



Ukraine 2024

christian
reponse
to
eastern
europe



Crossing the border from Moldova into Ukraine was surprisingly quick. On the Ukrainian side I heard someone call my name, I was amazed to see one of the officials calling my christian name and walking enthusiastically towards me. He greeted me like a long-lost friend. After a few seconds I recognised him to be one of the officers who helped me on a previous occasion when I had huge problems with the paperwork when crossing the border with aid a few months earlier. (Despite the huge need there is a lot of red tape to contend with before we can go through).



It is a two-hour drive to Vinnytsia where I would be spending the night. It had been a long day and my bed was a welcome sight. The haunting scream of the air raid sirens soon reminded me of where I was, this followed by the booming deep voiced recording telling people to go to the shelters. There were no shelters anywhere near therefore I, and the many people around had to sit it out praying we would be safe, sadly others would not be.

After a somewhat disturbed night blue sky and sun greeted me the next morning. I was due to meet my friend Andrii in an hour and this gave me the opportunity to face my first challenge of the day, finding a coffee. I knew there was a café close but even in England I am confused by the huge menu that displays a wonderful choice of coffee variations, most of which I have no idea about, I just wanted a simple cup of coffee.

Upon entering the café, on the wall was indeed a huge menu of coffee variations, the added problem, this was all written in Cyrillic! Feebly, I muttered 'Capuchino'. Thankfully, the young lady smiled, and I had my coffee.

Sitting in the sun, enjoying my coffee gave me the opportunity to reflect on my situation. As on my previous visits to Ukraine I found the normality of routine life very strange considering I was in a country at war. Mr Putin's war has created so many problems throughout the world. Prices of almost everything has rocketed, farmers in Poland have blocked roads and border crossings in opposition to cheap imports from Ukraine.

Further afield, over six million Ukrainians have fled the war seeking sanctuary in the West. Many of these seek employment and are frequently willing to work for low wages, putting others out of work. Many Moldovans have returned home as they are no longer able to find work in Europe or even in America. So many Ukrainians have fled and this has put greater responsibility on those who remain to protect their freedom and keep the country going.



Whenever a soldier is killed, and they manage to recover the body, it is returned to the family for burial, each grave marked with a flag. Seeing the forest of flags in the cemeteries is a stark and distressing reminder of the ruthlessness of war; and this is just one of many cemeteries.

Each flag marks the resting place of a brave soldier, someone's son, brother or father; who gave their life fighting for the freedom of their country.

The wives and families who remain work hard, not only to keep the country going but also in support of their army. We all know the Ukrainian army are woefully under resourced.

When the war first started you may have seen images of people making Molotov Cocktails to fight the invaders. There are groups, mainly ladies, who continue to provide support to those who are fighting. One such group meet in Grace Church and prepare nutritious individual small packs of food that can easily be carried in their pockets. Each packet contains some dried meat, nuts, dried fruit etc. Each carefully prepared package has a handwritten note attached.



In addition to food they also make camouflage nets and home-made 'candles' made from wax and cardboard packed into old tins.



These Cardboard candles are very effective. They not only provide light but are also used for cooking and, with a chimney attachment, be used to provide heat, significant heat.

You may have heard on the news over recent months of the relentless attacks on the infrastructure, especially on electricity power stations. It is mid-summer now, but the power is already being cut, frequently for between 8 and 10 hours a day. How will the children cope with their schoolwork? Many schools in the towns and cities are already held underground as most do not have a bunker very close by. An increasing number of schools have little option but to teach the children over the Internet, but without power what will they do?

Many are fearful of what the winter will bring when demand is far greater. The prospect of sitting in darkened rooms during bitterly cold winter nights is not appealing, this combined with the constant threat from missiles is a daunting prospect. How many more will abandon their country and seek safety and comfort elsewhere.... and who could blame them?



In June last year the Kakhovka dam was breached causing severe flooding and destroying many homes.

The water supply across a huge area was destroyed. Over a year later people still have to rely on bottled water or collect it from special filtered water stations which are few and far between and only in the major towns and cities.

Heading further east in the country, one of our good friends in Ukraine who runs one of the Soup Kitchens we support, wrote to me in the summer and said:-

In recent days, we have had a lot of anxiety and the arrival of many rockets...

Our children are growing up and they can't all stay close to me. My daughter Nastea, she is just 16 years old and is studying at a medical college. Nastea lives in a dormitory during her studies and when the alarm sounds they shelter in the basement. They are now used to this routine as they are now in their third year of such a life.

No matter how much time has passed there are times when it all becomes too much. One night Nastea wrote, 'when I was dreaming of going to university I never thought I would be studying in a dark basement that would frequently double as my bedroom'.



My friend went on to say *'my eldest daughter and her husband live in a high-rise building, during shelling they sit in the corridor, and if this happens at night, they sleep in the bathroom In the part of the city where they live, the sound of the war is very loud, especially at night when planes fly low and explosions are heard. During these times the children come to our room with my wife and silently look at us, at our reaction, to see if we are afraid, we understand this and calm them down.*

I am very worried about my son who is in the army fighting. Every day I expect at least some news from him....

It's like a dream, now more than ever you understand very well what it is to live today in Ukraine, to live rejoicing every morning, to truly rejoice. To rejoice in those very rare moments now when all the children can come to us at the soup kitchen, to see how they joke and smile despite everything that is happening. In times of war, seeing the smiling eyes of children is a great joy and blessing



I needed to get to Kharkiv as we had been asked to help there. There was so much to do and not enough time. Taking the night train would allow some sleep on the train and allow travel during curfew hours. The train to Kiev is about 300 kilometres and then take the night train to Kharkiv arriving at 6:00am.

The night train was old and the facilities basic. I shared the compartment with a mother and her son who was about 10 years old and another man. I was allocated the top bunk. The bunks were the only place to settle so soon after leaving Kiev I climbed inelegantly to my top bunk and laid down for the night. Sadly, at my age a night is seldomly uninterrupted and in the early hours I had to find my way down again to find the toilet. This was quite an achievement without awakening the others. What was a greater accomplishment, was successfully clambering back to my top bunk without awakening the others.

The train arrived at 6.00am and to my relief I was met, as arranged, by Sasha, a young pastor who decided not to flee but to stay in Ukraine with his family in Kharkiv.

The general situation in Kharkiv is worrying, many attacks and nobody feels safe. So many buildings are boarded up. There are insufficient air raid shelters but those who remain are bravely facing their everyday threats from missiles and shelling. As with other parts of the country, schools are on-line or held underground and as Kharkiv is so close to the front line there is frequently little or no warning of an attack, the air raid sirens and 'phone alerts are frequently reminders of the everyday dangers.

Living in Ukraine today is very difficult to say the least. For many of us throughout the world the struggle of everyday life has become increasingly difficult since the start of the war. It cannot be easy for the millions who have fled, seeking safety in other countries. Abandoning family and friends and starting a new life away from everything that is familiar must be so very difficult. The fears of the unknown, a new language to learn, new culture, new friends, new everything; this must be a terrifying prospect but more attractive than staying in war-torn Ukraine.

For those who have decided to remain they have to cope with increasing process etc.. The lack of electricity and other basic needs is terrible, but also the constant threat of missiles and shelling, never certain what tomorrow may bring, if it comes! Those who remain are brave, strong and determined, whether fighting on the front or working, keeping the country going, a wonderful example to us all and demonstrating to Mr Putin that they will not surrender to Russia's bullying.

Time and time again we hear how many, during particularly bad times, take great comfort knowing there are so many in England who are trying to help and support them. Every bag of clothes, every pound we send carries a message. We are so very grateful to all our fantastic supporters and volunteers who continue to amaze us.