Two Refugees, Both on Poland's Border. But Worlds Apart.

A young man fleeing war in Sudan and a young woman evacuating Ukraine crossed into Poland at the same time. They had very different experiences.

BY **JEFFREY GETTLEMAN** AND **MONIKA PRONCZUK**
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KUZNICA, Poland — On the day war broke out in Ukraine, Albagir, a 22-year-old refugee from Sudan, was lying on the frozen forest floor at the gateway to Poland, trying to stay alive. Drones sent by the Polish border patrol were looking for him. So were helicopters. It was night, with subzero temperatures and snow everywhere. Albagir, a pre-med student, and a small band of African refugees were trying to sneak into Poland, down to the last few shriveled dates in their pockets.
"We were losing hope," he said.
That same night in a small town near Odessa, Katya Maslova, 21, grabbed a suitcase and her tablet, which she uses for her animation work, and jumped with her family into a burgundy Toyota Rav 4. They rushed off in a four-car convoy with eight adults and five children, part of the frantic exodus of people trying to escape war-torn Ukraine.

"At that point, we didn't know where we were going," she said.

Over the next two weeks, what would happen to these two refugees crossing into the same country at the same time, both about the same age, could not stand in starker contrast. Albagir was punched in the face, called racial slurs and left in the hands of a border guard who, Albagir said, brutally beat him and seemed to enjoy doing it. Katya wakes up every day to a stocked fridge and fresh bread on the table, thanks to a man she calls a saint.

Their disparate experiences underscore the inequalities of Europe's refugee crisis. They are victims of two very different geopolitical events, but are pursuing the same mission — escape from the ravages of war. As Ukraine presents Europe with its greatest surge of refugees in decades, many conflicts continue to burn in the Middle East and Africa. Depending on which war a person is fleeing, the welcome will be very different.

From the instant they cross into Poland, Ukrainian refugees like Ms. Maslova are treated to live piano music, bottomless bowls of borscht and, often, a warm bed.
And that's just the beginning. They can fly for free all across Europe on Hungary's Wizz Air. In Germany, crowds line up at train stations, waving Ukrainian flags. And all European Union countries, many of which can trace blood ties to Ukrainians, now allow them to stay for up to three years.

Watching all this on a TV in a safe house in the Polish countryside, where it's too dangerous for him to even step outside, Albagir, who asked that his last name not be used because he crossed the border illegally, said he was almost in a state of shock.

"Why don't we see this caring and this love? Why?" he asked. "Are Ukrainians better than us? I don't know. Why?"

What Albagir experienced has been repeated countless times, from the Mediterranean Sea to the English Channel, as European governments have made it difficult for migrants from Africa and the Middle East to enter their countries — sometimes using excessive force to keep them out.
His journey was complicated by the fact that he chose to enter Poland from Belarus, a Russian ally that Western countries said manufactured a huge refugee crisis last year. After Belarus invited in tens of thousands of desperate people from conflict-ridden countries like Sudan, Iraq and Syria

and directed them to Poland's frontier as a way to cause havoc in Europe, Poland responded by harshly cracking down at that border.

Ukrainians are victims of a conflict on European soil that creeps closer by the day. The result is a response from Europeans that is largely loaded with compassion. That leaves refugees from more distant wars feeling the sting of inequality and, some say, racism.

"This is the first time we are seeing such contrast between the treatment of different groups of refugees," said Camille Le Coz, a migration analyst in Brussels, who added that Europeans see Ukrainians as being "like us."

"Hello, I am Janusz"

On Feb. 25, the day after Russia invaded Ukraine, Ms. Maslova was sitting shotgun in her family's car, racing through Moldova, guzzling Pepsi.
As she looked out the window, she saw people cheering, waving and giving them the thumbs up. She started to cry.

"It was not the bad parts that broke us down, but the good parts," Ms. Maslova said. "You're not preparing yourself emotionally for the fact that the entire world is going to support you."

Driving west, they argued about where to go. Someone said Latvia, another Georgia. But Ms. Maslova had her own plan, albeit a bit random.

She had studied animation at a college in Warsaw and her roommate's parents knew a man whose father had a spare house in the Polish countryside. If this worked out, she could go back to animation school and fulfill her dream of making children's cartoons. She convinced her family: On to Poland.

On this same day, Albagir was still trapped in the forest on Poland's border with Belarus. He's been on the run for years. As a boy, Albagir said he watched his homeland of Darfur ripped apart by war and saw "everything you can imagine." Then he fled to Khartoum, Sudan's capital, to study medicine. But Khartoum soon exploded into chaos too.

So last November he said he traveled to Moscow on a student visa to take courses at a private university, but after Russia invaded Ukraine, triggering severe sanctions, Albagir feared that his university might be ostracized. So he fled again.

His plan was to travel from Russia to Belarus to Poland to Germany, but he said he hadn't known that Poland had just reinforced its border to repel the migrants coming from Belarus.

About 130 miles away, to the south, Ms. Maslova's convoy finally reached its destination, a farmhouse deep in the Polish countryside.

Suddenly, a burly man with thinning gray hair emerged from the darkness.

"Hello, I am Janusz," he said.

Janusz Poterek and his wife, Anna, hugged them and they all started crying. But the tears didn't stop in the driveway.

Ms. Maslova's family walked into the kitchen and saw the three-course meal that their hosts had prepared for them, and cried. They stepped into the bathroom to a row of brand-new toothbrushes, soaps and shampoos, and cried. They saw freshly washed sheets, towels, and blankets lined up on their beds, and cried.

Mr. Poterek, an apple farmer, had never helped refugees before, but said that when the war broke out, he "couldn't stay indifferent."

"If you come back, we will kill you."

A few nights later, while Ms. Maslova and her family were admiring a stack of toys that their hosts brought for the children, Albagir and three men he was traveling with were arrested. They had made it across the Polish border undetected, but the driver they hired to get them to Germany forgot to turn on his headlights and was stopped. Albagir said Polish police officers stole their SIM cards and power banks; disabled their phones (so they couldn't call for help); and drove them back to the place they dreaded: the forest.

At least 19 people have frozen to death in recent months trying to get into Poland after Polish border guards pushed them back into this forest, human rights groups say.

Polish officials insisted it was not their fault.

"It's the Belarusians'," said Katarzyna Zdanowicz, a Border Guard spokeswoman. "They direct these people."

Human rights defenders say the Polish guards are also guilty of abuses. A Polish government spokesperson declined to discuss the treatment of refugees.

"Go! Go!" the Polish guards yelled at Albagir's group, shoving them at gunpoint toward a barbed wire fence in an isolated part of the forest, Albagir said. The guards threw one of the men into the fence so hard that he sliced open his hand, Albagir said. When interviewed, he showed a gash mark between his fingers.

A few hours later, after wandering with little food or water and no way to navigate, they reached a Belarusian border post and begged the guards to let them in.

"We needed shelter," Albagir said.

But the Belarusians had other plans.

Border guards grabbed them and threw them in a frigid garage, Albagir said. A huge Belarusian soldier screamed racial slurs and angrily assaulted them.

"He punched us, he kicked us, he threw us down, he hit us with sticks," Albagir said.

He said there was one light-skinned Kurd detained in the garage with them whom the soldier didn't touch.

The soldier then marched them to the forest and said: "Go Poland. If you come back, we will kill you."

According to human rights groups, tens of thousands of refugees have been pushed back and forth between Poland and Belarus, trapped in limbo, unable to enter either country or go back home.

On March 5, Albagir and his group crossed the border into Poland for the second time within a week, faint and nearly frostbitten. They called a number they had been given in case they got in trouble, and a Polish activist secretly took them into her home, and warned them not to step outside. Their experience would not be totally devoid of acts of kindness.

Albagir plans to apply for asylum in Germany, which has a reputation of being generous to all refugees, and finish his studies. He speaks Arabic, English and some Russian and wears gold rimmed specs and has a neat beard. He dreams of becoming a doctor and writing a book about what he just experienced. He said he still can't believe educated people from relatively prosperous countries would treat people in need this way.

One of the men with him, named Sheikh, couldn't speak English, so he typed a message into his phone and hit play.

The phone's robotic voice intoned: "All of Europe says that there are rights for every human being and we did not see that."

When asked if he believed racism was a factor in how they were treated, Albagir did not hesitate.

"Yeah, so much," he said. "Only racism."

"What would I cook for them?"

For Ms. Maslova's family, the treatment just gets better and better. Mr. Poterek enrolled her brother and sister in a primary school — the Polish government has extended free education and health care to Ukrainian refugees.

"It seems like the whole country is slightly bending the rules for Ukrainians," said Ms. Maslova, after a doctor refused to accept payment for a visit.

When her hosts were asked if they would take in African or Middle Eastern refugees, Ms. Poterek said, "Yes, but we had no opportunity."

But Ms. Poterek said it would be "easier" to host Ukrainians because they shared a culture. For refugees from Arab countries and Africa, she asked, "What would I cook for them?"'

Last Thursday, Mr. Poterek spoke to a friend about finding Ms. Maslova a job as a translator.

That same afternoon, Albagir and the others made it to a safe house in Warsaw. Once again, they were told not to step outside.