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Witness to War

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aids Ukrainian
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YULIYA GAYDAYENKO JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE

When the war in Ukraine started, I felt shocked. My family and friends speak Russian, and we are all from different parts of the former Soviet Union. Many of my friends and colleagues are from Ukraine.

I am a social worker focusing on older adults at Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit, having come to the U.S. in 1995 as a refugee from Moscow, Russia. One of my grandparents was born in a little shtetl in Ukraine, and my mom and her parents lived in Kharkiv for 10 years with the fondest memories of the beautiful city. Or what the city was before this war.

It felt absurd, surreal, and there was nothing I could do to change that. I could try to help my friends, talking them through the grief and betrayal. I could lead a group meditation and facilitate a trauma impact conversation with our staff at JFS who had family in Ukraine or worked with Holocaust survivors, many of whom were born in Ukraine.

I donated money to humanitarian aid organizations and talked to our partner agencies about any plans for refugee resettlement for those escaping war. But I wanted to do more. And when our agency received a request from the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, calling on Russian-speaking mental health professionals to volunteer in Poland assisting Ukrainian refugees, I raised my hand.

With the blessing and support of Jewish Family Service CEO Perry Ohren, I applied for a two-week deployment with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) and was selected for this mission, funded in part by the Jewish Federations of North America.



TOP: Ukrainian refugees at the airport before their flight to their new life in Israel.

ABOVE: The Ghetto Wall marker in Warsaw.

I tried to prepare the best I could, gathering donations for the urgent need items we received from JAFI staff. A week later, after running around like a wild woman, gathering medical certification that I was in good enough shape for this trip, signing my life away in liability forms, and meeting with my family and friends before I left, I was traveling to New York and onward to Warsaw, Poland, from there, with my own small suitcase and a larger one filled with donations.

My family and friends were somewhat worried (probably an understatement), but I overruled their anxiety, as I felt I could contribute my skills and expertise to help. At our orientation before the trip, we were told we would live in the same hotel where refugees are placed, eat the same food and would be sharing a room with another volunteer.

That last one was the scariest part for my American friends, but for those of us who came from the former Soviet Union, sharing living space (and taking turns to use a shared bathroom and shower) was nothing new. I've heard horrible, painful stories from my friends about their family members' and friends' war experiences in Ukraine. So, I thought I was totally mentally and emotionally prepared for the trip and knew what to expect.

ARRIVAL IN POLAND

The first thing I saw as I arrived at the hotel in Warsaw was that it was much nicer than I expected, probably what we would rate a three-

or four-star hotel. The next thing I saw, when I entered my assigned room that I was to share with a stranger, was one big bed. After the first moment of slight shock, I realized that there were two twin beds put together, and the hotel staff was able to pull them apart, albeit only a few inches.

My roommate turned out to be a wonderful nurse from Montreal, Canada, who was born in Kyiv, then repatriated to Israel, and after 13 years of working in a hospital with patients wounded by rockets, decided to move to Canada.

There were six other people from Montreal in our volunteer group, and they all spoke Hebrew, English and French in addition to Russian (and some Ukrainian and some Polish). There were also two Israelis, who currently live in the U.S. (and spoke three languages). And the group was rounded out by three Americans (including me) and one Israeli, the four of us "only" bilingual and feeling slightly inadequate in the group that kept switching among languages.

That first night we met with some of the JAFI staff and a small group of previous volunteers, who were preparing to depart the next day. Our group had social workers, teachers, medical and IT professionals, so we tried to assign jobs to ourselves where we felt we would fit. I helped with kids' activities on the first day, but after that had to step in and assist in the Humanitarian Aid store, where I was then needed for the rest of the deployment.

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TOP: A volunteer sorts through donations in the Humanitarian Aid store. **MIDDLE:** Volunteer nurses at work. **BOTTOM:** Volunteers make challah with refugee families before Shabbat.

“LISTENING WHEN THERE WAS A NEED TO HEAR, HUGGING WHEN A HUG WAS NEEDED, CRYING WITH THOSE WHO CRIED AND JUST BEING THERE FOR OTHERS.”

— JFS’ YULIA GAYDAYENKO



Yuliya (center) with fellow volunteers

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I was also busy assisting a Holocaust survivor in getting to the dining hall for breakfast, lunch and dinner, checking on families quarantined in their rooms due to COVID, and many other “small” things that were needed. Listening when there was a need to hear, hugging when a hug was needed, crying with those who cried and just being there for others.

Our volunteers helped with anything they could to assist JAFI staff and refugees: helping on the border, helping in the hotel, working with kids, staffing the medical room and Humanitarian Aid store, purchasing the supplies, accompanying refugees to medical clinics and their pets to the vet appointments, ensuring those with medical needs unable to be in the dining hall received food, organizing a trip to a concert and a tour to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, taking a group of kids and parents to a park, and so much more.

REFUGEE STORIES

All my mental and emotional preparation still did not prepare me for the raw wave of emotion I was hit with as refugees, mostly women with children and older adults, shared their stories. Some of the stories hit me in the gut, got hooked in my heart — and it was at that point I probably realized that I was not there just to help. We were also there to witness. And to bring some of these stories back, so everyone who reads it would feel that this pain and suffering is happening in the 21st century to people just like us.

There are people just like us who are suffering from families being separated, killed and losing everything they’ve worked for their entire lives, whether they are fleeing Ukraine, Syria or Afghanistan, or other war zones. Here are some of the stories that stayed with me:

- A young woman with a 3-month-old baby and a 7-year-old daughter from Mariupol, accompanied by her husband’s grandmother. Her 32-year-old husband was killed when he left the basement of their house to get water for an elderly neighbor. The 7-year-old doesn’t know her daddy is dead and is waiting for him, drawing pictures for him in a kids’ group run by a volunteer. His grandmother came to the Humanitarian Aid store and cried on my shoulder, saying that she couldn’t cry in front of her grandson’s wife. Grandma raised her grandson and was repeating, “I don’t want to live. Let them take me instead of him.”

- An 87-year-old Holocaust survivor, who evacuated from Odessa in 1941 when she was 5 years old, and now again, in a wheelchair, needing assistance to get out of the room during mealtimes and

with personal care. I ended up helping to bathe her, as we couldn't find anyone else to do it.

- An elderly man from Mariupol, putting his 10-member family, a dog and a pregnant cat in three cars and slowly making his way out, having to stop for days at a time to gather enough gasoline to continue their escape. He left his house after a rocket exploded in his yard, busting his windows and hitting his leg with a piece of shrapnel. They had to abandon their cars near the border. His son, an Israeli citizen, was not allowed through, as he was also a Ukrainian citizen and under 60.

The elderly man was emotionless as he told us, "I am from a city that doesn't exist anymore," and sharing that tanks "ironed out" an old cemetery, so he won't be able to find his mother's grave when he comes back. He held a piece of shrapnel in one hand and a newborn, blind kitten, the size of a small apple, in his other hand. His cat had five kittens the day after they arrived at the hotel, after almost four weeks of travel, and he said that this was what kept him sane and moving forward — his family and this pregnant cat with precious cargo in her belly.

- A tall, powerful looking woman with a proud carriage, a former model, crying in the elevator, as she was preparing to send her 13-year-old son off to a special program for teenagers in Israel (similar to a boarding school) alone, while she was going back to Ukraine to join her husband.

- An elderly woman, whose mother was the Righteous Among the Nations, saving a Jewish family during World War II, evacuated from Chernigov by an Israeli vol-

unteer, staying at the hotel for a few days before she flies to Israel to stay with the descendants of the Jewish family. A circle of kindness and humanity closing in a full loop.

- And so many others, coming with no change of clothing, needing everything from underwear, socks, a T-shirt, pants, a coat and shoes to a toothbrush and toothpaste.

BACK HOME

I am now back in Michigan, safe and sound. I was in Poland for 11 days, but it feels that I see life very differently, even after such a short time. Amidst all the pain, loss and all the trauma of the war, I saw amazing spirit, dedication and so many Light Workers gathering to help.

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TOP: A volunteer nurse sorts through donated medical supplies. **ABOVE:** JAFI staff with volunteers. **LEFT:** A piece of shrapnel that was taken out of an elderly man's leg after his home was hit.



The Detroit Jewish News Educator of the Year

Teachers are often the unsung heroes who inspire our children to greater heights and whose lessons often last a lifetime.

The Jewish News wants to honor the best-of-the-best teachers in our community — in elementary, middle and high school.

To nominate a Jewish teacher or a teacher at one of Metro Detroit's Jewish day schools, send an email to

jheadapohl@thejewishnews.com

with "Best Teachers" in the subject line.

Include the teacher's name, school, grade/subject and why you think they deserve to be recognized.

Then look for our "Educators of the Year" in the May 19, Cap & Gown issue.



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"I WAS NOT THERE JUST TO HELP. WE WERE ALSO THERE TO WITNESS."

— JFS' YULIA GAYDAYENKO

I am grateful and honored to have met the Jewish Agency for Israel staff, many of whom are refugees from Kyiv themselves, working nonstop at all hours of the day and night on the border and then to settle newly arriving refugees from the border into the hotel, working with the Israeli Consulate, making arrangements for transporting thousands of people in a month-and-a-half, including medical transport for people unable to sit on the airplane as well as transport for animals. And doing so much more, working with donors and volunteers to ensure all needed supplies, volunteer medical professionals, etc.

I am grateful and honored to have met volunteers from Poland, Israel, Canada and the U.S., supporting the JAFI staff in anything that needed to be done. I am grateful and honored to have met amazing people, experiencing loss and unimaginable pain and, at the same time, gathering to learn Hebrew with their kids, preparing for their new life in Israel, doing a Zumba class with their kids, and teaching their dogs to walk with a muzzle and their cats to stay in the crate for their travel.

I am grateful and honored to have met donors who showed up with money collected from friends and

colleagues, ready to purchase any needed supplies. I am grateful and honored to have been trusted with donations from my own friends and colleagues, which allowed me to purchase whatever was needed for the day: deodorants, T-shirts, shoes, flip-flops, hairbrushes, pants, dog and cat food (and more deodorants, T-shirts and pants).

And I am very grateful and honored to have represented the Jewish Federations of North America and to have been supported by an amazing agency where I have worked for the past 13 years, Jewish Family Service of Metropolitan Detroit. Thank you, everyone, for your support!

If there was one thing I could ask for as you read this, it would be to stop for a minute and send your light, your prayers and your good thoughts to help heal the torn land and the torn apart families.

If we all join forces in doing that at least once every day, we can help create a communal healing that is so much needed. 📧

Yuliya Gaydayenko, LMSW, MA, is Chief Program Officer, Older Adult Services, at Jewish Family Service, and the 2015 Mandell L. & Madeleine H. Berman Award for Outstanding Professional Jewish Communal Service winner. She was resettled as a refugee from Moscow, Russia, in Flint with her family in 1995.