



Ziggy ... at home on the streets of Toowong



Ice cream for an interview

A contract with Ziggy

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IF YOU are familiar with the area, you are most likely aware of him. Along with the shiny blue Toowong Towers, the Royal Exchange and the Regatta Hotels, Ziggy is a local icon.

I had heard of the “Bagman of Toowong” before I moved to Brisbane. For years, along with thousands of others, I have driven past him, but never stopped. Now, I had the opportunity to meet him and find out Ziggy’s story. Armed with a notepad, a list of well-thought-through questions and the naivety almost certainly reserved for rookie reporters, I approach him on a Sunday morning.

He interrupts me: he doesn’t work on the Sabbath. I’ll have to come back during the week, and mornings are best for him. But I must be aware there will be a contract. And an interview will cost \$10.

All I can see of Ziggy during this short conversation is his head. His lifeless grey hair, unkempt and matted. His face, lined and blackened, like an apple that has fallen from the tree and left to shrivel. He uses a cardboard pizza box, promising “toppings and cheese to the edge”, to shield his soft blue eyes from the morning sun. My olfactory senses are bombarded with musty, rotting, rank odours rising from the mountain in front of

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me. All the while a procession of ants marches across him, defiantly, working hard despite the Sabbath. He doesn’t seem to mind them, or their indiscretion.

And so I am dismissed and return on Monday morning.

Zbygniew Marian Willzek, or Ziggy as he is better known, is 47 years old, a Slovak, raised and schooled in New South Wales. He won’t say where for fear of embarrassing the townsfolk and the school.

Before we can start he checks the contract, which I had to write, sign and bring along with me. It states that in addition to the fee, I must supply Ziggy with double prints of any photographs I take.

And then he bombards me with intricate details of European history, questions the origin of my surname and argues with me about my ancestry.

He warns me that I won’t win any prizes with his story: I have done nothing special. And there have been many before me, it seems. Indeed, he rolls off a list of past interviewers. Names, institutions, newspapers, and dates ... and the contracts they have broken.

And then there are the tourists: French, Japanese, Americans, South Africans and New Zealanders. Some keep their promise and send him a photo.

Most, he says, don’t. And he remembers them all. By name.

He also remembers every attack and all the dates on which he has been attacked: what the attacker looked like, what they said, and every punch, blow, rotten egg, tomato, insult and fire bomb ever thrown at him.

“I am like an elephant,” he laughs. And I can’t disagree with that.

The interview is far from conventional. I sit on the pavement to Ziggy’s left. He lies back comfortably. It is apparent today there is more to his body than a head. His long dark-nailed bare feet stick out from under a pile of wet clothes, yellowed newspapers and a collection of empty containers.

It has rained and the flow of traffic on Moggill Road is crawling into the city. The noise, combined with the exhaust fumes and the steadily rising humidity, is stifling.

And then there are the mountains of garbage between Ziggy and I, exploding around him like lava from an erupting volcano. Protecting him like the walls of a fortress.

Empty soft drink bottles, baked beans and spaghetti cans, Neapolitan ice cream containers, unopened letters held together by a weathered red elastic band, various umbrellas, newspapers, bags of who-knows-what, a green rope curled inside a black plastic flower pot, and someone’s lost hubcap. These items do not stray beyond an invisible line. But the ants do. And I have to keep flicking them off as I shift uncomfortably.

Ziggy is a proud man, and a complex character. In a single conversation, he can be an historian, a linguist, a ladies-man and a Roman Catholic. He moves from European history to language trees, death and dying, politics, reli-

gion, vegetarianism and his beloved birds. He keeps informed by reading newspapers that are given to him. Every now and again, his hand disappears deep into the dungeon of debris and pulls out an article relating to whatever topic he has chosen to talk about.

He has a strong grasp of the English language, even though he says he does it no justice. His conversation is frequently peppered with self-deprecating comments: describing himself as an orangutan, and lazy and saying that he stinks.

It is difficult to interject and ask the questions I had set out to. Ziggy is overflowing with facts and memories. And he likes to talk.

He skirts around questions with professional ease, changing the topic in whichever direction he chooses. He is in control and there is little I can do to right the derailed train. I begin to suspect he is playing a game and that he is enjoying testing this rookie.

The topic of homelessness is eventually broached.

I ask Ziggy what he thinks about the Lord Mayor wanting to move soup kitchens from the city and inner-city suburbs to discourage the homeless from congregating in these areas.

First, he does a perfect impersonation of Campbell Newman. His head tilted back at just the right angle and his voice taking on the appropriate characteristics.

And then, to my surprise, he launches into a soliloquy of support for the Lord Mayor’s suggestion. His face is animated when he talks about the homeless. He does not have much time for them.

I gently remind him that most people would consider him to be homeless too. His reply is as philosophical as it is pragmatic.

“I am different. I stink and I smell, but I want to be here. I don’t ask anyone for money or clothes or food. It is up to us to be worrying about clothes and food,” he says.

“I don’t mind living this way, and I can do it. If the law changes tomorrow and living here meant I would go to prison or get fined, then I would move on. I am at the top of the housing list, but I want to stay here.”

The reasons Ziggy offers for choosing this lifestyle are as complex as his character, like a well-aged communion wine. A combination of wanting to practice self-control of body and mind heavily tainted with religious innuendo.

The conversation frequently returns to religion, like his admission of making a pact

with God to attend mass every Sunday ... in two years time. And his tale of being an altar-boy, and thoughts of entering the priesthood: “I believe God wanted me to be a Roman Catholic priest. But I liked the girls and I

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wanted to get married. I believe God has been punishing me ever since.”

Ziggy knows that his detractors most probably outnumber his supporters. But he talks kindly of many people in his life.

He waves to passersby and reminds a friend to recharge batteries for him. I ask if the reports are true that he has a good relationship with St Thomas Anglican Church on whose verge he squats.

He says he has a mixed reaction from St Thomas’ people.

The priest is kind to him and makes sure that the Brisbane City Council does not get too mean and pushy.

“A few people who go to church here are not on her side,” he says, “but she makes sure that they just bite at my heels and does not let them go for my neck.”

St Thomas’ the Reverend Doctor Marian Free confirms this and adds, “He has been around for so long, most people just accept him.” She is reluctant to say much more. No one else will comment.

As I am attempting to wind up the visit, Ziggy asks me to amend the contract. The “fee” is to be changed to a \$10 “donation” which I am to use at Woolworths to buy his groceries. He dictates a list.

When I return with four plastic bags straining under the weight of ice-cream, bread, cola, cookies, long-life milk, iced coffee, cans of spaghetti and baked beans, deli sausage meat, licorice and honeycomb, all of which cost vastly more than \$10, Ziggy asks me to amend the contract once again.

“I forgot to tell you that if you make money from this interview, I am to get 20%.”

I leave, convinced that I have been outsmarted by this savvy businessman, and my name will be added to his list of trophies.