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THE UKRAINIAN
REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Interviews with 45 refugees
at JCC Krakow

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Introduction

I'm still not sure what inspired me to go. But the more I read about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the more I wondered how I could help, and after a few weeks, for reasons I still don't fully understand, I was on a plane to Warsaw. I thought I'd volunteer at a humanitarian aid organization, maybe ladle soup or unpack boxes—I was eager to plug in wherever I could and do whatever was needed.

When I arrived in Kraków in March 2022, Poland felt if not quite like a country at war, certainly a nation poised to support a war—an essential rear base and refuge for Ukrainians. The trains and train stations were filled with evacuees, mostly women and children, often carrying nothing but backpacks or plastic shopping bags. Volunteers in dayglow vests manned help points in train stations, bus depots, airports, malls, even some hotels that had put ordinary business on hold to welcome fleeing Ukrainians.

There were blue and yellow flags everywhere and public signage, including big banners on government buildings, welcoming the exiles in several languages. Even local shopkeepers were stepping up. One convenience store near my flat in Kraków had posted a sign on a shopping cart near the exit: “Please take an item from your bag to help feed our Ukrainian visitors.”

Meanwhile, the numbers grew—an unrelenting flow out of war-torn Ukraine. By March 7, after just 10 days of war, more than one million Ukrainians had crossed the border into Poland. By March 18, the total was two million; by late April, nearly three million.

By then, more than 10 million Ukrainians had been driven from their homes. More than five million had left Ukraine for somewhere in Europe. And although some were starting to return to Ukraine, when this book went to press in September 2022, some estimates suggested there were still more than two million Ukrainian refugees in Poland—on top of some 1.3 million Ukrainian economic

migrants who were already living and working in Poland before the Russian invasion.

No one knew exactly how to keep count of those who appeared to be settling in Kraków and other Polish cities. One conventional method looked at the number of Ukrainian refugees who registered with municipal authorities to receive government benefits. Another approach, which generated much larger numbers, aggregated information from cell phones with settings that indicated the users might be Ukrainian, capturing both prewar economic migrants and recent refugees.

In the Kraków metro area, by late summer, the low estimate suggested 52,000 refugees in a region with nearly one million permanent residents. The cell phone approach posited two or three times that many—a total of 180,000 Ukrainians, or 19 percent of the population.

The 35 interviews that gave rise to this book were conducted over a five-week period from late March through late April. By then, just over a month into the war, Kraków had evolved into a hive of reception and resettlement activity.

A welter of nonprofit organizations had emerged out of nowhere to provide humanitarian assistance—transport, food, shelter, medicine and other essentials. Long lines of Ukrainians, mostly women and children, waited outside help distribution points scattered around the city: in storefronts, church basements, empty supermarkets and the region's giant sports stadium, the Tauron Arena.

Meanwhile, a second stream of visitors, mostly from Europe and North America, was arriving with supplies—huge duffel bags and sometimes truckloads of overcoats, sweaters, blankets, toys and other necessities like diapers and hygienic supplies—for these nonprofits to pass on to needy Ukrainians.

In contrast to some neighboring countries, the Polish government provided relatively little cash assistance for the newcomers. But merely by crossing the frontier, Ukrainians earned the right to work in Poland and send their children to school. And regional authorities

offered a small subsidy to local residents who opened their homes to refugees, encouraging what by all accounts was an outpouring of help, with thousands of residents in Kraków alone stepping up to host a foreigner, often someone they had never met.

The Jewish Community Centre of Krakow emerged early as a critical node in this helping network. Once devoted to rebuilding Jewish life in the shadow of the Holocaust, when the war broke out, the JCC put those activities on hold and arranged a raft of services for Ukrainians, Jewish and non-Jewish.

There was temporary housing, childcare for transient families, psychological help for those who had been traumatized by their experience and a popular distribution center manned by volunteers from around the world. By the time I arrived, just a month after the Russian invasion, the center was serving more than 1,000 refugees a day.

The idea of interviewing a few of them emerged first as a way to help the JCC provide better services. What exactly did the newcomers need, and what weren't they getting at other help distribution points? JCC staff also thought short write-ups could be useful in explaining to friends and supporters abroad how the center had pivoted, expanding its mission to include humanitarian aid.

But after a few conversations, I began to wonder if their true value might be for the Ukrainians being interviewed. People seemed to welcome the chance to tell their stories—to make sense of what they had been through and put it in some perspective by describing it to someone who hadn't been there.

Altogether, some 45 adults participated in 35 interview sessions. The youngest were university students; the oldest was an 86-year-old Holocaust survivor from Dnipro. Most but not all were women—with a few exceptions, fighting-age men were not allowed to leave Ukraine in those months.

They came from every stratum of Ukrainian society: a couple of cleaning ladies and skilled tradesmen, but also accountants, entrepreneurs, several engineers and a university professor. Some lived

in places where the war was raging—nonstop shelling, tanks in the streets, infantry firefights within earshot and the wholesale destruction of residential apartment buildings. Others, often no less traumatized, had traveled from cities largely untouched by fighting.

Every story in the book is unique—one individual's painful journey. But together, they add up to a collective portrait of the Ukrainian refugee experience—its arc, its stages, the critical decision points and a common set of challenges that emerged again and again from the interviews.

What made you decide to leave Ukraine? How did you get to the border? What difficulties did you face in crossing the frontier? Why did you come to Kraków? Who, if anyone, helped you get your bearings in the city?

Perhaps most important, the most challenging question for many refugees: what lies ahead? Do you plan to return to Ukraine? Might you stay in Poland when the war is over? Or are you thinking of going further, deeper into Europe or beyond?

It wasn't easy to listen to their stories. The pain and loss they had experienced sometimes seemed beyond comprehending. Many had given up their jobs. Others had seen their homes destroyed. A few had lost friends and family members. And almost everyone had left someone they loved behind in Ukraine—husbands, boyfriends, brothers, elderly parents or adult children.

Less tangible but just as trying for many was a sense that they had somehow surrendered their identity—that not just their lives but their life potential had been shattered by the war. And then, for everyone, there was the weight of the uncertain future. Will I ever be able to go home? Will I see my family again? Is this just an interlude, a temporary stay abroad? Or am I starting a new life—starting over from scratch?

Still, in the end, what came across most powerfully, for all this pain, was the refugees' strength—their determination and resilience and the sacrifices they were willing to make for their country and their loved ones.

The parents who had spared nothing to bring their disabled child to safety, the engineers and other professionals willing to work as cooks and cleaners if that's what it took to feed their families, the children whose bravery and optimism helped sustain their frightened parents: these weren't victims—they were fighters. And their fighting spirit wasn't that different from the spirit that other Ukrainians, just a few hundred miles away, were showing on the battlefield.

The months and years ahead will not be easy for many of these refugees. Who knows when the war will end or if Ukraine will emerge victorious? What will be left of the country by then, and how long will it take to rebuild?

Although much is beyond the refugees' control, the decisions they make will be momentous, and not just for them. Whether they return home or remain in Europe will have historic consequences for the continent and the future of Ukraine.

But in the present moment, all of that seemed fuzzy and far away for most of the Ukrainians I interviewed. The challenge now was just surviving. "I don't know what's going to happen today or tomorrow or even this evening," one man told me matter-of-factly. "There's nothing to do but keep going."