

The Suitcases

May 5, 2022

What you hear, when you are sitting in the medical tent, is the clattering of suitcases as they roll down (away from Ukraine) or up (towards Ukraine) a slight incline, toward or away from the border. The path itself is poured concrete made to look like pavers, so it looks like there are cobblestones or bricks, small rectangles a few inches wide by a few inches long arranged longitudinally, with indentations between the sections. The suitcases make a unique clatter as they roll over those indentations, a rhythmic vibration, something like the clatter of railroad cars, higher pitched than a thrum or the roar of truck engine and quieter, more like the sound a snare drum makes but constant, rolling, and regular, first louder, and then falling away, the way a car on pavement gets louder as it approaches and then washing away as it passes by.

Each suitcase, of course, is a person, walking toward Ukraine or walking slowly away. There are many people who carry their luggage instead of rolling it. Sometimes, even often, international volunteers in yellow and orange vests walk with those people, carrying their bags or rolling them in big silver supermarket shopping carts with yellow and white handles. This traffic goes on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, as people come to the border from all across Ukraine, or come from Pzremysl, the nearest small city in Poland where there is a train station, about six kilometers away. Buses carry people to and from Pzremysl. There is a brilliantly bright multicolored computer sign next to the bus stop that shows the train schedule, the trains that run to Warsaw and Krakow, but also to Prague and Berlin, to Gdansk and to Vienna. When you see that sign, it feels like you might be in the civilized world again, to the extent that our civilization has any meaning at all, given what we have all let happen in Ukraine.

At dinner last night, a French gynecologist, a French midwife, and an Israeli aid administrator reminded me about what I have been missing, as I talked to those few refugees who come looking for a little medicine for a headache, for blisters on their feet, to have their blood pressure checked or because they want something for sleep. We sit for a moment with each person who comes into the medical tent and use a single open-ended question (what has last two months been like for you?) to show each person that someone is paying attention, that their suffering matters, and that they are not alone, at least not for that moment we are talking.

But no one is talking about rape.

People who have worked in conflict zones before knowing that rape is a very common occurrence in places that are occupied by an invading army, and that the women who are raped, and too often impregnated because they are often raped repeatedly, savagely, over many days -- and that the women who have been raped almost never talk about their rapes with anyone. They never seek treatment for sexually transmitted

infections. Never think anyone cares enough to help them through the moral injury that has occurred to their psyches and their souls. They don't want to tell us. They don't want to tell their partners. Or their parents. Or their brothers and sisters. Or their friends. And they likely don't even want to tell themselves, and so they hide it in themselves, from themselves. Those who become pregnant and are in Poland are in a double bind, because Poland is a Catholic country and abortion is prohibited -- as is the morning-after pill -- although some people say the Polish government has made a special exemption for Ukrainian women and allow the morning-after pill and the abortion pill for them only.

Still, the idea that Russian soldiers would do this, that any human being would do this to another person, wounds my soul as I just think of it, those women so close up and personal who are walking by just a few feet away, their suitcases clattering as they roll across the pavement. If it wounds *my* soul, imagine the souls and inner lives of the women who have been through this, their flesh ripped open in the process. I think about all the women I've talked to who can't sleep and wonder who has been raped and sodomized or worse and can't admit it to themselves. I think about the women with headaches, or those who just want to get their blood pressure checked.

It is hard to find any compassion for the Russian soldiers or the Russian people themselves, hearing about this. Imagining this. But then you ask yourself, what kind of injury has also been done to them, to remove them of all hope, to strip away their humanity, all their decency, to reduce them to beasts doing to human beings what beasts themselves likely never do to one another, just because they can. That is what war does to us.

One woman who saw one of my colleagues, a woman with three children who walked across the border and was staying nearby was somehow able to tell the story of the daily multiple rapes that occurred while the Russians occupied the area around Kharkiv. She was worried about pregnancy and wanted an abortion pill, just in case, because as hard as it was to talk about what had happened, because as intense as the shame was, she hated the Russians even more, and hated the idea of carrying and giving birth to a child fathered by one of them.

To me, that means she was stronger than most people can imagine: she had enough of herself left to hate her abusers. Even so, once she told the story, she said, "so are you going to traffic me now?" to the people who listened. She thought once she had admitted to her rape, she had become nothing in the eyes of the people who were there to listen and to help, that she was now just a thing, a commodity without humanity. She had become valueless in her own eyes, and the world of people had become a world of abusers, profiteers and traffickers, a world in which no one would care, a world in which no one could be trusted. Still, she had enough strength left to be able to stand up and push back, to be "for herself" even when she felt that no one else in the world was for her. She was still strong enough to defend her future and the future of her family. She knew how dangerous it was to her soul and family to birth and raise the child of her rapist, the child of the invader.

Too many women, some abused by men in relationships before the Russians came or debased and their bodies torn open, desecrated, by the Russian soldiers these two months, don't even have the resources needed to protect their souls. How will they learn to hope again?

Few of us can talk about our deepest wounds. And rapes in wartime are even deeper wounds yet, wound inflicted by a world out of control, a world in which people fail to protect one another from intimate harms in which the soul itself is too often destroyed.

Sometimes you hear applause when you are sitting in that tent. That applause comes from volunteers and refugees alike. It happens when a troop of Ukrainian soldiers walks by, or a troop of international military volunteers walks by in uniform. Once or twice a day.

So here we are, in a world at war again. Sometimes, perhaps often, the US has been the aggressor. Now it is the other way around. I don't know how to stop this war, how to make sure that the Ukrainians drive the Russians out of their nation.

Even so, if we can't stop the war tomorrow, it is better to have people gathered around at the border, caring for the refugees. Better to care for the wounded, the raped, the battered and the bruised: the survivors.

But who are we as a people? as a race? as a species? that we ever let a war like this, or any war, happen at all. That a soldier, whose humanity has been stripped from him as he is made to kill, could rape as well as kill, could turn an act of love into a weapon of subjugation and disgrace, as if every person who is forced down this path has been completely stripped of their own humanity, their own solidarity, so that the value of another's life has no meaning, that life itself has no meaning, and they all exist only in pain and degradation, crying out, in their own way, for the rest of us to stop them. To stop this.

Democracy is not a spectator sport. Come to Poland and Ukraine. Bear witness. Be present. Carry the luggage of the refugees. Feed them soup and tea. Bind their wounds, both physical and psychological. Give them sim cards. Make them pancakes. Give toys to their children.

In every generation a tyrant will come to kill us, to subvert and destroy democracy and our humanity itself. In every generation the wheels of the suitcases will rattle on the pathways between the borders, as people walk across the no-man's land from border to border.

Call it what it is. Name the tyrant, the demagogue for what he is. Stand up. Fight back. Stop him.

And bring everyone you know because none of us can do this alone.

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