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“Out of That Hell, I Ended Up Here:” The Experiences of Older Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

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Overview

Photo courtesy of Association “E”



Since February 2022, millions of Ukrainian refugees have fled to Poland in search of safety from Russia’s brutal war. An unknown number of them are older people, although a regional analysis by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in countries hosting refugees identified that 13% of households include at least one person over 60, 77% of them women.¹

In April 2023, HelpAge USA spoke with a number of older Ukrainian refugees in Poland to learn about their experiences leaving Ukraine, making the journey to Poland, and coping with life in completely new circumstances.

They overwhelmingly spoke of deep gratitude to the people and government of Poland for welcoming and assisting them. Many of those with whom we spoke had family members—children and grandchildren—already living and working in Poland, even before the war, giving those traveling a specific destination.

An unknown journey

Many other older people fled Ukraine with little or no idea where they would end up and how they would survive. Most left with very few possessions, in extreme haste, having survived weeks or months of attacks, fear, and loss. Few

“I never imagined at age 74, I would be in a completely different country, in an unfamiliar house, with someone else’s cups, someone else’s forks, nothing of my own. Our whole lives we worked, we saved, we built our own house, all for nothing.”

**Nadia, 74, widow,
from the Kyiv region,
currently a refugee in
Łódź, Poland**

imagined they would remain in Poland for more than a few weeks or months before being able to return to Ukraine. They have all stayed much longer than planned due to Russia's ongoing attacks on residential areas and energy infrastructure resulting in blackouts, loss of heat, and severe disruptions to health and other critical services.

All of the older Ukrainians in Poland with whom we spoke have sufficient food and adequate shelter, in some cases subsidized or paid for by the Polish government. They each continued to receive their Ukrainian pensions using their Ukrainian debit cards. A few people said that they worked, typically in the facilities where they lived.

Older people's increased needs

Most older refugees spoke of medical and dental needs, often substantial, and obstacles to accessing adequate care, often due to cost. A few people said they lacked clothes, shoes, and winter boots, having left their own belongings at home. Those we spoke with are connected with other older Ukrainians, as they often live together in hostels or other accommodations and also participate in community groups for older refugees, including the “New Relations” project, which operates in 10 cities in Poland and is described in more detail below.

An April 2023 report from UNHCR found that older Ukrainian refugees in Poland and other European countries face disproportionate risks and hardship: 92% of older people struggled to meet their basic needs. Older people and people with disabilities experience “increased challenges accessing health care compared to other households,” and 82% of older people are unemployed or retired, relying only on Ukrainian pensions and, in some cases, social payments from host countries.²

Another UNHCR report in February 2023 found that households composed of older persons and those with dependents have lower levels of access to employment, more gaps in finding stable accommodation options, and higher dependency on assistance from governments and humanitarian organizations. UNHCR

warned that these conditions may influence their decisions to return to Ukraine, even if they would face significant security risks.³

Displaced at home and abroad

Older Ukrainians spoke passionately about their desire for Russia to end its war on Ukraine so that they can return to their homeland, even those who no longer have a physical home to go back to as a result of the war. UNHCR reported similar findings, with older people being one of the population groups most likely to be planning to return to Ukraine, “likely due to the heightened vulnerability [obstacles] older persons face to sustain themselves in host countries.”⁴

Large numbers of older people remained in their homes and communities in Ukraine, unwilling to leave behind the lives they had built and start over. Some fled unsafe areas and remain displaced in other parts of Ukraine. Others were unable to evacuate due to inaccessible evacuation systems and information or lack of sufficient resources and support. Older people disproportionately remain in or near active hostilities, including areas under Russian occupation. Many older Ukrainians have also been killed.

According to the UN: HelpAge documented the experiences of older people in Ukraine in a February 2023 report, “[I've Lost the Life I Knew: Older People's Experiences of the Ukraine War and Their Inclusion in the Humanitarian Response](#),” based on the first nationally representative survey of older people in the country.⁵



Photo courtesy of Association “E” in Poland

Methodology

HelpAge USA interviewed 14 Ukrainian refugees, 10 women and four men, aged 52 to 83, living in Łódź, Przemyśl, Suwałki, and Wałbrzych, Poland. Interviewees in their 50s had traveled to Poland with older parents. Interviews were conducted by phone or video in Russian or Ukrainian, with a translator translating from Ukrainian to English. One interview was conducted in English. Interviewees consented to have their first names used in this publication.

Four Polish non-governmental organizations introduced us to older people: the Ethnos Socio-Cultural Association in Łódź; Older Persons' Association "Joy of Life" in Wałbrzych; The Association of the Union of Ukrainians in Suwałki; and The Association of Ukrainians in Poland Przemyśl Branch.

These organizations are among 10 who participate in a donor-supported project that provides community safe spaces and supportive programming, including Polish language and exercise classes, art workshops,

psychological support, social events, and excursions, to older Ukrainian refugees in different towns and cities across Poland, called "New Relations." The Warsaw-based Association of Creative Initiatives, "E," coordinates the project.



Photos courtesy of Association "E" in Poland

Key Findings

Fleeing Ukraine

Some older Ukrainians we interviewed fled in the early weeks and months of the war; others remained for longer, hoping it would end quickly.

Valentina and Yuri, both in their early 70s, lived in the Kyiv region near Bucha together with their daughter and three young grandchildren. During the first two weeks of the war, they volunteered to support the war effort, weaving camouflage netting and preparing Molotov cocktails for self-defense. Two days after they fled, the bridge in Bucha was destroyed, and Russian soldiers occupied the area:⁶

"It was not an easy decision to leave your house and everything you have been working for your whole life, but we had to, especially because the danger was coming closer."
Yuri, 73

Valentina and Yuri described the travel as anxious and stressful, as they just showed up in small towns and asked locals where to stay.

They had hoped to remain in western Ukraine but could not find affordable housing, and constant air raid sirens left them feeling unsafe.

Their daughter had an acquaintance working in Przemyśl, a small city near the border, at the Ukrainian House, a cultural center turned temporary accommodation center for Ukrainian refugees. The family went there and eventually was supported to move to an apartment.⁷

Antonina, 62, described her life when Russian forces arrived in her town:⁸

“I lived alone in Chernihiv oblast. My house is intact, but [Russian] tanks streamed through our city, everything went through [towards Kyiv]. It was impossible to leave. Everything [rockets, bombs] was flying everywhere. It was only after two months that I could leave. ... Early on, the trains were full of millions of people. I have a disability. ... I use crutches to walk. ... It wasn’t accessible. Only after things calmed down a bit, our [soldiers] returned to our territory; then I could leave. ... Out of that hell, I ended up here.”

Antonina, 62

Antonina eventually bought a bus ticket and traveled on her own from Kyiv to Poland. She lived in a hostel for a short time before meeting some Ukrainians who had been living and working in Poland, who took her in and supported her.⁹

Tatiana, 70, fled Zaporozhia for Poland in late May, together with a friend, also an older woman. The women traveled by train to Prague via Lviv, and Tatiana then went on her own to Łódź, where her grandson lives:¹⁰

“I had a girlfriend in Zaporozhia; she was really afraid. Air raid sirens, [more] air raid sirens. It was so scary that you were even afraid to sleep. She had difficulty moving around, she got very lightheaded. She said, ‘Why don’t you take me to Prague [to my son]? I won’t make it on my own.’”

Tatiana, 70

Volunteer and Humanitarian Support

Some interviewees described the support of volunteers and humanitarian workers on the border in Ukraine and Poland and in various cities in Poland. The presence of humanitarian support at the borders and in towns receiving many refugees was especially prevalent in the

early months of the war but is less common overall.

During the first week of the war, Svitlana, 57, fled heavy fighting in Zaporozhia with her 87-year-old mother.

They had no idea where they would end up, arriving initially in Przemyśl, very close to the Ukrainian border and the city of Lviv. From there, volunteers recommended they go to Wrocław, further west in Poland, as other refugees traveled on to Warsaw, Poland, or other countries.

Eventually, the pair learned about the Hotel Maria, which hosted hundreds of Ukrainian refugees following the outbreak of the war, including many older people, in Wałbrzych:¹¹

“It was complete luck that we came here. Volunteers who met us along the way were very organized.”

Svitlana, 57

Volodymr, 65, and his wife evacuated from eastern Ukraine in April and drove in their own car to the refugee reception point at the train station in Przemyśl, where volunteers had free food and directed them to the Ukrainian House for accommodation.¹²

Valentina said that when she and her husband Yuri, both in their 70s, crossed into Poland, volunteers offered them accommodation and services at the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl and drove refugees there in minibuses.¹³



Photo courtesy of Association “E” in Poland

Other interviewees described gratefully receiving a hot meal and information at the border, either in Ukraine or Poland.¹⁴

Antonina, 62, traveled by herself from Chernihiv oblast,¹⁵ while Tatiana, 70, fled Zaporozhia together with a friend in June 2022:¹⁶

“In Poland at the border, the volunteers met us, checked in with us: ‘Everything ok?’ They even fed us. The food was really delicious. And it was all free.”
Antonina, 62

“In Lviv, they fed us. There were Red Cross tents, and they gave us soup, coffee, tea.”
Tatiana, 70

Olga traveled by bus to Warsaw in March 2022, and when she arrived, volunteers urged her to

take a train to Łódź, where she had relatives who helped her find a place to live.¹⁷

Some people received mobile telephones or SIM cards from volunteers at the border in Poland. Vadim, 62, explained:¹⁸

“The single thing that helped me, the assistance that really helped—they gave me a set for my mobile phone, a Polish telephone number. This was really timely because I needed to contact Tatiana [my partner].”
Vadim, 62

“I had a flip phone, but volunteers gave me this [smart] phone. I’m not friends with this phone, though. I don’t understand how it works.”¹⁹
Olga, 83



Photos courtesy of Association “E” in Poland

Accommodation in Poland

Most of the refugees we spoke with live in collective accommodations in different parts of Poland. At the time of the interviews, the Polish government continued to support accommodation costs for older and other at-risk refugees. Many Ukrainian refugees, including older refugees, continue to live in the Hotel Maria in Wałbrzych, which, like many hotels in Poland, accepted large numbers of refugees in 2022.

Another couple living in Łódź said that they live in a hostel room with a friend from their hometown, another older woman, and her dog. They receive meals every day:²⁰

“It’s crowded, of course, but we’re at peace with it. We spent the winter in warmth. I am so afraid of the cold at home. That’s the reason we’ve stayed in Poland.”
Older couple in Łódź, Poland

Victor, from Kramatorsk in eastern Ukraine, arrived in Suwałki in April 2022. He lives for free in a hotel with his wife, and they receive meals each day.²¹

One interviewee, Nadia, 74, lives with her grandson, 15, in a two-room house on the outskirts of Łódź. The government pays the landlord. Nadia said the location is not ideal because her grandson must travel to the city for his English and Polish language courses, and she is afraid of the dogs and wild boars that roam the remote area.²²

Access to Basic Necessities

Everyone we spoke with had sufficient food, including items provided by the accommodation where they live or from community service organizations.

Olga, 83, lives alone in a rented room in Łódź and regularly visits nearby social service organizations that provide lunch:²³

“I don’t need anything more. I have clothes to wear, shoes on my feet. I have something to eat. I’m just waiting to go home.”

Olga, 83

Older people often came with few personal possessions because they could not carry much as they left and did not anticipate longer-term stays outside of Ukraine. Many have received donated clothes or use local secondhand shops. Vadim, 62, from Zaporozhia said:²⁴

“I came here in shorts, in lightweight clothes, t-shirts. I didn’t think I would stay. I thought things would calm down a bit and I’d go back. But we ended up having to stay because of serious military activity ... near Zaporozhia. Poland helped us; we got some used clothes and some new ones.”

Vadim, 62

Viktor, in Sulvaki, said that he and his wife were able to get clothes through a local Ukrainian charity,²⁵ as did interviewees living in Przemyśl, who also utilized the secondhand clothing shops in the area.²⁶ One woman said she found it difficult for her and her son to get the clothing and footwear they needed:²⁷

“We really need clothes. We came in the early fall. ... In the winter ... we didn’t have decent boots. ... Spring comes, summer comes, and we don’t have the right clothes.”

Nadia, 74

Access to Pensions and Social Payments

When Ukrainians arrived in Poland, they received a cash payment of 300 zloty (\$71) from the Polish government to use however they chose. Most said they also received cash from international and local organizations, including, for example, 300 or 500 zloty (\$71 to \$118) payments, or three or four monthly payments of 600 or 700 zloty (\$142 to \$165).²⁸

In some cases, interviewees said they had to travel to the capital, Warszawa, or to Wrocław to receive payments.²⁹ One interviewee explained that soon after they arrived in Poland, they went to a local bank, opened an account, and could access various cash assistance through their account debit card. All interviewees were grateful for the support. “We didn’t have any savings,” said one woman in Łódź.³⁰

Older Ukrainians who received pensions continue to receive them in Poland, using a debit card to access the funds, which the Ukrainian government has continued to pay. Ukrainian pensions are small. They can be as low as 2,600 hryvna (\$71); the average is 4,500 hryvna (\$122).³¹ One woman explained:³²

“My pension is quite small: 3,100 hryvna (\$84), which is about 360 zloty. That’s one trip to the store, and even then, it’s modest. But I am not seeking more; even in Ukraine, I didn’t live luxuriously with this pension.”

Viktor, 70, who worked as a miner in Kramatorsk in eastern Ukraine, said that he and his wife live on his 5,000-hryvna (\$135) Ukrainian pension.³³

Lyudmila, 60, from Kharkiv, who lives with her 85-year-old mother in Wałbrzych, said that she had not yet registered for her Ukrainian pension. She tried to complete the process online but did not have all the necessary documents. She needs to return to Ukraine in person to organize it, which she does not plan to do because she cannot leave her mother alone.³⁴ Her mother’s pension is 3,500 hryvna (\$95).³⁵

Access to Work

Some older Ukrainians were able to find work. Others expressed a desire to work but had not been successful in securing it, attributing difficulties to age, disability, or nationality.

Yuri, 73, who taught music at a university in Ukraine, found work conducting an academic choir at the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl.³⁶ Volodymyr also said that he worked at the Przemyśl Ukrainian House, doing renovation and repairs, furniture assembly, and other odd jobs.³⁷

According to one of the residents of Hotel Maria in Wałbrzych, there is a donor-funded program that pays for part-time internships, which many older people and people with disabilities utilize, working in the kitchen, dishwashing or baking, or cleaning hotel rooms.³⁸

Vadim, 62, said that he was ready to work but that he found it difficult to find employment due to his age:³⁹

“I don’t work because there are complications here in Poland. ... I couldn’t find formal employment anywhere. ... [It seems] you can find formal work up to age 55.”

Vadim, 62

“People don’t want to hire us for work, or it’s work we can’t manage. I worked for a short time, but it was hard. I have arthritis in my hip.”⁴⁰

Nadia, 74

Antonina, 62, similarly reported obstacles to employment due to her disability:⁴¹

“I walk with crutches. It’s hard for someone who uses crutches to find work.”

Antonina, 62

Access to Medical Care

Poland provides Ukrainian refugees with access to health care services and medications.⁴² People we interviewed reported a range of experiences accessing medical care.

For example, Olga, 83, said she received 500 zloty (\$118) to be used for prescription medicines and over-the-counter medications. She also underwent eye surgery, enabling her to see well from both eyes now, she said, at no cost.⁴³ One interviewee said that he and his wife received pre-paid cards of 60 zloty (\$14) each for medicine.⁴⁴ Yuri, 73, in Przemyśl, said he had surgery in Poland and also did not need to pay for it.⁴⁵ Nadezhda, 85, had cataract surgery at no cost after an initial co-payment of 200 zloty (\$47) as well as emergency treatment in a hospital for high blood pressure, both in Wałbrzych.⁴⁶ Volodymyr in Przemyśl said that he got the free dental care that he needed.⁴⁷

A few interviewees said that they had dental issues that remained unresolved or could not access the care they needed because it was unavailable or too expensive. One interviewee in Wałbrzych, Marharita, said that her eyesight had declined, and she felt she was in need of a new eyeglass prescription. However, the first appointment offered for a checkup was in May 2024.⁴⁸ As noted above, surveys by UNHCR found that older people and people with disabilities experience “increased challenges accessing health care compared to other households.”⁴⁹

Others said they did not know how to access necessary care. Antonina, who uses crutches to walk, said that she had surgery on her knee and has a metal pin that needs to be removed within six months:⁵⁰

“The medical system here isn’t familiar to me and I am afraid. I don’t speak the language. ... This is my biggest problem. I need an operation, but I don’t know who to go to, how to start. I should go to the polyclinic, but you need to speak Polish there.”

Antonina, 62

Social and Cultural Activities

Many of those interviewed participate in activities organized under the “New Relations” project, coordinated by Association “E” in Warsaw, in collaboration with 10 organizations in cities across Poland. These include community safe spaces and supportive programming, including Polish language and exercise classes, art workshops, psychosocial support, social events, and excursions. Older people interviewed in different locations described that the program played an important role in their lives, facilitating socialization, encouraging them to remain active, helping them to familiarize themselves with the local language, culture, and services, and more.

“We have a group—a club for those over 60. There are volunteers; the young women introduced us to the city, to Poles, organized a Christmas party. One wonderful woman took us to the city’s museums for free.”⁵¹
Nadia, 74

People living in the Hotel Maria in Wałbrzych participate in a group for people over 50. A number also said that they attend free Polish language classes, which are important for their confidence and independence in many basic activities such as going shopping or navigating their new locations.⁵³

Svitlana, who played orchestra and now plays violin for the group, said:⁵²

“We have excursions and events, trips to museums, a Christmas party with Ukrainians and Poles together. My mom, (87), loves to sing Ukrainian songs in the group.”
Svitlana, 57



Photos courtesy of Association “E” in Poland

Their Homeland and Their Future

The Ukrainian refugees interviewed for this report all spoke about the great trauma of the ongoing war and intense longing to return to Ukraine, even those whose homes have been destroyed.

“If I had a place to return to, of course I would return, of course.”⁵⁴

Marharita, whose apartment is being occupied by Russian forces according to her neighbors who remain in the city, now living in Łódź, Poland

“We have people here from all corners [of Ukraine]. We have compatriots who have nothing, simply nothing. Their houses have been leveled to the ground. They are older people. They have absolutely no place to return to.”⁵⁵

Tatiana, living in Łódź, Poland

“It’s like we try to wall ourselves off from reality so as not to go crazy. It can start to really hurt sometimes, especially when you look at the Internet [news about Ukraine. We started to believe in God and to pray. We were atheists before.”⁵⁶

Victor, living in Suwałki, Poland

“I really want all of this [war] to stop. I really want to go home.”⁵⁷

Antonina, living in Łódź, Poland



Photo courtesy of Association “E”

Recommendations

To the government of Poland

- Continue to support older people's accommodation costs and monitor housing situations, which may need to be revised, given longer-term stays.
- Ensure that older people have equal access to employment opportunities and support in accessing information about appropriate employment opportunities and finding employment, should they wish to work.
- Ensure older people can get information about and translation for available medical and dental benefits to guarantee equal access to the services they are entitled to.
- Monitor the situation for older people to ensure that their financial, housing, medical, or other needs are sufficiently met so that they do not return to Ukraine before they feel that they can do so safely.

To the government of Poland and its international partners

- Continue to support programming directed to the protection of the human rights and social integration of older people, including through support to local organizations and local governments providing services, legal aid, and information.
- All actors involved in supporting older Ukrainians should actively seek and incorporate their perspectives and lived experiences to ensure effective policies and programming.

