

DISPLA CED

THE UKRAINIAN
REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Interviews with 45 refugees
at JCC Krakow

Tamar Jacoby

VALERY

Bucha

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 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 Valery 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 Kraków.

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 is 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.”