The Ukrainians' tragedy is the Poles' do-over

Over 2.75 million Ukrainians have fled to Poland since Russia invaded Ukraine, and have been given a warm welcome. Accompanied by artistic photographer Michal Chelbin, our correspondent visited these crowded homes in an effort to understand what opened the Poles' hearts

Shany Littman

Photos by Michal Chelbin

Olga Vinyk with her daughter Olena and her infant Nadzieja.

From left: Vinyk's hosts, Vislav and Dorota Zwierzyski, their daughter-in-law Zuza, granddaughter Helena and son Maciej .

Michal and Aleksandra Artymowska, left, their children Janek and Zosia, front, and guests Natalia and Denys Rassamakin.

Hosts and guests at the spacious home of Karolina and Sebastian Adamchuk. As of mid-March, they numbered 15 people and two rabbits.

What do you pack for the trip in the middle of the night, to an unfamiliar land and for an unknown amount of time, when you are trembling from fear and forced to quickly flee for your life from everything that you know and love? Olga Vinyk, a gynecologist, had prepared for every scenario. In early March, nine months pregnant, Olga decided to flee the Russian invasion with her 10-year-old daughter Olena from Chernihiv. The city is about 150 kilometers (93 miles) north of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Everyone told her she was crazy and that it was too dangerous, but Olga, who looks fragile, was determined.

She packed medicine, sterile gloves and other equipment she would need for giving birth along the way, knowing the pressure and tension could induce labor. The prospect of giving birth on a train headed toward Poland, out of the danger zone, frightened her less than giving birth in a basement while under Russian bombardment. Both her husband, Aleksander, and her ex-husband, Olena's father, said it was crazy to flee the besieged city. However, after spending a few days in their neighbor's cellar, with a few quick sorties home for a shower or to charge cellphones, she just couldn't take it any longer.

On March 2, Olga, Olena and Aleksander ran to their car carrying two suitcases and two backpacks. One suitcase was for Olga and Olena, the other was filled with equipment for the expected baby. One backpack held food for the road, the other medicine, medical equipment and important documents. They began driving toward Kyiv, from which trains depart for all over Europe.

They laid Olena on the back seat, fearing sniper fire, and covered her with piles of clothes. They took a twisting, circuitious route, avoiding roads reported to have been under Russian attack. When they reached the central station in Kyiv, they looked for the train to Warsaw. The first to arrive was completely full. The platforms were horribly crowded and Olga was afraid about the baby. A minute after the full train pulled out for Warsaw, a light flashed over them. A loud thunder clap was heard – and a Russian rocket exploded near the train station.

"I thought I was done for, but Olena was very brave and said: 'Mom, don't worry, it's only noise, we're still alive.'" Olga didn't want to stay there another second, and simply decided they would board the next train that arrived – regardless of the destination. In the total darkness of the nighttime curfew, with masses of people gathering at the station and complete chaos, it wasn't possible in any case to know where a train was headed. Somehow, they managed to board one, which took them to a small city near Kyiv, from which they continued on a slow train to Lviv.

The Lviv train station was also packed, mostly with women and children trying to reach Poland. Olga told soldiers who were organizing the lines about her imminent labor. They put her on a train immediately and even found her a place to sit. However, Aleksander, who was carrying all the suitcases and backpacks, was way behind her – trapped amid the huge crowds. They didn't have a chance to say goodbye. In any event, Aleksander knew he couldn't board the train because, like all Ukrainian men from 18 to 60, he wasn't permitted to leave the country.

Olga had thought the train would take her and Olena to Przemysl, a city on the Polish side of the border. Instead, it went to Chelm, Poland, some 200 kms to the north. When they arrived, volunteers got on the train and provided first aid. They organized an orderly exit from the train – first for the elderly, disabled and pregnant women. Volunteers at the station lavished them with food, candy and hugs. They checked which train went to Warsaw and at what time, dragged their bags and helped them board the next train.

When we conducted our interview, Olga's new daughter was exactly a week old. She wasn't born along the way, but waited patiently until Olga and Olena reached safety, and entered the world in a Warsaw hospital. Olga won't let Nadzieja out of her arms, and only lets Olena hold her, occasionally and only briefly. Olga does not let Michal Chelbin, the photographer who came to Warsaw as part of a photography project supported by the Polish Institute in Tel Aviv and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Poland, take a picture of the baby's face. She says it would be bad luck, since Nadzieja isn't yet baptized.

The effects of the escape from Ukraine and of giving birth in a foreign city, without her husband, were quite clear. Olga looked exhausted and periodically broke out crying while we spoke. Olena sat next to the table without smiling, her eyes sad, eating cake made by the landlady. She was worried about the fate of her best friend, Elizaveta, whom she last saw hiding in a cellar in the bombarded city where they lived; they had lost touch.

The interview was held in the spacious home of Dorota and Vislav Zwierzynski, in the Warsaw suburb of Marki. Their son Maciej works in the government ministry responsible for setting up absorption centers for refugees in the Warsaw area. Maciej was at the large center created at Warsaw's Torwar Arena concert and sports hall on the night that Olga and Olena arrived there. The volunteers at the hall wanted to send Olga to the hospital immediately for an examination, but Olga only wanted a clean bed to sleep in. At 2 A.M., Maciej called his wife Zuza to ask if a heavily pregnant Ukrainian woman and her small daughter could come and stay with them. After Zuza, who's doing her residency in family medicine, gave her approval, Maciej invited Olga and Olena to come with him. At first, Olga wasn't sure whether she should trust this Polish stranger. After he showed her pictures of his wife and three small children, though, she was convinced the offer was sincere.

> 'One reason people were afraid to leave Ukraine was fear of the unknown,' Olga said. 'But now I am telling my friends that you feel more wanted here than in an all-inclusive Turkish resort hotel.'

An hour later, Zuza opened the door to the two tired and despondent refugees. She gave up her and Maciej's bedroom for them, and they went to sleep in the children's room. Zuza, 32, and Maciej, 38, said that from the moment Russia attacked Ukraine, on February 24, they had been intent on trying to help as much as they could. Hosting Ukrainian refugees was definitely part of the plan. Many of their relatives, including Zuza's grandmother, and acquaintances have emptied entire apartments or rooms to give refugees somewhere to live.

More than 2.75 million Ukrainians – 90 percent of them women and children – have fled to Poland since the start of the war, according to the United Nations refugee agency. As of April 18, 4.9 million Ukrainians had fled their country. Warsaw's population alone surged 17 percent in three weeks, adding some 350,000 people. The numbers are similar for Poland's second largest city, Krakow, located in the southwest.

Nevertheless, hardly any of this dramatic demographic shift is discernible on Warsaw's streets. There are no mattresses on the sidewalks, or cartons on which families are huddled with bags and suitcases – the familiar images from refugee crises in both the distant and more recent past. Similarly, the reception centers set up by the Polish government in response to the sight of refugees streaming across the eastern border are functioning as transit stations. Instead of languishing in refugee camps, incoming Ukrainians make their way to the homes of Polish hosts or to other destinations in Europe and farther afield.

On the day after their arrival, Olga and Olena slept until the late afternoon. Zuza and Maciej's children didn't go to preschool, and the whole family celebrated the guests' arrival. A few days later, Olga's time to give birth arrived. She returned home after a few days in hospital. A week later it was decided that the Warsaw apartment was too small, and Maciej's parents took in Olga and her two daughters.

Olga said they felt very much wanted. "One reason people were afraid to leave Ukraine was fear of the unknown," she said. "But now I am telling my friends that you feel more wanted here than in an all-inclusive Turkish resort hotel." She was speaking with Aleksander every day. He had rented an apartment in central Kyiv for the time being, because he had nowhere else to go and travel in Ukraine was dangerous. She informed him by phone that she had chosen the name Nadzieja – meaning hope – for their newborn daughter.

In contrast to the understandable gloom of Olga and Olena, given the circumstances, Dorota, Vislav and Maciej look almost ecstatic with delight. "I am happy," Maciej acknowledged, "It simply does something good for me inside."

How do you explain the phenomenon of Polish citizens mobilizing so massively to assist Ukrainian refugees and inviting them to stay with them?

Maciej: "I can't really explain it. Maybe it's the Polish heart. I wasn't born yet in World War II, but it's true that the Polish people did not behave this way when refugees from Syria and Afghanistan tried to come here. Our government declared then that they were not legal refugees and did not admit them. The Polish people might have agreed to take them in, but the government wouldn't let them enter."

This time the refugees' entry wasn't prevented, but the government's organized aid came after the start of the popular movement to help.

"True. When we saw that there were masses of people from Ukraine in the train stations, we realized we had to prepare lodgings for them. The movement began with the people. Then the government followed suit and announced that Ukrainians could enter and receive whatever aid they needed. I myself am surprised at the movement's size. Many of my friends are doing it. When I ask them why, they say it's simply the right thing to do."

Confusing plot twist

It all sounds too familiar. A train from Kyiv to Lviv, to Przemysl, perhaps to Chelm, to Warsaw. Loss of relatives, search for rescuers, woman and daughter, heavy suitcases, lack of sleep, hot soup in a refugee camp. The next morning, when we find ourselves in a pine forest, next to which is a rail line that leads to Otwock, a former Jewish resort town that appears in stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer, it's already over the top. It's our history, but at the moment we are not the main characters. And that isn't the only plot twist. The players are no longer lining up on the sides we are accustomed to, and that is very confusing.

Anna Sikora, 56, a former parliament member for the ruling right-wing Law and Justice party, lives in the town of Jozefow, in a large house in a forest. She and her husband, Tadeusz Sikora, an anticommunist poet and musician, bought the home 32 years ago. She worked alongside party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, a former prime minister and the current deputy prime minister, and she raised five children. Now the house has emptied out, her husband is very sick and she feels lonely. The war gave offered her an opportunity to fill up the house again. She was hosting Oksana Prislyak, 46, and her children Zlototsvitka ("yellow flower" in Ukrainian), who's almost three, and Danilo, 10, plus Tania Melnik, 44, her son Bogdan, 14, and her mother, Maria Ribchak.

> 'We transported people over the course of a week. You're full of adrenaline, you sleep four hours, get up and continue. It was easier psychologically than sitting in Poland and watching the news.'

"My whole family is originally from the region of Lviv, which was a Polish city for hundreds of years," says Anna. "I have known Tania for 20 years; she came from Ukraine to take care of my daughter Yulia when she was little. Since then, Tania has also been like a daughter to me. She studied history and psychology in Ukraine. Naturally, we followed the events of the 2014 revolution in Ukraine and cried with the Ukrainians over the Russian invasion of Crimea."

Anna noted her many ties with Chechens as well. "I hosted [Aslan] Maskhadov," she recalled, referring to the Chechen leader who fought against Russia and was killed in 2005. "It destroyed me that [Vladimir] Putin annihilated the Chechen leadership and installed a puppet government. I also loved Georgia and visited there many times. We were always anticommunist in our family, so our opposition to the present war is truly from the heart."

She said it was "very natural" to take in Ukrainians. "A friend called and asked whether I could host a woman with two children who had been waiting at the border for days and intended to immigrate to Canada. Oxana and the children arrived on March 5. That same day, Tania and her mother arrived from Ivano-Frankivsk, in Ukraine. Then I got a call asking if I could also host a pair of journalists from Crimea, along with their three children. They already had jobs in Poland and needed a place to stay until they could find an apartment. They should be here any minute."

How do you explain this mobilization by the Poles? There are a few thousand Syrian and Afghan refugees on the Belarus border, and Poland isn't admitting them.

"I didn't see refugees there. I saw well-dressed young men who can work, with sophisticated mobile phones. They can work in their countries. We hear from Germany, England and France that they came there and the citizens' personal security deteriorated. So we didn't think we needed to help them. And look at the Polish border now – only women, children and the elderly. Every human who sees a woman with children who's in trouble wants to help."

Are there Poles who worry that too many Ukrainian refugees will arrive?

"Few say that. At the moment, everyone wants mainly to help, even those who are afraid that five million refugees will arrive. We don't know what will happen if the war goes on, but we'll get along. They are our neighbors. When the war ends, I think most of them will return to their country."

The photographer, Michal Chelbin, wants to take pictures of the hosts and guests in the forest surrounding the house, so we tour the area, led by Anna's two dogs. A stream runs nearby the house. We hear the occasional sound of a woodpecker at work in a tree. Chelbin has worked many times in Ukraine and a little in Russia. The light and landscape provide a certain aesthetic aspect that speaks to her.

For years, Poland had a problematic reputation in human rights and freedom of expression. The Polish Institute and the Warsaw-based Adam Mickiewicz Institute, which organized our trip, are happy to present the beautiful visage that is revealed by Polish solidarity with the Ukrainian neighbors. That solidarity is indeed felt to the point of tears, and the credit for it belongs above all to the country's citizens. They set in motion a magnificent popular movement that continues to heap determined yet delicate generosity on the refugees from Ukraine. It's uncertain whether the Polish government anticipated this, but the authorities fell in line and have been taking action on its behalf.

Oxana leads little Zlototsvitka carefully along the pine-padded forest trails. In Ukraine, they lived near Lviv. Oxana, a musician, was a music teacher before having Danilo. Since then she has been a stay-at-home mom. Her husband, who remained in their village, is a crafts teacher. On February 27, she decided they had to flee, that it was the safest thing for the children. Her husband went with them to the Polish border, and they continued on from there on their own. They spent three days waiting in lines, sleeping in their car and subsisting on food they'd brought from home or that was distributed by volunteers, before managing to cross into Poland.

How did the children respond to the journey?

"During the first two days in line, my daughter cried and wanted to go back home and sleep in her bed, but on the third day she got used to it. My son understands everything. He accepts that it is impossible to change the situation and that we need to be patient and wait for the journey to Canada."

What's it like to live in the home of strangers in a strange land?

"Anna is very open and nice, so we immediately felt comfortable there. On the other hand, it is hard to accept this situation, being needy. People here offer us help and food all the time, and I appreciate that the Poles want to help so much. That gives a very good feeling."

Oxana had visited Poland previously as a tourist. Before leaving Ukraine, she applied for a visa to Canada, where she has friends who offered to buy plane tickets for her and her children. She said that if she is successful in obtaining a visa, she will wait there until the war ends. If not, she will attempt to get to another place where she knows people, such as Germany. She wasn't planning on staying in Poland.

The good neighbor

Like Anna Sikora, many other Poles have developed professional ties and friendships with Ukrainians over the years. When the war broke out, they offered to host their families. Karolina and Sebastian Adamchuk have a business installing solar panels, and Sergei Homko was working for them at the time Rus-

sia invaded Ukraine. In the first days of the war Homko brought his wife, also named Oksana, and her mother, Roza, over from Ukraine to their home. The Adamchuks have nine rooms and only two children. They also have a rich past managing hostels and couch-surfing tours, so hosting many people at home is really a way of life for them. The Adamchuks' two daughters wanted to save Ukrainian animals. Instead, Sebastian drove to the border and collected Vika Smuylova, her two-year-old daughter Zalta, her daughter-in-law Natasha Khorova and her son Misha.

At the Warsaw train station, Karolina found Olga Vaslakova and her son Kyril. After Olga arrived, she asked whether her parents could join, which is how Svetlana and Yuri Takchenko arrived in the house. As of mid-March, 15 people and two rabbits were residing in Karolina and Sebastian's home. The older women, those who do not have young children to look after, have assumed the cooking chores. Somehow, everyone manages to sit around one table and eat together at least once a day. Karolina said there was room for at least one more family, but when she returned to the train station to find refugees to host, she no longer found anyone needing that sort of help.

Many Polish families hosting Ukrainian refugees don't live in a spacious home like that of the Adamchuks, and not everyone has a free guestroom to offer refugees. A case in point is that of Marcin and Maja Swidersk and their two children, who live in a charming but small apartment in one of Warsaw's new neighborhoods. Marcin is a lawyer, Maja is homeschooling their two children, ages four and seven. They moved the children into their bed and gave the children's room to Anastasia Aksenova and her daughter, Sonia Gonchar. The house of six also has three blind cats; Maja volunteers for an animal rescue organization.

Michal Artymowski and Aleksandra Artymowska, a physicist and an illustrator, respectively, live in a small apartment in the heart of Warsaw, where the Jewish Quarter once stood, together with their children, Janek, 11, and Zosia, 9. They were hosting Natalia, 44, and her son Denys Rassamakin, 16, who fled from Kyiv. To make room, Aleksandra moved into her daughter's room and Michal alternated between sleeping in the living room or on the floor in Yanek's room. There is really no reason to make a big deal – a "monument," in Aleksandra's words – out of it, they said. "When we heard, on the second day of the war, that people were fleeing to Poland, it was clear we would open our home" she said. "I can't imagine ourselves in that situation, suddenly fleeing the home. Our whole family is now hosting Ukrainians."

Like all the hosts we met, Michal and Aleksandra appeared to be in a very uplifted state of mind. It doesn't look like pretense, but is evidently an authentic feeling of satisfaction and happiness at being able to help others. But together with the merriment, the war has created absolute shock among them, they point out.

"Putin," Michal said, "has been taking small steps for a long time, and the West said he was being mischievous but would behave properly the next time. There were the invasions of Georgia and of Crimea, and the war in Chechnya. Now it looks as though he can do more or less anything. We in Poland don't have much confidence that the West will protect us if the need arises. I believe this is a large part of the reason why Polish society is so empathetic to the refugees."

Aleksandra noted that there were many historical cases of tension between the nations, when Ukrainians and Poles slaughtered one another, notably during World War II. But that topic is not fit for conversation now. "Putin would be happy for us to heighten the tensions between us," she said.

Aleksandra recalled that the Russo-Ukraine war was not new. "It actually started when Russia attacked Crimea and Donbas, eight years ago. That steered a lot of Ukrainians to Poland already then," she said. "They were ready to do jobs that Poles didn't want to do, manual labor. They are people who are willing to work hard. It will be good for our country to have more people, a young generation."

Michal said there were several reasons for the spontaneous mobilization of the country's citizens, compared to the approach during the crisis of the refugees from the Middle East and Afghanistan.

"The first is that these refugees are women and children," he said. "There is a strong emphasis in Polish culture on the idea of fighting for your country. So the fact that in the previous refugee crises it was mainly young men who fled from the combat zones seemed very odd in local eyes.

"The other reason," he added, "is that the previous refugees came from distant regions and from countries with which we had no connection. And let us be candid – it is human nature. If something happens to your neighbor, you are more concerned than if it happens far away. Ukraine is our closest neighbor, the languages are similar, there are very many Poles with Ukrainian roots. It was once one country. The third and strongest reason is the feeling that we are next in line, if the war continues."

Regarding Polish society itself, many of the interviewees saw current developments as a golden opportunity for a rare internal unity not seen in years – not since the days when Lech Walesa led the Solidarity trade union movement, which brought about the fall of communism in Poland. Aleksandra, too, said that after years of acute internal rifts, the war and the mobilization on behalf of Ukraine and its people were ushering in a new and hopeful spirit in Poland.

Sandwiches in the museum

As for the long term, an electronic board on the wall outside Warsaw's central train station displays an ad from the country's largest humanitarian organization, stating, "Help for war victims is a marathon, not a sprint." The relevance of that sentiment in Poland becomes more apparent from day to day.

Dozens of volunteers in the station wear yellow vests and offer arriving refugees whatever possible: a smile, translation services, information, explanations and solutions; a cup of tea, a toothbrush, an apple. It's very quiet here, and in the big tents erected outside the station that serve as areas for rest, catered food and supplies. There are women here with children, people in wheelchairs, others who arrived with their pets. One young woman got here – it's not clear how – with two cats, a dog and two rabbits. She set up a kind of temporary settlement on the station's second floor.

> 'Euphoria is the right word. That's the challenge. You can't run on euphoria over time. I don't want to sound unfair, but it seems that there is also a certain feeling of superiority among some of those helping.'

Opposite the station is the headquarters of Warsaw's Museum of Modern Art. The chief curator, Sebastian Cichocki, arrived at work a few days after the war erupted and discovered that the museum had been "captured," as he put it. Groups of artists and human rights activists had converted it into a center for aid and information for refugees. He had invited that development, to some degree, because a workshop had been organized there a day earlier to prepare banners and flags of support for Ukraine. "It started as something quite improvised, and everyone has been trying to do what they can since then," he said.

After making the banners, which proved the turning point, a collective of activist artists converted the building into a huge plant for making sandwiches for the refugees. And because it's so close to the train station, hungry refugees quickly began flocking to it in large numbers.

"I didn't recognize the place when I got there," Cichocki said. "Everywhere you looked there were medicine, children playing and painting on the walls, musicians playing Ukrainian music. It was like an assembly line. People arrive, volunteers bring stuff and donate money to buy things for the refugees, which also psychologically lets people feel they are helping. Very quickly, the refugees began arriving. They in turn made sandwiches for the new refugees. We started a solidarity workshop. We wanted to demonstrate in front of the Russian Embassy. Then a lot of people from the art community arrived and the next day were followed by more and more, and the place started to run on its own. From my point of view, that was the best thing that could have happened."

After that spontaneous outburst, the museum decided to establish a kind of "institution within an institution," which they named "The Sunflower," a reference to Ukraine's national flower. "We will teach Ukrainian, because a lot of people want to learn the language. We will screen films and hold poetry readings. It's cultural aid. Our improvised and chaotic refugee center is becoming a cultural hothouse of solidarity with Ukraine. We also founded a small journal, in which we will publish articles against 'Westsplaining,' the attempts to explain how the West and the United States maneuvered Ukraine and Russia into this situation, as though the countries of Eastern Europe have no interests of their own, or lack agency. That is a ridiculous, patronizing attitude, and it's important to set the record straight."

We asked Cichocki as well for his take on the different attitudes of his fellow Poles to the arrivals from Ukraine, as compared to those refugees in the previous crises.

"It's a paradox. Poland doesn't have a good reputation when it comes to taking responsibility for the other. The ruler of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, invited refugees from Iraq and Syria to Minsk, claiming the way into the European Union would be open to them from there. Then he pushed them toward the border with Poland – which denied them entry. That was a smart tactic, with fake reports on social media about agencies organizing safe travel to Germany with a stopover in Minsk. What was hidden was the fact that they were supposed to walk from Minsk to Germany [via Poland]. Lukashenko's aim was to generate an internal crisis in Poland. Poland is racist and nationalist, so he wanted to create an atmosphere of fear of invading foreigners to destabilize it.

"Those refugees were left to freeze to death in camps near the border, where they were for several months. Various organizations tried to help them, and art institutions tried to expose what was going on at the border. According to public opinion polls, however, most of the nation backs this tough approach toward the refugees there. The fact that they are not white doesn't help, of course. They have been labeled as potential terrorists."

Some argue that they are young and able to work and fight, and not wretched refugees.

"It's always the same arguments: Either 'they are too poor,' or 'they're too rich.' 'They will live off social security,' or 'they will take our jobs.' But something different happened when this war started. This is Russia, the perpetual enemy, and Ukrainians are the largest minority in Poland. The Ukrainian language is heard everywhere. We had already taken in about a million Ukrainian refugees even before the war. And the images of Ukrainian cities being shelled remind everyone of Warsaw being shelled in World War II. The Poles are still afraid of that. These things impact people. Warsaw's population has surged by 17 percent within three weeks. We have never seen that in Europe's history. And most of the refugees want to stay in Poland."

It looks like almost every Pole is doing something to benefit Ukrainian refugees. What is the state doing?

"Furthering Polish solidarity. I have nothing against that: fighting the bad reputation we have acquired. The government is discussing giving the refugees financial aid. A great deal of European money is being injected into this aid process. I hope it will reach those who truly need it. According to the current plan, people helping refugees will be the ones who receive it, and not those who actually need the help. That of course will reinforce the refugees' dependence on their hosts. The government has also set up information websites in Ukrainian and is organizing centers offering free coronavirus vaccinations, medical aid and more. There are municipal centers where you can get a license number for the car quickly, or an ID card, a passport, etc. Those things were once thought to be impossible, but they went into operation within a few days."

I wondered aloud whether it was remnants of communism that made people mobilize like this and take strangers into their homes.

"If so, it has more to do with the mistrust that developed over the years toward the government, even during communist era," he said. "You can trust your neighbor or yourself, but the government always screws up. When the crisis on the Poland-Belarus border started, the government tried to divide society further. State media portrayed those assisting the refugees at the border as traitors harming our brave soldiers. And it worked. Seventy percent of the people supported the idea of throwing those families into the cold. A week ago, another public opinion survey about refugees was conducted, showing that more than 90 percent of the people support helping them, and that over 70 percent are doing something themselves. The Ukrainians aren't even perceived as foreigners."

Dr. Kamil Kijek, a historian of Eastern European Jewry, was born in Poland in 1981 to a Jewish mother from Odessa. When the war started, he said, he felt shocked, panic-stricken. He normally lives in Wroclaw, which is far from the Ukrainian border, but a the time, he was in Vienna on a writing scholarship.

"I felt I could do more. I know the language and the country," he recalled. "Then I saw a friend's Facebook post, that he had gone to Lviv and had brought his Ukrainian wife to Warsaw. I called him and said I had time, a vehicle and money, that I could help. The next day he suggested we go rescue Ukrainians and bring them to the border. So we bought a hundred liters of fuel, filled the car with blankets, medicine and sleeping bags, and drove to Lviv with two friends."

Kijek and his friends posted a message on social media that they were ready to transport refugees. They took their first group the very next day. "I took children who were holding a teddy bear and a backpack, I walked with them to the border, hugged them and went back," he said. "I also took a woman with a walker. I drove people who had come from Kharkiv, Kyiv, villages, all parts of the country and society. We transported people over the course of a week. You're full of adrenaline, you sleep four hours, get up and continue. It was easier psychologically than just sitting in Poland and watching the news. We got 55 people across the border this week."

It's seems people who are mobilizing to help and do significant things, are somewhat euphoric. They simply look happy. It's almost grating, given the suffering refugees were clearly enduring.

"Euphoria is the right word. That's the challenge. You can't run on euphoria over time. I don't want to sound unfair, but it seems that there is also a certain feeling of superiority among some of those helping. A feeling that Poland is a more Western country and that we are helping them, the Ukrainians, help themselves. But we forget that Ukraine is actually fighting for us, and that the Ukrainians are the ones taking the greatest risk in this war and doing the most to help themselves. I left my apartment in Wroclaw to two women who arrived from Kharkiv with nothing, and the day after they arrived they were already volunteering and helping other Ukrainian women."

Does the mobilization for the refugees have anything to do with the Poles' guilt feelings over not helping the Jews enough during World War II?

"There has been much conversation in the past 20 years about the Poles' attitude toward the Jews. Most people understood that there was something problematic here. And there are guilt feelings passed from generation to generation without anyone discussing them. So maybe there is some sort of reaction to that. Suddenly, we see we are capable of helping."

Front: Anna Sikora, kneeling left, with Oksana Prislyak, kneeling right, and Oksana's children Zlototsvitka and Danilo. Back, from left: Maria Ribchak, her daughter Tania Melnik and Tania's son Bogdan.

Adults: Marcin and Maja Swiderska, and their guest Anastasia Aksenova. Children: Helena and Leon Swiderska and Sonia Gonchar.