

**At the End of the Tunnel, a Home; Forced to Leave Shanties, Dwellers Try Out Life Above Ground**

By ROBIN POGREBIN
Published: April 15, 1996

As a spring snowfall turns to chill rain outside his window, Robert Kalinski stubs out yet another cigarette and savors some of the things most people take for granted: a set of keys, a bathroom sink and silence.

"What I like about this is it's my own," said Mr. Kalinski, 54, surveying the small single room that is his new apartment. "This is the one place I can call mine."

For the better part of the last decade, Mr. Kalinski lived in one of the sagging shanties that lined the cavernous two-and-a-half mile Amtrak tunnel hard by the Hudson River, part of what may be the oldest remaining homeless community in New York City. With the exception of a failed attempt to emerge two years ago, and occasional shafts of light from the street above, Mr. Kalinski spent every day in darkness -- shivering through winters without heat, collecting cans at dawn and dodging rats at dusk.

Then last summer, Mr. Kalinski and several of his tunnel neighbors -- who have come to be known as the Mole People -- were encouraged to apply for Federal housing vouchers and try living above ground. And now, ever so tentatively, a trickle of them have begun the journey out.

So far, four people have made the move into apartments. Eight have leases pending. Five have received the vouchers but have yet to secure leases. And nine are trying to obtain the documentation necessary to start the application process.

Not every one of the more than 45 people living in the tunnel -- which extends from 72d Street to 123d Street -- wants to leave. For all its hardship, life under the earth has offered freedom and a feeling of belonging. Some have been living in the tunnel for as long as 23 years.

Moving the homeless into homes is no simple proposition, but taking the tunnel out of the tunnel people has proven particularly complicated. "They were so very isolated," said Mary Brosnahan, the executive director of the Coalition for the Homeless. "These aren't folks hanging out on a subway platform. They are really in the bowels of the city. And I suppose this carries with it a kind of a psyche that they really did just want to be left alone."

Indeed, Mr. Kalinski said, leaving the tunnel demands a mindset all its own. "The hardest thing for me was to accept being down there," he said. "Now that I'm out of the tunnel, I have to accept being out. See, you can't be out and mentally live back in the tunnel."

But now, the "moles" appear to have no choice but to move on; Amtrak has announced plans to clear and secure the tunnel beginning May 1. "It is not an area safe for anyone to pass through, let alone live in," said Richard R. Kelly, the general manager of Amtrak's metropolitan division. "You don't want people to live in close proximity to a high-speed rail line."

Amtrak has made similar attempts to oust the colony over the last few years. But the residents always returned. This time, the company is bringing in bulldozers. "It is our intention to demolish these structures and fence in the area," Mr. Kelly said. "We will be in a position -- with a police presence -- to respond to any resisters."

It was because Amtrak threatened such action last summer that the Coalition for the Homeless asked the Federal Government to make its housing subsidies available to tunnel inhabitants. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development had originally reserved 250 of its Section 8 vouchers in October 1994 for people living in the New York subway system, but few took advantage of the $9 million set-aside.

Margaret Morton, a photographer who has documented and developed close relationships with people in the tunnel over five years, has been helping them navigate the system.

It has been an arduous process. After years of living underground -- independent and invisible -- the tunnel people suddenly find themselves tangled up in the red tape of what it means to resurface and join society. They have had to prove their existence on paper with birth certificates, social security numbers and income records -- documents that, in many cases, do not exist.

Even as they have continued their tunnel routines -- collecting cans, firewood, water, newspapers, food; answering to nothing but their own needs -- the subterranean dwellers now also have to show up for appointments, scout apartments, sign leases and return phone calls.

Some have given up along the way -- partly because they could not keep it all straight, partly because it just sounded too good to be true.

But several have pressed on nonetheless, like Mr. Kalinski, who had to go through three interviews and fill out a 14-page questionnaire before moving into the Holland House -- an apartment with support services on West 42d Street -- about a month ago. "Bob was skeptical right up to the moment when I told him he could pick up his keys," said Dov Waisman, the housing coordinator for Project Renewal, a nonprofit social service agency that owns and runs Holland House and is helping the tunnel people relocate. "These people have been brought to the brink of expectation many times before."

Even when the paperwork is finally in place, there is no guarantee that landlords will let the tunnel people in. "They're very hesitant to rent apartments through this program," Ms. Morton said.

Yet those who question the capacity of homeless people to care for their homes need only look at the elaborate interiors they will be leaving behind. On the walls of his shack near the southern entrance at West 72d Street, Jose Camacho, 52, has hung posters of Seurat paintings. He keeps his bed made, his plywood slab of a front porch cleanly swept; he takes a coffee can shower every day amid piles of seething debris.

Mr. Camacho has been to see his new apartment in the Bronx and is anxiously waiting for word that he can move in. "It's beautiful," he said, kissing his fingertips. "I fell in love with it."

Although his cramped shack is cluttered with books and kitchen supplies, Robert Hall, 43, recently managed to squeeze in a second-hand bassinet for his cat and her new brood of kittens. Mr. Hall has parceled out each of the tiny animals to fellow tunnel inhabitants -- except for Fluffy, whom he plans to take with him to his new apartment in the Bronx. "I've been praying for the day," he said.

Those who wonder whether the tunnel people can confine their creative housewarming to four conventional walls need only look at how Mr. Kalinski has fared so far. Holland House provided him with the essentials: a bed, table, mirror, microwave. And, little by little, Mr. Kalinski is making it home.

A blue bathrobe hangs on the closet door ("that's my favorite color," he said.) A bowl is filled with a few individually wrapped Kraft caramels. And on a table by the door sits a circle of candles and three sample-size bottles of shampoo. Mr. Kalinski never lights the candles; he just likes to look at them. "That's my peace area," he said. "Everything else is like chaos."

But decorating is only one cosmetic step toward permanence. And Mr. Kalinski -- who has a history of drug and alcohol problems -- is aware of the odds against him. He has failed to beat them before. "It was a choice to get into reality and stop living in a fantasy," he said. "Someone opened the door for me. Now it's up to me to keep the door open."

The key to making the move last, said Ms. Brosnahan of the coalition, is support services: "For many of the people who have a history of either substance abuse or mental illness, there has to be follow-up care. You can't just give people a room and a key and walk away."

In addition, she said, housing the homeless makes fiscal sense. "It costs over $20,000 to put an individual on a shelter cot on an armory floor," she said. "It costs roughly $12,500 to put that same individual into supported housing."

There are aspects of the underworld that Mr. Kalinski may find himself nostalgic for, like sharing meals in the tunnel with his close friend and accomplished cook, Bernard Isaac -- boiled potatoes, sauerkraut, beef stew -- who is also trying to find an apartment. Or the Upper West Side landlords, who saved him cans and bottles and became his friends. "I miss it, but it was time to make a move," he said.

Already, he can see how hard old habits die. Mr. Kalinski does not have to wake up early to collect cans anymore -- he is now receiving $552 a month in Supplemental Security Income. But he nevertheless continues to rise at 2:30 A.M. for a breakfast of instant coffee and cut-rate cigarettes. And perhaps he will forever be drawn to the darkness.

"If I sleep past 4 o'clock, I think I'm missing something," Mr. Kalinski said. "Little things right now make me happy. A couple dollars in my pocket, roof over my head, food in my refrigerator."

Mr. Kalinski did not bring much with him from the tunnel, except a radio, some clothes and candles. "I wanted to start all fresh," he said. "If I get one item a week, or every two weeks, I'm happy."

There are a few items he has already set his sights on, like a television set that does not play in triplicate and a "little bitty" lamp that will not hurt his eyes.

Even though his new fifth-floor apartment faces onto the bustling four lanes of 42d Street, Mr. Kalinski calls it tranquil. In the tunnel, a steady stream of cars on the Henry Hudson Parkway bumped along overhead, and every now and then an Amtrak train would hurtle by. "You don't know how important the quietness is to me," he said. "It could have been a room in gold with parquet floors -- if it wasn't quiet, I wouldn't take it."

Most of all, Mr. Kalinski looks forward to going home every day, and closing the door. "I don't have company," he said. "You can come up and say hello and goodbye. But when I go in that room and I close the door, it's mine."

Certain things have not changed. Mr. Kalinski still wears his long hair Brillo-stiff and unruly. Crescents of dirt remain wedged under his fingernails. But Mr. Kalinski believes he can make this new start stick, if only because he wants it to so badly. "If I didn't want it -- if I was apprehensive -- it would be difficult," he said. "But I'm ready for this."