

## KONRAD KALINOWSKI

### *“Homo Miserus” – the homeless newspaper*

#### **Early years**

The first of this type of newspaper was “Street News”, launched in 1989, in New York. Following, an English businessman, Gordon Roddick, adopted the idea and began publishing “The Big Issue” as a monthly (presently weekly) in England. Today, twenty years later, there are 107 such papers, published in 37 countries on six continents. They have a combined circulation of 32 000 000 a year. It is estimated that they have helped so far over 250 000 people come out of homelessness. In Poland, the first newspaper devoted to the issue was “Parszywa Dwunastka”, published from September 2004 to March 2005, by the “Pomorskie Forum na rzecz Wychodzenia z Bezdomności” (Pomerania Forum for Coming Out of Homelessness). Also, in November 2004, issued in Poznan was “Gazeta Uliczna” (so far 17 issues have come out). In early 2009, the “WSPAK. Magazyn Uliczny” – Miesięcznik Społeczno-Kulturalny Akcji Przedsiębiorczej Filantropii (a socio-cultural monthly) was first published in Warsaw, so far printed were three issues.

The free of charge homeless newspaper, “Homo Miserus” (“HM”) has been published in Warsaw since November 2005. It is under the patronage of Fundacja Pomocy Bezrobotnym i Bezdomnym, “Domus et Labor” (Unemployed and Homeless Aid Foundation). It is headed by Konrad Kalinowski and Ewa Dobrzańska, two resocialisation pedagogues in charge of a volunteer resocialisation programme by the “Mokotowskie Hospicjum Świętego Krzyża” Association. The first “HM” issue, numbering 50 copies, was printed on private printers. So far, up until February 2009, 16 issues came out.

“Homo Miserus is a monthly about the homeless and for the homeless”. It is an independent publishing initiative, not focused on profit and based entirely on the volunteer work of those involved as well as a cooperating printing house. “HM’s” existence is completely dependent on the good will and free time of its creators. Its issues, in black and white, are distributed in Warsaw and are also mailed to the majority of homeless shelters and

organizations in Poland. The circulation is 550–570. The homeless in the capital also distribute it among themselves, eagerly read it and ask about new issues.

The monthly has got its own web site ([www.homomizerus.pl](http://www.homomizerus.pl)), where available are all its old issues. Up until April 2009, it has been visited by 23 000 people which averages about 20 visits a day over the three years the site has been in existence. The website is run by Andrzej Dobrzański, employee of ADED.

Over its three year period of existence, the periodical has accumulated a group of loyal readers and supporters. There was also a proposal to become part of “WSPAK” but “HM” editors decided to remain on their own as they did not wish to change their name and lose its non-commercial character.

The name, “Homo Mizerus”, purposely includes an error and is controversial. The word *miser* is from Latin and it means ‘poor’. The word ‘mizerus’ is a neologism easily understood by Polish readers as we commonly use the word ‘mizeria’ to mean poverty. The combination of ‘homo’ and ‘mizerus’ is in association with prehistoric times phraseology, ie. ‘Homo erectus’ as well as more modern, ie. ‘Homo Sovieticus’. In Poland, the word ‘homo’ is still often associated with homosexuality instead of Darwinism and, hence, at times the distributors are subjected to commentary as a result of people’s ignorance regarding the paper’s subject matter. It seems that most sensitive to the name... are people in charge of school groups visiting Warsaw.

### **Financing**

“HM” staff are volunteers. The periodical obtains its financing from donations made by its supporters or the project’s coordinators/editors from their own incomes from the sub-account with the “Domus et Labor” Foundation.

In order to be a credible partner to the homeless in social/volunteer work, it is imperative not to receive any compensation for the work done by coordinators. Any obtained finances are used to cover the costs of the periodical’s preparation and to aid the homeless members of the editorial staff.

So far, despite numerous attempts, we have not been able to obtain any finances from the administrative authorities or the EU. In order to obtain such financing, necessary is several years of the project’s formal existence. Additionally, indispensable are people who know how to prepare proper applications for financing and to do all the accounts. So far, we do not have the above.

Outside materials are obtained with consent for free of charge publications, according to the “Copyleft” license system or with the proper citation of the source of information.

### **Periodical as a new way of social activation of the homeless**

“Homo Miserus” was born spontaneously. It can be said that half way met were expectations by both sides – the homeless as well as the need to construct a modern and model method of resocialisation, created by the above mentioned social workers. Analysing what is on offer and the relations between institutions, non-government organizations or other people directly aiding those in need and the homeless, the conclusion is that there is inertia. This is a result of the disparity between expectations and interests. The way aid is provided is more like “seller-buyer” relations. According to the author, there are two basic reasons for that:

- bureaucracy and reporting nature of local government contract realization of tasks ceded most likely to non-government organizations,
- partner relations in the old epoch, official vs. applicant, style.

Such relations do not aid the situation but make it even worse. The offer, ie. night shelter, meals or basic necessities, does not give an opportunity to form closer relations with the homeless person. Among people alienated from society, with a ruined system of values, combined with reluctance to behave pro-socially as they focus all their efforts on daily survival, there is often very little room to make and upkeep social contacts. The effect is anarchist, self-destructive behaviour or apathy.

When the periodical was being established, needed was a specification of goals as well as the possibilities of realizing them. At the same time, noted needed to be the specific to this group dynamic which is difficult to predict and which influences the work and in consequence the carrying out of objectives.

The goals aimed to achieve by the creators and coordinators of the periodical were divided into two tasks with several sub-categories:

Task 1:

- Social activation, cognitive and prevention objectives in the sphere of homelessness,
- Work activation goals – organization of editorial, printing and distribution work.

.

Task 2:

- Therapeutic goals – resocialisation and anti-addiction therapies to come out of homelessness, through financial aid for those who are becoming socially independent, aiding in renting a room or obtaining council flat.

Coordinators in their volunteer work on this project took advantage of the opportunity to create a day care room in a place which many homeless people visit, in the building of the “Mokotowskie Hospicjum Świętego Krzyża” (Mokotow Hospice) on Domaniewska street in Warsaw. This is a place where those in need could use the cafeteria or obtain medical consultation and treatment. This place, unlike many others, is open during the day and people can come and stay there or on the grounds not just during meal time. Such conditions for the homeless, basically in the centre of a capital city, are a rarity. Normally, shelters are located on the outskirts, usually on the premises of old railway grounds. Those who use them are generally older or ill people and they are usually used short term only.

When a notice was posted inviting people to take part in the creation of a paper for and by the homeless several people responded and to this day they are part of our editorial staff. This is phenomenal. At the beginning, coordinators were not sure of the project and they considered starting with printing just a newsletter. In the end, they decided to go ahead with their initial plan as they had the technical opportunities to put a periodical together using computer programming and printing on their own or on their friends’ photocopiers. Later on the computers were provided by “Bank Drugiej Ręki”, an organization which redistributes old computers replaced by new ones in various institutions.

The people involved in the project all have strong personalities and their own individual visions of the periodical. They are, among others, Romuald Modrakiewicz “Mikołaj” (author of action “Duża Paka dla Głodnego Dzieciaka”), Adam Hetke “Adamus” (talented writer and globetrotter), Rafał Kucharski “Nietoperz” (Polish Salvador Dali still waiting to be discovered), and Karolina Wasiewicz (young, very talented poet). Among the volunteers there is Jan Jasnorzewski (great community worker and religion expert). Very quickly, in 2005, “HM” gained interest of the media, press, radio and TV, which were very eager to report on this new, extraordinary project. There were reports on our activity by all major national stations, also partly due to our location, close to TVP headquarters on Woronicza street.

### **Resocialisation through work on the monthly**

Working on this project has one basic goal in mind – to make the homeless not want to be homeless anymore. For those homeless involved in the project an artificial feeling of improvement of their situation was created. In reality, however, their living conditions did not improve for quite some time as they were not able to rent a room on their own due to lack of money. What was new was a chance to change their system of values. What they were doing now is playing the honourable role of representing their group outside to the rest of society.

The homeless, being the periodical's co-coordinators, are starting to want to live a normal life again. At the same time, visible are the effects of their work. With every issue, they gain new experiences, skills and contacts. They spend hours on editing texts, learn computer skills, DTP basics, take part in staff meetings and go to TV studios. It is no wonder that after such experiences going back to the shelter or sleeping alfresco is all that much more shocking. The goal for those people is to stop feeling homeless. They must not want to continue being in this situation. They must want to come back to normalcy, regardless their physical health limitations. By working together with coordinators they do not have to overcome the difficulties all on their own.

Since the beginning, they are encouraged to share their experiences and to prepare texts on their own. Based on a commonly written code of conduct, they actively co-create the periodical.

“Code of conduct:

1. We are abstinent, sober and drug free.
2. We do not raise our voice, are not aggressive, violent or behave in a superior way.
3. We respect each other and do not lie to each other.
4. Everyone has the right to express his opinion.
5. We share information and do not talk about anyone behind their back.
6. We do not swear.
7. We celebrate birth or name days.
8. Meetings are on Thursdays between 11am – 1pm
9. Presence during meetings is obligatory. Unexcused absence twice in a row results in being excluded from the editorial staff and put on a substitute list
10. During meetings discussed are issues in connection with the periodical.
11. Everyone takes a turn to speak about materials to be published.

12. We discuss any difficulties we may have regarding cooperation with other members of staff.
13. ....”.

Upon request, point 13 is marked by dots but everyone knows its content – about theft and the use of stolen goods which is strictly prohibited on the premises and outside them.

Editorial work involved includes timely preparation of articles, planning and conducting interviews and typing texts. This way skills such as punctuality, responsibility, solidarity and diligence are developed. Spending time together as well as carrying out specific tasks allows everyone to establish and maintain new contacts. It teaches patience and a proper work and learning ethic. It is a chance to come out of homelessness.

What was created was a unique place for individual and group therapy based on interaction through work in a group. By working on the periodical these people are encouraged to express their emotions and to take care of other people and things. Their sensitivity develops but also (and perhaps more importantly) their level of education. It should be noted that many homeless have inadequate educational background. Without coordinated activity and direct help the periodical could probably not function. What is imperative is continuity and systematic nature of the work as well as one main ‘boss’ to turn to for support in difficult situations. On the coordinators’ side, it is a form of care and therapeutic support but without the other volunteers’ engagement the periodical would not exist as they are its main contributors and creators, writing about their affairs and experiences.

People taking part in the project have had an opportunity to analyse the reasons for their homelessness, their limitations and to regain motivation through recognizing their self worth. Observation of behaviors making up this specific lifestyle, constituting the homelessness syndrome, shows that rebuilding one’s self is the most imperative element in changing one’s attitude to society from withdrawn to pro-social and cooperative.

### **Work organization**

Our editorial staff group is open. Anyone can come and join in on the work. There are people who have not missed one meeting. For the first several months there were as many as two 4–5 hour meetings a week. Now, there is one staff meeting a week and each time a different person leads the discussion. There are minutes taken from each meeting, written up

by our volunteers. Also, decisions on adding or removing anyone from the staff are made together.

The article texts are created and obtained various ways. Most are based on conversations or coordinator interviews on specific issues. People working with us either provide their own or other people's texts. Often they are first handwritten and then typed by our volunteers. Due to increased access to the Internet, materials can also be submitted electronically.

We continuously work to improve our graphic design, with particular focus on the cover page. Since many people use Microsoft Office programmes such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint or Adobe Acrobat (ASI), we put our pages together in Word format and then convert it into the PDF format in accordance with technical scanning and printing specifications.

The monthly is still developing its format. We are working on having regular columns and sections. One such column is *True Stories*, written by the homeless themselves. These texts are only edited in terms of spelling, without any other abridgements. If, however, the editorial staff is of the opinion that the subject matter may be too controversial, it supplements such a text with editor's commentary by one of the coordinators.

In every issue listed are addresses of select shelters and dosshouses in the Mazowieckie voivodeship. Regularly, printed are articles on methods of overcoming social pathologies such as alcoholism. There are also language notes and humour. In the future, we are planning to establish a regular column on state and local government welfare policy regarding the homeless.

A difficult issue during every staff meeting is whether or not to print various controversial materials which could potentially get the periodical or its coordinators into legal trouble for infringing people's personal or institution rights. This is something we would like to regulate in 2009.

Each issue's content is dependent on what the 'market' provides, that is what people bring in. In the table below listed are up to day "HM's" types of articles and their quantities. It should also be noted that that the classification is simplified due to the permeation of topics, sources and authors.

<b>Content analysis and media activity</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Content</b>	

Articles by the homeless	85
Literary articles	8
Poetry	23
Art by the homeless	12
Editor articles	25
Specialist articles	21
Articles on shelters	14
Introductory articles	15
Popularizing articles	32
Editor's guests	15
Initiatives and actions	8
Collections	2
Field reports	2
Academic publication as a source of therapy, the example of "HM" <sup>1</sup>	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>Media activity</b>	
Television programmes with "HM"	10
Radio programmes with "HM" (35 including "Mikołaj")	42
Press articles on "HM"	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>330</b>

"Homo Miserus" plays several functions. It informs about aid provided by the state, local government and non-government organizations. It is a forum for (but not only) the homeless. It includes debuts by different authors, writers and poets. It publishes nature, history, language and economic texts. Homeless authors best like to write about their own personal experiences so as to warn people. Often times, their stories could serve as plot for a novel or film. With great satisfaction we include any success stories on people coming out of homelessness. They prove that it is possible to change one's fate and to live a different way, even if one has no family or is seriously ill. "HM" always devotes space (not always used) for presentations of organizations and shelters aiding the homeless. Moreover, charismatic

<sup>1</sup> E. Dobrzańska, K. Kalinowski, „*Homo Miserus – gazeta bezdomnych*”, [w:] *Bezrobocie jako problem bezdomnych polskich*, pod red. A. Duracz-Walczak, Warszawa 2007.



“Mikolaj” regularly publishes articles on the progress of his charitable activity. As a result of his actions, he has become widely recognized throughout the country. Some even call “HM” ‘What’s new with Mikołaj?’.

The editorial office of “HM” is a place where meetings with guests take place and where some time can even be devoted to music. During this time coordinators also have individual resocialisation activities with those interested and aid them in taking care of any matters they may have.

### **Periods of the periodical’s activity**

Three different periods of the monthly’s activity can be distinguished so far. The first, dynamic beginnings took place from late 2005 to August 2006. During that time no outside support could be obtained. Additionally, we could no longer work in the “Mokotowskie Hospicjum Świętego Krzyża” Association building due to space limitations. During the summer of 2006 we negotiated cooperating with the “Otwarte Drzwi” Association in the Praga district but in the end no agreement was reached.

During “HM’s” second phase, from November 2007, we were focused on supporting the “Duża Paczka dla Głodnego Dzieciaka” (Aid for Hungry Children) action, on aiding our members of staff in need and on obtaining funds for the continuation of future resocialisation and editorial work activities. Up until December 2007, the staff cooperated with the “Monar-Markot” Association.

The third period of our activity takes place in the Praga district. Editorial meetings take place in the offices of befriended organizations such as: Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Bezdomnym, Fundacja “Pomoc Społeczna SOS” and Polskie Towarzystwa Higieny Psychiczej.

Over the years we have worked with several dozen homeless volunteers taking part in meetings. Some of them have contributed to the periodical in writing. Permanently there are people between the age of 25–40 working with us. Older people, with the exception of “Mikolaj”, were so far not interested in long term cooperation. It is believed that together we have created a family like atmosphere where people can, at least for a while, forget about their daily hardships. Since the beginning, it has not been about the money, everyone always knew this was strictly volunteer work.

---

What we would like to focus on in the future is cooperation with Warsaw's various rehabilitation and resocialisation schools in the form of lectures and volunteer work by students.

There is still a great deal to accomplish, also as far as work on the skills of our editorial staff. In addition, we are planning to increase our circulation so that the monthly can reach wider groups of homeless, also outside Warsaw.

### **Two ways of cooperation with homeless**

It is without doubt that activation of homeless through work on editing the periodical, in favourable conditions, with financial support and in cooperation with authorities is a modern and innovative idea for effective resocialisation.

Why aren't there any more such initiatives around the country? It seems that everyone, that is the state and society, are used to one type of aid, that of providing the needy shelter and the basic necessities. This group is generally not being resocialised as it is extremely rare that people can overcome their addictions (mainly alcohol). Meanwhile, according to Caritas, there are over 700 places in Poland that offer the homeless direct aid. After working with these people for countless hours on editing the periodical, it makes me believe that many of them, especially the younger ones, have potential to save their lives. Government policy to isolate these people in shelters so that they are not on the streets, being an uneasy sight to sensitive eyes, is unwise. There is a growing number of homeless in city centres and bigger towns, of which best aware are policing services. Moreover, a majority of them do not wish to use the shelters. That is why it is so imperative to resocialise and help these people come out of homelessness, especially the younger ones. Those who do succeed can, in turn, help others by, for example, cooperating with welfare centres.

Homelessness is a difficult and touchy subject, often ignored by politicians and decision makers. That is also why "HM" put itself on the line between the homeless and various aid organizations. It is a difficult position to be the moderator, especially when on the other side there are officials or non-government organizations dependent on them. The periodical was also created to unite those aiding the homeless. The goal is also to put pressure on various organizations to, for example, increase the standards in shelters and to encourage the state and local government to take action against various social plagues such as alcoholism, drug addiction, vandalism, corruption and organized crime.

So far it seems that there are two ways in which this resocialisation project could be continued.

First possibility – easier one, focused solely on the creation and distribution of the periodical, basing on interviews and correspondence with the homeless. Resulting is a guide on homeless aid in a given region and a tool used to exert media influence on people and institutions who can provide help.

Second possibility – more difficult, more in depth resocialisation with a select group of people, involved in the paper, via work on the periodical, until they completely come out of homelessness.

In the long run it is not possible to have people successfully break with homelessness until they are completely separated from this environment. However, being involved in the creation of the periodical makes these people all the more drawn in with this environment, partly as a result of the nature of the work on the periodical. There were also incidents where those working on our project were the object of attacks by other homeless. These attacks were mainly spurred by jealousy. Also, those involved in the project often feel superior to the rest. This is serious issue even though it may be hard to comprehend by those who are not homeless. Let's try to image a situation in which after being on television one has to go back to sleeping in a homeless shelter.

It should be noted that all those cooperating on “HM” somehow do deal with such situations and sooner or later they attempt to take the challenge to change their fate. All those who have worked for “HM” do not stay indifferent and are all the more eager to be a partner in accepting aid offered to them by non-government organizations in the process of coming out of homelessness.

\*\*\*

Homelessness is an ocean of solitude – as one of the homeless ‘editors’ says. Try to imagine a situation in which we are left all by ourselves, outside of society, on waters as deep and vast as an ocean. Most of us have experienced something similar and yet far from what these people are going through, when we have been away from home and/or without money. Loneliness mixes with fear and when we start to imagine what could be – fear turns to trepidation...

The main aim of “HM” is to create opportunities for people to return to society through social and professional activation. The periodical is a part of a bigger resocialisation

project, linking our group with other media. As far as the psychological/educational approach, we are relying on professor Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration. It is based on taking advantage of positive and pro-social qualities in order to resocialise the pathological individual through social work within a group, with the goal to gain lasting motivation to come out of homelessness.

What is, so far, not common in Poland is *streetworking*, or social work on the streets. This type of aid focuses on those homeless who do not use organized help, such as shelters, etc. To this day, the only streetworkers trained are those to work with addicted youths. This is too bad since there is a growing number of homeless on the streets and alcoholism is rampant. We need more trained people to provide direct help on the streets. It seems many are interested. Although, there are various higher education schools with social profiles, it seems we are still far behind in this sphere. "Homo Miserus" is promoting this type of social and volunteer aid. The European Union has planned to resolve the issue of homelessness by the year 2015...Let's hope so !