DISPLACED

THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Entering the third month of the war in Ukraine, more than 11 million people – one quarter of the Ukrainian population – have fled their homes. According to the UN, 5.5 million have left Ukraine, with more than 3 million going to Poland alone.

Who are Ukrainian refugees? What was their experience of the war – the Russian invasion, the occupation, the ordeal of getting out of Ukraine? What are their plans for the future?

In spring 2022, Tamar Jacoby conducted in-depth interviews with 35 refugees who arrived in Krakow in the first months of the war. These are three of their stories. The finished project will include sketches of all 35 interviewees.

VALERY

Valery, 48, came home to his apartment in Bucha in the early morning hours of February 24, expecting a day off after three nights on call as an HVAC technician. Instead, he watched from his living room window as helicopters circled and bombs fell on the nearby airfield in Hostomel. He considered his options, and none looked good. But one thing was clear: he had to evacuate his wife. Partially paralyzed and epileptic since suffering a stroke a few years before, she would not survive in an occupied city.

Valery's first instinct was to drive to his weekend cottage. But things were even worse there, closer to Belarus. Although he boarded up the windows, constant bombardments sent shards of glass into the house, forcing him and his friends to huddle under the kitchen table. A passing tank took a shot at his car, and when Valery went outside to investigate, a soldier shot at him. He knew he had to leave when an explosion blasted a hole in the roof, but he had no idea where to go or where he might find safety.

He and six others squeezed into someone's car and drove for eight hours, often under heavy bombardment. He tried calling a friend in Rivne, but the friend's apartment was already filled with displaced people. Volunteers hosted him and his wife one night; other strangers offered food. At the Polish border, he abandoned his car and walked, pushing his wife's wheelchair, and once they passed the checkpoints, they were surrounded by volunteers who put them on a bus to Krakow.

He had no idea where to look for help in Poland, but the JCC found him – a volunteer noticed the handicapped woman and her husband sleeping on cots in a big, crowded reception center. Valery jumped at the offer of a private hotel room. There was warm food and someone to call and, in a few days, an appointment with a doctor. Then, after three weeks in the hotel, the JCC offered him an apartment, along with continued meals and medical support.

Nothing is easy: as a foreigner, Valery doesn't know what he doesn't know, and he struggles with little things like topping up the SIM card on his cell phone. His biggest need: if he had a caregiver for just a few hours a day, he could find a job as a technician and start paying his own way.

A calm, patient man with a philosophical bent, he's trying to make sense of what has happened to him since the invasion. He lost both his parents in the year before the war and now feels they were lucky – spared what might have turned out to be far more difficult deaths. Friends tell him that the village where he sheltered has been completely destroyed – he and his wife got out just in time. He worries about the daughter and granddaughter he left inside Ukraine. But he sees no point in speculating about the future. "I don't know what's going to happen today, or tomorrow, or even this evening," he says matter-of-factly. "There's nothing to do but keep going."

SOLOMIYA

Unlike many Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion, Solomiya, 32, and her mother Maria, 62, were more eager to talk about the past than the present.

Solomiya's grandfather, Grigory, had told the story on his deathbed: how he and other residents of Peremyshlyany, a village in the Lviv region, had hidden Jewish women and children in the basement of a monastery, building a concealed room behind a wall and saving them from the Holocaust.

Solomiya and her mother didn't tell the JCC about this history when they arrived in Krakow seeking humanitarian help – they didn't want to "boast," they said, or ask for special favors. But when given a chance to talk about themselves, the story came tumbling out, bringing tears to Maria's eyes, perhaps because of the parallels to her circumstances.

The family's own escape had not been easy. Solomiya and her husband decided to leave on the first day of the war and drove three days to the Polish border – a drive that should have taken about two hours. The bumper-to-bumper traffic, the endless checkpoints, the hourslong wait at the frontier were all frustrating. But Solomiya's biggest challenges were feeding Mark, eight months old, and calming Yustyna, going on 4.

One day, Yustyna produced a drawing: bright patches of red on an otherwise empty page, and Solomiya complimented her on the pretty flowers. "Those aren't flowers," the child shot back. "That's blood." Now Solomiya tries not to talk about the war in front of the children.

In Krakow, the family found lodging on Facebook – a Polish volunteer willing to house them for a month. At the end of the month, they approached the JCC and within days were offered a week in a hotel room. When that week was over, they asked for another, still never mentioning Grigory's story or the year Maria spent in Israel working for the family of a woman who had escaped from Peremyshlyany.

Meanwhile, Solomiya lost no time making plans for the future. When she learned about the UK "Homes for Ukraine" program, she used social media to find a British sponsor willing to house the family in London. It took nearly a month for visas to come through, an agonizing wait but lightning speed for an immigration agency, and Solomiya had no doubts that she was making the right decision.

"Of course, I'd like to go home," she said. "But no one knows when that will happen. It's hard to find a job here – there are so many Ukrainians – and I want to work. I'm a qualified dentist. I can work right away in London. I want to provide for my family and get on with my life."

LYSENKO & LEWADA FAMILIES

None of the women in the Lysenko and Lewada families wanted to leave the village of Orly, just 10 miles from the border of the Russian puppet state, Donetsk. The women had experienced the last wave of fighting in eastern Ukraine, in 2014, and they felt they could survive another round.

This year, it took weeks for the Russian assault to reach Orly. There was a curfew and occasional air raid sirens. But the war seemed far away, and the women – Valentina, 58, and her daughter, Yulia, 37, plus Valya, 63, and her daughter, Natasha, 37 – were determined to stay with their men.

Things began to change in mid-March, three weeks into the war: first, planes flying over the village, then the deafening sound of explosions in a nearby town. Finally, a bomb fell directly on Orly. Soon there were regular bombardments, and the women spent their days running back and forth to a makeshift shelter several blocks from their homes. Yulia says they still hoped to hold out, but their husbands insisted they head west.

The intercity trains from Donetsk were packed beyond capacity, so the two families – four adults and seven children – boarded a crowded suburban train and traveled more than 26 hours to the Polish border. There, they were met by a bus paid for by the JCC, and when the driver learned they had no place to stay in Krakow, the JCC offered a hotel room.

By mid-April, the families were heading into their second week of free lodging: four rooms with breakfast, supplemented by groceries available at the JCC.

The women spoke to their husbands every day, usually several times a day. All the men were in the Territorial Defense militia. Two of the women still had apps on their phones that sounded whenever there was a bombing alert in Orly. “It’s constant now,” Yulia explained, “all day, all night. And the town is full of refugees from Donetsk.”

Still, the women said, they asked their husbands every day, “Can we come home now?” And every day, the menfolk told them, “No – it’s still too dangerous. You have to wait.”

The women said they were looking for more permanent housing in Krakow, and all insisted they wanted to work. But it was clear their sights were still fixed on returning to Orly. Even as the fighting intensified in eastern Ukraine, they were convinced they would be able to go back in a couple of weeks.