



UKRAINE / FROM PITTSBURGH WITH LOVE

Pittsburgher's train – and rabbinical students – shepherd Ukrainians to safety

In light of Jewish history, there's a dramatic backdrop to what's occurring on German platforms. For the moment, all Henry Posner III sees is the task ahead.

By **ADAM REINHERZ** | 28 March 2022, 3:13 pm

Main image by Henry Posner III. Henry Posner III, second from left, joins RDC-D staff and helpers on March 12

Alex Kovtun returned to his dorm an hour ago. He still hasn't showered. It's almost 10 p.m. in Potsdam, Germany, and by the time he finishes speaking with the Chronicle, there will be just five hours before he wakes and returns to the train.

Kovtun, 31, apologizes for the sound of his voice.

Its hoarseness isn't due to cigarettes, he said. "I don't smoke, but I've been speaking so much."

The yarmulke-clad Ukrainian-born rabbinical student at Abraham Geiger College is used to addressing an audience, but not like this. Since March 8, he has traveled across Germany, delivering food, translating and offering thousands of Ukrainian refugees whatever he can.

Some days, Kovtun stands for hours on a railway platform in Frankfurt distributing water. On the day he spoke with the Chronicle, he boarded a train, helping refugees determine where to head next.

Almost 239,000 Ukrainians have [entered Germany since Feb. 24](#), according to the German Interior Ministry.

As welcoming as Germany is, there's a problem, Kovtun explained: Train workers mostly speak German or English; refugees largely speak Ukrainian or Russian.



Passengers board RDC-D refugee train from Frankfurt/Oder to Hannover Messe on March 12. Photo courtesy of Henry Posner III

Pittsburgher Anne Molloy anticipated the language barrier weeks ago and asked her husband, Henry Posner III, to contact Geiger's rector, [Rabbi Walter Homolka](#).

Molloy, an executive board member of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and Posner have long supported Geiger. She said she knew there were Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking students on campus and that they could help during the crisis.

Posner, who was in Germany in early March, relayed Molloy's message to Homolka — but also found another way to help refugees.

As chairman of Pittsburgh-based Railroad Development Corp., [Posner oversees global train affairs](#), including RDC-Deutschland — an operator of passenger trains in Germany. On March 6, Posner was contacted by the German government about creating an evacuation route for Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

"We had our train crews put together a plan, a schedule and a rolling stock — everything it takes," Posner said.

Four days later, [on March 10, RDC-Deutschland transported its first train](#) (11 cars with seating for up to 660 passengers) from Frankfurt/Oder to Hannover. Following the three-hour ride, passengers were greeted by German Red Cross workers and taken to newly created reception centers.

Since that initial transport, Posner's train has operated daily, moving thousands of fleeing Ukrainians across Germany.

A time will come when the company will tally exactly how many people it's carried; for now, the objective is simply to transport passengers comfortably and safely, Posner said.

"The railway tradition is a tradition of safety and service, and the Jewish tradition is service," he said. "This is where they intersect, the cultural alignment of railway values and Jewish values."



The Walter Jacob Building at the Abraham Geiger College: © Tobias Hopfgarten

While Posner remains focused on transporting the refugees, Homolka remains cognizant of his responsibilities.

Speaking by phone from Germany, Homolka said Geiger and its rabbinical students have a big job ahead.

[The 1990s' exodus of Soviet Jewry brought about 200,000 people to Germany.](#) They came from both Ukraine and Russia and built lives within the German Jewish fold while maintaining their distinctive heritages.

“How we handle this new influx of refugees must be done in a way that keeps the peace in the Jewish communities of Germany,” Homolka said. “Our role as a rabbinical seminary is to foster this engagement and see that reconciliation is possible in a German context.”

Homolka said that students like Kovtun “can be a significant symbol of uniting in this misery.”

Kovtun is an orphan. After growing up in a children’s home in Ukraine, he lived with a non-Jewish family before eventually studying in Moscow and Israel. In 2020, Kovtun came to Germany to study at Geiger.

One of the college’s goals is to aid post-Soviet Jews; so whether these individuals arrived in Germany 25 years or two weeks ago, they need rabbis who can speak their language, understand their lives and offer pastoral care, Kovtun said.

Well before Russia invaded Ukraine, Kovtun was doing this work in Germany and across Eastern Europe. Six months ago, he began leading online services for a small community of Siberian Jews. Initially, 17 families participated. By Purim, the number dropped to 10.

Kovtun said Jews in Russia have told him they “feel guilty,” and it’s hard to hear people demonize their country.

“They feel bad,” Kovtun continued. “They have Russian citizenship and they’re also Jewish. [They are scared for their lives.](#)”

Kovtun said all he can do is continue providing pastoral care.

What he’s offering isn’t just words; Kovtun is saving people’s lives, Dina Pokyta, 23, said.

Three weeks ago, Pokyta’s mother, Natalya Barabash, a professor, contacted Kovtun. Barabash told Kovtun, her former student, that she and her family were in Slovakia and didn’t know where to go. Kovtun delivered instructions. Once the group entered Germany, he connected them with Jewish organizations, which found the family of seven an apartment and food.

“Alex is not a man; he is a miracle with hands and legs,” Pokyta said. “I can’t explain my feelings about him. He saved our lives.”

Every day since March 5 — when Pokyta and her family arrived in Germany — Kovtun has called to check in. On March 12, Kovtun asked Pokyta if she’d be willing to join him on the train and serve as a translator for new refugees. Pokyta agreed, although it was difficult for her to go because of her 3-year-old son, she told the Chronicle.

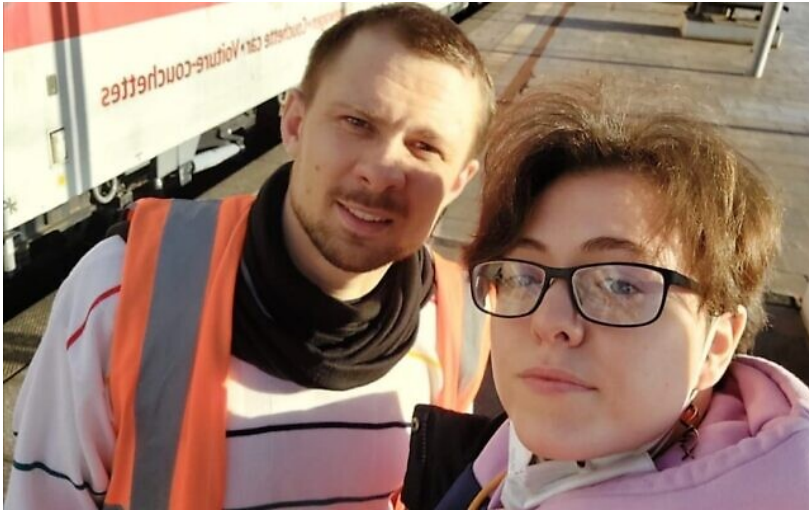
“He is a very cute boy, but he is now afraid of loud noises,” Pokyta said.

Despite the difficulty of leaving her son with her mother, who has two other children to care for, Pokyta accompanied Kovtun.

“Alex helped me and I wanted to help him,” she said.

Pokyta spent the day assisting refugees in [completing documents](#) and communicating with medical workers. On March 23, she joined Kovtun again.

“It’s really difficult because a lot of people can’t understand anything,” she said. “You ask them where they came from, and they can’t answer. [They only know that they’re immigrants.](#)”



Alex Kovtun and Dina Pokyta stand on the platform. Photo courtesy of Alex Kovtun

The last few weeks have felt like years, Pokyta said, and one incident remains especially haunting.

While helping Kovtun, Pokyta rode a train filled with children, some resting beside their mothers.

“Children are loud,” Pokyta said. “They scream and play, but on the train it was silence. They only sat and watched me. It was so strange and terrible.”

Some of the women told Pokyta about “bombs, ruined buildings and the terrors of war,” she said.

The descriptions elicited the only sounds Pokyta heard from the children — cries, she said.

Pokyta — whose husband Yevheniy, remains in Ukraine, like other men between 18-60 who are barred from leaving due to martial law — said it’s hard to understand everything that’s happened: how Yevheniy drove her and their son in a small Lada Samara to the Polish border; how she left Yevheniy and their dog Audrey; how she cut off her thick curly hair because the inability to shower during war made it too difficult to manage.

Everything in her life is what people would see in “a bad cinema,” she said.

Kovtun used similar theatrical terms when relating his interactions with refugees.

Whenever people approach him on the platform, he said he explains that the train shepherding them to freedom was provided by a Jewish person from the U.S. — from Pittsburgh.

“When I tell them that, people start crying, no difference whether they’re Jewish or not,” Kovtun said. “For them, they don’t believe it’s real. It feels like a Hollywood movie.”

In light of recent Jewish history, [the dramatic backdrop is evident](#), said German-born nonagenarian Walter Jacob, [Geiger's co-founder](#) and rabbi emeritus of Rodef Shalom Congregation.

During World War II, trains often shuttled Jews toward death, Jacob said. Now, it's trains and rabbinical students in Germany who are "doing their best" to keep people alive.

Posner acknowledged the historical significance, but said "this is about the Jewish community being in service to the community at large."

"There will be plenty of time to reflect on the irony later," he continued, "For the moment we are focused on the task." **PJC**

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