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Susan Mathison: A courageous Ukrainian girl and American help amid a war

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By **SUSAN MATHISON** |
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The [Ukrainian children](#) of war have suffered most and Russia continues to target their well-being — as evidenced once again by recent missile strikes aiming for utilities and other infrastructure. We must not forget these vulnerable yet resilient souls as [the war's](#) one-year anniversary fades into the rearview mirror.

Instead, we need to take bold action as individuals and a larger American community.

On that [grim anniversary](#) in late February, I found myself in a dark, cold orphanage in western Ukraine. The nonprofit that three friends and I co-founded, [Common Man for Ukraine](#), led its fourth humanitarian relief trip that day — delivering food, generators and more supplies to 700 orphans and displaced children across 14 orphanages and safe houses.

One child, and all she represents, caught my eye. Her courage helped guarantee that I would be back for a fifth journey, that my friends and I would launch a new goal to feed 10,000 children of war, and that her dreams would be shared, encouraged, and never forgotten.

She was bundled up against the Ukrainian winter cold, snuggled into her hood, gloves over her small hands. She had come to this safe house from Dnipro, a city now divided by Russian occupiers. She had been sent to a safe house, like so many thousands of the youngest Ukrainians, to be protected, warm and fed.

She waved her electronic translator high into the air, hoping against hope to catch a spotty internet signal. A broad smile graced her face and she came rushing over to me.

She handed me the translator, an electronic, blue-light bridge between our two worlds.

In Ukrainian she quickly typed, “I am 13 years old. I am Jewish and I want to learn Hebrew. I want to learn about my religion and I want to learn English and I want to visit the United States someday.”

“What wonderful goals!” I typed back, smiling.
“Perhaps you can come visit us when the war is over. We live in New Hampshire which is just north of Boston.”

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I am a worrier. I tell my friends that I was born with a PhD in Worrying. I am a widow and I raised two sons alone. I worried about all the things that parents consider as they journey the unknown path of parenthood. I worked hard to make sure my boys had all the best tools to launch them into their futures — a good neighborhood, good friends, a warm home, nutritious food, a hobby, a baseball mitt, and maybe college in due time. I checked their spelling words, they were taught good manners, to wear their seat belts, to do their chores each day, and to dream big. I taught them that they could do anything they dreamed in their bright, American futures.

And, in due time, they did.

But on this cold night in Ukraine, as my thoughts traversed across the blue-light bridge with my new 13-year-old friend's, my racing mind thought of the sheer audacity of her war-era ideas. Here she stands outside a dark safe house with a hundred other young Ukrainians while my friends and I deliver basic food staples, sleeping bags, and generators. Here she stands with air raid sirens in her ears. Here she stands with a past that had all the building blocks of a bright future like the ones I had assured for my own sons. I imagine that her mom once worried like I did. I imagine that she checked her daughter's spelling words, drove her to dance lessons, taught her good manners, to wear her seat belt, and that she could do anything in her bright, Ukrainian future.

This young girl has so far escaped the fate of at least 6,000 Ukrainian children, who — according to a report from the Conflict Observatory — have been forcibly taken by Russia and placed into so-called reeducation camps. There are tens of thousands of children like her, taking refuge in orphanages and safe houses in the war-torn country's west.

Common Man for Ukraine and our partners on the ground need just \$44 to feed this girl for an entire month. We launched our new campaign 4/4: Feeding Children of War with the goal of feeding 10,000 orphans and displaced children by raising \$444,000 by April 4. Our trauma counseling center for displaced Ukrainian children in eastern Poland helps serve another pressing need, their mental health, which will continue to require resources and treatment for years to come.

But this little girl building a blue-light bridge between our worlds didn't know all that then. I had so much I wanted to type to her, only hoping that my smile and our supplies delivered the message's meaning: Yes, our government will send your government weapons of war, but many ordinary Americans care about you, too — you, the youngest victims of war.

Today, ordinary Americans will bring you food. And a sleeping bag. And some candy and a new warm coat. And a generator for the safe house. You will eat tonight, and be warmer as you dream your beautiful, audacious, big dreams. I can't wait for you to see New Hampshire. In the meantime, Brave Girl, here is a sleeping bag and a hug. And a plan for my fellow Americans to continue helping to keep you warm and fed until that free, safe day comes.

Susan Mathison co-founded the New Hampshire-based nonprofit CommonManForUkraine.org. She also serves as president of Pemi-Valley Habitat for Humanity.



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