The War I Understand

I don't understand war.

Well, I might be oversimplifying it. I don't understand the politics of it, the tactics, the military part. Funny of me to say that, being a product of a military family myself. My dad is a military man through and through, even years after leaving. The army was not a career; it was a way of life, a passion, a calling rivalled only by his unwavering love for his family. When my mum was giving birth to me in a military hospital, he was at the training grounds hundreds of kilometres away, requesting his commanding officer to call and check on us. He had the unenviable privilege of serving at a tumultuous time for Poland. I don't know much of his life back then; only bits he considered child-appropriate, like visiting the local tank museum, and whatever I could glean from eavesdropping on his conversations with friends. I know that he looked handsome and serious in his dress uniform when he was marrying my mum. I know that my grandfather didn't approve of his career choice. I've been to his military school where he recalled his mum coming from the other side of Poland to celebrate his graduation. I tried to picture my grandma, forty years younger and equal parts proud of and terrified for her son.

I don't understand war the way my fiance understands it, from years of interest in the military, in planes and tanks and battle stories. When I wake up in February 2022 and the news is all red capital letters and serious faces, he is somewhat in his element. Whenever I say I'm scared, he gives me a deep dive into why the Russian military is trash. The logic of it, the facts, the order make him feel at ease.

Here's where it gets complicated: I don't understand war the way he does, being Australian and so removed from it, he doesn't understand war the way I do, being Polish and so exposed to it. The thing about growing up in Poland is you are never, ever allowed to forget your country suffered. My parents teach me to stand up and be quiet for a minute every August when the city sirens commemorate the uprising. The first day of school being also the anniversary of the Nazi invasion means that every September I sit through a play about the Second World War. By age seven, I've seen more flames painted on cheap cardboard and badly executed falls than I can count. I've been to the Uprising Museum so many times I know it by heart; they have an exhibition for kids where you can pretend you're a wartime nurse. The teachers explain why The Little Insurrectionist was a hero; all I see is a scared kid in a helmet four times his size. At school assemblies, I sing at the top of my lungs "Children of Warsaw, we'll go into battle - for every stone of our capital, we shall give our blood". What a terrifying scenario to look up to.

Once, on the way back from a weekend away, my parents take me and my older brother to the Auschwitz concentration camp. My brother goes on a guided tour with my dad; my mum takes me through a more child-appropriate version. We sit on a bench and I point to a strange construction in front of us; sort of an inverted U made of steel and partially dug into the ground.

‘What’s that, mum?' I ask, my seven-year-old brain trying to make sense of it. It resembles the carpet beater I sometimes repurpose as an acrobatics field.

'If the prisoners misbehaved, the Nazis would take them here and hang them with their arms twisted back.'

'That doesn’t sound too bad.' I say, thinking of the figures I make on the carpet beater. I can be quite agile despite my keen interest in chocolate.

My mum takes my arms and gently forces them back. It does hurt. If you were struggling to understand how you can make genocide child-appropriate, this is the best you could do. It’s a pretty difficult feat.

Another fun memory of growing up in a military family: when I was a kid, every now and then my dad would bring military rations home. It was a treat, an entire event; we sat on the kitchen floor and he taught me how to assemble a cooking station using the little aluminium frame in the bag. I loved these meals so much, even the beans I was normally not so fond of. When the war in Ukraine breaks out and he brings me some of the rations just in case ('Don’t tell your mum,' he says, 'she would only get nervous.'), I don’t even need instructions. I buy a backpack in Decathlon and assemble emergency bags under the disapproving gaze of my fiance. He has to sit through a presentation of contents: water, batteries, spare clothes, dog food. The effort is not appreciated.

'It must be so nice when it’s not your country that might get bombed next!' I explode one night, after one too many comments about how preparing the emergency bags makes no sense. He stands there, taken aback by my sudden outburst. 'It must be so nice for you but it’s not for me, because if the war gets to Poland, it’s not just my family and friends, it’s my whole world destroyed! My school, my playground, my favourite park will get bombed! How would you feel if your childhood home was turned into rubble? How would you feel if your favourite restaurant got burned to the ground? It’s my country, it’s my entire life!'

I might not understand the war the way he does but here is the war I understand.

The day the war in Ukraine breaks out, I get an e-mail - volunteers are urgently needed at Warsaw train stations. I drag myself out of bed at 6 a.m. and drive to Warsaw West. There’s a makeshift aid station organised in a city bus; not long after I arrive, people start dropping off water, chocolate, toys. One couple brings a tray stacked with 300 sandwiches. They disappear within an hour.

There are trains and buses with Ukrainian refugees coming every thirty minutes. I get assigned to the main hall and stand with other volunteers in reflective vests, trying to make myself useful. How do you make yourself useful to someone who just escaped war and arrived in a foreign country? It turns out there’s no shortage of needs but they all feel so ordinary, so unimpressive. Help someone buy a ticket, tell them when a train leaves for

Berlin, show them where the aid bus is. A woman with her daughter shows up with a backpack hastily stuffed with clothes but no cosmetics. I take them to a chemist and they look helplessly at the shampoo display.

'Ya ne znayu, ya ne znayu.' The woman breaks into tears. If I didn't speak any Ukrainian three hours ago, I'm starting to get a pretty good grasp on it now. I take the shopping basket out of her hands and put it on the ground.

'Wait. Slow.' I say. You might think Polish and Ukrainian are similar but it's not that straightforward most of the time. 'Your hair, dry. This shampoo is good.'

When we finish shopping and I show them where to wait for their train, she gives me a hug.

At the end of the shift, I'm rewarded with a sandwich and a chocolate bar. I chew through them slowly in the car while texting my Ukrainian neighbour. My smartwatch is congratulating me on clocking almost thirty thousand steps today.

Once it gets more organised and I register with the city as a volunteer, I am assigned to a sports hall in a neighbouring suburb. Overnight, it's been turned into a refugee shelter; rows upon rows of camp beds neatly lining up the basketball court. The shift coordinator shows me around before I start my work: the showers are here, the donated clothes and cosmetics are there, tea and coffee are available at the far side of the court, next to an entertainment station for the kids tucked into a corner. I look at drawings pinned on a wall above bright blue gym mats and spot one with planes dropping little balls of fire on stick figures.

The hall was somewhat quiet when I arrived; now I'm told that there will be buses relocating the refugees from train and bus depots. The first transport arrives not long after; the volunteers speaking Russian and Ukrainian are sitting in the front and registering anyone coming in. I get the job of showing them to their beds, one group at a time, distributing the single-use bedsheets and helping them make themselves at home. I thought we had plenty of space but I am quickly proven wrong - fifteen minutes later the hall is buzzing and I have to walk further and further in search of available beds.

The next family I help is three women: a grandmother, a mum and a daughter. I show them to their beds and start putting the bedsheets on thin blankets when the mother says something.

'She would like to do it.' The daughter translates to English. Her voice is soft and polite, she's no older than 15.

'Oh, that's alright, I'm here to help you.' I offer, grabbing a pillow eagerly. The mother disagrees hastily.

'She says thank you but she can do it. She says she doesn't have staff making her beds at home.' The daughter translates again with a timid smile meant as an apology.

I let them make their beds, baffled at their insistence and the daughter's apologetic smile. What is she even apologising for? Did I make them feel like they were an inconvenience when I wanted to be welcoming? Hours later, another woman approaches me and asks if any leashes are available; her French bulldog is desperate for outside time. In a stroke of genius, I fashion a dog leash out of long-forgotten lanyards and get to walk the Frenchie and play with him a little. As I return him, the woman thanks me profusely for coming up with the lanyard solution. I've never felt any prouder and I suddenly understand the mother's insistence to make her bed. We all just want a shred of control.

There's an alarm (of sorts) on another night shift I spend there; a cat has broken free and is roaming the hall. The owner is distraught, all of the refugee kids are excited to patrol the hall and look for the cat. Finally, I hear that it's been reunited with the owner.

'Here's the little runaway!' I exclaim when I notice them on my rounds. I adore cats. 'What's it called?'

'Liza.' The owner says proudly, drawing out the *i*. She's stroking the cat's beautiful, well-maintained fur slowly. Some kids hang around, daring to ask for a pat. I would love to sneak one myself but the cat is staring me down.

My third post is a former student boarding hall, now newly transformed into a longer-stay refugee centre. I share most shifts with the centre coordinator, a burly, no-nonsense woman in her 40s. Night shifts are usually quiet so I'm mostly assigned to clean-up duties. I tidy up the kids' playroom and restock tea bags. One evening, I arrive armed with coveted cleaning supplies rounded up with the help of my neighbours and I decide to take on the bathrooms. Any delusions I had about the glamour of volunteering quickly disappear once I see the first toilet.

One of the transports brings an elderly woman, strikingly similar to my nan. I've recently learned that her father was born in Ukraine. When I get home hours later, sleep doesn't come, even though it's 5 a.m. and I have to wake up for work in three hours. I think of my nan, my *babcia*, a woman who outlived the Nazis, the communists and two husbands with alcohol for brains. I've known nothing but love from her and yet I've never heard hatred as bitter as when she said the word 'Nazi'. I only ever heard her speak of the war twice. Once, when she told me of her father hiding her and her brother under stacks of hay while travelling around their town. The second time, when she told me of her friends being lined up under a wall and shot. She passed away three months before the war broke out; deep in my grief, I think that maybe it's better for her than being here and watching it all unfold. How would I even tell her about it?

Two and a half years later, they never disappear. I think of them often, I see them when I close my eyes. The mother insisting on making her bed and the teenage daughter translating.

I think of her and see myself ten years ago. Would I be translating for my parents if we ever had to run?

Liza the cat, the French bulldog on a leash of lanyards. I think of my own dog, an adopted border collie terrified of cars and vacuum cleaners. Whenever one of them appears, he drops to the ground and stays still. I try to picture carrying the heavy emergency bag and his fifteen kilos through a dark forest with bombs drowning out our thoughts.

The elderly lady and her quiet gratitude; my late nan, my ageing parents. A thank you letter from the president of Warsaw, left in a box in my parents' wardrobe after I moved to Australia. The thoughts of the war spilling into Poland never go away. I want to move back but if I do, will the parallels come true eventually?

This is the war I understand.