

BEACON of HOPE

REPORT OF THE WORK OF THE MENNONITE FAMILY CENTRE, ZAPORIZHZHYA, UKRAINE



by Louie Sawatzky
Project Director

We send greetings from the Mennonite Family Centre in Zaporizhzhya, Ukraine. The Mennonite Family Centre is a charity registered in Ukraine in 2002, formed to act as an Agent of the Mennonite Benevolent Society in carrying out the work of the Society in Ukraine. Never could we have imagined that we would find ourselves in the midst of a war with Russia.

The war with Russia really began on February 20th, 2014 when Russian backed separatists began fighting in the Donbas region, which includes the Provinces (or Oblasts) of Luhansk and Donetsk followed very quickly with Russia annexing the whole of Crimea. I will not report specifically about the details of the war other than to say that war is brutal, with many military casualties on both sides, with many people displaced within and outside of Ukraine.

When the war began, Russian forces moved quickly into southern Ukraine, occupying a large area in southern and eastern Ukraine, including the atomic electric power plant in a small city of Enerhodar, which in a straight line

is about 60 km from Zaporizhzhya. The area includes all the villages in the former southern Mennonite colonies. Many villages have now been destroyed.

Rockets and drones continue to arrive in Ukrainian cities and villages and small communities and there is a lot of destruction and loss of life. Many lives have been disrupted as people have left their homes and simply moved further west toward safety or left the country. The latest major catastrophe has been the destruction of the large dam across the Dnieper river at Kakhovka, which drained the large reservoir formed by the river, flooding the many communities further south.

HOW THE WAR IS AFFECTING THE PEOPLE OF UKRAINE

Zaporizhzhya is right along the Dnieper River, which forms a kind of border between east and west Ukraine. For some reason, Zaporizhzhya has not been targeted nearly as much as some other cities. Often it is the villages that are hit.

Air raid sirens warn people to take cover whenever there is activity in the air, and are often activated many times a day. During that time, all stores, markets and banks close and people are meant to find shelter. For many people in the city, this means going to a public fallout shelter, and for people in large apartment blocks it often means moving into the hallways, where it is safer than having just one outside wall. (Many people sleep in the hallways in the apartment blocks, when the air raid siren is on). Because the war has been ongoing now for over 470 days, many people in Zaporizhzhya no longer pay attention to the air raid sirens. They are just tired of the war. For the most part, they can still buy everything they need, but because of inflation, the money is never

enough. There is much more poverty.

In Ukraine held regions, the people feared the effect of electric power and gas outages in winter time, and possible food shortages. But it turned out so much better than expected. As they look back on winter, they are grateful for the determination and expertise of the people in charge, as power and gas lines were restored relatively quickly whenever they were cut. There have not been widespread food shortages in the markets, and the trains have been able to continue.

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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The population of Zaporizhzhya has greatly reduced as people fled the war, and many men have joined the military. But there are those who cannot, or choose not to leave. Most of our staff has remained in Zaporizhzhya, and I speak with Boris Letkeman almost daily. Most clients have not left either, since it is very difficult for them to move at their stage in life. Our clients need care to live from day to day, and cannot leave, and care providers have stayed to provide that care.

Most clients receive a monthly pension from the government, and try to exist on that, and are grateful the pensions have continued without fail. However because of inflation, prices have climbed tremendously in the past year. This includes the cost of meat and vegetables, where prices have more than doubled. In the past, many

vegetables were grown in the regions now under occupation further south, and are no longer available.

Life goes on as normally as possible for many people left in Zaporizhzhya. They have learned to cope with sirens and the constant threat of being bombed. They try to ignore what they cannot control but are so tired of the constant threats. When buildings are damaged beyond repair, they are either left or cleaned up. Most often, there are broken windows, which are usually repaired quickly by volunteers with the help of the Government. Flowers are still planted in the boulevards, even as air raid sirens are sounding. It is amazing to see the resilience of the people, caught in this war which is completely out of their control.

THE WORK OF THE FAMILY CENTRE

The work of the Mennonite Family Centre continues. The needs are greater than ever. Since the war began, the clientele has changed with internal refugees coming to Zaporizhzhya. Often people pass through, but if they find work and housing they may stay. This happened more at the beginning of the war in 2022 since it is now impossible to leave the occupied zones.

The Home Care program and the Respite Centre programs are working as usual, even under the pressure of the war, but the Day Program has been suspended. The staff has been very good at working around interruptions.

Boris Letkeman is our local Director. He lives with Maria in the village of Nieder Chortitza on the west bank of the river. When he goes to work, he is often stopped multiple times at check stops. Because the security guards have seen him many times, he is often just waved through. But any vehicle unusual in any way, is searched.



We have still been able to send funds through the Banks for the programs, but to get it from the Bank, Boris must stand in line. There are strict limits on the amount he can withdraw at any one time. When the air raid siren goes, the bank and all shops close immediately, and Boris must either wait until the siren stops, or come back another time.

Boris and Maria have two daughters. One daughter and her two children went to Poland for a time during the first part of the war, coming back when they felt it was safe to return. But it was not safe. So the other daughter left for Poland with her two daughters and remains there, hoping to return when it is safe. Boris and Maria grow a big garden and keep enough chickens for eggs for their family. “Where the war goes now, and how long it lasts is out of our hands”, Boris says. “We can only go on about our work and respond to the needs as we see them. We are privileged to be in a position to help. It gives me joy and energy.”



The roles of Tatiana Tymoshenko and Sergey Butyrin have changed significantly. Sergey is the Assistant Director, and has been transporting the Day Program clients to and from the Centre and buying all the required food. Tatiana is the Assistant Program Coordinator. When the Day Program had to be shut down because of the constant air raid sirens and bombing close by, Sergey and Tanya began visiting clients in their own apartments. They visit 8 to 10 clients every day; Day Program clients, refugees, and Home Care clients. They always bring food and stay in touch with them, becoming very familiar with their needs. Sergey lives in a small village east of Zapor-

izhzhya, and always within ear shot of the constant sounds of war on the southern front line. Often the villages are

bombed more than the city, and even though many neighbors have been hit, Sergey says they have had just one broken window in a small barn on the yard. He and his family live with his mother, who still tends the garden, trying to ignore the sounds and threats.

Tatiana lives in the city, and being an avid animal lover, she tends to some of the many dogs and cats that have been left to fend for themselves, as a volunteer in her spare time. She is always nurturing some animal back to good health.

I asked Sergey and Tanya how they cope with their own stress and trauma. Sergey said he copes by keeping busy and thinking of the day they will rebuild what is broken, and things go back to normal. Tatiana says people need them more than ever and they must focus on that.

Below are a few stories of “guests” or people in our program as told by Tatiana.



This is Vladimir Monets who is 72 years old and a client of the Home Care program. He was born, lived and worked in Zaporizhzhya. His wife died about 10 years ago. He has problems with his legs and has trouble walking. He has had rheumatoid arthritis in the joints of his hands and feet for more than 15 years. Vladimir underwent two knee replacement surgeries about 15 years ago. After the first surgery, everything was good but it did not last. He is able to get around with the help of a walker, but because of damage to the joints, he cannot use his hands. He has an adult son who lives with his own family and works at the Siemens plant in Voronezh, Russia, so Vladimir lives alone. He hardly communicates with his son because of different views on the war. Our care provider visits Vladimir every day because he has many needs.

The next story is about children from the occupied territory. Their parents are Daniel and Diana who lived in Prishib until they were forced to leave home because of the war and relocated to Zaporizhzhya, a distance of about 80 km. We donated products for Ilya, a three-year-old boy, and Lera, a one and a half year old girl.

They arrived last summer under heavy artillery fire, and say it was very scary. It was impossible to stay in their home because Daniel was threatened with arrest because of the large tattoos on his arm. (Tattoos are common with soldiers enlisted in the military.) They moved into a rented house in Zaporizhzhya. Daniel found work, while mom and the children were at home. When Daniel developed a condition requiring surgery, he was out of work for several weeks. It is hard to live on the assistance refugees receive from the state. We learned about their plight, and brought food for the family and medicine for Daniel until he was able to go back to work.



The third story is about grandmother Anna Vasilyeva who is, 87 years old. She was a client of the “Day Program”, which had to be suspended because of the constant air raid sirens and the dangers of a group congregating in one place. She lived like all ordinary people. As a child she had already survived one war. Since the Day Program closed, we visit her and bring food. She is lonely. Childhood was difficult and life was not easy. This grandmother had a husband, a son and grandchildren, but the son and his family do not communicate with her, and do not help. She lives alone and feeds homeless animals.



Help for Children with Special Needs

We continue to support the programs of the “Florence Centre” and “Prometheus” for children with special needs. Both programs are ongoing as they are able. The Florence Centre has continued the program, often on line, while the programs of Prometheus have continued in person throughout the war. Both programs help children cope with this time of war, and prepare children with special needs for life and try to minimize the trauma of war that will affect them for many years.

Support for the Work of the Mennonite Family Centre

Our work in Ukraine goes on even during the war. The needs continue to grow. We can only continue to meet the needs as we see them and continue the programs as best we can. We respond to new needs, which come as telephone calls or by word of mouth. Everyone is experiencing trauma of some kind. We appreciate your prayers and financial support for the people of Ukraine during this very hard time.

If you have recently sent a donation, we are grateful, and please see this as a report of the work. If not, we invite you to participate in this work in Ukraine.

(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.

Name: _____ Amount: \$ _____

Address: _____ City: _____

Prov/State: _____ Postal/Zip code: _____

Please note: Donations from the US are administered in Winnipeg, Canada.

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

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The Mennonite Benevolent Society

Ukraine Ministry

1045 Concordia Ave.

Winnipeg, MB R2K 3S7

Registered charity # 119244952 RR0001

In the USA, make checks payable and send to:

The Mennonite Family Centre (USA) Inc.

Ukraine Ministry

1045 Concordia Ave.

Winnipeg, MB R2K 3S7

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