

# BEACON *of* HOPE

## Report of the Work of the Mennonite Family Centre, Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine



by Louie Sawatzky  
Project Director

Greetings from the many clients and staff of the Mennonite Family Centre in Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine, and the Board of the Mennonite Benevolent Society of Winnipeg. January of this year marked the 20th anniversary of the Mennonite Family Centre in Ukraine. This is a worthy milestone to celebrate, and planning had begun for a celebration when the pandemic was over. And then the war in Ukraine began.

### The War

On February 24th the first Russian attacks happened on Ukraine soil directed toward the country and the people of Ukraine. At the time of this writing, we are in Day 140. News of the everyday effects of this war can be seen on the daily news. I speak with Boris Letkeman, our local Director in Zaporizhzhya, every day to get the latest information about how the war affects the people of Zaporizhzhya, our Centre and the programs, and our many clients. Zaporizhzhya has not been as dramatically affected as many other cities, but air raid sirens go almost every day, and people in the villages take shelter where they can, often in root cellars.

The effects of the war are long ranging, and will affect the people of Ukraine for generations regardless how it ends. It must be understood that many people in Ukraine and Russia have a long history together, firstly as part of the Soviet Union, and secondly and more personally as families and relatives on both sides of the border. This conflict has put a heavy strain on these relationships. These relationships will not be rebuilt for many years. I am told by folks living in Ukraine that they used to treat folks across the border like brothers and now “they” become the enemy. “My brother has come to my house to kill me”. It raises so many questions. What is a Christian response? What does this do to the historical peace position of the Mennonite Church? How do I forgive my brother when he is not asking for forgiveness? There are so many more questions.

About 20% of the country is now under Russian control. The conflict over the eastern territory has been going since 2014. Much of the population of this region

has left either for safety to western Ukraine and further, or east into Russia. Some have gone voluntarily and early on in the conflict, and others since February 24th. Men between the ages of 18 and 60 are not allowed to leave the country, so it is women and children. This area has seen much destruction, and cities are reduced to rubble and homes are destroyed. Those who are left, are the vulnerable who had no means to leave. That means many who remain are old. Farms have been destroyed, businesses shattered, infrastructure reduced to ashes. In total more than 10 million women and children have left Ukraine for other countries, leaving men between the ages of 18 to 60 to deal with a country at war. Although there is no conscription, anyone with military experience or in the Military Reserves have been recalled, and others have been told to be on standby. Daily there are reports of more shelling. There are no safe areas. There are untold numbers of military and civilian casualties. Everyone, young and old is a casualty in some way.

**We are grateful to God for protection for the city of Zaporizhzhya where our Centre is located. There have been some rocket hits in the city and although there has been damage and loss of life, it has been light in comparison to so many other cities.**

Mennonite Family Centre in Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine

#### Our Mission:

To develop and initiate delivery of health and social services programs, based on Christian values from a Mennonite perspective, in the Zaporizhzhya community:

- for needy individuals with a primary focus on the elderly,
- that train service providers and caregivers, and
- that demonstrate and promote the principles of volunteerism, sustainability and a civil society.

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## Here are some stories from Day Program clients:

*My name is Galina Petrovna and I am 84 years old. I was born in Russia on the island of Sakhalin. Since 1947 I have been living in the village of Balabino, in the Zaporizhzhya Oblast (region) and worked in Zaporizhzhya. I have been attending the Mennonite Family Center for eight years now. I am very grateful to those who work here, and those who send help and give us the opportunity to be here. We are here as a family. We really enjoy meeting here, and thank God. We eat here, we communicate, we receive support. It is a pity that now a difficult and disturbing time has come, the war has begun. Sirens often howl, and we hear explosions, we close the windows of our houses in the evenings so that no light can be seen. I want peace between us, between Ukraine and Russia. I came from Russia to Ukraine with my parents, they sheltered us, helped us grow up, finish school. Now it is scary to think how it was possible to create such a disaster: bomb cities, villages, kill women, children, old people, mock, rob, destroy in all possible ways. We could not even imagine that it could be with us! God grant us peace, your mercy, may the war end so people will not die and children will not remain orphans. I am grateful to God for this Center. We pray for the Center and for Ukraine.*



*Good morning! My name is Dina and I am 83 years old. I was born and raised in the village of Kushugum, in the Zaporizhzhya Oblast (region). I grew up during the Second World War, and I remember how enemy tanks stood behind our house. There were also soldiers behind the Dnieper and there was a shootout. But such a horror as is happening now, I do not remember. Now I live through another war. This war is very cruel. They kill civilians, maim, rob, rape. There was less brutality in that war than the one now taking place in the occupied villages. I have been attending the Mennonite Family Center for about eight years. We feel good here, we eat, we pray, we sing. Thanks to the people of your country who help and support us, and thanks to the staff of the Centre. May God send His mercy to you and may we glorify Him with health!*

## The Response of the Mennonite Family Centre

I must begin by giving so much credit to the leadership and staff of the Mennonite Family Centre. Boris Letkeman, the local Director, has been with us since inception, as has Nadia Nikatiina as Program Coordinator. They and their Assistants, Tanya Timoshenko and Sergey Butyrin have provided great leadership in this time of crisis. It was always our belief that the staff should be local people, who would take initiative, able to carry on when times get tough without a physical presence from Canada. The staff have responded accordingly. We know there is much trauma with all clients, and our way of addressing that is to try to be a constant in their lives, demonstrating stability even in hard times. Clients respond to this, and are grateful firstly to the staff who minister to them, and to those far away who make this possible. But most importantly, to God for hearing their prayers.





*This is an extended family with parents, their children and grandchildren who left their homes in eastern Ukraine to find shelter. For many, Zaporizhzhya was the closest city. When they arrive with just what they can carry, they are welcomed at a Refugee shelter (often a school or church) given a meal and immediate shelter for the first few nights. This gives them a chance to make longer term decisions. If they wish to, or have relatives further west who can help, they move on. If they wish to leave the country, they can leave by train, free of charge for the borders of Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, or Moldova.*

*This is another family with a mother and her children. There are so many families broken apart, with the men either in the military or working as volunteers in the war zones, when the rest of the family is forced to leave and find safety. These are experiences no child should be forced to endure. Often, they will not be able to go back. Here they are receiving a delivered food package.*

Since our last Newsletter, we have had periods of time when programs had to be suspended due to restrictions imposed by authorities. During this time, our staff made many telephone calls to clients, making sure they were safe and had food to eat. Food packages were delivered where needed. Remarkably, markets remained functional, and we are able to purchase food, which is often rationed, but because we are recognized as representing a charity, we are able to buy more food than the rations allow. However, in each case, as soon as the restrictions ended, we were back offering our regular programs. We were fortunate that although some workers and also clients developed covid, to our knowledge everyone recovered. We have had some care workers leave for other countries for safety. Some have returned, and we have been able to hire replacements for others.



*This is a small sample of people in the Home Care program, receiving food packages during the times when the programs had to be closed for periods of time.*



At the present time, the Home Care program is going well. Care workers are in place, and the program is going as it should. There are 111 clients currently, and we provide over 3000 hours of actual care every month. The Day Program also continues every day, with up to 8 clients coming in each day. We are now beginning to devote one day per week to clients who have recently come to Zaporizhzhya for safety from other parts of the war torn areas of Ukraine. It is too early to know how successful this might be.

The Respite Program is going well, and is operated in partnership with the Pentecostal congregation. We have only six beds in this Centre but all beds are occupied, and we have now taken in our first client from recently arrived refugees in Zaporizhzhya. Because these women are so isolated from the outside world, there is no talk of the war at the Respite Centre.

The work of “Prometheus”, a program for children with special needs, goes on at a reduced scale. Some families have moved out further west for safety reasons, and others have moved within the city, so it is operating with a reduced number of children. We support this program with funds that pay for transportation.

The “Florence Centre” is another program we support financially. This program has moved into the former Mennonite Church building, and staff have been working either one on one or remotely with children with special needs and with schools. They provide counselling for young people at risk and parents with children with special needs.

## Support for the Mennonite Family Centre

These have been hard times for the staff and clients of the Mennonite Family Centre. There have been two years of Covid, followed by the war. Many women and children have left for safety. Our Centre works with those who are left behind, mostly widows and handicapped adults, and also children with special needs. We continue to respond to internal refugees who come to Zaporizhzhya from the war zones, either for a few days before they move on, or those who choose to stay, hoping to return “home” at some point. We invite your prayers and financial support for this work. The needs are so much greater than we are able to meet, but we can be a stabilizing force to those in our programs and those sent our way. We cannot carry the burdens of everyone, but we can offer to share the burden with some. We pass on the gratitude of these many people we are able to help. They tell us how they thank God for what they receive.



(Cut and submit, or simply send your cheque in the envelope enclosed)

Yes, I want to help the needy in Ukraine! Use where most needed.

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Receipts are issued by the Mennonite Family Centre (USA) Inc.*

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**Ukraine Ministry**  
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**Winnipeg, MB R2K 3S7**  
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