



News from Ukraine 19, April 2024

Guten Tag Bonjour Buongiorno Добрый день

Nataliya from Lviv and Maria from Kyiv regularly write to us from Ukraine about their activities and send us photos. Despite the omnipresent war, they remain active, united, and supportive of each other. They strengthen each other, defy the war and give fear no chance. Annelies Debrunner is also fearless and has returned to Ukraine once again. During her visit, she visited the Soroptimists, the Liyubin Velyky orphanage, and met with blind women. She even gave a lecture to students at Lviv Polytechnical National University. Her presence was a great morale boost. In an interview with Pia Trümpfer (Club Schaffhausen and member of the ad hoc commission), Annelies Debrunner discusses her trip. Her report is very moving; but see for yourself.

Catherine Schuppli, President SI Union Switzerland 2023-2024.

Questions to Annelies Debrunner

The 10-day trip in March was your 4th trip to Ukraine since the start of the war. After a 30-hour train journey via Krakow, you arrived in Lviv on Friday 1st March. When you look back and compare your 3rd trip last summer with your current trip in March, what stands out?

The many tents set up by NGOs to provide free food have disappeared. But the queues at customs are the same, and the three-hour wait was not unfamiliar to me.

In Lviv, Nataliya Podzorova, the president of Club SI Lviv, met you at the station and you travelled to her home. What happened then?

I was naturally tired after the long journey, but my joy at seeing Nataliya again made me forget my tiredness and tension. We exchanged news (Nataliya speaks very good German) and I brought her greetings and some cheese from Switzerland. After a restful night and a wonderful breakfast, I was startled by the national nine o'clock news. Suddenly I was confronted with the full force of the war. But we wouldn't have time to brood today, because two Soroptimists, Valentyna and Irina, were waiting for us. We were going to visit six visually impaired women, some with their families.

In the 13th news report, of 13 April 2022, you told us that the second floor of the family home was still in need of renovation. The floors and interior were also in a bad state and it was difficult to keep things tidy.

Yes, that was a year ago. In the past year, a lot of work has been done in the two-storey house. Storage space has been created for all the families and women. With more storage space, everyday life for the residents is now easier. There is now a new swing in the playground. My second day in Lviv

ended with a visit to the Opera House. After the national anthem, we enjoyed the wonderful opera Carmen.

And the third day?

It was a Sunday. In other words, it was a good opportunity to gather the Soroptimists of the SI Lviv Club. A club meeting and the official inauguration of the therapy rooms in the orphanage in Liyubyn Velyky were on the agenda. On the way to the orphanage we bought some fresh fruit. Liyubyn Velyky is home to the most vulnerable, the most psychologically damaged. They have suffered severe trauma and need various therapies. About 75 children and young people live there. Almost all of the Club Sisters from Lviv were present at the inspection and inauguration of these therapy rooms and were overjoyed that they had been made possible thanks to their contribution and the cooperation with Jürg Streuli's Ukrainian relief organisation.



Lviv club sisters shopping for the Liyubyn Velyky orphanage

And how was the subsequent club meeting?

Later we went to a restaurant for dinner. President Nataliya thanked everyone once again and expressed her pleasure at the good cooperation. The women were then presented with a beautiful blue and yellow silk scarf! It was a gift from our Swiss Union for 8 March, International Women's Day.

In Lviv and the surrounding area you were far away from the current war. But the peaceful appearance of Lviv, a city rich in history, culture and art, is deceptive.

Peaceful, yes, thank God I didn't have to seek refuge in a bunker. But the soldiers and war-disabled are everywhere in the streets. In the soldiers' church we witnessed a wedding between a soldier and a beautiful bride. Nataliya said later: "Today's wedding - then straight to battle". I also saw the many photos of the fallen in an exhibition there. The children's notes are very moving. One son wrote: "My father is a hero. He is in heaven now. I want to be like him". A little girl wishes for a railway connection to the cloud where her father now lives.



Memorial site at Irpin near Kyiv



Soldiers in Kyiv

After 5 days and a 6-hour train journey, the rest of your trip took you to Kyiv. There you visited President Maria Bilodid and her family. The Soroptimists from Club SI Kyiv also gave you a warm welcome and talked to you about their everyday lives, worries and fears.

My visit to Kyiv as well as to Lviv was an enormous moral support for the women. They receive money for their projects, but the fact that I took a personal interest in their projects and asked about their daily lives and concerns was very important to them.

Millions of people have left the country, hundreds of thousands are on the frontline or have even died. We know that this is a huge challenge for the Ukrainian women who remain. They are taking on 'male', physically demanding work. Many of the women who stayed have lost everything and are now alone with their children. They are all very exhausted.

That's what I saw when we met. Julia, a Soroptimist and doctor, told me that in times of need, the young students have to take over the work of those who have already graduated, and that she always has the essentials at hand in case of an alarm. Anna, the teacher, adds that she and all the students are taking refuge in the shelters. I am aware that the sisters of the club do a lot of voluntary work in addition to their professional challenges, fears and worries.

What projects is the SI Kyiv Club currently supporting?

Maria Bilodid has initiated two courses on trauma management. Valentina, President of the SI Chernihiv Club from 2016-18, helps her with the practical implementation. Around 25 women have been supported with art, painting, music therapy and physiotherapy. A third course is planned as the need is great. I met some of the participants and was moved by their stories. Anna describes it this way: "Thanks to the course, I have learnt to give less space to my fears about my husband and older daughter (both at the front) by talking to other people or baking at home."

Tatyana, 58, who was an engineer at the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant for 35 years, has both a husband and a father-in-law at the front. She now lives in Kyiv. She is worried about her husband.

Tatyana puts it this way: "For me, trauma recovery is a distraction from reality, from everyday life. I didn't know there were courses. This is a completely new and wonderful experience".



Anna talks about her experiences on the course



Maria Bilodid, President of SI Club Kyiv

After 10 days full of impressions, you said goodbye to Maria's family in Kyiv and started your 40-hour return journey. Plenty of time to look back. What images have accompanied you?

It's always the women who show great creativity and resilience. But also the students at the polytechnic in Lviv making camouflage nets, and Maria's father-in-law assembling drones for the army in his small workshop. Then I think of Maria's children and wonder about their future. I hope they will all continue to be supported by various European SI Clubs, the SI Union Switzerland and the two Clubs in Kreuzlingen and Rapperswil.

Many thanks, Annelies, for this impressive report and the pictures.

For the Ad-Hoc Committee of the Swiss Union

Pia Trümpler

Register now

Golf tournament of 19 July 2024 in aid of Ukraine, organised by SI Club Crans-Montana with the support of the Ad-hoc Commission Ukraine.

Registration form see swiss-soroptimist.ch/event/golf-ballesteros-crans-montana/

On our website <https://swiss-soroptimist.ch/solidaritaet-ukraine/> you will find the blog on the Ukraine war as well as the latest news.

Contact the ad hoc commission: ukraine@swiss-soroptimist.ch

We look forward to your feedback on the News from Ukraine 19!

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