

Sister Teodora Kopyn: The Way of the Cross in the footsteps of the Ukrainian people



My mission trip to Ukraine began in Mukachevo on April 16, 2022 as I boarded a free train to eastern Ukraine, stopping at Lviv, Kharkiv, Poltava, and Lozova. I felt relatively safe because my uncle was the train's conductor. He had been, from the war's beginning, bringing refugees from the dangerous eastern part of the country to the west. He said that on one of his first trips very close to the Russian border, not only the train shook from the bombing, but his feet could feel the entire earth under him moving! Also, his stop in Kharkiv on the Monday after Easter was terrifying because a low-flying plane right above him was bombing, and the bombs hit somewhere close. Because no one knew exactly where, all began to run and scatter - some running OFF the train, and others hiding in corners in the train station. It was dangerous and frightening!

On the first day of my trip, because of lack of time and because stores were closed, I had very little to give. I found in one open store 5 packages of colored pencils which I cut in half. These, in addition to the pictures which I printed, brought joy to so many children on the train! At least for a short while, they were able to forget what they were going through. So many times during my train rides, children would run to me to beg me for anything I could give them so that they could more easily pass the time...

Each time we went through villages in eastern Ukraine, we were met with an eerie silence and TOTAL darkness, because lights were forbidden. On the day before we arrived in Kharkiv, (as well as the after we left), the city was bombed.

Lozova, our last stop on the way to Eastern Ukraine, was the most dangerous, and instead of our planned 10 hours there, we had to leave after only 8. In both of these cities, we actually saw and heard the extremely close explosions...

On the way back, our train stopped again in Kharkiv, this time to pick up refugees. They

were crying, and unable to be comforted. Then as the train began to move after 2 hours, I could hear a combined loud sigh of relief.

In Poltava, I saw one woman at the train station holding two small children, crying “I want to go home - why must we run away? - where are we going?” Her husband tried to comfort her, but no words would help. It was so heartbreaking to see!

On the train were many families with children. They told me, “We cannot stay in Kharkiv anymore. Our houses are ruined, and it’s too dangerous to stay there. We don’t know where we are going or what will happen to us.”

One woman told me that all have left her city except government workers, and so she had to stay. But she was taking her 16-year-old daughter to safety in the west and then would return. Her heart was broken, as Kharkiv was becoming more dangerous for her family there each day. As I left her, she told me that she had just told her husband that seeing the religious Sister on the train had brought her peace and relief... I keep remembering how, as her husband bid them farewell in Kharkiv, all were crying, not knowing if they would ever be united safely again...

There were so many more people I met who wanted to share their stories with me... So many told me that their apartment buildings had been bombed, but that they were so grateful to have made it out alive!

One family said that having the military all over their city was frightening, but not as frightening as the constant sound of sirens!

Those who were fleeing only carried small bags with themselves. They were saying how hard it was to leave their homes and were so hoping to come back as soon as possible. One man said, “I cannot leave my dear Ukraine! I was born here! My children were born here! I’ve spent my entire life here! One day I WILL return!”

Most people could not tell their entire stories, but I could see so much pain in their eyes. When I could not comfort them, I felt so helpless Their pain will last their entire lifetimes, and it was unbelievably caused by those without any sense of human compassion.

As I was walking through the train, I met one family with 5 children. There was a 5-year-old girl named Bohdana who was drawing. When I asked her what she was doing, she

said, "I am painting a devil. I want him to go away." I said, "Would you like to draw an angel?" As soon as I showed her a picture of an angel, she quickly drew many angels and promised me, "I will never draw a devil again." But then she went on - "I don't like Putin. If he comes here, I will tell him to get out!" The next day when I visited her again, she told me that she wanted to give her painting of an angel to someone who looked like an angel. Then, as for so many there, after a short period of unexpected joy, the cloud of darkness settles in... So, after a few minutes of quiet, she said "My grandmother was crying all night."



And they kept coming to tell me their stories.... One woman was fleeing from Kharkiv with her husband. Her children had already been sent to western Ukraine. But she, like all the others, had taken nothing with herself. She could not even afford to buy an empty cup. When I tried to give her money to buy tea, she refused, saying "I don't want to take your money." But I told her that this was war, and that she MUST accept help from strangers now. She hugged me and assured me that she would now be okay. But my uncle came to tell me soon thereafter that he had just seen that woman alone in a secluded part of the train - sobbing uncontrollably.

My trip lasted an entire night and day. One little girl came to me and wanted to share something with me. She said, "Every day I kneel and pray: Please, God, keep my mother and father and sisters safe!"

At one point I asked my uncle if I could buy from him some tea and crackers to give to the refugees. When we gave crackers to an elderly man, he kept repeating, "For ME? For me? For free?" It was so heartbreaking to see so many suffering people who had just lost their homes and everything they had, and yet they were SO appreciative now - for even small things!

My uncle had told me that the earlier trips were much harder - the train was PACKED with people who had to STAND the entire time, some in total shock, but most of them simply crying throughout the entire trip. They were all hungry, and whatever food my uncle had was given out in one hour! He had to call his boss who then arranged for the volunteers at the next train station to give him more food, but it was never enough... As the people left the train at the end of their journey, so many people, filled with gratitude, hugged and kissed my uncle. They were so relieved that he had gotten them to a safer

place...

At the end of the trip the children especially were happy to get off the train. They felt safe, even though they didn't know where they were going. One very small boy said, "I'll help you, Mom - I'm strong enough - don't worry!" It warmed my heart to see how children cared for their parents, and of course it was evident how parents cared for their children...

This trip had been an extremely long one because as we approached Lviv, we heard that the train station there had just been bombed. The delay was long and made everyone feel even more anxious.

I cannot put into words how heartbreaking it was to see such sadness everywhere - people crying with no words to express, or desire to express how they felt - people who had until recently lived normal and happy lives but who had suddenly witnessed their homes completely destroyed. They had to leave not only all their possessions behind, but elderly relatives and friends. Life as they knew it would never be the same.

As they were running away, most did not know their final destination. All they knew was that they must seek a safer place. I had to witness fathers and husbands at train stations having to bid goodbye to their wives and children, not knowing if they would ever see one another again. It was so difficult to watch and to hear... On a brighter note, I met so many kind volunteers at the train stations. But unfortunately, by the time I met them, they had run out of food and all other necessary supplies! They said that it was especially hard for them to tell the children who were asking for water and fruit that they just didn't have any. They told me that they needed EVERYTHING!

The next day I started my trip to Zaporizhzhia with Ivan, the driver of a small van. He wanted to help me get there and back safely. We first visited Drohobych where there was an organization which was helping ALL refugees in need. Because it was a few days before Easter, they gave us all kinds of Easter foods for those in Zaporizhzhia .

There was a priest in our van who was returning to help his parishioners after he had just taken his family to a safer area in western Ukraine. He said that it was so hard for him to leave them because they, like so many others, were unsure of what would become of them.... And would they ever be reunited? I had already met SO many people who had first fled to the west but were now returning to the dangerous east to serve those in need. Their hearts were so filled with love for their homeland that they could not stand

to be away...

During our trip, our driver suddenly said, "Now we'll pray the rosary." To see a grown man with a rosary in his hand and to hear him praying not just words, but words filled with emotion and hope showed me how powerful a weapon prayer is... This gave me (as well as my driver) solace and hope.

When we reached the city of Zaporizhzhia, it was early morning. Our Sister Lukia met me and she was in tears - she was thrilled that I had come from so far to visit them. The Sisters there were caring for refugees, helping out at the hospital, and especially helping the military who came to them for help. They were working so hard to help anyone and everyone in need!

Sister Lukia was telling me that the Russian troops were now only 40 km. away. When the war first began, most of the people had fled, and so Zaporizhzhia had become a "ghost town". But now people were beginning to return. But it still remains unsafe because of frequent bombing. I myself heard the sirens there many times...

On our way back, we met a woman named Natalia who was fleeing from her village of Irpin which had been totally destroyed by the Russians. She said that she had just left her apartment to do some quick shopping. When she returned, she found that her entire building was gone! She tried to run to two other family buildings, but found that these had also been destroyed. She was now on her way to Lviv where hopefully she would meet a volunteer who would help her. She had absolutely nothing with herself except two small bags and was telling me that it was a miracle that she had not been in her building when it was bombed. She was crying, but humbly said, "I don't need anything - just a small room to go to, so that I can be safe."

One stop on the way was the city of Kamiansk where one church, open to the public, served 200 families each day. The priest there said that all who came were in need of food and housing - not clothing. But unfortunately they were quickly running out of food.

We picked up refugees who were most in need and took them either to Lviv or to the Polish border. But when we came to one rest stop, the sirens sounded and the driver said, "We must leave quickly!" Everyone was terrified, but it was especially difficult to see the children so afraid, not knowing what would happen to them. The sound of sirens made everyone live in fear every moment...

When we finally arrived in Lviv, I met Natalia once again. She was standing in the bus station, not knowing where to go. I said, "Come with me," even though no one was allowed on the streets yet. But I took her inside the station and found a volunteer who was so kind and told me, "Don't worry, we will help her." When I gave her money, she, not looking at it, simply said, "Thank you." Later she returned to me, hugging and kissing me, saying, "You gave me so much!!!" She was SO appreciative!!! She said, "This will help me A LOT!!!"

The train trip from Lviv to Mukachevo was extremely long. The delays were due to the several sirens that were sounding in Lviv. When I finally arrived late in Mukachevo, there were MANY people. But when the sirens sounded, they all fled. I was standing there alone.

It seemed so unfair - especially for the children - to have to live in constant fear in this century. The sounds of sirens still frighten me in the middle of the night - until I realize that I am in America!!

On the Tuesday after Easter, I visited an organization in Mukachevo which was caring for 100 people, including 37 children who had fled from Bucha and other decimated cities. There I met one woman who had fled from Bucha with her two tiny children and her friend's small child. There was also an elderly couple who had been in their apartment when it was bombed. Volunteers got them out. The man was paralyzed and could not speak. The woman was out of breath as she told me her story. As she spoke, the man listened intently, and then kissed my hand - so grateful for someone to listen and to care.

The next day I visited our Sisters in Lviv who were caring for refugees and really helping so many people. Our Sisters in Beryhy had 30 refugees in their home, and our convent in Yavoriv was also housing approximately 30! Our Sisters in Perechyn also were housing refugees. ALL of our dear Sisters in every region of Ukraine are continually helping refugees in all parts of Ukraine. May God bless them all!



When in Mukachevo, it came to my attention that the volunteers there were all out of food and medicine. This was the first stop for refugees from the east as they approached Europe's borders. So, the next day my brother and I went to the bazaar where we purchased fresh fruit, as well as crackers and cookies. The children literally RAN to the table where they were put and were thrilled to be able to have fresh fruit, such as apples and bananas!! It was heartwarming to see their happy faces (especially when they saw some lollipops I had purchased)!

As my mission trip was coming to an end, I met with my brother's parishioners at church. All shared their sad stories with me. One woman with two sons in the military asked for prayers - for them and for herself, because she couldn't sleep at night, filled as she was with worry about them.

Daily there is news for these people of their loved ones who have either been killed or wounded. It must be terrifying to wait for such news! And how can I comfort the young woman who just found out that her husband was just killed and who kept sobbing, "I can't believe it! I want him back! I want to build my future with him!" Or what can I say to another young pregnant woman with a small child who just received the same news?

I suddenly received a call from a family friend - a soldier from Moldova stationed near Belarus. He shared with me how badly those in his battalion were suffering. As they were trying to dig trenches, the nonstop rain prevented them from doing this. He asked me to send him heavy plastic with which to line the trenches, as well as other items.

When I told him that these items were expensive, he said, “We can do without food – and clothing we do not need. But things such as sleeping bags and tents are so necessary because we need to protect ourselves and to survive. When we first arrived here, we had none of these, and we need them badly...”

He then went on to say that they have many soldiers from western Ukraine there, and that on that very same day their main headquarters in Lviv was bombed by the Russians. So many soldiers died. But that particular group somehow, miraculously, was not present when it happened. They had been saved...

During my travels throughout Ukraine during this mission trip, I saw so much beauty still left – fields full of flowers blowing in the wind, and people tending to their gardens and trying to keep their tiny villages neat and clean. I cannot imagine anyone wanting to destroy this beauty, and my heart breaks daily as I hear how the enemy continues to persecute my beloved people and their land.

I soon left Mukachevo, and bade goodbye to my mother in the Czech Republic before I boarded a plane back to the U.S. My mission trip had ended.

Here in America, as I work with homeless people, I feel their pain. I understand how hard it is for them not to have housing or food. But their pain is totally different from the pain felt by the people in Ukraine. Ukrainians must flee suddenly from their homes without ANYTHING, and the most terrifying part is that they are not sure if they will even HAVE a future. The entire country is constantly in fear and in tears.

Please, dear Lord, bring a speedy end to this unjust war, and let my people live in peace!