

"I DRINK, BUT AT LEAST I AM CLEAN": NOTIONS OF BODY AND SOUL AMONG HOMELESS RUSSIANS

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Homeless people are in Russia generally regarded as weak and morally inferior. The stigma strips them of human qualities and dismisses them as useless, asocial outcasts. The negative attitude of the surrounding, 'domiciled', society is shared by most homeless people themselves, who by basing individual claims to dignity on notions of 'humanness' try to avoid being seen as 'typical' representatives of the stigmatised category. The criteria are, however, often adjusted to the predicaments of their own lived practice. Flaws considered unavoidable due to the homeless condition as such are not judged very hard, while qualities seen as within reach of individual agency gain relevance. In particular, cleanliness and generosity are used as self-affirming devices.

This paper is based on a nine-month fieldwork on homelessness conducted in St. Petersburg during 1999. Most of the work consisted of 'hanging out' in places where homeless people gather, which were the few existing charity organisations for homeless people in the town, but also certain squares and train stations. I have singled out one of the latter as a place of reference for this paper, and I will return to it after a comment on the core concept of the stigma of homelessness, the acronym BOMZH.

Bomzh

Bez opredelennoogo mesta zhitelstvo, 'without fixed abode', is an official term used by the Russian state administration for people without a registration at a permanent address, or *propiska* as most people call it. The *propiska* is the corner stone in the administration of both social benefits and housing, which also makes it a prerequisite for social welfare and civil rights. (This can be locally adjusted; the city of St. Petersburg now provides at least medical care and pensions for its own non-registered locals.) Since the right to work also depends on the *propiska*, only day-labour and the 'second economy' remain as sources of income for most non-registered people. A *propiska* is, moreover, geographically limited in the sense that a registration in Leningradskij Oblast gives no rights in the city of St. Petersburg. Serfdom is, in this sense strictly, not completely abolished: Russian people are supposed to stay put. Once

home and *propiska* are lost, the only way back to social personhood is – for those who have the necessary economic and social capital – basically to purchase a flat or try to register with a family member or a friend who has some spare space.

St. Petersburg is, by a couple of charity organisations, roughly estimated to have some 50 000 *bomzhi*, but the number seems low and more adequate for the amount of literally homeless people. These are generally, but not always, *bomzhi* as well, and have usually lost their places of living because of a prison sentence, family conflict, or divorce. Many are also victims of frauds connected to privatisation of housing, or have migrated from other parts of Russia or former Soviet republics. In most cases, the homelessness is also determined by a loss of the intimate networks of family and friends that in practice constitute the only form of social security in contemporary Russia.

The every-day use of the word *bomzh* has ceased to refer to administrative matters only and is now a derogatory synonym for *bitch* or *brodyaga*, bum or tramp, with a corresponding verb, to *bomzhevat*. The *propiska* system dates from 1932, but the frequent use of the acronym *bomzh* as a pejorative is, according to both homeless people and others, a post-perestroika phenomenon. Homelessness existed in the Soviet period too, but covertly, since both *brodyázhnichestvo*, vagrancy, and absence of a *propiska* were criminal acts which could render a couple of years in prison camps.

Public opinion – as I perceive it and partly as represented in a few sociological surveys – tends to view *bomzhi* as morally weak drunkards. They are supposedly unwilling to work, inclined to steal, and on the whole undisciplined, unpredictable, and violent. Being dirty, they are also assumed to pass on diseases and lice. A foreigner might be somewhat intrigued by the fact that the main ascribed characteristics of the *bomzhi*, drunkenness, laziness, and unruliness, also are vices that frequently are pointed out when Russians – homeless and others – speak ironically about the Russian national character. Perhaps *bomzhi* also serve as unpleasant reminders of the

fragile border between an established life and the street – the more ‘typically Russian’ their weaknesses are, the bigger the risk for anybody to end up in the gutter. This may be a reason why *public opinion sometimes also expresses a paradoxical compassion and helpfulness to the ‘prodigal sons’*. At times, a thin strand of admiration and romanticism also appears when *bomzhi* are discussed, an idea of the *brodyaga* who voluntarily chooses the road to be free from the confinements of family duties, tedious work, and state control. This liminal status is seen as both congenital and addictive. Russian psychiatry has a diagnosis for a chronic craving for vagrancy, *dromomania*, but there is also a popular idea stating that once you have lost your home, you will become dependent on ‘the road’ and lose the capacity to live a domiciled life. In particular mass media like quotations of the type: ‘I’ve been a *bomzh* for 10 years, and could never go back to an ordinary life’, or stories about formerly homeless people who repeatedly shun the comfort of their established homes for ‘holidays’ in the gutters with their old boon companions.

These associations partly apply to Western conceptions of ‘bums’ as well. The difference is that ‘bum’ – or even ‘homeless’ – is not a formal category imposed on the subject by a state bureaucracy. For a Russian who has received the stamp in the passport announcing the end of the latest *propiska*, there is suddenly a new identity to deal with. A telling incident happened to me many years before this project started. I meet a furious old man on Nevskij Prospekt who claimed that ‘they’, the state, had turned him into a *bomzh*. I thought he meant ‘homeless’ and since he apparently lived where he always had – evidently he had lost the *propiska* but not yet his room – I did not understand. His enraged argument that ‘they’ had made him an alcoholic by putting a stamp in his passport made sense only years later.

This man still had a roof over his head; my informants have not. Even though they react against the use of an administrative acronym as a moral category, they are seldom rid of the feeling of being stigmatised. What most of them do, is try to disarm the dehumanising force of the ascription *bomzh* by making its negative connotations less applicable to themselves.

The Moscow Station

The Moscow Station is a special field site because of its limited territory and the intensity of the ongoing social interaction, which in this arena is not affected by behavioural restraints set by

agents from the charity sector. The homeless regulars are constantly involved in dealings with each other, with domiciled people, or with the police. I have other informants who, in their own words, find the station and its regulars ‘sleazy’ and never go there, so I cannot argue that my conclusions about the station regulars apply to the homeless in general. Hardly any conclusions would, though; homeless people share a predicament, not a mentality. As I see it, the station regulars are similar only insofar as they often have been homeless for a relatively long time, most of them know each other quite well, and they also seem to be people who enjoy things happening all the time. Depending on season and weather, there are some 50-100 homeless persons there, ranging from 20 to 70 years of age. About four out of ten are women, which is more than the average statistics of homeless people in the city where women are supposed to constitute about 25%.

First and foremost the station offers incomes and company. It consists of a long outdoor yard on the side of the actual station building, lined up with kiosks and small cafes. Passengers pay for their luggage to be carried along the yard to the far distance trains, and some money can also be made on cleaning train wagons. Only a few of the female ‘station regulars’ work systematically as prostitutes, but they have a substantial number of domiciled colleagues there. Paid sex is probably more frequent on an irregular basis among the young women who drink very hard, but it is difficult to investigate. Not everybody likes to talk about it, and the girls concerned are also normally so affected by drunkenness or hangovers that it is difficult to have a consistent conversation with them. To me such sex seems rather arbitrary; a drinking bout at the station may or may not continue at the place of some domiciled man, where it may or may not lead to sexual intercourse. Tanya, a stout and healthy looking twenty-five year old, says that she certainly can ‘do it’ for a bottle in return. It is not a problem to her, she claims, but she also adds that this is not really prostitution. “Prostitutes work at Hotel Europe, make big money, wear fancy clothes, that’s not us.”

In fact most incomes at the station are related to the fact that it is a place where everybody drinks. Train journeys are traditional occasions for drinking in Russia, and drinking is also a natural part of both seeing people off and welcoming them upon arrival. There are many casual visitors at the station as well, people who

use it as a lively place among others for a drink and just enjoying the atmosphere. The people who work there also have a taste for liquor, not only carriers and cleaners but sometimes even policemen. Deposit bottles are the main source of income for most impoverished people, not only the homeless, and the latter have to put up with the concurrence of poor but domiciled pensioners who also make their living at the station. The cafés and kiosks normally have some homeless person, most often a woman, clearing the tables and cleaning for only empty beer bottles in return. At first I was stunned by the apparent meanness of the employers – they would not even offer some food – but the employed people claim that they in fact can make rather good money, in particular on holidays and in the summer. The drinking also provides drunk people to steal from and drunk people to beg from. Only a few station regulars steal systematically for a living, whereas many others seldom refuse gifts offered by coincidence. Drunk people often displace their possessions on their own accord, and someone is bound to find them sooner or later.

Most homeless drink themselves when working, usually cheap solvents. During my time there it was Bomi, ostensibly designed to cleanse oily skin, and Ldinka, a solvent which they said was meant to clean cars with. Both were displayed in the kiosks, side by side of the different sorts of beer on sale. (Just before I left, the sale of these two were prohibited at the station. My informants had by then already discovered Boyaryshnaya, a 70% herb medicine against high blood pressure on sale in the numerous pharmacy kiosks.) 'You have to drink', the station people often assure me, 'in this place you mustn't be embarrassed or afraid'. Just to be alert enough to discover bottles or heavy luggage before everybody else, demands a drink, and one also needs nerves both to steal and to prostitute oneself – violence is not uncommon in the latter trade.

Most ways of working mean to patiently wait for opportunities, and between the sudden interruptions there is time to *rasslabit'sa*, 'relax', as drinking is referred to. This is a collective enterprise and, with few exceptions, the only case when my informants beg systematically. The logic is somehow that all drunk or thirsty people are united in spirit, and nobody belonging to this communion should ever refuse his brothers and sisters their obvious needs. When the regulars beg, they therefore always walk up to people and frankly declare that they are collecting money for something to drink. It is surprisingly successful,

passengers and other visitors often contribute, in particular if they are drunk themselves. 'Getting drunk for free is easy here', I often hear, 'but getting something to eat is impossible.'

Drinking may even provide nightshelter; not few of the regulars frequently manage to stay the night in the homes of poor elderly people who have a spare corner, but nothing to eat or drink, for only food and vodka in return. These stays tend to be short and unpredictable, though. The station is otherwise not always a good place to sleep. During my own work there, the waiting rooms were periodically accessible to the homeless, but the station authorities do what they can to keep the *bomzhi* out. A few of the more ambitious prostitutes and some industrious pickpockets manage to rent rooms from time to time, and some people are permitted to sleep in the washrooms by the staff in charge. But most stay in attics in the neighbourhood or sleep on local trains – two hours going out from town in the evening, a few hours at some rural train station, and two hours going back to 'Piter' in the early morning.

Humanness, hygiene, and helpfulness

My work at the station consists of a flux of talkative and not always very sober acquaintances who turn up and chat a little, constantly interrupting each other, and then suddenly disappear. Structured interviews are not to be thought of, hardly even planned questions, but there are recurring themes in the talk. People, to put it short, want to show me, or want me to show my future readers, that they are not what the domiciled Russia wants us to think; that *bomzhi* are humans too.

One thing they often bring up is violence and degradation. There are indeed fights between the homeless, often over bottles, but as I see it not more than between drunk Russians in general. Systematic violence usually comes from the large number of police officers at the station. They can take anybody into custody for drunkenness, and during the confinement a *bomzh* may be both severely beaten and robbed of whatever money he or she might have. Besides that, railroad employees often beat the homeless, and there are also youth gangs who seem to specialise in beating the *bomzhi* who sleep nearby. 'And even if the cops are watching, they don't do anything', the victims complain, 'because we're *bomzhi*. But we are people too!'

This expression, 'we are people too', is very common when abuse is discussed and

indicates a sense of unity, a homeless 'us' against an oppressive world of *domashnye* (as domiciled people are referred to). The concepts 'people' or 'human' are, however, more often used to make distinctions between the homeless themselves than to assert their right to be treated decently by outsiders. The category 'human' is normally used to negotiate the contradictory category '*bomzh*' on an individual level, by conceptually separating ego from others. In particular, this is the case when physical appearance is on the agenda. 'You couldn't guess that I'm a *bomzh*, could you?', is something I often hear, just as 'I am a *bomzh*, but I always look like a human'. Many people also talk at length about the need to keep one's self-respect at all costs, and cleanliness is always brought into the argument as a sign of success or failure. Once the physical appearance degenerates, so do the morals. 'You don't respect yourself if you live in filth', says Dima, a 30-year old gambling addict, 'and if you lose your self respect you have lost everything, you're stuck. In this situation, you can't allow yourself to accept dirt, for if you do your mind goes the same way and you end up like that *bomzh* over there – he's just ceased being human, doesn't even care about lice any more'. He refers to an extremely ragged and uncouth old man who sits and scratches himself not far from us. Dima does, like most of my informants, regard lice as the final exit from humanness. To get them is forgivable, that can happen even in a waiting room, but then immediate measures have to be taken. The unpleasantness of housing them is naturally reason enough, but nevertheless most people mention shame and disgust first. The municipal *prozharka*, 'disinfection centre', is free of charge, but some people simply get hold of something new to wear, shave their heads and burn the old clothes to be rid of the problem immediately. Valya, a former window dresser, is very careful about hygiene and her looks, but despite this she once caught lice just from falling asleep drunk beside a radiator. 'Someone else must have been resting his head at the same spot just before me', she said and added that she immediately found some dye and went to the washroom and bleached her then brown hair. It came out brightly carrot-coloured, not all that elegant, but the lice died.

It is true that some look better than others – Dima, Valya, and a few others are real snobs – and hygiene is not totally out of reach; Russian saunas are cheap, there are washrooms at the station, and there is a certain circulation of second hand clothes among the homeless. But a drinking

session, a beating, or just bad weather easily destroys good appearances, and it takes some effort to get back in shape. Dima's way of emphasising his own cleanliness by means of comparison, is perhaps related to this relativity of hygiene, and among the station people it is the usual way to accentuate one's own human qualities. To them, just as much as to the 'public opinion' of *domashnye*, the 'typical' *bomzh* is dirty and less human. But even the ones who cannot avoid being defined as *bomzhi* can, at least, avoid being 'typical', and that is easier when someone else nearby can serve as an antithesis to oneself.

The ambivalence between on the one hand unity among the homeless and on the other separation of 'good egos' from 'bad others' is noticeable also when matters of generosity and loyalty are brought up. People like to describe themselves as altruistic and helpful, but reality too often contradicts this. A telling incident was when Sveta, a handsome woman in her early thirties, staggered up the yard one spring day, barefoot and dressed only in trousers and a shirt. 'And those people were supposed to be my friends,' she screamed. 'We got pissed in this attic and I fell asleep, and they took the lot; my handbag, the money, and I had some really fine clothes too, damn it, they even took my shoes! And I worked to get this stuff, I bought it, I even bought the booze we drank! All *bomzhi* are like that, they only steal from other *bomzhi* because they know that the cops don't care about it!' Her rage was received with a resigned understanding. 'Well, you didn't precisely discover America', said an old woman ironically and told Sveta to cool down. Other people were more empathic and equally upset about mates who steal from each other, and they agreed with Sveta about how typical such behaviour is for *bomzhi*. An old man offered her two pairs of high-heels that he had got from an acquaintance the same morning, and Sveta had a new outburst of mat when they did not fit. (Mat, extremely foul Russian swearwords, are unfortunately difficult to translate properly). Finally, Irina, an old acquaintance of Sveta's, took her by her shoulders and said firmly: "OK, it is gone, and that's it. I've got some stuff in my bag, so just stop cursing and come to the toilets and try it. It's not the first time, it won't be the last, and mat doesn't help you." Sveta got a new, although less fashionable, attire from Irina for free, and in a few hours she was in fact drunk again – also for free.

Theft as such is not frowned upon by most *bomzhi* at the station. Both men and women

have often served long prison sentences for it, and it is normally viewed as a sad necessity. Cheating or stealing from 'one's own', other *bomzhi*, is on the other hand fiercely condemned, even though it happens virtually every day. It may be an expected drink that never turns up, or outright thefts like in Sveta's case, where hard-earned savings and possessions disappear together with the drinking mates of yesterday. The strength of the condemnations in cases like this give, considering their commonplace, an impression that what cannot be realised in practice can at least be compensated by discourse.

But there is actually a good deal of mutual help among the station regulars. Clothes are, as in Sveta's case, often given away for free just as people often share food or medicine. Nevertheless, the ethos of generosity mainly concerns drinking and curing each other's hangovers – a problem that many have more than once every day. 'We have to help each other, nobody else will', people explain, and some think that *bomzhi* generally are more generous than *domashnye*. Others assert the contrary, though. Accusations of stinginess are frequent. People refuse each other a sip with arguments like: 'You didn't help me when I felt sick this morning, so don't even dream about what's left of this bottle!' and explain it to me like: 'They talk about generosity until it is their turn to treat'. Also in this case, the imperfection of others affords ego some dignity. Sergei, a man in his early forties, expressed it as: 'This station sucks. People use you, they take everything they can from you and give nothing back. I've spent 25 years behind bars, but I tell you I've always been an honest thief!' But two weeks after this statement he disappeared – together with 800 roubles belonging to an old acquaintance of his. The victim, Volodya, claimed that he had shown Sergei the money, which he kept in his underpants, and then Sergei had pulled them out when Volodya fell unconscious from drunkenness. I never saw Sergei again and cannot account for his motives, but I know that Sergei basically regarded Volodya as a boastful and silly nobody and also that he at the time rented a room and needed money. Perhaps he construed a reason, after all he had proper use for the money whereas Volodya just would waste it on *Ldinka*, but the incident still shows the intricacies of relations between the station people. It would be an exaggeration to say that everybody always steals from everybody, but in reality it is sometimes difficult for people not to. Long interaction, normally in a drunken state, provide people with

plenty of reasons both to like and dislike each other, and at the same time they have competing needs. The relations between people are often so complex that it is very easy to give oneself moral legitimacy to cheat on the grounds that the others earlier did something to you.

Theft can also be excused if the victim too obviously violates the expected norms of generosity. Kostya, a young Moldavian, had come to work in St. Petersburg but was robbed of his money and could not go home. It took him months of hard work to save up the sum necessary for the ticket, but only a couple of days before he intended to go the money was stolen. It disappeared together with a woman, Larissa, with whom he had shared food while living in the waiting hall for two months. In spite of his desperation and Larissa's evident breach of the codes of behaviour, people seemed less sympathetic to Kostya than to, for instance, Sveta, as he too often had disrespected the ethos of generosity himself. They said that he had been a parasite to everybody, not only Larissa, and that she probably got as tired as everybody else from his stinginess – if she had not done it, someone else would have in the end. The one who takes should also give, and if Kostya had been more observant he would have noticed that other people in his situation at the station actually stayed away from all sorts of reciprocity – 'It costs more than it gives, and I want to go home', as a likewise stranded Armenian expressed it. As for Kostya, the general opinion was merciless. 'He did deserve it', someone commented, 'that miser, but Larissa is a bastard too – she should have shared the money with us, not just run away!'

Here and now, body and soul

There are of course other themes than moral virtue and cleanliness that the homeless use to divert and negotiate the negative traits of the stigma. Most people stress that they would work if they were allowed, many tell me to write that they drink only out of desperation and steal because there is no choice. There are also those who always have extensive plans for the future, as well as some who refer to the lives they used to live before they became homeless. I never know what to believe of these stories, and the other homeless are usually sceptical. A cynical comment was: 'We've all done something we're not proud of, and therefore we don't talk about ourselves with each other. If we do we lie. Only outsiders like yourself believe it.' When these alternative affirmation strategies are brought up, they are, however, in the end backed up by humanness,

hygiene, or helpfulness. People are aware of the fact that dreams about work, sobriety, and many other projects in their situation are just dreams, just as they know that the past is gone.

What I think they do, is to adjust the criteria for what can be demanded of a human being to their own uprooted reality. The established society condemns them for things that they cannot influence, but also for things that they actually can affect. Without really opposing the unfair ascriptions of the stigma, they evade them by making them less important. Laziness is disdained also among the *bomzhi*, but deprived of possibilities to take normal jobs, they have to be flexible regarding the definitions of 'work'. Drinking is not morally approved of, but it is forgivable. It is actually considered more unnatural and inhuman to endure the homeless life in a sober state than to escape it being drunk. Chronic disease is regarded tragic, but not even tuberculosis is looked down upon – it is a consequence of prison, not a choice, and prison, in turn, is a consequence of poverty and hunger. Prostitution is by most station regulars regarded as just another way to earn a living, and some of the women engaged in it are among the more respected people in the collective. The *bomzh* is, however, a male stereotype which does not really include 'female' transgressions of social norms. A homeless prostitute is, if she is sneered at, judged due to her profession and not because of her status as *bomzh*. The homeless people at the station are, on the whole, quite indifferent to established norms of femininity, at least judging from their verbal statements. Women are rather free to drink heavily, to behave and dress in a masculine way – which some certainly do – or change partners frequently. Raia, fifty years old and overtly lesbian, would probably have had far more problems with people's attitudes to her sexuality had she lived an established life outside the station. The gender dimension in this demands a study of its own – and some more fieldwork – and all I can do here is to suggest that this permissiveness for women to enter traditionally male domains hardly means that men are allowed the same vis-à-vis femininity. It is more likely to be caused by the fact that the arena where the station people live and act is as exclusively male as the stereotyped *bomzh*, and this is recognised with the same pragmatism as in the case of attitudes to work or drinking. If there is no home and hearth where your femininity can be manifested, who can then blame you for not doing it?.

The values that most frequently are verbally manifested by the station regulars, male and female, are, in the end, cleanliness and loyalty. They are within reach of agency and they can be demonstrated here and now, albeit with a little help of discourse when practice becomes too complex. In a sense this elevates the idea of what it takes to be human to a more spiritual level. Criteria that are tied to official positions in society, usefulness within economic structures, or loyalty to the state are downplayed. What remains is the negotiable purity of body and soul and the unquestionable worth of being human as such – the only things of which nobody can deprive even a homeless person.