

Dr. Neil Scheier Volunteer's Service in Medyka, Poland to Assist Ukrainian Refugees

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My daughter and I continue to debate as to who made the initial suggestion to go to Poland and volunteer in a Ukrainian refugee camp, but April 4th found us on Air France, escorting medical supplies collected via the efforts of University of Rochester physicians Alex Paciorkowski and Yuliya Snyder (www.RocUkraineMedRelief.net) with intended first stop Warsaw for a drop off of the medical supplies, and then to the refugee camp. What we saw and what we did will remain with us forever.

My daughter Rachel Kaplan currently serves as the Executive Director of Hillel at the University of Cincinnati; in 'retirement' I work part-time as a practicing physician for the University of Rochester, with the remainder of my 'usual' week filled with activity as Board President of the Joseph Avenue Arts and Culture Alliance. For both of us comfortable jobs, comfortable lives, and neither of us with any prior relationship or interaction with either Poland or Ukraine. However, like many, inflamed at the horror of the Russian invasion and the evident lives disrupted. Which somehow led to the refugee camp at Medyka, Poland

Warsaw itself is a major city. Although we were there only a few hours, it's big and its streets and buildings remind one of Boston; it has a modern flavor amidst older buildings, fifteen story steel and glass structures side-by-side with three story brick boxes. After our medical supply drop off we immediately began our trip to the border, a four hour drive through farmland, villages with cobblestone streets and colorful houses, and one lane highways that somehow allow for the passage of cars going in opposite direction from each other.

Medyka itself is a town of no more than 2000, a church, a cemetery, a market -- and a border crossing which until this past February was on no one's map. As I write this, the Polish News reports 27,000 people crossing within the past 24 hours, 11,000 of whom crossed on foot. To date over 4 million refugees. We hooked up with Sauveteurs Sans Frontieres (SSF), an Israeli group more commonly known as Rescuers Without Borders. In the week prior to our trip I had sent a slew of emails to anyone and everyone I could think of, searching for volunteer opportunities; both Rachel and I thought it best to join an established group as opposed to "just showing up". Watching a news report with an on the street interview from Lublin I recorded the name of a business in the background; they, too, received an email and lo and behold responded -- with a contact, who then led me to another contact, and another, and thus to the Israeli group.

The refugee 'camp' at Medyka is approximately 30 tents arranged along a pathway leading to a makeshift bus depot -- from where the refugees are taken to either a local school or indoor shopping plaza now acting as overnight accommodation. The initial tent complex provides basic



needs -- food, dry clothing, a sim card, a place to sit -- all free, all provided by non-profits, religious organizations, government affiliated groups, concerned businesses . SSF is the first tent at the border itself, one physician and one nurse per 8 hour shift providing 24/7 medical help to those amongst the 11,000 walkers requiring care. The tent is heated by a small wood burring stove (yay for my Cub Scout years!) , the supplies are all donated and, yes, sometimes you have exactly what you need and sometimes you make do -- a half filled water bottle laid on its side with a hole cut in top for medicine insertion effectively serves as a nebulizer that provides aerosolized medication.

I had wondered in advance just what medical issues I would see. What I neglected to wonder about was how I was going to communicate with patients speaking languages that I don't (half of Ukraine are Russian speakers, half speak Ukrainian), and would I recognize the medicines they take. The answer to the first: volunteer Russian and Ukrainian interpreters from around the world roaming the camp. The answer to the second: Google Translate.



What I did see ran the gamut from known diabetic patients without insulin for a week to high blood pressure patients without medications, to burns and wounds, to babies crying because their diapers had not been changed in over a day, to painful feet and backs, to stomach ailments, to acute gall bladder issues, to chest pain in the elderly, to children with runny noses and sore throats -- the entire gamut of medical ails. In a population that had just walked for days to get to Medyka -- and who were totally appreciative of any and every gesture of help

Behind the medical tent is a larger tent for women and children, offering a warm place to sit (Medyka's weather mimics Rochester of March, rainy and 30's to 40's), a cot to nap on, dry clothing, diapers for babies, food for all. If necessary one can stay overnight in this tent, continuing the journey in the morning. The border itself closes at midnight, but already initiated processing continues, and thus people continue their entry into Poland until about 3 in the morning. The flow starts again at sunrise. There is a distance of about 1/8 mile between the actual border crossing and the official Poland border, a paved path surrounded by a high fence. Thus standing at the entry to the medical tent I could watch refugee families complete their journey. What struck me most was the confidence in their walk; whether carrying child in their arms or using 2 canes to walk, they had arrived.



What I cannot in any way convey in this writing is the extraordinary stress of people forced to leave their homes with their lives packed in a single suitcase. Yet, amidst the expected stress reactions of crying and tears and pain and anger, one could also sense a belief that this was all temporary, that ultimately they would return home. It may be months, it may be years, they may be heading to a country whose language they don't speak, but there exists amongst so many the firm belief that Ukraine is their homeland and return they will.

They were all very appreciative that we were there.