

At the Gates to Hell

We stood, like modern-day Virgil and Beatrice, at the border crossing from Lviv into Poland to greet a bus that disgorged refugees from Kharkiv. As in the early days of the Ukrainian evacuation, it was mostly women - mothers and grandmothers - with broods of children plus a smattering of old men (and a lot of pets).

But this group was markedly different: First, they were from eastern rather than western Ukraine, and were palpably exhausted and traumatized. We later learned that they were victims of two months of Russian shelling of Kharkiv who had sheltered in underground bunkers until just about everything in their lives above ground was destroyed - and they had no option but to make the arduous and dangerous exodus to Poland.

Next, we noticed more old, frail and disabled refugees than among earlier arrivals. In the first stage of crisis, the initial round of evacuees was disproportionately younger, healthier, middle-class and mobile. They could choose to leave albeit sorrowfully (and some have since chosen to return). In contrast, we were now greeting people who had been compelled to leave. The journey had been much harder on them due to their limitations and their future was more fraught.

Once they cleared immigration, we greeted them warmly. "We" comprised a coalition of aid groups including World Central Kitchen, Polish Humanitarian Action (aka PAH, a Polish overseas humanitarian group that had rushed home for this emergency) and CARE (where I chair the board).

The first item of interest to the refugees was a SIM card and a charge for their phones so they could reach out to loved ones at home. It turns out that even refugee crises are tech-enabled these days (by the way, that the wireless service continues to operate in Ukraine is itself remarkable). Next we plied them with food and drink, warm clothing, toys for the children, nutrition for their pets, hygiene products and access to medical treatment (there is mercifully little COVID in this population).

But the real welcome involved simply listening to their stories and playing with their children - an amateur version of the psycho-social counseling which they plainly needed and which is a mainstay of modern humanitarian work.

And their stories were heart-breaking. Svetlana recounted to us her months in an underground bunker with her ailing mother who was ejected from the shelter when she contracted pneumonia. As far as we could tell, all Svetlana's remaining possessions in life - other than her massive dog - were in her luggage. She had no idea where she would go or what she would do. She also worried deeply about her brother who had been left behind, too frail to fight but too young to be permitted to leave.

She concluded our conversation by asking us - without really expecting an answer - "why can't you stop him? Why won't you stop him?" Explanation of geo-political realities seemed pointless and any reassurance would be irresponsible. We were simply left in silence to contemplate the senselessness of it all.

We spoke also to an elderly gentleman on the way to Munich to join his daughter who worked in the biotech industry. He was a nuclear physicist who had served for his entire career in the renowned scientific cluster in Kharkiv. Knowing he would soon be in the bosom of family, we was more

philosophical. He reflected that, in 1941, he had fled to Russia to get away from the Germans and now he was fleeing to Germany to get away from the Russians. These were the bookends of his life.

As they prepared to re-board the bus for Warsaw, we briefed them on what to expect next. They would be greeted by another assistance team that would offer them a place to sleep (often located by Air BnB), a cash card for supplies, enrollment in schools for their children, healthcare and hygiene, and logistical assistance for any onward travel.

In the midst of all this suffering, our faith in humanity was in part renewed by witnessing this outpouring of support from the Polish government, NGO's and volunteers who have come from around the world to help. I spoke with one woman from Malaga, Spain who was spending her two week "holiday" in Poland volunteering with PAH. Another, who served as my translator, had been a refugee herself not long ago (driving through five countries with her mother and son on their escape from Ukraine). She was now employed in a CARE program as a Ukrainian-speaking teacher in the local schools to help manage the influx of refugee children. For every invading Russian soldier, there are more of these "angels" who give us hope.

We met still more angels earlier in the day in a nearby town at a Ukrainian cultural center, hastily reconfigured as a multi-purpose shelter. As craftsmen clattered around us renovating the building, we learned about the first tranche of services available to refugees as they transition to residence in Poland. We retreated to a quiet play-space where, as we heard about the assistance being offered in the building, we browsed drawings created by refugee children which depicted - with child-like clarity - the trauma they had witnessed first-hand at such tender ages.

On the ground floor, a storefront office offered cash cards (in partnership with Mastercard) which furnish refugees with money to spend - allowing them to determine their own needs - until they can register with Polish social service (or find work). These cash cards are remotely reloadable, enabling refugees greater mobility and flexibility than the in-kind handouts offered in the past.

Inside, the large community theater had been re-purposed into a shelter. The stage was chock-full of donated bedding, clothing, toys and the like. The seats on the auditorium floor had been removed and replaced with beds - each with a number which was the rough equivalent of a home address for the occupant. There were perhaps one hundred beds many of which, even in mid-day, were occupied by exhausted and ailing refugees in evident distress.

Rather than intrude on the refugees' privacy, we climbed the stairs to the once ornate balcony and gazed down on the human drama unfolding below. While their exhausted parents rested, a couple of refugee children played hide-and-seek with volunteers on the stage using the piles and racks of clothing as hiding places. Real life was acted out in the theater below us, dramatized in a powerful manner that blended theater and reality into one incomprehensible - and intolerable - whole. Life and art fused in a way that haunts me still.

And, to this day, echoing through my mind are Svetlana's plaintive questions, "why can't you stop him? Why won't you stop him?". I do not have an answer.

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April 2022

