



“I arrived to Athens in the beginning of August last year. It was the first time when I faced the work with the refugees. In Ukraine I had just a few meetings with people who escaped from the war area on the east of my country, but it was just short visits of them.

I fell in love with Greece immediately with its nature, climate, historical sights. It reminds me the southern cities of Crimea, my homeplace, which were Greek colonies once. I also was positively impressed by the people I met, volunteers of JRS and refugees themselves of course. From the majority of the people we meet every day I experience great respect and gratitude, also a strong feeling of hope in spite of all sufferings and misfortune.

I give classes of English for adults and children, painting and other handicrafts lessons for kids. The last I enjoy the most. When I see the inspiration and creativity of kids while they are painting or drawing, their excitement when they take their small masterpieces to show to their parents or give to me in order to put on the wall, they forget for a short time about that tough reality they got and still going through and just enjoy bright colours of life and emotions. Although it is very difficult to see the suffering of especially the youngest absolutely innocent ones, I also receive a lot of joy as they know how to find it in the very small things.

Due to spreading Coronavirus we first had to stop our activities such as tea-time and classes where we always have big groups of people gathering together, but our store for clothes and day centre for women were still open. Our sister Ada, who is 81, had to leave for Austria for the time being, as she is at the risk group due to her age. Sister Preethy returned to India for her home leave as it was planned before and sister Carmen is blocked in Rome. All volunteers of JRS had to return to their countries and it was very difficult for them. Our MBB volunteer from Russia just arrived to Athens and had to come back to Russia already on the 7th day after her arrival.

Sr. Ewa and I decided to stay in Athens, even if we cannot directly be in contact with refugees but we hope we would be able to support at least somebody with simple medication, clothes distribution or just our presence.

But as the number of infected people is constantly growing the government decided to implement the full lockdown. From 23th of march no one can leave the house without special permission. We had to stop all the activities and move to the house of Jesuits for this time. Of course, the refugees, especially homeless and people in the camps, are the most vulnerable in this situation, as they also cannot move freely around the city and cannot get help from NGOs, not even food. But it is also the fear if the virus would get into the camps thousands will be infected in a few days or even hours and it will be impossible to help them. We are constantly praying that God protect them especially and believe in the miracle.

By today we had 695 cases and no one was confirmed being a refugee, but there are also cases in Lesvos where are more than 20.000 people saying at the Moria camp. And of course, this is only official data, and there can be a lot of uninformed cases. So at the moment we cannot do anything but pray.

Before this all happened, I started making dolls in our Ukrainian style for children, as we do not get many toys for them and kids have nothing to play with. Children were excited getting these simple toys. So now we are continuing this activity with hope that very soon we will be able to go out on the streets and give them to the children, bringing them a little more joy. We also try to continue English lessons online, making videos and posting them on JRS Facebook, but we are aware that a lot of our students do not have access to the Internet and face now even more basic needs as food, clothes and medicine.

Unfortunately, at the moment we are helpless. We unite with all the people of good will and continue to ask God to stop this sickness, to protect especially those who do not have any other support and protection except Him alone. He will not abandon His children. And we are happy that we are here. For me personally it was an invitation as to Abraham to leave my country and my home and go to the land that God will show me. Greece for now is my promised land and I am happy that I can be here also in this difficult time.”

Wiktoria Kowalchuk