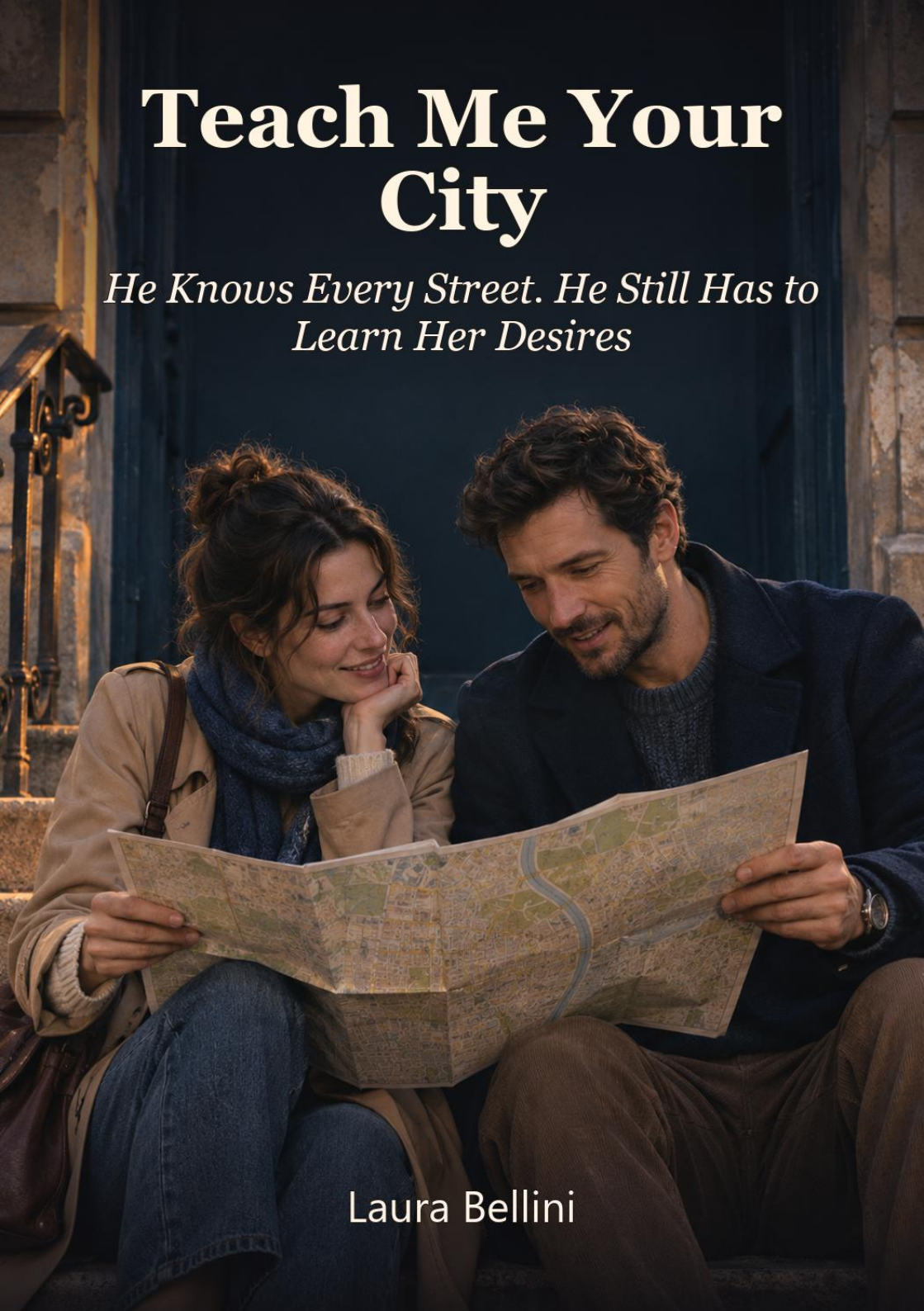
Teach Me Your City

He Knows Every Street. He Still Has to Learn Her Desires



Laura Bellini

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Laura Bellini

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

The first thing I marked on the map wasn't a street, a square, or a building. It was a gateway that most people walked through without a second thought, never noticing that an entirely different world began on the other side.

I stood in front of it on a chilly October morning, a folder of papers tucked beneath my arm and a cup of coffee in my hand that had already gone cold. A newly renovated district of Łódź was slowly waking up. Lights were coming on behind the ground-floor windows of restored tenement buildings. Someone was opening a small bakery, while across the street a delivery driver was attempting to squeeze his van into a parking space that had clearly been designed for a vehicle half its size. Behind me, a tram rattled past, leaving behind its familiar metallic screech.

I liked mornings like this. The city hadn't yet put on its public face. There were no crowds, no cameras, no people stopping in the middle of the pavement to read a plaque explaining the history of another restored building. Instead, there were half-open windows, the smell of freshly baked bread, uneven pavements, and places that had absolutely no reason to appeal to anyone. Those were precisely the places I found interesting.

I'd been drawing maps for years. Not the kind you found in tourist guides, with thick lines, colourful icons, and obligatory landmarks where everyone was supposed to stop and take a photograph. I was interested in passages, shortcuts, little businesses, courtyards, staircases leading nowhere, and places whose significance was known to only a handful of people. I believed a map didn't have to tell

someone where they ought to go. It should show them where they might discover something they hadn't even known they were looking for.

That morning, I had a plan of my own. I wanted to walk the route I'd mapped out, check several locations I'd marked earlier, and decide which ones deserved a place in my original walking tour. I didn't need a guide. I didn't need a consultant. Above all, I didn't need anyone standing beside me, explaining what I ought to see.

I was thirty-one, with enough experience to understand that independence didn't mean never accepting help. It meant being able to decide when help was actually needed.

I opened my folder and took out a printout of my working map. In one of the courtyards, I'd marked a small spot that had caught my attention the previous day. A narrow gateway led into it, and beyond that stood an old staircase with wooden doors and a window overlooking the inner courtyard. On a satellite image, the place looked like just another empty space between buildings. In reality, it had its own rhythm, the smell of damp walls, and a particular quality of light that fell across one of its walls at an extraordinary angle for a few minutes every morning.

I'd taken two steps towards the gateway when I heard a voice behind me.

"Excuse me, are you looking for someone?"

I turned around. A woman stood in the doorway of a small shop, dressed in a dark sweater, a set of keys hanging from one finger. Her grey hair was tied loosely at the back of her head, and she had the unmistakable expression of someone who had no intention of pretending she hadn't noticed a stranger wandering around in front of her home.

"No. I'm looking at the courtyard."

"What for?"

It was a simple question, but the answer took me a moment to formulate.

"I'm creating a map of this neighbourhood. I'd like to show people places that don't appear in ordinary tourist guides."

The woman looked at my folder, then at the gateway.

"This courtyard isn't a tourist attraction."

"I know. That's exactly why it caught my attention."

She didn't smile. For a moment, I felt I should explain more, but I didn't want to persuade her of something I couldn't quite put into words myself.

"People live here," she said. "Some of them don't appreciate strangers looking through their windows."

I glanced back at the gateway. On my map, I'd marked it as an interesting passage. I hadn't considered that, to someone else, it might simply be the entrance to their home.

"You're right. I don't want to disturb anyone."

The woman remained silent for a moment, as though checking whether I meant it.

"If you want to see what the place looks like, I can show you from the shop's side. But please don't include the address."

I nodded and put away my pen. I followed her into a small room that smelled of coffee and cleaning detergent. At the back were doors leading into the courtyard. The woman opened them just enough to give me a view.

I saw a bicycle leaning against the wall, several flowerpots, a child's scooter, and a window with a porcelain figurine standing on its sill. None of these things had any historical value. Not one of them would ever appear on an official city map. And yet, there was something in those ordinary details that was exactly what I'd been looking for.

"I understand," I said quietly.

"Good. Because not everyone does straight away."

I left the shop with a new note in my folder, but also with an uncomfortable feeling that my carefully prepared plan was less complete than I'd imagined. A map could be beautiful, accurate, and filled with fascinating places, yet still be unfair to the people whose lives unfolded beyond its lines and symbols.

I sat on a low wall and opened my sketchbook. Instead of adding another location, I crossed out the one I'd marked earlier. Beside it, I wrote: "Not everything you can find needs to be shown."

I liked that thought more than anything I'd put into the project so far.

For the next half hour, I wandered without rushing. I stopped in front of shop windows, photographed architectural details, and made notes of street names. In one place, I discovered a small workshop where an elderly man was repairing watches. Somewhere else, I found a staircase leading to a business whose sign was so faded that its name could only be read from up close. Each of these places had its own story, but I had no intention of inventing one on their behalf.

When I returned to the main street, my phone vibrated in my coat pocket. The message was from the person coordinating the walking tour project.

"I have a contact for you — a guide who knows this part of Łódź better than anyone we could recommend. Radosław Żak. Apparently, he can tell you something about every street. I'd like you two to talk before we give the route final approval."

I sighed.

Working with a guide hadn't been part of my original plan. Still, I understood that if the walking tour was going to be more than a private collection of sketches, I needed to verify information I couldn't check on my own. I didn't want to build the project on assumptions. On the other hand, I had no intention of handing anyone else the right to decide which places were worth showing.

I replied briefly that we could meet.

Then I looked at the map again. I already knew a few streets, several passages, and a handful of stories I had no intention of taking away from the people who owned them. I knew what I wanted to create, although I had no idea how much I would have to change to bring the project to completion.

I didn't know Radosław Żak. I had no idea what he looked like, how he spoke, or why he should know this neighbourhood better than I did. All I knew was that, according to what I'd heard, he could find his way through places where everyone else saw nothing but dead ends.

I wondered whether he would understand that sometimes the most interesting route began precisely where someone decided to leave the marked path.

I slipped my sketchbook into my bag and continued walking. For the first time that day, I wondered whether the greatest challenge wouldn't be drawing the city as it really was, but finding someone who would let me see it in my own way.

And what if the man who knew every street couldn't accept that not every road led where he would have chosen to go?

Chapter 1 - The Man Who Knew Every Way

Our meeting was scheduled for ten o'clock, in a small café on the ground floor of a former factory. I had chosen it not because it was particularly charming, but because it sat exactly between the two parts of the district I wanted to connect on my map. From the window, you could see the restored façade of one building and an entirely ordinary grocery shop across the street. I liked contrasts like that. They reminded me that a city wasn't made up solely of the things someone had decided were worth restoring.

I arrived fifteen minutes early. I spread my sketches, notes, and a printed map marked with various locations across the table. I'd prepared questions about the area's history, the names of former factories, and several passageways whose layouts had changed during recent renovations. I had no intention of handing the entire project over to the person I was meeting, though. I needed his knowledge, not his permission to do my own work.

When the waitress brought me a second coffee, the café door opened and a man walked in. I recognised him from the description I'd received the previous day. Not because he looked like a tour guide. He didn't have a camera slung over his shoulder, a tourist backpack, or any of those little accessories people liked to associate with someone who made a living telling stories about a city. He wore a dark jacket and a navy-blue sweater, and carried a sheet of paper folded in half.

He looked around the room, spotted me, and headed towards my table.

"Irmina Borek?"

"Yes. Radosław Żak?"

"In person."

We shook hands. His grip was firm but brief. I noticed that he looked at me first and only then at the documents spread across the table.

"Sorry for being on time," he said as he sat opposite me. "I usually arrive early to check whether the meeting place still exists."

"Cafés don't tend to disappear overnight."

"In this neighbourhood, I wouldn't be so sure."

He smiled faintly. I couldn't yet tell whether it was a joke or a comment based on experience. He placed the folded sheet on the table and ordered an espresso.

"Marta gave me the basic details," he began. "An original walking tour, a new district, places beyond the main tourist routes. I'm supposed to help verify the information and suggest a few locations."

"Not quite," I replied. "I already have a working route. I'd like you to help me check the facts, whether the places are accessible, and the local stories. I'm not looking for someone to come up with the whole thing for me."

He looked at me with interest, as though I'd just said something worth remembering.

"Good. I'm glad you've made that clear. Sometimes people commission a walking tour and then expect the guide to invent a reason for doing it as well."

"I already have my reason."

"Which is?"

I pushed the first sheet towards him. The map showed nine locations connected by a thin line. Some were near streets familiar to everyone who lived in the area; others were tucked away in places that were easy to overlook. There was an old workshop, a small square between tenement buildings, part of a former industrial complex, and several businesses without any information boards or historical plaques.

"I want to show the district without pretending it's something other than what it is," I explained. "I don't want to tell the story of Łódź exclusively through factory owners, architecture, and dates. I'm interested in everyday life. Places people walk past because they have somewhere to be. Details you won't find in promotional brochures."

Radosław leaned over the map. He said nothing for a moment, studying the markings before taking a slim pencil from his pocket.

"May I?"

"Please."

He marked a short section between two of the locations.

"There's a problem here."

"What kind of problem?"

"The passage has been closed for three months."

"According to the city maps, it's still accessible."

"According to the city maps, you can also reach a building that hasn't existed for six years."

I didn't like the tone of his response. Not because he was rude. Quite the opposite: he spoke calmly, without the slightest hint of mockery. It was precisely that confidence

that made me want to find an argument and put the matter firmly back in its proper place.

"That's why we're meeting with someone who knows the area," I replied. "But if you have information confirming the closure, I'd be happy to see it."

"I can show you."

He marked another point.

"Here, there's no reason to bring a group in from the main street. It's better to enter from the south."

"Why?"

"Because from the north, you'd have to cross a delivery parking area. It's not particularly pleasant in the mornings."

"The walking tour isn't going to be designed for people who are afraid of seeing a delivery van."

"I never said it was. I'm saying there's a way to avoid it."

I studied him more carefully. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, perhaps thirty-seven, with the face of someone who spent more time observing than talking. His dark hair was slightly longer on top, and a few days' worth of stubble made him look less formal than his manner suggested. He wasn't trying to impress me. Nor did he seem to need reassurance that his comments were correct. He simply assumed they deserved to be taken into account.

"Do you make a habit of correcting other people's maps?" I asked.

He raised his eyes.

"Only when someone's planning to use them to lead people around."

"And what if someone wants to decide where they want to take those people first?"

"Then they should know the way."

"I do."

"In that case, half the work is already done."

I leaned back in my chair. For a moment, I was tempted to close my folder and end the meeting. Not because Radosław had said anything offensive, but because I sensed that his particular brand of confidence might become difficult to tolerate over several weeks of working together.

On the other hand, he was right about the closed passage.

"I'd like to walk part of the route with you," I said eventually. "Not so I can see everything you consider important. I want to check whether my locations make sense."

"That's fair."

"And I'm not going to change every location simply because you know a better way of getting there."

"I don't expect you to change every location."

"It sounded as though you did."

"Perhaps I didn't express myself very well."

For the first time, I saw that he was capable of accepting criticism without immediately striking back. I noticed it, and I didn't particularly want to admit that it made a good impression on me.

We got up from the table. Radosław folded the map but didn't put it away. We stepped outside, where the October sunlight reflected off the windows of a new building. I

headed towards the first location, and he walked beside me, slightly behind. After a few dozen metres, he pointed towards the entrance to a narrow passage.

"This way is quicker."

"I don't want to take the quickest route."

"All right. I just wanted to show you the option."

I turned in the opposite direction. On the way, we passed a tailor's shop whose window was almost completely obscured by fabric. I stopped to photograph the sign. Radosław didn't ask what I was photographing. Instead, he said:

"Mrs Elżbieta runs that place. She's been working here for more than twenty years. If you want to tell her story, you'd better ask her before taking pictures inside."

"I wasn't planning on going in without asking."

"I know. I prefer to give people a heads-up."

"Do you always assume people don't know how to behave?"

He turned his head towards me.

"No. But I often meet people who arrive with a ready-made idea of someone else's life. Then they're surprised when the residents don't want to become characters in their story."

I didn't answer immediately. I remembered the woman from the shop and the note I'd made the previous day. I wasn't going to explain to him that I was only just beginning to understand exactly that.

"That's something I actually understand," I said.

"Good."

We stopped at a small square that didn't appear on any of the popular tourist maps. There was a bench, a few trees, and an old kiosk with its shutter down. In the background, part of the brick wall of a former factory was visible. There was nothing spectacular about the place, but the way the light fell across the wall immediately caught my attention.

I took out my sketchbook and began drawing.

Radosław stood beside me for a while. Then he pointed towards the kiosk.

"That spot has a story you won't find in the archives."

"What kind of story?"

"For many years, newspapers, tickets, and cigarettes were sold there. The owner knew everyone who crossed the square every day. He knew who had changed jobs, who had moved away, and who had stopped coming by. When he closed the kiosk, people started saying that the square had lost its centre."

"And how do you know that?"

"From the people who used to come here."

"You spoke to them?"

"Some of them. I've known a few for years."

I wrote down what he said, but didn't add it to the project just yet. First, I wanted to find out whether the kiosk's former owner would agree to having his story used. Radosław noticed that I hadn't placed any symbol on the map.

"Aren't you marking it?"

"Not yet. First, I want to know whether this place can tell its story without violating anyone's privacy."

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

"That's sensible."

"You don't have to sound surprised."

"I'm not."

His smile appeared only briefly, but it was enough for me to notice the change in his expression. Earlier, he'd seemed rather stern. Now I could see that he was capable of warmth, although he didn't offer it to everyone he met.

We walked several more streets. At each location, Radosław added something, sometimes correcting a name, sometimes pointing out a change in the arrangement of the buildings. Some of his information was extremely useful. Other details struck me as unnecessary additions. When he suggested moving one of the locations a few hundred metres, I refused. He accepted my decision, although I noticed him looking at the map for a moment as if he were still considering his own version.

Before noon, we sat down on a bench. I opened my sketchbook between us.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Go ahead."

"Why did you agree to this project?"

"Marta asked me."

"I know. But why didn't you say no?"

He considered the question.

"Because I like showing people places they wouldn't find on their own. And because more and more walking tours of Łódź seem to suggest that the city consists of a few obligatory landmarks. But people live in all the spaces between them, too."

"Then at least we have one goal in common."

"It seems we do."

"But our methods are different."

"That doesn't necessarily have to be a problem."

I looked at him. There was no irony in his voice. He sounded as though he genuinely believed differences could be put to good use.

"We'll see," I said.

On our way back, we stopped at an intersection. I was about to turn left when Radosław pointed towards the pavement on the right.

"You'll get back to the café faster this way."

"I know."

"Of course."

"I wanted to see that façade over there first."

He looked at the building, then at me.

"Then that way it is."

He didn't comment on my choice. He didn't try to convince me that another route would be better. He simply started walking beside me. That small gesture made me feel more at ease than I had during our entire earlier conversation.

Outside the café, we exchanged phone numbers. Radosław saved my contact and then glanced at the map once more.

"I'll need some time to prepare a list of places worth checking."

"So will I. I'll send you the latest draft."

"All right. Just please don't treat my comments as an attempt to take over your project."

"And you shouldn't treat my decisions as mistakes that need to be corrected immediately."

We looked at each other in silence for a moment. Then he smiled more broadly.

"Deal."

He held out his hand, and I shook it.

I still didn't know whether working together would turn out to be a good idea. What I did know was that Radosław Żak wasn't the sort of man who easily gave up his opinions. I had no intention of giving up mine either.

And perhaps that was precisely why, when he walked away towards the tram stop, I found myself watching him for a little longer instead of immediately returning to my notes.

It wasn't until I got back to my studio and spread the map across the large table that I realised how many small changes he'd suggested during our walk. Not all of them were necessary, but several could genuinely save me from making mistakes. I marked the closed passage, added a note about delivery hours, and put a question mark beside the kiosk.

I didn't want his comments to automatically become the new version of my project, though. I intended to check every one of them myself.

My phone vibrated. A message from Radosław contained a photograph of a section of the map with an alternative route marked on it.

"You don't have to use it. It's just worth knowing that it exists."

I read it twice. Then I replied:

"Knowing something exists isn't the same as choosing it."

His answer came almost immediately.

"I'm beginning to understand that you'll be very particular about that distinction."

I put my phone down and returned to my drawing. I wasn't sure whether he was teasing me or genuinely trying to understand my approach. Either way, for the first time in a long while, a conversation about a professional project hadn't ended with an exchange of files and deadlines. Something had remained after it, something I couldn't quite name yet.

Chapter 2 - The Rules of the Road We Shared

We met at my studio the following day. I'd invited Radosław for five in the afternoon because I needed to finish an illustration for another client before noon. I had no intention of rearranging my own commitments simply because a new project required the involvement of two people. If we were going to work together for the next several weeks, I wanted it to be clear from the beginning that each of us also had a life outside that collaboration.

My studio was on the second floor of an old tenement building, in a space rented by several creative professionals. I occupied a small room with a large window, a wooden table, and shelves full of paper. Colour samples hung on one wall, while the other was covered with sketches of maps that had never made it into any publication. I hadn't gone out of my way to tidy up before his arrival. I didn't want to create the impression that anyone visiting me for professional reasons had to be greeted by a perfectly organised space.

Radosław arrived on time. He carried a canvas bag from which he took out two notebooks, several printouts, and a small book with folded page corners.

"I see you've prepared for a lengthy visit," I said, pulling out a chair.

"I didn't know how many questions you'd have."

"Quite a few."

"Then it's a good thing I didn't come empty-handed."

He took off his jacket and hung it over the back of his chair. His gaze moved around the room before settling on a

large sheet of paper lying on the table. It showed a map of the district, but without any street names. Instead, I'd drawn small illustrations: sections of walls, windows, staircases, trees, and entrances to courtyards. It wasn't finished yet.

"Is this your work?" he asked.

"One of my projects."

"It's beautiful."

"You don't have to compliment me for us to be able to work together."

"I'm not complimenting you out of obligation."

He said it so matter-of-factly that I couldn't think of a reply. I did notice, however, that he didn't touch the sheet, even though it was lying right in front of him. He waited until I moved it towards him myself.

I didn't miss that small detail. The previous day, during our walk, I'd had the impression that he wanted to correct everything. Today, he was behaving differently, as though he understood that my studio wasn't his territory.

I made coffee for both of us. When I returned to the table, he had arranged his notes in a neat little stack.

"Let's start with the practical details," I suggested. "We're creating a walking tour that should take about ninety minutes. Nine or ten locations, without any obligatory tourist attractions. The route needs to be manageable at an ordinary walking pace, with a break and an alternative version included."

"Ninety minutes might be difficult if we want to talk to people along the way."

"Not every location has to involve meeting a resident."

"Of course. But some stories are worth hearing directly from the people who created them."

"Provided they want to tell them."

"I agree."

He took one of his notebooks and opened it to a page with several names written on it. There were no addresses or detailed descriptions. I noticed only a few brief notes: "workshop — ask permission", "kiosk — undecided", "square — residents' memories".

"These are contacts we could approach," he explained. "Not everyone has agreed to take part yet. Some people wanted to know exactly what the project would involve before making a decision."

"And what did you tell them?"

"That we wouldn't publish anything without their permission."

I pulled the notebook closer. I liked the fact that he hadn't treated those people as ready-made material to be used. In my work, I often encountered the expectation that if someone appeared in a photograph or shared an anecdote, they automatically became part of someone else's project. I didn't want to work that way.

"Good," I said. "I'd like us to agree on what we can show at each location and what we can't. If someone doesn't want their name published, we don't publish it. If they don't want photographs taken, we don't take them. And if they decide they don't want to be part of the walking tour, we find another solution."

"Those are sensible rules."

"I don't want us to discover later that we have different definitions of the word consent."

"We won't."

There was something firm in his answer, but this time I didn't interpret it as an attempt to impose his opinion on me. He was talking about something he clearly considered just as important as I did.

We moved on to the next issue: the actual route. Radosław presented his suggested order, in which the individual locations formed a logical account of the district's development. It began near a former factory, continued along a street with preserved residential buildings, and ended at a small square.

"Historically, it makes sense," I said. "But not necessarily emotionally."

"What do you mean?"

"People don't have to discover a city in the same order in which it was built. We could start with a place that looks unremarkable and only later explain why it matters."

"But without the context, they might not understand what they're looking at."

"That's why we'll tell stories. I'm not planning to turn this into a lesson in chronology."

He studied my map for a moment. Then he pointed to a small drawing of a staircase leading to an old residential building.

"Would you like to start here?"

"I'm considering it."

"There's one problem. The entrance on that side is only accessible at certain times."

"That's something we can check."

"I've already checked. The building's owner doesn't want groups passing through there without prior arrangements."

"Then we'll ask for permission."

"And if he refuses?"

"We leave the location out."

Radosław looked at me for a moment.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. I'm not going to convince anyone that our project is more important than their peace and quiet."

"All right. In that case, I'll prepare an alternative."

"You can prepare a suggestion. We'll make the decision together."

He paused with his pencil above the page. He didn't comment on my qualification, but I noticed him writing it down in his notebook.

We worked for another hour. We discussed distances, walking times, and places where a group could stop without blocking the pavement. Radosław knew details that couldn't be found online. He knew when morning delivery traffic appeared on one of the streets, where the pavement narrowed beside a building under renovation, and which entrance to a former industrial site was currently inaccessible.

I, on the other hand, could look at the whole thing from the perspective of someone who had never visited the district before. I noticed where the map became difficult to