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Rescues, Refugees, and Rebuilding: Chabad of Moldova Part II

By Chaya Chazan

The war in Ukraine began without warning. One day, everything was normal, and the next, bombs were raining on residential streets, destroying everything in their path.

Refugees were forced to flee, often with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. The lucky ones managed to board buses to safer borders. But the trip was perilous and long. The buses had to take circuitous routes to avoid the bombs, and the freezing winter air penetrated the walls, gusting mercilessly throughout the miserable journey. By the time the buses arrived in Moldova, 50 hours after leaving Ukraine, their passengers were sunk in utter depression, starvation, and fear. They stumbled off the bus, half-dead.

I remember seeing an elderly woman struggling with her weather valise. She reminded me of my mother, so I stepped up to her with a smile.

"Babushka, please let me take your suitcase for you," I offered.

"Why? Because you feel sorry for me?" she snapped, her eyes flashing. "No, thank you! I can manage for myself!"

My heart broke. "No, no," I assured her. "Because you remind me of my mother, and I'd do the same for her."

Mollified, the woman allowed me to carry all her worldly belongings into the shul.



I had to sit in the privacy of my office for a while, trying to regain equilibrium. It was so hard to watch busload after busload of people who'd lost everything in moments. Even their dignity was being snatched from them.

We were determined to do everything we could to help. The most important things were shelter and food. The government helped me secure four resort areas outside the city with enough beds for 400-500. Our soup kitchen went into overdrive! We worked from 4:00 AM to 11:00 PM, every night, with no respite, serving one portion after another. Most days, we ended up serving over 1,500 meals. We also provided kosher meals for the field clinic set up by Zaka.

One day, I got a call from a wealthy businessman from America. "I saw a video of your kitchen operation," he told me. "It's very impressive - especially considering how old-fashioned and small your appliances are! I want to help. I own a commercial kitchen appliance company. I want to donate a new kitchen."

The new kitchen made it so much easier to keep up with the demand, and we continued cranking out bowls of soup by the hundreds.

One day, another busload of refugees arrived outside the shul. As always, I hurried out to greet them, welcoming them with a smile, and directing them to a seat with a hot bowl of soup.

Among them was Marina*. Her entire town had been razed to the ground, but she was determined to stay as long as possible. When the bombs began falling on her building, she grabbed her husband and ran. Her husband had inhaled a lot of smoke, and he couldn't keep up for long. He collapsed on the ground and died, right in front of her.

Distraught, Marina lay down beside him, sobbing. She vowed she would die there beside him, and wished for oblivion to claim her.

Instead, her friend grabbed her arm. "There's a bus to Moldova leaving now. You're getting on it," her friend insisted.

"No! Leave me here! I just want to die!" Marina wailed.

Her friend refused to take no for an answer and dragged Marina onto the bus. Over the next 50 hellish hours, Marina wished for nothing more than death. She cried, asking her friend why she'd taken her instead of leaving her to die with her husband. Eventually, the bus came to a final, shuddering stop, and everyone trailed off the bus.

Marina followed them like an automaton. Suddenly, a warm glow appeared. A rabbi with a flowing beard and a beaming smile welcomed her warmly and offered her a bowl of soup. Marina felt she'd seen an angel.

That warm glow imbued Marina with a renewed purpose. She called her son in Toronto and asked him to send her a plane ticket.

After being reunited with her son, Marina asked him to take her to shul on Shabbos. Her son raised a brow.

"Shul, Mama? Now? All the years we were growing up, we never went to shul. All of a sudden, you want to go?"

"For the angel rabbi with the soup in Kishinev, I must go to shul," she said.

"You've already done so much for us, but I need your help," said Katya*, a Ukrainian refugee. "My mother escaped Kiev with me, and she made it here - but only barely. I took her to the hospital right away, and the doctors tried to help. Now, they're telling me there's nothing else they can do for her. They told me to take her home, because if I leave her in the hospital, she'll die. What should I do?"

I immediately thought of Adrian, a parliamentary member and a good friend. He'd been one of the top doctors in the country before becoming a politician, and he had many powerful connections. When he heard Katya's story, he called the hospital right away. They told him the same thing they'd told her - her mother's condition was too severe for them to treat. If there was any chance of survival, she'd need to be airlifted to a hospital in another country.

I knew Hatzalah Air was in Romania then - just a short hop over the border. I contacted them and asked if they could help Katya's mother. A few hours later, I watched as she was airlifted to Germany. Baruch Hashem, she received the care she needed and made a full recovery.

Today, Katya's mother has resettled in Germany, and, despite her advanced years and health scare, she's dancing to greet each morning!



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Among the many refugees that flooded in from Ukraine, we were honored to host the shlichim of those cities that had become too dangerous to stay. One week, we had five shlichim from Kharkov and Sumi staying with us.

"Chevra, you've been through a lot," I told them. "I have a gorgeous vacation estate outside the city. Go there for Shabbos. The peace and quiet and fresh air will do wonders for you and your families."

Rabbi Moshe Moskowitz looked at our shul, then crowded with construction equipment, dust, and debris, and looked back at me, deliberately. "I'll sleep on the floor of the shul, but I'm staying here for Shabbos! What I need more than a relaxing getaway is a warm, chassidische farbrengen with my brothers!"

Of course, I wouldn't let them sleep on the shul floor! I racked my brain for ideas of where I could possibly host them. I thought of the house next door to the shul. I'd been eying it for a long time, and had made many offers to the owner. She always turned me down, refusing to sell. I decided to approach her from another angle.

"I have some important Ukrainian refugees staying for Shabbos," I told her. "Can you find somewhere else to stay this weekend? I want to rent your house for them!"

She thought about it for a while, before finally agreeing. She even told me she felt bad accepting the amount I'd offered, and took a much smaller sum as the rental payment.

Baruch Hashem, we had a wonderful, uplifting Shabbos together. There were many reporters covering our aid efforts, including a Jewish reporter from *The Times of Israel* that stayed with us over Shabbos.

The lechaims flowed freely, and soon, Rabbi Moskowitz was dancing around the room energetically, singing *V'somachto Bi'chagecha* loudly and joyously.

The Israeli reporter smirked and asked him, "Rabbi, what chag are you celebrating?"

"I'll tell you what I'm celebrating!" Rabbi Moskowitz answered him. "I'm celebrating that I was a shliach of the Rebbe; I am a shliach of the Rebbe, and I will be a shliach of the Rebbe. They can take my house and all my belongings, but this is something they can never take from me!"

We were all inspired by his answer, not least of all the reporter.

After Shabbos, I called the owner again. "Thank you so much for renting us the house," I told her. "By the way - I'm still interested in buying it. Would you change your mind?"

"This Shabbos has shown me that you really mean what you say," she said. "You're here to stay! Yes; I will sell you the house."

With the new property, we made plans to open a kosher cafe and playgroup. Baruch Hashem, there's always more to be done!

Svetlana* had married a non-Jew and never thought twice about her Yiddishkeit. She fled Ukraine with her husband and son and found refuge in Kishinev. She watched in amazement as our team of shlichim and volunteers took care of everything.

"I've been very inspired by you rabbis," she told me. "You dedicate your lives to helping other Jews! It's made me think about my Judaism in a whole new way. I want to give my son a bris. Can you help me with that?"

Among the refugees was an expert mohel, and he was happy to accommodate her. With tears in her eyes, Svetlana watched her son join the people she'd only recently come to admire.

For over a month, we operated on emergency protocol, adrenaline alone keeping us going. There was never a second to relax - not even a moment to think. Baruch Hashem, fellow shlichim were invaluable, and our crew of locals kept things running as smoothly as possible. But the sheer amount of people that needed food, clothing, medicine, shelter, advice, support, and guidance was neverending. Our phones rang constantly, even throughout Shabbos, with one life-threatening call after another. Most nights, I got by on just a couple hours of sleep and copious amounts of coffee.

At one point, a family matter required me in New York. As I boarded the plane and found my seat, my mind finally stopped racing. It was the first moment in a very long time that I'd had even a minute to just *think*. When you're in the thick of things, you don't have the time or luxury to process what you're doing. You just act on in-

stinct. The magnitude of the utter devastation and suffering I'd witnessed struck me all at once, and I spent the entire flight in tears, trying to process a month's worth of emotion in just a few hours.

We hope for an end to all this pain and suffering, when everyone can return home and rebuild their lives.

We noticed that many refugees preferred to stay in the airport, hoping to figure out their long-term plans quickly enough so they wouldn't have to leave and find a place to stay in the city. Meeting the needs as they appeared, we opened a Chabad house in the airport.

On Shemini Atzeres, a stranger walked into the shul and joined the dancing with gusto. When I had a moment, I welcomed him and asked where he was from.

He told me he was Johnny* from Morristown, New Jersey. He'd had a traditional upbringing, and even attended yeshiva for a while. Although he'd left the Torah path, he remained on good terms with his family, and often visited the Chabad house in Belgium, where he lived.

The shliach in Belgium called Johnny before Yom Tov, inviting him for hakafo.

"Rabbi, G-d is going to have to have hakafo in Belgium without me this year," he told the shliach. "I need a vacation. I'm going to Moldova for a fun getaway!"

"Imagine my surprise," Johnny told me, "when I walked out of Kishinev's airport, only to be faced by a huge sign reading, *Chabad*. It's like G-d was chasing me down! I looked up your information and came right here. Apparently, G-d *can't* do hakafo without me."

*Names changed to protect privacy

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