

'My last words to him were you're going to be found dead on the street'

Mick Clifford reflects on the passing of one of Dublin's homeless, and with those who remembered his struggles



THE notice in RIP.ie gave Piotr Torng's address as Dublin 8. Not any specific address in the postcode, just the general area, wherever in the environs of Thomas St he tended to sleep.

Piotr had lived a hard life. Who knows at what point in his journey the dream of life flowering into something more died. He was probably still chasing it when he left his homeland and arrived in Dublin some time in the last 20 years. As is the often the way with troubled souls, it's hard to know where the searching ended and the running began.

This week, he was laid to rest in a ceremony fit for a pope.

Alice Leahy brought up the departed pontiff at the graveside: "Pope Francis will be buried at the weekend but all we know about him would say that, while the whole world will be at his funeral, he would probably prefer to be at one for somebody like Piotr."

The observation was profound and timely, and a nod to humanity of the departed head of a billion Catholics.

Piotr was a fan of Pope Francis. Nobody was certain, but there was a general feeling that Piotr was in the Capuchin Centre that day in 2018 when the Pope dropped in to Brother Kevin. Piotr carried with him a small photo of the Pope. On his regular visits to the trust's premises, for a cup of tea or a wash, he often showed the photo around, pleased with himself, expressing his admiration.

There were 10 people present when the hearse pulled up near the Alice Leahy Trust plot in Glasnevin cemetery just before 1pm. The plot sits in the shadow of a drooping evergreen oak tree, a resting

place for mainly men who lived on the streets and died without the benefit of a loved one to take care of burial.

Fanagans Funeral Directors provided their services. Piotr's body had lain in the city morgue since soon after his death last November. He was 41.

When his body wasn't claimed, the people in the trust set the wheels in motion to bring him to his final resting place.

The funeral procession was simple and sparse. As the hearse drove across Bride Rd, it stopped briefly outside the gate to the trust premises, in the basement of the Iveagh Hostel. This was where Piotr came regularly to feel human. He knew everybody in there and was habitually on his best behaviour: Reserved, gentle, and always, always fastidious about his appearance.

Life might have consigned him to an itinerant existence but he strove to look like a million dollars.

"There were two things he really liked," remembered Mark Duff from the trust. "He loved washing his feet, getting into a fresh pair of socks, and he loved his hair. He'd be down in the backroom for ages listening to AC/DC, always it was AC/DC and washing his hair."

"He also had great respect for the place. The first thing he did every day he walked in was to wipe his feet."

Four men lifted the coffin from the hearse and brought it across to the grave, laying it on a stand. Fr Padraig Daly stepped forward to offer a few prayers. He knew Piotr well, encountered him regularly when Piotr would hang around after 11am Mass in the Liberties, usually trying to tap up the priest for a couple of euro.

He was believed to be



from Lithuania, but like much about his existence, that couldn't be confirmed.

"He would tell you he was from different places

and one day he said he was Russian and I teased him about Putin but he just spat out the name.

"So he wasn't a fan of

Putin, whatever he was."

Fr Daly led the prayers and finished by suggesting that "we pray for all who are buried in this grave".



asking him for a reference for a job:

*He has found a place in the church,
Away from others who gather at radiators,
Until the hostel opens He speaks with Russian gutters,*

*Begs me to find him work,
He will be diligent, forget the drinking,
I tell him he has failed too often,*

*His eyes reproach me,
Like a mistreated spaniel's.*

The coffin was lowered into the grave and Mark Duff stepped up to say a few words about the departed man, how his presence was always agreeable and humour was often lurking with intent.

"I was very fond of him, even though he did my head in," Mark said.

"The last thing he would

Left: Alice Leahy among others attending the burial of Piotr Torng in Glasnevin Cemetery. Pictures: Gareth Chaney
Below: Piotr Torng.



say to you before leaving every time was: 'Who loves ya, baby?'"

NOBODY tried to avoid the darkness that shadowed Piotr. He frequently showed up at the trust in a bad state, obviously having received some form of a beating.

His weakness for drink, the laws that govern the streets, maybe his personality when drunk — whatever it was, Piotr often encountered the worst of humankind.

As the years wore on, his health deteriorated.

Alice Leahy remembered trying to get him to seek out medical assistance.

"My last words to him were 'you're going to be found dead on the street'," she said.

"I asked him to just go and get help and after he left I contacted some of the local guards who said they'd keep an eye out for him. He was found in a bad way that night and he was brought to St James so at least he had a hospital bed, but that was where he died."

Others shared a few memories and a single bunch of flowers was thrown in on top of the coffin. Towards the end, a man by the name of Joe, who knew the same streets as Piotr, arrived on a bicycle.

He wanted to pay his final respects.

"Ah he was a lovely fella," Joe said. "Kept to himself, never bothered anybody but... just addiction."

It was all over in 20 minutes. The fragments of a life had been assembled in order to say goodbye, and the respect and affection that permeated the graveside was as strong as might have been the case had it been a pope who was being buried.