

DIARY OF ANYA VERKHOVSKAYA

Today I went to war without ever leaving my office in Milwaukee. Every morning at 3 a.m., which is 11 a.m. in Ukraine, I leave my warm, comfortable bed, drink my coffee, and then I stand up tall and strong to the bully. I stand up to Putin. I am a proud U.S. citizen, saving the lives of strangers halfway across the world. I work with citizens of many other countries, providing children, the elderly, and the infirm with supplies that make a difference on a small and large scale, and so can you.

I am a political refugee, born and raised in the former Soviet Union. I have lived in the United States for over 30 years. My three children were born here. Despite my youth as a persecuted Soviet Jew, despite being forced to flee as a refugee, I have been so proud of my Russian roots my entire life. But lately I have been feeling so deeply embarrassed and ashamed; who are my people?

Like so many others who left the former Soviet Union, I have maintained close ties to Ukraine through family and friends. The invasion of Ukraine has had a profound effect on my connections and has prompted me to question my identity.

Identity is interesting to ponder no matter where you live in the world and who you are, since we are inevitably defined by others regardless of how we view ourselves. Although I was born and raised in Moscow and was steeped in the language, cuisine, books, and culture of Russia, my identity was invariably defined by my Jewish ethnicity. I was never accepted by the Russian people as one of their own. Later, when I lived and worked in Ukraine, I was considered a Jewish American, an entitled Moscovite, but never as a Russian. Yet, in America, I am a Russian.

Both my parents were ethnically Jewish, a concept difficult for many Americans to understand. Practicing Judaism was not permitted in the officially atheist former Soviet Union when I was growing up. I was never given the opportunity to embrace the history, language, and culture of my ancestors. Yet Jews were ethnically identified in passports, work papers, and birth and death certificates and treated differently by “pure” Russians and the government alike. It was a political catch-22. I was persecuted as a Jew without the privilege of fully understanding who I was. Robbed of my past, I feared my future would also be dictated by the Soviet political system, so in 1989, I fled to the United States as a political refugee. I was 19 years old.

I contain multitudes: I am a political refugee from the former Soviet Union, I am an American, I am Jewish, I am a mother, I am a businessperson and more. I am all of these things. I am not unique that way. We each have a bouquet of identities, which is precisely why we all contain multitudes. Through the prism of my refugee journey, I want to touch your hearts and souls. I want to help you feel the experience of the Ukrainian people and those of other war refugees, which is the story of millions of people before them—and likely your ancestors somewhere along the way.

MY JOURNEY

It was terrifying to be a refugee. Those first moments of leaving my life behind without an inkling of whether or not I would see or even speak to my loved ones again; arriving at a train station in a foreign country without speaking the language; standing on a platform with two suitcases that comprised my entire life's belongings, a 100-dollar bill in my pocket; not knowing where I would sleep that night or the next, or when I would have my next meal; not knowing where to go or what the future held.

After a year of living in refugee camps and multiple cities in several countries, I finally found my way forward in New York City. From that moment my somewhat circuitous professional journey, which has culminated in the creation of my own company, has been centered on helping people. Perhaps unconsciously, my refugee roots led me to dedicating my life to human rights issues.

From 1994 through 2001 I worked for the brilliant and story-driven Steven Spielberg, overseeing the Eastern European and Central Asian operations of his Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which is now the USC Shoah Foundation Institute. My community outreach experience in Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union enabled me to create a network infrastructure in more than 20 countries. As a result of that work, the life stories of more than 11,000 Jewish, Romani, and other Holocaust survivors and witnesses were videotaped for historical preservation and education purposes. My visceral knowledge of what it is like to be a refugee was enhanced through the thousands of other human stories I was privileged to hear. Most of them were recorded in Ukraine.

This led me to further work with Spielberg—as field producer and production manager for *The Last Days*, an Oscar-winning documentary that recounts the stories of five Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. I then co-produced *Children from the Abyss*, in which Russian Holocaust survivors detail their childhood experience of resistance, betrayal, collaborators, rescuers, bystanders, and their desire for revenge. This film was part of *Broken Silence* (2002), an award-winning documentary series.

During my years with the Shoah Foundation, and working on these films, I created a comprehensive method of reaching out to Holocaust victims and their families that I later applied in my other projects. Through them I worked to bring a small measure of justice to those who suffered in World War II, in forms of restitution and reparation programs for them and their families. These efforts included the *Holocaust Victim Assets Litigation, Austrian German Bank Holocaust Litigation*, the German Forced Labour Compensation Programme, International Commission of Holocaust Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC), *Assicurazioni Generali S.p.A. Holocaust Insurance Litigation*, Holocaust Era Asset Restitution Taskforce (Project HEART), and my work on the Holocaust Insurance Accountability Acts of 2019 and 2021.

I also found myself amid several wars for different reasons in Abkhazia in 1988, Croatia in 1994, Kosovo in 1998, and Belgrade in 1999. That is a different story altogether.

I understand the wages of war, and how war ravages the spirit and impacts innocent lives. In the words of writer Neil Gaiman, “If you take the long view . . . the human race is mostly people just trying to live their lives, and . . . [expletive] is going to happen. That then moves you into other territory.”

REFUGEES ARE ALL OF US

In this essay I hope to make a case for helping people wherever they are currently stuck and rendered helpless in war zones. When you strip away all our differences—whether they are centered on where we were born or found ourselves at one point in history, our varying skin shades, cultures and religions—it is obvious that we all require basic things to survive: Emotional support, safety, nourishing food, clean water, fresh air, a bed, clothing, personal hygiene products, electricity, shelter, a sense of security, and healthcare. This is as true for today’s refugees as it is for those of us who live in peace.

Refugees have always been part of world history. Populations have been fleeing their homes, villages, cities, and countries since the beginning of time due to natural disasters, war, persecution, or disease. The first people officially deemed refugees were French Protestants fleeing religious persecution. In the 17th century refugee terminology (French for “hiding place”) was adopted in Catholic France following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by King Louis XIV. America’s first refugees were the immigrants who arrived in 1620 on the Mayflower fleeing religious persecution, part of waves of settlers who displaced the indigenous population, creating yet more refugees. As many Ukrainians can attest, being uprooted can happen to anyone, anywhere, and anytime.

No one chooses to be a refugee, to be ripped away from the familiar fabric of their daily lives—separated from their homes, family members, community, work, friends, and pets. To be a refugee is to be perpetually uncertain and insecure, worried about what the future holds, wondering where to find a home, unable to work in their professions. So many who have found refuge were engineers, professors, mathematicians, doctors, and businesspeople back in their countries of origin. Yet now they work as drivers, janitors, agricultural workers, and kitchen help in this country to survive and to give their children different, brighter lives.

WHY DID I GET INVOLVED AND WHY SHOULD YOU?

I remember speaking with my friend Martin the day before Russia invaded Ukraine; I was convinced that a full-scale war was just not possible in this day and age. Naively, I was certain that the threats of war were political maneuvers designed to spur a response. When Russian troops descended on Ukraine in February 2022, it was a rude awakening for me. I was truly shocked. I did not know what to do with this new reality.

It felt wrong and simply impossible to carry on with my own life as though nothing had happened. I imagined my own three children being subjected to war, and it was terrifying. I knew I had to do something to help, to take some sort of action. I spent the second day of the war staring at my computer with a phone in my hand trying to figure out what I could do, who to call, and how to help. First, I contacted my friends and family in Ukraine to make sure they were

alive. They, in turn, referred me to organizations and individuals who could give me more information. I kept frantically calling and learning along with everybody else what the heck I could do. During these first few surreal days I talked to so many people in the United States and Europe, amazing people whose paths I would never have crossed under different circumstances. We spoke different languages, came from different countries and cultures. We were different races, religions, and generations. With that said, we had one trait in common that united us—we were standing up to Putin, and we were taking this violation of humanity personally. War stripped away everything that is unnecessary and left us with what is important: Human connection, helping each other, and thinking of the future, of our children, the societies and the world they will inhabit.

Within a few days this quickly organized group of strangers had realized its common goal; our bond felt like family. Several of the group were members of the German NGO Be an Angel, headquartered in Berlin, which was helping refugees worldwide since 2014. It was a natural progression for the team to agree on a shared vision and plan what to do. Everyone carried their weight. This eclectic group of people united over values that were near and dear to my heart. Every one of us feels that refugees are people like you and me in dire circumstances who are to be treated with dignity and respect at all times. Serving people in need with the utmost transparency and altruistic dedication is at the core of our mission. Our team members, still to this day, are risking their lives to evacuate the sick, the elderly, and the vulnerable—women and children from the war-riddled areas. They are bringing people to safety regardless of their professions, income levels, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, ages, or ideologies.

While recruiting and organizing those working on the ground, the team also focused on raising funds for medications, medical equipment and more. We were able to secure large amounts of humanitarian aid from Spain, Italy, United States, Poland, Switzerland, Germany, and other countries. Within a very short period of time, we had trucks going back and forth between warehouses, transporting humanitarian aid and distributing it to the people in need at the front lines. We arranged for regularly scheduled buses to evacuate people to safety. This infrastructure was created in a few short weeks by people many of whom did not know each other prior, and who had never ever done anything even close to this type of organizing. Yet we all worked together as if this was something we had done for years. We found ourselves to be part of a well-structured, serious organization. Our team of volunteers live and breathe altruism and strategic effectiveness. We are devoted to unconditional dedication and to bringing dignity and respect back to the daily lives of war-impacted refugees.

This is how our system works: We pick up refugees in the south of Ukraine. They say goodbye to their fathers, husbands, and sons (men between 18–60 years of age are not permitted to leave the country). They leave everything behind. They are scared, stressed, often physically injured, and traumatized by their recent horrifying experiences. They are facing uncertainties in every way possible. After a long bus ride, sixteen hours or so, and a five-hour-or-so border crossing, they arrive at the emergency shelter in Chișinău, Moldova, where they spend the night. The next day or so, they travel by bus for at least 36 hours to Germany or other European Union countries. Headquartered in Germany, the Be an Angel team constantly monitors the capacities of cities and towns that accept refugees. This way, we can ensure adequate accommodation upon arrival. This is also why destinations change daily. For people with physical disabilities, we cooperate

with European Union organizations to accommodate them. For example, about an hour away from Chișinău, a former kindergarten was transformed into a refugee shelter for the disabled with space for up to 45 guests.

Why should you care? Why should you get involved? Why should your life change today? Well, your life has already changed, everyone's has life changed, whether you realize it or not. Inflated prices at your gas pumps are just the thin edge of the worldwide economic and political stresses that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered. If other nations are emboldened to adopt similar invasion methods, we will see an escalation in war and refugees. The escalating risk of each one of us being worse off tomorrow is very real. Standing up to Putin's war will not only help the people of Ukraine, but it will also help you and your family ensure a better, safer, and more comfortable tomorrow. This war affects us all and it will get worse if every one of us does not step up and do something about it. Friends of Be an Angel is now a registered non-profit humanitarian aid organization in the United States. I urge you to donate or join our organization or any other organization of your choice, to aid refugees from this war in Ukraine. Look at everything around you, and imagine how a war would impact you, your children, and your family. I did, and it was impossible for me to sit by and do nothing.

IMAGINE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LIFE

Natalia K., a 29-year-old pediatrician, found herself in a dark basement with her six-year-old son, amid shelling and bombardments, scared and traumatized, hungry, and left without anything else to do but to sit and hope to survive. Natalia had to make a choice between leaving her son alone in that dark cold basement to find food and water. When she was two blocks away, she heard the sirens, and the shelling started. Natalia recounted, "I froze. I just stood there with the bombs falling not knowing what to do. Do I go back to my son alive and stay there together starving or do I keep going not knowing if I can survive and come back to him at all?" We evacuated Natalia K. with her son a few weeks later.

Vanda Obiedkova, a 91-year-old Holocaust survivor whose audiovisual testimony I arranged in Mariupol in 1998 for the Shoah Foundation, was killed by the Russian shelling on April 4th during the siege of the city. In 1941, 10-year-old Vanda hid in her basement while her mother was taken away to be murdered by the Nazis. Eighty-one years later, as she lay dying in another basement without any medical attention, freezing, in agonizing pain, and pleading for water, Vanda asked, "Why is this happening?"

This is the reality for millions of people in Ukraine. This is happening in 2022, and it is not an exaggeration. There are a variety of ways, all tailored to your unique skills and resources, that you can help make a difference in a refugee's life. In the end, when it is all said and done, isn't that one of the salient points of being here in this space and time together? We each have a unique way of helping, and if we each did one small thing, it would make a tremendous difference in the lives of innocent people who are being subjected to unimaginable trauma. Let's fully imagine it, and let's do something to improve it together.

BE AN ANGEL FOR UKRAINE: WHAT CAN YOU ACTUALLY DO

Just as I was able to make an impact from my desk at home, you also can help in a myriad of ways: A small monthly donation, or as large a donation as you can comfortably afford, to Friends of Be an Angel USA will have a significant impact. You can donate your skills and knowledge as a graphic designer, webmaster, content writer, public relations professional, marketing maven, fundraising caller, doctor, teacher, host family, videographer, podcaster, and more. You can choose how often and when you want to share your talents. Ask your employer to participate. We can provide you with all the necessary tools for making a difference, and we are open to hearing your suggestions and solutions. If you can and want to donate more than \$5,000 US, you can closely work with a coordinator to choose a specific project to sponsor, such as purchasing a certain amount of baby formula to be delivered to a specific location or place in the hotspots where few other organizations go. Anything and everything we do is based on need, and the need is endless.

I know, people are donation weary. It is also concerning that many charities are less than transparent about where donations go and disturbingly top-tier heavy when it comes to their executives' salaries. Friends of Be an Angel **is** different. It is completely volunteer fueled, by people like you and me; 100% of each donation is utilized to operate its programs and assist Ukraine's refugees. Helping Ukraine is more important than ever each passing day. I am a proud volunteer, and I urge you to roll up your sleeves, join us, and make a difference.

Friends of Be an Angel also documents everything in real time—showing you the mother in Ukraine or in a refugee camp who received your donation of infant formula, the elderly man who received lifesaving medication, or the children who received your gift of warm clothing for the winter. Your monetary donations are equally transparent, and your donation of time or professional skills pays off in concrete, understandable ways rather than the merely conceptual and somewhat cryptic. You can read more at www.FriendsOfBeAnAngel.org.

To date, we have evacuated more than 12,000 vulnerable people, distributed more than \$29 million in aid value, provided 2,700+ tons of humanitarian aid, and sent more than 1 billion liters of clean water, hospital beds, wheelchairs, baby food, blankets, medications, and so much more.

You now know my story and the story of my organization—how, in a short time, I united with an international team of like-minded individuals, some like me with personal experience of forced displacement, some from completely different walks of life, to come together to the aid of Ukraine's people. I implore you, help on your own, talk to your friends and ask them to not forget those in need, or join with us, but please do something and do it more than once—and, if you can, do it on a regular basis. This war is not over; it is getting worse, and winter is coming soon. We need you now more than ever.

I still feel like a refugee myself, all these decades later. I am so grateful that I was given refuge. Who are my people? These are my people — human beings in need — and I hope they are your people, too.