

Three Conversations with Mr Sienkiewicz

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Edward has always been fascinated by the homeless people he sometimes sees about. He wonders how it's possible to grow up and become an adult, and to have some kind of life behind you, whilst still remaining as alone as Edward himself feels for much of the time, at age thirteen and despite all the people in his life.

It was a couple of years ago that he first saw Mr Sienkiewicz in Victoria Park. He was not especially keen to get back home to an empty house. He still sometimes stops on his way back from school to sit and maybe do a drawing, maybe read one of his Dad's dozens of books, which he's slowly working his way through as he promised he would before his Dad died. Mr Sienkiewicz was there often, and on a couple of occasions that Edward's been in the park with his mum, she'd pointed him out, always there in the same spot on the bench on the other side of the fence.

'Where does he sleep?' Edward asks, and his mum replies that she didn't know. In summer, perhaps he sleeps in the open air or in the tunnel next to the railway station; she's seen them down there. *Them*, as she refers to homeless people. Edward wonders whether losing your home transforms people in this way, from being us to being them. In the winter, his mother explains, the council's probably set something up. Come to think of it, there are local churches, St Peter's for example, which open their doors to the homeless. He'll be all right, he'll survive. But Edward is not so sure, because surviving is not what being all right means.

His mum has told him once or twice not to speak to the homeless man, and when Edward asks why not, she speaks of something she's heard from the other mothers. This has made Mr Sienkiewicz an object of great fascination to Edward. Other questions, such as what Mr Sienkiewicz eats, how old he is, whether he's mad, whether he can have showers, and what he does when he's ill, are met by his mum with similarly vague responses.

'Poland, maybe,' she'd said when he asks where he's from. 'Romania. Somewhere like that.'

Edward parks his Raleigh. Mr Sienkiewicz is sitting there on his bench opposite the swings, just beyond the fence, looking as though he's been half wrapped up by someone and then left behind, perhaps forgotten altogether. He's plump and puffy-eyed, with a small amount of matted white hair, and he gives the impression that he'd be rough to the touch even in his smooth places. The lower portion of Mr Sienkiewicz's face is part-covered by a brown woollen scarf, his hands pushed deep inside his overcoat pockets, and next to him on the bench there is a large plastic bottle of something called White Ace.

Moving with great slowness, Mr Sienkiewicz withdraws one of his hands, looks up and beckons Edward over with a raised, tubby finger.

'My mum told me not to talk to you,' Edward says, aware that with these very words, he's failing to comply with that request.

'I watch you,' Mr Sienkiewicz says. 'I come here to watch the children.' Considering the enormous vessel of a body in which it's housed, his voice is surprisingly high-pitched and gentle. He closes his eyes tight shut and then opens them again, so widely that a spark seems to flash from them, and he smiles.

'Are you a paedophile?' Edward asks, feeling that this would be useful information to have before proceeding. Mr Sienkiewicz does not reply to this, but screws up his eyes and stares hard at Edward, who finds that he is suddenly transfixed: he could watch Mr Sienkiewicz all afternoon, with his weird expressions and his funny way of speaking. This is despite his smell: the longer you stand there, you realize that Mr Sienkiewicz sometimes uses himself as a toilet. Which probably, Edward thinks, has its advantages if you have no home.

Edward is a method-minded lad: the description of him, delivered during a chat with his mother about his lack of progress, comes from Mrs Starling, who followed it with the phrase 'but not a particularly bright one'. He proceeds to ask Mr Sienkiewicz about the things he doesn't know about him, but Mr Sienkiewicz's answers are not always clear and Edward has to fill in some of the missing bits. When Edward asks what Mr Sienkiewicz eats, the reply is 'food: we all have equal stomachs', his English suddenly and strangely perfect. To the question about whether he has showers, Mr Sienkiewicz tells him it's not easy for him to do that.

Then Mr Sienkiewicz seems to fall asleep for about ten minutes, uttering some Polish words half-way through. When he wakes up, Edward, who's taken the chance to draw a quick sketch of Mr Sienkiewicz's head, asks what he does when he falls ill. Mr Sienkiewicz says he used to go to the doctor, but now he doesn't bother so much: he points at his fat legs and what look like fat ankles. He is 73 years old, he says, but at the moment he can't remember when his birthday is.

'It might be today, then,' Edward says, 'September 17th. Happy birthday.'

At this Mr Sienkiewicz's eyes crinkle in what remains of his smile. 'You ask many questions,' he says. 'This is good.'

'Do you sleep in a church?'

'Sometimes yes. In a church doorway, in a hostel, in the park. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. All the time I am tired.'

'Are you mad?' Edward wonders. 'Everybody looks at you and thinks that you are. That's my final question, you'll be pleased to hear.'

'For them I am mad,' Mr Sienkiewicz says, not specifying who 'them' is, but Edward knows. 'You. Do you think I am mad?'

'I don't know yet. You're a bit hard to understand, but that doesn't mean you're mad. Where are you from?'

'Excuse me,' a woman says who's suddenly appeared. 'Are you alright?' Edward and Mr Sienkiewicz slowly turn towards the unwelcome interrupter, whose voice is loud. Neither is clear who she's speaking to, but it's Edward she's looking at.

'Yes, thanks,' he says.

'Well, if he's bothering you, love, we're over there.' Over there is

a short line of formidable mothers who all seem to have their arms folded.

‘Actually,’ Edward explains, ‘I’m the one bothering him.’

‘I am harmless,’ Mr Sienkiewicz says to her. ‘Look at me. I am old, fat. I am no bother. Look.’ But her expression shows the woman remains unconvinced: turning to leave, she offers the opinion that a play area is no place for him. ‘*Pieprzona suka,*’ says Mr Sienkiewicz when she’s gone. Edward repeats the sound, and Mr Sienkiewicz smiles, pleased.

Still in no rush to get home, because as well as it being an empty house there are equations to be done, Edward hops over the fence and sits down on the bench next to Mr Sienkiewicz. There is something about him that urges Edward to learn more, despite Mr Sienkiewicz just having issued a weapons-grade fart: sparrows flutter from a tree, wisely escaping the area.

Although he knows now what a homeless person does, Edward doesn’t know what Mr Sienkiewicz is actually like, and Mr Sienkiewicz, who seems happy enough looking at the children, sitting there fatly breaking wind and smiling gently, doesn’t seem in any hurry to tell him. He’s a mystery, Mr Sienkiewicz is, a potent-smelling mystery wrapped in rags. Looking around him at the mothers and fathers, the children, the dogs, Edward works out that he already knows about them, where they go, what they watch, how they spend their lives, because their lives aren’t so very different from his own, i.e. tedious and governed by the wishes of others, something you’d want to escape from.

But about the real Mr Sienkiewicz, the man Mr Sienkiewicz had been before he lost his home and perhaps also himself, Edward knows nothing. And what’s more, being from a foreign country, he’s homeless twice over: let’s not, Edward tells himself, forget that.

Edward wishes to know how Mr Sienkiewicz has come to be here, homeless in Victoria Park in September, and asks him, adding ‘It doesn’t matter if you don’t want to tell me.’

‘I do not know,’ Mr Sienkiewicz replies, ‘how I came to be here. And also, I will not tell you. You are a boy.’ He reaches over, raises the plastic bottle to his lips with a heavy arm that trembles slightly, and drinks. ‘Mine,’ he states, ‘is the usual story.’

‘How long have you been in England?’ asks Edward.

‘Fifteen years, twenty maybe. Why are you asking me these questions? Now you are making me tired with your fucking questions.’

‘A school project,’ Edward says. ‘They asked us to find a homeless person and interview him.’

‘That is a lie,’ Mr Sienkiewicz declares, and Edward agrees that it is, that his teachers spend all their time making people aware that the world is in a mess but without showing them what to do about it. ‘Gdansk,’ Mr Sienkiewicz says, ‘is where I was from.’ Edward asks him to spell that, and Mr Sienkiewicz does. Noting that Mr Sienkiewicz’s words are suddenly not coming out of his mouth properly, he asks for a repetition, but confusingly the letters come out in a different order this time, and they have to spend some time working it out.

‘I asked my mum what to give homeless people,’ Edward says in a little speech he’s prepared for when the time comes, which is now. ‘Because she says not to give money because they spend it on stuff like that stuff in the bottle. So I went on Google and found a list of the things that homeless people need.’ On the list had been socks and shoes, blankets, toiletries and high-calorie food. But these people aren’t called *sockless* or *toiletries-less* people, they are *homeless*. What they need is right there in their name, but people don’t see it.

‘I’m Edward,’ Edward says, and holds out his hand, which he feels is an appropriate action, given what he’s about to do. Mr Sienkiewicz observes the hand for a moment before refusing, perhaps thinking it would be too great an effort to lean forward and reach out. Clearly used to parcelling out his energies, he raises instead his bottle to his lips.

‘Edward,’ he says, and burps slightly and sighs. ‘In Polish, *Edzio*. Repeat that.’

‘Edzio,’ says Edward, slightly startled.

‘Edzio. My name is Sienkiewicz. I changed it, but now I am Sienkiewicz again.’

‘Please could you say that again?’

‘Sien-kie-wicz.’

‘Thanks,’ Edward says. He tears out the page on which he’s drawn Mr Sienkiewicz’s head: Mr Sienkiewicz doesn’t seem like the kind of person who’d have WhatsApp or Google Maps, or indeed know what they were at all. ‘Our address is written on the back.’

Mine and my mum's. Come whenever you want, Mr Sienkiewicz. Except Saturday mornings when we're at Tesco's. It's over there.' He points towards the general area of 37 Rainow Road and Mr Sienkiewicz slowly swivels his head half an inch in the same direction as the number of furrows in his brow subtly increases. He takes the piece of paper and pockets it without removing his eyes from Edward's. God only knows what other items are to be found at the bottom of that pocket. There might be small, dead animals in there.

'Thank you,' he murmurs. *'Dziękuję.'*

'I could sleep on the sofa for a bit. You can't stay forever, though,' Edward warns Mr Sienkiewicz. 'There has to be a limit. And also, you shouldn't drink that stuff, Mr Sienkiewicz.'

Shortly before the park gates are to be closed for the night, a bearded policeman approaches them and asks them to leave. Mr Sienkiewicz refuses, gesturing with his fat arms, saying he's on the other side of the fence from the play area. Spit flies from his mouth as he stands, and he's breathing heavily. The policeman insists, wondering whether Edward doesn't have a home to go to: he places a gloved hand on Mr Sienkiewicz's arm, but Mr Sienkiewicz shakes it off, angrily saying something in Polish.

'He's telling you,' Edward tells the policeman, 'to fuck off. I speak Polish. He's asking what harm he's doing. Why can't he stay?' But in the end the policeman leads Mr Sienkiewicz away, very slow and unsteady on his feet, towards the doorway of a church perhaps, towards a tunnel, or a bridge. The bearded policeman will at some point walk away towards somewhere he belongs, and Edward imagines Mr Sienkiewicz standing there, leaning against a lamppost, uncertain about where to turn and anyway finding it a struggle to do so, with his weight, and the White Ace overpowering his senses.

Over the following days, Mr Sienkiewicz does not reappear. Edward asks his mum what 'the usual story' means when it came to homeless people. It might be a series of unfortunate events coming together, she explains, after being annoyed that he'd been talking to Mr Sienkiewicz: losing your job, family problems, having nowhere to go. Perhaps Mr Sienkiewicz has a family back in Poland, but perhaps they've fallen out of touch, or they're not speaking, or something.

That happens in families more than you'd think. It's awful, really, when you think about it.

His face glowing blue, Edward looks up Gdansk on Wikipedia, and goes on from there. Gdansk is where something called the Solidarity Movement was born. This requires a word journey through the internet by Edward, who has a tendency to drift away in class when matters that have no relevance to the present or future lives of anybody at all are being explained: he does a lot of drifting. He's not completely sure about the meaning of words like *strike*, *communism* and even of *solidarity* itself, since they've never been uttered in his presence, and he has no idea at all about other words such as *foreign credit*, *trade union* or *Warsaw Pact*, which as far as Edward is concerned might have been Polish.

Seeking to work out what the word 'home' might actually mean for Mr Sienkiewicz, Edward looks at photographs of Gdansk, which was called Danzig in German. As he looks through the photos he quietly sings to himself '*Baby, I'm Danzig in the dark, with you between my arms*,' to the tune of Ed Sheeran's *Perfect*, wondering as he does so why nobody calls him Ed. Gdansk is where some of the novels of Gunter Grass are set: Edward tried to read *The Tin Drum*, which was one of the ones his Dad left behind, but has decided to put it aside until he's about seventeen. *Dom* is the Polish for home, he learns from Google Translate: 'dom,' Edward mutters, wondering whether that was what ET uttered in the Polish version of the film he remembers watching with both his parents, before his Dad.

Then Edward is surprised to see Mr Sienkiewicz looking back at him from a grainy YouTube video made in the Gdansk shipyard. In the video, Mr Sienkiewicz has less blotchiness on his skin, and he has blowy blonde hair, and he's wearing a very smart white shirt with a grey stripe running around the collar's edge. 'I look at it this way,' the man says, translated by the presenter. 'In the history of Poland since the war, there hasn't been an event like this.' It's definitely Mr Sienkiewicz: though he can't hear the voice because of the voiceover, you can always tell from the eyes. Hearing him speak properly like this makes Edward feel funny inside, as does the notion that Mr Sienkiewicz, whose words are full of hope, does not know what will happen to him. He has a square but kindly face, a half-smile on his features as he speaks.

‘Whenever we stand outside the gates of the shipyard, we feel threatened,’ Mr Sienkiewicz says.’ But here, in this little piece of free Poland we have here, I feel quite safe. No one is telling me how I should speak, or what I should do.’ He’s a big man, but there is a playfulness about him that Edward warms to, and which he can still see in the old Mr Sienkiewicz. *Something suka*, he’d said about the woman, and smiled: *suka*, Google Translate says, means bitch, so it was pretty obvious what the other word meant. *No one is telling me how I should speak, or what I should do*: later, Edward will write the phrase down in his *Words and Other Things to Remember*, his personal book. Perhaps that’s what Mr Sienkiewicz had been telling the bearded policeman after all: perhaps it was his memory of the sensation of the gloved hands of policemen on his arm that had made him so angry.

The safe place the man is describing is what he feels to be his true home, the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk where, following the sack- ing of Anna Walentynowicz, the workers refused to work, and from their refusal to work the Solidarity Movement arose. After much suffering, ten years later, their leader, a man called Lech Walesa with a brilliant moustache, came to power, and they’d triumphed over their oppressors. Edward has not before heard of such things hap- pening in the real world, and certainly not to anyone he’s met and spoken to himself, not unless you counted Mohammed Gailen let- ting down the tyres on Mr Cowans’ Renault Twingo after failing history.

Mental arithmetic is not Edward’s strong point, so it takes more than three minutes and a sheet of paper that looks like Einstein’s blackboard before he’s able to work out that Mr Sienkiewicz was born in 1945: he’s frankly no good at guessing adults’ ages, but yes, the man in the video looked about right for 1980. *Gdansk 1945*, he types into YouTube, and up comes a video of a city in ruins, bombed by the Nazis who killed so many millions of Mr Sienkiewicz’s fellow Poles, and who would perhaps have killed Mr Sienkiewicz himself had he not had the good fortune to survive being born into a city in ruins, about to be conquered by the Soviet Army who would then wreak their own havoc upon it. Is it any wonder, thirty-five years later, in a shipyard in Gdansk, that you’d want to stand up and fight? If Mr Sienkiewicz was now

rough-faced and large and smelt bad, it was because he was stuffed so full of history. How could a man and his farts ever smell good, when his life was stuffed so full of the evils that had been done to him and to his people and to their city, their country? How had Mr Sienkiewicz found it inside him to become a hero after all that? Why was nobody telling Edward about all of this? *I feel quite safe*, Mr Sienkiewicz had said. For some people, Edward can see, that in itself is a victory.

In 1970 shipyard workers were killed by the communist authorities in Gdansk. There's a monument to them at the entrance to the shipyard, on which appear the words:

Który skrzywdziłeś człowieka prostego
Śmiechem nad krzywdą jego wybuchając

‘*You who wronged a simple man/Bursting into laughter at the crime...*’

Edward reads. He notes it down in his *Book of Words and Other Things to Remember*, and then below it effortfully transcribes the words in Polish, muttering to himself the strange and beautiful words as he thinks they might be pronounced. He continues his internet search, understanding what he can, knowing that he won't be able to leave this alone. If Mrs Starling, his history teacher, were to give him a quiz about the Solidarity Movement, then he'd probably fail it: there are too many people, too many dates, too many ideas, too many new words to take it all in. But Edward knows that he's learned the essential thing: in 1980 Mr Sienkiewicz finally reached a place of safety, but has now lost it again. Who could ever be angry if you offered a man like that your home?

It is 11:47 at night. His mum and Craig have fallen asleep on the sofa while on the telly Nigel Farage, who hasn't noticed that here in Rainow Road nobody is listening, continues to spout out stuff in that pompous voice of his; his mum had called Edward down to ask if he wanted to watch, feeling as she did that they should spend more time together watching rubbish as a family, but tonight Edward had more important issues to attend to. Now he goes downstairs and quietly lets himself out, unlocks his Raleigh and cycles the mile or so along damp, weakly-illuminated roads, first to St Peter's whose doors are locked, and then to the tunnel by the railway station. There are two people asleep down there in the dankness, and from a safe distance Edward shines his torch on them,

making them grunt and turn over. One of them tells Edward to piss off: but neither of them is Mr Sienkiewicz.

Two months pass by without Edward seeing Mr Sienkiewicz. He doesn't reappear in the park: someone his mum knows who works at the hospital says she thinks she saw him being brought in after a stroke. 'Was he all right afterwards?' asks Edward. His mum says she doesn't know, that she didn't think to ask, and Edward wonders what kind of person his mum must be, not to wonder about something like that. 'I was in a rush,' she explains. 'I'm not a monster, Edward. I'm just always in a rush.'

It's when Edward is pulling his bedroom curtains to one evening that he looks down into the street to see Mr Sienkiewicz fatly standing there, or rather leaning against a lamppost, head bowed just as he'd imagined him after the policeman walked him away. There's a kind of continuity to that which to Edward feels right and lovely. His mum and Craig are asleep in front of the television. Edward runs out into the street in his pyjamas and tells Mr Sienkiewicz to wait until everyone's gone to bed, but Mr Sienkiewicz doesn't really seem to understand him: it's as though he's used up all of his remaining powers in just getting as far as the lamp post outside 37 Rainow Road.

One hour later, about half of which is taken up with getting Mr Sienkiewicz up off the pavement where he'd decided to lie down, then through the front door and up the stairs, all without waking up his mum and Craig, Mr Sienkiewicz is lying on Edward's bed with his socks and shoes off: the window has had to be opened. It's clear that he does, in fact, need new socks. So far he hasn't said anything except, at one moment on the stairs, the word *Edzio*. He's giving no sign of knowing where he is at all, but, Edward supposes, the important thing is that he got there. Wherever he's come from, it must have taken him all day.

'You've not brought your bottle with you,' Edward whispers, 'that's good.' Mr Sienkiewicz's ankles are big and puffy, and all sorts of funny colours, colours nobody's ankle should ever be.

'I saw you in a video,' he says. 'You were wearing a shirt with a grey stripe on the collar. Do you remember, Mr Sienkiewicz? The shipyard in Gdansk?'

Mr Sienkiewicz half-opens his eyes and turns to look at Edward, who has turned his desk chair round to face him. 'Gdansk,' Mr Sienkiewicz says, and then turns away and closes his eyes again.

'That's right, Mr Sienkiewicz. It was a great time, that was. June 1980. All of you locked in there together in the shipyard, behind the fences. People coming from far and wide bringing you stuff, food, blankets. Doctors came to look after you, and priests as well. Not only from Gdansk but from other countries, too. From all over, they came. Do you remember, Mr Sienkiewicz? Nearly forty years ago, it was. My mum wasn't even born. Do you remember all that?'

Mr Sienkiewicz's fat chest slowly rises and falls, and he makes a small gurgling noise which might mean that he remembers, but also that he might not.

'On August 31st,' Edward goes on, 'Poland was allowed to have trade unions. You were free at last to say and think what you wanted, Mr Sienkiewicz. No one was telling you how you should speak, or what you should do. And what you said about the shipyard being a safe place, well it wasn't just the shipyard any more.' He has to work to keep his voice down: it won't do to have his mum come in at 12:30 am to find him talking about the end of Communism to that paedophile from the park he wasn't supposed to be talking to. 'It wasn't just Gdansk. It was the whole of Poland. East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, other places too. It's fantastic what you did there, Mr Sienkiewicz, when you think about it. You helped to make a proper home for everyone. We all have equal stomachs, is what you all told each other. I've thought about it. If you don't mind me saying so, Mr Sienkiewicz, you're actually a bit of a hero.'

Over the past two months, during his wait for Mr Sienkiewicz's homecoming, Edward has gone often through this scene in his mind: once he even dreamed it. In the dream version, a single tear appears in the corner of Mr Sienkiewicz's right eye and makes its way down his blotchy cheek, tracing a route through the bristles, before dislodging and plopping softly onto the pillow. But no such tear appears now, and indeed Mr Sienkiewicz is giving every sign of having fallen asleep mid-conversation again. Edward hopes that he doesn't relax so much that he delivers one of his farts: if he does

that, it'll disturb not only his mum and Craig, but the whole of Rainow Road and environs.

'Hold it in the best you can, please, Mr Sienkiewicz,' he whispers. 'And it doesn't matter if it wasn't you on the video. It might be somebody else. It would be nice if it was you, but it's OK if it wasn't.' He pauses and sniffs, secretly knowing that actually, it really is the same man: it cannot *not* be the same man. 'Do you remember the monument at least?' he asks Mr Sienkiewicz. 'The monument that went up near the entrance to the shipyard?' He pauses for a second to collect his thoughts and recites the words: *You who wronged a simple man/Bursting into laughter at the crime... Który skrzywdziłeś człowieka prostego/Śmiechem nad krzywdą jego wybuchając...* It's great stuff, that is, Mr Sienkiewicz. Czesław Miłosz wrote it.' He'd practised the pronunciation on Ms Kempinski at Moat Hill during her lunch break: when she asked him why, he just told her he'd decided to learn Polish, and left it at that. Later it occurred to Edward that Ms Kempinski might have thought he had a crush on her, which he 100 per cent did not.

As Edward is reflecting that probably he does in fact have a crush on Ms Kempinski, he hears Mr Sienkiewicz mumbling in his rough voice, talking in his sleep perhaps. 'NIE BADZ BEZPIECZNY'. Edward is sure he's continuing the poem: feeling it would be right at this point to do so, he trundles his desk chair over to the bedside and takes Mr Sienkiewicz's right hand, pressing it between his own. 'Poeta pamięta.' The words come very slowly, as though Mr Sienkiewicz is struggling to remember them or because he's struggling to find the breath, but the good part is that Edward can understand what he's saying, and that he's saying the words he should be saying.

'Do not feel safe,' Edward encourages him, urgently whispering. 'The poet remembers. Go on, Mr Sienkiewicz. Don't stop.'

'Możesz go zabić – narodzi się nowy,' Mr Sienkiewicz says, so quietly as to be almost inaudible. Bubbles of spit gather at the corners of his mouth. 'Spisane będą czyny i rozmowy. Oh,' he says then, drawing out the sound.

'You can kill one, but another is born,' Edward says. 'The words are written down, the deed, the date. It's great stuff, that is. It was you, wasn't it? Dom, Mr Sienkiewicz. Dom. I understand you.'

After nearly a minute Mr Sienkiewicz too says dom, twice, and then he sighs and falls silent again. He is tired: there's not a lot keeping him going now. He's had a very long journey indeed.

'Goodnight, Mr Sienkiewicz,' Edward says, when it's clear that Mr Sienkiewicz won't be saying any more words, at least not for tonight. He lifts a corner of the bedsheet and dabs at Mr Sienkiewicz's mouth. 'It's great that it was you. Sleep well.'

He pulls a blanket from the cupboard and, quietly closing the door behind him, makes his way along the landing past his mum and Craig's bedroom. There'll be hell to pay in the morning, especially if Mr Sienkiewicz takes the decision to go to the toilet in his bed or indeed to die in it, but what can you do.

Edward brushes his teeth for not as long as his mum always tells him to and then pads down the stairs to the living room, where he lies down on the sofa, kicks the cushions onto the floor, makes himself comfortable with the blanket and closes his eyes. Upstairs Mr Sienkiewicz is sleeping, perhaps forever, and if not forever then at least until tomorrow, when the sun will rise over Poland also.