

OMADS Member Helping Ukrainian Refugees in Krakow

Graeme Warnell (formerly Crump) attended Desborough School from 1980 – 1988. Since 2008 he has been living in Krakow Poland with his wife and 2 of his 3 daughters.

When Russia renewed its attacks on Ukraine from both the Donbas and Belarus there was an exodus of refugees fleeing Ukraine with the majority of them heading to Poland. With Krakow being only 4 hours' drive from the Ukraine border Graeme and his family saw events unfolding that they felt compelled to become involved with.

At first, we organised through our daughters' school two buses that would drive to the Ukraine border and bring refugees into Krakow. On their way to the border, we would ensure the busses were filled with essential supplies that could be used at the border before they returned filled with people fleeing the invasion.

It was not long before the population of Krakow swelled by over 10% as a result of the fleeing refugees that comprised mostly women and children. At this point we decided to open up our home to refugees and start a fund-raising page so that we could do more immediately on the ground to help.

Our first family was a young mother Elena and her 3-year-old son Maxim. They had fled Ukraine and were trying to get to Rostok in Germany, however after travelling for 3 days they were exhausted. We were able to provide them with food, a place to sleep, rest and comfort. After a few days they managed to contact their colleagues in Rostok, we made sure they had all the provisions they needed and some money. We then got them on the train to Rostok where they arrived safely the next day.

In the meantime, we learned of 40 families who were sleeping in the local football stadium, so we started to take food and essential items to them every week. It was clear living space was now becoming very scarce in Krakow and nearly every sports hall, gym and hotel had been converted to house refugees.

The requests for help came in all different forms. We answered a plea from a woman with a 24-year son who suffered from a severe form of autism. The son only found comfort when he could play music on his piano which of course they had to leave behind. From the money we raised we were able to buy a portable electronic organ for him. It may seem like a small gesture, but it made a huge difference to both him and his mother.

The arrival of our second family shocked me the most. We were informed of a mother, Vlada, with two daughters Yasmina and Tzarina aged 8 and 3 who were arriving by train into Krakow from Ukraine, they had nowhere to stay. My wife drove to the station at midnight to collect them whilst I prepared a room for them all. When they arrived, the children were asleep, and my wife and the mother carried the children into their new room. When I went to the back of the car to collect their bags, I was truly shocked – there was only the mother's handbag and a small plastic shopping bag with a few toys in. They had left with nothing, all that they had was the clothes they had travelled in. Whilst they had been in a bomb shelter their apartment block had been totally destroyed. They stayed with us for almost 4 weeks. In this time my wife managed to arrange all their paperwork, establish the mother with a bank account and find schools for the two young children. After much searching, we were also able to find an apartment for them in Krakow, a place they could call home, which we help subsidise.

After a few trips to the shops to buy bedding, towels, toys, food and other essential items the apartment was beginning to feel like home or at least a new start.

Shortly afterwards the mother's cousin who was 5 months pregnant and fleeing with her 8 years old son were able to join them and they are now all live together and I am pleased to say in August she gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

Our third family we helped transition to the UK under the Government Sponsorship scheme. Once again it was a mother and her 12 years old son, all the fathers remained to fight. The mother was a Grand chess master, and the son was studying to be one as well.

In between families staying with us we provide food and support wherever we can directly to refugees on the ground. As an avid networker my resourcefulness seems to have taken on a new lease of life. In the last 4 months I have secured from the UK 1 vanload of masks, gowns and field dressings, 100 mobile phones, a prototype field stretcher which has gone to the Ukrainian Special Forces in Kherson and in November I am expecting a delivery of 100 sleeping bags.

I would not be able to achieve half of what I do if it was not for an incredible band of Polish drivers with nerves of steel who then drive everything we have obtained and drive it right up to the front line and the most remote villages in Ukraine. They often come under fire but thankfully have all come back safely.

It is important to understand that no one wants to be a refugee and there is a strong desire for them to remain independent and in control of their own lives in some shape or form. The wish of all the mothers and children we have supported is to return home and rebuild their lives.

We are so thankful to everyone who has donated and supported our campaign, we could not have achieved any of this without people's kind donations. It is our aim that we will use the fund to not only help people fleeing the war in Ukraine but to ultimately help them to return and rebuild their lives once this nightmare is over.

When peace one day hopefully comes to Ukraine my family and I will work with as much effort and passion to help them return as we did to help them in their flight from the terrors of war.

If anyone would like to support the campaign, they can do so by going to the link
<https://gogetfunding.com/hands-on-help-ukraine/>

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