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War Through the Rearview Mirror: On the Ground with Ukrainian Refugees Fleeing into Poland

By Carole Rosenblat
Mar 31, 2022

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A woman sits at the border refugee area with possessions she was able to gather before leaving Ukraine.



Editor's Note: Carole Rosenblat is an American journalist living in Budapest. She headed to the Polish border with Ukraine on a humanitarian mission and found herself witness to a mass exodus from a brutal war. Here is her witness testimony and stories of the people who fled.

Anna Yemchenko sits next to 4-year-old Yeva at a picnic table under the perpetually gray, early March skies of Hrebenne, Poland. Smoke from flaming logs on the ground and in cans lit to warm cold hands of refugees and aid workers fills the air. Until the war began, they lived in a two-bedroom apartment she owned in Kyiv. Her daughter's father, her parents, brother and his family, and other relatives are still in Ukraine, with most living in the cities of Enerhodar, Zaporizhia. The name of the city literally means "energy gift" and is named such as the city is the base of a nuclear power plant.

Anatevka, Anatevka

Underfed, overworked Anatevka.

Where else could Sabbath be so sweet?

As we talk, she takes breaks to calm her daughter's cries and hold back her own. Yeva is overtired and over-stimulated. Anna pulls a laptop from her bag and opens a cartoon stored on it as an aid worker brings bowls of soup.

"What have you told her?" I ask. It's a question I'll ask many moms over the next few days. "I told her we're going on a trip."



Carole Rosenblat

How does one decide what to take when they don't know if they'll return?

“Warm clothing, some hygiene items. I took a lot of things for her and less for me, all the paperwork for everything, food, a blanket and that's it.”

Anna's parents are originally from Russia but found themselves working at the plant in Ukraine

when the USSR still ruled. The communist government told them they needed to move there and work at the plant, so they did. That's how communism works.

“Why did they stay when the fighting began?” I ask.

“When we were discussing the plan in case something happened, they said they were not going to leave anyway because all their life they lived there. Also, to understand fully, it's that a nuclear power station is not a place to play with weapons. They knew that, for the citizens of the town, nothing's basically going to change because nuclear power stations demand people to work for it to sustain it. It would be really stupid to bomb the town where the station is, so their life is definitely going to change if the [government] powers change, but they're not going to leave because it's just too [incomprehensible] for them to leave.”

After a couple of hours, Anna's arranged ride can't seem to find his way to this border encampment. He's a friend of a friend whom she's never met. I arrange for him to find a business to park at and send me the name. Within a few minutes, we've loaded Anna and Yeva into my rental car and driven five minutes to a convenience store with a parking lot that looks like rush hour on I-696. Dozens of cars wait to meet evacuees that they may or may not personally know. The connection is made, and we hug goodbye.



A woman sits at the border refugee area with possessions she was able to gather before leaving Ukraine.

How Did I Get Here?

My conversation with Anna took place at the outdoor refugee area, the first stop immediately after crossing the border from Ukraine to the Polish City of Hrebenne. It was 10 days after the first bombs fell.

Originally from the Detroit area, I currently live in Budapest, a city I fell in love with after I first visited in 2015. My Ashkenazi Jewish roots had me feeling at home in Budapest, and this current situation made me feel the presence of my grandparents and great-grandparents who had fled similarly more than 100 years ago.

Budapest is only about an eight-hour drive from Hrebenne, but the journey had begun five days prior with a post on a Facebook expat group. Someone had requested help getting handheld radios from a local store and delivering them to Steve and Maddie, an American volunteer translator and nurse, at the airport in Budapest, before they traveled to the border.

Everything was fluid as getting into Ukraine could be just as dangerous as getting out, and, as they were meeting a team of volunteers, some loosely affiliated with various volunteer agencies including the United Cajun Navy, it was still undetermined through which border they would enter.

We never secured the radios as the two shops that carry them in Budapest were out, but somehow things snowballed, and I became part of the team.

After a long and winding road overcoming stumbling blocks of lost luggage containing body armor, impossible-to-obtain Western Union Transfers to bring cash to the team, and a farmhouse hotel with shady Russians dressed in all black and smoking outside, we made it to the border city of Hrebenne, where Steve and Maddie met their contact who would help them catch a bus the 45 miles to Lviv before curfew, as they'd been warned of a high chance of being shot if out after.



A woman sits at the border refugee area with possessions she was able to gather before leaving Ukraine. Nathan Vicar | Detroit Jewish News

The Faces in the Rearview Mirror

I find a place to sleep that night in the last room in a small hotel a couple of miles from the border. It's inexpensive. My room smells like sewage, and the restaurant serves vodka. I have no complaints. Many will be standing in the cold waiting up to 80 hours to cross the border tonight. I give instructions to the hotel that, should any evacuees need a room, I have a sleeping bag and will sleep on the floor and allow them the bed. Later, when no one claims the room, I invite a photographer to sleep on the floor. These are not normal times.

The following day I hear about a refugee center set up in what had been a shopping center about 80 minutes away. On my arrival, I find a parking lot filled with buses, cars, people, outdoor cooking tents, first aid stations and news crews from around the world. Inside are thousands of people, some walking around and some planting themselves on army cots.

A group of people in suits surrounded by plain-clothed and uniformed security walk past. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken is touring. For a pop-up, overcrowded refugee center, things are fairly organized. I take a photo of the QR code shining on a computer at the front information desk, register my name, car, how many I can transfer and to where, and if I can provide housing. The volunteers write that information in Ukrainian on a large piece of paper which I hold above my head in a line with others offering cars to Berlin, Krakow, Dusseldorf, France and beyond.

Within minutes, a volunteer approaches and, before long, we've loaded Jania, mother of 8-year-old Zarima and 2-year-old Sasha, along with her mother, into the car, stuffing it with a random collection of bags they'd fled with along with

some diapers and snacks provided by the refugee center for the four-hour trip to Warsaw.

Anatevka, Anatevka.

Intimate, obstinate Anatevka,

Where I know everyone I meet.

They speak little English, and I speak absolutely no Ukrainian, but we bond over Lady Gaga playing through the speakers. We try talking some, learning bits of each other's languages, but we all know they need sleep. I look in the rearview mirror and see the eyes of my ancestors running from similar horrors.

Arriving at their friend's house in Warsaw at about 10:30 p.m., they're welcomed with hugs and a hot meal. After a quick coffee and bite of chicken, I head back to my hotel in Hrebenne. Arriving at 2:45 a.m., I sit on the edge of the bed, allow a few tears to escape, and try to sleep.



Volunteers help in a refugee center near the Ukrainian border.

They Just Keep Coming

The days continue like this. A smaller refugee center was opened in a school across the street from my hotel. I pick up Yaroslava and her 13-year-old daughter along with another mother and her 13-year-old son and transfer them to the Warsaw train station which, due to crowds, takes nearly two hours to enter and exit. On the way, while on her phone, a couple of tears escape from Yaroslava's eyes. As she hangs up, I reach out to hold her hand. "My house is gone," she says.

"Bomb?" I ask.

"Bomb."

In between, I take a day off from driving here and there to spend time answering the pleas for help I'm receiving through various messaging apps. Coordinating with the team in Ukraine I'm now working with, we try to help a mother whose baby is to be born via surrogacy in two days. The clinic with the paperwork is closed and she has valid concerns about getting her baby out. I try to help a woman in France whose 83-year-old mother is the only person left in her apartment building in Kyiv. She's too afraid to leave, but also too afraid to stay. The mother refuses our help and her daughter is heartbroken.

I arrange housing for an old friend who contacts me about a Ukrainian ice dancer who trains in Michigan. His mother and a skating coach are at the Warsaw train station with no place to go. Like other older people, his mother is afraid to go very far from Ukraine. She doesn't want to leave Warsaw, but I've found a family to host them a few hours away by train and, working by phone with a volunteer at the train station, we convince them to go.

While using the hotel's small restaurant as an office, I meet 100-year-old Tamara Butencae who was an army nurse in World War II and is now fleeing to Germany to escape the Russians. Irony abounds in a war zone.



Unidentified woman holds a flag signed by 14 members of a Ukrainian army battalion. At the time this photo was taken, the woman said three had survived.

There Were No Trees

I also meet 29-year-old Marie, mother of a seemingly happy and energetic 3-year-old named Alissa. I ask my usual questions: “What did you bring? What did you tell her?”

“I brought one bag, mainly her things. I brought nothing of my own.” Pointing to the sweater she wears, “These are my only clothes.

“She woke up when the bombs started to fall one night. She asked if it was thunder. I was honest; I told her, no, those are the bombs. The war is here. We went to an underground parking garage. We spent every night for five nights there. In the morning we would go back to our apartment. One morning I came out and there were no trees.”

No trees; the bombs had destroyed them.

“When we decided to leave, I explained that we were a team, and we had to help each other to be brave. I told her it was time only for us to leave. It wasn’t time for daddy to leave.”

Soon I’ll be a stranger in a strange new place,

Searching for an old familiar face



Irina and her daughter, Anastasia, head into the Warsaw train station to an uncertain future.

My Time to Leave

On my final day, I collect Steve, the translator, at the border, along with an EMT from Malta. He’s leaving our little group of volunteer misfits and joining a larger NGO to re-enter the country. They can provide life insurance. These are the things you consider when going into a war zone.

Steve’s flight departs from Warsaw the following day, so we stop at the refugee center to offer a ride. That’s how we meet Irina and her daughter Anastasia. Irina is a doctor and her husband is a stay-at-home dad. She stayed in the country as long as possible, knowing her medical skills were needed. Finally, they made the tough decision for Irina and Anastasia to leave. As healthy men

between 18-60 with less than five children aren't allowed to leave, it's up to Irina to get their daughter to safety. We say a muted, tearful goodbye at the train station where they board a train to Germany and an uncertain future.

I drop Steve at the airport the following day before heading back to Budapest.

From Anatevka.

I belong in Anatevka,

Tumble-down, work-a-day Anatevka.

Dear little village, little town of mine

This, a synopsis of my week-long experience at the border, tells some of the stories of the people I met. There are many more. After a short visit to the U.S., I will return to the border to assist. In the meantime, I continue to receive messages requesting help getting out of Ukraine and work with my new friends in the country to try to facilitate escape methods and routes. Friends and strangers have been kind enough to donate money to assist my efforts.

Detroit's Federation has provided a link to aid Ukrainian refugees:
[jewishdetroit.org/ukraine](https://www.jewishdetroit.org/ukraine).

Many Faces of War



Individuals hold signs at a main refugee center offering rides to cities across Europe.



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Helen, a Ukrainian English teacher, fled with her dog. They wait for their ride on the Polish side of the border.