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Constable: Northbrook man helping Ukrainian refugees feels need 'to climb the tree and scream'



Throngs of families fleeing the war in Ukraine make their way to this shelter in Berlin, Germany, where Northbrook businessman Jeff Kaminsky is one of the people organizing a massive effort to find the refugees food and lodging. (Courtesy of Jeff Kaminsky)



Burt Constable

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The plane ticket said Jeff Kaminsky would leave his charity work on behalf of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Germany and be back with his family in his comfortable Northbrook home this weekend.

"I was all packed and ready to leave for the airport," Kaminsky says during a Friday afternoon phone interview. "But I went to the bus station in Berlin, where they are bringing in 30 to 40 buses each day and welcoming between 1,500 and 2,000 Ukrainian refugees (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100011593478120>) every day. I stopped what I was doing and turned around and canceled my trip."

He's slept very little and struggles to stifle tears.

"These are children," he says, pausing to collect his emotions as he gathers with a family with three children looking for lodging and food. "It is absolutely heartbreakingly."

On March 7, Kaminsky, a national sales manager and director of business development for Accurate Perforating Co. and Accurate Metal Fabricating, figured the best way to help ease the suffering caused by Russia's war in Ukraine would be to go to Berlin and assist the throngs of Ukrainian refugees arriving there in need of help. Former Northbrook Deputy Fire Chief David Crawford went with him and helped organize the relief effort.

"We just flew out on a whim," Kaminsky says, noting Crawford should be home this weekend.

"This is one of the lucky families that the father came with," Kaminsky says of a Ukrainian family with three girls, ages 13, 11 and 1, for whom he is finding a hotel room with a shower. "I'm trying to get people back home to realize what's going on."

Many of the families he helps remind him of his wife, Shari, and their kids, David, Ethan and Samantha. His Facebook page updates often with ways to help, with a recent request for helping him book 50 hotel rooms per night in the next two weeks for the refugees. He's working with American Friends of the

Jewish Campus Berlin, the Chabad Berlin charity and other groups overseas and at home, including the Northbrook Citizens Emergency Response Team.

"There's a whole team of people back home," Kaminsky says.

Schools in Northbrook Glenview School District 30 have packed up truckloads of supplies to be sent to Ukrainian refugees. Varenychok, a Ukrainian cafe and store in Buffalo Grove, has been collecting supplies to send.

"Baby formula, baby food, medication," begins Alex Lukrov, owner of Varenychok, before she decides it's easier to text a list with more than 50 other items that include anti-burn hydrogel, defibrillators, binoculars and USB cables.

Kaminsky is Jewish, but he usually does not adhere to the tradition of covering his head. Still, he wants to let the Jewish refugees, who might be afraid of identifying as Jewish, know he is there to help them find resources.

"So I'm a Jew in Berlin wearing a yarmulke," Kaminsky says.

He hears horror stories and sees families split apart by the Russian invasion into Ukraine ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin. But he's also encouraged by the charity efforts he sees in Germany and the help he's gotten from people back home.

"You inspire me, and I can tell you from firsthand experience that the people here that are suffering the most send their thanks and their love back to you," Kaminsky says in an email. He urges potential donors to reach out to him on his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100011593478120>) or donate to his GoFundMe effort called "Urgent Aid for Humanitarian Mission to Ukraine" (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/urgent-aid-for-humanitarian-mission-to-ukraine?qid=e83ee97c2048d1a9880a44995c8368e7>)."

"This is one of those situations where you need to climb the tree and scream from the branches," Kaminsky says.

He uses his business connections to work out the logistics.

"I've got a guy. I'm making connections. We're networking," he says. "The needs are great. I'm literally putting stuff on my credit card."

He paid for food and lodging for 13 families, and he will connect them to larger charities after they get a night's sleep. Kaminsky is doing some work for his job on his laptop in moments when he can. And he's scheduled to fly home on Tuesday. But he can't be sure.

On his Facebook page, he notes that some families change buses in Poland "because the buses that they used to evacuate from Ukraine have bullet holes and people in Germany have complained that they don't want to see buses full of bullet holes driving the streets of Berlin." But he says the German people have been wonderful.

"The German people did this on their own," Kaminsky says of the massive effort to welcome refugees.

"It really is important. In the face of Putin's holocaust, humanity is coming out to help," Kaminsky says. "I have a home, you know. I have something. I can't look the other way and pretend this doesn't exist."