

Reading, writing, arithmetic – and resilience



Far from Ukraine is a school in the city of Kraków, Poland, where refugee children whose classrooms and teachers are helping young Ukrainians face a future which, peace treaty or to one day be a vet, or a pilot, or a hairdresser – is being trained to flourish along with the

lives have been upended by war can express the familiar hopes of youth. Its innovative not, will be difficult. Judith Woods meets the pupils to discover how childish ambition – grown-up skills of ‘resilience’ and ‘critical thinking’ that the post-war generation will need

A little blond boy is sitting at his school desk, visibly straining as he furiously waves his hand in the air. His name is Oleksii and he is six years old, with the rounded cheeks of a toddler and a solemn blue gaze that has seen too much.

“When I grow up I want to sell doughnuts,” he bursts out when the teacher finally calls on him to speak. “In Ukraine.” The grown-ups smile – how could we not? – but the bitter-sweet truth is that today, even selling doughnuts seems like an ambition too far. Oleksii and his mother no longer live in their homeland. Like so many others forced to flee by the Russian bombardment they find themselves across the border in Poland. When I ask about his father, Oleksii looks stricken.

As a fat tear slowly pools in his long lashes I notice for the first time the dark rings round his eyes. “I don’t know where he is. He is... away,” Oleksii falters. “He is gone.” Oleksii’s father is in Ukraine fighting in the war. His mother cannot bear to tell him the truth; it would break his heart. Anyone can see it is already broken. But like every other mother, she is doing what she can to get through the days, the nights, memories of the low whine of missiles, the thunderous rumble of death and destruction.

“It is impossible to ask parents not to talk about the war,” says the school psychologist Valeria Kurianinova. “It is absolutely central to their lives. They have relatives back in Ukraine, husbands fighting, alerts on their phones still go off when there’s an order to evacuate in the towns and cities where they used to live. All we can do is impress upon them the need to reassure their children that they are safe. They no longer need to flinch at the sound of sirens or planes overhead.”

I have come to the elegant city of Kraków, Poland’s former royal capital, where pairs of draft carriage ponies in brightly decorated tack patiently wait in the stunning medieval Rynek Główny main

square for visitor fares round the beautifully preserved old town. This tourist honeypot lies a 10-hour drive from the border with Ukraine, a journey many millions of refugees have made in varying states of fear and confusion, children hastily bundled into clothes, chivvied into cars. At the beginning of this war, the roads out of Ukraine were jammed. These days vehicles can come and go – but not fathers. Men of fighting age must remain.

As Russian forces entered eastern Ukraine in February 2022, whole communities fled, desperately seeking shelter across Europe and beyond with no clue as to their future. There are an estimated 6.9 million refugees from Ukraine worldwide, according to the UN Refugee Agency. At least one million people, mostly women, children and the elderly



have settled in Poland, but for them there is hope of a new beginning back in Ukraine, thanks to the unique education a generation of children is now receiving.

Here, at The First Ukrainian School in Poland, young people are not only being taught in their native language but are being given the skills they will need to rebuild their country. So innovative is this approach that in October last year the school won The World’s Best School Prize for Overcoming Adversity in recognition of the work it is doing. Peace may or may not be in the offing after Donald Trump’s intervention but whatever happens and whenever it takes place, an uphill task is

faceted by the Ukrainian people.

But what does rebuilding entail? Those of us who have watched evening news coverage of flattened factories and residential areas reduced to rubble tend to literally equate it with bricklayers and architects. That was, to my shame, my own over-simplistic assumption. Viktoria Osadcha, president of the Unbreakable Ukraine Foundation, the new charity that she set up in order to run the school, is generous in her response. “Of course that’s your reaction,” she says. “I would have thought that too. You look at the news footage from afar and only see the huge task of clearing the wreckage and restoring the buildings – but putting one brick on top of another is the easy part.

“An entire society will be psychologically traumatised and a great many physically injured; we will have to heal minds as well as bodies, rehabilitate the wounded, find jobs for them. The high rate of suicide among war veterans is well-established; we need to learn those lessons and adapt our soldiers to civilian life.”

Her elder son, Danylo, now 23, who was already studying in Poland when war broke out, immediately wanted to join the army. His mother admits she gently intervened. “He’s a tender-hearted individual, he wasn’t raised to be a warrior. He might have survived his first encounter with the enemy, but the second time he would have been shot. I explained that I understood his patriotism but that finishing his Masters in European studies would be of much better use; that’s where his contribution will eventually lie.

“Rebuilding Ukraine means not just restoring it but transforming it; we have ongoing problems with corruption and bribery so we will need new institutions and a new model for citizenship, where the Ukrainian people have rights as well as responsibilities. That requires us to educate the next generation for leadership across every sector of society. Ukraine will need psychologists and doctors, lawmakers and entrepreneurs. This is why, along with maths and geography, our students

Above: the school’s co-founder Viktoria Osadcha: “Rebuilding Ukraine requires us to educate the next generation for leadership across every sector of society”

are being taught resilience and critical thinking, teamwork and creativity."

Critical thinking is a discipline more usually introduced at postgraduate level and on business leadership programmes in the UK. It focuses on evaluating information and arguments, constructing and analysing opposing points of view, and reaching conclusions based on objectivity rather than emotion. It is a framework that can be used on any subject matter – and such dispassionate thinking will be crucial when Ukraine seeks to re-establish itself. Not least because Russia, its enemy, will forever be its neighbour.

"It depends on the peace treaty but really I feel indifference to Russia. It won't change anything for me, even though I'm from the east of Ukraine. The past is the past," asserts one 17-year-old I meet at the school. His friend says he knew nothing about war and little of Russia before he experienced "the horrors" firsthand. "I live in a town very close to the border and of course it will feel very threatening to be there again," he says. "All we can hope is that there will be a demilitarised zone on both sides of the border and that Ukraine will get some guarantees from our western allies."

The ethos of the school is to encourage young people to visualise ways in which they can eventually make a difference. Although there is no compulsion to return to Ukraine, almost every teenager I spoke to was determined to return home.

The school has three sites, in Kraków, Warsaw and Wrocław, with a total roll of 1,500, ranging in age from six to 18. There is no funding from Ukraine so parents, the vast majority of whom have found employment in Poland, pay 1,500 zloty (£300) a month for tuition which covers the rent and teachers' salaries. Lessons are conducted in Ukrainian and Polish but the schools also teach the Polish curriculum, to help with integration and potential transition into the Polish school system, providing graduates with both a Ukrainian and a Polish diploma.

More than 4,000 young people have passed through its doors since 2022. Last year around half of pupils eventually signed up for Polish school and an estimated 150 of the 160 school leavers entered Polish universities. But a tension exists with the Polish authorities, who recently ordered all Ukrainian parents to enrol their children in Polish schools – many had been doing online lessons – or risk losing state benefits. The First School of Ukraine in Poland has applied for official status as it also teaches in Polish and follows the Polish syllabus, but permission has not yet been forthcoming.

"The Poles don't want the Ukrainians to leave because we are hard workers, we pay taxes and we spend money that boosts



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the economy. They view us as their future workforce. So they place parents under pressure to integrate," says Osadcha. Chic and authoritative in a brown leather dress and jacket, her English is impeccable and she exudes an air of unflappable efficiency. But she admits she was thrown in – threw herself in – at the deep end when she set up the Unbreakable Ukraine Foundation. She was living in Portugal with her businessman husband when war broke out. She recalls the phone call at 4am on 24 February 2022 from relatives. The shock. The stunned disbelief. The urgent need to do something.

Between them, she and her husband have six children, so the needs of young people were at the forefront of their

minds. Earlier in her career she had taught English at university in Kyiv but subsequently entered the corporate sector, providing language tuition for international staff. "We knew how damaging it had been for children to be out of school during Covid so we decided to set something up, however short term, for children who had been evacuated to Poland. At the beginning we would meet in shopping malls or parks – anywhere there was space."

The First Ukrainian School in Poland was up and running within six weeks of the war. Thanks to Unicef, Save the Children and other charities there was money for backpacks and stationery, although at the outset many of the children who had fled in the night with mothers and grandparents needed clothing as well. In those early days many of the children were rendered silent by trauma or beset by panic attacks. They would regress – one eight-year-old started sucking his thumb – and disruptive classroom outbursts from angry, frustrated children were a daily occurrence. Pastoral care was a priority.

Now, all is calm. The younger children resemble those in any primary school; lively and eager to learn, with *Frozen* pencil cases and soft toys spilling out of backpacks. Oleksii's classmates variously want to be pilots or vets, YouTubers and hairdressers. Yeva, aged seven, is determined to be "a doctor and a gymnast". The one thing that unites them is a shared assertion they will be in Ukraine; some only dimly remember where they used to live, but it is still regarded as home. When students graduate to the upper school, extra-curricular sessions on the themes of citizenship, the rise of AI and critical thinking begin.

"For me, critical thinking is about having the ability to pause and reflect on ideas without getting upset," says Daniil, 16. "We lived in Kherson and so my parents left Ukraine when the war started. Everything was going crazy but instead of getting overwhelmed they took a very logical decision and followed it through. That, to

me, was critical thinking and I admire the logic." His classmate Sofia, 17, concurs: "In modern life it's really important to maintain a cool head in a fast-changing situation and do what needs to be done swiftly. It is a great skill to learn."

The World's Best School Prize for Overcoming Adversity, which was awarded by global community T4 Education last October, marked a watershed for Viktoriia Osadcha and her staff.

To be considered for top honours, a school must go above and beyond closing any educational gap caused by challenging circumstances. In 2023 it was given to a school in Jerusalem educating Jewish and Arab children together. With The First Ukrainian School in Poland, the international judging panel was impressed by the way in which it was giving students universal skills that could be applied in a host of different careers and contexts.

"The school is really taking on board the 21st-century challenges and opportunities that AI presents while also placing an emphasis on 'soft skills' in order to boost confidence and communication," is the verdict of Salman Shaheen from T4 Education, the UK-based company behind the prize. "These young people are benefiting not just from the core curriculum but from a bedrock of critical thinking, which will enable them to examine problems from multiple perspectives. It will really prepare them for life if they go back to Ukraine after the war."

After the war. Always after the war. It's a phrase repeated here like a mantra; better for the children to anticipate the future than mourn the past. Their parents find it much less easy. Tears come easily to Tetiana, who worked in hotel management, and is the mother of Artem, aged eight: "I never imagined a war would ruin my life." Like many here she considers the war to have broken out in 2014 when Russia invaded Crimea. This latest conflict has taken a wrecking ball to her future. "Back at home we had plans; to extend our house, to have more chil-

dren, to live quiet, happy, fulfilling lives. But that has all been destroyed," she says, mopping her eyes. "In Ukraine we had everything we needed; here we exist from day to day."

Tetiana's husband is here in Poland too but their dramatically reduced circumstances and his income as a taxi driver cannot support a bigger family. Grief is etched on her features; not all losses are material. "War has taken everything. War has robbed me of hope."

It is impossible not to feel moved by her personal heartbreak. But in the classrooms of the upper school hope has not been extinguished. Far from it. Daniil has ambitions to eventually enter political life in order to effect real change in his homeland.

'There were rockets going off and tanks rumbling down our streets. We were told that if we didn't support Russia we could no longer live there, so we left'



Ukraine, which achieved independence in 1991, inherited widespread corruption following the fall of the Soviet Union. Since then the ongoing influence of Russian oligarchs has hampered the establishment of a democratic political system. As it looks to Europe to safeguard its future through Nato membership, root and branch reform will be necessary. Who better to deliver it than this generation?

Daniil tells of his experiences in the run-up to leaving Ukraine: "At the start of the war it was terrifying; ballistic missiles, sirens, chaos. The lights would go out and every time there was an attack the whole school would have to evacuate into the basement until the sirens stopped. We could be underground for six hours at a

time. It was really disruptive to our studies, so it was a huge relief to come here."

His friend Ratmyr, also 16, wants to study economics, management studies and analytics so he can go back to Ukraine and "use the knowledge I've gained to rebuild it; people will need jobs and a growing economy based on innovation".

For now, all they can do is study and absorb all they can. Hlib, 17, who wants to study logistics, lived in Zaporizhia, a city in southeast Ukraine on the Dnieper River. It was occupied on the first day of the war. "There were rockets going off and tanks rumbling down our streets. Soldiers were walking round the supermarket - we were told that if we didn't support Russia we could no longer live there, so we left."

Mariia, 17, intends to do a degree in international relations. She feels an onus to understand global issues so Ukraine can take its part on the international stage. Like her peers, much of her daily information comes from Telegram news channels. Her father is fighting in the war. "I'm very unhappy about it but I also know it was the right thing for him to do. He is a driver and I worry a lot. My mum can't go back and see him because she used to be in the military and they wouldn't let her leave again; she would be conscripted."

"Our nation is really tired. Our troops on the front line have been fighting for so long that we all want peace - but we must get a fair deal. We just want back the land that is ours. I feel I want to fight for justice and truth, maybe I will become a journalist and expose fake news."

Journalism and law, logistics and entrepreneurship. These will be the building blocks of the new Ukraine - a country that remains bloody but unbowed by three years of war. Peace seems as far off as ever, but these young people believe they will have a future in the homeland they love, where shells will no longer fall from the sky and six-year-olds can realise their dream to sell doughnuts.