

# A DEATH IN A BIN TRUCK

The death of the homeless Polish man Henryk Piotrowski in a waste collection truck in west Dublin highlights the precarious lives of Ireland's migrant homeless



**Carl O'Brien**  
Chief Reporter

to use an emergency phone number for accommodation to organise a bed on a nightly basis.

Then he disappeared. He was no longer to be found in any of the agencies or drop-in centres where he had become a familiar face. Just over a week ago came shocking news. He had been found crushed to death in a commercial waste pick-up truck. He had been sleeping in an industrial-sized bin in the south inner city.

The circumstances of Piotrowski's death were shocking for a country that prides itself on its compassion for the less well-off at home and abroad. It has also raised urgent questions about the kind of support available for Ireland's migrant homeless population and whether enough is being done to support them at a time of cutbacks to vital social safety nets.

"Homeless services are especially poor for foreign nationals," says Fr Peter McVerry, the homelessness campaigner. "The Irish can get a bed for six months in a hostel, and it brings them at least some stability. But the non-Irish can only get a hostel bed for one night at a time."

Neither Poland nor Ireland ever predicted the scale of the rush to work here in 2004, when borders were opened to access-

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tion-state members. Hundreds of thousands came to chase the Celtic Tiger dream. And for most it delivered on its promise of well-paid work.

But a small number who came without money, contacts or basic English had a different experience. For them no job was waiting. Later, when so many temporary jobs on building sites ended abruptly, there was no accommodation or support system for them. Once on the street or in homeless shelters they found themselves in another trap: accession-country members have no right to public funds, which meant they could not claim welfare benefits or get long-term beds in publicly funded hostels.

Today it's estimated that anywhere between 15 and 20 per cent of Dublin's homeless population on the street are migrants from eastern Europe.

### Welfare entitlements

Tackling the issue of migrants is complex. Any relaxation of rules over entitlement to welfare benefits for foreign nationals could make Ireland a "haven" for destitute foreigners, says one policymaker who declines to be named.

The State's policy towards migrant homeless has been, wherever possible, to repatriate them. In the first five months of this year 153 foreign nationals were flown back to their countries of origin after seeking help from the Reception and Integration Agency to go home on destitute grounds. That compares with 95 in the same period last year.

■ **Hard times:** Henryk Piotrowski, who died in a waste collection truck in Dublin this week (above); Josef Pavelka (below left), the Czech who died last May, with Peter Baram, a Pole, in the public toilet in Ennis that was their makeshift home; and Pavelka's funeral, in Drumcliffe cemetery in Ennis. PHOTOGRAPHS: AN GARDIA SIOCHANA AND EAMONN WARD



### Falling through the cracks Migrant homeless deaths

■ **Dozens of homeless people die every year.** Dublin Simon Community says the average age of death is just 38. Many have issues with addiction and are more likely to have serious health problems. Migrants have accounted for an increasing number of these deaths over recent years. Some of the most high-profile include:

■ **May 2013: Josef Pavelka**  
The Czech's body was found in a lane in Ennis, Co Clare, last May. Efforts to repatriate him had failed. His case had attracted attention when, months earlier, a judge described it as a "scandal" that he was forced to live in a public toilet.

■ **December 2011: Aladar Turtak**  
The body of the 46-year-old Slovak was found near a cardboard box at Dominick Street flats in central Dublin. He had been sleeping rough in freezing temperatures.

■ **August 2009: Eugenia Bratis**  
The 50-year-old Romanian often begged in central Dublin. She was found dead in the Phoenix Park and had been stabbed.

■ **September, 2007: Kevin Fitzpatrick**  
The body of the 36-year-old homeless man from Derby, England, was found at a waste recycling facility in Grange, Co Limerick. His body had been crushed.

Although some have voiced concern that the policy is simply dumping the problem elsewhere, staff and volunteers at the Mendicity Institute see it as a progressive solution, if done properly.

The idea of repatriation is nothing new. When the Mendicity Institute was established, in 1818, there were an estimated 6,000 beggars on the streets. As part of a policy of "transmission" in the early 19th century, about 3,000 were given funds to go abroad or to parts of the country where they had been guaranteed a job. Another 3,000 were given work and shelter.

Over the past 18 months, Charles Richards says, the institute has been working closely with a Polish outreach team - Barka - to help repatriate those who wish to return home. "It is all done on a voluntary basis," he says. "If people are interested in engaging, it's up to them. No one is pressurised. They can leave any time. We've helped to move 100 people out of homelessness and connected them back home or into training or work."

It's also cost effective, he says. The programme has cost about €200,000 in its entirety, yet a single hostel bed can cost anything up to €20,000 a year, not to mind support services.

Kris Jameczek, the former homeless man turned outreach worker, is one of those who chose to return home to Poland. He had been working on building sites in London before he lost his job and found himself sleeping in a park. In all he spent six years on the street.

"There was so much expectation at

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home," he says. "I felt like a failure. I could not go back to my family. But there was also freedom on the streets. I drank every day. There was nothing else to do. The longer I was on the street the more it felt like normality."

It took years of gentle persuasion from the Barka team in London before he decided to go home. When he got back he joined a group-living scheme, received addiction counselling and found basic work.

"I'm trying to help others," says Jameczek, who is now 58. "It can still be difficult. I hope my relations with my family improve. I'm an optimist. That's why I'm doing this."

Alice Leahy, the cofounder of Trust, says repatriation may be the answer for some. But for many the system's reliance on paperwork and invasive questioning is a turn-off.

"In all the years we've been operating, the system hasn't progressed all that much. It still lacks basic compassion and understanding of how the real world operates," she says. "We've seen people who've been repatriated and then arrived back here months later... There are often unrealistic expectations, or a rush to push people into accommodation, without the right kind of support."

Leahy says the fact that migrants are able to access only a single night's accommodation is just adding to the sense of isolation among the most marginalised of our homeless population. "It's not good enough to have to ring up every night for a bed," she says. "There are just too many rules and regulations. It's no surprise then that people won't link in with services."

### Supporting migrants

There is no obvious best way of supporting migrants. Even those who provide homeless services are divided. There's little doubt that Henryk Piotrowski posed complex challenges for homeless-support agencies. No shortage of help was available to him over the course of his life.

Groups such as the Mendicity Institute take grave issue with the notion that he or other migrants are being let down by the system. "We did everything we could to support him: food, medical care, counselling, accommodation options. But he was a chaotic alcoholic, and his family life was in disarray," Richards says. "He was estranged from family. We contacted his brothers, but he wouldn't engage with them. We located his daughters on Facebook. He could see they were healthy and surrounded by friends - but Henryk felt there was no way back to his family."

Richards believes that Piotrowski was on the road to oblivion and that nothing was going to stop it. "Once, we had a passport, flight, he was off drink for two days, there were new clothes, he was all ready to go. He never turned up... I don't think anything would have saved him."