Third trip to Ukraine

The last 7 days in Kassel were quite busy with the acceptance of packages, the opening of the same, the sorting by types (e.g. warm clothes, blankets, sleeping bags, then material for wound care, surgical instruments, infusions and medicines as well as technical devices such as cell phones, batteries, flashlights, jumper cables and diapers - alone 200 packages with 66 pieces each! When I loaded everything yesterday, I was pretty groggy.

Day 1

Today the first leg to Röttenbach near Erlangen. 4 Euro pallets with canned food, noodles, water and again diapers were waiting there along with about 30 moving boxes with medical material. With 6 helpers from the community and from the building yard the trailer was loaded up to the neck ruff. So now there are about 4 tons of cargo on board. Oh, and two large emergency generators also found a place.

Day 2

Today we continue through the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the north of Hungary and Romania to the Ukrainian Carpathians. Two to three days we (Michael and me - he is professor emeritus of geography and I met him yesterday for the first time in person) will probably need. Then it won't be so exactly plannable. The people we want to take back with us escaped from Mariupol a week ago and are on foot. At the moment they are stuck in Zaporizhzhia (on the Dnieper). Shelling and curfew. And it's still 550km to the Carpathians.

I hope we can meet them even further!

But who knows...

We will try.

We make it to Trencin in the Váh Valley by evening.

Day 3

Our way leads us further east along the High Tatras. Sun, snow, storm and blue sky. Small towns line our way. Kezmarok, Levoca. Then Kosice, the second largest city in Slovakia.

Day 4

Early Sunday morning we set out for a walk through the gorgeous old town. We visited Saint Elizabeth Cathedral, the Gothic landmark of the city. Then it was back on the road. Today, the first thing we had to do was change our plan: with the heavily loaded trailer, we couldn't make it to Romania. Too many long slopes, hot axles and the risk of burning the tires.

So we set course for Uzhhorod, which is 120 km east of Kosice in Ukraine. This in the hope to find a collecting station at the border for the further transport of at least the heavy food pallets (like e.g. in Przemysl at the Polish-Ukrainian border).

But: No such thing.

Instead, we were allowed to fill out forms: which goods were to be exported. A list should be presented - only how? Unload everything?

Finally, one of the Slovakian customs officers had the idea to do it by weight. Ergo: 200m back and twice over the electronic scales.

It was then entered 3.8 to load for export from the EU. 😶😭

Then we went to the Ukrainian customs officers. There our team was x-rayed 2x. Then we had to fill in papers.

For lack of sufficient knowledge on our part, the ladies of customs did it for us. The next problem: who is the recipient? Name, street, phone number.

Of course we did not have that. But necessity is the mother of invention: Central Hospital in Uzhgorod!

Of course I couldn't name the street, but the friendly lady from customs looked up in Google Maps in which street the Central Hospital of the Transcarpathian region can be found.

But that was not enough: a customs superior (3 stars) who was unfortunately not powerful English, organized with translation help of just that lady, that the chief physician of the clinic picked us up 20 minutes later at the border. He is a surgeon and had operated on the customs officer last year. So: in the Ukraine we know each other...

Ivan, as he introduced himself, drove ahead and in the clinic a dozen doctors, nurses and orderlies started unloading. The atmosphere was one of joy and exuberance. A ray of hope in the darkness...

Two and a half hours were spent busily hauling. Medicines, infusions, syringes, protective clothing, bandages, cans of lentil soup, canned fish, diapers, clothing, sleeping bags, blankets, even two large emergency generators, everything was loaded into the clinic for further distribution.

Then everyone stood together and the chief physician gave a very moving speech. Incomprehension about the cruel events and the longing for peace, thanks for the unexpected help and support and hope for the cohesion of the people were his words....

Because of the imminent danger of bombing especially the cities and civilian targets, we then drove further overland to the east.

Before dark the next change of plans:

our family(ies) are still stuck in Zaporizhzhia, but have a possibility via Lvov (Lemberg) in sight and will be picked up there by another team.

So we first turned south and wanted to reach the border at a bridge over the river Theiss near Sighetu Marmateei. Diesel is available here if at all only 20 liters. Deep holes in the road are sufficient for it. The bridges on the way are quite dilapidated and single lane (but at least there are no warning signs).

At a gas station we finally met two soldiers of a border patrol. They drove ahead and showed us the unsigned way to the bridge. While we followed them in adventurous speed through the potholed road, the sirens sounded: Air raid warning.

Therefore, the border crossing was closed immediately and we waited in the bright light of the only lantern that had not been switched off, in front of the closed barrier. We had a very queasy feeling - but we couldn't leave.

After 30 minutes the alarm was over and the clearance could begin - see above...

Over the bridge, which was decorated with hundreds of teddy bears (?) (a last greeting to the lost homeland!) we arrived late at night in Romania. We registered for a transport to Germany and will probably take a break for one day tomorrow...

Day 5

Monday was a fulfilling break day in the Romanian Maramures. Beautiful forests, snow-capped mountains, archaic villages and beautiful homesteads in the mountain valleys.

Day 6

Today we went again to the border in Sighetu. But no demand for transport to Germany. The opposite Solotvyno is just very difficult to reach.

So we decided to drive to the other border crossings in the south of Ukraine.

On the way we had a memorable encounter. The "merry cemetery" in Sapanta....

The wooden tombstones stood close together, all carved and decorated with colorful likenesses of the deceased and a description of their virtues and (on the back) their vices!

After a long drive and a three-hour stay at the Schengen external border, we reached the highway crossing in Zahony, Hungary. There, too, nobody was waiting. Also at the customs (where really only Hungarian was spoken!) there was no information.

Then my railwayman soul spoke up and we went to the train station...

There we were right. Tents for care, treatment, registration and organization of further transport were set up on the station forecourt. The mayor was whirling with a dozen volunteers. Two Englishmen had come with their VW bus to bring the arrivals to Budapest. Two Protestant churchmen from Detmold (whose wives had taken away their passports so that they could not enter Ukraine!) and we were waiting in the midst of the hustle and bustle for the next train from Ukraine. Then everything happened very quickly. A family from Mariupol immediately asked us if we knew how they could get to Amsterdam. Some relatives had already arrived there.

Nothing easier than that: we accompanied them to the food tent (where two lovely Italian ladies from Naples sang Italian songs and distributed their "Pasta a' la Mama" on the plates) and then stowed everything and everyone in the car. Mother and father on the bench, daughter (8 years) on the bed and the dog...where did he find room?

Then we headed west. Small roads, field paths, then we were in front of a river...

After crossing it, our guests fell into Morpheus' arms and we took turns to reach Trencin in the Váh valley at 1:30 in the night and 400 km later. We caught the last rooms in the hotel and sank contentedly into the pillows.

Day 7

In the morning we had a delicious breakfast. The hotel staff was happy to see us again and pampered us and our passengers to the best of their abilities. A long day lay ahead of us via Brno and Nuremberg. In Prague, a tanker truck had exploded on the highway, which of course led to endless traffic jams even on the detour routes. Tired, we finally reached Erlangen and Röttenbach.

In silence we sat together at dinner.

What might be going on in the minds of our guests?

A new world, space for beautiful things, a Disney land?

And: the ruins of their existence....

Only their lives were saved, that was all.

Marina and Viktor are competitive dancers and had their own dance school in Mariupol.

They had visited Germany and Italy once. To tournaments. They had stayed at the hotel. Viktor spoke broken English. Marina spoke little. Daughter Kristina hardly.

What should happen now?

Day 8

A ticket from Nuremberg to Amsterdam has to be organized for our guests. Ukraine Help Ticket. Not uncomplicated. Reservations for the following day as well. A visit to the botanical garden of the University of Erlangen brings them in between to other thoughts.

I wish them courage and good luck, say a'dieu and drive on to Kassel. In the evening I am back home.

Day 9

Michael takes our guests to the train to Nuremberg. In the evening they reach Amsterdam. There they are welcomed (by distant relatives they have met only once in their lives).

And now?

Sure: the trip was exhausting. But I'm used to that.

There were a few challenges. But I know that and I can handle it.

The tension of the people is immense - also in the south of Ukraine.

Here it is still quiet, but: when will the war come here, too?

The harbingers are the many (thousands!) of internal refugees from the south and east of the country. Ushhorod has 110,000 inhabitants. Now more than double!

This brings not only the supply to its limits.

The soul cannot bear it, the mind cannot grasp it.

The terror, the horror, the loss of everything is deeply etched in the features of people's faces.

I feel my powerlessness and emptiness.

I thank all those who stood with me against injustice.

With all my heart

Karl-Wilhelm Steuernagel