

I am an American Jew in Berlin!

“Yevreys'kyy? Vy yevrey?” “Jewish? Are you Jewish?” I never thought in 1 million years that I would be walking a bus terminal in Berlin Germany and asking in Ukrainian, “Yevreys'kyy? Vy yevrey?”, “Jewish? Are you Jewish?”. I am rescuing Ukrainian refugees.

I'm working with a team of volunteers that is welcoming into Germany between 30 and 40 buses from Ukraine a day, and processing between 1,500 and 2,000 Ukrainian refugees each day. These people have just made a grueling trip from Ukraine to Poland and now to Germany. There is a desperate need for hotel rooms and housing in Berlin as well as the rest of Germany.

Many of these people have barely escaped with their lives and they are telling me unbelievable stories of bombs and gunfire around them that has terrorized them for weeks. Most of these people have not had a good night's sleep in weeks. Sometimes when the buses and trains arrive with only a few people, the station gets very somber as it's a really bad sign. It means that there have been a lot of bombings and the civilians have not been able to escape and make it to the border.

This remarkable grassroots volunteer organization has come together and organized themselves efficiently and effectively. But after learning that the volunteers had no real plan for what to do if they came across Jewish families, I asked my Rabbi friend for his advice. “What do I do? Just walk around and ask people if they're Jewish if I think they look Jewish? How do I try to identify Jewish Ukrainians and get them in touch with the Jewish agencies?” He said to me that I should “wear a Star of David or better yet wear a kippah.” So that's what I did!

I am an American Jew in Berlin! I wear a kippah while volunteering in Germany as an American Jew helping Ukrainian refugees in the midst of the worst humanitarian crisis the world has seen since World War II.



Today I wear a volunteer medical vest and a Jewish kippah (yarmulke) at the bus station. I don't normally advertise being Jewish in public. And I never thought I'd do so in Berlin, Germany. I must admit, I had reservations about wearing a kippah in Berlin. I thought I was asking for trouble or that some would be threatened by it. While today is 2022 and not 1939; I knew full well that antisemitism was still alive and well throughout the world, however I have not experienced it personally while I've been here in Berlin.

Pictured Above: The Sotnik family is rescued. They come from the beautiful resort town of Berdyansk, which is located on the coast of the Azov Sea. Svetlana is 38 years old, and a veterinarian by profession. Her husband Alexei is 41 years old. He is a veterinarian and a builder. They have 5 children (4 are pictured). Their eldest son Ruslan stayed at home with his grandmother.

Their city was occupied by the army of the Russian Federation. Missiles were shot down over their heads, airports were exploding. Not a single government agency was working. No food was delivered. There is a humanitarian disaster in their city. The Sotnik family was without work. While fleeing, their convoy was hit by a hailstorm of explosives. They witnessed casualties in front of their eyes. They drove 180 km for 7 hours and prayed the whole time. They abandoned their car and took the train to Poland and then to Germany.



Picture to the right: Jeff Kaminsky with rescued Sotnick Family little girl and newborn baby.

That being said, I am also proud as a Jew, to be wearing my kippah, especially in Berlin! The kippah that I'm wearing has flags of the United States and Israel on it. And, I am equally proud to wear my First Responders CERT (*Community Emergency Response Team*) jacket, as an American who came to help these devastated people, who are complete strangers, at their greatest time of need.

Call me crazy or insane but I felt a moral obligation to come here to do whatever I could to help. I know that my dear friend and travel companion, Dave Crawford (Deputy Chief of the Northbrook Fire Department) felt the same. We believe that tyranny must be fought at any cost. And we also know that what happens in Europe today, left unchecked, can very quickly happen in America tomorrow.

Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine put it well: "We are all at war," he said in an address to Ukraine. "Everywhere people defend themselves, although they do not have weapons. But these are our people. They have courage. Dignity. And hence the ability to go out and say: I'm here, it's mine, and I won't give it away. My city. My community. My Ukraine."

This is how I feel, and what I felt when I made the decision to come to Berlin. We are already at war. For some, like those in Ukraine, the war is already inside their homes. While for others on the other side of the pond, unless you have a personal connection to Ukraine, the war is just coming down the driveway.

Friends, if you want to help, and you can help, please feel free to contact me directly at jeffreykaminsky@gmail.com or at (708)269-9384.