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The Volunteers Who Rushed to Help Ukrainians

By Tamar Jacoby
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I'm not sure what gave me the idea. It might have been a news story about people volunteering to fight in Ukraine or driving to the border to pick up refugees. But once the seed was planted, there was little question in my mind. For reasons I'm still not sure I understand, I had to put my life in Washington, D.C., on hold and go to Poland. I had to try to help.

It wasn't easy to find a spot to volunteer, somewhere I could be useful. But now that I've made it to Krakow, I'm discovering a world of other people like me—international volunteers and Poles from all walks of life who feel compelled to pitch in where they can.

Tara Flynn, 43, took a few weeks off from her job at a London financial firm and traveled by herself to the border, where I found her serving grilled cheese sandwiches to hungry refugees walking out of Ukraine. Camilla Cabral, 25, is a Portuguese nurse who had a few weeks between jobs and wanted to "do some good." When I met her, she was helping transients at the train station in Przemyśl, about 10 miles from the frontier. Krakow residents Adam and Iwona Reichardt welcomed five homeless women and children—relatives of Ukrainian colleagues—into their apartment.

All the big international humanitarian organizations have a presence in the border region: the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration,

national and international Red Cross groups, the Jewish Federations of North America, CARE, Save the Children and many others. But most of these big NGOs are relying on professional staff, not volunteers, and many are working together with Polish groups rather than setting up operations of their own.

People from the U.S., Europe and elsewhere have felt compelled to travel to Poland to help refugees traumatized by the war.

More striking and by all accounts unique to this war are the newer players. Some, like chef Jose Andres's World Central Kitchen, are global in scope but nimbler and more entrepreneurial than many traditional NGOs. Others are small, existing charities, Polish and non-Polish, that have repurposed themselves to serve refugees rather than local residents. Still others are informal networks that have emerged out of nowhere with no organizational leadership—spontaneous, ad hoc groups that coordinate by instant messaging to arrange evacuations and deliver supplies into Ukraine.

Bystanders from around the world—people who could have sympathized from afar and gone on with their lives—have instead raced to help the victims of Russian aggression in Ukraine. The challenge: it isn't easy to help effectively. Good intentions don't always produce results, and most of the best operations in Poland remain works in progress, constantly improvising and adjusting to serve people better.

"Unlike the big groups, I can't take three weeks to do an assessment of local needs," Mr. Andres says. "I just show up and feed people." World Central Kitchen is ubiquitous in the region—usually a tent with a half dozen volunteers ladling soup or serving coffee. In just six weeks, according to Mr. Andres, the group has found ways to serve 300,000 hot meals a day at hundreds of locations on the border and inside Ukraine.

The Jewish Community Center in Krakow, where I've been volunteering, interviewing refugees to identify their needs, was once devoted to rebuilding Jewish life destroyed by the Holocaust. But when the war broke out, the center put those activities on hold and arranged a raft of services for Ukrainians, Jewish and non-Jewish. There is child care for transient families—most of the refugees are women and children—also Polish language classes, temporary housing and a "distribution center" where people pick up food and clothing donated by well-wishers around the world.

The center's executive director Jonathan Ornstein says he's had scores of offers from strangers eager to volunteer—many more than he can accommodate, even serving over a thousand refugees a day. "I've been stunned," he reflected. "I didn't expect this outpouring of care and love." His biggest needs are for volunteers who speak Russian or Ukrainian, have some experience providing emergency services or can help tell the story of what's happening in the border region.

But help comes in unexpected forms, and what's important, he says, is responding creatively. One day, it's a man from England with a van full of clothes and toys who shows up at the front gate and starts unloading boxes. The next week it's an offer from someone local to use an uninhabited palace on the outskirts of Krakow. What the JCC provides are connections—for example, hatching a plan to house a group of orphans in the palace and enlisting a volunteer with friends in high places to smooth the children's passage out of Ukraine.

The ad hoc Polish volunteer group Letjaha—it means “flying squirrel” in Ukrainian—is even more agile. Members came together spontaneously in Krakow in the first days of the war and organized a convoy to pick up refugees at the border. Friends recruited friends. Someone who owned a restaurant found people to cook soup. Someone else canvassed the network and produced a list of empty apartments. By 8 p.m. on the third day of the war, 27 cars were on the road heading for the border crossing at Hrebenne.

Informal networks have emerged out of nowhere—spontaneous, ad hoc groups that arrange evacuations and deliver supplies into Ukraine.

The first night was chaotic. “We didn’t know what we didn’t know,” explains Karolina Fedyk, a postdoctoral psychology student who helped jump-start the network. By the time the volunteers arrived at an improvised shelter in Hrebenne, many of the women and children were too tired or frightened to travel further, and half the cars returned empty. But the group learned and adjusted. It now mobilizes weekly convoys, delivers medical supplies in Ukraine, has evacuated some 600 refugees and is providing housing in Krakow—all organized by instant messaging and with no formal leadership.

Letjaha isn’t unique. I’ve encountered more than a half dozen similar ad hoc networks: spontaneous, informal, built on trust—sometimes more than a hundred members who know each other or know of each other—and enabled by the new technology of instant messaging. Most of them operate 24/7. Some have never met in person. Mr. Andres calls them “random people out of nowhere” and says they are the “unsung heroes” of the relief effort.

The question many of these groups face now: do they need more formal structure or professional staff—a financial entity to process donations or leadership to ensure continuity?

Justin Riley, 37, an event organizer originally from Lawrence, Kansas, has been helping to manage a giant refugee center in an abandoned supermarket outside Przemysl. Now serving 2,000 to 3,000 transients a night, it too was originally organized by volunteers. People showed up spontaneously and took on whatever tasks they felt they could handle, from setting up cots and cleaning floors to supervising crews and managing the facility.

After more than a month of freestyle staffing and coordination, the municipality is taking over, and volunteers like Mr. Riley have mixed feelings. “The rules change every day here,” he explains, “depending on which volunteer manager is making decisions, and that can be inefficient. But will the city be as responsive as our decentralized collective?”

What difference will this volunteer work make? You touch only a few people at a time. Some kinds of aid are clearly more needed than others. “It isn’t always easy to know how to help,” says Mr. Ornstein. “But every little bit we put into the pot of good makes some difference. You never know what will come out of it.”

Ms. Jacoby is the president of Opportunity America, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group working to promote economic mobility.

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