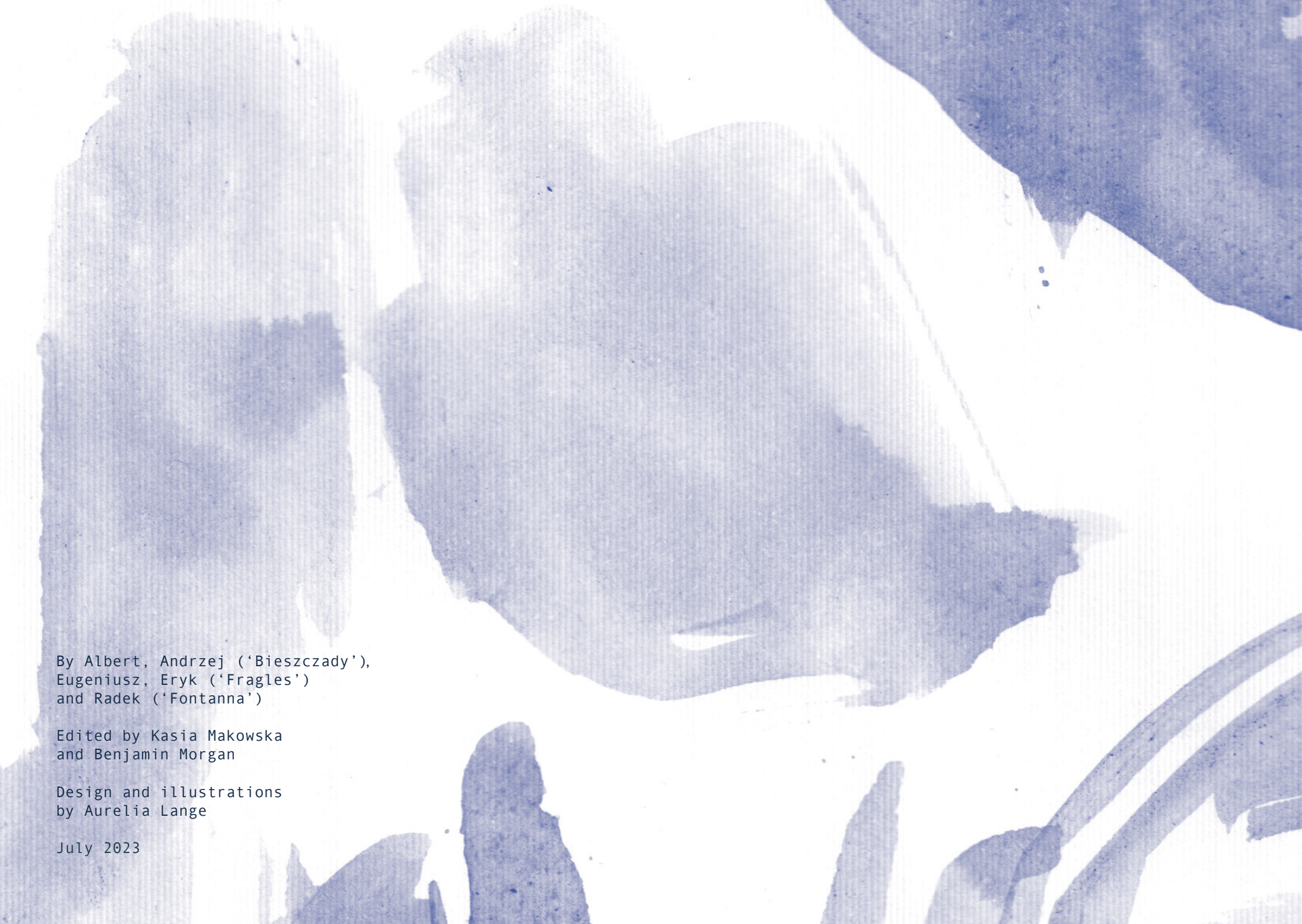




**'England took us in...'
Polish rough sleepers
speak back**

Other Voices 03



By Albert, Andrzej ('Bieszczady'),
Eugeniusz, Eryk ('Fragles')
and Radek ('Fontanna')

Edited by Kasia Makowska
and Benjamin Morgan

Design and illustrations
by Aurelia Lange

July 2023

Introduction

We're ending this [series of publications](#) centring the voices and analysis of people typically marginalised in accounts of migrant destitution - activists, frontline workers, homeless migrants themselves - with a dialogue between five Polish men with a history of rough sleeping.

The five - Albert, Andrzej ('Bieszczady'), Eugeniusz, Eryk ('Fragles') and Radek ('Fontanna') - were members of a Polish-language coffee-mornings group run by Kasia in 2021 and 2022. This was a space where Polish speakers who were or had been homeless could come together to share experiences and talk about issues that affected them. Kasia first met most members of the group at Akwaaba, a social centre for migrants, which Benjamin helped set up in 2015 and where she has been volunteering since 2017.

We've written quite a bit *about* Polish rough sleepers - including their [difficulties accessing the NHS](#) and how they were [targeted for deportation](#) by local authorities, the Home Office and some homelessness charities between 2010 and 2017. But getting to know the guys over the past six or seven years made us want to publish something based around their voices, which we find humorous, sad and full of the insight born of often bitter experience. So we approached Albert, Andrzej, Eryk, Eugeniusz and Radek and invited them to share their reflections on migrating to the UK and living here over the past decade or so.

The conversation presented in this booklet ranges widely over themes including: the experience of sleeping rough; trying to find a stable place to live or stay, including squatting; encounters with support services; being targeted by immigration enforcement; leaving Poland and returning to Poland; migration to other countries; Brexit; drink and drugs; being a victim of violence; being homeless during Covid-19; friendships and family relations; and working in the black and grey economies.

We should also note that the 'dialogue' has been stitched together from four conversations recorded between April 2022 and February 2023. The first of these conversations took the form of a group discussion. This was followed by three one-on-one conversations between Kasia and Albert, Eryk and Radek.

We tried to involve the five authors as much as possible in the editing process. In our ideal scenario they would have shaped the way the text was edited at every stage rather than just being invited to amend a 'fair copy' draft. But we didn't have the time or resources to do this, and the guys were happy to leave the work of turning their speech into a written text in our hands. We understand that some people might have doubts about this way of working; we had doubts ourselves. But in the end we decided that it was better that Albert, Andrzej, Eryk, Eugeniusz and Radek's stories be told in this imperfectly collaborative fashion than that they not be told at all.

Some errors, misunderstandings and misrepresentations will have crept in. As editors we've made choices about what to include and what to leave out. In places we've moved text around to improve the flow of the dialogue or make the piece read more like a story. We've always consulted the authors when doing so. Some details (e.g. dates, places and people's names, including the names of some of the authors) have been changed.

We've tried not to sanitise language and sentiment, and we've sought to render the rich colloquial Polish of the guys into comparably colloquial English. We've kept footnotes to a minimum, so in places the reader is asked to do a little imaginative work.

We've done our best not to sensationalise, and to be faithful to the letter and spirit of what the guys said, even where we didn't agree with their views or ways of expressing themselves. We're pleased that they seem happy with the final texts, and we're grateful to them for their trust and patience, as well as for providing the photos that formed the basis for some of Aurelia's beautiful illustrations.

'The women have it worse than us, of course...': all five authors of this piece are men. Women are usually a minority in spaces used by rough sleepers, and only a couple of women regularly attended Kasia's Polish coffee mornings. For various reasons none of them participated in this piece. Kasia would like to produce another text highlighting the experiences of homeless Polish women, and think more about how to create spaces where women with a history of rough sleeping can feel comfortable coming together.

Kasia Makowska & Benjamin Morgan



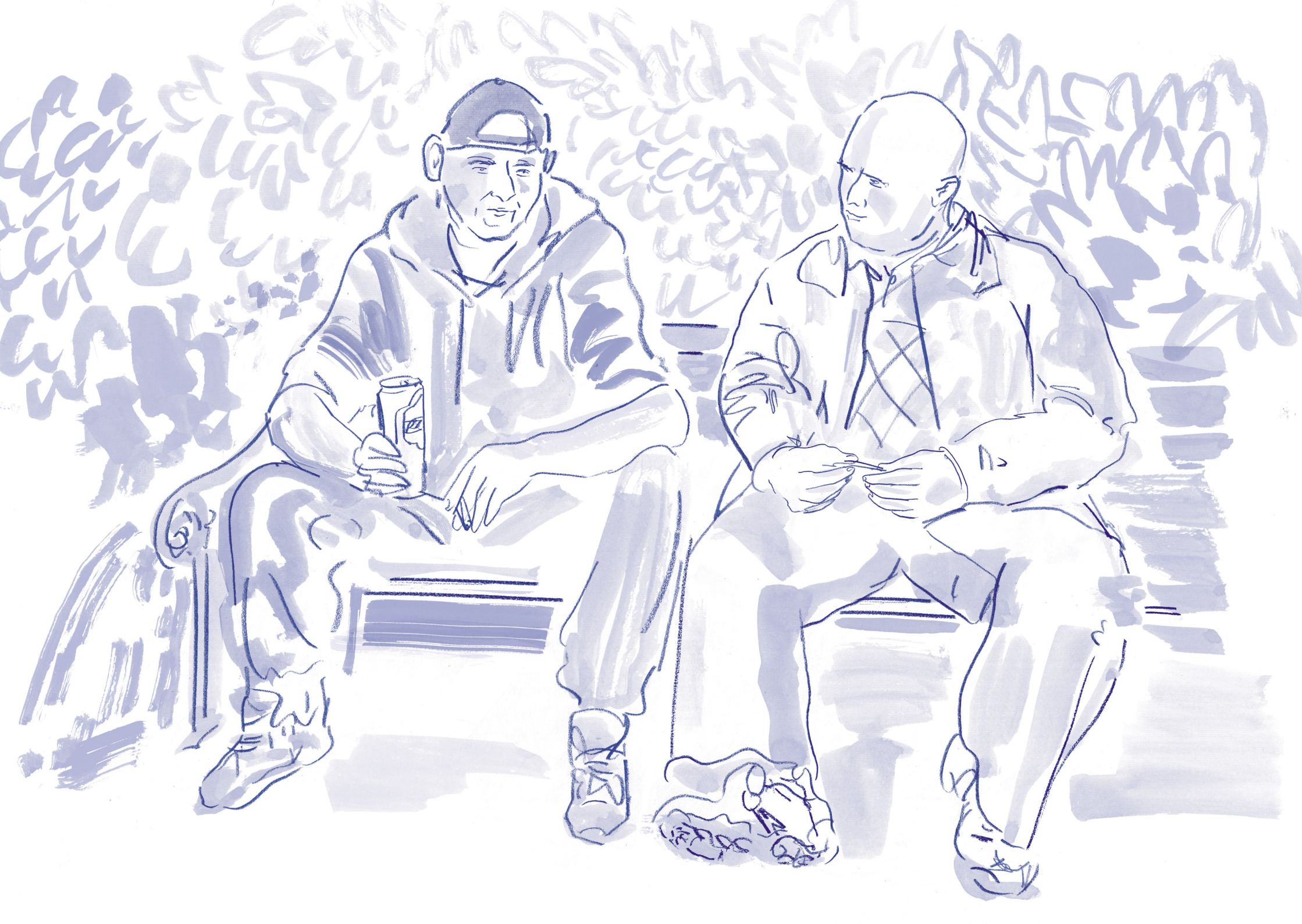
Acknowledgments

Albert, Andrzej, Eryk, Eugeniusz, and Radek would like to thank the whole crew and everyone who helped make this booklet happen. Special thanks to Kasia and Benjamin for their help and concern for the issues facing homeless people.

Kasia and Benjamin are grateful to all of the translators and interpreters who helped create the piece: Tomek Muszyński; Paul Rekret; and Kasia's siblings Ola Makowska and Michał Makowski.

Thanks are also due to St Ignatius church in Stamford Hill for renting us the space for the coffee mornings and to Kasia Wójcik, Gabi Wertman and everyone at the church's Social Apostolate for all the breakfast snacks.

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WHAT IT'S LIKE

Eugeniusz: What's it like? You'd have to see for yourself...

Andrzej: It's not something anyone would believe.

Eugeniusz: Yeah you'd need to do it yourself for a week...

Eryk: Even that wouldn't be long enough... You can break it up into stages, let's say. The first stage, those first days - that's a shock to the system. You don't know where to sleep, you're petrified...

Eugeniusz: You don't know the terrain. You don't know where to get a drink of water, or where you can go for a piss...

Eryk: So long as you've got something in your account, it's not too bad. You'll meet someone somewhere and they'll say: here's where you can get some dinner. That's how it starts... In the old days you could jump on a bus and ride around all night. They didn't chase people off back then. Yeah you could ride around and get some sleep, if you can call it sleep...

Eugeniusz: After a while it's like being on your own turf. You know the area, you know the people...

Albert: They used to give out paper tickets. Each driver had fifteen a month - this Polish lad who drives the 149 told me so. But it's a lot of paperwork for them. They have to write 'at such-and-such a time I gave this voucher...'

Andrzej: They wouldn't give it to me. Only to the lads with rucksacks...



Albert: You have to have a homeless look... Take Leszek... Not the electrician, another Leszek... They used to give out food at King's Cross on Wednesdays, and one day Leszek turns up clean shaven... Hasn't had a drink in three days - that's an important detail. He turns up and says his shoes are too small for him. And the woman says: but you're not homeless. He was fuming! I remember thinking, if you'd seen him three days ago you'd have given him some shoes...

Eryk: This idea that every homeless person has to be unshaven and hairy! Smelly and dirty... I've got somewhere to go and wash my clothes. Others might not want to, they'd rather lie down in the bushes or on a bench. Drink and take drugs... There's homelessness and then there's homelessness, you know?

Eugeniusz: And there are druggies and there are druggies... Let's not lump everyone together! I've been smoking cannabis for as long as I can remember. I smoked yesterday, I smoked today and I'll smoke tomorrow. But I don't shoot up, don't put coke up my nose. I won't sell everything I've got for a hit. Others will...

Albert: I can't go to sleep without washing my legs. So I'd go to Hyde Park and wash in the lovers' fountain. Yeah, wash my feet and pick out a few coins. At five in the morning. The water was ice cold like a mountain stream, I'd be white to the bone when I came out. That's how you learn...

Now I'm going to show off a bit. The first time I landed on the street, I slept outside the VIP exit at Harrods... The Mr. Bean guy bought me a packet of doughnuts once! Plus a bottle of water and twenty quid... I was still drinking in those days, I had to hop on the 73 to Dalston to buy a three-litre sajder ¹...

Eugeniusz: 'Had to'!

Eryk: Well, they don't sell it in central London...

Albert: The point being I didn't know about the missions,² that there were places you could go at six in the morning to get a coffee. Then at eight you can get a free breakfast and have a wash. At least that's how it used to be before the pandemic...

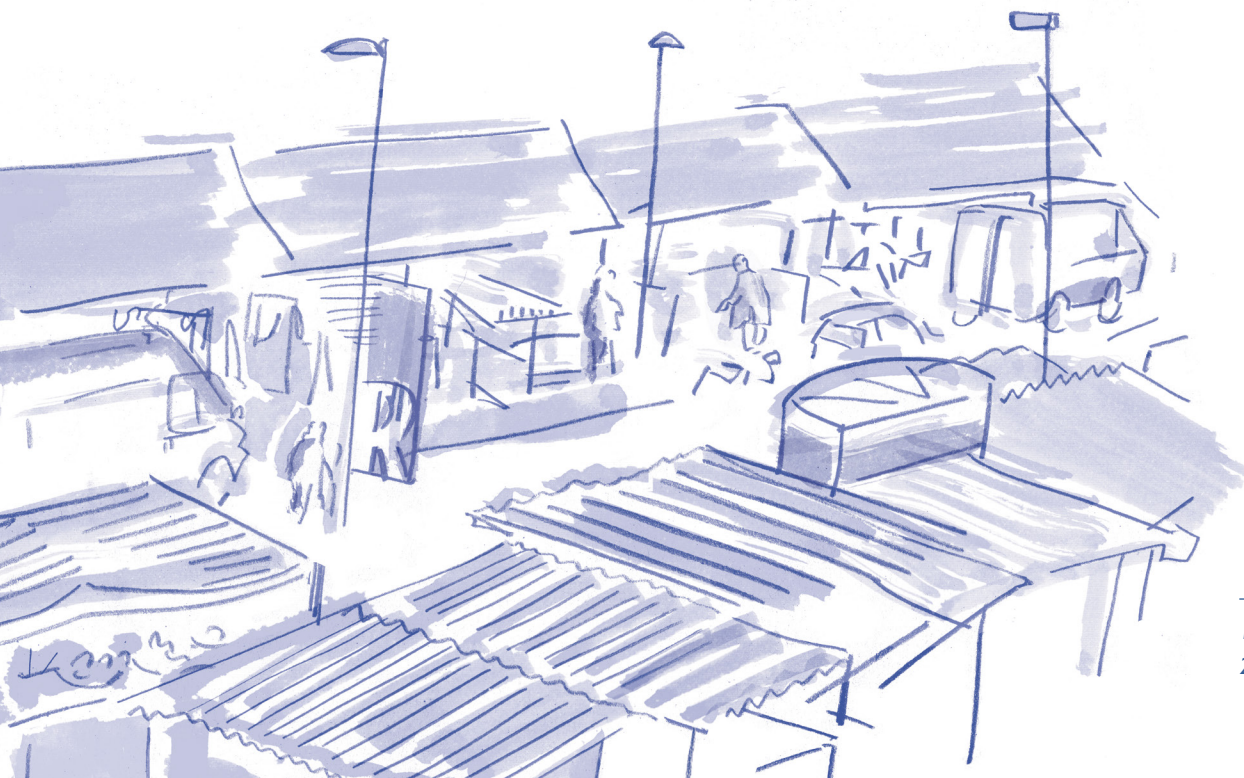


I didn't know about any of that. So you had to hustle. There was a bakery right next door to my spot, and I'd get up at four in the morning, when there was no one around, and pinch a couple of buns. Yeah I had to make do with that, because I didn't know about the missions...

After a while I clocked that they were leaving bread outside the Sainsbury's. Whole bags full, after the shop closed. So if nobody was passing by I'd go and make a hole in the bag. Pull out a bread roll. Like a thief...

Then there were these old rich people's houses, where they still get their milk delivered in bottles. Sad to say, I used to have to steal those sometimes. Just a bottle here and there. I could've been locked up. For some stupid milk...

The bendy buses were a godsend. The 63, and the 73 to Victoria. But then they started checking tickets again... You'd have to jump off and schlep the rest of the way on foot. Fifteen or twenty miles, there and back. When you took your shoes off at the end of the day your feet'd be burning. But you had to keep walking...



1. A Polishized version of the English word 'cider'. The standard Polish for 'cider' is 'cydr'.

2. Homelessness day centres.

ENDING UP HERE

Eugeniusz: How did I end up here? What can I say... I was born and here I am.

I've travelled all over the world. Poland never interested me. I came here by accident because someone offered me a job... That's how I got here. I brought my missus and my daughter. Then things went pearshaped...

Eryk: I ended up here by accident. I didn't have the slightest intention. I can't say that I liked the English. Can't say I like them now. I read up a bit on the history...

I was in Italy first...

Eugeniusz: I was there, too. What a scam...

Andrzej: I came to find my cousin. I'd been working in Germany, but they asked me to go to London to look for her coz nobody knew where she was. So I came...

I wasn't planning on staying. I'd been in Sweden for four years, I liked it there. But a friend told me there was lots of work going here. So I stayed...

Eryk: It was written...

Andrzej: Must've been!



Radek: I never thought about going abroad. But in the end it was that or prison... So I went to Holland for four years. Killed rats in the sewers. Later I went to Norway. Then six months in France. Lyon. After that I went to Finland for the white nights and ended up in Hamburg... My colleague from there brought me here. Brighton, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Wolverhampton... Then I ended up in the Tropics ³...

I had a little studio, I didn't pay for it because I built it myself. On the building site, out of an old office... It even had a little shower...

Then the work ran out and I ended up on the street. Parks and tents... Later it was squats squats squats. You get used to it. But I started having health problems...

Yeah I had an accident on the job. A basement collapsed on me. We were working without protection and something broke beneath my feet. The bosses said they'd pay me sick money, but that only lasted three weeks. Then they vanished. I didn't want to rat on them, that's not my way...

When I came out of hospital I lived in a squat. Then I had another accident on the job. Fell down and broke my arm. So that's where we are now. Fighting with the paperwork. It's cool... I'm going to physio, doing my exercises. I can't bend my arm properly, but it's getting there... I'm not twenty years old any more, things don't heal the way they used to.

I was hit by a car on this very street... Broke my collarbone in six places. Another time I fell off a roof. Three storeys up... I was in hospital for six months. Everything in plaster. Arms, nose, chin - like a mummy! They only left my you-know-what free... I should set up as doctor, you know? I know every cartilage by heart...

Yeah that's life on the streets...

3. Turnpike Lane.



Eryk: The women have it worse than us, of course...

Albert: But people look at you funny if you're Polish. There's this idea that a Pole must be a thief...

Eryk: Yeah us Poles are like lepers...

Radek: The English lads could sleep wherever they wanted because they weren't going to get deported. But for Poles or Lithuanians it's different...

Albert: People have this notion that they'll come here and it'll be easy to earn. But it's not that simple. The language is one thing, and for another - if you don't get paid, no one cares. Yeah if you can't meet the rent, you get kicked out straightaway... And not everyone can make it on the street...

Most rough sleepers are alcoholics in one way or another... The situation forces you to drink. It makes the day go by quicker. Or the night. But there's drinking and drinking... I drink. I don't deny it. But then I'll down five bottles of water the next day to detox. I can live without alcohol for a couple of days, and I know I could stop if I had to...

For other people it's different. Take Mr. Zielony. We visited him in the hospital, remember? His legs are blue up to the balls and he can't walk four metres to the toilet. Yet he keeps on bingeing... Yeah it's a question of standing firm. When I say stop, I mean stop... Take Fox... He was drinking, drinking, drinking, and then what? The problem with Fox was that when he was drinking he'd lie down wherever he happened to be. Concrete or not, he'd lie down to sleep! He had a wife here, and kids... Not that they were speaking. In the end they disconnected him from the ventilator...

Eryk: Can we take a break? Fontanna wants to smoke...

ALBERT

I'm hungover after the weekend... It's normal in Poland. Sometimes I feel like we're in Poland... But I'm alive. Onto my fourth bottle of water. I'm doing a detox...

They were supposed to cut me today but they've postponed it to Thursday. On Thursday I reckon they'll postpone it again. The cardiologist wouldn't sign the papers because my blood pressure's too high... 210/190. I've been taking hypertension tablets three times a day, but he still won't agree to it. Says I might not wake up from the operation...

I came for a short while and I've ended up staying for a longer while... Eighteen years... It's my eighteenth birthday! I've come of age, and I'll probably stay here till the end...

Sometimes it's better and sometimes it's worse. More often it's been worse, but it doesn't matter. I've spent more years on the street than at home. I fell in love with the wrong woman...

I came on January 17th 2004. We weren't in the EU yet... My missus had been fooling around... We ended up getting a divorce and so I came here.

I was working in a restaurant, but then the London bombings happened and it all went up in smoke. There was this one Arabic lad working there and he was happy that so many people died at King's Cross. And there were four of us Poles. And, well, all four of us got sacked for racism...

Yeah I'm a chef by trade but the doctor won't let me do it. It's too hot in the kitchen, and in restaurants it's fast fast fast. Plus in as many years as I've been here I don't know English. I can only speak it when I've had a drink... But I love cooking! I still do it for friends, on Christmas Eve I made two hundred pierogi... Ruskie,⁴ and the ones with cabbage and mushrooms. I don't get tired. Even with my blood pressure I don't get tired in the kitchen...

4. A popular type of pierogi in Poland, filled with quark, boiled potato and fried onion.

Later I used to collect glasses in this nightclub. A Mexican guy owned it. Yeah I was collecting glasses, and doing the hoovering in the morning, taking away the empties. Then the Mexican fucked up somehow and they took away his licence. There were six of us working there, three girls and three lads...

The friend that brought me here happened to be in Poland and I didn't have his number. So I ended up on the streets. Later I started working for him again. But I liked my drink... Still like it, though I can't hold it like I used to. Three beers and I'm full. Then I start to feel sick...

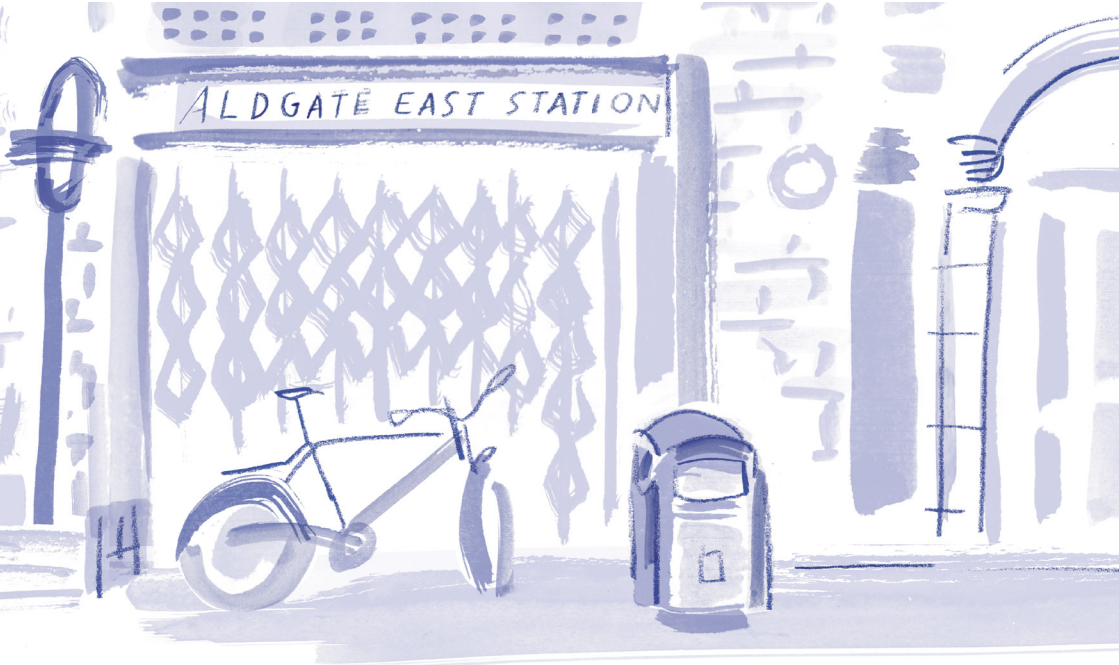
For a while I was on the buses. The 149 or the 73. Seven Sisters to Victoria and back until six am. It gets tiring, you know, after a couple of months. And there used to be so many canaries⁵. Some would make you get off, others would let you be...

But in the summer you stink, don't you? We'd go to the ponds to wash, because showers at the missions are only Monday-Wednesday-Friday. But if there were people fishing in the ponds, they wouldn't let us bathe. They used to chase us away... We'd have to walk all the way from the other side to get into the ponds... Or we'd go to the marinas, they have these shower cabins for the people that sleep on barges...

It was easier when squats were allowed... You'd just break the glass and change the lock. Now you can get sent down if you open a squat... We opened one in Walthamstow once. But the downstairs neighbour snitched... When the police arrived they said: you came in through the garden, so you can leave through the garden too! There was a compost heap out there, they stood there laughing their asses off while we traipsed through it...

Later I slept rough at the Monument... Monday to Friday it was crawling with suits. But on weekends and bank holidays it was like a ghost town. Just a security guard passing at seven in the morning, seven in the evening. Zero threat, really... And the suits would throw you a tenner here, two tenners there. Sometimes they'd bring us booze. A bottle of wine from the pub, I wasn't complaining... One woman brought me a nice sheepskin coat, which I got rid of

5. Ticket collectors.



very quickly, because if the police came, they'd say I stole it. She was drunk, she brought it because she thought I was cold...

Later they locked me up, because Pawlo - may he rest in peace - and Robak came and nicked the lead out of the pipes. To sell it for scrap, of course... They came at night and stripped the lead off the pipes even though they knew I was sleeping there... I chased them round Whitechapel for that later on...

This one old copper with the tall helmet used to bring me coffee, because there was a McDonald's right there. I slept there for a year and a half, so they all knew me by heart. The security guards would pop by for a look: ah, he's asleep! The Pole's sleeping...

It used to be easy to sleep in central London. Before they started to pin us down... I mean, Benjamin, you knew not to sleep in Dalston, and you didn't sleep in Whitechapel... Okay, you're a responsible guy, I'm a responsible guy. I won't fucking kick a homeless guy, I won't fucking hit him... But when people are off their faces they'll do anything. They'll kick you. Or they'll fucking spit on you. They might even piss on you...

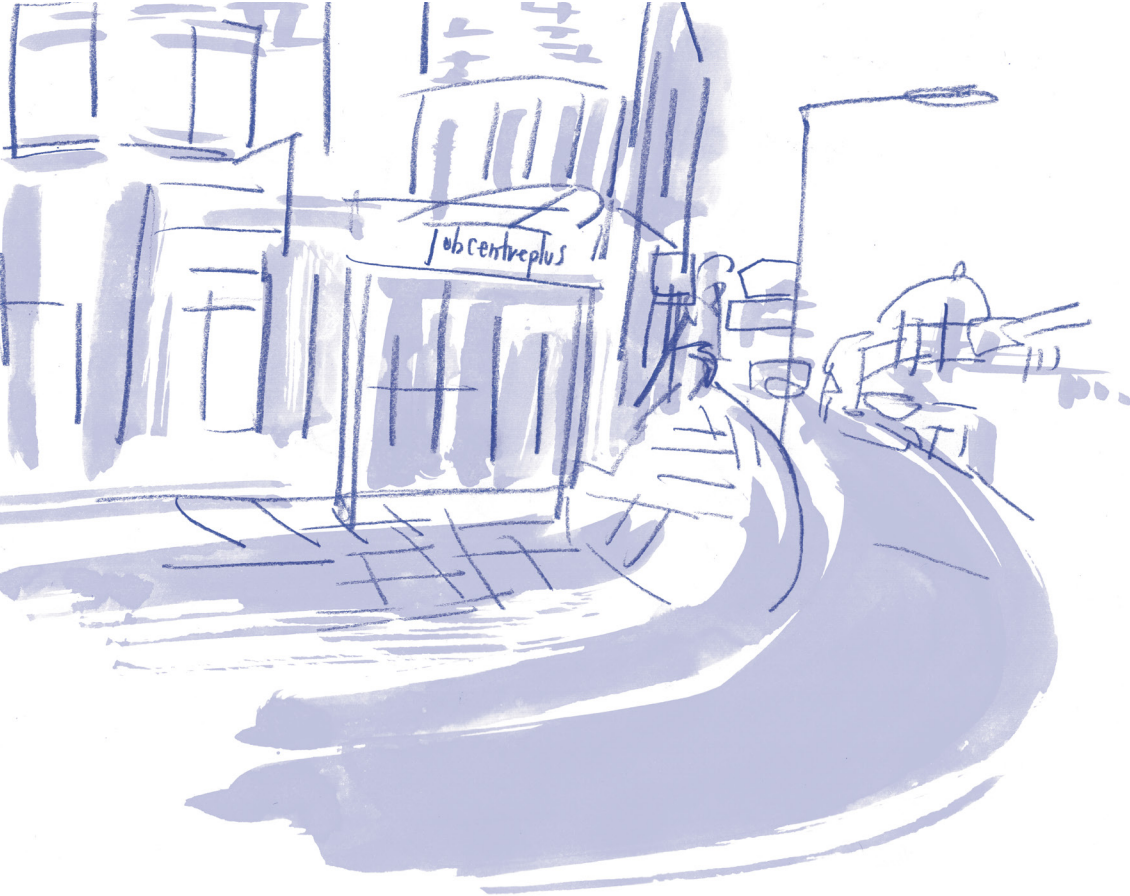
A lot of people used to sleep outside the library in Whitechapel. They'd come and piss on you there. Or bottle you in the head. You can't get up fast enough, because Poles like to drink... Yeah when I'm drunk I don't hear who's coming up behind me... It's not like in central London, where they only sneak up to check if you're alive, or to give you a bottle of water...

Fox got beaten up... This was in Shoreditch... Oh Fox! The number of beatings he took from these crazy fucking teenagers. They were out to have fun. Fuck me, I'm sorry I'm swearing... They were showing off for their girls. Twice he got hit over the head ...

Do you remember Zosia? The one that used to knit... When her daughter kicked her out, she slept under the stairs with me. That was in Shoreditch, too... These three young kids started throwing bottles at us from the roof of the building opposite. But they were unlucky because our guys were sleeping in the park next door... It only took one shout: kurwa, they're fucking beating us! That was when Fox was still alive...

You make friends, you know? You meet people in the missions, or at the soup kitchens, or at Crisis at Christmas. Some people you get on with, some you don't. A lot of it revolves around booze. Poles drink, you know... So in the summer, in the park, you sit down and say hello... It used to be that if you went to the park and you saw someone holding a Polish beer, well, of course it had to be a Pole! It's not like that any more. Even the black guys drink Polish lager nowadays...

Later I had a flat... Yeah most people wanted to go to hostels but I said I'd rather get a flat. The only thing is, I was thinking with the lower part of my body at that time. You know what I mean? Yeah I'd fallen in love with a neighbour of mine... Three kids we raised together, for almost five years... Not mine, hers... But then I stopped being able to pay for the joint. I was eight and a half thousand in debt...



I had Job Centre⁶, but I lost it... I was supposed to start working in Bounds Green. A chocolate factory or something like that. But she sells juices at Chapel Market. Blended, natural... Come and work with me, she says. So I blew off the job centre... But she'd disappear for two hours at a time to see her pals. Yeah she'd leave me there on the stall, and I don't know English... I know the name of some fruits, more or less...

I remember, eight grams of snuff⁷ was £3.20. But when I asked her for money to buy some she said no. Yeah she wouldn't even buy me tobacco, so fuck that! I'm not going to stand all day in the sun while you go and have a gossip. I lost Job Centre because of you...

Her kids were crying when I left the house... The bailiff came on June 14th and closed the joint... I am... It was their mum's birthday the next week and they kept calling me... I'm still in touch with the oldest one. But we can't have a proper chat since her tablet broke... I bought her that tablet, I couldn't even swear in front of them because she'd look it up straightaway...

Eight and a half grand! Mum wanted to pay it, but they said they'd evict me anyway... That was after she found out I'd been homeless... There was a party for the volunteers at the church, and she saw the photos on Facebook. So she found out. That I've been lying to her all those years...

6. Universal Credit (UC).

7. Tobacco.

RADEK

Okay, my name's Radek - Fontanna - and here's what I'm going to say. I'm pissed off. Really pissed off. I had a nice couple of złoty put aside, but it all went away. Gone. I've got a hangover today. What more can I say? I'm right pissed off at myself...

Yesterday I had a drink with Strongman and Krzyś. They came to my place, it was cold, so we drank a little bottle... We laughed and that's how the afternoon went...

I came to England on November 26th 2008. But I've been away from Poland since 2000. Holland, Finland, Norway... Escaping some responsibilities! Yeah, I messed up a bit. I've been away for 23 years. Half a lifetime...

I was working in Acton. Doing construction. And somehow I lost my job... I lost it because of this one guy. We were doing bathrooms, I was teaching him the ropes and we were hanging out together. I was staying with him, too... But then the work dried up and I didn't have the money to pay the rent. I was probably a week in arrears, and he tells me to leave...

I knew him from back home. Yeah we'd been neighbours since we were kids. Played together and everything. He grew up three doors down from me, and he goes and kicks me out! As I was leaving with my stuff, his friends were coming round for a barbecue. This family atmosphere, you know? I went to the park, and found this sort of hollow, and went to sleep. It was still summer...

I was out for about three months. Then I found the number of this pal of mine. I lived with him for a bit, then we found a flyer and went to Brighton for work... We converted a vacant building into eleven studio flats. For disabled children. Slept there while we were renovating it...

For a month or so everything was peachy. It was a big job and I got paid every week... All the walls had to be knocked down, everything had to be brought out to these big skips... Then the money started getting smaller and smaller. Yeah that guy cheated me too, he owed me a thousand eight hundred but he gave me fifty. Said he'd sort the rest out tomorrow... Later it turned out he hadn't paid anyone... He was Ukrainian but he'd lived in Rzeszów for fourteen years. He spoke beautiful Polish...

So I ended up on the streets again.

I went looking for him, though... Coz he just vanished. No phone call, no nothing. I was walking to Richmond every day. There and back on foot. And finally - just when I'm about to give up - I go to the shop to get a beer and there he is on the corner! Him and his sister. Just standing in the street. With that Laszlo the Hungarian, their mothers are sisters...

They were just standing across the street. So I shout to them: what the fuck am I going to do with you now! Radek, says the Ukrainian, let's talk. They were dressed up to the nines. Suits and briefcases, they were on the way to a meeting. So I went along with them! He says, Radek, there's no money...

I got my thousand eight hundred back though. My late dad sorted it out, God rest his soul. Yeah he got it back for me... These boys that worked for him, Ivan and Marcinek, went to the Ukrainian and gave him a box, and there was something inside. A little bullet! And a note asking which leg was giving him trouble... So he understood... I didn't even know about it! But I'd been talking to my dad, I'd told him how that bastard screwed me over...

Later I found a room... That was the place with the leaky roof... I found it through Marek's brother-in-law. We used to hang out, have a laugh... Cieniu ['Shadow'] also threw me a bit of work. I insulated his loft...

Then there was the surfing champion. Yeah this surfing world champion used to bring me breakfast! I had a newspaper cutting with his picture in it... He played the guitar under the bridge in Richmond, he was saving up for a new surfboard. Said it cost the same as a couple of cars...

Half of those guys are dead now. Dead, deported, locked up. All sorts of situations. The Poles, I mean...

There's a nice mission round those parts. The name always escapes me, but it opened at nine in the morning and stayed open until 8pm. It's changed now, there's only meals... But there used to be a doctor every day. Every kind of doctor you can think of. Even an ophthalmologist... You could do laundry. Have as many baths as you wanted. And there was a ping-pong table, snooker, a TV... If you needed clothes there was a whole wall of trousers. Just take your pick! There was a wall for jackets, another one for shoes. It was 10p for two toasts and you could drink tea until it hurt... The garden there was beautiful...

Eddie the Scotsman showed me the ropes... I was sitting out on a bench one evening - I had my stuff wrapped up in a bundle - and he had this little portable stove. He was making himself a tea and he treated me... A few gestures and I knew what the deal was. I didn't speak any English...

He showed me this and that. Took me over to St. Margarets⁸, you had to cross the bridge for that... We got chased out of St Margarets for drinking sajder. It was me, Andrzej from Warsaw, and Darek from Radom. I mean, Darek from Warsaw and Andrzej from Radom. He's dead now...



We were sleeping in the park. Not the big park, but down where the river flows past... I can show you a photo, I took one when I was last there... It's more overgrown now, but it was always nicely covered with trees. Immigration came once and they didn't find me...

There was a pub there. Beautiful setting, right by the Thames, and one of ours was on security. A Polish lad, I mean. So I'd be there, pouring away... Coz people would come in and only drink half their glass of wine. And they couldn't serve it again, it had to be poured away. So our boys were carrying it out to me... Yeah I was up to my eyeballs in wine...

I'd never slept outside before coming here... What was it like? Well, I got woken up by a fox once. He started licking my cheek...

8. A suburb in the London borough of Richmond-Upon-Thames.

I was earning bits and pieces... I did a ceiling for Cieniu... That was the same day we went fishing... And Leszek had a couple of garages, so we cleaned those... Yeah we used to go for a beer after work. We'd go down the pub, play some pool. I was paying my child maintenance in those days. Not through Western Union, coz the money never used to arrive! I used Sami Swoi, the Polish service...

Later I moved to Trupik [Little Corpse] Lane⁹. That's what we call it... Made myself a little room on the building site. Plastered it and everything. I had little halogen lights, a TV, a laptop. Even heating. I had to connect the electrics up myself...

After that we were opening squats. I remember this one place, we had five flats upstairs and three downstairs. It was mainly us Poles, a few Portuguese... There was only one old grandma left in the building! She always defended us from the police...

We'd stick a bit of paper under the door... If it was still there two weeks later we'd go in. The place with the grandma was fully furnished. But the bills came to a grand a month... Utilities, electrics, all that... I was working at the time, and said we should pay it. But some of the others didn't want to... So it started piling up... In the end it got to fifteen grand, then thirty. The police came, and then the council... The whole shebang... They locked it up and sealed it, and that was that...

How many squats did I live in? Let's see, Manor House, a few in Tottenham... Then the one on Little Corpse Lane... Mount's Hill, that's nine. Haringey, ten. Wood Green, eleven. Palmer's Green, twelve. Bounds Green... Thirteen in total. Yeah that's all...

It's tough in the squats. A brawl here, someone getting beaten up there... It's normal when people are drinking...

We'd be fifteen or twenty people at a time. So it's like in prison. Yeah I've lived through that too... If we're six to a cell, and you want to watch TV and I want to read a book... One person wants to work out, another wants to watch the match... Yeah you have to put it all together to make a unity. Time for this, time for that. It's all got to come together, otherwise you're screwed...

I was squatting until I went into hospital... I went in at the beginning of September and came out on All Saints' Day... I remember that day... Yeah they kicked me out of hospital first thing in the morning with a hole in my leg... They gave me some hospital yoghurts, and a pallet box of vitamins...

We went to the council in Wood Green and sat there till closing time... They said they couldn't help me with anything... So I called Stasiu, may he rest in peace... He was collecting cigarette ends down in Dalston. With Adaś, do you remember Adaś? Always smiling, with those teeth... He's in Poland now... Anyway, I meet them outside the Asda and I say, Adaś help me... I remember it was raining and I fell down on my crutches. It was slippery and I couldn't get up...

Rysiek took me in. But I was embarrassed to stay with him. Yeah that lad used to leave me food, and I'm not like that, I always try to pay people back, one way or another... Then Piotrek took me to his place, this was before he went mental and ended up in hospital. He's still there...

I love working. If you've got no money, you don't exist... Even with a broken leg I wanted to work... When you've got cash in your hand, that's your life you're holding... I had my doctor's note, but I kept trying. Kept testing my hand to see if it worked. But there was no strength. As soon as I lifted something it'd go out of whack...

9. A pun on 'Turnpike Lane'.

It's my fault. My own thoughtlessness... I lifted too many kilos, or lifted them too fast... Something tore somewhere... Remember how it snowed yesterday? Well, I've been getting my twinges. It always comes with the change in the weather...

My late dad was the same. We'd visit with the kids for dinner. Beautiful weather and we're supposed to go to the zoo. But dad would be like: don't bother, it's going to pour down in fifteen minutes. He had these screws in his knee and he could sense when it was going to rain...

My kids are in Poland... The girls I call from time to time... I wasn't home so much when they were growing up. But - listen - I built them a house each. From working in Norway, in Holland... My missus is in Birmingham. As far as I know. We're not in touch... I hated her for the number she pulled on me...

The guy she got with was a very good friend of mine... I taught him the ropes, we used to go stealing together, to football games. I'd cover for him when he didn't know how to do his job. He didn't know how to do anything...

Yet somehow they got together. That's life, you see... He's from my old neighbourhood, too, and all of a sudden he's swanning round with my ex. But it didn't turn out that well for him! He died a year ago September...

I'm always giving way. I'm a touchy person, you know? A real hothead. So I prefer to give way. Just move on to something else...

ERYK

They were doing stupid things in those squats. They were drinking a lot, so the first thing they'd do is pull up the floorboards and rip out the pipes. To sell as scrap metal, because they didn't have any money. So they'd go without water, the taps would be twisted out...

I've never been one to judge, people will do as they will do, and I'm hardly a teetotaller myself... Yeah I like a drink here and there. But I'm not the kind to drink nonstop for a month... Some people go on benders that last for years. Like that Daniel, or Damian who used to sit on the wall outside Sainsbury's. Their livers went, it was like they were in a black hole. They didn't know what to do with themselves. Couldn't get themselves to work...

I'm not ashamed of being homeless. Not that my family knows. Well, my sister died, my sister knew. And my mum knows... That was hard at first. She's not young. There was crying and so on...

Her first words were: was I hungry? Actually, that was even before I was homeless. When she heard I was coming here. Like a mother, you know...

I'd wound up in Italy, with this friend that had bought a Transit bus... It was just after we joined the EU, and people from our town were starting to leave for work... He was looking for a guy, and he knew I had a bus licence. He couldn't manage on his own...

We used to run into each other in town, we'd drink a beer... One day he asks me: would you go to Italy? I said, why not? I'm the curious type... So it worked out like that. Because I'd already split up with my missus, and I was living alone...

We leave in an hour, he says. Okay, I say. So I went home, took a bath and packed. Bring summer stuff, he tells me. It was the end of September...

The driving was hard. There was no GPS in those days... I had the atlas of Europe on my knees, we'd stop in lay-bys and look at it. I'd write down the names of the towns, and how many kilometres there were between them. Then I'd reset the counter and keep my eye on it...

We'd drive through Venice, Rome, Naples... In Naples we dropped them off for work. Picking tomatoes and mandarins. Yeah we used to put ads in the Polish newspapers... Then from Naples back to Rome, where we'd kip at his pal's place... We'd get there on the Friday at eleven at night and leave at noon on Sunday... It was hard, but I got used to it. Two and a half thousand kilometres a week...

Then it started to get to me... In Italy they drive without seatbelts. Motorbikes with no helmet. That didn't bother me. But he was drinking... We were supposed to share the driving, but he'd be knocking it back... Yeah I'd have god-knows-who sitting next to me in the co-pilot's seat, and he'd be at the back of the bus drinking. Not cans. Big bottles...

One time I'd driven eighteen hours straight, I could hardly keep going because I had sand in my eyes. So he offers to swap with me. But how am I going to give him his turn? Fine, I'm tired. So I'll have a nap and so will he! It went on and on and on and on, till one day I said to him: this time you're going back alone... But I liked Italy. Warm nights at the end of September, you'd sleep under a single sheet...

I went home. My mum was very ill around that time... I was insulating flats... Then my cousin's husband left for London. He knew I was decent at renovations, and he told me I'd get work straightaway. So I quit my job, said 'sorry for the short notice', and jumped on a bus. Thirty hours later here I was... Nightmare! I arrived on the Saturday and went to work on the Sunday... Yeah I didn't plan to come here. I only knew there was no winter to speak of...

It wasn't that the work was hard... But I didn't even know how to say 'thank you'! I remember I always went to Tesco, because the price of everything was written on the shelf. I'd have a pocketful of change because I didn't know what coins to pay with... I didn't even know how to take the bus. The boss used to drive us from his place to work, then home again...

It was always renovations. Flats and shops. Restaurants. This so-called boss of ours would arrange it. When he wasn't AWOL... Yeah he used to disappear at the weekends. Well, fine! Some people like to hit the clubs. And the pub near our place used to stay open late... I used to go there myself sometimes. On my own, of course. Who would I take?

I'm a mechanic by trade, but I only worked as one for a year. I didn't want to be up to my elbows in oil my whole life... It's my father's fault... I wanted to train as a chef but he said: I didn't raise a sissy. That's how it began... I started renovating flats when I was thirty and I'm nearly sixty now...

I wasn't the perfect son... I was rebellious... My sister was my dad's favourite, and I was my mum's special boy. But a rebellious one... Yeah she cried when I left for England. She was worried I wouldn't be back in a year like I said. And I wasn't...

One fine day the boss kicked me out... I remember it was a Sunday... He used to like to drink whiskey, he'd lock himself in a room with the bottle and his computer. That night me and 'Grandpa' were sitting on the couch, it was past ten in the evening, and out he comes. Half-cut, you know? And he says to me: you've got fifteen minutes to get the fuck out. Word of honour... Fuck off right now or I'll throw your stuff out of the window. We had to laugh because my room was on the ground floor...

There's a park nearby, I used to go for walks in it on my day off. So I went there... I thought I'd catch a bus back to Poland. I didn't have a bank card back then, but I had a few zlotys on me...

I slept there for three nights. I say 'slept'... I didn't know London, but I knew there'd be people hanging round. People doing drugs. Instead of sleeping on a bench I slept behind it. So as not to be seen. During the day I stashed my stuff in the bushes...

By the third day I'd given up. Ready to go home. Then I thought: not because of that bastard! Not with my tail between my legs. I can't do it...



I'm 59 years old. Why would I go back to Poland at this age? Who'll take me for work? They want a 20-year-old. Preferably one with 10 years of work experience...

So I ring up Stanley... He was a cleaner at one of the big museums... He says, can you find your way to mine? So I wander round for a bit, and eventually I get there. A girl opens the door. It's warm, she says, go and sit in the garden. So I started living with Stanley...

I told him, I don't know how to get a job. Rest up here for a week, he says, I'll call my pals... They've got this... sort of company. Like we used to say, if it's two blokes working together then it's a company! All off the books, of course...

But you'll have to take the tube to get there, says Stanley. Oh man, I say, that's suicide... I'd never heard of the A-to-Z in those days. The first time I saw one I said, that's a book not a map! So Stanley went with me twice so I wouldn't get lost...

The third time he says, now you lead the way. But if you get mixed up I'm not helping you. We'll just end up where we end up... But I didn't get mixed up, I got it right...

At that place I worked and worked and worked. It was four quid an hour, which wasn't bad, because a pound was seven zlotys back then... I remember it like it was yesterday...

Later I ended up in Stamford Hill. With this Jewish lad, he had twelve children... We were laying flooring for him, and he had this Polish cleaning lady. Such a nice girl! She always told me: don't clean the stairs. Because I used to vacuum the stairs at the end of the day, after we'd covered them in dust. Why, I said... Because I'm getting paid by the hour, she says! So I didn't clean the stairs after that...

The woman from the job centre wanted to send me to English class. But that's more money through my fingers, I'd need to top up my Oyster more often. I say to her, lady, I'm fifty-nine years old. What am I going to learn now? I only ever went to eight weeks of lessons, and that was when I knew how to fix it so I didn't pay. I don't need it. In construction you can get by...

I have a bit of a tough character, you know? I don't give up easily. Like my dad used to say, if I fall on my knees I'll jump up twice as fast. I know how to sort myself out... I'm not the sort to go round stealing food. Begging outside bars and chicken shops. That's not my character. 'Change please, change please, change please'. Nah...

I've been not very frugal over the years. Not that I've been extravagant, but the extra I earned every month I used to send to my mum, and especially to my sister. She was widowed with two little ones...

You make friends by chance... Coincidence... Take me and Albert. He lost his flat and started coming to the mission in Clapton. Somehow he sits down next to us, and you know Poles... Talking, talking, talking... Sometimes there'd be ten of us, sometimes five. Sometimes two. After dinner we'd go for a beer. So he starts telling us about himself, how he had a flat and lost it...

Some people you want to know, some you don't. A word or two here and there, then: listen, I'm in a hurry. And off you go. But there's a few sound people. People you're on the same wavelength as. Like Anna, who lives with Adam and Jurek down in Dalston. Solid friendships. If I wasn't spending Christmas Eve with Albert, I'd be going to see those guys...

I only had trouble with the police once. A friend of mine was living in this disused nursery. I'd take him to work with me sometimes. Yeah if he didn't have any money, I'd pick him up. We'd have a smoke out front and then go on our way...

So one day I'm there at six in the morning and the cops show up. They take us all away... I told the interpreter I wasn't homeless, because I wasn't at the time. I'd just come to pick up my pal. But they wouldn't listen... They made out it was about the electricity being illegal but that was just a pretext... Two months they started putting up a nice new block of flats. They demolished everything...

Now I stick to a couple of charity organisations. At the Manna they ban you straightaway if you kick up a fuss... First for a week, then for three months. Then six months. After that you get banned for life. Whitechapel [Mission] on the other hand! It's like a circus... Ninety percent Brits, and the ones who aren't drunk are stoned...

At another place I go to from time to time they do soup in a big takeaway cup with Turkish bread on the side. And they give out vegetables... Flour, sugar, whatever you want. I don't take it... What am I going to do with it? I don't have a fridge. It drives me crazy when people fill half a rucksack... There's this one old geezer at the church. Fills two bags full of sandwiches every time. He'd take the whole box if he could! Just to throw them away, while someone else goes hungry...

My friend tipped me off about another place. If you go into the station and stand at the top of the stairs, you'll see these stalls downstairs. Food stalls. At night they leave bags of sandwiches outside the back door... You don't see it unless you go through the gate... The first time I went there I took my backpack. Coz I knew some of my boys needed a drop-off, too... So I'm kneeling down, picking out the ones I like, and suddenly: ahem. There's someone behind me!

I spin round and four coppers are standing there! And I'm thinking to myself: does this count as stealing?! I finish choosing and zip up my backpack. Pick myself up. Zero reaction from these cops, so off I go. But I'm thinking: what are they doing there? So I watch them from the railings, and they're taking a baguette each! They were coming for their dinner, too! Too bad I didn't take a picture...

Yeah my boys were boozing and I didn't want to, so I was walking around. I like walking at night... But do you know what they did to me? I used to drop off their sandwiches after they'd gone to sleep. I'd wrap them up carefully so the rats didn't get them. Sometimes there wasn't much choice, I brought what was left...

And guess what I started getting from them? 'Fragles, how come you only bring us cheese sandwiches? What happened to the ham ones?' My name's Eryk, but everyone calls me 'Fragles'. If someone shouts Eryk in the street I won't turn round...

Can you imagine! I said to them, that's the last time I bring anything for you. If you'd rather drink and go hungry, be my guests... I'm well past fifty at this point and they're in their thirties. They should be bringing food for me...

I feel sorry for people who don't know where to go to eat... Quite a few of our lads don't. Coz you can get kicked out overnight. Pack your suitcase, grab a few essentials... It's not like you get notice. If you don't pay the rent, then - pfft, off you go! And then what? If you have friends, then you can ring around. Someone might give you a place to rest up for a couple of days. But once you outstay your welcome you're not a guest any more. You're an intruder! That's when the friendship ends... If you want to make a friend abroad, buy a dog - a pal in Poland told me that once...

Some people have family, but whether they'll take them in's another questions. Everyone's different, I'm telling you. I don't have anyone here...

Am I in touch with my family? Most definitely... Not only with mum. With my daughter, too. Not with my son. When I left we were... Not on the best of terms, let's say. I only know he works in Germany, near the Polish border. I know that he tied the knot, that I have a grandchild. But he didn't invite anyone to the wedding! Not even my sister, his godmother, she was still alive back then...

My wife went back to her village. Ostrowiec. Everyone knows everyone there... She wanted to leave me, so she left. But we lived together for seven years. Then it ended. No-fault, like she wanted. Two hearings - done... I'm lucky that the flat was in mum's name. It's mine now, and it'll go to my kids. I'm not going to live forever...

My sister's boy lives there for now. He pays the bills on time, so let him. He's got a girlfriend. It's the fashion to live together without getting married these days. I'm in favour! Polish weddings hardly ever pass off peacefully... Yeah my mum was the tolerant sort and she instilled that in me...

Anyway, am I talking too much? Just tell me to stop and I'll shut my mouth...

CLEANING THE STREETS OF RUBBISH



Albert: When they voted to leave the EU, the immigration started to pile on... You couldn't sleep anywhere any more. They were sweeping people up direct from the street, straight into vans. Straight to detention... Yeah, 2016 was when they started rounding everyone up. In Seven Sisters they wrapped up twenty-six in one night...

I wasn't there but I heard about it. News like that spreads fast... Twenty-six people! Fontanna can tell you... The heat was on migrants back then, and mostly they piled on the Poles...

Eryk: If someone had told me I could get deported for sleeping on a bench, I'd have said: there's something wrong with your head! If it was me on that bench, I'd as likely've been dead drunk as homeless, wouldn't I? They can't deport you for that...

I remember when people stopped going to Barka¹⁰. Do you know why? Because if you were homeless, they'd offer you some cash and a ticket to Poland. They were taking money per person. From the state. I don't know how much...

Albert: It was twelve hundred back then...

Eryk: Twelve hundred! And out of that you got your ticket and a hundred quid for the road.

Albert: You were lucky if you got a hundred. Later it was twenty...

Eryk: It was a well known thing, Kasia. You'd be scared to go to those charities when you were homeless. Because they might deport you...

Albert: I remember this one mission... You'd be sitting there and one of the girls would wander up with a policeman. She'd point her finger and say, that's him. And they'd clap a pair of handcuffs on you. Off you go!

Eugeniusz: It's the first I've heard of that...

Eryk: Word of honour, it's true.

Albert: It was the same when you were on the street... They turned up when I was sleeping at the Monument. Dzień dobry, he says - it was a Polish lad. How's it going, do you need anything? No, thank you, I say. What's your name, he says. You've known my name for a long time, I say. It was two o'clock in the morning...

Radek: You should've legged it!

Albert: I did! Half an hour later immigration was standing there. With the police. Yeah, this lad used to sleep on the street himself. Then he started selling out his friends. This is ten years ago now...

Eugeniusz: It's sick.

Albert: People being purged left, right and centre...

10 . A Polish homelessness organisation with branches in the UK.

Radek: I mean, that's what they're there for... That's their job. It's like cleaning the streets of rubbish. You clean the streets of people...

Listen, Kasia, I was always the enemy of St. Mungo's. I was never convinced by them. Because they were trying to get rid of us. They'd turn up at the place you were sleeping and the next minute immigration would be there. I saw it with my own eyes...

I was with Piter and Grażyna... Piter's in Poland now, Grażyna's still here... Out of twenty-six people only me and Piter got away. Piter jumped off the overpass, that's how he escaped. He broke a few fingers, but he got away. The rest were deported...

We were hidden away... We had tents and a kind of a tree house. It was cool... Like a family of homeless people. We were well camouflaged, so hardly anyone found their way there... Gregu and 'Uncle' made themselves a little bungalow, did you ever see it? It was so cool. Like a studio flat... Two rooms, even, with a corridor in between. Proper glass windows, like in a holiday cottage. And Piotrek had his tree house. I used to sleep there...

I remember I was coming home from work... It was the weekend, I had two bottles of vodka on me and I went to visit Piotrek. The electrician... He was with this Pawel from Kołobrzeg. Yeah I went to their place to have a drink, and that's what saved me... I took off my jacket and shoes, and I was so drunk I fell asleep straightaway...

They came at five o'clock in the morning. They had these torches... Halogen lights, big ones. Like the sun, you know... It was October, so it was still dark at that time, but suddenly it looked like daylight. We could hear their walkie-talkies crackling... They deported Banan and Seba. Yeah they took them...

I was scrabbling round in the dark looking for my hat. Looking for my backpack and shoes. Suddenly I look up - they're coming back! So I threw myself into a blackberry bush... Yeah I'm lying on my stomach and they come right up to me, I can hear their voices... But they didn't find me...

I lay like that for half an hour. Until it started to get light. People were walking past on their way to work... That's when I ran. I think I broke a world record... When I came out of the bushes there were these girls. English girls, walking along with two boys. And that's when I realised! When I'd thrown myself into the blackberries, I'd split my pants right here...

So I'm walking along with them for a bit, but suddenly immigration are coming towards us! Maybe five or six of them... Where are you going, they say. To work, one of the English lads says. But after we've walked away he turns to me and says, they're looking for you, huh? Yeah, I say... Haha...

After that I took my things and went to Argos. Bought a new tent and set up somewhere else. I got lucky, yeah...

You had to avoid sleeping in conspicuous places... After that raid I kept thinking: when are they going to come for me? I'd sleep two days here and two days there, and if someone started poking around I'd move straightaway. I was scared... All it takes is a phone call, and they'd come and take me away...

Albert: They used to come to Liverpool Street. Opposite the Coral... That bookies where you can go and play the machines... You could sit there for hours, and have a drink too. I was still on the sajder back then... I don't touch it any more, it's blown my guts out... Yeah they used to come there, and later on they came to the missions...

I'm not saying the charities didn't help me as well. They got me a flat... First a hostel, then a flat. There was this Scottish lad, long grey hair... He was learning Polish, and he talked to us through Google Translate... But they were deporting people... They were! They sent my best friend, Patryczek. He was ready to go, but at the airport they handcuffed him anyway. And he was wanted in Poland. He'd taken out too many loans...

I don't know how many times we'd be sitting there and someone says, ahh here comes immigration. Time to fuck off... You can spot them from their markings. Immigration is yellow and dark blue...

And as you know their office¹¹ is in London Bridge, right opposite the Manna Day Centre. Sometimes you'd get a call from a pal there: watch out, they're leaving... They mostly came at night. Five or six am. That's when a person's least alert. You're deep asleep...

Let me ask you a question: don't you [PILC]¹² report on us to the police every month? Barka used to... St Mungo's did. Where this or that guy sleeps, more or less... Yeah, they had to file reports. 'So-and-so comes to us, and here's where he bathes, and here's where he kips...'

I heard about it from that Anita who worked at Barka. We were thick as thieves... She used to tip me off: change your sleeping place now and then because we have to report our clients. I told her, a client's what you have in a brothel...

You didn't know where they'd sweep you up. They even used to come into this one mission... They'd surround the place, coz there's three exits there: two from the kitchen side and then the side we go in. But there's a basement too! Old Dave - he'd been working there about twenty years - used to let us down there... Five or six hours in a cold basement till he closed the joint. Then he'd let you out...

They were sticking the knife into the Poles... It felt like we were the only ones getting deported. Even though - there's no way round it - we're the backbone of the labour force... A Brit or a black lad or a Pakistani won't go to work for you on Christmas Day, will he? He doesn't give a you-know-what... But a Pole will go to work, whether it's Christmas Eve or New Year's Day. And it's not like you get paid double, it's like going to work on a normal day...



So here we are working our arses off for peanuts, and now they're trying to deport us! The country has to function, doesn't it? Whether it's in a factory, cleaning the streets or in restaurants, somebody has to work for the lowest wage... So England took us in... And then they screwed us over. Now they've got problems, too... There's no one to kill their turkeys for Christmas... So many people left, not only the Poles. In construction people were getting paid double. Just to make them stay. Some left anyway, because they were scared they'd get kicked out...

I'm telling you, Kasia, there were a hell of a lot of these raids. Those vans were flying back and forth to Heathrow...

11. Becket House reporting centre, now permanently closed.

12. PILC doesn't report on clients to the police.



AND IT HURTS, YOU KNOW?

Eryk: Getting off the streets used to be hard. Before the pandemic, I mean. You didn't know where to go. You didn't even know what you needed to sort out. How could you? It's not like you spend a night on the streets and suddenly you know...

Take the job centre... I see a nice guy down there, he knows the score... Always uses an interpreter. But I don't need one any more, coz I only stay five minutes... I tell him: so you're trying to get me a job. Fine. That's what you lads are for. But how am I supposed to go to work?

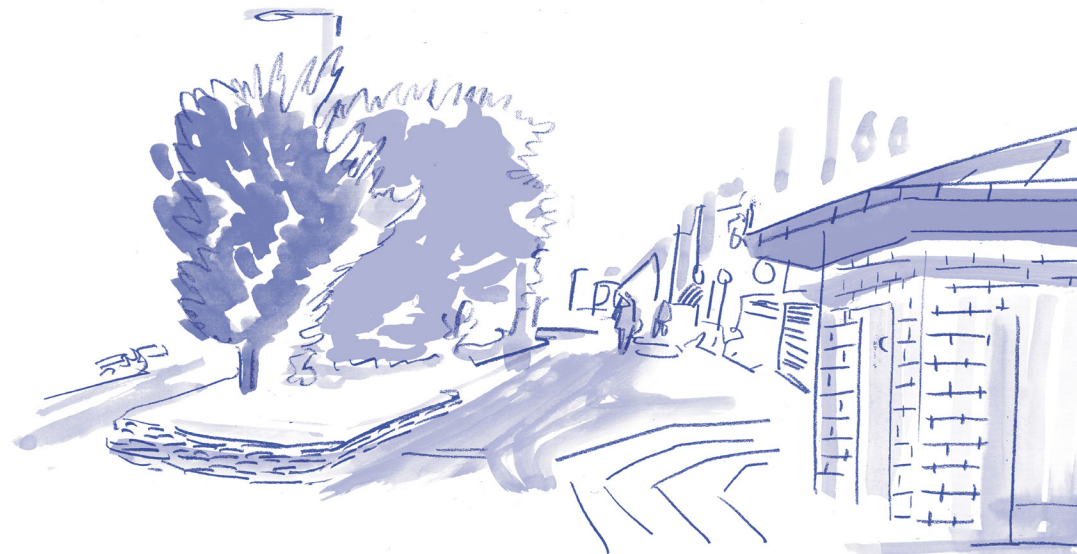
Most of these jobs pay by the month, right? And what am I meant to do? Work starts at eight and you finish at five... So I'll borrow money for my Oyster, there's always someone to borrow from... But where am I supposed to shower? The missions are closed by the time I get off work. Where am I meant to eat? I'm not about to go stealing... So back I go to the park. Lie down on a bench and sleep. Nowhere to wash. Or maybe I'll wash my feet, find a tap somewhere. And they want me to go to work like this for a month? After a few days they'll be running away from the smell...

Another example. Him from the council calls me up: do you want to see such-and-such a place? Near the ponds in Stamford Hill. Alright, I say. So we make an appointment, and there's this studio flat. The park's just across the way, the fountains are beautiful...

I took this pal with me, a lad that speaks English, and we went to see it. It's lucky this pal was free because you know how it is with that Hackney crowd... Enough of them speak a bit of English, but they're a fat lot of use once they've had a drink...

Anyway I went and saw the place. Tiny little room with a double bed stuffed into it. I'll swap it for a single, I thought... These agencies, you've got to laugh... There's not even a stool in the place, let alone a table...

I say to the agent, where's the meter? He points above the door. And where's the card? On top of the meter, he says. How am I supposed to get that down without a stool to stand on? I'm not exactly six foot tall...



The window was dirty, but I thought: I can wash that. I've got hands, haven't I? And the floorboards were stripped bare. No carpet. Fine! I'll think of something. Paint them over. I'll get some paint off one of the boys who are working... I open the freezer and there's vegetable juice leaking out... I open the fridge and it stinks... Anyway, to cut a long story short I signed up...

He didn't give me the contract then and there. He just gave me the key. It was cold by then so what do I? I start walking down the street. Found a chair, so I can take the card down... But the meter's one of these new ones. Buttons numbered one to nine, then a zero... I'm thinking: who's going to show me how to use it?

I ask this one guy I know. Then another, then another... I mean, what else am I going to do? Stop a stranger in the street? So I ask around our guys. But nobody knows how to use that kind of meter. In the end I ring up the American - we call him that because he was over there for a few years...

So me and the American trail round shop after shop. Places where they do top-up. But they all say: no, sorry, we don't charge that particular card. We must've gone to about a dozen shops... In the very last shop we get ourselves a couple of a beers... And I say to the American: ask here. So he asks if they can top up the card, and the bloke says yes! I'm thinking to myself I'll put two tenners on it. It's winter after all, and the heating runs off the electricity... So he puts the card on the reader and what does it say? Card not activated! Haha...

It's a circus, an absolute circus... On top of which it was Sunday, so we couldn't call the agency. So I ring up another of our guys, I've known him for years, he lives in Dalston... I tell him: call the landlord about this card. And on Monday morning he starts ringing... Yeah this pal rang the agency for three days straight, but either he doesn't get through or the lad's not in... A couple of dozen calls, he told me... So I sat in the cold until I'd had enough, then went back to my old hideout. It was warmer there than in the flat...

In the end Marcin helped me sort it, the one that cooks at the church... A Pole... He was cutting my hair for me, because I'd left my clippers at Albert's... I'm not about to leave them at the hideout. They could close it up at any minute... So I'm telling him about my meter, and he says: show me the card. I always stay at the end anyway, to sweep or do a bit of mopping... Anyway Marcin picks up the phone and calls someone: blah blah blah. Then he turns to me: now you'll get a text message saying it's been activated. And I did...

But it was pointless in the end. I never saw the contract on that place... Four times the lad agreed to meet me. Twice at his office, twice at the flat... I was there, of course, every time. But he disappeared into thin air... It's all talk with them, they only care about money... And it hurts, you know? It hurts because you've been on the streets so long...

You had to twist my arm to apply for Universal Credit in the first place. What did I say to you? I don't want them or their money. I just want a bit of peace and quiet. I'll manage on the streets. Because you wait and you wait, and all you get is a big kick in the arse... You don't feel like trying after that... I'd always been an optimist, but they grind you down in the end...

Yeah I would never have gone on UC if you hadn't persuaded me. I never thought I could get it... There's loads of people that don't work. They don't like us very much because of what they wrote in the newspapers about Poles taking their jobs... But the reason they don't have jobs and we do is because Poles do things differently! He'll be glued to his phone and I'll be getting the job done. I'll finish the bathroom wall in the time it takes him to glue four tiles...

Nowadays I kip at Albert's from time to time. My stuff I keep at the hideout... It's a utility room, on the side of this old council building. There's a coffee shop next door... I used to walk past and the door would be slightly ajar... Alright, well, it wasn't locked... So I popped my head in, just out of curiosity, and it's cardboard boxes up to the ceiling... OK, so it's in use. Someone's coming to collect that cardboard... But the next few times I pass - I've got a few friends that live round that way - there's no cardboard...

So I get hold of a padlock, and a bolt, and a screwdriver, and I lock the door. After that I laid low for a couple of days. Just watching, to see if anything happened. Then gradually I started putting stuff in there. A mattress, a sleeping bag... Then I started spending the night. One two three four five times... Carefully, because you never know who's going to see you. Who's going to let you be and who's going to take an interest... Between one man and another there's a world of difference...

The people who live in the block know I'm there, of course. I see them when they're out with their dogs... Someone'll ask me to take care of a lock here or there, or they'll ask me if I'm hungry, or if I want a coffee... The café owner's a Turk, this slim little fella. I did some plumbing for him when his sink was leaking, and now he gives me coffee with milk almost by force. It's a tragedy for my stomach... But no brawls, coz there's no one to bring home. No piss-ups like we used to have. Drinking and singing all night... I'm telling you, it's good to be alone. To live alone, I mean...

I've got a single mattress and about a metre to the wall either side. That's where I keep my bag and my suitcases... I hammered nails into the wooden beams in the ceiling so I've got jackets hanging there... Haha... It's dark when I come home, so I make sure the torch is in the right spot. What more do I need? Come home, turn the torch on, undress. Maybe have a smoke. Everything in its place. Phone next to me. It's dark when I get up in the morning, but I've got the torch for that, too... The door doesn't close tight, there's a centimetre gap, so there's air con...

I used to worry about night times. Especially at weekends when they're coming back from the clubs. But you can't see I'm there coz there's a street lamp shining straight at my door...

CALL ME BY MY NAME

Albert: It's incredibly annoying when you call me your client... Escort agencies have clients... Call me by my name! Though, actually, only my mother calls me that... Even my sons calls me Albert. That's the name I got on the streets...

These support organisations... It's like this: they either want to help you, or they don't want to help you, or they want to drown you in warm piss... Take this girl from the job centre. She was crying in front of me when I showed her pictures of my hideout... She ran to the manager. I tell you, she was the one crying... To see me sleeping in such conditions...

When I got my flat I bought her a box of Polish chocolates. The boozy ones with the cherries. That was a mistake, coz she doesn't drink alcohol. I bought her flowers, too... And the council woman that gave me the keys, I thanked her as well... My housing officer told me it's a Polish tradition... Yeah the Poles always give gifts... Well, it's such a tradition that I ended up two and a half thousand in debt! Because she didn't send some papers... I kiss her fucking hands - sorry - for sorting me out and she pulls a stunt like that...

Eryk: Most services had been seeing Polish homeless for years, and they didn't care... But when the pandemic hit, people started getting housed... We were scattered all over London in hotels. Some people got flats, and they're happy. Others ended up back on the streets when their time was up...

Listen, nobody knew it was coming... All of a sudden the work dried up, and, strange as it might seem, when there's less work there's less cash! We were living payday to payday as it was... I wasn't a spendthrift, but if something caught my eye I'd buy it... Why not, if you've got the money? It's not like in Poland where an old lady can be a pensioner and not have enough to buy bread...

But then suddenly, overnight, bang! Pandemic. I tried to figure it out. What to do, I mean. But you can't plan for something like that. Who knew it would last that long? A couple of months and it'll be over, we thought...



Eugeniusz: If it wasn't for coronavirus I don't think I'd have sorted myself out... I didn't even think I wanted to. But somehow being in the hotels gave me a sense of comfort, of normality. Of being able to care about everyday things, like washing your socks in your own room. Taking a shower at home...

Albert: A luxury like that!

Eugeniusz: And more and more I felt like I didn't want to go back to where I was before.

Radek: I suspect lots of good work was done. Good work. People taken off the streets. Thousands of people who got the basics sorted...

Eryk: I didn't want to go to a hotel. I'd been in hostels before. I want to sleep at night! Other people want to party...

Eugeniusz: They want to go crazy...

Eryk: There's a whole crowd of them. Druggies and alcoholics. I used to put my bed against the door, just in case...

Albert: I didn't fancy it either. I'd rather stay in my little den than go to a hostel. I turn in at half eleven and I'm up at five. But at least I know I'll get some sleep... I remember being in a hostel in Aldgate. Instead of getting up at seven for work, or to look for work, I'd be going to sleep at that time. Coz they'd be running around, banging on the doors. It stank of weed in there... I had to hide my things, you could easily kick the doors in even when they were supposed to be locked... No offence, but these druggies didn't want to be housed. Because in hostels you get breakfast, dinner... And they were paying maybe forty quid from their benefits in service charges. The rest they had for themselves...

As for me, I said I'll go to the flat. I'll make a big pot of soup every other day and I'll eat it. I've got a passion for cooking, too. I've got a chef's certificate...

Radek: In the first [Covid] hotel they only gave us stuff to reheate. A bit of fruit... Later they brought more stuff... Those electric cigarettes... We lived there for three months then they moved us to West Green Road... I had my name day there, 27th November... From there they moved us to Leyton... We had free everything. Free buses. That was a big advantage, I'd go to the missions, I'd go and meet the guys... Before I was pretty stuck, it's hard to get about on crutches...

There were fights. All sorts... There were a lot of addicts, you know? And people were pissed off, coz it was all talk. No action. If you needed something, if you wanted to renew your passport, say, they'd fob you off... 'Tomorrow, maybe the day after... 'Next week'. Just fobbing you off...

I mean, everyone was pleased not to be sleeping out... You were warm, there was food to eat, and they threw you a voucher here and there... But here I was on crutches, and there was no way to earn money... My friends would help me out: Radek, here's a tenner, or two tenners, or a stupid fiver. Whatever...

Albert: In some ways the pandemic effed everything up. We used to hang out together, but a lot of the neighbourhood groups broke up. It all fell apart...

In other ways it was good. Everyone got a bit of rest. Their organisms, if not their livers... It made a change from walking sixteen hours a day in the same pair of shoes...

On the first night they offered me a hostel. But it was either Richmond or Lewisham. So I said, no, I'm staying here. Too far. I don't have money for a ticket to get back. Coz I know this district. I know where to go to eat in the morning, where to get a wash... And over there, what? No food, no nothing...

In Lewisham or Richmond I'd have to hunt out a church where they'd give me something to eat. Or steal a bread roll and get sent down again... You can't just go round asking people, hey listen, where can I get something to eat? You're liable to get a punch in the face...

Eryk: Or they'll say, go and buy us a sajder...

Albert: I said, I don't want to live down there. I want to live here. I can wait longer, but I want to live here, in a neighbourhood that I know by heart.

Radek: People just aren't on the street in the same way now... Everyone's happy... The other day I met a friend at Seven Sisters. He says, Radek, look, I've got a bath tub! I shaved today, look at me! All sleek... Though there is this other friend of mine... He's been dossing down on the street for a year and a half... They gave him something once, some hostel somewhere. But something went wrong. He did something, and they kicked him out. So now he's cooling his heels again...

SOMETHING SMALL THAT'S JUST FOR ME

Albert: Now it looks like I'm getting a place at last. Maybe I'll even go back to work...

I've had one appointment so far. The agency says it's a studio flat but it's not a studio flat. It's a tiny room. The bloke said he'd put the cooker on top of the sink, and that did it for me. That's not what the sink's for! I walked away from that one...

I turned up at eleven and talked to him for about an hour. He said he needs to check with the landlord, that he'd call me later. So I walked out. I'm not going to sit all day, I'm either going to sign the contract or I'm not...

They were going to put a bed in there. The lad said I could lift up the mattress to open the door and go to the bathroom...

I took pictures and showed them to my housing officer. He had his head in his hands: 'The council's paying £960 for that...'

Eryk: So it goes. Day by day. The main thing is I've got my hideout. There's room for my stuff and for me...

If it was any bigger someone else would want to jump in! That's how it used to go in the squats. Two went, a third came. A friend needs help... Nowadays I say: well come on then, but don't tell anyone else. Don't bring anyone. In the squats there'd be ten of us. A big drunken mess...

That's how places get compromised. These late-night sessions. Someone calls the police once. Twice. The third time you get kicked out. So anyone with a bit of sense has somewhere else to go. You sleep in the squat, but you've got your hideout up your sleeve. Somewhere no-one knows about...

Eugeniusz: When it comes to getting housed, it depends who's helping you... There are people who treat you like a number. You can see straightaway it's just a job for them, they'll write their little notes up on their computer... Then there are the ones that call you back. Come and see you. Knock on your door and strike up a conversation... They get interested... They're the ones who'll try to push your case forward...

Eryk: But if the agency finds out that the council's paying - that you're homeless - they're going to drop you right in it! They're going to give you the worst place, because you're from the street... So you deserve a broom cupboard, a cubbyhole... They'll palm the worst kind of place off on you...

Eugeniusz: The last studio flat I saw, I told them I'd rather be in the woods. Aren't they ashamed?

Albert: You sign the paper and the council money flows in for the landlord... They tell you that you can only view three and then you go back to the bottom of the list. But it's not true...

Eryk: I understood a long time ago that it's best to - I don't mean be greedy and reject everyone... But keep something small that's just for me. To be alone...

Albert: I don't need a palace, just as long as I don't fall out of bed into the sink...

Eryk: I have UC now... But I still have to top up the Oyster, top up my phone. Pay the gas, pay the electric. Light's expensive these days... That'll leave me ten quid a month. If it wasn't for the missions I'd be chewing grass...

It's one thing to tell me I don't have to smoke, but I have to eat! And they call us 'Poles on benefits'!

Radek: 'Those freeloaders...'

Eryk: You try it! Try and survive if you don't know where to go and eat... You'd die in the wintertime... In Poland it's worse, you only get the dole for six months, then they take it away...

Like I say, I'm not abstinent. But some people go on benders that last for years... The pandemic didn't help. People lost their jobs and then got lost themselves. It's hard on your own. Some people can hack it, some can't...

I'm dying to go back to work. But as long as I'm on the streets it won't happen. Even if I get a flat... Because England will find me an 'English' job, and I won't be able to talk to anyone... I'll do self-employed instead. I can't bear to have a manager over me any more... I've got a few ideas already. But if I go and tell the job centre what I'm earning I can forget about help with my rent...

Radek: The hostel I'm living in now? I'm satisfied... But some of these guys! I mean, I know what it's like... I've slept on the street and I was always happy when someone took me home... But they're sleeping on the tables, on the kitchen counters. There are four hobs so it gets nice and warm...

I get up today and what do I see? There are two toilets, and the first one's a mess, so I try the second one... Carnage! A massacre... Alright, come and get some sleep but let it be clean! When I was in the squats it had to be clean. Sparkling... These lads don't give a fuck, because they don't live here... They just come, make a mess and go away again. Then they're back the next night and screaming the place down. Howling and brawling...

But I'm happy when the boys come to me. I do their laundry and they sleep in my room. Two at a time, with a mattress and pillows... They'll come and eat, we'll have a beer. They'll find a way to make it up to me later. Some of these lads gave me a helping hand in the past...

It goes like this. Someone'll call me and say, Radulek, I've got a problem. So I'll go out to Seven Sisters and pick them up... 'Listen, Raduś, just give me two-three days.' Then boom: in three days he's gone. He's got himself a job and he can sleep there, too... That's how it goes... There's always someone who can help. If one person can't someone else will. That's how it works. It's like having a second family...

Everyone says: homeless people this, homeless people that. It pisses me off. These smartarses have never been on the street. Never done a day. But they tell it as if they've lived it, you know? To hear them talk you'd think they'd been out for a year, maybe two...

D'you know what keeps happening to me every time I go to the shops? The other day the sink was blocked, so I go out to buy some caustic soda. They didn't have any, so I'm walking out of the shop and the lad stops me. He thinks I'm hiding something... Three security guards, and then the police turn up...

They can see this bulge, you see? So I must have something hidden! I have to show them my hernia... I tell them that I've been waiting for an op, and in the end they let it go. But the next time I go shopping the same thing happens. I've waited two years for that surgery...

Eryk: I hardly knew any homeless people before. Now I know a few... It's not just our lot who end on the streets. The old black lady from the church, she's homeless... And in Stamford Hill there's one old boy who pushes a pram up and down. Yeah he's always walking up and down, I wonder what he's carting... A granddad like that! He should have a house at his age. And I've never seen him drink alcohol... Yeah, I only knew Poles before...

Albert: Since coronavirus lots of people've got flats. Some of them can't cope with it... They're still knocking it back, so there's not enough left at the end of the month. You have to pay council tax... Sometimes the agency pays for water, sometimes it doesn't... But if you're pissing your Job Centre away on booze, you'll end up short... A lot of guys still eat at the missions. It's pure laziness, they can't be bothered to cook...

Eryk: I've always been tolerant... I took that from home. If I meet someone sitting on the wall I'll do the pleasantries. Where you from? What town exactly? I'm from Poland. You know, that kind of talk. I'll get them a beer and ask them if they're hungry. You don't ask people why they're homeless, you don't ask people where they live...

Eryk: *If someone wants to see what it's like, let them come. I'll show them! It's like the army. You go on leave and your pals ask you what it's like. You say, go and experience it for yourself. Then you'll see...*

Eugeniusz: *It's like being rich. I don't know what it's like to have millions in the bank. A rich lad can't explain it to me because I don't have the money and I never will...*

Eryk: *The rich were poor once. Before they stole their first million...*

Eugeniusz: *The difference being, I don't know how to steal the first million, and they do... But here we are whining when there's nothing to complain about...*

Eryk: *Yeah there's nothing to complain about. It's life and you have to take it as it comes.*

Eugeniusz: *Keep your spirits up and smile...*

Albert: *Maybe tomorrow will be better...*

Eugeniusz: *It can't get any worse...*





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