

A Short Trip to Lviv, Ukraine

On Saturday 16 September, I caught the train to Dunkeld, to join Archie and Muriel Gibson at their lovely home. I was there to join them as driver for one of the two pick-ups they had organised for Pick-ups for Peace (P4P). This organisation was founded by a Scottish farmer/businessman, Mark Laird, with extensive interests in Ukraine. It is supported by the NFU, and so most participants come from the farming community, who get hold of, or just donate their own old pick-ups, and drive them across to Lviv to donate them to those who need them in Ukraine – primarily the Armed Forces, but also humanitarian organisations working in East Ukraine. The best online summary of P4P's work, although rather out of date since March 2023, is at <https://www.nfuonline.com/media/lurh3oy4/pick-ups-for-peace-9-mar-23.pdf>. We were scheduled to join a convoy of 35 pick-ups, provided by mainly the farming community in the UK, to be delivered to the Ukrainian Armed Forces in Lviv on Wednesday 20 September.

We left Dunkeld at around 10 am on the Sunday, Archie and Muriel going via Inverkeithing to drop their car for their return flight, and I driving directly to Gretna, where we were all to meet up with Dougie Hay, who was scheduled as co-driver for our vehicle. With Dougie on board, we left Gretna at around 1.30pm and headed down to Hull to catch the overnight ferry to Rotterdam, and by 1800 we were on board, enjoying a beer, and meeting some of our fellow travellers in the convoy. Other were travelling via the Newcastle ferry to Amsterdam and some by the Channel Tunnel. We would not all meet up until Poland.

Our vehicle was a 2008 Toyota Hilux, painted olive green, and with 220,000 miles on the clock. Apart from the passenger window not opening, no power in the lighter socket for phone charging, and a tendency for the brakes to make a rather disconcerting sound, it was a fine wagon, able to clock along happily at 70-80 mph (when allowed, of course). It was loaded to the gunwales with sandbags, bedding and Lucozade – all desired items in Ukraine.



Our beasts

Archie and Muriel were in an equally old Nissan Navara, funded by ex-members of our Regiment. It was a rather smarter, shiny black affair and similarly laden down, but had the disconcerting habit of shaking at speeds over 65mph, which rather slowed them down on the continent.

On arrival in Rotterdam at around 0845, disembarkation seemed to take an inordinate time, and it was not until almost 10am before we got off the ferry, only to hit very heavy and slow traffic through and round Rotterdam itself. However, we got through and were rolling fast by about 11am. We needed to get going, as we had 600 miles to cover, right through the Netherlands and Germany, in order to get to our first hotel

in South West Poland. We had been warned that the hotel restaurant would close by 10pm, but that soup would be available until midnight. So, it was heads down, and keep going with brief stops for refuelling and changing drivers.

The bulk of the journey was run as a 'wacky races' affair, with vehicles or small groups travelling individually. However, one of the P4P co-ordinators had set up a WhatsApp forum and had provided everyone with a Google Maps pin location for our destination that night. Most drivers then put in their live locations so that we could track the progress of other members as we went. It was a very efficient system.

Just outside Leipzig we had one of our stops, and Muriel remarked that she thought it looked like rain. I looked up and could see only thin clouds overhead and dismissed her concerns. I had not really looked ahead. Shortly after moving on, a beautiful full double rainbow appeared, and shortly thereafter, the rain started. The shades of night were falling fast, and Dougie was driving. By the time night fell, the conditions were horrific, with lashing rain, standing water on the ill-lit autobahn and much spray from the trucks we had to pass. However, Dougie drove brilliantly (and Muriel in the other car) and we were able to press on. However, it was becoming increasingly apparent that we were unlikely to make dinner time. Then, shortly before the Polish border, we were suddenly ushered off the Autobahn by the Police and found ourselves on small rural lanes with no guidance, and me fumbling desperately with my phone to navigate our way to the next intersection where we hoped to rejoin. This overcome, we had another quick stop and catch-up with Archie and Muriel. As we got going again, I sent a message to other members of the convoy that we would be missing the dinner, but on no account to allow the bar to close until our arrival. We eventually pulled in at round 1130pm. We decided that beer was the priority and didn't even bother asking about the soup. We each had a couple of beers, met other members of the party, swapped tales of the trip, and rolled into bed.

Early in the morning, the weather was pleasant, and I was able to have a very brief look around our hotel, the Palac Krobiewowice, which was actually Marshal Blucher's (of Waterloo fame) old palace, where he had ended his days. Curiously, this was not really mentioned on the Hotel's website, but there were some mementoes on display inside. In the carpark, stood a sign illustrating various other palaces within Lower Silesia, and I was intrigued by the lack of enthusiasm that the Poles seem to feel about this aspect of their country – but fair enough: this was, of course, part of Germany until 1945, and these were all German palaces. It was only a brief look around, as we had to get on to our next RV, and then get over the border and into Lviv.

As we got going at around 7.45 am, the rain started again. We had done a minor re-arrangement, and Archie was travelling with me, and Dougie with Muriel. Happily, Archie took the bulk of the rainy driving. Conditions again were dire, as evidenced by the considerable number of crashes we passed enroute. As a result, progress was not as rapid as hoped, and we pulled into our RV at around 2pm. This RV was a carpark outside a Nettos

supermarket, about 10kms before the Ukrainian border. There P4P had provided a lawyer who rushed around all the vehicles getting the nominated drivers to sign various papers required for border clearance. Then we moved off as one long convoy down to the border post.



Approaching the Border Post

job, and following Zelensky's lead in trying to make Ukraine an honest and trustworthy country.



An enthusiastic reception from the locals



Archie, Muriel and Dougie on arrival

The border post was a modern, well-designed structure on a minor road, newly built and designated for organised parties. And we were ushered in groups of about 6 vehicles, our passports and V5 documents were taken off and our vehicles and contents inspected. Some members muttered about the over-zealous attitude, but I felt it was fine: It was good to see border staff trying to do a proper



We're through!

We were lucky to be in the first half of the convoy, as once we were through, this first half was mustered into a proper convoy, warned not to stop for anything – roundabouts or redlights – to keep closed up, to put on our 4-way flashers, and with police with blue flashing lights at front.

I don't particularly like convoys like this. The inconvenience to poor innocent motorists or pedestrians) stranded by the convoy's passing is embarrassing. However, it has its logic and it worked – we got into the centre of Lviv in one body and parked our cars in front of a government building. There we removed our personal baggage, put that into a minibus and headed for our hotel. As it was only 5 minutes' walk away, we walked down, and

picked up our baggage from the minibus (which arrived just after we did).



Hotel Leopolski

The hotel was comfortable and modern (albeit in a traditional Lviv townhouse), and we were greeted with beer, chips and sandwiches, and spent a highly convivial evening getting to know our fellow travellers, all of whom had arrived successfully, with no accidents or breakdowns (a bit of a miracle). The following morning, feeling mildly the worse for wear, we walked back up the hill to the vehicles, where a government official and an Air Defence Colonel made speeches, as did

Mark Laird, our leader and founder of P4P. We were all presented with bottles of Lviv Gold Vodka, and then, as various soldiers climbed into the pick-ups and drove them away, we set off on a tour of Lviv.



The handover ceremony. Mark Laird on the right.

Our first stop was at the military cemetery. This is an extremely moving place and handkerchiefs were discreetly deployed. It is, of course, still growing, and the newest graves at the top of the

hill were dated 10 September 2023, and a fresh hole stood ready to receive the next casualty. All the occupants were from the Lviv area, but comprise only 10% of that area's total deaths: many families prefer to have their loved ones



The red and black flags signify the Ukrainian Armed Forces

closer to home. The older graves are rather beautiful, in that each has a wooden wall constructed above ground, leaving a flower bed. These are then planted up and maintained by the families.



Each grave has a photo and flags and a small bench is fixed between the graves so visitors can sit in comfort by the grave. Several benches were occupied during our visit.

Thereafter, we visited the Maidan monument, which commemorates the hundred or so protesters killed in the 2014 'Maidan Revolution'. This was a stark and modern series of



terraces and steel angled plates, with photos of the victims. Its situation on a hill gave a fine view of Lviv's roovescape. And from it we walked down into the old town of Lviv. This is a beautiful place, with over 95% of its old buildings still preserved and in use. Although it had been a medieval walled town, most of the buildings date from 17-18th Century, the walls having been demolished and the city enlarged and enhanced by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who took over in 1772.

But some older buildings remain, including a 12th Century Armenian Church. There are ample descriptions of the city available on line (and a selection of pictures below), but it is vibrant and full of café culture, and the only visible signs of the conflict are many statues and windows being covered for protection. The population seem remarkably relaxed: as we left on the Thursday morning the air raid sirens were wailing, but no-one seemed concerned.

We had an intelligent, well informed, and articulate guide for our tour. It was the only real opportunity I had to chat to a Ukrainian, and he was keen to stress the European nature of Ukraine (and that is certainly true of Lviv) in comparison to Russia, who he now regarded with visceral hatred: 'It is not just Putin – the soldiers come here and enjoy killing and destroying our country – they are animals'. He contended that young Russian soldiers could not understand why Ukrainian houses all should have indoor sanitation (I wonder if they all do in Eastern Ukraine?). But also commented on the value of the pick-ups that P4P provided. Apparently, the Russian equipment with which the Ukrainian Army is largely equipped includes no similar light fast transport, and relies heavily on high, noisy trucks for routine local logistic tasks. A friend of his had been severely wounded, but was extracted by a pick-up from a location where a military ambulance could not reach. We heard similar testimony in speeches.

Our final evening consisted of a dinner with further speeches and presentations, and the following morning, minibuses were laid on to take us to the Polish Border. This we had to cross on foot and was a slow process on the Polish side. A single rather meticulous customs officer admitted one pedestrian at a time and insisted on checking every bag. It was not helped by an enormous queue of Ukrainians waiting to cross (but by a separate entrance) and the presence of a rather unruly and noisy collection of youngish Orthodox Jewish men, who all queue jumped like mad, and then once through, set up camp in the shade of the

minibus waiting for us on the far side (much to the disgust of its Polish driver – ‘Sion!’ he hissed, with his hands on his hips). I never discovered who they were, or what they were doing – they were mildly aggressive in their declarations of having no English. However, we got through and 3 hours’ drive got us to Krakow Airport, then I caught an afternoon Ryan Air flight to Luton and trains back to home, arriving around 9.30pm.

It was a great trip, and I would recommend it to anyone who fancies a long drive in a good cause to a beautiful city at an interesting time. P4P is a well-run organisation, issuing clear instructions and with efficient administration. I am confident that:

- The pick-ups (and contents) are genuinely useful, if not strategically battle winning.
- They are properly used, and not siphoned off to dodgy businessmen. P4P are given evidence of where and to whom all vehicles are distributed.
- Ukraine needs all the help it can get.

Pictures of Lviv



City Hall



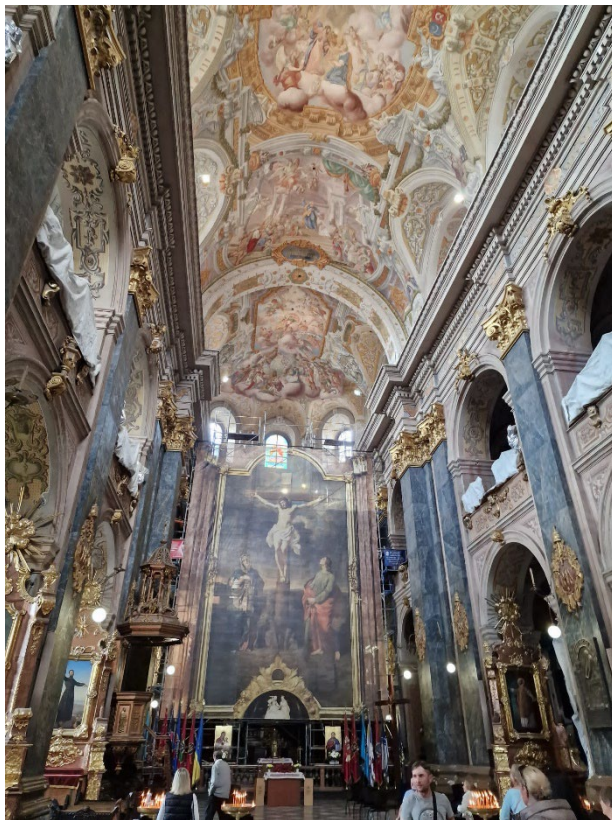
A previous donation, still with its UK plates. Reportedly the driver survived the mortar attack



Elegant terraces and cobbled streets



The Catholic Cathedral, windows protected.



And its interior



The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Cathedral



And its interior, with mementoes of the dead



The Armenian Church



The Dominican Church



The Opera House



And a reminder of the realities: Bullet holes from WWII and the uses of sandbags.



An artistic shot from a fellow traveller