

A House Made of Splinters

A FILM BY SIMON LERENG WILMONT



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE

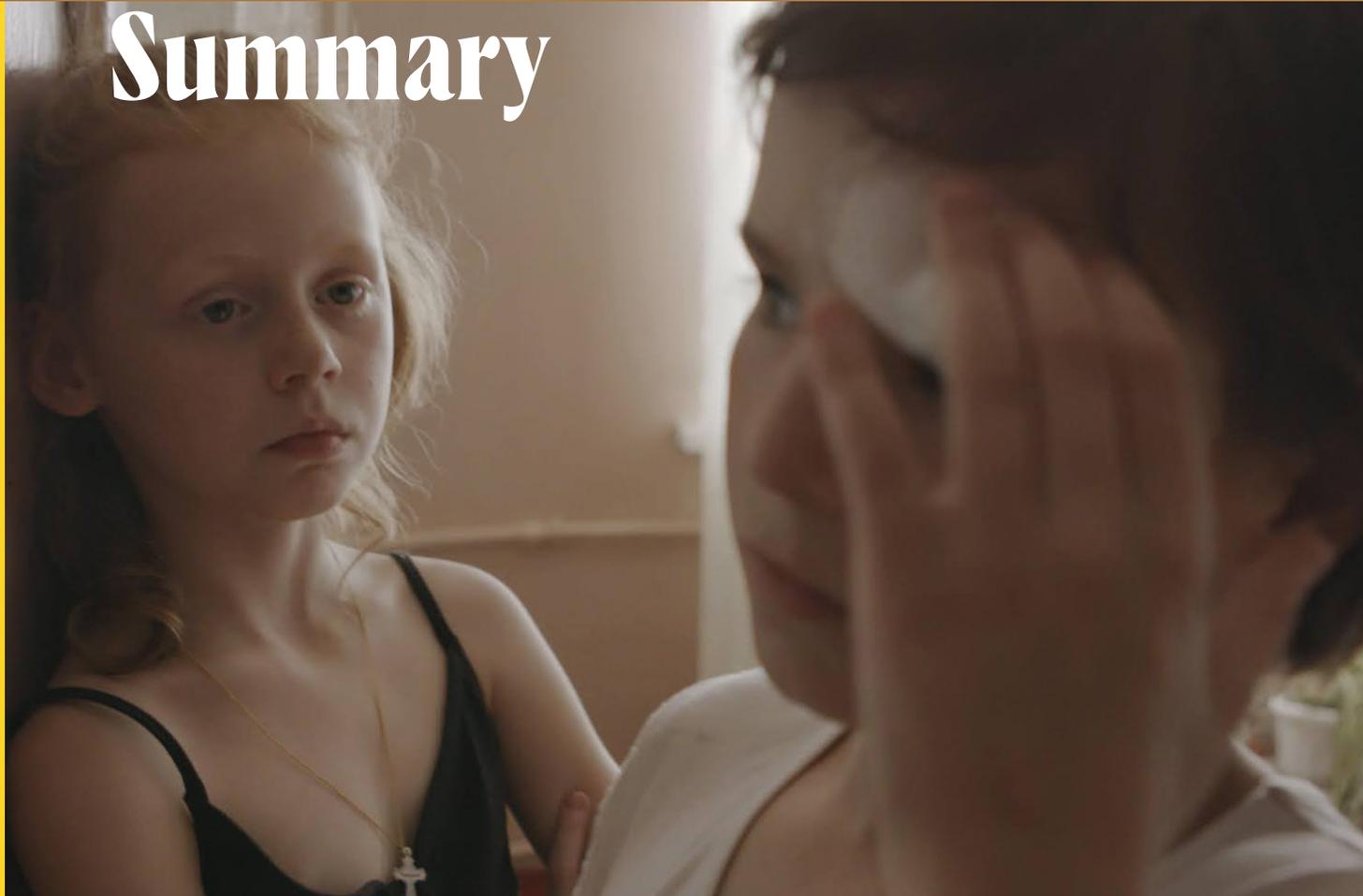




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Film Summary



Near the frontlines in eastern Ukraine, a safe haven provides refuge for children who have been temporarily separated from their parents. *A House Made of Splinters* chronicles the experiences of three displaced kids who, despite the perils surrounding them, find moments of joy and friendship with the aid of dedicated social workers who work tirelessly to protect them from harm.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *A House Made of Splinters* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing experiences and viewpoints and actively listening to one another in a care-forward environment.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. [Here is a model](#) of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- **Pass around** sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- **Allow time** for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- **Go around in a circle** and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- **Go around two to three times** to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- **Read the list aloud.**
- **Invite** questions or revisions.
- **Ask** if all are satisfied with the list.
- **Ask** all participants to sign the list of agreements. Leave it where all can see. As the facilitator, be mindful of the agreements throughout your session, noting if someone speaks or acts in a way that runs counter to them.

Participants

Key participants in the documentary are children at the Lysychansk Center for Social and Psychological Rehabilitation for Children.

Kolya, 12 years old, and his two siblings were taken to the Lysychansk Center. Their mother, like most parents of the institution's residents, experienced problems with alcohol. Kolya, being the eldest brother, took on the responsibility of caring for his younger siblings. However, the pressure of this responsibility, combined with the challenging family situation, caused Kolya to exhibit rebellious behavior and display traits of a troubled teenager. While Kolya's two siblings were eventually adopted, Kolya faced difficulties finding a suitable adoptive family due to his challenging behavior and age. As a result, he was transferred to an orphanage. However, after the premiere of the documentary, a man from Lysychansk who fled to Kyiv saw Kolya and made the decision to adopt him. Now Kolya lives happily with his new family.

Sasha, 8 years old, came to the Lysychansk Center due to parental neglect. In one instance, the police found her unsupervised at home alone. Sasha had to cook for herself, clean the house, and manage everything independently. Her mother's constant drinking and the absence of her father added to the instability in her life. At one point, a woman expressed interest in adopting Sasha but then changed her mind at the last moment. This experience made Sasha resistant to the idea of adoption, and she chose to remain in the orphanage. Currently, she resides safely abroad.

Eva, 12 years old, was taken to the Lysychansk Centre because her mother was unable to be a caregiver due to her own alcoholism. Eva's father has also passed away, leaving her without an adequate caregiver. While in the Lysychansk Centre she lived in constant fear of being moved to the orphanage. Her mother would frequently call her but never took her back home. Eva's grandmother later took her in, but unfortunately passed away due to COVID-19. There were concerns about Eva returning to an institution, but thankfully, her uncle stepped forward and adopted her and her brothers. They now live together in Lviv. They were invited to the premiere of the documentary in Kyiv.

Key Issues

A House Made of Splinters is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- The war in Ukraine
- The long-term consequences of war
- Impact of war on children and family
- Addiction, alcoholism, and substance dependency
- Non-normative family structures
- Caregivers
-



Background Information

A History of Lysychansk

Lysychansk was founded in 1795 as the first coal mining settlement in the eastern Ukrainian region of Luhansk. When Ukraine was part of the USSR, Severodonetsk—Lysychansk’s neighboring city—was founded in 1934 as the site of a new chemical plant. Shortly after its founding, both cities were confronted by the catastrophes of World World II, suffering a brutal Nazi invasion. The cities ultimately survived off of the industrial labor of the chemical plant, which was nearly as large as the city itself. Severodonetsk and Lysychansk retained this industry following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They then won independence and became part of the newly unified country of Ukraine in the early 1990s.

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Lysychansk and Severodonetsk were twin cities separated by the Siverskyi Donets River. Because of the similarities between the two cities, sometimes, when moving from Lysychansk to Severodonetsk, it was impossible to be certain where one city ended and the other began; they were like two districts of one huge city.

Lysychansk contained many historic buildings and was surrounded by terricones—mountains of solid waste left over from the mining plants. Severodonetsk was a very Soviet city, without a single historical building; it was lined with identical houses and identical gray streets.

The Russian offensive on Ukraine has since decimated this reality. In 2014, when the offensive began, Russian-backed separatists seized Ukrainian government buildings and declared the DPR (Donetsk People’s Republic) and the LPR (Luhansk People’s Republic) independent states. In April 2014, Ukraine launched a counter-offensive and after several months it reclaimed nearly half of the territory in the Luhansk region that was under the LPR. Lysychansk became controlled by Ukraine, yet supporters of pro-Russian forces remained in the city.

The troubles between Ukrainian Lysychansk and Severodonetsk continued up until 2022. Russia fully captured Severodonetsk in June and Lysychansk in July, making it the last major city in Luhansk, Ukraine’s eastern region, to fall under Russian control. At the time, the total combined population of people living in the cities was approximately 200,000.

Sources:

BBC News. “Ukraine War: Severodonetsk and Lysychansk Are Dead Cities—Zelensky.” June 6, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61711028>.

CNN. “Ukrainian Forces Withdraw from Lysychansk, Their Last Holdout in Key Region.” July 3, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/03/europe/russia-ukraine-luhansk-lysyhansk-intl/index.html>.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Kamila Hrabchuk, and Vivian Yee, “As City Falls, Ukraine’s Last Hope in Luhansk Falls with It.” The New York Times, July 3, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/03/world/europe/ukraine-war-lysyhansk.html>.

Context for the Existence of Displaced Children in Lysychansk

In *A House Made of Splinters*, we encounter children who've been removed from their homes and found temporary housing at an orphanage in Lysychansk, a region that has been impacted by war for nearly ten years. There are many factors that contributed to these children's situation, primarily Russia's war against Ukraine. Additionally, war has long impacted the economy, and the chemical plants that were once thriving shut down many years ago. Once the primary industry in the area, coal has been cut off, as have all the sales chains, supply chains, and commercial business connected to it. Those who worked factory jobs were fired, evacuated, or enlisted in the Ukrainian defense against Russia. Due to its location so close to the frontline between Russia and Ukraine, in addition to suffering the ongoing impact of war, Lysychansk became a desperate, desolate, and depressing place for all who remained—including the children who were born into the sociopolitical situation in the region.

Social Workers, Children, and Suffering in Wartime

A House Made of Splinters offers heartbreaking glimpses into the lives of both social workers and the children they serve and support. In Ukraine, social workers are government employees. The shelters the children live in are government-supported shelters. Such shelters exist in every region of Ukraine. Though social systems are in place, they are very weak and have only grown weaker as the country faces increasing challenges spurred by the war.

In times of war, pre-existing suffering is exacerbated and as economic and social support declines within communities, rates of depression and substance abuse often rise. In the film we see that many of the children have lost their parents, not directly because of the war (i.e., not because their parents enlisted), but rather because their parents are struggling with substance abuse—a consequence of the war. While children suffer the direct consequences of this heartbreaking socio-political reality, social workers have stepped up as the war's unsung heroes and are caring for those who are no longer safe in their neighborhoods or communities. Social workers provide more than safety—they provide emotional and psycho-social support that allows children to have their needs met in situations where they wield very little power.

Amidst this tragic reality, a reform effort has been ongoing in Ukraine to change the status of these care facilities, many of which are subject to closure. The institution that is shown in *A House Made of Splinters* is a temporary one where children are placed for nine months. Such institutions have yet to close down because children are still in need of immediate care. On the other hand, boarding schools, which offer round-the-clock supervision on a permanent basis, are subject to reform and are being closed, cut back, or reorganized. The goal in Ukraine is not to have boarding schools where children live for years and years, as was true in the Soviet era. Rather, the aim is to create institutions that provide temporary care for children with the ultimate goal of supporting them in finding permanent adoptive homes. The center in the film is a model for these types of facilities. The government also wishes to focus on more attuned preventative care, addressing the social problems that lead to the need for adoption in the first place. A major focus of this would be navigating addiction, which impacts many of

the children depicted in *A House Made of Splinters* and care facilities across Ukraine. Despite these laudable intentions, the current reality in Ukraine makes it difficult to move toward both models, making the transition a very slow process.

Without the ability to put proper social systems in place, social workers are suffering high rates of professional burnout. They lack fair wages and proper vacation time and due to their high workload they cannot devote adequate time to the children who need it. They are working in economically depressed cities and villages, and they, too, are suffering the impact of the war. In principle, these social workers themselves are often in need of assistance as much as those they help.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The discussion prompts, which follow specific chapters of the film, are an invitation to dialogue. Please select discussion questions that are relevant to your community.

Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- **What emotions are you feeling after watching the film?**
- **Do you see yourself in any of the film's participants?**
- **Are there any lessons in the film that stuck with you?**
- **What characteristics did you notice about the film's participants (the children, social workers, or parents)? What were their strengths and weaknesses?**

The Relationship Between Parent and Child

- How does the parent-child bond affect the ability of children in the Lysychansk Center to adapt to their new circumstances?
- Further, how does this bond influence the behavior of the children? Are they more likely to deviate from the patterns of their parents or follow the model they've created?
- What are the consequences of child and parent dependence?
- Beyond their parents, who has the potential to influence the lives of these children? Is this influence as effective as the influence of their parents? Why or why not?

The Role of the Social Worker

- What roles do the social workers play for the children in the film?
- How much power do social workers have to impact the children's lives?
- In what ways could this film impact current and future social workers?
- What is your reaction to the underpayment of workers in the residential center?

Examining the Impact of *A House Made of Splinters*

- What type of people, organizations, or social movements do you think would benefit most from viewing this film?
- For example, people considering adoption, adoption agencies or services, foster care agencies or services, teachers or school programs.
- Do you think this film will influence the adoption of children or vice versa?

How Do We (the Audience) Interpret the Experience of the Displaced Children in the Film?

- How do you think the events revealed by the film will affect the wellbeing of the children portrayed?
- How much have these events been influenced by the war taking place?
- What specific events stuck out to you the most and why?
 - For example, when Kolya and his sister were separated, how did you react? Do you consider this separation normal? Does it surprise you that siblings are separated this way in Ukraine? Moreover, what other options could have been instituted to prevent the children from being separated? In what ways could they have been informed of their separation in a more humane way?
- How do you perceive the behavior of the children in the film? Why do you think this behavior is taking place?

CLOSING QUESTION/ ACTIVITY

OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these:

Can joy exist in the midst of tragedy? If so, how do we cultivate this joy?

How much responsibility do we as a global community have to protect the children and individuals impacted by the invasion of Ukraine? What can we do on the individual level? What can we do on the collective level?

TAKING ACTION

What can people who watched this film do?

- Find groups and global services that can help you host a refugee in your area.
- Donate to impacted individuals.
- Check the status of children's shelters in your community and see what you can do to help.
- Look into becoming a mentor or volunteer at a children's center.

Resources

Nova Ukraine: A U.S.-based nonprofit that works with Ukraine-based organizations to put together supply packages for children and adults, including baby food, diapers, dry foods, and hospital supplies for children's orphanages in Donetsk.

Sunflower of Peace: Raises money to aid medical workers on the frontlines.

UNICEF: Supports safe drinking water, sanitation, nutrition, and health for children and families impacted by the invasion of Ukraine.

Voices of Children: Provides psychological and psychosocial support to children who were impacted by armed conflict in Ukraine.

Vostok SOS: Partners with the German-Swiss NGO Libereco to provide immediate evacuation support to Ukrainians who are attempting to flee their homes and maintains a hotline for those in need.

Credits & Acknowledgments



This guide was created through collaborative efforts of Voices of Children (Olena Rozvadovska and Azad Safarov) and the POV Education Team (Courtney B. Cook, PhD and Jordan Thomas).

Emergence of the Voices of Children Charitable Foundation, with its many initiatives and a large team, was unplanned, but absolutely logical if you look at the stories of its co-founders.

From the very beginning of Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Olena Rozvadovska spent a lot of time in Donbas, providing humanitarian aid to local residents, convincing them to evacuate, and looking for opportunities to rehabilitate injured children.

Rozvadovska worked with people directly, spending her own reserves and organizing fundraising to help children. Later, international initiatives began to contact her because they needed help writing reports from the scene and consulting on the areas with the greatest need for charitable funds.

Azad Safarov was a documentary filmmaker who traveled to the east of Ukraine to make a film about the war. There he met Rozvadovska, and they began to work together on the film *A House Made of Splinters* about children from a destroyed orphanage whose destinies changed in an instant.

Safarov and Rozvadovska wanted not only to spread the word about the war in Ukraine and abroad, but also to collect targeted aid for these children, so they created their foundation in 2019. This is how Voices of Children began.

THANKS TO THOSE WHO REVIEWED THIS GUIDE

Natalie Danford, Copyeditor

DISCUSSION GUIDE PRODUCER

Courtney B. Cook, Phd | Education Manager, POV