

This Is London: Life And Death In The World City

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Brilliant, incisive-as-ever essay excerpted from Ben Judah's new book on London today published in the [February 2016](#) edition of *Prospect*. His eye for the telling detail combined with empathy, informed by real understanding, for the often intertwined fates of the capital's new immigrant communities is extraordinary. A must read – the book [This Is London: Life And Death In The World City](#) now included.



London's skyline. ©Ben Judah

Pawel does not look like a builder, with his thick black glasses and plush grey mane. Pawel doesn't sound like one either. Inside his overheated white van he talks about communism, literature, politics, chess: everything he lost in 1981 when he became a dissident refugee. He misses those first building days.

“You know what it was like then? Back in the eighties, the nineties, when I was first building, your painter, he would've

come from the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts... You'd tell him to rip off the wallpaper and throw on three thick coats of paint and he would just begin telling you about Polish minimalism. Your bricklayer... He would be a sociologist, talking Hayek when it was tea break."

His voice purrs.

"Those days... When we finished and the sun would come pouring in... Loft conversions were very popular then, that's what I remember... We would have all these nice chats as we cleaned up. The English... hah, they probably thought it was football we were always arguing about so passionately."

Pawel's first job on site was wall painting, in a building trade then run by Irish wide boys. Pawel is one of the old Poles. Today he swerves the corners between his sites. Pawel is one of the winners: one of the make-it-up-as-you-go-along building bosses who benefited from the mass migration of labour in the 2000s.

Pawel knew London wanted bathroom refits for cheap. And he has been rewarded for it. As we hit red lights, he reminisces: how he walked this street when he owned nothing except a small ripped suitcase; when he slept in that mite-infested bedsit. Today he owns a house in Balham, a chalet in France and an apartment in Warsaw.

"I'm not middle class... I'm an immigrant, I'm not part of that." He squints at me. "I'm privileged... I got the chance to be both Polish... and a little English."

"'You know what breaks my heart?' says Pawel. He glances at me. 'That my job is to destroy London... The lovely things I rip out'"

Like any mansion builder he knows everything about the rich. "These people... They like the Polish because they hate having

the white English inside their house. Those boys, they are so rude. They come in and they go, 'Put the kettle on love,' then sit on the sofa. This make the rich very tense. They like my boys. They are silent... They can't speak English, so they're very polite."

Together we drive long afternoons around Pimlico. But these rows of white dolls' houses are not all the same. There are damp flats let out by the council with cracked paint, facing freshly veneered mansions owned by Russians. Pawel knows quite a few of them.

"You know what breaks my heart?"

He glances at me.

"That my job is to destroy London. They call me every week... and every time they want the same thing over the phone. White walls with chrome finish. Minimalist, modernist. That's what the Russians want. The lovely things I rip out... the mouldings, the wallpapers, the carved old basins... You wouldn't even believe."

Pawel has three Pimlico Ukrainians as his clients.

"They come quickly, when they want to buy... And the English, they rip them off every time. They lie to them. 'Yes, Mr Boris, this place is so prestigious. Yes, Mr Boris, this place is so close to the Westminster Palace.'" He imitates their fawning lisp. "These guys were nervous... they were politicians in Kiev and they needed this money out very quickly. So they believed, the stupid fools, those English suits trying to pick their pocket. Nobody bothered to tell them that opposite is the council terrace, with a hoarder, with rats, with loads of mental-health issues. Never trust an Englishman in property..."

Renovating a £2.5m flat for £7 an hour are a bunch of dreamers. The youngest labourer in the team is a grumpy, heavysset joiner inexplicably called Miner. He is a newcomer,

in England since 2009. The boy knows some English. Just about enough to read. Miner was permanently alienated from his life in a cramped flat in Wood Green when a plumber was called in three years ago. The Essex man left *The Sun* next to the radio. Miner opened the paper. He was horrified.

“Why you English always saying things like, ‘We like Polish... The Polish so hardworking... The Polish so good.’ Why you say this to my face? When I open the paper, I see all lies about Polish. They say Polish stealing, Polish drinking, Polish taking the work... You English only pretend to like Polish... English must be lying when they talk to my face.”

Miner is, like almost all builders, an obsessive saver. But he is neurotic about it. He is always on his mobile phone calculating the precise value of his savings. This is because like many of the young Polish migrants he thinks he is only here temporarily. He is saving to build a dream mansion. Miner needs £30,000 but the exchange rate and the influx of Romanian labourers are working against him.

He rolls a cigarette.

“Those Romanian... They are like, how you say... like cowboy. They never have insurance paper. They never make, how you say, the health and the safeties... They working for nothing. Romanians making Polish wages go down... They working for £4 an hour. The Britain is mad to let them come... The Britain is mad.” He groans. “The Romanian, he not the worst... The worst, he is the Albanian. They coming more and more to the London... They are thief. They like work building too. They come find Polish... Go, ‘Yes, we pay good, we have good work, one week, two week, easy cash, no problem, no contract... No worries, mate.’”

He draws breath and begins looking for a framing square.

“Then they throw out Polish... He work maybe one month, but they change job, say, ‘You got no contract,’ and never give Polish money. The Polish, he gets beaten. My friend, the Albanian

they beat him... hitting him, hitting him. He come to me... Teeth is gone. Albanian mans... They are only peoples in London who scares me. They look like white but they are really like Muslim..."

Polish churches are full every Sunday. London was long a city of empty Victorian chapels. These frumpy Gothic naves now echo to Polish mass or Nigerian choirs. Polish churches are full of toddlers and pushchairs. Teary tattooed plumbers cross themselves. Hard-up meat packers shove £20 into the collection boxes for the nuns needing furniture in eastern Poland. Masses are sung for the war in Ukraine.

"Polish builders have little time for the white working class. They think they do not know how to look after themselves. They think they talk like black people."

"Polish people think English churches only very, very weak."

I go drinking with Miner. We begin in the newsagent, filling his blue plastic bag with a dozen cans of Lechs. It tears. Traipsing home, Miner shares his confusion about the English.

"Why do they give the benefits? Why £60 a week and a flat for free for the lazy pig... when he no work? Why this happen? Poland... no money for the pig... no nothing for the lazy pig."

Polish builders have little time for the white working class. They think they do not know how to look after themselves. They think they talk like black people. They think they look sick. Like they are going through a very hard time. Some think they are stupid. Polish builders buy food in bulk to make the cheapest packed lunches.

"This is the only way a poor man can eat..."

But why do the English wander into expensive sandwich bars and lose more than one hour's wage for just a meal deal? Polish builders think they are out of their minds to spend three

hours' wages on three pints in the pub, when you can get eight tin cans for that, and even drink them in the park with roll ups and everything.

"The English no understand money, I think..."

Miner snatches the police notice in his letterbox. "Fuck! Not again." He quivers in rage. "The black people... They are stealing again!" There has been a robbery in the area. Miner lives in the part of London filled with dirty parades of betting shops, twirling doner kebabs, payday lenders, unlicensed pawnbrokers and signs for we buy gold.

"The black people... They are crazy people."

We crack open the cans. Miner drinks, then grows flushed. "The black people, they like to fight Polish... "

London is home to more than 150,000 Polish migrants, probably. So keen are they to save that little bit extra that many go under the radar to avoid tax. This is why every builder I get to know on site has been burgled. Their flats are always the cheapest, built with flimsy locks. The kind that can be undone in 10 seconds. Sometimes landlords are in on the racket.

Burglars love Poles because they are paid in cash and hide it in shoeboxes. When they see builders and cleaners moving in over the road, they are already laughing. They can sometimes make £5,000 from one bedsit. And they know the Poles will never call the police.

Tonight I am waiting for the Fiddler in sodium light outside the Fine & Country estate agent. The Roma are homing in to sleep; they shuffle and stumble on crutches and sticks, sniffing for coins in Russian, Arabic and French. They wheel their belongings in granny trolleys under the bare trees of Hyde Park, and cross their legs under these preposterous, belittling buildings, pleading with their eyes for 50 pence and pound coins. The shape of the Fiddler moves into the light.

With a flick of his leather cap, he gestures at me to follow him.

“We are not from this village. I hate those Gypsies. They are thieves. Our village is down at the bottom of Park Lane. At the edge of the streets of the Arabs.”

London is

home to 150,000 Polish migrants ©Ben Judah

The Fiddler laughs at the map I have made of the area as the traffic swirls past in a static hiss, screened with the immense, winter-dead plane trees in the darkness of Hyde Park. He chortles quietly as we pass an illuminated Americana of boasting concrete, glass and stucco ultra-luxury hotels, overlooking the Serpentine.

The Fiddler stops, and stares at a gleaming Mercedes, where in

the white space of a supercar showroom, the lights never go out, be it day or night.

“What struck me first when I came to London, two weeks ago now, were the lights. There are no lights in my village. There are no buildings wrapped in lights. There are no rooms where white lights never go off. The whole two nights on the coach from Romania I was depressed. I curled up and saw my children in my head. The ones I can't feed. But when we arrived in London and the night came and we saw the lights, I felt we had, maybe, a chance to pay back the debts.”

I am listening to the Fiddler talk about the first time he played in London. He says he stood right in front of a huge florid department store, the brightest building he could find in all these streets, and began to scrape the violin into a Gypsy melody, up and over, as manicured Arab men, in black tailored coats, gold watches glinting from their wrists, and impossibly leggy Russian women, clutching black leather handbags, passed by Harrods, laughing with each other, in another world.

Fiddler was amazed: “These bright, bright buildings... They are so beautiful. But that night when I went back to the tunnel where we sleep I began to feel scared. I'd made no money and the others were telling me... The night before there was a Polish attack. They said that three drunk builders came into the tunnel and started beating them. They were sleeping when the attack happened. And that night the others had seen those three Poles coming off a building site nearby.”

The Fiddler takes me into the underpass.

The encampment from Slobozia is under Hyde Park Corner. The chi-chi stucco and glistening Maseratis are out of sight. We enter subterranean tunnels of cream white tiles. They shine with clinical white lights embedded into the ceiling. These are long and low tunnels. And they are covered with thin line-

drawings of the glories of Victorian London. Walls of men in top hats and ladies in flowing frocks. Tiles painted with cavalry charges and country houses. And, in places, if you look closely, they are smeared with blood and shit.

“Those English... They scare me.”

The Fiddler points. This is where the smack-heads are. They are mostly northern. And they are dying. There is a girl with a blue sleeping bag who sits under the tiles of the golden coach and horses. She barely looks human, and she hides this in a thick waterproof hood, because her neck has pinched and vanished, and her eyes have swelled up, all glassy and black, on a bulbous head which has lost its hair, so she looks more like an alien. Fiddler says she hardly sleeps.

“All of us from Slobozia are frightened of her.”

He says they always choose the tunnel furthest away from her, with the pastel-coloured sketches of the garden wing of Buckingham Palace, when they camp down, ripping up and laying down their scavenged cardboard boxes.

“Here we are. This is where we sleep. The rubbish of London.”

Fiddler is exhausted and confused as the village beds down in the tunnel. He says they have to keep walking until this late, when they are almost faint, otherwise they get told to move on. He says around now is the time the police stop caring. The Fiddler scratches his stubble and his eyes turn to me, sombre. There are 16 of them here in the tunnel; throwing down worn peach and yellow blankets, patterned like summer flowers, between damp duvets.

“I’m worried I am going to be stuck here begging for ever. Here where there could be a Polish attack. Here in the tunnels where people come and go. And the tramps blabber like crazy people.”

The Fiddler stares at the others. The villagers all look different. There are gaunt faces and sunken eyes. There are some caked in dirt and others still smooth and bright. Their skin is a yellowish ivory or a tanned brown. And they plead with me to find them work in the stables. The Fiddler starts asking questions for them.

“Is it true that the Queen of England has given an order that the Romanians may never work with her thousand horses? Is it true that the Queen hates us and she thinks we will steal her horses? Please tell her... we can make ironwork, their horseshoes, we can leatherwork the reins. We can do anything with horses.”

The pubs are emptying.

Drunk eyes linger on us. A white man with a slick black and grey fringe and red cravat, turns to the Asian woman on his arm, with curly black hair, in a long brown flannel coat, and points at the Fiddler. She turns to him, as they pass, playfully stunned by what she sees. But fumbling through her green leather bag, she finds only copper change.

This enrages the Fiddler.

“I can't take it any more. Today I only made £15. All day I went trying to play the music for the Arabs and they gave me nothing. I saw them coming in and out of the golden places but they gave nothing. They couldn't even see me.”

The Fiddler is distraught about the police. They have shocked him. They are white. They are brown. They are even black. And they keep confiscating his money. But there is nothing he can do when he loses a day of fiddling for coins. He barely knows how to say, “Hello, Bye,” in English.

Fiddler does not eat. He covers his face with his tattooed hands and starts talking about having been an alcoholic. Things have not turned out the way they should. Fiddler says

he has always lived his life in and out of brawls. Tucked into his pocket is a scuffed and thumbed New Testament. But he doesn't want this. What Fiddler wants is a dictionary. There is no other way to make back the debt.

The Filipinas took weeks to persuade. The bosses are violent, they said. The bosses will fire us, they pleaded. But finally the Filipinas invited me for tea: on one condition. They could only be identified collectively as the Filipinas.

And once that was agreed, they promised me the secrets.

The Filipinas have seen it all: Doha, Abu Dhabi, Dubai. They have seen a thousand skyscrapers, a hundred gleaming airports, and a hundred days of smog. Every Filipina has felt like family; and every Filipina has been slapped like a slave. They have seen every side of them: the master's little smiles, madam when she cries. The Filipinas have seen what they wanted. They have shivered on rolled-out sleeping mats on the balconies of Beirut and sweated trembling on bunk beds in Bahrain.

They are enslaved by the Arabs before they realise what is happening, and they pray and cry and dream that the Arabs will take them to London. Because that's where you can run away.

Auntie Mia would never forget the first hundred runaways: their names, their eyes, their villages. How the girls first heard of her having lunch in the McDonald's or the KFC in St John's Wood (she liked to alternate) she was never entirely sure. Auntie Mia never rushed the girls. Auntie Mia always held their hands: as in the corner of the McDonald's (or the KFC) it all tumbled out—how madam had thrown boiling water at her, how master had raped her, how madam had whipped her, how master had not paid her for nine months. Auntie Mia hugged them—Auntie Mia loved them.

Every weekend the Filipinas come to see Auntie Mia. They come to relax, they come to laugh. With Auntie Mia the tension

shakes out into hysterics—unstoppable hysterics. Because all week they are hidden, cowed, silent little women. All week—they are frightened of the line.

“Nobody knows where the line is with their master, because the Filipinos who have crossed it are fired”

Nobody knows where this line is with their master and madam, because the Filipinas who have crossed it have been fired on the spot. All the servants have their own ideas. There are some that say the line is speaking when not spoken to. There are some that say the line is speaking like a master: questioning, criticising, even asking. There are some that say the line is being seen: a good Filipina is an invisible Filipina.

There was a Filipina in a crooked old mews off High Street Kensington who was receiving hush money. There was a Filipina in Hampstead who had been handed £5,000 to lie. There was a Filipina in St John’s Wood who refused three weeks’ paid-holiday hush money because she was a Christian and ran in a fury to Auntie Mia to find her a new home.

And every week there are the tears about the children. A few years here; a few years there. And the Filipinas become mothers. And they pass around their smart phones—there are my two Jewish children, these are my lost Arab babies, and here is my two, back then, Italian twins. And they cry, and cry as they pass around their smart phones with the smiling backgrounds of little ones. They bonded: and then they were culled.

And they ask questions. “Please, sister, please—you are now working in the big house in South Kensington. Does my French baby still remember me? Does he still put his head like this? Does he still remember who taught him to brush his teeth? Does he still read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*? Does he still cry a little when he laughs? Please, sister—ask him if he remember

me. Please, sister—kiss him for me.”

And then they tell the brave stories. And everybody listens and cheers. And everybody says, “Next time I will be a brave sister like you.” And this is something they never expected to see: the punching, the kicking, the swearing—the men, the rich men, the men who have everything—they are hurting their women like the men who have nothing. And they hide this from everyone: apart from their Filipinas.

There was the millionaire in Hampstead that punched his pregnant wife. There was a drinker banker in Notting Hill who would come home and smash his cutlery and hurt everyone—the banker would even hurt his children. The beaters and the drinkers: they were no different from the beaters and drinkers in the shacks of Manila. They are cowards. They are always cowards: these men who lash out at women.

And every week they come and tell Auntie Mia: “Auntie, Auntie, they treat us like appliances, like one of their appliances, which are made of metal, and even these sometimes break, and what about us, us who are made of flesh—we are the ones who are never allowed to have a breakdown.” And Auntie Mia hugs them.

As the afternoon becomes dark and the lights are switched on, the Filipinas talk about managing madam. About how sometimes madam throws out all her perfumes—hundreds of little bottles—and they scabble out to the bins when she is asleep to scoop them up. About how unfair it was when madam threw away her Filipina for grabbing dozens of dresses out of the recycling bags, which she was supposed to have taken to the charity shop on High Street Kensington.

But lots of Filipinas have nothing to gossip about. They are the Filipinas of empty mansions that they have to clean, day in, day out. They know every nook, every cranny, every alarm, every alcove. They know how the light falls in the master

bedroom and where the chimney draughts rush across the living rooms in winter. These are the Filipinas of the golden cage.

But they are not fools. They get to know everything. They understand the security. They come to trust the guards. Every year, in the dead of winter, when master and madam are in the warm islands—there are the Filipina balls. Those nights in winter, the streets in Mayfair are silent and cool like an ancient tomb. The street lamps come on but house lights and fireplaces do not follow them. There is nobody here. And this is when the brave ones, the clever ones, open the doors—and they stand under those colonnade steps in white women's clothes and welcome other Filipinas into the warmth of the winter ball.

Walking up the stairs into the mansions of Mayfair, they look beautiful in clothes as precious as diamonds which madam never wears. And inside they are singing, the curtains thrown open to enormous views of the parks. And the Filipinas are laughing—their smiles across the black canvas of the night.