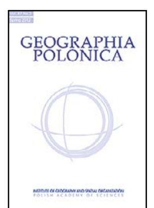

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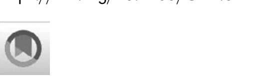

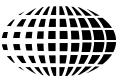

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THE ROLE OF PLACE IN EVERYDAY LIFE OF UKRAINIAN WAR REFUGEES IN POLAND

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Abstract
The article addresses the issue of Ukrainian war refugees in Poland. The authors aim to reconstruct the role that various places play in the everyday life of refugees in Poland and the differences between recognized places. In this way, the authors try to answer the question about the meaning of place in life as refugee persons during the first weeks and the following months of their stay in host country. The research used a mixed method approach: general questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews. The particular findings of the study are related to the observations that: a) the spaces/places in the first days and weeks of war refugees' stay in the host country are completely generic, b) during their stay in the following months, refugees look for places to redefine their situation. The main conclusion of the research is that places have a very great, perhaps underestimated, importance during the stay of war refugees in the host country.

Key words
war refugees • Ukrainians • sense of place • places as gaps • places of redefinition

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the first decades of the 21st century will be associated in human history with huge migratory movements to Europe and within the Old Continent, activated by nightmares of armed conflicts (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021; Etzel, 2022). European countries had not yet managed to resolve most of the issues surrounding the influx of war refugees from the Middle East that peaked in 2015 (Busetta, 2021; Tyldum & Zhuang, 2023), when another drama began to unfold, this time in Central and Eastern Europe (Andrews et al., 2023). In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and began a full-scale war with Poland's

neighbour. The tension-filled weeks leading up to the invasion and the days following 24 February triggered a huge wave of Ukrainian war refugees, numbering in the millions, arriving in many European countries (Enríquez, 2022; De Coninck, 2023; Mois et al., 2024). For geographical reasons (proximity), but also for cultural reasons (ease of communication in both languages, similarity of celebrated religious holidays) and socio-economic reasons (work of many Ukrainians in Poland before the outbreak of war), Poland became a natural direction of escape for Ukrainian citizens (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022a,b). Practically overnight, Poland began to act as an asylum for hundreds of thousands of people, primarily women and children, from across the eastern border (Kohlenberger et al., 2022; Mickelsson, 2023b). Collective and individual involvement in assisting Ukrainian war refugees was centred around the organisation of contact points, temporary points of residence, the provision of workplaces and their transport from the border to other regions of Poland. Poles received war migrants in large numbers into their flats and homes (Roszczyńska-Kurasińska et al., 2023).

The exodus of war refugees from Ukraine triggered, not only in Poland, a wave of phenomena occurring along the axis of the Ukrainian war refugee – the host society. Papers appeared in the literature reporting on, among other things: migration preferences (Elinder et al., 2023), psychological consequences of the refugee role in the host society and the care of war victims (Duray-Parmentier, 2022; Greeneway et al., 2022), the dynamics of attitudes towards refugees (Kirk, 2022; Mois et al., 2024), vulnerability of refugees in the host country (Mendola & Pera, 2022), institutional arrival infrastructures in refugees' home-making (Kox & van Liempt, 2022; Holovko & Korolyk-Boyko, 2022), refugee narratives created in the media (Zawadzka-Paluektau, 2023), the future of Ukraine's population (Kulu et al., 2023), relations between refugees and the new home (Korobanova & Schulzhenko, 2022) and the construction of 'hierarchies of victims' (Mickelsson, 2023a).

The aim of our research and this paper is to contribute to the discussion on the role of place in the life of the war refugee from the perspective of Ukrainian citizens protecting themselves from the effects of war in the Polish host society. We want to document a kind of 'truth of the time' in the views and opinions of refugees about their relationship to their places of residence in Poland. Nevertheless our primary scientific aim is to reconstruct the role that various places play in the everyday life of refugees in Poland and the differences between recognized places. In a broader sense, we want to join the scientific discussion on the role that places in the host country play in the lives of refugees.

The role of specifically understood space, place and its sense and home from the perspective of war migrants is conceptually interesting and pragmatically essential issue. The literature points out that finding oneself as an 'alien' both socially and territorially exposes one to many tensions (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Refugees are suddenly uprooted from their homeland, but importantly from an individual perspective, they are also uprooted from locally defined and important places—their homes (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Kaya, 2016; Papadopoulos, 2018). In each of the spatial dimensions they have to redefine themselves (Turton, 2005). The existing literature suggests that place can be an obstacle in such situations, suspending war refugees in a symbolic vacuum for a long period, but also an important spatial and psychosocial anchor (Jean, 2005; Albers et al., 2021).

Refugees' more-than-home places

In order to understand the role of sense of place and, as a result, power of place in the life of the war refugee, it is useful to first look at the question of place as a socio-spatial phenomenon (Twigger & Uzzell, 1996).

Power of Place…

The idea of a sense of place is rooted very widely not only in human geography, but also in many social disciplines. For nearly half a century, researchers working on the issue of the sense of place have noted its constitutive role in the construction of individual and collective social identity (Cresewell, 2004). Sense of place is defined as emotional relationships with a place. In this way, a positive or negative sense of place can be a kind of power of place in the adaptation of refugees in the host country. Yi Fu Tuan (1974) introduced the concept of topophilia into the narrative of place. The term describes a complex set of characteristics that bind a person and a place together in a positive way. Attributes of a person's relationship with a place arise from, among other things, emotion, experience, lived experience, cultural associations and mediated knowledge. The insights of Yi Fu Tuan and the researchers following in his footsteps have become fundamental in explaining the role of place in the emotional and social life of human beings.

The concept of the sense of place was, in the 1990s, the starting point for the development of the intellectually compelling concept of place attachment. This approach, mainly involving psychologists, first started as a quantitative exploration of the human connection to place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), then expanded to further explore the essence of place (Lewicka et al., 2019). In addition, the turn of the century saw the emergence of concepts of the dynamics of human-place connections (Massey, 1994, 2005) and the relational treatment of human and place interrelationships (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Anderson & McFarlane, 2011). Each of these approaches elaborated on the phenomenon of place and revealed its relational relevance in human life. A place takes on spatial and social roots, provides a sense of security and stability, allows one not only to exist but also to develop as a human being on many psychosocial levels. A place is progressive (Massey, 2005), and through its dynamics influences the human being and continuously shapes the identity of each inhabitant. After all, Casey wrote: "Our lives are so place-oriented and place saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer placelessness would be like" (Casey, 1993: ix).

Researchers concerned with the issue of place were equally quick to point out that the absence of tame, personal, positive and relationally warm places evokes negative emotions. Yi Fu Tuan (1974, 1977) himself had already formulated the notion of topophobia as a counterpoint to topophilia, Relph (1976) described the phenomenon of placelessness, and French ethnographer Marc Augé (1995) formulated the thesis of non-places. The latter concepts have also been widely discussed and thoroughly analysed (Gonzales, 2005; Freestone & Liu, 2016; Ruan & Hogben, 2020). The lack of a positive relationship with a place, which is to say a generic sort of place relationship, may have negative effects on a person's psyche and social behaviour.

…and its role in the everyday life of war refugees

The observations cited above provide a compelling background for the debate on the role of place in the everyday life of the war refugee. Based on the literature, it can be assumed that when refugees are able to build strong positive relationships with new places, their assimilation in the host country is easier. The sense of place gives rise to the specific power of place in a refugee's life. Sampson and Gifford (2010: 117) point out that 'The importance of place in the refugee experience cannot be underestimated'. The literature considers various aspects of the role of space/place in the lives of refugees: camps (Darling, 2009; Sanyal, 2012) and zones of transit (Fontanari, 2018) but also different spaces referring to the semantic idea of the home (Boccagni, & Miranda Nieto, 2022; Ghosh, 2022).

One of the main areas of debate is the role of refugee camps (Darling, 2009; Ehrkamp, 2017). Jean (2015) points out that most of

the literature on refugees pays attention to the process of displacement and social integration, therefore proposing research on 'the role of the physical environment in refugees' sense of place and newly reconstituted personal landscapes' (Jean 2015: 47). This includes such things as refugee farming and gardening programmes and the socio-spatial assimilation of refugees. Researchers also point to the important role of small, often rural, local communities that can become an assimilating environment for refugees in both social and spatial contexts (Haugen, 2019). Local communities and local spaces then become a kind of new family and home in the lives of newcomers (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2009; Gemignani, 2011).

Other studies point out that cities, especially large ones, can be a 'blind alley' in the assimilation of refugees due to the multifaceted exclusion caused by staying in a large collective (Sanyal, 2012). The common denominator in this debate is the refugee's need for spaces/places that they can call home in tangible and intangible terms and the problem of losing such places (Kim & Smets, 2020). Contemporary scholarly texts also refer to the aspect of non-places in the lives of war refugees by considering reception points, for instance, as 'places in transit' (Göler, 2020). Refugee asylums are sometimes even described as spaces of psychosocial catastrophe for their inhabitants (Kublitz, 2016).

An important topic of discussion regarding the role of space, places and their senses in the lives of war refugees is the semantic construct of home (Ghorashi, 2014; Boccagni & Miranda, 2022; Ghosh, 2022). The research shows that the definition of home as perceived by refugees may go beyond a specific location with residential functions. Places that do not resemble home at all may become a more or less metaphorical 'home' that acts as a refuge and allows one to work through pain. Arvanitis and Yelland (2021: 17) write on the important role of specific places in the refugee's life: "The continuous production of dreams is intertwined with nostalgia for the place of origin (home) and the place of destination (the reconstruction of new home). Both homes/spatialities are idealised in their imagination [...]. It also seems to be the place where dreams come true". The invoked words describe the need to find a safe, if temporary, anchorage point and shelter that can replace the functions of a home. In this case, the concept of 'home' has an expanded scope of meaning. Home can describe any place in a public space that is able to 'mentally transport' the refugee into their lost world (Van Liempt & Staring, 2021). Such places build a refuge in a mental, emotional, imaginative sense. They are places of restoration, renewal and recovery (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Other researchers support themselves with the more metaphorical term of 'a safe place to cry' (Pepworth & Nash, 2009). In both cases, reference is made to places within the larger public space that, for some reason (silence, stillness, isolation, surroundings), allow the 'alien' to stop and be in their suffering, without being exposed to unwanted contact.

In discussing places of importance for refugees, an interesting thesis is put forward by sociologists Boccagni and Miranda (2022). Social researchers use the term 'non-home' to build a positive narrative around the places where the larger group of immigrants lives. Sociologists note that when unable to have a traditional home, refugees can build their sense of agency by consciously living in a collective with other refugees. In this case, immigrants themselves made their choice of living in a shared rented house/apartment or in an asylum centre. Sharing a common living space among people in the same situation is meant to build collective solidarity and identity and to work through difficult times abroad together. The multifaceted nature of this issue is also highlighted by Oesch (2017).

Summarising the presented views, we can conclude that the categories of place and sense of place are constitutive of identity, self-confidence and agency of each individual. In the lives of war-migrants, places seem to be a much more pronounced category, as they are perceived through the loss of homes, neighbourhoods and entire homelands. The

literature shows that in the dynamic and dramatic fate of the refugee, places signify worlds that are lost and worlds that are sought at the same time. In the following sections, we try to reconstruct the role that various places play in the everyday life of Ukrainian war refugees in Poland and the differences between recognized places. In this way, we want to show the role of places and the sense of places (both creates power of place) in the everyday life of war refugees.

Methodology

The study we designed was a two-stage activity. At the first stage, we conducted a CAWI questionnaire survey among 555 Ukrainian war refugees who found refuge in Poland after the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022. The study was conducted among refugees located in Poland and included in the InfoSapiens agency research panel. The research tool was built by the authors of the study, while the field survey was carried out by the Ukrainian social research agency InfoSapiens. The quantitative stage of the study was a type of pre-research investigation used to find topics of interest for in-depth study in the interviews. We tried to recognize general opinions about predefined places and find out information valuable for in-depth stage. The 555-strong study group consisted of: 485 women (87.4%), 69 (12.4%) men and one (0.2%) non-binary person; 11 (2.0%) people had primary education, 51 (9.2%) high school, 141 (25.4%) technical school secondary level, 82 (14.8%) bachelor's degree, 270 (48.6%) master's degree; 28 (5.0%) were aged 18-24 years, 108 (19.5%) 25-34 years, 230 (41.4%) 35-45 years, 102 (18.4%) 46-55 years, 67 (12.1%) 56-65 years, 16 (2.9%) 66-75 years, 4 (0.7%) 76 years and more. Almost 93% of respondents arrived to Poland between February 2022 and October 2022 (the first six months of the full invasion), just over 7% of residents arrived to Poland between November 2022 and February 2023.

Following the quantitative survey, we conducted 17 in-depth interviews with refugees who came to Poland after the invasion and lived in the vicinity of Poznań and in the city

Table 1. Summary of selected characteristics of participants in the in-depth interviews

Selected attributes of participants in in-depth interviews				
Code	gender	age	education	time of entry into PL
R1	W	34	higher	03.2022
R2	W	73	high school	10.2022
R3	W	48	higher	03.2022
R4	W	44	high school	03.2022
R5	W	29	high school	04.2022
R6	W	38	high school	03.2023
R7	W	43	higher	03.2023
R8	W	44	high school	03.2022
R9	W	70	high school	09.2022
R10	W	49	vocational school	09.2022
R11	W	36	high school	07.2022
R12	W	27	high school	04.2022
R13	W	60	high school	03.2022
R14	W	42	higher	04.2022
R15	W	46	high school	03.2022
R16	W	31	higher	02.2023
R17	W	48	higher	03.2022

itself. This stage was crucial for us. We wanted to deepen the themes identified during the survey research. Seventeen women were interviewed in Poznań, Poland (cf. Tab. 1). The selection of interview participants complete dominance by women was due to the specific nature of the war migration of Ukrainian citizens (Kohlenberger et al., 2023; Mickelsson, 2023b). Men aged between 18 and 60 were banned from leaving Ukraine from the outset. Consequently, almost all men with Ukrainian citizenship in the stated age bracket who arrived to Poland after 24 February 2024 are not there legally, and hence form a 'grey zone' of war migration. They refused to participate in our qualitative research for fear of identification. We therefore decided to focus on women.

The role of place in 'time of arrival': places as the gap in-between the past and the future

One of the issues explored in the surveys and interviews was attachment to places that served as the first key locations for refugees upon arrival in Poland. We asked a group of 555 respondents about the two main categories of such places a war refugee most often encounters: reception points and first places of residence. In the qualitative research, we undertook discussions on the more in-depth opinions and attitudes of Ukrainian refugees during their entry into the host society. During the survey, we asked a closed-ended question about the evaluation of the role of the special aid points. Respondents had to rate each of the listed place categories (cf. Fig. 1). Such logistical hubs of sorts were established very quickly in many of Poland's smaller and larger border towns. Refugees were directed to these locations after crossing the border. After a shorter or longer period of time, migrants were either redirected to collective accommodation or were picked up by Poles in private homes. According to the responses of the survey participants, reception points were very important to a large group of respondents at the very beginning of their arrival, when they most often did not know what to do after crossing the border (almost 70% of positive indications). However, for many respondents, places of assistance began to lose their importance as the length of their stay in Poland extended to months. Responses to the survey indicate that, most often, at the time of the survey (approximately 1 year and a half after the start of the invasion of Ukraine), refugee aid centres served as places to obtain official information regarding residence in Poland (close to 40% of positive indications). Respondents were less likely to see such centres as places to meet, talk and spend time together with other refugees (30% of positive indications) and as a way to get hygiene products or food (just over 20% of positive indications). These results can be commented on with the general conclusion that these places served a functional purpose as logistical hubs during the most difficult time for refugees, upon entry to the host country but, for the majority of respondents, they did not become durable anchor places. In reaching this conclusion, it should be borne in mind that for almost 30% of the respondents still in the survey, these are socially important places (where you can meet people in the same situation and talk). We currently find more interest in this type of function in the responses of older people: 38.81% of positive indications among respondents aged 66-75, 31.25% of positive indications among those over 75 and only 17.86% of positive indications in the 18-24 age group. Among the respondents located in the age categories between 25 and 65 years, a positive answer was chosen by an average of around 26% of the respondents.

The in-depth interviews we conducted showed profound views on refugee aid points. The following are extremely different viewpoints. As we mentioned, on the one hand, such places are still (several months after their arrival) socially important. One respondent, an elderly person who does not actually use the internet, said:

> *"Aid centres are important because we get some food there and we can*

meet our compatriots. I am happy to go to such an aid point because then I can sit and talk to someone from my country and complain, share my pain. There is someone who understands me, speaks my language and is in the same situation as me. It is good that these points exist" (R9).

On the other hand, however, some people pointed out that these places often generate tensions between users. A woman aged 31 with a university education said:

"I have been there once or twice. I don't want to go back there because there are different people there, from different parts of Ukraine – both the east and the west, with different education and different views. Some of them speak only Russian. There are also those who say that it all happened because of the West and that there was no need to irritate Putin. There are disputes in such places. I don't go there anymore and I know that many people avoid such places" (R16).

Yet another person, also with a university degree and relatively younger, pointed out that over time, as she acquired the necessary documents to function, she wanted to have more agency in her life:

"In the beginning, these aid points were very important. There we had information, help and were able to relax. But over time, most people looked for solutions on their own, I already had the internet, refugee documents and I wanted to start functioning normally. These places were so depressing"(R1).

The second survey question was identified the first place of residence of the respondents immediately after their arrival in Poland, their current place of residence (Fig. 2), and the frequency of change of residence. Nearly 50% of respondents indicated 'flat/house of Polish family' as their first place of residence. These were usually rooms made available for free by Polish families in private flats or houses where the owner also lived. In addition to this, participants in the study were sent to specially organised refugees centres, which are in fact railway stations and sports halls converted into dormitories, or to workers' and tourist hotels, which were able to give away vacant rooms. These were the most popular venue types in the participants' declarations. Both solutions had three important attributes: 'they were immediate, free of charge and provided reasonably stable shelter'. They allowed people to rest, very often after travelling for several days. The basic expectations of places at this time, articulated in the words of one interviewee, are very simple:

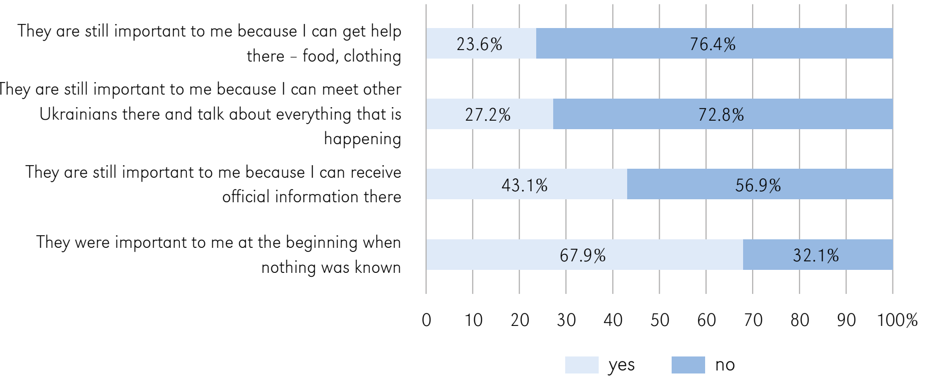

Figure 1. The opinion about the role of special aid points for war refugees in Poland (%)

> *"I wanted to be able to go home and sleep all night at home, and for the baby to sleep in bed and not hear the sirens. It was the only thing I thought about during my escape to Poland" (R4).*

Those taking part in the survey pointed out that they often changed their first place of residence to another. Declarations of change of first residence were made by 67.2% of the 555 respondents. Of these, 25.9% had changed their place of residence once and 41.3% had changed their place of residence more than once.

The results of the surveys (Fig. 2) show a clear decline over time, the popularity of staying in refugee centres, but also in hotels and hostels. In contrast, the category 'rented room, apartment or house' is gaining more positive indications. Only 14.8% of respondents decided to rent immediately upon arrival. After a stay of almost one and a half years, this way of living and a kind of step towards independence was declared by almost 40% of the survey participants.

The coincidence of the responses 'places of stay upon arrival' and 'present places of stay' shows that:

- of those declaring residence in a refuge for war refugees as their first place of residence, 42.7% have continued to stay there since their arrival, 16.85% have changed it to a room with a Polish family and 28.1% have decided to rent a self-contained room, apartment or house
- of those declaring residence in a flat/house of Polish family as their first place of residence, 63.56% still live there and 31.36% changed from this type of residence to a self-contained room, apartment or house
- of those declaring hotel residence as their first residence, 20.00% moved into a flat/house of Polish family, 32% rented a self-contained room, apartment or house and 44% continued to stay in the hotel in which they were accommodated

The results of the questionnaires also for the second question show an increase in a kind of 'spatial agency' in the actions of refugees with the length of stay. The mobility of a sizeable proportion of refugees is increasing and they are beginning to look for a place to live that is more stable and offers independence. The role of aid points, which were a very important place to get information in the first weeks, is losing its importance over time.

The interviews reveal the in-depth content of refugees' accounts towards the first weeks of their stay and the places they encountered on their way in the first weeks of their stay.

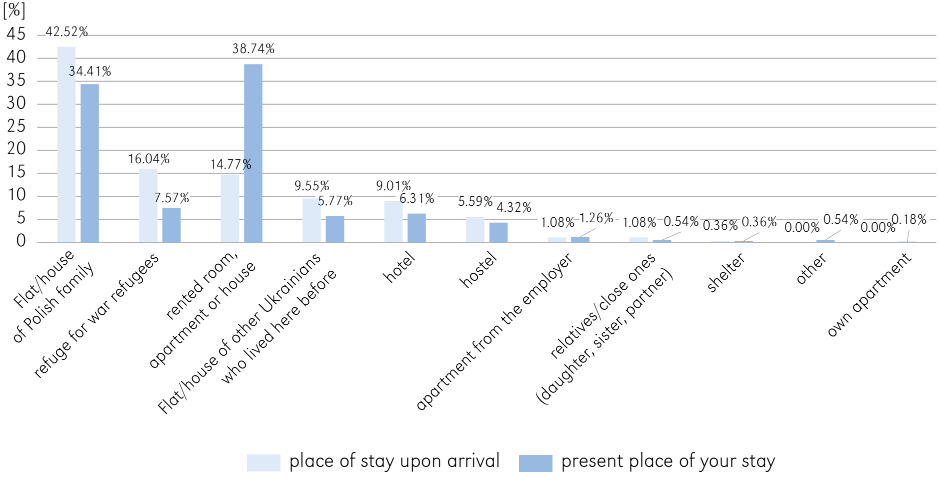

Figure 2. Places of stay upon arrival and present (%)

One interviewee was just in the process of deciding to relocate. At the time she spoke to us, she was living with her child in a hotel where other refugees were accommodated. This is what she told us about her situation:

> *"I have been living in a hotel for a very long time. At first, I was happy to find myself in a hotel. It was a terrible time and I didn't know what to do. There were people speaking the same language in the hotel, my compatriots. But now I want to move out of the hotel. It is best to rent something. There are different people in the hotel. Some help. Others harm their own kind. I had problems in the shared kitchen for a long time. There were people who resented me taking up space in the fridge, since I'd come later and they had to give me access to the shared kitchen on the first floor. But my child and I didn't come here of our own free will. Such collective places are good for a start, for a short time, then you have to find someplace of your own and deal with the situation" (R16).*

In the interviews, respondents revealed to us the behind-the-scenes aspects of reaching specific homes and the often difficult and dynamic journey to these first places of residence. One respondent said:

> *"The moment of departure was a terrible time. We travelled 2 days to the border. There was a volunteer on the Polish side and he had addresses from private people who wanted to take in refugees. He said there were people close to Poznań who wanted to help a family with children. I have 2 young children. I took the train completely blind. I was very scared that a stranger would be waiting for us, but it turned out to be wonderful people. We lived there for three months and then moved to Poznań. But we have contact all the time with this family and we visit them" (R1).*

Another person recalled her arrival in Poland and her first place of stay differently. She presents the motives for relocating as linked emotional reasons (longing for a big city) and purely functional motives (too small room):

> *"When we left Kiev for Western Ukraine, I met a friend of mine there who also wanted to go to Poland. A Polish family near Poznań was hosting her and her 2 daughters. And this family agreed to take in me and my daughter too, and someone immediately took us near Poznań in their car. However, I knew immediately that it was a transitional place because there were 2 of us adults and 3 children in one room. I am from Kiev and I missed the big city so much. I loved walking the streets of the old city in Kiev with my daughter because I lived in the centre"* (R3).

On the one hand, the difficult living conditions and, on the other hand, the longing for places in Kiev led this person to rent a room in Poznań, a large city (pop. 540,000) that could at least remind her a little of Kiev. Most of our interviewees pointed out that for the first few weeks they lived under enormous stress due to the shock of suddenly leaving their place of residence and the fear of a new place. One of them said:

> *"The first place in Poland was accidental. I wanted to get as far away from the war as possible with my children, and Poznań was near the German border. That's all I knew. I travelled from the train station in Poznań to my family near Poznań. Someone picked us up from the refugee point. After two months I moved to Poznań and here I still rent to this day. The fear passed and I started looking for a job and my own place without pressure. The first place I lived was nice, but I had this feeling that I was detached from reality, like in a film. In Ukraine we had a job, a flat,*

and here you have to start from scratch. Within a few days it was over. I had one thought. What if there had been no war and no bullets flying overhead. I wanted to be able to go home and sleep all night at home and for the baby to sleep in bed and not hear the sirens. That's all I was thinking about" (R4).

The words of another person are also telling:

"The first two months were a nightmare. I was afraid of the regular truck that picks up rubbish at 5:00 in the morning. When it arrived, you heard terrible sounds and I would wake up and shake. I was afraid it was a tank. In Poznań, passenger planes fly over the city on landing. I was afraid of the sound and thought every time to run to the shelter. It was a fear that we could not overcome. I didn't see much in the area. It was terrible fear" (R5).

This survey participant also had other negative experiences with her first place of residence in Poland:

"I had a huge distaste after my first place to live and concerns about continuing to stay in Poland. On the one hand, I was grateful that strangers in another country helped me. On the other hand, the family who took us in received a subsidy for a period of three months and allowed us to live. But as the government support ran out these people started to pressure us to look for another place, threaten to take us to a refugee hotel, eventually sending abusive text messages. And I was alone with a small and sick child. However, we managed to find another room" (R5).

This last voice shows what problems the refugees faced in the first days and weeks. These are anxieties linked to the recent past, the suddenness of the change that has befallen them, a kind of helplessness in new, unfamiliar places, but also often enormous stress in relation to representatives of the host society.

The results of the questionnaires presented so far show that, with the length of their stay in exile, respondents in most cases became more familiar with the conditions and rules of life in exile, acquired a kind of 'spatial agency' and the courage to make decisions. In most cases, they broke off relationships with reception points, gave up their first places of residence and searched for a suitable place to live, sometimes moving many times. They also became more voluntarily mobile in the environs of their living space with the passage of time.

The in-depth interviews reveal the behind-the-scenes of such decisions and the social contexts surrounding those first weeks and months in exile. The role of place in the first weeks in Poland was very important, although perhaps not fully realised. The place allowed one to feel safe and to 'stop in time and space' while fleeing the war, somewhere 'between places of the lost past' and 'places of the unknown future'.

At this point, a place generally is an unnamed and unfamiliar location providing at best a sense of security. However, it cannot be ruled out that coincidences allow refugees to find places that offer opportunities for stronger relationships:

"I really enjoyed it there. We come from the same small town and also have a detached house. And it was all just like here in Ukraine. Me and my children felt at home. We felt so at home because this family had toys for the children, beds, rooms. This made us feel very safe. There was an immediate bond with the place and although we moved to a big city we go there very often to visit" (R1).

Interestingly, despite being in such a positive and emotionally warm place, this woman decided to move to a place that offered opportunities to get a job, send her children to school and be independent. For those who

manage to survive this period of entry into society, a subsequent period of begins, characterized by more conscious choices associated with exploring and taming the space.

The role of place in 'time of taming' – places of redefinitions and restorations

In the following survey questions and in-depth interviews, we sought information on places of importance to war migrants in the following months of their stay in Poland and their role in the life of a refugee.

In the survey, we included a closed question in which respondents were asked to assess the role of the listed categories of important spaces and objects in Poland (Fig. 3). The rating of importance ranged from 1 'definitely no' to 5 'definitely yes'. When presenting the results and comparing them, we also calculated the net indicator—positive choices[1]. This allows for a comparison of responses between the assessed categories. The results draw several conclusions:

- all kinds of green areas (of which there are many in Poznań) and areas by the river flowing through the city are extremely popular with refugees,
- a relatively important place, although not as highly rated as green spaces, is the respondents' current place of residence,
- very high positive marks were given to the internet and social media as places[2] of importance to them.

The high ranking and positive evaluations towards the place of residence are not surprising, especially when talking about the fate of refugees. The narrative of the home is fundamental in immigrant stories, as we mentioned in the literature review. The other two categories, public green spaces and the internet and social media, are places specifically used by refugees. The former become specific 'places of restoration'. We will return to this thread when analysing the content of the in-depth interviews. In turn, the internet and digital media are literally becoming 'everything' in the hands of refugees. They offer the chance to locate and navigate in an unfamiliar city, quickly provide essential information needed for life, allow translation into a foreign language, finally provide news of the home country, and are the only bridge between those who have fled and those who have remained in their homeland. It is enough to quote one of the interviewees to understand the essence of this medium and, at the same time, of a specifically understood place in exile:

> *"My child knows who her dad is only because of the internet. When I arrived in Poland the little one was not yet talking. I am constantly talking to my husband online and showing him the baby. The first words the son said online were dad. The internet connects us every day and through this, the husband sees the child every day and the son knows that dad exists and he can have contact with him"* (R1).

In exile, the internet and social media cease to be entertainment and 'time fillers'. They become 'bridges' allowing one to carry along at least a facsimile of the worlds left behind.

The places that our respondents rated as the least useful are the commercial spaces: pubs, restaurants and swimming pools and aquaparks. From a refugee's perspective, the first two categories in particular, i.e. pubs and restaurants, even become unnecessary places and, most likely, economically inaccessible.

In a further question, we asked survey participants to rate the reasons why 'their places' become important to them (Fig. 4). Respondents were asked to rate the categories we

[1] Net indicator (positive choices) is the sum of positive responses minus the sum of negative responses, excluding 'difficult to say' responses.

[2] In the study, we used an approach in which Internet resources and social media are treated as categories of places e.g.: cyber places, digital places (Adams, 1997; McArthur & White, 2016). Hence, the survey included many questions about refugees' use of digital space as a place, in addition to questions about places in the traditional sense of material space.

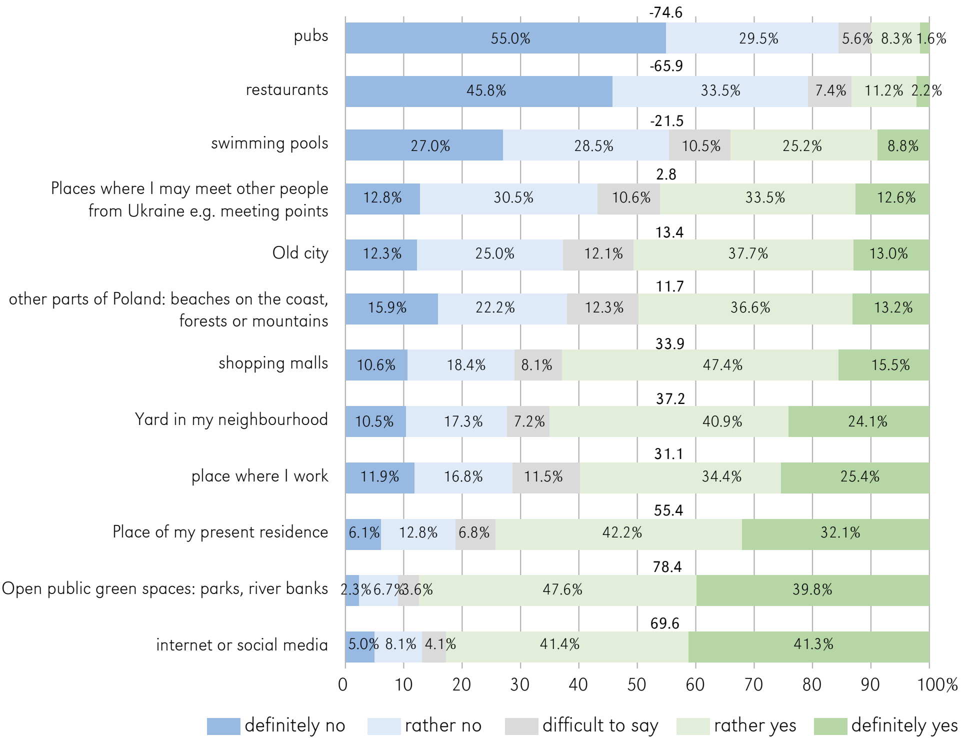

Figure 3. Places important to respondents in Poland (%) and net indicator (-100;100 pts.)

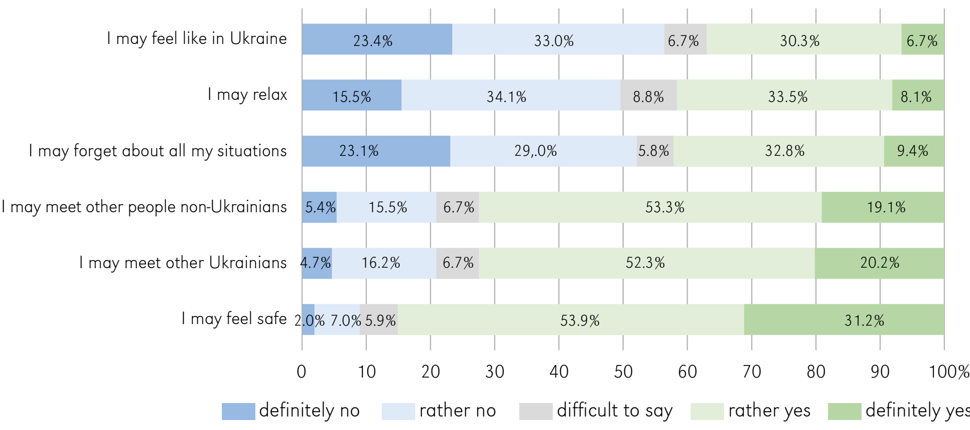

Figure 4. The reasons for the importance of places (%)

formulated on a scale from 1 'definitely no' to 5 'definitely yes'. The most popular reason for choosing places as 'own, tame' is the sense of security and the opportunity to meet other people, both Ukrainian citizens and Poles.

A large group of survey participants also point out that their favourite places allow them to forget the whole situation and relax (both more than 40% positive).

In the interviews, we wanted to deepen the themes identified in the quantitative research. It turned out that talking about favourite places was sometimes very difficult for people. These places were tied to distant memories and triggered layers of longing as well as the trauma of losing contact with these places. Participants were quite quick to mention their favourite places in Poland, but it was more difficult for them to talk about the emotions these places evoked. Each of the interviews brought on a deeper reverie and the articulation of broader reflections on life by the respondents. For example, one respondent said:

> *"My daughter and I like to go for a walk in the parks. We also like to go to Malta (author's note: recreational area for Poznań residents), to the lake. On the one hand, I feel nostalgic because there was a similar lake in our town in Ukraine. On the other hand, I relax here. There are a lot of people around, but I can also sit and think about it all. Among these people I am less visible, but safe. We are comfortable in this place. Somehow you have to live here. At the first place of residence, near Poznań, there was a large forest. And that's where I often cycled. I ran away to the forest to be alone. My daughter stayed at home and I had to be alone and think about what had happened. You know, to realise where we are and why" (R8).*

Another respondent described her favourite place in exile with these words:

> *"I found such a Square of the Righteous Among the Nations in the city. Immediately, the name made it important to me. I go there to sit. Poles saved Jews during the Second World War. There is a monument in this square symbolising this aid. I like to sit there, among the greenery, close to that monument. It's in the centre and everyone is in a hurry to get somewhere. I watch people, I think, I reflect. My Soul stayed in Ukraine. I had to come here to help my daughter and granddaughter. But if it wasn't for them I would be struggling now. And so I think while sitting there, what am I doing here and why" (R10).*

On the other hand, an older person said that she very much enjoys visiting Poznań's museums. She found out that there are cheaper tickets for pensioners on certain days. She loved to use this moment for herself:

> *"I like the National Gallery in the city centre best. As I am in this place I feel a huge sense of relief, contentment, peace. I look forward to the day I go there. I immediately sit down next to my favourite painting and can sit for such a long time. I also spend time at the Archaeological Museum, the Museum of Wielkopolska Uprising, but I like the National Gallery best. And when I'm having a bad day, I'm sad then I go to the Palm House. There's nothing like sitting among the flowers. There, in the Palm House, the flowers are presented in the arrangement of the different zones of the world. I feel like I've travelled the world. It is so peaceful. There is silence in all these places. I am in a safe world. It's as if this war wasn't with us and I was [just] travelling" (R9).*

A common feature of the places cited in the above statements is their public character, other users in these places, a kind of anonymity in them and the tranquillity and possibility to stop, being unnoticed. In the last statement, there is also a theme of narrating the stay in exile as a kind of 'holiday' or 'travel'. Of course, with a full understanding of the difference of these situations and pointing out the roles of the 'alien' in both cases. Another of our interviewees also mentioned this phenomenon:

> *"I feel a bit like a 'tourist on holiday' here in Poznań. The thought keeps coming back to me that I will soon return*

home to Ukraine and tell my relatives, my father and my husband, how it was on holiday. Please do not get me wrong. I suffer and I miss a lot. My compatriots are dying there and there is war. But I am talking about places here in Poland and the attachment to them. I often have this feeling that I'm renting a room here, I'm working to earn a living and I'm a tourist and not a war refugee, and it's all about to end" (R7).

'Tourist' or 'traveller' are also figures of the 'alien' in literature. The common denominators of these social roles and the role of the 'refugee' are temporality, transience, the rapidity of change and detachment from the surrounding world. Not surprisingly, life in exile provokes associations of 'being on the move' in our respondents. These associations may be reinforced by the need to displace the stigma attached to the role of 'war refugee' and the drama associated with it. Arguably, it is much easier to find 'one's worlds' in a foreign country by taking on the role of an 'alien on the move' rather than a 'war refugee alien'. Stories about travelling or being on holiday seem to be the simplest semantic shorthand for accepting the figure of the 'alien', which is de facto the refugee.

The last of the quotations we wish to recall vividly shows the drama of 'uprooting from places' and trying to enter other places that are alien to oneself:

"At first when I arrived in Poznań I was lost and didn't know what emotions I had. I have never felt them before. I asked myself what I was doing here and where I was. I made the decision to run away from home with my daughter in 15 minutes. I packed my rucksacks and we were already heading west. I am from a town near the Russian border. And once I came here, I kept asking myself why I came here. And this was my answer: because there is a war in our country. I left because of the baby. We live next to the large Citadel Park. And I would often go there and say to myself… God, there is a war in Ukraine. And so I walked to this park and tried to put my thoughts together to know who I was" (R15).

From the cited conversations, it appears that the green spaces that were viewed so positively by many respondents in the survey can act as a kind of place of redefinitions and restorations. These are good places to stop and think about your situation. They are places where respondents remain anonymous. Although they are among people they feel safe and can become immersed in their thoughts and recollections. The following months in exile can be summarised by the need for stability and a taming and understanding of the situation. The places more or less intentionally sought by war refugees from Ukraine are places that allow these needs to be realised.

Conclusions

The aim of our research was to determine the meaning of place in the life of the war refugee, explored through a retrospective of the first several months of immigration of Ukrainian citizens. We have tried to formulate some generalisations that, on the one hand, allow us to relate to existing hypotheses (e.g. Sampson & Gifford, 2010; Göler, 2020) and, on the other hand, allow us to reconstruct the role that various places play in the everyday life of refugees in Poland and the differences between recognized places in this dramatic time.

The fate of refugees and their relationship to place is very complex and dynamic. Without doubt, the world of the war refugee is one of loss, longing, anxiety, pain and fear. The war refugee is suspended between the unremarkable past and anxieties about the immediate future. This dramatic set of attributes describing the immigrant's fate applies equally to psycho-social issues and narratives of space (places). In spatial terms, the fate of the war refugee sketched by the tragedy of Ukrainian citizens is marked with:

- very sudden decisions to flee the war and to part with the mosaic of places that are familiar and form the identity of Ukrainian citizens in their home country,
- genericness of places in the first weeks in exile that, although bland, give a sense of security and allows a point way,
- stabilising the personal situation in the following months and looking for at least a symbolic 'home' and places to work through the experience of tragedy.

The semantic scope of the place in the war refugee dictionary includes:

- places that are past, and perhaps even physically no longer exist,
- places recalled in memory,
- places without content, lacking a sense of place,
- new places tamed.

The first two categories are linked to homeland and neighbourhood. The remaining two categories are places encountered in the host society.

The locations and facilities most often encountered by a war migrant in the first days and weeks of their stay in the host country are hastily created out of the need of the moment. They have a purely functional, operational character and are most often called such. They are 'rallying points' and 'dislocation centres' filled with terrified people who have lost everything and do not know where they are going. Such centres are most often established in places that are redundant from the perspective of the host society, empty or simply vacant. These are halls, stations, stadiums and hastily erected container buildings. Such places are the hinterland of war. They are filled with tragedy and do not create connections and bonds with the people there. Perhaps the terms 'no sense of place', 'non-place' and 'placelessness' fit such places like no other. War refugees are "dropped" into these types of places very violently, just as they usually had to flee the violence of war and invaders. These are mostly 'places-for-a-while', with the chance of a peaceful night's sleep. These are refuges where incoming planes, exploding bombs and gunfire cannot be heard. They offer peace of mind, but at the same time materialise spatially a sense of tragedy.

At the beginning of their stay in the host society, immigrants fall into temporal and spatial 'gaps in-between the past and the future places'. In the case of war migrants from Ukraine, this is the time spent at dislocation points and the first shelter received in a hotel or with a Polish family. Over time, Ukrainian immigrants acquire greater agency and the courage to act. Very often, respondents change their first place of residence after a few or several weeks. This is related to the need to find a job, a nursery or school for the children, a medical facility if the child has any ongoing illnesses.

Reflection and an attempt to understand what happened come with time. These characterize the second phase of the stay, when one finds a substitute 'home' – a place that is safe and offers the chance of a certain measure of stability over time. Places then become a potential starting point from which to rebuild, understand and redefine oneself in the context of the role of the 'alien'.

This is the time when the first attempts to find answers to the questions 'what really happened' emerge, and the venues of experience make it easier to find those answers. After a period of shock from having to take flight and the violence of the change, refugees from Ukraine try to 'anchor themselves in place'. In their search for 'places to stop and reflect', they often end up in non-commercial, free-access parks and squares filled with other users. Places begin to play a more prominent role in their lives in the host society and can become pivotal axes for life's temporary fate as a war refugee in exile. Whether kindergarten, school, workplace, a rented house, or park, the newly tamed place is where one can understand oneself in a new situation, step out of the role of the 'alien', and take on the social role of 'quasi-local' In such places one becomes a person who resembles the permanent residents in regard to behaviour, a human being who is able to blend into a public space and into a community of users,

although one may still be recognised as an 'alien' at any time. After all, one still does not know all the complex rules and patterns of behaviour, language, and interaction. One remains suspended between two worlds: the lost world – their own, and the present world – something tamed but not yet owned (Pearlman, 2023).

Finally, we would like to say that places matter in the lives of war refugees. Places perceived positively or negatively may be an invisible force that builds identity among war refugees or pushes refugees into an even greater tragedy of the effects of war.

Authors' note on the study limitations:

The study was conducted at one point in time and the retrospective technique was used in the survey research. The respondents were asked to evaluate certain situations, facts, events and decisions from the perspective of time. There was no study repeated at two times on the same sample.

The study was conducted using the CAWI method (online) and only respondents with access to the network and in the research agency's database could participate in it.

In the quantitative survey we did not use questions about the respondent's place of residence (village, small town, large city). This distinction would allow for deeper results of quantitative research and it can be interesting and valuable topic of future research on the war-refugees.

The qualitative study involves conducting 17 in-depth interviews. The interpretations and conclusions drawn from these interviews are intended to show some deeper mechanisms of the studied phenomena, but do not lead to statistical generalizations. In our opinion, however, it is qualitative research that is the most valuable empirical material when examining the issue of war refugees.

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