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# **“On the other side of our border a war has broken out”**

Michal, a supernumerary of Opus Dei living in Poland and the father of four children, recounts his family's efforts over the past days to assist the flood of refugees arriving from Ukraine.

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**Friday, February 25.** On the other side of our border a war has broken out. The first refugees from Ukraine

are arriving in Poland. The internet is filled with news of Ukrainian mothers and children with urgent needs. They need lodging, sheets, clothing, food, and cleaning products. At the request of someone I know, I post on social media the needs of 18 Ukrainian mothers and children who have taken refuge in Lublin. The response from my friends is immediate. I offer to transport refugees to Lublin on Sunday morning.

**Saturday, February, 26.** We have drawn up a plan of action for the purchases and transportation. Welcoming sites are being set up, with food and hot meals, and we have a large supply of diapers. On returning home I speak with my dear wife. We fill two cars with donations: a crib, a baby carriage, changing tables, clothing, diapers, and cleaning products. We have even bought some Ukrainian chocolate in

one of the department stores. We hope it will bring a smile to the children's faces. The cars are completely loaded so we look for a bigger car to borrow in which everything will fit. Right at that moment, my son calls, "Hi, Dad. My friend has two big vans that he's willing to let us use to help the Ukrainian refugees." In the evening we go home to package all the gifts. The two of us will leave early in the morning.

### **"A guest in the house, God in the house" (Polish refrain)**

**Sunday, February 27.** Lublin. We unload the aid packages quickly and efficiently. Everything is handled professionally. First contact with the Ukrainian mothers. I try speaking to them in Polish. They find it hard to understand me, so I switch to Russian and explain to them what we have brought. How alike our two

languages are. I tell them that they can feel at home in Poland. Before leaving, I call the coordinators and friends who were at the border to see if there is a need to bring anyone with us on our return trip.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, they already have too many cars waiting for mothers and children from Ukraine at the border crossings. So we return home.

**Monday, February 28.** A message from a colleague appears on my phone: "Transport of Ukrainian mothers and children from the border to Zabki and surroundings: looking for families who could take them in." I write back that our town has several thousand inhabitants, and could receive at least a hundred refugees. "Would you like to come with us?" "Of course," I reply.

**Tuesday, March 1.** After morning Mass and breakfast, I go with the

buses and the van from the School of Law that are bringing aid to the border. We pray the Holy Rosary on the way. Stopping in Hrubieszow, we pick up the first three mothers with their children. After learning their names, we speak with them and try to tell some jokes. Danilo is 2 years old, Kozak Marko is 5, and Swieta is an adolescent. We are heading for the Dolhobyczow crossing. There we find several hundred people awaiting transport. We take first the mothers with children. We ask if they have a place in Poland to stay. Our bus fills up quickly, as do the other buses. We set out towards Warsaw. The bus is full and we try to look after the passengers. I make the children laugh. We want to help them forget, even if for just a moment, the nightmare they have left behind. And to stop thinking about their father who has stayed behind to fight for their country.

It is almost midnight when we reach Zabki. Most of the passengers get off there, while the rest go on to Milanowek. Meanwhile, I have drawn up a plan to distribute all the families. With our friends and with our own family.

Some friends and one of our sons come to the parking lot in front of the school. We bring some of the refugees to our home. They can finally get some sleep in a comfortable bed and spend the night feeling safe and secure. Someone tells us that since the war began they haven't slept more than three hours at a stretch.

**Wednesday, March 2.** Katerina, the children and the dog spend the night in our room. We eat breakfast with our guests. We talk in English, laugh, and listen to their plans. I bring our guests to the Central Station where they will continue their journey. We

say goodbye and I ask them to keep in touch with us. They are going to see some friends in Krakow and then continue on to Germany.

In the afternoon I take part in a day of recollection in the center of Opus Dei. A text message arrives from the director of my children's school: "Can I call you?" "Of course!" We speak about the possibility of designing an online tool to enable Ukrainian children to attend classes in Polish schools. Simultaneous translation of the Polish classes into Ukrainian has to be set up. A test needs to be organized with some young Ukrainians. "Would you like to take this on?" he asks me. "Of course!"

**Thursday, March 3.** I invite Igor, 16 years old, to dinner. He is a music student and lives close to the border with Poland. He has come to Poland alone. His mother works in a hospital, and his father and brother

have volunteered for the army. We talk about the plan for using computer tools for learning and for examinations. We set up a meeting for Friday.

**Friday, March 3.** First test of the translation system. I leave for work, where I receive a text message: “We need help for several hundred physically handicapped persons from Ukraine who will arrive in Warsaw at 11 pm.” I share this news with some friends I can trust. We receive news that their arrival has been delayed and they will now arrive at 4 am. My children and I are able to get a few hours sleep. At 3 am the alarm rings and we head for Warsaw in our car.

The group of people we are receiving is made up of children and adolescents with serious disabilities. We help the refugees to get settled in the shelter and prepare to get some



sleep. Some have Down Syndrome, are partially paralyzed, or have other disabilities. I talk and laugh with them; at times I even sing lullabies to the youngest of them. Here it is so easy to realize that we are all children of God. Now I am more convinced than ever that Good will triumph in the end.

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