

Resilience in the Face of War: a Collaborative Autoethnography of a Ukrainian Refugee Student's Journey through Europe Striving to Find Oneself

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Abstract

Objective. This study presents the personal experience of a 19-year-old student who fled the war in Ukraine, journeyed across multiple countries, and ultimately enrolled in a university psychology program in Croatia. **Methods.** A collaborative autoethnographic approach was employed to explore the student's experience as a war refugee, traversing Europe, and beginning university life in a foreign country. Data were collected through the student's reflective writing. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key emotional and experiential themes. **Results.** The narrative provides a comprehensive account of the student's emotional and physical journey, beginning with the onset of war in Ukraine and progressing through her travels in Romania, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, before settling in Croatia. Thematic analysis revealed a complex interaction of emotions, family dynamics, community support, and the challenges of adapting to a new environment. Despite numerous obstacles, the student and her family remained hopeful and proactive in seeking a better future. The narrative also underscores the therapeutic impact of sharing personal stories. **Conclusions.** The findings highlight storytelling as a powerful medium for personal healing. Moreover, the study emphasizes the collective importance of individual narratives in fostering empathy, understanding, and connection across diverse communities. The narrative underscores the resilience of individuals and the crucial role of compassion and support in times of crisis. This resilience is not just about surviving but finding ways to thrive and contribute meaningfully despite the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the war.

Key Words: Migration ■ Psychological Adaptation ■ Narrative Therapy ■ Emotional Adjustment ■ Trauma Healing.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, with missile strikes across Ukrainian cities. Although the initial plan to swiftly overturn Ukraine's government failed, Russian forces gained control of significant territories in the east and south, including Kherson and Mariupol, within weeks (1). During the early stages, around 3 million Ukrainians fled the country, and 1.85 million were internally displaced, as reported by the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2). As of February 2024, approximately 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded globally (3). The global response was swift and compassionate (4). In the European Union (EU), Temporary Protection status granted Ukrainians similar rights to citizens, allowing access to employment, education, and health-care (5). Despite the support, each Ukrainian must adapt to new environments, and challenges vary by country and individual. Common hardships include the traumatic experience of fleeing war, which often leads to severe stress and anxiety (6). Oviedo et al. highlighted the initial struggles of Ukrainians, including exposure to life-threatening conditions, lack

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of sleep, food deprivation, cold, and long queues at the border. Families with children faced additional stress in keeping their children safe from trauma (6).

One of the common barriers that people confront as immigrants is the traumatic experience of leaving the country and being the victim of war (4). Traumatic experiences and the threat to life significantly impact psychological well-being (7). A study by Buchcik et al. found that 85% of 389 Ukrainian refugees in Germany that contributed to the study exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression, which negatively affected their quality of life (8). This psychological distress was associated with a lower quality of life in refugees (9). Additionally, a prevalent part of refugees suffers from survivor syndrome guilt (10).

In those circumstances, it is harder for people to manage work and life in a new country, as they are unprepared for it (4). Many countries have organized free counselling sessions to address this challenge and help refugees' mental health. For example, in Germany, a Hamburg clinic provides psychological help and counselling for child and adolescent refugees (11). Language barriers are another significant obstacle to integration. Mastering the local language is crucial for accessing employment, education, and healthcare (12). For instance, Ukrainian students in Poland faced difficulties in adapting to higher education due to language challenges, although those studying in English fared better (13) and language challenges were a limiting factor for accessing healthcare support (10). Not knowing the native knowledge of a country may make refugee students feel somewhat excluded from the community. Luckily, most countries have established courses for Ukrainian immigrants to learn a local language for children and adults (14). Uncertainty about the duration of their stay adds further stress for refugees as they struggle to plan their futures (15). This uncertainty mainly affects higher education students, who often feel torn between pursuing their goals abroad and a strong desire to return home (13). Forced migration also disrupts refugees' sense of identity, leading to feelings of exclusion and difficulty adjusting to the host country's culture (13).

Despite these challenges, many refugees have had positive experiences. Oviedo et al. reported that refugees frequently mentioned the kindness and support of volunteers and local citizens (6). Ukrainian students in Poland expressed gratitude for the welcoming environment provided by the local community (13).

Refugees rely on various strategies to cope with these challenges, including maintaining relationships, religious faith, therapy, and staying focused on daily responsibilities like work and volunteering (6). However, the influx of refugees has increased the risk of human trafficking and exploitation, with reported cases of sexual exploitation, financial fraud, and mistreatment by those offering housing, transportation, or fake visas (16-18). Although refugees face difficulties in their daily lives, this does not exclude the positive experiences immigrants might live through. This topic is usually not the focus of existing literature. Oviedo et al. found that positive experiences that prevail among Ukrainian war refugees are the kindness and willingness of volunteers and citizens of foreign countries to help. The volunteers were described in most cases as "very nice" or "nice" (6). Also, it has been recorded that Ukrainian higher education students showed gratitude for the assistance and welcoming environment that Polish people provided (13).

Here, we provide the experience of a 19-year-old psychology student from Ukraine who escaped war, moved to Croatia, and enrolled at the University of Split in Split, Croatia. This collaborative autoethnography aimed to provide a more detailed description of what a higher education student went through as an immigrant, encountering both challenging and beautiful episodes in a new environment.

Methods

Study Design

We used a qualitative research design with collaborative autoethnography. The first author (referred to as "narrator" in the manuscript) provided her experience as a narrative, describing her

individual experiences. Other authors contributed to the development of the narrator's story, prompting a more detailed description of her experiences and conducting a thematic analysis of the narrative. In autoethnography, research takes a self-reflective form that examines the researcher's viewpoint on a given topic. With this approach, the narrator aims to describe the experience from within (19).

Approach and Philosophical Stance

Given the need to understand the nuanced thoughts, feelings, and behaviours associated with the narrator's experience, a qualitative methodology was adopted. This approach facilitated the exploration of complex phenomena through immersion, interpretation, and analysis of the lived experience within the environmental setting. Specifically, an autoethnographic design was employed, reflecting a relativist ontological stance (acknowledging multiple possible realities) and a subjectivist epistemological stance (emphasizing personal experience and interpretation as sources of knowledge).

Obtaining the Story

This article is part of the Giving Voice project (20), which fosters writing research reports about the war in Ukraine. One of the project collaborators is a professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, University of Split. He informed the narrator that there is interest within the project to publish first-person accounts about the war experiences, and the narrator accepted the invitation to write this manuscript in collaboration with academic researchers.

Data Collection

We used a twofold approach. Initially, the narrator wrote a reflective account recounting her own experiences of escaping from Ukraine after the start of the war, traveling across Europe as a refugee, and enrolling in a university in a new country.

After writing the first draft, the second author (DH, academic researcher and professor; psychologist) provided comments to seek more in-depth descriptions of the experiences and feelings of the narrator. Finally, the third author (LP, academic researcher and professor; research methodologist) provided another layer of feedback and suggestions, using the additional perspective to enhance the reflective process. Feedback from the co-authors was used to explore the narrator's experiences in greater depth and cover areas of potential interest that were not covered in the initial narrative.

Ethics

The manuscript contains the narrative of the study's first author (MS). Two co-authors (LP and DH) helped the first author write the narrative and participated in the thematic analysis. The author of the narrative (MS) consented to write her story. Two co-authors (LP and DH) consented to participate in the study. Since the narrator is also an author of this manuscript and an adult (and no other human participants were involved in the study), we consulted with the institutional ethics committee, which advised that this manuscript does not need to be submitted for evaluation.

Thematic Analysis

The narrator's story was then thematically analysed. We followed the six-phase framework for the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (21). We began by open-coding the data. Preliminary themes were constructed to define codes relating to similar concepts. DH and LP proposed initial themes. The entire author team reviewed the suggestions and approved the final themes iteratively to ensure they accurately represented the narrator's experience.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity in this collaborative autoethnography is multi-layered and enriched by the shared

experiences of war and displacement. As co-authors, LP and DH bring their own adolescent memories of the Croatian War, resonating with the narrator's current struggles and fostering a deeper understanding of the emotional landscape. While not identical, this shared history created a unique space for empathy and nuanced interpretation. The narrator's lived experiences are central, yet the co-authors' reflections and interpretations added depth and context. The collaborative approach enhanced reflexivity, acknowledging the subjective nature of memory and interpretation while striving for a balanced, authentic portrayal of the narrator's experience.

Results

The Narrative of the Ukrainian Refugee Student

Before the war, I lived in Boryspil, Ukraine, a small town 36 km east of Kyiv. I shared a house with my brother, parents, grandparents, a cat, and two dogs in a joint household. I attended the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, pursuing a degree in psychology as a second-year student. The start of the War in Ukraine was a big surprise for me, even though people were mentioning the possibility of war. I thought those were just some unsubstantiated worries. A month before the start of the war, a psychologist I recently met recommended running away because the war was coming. Then I heard my parents talking about war a few days before it started. But I did not perceive it seriously; it all seemed to be a fictional threat to me. And I just hoped that everything would be fine. My friends were also confused, and they did not believe it either. But on the night before the war started, I felt really bad; I could not explain why. That day, I went to sleep like an ordinary student, thinking about homework and of that one boy who I met, who I thought was cute. Everything was the same, yet something felt wrong. On one side, normal life was continuing; objectively, everything was alright, and it made me think – how can anything go wrong if I am safe and at home right now? But something felt wrong – the feeling of a possible threat, like some little

worry that started to grow with time. I felt a little bit of uneasiness as if I was waiting for something bad to happen. Maybe the conversations about the war that I heard made me think about its realistic possibility. As such, I was quite depressed with all the situations that were going on in the world in general, like COVID-19, for example.

The War Erupts: Confusion and Difficult Decisions

Unfortunately, my expectations were met the next day. “Did you hear that?” I asked my brother as I woke up. “Yes, there are explosions that could be heard from the nearby airport. I read about it in the news”. He seemed to have been awake for a long time now. In the next few moments, my whole family was up. Initially, everyone was confused because we were uncertain about what to do next. I felt the rejection and misunderstanding of reality. My beliefs about the world and what was safe were shaken. I just sat quietly and tried to do my university assignments while my family was panicking and thinking about what to do next. There were differences in opinions, which led to minor conflicts. My father insisted on packing stuff and going to the West of Ukraine, where some friends of my parents were living, and my mum agreed. We thought it would be safer there than in the central part of Ukraine, at least for now. My father reassured us that everything would finish in a week. My parents acted fast and smart, I must say. I was just obedient at that point because I did not know what to do. The first difficult decision occurred when my grandfather refused to go with us, no matter how hard we asked him to go; he wanted to stay so he can take care of our house and dogs. I did not understand why grandfather wished to stay, but somehow, I felt he would be safe and fine. I believed in his decision and accepted it. However, we were all upset because of his decision, especially my grandmother; she and my mum tried to convince him to go with us. My father respected his decision. We had to agree with grandpa's decision, just on the condition that he try to keep himself safe. My parents asked him to leave the city when

the danger would be too close. We got in the car with some belongings and our cat. We were heading from Boryspil to Chernivtsi, hoping grandfather would be able to leave if the danger came closer. To make matters worse, my cat struggled being driven in the car. We did not give her any medicine, and she kept trying to escape from the box we placed her in. It was very hard for me to see the cat struggling.

Driving Through Kyiv

To get to our destination, we had to drive through Kyiv first. In the city, we encountered panic, heard explosions, and saw people running in all directions. I watched in awe, still unable to grasp what was happening. I could not believe my eyes because everything was happening so fast. It felt like the end of the world, something disastrous. It was very sad to see all those events. I do not remember seeing any rockets; I could only hear a sirens and explosions.

At the exit from the city, there were enormous traffic jams; people were escaping the danger that could strike at any moment. Ukrainian tanks could be seen near the road, adding to the traffic jams that extended for miles.

A Long Trip to Chernivtsi

There are 570 km between Boryspil and Chernivtski. Normally, this would take 8.5 hours of driving. However, for us, this turned out to be a very long trip. It took us two days and one night to reach the western Ukraine. We were stuck in traffic during the daytime and were sleeping in the car at night. I felt many different emotions. At first, I was sad and crying. Then, I was stressed and curious. At one point, I was okay and positive because I had my family with me, so I did not feel alone. My brother was confident that this would end in a week, and I believed him; this calmed me a bit. In the car, there was my dad, mum, grandmother, brother, me and the cat. My father was stressed, probably thinking about how to keep all of us safe.

My mum and grandmother were calm but sad. The trip was tiring for everyone. Finally, we arrived at our friend's house in Chernivtsi. For the next two weeks, we lived there. We checked the news 24/7, talked to our grandfather over the phone, and occupied ourselves with anything we could find to distract ourselves from the situation. To distract myself, I worked in the garden with my family, as our friends had big fields for harvesting. Also, we kept ourselves busy with cleaning and cooking. I also listened to some lectures about first medical aid, just in case. I talked to my friends pretty often; we were all checking on each other's well-being.

An Invitation to Come to the United Kingdom

During our stay in Chernivtsi, my aunt, who is living in the United Kingdom (UK), insisted that we come to her house. She was worried about us. After days of thinking, we agreed to apply for visas for the females of our family since men were not allowed to leave the country. The original plan was that my grandmother, mother, and I would obtain visas in Romania, and then my grandmother and I would travel to my aunt's house by plane while my mother would return to my dad and brother in Chernivtsi. The plan looked good 'on paper', but in reality, it turned out to be a very different story. We completed all the visa application paperwork through the Romanian website. That process was relatively simple since the government of the UK made that easier for Ukrainians. The last step was to schedule a meeting at the visa application centre, which we couldn't do because we were not physically located in Romania. So, we decided to rent an apartment in Bucharest for a few days till we obtained the visa. And just like that, the three of us packed our things and said goodbye to everyone we had lived with for the past few weeks. I was excited about something new because being in one same place was pretty hard. Also, I wanted to help my grandmother and meet my cousin. However, at the same time, I felt like a traitor for leaving the country.

Entering Romania Aided by Countless Kind Volunteers

We planned to go to Bucharest by bus, but most of the bus lines were interrupted, so my dad decided to drive us to the border. We could see a lot of cars there when we got closer to the border. We took our stuff from the car and walked until we reached a line of people standing and waiting to cross the border. Many Ukrainian and Romanian volunteers were offering food, tea, and blankets. I still feel great respect to them because the weather was cold, and the line was too long. The experience of seeing people help others is still hard to grasp for me. I am thinking about how the world can be cruel and kind at the same time. Also, I wish I was the one who helped and not the one who ran away. We stood in that line for eight hours before we crossed the border. It was already night-time, and we were shaking as if we were about to freeze. I felt sorry for the children and older people; the cold was bitter, and the stress was tremendous. Just before crossing, we said goodbye to my dad. Despite our fear and anxiety, we held onto hope that everything would turn out well. My grandmother was not that happy to leave the country; during the trip, she would always say that it would have been better if she stayed with grandad. My mum and I were more positive because we had to think positively to succeed. Additionally, I was interested in discovering something new and challenging myself. Upon crossing the border, it was so lovely to see how volunteers warmly welcomed all Ukrainian people in Romania. Those were mostly men in red jackets; they might have been from the Red Cross or other non-profit volunteer organizations. They were standing near the border, compassionately meeting us and giving instructions on where we should go next. They established tents with food and places to sleep. Also, they provided free buses to the nearest city, so we got one to Suceava, and from that city, we had a free train journey to Bucharest.

Disappointment in Bucharest: a Month-Long Wait for the UK Visa Appointment

When we reached Bucharest, we took a taxi to the apartment we had booked previously and

tried to schedule a meeting to apply for the visa. The earliest date we could get was approximately a month time. It was impossible to have a meeting earlier because all other terms were already booked by Ukrainians. We booked another night in an apartment and realized staying in Romania for a month would be too expensive. Also, we couldn't apply for refugee status because then we would have to stay in Romania, and we wouldn't be able to reach my aunt. We decided to go to Bulgaria, hoping the visa appointment could be quicker. My mum and I made this decision together; we always respected and helped each other during the journey. We were trying to think logically. We knew there were many places for obtaining visas, and Romania was one of the countries that shared a border with Ukraine, so we assumed that many Ukrainians must be there. Bulgaria is a little further away, so we assumed that the waiting times for visa appointments should have been shorter there.

Difficulties Reaching Bulgaria

So, the next day, we were looking for a bus going to Bulgaria's border. We discovered that the bus fares to Bulgaria were quite high, ranging from 40 to 70 euros, and we couldn't find one that went to Sofia. While looking for a bus, we met another Ukrainian woman who was also trying to get to Bulgaria. She was from Mykolaiv. She had two sons, who must have been in the army. Somebody recommended a job to her in Bulgaria, so she headed there. My mum suggested that the border was not far away and that we could take a taxi to get there. Though the taxi was still quite expensive, we managed to get near the border with it, a few kilometres from it. The next problem we faced was that the taxi driver could not take us over the bridge between the two countries. So, we had to cross the bridge on foot, as it had no pedestrian walkways. It was indeed scary, but we managed to cross the border. As we crossed the bridge and entered Bulgaria, we saw a small Red Cross tent near the border. My mother approached the volunteers and asked if we could find transportation to the nearest city. To our relief, a friendly Ukrainian man offered to

drive us to the train station. Later, we parted ways at the station with the Ukrainian woman as we took the train to Sofia.

Hospitality of Unknown People in Sofia

At the train station in Sofia, we met a very kind woman whom we contacted a few hours earlier through the site *Icanhelp.host*. That is the website where people offer accommodation to refugees from Ukraine. She offered us her apartment, but upon arriving at the apartment, we felt uncomfortable staying there with the owner. The apartment was small and not very clean, and a big dog lived with the owner. I was okay with anything, but this was uncomfortable for my mum and grandmother. The owner went to the work, so we took opportunity to do some cleaning and cooking. When the owner returned from work, we explained the situation but showed gratitude for her willingness to help. She was surprised and slightly disappointed, maybe because she wanted to help and to have someone around, but she understood us.

We thanked her for her kindness and hospitality and for driving us to the city centre. We found a hostel and immediately tried to schedule a meeting at the UK visa application centre. The waiting list was not more than a week, so with relief, we booked the appointment. We visited the Red Cross centre in Sofia, where we got some food and clothes and received information about available help, including free accommodation. We registered on the Red Cross website to request assistance in finding an apartment. The next day, we were contacted by a manager, who offered us an apartment where the only inhabitant was a cat while the owners lived in a different home. That was an excellent opportunity for us. The owners were very friendly, the apartment was cosy and comfortable, and we felt grateful for their generosity. We stayed there for approximately 2 weeks, waiting for our visas' approval and the documents that had to come from another country, where they were prepared – probably from Germany. Although the visa application process can take much time, we were lucky to obtain ours rather quickly

It is hard to understand why the procedure is so challenging, especially in the case of an emergency. The procedure to make visas is complicated in general. But when the war started, the UK was one of the countries that accepted refugees, and the country made the requirements easier to meet. Maybe the lack of knowledge makes me think it is unfair and unwise to create this lengthy process for checking people as if we were some kind of criminals. Some parts of the process seemed meaningless to me, as we had to go to the visa application centre multiple times to provide documents or for fingerprinting. However, we were lucky to have relatives in the UK compared to others who did not. The process of obtaining a visa is much simpler if you have relatives of citizens in the UK, so it must have been even more complicated for those who were not in the category. In general, it felt like we should prove that we deserve the help the British government was providing.

After getting the visa, we bought tickets to London, and the apartment owner was kind enough to drive us to the airport. I miss Bulgaria a little, especially after meeting kind people who helped us during our stay in the country. We felt accepted and supported by its society, and the citizens of Bulgaria showed us nothing but warmth and hospitality.

A Warm Welcome to the United Kingdom

London has always been a dream destination of mine. However, I never imagined that my visit would come under such unforeseen circumstances. My aunt, who is my mother's sister, lives in St Albans, a lovely town close to London. We were delighted to see my aunt, her husband, her daughter, and my other cousin, who had also been living with them for a week, having arrived from Ukraine a little earlier. Over the next week, we all lived together, having a nice time enjoying each other's company and exploring the city. My aunt gave us the best care, and we, in gratitude, helped her around the house.

Struggling to Adjust to the New Communal Living Conditions

Even though everything seemed to be fine on the surface, somehow, my mental state deteriorated. I did not feel in place. I realized that throughout the journey, I focused on helping our family reach our destination, and I hadn't paid much attention to my well-being. But, once we accomplished the goal, I felt uneasiness in my chest. Realizing where I was and what was happening knocked me off my feet. This was a late reaction to the stress. I needed time to process my feelings. I wanted a space for myself because it is usually how I cope with stress, but the problem was in that I rarely had time alone for myself. My aunt's daughter adores me and loves attention, so seeing me was a true joy for her. She wanted to spend as much time as possible with me. While I wanted to be there for her, I felt depressed and wanted to be alone. To make matters worse, her father was very strict with her, and I felt helpless. He also put pressure on me and my male cousin to start working quicker. He controlled the process of applying for jobs and criticized our resumes. Also, he used to discourage my belief and hope that the war would end soon and that I would return home.

One night, I couldn't hold back and burst into tears. I remember I was mailing my friends on my laptop. My grandmother and mother were sitting on the bed and talking and I was sitting on the floor and typing. Then my little cousin came in and talked about something. Maybe she asked if I would like to play or spend time together. I remembered I was stressed about my assignments at the university. But her attention towards me triggered something inside. And I was repetitively typing one key on the keyboard and could not stop. Then tears came down, and I was unable to control them. When my cousin noticed that, she was truly concerned and worried. I was afraid to make someone worry about me. So, when she noticed, I started crying even more. And then the attention of my grandmother and mother was on me as well. And then the whole family came to see why I was crying. I said that I missed my friends,

which was part of the truth, but actually, I wanted to escape everything at once.

I couldn't stop myself from crying, and being seen in this state by others, I felt judged. When everyone was looking at me, I wanted to vanish. I did not want to turn myself into an additional 'problem'. I did not want to be seen in this state by my small cousin's father, the 'boss' of the house. When he saw me, he told me not to cry, that everything would be fine, and that I should come down because he made the apple cake and that I should try it. On one hand, he showed concern and wanted to improve the way I felt, but on the other, I did not want to talk to anyone or eat cake. I think I asked him if I could stay in the room, and he declined. I could feel the tension in the room when we were all eating the apple pie. I felt like my grandmother and the owner of the house saw me as weak or the one who wanted attention. My mum was the biggest support I received when I was in this 'down' time. She tried to comfort me, and I felt accepted. She was the biggest and most important figure for me at that point.

The Need to Escape

After that, I realized I needed to distance myself from everyone and find another place to move to and heal. I spoke to my mom, and she agreed. She knew being in that house with everyone was hard for me; she supported my intention to find my own place. We were considering different options but in the UK, the only option for accommodation was living with another family and I wanted to be by myself. Moving to another country seemed like a better option. I wanted to act right away and that was when I remembered that one of my friends was living in Ireland, having also fled the war the day it began. I contacted my friend to learn more about her experience of living in Ireland and what kind of help was available to refugees. She reassured me that there was an option for me to stay there as well. There was a great help established in Ireland for refugees; a place to stay was provided for everyone. She explained that after arriving at the airport, volunteers would assist with finding

accommodation and other necessities. I thought it was a great opportunity, and I gave my mother good arguments as to why Ireland was a good option for me. Having a friend in Ireland made me feel supported. Also, it was close enough to the UK that my relatives would not feel like I was too far away, and if I failed, I could always return back to the UK. My mother was supportive; I don't remember her being judgmental or overanalysing the situation. That very day I decided to purchase a plane ticket to Dublin, and that's how I ended up traveling alone. I did not have any detailed plan about what would happen in Ireland, but I wasn't afraid. I was just eager to get away from everything.

Joining Many Ukrainian Refugees in Ireland

Upon arriving at the airport in Dublin, I was met by a group of volunteers, as expected. What caught me by surprise was seeing a lot of Ukrainians, as I thought Ireland was too hard to reach from Ukraine. Together, we were taken to a centre, where we registered for a green card, which would allow us to stay and work in Ireland. After that, we were instructed to get onto the bus, as we were heading to another centre, where the volunteers would offer us accommodation. When I entered the large hall of the centre, I was amazed to see so many Ukrainians were sitting and waiting there. Volunteers organized people into small groups that would later be sent to different places around the country where refugees could live. They provided food and even toys to keep the children occupied while we waited. I sat for a few hours until it was my turn, and I was placed in the group that was going to the city called Kilkenny. A bus was arranged for us, and we headed towards our new home.

New Temporary Homes: A Scout Centre and a Convent in Kilkenny

Accommodation is one of the biggest issues in Ireland. Even before the war, the country couldn't provide enough housing for its citizens, and the prices were high. With the addition of refugees, the problem has only grown larger. As a result, our temporary home for the next week was a scout centre. Our group in the scout centre consisted of 40 Ukrainians, and we had a few volunteers with us who provided us with incredible care and support. They transformed the scout centre into a cosy home by setting out the beds. We were all sleeping in one room, which did not have real beds but numerous folding stretchers (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A temporary sleeping place for Ukrainian refugees in the scout centre in Ireland.

But it was not difficult for me to sleep in such beds, with all these people in one space. I think all my concerns were about how to live from now on. It felt good that no one knew me, and I could be alone for some time. And it was comfortable sleeping in that folding bed. When I lived in Ukraine, I was used to going to the mountains often and sleeping in camps, so I was used to such sleeping conditions. The volunteers also provided us with essential items like food, hygiene products, toys, and clothing. We were amazed that they even obtained washing machines.

This was the first time that I had lived separately from my family. I was actually feeling OK because I found it comforting and warm to be by myself. I felt as if I was my own boss, and it felt good. I met a lot of people, and with one woman, I got pretty close. So, in some sense, I gained a new family—this group of people who were living with me. The volunteers supported us every day and gave us any possible information they could. They worked so hard; I could see their tired faces. During our first week living in the scout centre, the volunteers wasted no time and were preparing a new house for us. They were renovating a convent, furnishing it with new furniture, and creating a kitchen and bathrooms for our use. After it was ready, we all moved to the convent. There, I shared a room with a girl that was a bit older than me, but it was nice. And for the next month, we were peacefully living in this sacred place.

Ireland Treated Refugees Very Kindly

In Ireland, we felt incredibly supported. We received financial assistance of approximately 200 Euros per week. The government provided free medical care, English language courses, education for the children, and even help finding employment or certification training. Sometimes, the locals would even hold a concert for us, and the profit would be donated to Ukraine. They also set up a shop specifically for us, where the residents donated clothes, and we could take them for free.

Ireland is a country that treated us very kindly, the citizens were very generous and supportive.

They would give us everything we needed without a second thought to ensure we felt great.

During our stay at the convent, I helped volunteers and Ukrainians by translating for them, as language was a barrier for many people. Another challenge we faced was getting a job, as it required having a credit card, which took a month to obtain. However, these were minor obstacles compared to the enormous support we received. At the end of the month, living in the convent, half of our group had to move again due to the constant flow of refugees coming to Ireland. We had to free our living places for them. So, our next stop was a cosy hotel nearby, where everyone got their own room in brilliant condition. I did not have to share that room with anyone.

Worrying about My Future and My Studies

This hotel became our new home for the next month. Our little group felt like family to me because we were always talking to each other and seeing each other. We would go on excursions or to classes together. Those people were from different parts of Ukraine, mostly women, but there were also some grandparents and people from occupied territories. I am still in contact with one woman with whom I spent most of my time in Ireland. Being in my own space allowed me the opportunity to focus on myself. I searched for different opportunities to study in Ireland and received a helping hand in this process. But the more time I spent 'alone', although I still socialized with everyone, the more anxiety took over me. I became too worried about my future – I wasn't sure what to do with my studies. Back in Ukraine, I studied psychology, having finished two years of the undergraduate program. So, I was thinking about continuing my studies in Ireland. Additionally, there was an opportunity to study music professionally, as I love singing. But most universities or colleges were in other cities, and I was concerned that I would have to pay for accommodation if I moved. But I didn't have an income, nor did I have a job. My mind was going 'crazy'; the more I thought, the more I felt lost. I am sure everyone

would help me find the best option; nevertheless, I was not thinking critically and was afraid to face the future alone. From one point, I wanted to be alone, but from the other, I needed someone to help me. Maybe I was afraid to start something new that was far away from my home and family.

That's when my rescue came out of nowhere. At the end of that month, my dad gave me some great news – he had received permission to travel outside of Ukraine due to his disability status. He proposed that our entire family could relocate to another country, such as Croatia. My dad had always dreamed of living near the sea, and we had experience living in Croatia as we previously travelled there on our summer vacations. I saw this as a great opportunity and a way to escape my worries and problems. However, I did not fly directly to Croatia. We decided to first get together at our home in Ukraine. Also, I wanted to see my grandfather. I kind of missed my family. It is so interesting how, on one side, I was eager to be an adult and live life independently, but I was so afraid to do that, so I needed someone to be there for me. The following week, I bought a plane ticket to Warsaw. From there, I took a bus to Kyiv, finally returning to Ukraine.

Brief Return to Ukraine

By the time I returned to Ukraine, it had already been six months since we left the country. The atmosphere of the country had rapidly changed from the last time I was at home. It seemed like everyone felt 'dead' inside, and everything looked dull and empty. Almost all of our family was together when I returned home, except my grandmother. My mum arrived in Ukraine earlier than me because my father missed her and needed her. At the same time, my aunt in the UK needed help from my grandmother, so she stayed in the UK for another month after my mum left. But, when we all gathered back home in Boryspil, my grandmother was also on her way home as well – she missed her family too. Our whole family was finally reunited. It was a wonderful feeling just being around your loved ones. But after some time, it

was time for us to move forward. Our grandmother and grandfather wanted to stay at home because it was much safer now than before, while my dad, mum, brother, and I were getting ready for a trip to another country to find a way to continue with our lives until the war ended. We got into the car and headed to Croatia.

New Beginning in Croatia

Leaving Ukraine this time, the trip was a lot easier. It was another long trip, as we had to drive for about 1500 km from Boryspil to Zagreb, but we arrived in Croatia with no troubles. When we reached Zagreb, we went to the Red Cross centre to ask for information and any possible help that we could get. They informed us that Croatia had three reception centres outside of Zagreb, where we could ask for accommodation as refugees. However, each of the centres was located away from the city of Zagreb – in the cities of Gospić, Osijek, and Varaždin. We decided to try finding an apartment ourselves. My parents preferred a place near the sea and a big city where my brother and I could continue our studies. We first tried Rijeka, a nice city near the seaside. We drove 170 km to get there from Zagreb. We entered the Red Cross centre in Rijeka to ask for help finding cheap accommodation. We were told that there was no such possibility because everything was too expensive, especially during the summer months. We didn't expect this and considered returning to Zagreb, thinking it would be easier to find accommodation there. However, we remembered that we were told in Zagreb that one of the reception centres that had information about all possible accommodations in the country was in Osijek, so we headed there. Osijek is 450 km away from Rijeka.

The people in the refugee centre in Osijek were very helpful and offered us various apartment options: a house in Plitvice Lakes, an apartment somewhere close to Osijek, and in Zagreb. Eventually, we chose a place in Zagreb, as it is a big city, the capital of Croatia, with about one million inhabitants. We were supposed to live on the first floor of a big house with another family

in Zagreb, and the owners would receive 400 Eur per month from the Croatian state for hosting our family. That's how we returned to Zagreb and met our new family and home. The family in Zagreb that owned our apartment welcomed us with open arms and were eager to help us adapt to the country and obtain the necessary documents, including residence permits and identity cards. The house was beautiful, with a big garden, and we could stay there for a year. As we now had a place to stay, it was time to look for different opportunities in Zagreb. We were happy to discover a free course for studying the Croatian language for Ukrainian refugees. There we met very nice people. One woman, a kind-hearted Croatian volunteer, helped us with everything she could. I feel great admiration for her kindness.

Seeking a University Psychology Program Where I Could Continue My Studies

After the family was settled, we also wanted to find a place where I could continue my studies. With my background in psychology, we focused our search in that direction. There was a psychology program in Zagreb where I could enrol in the third year, as I finished two years before. But the biggest obstacle was that it was taught in Croatian, and my Croatian was still not good enough to follow lectures. Luckily, a psychology program was offered in English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, at the University of Split. However, that program required a payment of 6000 Euros of tuition fee per study year, which was a big amount of money for us. We decided to try our luck and come to Split in person to ask for assistance. We thought it would be easier to explain the whole situation in person.

When we arrived to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split, we asked for the information we needed. A young lady from the administration approached us and explained how we could apply for the program, mentioning that we might have a chance to study for free, but we had to file a written request with supporting documents. My family was glad to hear that, and after

we returned to Zagreb, we completed all the requirements. Namely, we sent the documents with my previous university grades, my exam grades after finishing school, and a motivational letter. We also enquired if it would be possible for me to study there free of charge. Then we waited anxiously for a decision to come. While waiting, we met an amazing Croatian man who had connections with different universities around Croatia. A volunteer that we met in Zagreb recommended him to me. He was involved with student affairs, so he was in contact with many professors, and was in a situation to help with my case at the University of Split.

My New Life in Split, Croatia

Luckily, my enrolment was approved, and my family and I were filled with gratitude toward the faculty members who gave me this incredible opportunity. Soon I was going with all my belongings to the Split by train, excited for the new chapter in my student life to begin. Thanks to the Croatian man we met earlier, I was offered a room in a student dormitory on campus, a comfortable and affordable option that cost 100 Eur per month at the time. And here I am today, in Split, Croatia, grateful for every support and help that brought me here.

For the first year of my studies in Split, I was living alone in my room. At first, living by myself in Split was scary; it was hard and confusing again. But with time, I gained more confidence in myself, I learned how to live by myself, and I always had support from my friends. Sometimes, I used to spend weekends with my family in Zagreb. This felt good because I was living alone, meaning dealing with my problems and taking responsibility for myself. At the same time, my parents were not that far away, and that was very comforting for me. Also, I was afraid of how my classmates and professors would react to my presence. But to my surprise, they were very welcoming and gave me enormous support. I felt accepted, and I made a lot of nice Croatian friends with whom I hang out from time to time.

I also regularly talk to my friends from Ukraine, and I participate in online sessions with a Ukrainian psychologist to support my mental health. During the first year, I was also working to pay some of my bills, but this year I decided to focus more on my studies. Studying also helped me to be distracted from what was happening in the world, and my studies were very interesting. But the biggest struggle that I would encounter from time to time is when I would think about the situation in my country and the guilt I felt for doing nothing. I miss my home very much and the old days of being with my family and living at home. But I hope these old days will return soon. So, I hope I will go back home when I finish my studies in Split in a year time. During my studies, I was also invited to participate in the Giving Voice project. When I got to know the project's ideas and developments, it melted my heart. The people were sincerely interested in the situation in Ukraine and were willing to help Ukrainians in the way they could. Mainly, project was focused on helping Ukrainians share their experience through writing. I liked the ideas that the project held, and wanted to contribute to it, with the hope that I could help my country as well. So now, I try to assist in different tasks within my abilities, such as helping with translation. And I hope the Giving Voice project will continue to grow, and so much more people will get an opportunity to be heard, as I could.

I Still Hope to Return to Ukraine Soon

My mum and dad currently live in a new apartment they rent in Zagreb. My family and I feel very accepted by Croatian people, and we are grateful for all the help and support they have given us.

Throughout our journey, fleeing the war in Ukraine, my family and I have travelled a lot and encountered different challenges, both good and bad. We have met many wonderful people, and I can say that during this time, I have seen the world from its best viewpoint. Because people from all around the world were and still are eager to help us, no matter how difficult the situation is. We know that 'the world' is on our side, and I am incredibly

grateful for all the support for Ukraine. I feel lucky that my family and friends are alive and that I have been given such great opportunities. However, I also feel guilty for leaving my country and not defending it. That's a burden that I will carry with me, but I hope that in the future, I will have the opportunity to thank the world back and especially help my country.

That's my story, one of the thousands, millions of other stories, with each one of them being unique and valuable. I hope that every person who carries a big story feels safe and loved right now and that they will be given the opportunity to present their stories to the world, as well. At first, when I started writing this story, it was very hard. I did not want to bring up all those memories and just wished that everything we overcame would disappear in my mind. While writing, I cried sometimes. But I think that is a part of the therapeutic process, in which you have to face the pain of the past and live through it. So, I would say that revisiting what happened to me along this journey helped me to be a little bit more at peace with the past. In the end, I wish to thank the readers of this story for their attention, for being with me throughout this story and for going through all of the struggles that my family and I faced.

Thematic Analysis by the Co-authors

The narrator describes a journey of loss, displacement, and adaptation following the war in Ukraine, starting with the ordinary life of a university student disrupted by conflict. Thematic analysis reveals key themes, including anticipation, surprise, and unpreparedness for the war. Family dynamics shift under stress, with difficult emotions during displacement and varied coping mechanisms. Gratitude emerges for the volunteers encountered during migration, despite bureaucratic challenges. The narrator navigates internal and external conflicts, resolving them pragmatically, and adapts to new environments with hope for returning home. The healing power of sharing personal narratives is also emphasized. A thematic map (Figure 2) summarizes the themes.

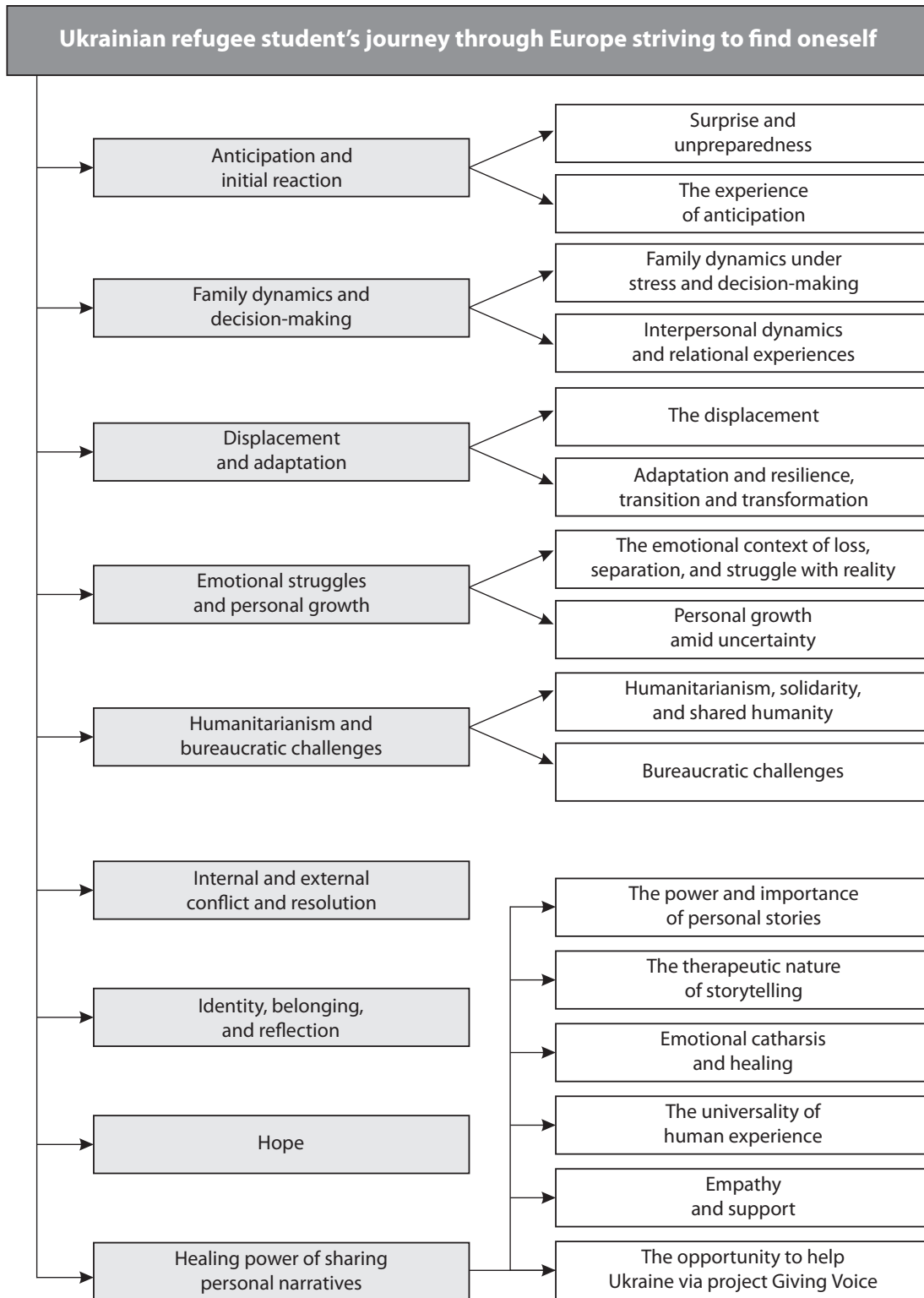


Figure 2. A thematic map of themes identified by co-authors in the narrator's story.

Themes

Anticipation and Initial Reaction

The Experience of Anticipation

The narrator describes feeling a sense of foreboding before the war, influenced by discussions and subtle indicators that something was amiss. Anticipation and uncertainty grew as the war drew closer, contrasting the normalcy of daily life.

Surprise and Unpreparedness

The narrator initially reacts to the war with disbelief and unpreparedness. Despite warnings and family discussions, the reality of war feels distant. This is contrasted by the narrator's focus on daily concerns like homework and a crush, alongside a persistent sense of unease the night before the war began.

Family Dynamics and Decision-making

Family Dynamics under Stress and Decision-making

Family plays a central role in the narrator's story. The shared household and the differing reactions and decisions among family members during the initial chaos of the war showcase the complexities of family dynamics under stress. The father's proactive approach, the mother's agreement, and the grandfather's refusal to leave the family home highlight diverse perspectives and priorities within the family.

Interpersonal Dynamics and Relational Experiences

Interpersonal dynamics within the family unit are highlighted, depicting a mix of support, conflict, and the resilience of familial bonds amidst crisis. The interactions reveal varied coping mechanisms and decision-making processes shaping the journey.

Displacement and Adaptation

The Displacement

A theme of displacement emerges as the narrator and the family make the difficult decision to leave their home in search of safety. Confusion, conflicting opinions, and a sense of urgency contribute to the turmoil experienced during the departure.

Adaptation and Resilience, Transition and Transformation

The narrative emphasizes the recurring theme of adaptation to new and challenging circumstances. It transitions from immediate displacement to a process of seeking stability in a new environment, highlighting adaptive strategies such as seeking external support, engaging in productive activities, and demonstrating resilience. Despite bureaucratic obstacles and emotional challenges encountered while navigating multiple countries, the narrator and her family ultimately achieve temporary stability, illustrating their persistent resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Emotional Struggles and Personal Growth

The Emotional Context of Loss, Separation, and Struggle with Reality

The author's emotional struggles intensify as she departs from her country and family, experiencing a range of emotions, including loss, fear, sadness, stress, and guilt. These emotions are driven not only by the immediate threat but also by broader uncertainties and a sense of helplessness. The journey to Chernivtsi, followed by relocation to the UK and Ireland, is characterized by emotional fluctuations, with significant difficulty in adjusting to the harsh realities of war and the abrupt transition from student life to seeking safety.

Personal Growth Amid Uncertainty

The narrator's journey reflects personal growth, marked by a quest for stability and a future in a

new country. Initially anxious about the future and studies, the narrator gradually develops resilience and confidence, adapting to new systems and living independently. The narrative reveals growing self-awareness, balancing independence with the need for support, and a sense of gratitude, guilt, and duty toward the homeland.

Humanitarianism and Bureaucratic Challenges

Humanitarianism, Solidarity and Shared Humanity

The narrative highlights shared human experiences, emphasizing empathy, mutual support, and resilience during crises. The narrator encounters various forms of assistance from family, volunteers, and locals, underscoring the significance of collective humanity. Support from volunteers in Romania, Bulgaria, Ireland, and Croatia, along with local and governmental assistance, provided essential resources, including housing, food, and aid in university applications. This reflects the critical role of human kindness and solidarity in fostering hope and stability in times of need.

Bureaucratic Challenges

The contrasting experiences of humanitarian aid and bureaucratic challenges are evident throughout the narrative. While volunteers and ordinary citizens provide much-needed support, the bureaucratic processes for moving across borders and obtaining visas add layers of difficulty to an already challenging situation. For example, the narrator and her family had to wait for 8 hours outside in the bitter cold to cross the Ukrainian-Romanian border. Once they arrived in Romania, they found out they would need to wait a month for the appointment to apply for a visa to enter the UK. In Bulgaria, the visa application process involved multiple visits to the visa application centre.

Internal and External Conflict and Resolution

The internal and external conflicts faced by the narrator are central to the narrative. These include the disagreement over whether to leave their grandfather behind, the struggle to find a stable living situation, and the personal conflict of feeling like a traitor for leaving Ukraine. The resolution often comes through pragmatic decisions and support from others.

Identity, Belonging, and Reflection

The narrator's personal and societal identity undergoes shifts, influenced by acts of kindness, cultural encounters, and the navigation of a complex internal landscape. The theme of belonging surfaces as the narrator struggles to adjust to life in the UK and Ireland. The feeling of being out of place and the desire to find personal space to process their emotions are indicative of the deeper search for identity and belonging in a new and foreign environment. The journey reflects a process of self-discovery and re-evaluation of values.

Hope

Despite the ongoing war and displacement, there is a persistent thread of hope. The narrator's belief in the grandfather's safety, the hopeful plans to reach the UK and Ireland, and the eventual support received in Ireland and Croatia reflect a desire for a better future amidst the uncertainty. The narrator's hope is tempered by the recognition of the unpredictable nature of the situation.

Healing Power of Sharing Personal Narratives

The Power and Importance of Personal Stories

The narrator emphasizes the significance of individual stories by asserting that each story is "*unique and valuable*." This theme underscores the idea that every person's experiences, no matter

how common they may seem, hold intrinsic worth and contribute to the rich tapestry of human existence. The narrator's hope that "*every person who carries a big story feels safe and loved*" and is given the opportunity to share their story reflects a deep respect for personal narratives and an understanding of their potential impact.

The Therapeutic Nature of Storytelling

Writing the story is portrayed as a therapeutic process. The narrator describes the difficulty of revisiting painful memories and the emotional release experienced through crying. This indicates that confronting and articulating past traumas can be crucial to healing. The act of writing serves as a means of processing and coming to terms with the past, suggesting that storytelling is not just a means of communication but also a form of self-therapy.

Emotional Catharsis and Healing

The text details the emotional journey of the narrator, who initially struggled with writing the story due to the painful memories it evoked. The process of facing and expressing these emotions is portrayed as a necessary step towards achieving "a little bit more at peace with the past." This theme highlights the concept of emotional catharsis—individuals can achieve a sense of relief and healing by reliving and expressing past traumas.

Universality of Human Experience

While the narrator's story is personal and unique, the mention of "*thousands, millions of other stories*" points to the universality of human experiences. This theme suggests that despite the uniqueness of each individual's journey, a shared human experience connects all people. This collective experience underscores the importance of empathy and understanding, as everyone carries their own set of stories and struggles.

Empathy and Support

The narrator's hope that others with significant stories "feel safe and loved" and have opportunities to share their narratives reflects a deep sense of empathy and support. This theme speaks to the need for a supportive community where individuals feel valued and safe to express their experiences. It underscores the importance of creating environments that foster emotional security and validation.

The Opportunity to Help Ukraine Via Project Giving Voice

The narrator seized the opportunity to help Ukraine by participating in the Giving Voice project, which helps authors publish research articles about the consequences of war in Ukraine. As evidenced by the phrase "it melted my heart," the narrator had a strong emotional reaction to the project's goals and initiatives. The enthusiasm for contributing to the project stems from a genuine connection to its mission, revealing a deep personal resonance with the project's objectives. Participation in the project allows the narrator to help Ukraine, compensating for her earlier feelings that she wished she was the one who helped. The project's intent to help Ukrainians share their experiences highlights an effort to give a voice to those affected by the situation in Ukraine, reinforcing empathy and support.

Discussion

The first author's narrative describes emotional experiences, family dynamics, community support, and the struggle to adapt amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. The current phase highlights stability at the University of Split, Croatia, where the narrator received free tuition and affordable accommodation. Gratitude is expressed for the support from various individuals and systems. Despite the emotional challenges, the narrator remains hopeful for the war's end and a return to Ukraine. After the beginning of the war, the narrator's parents acted swiftly, deciding to leave their home immediately

to seek safety. They joined millions of people who fled Ukraine in the first two months of the war, which became the fastest exodus globally since World War II (22). The Ukrainian refugee crisis was much larger in scale compared to almost 2.5 million refugees that entered Europe from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan in 2015–2016 (23). Those who fled the devastation of Ukraine joined the estimated more than 100 million forcibly displaced individuals worldwide (23).

Lives that before the war had seemed so ordinary and predictable were turned into uncertainty of whether refugees could return to their home country or they would need to live their life in exile in one or multiple countries. The decision-making of refugees will be guided by whether and where they have families or friends, the language, cultural, and financial resources available to them, and the humanitarianism and hospitality of strangers on whom they may need to depend (22). The narrator in this story was helped by both friends and relatives and many generous strangers. After leaving their house in Boryspil, the narrator and her family were first hosted by friends in Western Ukraine. Then they left to join family in the UK. However, staying with a family in a foreign country was not without the challenges, as various expectations were imposed on the refugee relatives. In a manuscript exploring refugee flows from Ukraine, Albrecht and Panchenko observed that there is a high chance that most refugees who initially live with relatives, friends, or another private accommodation will soon face the issue of finding long-term accommodation (24).

The narrator was not content with only having her basic needs met. She also wanted to be independent and to continue her university studies in a psychology program. In 2017, there were 1.67 million higher education students in Ukraine (25). Many of those students experienced being displaced within Ukraine or fled to other countries. Ukraine is a member of the Bologna process, and the EU and UK have enabled Ukrainian nationals the right to study. Some countries committed to financially supporting Ukrainian students (24). The opening of the EU and UK borders and recognizing

the importance of enabling refugees to access higher education was unprecedented and demonstrated what can become possible when there is the political will and public support (24). The narrator movingly described many psychological challenges she faced and various feelings she experienced along her journey. The ongoing war and the uncertainty of the situation of refugees may cause anxiety and stress, exacerbated by the constant information about war events. Thus, it is important to cater to the mental health and well-being of refugees, but also the host population helping them (26).

It is important to emphasize that, in the narrative, there is a notable lack of negative feelings about Russia or Russians. The narrator is positive, hopeful and optimistic, focused on herself, her personal growth, her studies and her family. It has been shown that positive expectancies, including hope, self-efficacy, and optimism, predict post-trauma resilience (27). The narrator indicated that sharing this story had a healing power. While it brought some sad memories, the writing of the story is described as therapeutic and helping the narrator make peace with the past. Multiple studies have explored expressive writing and storytelling as interventions that may help individuals cope with different types of trauma. For example, a systematic review published in 2021, which included 44 randomized controlled trials (RCTs) concluded that expressive writing may contribute to improving symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in medium to long-term (28).

In 2023, Begoteraj et al. published the results of a study that explored the effectiveness of expressive writing on the psychological distress and traumatic symptoms of migrants (29). The results of the study indicated that trauma-focused expressive writing led to an immediate improvement in phobic anxiety and positive total symptoms and improvement in somatization, global severity index, and hope for the future in migrants (29). Stickley et al. described the effect of a professionally-led creative writing program on refugees and people seeking asylum (30). The results indicated that the creative writing program helped improve educational and well-being outcomes for 144

participants. The program also helped the attendees to improve their English language; satisfaction of the attendees was extremely high, and they reported increased confidence and an increased sense of hope (30). While the primary aim of this manuscript was to document the consequences of war in Ukraine through the project Giving Voice (20), it is also immensely satisfying and practically relevant to see that sharing her story also helped the narrator to further build her resilience.

Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of an autoethnography is that of the researcher's voice (31). An autoethnography allows the narrator to eliminate the risk of misrepresentation and gives the narrator complete control over the narrative being told (31). Two co-authors collaborated with the narrator in writing this autoethnography, providing prompts and conducting thematic analysis to produce rich descriptions of the narrator's experience.

Since autoethnography is focused on the experiences of one individual, the obvious limitation is that the results may not readily be generalized to other individuals with similar life journeys.

Conclusion

The narrative provides a detailed account of the narrator's emotional and physical journey from the onset of the war in Ukraine to seeking refuge in multiple countries, finally setting in Croatia and finding a university program to continue her studies. Thematic analysis reveals a rich tapestry of emotions, family dynamics, community support, and the struggle to adapt and find hope amidst chaos. The story ultimately portrays resilience in the face of adversity. The protagonist and their family navigate numerous challenges yet remain hopeful and proactive in seeking a better future. The narrative emphasizes the importance of education, familial support, and personal determination in overcoming the obstacles posed by displacement. The narrative underscores the resilience of individuals and the crucial role of compassion and support

in times of crisis. This resilience is not just about surviving but finding ways to thrive and contribute meaningfully despite the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the war. The narrator portrays storytelling as a powerful tool for personal healing and emphasizes the collective value of individual narratives in fostering a deeper understanding and connection among people.

What Is Already Known on This Topic:

The war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has resulted in a significant refugee crisis, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing to neighbouring countries. Research has shown that war refugees face numerous psychological and emotional challenges, including high levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These difficulties are compounded by struggles with adaptation in host countries, such as language barriers, disrupted education, and uncertainty about the future. Ukrainian refugees, particularly students, report feeling isolated due to language differences, which hinder their ability to integrate into academic and social settings. While host countries have provided support, including Temporary Protection statuses, educational opportunities, and mental health services, refugees must still cope with trauma, identity changes, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, many refugees have also experienced kindness and support from host communities, helping them navigate the difficulties of displacement and war trauma.

What This Study Adds:

This study adds to the literature by providing a detailed narrative of a Ukrainian refugee's emotional and physical journey through multiple countries, highlighting the complex interplay between emotions, family dynamics, and community support during war-induced displacement. It emphasizes the resilience and proactive efforts of the protagonist and her family in seeking a better future, despite significant challenges. The findings underscore storytelling as a therapeutic tool for personal healing and illustrate the power of individual narratives in fostering empathy and understanding. This study enhances understanding of how war refugees navigate the psychological, social, and cultural obstacles during resettlement.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: The manuscript contains the narrative of the study's first author (MS). Two co-authors (LP and DH) helped the first author write the narrative and participated in the thematic analysis. The author of the narrative (MS) consented to write her story. Two co-authors (LP and DH) consented to participate in the study. Since the narrator is also an author of this manuscript and an adult (and no other human participants were involved in the study), we consulted with the institutional ethics committee, which advised that this manuscript does not need to be submitted for evaluation.

Availability of Data and Material: The narrative of the first author, which was provided in the manuscript, is the only data collected for the purpose of this study.

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Authors' Contributions: Draft of her story: MS; Revision of the story: DH and LP; Drafted the initial version of the manuscript: MS and LP; Participated in conceptualizing the study, analysing and interpreting the data, revising, editing, and finalizing the manuscript: MS, DH and LP; Read and approved the final manuscript: MS, DH and LP.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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