

[A rake and a rag: fighting for people, mending broken lives](#)¹- Joanna Cutts



I was born in Puck, Poland on the Baltic sea in 1965. My grandmother, Helena, had married a German, who committed suicide during the war. Tortured by the Gestapo after his death, she still continued to love the Grandfather I never met. I live with and in her words: “Joasiu, remember, there are never just good Poles and bad Germans but only good and bad people.”



I write this on February 25th, 2023. Russia’s attack in 2014 started the war in Ukraine, but until this day last year, it seemed far away. A year ago, I felt as if punched in the stomach. As Russian troops advanced, Ukrainian people poured in unimaginable numbers over the four boundary checkpoints into Poland. I could not help but think of my grandmother, and of my father’s family dead in Katyn and Siberia. From the very first news, Russia’s war became *my* war.

Eliza



On February 23, a day before the war broke out, Eliza had finished her law studies. The same day, she took a train to Kyiv for her internship in the Ukrainian parliament. After the summer, her government was to pay for a master’s program in international law in Holland. The war shattered her plans. As her mother hid in a basement under bombardment in Kharkiv, she joined the stream of refugees, sleeping on floors and trains. In Rzeszów, Poland, an elderly stranger handed her 200€. With it she made her way to Berlin. On March 14th, an old friend from Berlin emailed me that his family was hosting her.

Putin took Eliza’s internship away, bombed her city, separated her from her mother. Could we defy him in a small way to give Eliza her dream back? I proposed a zoom with Eliza. She accepted. Through the screen I looked into her sad, beautiful eyes. Trying to stop herself from crying, she was telling me her story. I thought of my older son, the same age. The longer we talked, the more convinced I grew, that there was a reason I met Eliza, and that there must be a way to help her to live her dream. I asked her to trust me, to allow herself to regain hope that Putin’s hand did not stretch far enough to take her dream away from her. I reached out to my Dutch friends and we all met Eliza via zoom the next week.

We made lists, shared responsibilities, gave Eliza tasks. Eliza grew stronger in her hope, we felt closer to reach the goal, we organized a GoFundMe campaign on Facebook. I told Eliza’s story to family and friends. Everyone was generous, especially the mom of my most dear student who became Eliza’s patron and took care not only of the rest (an essential portion) of her

¹ <https://www.tbf.org/home/donors/forms/ukraine-humanitarian-relief>

tuition but also gave her extra money for clothing and books. With everyone's help, we were able to send Eliza to the Netherlands. A Dutch family hosted her for a week, drove her to Utrecht and Leiden, so she could experience both campuses. I reminded her, that she has the freedom of choice, where *she* really wants to study. Eliza chose Leiden University. She moved from Berlin to Haag, lives her dream with a generous family and has been studying her long chosen International Law since September. A diligent student, she loves every minute of her life there.



Meanwhile, she has met her mom twice, in Berlin and in my home in Bieszczady where they could be together for a week. Her mom is a refugee in Rzeszow, Poland. One, maybe even two lives mended?

[KIK²](#)



At the same time I met Eliza, I discovered KIK, a foundation in Poland, that had been actively helping Ukrainians since the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. I had a few zooms with the secretary of KIK and others directly engaged in helping Ukraine. I was struck with the same feeling I had with Eliza: It was no coincidence that I met them. My American friends and family wanted to support Ukraine and my engagement in helping Ukrainian refugees. They sent money to KIK, which enabled them to create an even

more meaningful and intentional response to the massive wave of moving through our country Ukrainian mothers, children and youth. Already in April they opened the Ukrainian School in Warsaw: SzkoUA for 270 kids, age 7-17 employing refugee Ukrainian teachers. This initiative allows the grieving, shocked, mortified kids and youth to continue their school year, to speak their language. They are able to maintain an inner connection to Ukraine even if they themselves have been pushed out from their country. By the beginning of April, I knew that I would be going to Poland soon.

Working with the staff of KIK's Ukrainian initiative, we started to talk more specifically and discovered that my philosophy and practice of teaching in Cogitania: www.cogitania.com together with my knowledge and experience of VTS could be used in their program, "Summer in the City" created for Ukrainian kids, ages 7 to 17, of the poorest economic background, from the active war zones: Kherson, Kyiv, Mariupol, and Kharkiv.

My workshops--120 kids in groups of 15--ran every Monday from 10 am to 4 pm for 7 weeks. All of these children had lost their home, some of them a parent or both. I chose the theme, Our

² <https://donate.kik.waw.pl/en>

Planet, thinking the story of Earth might be fascinating enough to reengage them in learning and growing.

Marharyta



Nine-year-old Marharyta responded deeply to the theme, yet I noticed her hands moving all the time left to right on the school table. Her parents were both fighting for Ukraine; she had been evacuated by a neighbor. I asked Lena (the neighbor) if there was anything I could do to calm Marharyta. What a look on her face I confronted. “Marharyta lost her piano, she played every day since she was four. She performed even in Lviv,” she said. “She has not slept quietly since we arrived in Warsaw.”

Before I came to Poland some of my Americans friends gifted me money which I put in a separate Ukraine account to spend at my own discretion. Marharyta was just such a moment. I decided to gift the wonderful girl a keyboard. For the first time since the war started, Marharyta slept soundly.

[SzkoUA in Warsaw](#)³



Оксана Колесник

Oksana Kolesnyk was the Ukrainian head of the Summer in the City initiative. She is a true democratic leader and the head of SzkoUA. Oksana asked me to lead workshops for her teachers to share the techniques and strategies I use in my daily work in Cogitania. I humbly accepted and held the workshops towards the end of August 2022 at SzkoUA. Together, and in subject groups, we looked at ways to see/shape relationships between the students, the teachers and the curriculum. We developed ideas on how to make the 270 students

grow by listening to their own voice. Since the beginning of September I have been teaching Aristotle, Plato and Socrates to the 11th grade. We will continue our conversations when they come to visit me in Bieszczady May 19-21.

The summer and the early fall of last year had a rhythm. I drove from my mountain house to Warsaw for educational work with Ukrainian refugees for a day or two a week. I spent four days searching on my own for Ukrainian families, kids, youth who might need assistance. I knocked on doors, sat with many



³ <https://www.vshkolu.edu.pl>

Ukrainians and their kids, asked what they needed most, listened, observed. There was always something I could do. I felt like a rake--finding all the broken, forgotten lives.

Veselovski Family



June 26, 2022. I will never forget this day. In the morning I went to our carpenter's workshop. As I approached, the men sat as usual under the old apple tree, but there was someone new.

Vitali was learning how to work with wood, but I sensed, he must have been someone else before the war. That evening I invited Vitali with Svieta, his wife, Sofia (14) and Stepan (10). They were shy, but each full of inner light, so I felt. After dinner I asked the kids to feel at home and take any of the books, drawing materials. Stepan went straight to the 3D puzzles, Sofia started drawing in the notebook she brought. They reminded me of my Cogitanians: focused, inquisitive, curious. I left

them and went out to Svieta and Vitali. They shared with me how much was lost in just one day in their lives. They were worried, awkward, afraid of trusting, yet full of gratitude to the people of Mchawa (the little village they found refuge) and especially the village school and its teachers. There was pain oozing out of their story.

Vitali studied geology and economy, but couldn't find work in his profession. Svieta was a fashion designer and a seamstress. Stepan had a hearing loss since birth. Prior to the war, they did all in their might to help him develop rather than being crippled. He had an implant over his left ear, but it worked poorly. Sofia was withdrawn, shy but strong. After they left my home, I felt deeply touched with meeting them. Little did I know that this family would become mine!



On June 29 Veselovskis were asked to leave a day earlier than they were told in May. They had an apartment in Rzeszow secured from July 1st, but for the two days they had nowhere to go.

I invited them to me, they came. I have already hosted Eliza's mother Valya, who had escaped from Kharkiv. While with me, I have observed Sofia's excellent drawings and asked if she would like to go to an art store in Lesko, the nearest town. We bought an easel, paints, art pencils, paper... Valya, restored by the fellow Ukrainians, cooked and baked for us that day. For the first time since her daughter left I could see her gentle smile.

On July 1, the Veselovskis left my house in their very old green Audi, with just two backpacks and some food I gave them to last a few days. I promised to visit the next day. I called them to learn that the apartment was clean, the kitchen small, lacked any equipment, there was an old sofa there, the bedroom, also small had 2 bare matrices, the bathroom spacious had a broken washing machine, no soap or towels. Next day, on the way to Rzeszow, I stopped in multiple stores and bought all I could think of necessary to cook, eat, bathe, sleep, function in a new

place. I even stopped at the flower store to buy Svieta an orchid. We arrived at Forsythia Street in Rzeszow. Sophia, Stepan, Vitali and Svieta greeted us outside with hugs and joy. Their new apartment did start looking like a livable house, yet it was to become home.

The next day I took Sofia with me to Warsaw to participate in one of the workshops. She was curious to meet youth her age, who like her struggled with their new status of a refugee. I showed her the city, took her to a Chopin concert, and different sushi restaurants. Sofia loves eating, sushi and sweets are her favorites!

Meanwhile, Vitali became a cargo driver, home only intermittently. Before the school year started, I travelled with Vesolovskis once more to Warsaw. Thanks to KiK, I arranged for Stepan a comprehensive ear exam. The doctors decided not to operate on his second ear, but instead to exchange his hearing aid.

The school year started. The transition from a small, kind personal village school in Mchawa to a 700-student, anonymous school in Rzeszow was challenging. Stepan went from one teacher to six. He didn't speak Polish, and left his two good friends behind in Mchawa. For a child with hearing loss, Rzeszow offered almost nothing. I spent over a week calling Foundation Echo, and multiple glotto-speech therapists. Miraculously – again, via an acquaintance of KIK – I found Dr. Beata Naklicka, who teaches Polish to Polish kids with hearing loss. She was skeptical, but agreed to meet. As I watched her teaching, I understood that Dr. Naklicka was just who Stepan needed.

As I write this, after five months of therapy, Stepan's Polish is even better than his sister's. He has adapted well to his class environment, and even found a few friends. Sofia, the promising artist, works hard to get in to the Liceum Plastyczne, the high school of art in Rzeszow. Her health has also been an issue that I have been trying to resolve since September. Her dermatological problems are almost gone, we are working now on her scoliosis and displaced pelvis - 18 PTs to go. I am in daily contact with Svieta, often also with Vitali. The Veselovski family became ours.



Vova, Nadia and Joroslav, Ukrainians from Odessa

It was the 4th of July, my first Monday with the Summer in the City science workshops for the Ukrainian children in Warsaw. I had to meet 120 students, age 7 to 17, in one day. With two baskets full of 3D science models, pastels, paper and a poster of Earth's interior, I noticed the Uber had arrived. The driver stepped out of the car: Ms, who are you? Where do miss go? What is it?" he exclaimed, wondering at my kit. I recognized his Ukrainian accent, smiled, and said, "My first day to help your children and youth." Vova looked at me in disbelief. "Pani, I thought Polaki are tired of helping us," he said and told me about his difficult experiences with multiple Polish doctors. As he spoke, an angry, judgmental, opinionated story of his two years

of life in Poland emerged. At 31 years old, he was trapped in the suburbs of Warsaw, with a wife, Nadia, not able to walk because of her excruciating back pain and a son, Jaroslav, just four years old, who due to his chronic nasal infection was not able to go to a kindergarten. Vova was like a roaring lion closed in a cage. Only three minutes left till my destination, my head was spinning and I had that same feeling again. There was no coincidence, me driving with Vova. We arrived. I took 400zł (about 100\$) out of my wallet and handed it to him. He became beyond angry. "Pani, do you think, I told you my story to get money from you?"

I took his hand, "It is not for you, It's for Nadia. All you have to do to earn this money is to find a Chinese acupuncture place here in Warsaw, drive Nadia there and see what happens." I looked into his face and asked: "Promise?" He nodded. Around 11 pm, I got a message. "Pani, can I call you?" I agreed. "Pani, Nadia is not much better, but she can walk again." His voice rang with a different timbre. We can't afford acupuncture, but a world opened to us. I researched, we ordered books, we will learn to do it on our own. The doctor gave us a lot of advice." Vova said, "Thank you," his words piercing through me. Today, Nadia is still recovering but much better, and has started working cleaning and organizing offices. Her family once owned land in Odessa. She dreams Ukraine will be free of Russian occupation, her land back belonging to her, she would open a small boutique hotel and grow a vineyard. Vova, skeptical as always, is less roaring. I have been able to lend him money to buy his own used car. He is free of debt and it looks like many of the locks in his cage have been opened. All three of them have a visa to Canada, they might go there one day. With Vova, I felt like a rag clearing a mirror he looked in.

I am going back to Poland on April 25th and will be working as hard as I can to help the Ukrainian youth "trapped" and isolated- so they often feel, in my country to discover that there are paths out of their loss. It will be a time of mending hope and building resilience. One day they might again dare to dream, so I hope...

