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Lessons Learnt? War, Exile and Hope among Child Refugees in the Czech Republic

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This study describes the experiences of child refugees from Ukraine residing in the Czech Republic and sheds light on the perception of their situation. Our research is based on selected stories of 22 children from Ukraine – who wrote down their experiences of the war – and additional sources containing children's memories of the war from other contexts and historical periods. Using qualitative analysis of their narratives, we look at their life stories, which we have recorded, code, and sorted into analytical categories. The results indicate children's agency and the importance of their social relations. Moreover, we stress similarities with other refugee situations from the past that led to shaping children's identities. Attention should also be paid to the importance of children's vulnerabilities and special needs in refugee situations, especially when it comes to securing their emotional needs and education.

Keywords: child refugees, exile, trauma, identity, Ukraine

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Introduction

Throughout history, children have been involved in many refugee situations and represent an under-researched group of people who deserve further attention due to their unique characteristics. Our research unravels the current Ukrainian refugee situation in the Czech Republic through the eyes of children and adolescents. We follow their narratives as they discuss their lived experience of the war and emigration, followed by their future aspirations. Based on the experiences recorded by refugee children from Ukraine, who were driven from their homes at the beginning of the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, we analysed the key themes experienced during their resettlement and compared them with problems that are repeatedly described in the literature about refugee children from other historical periods.[1] In this study, we look at refugee children from former Yugoslavia in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republics. We analyse the ways (if any) in which the child refugee experience differs in the various contexts. To do this, we use children's written narrations of their experiences with the war – in this way, we might use it as a stepping-stone to better address their needs.

The Czech Republic has registered more than 500,000 refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR 2023); however, it is estimated that the current numbers are lower, as about one-third of the refugees returned to Ukraine (MVČR 2023). Refugee children represent more than a fourth of all Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic (MVČR 2023). The Czech Ministry of Education recorded 57,000 children registered in schools (including kindergartens and elementary schools) for the school year 2022/2023 (MŠMT 2022). However, research has shown that not all children attended educational institutions and attendance was generally lower among older children (16+ years) and children living in Prague and Central Bohemia, which host larger numbers of refugees (PAQ Research 2022). Their numbers slightly decreased in March 2023 to 51,000, with the largest share of children attending elementary schools (MŠMT 2023).

The war through the eyes of children has been recorded by ethnologists, anthropologists and historians in the past. For example, Povrzanović (1997) inquired about the formation of the ethnic and national socialisation of children, using the example of Croatian (and Bosnian) children in the 1990s, whose development was disrupted by the war and in which ethnicity played a significant role. Povrzanović draws attention to the fact that displaced and refugee children have acquired a maturity that is not usual for their age (Povrzanović 1997). In our paper, we showcase the experience of refugee children from Ukraine. We also focus on the psychological consequences, for children, of fleeing war zones and the specifics of working with these young people.

Next, we turn to the literature on child refugee integration, the identity formation of refugee children and the impact this experience has on children's future development. We also discuss the trauma that can affect refugee children and how their refugee experience differs from the stories shared by the Ukrainian refugee children staying in the Czech Republic. The analysis is divided into 3 parts to reflect key themes emerging from children's experiences of witnessing war and being refugees. The following themes are (1) the war experience, (2) the exile and (3) the aspirations and hope. In the discussion, we also discuss the experiences of refugee children from other European countries, as we draw parallels in their stories. While we are aware that there are more child refugees outside of Europe and it would be worthwhile looking at their experiences, we nevertheless decided to stay with the European context. Finally, we conclude by summarising the child refugees' experiences, which might differ in the details but which share specific characteristics in many different contexts.

Theoretical background

There is a difference between autobiographical and collective memory for people who have learnt about events indirectly (Nets-Zehngut 2011). Some refugees might be too young to remember their journeys, yet might be affected by the experience. Wylegała (2015) points to the fact that there is a difference between children who migrated as teenagers and small children who might be more affected by the transfer of familial memories. Teenage refugees might be more acutely aware of the changes taking place. In one study, refugee adults reported that they felt confused by the conflict that took place when they were young because it was difficult for them to understand the social and political reality at that time (Wylegała 2015). At the same time, the refugee experience can affect a person's identity for both child and adult refugees. Previous research on refugees discusses various themes relating to their changing status and differences in identity (Khan, Kuhn and Haque 2021). Many refugee youth attach importance to their past identity (Chen and Schweitzer 2019) and might find it problematic to re-enact their identity in line with their host environment (Wylegała 2015). Wylegała (2015) also claims that refugee children were more likely to face peer pressure and, unlike adults who felt proud of their identity, faced adversity due to differences in language or traditions.

There are different ways in which trauma can manifest itself in child refugees. In order to deal with it, some therapies involve story-making, such as narrative therapy, testimony therapy and other techniques (Lustig and Tennakoon 2008). Kevers, Rober and De Haene (2018) focused on the co-construction of silence and speech in refugee narrations; protective silencing was also often found in refugee families. Therefore, silence can be as important as narration. Currently, there is a shift towards inquiring about refugee well-being, incorporating both the experience of exile and the war-related experiences (Miller, Worthington, Muzurovic, Tipping and Goldman 2002). Miller *et al.* (2002) inquired about the different exile-related stressors for adult refugees and found that a lack of adequate housing or income for the basic necessities influences their children in a negative way. In some cases, refugee children are forced to take responsibility – which is uncommon at their age – and to show further agency by supporting their parents emotionally or in other ways. Hence, it is important to note that the refugee experience might be even more difficult than living through the war. Research has indicated that displaced children who returned to Croatia after the war showed more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those who experienced the war at home (Papageorgiou, Frangou-Garunovic, Iordanidou, Yule, Smith and Vostanis 2000). It depends on the coping mechanisms and support networks which the children might have – it might be more difficult to leave the country without having any of them.

Interestingly, some younger refugees spontaneously recalled traumatic memories, even though they were not directly exposed to the events but only knew them from the stories of others (Hollo 2020). Therefore, children can also have a variety of feelings associated with the conflict. The psychological impact of war, especially on vulnerable persons, including children, is widely known and well-documented (Danforth 2003; Danforth and Van Boeschoten 2012; Goldin, Levin, Persson and Haeggloef 2003; Knezivic and Olson 2014; Papageorgiou *et al.* 2000). Many children experience PTSD, often 'followed by depression, recurring nightmares, insomnia, chronic hyperactivity, concentration disorders and irritability' (Knezivic and Olson 2014). The authors also add that the lifetime prevalence of PTSD in specific groups of people who have experienced trauma ranges between 15 and 24 per cent (Knezivic and Olson 2014). Research has found a connection between the intensity of wartime traumatic experiences in children and intrusive (bothering) memories and their avoidance (Papageorgiou *et al.* 2000). Therefore, the integration of child refugees can be made more difficult by the trauma to which they have been subjected.

We understand 'integration' as the most common way of referring to migrant adaptation processes, not only when talking about normative dimensions but also when discussing migrants' own experiences (cf. Erdal and Oeppen 2013). The integration of child refugees might include them learning the language or obtaining an

education in the country of settlement but does not exclude contacts with the country of origin. Research has shown that education is crucial for refugee and immigrant children's adaptation and socialisation (Hones and Cha 1999). Moreover, education can also help their social and emotional healing (Eisenbruch 1988; Lustig, Kia-Keating, Knight, Geltman, Ellis, Kinzie, Keane and Saxe 2004). While the psychological impact of forced migration is not the main crux of our research, it is still important to bear it in mind in order to understand the wider context of the forced migration experience among children and to be mindful of it when researching with child participants. Next, we turn to the methods used in our research and our ethical concerns when working with children.

Method

We have used a qualitative research strategy for this research (Denzin and Lincoln 2011), which was conducted with child refugees from Ukraine, who arrived in the Czech Republic between 25 February and the end of June 2022. The children were asked to write about their life. Many children wrote about the war, which affected their lives, including their journey to the Czech Republic and the post-migration experience. We used a narrative analysis (Webster and Mertova 2007) and coded their life stories. After categorising them, we created an analytical story to formulate the key statements that emerged from the categories and the relationships between them. For our paper, we use 22 collected stories. In total, we collected 42 narratives but, for the purposes of this article, we only worked with those that offered a longer coherent story. The children and adolescents lived in two different regions of the Czech Republic (the Olomouc Region and the Central Bohemian Region) and their ages ranged from 7 to 18 years. The narratives are consistently anonymised and we only use gender and age to characterise them. In some cases, children and young people wrote their age in their stories. If we do not know the exact age, we distinguish an age range (e.g. lower-primary-school age at 6–11 years and upper-primary-school age at 12–15 years). In total, there are stories written by 15 girls and 7 boys – among whom 7 girls up to the age of 11 and 8 over 11 years; there are 7 boys under the age of 11.

The stories of Ukrainian refugee children were collected between May and July 2022 in children's clubs that were used as spaces for children's activities before the majority of them enrolled in schools in September 2022. In these spaces, often run by non-governmental organisations, they could play games or attend Czech language classes. The parents and children were informed about the ongoing research by the educators, our gatekeepers, one day in advance and the researchers (with the help of our Ukrainian colleagues) informed them about it once again on the day when our research in the given institutional setting took place. The stories were collected in a group setting with prior written parental consent and the children's assent (the child's affirmative agreement to participate in research, which was oral). Children could withdraw from the study at any time and did not have to participate (without any ramifications on the provision of services by the children's clubs). The children could decide about the timing of the narrating of their stories and could do so with their parents being present in the morning or later during the day. They had a right not to participate in our research or to withdraw at any time and all standard ethical considerations while researching with children were taken into account.

We followed the UNICEF (2021) procedure on ethical standards in research, evaluation, data collection and analysis and we consulted Alderson and Morrow's (2020) book on the ethics of research with children and young people. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Science, Palacký University Olomouc (Ref. No. 23-02). We understood that recalling the outbreak of the war and subsequent forced migration might provoke emotional responses. Therefore, in line with the recommendations of other research (Helseth and Slettebø 2004), children and their families had the possibility to attend a follow-up consultation with a trained psychologist working closely with the children's clubs. Involving children in research requires special attention regarding their vulnerability and informing them about the research details

in a way that they can understand (Helseth and Slettebø 2004). Therefore, we made sure that the task for children and the aims of our research were explained in an age-appropriate way and that they had an opportunity to ask questions about it.

Finally, we also used some recorded testimonies of children fleeing the conflict in the former Yugoslavia to shed light on child-refugee experiences in general. These testimonies appeared on the pages of the children's magazine *Our Corner* (*Náš koutek*) in 1991 and 1992. The magazine was published on the territory of the former Yugoslavia by the Czech diaspora (in Czech) and it is a unique historical source conveying authentic and immediate testimony about the horrors of war in the 1990s. *Our Corner* magazine provided a space for sharing the experiences and memories of children who were evacuated to the Czech Republic during a critical period, thanks to which today's researchers can see the emotions and inner experiences of children affected by the war over time. More than 1,000 children from Daruvar were separated from their parents and evacuated to reception facilities in the Czech Republic, where they remained for nearly 5 months (Preissová Krejčí and Kočí 2020). However, there was no discussion about integration as it was presumed that the children would return back to their parents – which they eventually did. *Our Corner* became a direct intermediary between children and their parents as it shared their stories across the borders. The children's narratives we use to illustrate their situation are also taken from a magazine but are authentic to the period and written by the children themselves. Therefore, we worked with them in a way similar to that used with the narratives we recorded (we coded and interpreted them).

We selected two groups of children who became refugees from a war conflict (the context of which differed), mainly at an age corresponding to primary- and secondary-school pupils. Both groups share authentic narratives and the place where they found their temporary residence – the Czech Republic. We acknowledge that there are limitations to the data and that there are difficulties in comparing both groups of children despite their being similar in age. The political context for both groups of refugee children differed and so did the historical period in which they lived. While the children from former Yugoslavia stayed with other children in temporary housing and returned after several months, the experience for many Ukrainian children is dissimilar. They might be more isolated from their peers but often have some family members with them. The children's purpose in writing the stories varied – in our case, children from Ukraine wrote the text for us as researchers whereas, in the case of children from former Yugoslavia, the audience was much wider and one of the purposes of the text was also to connect with others. While the children from Ukraine often came with at least one relative, this was not the case for children from the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, writing the text could serve as a tool to connect with their families and their stories could reflect this in a way that they could enhance some features while leaving out others. In today's world, thanks to interconnectivity, it might be easier to keep in touch with friends and relatives – and yet child refugees suffer from not physically being with them. Without claiming the universality of the child refugee experience, we want to highlight some similar aspects, despite the differences in both contexts.

Ukrainian children's narratives

The children's narratives, recorded in the form of written stories, can be divided into three main lines of narration. We acknowledge that migration 'presents itself as fragmented, non-linear, including different intermediate stops and multiple returns and new departures' (Triandafyllidou 2022: 3847). However, for analytical purposes and in line with children's stories, we decided to divide their narratives into three parts, which follow the pre-migration phase, the migration itself and the children's future return aspirations. In other words, we use the following three categories, (1) the reasons for leaving the country (war experience), (2) the exile and (3) the aspirations to return home. The journey to exile was often accompanied by the first realisation

of a change in the situation and initial adaptation; it is connected with experiences of war and fear, which either immediately complemented it or preceded it.

War experience

We turn now to the experience of war among child refugees, which is definitely an important factor in their further integration. We can say that their war and pre-war experiences influenced the children's settlement in the Czech Republic. Some stories share different aspects of the war and relationships with the country of origin. The beginning of the war was connected with an element of fear, surprise and injustice for some children – many children were surprised by the sudden onset of the war*:* 'I hate war! It is cruel. That shouldn't have happened' (boy, aged 10); 'I couldn't believe that it was all true, that the war had started…' (girl, aged 11); 'We didn't understand what was happening until we turned on the TV. And so we learned that the war had begun. And what was next? Like in a terrible dream – panic, fear, inability to accept reality' (girl, aged 11).

Some children, who did not leave Ukraine at the beginning, had to live through the war. Other than physical discomfort – like living in the basement – manifestations of the war were present in the daily lives of children such as this 8-year-old boy: 'I was very scared and cold. I covered my ears so I wouldn't hear the crash or feel the explosions'. The situation was difficult even for children who left Ukraine in the initial days of the war, such as this girl in lower-primary school:

> *The war began on February 24. We left for the Czech Republic on March 1. The whole days I spent in Odessa were terrible. I was scared when people outside were slamming doors, I thought those were explosions. Everything was fine in our city, but still it was terrible, because Kherson was bombed, so we thought that we would be bombed too.*

During the journey itself, many children experienced the perils of war, as recounted this upper-primary-school girl:

> *At that moment, mum decided that we would definitely leave. She called her cousin to prepare for the trip tomorrow. (...) We left the village on 5 March. At the station, someone sounded the siren and all the people started running. We barely got onto the train – it was full of people. As soon as we left, they started bombing the station. We drove 12 hours to Lviv. We were supposed to change to the Lviv–Uzhhorod train, but were told there were no seats. Often the siren went off. There were an awful lot of people there and mum got lost several times.*

Understandably, even at the time of our research, some children were still struggling with loud noises and other things that reminded them of the war, even while being safe, as this 15-year-old girl confirmed: 'Even though we have been in the Czech Republic for three months, we are still scared of any loud noise and airplanes above us'. The war left its marks and, while many refugee children had to say goodbye to their loved ones, some of them permanently: 'A couple of rockets flew through my town but it didn't seem to do much damage. In a week I found out that my dad is in heaven. I hate Putin. Ukraine must win' (girl, aged 11).

While children are usually seen to not understand the wider complexities of the conflict situations, some of them, like this 18-year-old girl, were acutely aware of the implications for the nation-state and understood the war in a wider geopolitical framework: 'It is the most difficult test for the nation'. Another girl, aged 10, noted: 'My homeland is Ukraine. The war on the territory of my state has become a great suffering for me. (…) I lived in the basement of my school for a week. (…) That was in Kyiv. My mum is in the army'.

The war was something unreal or unexpected for many children – they struggled during the war and may still have difficulties with living in their new country of settlement because of their war experiences. Moreover, the relationship to their country of origin has also been highlighted in some of the stories, with one girl even stressing that the war was a 'test for the nation'. However, it needs to be acknowledged that some of those ideas might have been adults' opinions, overheard and repeated by the children. Next, we turn to the children's experiences of life in exile.

Exile

The children recall the events and, in many narratives, the date of 24 February is mentioned explicitly. Some of the children and their relatives started packing on that day and left for safer areas, sometimes outside Ukraine. This date represents an abrupt change in respondents' lives, as confirmed by this 10-year-old boy: 'After that, mum quickly packed us up in a few minutes, dad took us somewhere on a bus and we left for the Czech Republic'.

The narrative of change and disruption is clear in the narratives, as stated by this girl, aged 11: 'One morning I woke up and heard from my mother that the war had started. That's when my world turned upside down'. For many children, their plans for their future studies went awry, as for this girl, aged 11:

> *When the war started, I was preparing to go to art school. At that time dad was sitting and watching the news. I learned from him that the war had started. Within days, dad said we had to leave the country. I hoped that this would not happen but, very quickly, we found ourselves in the city of Mladá Boleslav. Later we moved to the city of Olomouc.*

Therefore, the experience of before and after the war is particularly stressed and there is some decoupling between these two worlds. For some children, the migration experience took place without their parents, who stayed in Ukraine and, therefore, the change was even more disturbing and profound. Most children had left at least 1 parent behind due to the ban on travel for men of working age. The children were forced to 'grow up' and take further responsibility in their families. Children were also worried and anxious about their relatives remaining in Ukraine. Two girls, of upper-primary-school age and 13 years old respectively, had to leave both parents behind, which represents a profound change in their familial situation. 'I am very worried about my parents, who stayed in Ukraine'; 'Unfortunately, my mum stayed in Ukraine because she decided to stay close to my dad'. For many child refugees, the experience of being uprooted from a familiar environment is deeply unsettling. In their minds, they prefer to keep a connection with Ukraine that involves their social networks but also familiar places, as experienced by this 7-year-old boy: 'This war separated me from my dad and my city. It took away my classmates and first year of school'. Many children, like this boy aged 8, do not see the whole situation as something they would choose for themselves: 'We moved to the Czech Republic and I don't want to be here, I don't want to learn a foreign language. I want to be at home in Ukraine'.

Some stories represent a mix of different feelings. While children often mourn what they had left behind, they also show appreciation of the new situation and thank people or institutions in the Czech Republic. Some stories, like that of a 13-year-old girl, also offer a glimpse of positivity: 'I went to school in the Czech Republic with my brother. I really liked it there. I made friends'. In general, the presence of family members and other close persons is definitely advantageous in the migration process. Social networks play a role in refugee children's embeddedness in the new place of residence. While many children mention friends, family or even pets who remained behind, some stories also appreciate the new connections and friends they had already made. It also seems that friendships and family links in Ukraine will stay strong due to frequent communication

with the country of origin. As many children had only been in the Czech Republic for a short period at the time of our research, it is understandable that most stories do not mention new friendships forged in the Czech Republic. However, gratefulness towards the country of refuge is a recurrent theme in many narratives, as are hopes of a Ukrainian victory and return.

Hope and return aspirations

The aspiration to return retains strong transnational connotations, as children hope to be simultaneously 'here and there' and have a 'home away from home' (Vertovec 1999, 2004). Interestingly, none of the children's narratives mentioned that they would like to remain in the Czech Republic and all were hoping to return to Ukraine. However, our research took place shortly (weeks or months) after their arrival, so it is possible that the preference might have changed for some with their increasing length of stay – some might have even returned. Returning home is a category developed by a series of stories that converge in the lived fear and anticipation of returning and being reunited with family and friends. The strong transnational relationships with friends and family have been particularly highlighted in the following stories by 2 boys, the first 10 years old and the second of senior-school age: 'Now we have been accepted in the Czech Republic but I really want to return home to my friends'; '… with all my heart I wish to return home, where my grandfather, grandmother and little sister are with my family, all my dear and beloved family'.

However, some children, like this 12-year-old girl, acknowledged that their stay in the Czech Republic is longer than expected, due to the situation in Ukraine: 'Although the leaders assured us that we would return by 8 March, we have been here in the Czech Republic for 4 months and it is not known when we will return home, because rockets are still attacking Zhytomyr'. The issue of return is also deeply intertwined with wider geopolitical considerations and the hope for Ukrainian victory, as these 3 children testify: 'We will see victory and we will definitely go home' (girl, aged 15); 'But now the situation is better, so I hope we will go home very soon' (girl, aged 11); 'I hope that the war will end soon and we will return to our Motherland' (girl, aged 11).

All the children expressed their aspirations to return to their country of origin. While some children, like this boy aged 8, wanted to appear strong in their narratives, they nevertheless wanted to return: 'I'm not afraid of anything because I'm a fearless fighter but I want to go home'. All of these narratives show a strong sense of hope instilled in children who wish to return back to their country of origin. Next, we turn to children's narratives of another refugee situation from the 20th century.

Comparison with the situation of child refugees from former Yugoslavia

Testimonies of children were also written in earlier refugee situations. For the needs of our comparison, we chose children who fled the civil war in Yugoslavia to the territory of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic more than 30 years ago. The children from former Yugoslavia wrote their stories in the *Our Corner* (*Náš koutek*) magazine (for more on this issue see Preissová Krejčí and Kočí 2020). Both refugee groups have in common the fact that they found a temporary home on the territory of the Czech and Slovak Federation – or, later, the Czech Republic – and that they left many of their friends and family members in their countries of origin. Child refugees from former Yugoslavia started to make new friends and relationships in the Czech Republic, primarily with other refugee children. These children, too, could not wait to return home and meet those they left behind. These two processes of adaptation to a new environment and forging new connections are not in conflict and indicate a similar experience for both groups of refugees. The following statements or quotes from children in both refugee groups document the acquisition of new social ties. Children from former Yugoslavia wrote at that time: 'I made a lot of friends in Janské Lázně. We had a good time there. (...) Even

today, I remember the beautiful days in Janské Lázně and all my friends'[2]; 'Last autumn, I spent 3 months in Janské Lázně. Even today, I remember our company at table number 43. (…) What are brothers Tony and Dalibor doing now and will they ever remember?'[3] Children from Ukraine, like these boys aged 9 and 8 respectively, noted: 'So we went to the Czech Republic. Now I have many friends and a good teacher in the Czech Republic. And no war!'; 'I already have many friends in the Czech Republic. I like the city of Olomouc'.

We discussed the hope to return home in the previous section, as expressed by many Ukrainian children. By the same token, Ukrainian refugee children note feelings of homesickness or nostalgia for their country of origin: 'When there was no war, we had a good time. I like Ukraine very much' (girl, aged 8); 'I'll say one thing about the Czech Republic – it's good here but it doesn't matter because I am sad for Ukraine' (girl, aged 11); 'Now I am in the Czech Republic and I hope that the war will end soon and everything will be as good as before' (girl, aged 15).

Child refugees from former Yugoslavia also expressed similar sentiments in their stories. The experience of being child refugees helped them to verbalise their love for their home, using patriotic statements: 'In my heart there is an indescribable love for my homeland'[4]; 'We live here but it's not like home. I often think that, once we return home, I will never want to travel again. I miss being there and want to go home. I have many friends here but I often think of Daruvar and am keen to return home'[5]; 'I really wish that next spring there would no longer be a war, so that we could live in peace and happiness again'.[6] While children from Ukraine were staying in the Czech Republic for a longer period of time, the return for most Croatian children materialised after several months – during February 1992.

Refugee children from both situations dreamed about returning to a place to which they felt that they belonged. While some children wish they could return to the place that they cherish in their memories, others understand that this place is no longer the one to which they can return because it no longer exists. There is a sharp contrast between the pre-war situation and the situation now and children recall the places in their memories. Two Ukrainian refugee children, a girl of 15 and a boy of 7, note: 'I am sad for Kharkiv. Kharkiv is an unusually beautiful city, which I associate with flowers, with the singing of birds in magical parks and with my female friends. After February 24, this city no longer heard birdsong, but explosions and gunfire'; 'My mother, younger brother and three sisters went with me. No one stayed at home and our house is no longer there. I wish you all the best'. Children from former Yugoslavia recalled: '… suddenly our house shook. It was a powerful explosion. I was very scared and started crying. When I got up in the morning, I saw that my friend's house had been demolished. Now my friend has nowhere to return to.[7] Older Ukrainian refugee children expressed statements in favour of a Ukrainian victory in the war: 'We will see victory and we will definitely go home. Our big thanks go to the Czech Republic. Everything will be Ukraine!' (girl, aged 15); 'I believe that everything will end with the victory of Ukraine. And we will be even better off than before. Everything will be Ukraine' (girl, aged 18); 'Ukraine will be a strong and great state' (girl, aged 15).

While we did not encounter similarly strong nationalist sentiments among the stories of children from former Yugoslavia, they are present in other accounts. For example, Croatian anthropologist Maja Povrzanović (1997: 84) describes the awareness of national identity among the children in Zagreb during the war:

> *In the summer of 1991, the 6-year-old daughter of my Zagreb colleague came home from kindergarten and asked: 'Mum, why should all Serbs be massacred?' Her mother is Croatian and her father is Serbian. When meeting a soldier in uniform, the 3-year-old daughter of another colleague shouted with joy: 'This is my Croatian homeland!'.*

The situation is difficult for the children of parents with different nationalities, especially if the countries are now the warring parties. As written in one 8-year-old Ukrainian boy's story: 'My dad is Russian and my mum is Ukrainian but I don't want to be Russian…'.

The war, the period of exile and the longing to return brought new experiences to refugee children. That of refugeehood is difficult to deal with for adults but can be even more stressful for children – regardless of the historical period in which they find themselves. Both groups of refugee children found new friends but this did not prevent them from longing for 'home'. Many child refugees from former Yugoslavia left without either parent and, while this is not the norm in the current Ukrainian situation, there are still some children who had to leave without their parents. Similarly, many child refugees from Ukraine had to leave their fathers behind due to the law in Ukraine. We see parallels in the narratives of child refugees – and not only in their longing for home and family. Children, many of whom are separated from their parents or siblings for the first time, see their future in peace after the war. Many of the children in both groups expressed strong feelings of nostalgia for their cities or countries of origin. However, they also realised that the places to return to might no longer be the same, as many of them witnessed their destruction before leaving.

Lessons learnt and conclusions

Pre- and post-migration experiences all impact on refugees' mental health as well as on the ways in which they think about their 'homeland' and sustain and forge new connections. Many children described their fear while being in Ukraine and their experiences of witnessing war first-hand. This latter and its implications increased the risk of the children experiencing a broad spectrum of direct and indirect burdens on their physical and mental health (Schwartz, Nakonechna, Campbell, Brunner, Stadler, Schmid, Fegert and Bürgin 2022). While it is not the ambition of this paper to discuss child refugees' mental health, some statements point to the difficult experiences through which the refugee children went. Even while being in exile, children still fear for their families and friends who remained in Ukraine. This is similar to the concerns of adult Ukrainians. Research shows that among the major concerns facing Ukrainian adult refugees are their 'fear for the fate of relatives who stayed in Ukraine', 'fear for [their] homeland' and their uncertainty about the return (Isański, Nowak, Michalski, Sereda and Vakhitova 2022). We have found similar issues faced by child refugees in their narratives, in which the words fear, being scared or worried appeared frequently.

The decision to migrate was not taken lightly by children's families. In our narratives, understandably, we saw that children did not have the decision-making powers about migrating but simply followed their families. While the children who fled former Yugoslavia often left without their families, this experience of being unaccompanied minors is rarer for Ukrainian children. Yet, most of them had to leave their fathers behind due to the current law in Ukraine. Authors – such as Bobrova *et al.* (2022) – discuss the decisions about relocation that were taken at the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine and show how they related to emotions. For some, the decision might include reconciling oneself to the migration situation while being aware of the risks of staying in Ukraine. However, others decided to leave, often framing the decision in terms of protecting the children. The risk of psychological impacts when fleeing war zones is significant and its impacts are higher for children who are more vulnerable than other refugee groups (Dangmann, Dybdahl and Solberg 2022; Fazel and Stein 2022; Hameed, Sadiq and Din 2018). However, leaving the conflict rather than staying in a familiar environment might still be the preferred option.

At the same time, children expressed strong feelings about their country of origin. The age might play a role for refugee children – as the older ones spoke of patriotic feelings in their narrations – but even younger children wrote that they 'liked' Ukraine or 'felt sad' for it. Importantly, children strongly expressed their wishes and preferences about their future return and thus expressed their migration aspirations. They understood the wider

implications of their refugee predicament and what led to it. The following quotation from an 11-year-old girl aptly summarises many issues that Ukrainian children face in the current situation: 'War is a 5-letter word [in Ukrainian]. But how many associations it awakens in us! Pain, heroism, patriotism, longing for loved ones, hatred and love'.

With refugee children being physically cut off from some of their friends and relatives in their countries of origin, they attempt to forge new connections and make friendships in their current predicament. While many Ukrainian children mention friends, family or even pets who remained behind, in some of their stories they also appreciate the new connections and friends they had already made. It is important to bear in mind the specific needs which children affected by conflict might have in the initial stages – as well as months and even years after the experience of relocation. Migration and life in exile have an impact on child refugees' feelings of wellbeing and affect how they perceive their country of origin. As seen in the children's narratives, many of them are resilient and perceptive about the whole situation – creating their own meanings of war and exile.

We analysed the written narratives of child refugees from Ukraine. We divided their narratives into different parts, including their war experiences, their exile and their aspirations to return. These children, whose experience we have shared, hoped to return 'home' soon. However, the longing for 'home' and their understanding of the relations between countries was a recurring theme. Children tend to realise their feelings for their country of origin and the people they had left behind. Similarly, we used the case of child refugees from former Yugoslavia to illustrate some similarities and shared problems for child refugees in the different historical periods. Many of these refugee children longed for 'home', friends and family and felt a strong attachment to their place of origin. While most children from former Yugoslavia returned after several months of exile, many Ukrainian children are still outside their country of origin and might remain there in the future. At the same time, children actively express their wishes about their future and their migration aspirations.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Notes

1. The Ukrainian children we describe as refugees are, in fact, holders of temporary protection under the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) and the Czech Act No 221/2003 on the temporary protection of foreign nationals, as amended – see EUR-Lex (2001, 2003).
2. Mirela Štrumlová, 6th grade, primary school, Hrubečné Pole. *Náš koutek*, June 1992, 58(10): 17.
3. Marie Burdová, 6th grade, primary school, Hrubečné Pole. *Náš koutek*, June 1992, 58(10): 16.

4. Taňa Novotná, 7th grade, primary school, Jánské Koupele. *Náš koutek*, November–December 1990/91 [1991/92], 57(3/4): 17.
5. Davor Ivanović, 6th grade, primary school, M. Lázně. *Náš koutek*, January 1992, 1991/1992, 5: 16–17.
6. Daniela Francetićová, 8th grade, primary school, Daruvar. *Náš koutek*, October 1991/92, 57(2): 16.
7. Marina Nestingerová, 2nd grade, Daruvar. *Náš koutek*, May 1991/92, 57(9): 16.

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