

Martyna Pryszmont
ORCID: 0000-0003-1637-8123
University of Wrocław

Ukrainian Microworlds of War, Refugees and Volunteers in Wrocław: Between Autoethnographic Accounts and Reportage

Paweł Rudnicki, *Kto, jak nie my? Wspólnota i działanie na Dworcu Głównym we Wrocławiu (marzec, kwiecień 2022), [If Not Us, Who? Community and Action at the Wrocław Main Train Station (March–April 2022)]*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Wrocław 2023, pp.192

It is now two years since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine—an event that has halted and moved the whole world. It has caused the hitherto international humanitarian standards to be severely compromised, and it has challenged humanity, especially the Polish people. The passage of time has meant that, to some extent, the war in Ukraine has been normalized, although it continues to bring injustice and brutality and remains a lifelong trauma for many. However, this passage of time also allows for reflection and an attempt to give meaning to the experiences of people living in these microworlds of war, such as the people who



SPI Vol. 27, 2024/2
e-ISSN 2450-5366

have chosen to respond to this injustice by taking action to help the Ukrainians arriving in Poland.

This is the subject of a book by Paweł Rudnicki titled *Kto, jak nie my? Wspólnota i działanie na Dworcu Głównym we Wrocławiu (marzec, kwiecień 2022)* [*If Not Us, Who? Community and Action at the Wrocław Main Train Station (March–April 2022)*] (Wrocław 2023). The monograph was published as a result of a competition carried out by the Council of the Robert Kwaśnica Scholarship Fund in the series “Poza Kulturową Oczywistością” [Beyond Cultural Obviousness], which takes up issues within the pedagogical sciences.

In fact, the book cover itself is already an illustration of a symbolic “gateway” to different microworlds: war, refugees, volunteers, observers, researchers, and so on. It can be interpreted as the letters “M” and “W,” associated with the city of Wrocław, where the research was carried out. Another association is “love,” which, according to Erich Fromm, denotes a certain attitude, a character trait, a person’s approach to the world in general, and not a single object of love (Fromm 2000). Another association is with the volunteers who display this attitude when providing their support to refugees arriving in Wrocław. Also visible in the background of these letters are train tracks, symbolizing travel, being on the way, and a gateway to “another” world. These are not the only illustrations in this publication that show the particular circumstances of the issue taken up by its author. The table of contents is preceded by two black-and-white photographs by Rudnicki, showing the main railway station in Wrocław and the research station in Café Dialog, which is part of Station Dialog run by the Aid to the Church in Need Association and located at Wrocław’s main train station. It is in this space that the author carried out his research and support activities. The important message of the publication is reflected in the quotation that opens the book:

May God bless and keep you always,
May your wishes all come true,
May you always do for others
And let others do for you.

(Bob Dylan)

Paweł Rudnicki's monograph is undoubtedly an important and valuable book not only for the world of science, but also for others who are interested in its topic. This was the assumption of its author: that the book should be understandable for the majority of its readers. Thus, it is not laden with theory and the accompanying scientific nomenclature, but it provides an open and transparent communication style that enables the individual parts, as well as the publication as a whole, to be understood. An important role in communicating with the reader is played by the introduction, in which the author presents both his motivations and inspirations for writing the monograph, describes the methodology of the research he carried out, and introduces the atmosphere of this research. Emphasis is also placed on introducing the reader to the characteristics of the subsequent chapters, which constitute three separate but complete parts of the book.

The monograph has a popularizing nature, which is, firstly, a response to the challenges of academic environments—whose task is to care for the current needs of society—and secondly, a reference to the needs of the people involved in the research and their communities, which support Ukrainian refugees. This is because it gives them the opportunity to “re-read” and understand their own actions, motivations, and emotions. Thus, they gain the opportunity to reflect more deeply on their volunteering and, moreover, to learn from this life experience (see Golonka-Legut 2019). The research project carried out by Paweł Rudnicki is undoubtedly a socially committed project in terms of the values in it (towards which the author turns), as well as in terms of the aid and voluntary activities for those in need. It also provided the author with an opportunity to learn in these different spaces on which the relationships were based. This reflection on the qualitative researcher's learning is an important dimension of the monograph and is the result of the reflective research practice that underpinned the research. Here is a quotation that illustrates these characteristics of the book:

I chatted constantly with other people in vests. On the run, we exchanged experiences, told refugee stories we had heard, and wondered how many more people would arrive, whether there would be anything to feed them, or where we would find accommodation for them. We were moved, we cried, we joked (without knowing if we should). We commented on the absence of the state and its institutions at the main station and on the late presence of the city authorities. We were

happy to see the solidarity of people from Wrocław and the surrounding area; we marveled at how many people wearing vests were at the station, how many different languages they spoke, and where they were from. In this experience of cooperation of vest-wearing volunteers, I saw the need to document motivation, work, commitment, informal/situational learning, and ways of dealing with emotions, stress, and fatigue. I decided to interview people volunteering at Café Dialog at the main train station in Wrocław. (Rudnicki 2023: 16)

This reflective commitment of the author is evident in all parts of the work. The first chapter, “I want to help people who need it’: Café Dialog—The Beginning,” deals with the origins, scope, and motives of volunteering activities at the Wrocław main train station and with the importance of using social media for this purpose. The author describes how volunteers started to appear at the station, how they organized themselves, and what motivated their actions. This chapter consists of two parts: in the first part, the author interprets the qualitative data collected at the station, and in the second part, he presents an interpretative analysis of the data from the study in relation to selected concepts from the social sciences (Rudnicki 2023: 33).

Chapter two is entitled “Everyone thinks they are doing the right thing’: Volunteer self-organization,” and it deals with the self-organization presented from the perspective of the volunteers, who (wearing yellow vests), like the author, provided assistance in their first contact with refugees. It also describes the enormity of the measures that had to be taken during the several days of the refugee crisis and the self-organization of the system, which involved volunteers taking responsibility for the state and the city (Rudnicki 2023: 82).

Chapter three, in turn, titled “Just like that, inner self-pride’: On learning (about oneself), emotions, and fatigue,” talks about the intangible costs of volunteer work related to emotions, stress, burn-out, awareness of regeneration, and the lack thereof (Rudnicki 2023: 27). Emotions accompany the reader from the beginning of the book, especially concerning the moments when the worlds of the refugees come into contact with the volunteers’ experience. When thinking about aid situations, we may focus on the people in need, but both the recipients and donors are important. For this reason, this chapter touches on a particularly important perspective in analyzing the phenomenon of volunteering issues. The diversity of this process is already apparent in the very titles of the following subsections: “There were

times when I just couldn't stand it and cried': Emotions and reclaiming agency," "I sleep better, although it is human tragedy': Ambivalence and helping," "Everyone comes here for something, because of something, and with something': Addictive helping," and "Because images stay in our minds, anyway': Stress and regeneration."

The conclusion of the work is as valuable and innovative as the previous parts, since the author includes an appendix—"Postscript: One year later (interviews)," which contains three interviews that he conducted with volunteers in May and June 2023. Moreover, the book is also accompanied by the broadcasts of the *Wrocław Helps! Mini-cycle of podcasts*, which present the research material in this fascinating form. The podcasts have been published as part of the project "Podcastownia DSW" (<https://www.dsw.edu.pl/podcastownia-dsw>) (Rudnicki 2023: 28). It is also a superb tool for popularizing the results of research among people with a keen interest in the topic, including those outside the world of academia.

The monograph by Paweł Rudnicki entitled *Kto, jak nie my? Wspólnota i działanie na Dworcu Głównym we Wrocławiu (marzec, kwiecień 2022)* is one of the most interesting publications available on the market written for a wide audience. Its uniqueness, apart from the qualities mentioned above, is also evidenced by the author's method of narration, which can be described as both an autoethnographic account and reportage. The author describes the microworlds of war, refugees, and volunteers in an extremely interesting and diverse way. What makes it seem not only convincing, but also authentic in its narrative is the social and emotional involvement of the author, who honestly and directly reports on his research and aid experiences. I will conclude my reflections with a quotation from this publication, which can be read as a kind of epiphany in the biographical learning of the author:

If I was to remember one event from that time, it would be when the youngest volunteer, a teenager in an orange vest, taught a group of adults in yellow vests how to act on the platforms. How to receive people escaping from the war, how to be careful, what to look out for, how to broadcast messages. He talked about his experience; he encouraged people to work closely together to build trust; he was extremely caring. And then he invited everyone onto the platforms: "Our friends are about to arrive, let's go!" And they did go. (Rudnicki 2023: 149–150)



Bibliography

- Fromm E. (2000). *O sztuce miłości*, trans. A. Bogdański, Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis.
- Golonka-Legut J. (2019). *Edukacyjny potencjał indywidualnego doświadczenia życiowego*, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut.
- Rudnicki P. (2023). *Kto, jak nie my? Wspólnota i działanie na Dworcu Głównym we Wrocławiu (marzec, kwiecień 2022)*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyżej.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Martyna Pryszmont
University of Wrocław
Institute of Pedagogy
e-mail: martyna.pryszmont@uwr.edu.pl