

A Trip Never to Forget

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I first visited Ukraine in October 2018, when I was President & CEO of GE's Global Growth Organization, to speak at the Kyiv International Economic Forum. Afterwards, the GE-Ukraine team showed me around their capital city. Our first stop was to the then-new memorial for the Ukrainians who were gunned down during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. As a leader of the movement put it, the people of Ukraine "chose democracy over dictatorship. We chose freedom of speech and freedom of elections." In response, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula.



We then made our way to the famous Motherland Monument. Despite Moscow's aggression in 2014, it never occurred to me as I stood before the Monument contemplating the pain of World War II that Ukraine would again experience such widespread brutality within years. These reflections were personal and painful for me. Shortly after my mother graduated from high school, she was taken prisoner by the Nazis during their invasion of Russia and nearly starved to death in a slave labor camp. Truth be told, she never fully recovered from this horrific experience.

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Fast forward to March 2022, when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine prompted me to ruminate about all of this with Rich Bindler, one of my best friends. In response, he said: “We should go there to help.” I was intrigued and Rich is persuasive. I’ve always tried to be philanthropic, but I’d never gone to the scene of a disaster. We had both retired (or, as Rich prefers to say, “rewired”) and this was a chance to be a “doer” in addition to a “donator.” So we started to do our homework and Rich soon connected with Teddy Raskin, an energetic entrepreneur who had grown up with our daughters on the North Shore of Chicago and recently cofounded “Ukraine Friends,” a non-profit that was already doing great things in Poland and Ukraine but was also still small enough that our help could genuinely make a difference. Three more friends – David Kahnweiler, Greg Pearlman and Mark Futrovsky – signed on to round out what eventually came to be known as the “Krakow Five.”

Our first task was to raise money to complement our personal contributions to Ukraine Friends. We hoped to raise \$250,000 or so. But the response from our friends and families to the plight of Ukraine was nothing short of heart-stirring. To date, we have raised over \$950,000 to support the work of Ukraine Friends and other non-profits in Poland and Ukraine.

Here’s my journal of how we put these donations to work.

Day One

Our journey began at the Ukraine Friends warehouse in Cedarhurst, New York, where we packed Individual First Aid Kits (IFAKs) designed to be clipped to a soldier’s gear. When I saw my first IFAK, the mission became very real to me – tourniquets, clotting gauzes, breathing tubes, compression bandages and other items whose seriousness brought home the depth of the sacrifices that the women and men of Ukraine are making to fight for their freedom.



That night, we transported 138 duffels with 3,312 IFAKs on our flight from New York to Krakow. We kept apologizing to the LOT counter personnel who had to process our bags, but they reassured us that, in their view, we couldn’t get the IFAKs to the front lines in Ukraine soon enough.



Days Two and Three

Our bags caught up with us over the weekend. At the time, we weren't sure which group of passengers were more upset about the logjams that we caused on LOT – the long line of people waiting to check in at JFK Airport on Friday night or the passengers who were impatiently watching our duffels come down the ramp as they were waiting for their bags on the Saturday/Sunday flights from Warsaw to Krakow.

We devoted the bulk of our first weekend in Poland to assembling more IFAKs in Poland. Not to belabor this point, but it was chilling to hear the badass ex-military nurses who volunteer for Ukraine Friends explain that the IFAKs contain two body patches to cover exit as well as entry wounds and include permanent markers to denote the time that a tourniquet was applied so that medical personnel can later determine whether it's realistic to try to save a limb.

We also met one of Ukraine Friends' key operational leaders on the ground. Kat, who escaped from Ukraine shortly after the Russians invaded, has recruited 25 women to identify evacuees at the train station in Lviv, place them on buses to Krakow (from six to ten per day) and situate them and their children in safe Airbnb's for 30 days. She explained that it is critical for females to make the initial contacts at the train station because the evacuees fear falling victim to unscrupulous sex traffickers and/or kidnapping plots that would lead to prison cells in Russia or back to parts to Ukraine controlled by Russia. Until then, I had thought that the stories out of Ukraine couldn't get any worse. It breaks my heart that women and children are still being subjected to such torment in the year 2022.

We also met with Will McNulty, CEO of Operation White Stork, for an update about his organization's work with Ukraine Friends to get medical supplies into Ukraine and evacuees out. He identified what we would soon see has already become another major challenge for humanitarian organizations – providing safe transportation for evacuees seeking to return to their relatives and homes in Ukraine in the coming months and years. (We would soon see this for ourselves when the lines to get into Ukraine appeared to be longer than the lines to get out of Ukraine.)

Day Four

I visited the Ronald McDonald House in Krakow, located across the street from the Krakow Children's Hospital. Like its counterparts around the world, the RMH in Krakow provides a home away from home for families who are trying to hold it together while a child is hospitalized. This mission has taken on a special meaning in the context of the war in Ukraine. At the time, the Krakow RMH was home to four families (some together, some split apart) who have evacuated from Ukraine, with more to come.



In the afternoon, we went to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest of the Nazi concentration camps. Words still escape me. What hit me the hardest (among many candidates) as a new grandfather was the display of piles of shoes from the innocent children who were murdered there. What angered me the most were the pictures of Nazi guards wearing smug smiles of satisfaction as they perpetrated such evil.

Day Five

We went to Ukraine Friends' warehouse in Krakow on the grounds of the Jesuit University to assemble more IFAKs and put together care packages for children on the buses out of Lviv – candy bars, juice, crayons, stickers and stuffed animals.

We then visited an orphanage in Zmiaca run by the Jesuit University. The children who live there have been unfortunate in so many ways, of course, but they are fortunate to have landed in a safe and nurturing environment. The University is completing renovations of two buildings on the campus to accommodate orphans from Ukraine. We also visited a nearby school that the University has launched for K-8 evacuees at which lessons are taught in Ukrainian and the students are learning how to speak Polish. The University hopes to open comparable facilities in Lviv.

We devoted the afternoon to volunteering at the Jewish Community Center in Krakow, which has helped over 50,000 evacuees since the Russian invasion. The JCC functions seven days a week as a denomination-neutral distribution point for food, medicine, hygienic supplies, toys and clothing for 600+

Ukrainians a day. Volunteers from Phoenix (including a Diamondbacks fan who took exception to my Cardinals sweatshirt) were manning the pantry. We also met a Holocaust survivor who brought us to tears when she recounted her first thought when she first met evacuees from Ukraine: "That was me."



We met over dinner with two former British Special Forces who have started a NGO known as Project Apollo to extract vulnerable Ukrainians (e.g., people with disabilities) and to locate missing children. They are also inventing new Apps to locate facility members and match providers of transportation to evacuees in search of trips to safety. The stories these brave men had to tell about the rescues they had pulled off at the front lines were harrowing.

We had not originally planned to cross the border into Ukraine, but we overcame our doubts when the leaders of Ukraine Friends and Project Apollo assured us as best as they could that Lviv was an unlikely target and Project Apollo kindly offered to escort us.

Day Six

We left Krakow at 4:30 am. It took us six hours to make the 200-mile trip to Lviv even though we were able to jump most of the line of cars at the Polish-Ukrainian border, which was several miles long (and next to a line of trucks that was even longer). It was unnerving when we were instructed to switch our phones to airplane mode so that the Russians would not be able to detect signals from a U.S. wireless carrier (so much so that we pinky pledged that we would not check our phones while in Ukraine).

Upon entering Lviv, we were struck by the seeming normalcy of what we saw in a town of 700,000 that was swelled by some 300,000 refugees. But the sense of normalcy ended when we arrived at the train station to help place evacuees on buses to the border towns of Poland. As Greg put it, "nothing you see on TV can prepare you to see refugees in person." In all, Ukraine Friends got 6 buses with 300 evacuees to safety that day.

I was especially struck by how kids could still be kids with infectious laughs and smiles even in such distressing circumstances and how mothers under duress could still find it within themselves to insist

that their children say “thank you” and not accept more than one of the care packets that we had prepared. We heard so many stories that broke our hearts. One woman told us how she had paid a dirtbag over \$500 to be extracted from Odessa to Germany only to watch as he took off with her money. We met her just after she had since completed a 4 day odyssey which included dodging bullets and soldiers and walking over 3 miles to safety.



Our next stop was to the “Project Yankee” warehouse, where volunteers from throughout the world were preparing IFAKs (including the ones that we had brought with us from New York) to be distributed in the field. We met several of the drivers who would be driving our kits east to the Donbas region. They told us that IFAKs had already saved more than ten soldiers with wounds.

Our final stop was to St. Nicholas Children’s Hospital, a 425-bed facility with about 50 kids who had been injured in front-line cities. We each brought gifts to give to patients and the experience gobsmacked us. Our first gift went to an 11 year old girl who had lost both her parents during an attack that left her with multiple cranial fractures, brain damage, many lacerations and lost fingers.

We were then ushered into a room that was holding a Mom and her 11-year-old twins, Yarik and Yana. They had been fleeing to safety when the Russians bombed a train station in Kramatorsk. The Mom lost her left foot, Yana lost both her feet and their grandmother was killed. Yarik, who had stayed behind to watch the family’s luggage while the women went to the restroom, was unharmed – at least physically. To make matters worse, the twins’ father had been killed the previous week in battle. Despite all this,

we were met by smiles and optimism. We were told that a kind soul will be flying the family to San Diego to receive state-of-the-art prosthetics.

As we left, the head anesthesiologist explained that, for the foreseeable future, St. Nicholas will serve as a relatively safe hub to care for children who are injured in battle zones to the east. The anesthesiologist doubles as a reservist who trains battlefield medics and made an urgent plea for more supplies.

The trip back to Krakow did not take as long, thanks largely to how Kat was able to navigate the long lines to leave Ukraine at the border crossings. We felt safe during the day, but we were relieved to return to NATO soil.

Day Seven

We traveled to the border city of Przemysl to pitch in as volunteers for Chef Jose Adres' World Central Kitchen. We began at the immaculate main food preparation facility, where, after being tested for Covid-19, we were promptly inserted into sandwich assembly lines unlike anything that I'd ever seen before. What an amazing operation – chefs, restaurant owners and volunteers from around the world working together in a makeshift but spotless state-of-the-art facility to the beat of an amazing playlist that I hope will eventually be posted on Spotify.



We then helped to staff two of the distribution facilities in Przemysl, which, despite being located in a war zone, reminded me of walk-up counters at a restaurant with the available choices of food on display. I drew the assignment of warming the sandwiches that we had assembled earlier. I'll confess

that this is when the week finally got to me. Two sisters who could not have been more than 6 and 8 ordered sandwiches; the older sister then came back to the counter to ask if I could make a third panini because her little sister was really hungry. All I could think about was how they could have been my own Jackie and Jen if our family wasn't so blessed as to live in the United States. I held it together long enough to warm up their third sandwich and then made it out to the van for a good cry.

Chef Andres deserves to win the Nobel Peace Prize for the work of World Central Kitchen. We saw distinctive World Central Kitchen tents everywhere we went and were awed by the dignity that the #ChefsForUkraine and other volunteers afford evacuees who might otherwise go hungry.

Day Eight

My final stop was to the Ronald McDonald House in Warsaw. Like the Krakow House, the Warsaw House has opened its doors and hearts to families from Ukraine (over 20 on the day I visited). RMHC Poland is also hoping to build a second House in Warsaw to serve, among others, the families of the growing number of Ukrainian children who are receiving medical care at the Children's Memorial Health Institute in collaboration with children's hospitals in Ukraine.



The House in Warsaw is also serving as a safe haven for leaders of RMHC Ukraine, and together the leadership teams are making a significant difference. RMHC Ukraine is operating Family Rooms in Kyiv, Lviv, Vinnytsia and Sumy and is opening a new family room in Rivne. RMHC Ukraine has resumed plans to build a new House in Kyiv near the National Specialized Children's Hospital, but the costs have increased significantly, including the previously unanticipated expense of building a bomb shelter. RMHC Ukraine is also launched a volunteer program that responds to humanitarian requests made by McDonald's employees and an emergency medical equipment program that is providing Vacuum-Assisted Closure machines identified as a priority by the Ministry of Health.

I left Europe prouder than ever to be a Global Trustee of the Ronald McDonald House Charities.

Use of Funds

Over \$850,000 of the donations will fund the work of Ukraine Friends to provide Individual First Aid Kits, evacuate families from Ukraine to Poland and Slovakia and provide emergency vehicles to the Volunteer Ambulance Corps. We are grateful to Teddy Raskin, Michael Sinensky and their incredible team on the

ground in the U.S. and Europe for the remarkable things that Ukraine Friends is accomplishing. The balance of the donations will make it possible for Ukraine Friends to donate some of the medical supplies that were requested during our visit to St. Nicholas Children's Hospital in Lviv and support the work of the Jewish Community Center in Krakow, Project Apollo, the Jesuit University's orphanage and school for Ukrainian children and the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Poland and Ukraine.

Final Impressions

As I think about our trip, I struggle to articulate why this crisis is so maddening and yet, at the same time, inspiring. Because the able-bodied men are staying behind to fight for their country, the exodus of millions of evacuees is uniquely about the resilience of the women of Ukraine – how mothers are somehow holding it together for their children, how daughters are looking out for their parents, grandparents and in-laws and how everyone is prioritizing proximity in Poland, Germany, Romania and Slovakia over greater safety and comfort elsewhere because they are determined to rejoin their families in Ukraine as soon as they can. Honestly, the courage all around us was breathtaking.

I will never forget the evacuees we met in Lviv or their dignified gratitude for the kindnesses offered to them by Kat and the rest of the Ukraine Friends team. I wish that we could track the progress of the little angels whose faces lit up with smiles when we gave them juice boxes and teddy bears. Unspeakable cruelty unfailingly brings out the best in others; personally witnessing the latter part of this cycle repeat itself in Poland and Ukraine restored my faith in the innate decency of people. I also have a new appreciation for the power of affording five – ten minutes of compassion to people in distress. Sometimes, people just need someone else to hear them; I had an advantage over my American friends because of my Russian language skills, but they didn't need to be able to speak Ukrainian or Russian to be able to empathize with evacuees as they recounted their escapes from battle zones or the losses of their loved ones. Horrific stories transcend language barriers.



I do not wish to wade into politics, but Putin's attacks on a neighboring sovereign and its civilians should reinforce the collective commitment of NATO to peace through strength. As President Reagan said back in the days when Democrats and Republicans were still able to engage constructively on the important things: "We know only too well that war comes not when the forces of freedom are strong, but when they are weak. It is then that tyrants are tempted."

What's Next?

No one really knows when or how this conflict will end. To be sure, Ukrainians have a sense of resolve that is admirable and their military so far has exceeded expectations. But the Russians are grinding away mercilessly in southeast Ukraine without regard for the casualties on either side and are now blocking vital agricultural exports from Black Sea ports. Putin must be banking on what he sees as a lack of resolve in the United States and Europe to maintain military and humanitarian assistance at the levels necessary to thwart his ambitions. It remains to be seen whether we show him (and other autocrats who are watching closely) that good can stand up to evil. There are discouraging signs that Ukraine is already fading from our country's ever-shorter collective attention span.

There is a powerful and adept ecosystem in place to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine. Our main takeaway from our trip is that these organizations will not be able to succeed without our support. Please consider helping the following non-profits:

- [Ukraine Friends](#), which made our trip and efforts possible, continues to do great work and is able to adapt its efforts to focus on the more dire needs of the moment.
- [Project Apollo](#), which is dedicated to extracting vulnerable evacuees, reuniting families and providing logistical support to other relief efforts.
- [The Jewish Community Center of Krakow](#), which provides its wide-ranging services non-denominationally.
- [Ronald McDonald House Charities of Poland](#).
- [Ronald McDonald House Charities of Ukraine](#).
- [World Central Kitchen](#).

We also hope that you'll consider making your own trip to Poland and Ukraine to provide humanitarian relief in association with Ukraine Friends, which is eager to use our trip as a template for future such undertakings as the crisis continues. If you're interested, please reach out directly to the leaders of Ukraine Friends on their website.

I remain humbled by our trip and the remarkable generosity of our supporters. I'm grateful to Rich and Teddy for making the trip happen, to the rest of the Krakow Five for embarking on this journey with us and to the entire Ukraine Friends team for making our trip such a meaningful experience.

Here's to you, Mom. I wish that I had said this to you more often, but please know that your courage and determination continue to serve as an inspiration.