

# Sociologist vs rats

Of course, rats have no idea that it is general Jaruzelski who is to blame for their destruction. If it wasn't for the martial law, Jan Stromidło would probably never consider becoming a ratcatcher.



And he is one of the best in the country. His company has recently completed disinfestation in the Morliny meat processing plant. "There are not many plants in this branch of industry localized in Poland, and this is the only one that has received the highest mark for sanitation from the European Commission," proudly announces Jan Stromidło.

## What do the rats like?

He works mostly during the night, because that is when the rats become active. When he receives an order, he lives on location for 14 days. It can be a farm, a food processing plant or a private house. Anywhere where people work and live, because where there are people, there are rats as well. "For several days, we show up during their feeding time in the place where they search for food. At first, they scatter, of course. They gradually become used to us, we are a part of the scenery to them. They crawl between my legs. We don't disturb each other. Sometimes, there are so many of them that I feel a certain chill, despite being used to the view," recalls Jan Stromidło. "We place the bait, and sometimes we have to try for several days to find the food that suits them. There have been times when we fed them chocolate, because it was the only thing they would eat. Finally, there comes the day we add poison to the bait and they eat it." The poison works gradually, for several days. Above all, to avoid alarming the rats that have not yet ingested the poison by seeing the bodies of their dead comrades. Secondly, according to Stromidło, so that they do not suffer. Rat poison causes the small blood vessels to break. The animal becomes weaker and finally falls asleep, never to wake up. The chemicals are prepared in such a way, that they cause natural embalming, mummification of the dead rats. It helps to avoid creating epidemic breeding grounds in the holes that most of the rats die in.

Rats have accompanied humans "since the dawn of time". Archeologists find their bones in prehistoric human settlements. There are passages about them in the ancient Mesopotamian chronicles. And their images can be found on Roman altars. They belong to the murids family. There are many different species of them, but only two species can be found world-wide: the black rat (also called the house rat) and the brown rat. Rat's lifespan is approximately 2-3 years. The black rat can average from 2 to 6 litters per year (the young are ready for reproduction within 6 months). The brown rat has a lower average of litters per year, only 3 to 4, but it reaches reproductive age faster – even a 3 month-old female can conceive. Rats wreak havoc on the economy: they destroy food supply, structure of buildings and even the foundations. They are also carriers of many dangerous diseases.

## Illegal bugs

"I started to work in deratization and disinsection almost by accident," says Jan Stromidło, with a faint smile. This slender man of average height seems calm and sensitive. It is difficult to imagine him as the destroyer of rats. "In 1980 as an activist of Solidarność, I worked in the Regional Board. After the martial law was declared, I couldn't find work. I was searching for an idea what to do with the rest of my life." Marek Berak, his colleague from Solidarność, lent a helping hand. Someone told him that there was an option "to spray apartments". Stromidło was skeptical at first. Especially after a disinfection technician from a company in Bydgoszcz promised to show him the ropes for a bottle of vodka and later, drunk, spilt the poison all over himself. "I returned to the idea after a while. I started by trying to find specialist literature. There wasn't a lot of it to find in Poland, so I smuggled it through friends from the West." That is how books about pest control were smuggled into PRL, in addition to blotting paper. But even the textbooks from beyond the Iron Curtain were not very helpful. "So I started experimenting," he says.

## There are always a couple of them left

The most difficult moment comes, paradoxically, when most of the rats are dead. There are always a couple of them left. "When there's mayhem, they won't take the food anymore. But they don't run; they stay to rebuild the colony. They begin to breed very fast. I can't tell whether their decision to stay is a conscious one," smiles Jan Stromidło. Rats can last several days without food. Without water they die after just one. That is why they have to leave their hiding spots, even when scared. And Jan Stromidło knows this. This is where his dachshund with a hunting streak and a pneumatic shotgun come in.

"I think people exaggerate rats' exceptional intelligence. Rats are smart, that is true, but not that smart," he smiles again. "One of the indicators of how smart they are is for example the fact that they climb onto tin roofs in the morning in search of water. They are out of my reach there and they lick the dew off the roof to drink."

I can sense rats a mile away "If it wasn't for my meeting with Wiesław Dobrzeńcki, the protagonist of the documentary "Szczurołap" (eng. "The Rat-Catcher") in 1986, I would probably have quit this job. He shook my hand, showed me how he dealt with rats. He had a company that eliminated rats, I had one that focused on German cockroaches. We remain colleagues and help each other even now," admits Jan Stromidło. "Now I know rats enough to sense them in a room, even if other people don't notice anything." Stromidło is against genetic experiments which would lead to eliminating rat completely. First of all, for environmental reasons. Nature abhors a vacuum. There would be other animals to take their place, animals we would not know how to fight. "Second of all, thanks to them a lot of old sewage pipes still have free passage. Rats remove any waste in them," he claims. He does not mention the third reason, but he has to make a living somehow.

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