

TWO HOUSES, ONE RESPONSE

Private refugee accommodation in Bad Langensalza, Thüringen, Germany



MICHAEL LUICK-THRAMS

dokumentiert durch Fotografien und öffentliche Aufzeichnungen

Volunteer Juliane [left] with Michael Luick-Thrams and Marianne [right]



Stefan and Christin Mueller

Two independent initiatives, only a few minutes' walk apart, turned private property into safety, school access, work opportunities and long-term relationships.

BAD LANGENSALZA • THURINGIA • 2022-2026

INTRODUCTION

Two houses, one local response

How private housing became long-term support for Ukrainians displaced by war:

When Ukrainian refugees began arriving in Germany after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, accommodation quickly became one of the most urgent local challenges. In Bad Langensalza, a small town in Thuringia, two independent private initiatives emerged within walking distance of one another.

Historian Michael Luick-Thrams transformed the lessons of the historic Scattergood Hostel (1939-43) in Iowa into a modern refuge. At almost the same time, physician Stefan Mueller and teacher Christin Mueller made a vacant family property available to Ukrainian families and organised everything required to make the house habitable.

2

independent private houses

5 MIN

approximately between them

2022-26

four years of local support

Two independent responses

Luick-Thrams approached the crisis through the World-War-II model he had studied for decades. Stefan and Christin Mueller responded through an immediate family decision, using an empty house and the professional skills they already possessed. Their initiatives were separate, but both developed from the same conviction: Available housing should become safety for people displaced by war.

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This article examines what happened after two private houses were opened: How rooms became homes, how residents entered schools and workplaces, and how voluntary responsibility changed the people who provided it. Michael Luick-Thrams, Stefan Mueller and Christin Mueller all agreed to take part in recorded interviews and to be identified by name in this article.

From Iowa to Bad Langensalza

How an Iowa refugee story became a modern refuge for Ukrainians fleeing war:

Michael Luick-Thrams did not arrive at this work by accident. Born and raised in Iowa, the historian and Quaker had spent decades studying how the Scattergood Hostel helped European refugees rebuild their lives during the rise of the Third Reich and then WWII. In spring 2022, that Iowa story became his model for transforming a vacant house in Bad Langensalza into a refuge for Ukrainians.

IOWA

historical and ethical origin

40+

local volunteers

80

people welcomed



Figure 1. Michael Luick-Thrams (center) and local volunteers Julianne (left) and Marianne (right) welcomed the first Ukrainian family with bread and salt. Photo: Haus der Spuren / TRACES-Spuren.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

Iowa: where the idea began

For Luick-Thrams, Iowa is more than a place of birth. It is the landscape that gave the modern initiative its historical and ethical foundation. The original Scattergood Hostel operated near West Branch, Iowa, from 1939 to 1943, when a former Quaker boarding school became a temporary home for almost 200 people fleeing Nazi-controlled Europe. Local Quaker farmers and college students helped residents learn English, develop job skills and prepare for life in the United States.

1939-43 years the original hostel operated	45 addresses supplied by Robert Berquist	~1,000 pages of preserved records
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The history survived because former refugees and staff preserved their own records. After Robert Berquist, a former staff member, supplied about 45 addresses, Luick-Thrams wrote to people connected with the hostel. Nearly all responded with narratives they wrote at the time, diaries, articles, artifacts and photographs. Berquist also uncovered roughly 500 pages of menus, internal memoranda, press material and essays written during English lessons.

With support from Berlin Senate scholarships, Luick-Thrams travelled to the United States to conduct interviews. The research produced a dissertation, as well as a resultant book, *Out of Hitler's Reach: The Scattergood Hostel for European Refugees, 1939-43*, exhibits and short films. Its focus was social as much as historical: how displaced people lived together, worked, formed relationships and entered a new society. Find further information about several Quaker responses to Nazism at: <https://usgerrelations.traces.org/rescuersofjews.html> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Dagbvsm24>

To learn more about this spin-off project or donate towards the costs of its further operation: <https://traces.org/ukraine/>

“The idea did not begin in Germany. It began in Iowa - with the memory of a Quaker hostel that turned shelter into a path toward a new life.”

Editorial summary of the historical connection

HISTORY PUT BACK TO WORK

The Iowa model returned to Europe

When Ukrainian refugees began arriving in central Germany in February 2022, Luick-Thrams recognised the same basic challenge in a new setting: People needed immediate safety, but also the tools and social connections required to begin again. In March, he purchased a house at Jüdengasse 1 with personal funds rather than money from Spuren e.V., the German state or public charities. Spuren e.V. in Bad Langensalza supported the day-to-day operations and liaised with government agencies.

IOWA FARM family resources	HISTORICAL RESEARCH lessons of Scattergood	JÜDENGASSE 1 a house purchased in 2022	SCATTERGOOD CENTER refuge and integration
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The purchase was tied to proceeds from the sale of his family's Iowa farm and the inheritance of his mother, Phyllis Thrams Luick, who had died in 2020. The new refuge was named “the Scattergood Center in the Phyllis-Thrams-Luick-Haus” in her honor.

The name connected three histories: the Iowa hostel, the family whose resources helped make the German initiative possible, and the tradition of welcoming people from different backgrounds that Luick-Thrams associated with his mother. Her maternal family had emigrated from southern Thüringen to Iowa in the 1850s. Part of the value accumulated by that family across generations had now returned to Thüringen in the form of a house for people displaced by another European war.

A TRANSATLANTIC CIRCLE

A family story that began with migration from Thüringen to Iowa returned to Thüringen as practical support for people displaced by a new European war.

EMERGENCY PREPARATION

A house built with many hands

A building alone could not provide refuge. More than 40 local volunteers cleaned, repaired and furnished the house. The initiative's own account states that the main renovation was completed in one week, about a week and a half after the purchase; local reporting described the empty property as having been transformed into a refuge within two weeks.

Walls were papered and painted, floors renewed and rooms supplied with furniture, electrical equipment, blankets, food and household necessities. Some people donated materials; others repaired rooms, assembled furniture or brought cleaning supplies, groceries.

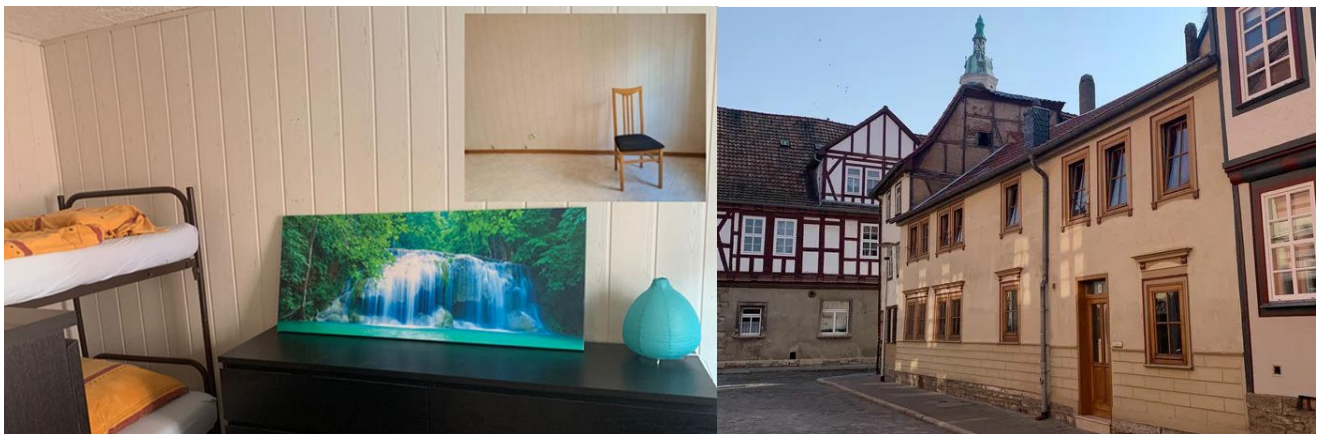


Abbildung 2. Left: Before-and-after views of a downstairs dormitory prepared to accommodate two people.
Right: Das Haus von außen gesehen. Photos: Haus der Spuren / TRACES-Spuren.

“I am a Quaker and we tackle things together... 'No' is not an answer for me.”

Michael Luick-Thrams, quoted in Thüringer Allgemeine

ARRIVAL AND COMMUNITY

A welcome, not only a placement

The first Ukrainian family was welcomed at the door with bread and salt, a gesture intended to recognise the residents as guests rather than anonymous cases. By mid-April 2022, 23 people had already been received, and more were expected.



Figure 3. On 3 April 2022, Ukrainian residents and volunteers met for coffee and cake at Haus der Spuren. Photo: Haus der Spuren / TRACES-Spuren.

On 3 April, Haus der Spuren hosted a coffee-and-cake gathering for residents of the new center. Such meetings made space for conversation after weeks marked by war, abrupt travel and uncertainty.

HOSPITALITY AS METHOD

The welcome was not decorative. Shared food, regular conversation and personal contact were treated as part of the practical work of helping people regain stability.

EVERYDAY SUPPORT

Refuge means more than a bed

The initiative was organised around daily needs. Donations supported food, clothing, toiletries, utilities, building repairs, medical costs and education. The house did not charge rent, although help was needed with operating expenses. Public reimbursement could be delayed until refugees completed registration, while appointments and administrative procedures often took time.

Volunteers helped residents orient themselves in Bad Langensalza, practise German, search for work and look for longer-term housing. Ukrainian, Russian or English were useful but not treated as prerequisites for helping; patience, gestures and regular human contact could begin the work of communication.



Figure 4. Online lessons at Haus der Spuren. Photo: Haus der Spuren / TRACES.

For families with school-age children, continuity also depended on technology. Some residents used Wi-Fi at Haus der Spuren so that uprooted children could continue online lessons while families were still moving between temporary arrangements. A stable internet connection, a table and a quiet room became part of the infrastructure of refuge.

LONG-TERM WORK

From emergency response to a living home



Figure 5. Before-and-after views of the upper-level common room, where volunteers installed a new floor, created shelving and added seating and a dining table. Photo: Haus der Spuren / TRACES-Spuren.

The physical arrangement of the Scattergood Center reflected both privacy and shared life. Dormitories could accommodate individuals or pairs, while larger apartments provided space for families. Shared kitchens, bathrooms, storage and a common room allowed residents to cook, study and spend time together. The renovation was not presented as a temporary collection of beds, but as an attempt to create an inhabitable home.

48	80	4 YEARS
residents recorded by November 2023	residents reached by August 2026	of arrival, departure and settlement

The rising figure shows how an emergency initiative became a long-term process filled with appointments, translation, maintenance, reassurance and care. For Luick-Thrams, the eightieth resident also marks the beginning of the closure of his project devoted to operating a residential refuge. It is projected to continue to house refugees until Christmas 2026; until then, donations are needed and welcome: They can be given also online, on the lower left at: <https://traces.org/ukraine/>

A legacy carried from Iowa

The project's significance lies in the bridge it created between remembrance and responsibility. A hostel that sheltered refugees in Iowa more than eighty years earlier inspired a house in Thüringen; the house, in turn, gave 80 people a place from which to begin again.

“History made useful: not simply preserved, but translated into shelter, attention and human connection.”

Article conclusion

TWO INDEPENDENT INITIATIVES

A second house, only minutes away

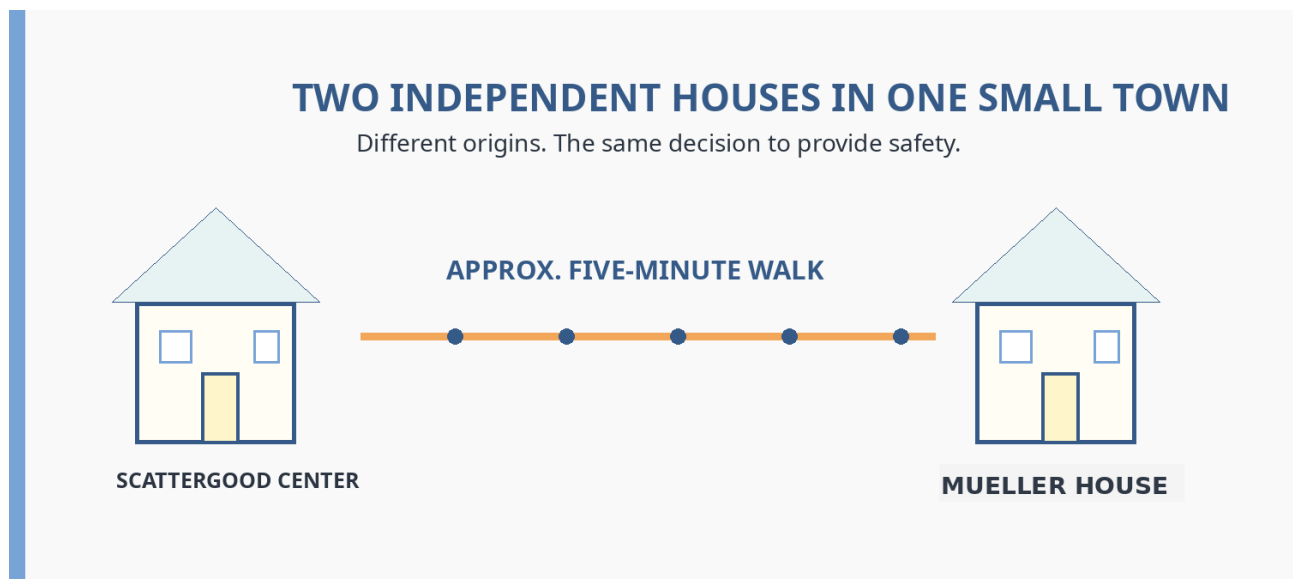


Figure 6. Editorial diagram based on the interview. It represents the unusual proximity of two independent private refugee houses in Bad Langensalza; it is not a precise map.

The two houses were not branches of the same organisation. They emerged independently, and followed different models, nevertheless addressed the same local emergency.

Michael Luick-Thrams acted through a historical model, a purchased building and a broad volunteer network. Stefan and Christin Mueller acted through an immediate family decision, an already vacant property and professional skills in medicine and education.

“The strongest shared fact is not that the initiatives were identical. It is that one small town produced two unusual private housing initiatives within walking distance of one another.”

Shared finding from the two accounts

STEFAN AND CHRISTIN MUELLER

One Empty House, One Week

How Stefan and Christin Mueller turned a vacant house into a four-year refuge for Ukrainians:

When Russia's full-scale invasion began in 2022, an empty house in Bad Langensalza was waiting for renovation and future tenants. Stefan and Christin Mueller saw reports of women and children sleeping in gymnasiums or cars and made a decision overnight: Their house would not remain empty.



ONE EMPTY HOUSE, ONE WEEK

In spring 2022, a vacant family property became a long-term refuge for Ukrainian residents.

1 WEEK

to prepare

21

people accommodated

2 YEARS

of German lessons

A PRIVATE INITIATIVE BUILT THROUGH HOUSING, SCHOOL, WORK AND TRUST

Figure 7. Interview-based visual summary.

1 WEEK

to prepare

21

people accommodated

2 YEARS

of German lessons

“At the beginning, we did not have a plan. It was simply humanity and social interest.”

Stefan Mueller, lightly edited for clarity

THE FIRST DAYS

The decision made overnight

The house belonged to Christin and stood empty, awaiting renovation and rental. War changed the vision for those vacant rooms. Seeing the urgent search for accommodation across Thüringen, the couple decided the property should provide immediate refuge instead of waiting for a future plan.



Figure 8. Editorial visual based on the interview; the house icon is symbolic.

A house furnished in a day

Christin used social media to ask for second-hand furniture and household goods. Stefan rented a truck, and in one intensive weekend they collected beds, cupboards, tables, bedding, towels and the other basics of daily life. Although they had given themselves roughly a week to prepare, the central furnishing effort happened in a single day.



Figure 9. The practical preparation combined donations, purchases, transport and help from the first residents themselves.

Some of the first Ukrainian residents arrived before the work was finished. Instead of waiting passively, they immediately joined in, carried furniture and helped prepare the rooms that would become “home”. Hosts and residents met one another as people solving the same urgent problem.

ARRIVAL AND LOCAL SUPPORT

Trust began before the paperwork

Christin found the first contacts through a Facebook group searching for accommodation in Thuringia. Telephone numbers followed, then WhatsApp conversations. Some residents were collected at the railway station with only their bags. Others arrived in their own car after sleeping in it during the journey.

“You look into each other's eyes and you see that this must be a good person. Trust was there from the beginning.”

Stefan Mueller, lightly edited for clarity

A private network moved quickly

The greatest practical challenge was equipping two flats with functioning kitchens. A normal kitchen ordered from a shop in Bad Langensalza could take two or three months; the Muellers had only days. They took what was physically available, transported it immediately and asked shops for humanitarian discounts.

WHAT THE COMMUNITY PROVIDED

A colleague donated a washing machine. Craftspeople contributed working hours. Local businesses reduced prices. Utility and waste providers offered concessions, and an internet company supplied the house without charge for two years.

A CENTRAL LESSON

Private networks could make decisions and move materials quickly, while official processes remained slow, fragmented and appointment-dependent.

COMPLEMENTARY SKILLS

Two roles that developed naturally

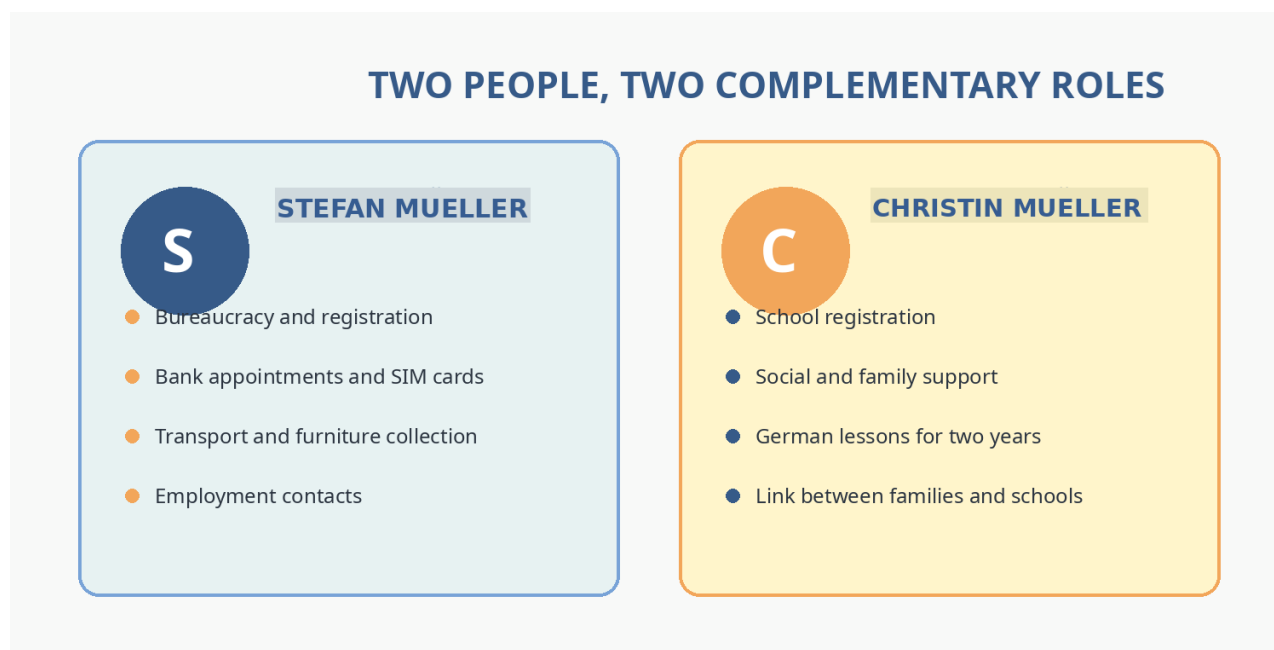


Figure 10. Editorial role diagram based on Stefan and Christin Mueller's interview responses.

Stefan, a general practitioner with his own medical practice in Bad Langensalza, took responsibility for much of the bureaucracy: registration, appointments with authorities, bank accounts, benefit procedures and SIM cards. Christin, a teacher, became the main social and educational link. She contacted schools, registered children and responded when families or teachers needed help.

21 people accommodated in total	16 residents at the busiest point	~14 schoolchildren supported	2 YEARS of German lessons
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Language as practical care

For two years, Christin taught German, especially to children. She worked with translation tools, simple vocabulary and the language needed for subjects such as sport, science and mathematics. Her professional knowledge gave the household direct access to the education system and helped Ukrainian children enter regular German schools with additional language support where possible.

THE INVISIBLE WORKLOAD

The work no opening-day photograph shows



Figure 11. Interview-based visual summary of language learning and school access.

The house was created quickly, but running it was not quick work. Stefan and Christin both had full-time jobs and were raising two young children. During the first period, helping residents often required one or two additional hours every day; some weeks brought too little sleep. There were appointments, translations, calls from schools, new forms and repeated explanations of the same procedures.

Opening bank accounts became a symbol of the problem. The bank required an individual appointment for each refugee, even when every person needed the same explanation. Stefan had to accompany them separately, repeating a process that could have been organised collectively.

“I am a doctor, and there were forms in German that even I did not understand. How were the refugees supposed to deal with them?”

Stefan Mueller, lightly edited for clarity

HOUSING rooms and furniture	PAPERWORK registration and banks	SCHOOL enrolment and language	WORK contacts and recognition
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INTEGRATION IN ORDINARY LIVES

What the house made possible

The Muellers did not describe integration as a slogan. They remembered individual turning points: a first job, a language certificate, a school result, an apartment and the confidence to organise life independently.

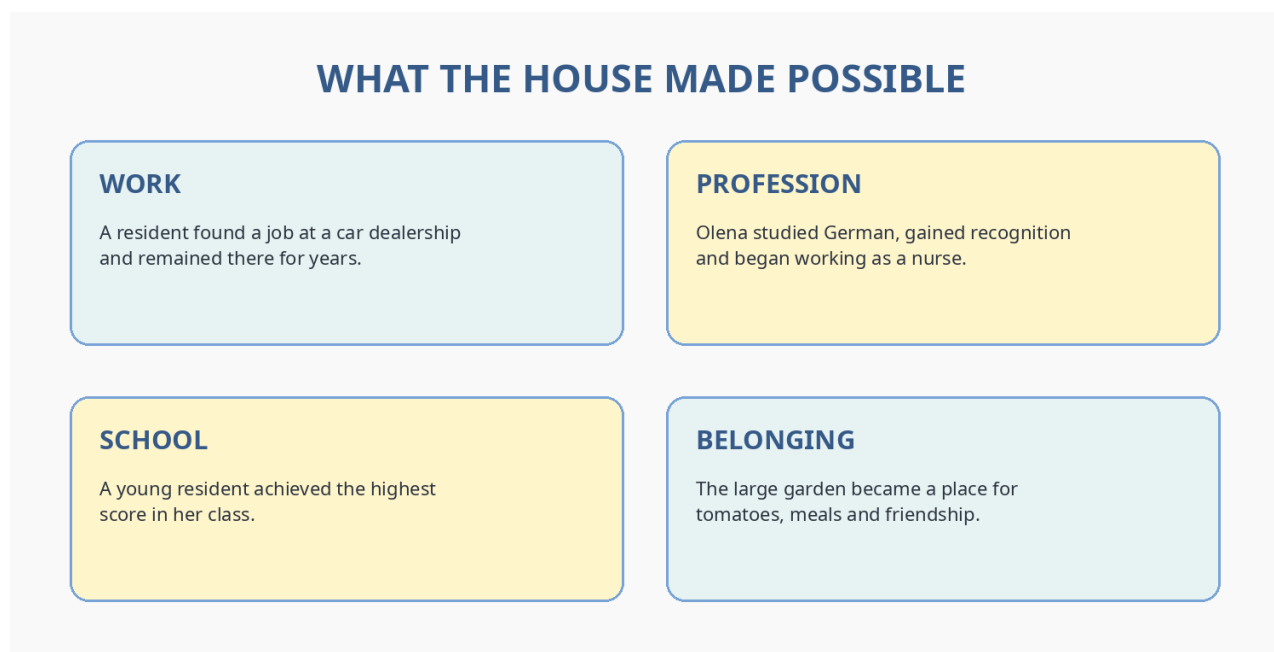


Figure 12. Editorial summary of four outcomes described during the interview.

One man arrived and almost immediately asked what work he could do. Stefan found a car dealership that needed someone to clean vehicles and whose owner spoke a little Russian. The resident began working there and, at the time of the interview [30 July 2026], had remained in the job for more than four years.

Olena, a trained nurse, studied German toward the required B2 level while working evenings and weekends in a restaurant. She eventually obtained professional recognition and began working in a hospital. The couple also recalled a teen resident who achieved the highest result in her school class.

A garden large enough to belong

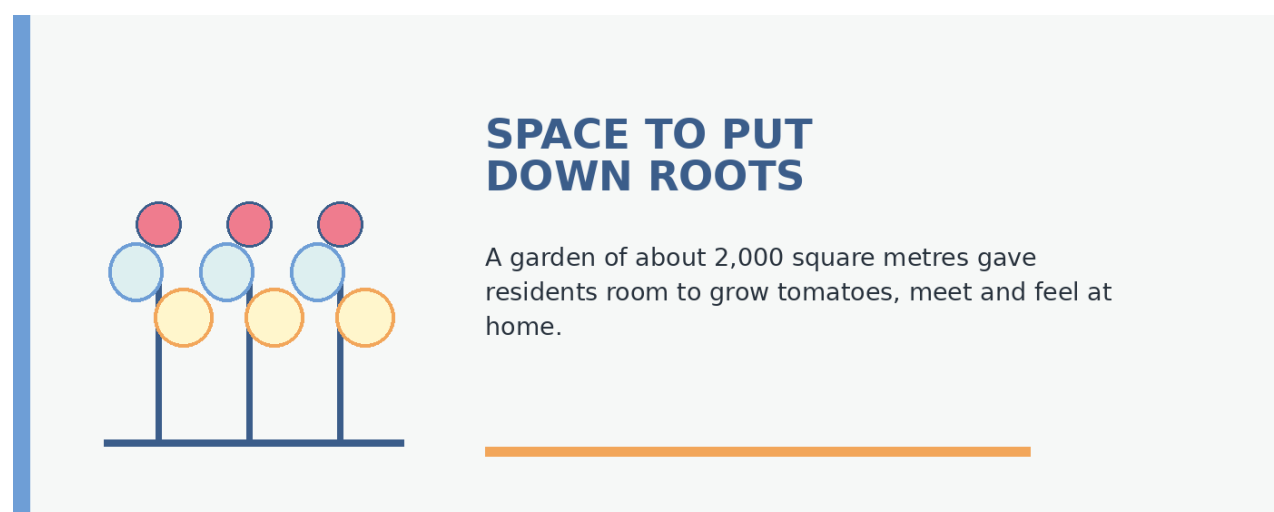


Figure 13. The property's garden of about 2,000 square metres became a place for fresh produce, shared meals and everyday belonging.

RELATIONSHIPS BEYOND ACCOMMODATION

From refuge to friendship

The residents were initially strangers, yet the relationships became markedly personal. The Muellers joined Ukrainian barbecues, shared toasts and heard expressions of gratitude that stayed with them. Once the most urgent administrative work had been completed, the house became a place of ordinary social life: food, garden work, children's games and long conversations.

Their own sons were included from the beginning. They attended meetings and barbecues and played with Ukrainian children even when they had few shared words. Christin believed that the experience made the children more tolerant, open-minded and comfortable with people from other countries.

WHAT CHANGED FOR THE FAMILY

The experience brought new friends, drew Stefan and Christin closer and made international relationships a normal part of their children's lives.

WHY "PROJECT" FELT TOO SMALL

For Christin, the relationships had become too personal and too permanent for the word project. The house was closer to an extended family and became part of the lives of all four Muellers.

“For Christin, this was never only a project. It became a family connection and a lasting part of their lives.”

Paraphrased from Christin Mueller through the interview discussion

THE CLOSE OF A CHAPTER

Twenty-one people, four years, different paths

Not every resident stayed in Germany. The Muellers estimated that about one third returned to Ukraine, often because of homesickness or because life in Germany made it difficult to continue a former profession. One Ukrainian doctor chose to return and work in Zaporizhzhia rather than remain dependent on social assistance while unable to practise medicine.

1/3 estimated to have returned to Ukraine	6 residents remaining in-house at the interview	21 people accommodated over four years
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The couple found such decisions painful and sometimes frightening, especially when returning meant renewed exposure to war. At the same time, they understood that safety alone could not replace a person's language, work, identity and sense of home.

By the time of the interview, smaller apartments had finally been found so that the remaining residents could have more privacy instead of six people sharing one flat. After the final residents move, the Muellers plan to renovate the bathrooms and return the property to ordinary rental use.

What others can learn

Their experience shows that a private house can become more than emergency shelter when professional skills and local knowledge are paired with personal commitment. It also shows the limits of volunteer action: private initiative can furnish rooms in a day, but it cannot simplify bank rules, accelerate every appointment or replace a functioning public integration system.

FOUR YEARS IN ONE SENTENCE

One week of emergency preparation became four years of shared responsibility. An empty house became a place where strangers found work, school, friendship and time to begin again.

WHAT THE TWO STORIES REVEAL

Same crisis, different paths

The two initiatives were not competing models. Their differences reveal how private humanitarian action was shaped by the resources, histories and professional skills available to the people who undertook it.

MICHAEL LUICK-THRAMS	STEFAN & CHRISTIN MUELLER
- Initiative inspired by the historic Scattergood Hostel in Iowa - A house purchased specifically for refugee accommodation - More than 40 volunteers and a larger turnover of residents - Historical records and documentary photographs preserve the work 80 people welcomed between March 2022 and August 2026	- Immediate response using an already vacant family property - Responsibilities shaped by medicine and education - Long stays, school integration and close family relationships - Interview testimony is the main documentation - About 21 people accommodated over roughly four years

What both houses had in common

SAFETY	ACCESS	RELATIONSHIPS
an immediate place to live	school, work and services	trust, friendship and belonging

In both cases, accommodation became meaningful only when it was connected to transport, paperwork, language, education, employment and regular human contact. The houses were physical spaces, but their real work happened through relationships.

CONCLUSION

Private property became public responsibility

The initiatives led by Michael Luick-Thrams and by Stefan and Christin Mueller began independently, but together they reveal both the possibilities and the limits of private humanitarian action.

Neither initiative was only about providing beds. Their work included furniture, transport, school registration, bank appointments, language support, employment, medical questions and the everyday difficulties of living in a new country. Much of this assistance was provided personally, often alongside full-time employment and family responsibilities.

One initiative grew from historical research and an established philosophy of refugee integration; the other developed through family responsibility, professional experience and immediate personal contact. One story is preserved primarily through photographs and public records; the other through interview testimony and carefully labelled editorial visuals.

“In both cases, private individuals looked at an empty building and saw not property, but possibility.”

Final conclusion

SOURCES FOR THE MICHAEL LUICK-THRAMS SECTION

Public records and documentary photographs from Haus der Spuren / TRACES-Spuren, together with the earlier profile “From Iowa to Bad Langensalza{.

SOURCES FOR THE MUELLER SECTION

Two audio recordings and accompanying transcripts of a recorded interview with Stefan and Christin Mueller in Bad Langensalza, on 30 July 2026. Michael Luick-Thrams also took part and occasionally interpreted or clarified responses. All three participants agreed to be interviewed and named.

EDITORIAL NOTE

Michael Luick-Thrams, Stefan Mueller and Christin Mueller agreed to participate in recorded interviews and to be identified by name. Direct quotations have been lightly edited for grammar and clarity. Translated or reconstructed remarks are identified as paraphrases. All Mueller graphics are editorial diagrams or interview-based visual summaries; they are not photographs of the family or property.