

Elena Mistrello

RESTARTING FROM WHAT IS LEFT

Stories of women at war's edge.



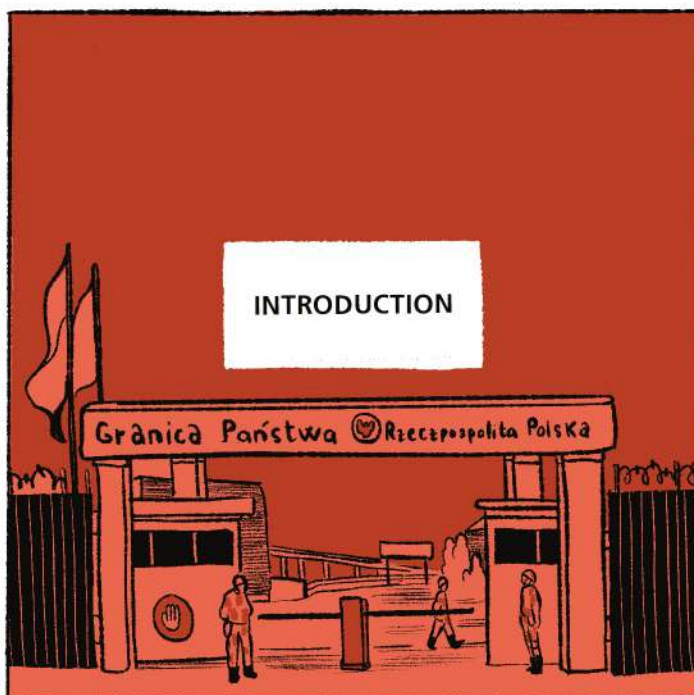
People for development

AVSI

Polska

Editing and interview
supervision:
Rita Marzio Maralla

INTRODUCTION



February 2022.



Within a few months, Poland was faced with one of the largest migration phenomena in its history.



In the days immediately following the outbreak of the war, the country had fled a large number of forces to take in those who flee: these are mostly women and children, as men between the ages of 18 and 50 are required to perform military service, and are forbidden to leave Ukraine.

Today Poland is hosting 1.6 million ukrainians, and people continue to arrive...



Immediately after the outbreak of war, the European Union made the directive of "Declaration of Temporary Protection" operational for the first time.



Through this declaration immediate and collective protection is offered to all displaced persons from Ukraine, without needing to examine individual applications.



People receiving 'refugee' status are allowed to return to Ukraine to visit family members up to 14 days, after which they lose their status of refugee.



Not all people who are fleeing the war apply for refugee status, so that they can always return to live in their country.



ANNA
ZIARKOWSKA
Dom spotkań z historią

I remember very well when the first refugees started to arrive, there was an extraordinary organization, not only state-owned and military.



Every Pole opened his home, cooked soup for the front, brought food and clothes for ukrainians fleeing the war.



ANNA
ZIARKOWSKA,
Director of the
House of Encounter
with History.

The reasons for this solidarity lies in the history of Poland, a country that has always been close to Ukraine.



In addition, Poland has a strong anti-Russian feeling, has ancient origins and which was strengthened during World War II, when the population of Warsaw felt first abandoned and then subjugated by Soviet forces.

Polish history is a layered history that often took place at its borders.



This is the first time Poland has faced such a phenomenon, immigration policies are very strict.



DONATO DI GILIO,
President of
AVSI Polska.



AVSI POLSKA
Warsaw

Rita and I arrived in Warsaw in September 2023. We are guests of AVSI, an NGO operating in 40 countries.



AVSI Polska has been present in Poland since 1993 and has been working with ukrainian refugees since 2022. Together with the AVSI Foundation, it currently implements **Wagees** project, which aims to support the integration of Ukrainian refugees into Polish society.



At the first meeting, we are introduced to the people involved in the project.

Most of the beneficiaries are women fleeing war with their children: they arrive through associations, acquaintances or through their employers.



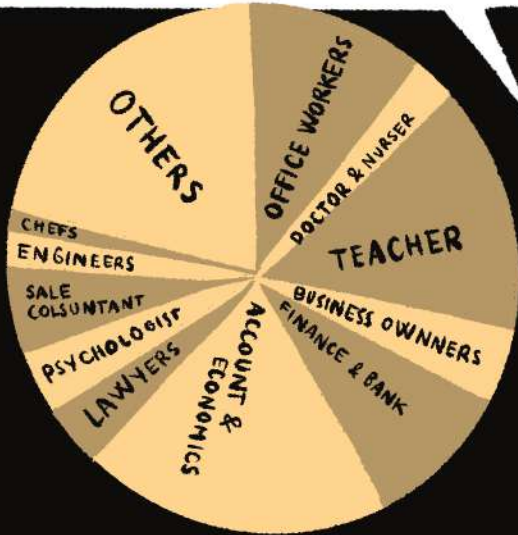
Our project has been active since the beginning of the war, and our beneficiaries can be people who have just arrived but also refugees who are now stable, who have been living here for a year and who may have already found a home. They are usually young adults as the elderly find it difficult to leave Ukraine.

The main goal is integration: we try to help people find stable employment to build a future for themselves and their families.



Over time, some of these people have been directly involved in the project, such as Myla or Viktoriia, the secretary, both ukrainians who fled the war. The AVSI team is very heterogeneous. There are different nationalities and skills.

Many of the women we assist usually have a university education. To participate in the project, they fill in a questionnaire, so we can track their needs and professionalism.



One of our goals is to help ukrainian women to certify their previous work qualifications, preventing them from being de-qualified.



Poland has different laws compared to Ukraine and it often happens that these women are not allowed to practice their work. Moreover, the certification process is long and expensive.

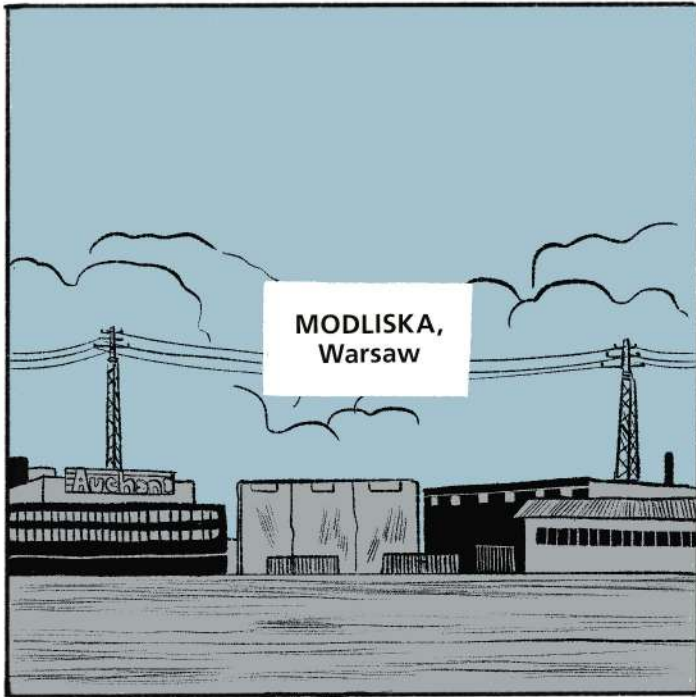


The project is very complex. AVSI cooperates with various organizations working in the field of refugee reception, offering various services: summer camps for children and places of entertainment, kindergartens, Polish language courses, English courses, vocational training, psychological assistance and legal protection. It also participates in job fairs and cooperates with several companies willing to hire ukrainian women.



We do not do the all-round reception process, as there are already various organizations and associations involved. Instead, our specific contribution is to offer ukrainians people the chance to build a long-term future for themselves.





Opened in March 2022 **Modlińska** is one of the largest first reception centers for ukrainian refugees in Poland. AVSI does not currently partner with this center.



The center is located in a fairground in an industrial district of Warsaw suburb. The building is surrounded by factories and is poorly connected to the city center, another factor in determining its isolation.

People who come here for help can receive assistance for a period of about 100 days, after which they must leave, or pay a small fee to stay.



The only people who can stay longer are mothers with more than three children, disabled and elderly people...and those who cannot pay.

ПРИЙОМУ БІЖЕНЦІВ З УКРАЇНИ
PUNKT RECEPCYJNY DLA UCHODźCÓW Z UKRAINY
RECEPTION POINT FOR REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

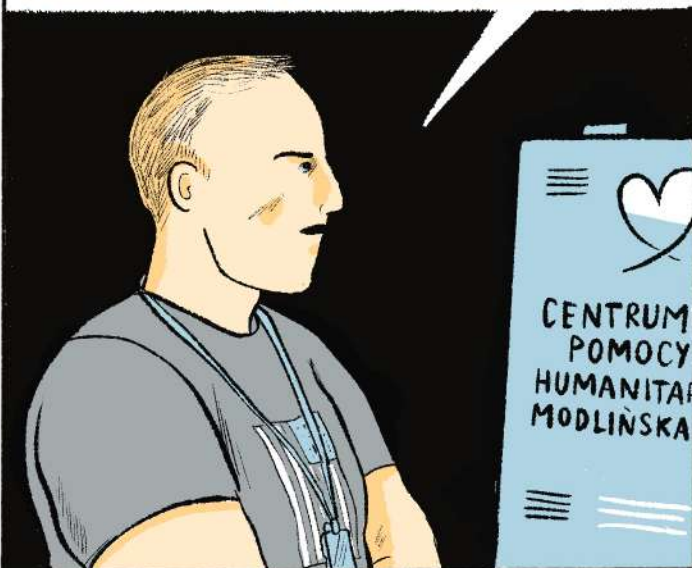


In general, those who come here are people who do not know where to go, although most people find other solutions thanks to friends and acquaintances; some people manage to emigrate to other countries such as Canada or Germany.



The very morning we opened we suddenly had to accommodate 2000 people, now there are about 600 left. We had no experience on how to organize such a reception center.

We offer support to reach other European countries. The people who stay cannot afford to travel, while others do not want to go too far, perhaps they have husbands and children at war and hope to return to their homes soon.



Every person who arrives is registered and anyone without an ID cannot enter: we have a strict security system. In the beginning the police, the army and the border guards helped us.



This whole procedure is necessary to make the place as safe as possible. Unfortunately, people need money here... For example, we had to stop cars coming here to pick up young girls.

After registration, people access the medical clinic for a check-up. We try to prevent the spread of viruses or other infectious diseases. When a person is sick person, they are quarantined to prevent further spread.



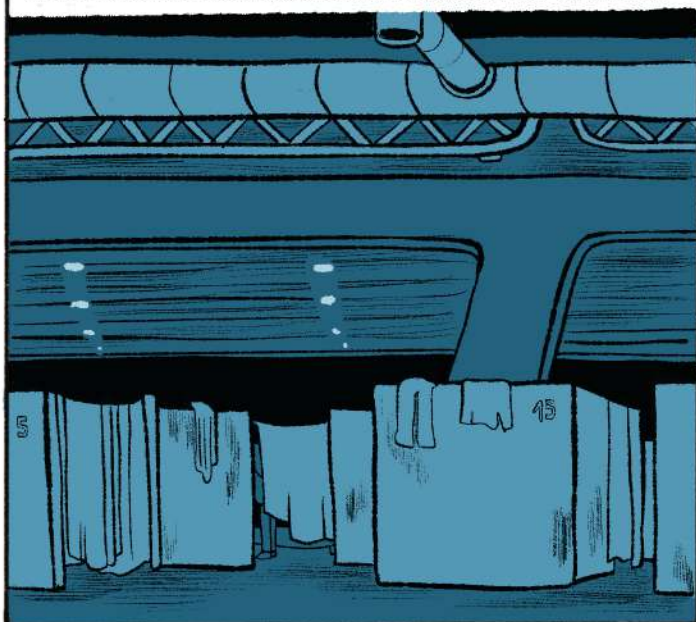
We go through different spaces: there is a canteen, a hospital, several recreation rooms with people painting and sewing, a children's space, an elementary and middle school.



We have received many official compliments about our school. Unfortunately, many children after two years of Covid and two years of war have learning setbacks... for example, at ten years old they may still not be able to read.

The school is called Love Does and was created thanks to an american company donation.

We visit the indoor football field, where parties and ceremonies are also held, and a vocational school for nurses.



We then move to the sleeping area where there are bathrooms, a laundry area, and storage of clothes and blankets. It is hard to imagine what this area was like when there were thousands of people within the center, considering that life here must still be hard today.



Most of the people who live here now are the poorest ukrainians, people who have not been able to find an alternative: the elderly, the disabled and the people who are not self-sufficient. Many of them have psychological disorders.



During the entire visit we perceive, probably for the first time, a general atmosphere of tension. People seem to be waiting for something and the front appears closer to us, as if we could almost hear it from here.



An elderly woman, alone in a corner, is preparing camouflage blankets using some rags recycled from discarded clothing: they will be used to cover the positions of the soldiers at the front, and will be shipped soon.

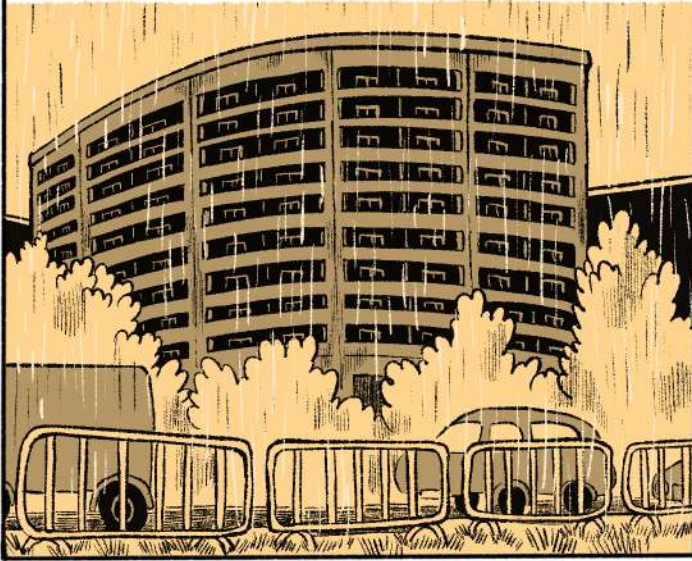


We say goodbye to our companion. Later, Julia confides in us that this center will close in a month, as it has already happened to many others. It is still not clear where these people will go.



IRINA, doctor.
Sumy.

Irina is a 40-year-old ukrainian woman. AVSI helped her during the professional certification process by giving her legal support, and now Irina is back to practising her profession: doctor.



On 24 February my sister called me: «the war has started, take your children and run away from our parents!». So I joined my children in Sumy, but it was not easy to run away from home.



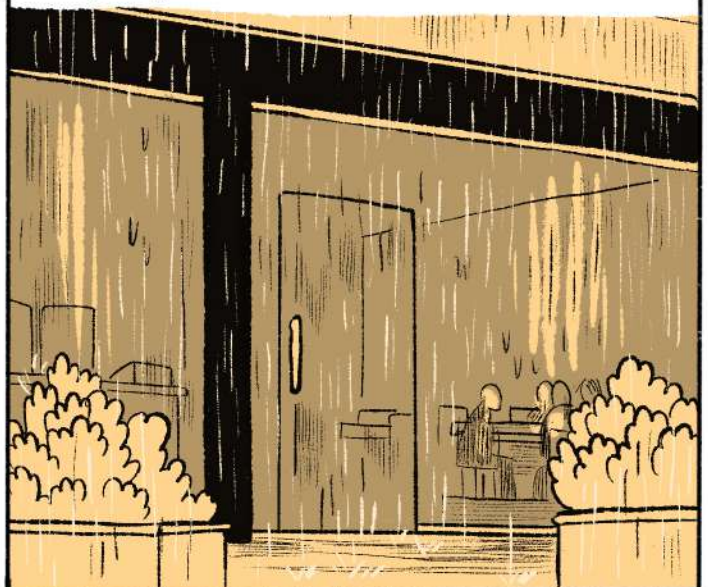
The children were starting to have panic attacks, they didn't understand why we had to be locked inside. We adults were sharing the space, because there wasn't enough for everyone.



We spent two weeks hiding in the basement. All around us there was chaos, a lot of fighting and shelling in the streets, and soldiers everywhere.



From 8 March buses began to be available for international students. Those with a private car could try to escape by interposing themselves between one bus and another.



The supermarkets were empty, supplies were starting to run out. The bridge had now been bombed. Sumy was completely occupied.



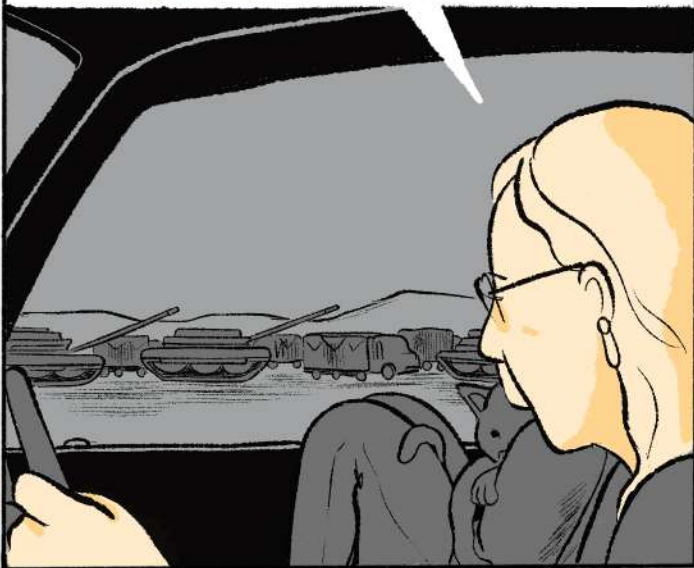
I decided to try. I borrowed some petrol from the neighbors. I just hoped it would be enough! We loaded up the car.



Just before leaving, the cat also joined us. We had been looking for her for days, and she finally arrived. We managed to take her with us.



On the way we passed a column of 170 Russian tanks. It was the worst moment for me: I realised that if anything happened the responsibility would be mine alone, and I was endangering my children.



The column passes, we are safe. But the buses continue at a walking pace. Continuing like this we would not arrive before curfew, and it would just get worse. I decided to go on alone.



On the way I try to slow down near the missiles I encounter, some are unexploded and the vibrations could set them off. The road is littered with them.



After a few stops we manage to reach the border, I don't know how long the journey took. I arrived exhausted. The pharmaceutical company I worked for helped us find accommodation in Poland.



Irina now works for a private polyclinic: it was not easy for her to learn polish medical language or to receive the necessary documents for new employment.



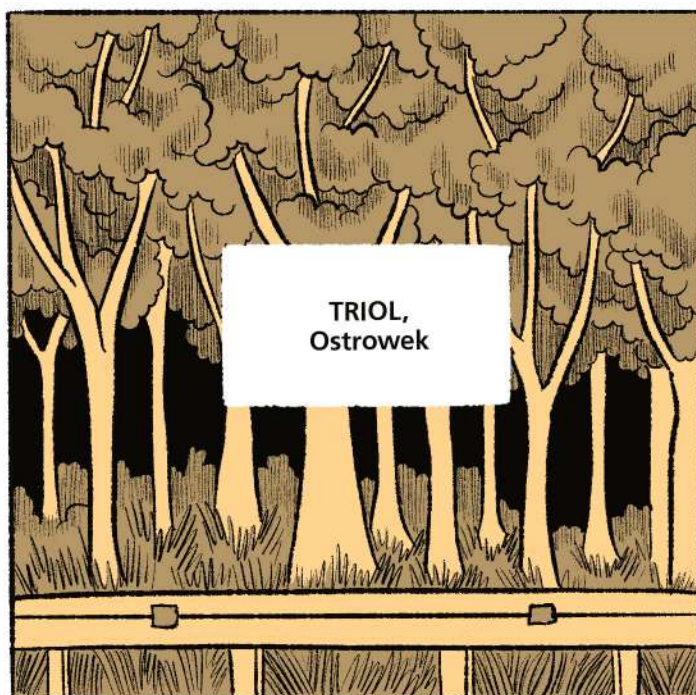
The first agency I found wanted me to sign a contract for a year's unpaid work, a scam that often happens to ukrainians. In desperation, one risks getting screwed.



I got to know AVSI through the Internet, registered on their platform and enrolled in a polish language course.

If I think back to what I've been through... now I wouldn't have the strength to make it again, I don't think I'm capable anymore, actually I don't even know how I did it.





TRIOL,
Ostrowek

To get to Ostrowek, which is 1 hour from Warsaw, we pass through numerous young forests and several small polish villages with typical polinty-roofed houses.



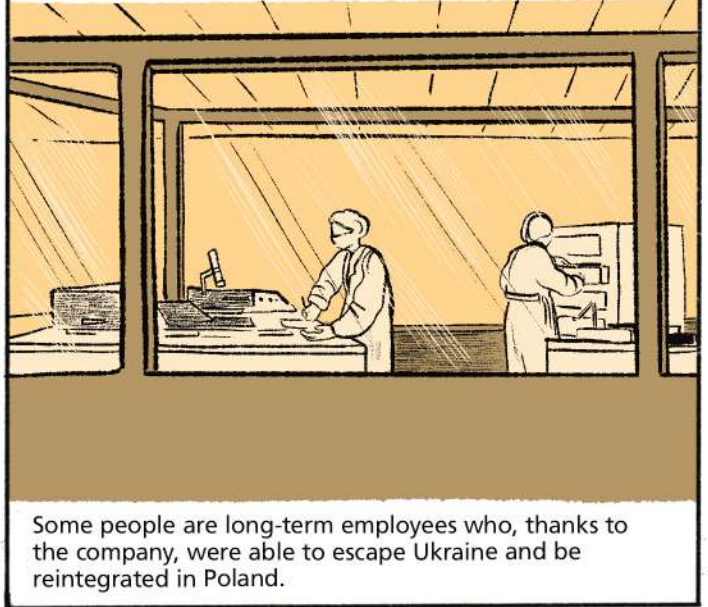
We are visiting the TRIOL Corporation, an ukrainian company from Kharkov which decided to relocate to Poland as a consequence of a bombing at one of its sites.



In just a few months, thanks to Poland's support for ukrainian companies, the company managed to open a new office which is now producing at full capacity.



AVSI works with them by providing training and job placement courses so that the company can secure new hires.



Some people are long-term employees who, thanks to the company, were able to escape Ukraine and be reintegrated in Poland.

We are welcomed by Olena, the personnel officer. She has worked for the company for 10 years, and thanks to the company she was able to escape from Kharkov.



Today you will meet some of our employees, most of whom came here thanks to AVSI courses.

Rent in Poland are very expensive, it wasn't easy to find housing at the beginning, for the first month we received support from a foundation.



SASHA,
assemblywoman,
Kharkov

Now I am fine, my children go to a Polish school that also respects ukrainian holidays, and I am happy about that. However, what I really want for my future is to return back home and see my mother again.

My husband and I had a farm and we stayed there until the last moment, but when the Russians came to make us sign the referendum, we refused. We left because they would ban ukrainian language and culture overnight.

ALINA,
assistant editor,
Kherson



Now I am fine, I am happy to be alive and I'm sure that no one can kill me. Besides, my children will receive a european education.

I can't imagine my future, I feel like i've been spilt into two now, before and after the war.

LARISSA,
maintenance
worker



That's what we used to hear from home... It's still get scared sometimes, waking up suddenly in the middle of the night but luckily it is just the sirens or fire department.



All of these women had different jobs in Ukraine: teachers, economists, farmers, professors at the university. As Julia warned us, professional deskilling is one of the most complex problems for ukrainians in Poland.



Ostrowek, the place where they are living now is a very small village, and many of them didn't want to, or could not receive psychological support.

Talking to them was not easy, maybe because it was the first time someone asked them how they arrived in Poland, how they escaped from home and how they imagined their future. Some preferred not to answer, others cried softly, and Sergej, the only man there, preferred not to talk a lot with us.



**INESSA,
Avsi Psychologist**

Inessa is the psychologist who works with AVSI offering individual and group therapy, as well as telephone support. Since the beginning of the project she has taken care of 600 people.



Only 5% of the beneficiaries of the project have previously used psychological assistance. Many ukrainians, especially those coming from the eastern part of the country, are prejudiced in relation to this issue. They are afraid of ending up in psychiatry, they are prejudiced against it.

In reality, people have previous problems and the war only brings these issues to the surface.



Years ago, I followed a research between the University of Kiev and the University of Warsaw on syrian refugees. This was the first time I had worked with people who ran away from war... Now I had to go back to study again!

I usually face problems of alcoholism or psychiatric disorders, but difficulties related to war are not my business.



Most women live in the illusion of a prompt return to their homes, they live as if waiting for something. Others realize their husbands are alcoholics, leave them, and in response to this men reproach their wife for choosing 'the european lifestyle', making them feel guilty.

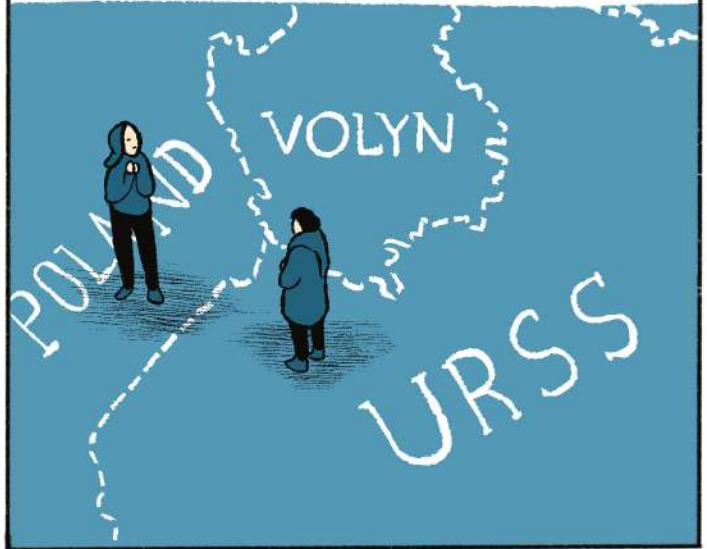


I don't know if this model of refugee reception, developed for ukrainians here in Poland, is applicable to the rest of Europe; I think the key element in this integration process is the language, polish and ukrainian are quite similar. Here in Poland, however, there is a lack of cultural mediators.



Irina is very prepared, she tells us several stories of her beneficiaries, even if one of the most interesting is exactly her own story.

She too experienced the drama of being separated from her family and her homeland. Inessa's family is originally from Volyn, a region that was considered Poland and became Ukraine under the Soviet Union.

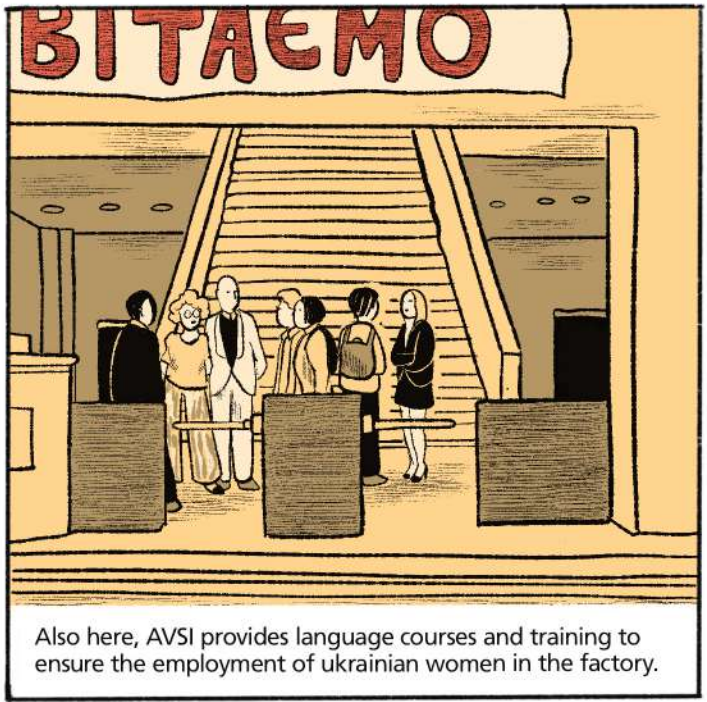


It is easy for me to empathize with them, I know what it means to be forced to leave home. For years I couldn't see my mother, just because overnight a new border had been established.



LOWICZ.
Hotel and guesthouse
of PartnerPolGroups

Lowicz is located west of Warsaw. In this village there is the hotel for seasonal workers of **PartensPolGroups**, a logistics and packaging company with several factories in Poland.



Also here, AVSI provides language courses and training to ensure the employment of ukrainian women in the factory.

The hotel offers various services: canteen, psychological support, kindergarten, school, recreational activities and various social events such as dinners and parties. There are also medical clinics which people can use at moderate prices.



When I realized what conditions my seasonal employees were living in, I decided to open a hotel for them. Many of them were already ukrainians, so when the war started, I expanded the hotel to accommodate those who were fleeing.



MAGRINI,
entrepreneur
and owner

MALGORZATA,
reception project
manager



They came here with just a few things, desperate and closed off themselves. In the beginning we were still not very organized, there was a lot of work to be done. The guests didn't cooperate, they didn't want to. Slowly they realized that this was a collective project and got active. There were people who painted, carried mattresses and helped.

We received fridges, kitchens, beds on loan to use from different private companies. Now the hotel accommodates more than 400 people. Not all are ukrainians, there are also people who come from other countries.



After this first meeting we had the possibility to visit the factory.



Most employees are women, because small hands are better to pack.



Poland is a country with strong economic growth, with a constant need for a labor force.



Poland's acceptance of ukrainians refugees is not without economic and political interests, as it is often in migration processes.

We meet Valentina and Alina in the afternoon. Alina is an English teacher from a small town near Kiev.



My city was not taking many risks, but the army was deducting more and more money from my salary, life was starting to become hard, and so I decided to emigrate. There is a future here in Poland.

Valentina arrived from Kherson one month ago. Her father had broken his leg and she had to assist him all these months, even quitting her job to be with him.



Valentina's eyes are dull, she speaks little and does not explain to us the details of her journey. The corridor to escape from one of the most besieged cities in Ukraine remains open, part of her family is still there and she is afraid of compromising them.



She has not yet participated in AVSI courses and she cannot work for now because she is ill. We greet her kindly, without adding anything else. In the courtyard, with fresh air, she seems to rest in the quiet.



ALEKSANDRA,
Kiev

Aleksandra is one of the participants in AVSI's vocational training courses: she reached Poland thanks to her company, now destroyed, but supported its employees for the first few months.



Actually I work for Leroy Merlin with a part-time contract in the gardening sector. Of course, it's not a job of responsibility like I had before, but at least I have free time, I can think about myself and take language courses. There is a lot of work in Poland, even though the pay is often minimum wage.



I would like to go back to office work, but my level of English is still too low. I would also like to go back to traveling in Europe with my boyfriend: we used to do several trips before the war.



I don't understand how people can still live in Ukraine. I could no longer sleep peacefully, even if my area was not particularly critical. I was always afraid that planes would come to me and destroy my life.



Yes, my boyfriend is still there, he cannot move because of his job and because his company also supplies the army. He doesn't want to leave.

I don't know if i want to go back to Ukraine or not.



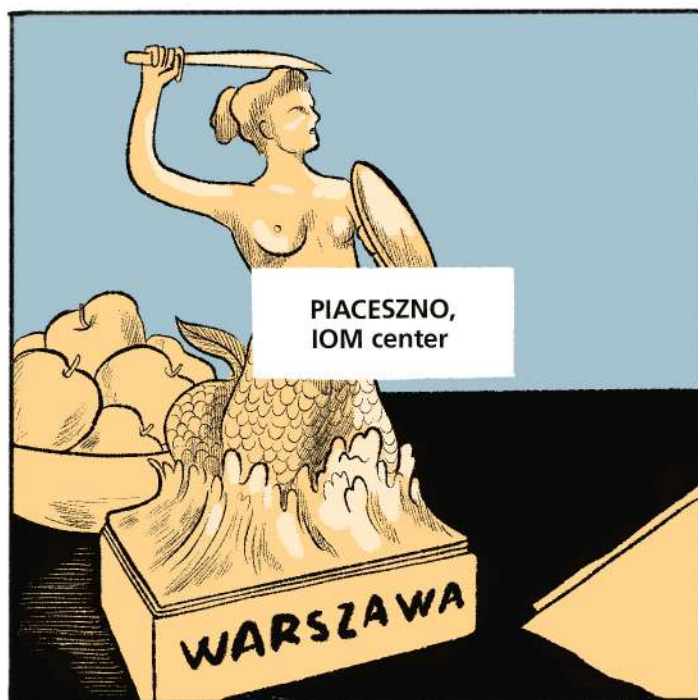
What would I find there?
After every war there is only
disease and sadness, in
Poland at least people are
happy. I don't want to
change my nationality, but
for now I'm fine here.



In November, I will go to Spain with my nephew. At the moment I can only travel with the youngest because the trip is expensive. I would also like to participate in an Erasmus Plus project with the polish history museum... We will see.

Aleksandra is not the only one with these feelings. Many other women like her live in uncertainty. For them, the return to Ukraine is not without difficulties and doubts, and the desire to rebuild their lives, to think about themselves again after two years of war is very strong.

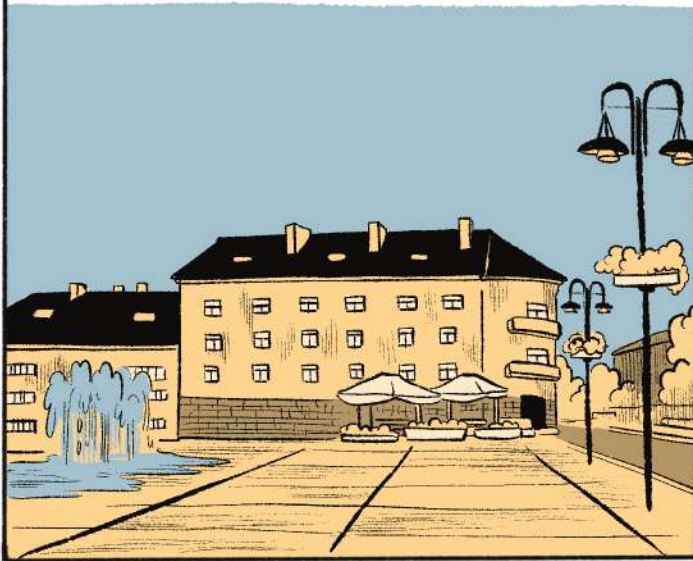




PIACESZNO,
IOM center

WARSZAWA

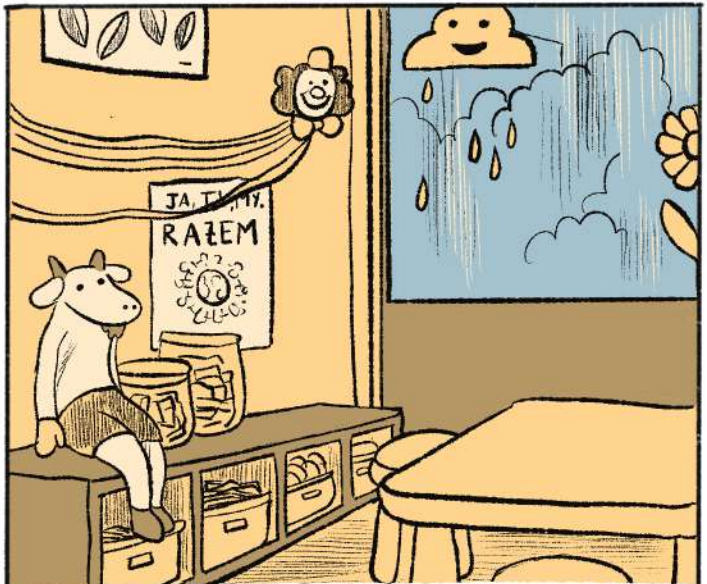
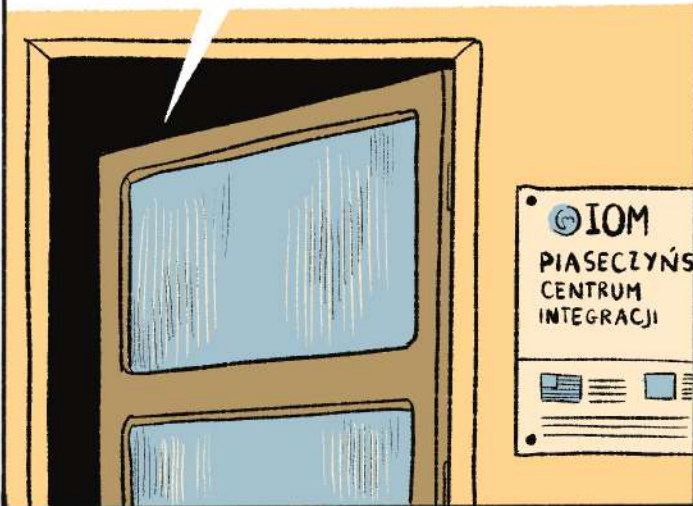
The IOM center for ukrainian refugees is located in Piaseczno, in the Masovian region. It is a multicultural city, with high rate of immigration and for years belarusians, ukrainians and poles have been living here.



That is why several years ago we founded the Women for Welcoming Committee, to promote integration in our city. We also wanted to be present in city politics. Women in Poland are not represented.



We used to have another location. After the outbreak of war, we transformed this warehouse into a multifunctional center. The American government provides us with funds to develop projects for ukrainian refugees. We used to work with groups of 30 people, and suddenly we were assisting hundreds.



The center holds polish language and culture courses, sewing and yoga classes, and a summer center for children run by AVSI.



Beyond all the activities, our priority is to create bonds, to strengthen the community. We bring people together and for these reasons we organize many excursions and recreational moments such as barbecues or community lunches.



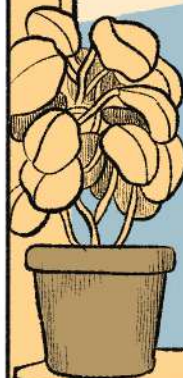
We also cooperate with schools because very often ukrainian children do not want to learn polish, they refuse to be here and they want to go home. Thus, isolation and episodes of aggression can happen instead are generated. Thirty percent of them want to go back, but there are 30 percent who want to stay, and this is where the integration process begins.

- Funding instability
- Inequality of support provided according to migrant status
- Changing needs and expectations of migrants, to which the Center's offer must be adapted

Being a small town is in our favor. Big cities always create more problems.

Many more women's committees are being created: when we started, we were the fourth in Poland, now there are twenty!

We all know each other here, even if the committee members change, and we are efficient because we have been friends for years.





ANNA
and NELA

Targowek is located 30 minutes from Warsaw. In the parish of this city, Krystyna would like to create a club for mothers, a way of giving material and social support to the women in her neighborhood.



I met Anna and Nela because their children and nephews used to come to the AVSI's kindergarten here in Targowek. I would like Anna to work at the mothers' club, give her a salary, as now only her husband works but it is not enough.



The war crept in slowly into our lives. The media kept on telling us to be quiet, but we saw more and more tanks. When the bridge was destroyed we sought refuge in the air raid shelters but they were all full.



Anna has 13 children, 2 of them living outside Ukraine, but finding a place for the other 11 was not easy.



The buses and trains were all full, the city was in chaos. My children were starting to have seizures, they had fevers and had stopped eating.



When the russians reach the nuclear power plant, I finally got a phone call: there are some places, but not for everyone. The three oldest children stayed at home and although the others are still sick we couldn't wait any longer.



My husband was worried, so he decides to accompany me to the bus station and then would go back to the oldest three children.

After a twelve-hour journey we arrived at the Polish border.



There were many people in line, even pregnant women. They distributed blankets. It was very cold. I felt lucky to be on a bus. The children were crying.



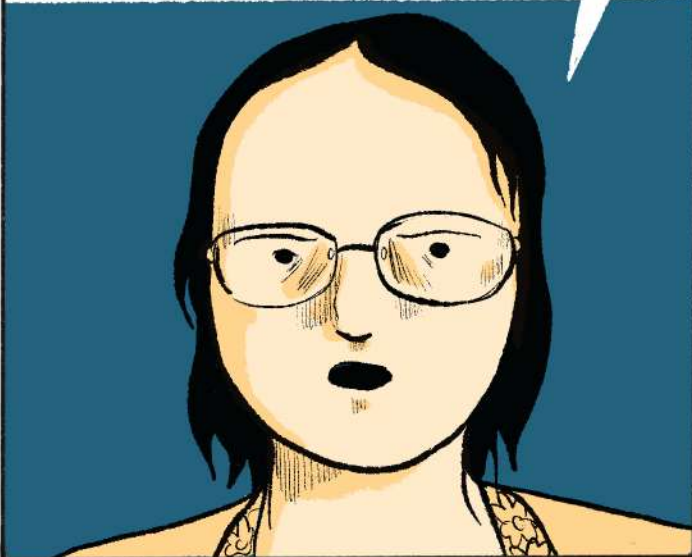
The snow was also crying.



Her husband was not able to return to Ukraine and to three oldest children. He accompanied Ana to Warsaw also because they needed more money, and now that he has a new job, he cannot leave Poland. Moreover, he fears that if he goes back to Ukraine he won't be able to return to Poland.



I talk to my children every day, two of them have found accommodation through contacts. The youngest is 22 years old, he is depressed. He has been locked in the house for months.



He is afraid of being picked up by the army. He doesn't want to go out. They say they come to pick you up even at your workplace and force you to go to the front.

It's not that easy to leave Ukraine. In theory, by law, they can't leave Ukraine.



My younger children are better now, but I can't imagine my future until I have reunited my whole family.

Nela is the first elderly woman we met. She came here with her grandchildren and her sister-in-law, thanks to the parish. Her son joined her shortly afterwards.



Nela receives financial support from AVSI. The project is trying to help her son get the necessary documents to be able to work.



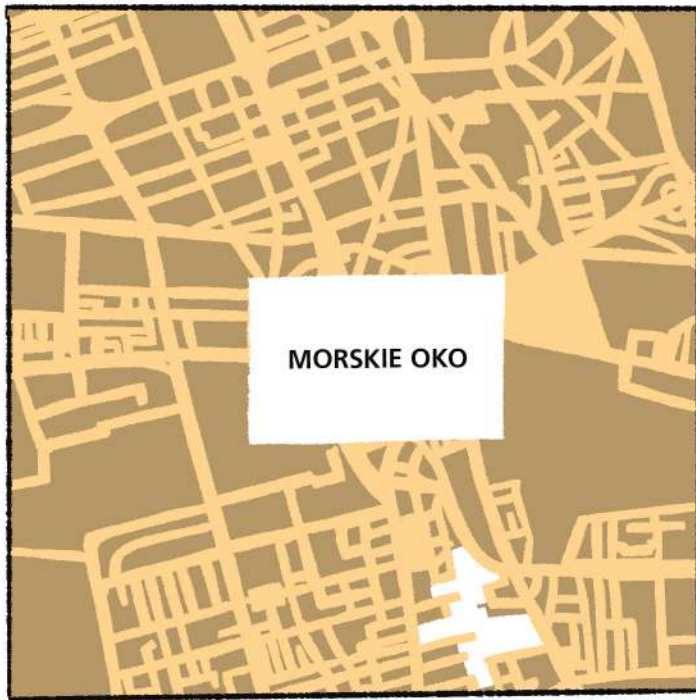
At the beginning I didn't want to escape, but the priest convinced me. They offered us hospitality, food, blankets, a sim card and pierogi.



We received a warm welcome here. We are fine. I don't need anything, I don't lack anything.

I just want the war to end.





Around the city there is a lot of noise, people everywhere, music, lights and big buildings. Warsaw seems to be in constant frenetic change. There is construction everywhere.



Near our flat there is a small park. Rita and I decided to spend the last evening there. There is a small lake and a very large weeping willow. There is silence.

The days spent in Warsaw have been full of stories, encounters and reflections. It is the first time we hear about war from someone who is living it first-hand, a war that is present, concrete.



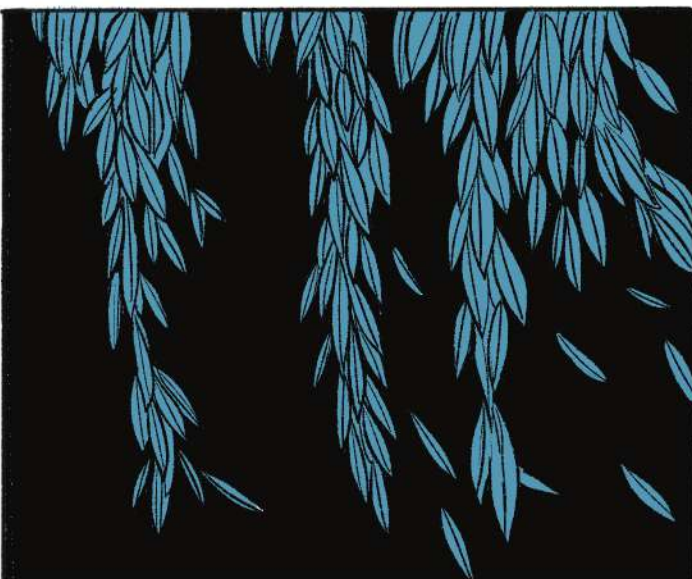
Cities like Zaporizhya and Kharkiv have ceased to be just daily news, now they represent homes, faces, hopes.

Like Nela, we wish for this war to end, for all wars to end. The reception project we have been following these days proves that encouraging legal immigration and integration prevents further suffering. It is enough to really want to put it into practice.



Because welcoming those who emigrate and those who flee cannot be a political and economic issue. It is instead the only choice to be made.

The most humane one.



Since borders are inextricably linked to war, we can only wish that not only wars, but also deaths at the borders, in Europe and everywhere, would end.

Elena Mistrello, Varsavia '23