

On the Tragedy of War and the Beauty of Humanity

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Maria Markina, a singer and volunteer from Hamburg, talks about her experience of helping Ukrainian refugees, her volunteer organization, and the relations between volunteers from Russia and Ukraine

Maria, first of all, tell us a little bit about yourself. Are you still active in opera? How did you start volunteering, and what place does it occupy in your life?

As for my main job — it's going on as before. Initially, I worked as a solo singer at the Hamburg State Opera, which is why I live here. Now I work as an opera singer and performance artist in various theaters in Germany. In addition to concerts and productions I teach singing. During the Corona pandemic I got a job with a women's organization dealing with forced prostitution and labor exploitation. In German this is called "Zwangsprostitution" or "Zwangsarbeit." Our employees provide support to women who are affected. We assist them in getting help, from legal to psychological, and we explain the various risks, but the decision always remains with the woman herself. Understanding this helped me a great deal in volunteering. These two years that I have been working there have taught me that the attitude of "I will help you because I know better" is very destructive both for those who provide and those who receive help. It took me a long time to realize that.

There were two circumstances that prompted me to volunteer. First, a war broke out, which was a terrible blow to everyone, and people just fell apart. It was completely unclear who you were and how to go on living. And any help was a salvation above all for ourselves. Many volunteers, as they said later, came for this very reason. The war happened "all of a sudden" for all of us. When the war began, there was a feeling that the world had collapsed, but thanks to volunteering we were able to come out of this horror and see the world around us. Secondly, I had had experience working in an activist group that we had set up here in Hamburg, the "Activist's School," which had been connected to the protests in Russia since 2011, and some of the people from this "school" later switched to volunteering. That was a political group, but our current organization is politically and religiously neutral, although, like any citizen of the country, we can and do take part in politics and protests — we go to anti-war rallies and demonstrations in support of Ukraine.

My personal story of volunteering began when I went to help with translations at the reception center for refugees, where my friends were already working. There I learned about all the documentation, and how the necessary paperwork should be done. At the same time we were volunteering at the railway station. From the first day of the war people began to come to the Hamburg railway station and organize help for those who were arriving. Along with this a live chat room was created, where one could ask questions and get up-to-date information for refugees in Hamburg. There are now more than 10,000 people in this chat room. At first this chat room provided answers to questions about registration, free food and clothes, but then it became necessary to coordinate information, and we created separate groups. It is very important for our organization to

remain horizontal. We have no superiors who decide what all of the groups should do.

Describe the main areas of your organization's work and the composition of its members. What languages do you use to communicate with refugees from Ukraine?

The name of our organization is *Nordherz Hamburg*, the "Nordic Heart," and some time ago we completed the registration procedure. We focus on Hamburg and the neighboring provinces. Nordherz consists mainly of people from the former Soviet Union living here. It was important to have a common language of communication in a situation where one does not know English or German. We have people from Russia, from Belarus, from Ukraine, from Georgia, from Azerbaijan, from Kazakhstan, from the Baltic States. We also cooperate with many local German-speaking organizations.

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Our chats are in Russian and Ukrainian. People ask questions in different languages, but the main flow is in these two. A large chat room has 30 admins, people ask any questions, and if we see that the situation is complicated, we start working with the request individually, and an administrator with the appropriate qualifications takes that person on. Many of our volunteers have relevant experience, they can give expert advice, and we learn from them, too. We also have a lot of specialized chats. I, for example, run a chat about apartments, and one for seafarers, among other things.

Our most important activity is receiving and providing information and translation. In addition to chat rooms, there is field work. We have volunteers who go to the refugee camps: We collect requests, but above all we spread information about our chats and our website, where people can learn for themselves how to proceed. "Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe" is the German name for this concept [literal translation: "help people help themselves"].

As for the online work, it is above all our website and information channel, which are updated almost every day. This volunteer work may seem "invisible," but it is of critical importance. Volunteers are constantly proofreading and verifying the information, and updating it all the time.

The site gathers a lot of information on our province and explains the whole procedure: how to fill out certain forms, where to get free food and clothes, how to find an apartment, how to enroll at university — everything related to life in our city. In our information channel we publish city news and information about social gatherings, courses and mutual help groups.

At the same time we wanted refugees to join our community themselves. Now more than half of the admins in the large chat room are refugees. We wanted to avoid a "we know the deal" attitude, because no one really knows the right way. The situation is very different now: a lot of people have arrived, they will have a completely different agenda, and we don't need to "teach" them, we need them to come to us and say what they need, what support they need, how we can find solutions together and even change things in our city. This has been our position from the very beginning.

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If a person is in a difficult situation, we work with them personally, go through all the documents, tell them what and where to write, and if necessary, help them further, or redirect them to specialized chats. For example, we have a separate chat room for students, which contains all the information for admission. We are connected to almost all universities in Hamburg, and their

representatives work with us. Once a week, there are online discussions where you can ask questions about various things that help newcomers find their way around. There is a chat room with information about medical care in Germany, which is also staffed by medical volunteers. There are chats to help pregnant women and women with children. Our volunteers provide help to people with disabilities. There are also groups rendering assistance with different kinds of technology, for example, computers.

We do many things, but we don't provide legal aid, for instance. In Germany you can't render medical, legal or psychological help, or help with tax issues, without a certificate. We gather as much information as we can about places where people can get free advice. If we cannot do something, we refer people to other organizations.

Do you have difficulties communicating with the people you are helping? Is there a language problem?

I will say right away that I am more than aware of the political contradictions with the Russian language in Ukraine, but again, in this case the Russian language helped us come together to help. Initially, we had mostly Russian-speaking volunteers working for us. There was often a question: would speaking Russian undermine our credibility? However, in practice, things have been easier since everyone has chosen the language in which they feel more comfortable. Often in chats people write a request in Ukrainian, and volunteers answer in the language they know. I had such a communication for months: a person would write to me in Ukrainian, and I would write to her in Russian. Sometimes I would ask to clarify or explain some words, or check their meaning.

In the beginning some of our volunteers complained, "Why do they write to us in Ukrainian? We can't read it, can we?" But a bit later our work became smoother: the Russian-speaking volunteers simply began to understand Ukrainian much better. There are many Ukrainians working in our chat room now, and we don't have strict rules. A person can switch from one language to another and back again.

We offer help and a person chooses whether she needs it or not. We react quite normally if someone refuses. At the railway station, at the first moment of contact, people had very different reactions. I followed one rule: if a person says something [rude] to your face, just step back, don't react. That doesn't mean I have to take what they say to heart. But you have to understand that people are in shock, and they could have any reaction to your help. Sometimes you just have to leave them alone.

What are the core principles of your work? What has priority: fundamentals or efficiency?

The horizontal structure of our work was important to everyone, it would have been impossible to work any other way. We work as a group, and when one person starts trying to control everything, it can become an issue for the other participants. Sometimes you want to block someone (smiley face), but over time you realize that you need all sorts of people. That is why each group develops its own atmosphere, which is comfortable for members of this particular group, and there is no constant supervision from outside.

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We have a headquarters, which is attended by the organizers of all of the work groups. Representatives of other organizations communicate with the headquarters when there is a need to solve problems together. For example, we cooperate with the Ukrainian hotline service in Hamburg, a telephone line where people from Ukraine and Germany can call free of charge and ask questions.

For example, when refugees turn to the hotline or to us with some problem, then we unite and start “pressuring” the city authorities, writing a joint complaint.

As for money, in Germany, I, as a member of an organization’s board, can’t get paid for my work. Volunteers, yes, they can get something. From time to time we pay a little cash to those who work in the chats or in the field, but this is not a salary, but a so-called minimum compensation for the volunteer’s personal time. If someone buys the necessities for camp themselves, we pay the bills. Overall, we don’t have a lot of financial arrangements.

Regarding chat moderation, we have a certain boundary: we don’t allow racist comments, or religious, national or gender-based hostility. However, we understand that if you start “filtering” every word, it doesn’t lead to the desired results. There are discussions going on every day.

As for the “hierarchy.” I would not say that we have such a tendency, but maybe I do not see everything, because I myself am at the height of this hierarchy [laughs]. However, with as much work as we have, no one wants to be responsible for everything, so we seem to tend toward anarchy. We have a lot of these people who are in all of our chat rooms but aren’t listed as our volunteers. There aren’t more than 30 people who signed up as members, but there are several hundred who do something for the community. People enter our structure not only because we are cool, but also because to solve problems on a certain level, it is better to be a representative of an organization like ours, *Nordherz*, than to speak on your own behalf: an individual simply may not be given access to information or to places they need to go.

Could you share some stories of the refugees you helped which struck you most?

This is a difficult question because these stories happen every day. My favorite story, because it has become personal, is about L [note: Names have been changed for ethical reasons. The stories are told with the consent of the participants]. We met L at the registration point at the railway station at the very beginning. She was with her kids. We started talking, and literally that same night I got a call that someone was renting an apartment for a month and I offered L to move in there. That’s how we started communicating. L is half Ukrainian, half Lebanese. She and her parents had already come to Germany as refugees during the war in Lebanon. She went to a German school and hence knows the language well. Then a few years later L and her parents were expelled from Germany, so she did not see Germany and its refugee policy through “rose-tinted glasses.” L and her family lived in Ukraine, had her own business and a great life, but now that bitter experience in Germany has come in handy again. After going through two wars and becoming a refugee for the second time, she has not lost her spirit. L’s children took after their mother. Almost from the moment they arrived, the girls volunteered at the station, serving soup, and their mother helped others with translations. It was through that help that they really got to know our city, and the city got to know them, they became a beautiful part of it. Recently a friend of mine got them into a kickboxing class, taught free of charge to migrant children by a refugee Kurd. The children love it so much that they say they won’t move anywhere.

“We work as a group, and when one person starts trying to control everything, it can become an issue for the other participants”

When people come to us, they’re not just dealing with their bureaucratic problems — often they want to talk about themselves and share their fears, and you begin to immerse yourself in those stories. I’m a theater person, that’s of particular interest to me. You live this tragedy of war every day from different perspectives, you see loss and disruption, and it’s scary, but you also see the beauty of humanity, you see how people live through the war together and support each other.

Another story. About how you can't decide things for someone else. It was when I volunteered at the railway station, at the end of my shift. I was on duty with a volunteer from Odessa. A woman comes in and asks for a pill for pain, and says that she needs to go to Berlin urgently. And we see that this woman has blood all over her leg, she can't walk. She was with a small child and carried huge suitcases. We started cautiously saying that she needed to go to the hospital, not to Berlin. And eventually I managed to get her to the hospital, although she was hard to convince. At the hospital her leg was stitched up, but she could not walk for a long time.

Her hometown was one of the first to be hit by Russian artillery fire, and at first she was forced to go to some remote place in the Nordic countryside to visit a friend. The friend's husband tolerated it at first, and then said: "If things are going well there [in Ukraine]," and it was in May, "why don't you move out?" So she decided to go back. On the way home the following story happened to her: they were traveling for a day and a half without sleep. Her daughter was exhausted, and while going down an escalator, began to fall. When she tried to catch her, the woman fell down herself and severely cut her leg. She needed medical attention, but she didn't have any documents with her, so we started arranging her paperwork. At the time, her father in Ukraine got seriously ill. One day she came to me and said she had to go to Ukraine urgently. That day my hair nearly went gray. I realized that I had no right to dissuade her. But I tried to explain: you're on crutches, you can barely walk, you have a child, and there are hostilities there. At that moment our volunteer came and brought her some medication. He said that I shouldn't let her go. But it's her life, I have no right to dictate what she should do with her life. So we sat down with her and wrote down possible scenarios on paper. At her request, one of our psychologists talked to her and everything calmed down, she didn't go after all. But it was her decision. In that situation, you don't have the right to make that choice for the person because it's not your life, it's someone else's. And it's very hard to come to that when a lot depends on you, and often the person wants you to share responsibility for their decision. A few months later her father died, and she was never able to go to his funeral because there was fighting near the city. So we gathered at my place in Hamburg and commemorated him. Just being with the person at that moment is very important. I won't forget the trust she put in me.

Is there a problem of emotional fatigue? How do you deal with it?

This is an important issue, and we took it on fairly quickly, especially because for people at the railway station, working one-on-one with refugees is very hard work. It's a different experience from chatting, although working in a chat room causes a different kind of burnout, too. We now try to arrange monthly volunteer team meetings, where we can just sit and talk. We have supervisions. Some of them lead to people just being pulled out. We discuss different issues, for example, the difference between service and volunteering. In these groups you can express your anger, talk through what's behind it, and, importantly, get feedback. And because we have refugees in our network, and they come to these groups as well, we see the different problems we face. When mobilization began in Russia — and we have many volunteers from Russia who once left small towns where people had relatives who were directly affected by mobilization — there were conflicts in the groups. It was a very difficult moment, and we decided that we needed to talk about it in supervision meetings. There were many people in the group from both Russia and Ukraine, and everyone had different feelings. Some said "that's what Russians deserve," and one Ukrainian volunteer said she just couldn't sympathize with Russians. But we were able to talk about it all together and realized that maybe this is the only place where we can still get back the scorched earth between us. I mean, not talking about it at all, not having that platform, that's hard. It's an important rescue mechanism for us. It is a tool that we have, and anyone who wants it can use it.

"You see loss and disruption, and it's scary, but you also see the beauty of humanity, you see how people live through the war together and support each other"

I don't think we have to work no matter what. We do what we can, and it was important to me from the beginning to maintain an environment where everybody knows that nobody owes anyone anything. Do you have an hour a week? Good for you. If you can't, you have to take a break. You have to relieve the pressure.

If you're having a hard time, no one has to text you with disappointment, "I'm really sorry, but we were relying on you." No one will die without your help: there are plenty of other people helping, people generally survive without help, you are not a guardian angel. Don't take on that role. So if at some point our project runs out of steam and dies, well, then so be it. It means that people don't have the strength to do it anymore, and that's fine. We need to keep that atmosphere and create those platforms, so that it's a pleasure for us to be there and for others to connect with us. A lot of people stay because they find companionship here, it's just nice to be in the same community with each other. To turn this into some kind of "firm" is the road to nowhere.

At one point I had insomnia, and I would get up at four in the morning and start working in chats, and by nine o'clock in the evening I thought that I should have breakfast. So the whole time I was working and answering questions. And then I realized that I shouldn't do that.

Over the summer, at a supervisory session, we were answering a question about how we felt, and I wrote that paradoxically I was happy, because it was as if we were building our invisible city within the city. There are so many different people among us: doctors, bakers, artists, IT people, teachers, such a wonderful mix. We didn't know each other, and we discovered a community, made it a community, and we can build our city. And when the war is over — and this is the biggest dream of all of us — our invisible city will not perish, it will just change its visible boundaries. I got involved in our project for this utopia and it is for this utopia that I still continue.

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