

Pal2U: Connecting Hearts, Building Futures – How Young Volunteers Empower Ukrainian Refugee Children at Hebrew Public Schools

Interviewed by Valerie Khaytina

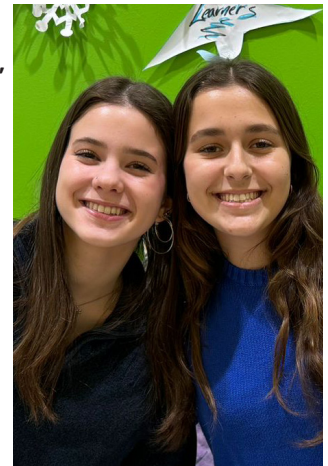
“What’s that?”

“Бомбосховище.”

After a few gestures imitating an explosion, Sabina Cherner finally understood what he meant. A bomb shelter.

In 2022 a sudden attack on Kyiv and Kharkiv out of Belarus escalated to a largely unprecedented and record-setting number of casualties in the invasion of Ukraine. Thousands of men were drafted as families were torn apart, homes were completely destroyed, and bomb sirens and shelters became the new norm for Ukrainians. As many fled their nation, over 14 million people crossed the border to Poland. Although eager to welcome the refugees, Poland was soon overwhelmed by the sudden influx.

That summer, Sabina flew to Warsaw to volunteer at a camp for children of Ukrainian refugees. The camp’s goal was not only to provide free child care, essential to single mothers scrambling to learn a new language and find work but also to foster social interaction for the children who spent their days in hotel rooms. The camp counselors also wanted to offer academic support given that many of the children had not attended their schools since the war broke out. Sabina was assigned one of the youngest age groups (5-6 year-olds). She spent the days coloring, Lego-building, and playing tag in the schoolyard with her campers. Almost immediately, she began noticing traces of the war in the little things they did. Her ‘campers’ seemed just like average kindergarteners, entranced by Ninja Turtles and obsessed with picking fights over crayons, but they all shared massive trauma that had been internalized to an extent where it was virtually the only normal they knew. The kids colored almost exclusively with yellow and blue, and she couldn’t count the number of hearts that were drawn with the Ukrainian flag colors and boastfully gifted to their parents at dismissal. When the boys ran around pretending to shoot each other with finger guns, they would ‘claim’ a specific weapon of choice, distinguishing between AR-15s and regular pistols. Sabina recalled building mini villages with Lego pieces with 5-year-old Artem, and seeing him construct some sort of cube. She asked what he was working on and he said it was a “бомбосховище.” Not understanding Ukrainian, it took a few attempts at charades for her to understand what the little building was. Sabina realized it was a bomb shelter. She looked around and saw that the two kids next to Artem had built one of their own as well. At the time Sabina didn’t know how to respond. She recalls complementing his construction and moving on with the children’s play, but she will never forget that interaction. Seeing a little boy instinctively build a bomb shelter in his Lego village, his view that it is an obvious necessity in his town was both jarring and horrifying.



Sabina Cherner & Sonia Girshin

I remember realizing how 'normal' the entire war must have seemed to the little kids, having served as their reality for months

Throughout the four weeks of summer camp, the actual war was rarely explicitly mentioned, but all the counselors would pick up on subtle references. The conflict that had begun four months ago had already shaped the childhood of these young children.

While Sabina was volunteering in Warsaw, Sonia Girshin was volunteering in New York. As the United States became a safe haven for more than 270,000 Ukrainian families fleeing the war zone, tens of thousands have made their way to New York State. As New York experienced an influx of Ukrainian refugees, particularly in Brooklyn neighborhoods, most local schools remained



unresponsive, but one Brooklyn school stepped up. A New York charter school, Hebrew Public, launched a campaign to enroll Ukrainian refugee children fleeing Russia's invasion. Sonia led outreach efforts, organized a welcome picnic, and managed clothing and school supply drives for Ukrainian families joining the Hebrew Public community.

It was at that welcome picnic that Sonia realized a powerful way she and Sabina could help. While support systems were established for mothers, including language classes and job interview training, Sonia and Sabina focused on serving the children in areas where their contribution was most needed.

Sabina and Sonia were both born in New York City to Jewish families who came as refugees from the former Soviet Union, more specifically from two Ukrainian cities, Odessa and Lviv. They had the advantage of being bilingual, making them a perfect match with children who urgently needed to learn English. The girls launched Pal2U and began offering peer tutoring to the school-age children currently enrolled at Hebrew Public. They recruited their friends, and as the demand grew, they reached out to their friends' friends. One would have trouble finding a Jewish, Russian-speaking, American-born teenager in New York whose family remained unaffected by the war in Ukraine. Many of the teenagers who joined PAL2U as volunteers were like Sabina and Sonia - born and raised in America and fluent in Russian, the language of their parents and grandparents. It is in this language that the teenagers learned about their families' complicated history with the former Soviet Union, Russia, and Ukraine.

Our family's past became part of our present, and we could relate to the Ukrainian children we served in a unique way.

As Sonia explains, for many of her friends, the main inspiration to begin tutoring Ukrainian children was the thought of their own parents and their experiences during the first years in the United States. Hearing about their struggle to learn English and start a new life for them inspired Sabina, Sonia, and their friends to pay it forward. They felt a responsibility to help. They felt strongly about partnering teenagers with the children rather than adult volunteers. "Children relate best to other children", Sabina and Sonia explain in unison.

Committed to providing educational, social, and emotional support for Ukrainian families, Pal2U connects volunteers with Hebrew Public's Ukrainian students between the ages of 6-14 to host virtual, one-on-one English language learning sessions. In addition to teaching the students English, ranging from common phrases to learning how to read, these meetings also serve as a time for students to build connections with their 'teachers.' Young children who just came to this country build friendships with our volunteers. New friends listen to the nuances of their school

day, explain the weird holiday of Halloween, and simply make them smile. A constant friend who would be there just for them every week, on the same day, at the same time. Volunteers have described their Zoom meetings as a chance to share common interests and play games, in other words: a time for engaging and entertaining activities while also learning the English language. Having grown from 30 to 50 students in the last year, Pal2U strives to ease the children's transitions to an entirely new language and culture and provide a social outlet and support through it all. As one student said, "I love working with my tutor. I learn English and I also learn a lot about American teenagers. It's a window for me to understand American life better." Seeing such a tangible difference encourages Sabina and Sonia, and all the volunteers at Pal2U, to continue their work in solidarity as children connect to building new lives in new places.

