

ROTARY

February 2023

Life during wartime

**An exclusive frontline
account chronicles Rotary's
response to the humanitarian
crisis in Ukraine** page 24

**Hope flows from
a water project
in Lebanon**
page 14

**Pedal power:
a two-wheeled
transit toward
a better life**
page 34

**A peace fellow's
perpetual journey**
page 50

Rotary 





A FRONTLINE REPORT

LIFE DURING WARTIME

PART I: POLAND

As the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine approached, *Rotary* magazine's **Wen Huang** traveled to Europe to see firsthand how Rotary members are responding to this humanitarian crisis. In the first installment of his two-part report, Huang visits Poland en route to Ukraine.

Photography by Ed Zirkle

TUESDAY, 7:45 P.M., WARSAW

A glittering, guitar-shaped sign for a Hard Rock Cafe welcomes me when I step out of Warsaw Central Railway Station. I snap a photo and send it to a journalist friend whose wife used to collect Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts from former communist countries. She and other pop culture experts believe that there is a strong relationship between rock 'n' roll and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. From my perspective, the sign is one example of a loud declaration of Poland's modern identity.

When I turn to take in the rest of Warsaw's central landscape, I am confronted by the Palace of Culture and Science, a hulking edifice that rises nearly 800 feet and remains the second-tallest building in Poland. Begun in 1952 and completed after Stalin's death, this Soviet-style high-rise that resembles the Empire State Building was a "gift" from Moscow to its unruly satellite. At night, the Poles light the building in hues of yellow and blue, Ukraine's national colors, in solidarity with their besieged neighbor. This symbol of Poland's communist past overlooks nearby shopping centers decked with Christmas lights and neon signs proclaiming Western fashion brands.

It is approaching 8 p.m., and though I am inspecting my surroundings outside the train station, my thoughts are focused on the days ahead. During my career as a journalist, I have covered international crises, violent revolutions, and natural disasters around the world. So I wanted to visit Ukraine to see for myself the conditions for millions of Ukrainians who have suffered and endured since Russia invaded in late February 2022.

From my home in Chicago, I followed news of the war closely. Working for Rotary, I received near-daily reports of members' efforts to assist Ukrainians, including those forced to flee to neighboring countries. At *Rotary* magazine, where I am the editor in chief, we held weekly video meetings early on with Ukrainian Rotary members, and in the first three months of the invasion, we watched as The Rotary Foundation collected \$15 million to support initiatives helping people affected by the war. All this only increased my desire to experience firsthand the *esprit de corps* of the humanitarian army that has rushed to Ukraine's aid.

An unexpected opportunity to do just that came last fall as I vacationed in Berlin. Mykola Stebljanko, who publishes *Rotariets*, Rotary's regional magazine in Ukraine, invited me to visit Lviv, the largest city in western Ukraine. Since Lviv is close to the Polish border, he suggested that I join him and other Rotary members at a Foundation seminar there. All I had to do was get to Warsaw, and everything would fall into place from there.



This is why I am lingering in the Polish capital this October night beneath the Hard Rock Cafe sign waiting for Paulina Konopka, the charter president of the Rotaract Club of Warszawa City. Pola, as the 30-year-old Rotaractor likes to be called, takes me to a nearby restaurant, where, over a pepperoni pizza, she tells me she was on a plane to Maldives with her family when the war began. Soon after she landed, she contacted her fellow Rotaractors in Warsaw to brainstorm ways to help. "In that first month, our whole country, from government to businesses, seemed to have stopped to help refugees in Poland and people in Ukraine," she says. "As a member of Rotary, you just instinctively want to help."

Using social media, the Warsaw Rotaractors appealed to friends in other countries for donations. With the Rotaract Club of Wilanów International, Pola's club set up a long-term home in a suburb for about 40 Ukrainian women and children and organized social events for the refugees, from cooking to disco parties. Club members visited them on Saturdays, bringing them gift cards and driving them to stores. "We also meet every week to teach refugees Polish and English and help them acclimate to life in their new country," Pola says.

A month after the war started, Poland had welcomed some 2 million Ukrainian refugees; about 300,000 lived in Warsaw, but many have since returned to their country, including about half of the 40 people who had lived at the Rotary shelter. "Many people simply missed their homelands and their husbands, brothers, and grandparents," Pola explains. The end of some food and transportation subsidies granted by the Polish government, as well as high energy and food costs as a result of the war, might also be contributing factors. Pola says that she and her fellow Rotaractors will continue to help those who remain find jobs and learn Polish.

As Russia intensified its bombardment of Ukrainian cities throughout the fall, Pola said that people might be forced to flee again to Poland, and the

Previous pages: The Ukrainian Support and Education Center, established by Polish Rotary clubs **Left:** Pola Konopka, charter president of the Rotaract Club of Warszawa City **Opposite:** Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science



Warsaw Rotaractors “will prepare to welcome and help them.”

Back at the bar of my hotel, I spot Ed Zirkle, a Rotarian from Ohio who’s a photographer and documentarian. “When I saw on TV the injustices done in Ukraine, I felt that I had to be there and document it,” he says, sipping his vodka on the rocks. So when he learned that the Rotary Club of Lviv was hosting a Foundation seminar, he decided to journey to Ukraine, hoping that he could meet up with Rotary members and get them to take him around the country. His request was forwarded to Mykola Stebljanko, who suggested that we travel together. Now, both Ed and I are awaiting further instructions.

WEDNESDAY, 10:15 A.M., KONSTANCIN-JEZIORNA

The next morning, Jacek Malesa, past president of the Rotary Club of Warszawa Fryderyk Chopin, invites us to visit a refugee center established by Rotary clubs in Konstancin-Jeziorna, a historical town south of Warsaw. Malesa, 58, took the day off work as a media company auditor to accompany us. Volunteering for Rotary, he says, is more fun.

The Ukrainian Support and Education Center is housed inside a three-story concrete building on a quiet street near the center of town. Its walls are freshly decorated with blue and yellow paper butterflies crafted for the children of Ukraine by U.S. students in New Hampshire. We visit a simply furnished room where two girls and four boys sit around a large table, drawing eyes and noses on a yellow paper cut in the shape of hands. A bit timid at first, they soon warm to us and are chattering enthusiastically. I catch snippets of what they’re saying as the translators struggle to keep up with the conversation.

The children came from the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv, Kherson, and Kharkiv. “Their fathers served in the military, and they came here with their mothers and siblings,” Malesa says. “Separating from their loved ones is hard on them. You should have seen them when they first arrived. They were not responsive to care and non-communicative. The care we provide has dramatically improved their condition.”

At the end of the drawing class, the teachers take the children outside for a break. Inside a small tennis court at a nearby park, a boy wearing a blue jacket and a hat that says “I ♥ Dad” moves to a corner and toys with a soccer ball. His eyes betray traces of sadness. A woman in a red sweater walks over to the boy and gives him a big hug. The woman, 36-year-old Luliia Cherkasbyna, is the boy’s counselor. She came from Kyiv and has been in Warsaw since the start of the war. Back home, she counseled autistic teenagers struggling with socialization issues. “I enjoy working at the Rotary center because I feel I’m doing something for the future of my country,” she says.

In June, before the center opened, Rotarians invited top-tier psychotherapists from Israel to train Ukrainian psychologists to treat and counsel children. “See,” she says, gesturing toward the children, “they’re smiling. It’s very rewarding to see the difference that Rotary and other kind-hearted Polish people have made on these children.”

The children came from the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv, Kherson, and Kharkiv. **“Separating from their loved ones is hard on them,”** says Jacek Malesa, a member of a Warsaw Rotary club. **“You should have seen them when they first arrived.”**

WEDNESDAY, 3:30 P.M., WARSAW

Malesa takes us to a traditional Polish restaurant nestled in the woods. As we eat our bowls of borscht and wait for our orders of beef tartare, pierogi, and pancakes, Malesa hands me his cell phone. Michał Skup, president of the Rotary Club of Warszawa Fryderyk Chopin, is on the line with an update about our travel plans: Zirkle and I are to head to the Polish town of Zamość, where Ukrainian Rotarians will meet us to accompany us across the border to Lviv in a couple of days.

Since Skup’s club is named after my favorite composer, I suggest that, before we depart for Zamość, we meet at Łazienki Park in central Warsaw and take a photo in front of the Chopin statue.

Dressed in a dark blue sports jacket over a white shirt, the spectacled Skup, the general counsel for an international corporation’s Warsaw branch, looks dashing fit. He has recently completed a 10-day bike tour from Warsaw to Tuscany, Italy, covering about 1,000 miles to raise money to purchase a minivan for the refugee center. After I describe my visit to the center, Skup shares in English — he spent a better part of his teenage years living in the United States — some behind-the-scenes stories about the center’s creation.

People in Poland were in shock when Russia invaded Ukraine, and many filled up their gas tanks, worried they might have to escape if Russia also targeted Poland, he recalls. “My wife packed our stuff and was ready to run away if the Russians came,” he says. “Fortunately, our fear was alleviated by the kindness of so many good people around the world. They contacted us through our club websites, via email or phone, asking us how they can help.”

Skup and others formed a working group that, at its peak, included representatives from 14 Rotary clubs or districts around the world. They held weekly video meetings to discuss ways to raise funds and offer relief. “At the beginning, we had no idea how long the war would last,” Skup says. “Many refugees were in standby mode, with-



Clockwise from left: Blue and yellow butterflies, crafted by students in New Hampshire, adorn the walls of the Ukrainian Support and Education Center; a child at the center shows off an art project; Luliaa Cherkasbyna, a counselor from the center, watches over the children as they visit the ducks at a nearby park.



PHOTOGRAPH: (CHERKASBYNA) WEN HUANG

out an idea about what to do next. They needed support to try to build resilience and lead a normal life, especially the children. I believed this war wouldn't end quickly, so we needed to think of helping refugees in a sustainable way."

In September, with the help of The Rotary Foundation's disaster response grants and with donations from local corporations, individuals, and Rotary members in Germany, Canada, Japan, Korea, and the United States, the group opened the center. It hired and trained psychologists, teachers, and a center manager — nearly all of them Ukrainian refugees — to provide counseling and education for children and others traumatized by the war. "The whole thing is so surreal to me," Skup says. "Even though we're experiencing so much evil in Ukraine, all these good Rotary people were coming to us out of their own volition, offering their help. The amount of goodness is just incredible."

During the conversation, Skup mentions the name Alex Ray more than once. A member of the Rotary Club of Plymouth, New Hampshire, Ray provided more than \$300,000 to the center. "He's in Ukraine," Skup says. "You might run into him."

Skup echoes what Pola told me the previous evening, that more people could seek refuge in Poland if Russia escalates the war. With that in mind, and with the benefit of Ray's donation, Skup and his colleagues in Rotary hope to make a long-term commitment to expanding the center to provide day care, vocational and language training, psychological help, and basic medical services to refugees from other countries, including Russia and Belarus. "We're a relatively small club, with 17 members," Skup says. "But our clear commitment to helping others is driving membership, and we're expecting at least three new members soon."

With that, Skup strikes a pose in front of the Chopin monument, stretching his arms wide and holding his club's flag. After taking his photo, I study the sculpture, which was erected in 1926, destroyed by the German army in 1940, and restored in 1958. It's then I notice an inscription engraved on the statue's pedestal: "Flames will consume our painted history, sword-wielding thieves will plunder our treasures, the song will be saved."

The words come from a poem by Adam Mickiewicz, considered by some to be Poland's greatest poet, but they could just as easily have been written about Ukraine.

From left: Alex Ray helps unload needed supplies; Steve Rand, Ray, and Ryszard Łuczyn, a Rotarian in Zamość, collect boxes of sleeping bags at a warehouse in Chelm, Poland, before entering Ukraine. **Opposite:** Michał Skup and Jacek Malesa stand in front of Warsaw's inspiring Chopin monument.

THURSDAY, 5:15 P.M., ZAMOŚĆ

Warsaw to Zamość is a four-hour bus ride through the Polish countryside. When Zirkle and I step off the bus at dusk, Google Maps indicates that we are less than 40 miles from the border with Ukraine. Darkness soon envelops us, and the October air carries the pungent smell of burning wood. With skyrocketing energy costs, many families here and throughout Europe are using fireplaces and wood-burning stoves to heat their homes.

Zamość is built on a medieval trade route connecting western and northern Europe with the Black Sea. Designed by the Italian architect Bernardo Morando, the city was overrun by the Nazis in World War II despite the brave resistance of its residents, many of whom died. The Nazis then systematically rounded up Jews for deportation to the death camps. I suspect this tragic history of subjugation contributed to the amazing empathy the townspeople have shown during this latest crisis. In a news report in March, officials said about 4,000 refugees had found shelter in the city.

The Morando hotel lies on the edge of the charming and lovingly restored Great Market Square, which resembles an Italian piazza. On the perimeter of this perfect square, multicolored Renaissance buildings stand shoulder



PHOTOGRAPHS: (N.H. CLUB) COMMON MAN FOR UKRAINE/STEVE RAND



to shoulder, their rooflines mimicking the 16th century architecture. As Zirkle and I haul our luggage into the palatial lobby, we run into Alex Ray, just as Skup had predicted. Ray had raised \$1.3 million with the help of friends, all of it destined to fund humanitarian projects in Ukraine — and then nearly matched those donations with \$1 million of his own money.

The owner of the popular Common Man family of restaurants in New Hampshire, Ray, mild-mannered and unassuming, is traveling with Steve Rand, fellow Rotarian and his friend of 40 years, as well as their partners, Lisa Mure and Susan Mathison. They have just returned from their second trip to Ukraine to identify what kinds of things were most urgently needed as Ukrainians were preparing to begin a dark and cold winter made worse by the loss of electric power.

“Last March, when we saw images of Russian tanks rolling into Ukraine, it felt immensely oppressive,” says Rand, a 78-year-old hardware store owner. “It was like a World War II-type of military operation in real time. All the machines of war are being used against a civilian population that had very little ability to fend for themselves.”

Ray nods in agreement. “This is a one-way aggression, unfair and unjust,” he says. “We feel empathy toward the innocent civilians who are going through this tragedy. It parallels those hurricane victims whom we have helped in the U.S., except that nobody could figure out how our help could reach Ukraine.”

Since Ray and Rand are members of the Rotary Club of Plymouth, New Hampshire, they found their solution through the organization. “We decided to use our Rotary network in Poland and Ukraine, making them a conduit,” Ray says. “In this way, we can assure our donors that the money would go directly on the ground to people in Ukraine.”

Ray and his big-hearted friends decided to raise money in their home state. Their efforts have won the support of local politicians, a radio station, a minor-league baseball team, and local nonprofit organizations such as the Granite United Way, which served as the campaign’s fiscal agent. Ray also involved his 850 restaurant workers, who distribute cards and pamphlets to customers. “We’re proud that New Hampshire, with a population of 1.38 million, is able to donate about one dollar for each of the state’s residents,” says Mure, Ray’s partner.

Ray says that they are expanding beyond New Hampshire. He and his friends conducted a reconnaissance mission in Poland and Ukraine last summer and identified six projects, including the refugee center established by Skup and his club, and a bloodmobile purchased by the Rotary Club of Kraków to support hospitals in Ukraine. They have purchased and distributed about 700 tons of food through Rotary members in Zamość. “Now we’re adding sleeping bags and generators,” he says. “The reason we have success is because of the Rotary clubs here. They knew the situation in Ukraine and take the responsibility to use our funds and deliver the aid to where it’s needed.”

Feeling a bit jittery about my impending trip into Ukraine, I ask the travelers if they had been concerned about their safety. “My trip in May was my first time to cross into a war zone,” replies Mathison, whom I jokingly call the public relations manager of the group for her eagerness to share its story. “I’m just a regular middle-aged, middle-class mom. I never thought I would find myself there. Before we left for Lviv, our host warned that there had been bombings and asked if we still wanted to go. I thought to myself: There are millions of Ukrainians who wake

up every day to bombings and find the courage to feed and clothe their kids and keep them safe. If they can do that, it’s my job to do it for a couple of days and then leverage that experience to help them in the long-run.”

The four go on to describe what they saw in Ukraine: a convention center and Soviet-era military barracks converted into rudimentary refugee shelters, a makeshift warehouse coordinating emergency food deliveries into eastern Ukraine, and a run-down orphanage that they were able to help rebuild. And Ray praises his new Rotary friends in Poland for their limitless generosity: “Our organization — Rotary — gives us the power to help.”

Their October trip reinforced the fears of a cold winter for children in Ukraine. Ray and his friends returned to Ukraine in mid-December. During the trip, he dressed as Father Frost and delivered 18 tons of food, 1,000 sleeping bags, and 24 generators, as well as 1,300 Christmas packages, to orphanages in the cities of Lviv and Rivne.

Our interview might have gone on for another hour if the foursome had not been called in to dinner. I head up to my hotel room, and as I enter, my phone begins to ring. It’s Piotr Pajdowski, president of the Rotary Club of Warszawa-Belweder. He tells me to be ready: Two Rotarians will arrive at the hotel in the morning and escort me and the photographer across the border.

At 9 a.m., Vasyl Polonskyk and Hennadii Kroichyk stroll into the hotel lobby, where the quartet from New Hampshire and a Rotary member from Zamość are waiting to check out. The mere mention of Rotary removes any language or cultural barriers among this group of strangers, and we greet one another warmly as if old friends. The conversations are so animated, we drop our bags into a jumble on the tiles.

Then, we are off.

Polonskyk pauses to drive me around the scenic parts of Zamość twice for good luck, which we sorely need for our next stop: Ukraine. ■

Next month: In the March issue of Rotary, Wen Huang concludes his report as he visits Lviv, the cultural capital of Ukraine and a city under siege.

Alex Ray praises his new Rotary friends in Poland for their limitless generosity. **“Our organization — Rotary — gives us the power to help.”**



Above: The town hall in the Old City of Zamość **Left:** A humanitarian quartet — (from left) Susan Mathison, Rand Ray, and Lisa Mure — study a map at the Morando hotel in Zamość.

PHOTOGRAPH: (TOWN HALL) GETTY IMAGES