

Slow suicide

BY JESSE REEVES

KRAKOW, POLAND – A 29-year-old homeless man called T.L. is going person to person to ask for used phone cards in Krakow's city square. Collecting the expired cards is a hobby of his. When approached, most people pretend they don't see him and walk the other way. His gaunt appearance, dirty clothes and wild eyes seem to frighten businessmen to a quicker pace as they walk through the square. T.L. can be found here often – he is unemployed. He is also HIV-positive and addicted to heroin.

He receives 2.80 zloty a day (US \$0.81) from Opieka Społeczna (Population Hospitality), a humanitarian organization, in the form of food stamps. This helps, but is not a great deal, he explains, considering it is "very costly to live in a major city." He also receives money once or twice a year from the same organization to buy shoes. T.L. stops at this for assistance. "I'm not a beggar," he says. "Besides, it's too hard to get anything from the government. All it is standing in lines and a lot of paperwork and talk." He insists the only change in government after Communism died was the officials wanting more for themselves. "They worry about themselves [first] and then think about the little people."

He found out of his HIV infection through a physical he was required to take for a job. He tried suicide but failed. After this, he turned to heroin for the first time to slowly kill himself. "I want to die because of something I do to myself. Not by what someone did to me." To supplement his income, he will sit outside a cemetery's gates and offer to clean tombstones for 10 zloty (US \$2.90). Other than that, he resorts to thievery. Usually, he will rip off naive tourists visiting Krakow. "To cheat is more fair than begging — it takes effort," he says.

He will spend tonight in a building's



PHOTO: JESSE REEVES

"I want to die because of something I do to myself. Not by what someone else did to me," says T.L. who is in a public lavatory in Krakow.

staircase, as usual. He doesn't know which building yet as it varies night to night. He wants to have food, clothes and cigarettes but these items cost money that he doesn't have.

He spends his days walking around the city, looking for heroin, work and phone cards. Proudly, he takes out his collection and carefully spreads them upon a table.

"And look at this one," he says, "This one's from Germany."

Hurriedly, he stands up and says that it's "time for a shot." Rushing into a restaurant's lavatory he sits on the toilet and goes through his routine. Leaving the restaurant, finally smiling a smile, he laughs and says: "Anything is better than reality."