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The hero from Northbrook



Jeff Kaminsky, left, has been in Berlin since March 8 helping hundreds of refugees find temporary housing.



Working with myriad German charities at this site welcoming Ukrainian refugees to Berlin, Northbrook businessman Jeff Kaminsky also is getting help from individuals, schools, businesses and others back home. (*Courtesy of Jeff Kaminsky*)



Ukrainian refugees who are able to make the long journey to Berlin are greeted by a team of volunteers, including Northbrook businessman Jeff Kaminsky, who has started a charity to help find lodging, food and other necessities for people fleeing the war in Ukraine. (*Courtesy of Jeff Kaminsky*)



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. (PHOTOS Courtesy of Jeff Kaminsky)



Among the charities that have set up shop in Berlin, Germany, to help Ukrainian families fleeing the war in their homeland are American Friends of the Jewish Campus Berlin, the Chabad Berlin charity, and the Northbrook Citizens Emergency Response Team. (Courtesy of Jeff Kaminsky)

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It was about 11:15 p.m. Tuesday, Berlin time. Jeff Kaminsky got a text message.

A family of nine was coming in from Ukraine.

It sounded like another long night.

In the span of a 50-minute phone conversation that message was among several similar notices the Northbrook husband, father and businessman said he'd received from his "team" of people he's met in Berlin.

Like Kaminsky, now fluent in Google Translate, these volunteers meet, deliver, arrange, procure, bargain and otherwise offer what help and humanity they can to the "most vulnerable of the vulnerable" Ukraine refugees, Kaminsky said.

He estimated he's found temporary housing for 500 people since he arrived in Berlin on March 8. Some stay a day, some for a week.

Then they head off to places like Denmark or Switzerland, maybe they stay in Germany. For the Jewish family of eight he'd assisted, there was a 10-hour trip to Israel.

"People are calling me a hero. I'm not a hero. I just feel an obligation to help. I can't imagine what these people are going through," Kaminsky said.

Well, for Galena, a widowed mother from Chernobyl, before the Russian-Ukraine war began she was scheduled for a fourth surgery in her battle against Stage 2 thyroid cancer. She's since been to three different refugee camps with her 8-year-old son, who has pancreatitis.

To Galena, Kaminsky absolutely is a hero.

"Nobody has helped me after my husband died," she wrote to him. "Nobody has been there the way you have."

Kaminsky, who said he began his in-country charity by helping Chabad Berlin rescue 200 orphans from Odessa, tells Galena's tale and others on his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100011593478120>).

"I've asked them to rest, shower and if they feel like doing it, to share their stories with me so I can share their stories with the world," he said. "Several people have suggested that I've seen enough that I could write a book."

Cars rolling in spray-painted with words meaning, "Don't shoot, children inside."

Refugees refusing the folded money Kaminsky tries to give them.

The first-year med student now on the run.

Bus drivers he calls "Moses" for their deliverance to safety.

A member of the Northbrook Community Emergency Response Team, Kaminsky has been a first responder to several car crashes back home.

Now he's helped establish safe houses in Ukraine. He coordinates with three different "extraction teams" there, connecting the Berlin refugees with relatives still in Ukraine, passing on contact information, checking up on folks, trying to get them out.

Some don't want to leave their home. Families separate; the young and strong remaining behind to protect their elders.

"Which child do you leave behind? How do you choose?" wondered Kaminsky, father of three.

He scours the bus and train stations looking for young families, the elderly, people needing medical care, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

For those whom Kaminsky can't find a room in a private home via word-of-mouth, or lodge at places like the Europa City Hotel or Golden Tulip Berlin, he's concerned with them staying in convention halls and other large facilities.

COVID-19 is there, as are refugees who in Ukraine were migrants, rootless with nothing to lose.

"It is mind-blowing. I could not in a million years ever dream that I'm doing what I'm doing," he said.

It is war. Kaminsky has seen bad things. He's also felt the warmth of the refugees, and of the network of Berliners working, like him, without sleep.

After more than three weeks all he can say, haltingly, is he hopes to come home "soon."

It's 11:15 p.m. in Berlin. Feel free, Kaminsky said, to call him any time.

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