

My visit to the Barka foundation, Poznan, October 2007.

Four years ago, the Poles arrived on British shores. At first it was a trickle but it soon became a flood. They got off the buses at Victoria, laughing and joking. Some had been drinking and some carrying their meagre belongings. They were here because of the promise of higher wages, work, and a better life. From the outset, the ones that came through the doors of the Broadway daycentre in west London looked beaten. They had the look of being in crisis, some looked lost and bewildered and some looked angry and cheated. And the vast majority had problems with alcohol.

Dignity, pride and denial have a very short shelf life and can shore a person up for a short while. But without food, shelter or money, a propensity to drink and an inability to communicate wants and needs, because you can't speak the language, any human being starts to unravel. I hear them on their mobile phones, speaking to loved ones in Poland, making out that everything is ok, when the opposite is true.

Since the Poles arrived I hear regular stories of them being ripped off, paid low wages and exploited. Their documentation and belongings are being stolen and many are sleeping rough. They sleep in parks, on friend's floors, in squats and doorways. They are littered around the west London boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham and Kensington and Chelsea where I work. Evidence suggests that these A8 nationals make up around half of all rough sleepers in London.

Police have come under pressure to move groups of Polish rough sleepers on, breaking up the only protection they have – each other – when out on the streets at night. They may fight and argue amongst themselves but splitting them up just increases their vulnerability and isolation. Such actions by the police and other authorities shore up in the minds of the general public the popular misconception that the Poles are a “threat” to services and their way of life.

While the majority of Poles come to the UK to work successfully, a significant minority are clearly unprepared for the harsh realities of life in Great Britain. Although they are entitled to be in the country as EU members, they are not currently entitled to services or have access to public funds unless they have worked here in England without a break for a year.

Various services in London including the Broadway daycentre out of necessity gave them food and services for humanitarian reasons. There was an initial reluctance from local authorities who part funded the centres to condone this, but staff and the management in these services wanted to help.

Local authorities stated, not unreasonably, that the A8s had not been factored into the running costs of the services. Secondly, A8 clients were using up resources and services that were meant for pre-existing clients. Also they feared that providing services for A8 clients would attract more Polish people who were homeless into the boroughs. The politics had begun.

Day centre regulars were getting resentful because they believed the Poles were taking over.

Around nine months ago, talks began between the Broadway, the local authority Hammersmith and Fulham (H&F) and the Barka Foundation. This was done with a view to giving practical help to those Poles living rough on the streets of H&F.

In June this year, a small team of Barka workers came over from Poland to see what we did, and joined in the daycentre and outreach work.

Currently Barka workers help to repatriate Poles who have fallen into unemployment, alcoholism and homelessness on the streets of London. Before now, I had very little insight into the scope and nature of the work they were doing in England, and the importance and significance of the work they were doing back home in Poland.

It wasn't until I went to Poznan in October to see what the Barka foundation did, that I started to understand the implications of the work they were undertaking.

Most of the people on my flight to Poznan were Poles returning home. Many of them had the trappings of modern western culture. Designer labels, duty frees and affluence, however their Polish faces still bore testament to the hardships they had endured and encountered through world war two, and 60 years of communism. As I disembarked, a bus took us the short distance from the plane to the terminal. The sky was overcast and I felt the comfort of autumn upon me. It was good to be back on Polish soil again.

On my arrival at Wiorek, a Barka hostel for returnees, Slawek, Zibby and Robert, who were returnees I had worked with in London, and Leszek, one of the Barka leaders who had been my colleague, warmly greeted me. I was surprised how well the boys looked since the last time I saw them in London. I was invited to sit at the table with the rest of the boys in a small cramped kitchen cum living room with steamed up windows, whilst supper was being prepared on the stove. The television was blaring in the background and was showing "Name that tune" in Polish. I was promptly offered hot black tea with lemon and was told to help myself to the boiled sausages, mustard and rye bread. "Eat," they said, "Eat!" It felt homely. It was a fantastic welcome. I felt that people cared. This notion of care seems to pervade all strata's of the organisation

I began to observe that Barka is keen on developing a "work ethic" with returnees from London, and the homeless in Poland, and is continually engendering an entrepreneurial spirit within the community. This is being achieved by helping people start up and form cooperatives and small businesses in their respective areas. For people to be a part of the Barka "experience" the work ethos and being sober is paramount. Everyone is expected to contribute in some way. Meetings are held, discussions are had,

they smoke, drink coffee and break bread, but people cotton on quickly that there is work to be done. This generates for the most part a feeling of ownership and belonging for the people working and living at these various projects.

The Barka foundation demonstrates to me that disenfranchised, homeless and addicted people can rebuild their lives through bottom up structures, collective responsibility, participatory democracy, user involvement and hard work, while at the same time benefiting the wider community and society at large.

There is also an opportunity for returnees from London, with ongoing alcohol problems to engage in detox and treatment either prior to going home, or on to one of the various Barka projects around the country. People are also encouraged to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. For me there is a great sense, that all things considered, things are really changing. These people are part of the whole with a share in its purpose.

This had a profound impact on my thinking and my understanding of homelessness and substance use. As an ex service user and a Pole born and living in England the impact on me has been life changing. In England, homelessness, alcoholism and addiction are big business. In a push by the government to get rough sleepers off the streets into hostels, and drug and alcohol users into treatment, policy makers have made a rod for their own backs. They have not thought through what to do with these people once they are in their services. Also the drug 'treatment' services have expanded to such an extent that they are hanging on to clients so as not to lose funding and jobs.

In England we have a situation of warehousing people, no exit strategies and no real social integration programmes. People are in an eco system that propagates dependency, and the only clients the clients see are clients "in the system". They have no role models and no real peer support. User involvement for the most part is under funded and tokenistic.

These people have no structure, no consistent message, only policy driven agendas and flavour of the month ideas or policies and successive government vote winners.

Staff in these agencies are continually complaining about too much form filling, data collection and bureaucracy and not enough face to face work with the clients.

So for me Barka's model embodies in a practical sense a vital component that has significantly shaped the way I view homelessness, alcoholism and substance use.

One of beliefs in Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is, that "the newcomer is the most important person in any room." This is ethos is reflected by Tomek and Baszia Sadowska and people working in the Barka

projects. Tomek explained, “you may only have one window of opportunity with a homeless client. So when he or she comes through our doors for the first time, they are the most important person in the room.”

What Barka is doing is in some way mirrored by the twelve-step fellowships of NA and AA. Through democratic and bottom up structures, through being fully self-supporting, not owning buildings, where “doing service is key”, these fellowships have flourished and grown around the world and provide a model of working for organisations like Barka.

Many of the people working in Barka were previously homeless and had problems with alcohol, reflecting the NA tenet: “the therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel.”

The NA concept of “I alone can do it, but I can’t do it alone,” shows that people get well by seeing other people getting well. These processes, structures and philosophies engender a notion of wellness. Barka, as well as NA and AA, show that people can stay clean from drugs and alcohol, and lead happy and successful lives by following their tenets.

As in NA and AA, abstinence and work are integral to the survival of what Barka does. In a country that has very little funds to deal with alcoholism and homelessness, and its main assets are the people who work in these various projects, sobriety and abstinence are key. We in England cannot imagine the poverty that still exists 600 miles away from our borders. In Poland they are rebuilding these services from scratch.

It is by having these strong external structures based on democracy, we rather than I, ownership and collective responsibility that allows the work of Barka, NA and AA to go unhampered. Barka's future must be about maintaining a strong independent spirit. Developing structures that protect the ethos of individual responsibility within a system of responsible democratic collectivism. These structures should allow for more flexibility, less bureaucracy and more joined up working within the organisation.

I don't want to go down the road of; those who invent the structures and systems being more deserving than those that maintain them. We are all interdependent. It's people that bring structures, ideas and concepts to life. This is about people celebrating life, giving people a voice and not having to put up with, 'settling for second best.'

The work of the Barka foundation is in some ways embodied for me in the philosophy of a well-known south London drug rehabilitation centre called Phoenix House, read out each morning by its residents, during their morning meeting:

**We are here because there is finally no refuge from ourselves
Until we confront ourselves in the eyes and hearts of others we are
running**

Until we suffer them to know our secrets we can know no safety from them

Afraid to know ourselves we can know no others

Where else but in our common ground can we find such a mirror

Here at last we can appear clearly to ourselves, not as the giant of our dreams or the dwarf of our fears but as people-part of the whole with a share in it's purpose.

Here together we can take root and grow, not alone as in death-but alive in ourselves and in others.

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