? Will they ever be able to return to Ukraine? No one was sure. The only thing that seemed certain was that they were starting over. "You have no idea what it's like at my age," one woman explained. "I'm 55. I've lost everything. Now I must start from scratch in a new country."

Jacoby is president of Opportunity America, a nonprofit organization.

<https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-ukraine-refugee-crisis-20220326-uutehgsy5rb3bopkxc4wixu3fu-story.html>