

Freedom of a (Bike) Courier

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I was in front of Romek's place by 10am. His working day was just about to start. However, as it turned out, my guide was still fast asleep. When his grandparents let me in and I went into his bedroom he pulled the duvet over his head. He later explained that this is the way he relaxes before a tough day. Then his dispatcher called with the first assignment. Romek got dressed quickly, packed his courier bag and off we went. Romek's first assignment was for an advertising agency where we were supposed to pick up some photos and then deliver them to another agency in the city center. At first the ride was quite enjoyable; the traffic in Łazarz in Poznań was not bad so we were riding calmly down the city streets. I was first surprised, recalling how some couriers complain how tough their work is. For me it was just a fun bicycle ride. This was put to a stop by Romek who began rushing me. We were already in the center, at the Kaponiera roundabout. I thought we would stop at the red light but instead my guide only began pedaling faster and urged me to do the same. The cars driving in the opposite direction started beeping and I almost

ended up underneath one of them. This made me appreciate a courier's reflex. Back in our lane, I was still a little shaken and tried to calm myself down, but Romek kept going as if nothing had happened. I sat down at the agency entrance to calm down but my companion put a stop to it and hurried me again. We went inside where the photos had already been packed. While I stood on the side and listened to Romek talking to the secretary, I had the impression that it wasn't his first time there.

He filled in the form hastily, packed the parcel and in no time we were on our bikes again. The ride back was smooth, even though I could feel Romek's eyes fixed on me. He was controlling my pace. Although the ride was quite tiring I had the impression I was slowing him down. His phone rang again; it was the dispatcher asking about our whereabouts; he also gave us another assignment. The pickup point was close; hence we delivered the photos and moved on speedily. This time we reached a private company that needed to have important documents delivered to a bank at Freedom Square. When I reminded myself of our previous ride through the roundabout, I didn't feel like going anywhere but there was no turning back.

The street traffic was getting worse. To my surprise, at the roundabout we duly stopped at the red light. Perhaps my companion understood that for the first day of being a courier the beginning of the day must have been too harsh. We reached the bank in no time. Having completed several assignments in the city center we

had a moment to catch our breath. Romek was not happy about the break, but I couldn't hide my joy. It was almost 1pm; our stomachs were rumbling. Romek suggested that we eat at a milk bar. When entering the eatery I noticed several bicycles and we chained ours nearby. Inside were two courier friends of Romek who were also having a break. We joined them. I listened to their conversation and couldn't help but wonder how much couriers are dedicated to their work. They were chatting about bicycles (When I met them in a pub after work it was no different).

After lunch we received another assignment, several quick rides. When maneuvering around the cars I noticed the angry looks of the drivers as if they feared we would do them harm. The same with the pedestrians: when already on the crosswalk, they would take one step forward and then back on the pavement. Romek believed that this indecision was the most common cause of collisions as pedestrians would jump onto the crosswalk, crossing at the very last minute only to leave the courier no chance for braking.

I was fed up after another long route. It was both the heat and exhaustion that was getting to me. I road through intersections like crazy. I noticed, however, that staying fully focused during the ride as well as having no limits and wasting no time to think about yet another maneuver helps immensely in this job and, thanks to that, other road users do not push cyclists out from the road. We made it to

the base in the end. I was amazed to see scattered bicycle parts all over the place as well as couriers hurriedly preparing their meals. When they saw me one guy laughed and said that if I had let them know that I was coming, they would have cleaned up a bit. There was a lot of hustle and bustle, yet the couriers were waiting patiently for instructions. I took this opportunity to have a little chat about the weirdest deliveries they ever had. Apart from ordinary documents and million zloty bills they have delivered smoked fish, Dom Pérignon champagne, a Polish flag, strawberries, sanitary pads, ice cream and even an Easter basket for the traditional blessing. Apparently, an important delivery might take on more than just one meaning.

On the next day we were supposed to continue delivering packages, but I gave up. So far we had covered a few dozen kilometers, which unfortunately negatively impacted my wellbeing. I could feel every muscle aching, even those which I didn't even know existed. Practically speaking, I couldn't move. After work I longed for a soft bed. Several days later Romek had a serious accident. A reckless driver opened his car door while driving. The courier didn't manage to stop and hit the car. Luckily, there was no need for him to stay in hospital and he ended up having a few cuts and bruises and a few days of sick leave.

Do you feel trapped?

In the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, bike couriers played a pivotal role in communication. It

might seem that they would be history when the modern means of transport appeared. Despite the fact that the telegram was pushed out by new technologies and is no longer a competitive means of passing on news, all over the world young bike couriers are the inheritors of the old telegraph couriers. In the 1970s the congested streets of a metropolis brought couriers back and in the 1980s the job of a bike courier made a successful comeback. Cyclists are ideal for the job as, similar to telegraph couriers of the past decades, while having memorized the city map, they cover similar distances and their goal is to deliver a package as fast as possible.

Why would people choose this job? Three main motivating factors can be distinguished: first and the most trivial reason is the urge to make money. Financial matters play a crucial role even though this job is not very lucrative. Couriers are people who pay no attention to the type of profession, neither are they interested in the ideological aspect of the job; the opportunity to earn money is the priority here. Such people seek any form of employment, with neither experience nor qualifications required and the job of a courier meets these criteria. The only requirements include a bicycle, a mobile phone and knowledge of the city topography, but the latter is not very strictly obeyed. In practice they are usually seasonal workers whose maximum stay in the company is a couple of months or they work in the summer. They are usually students who want to earn some extra money during the summer break. Dreadful

rush versus relatively low earnings puts a high number of people off.

However, I believe that the majority of people choose this way of making money because of the widely understood bicycle culture. They consider work as a hobby and cycling eight hours for five days a week makes them happy. *Bażant*, a courier from Poznań, says: “I have always dreamt about this job; I have always enjoyed cycling in the city and getting paid for this I find fantastic! *Głowa* from London agrees with him: “I’m a courier for a reason. It was my idea to find this and no other job. I was motivated by a passion for cycling, freedom at work, a lack of monotony, a possibility to get fit, and, what’s crucial, the *hardcore* that goes with it. This way of making money keeps me encouraged to act, helps me enjoy my job and gives an opportunity to meet people. To make a long story short, while being a courier I can do what I like and make a living. I can’t imagine myself as an employee passionately laying out paving stones.”

The decision to become a courier is also influenced by the feeling of freedom this profession promises. Couriers stress that this occupation is so fascinating due to autonomy and relative independence. This job obviously involves picking up and delivering packages and it’s assignment-driven. However, this is not office work within four walls, where an employee feels trapped. A courier is always on the move with a changing urban landscape; and the fact of having a choice of a route to cover contributes to the feeling of freedom.

The main driving force for taking up this job is, however, the ideological element. This work is performed by individuals with a specific outlook on life who might find the reality upsetting but they are alien to the omnipresent rat race, climbing up the career ladder, and the materialistic approach to life. Paradoxically, the majority are university graduates, often with experience and the so-called social position. At the same time, they don't feel comfortable as employees of big corporations; they were unhappy in their previous jobs and now they object the existing reality. On the internet forum www.ifbma.ca/forums a courier nicknamed Red Baron writes the following words: "Have you ever felt trapped? I simply wished to be off the radar for a while, to be free and enjoy what I do. It doesn't need to be the best thing but rather the one you enjoy. I can sense I'm being childish here, unrealistic but this is just me. In my previous job I worked 40, sometimes 60 hours per week, and at the end of each week my wages weren't even close to 300 (dollars). Why on earth do I have to pay all these benefits while the government is spending money mindlessly?" Then there's time for reflection: "I'm not even going to have enough money for insurance. Check the figures; you might find that surprising too. I could go on and on. No one listens to me. Everything they want to do is to MAKE MONEY and screw how much they hate this job."¹

The couriers I find most interesting are those who, because of their motivation, belong to the third group. By

¹ <http://www.ifbma.ca/forums/viewtopic.php?t=472> (07.05.2007)

this I mean those who take up this job mostly driven by money. Despite the fact that the choice of occupation was simply a coincidence, in time their job has turned into a passion. In this courier group economic reasons have given way to ideology as it turns out that the pull factor for young people to take up the job of a bike courier is the courier community. This goes beyond a 9-to-5 job as it involves hanging out after work, organizing races or weekend bicycle rides as well as other activities. The possibility to hang out with likeminded people while preserving one's own autonomy and knowing one belongs to a large community seems quite a phenomenon in capitalist times.

Working at a Tesco checkout

Bike couriers are often exposed to danger. Poor road conditions and inhaling fumes on an everyday basis are major inconveniences. But the main problems are caused by other road users. Couriers must take into account the possibility of having an accident, getting injured or, to keep it short, poor health. A high number of them have already had some unpleasant experience. They complain about recklessness and rude behavior of other road users. Car drivers show zero tolerance for cyclists on the road. They often provoke hazardous situations. Kura has only one sentence to describe it: "Stress; drivers are morons." According to DJ: "car drivers are nuts, similarly to passengers who suddenly open the car doors!", while Ry\$ stated: "Those are idiots behind the steering wheels."

The weather can also act as a deterrent. Working in the winter is a real challenge; riding a bike in sub-zero temperatures makes one freeze and strong winds only make it worse. Couriers also complain about snow, ice and rain. Arek, a courier in Warsaw, when asked about the hardest element of the job didn't hesitate to mention the weather: "It can ruin everything. But when it's not raining and the temperature is above five degrees, being a courier is pure fun." Krzychu from London confirmed these words: "Another inconvenience is the weather which can put you off work, especially in the wintertime. Everyone who believes being a courier is idyllic should try to ride a bike for eight hours in heavy snowfall. Then they will know what I'm talking about."

Relatively low wages are also a problem for cyclists. They often emphasize that this work is ideology-driven. Pietrucha, a courier from STM, a Poznań based company, says: our wages don't correspond to the work we do, which is by far the greatest difficulty. Romek adds though: "For me it's more than just a job; otherwise I wouldn't put my life at risk for a feeble couple of hundred zlotys. Instead I'd work at a Tesco checkout."

Trendsetters and painful knees

Adequate equipment and clothing is a major concern for bike couriers. It's not about good looks, but comfort and functionality that make this job. An eight-hour work day requires being ready to ride in any season, often in adverse weather conditions. Snow, rain, and scorching sun

are factors that have an enormous impact on the choice of clothing. Taking good care of one's legs, especially knees is also crucial as when overworked by pedaling they no longer cooperate, often already after several months of intensive exercise. Illnesses of the joints and arthritis may lead to a serious operation which means the end of a career. A courier makes a living thanks to their legs; it's their strength that corresponds directly to the number of deliveries and hence the wages. That's why selecting adequate clothing is crucial.

Bike shops offer a wide range of clothing and accessories. Companies that specialize in selling courier gear are popping up like mushrooms.² These shops are often established by former or active couriers. Who else might be better informed about couriers' needs if not a member of the community or a colleague? Unfortunately, in Poland couriers who are to choose the right equipment are often forced to make such decisions on the basis of the price rather than quality and comfort. Companies that specialize in selling courier equipment gear are rather top shelf. Pietrucha admitted sadly that the lack of equipment is biting him hard: "I have one worn-out T-shirt and a tatty backpack." Almost every courier said that paying attention to details is key although not everyone wishes to admit at once how much time they devote to it.

In the 1980s couriers would wear jeans, a working shirt and sneakers. Now a T-shirt with the company name and

² <http://www.chromebags.com>, <http://www.timebomb.pl/sklep.html>, http://www.cicli-berlinetta.de/cicli-berlinetta_bags.html, <http://www.qbike.com>, <http://www.gromada.waw.pl>.

a backpack with the company logo and emblem are most frequently encountered among Polish couriers. Every Poznań-based courier company provides company clothing for its employees. It is lent to a cyclist and must be returned upon resignation. One can recognize the corporation because of the color of T-shirts and backpacks. Couriers working for Błyskawica receive blue backpacks, cyclists from Maraton are given dark green ones. Silver is exclusive for Intercity couriers while Orange backpacks indicate Szybki Transport Miejski. The uniform is to make quick identification easy. It is especially large corporations that care about the company image and their couriers having direct contact with the client must act as a living advertisement of the company. In this respect little has changed since the 19th century when first couriers would make deliveries in full uniforms.

A courier is allowed some freedom in terms of clothing. The company T-shirt and the backpack are mandatory. However, a courier who wishes to manifest their autonomy and individual personality will try to smuggle in some elements of their own clothing style into the company uniform. The clothing also identifies the courier. Sometimes clients can't remember the courier's name but they do recall some clothing elements, physical features (for instance a guy with dreadlocks or piercing, in characteristic clothes). It must be admitted, though, that it is difficult to distinguish couriers from different countries or cities. While their style is original they all look alike in a group, and their image is scruffy which is to emphasize

independence and autonomy of the courier. Short combat style pants pulled on full length leggings, baggy T-shirts or old cycling shirts. A chain for a belt around one's waist. Tattoos, dyed hair or dreadlocks are very common. Piercing is the new black everywhere. Couriers are fans of *retro*; especially popular are baseball caps with logos of big companies, such as Campagnolo or Bianchi. Anything unique and mismatched at face value is always fine in accordance with the courier dress code. Both men and women prefer similar styles. Regardless of their origin, they are united by passion for the two-wheeled vehicle. The motif of a skull is often seen on T-shirts, bicycles and bags. As couriers explain, they are contemporary pirates exploring city streets.

Whatever is independent and original is often quickly adapted and assimilated by pop culture. The courier community is reluctant towards this trend. "Now everyone wants to look like a courier", says a female courier with red dreadlocks sticking out from underneath her cap, "but it is not them who are out there on the bikes for eight hours per day."³

Bike courier fashion has become a global icon of youth. It is the fact that this movement is alternative that is attractive for many young people, it is luring individuals from outside. Unknowingly, bike couriers have become trendsetters. Clothing companies have begun to use the image of a courier on a massive scale. More and more often products dedicated to couriers are purchased by those who have nothing do to with this profession. Companies

³ <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=c/a/2006/12/31/LVGNAN67MR1.DTL> (17.06.2007).

such as Adidas, Puma or Nike have even marketed new collections based on the courier clothing.⁴

A fixie forever

There is no doubt that for a bike courier the most important thing is the bike. It comes hardly as a surprise that today the most popular one is a fixed gear bike. It's a type of bike with no chain while the drive sprocket is permanently attached to the wheel. It was once commonly used, now it is only seen in bicycles for track ride. This bicycle is extremely light due to lack of accessories: no brakes, cables, or a chain, etc. Koperek from Poznań stated: "Old-school as no other. I don't think gears are a must; in urban areas they actually stand in the way rather than help. A bike should be as simple as possible. It is reliable, the fewer parts the less risk it will break." Another important aspect is that the bike is not attractive for a potential thief and it's relatively inexpensive. "I ride a track bike, the so-called fixed gear bike. Thanks to its simple construction, I keep down the maintenance costs," says Krzysztof.

The fixed gear bike has become a cult object among couriers worldwide. There is an abundance of websites dedicated to it with online photo galleries where cyclists post photos of their bikes and present them to a wider audience. The most popular one is <http://www.fixedgeargallery.com> which shows some real wonders. In Poland the best known is <http://www.fixedgears.neostrada.pl>. Its founders admit finding the inspiration on the fixedgeargallery.

⁴ http://www.nike.com/index.jhtml#l=nikestore.grid,_grid,s-essenger&re=US&co=US&la=EN (17.06.2007).

The internet also provides us with manuals for DIY bikes. The ability to move around on this type of bike requires knowledge and certain habits. When riding one must pedal ceaselessly (otherwise there might be dire effects) which at first might pose some problems (for instance when riding downhill pedals keep moving); one must also get used to specific mounting and dismounting of the bike. Couriers emphasize that the fixed gear bike is like an extension of themselves. During the ride on a fixed gear bike a human remains in perfect symbiosis with the bike.

Mass and criticism

Activities related to being a part of the courier community take on a variety of forms. One of them is certainly urban racing called “an alley cat race”. An alley cat is a bicycle race taking place in normal traffic conditions. To a great extent it is based on the everyday work of a courier, an individual who chooses their own “cat-like” routes. The main objective is to get to all the checkpoints in the shortest possible time while the participant chooses the order and the route. At the starting point, competitors are given either a map or a manifesto with the indicated checkpoints. Another option is that participants learn only about the starting point and then they move up like climbing a ladder until they reach the finish line. The winner is the first person who has reached the finish line with all the checks from the checkpoints and has completed all the additional tasks if any.⁵

⁵ <http://www.alleycat.waw.pl> (10.07.2007).

Alley cats are a real indicator of the strength, agility and skills that every bike courier should have. During the daring races when speed is of the highest priority all road rules cease to exist. Red lights, road signs, other road users are not able to stop the racing couriers. Because alley cats are usually illegal they are often organized in the evenings or at night. These races take place regularly. Due to significant events there are spontaneous alley cats with a motto, for instance an MA alley cat to honor a new graduate. An alley cat is more than just a race; it is accompanied by a range of events, such as: an after party, bike film shows, underground music shows. It is a holiday for all couriers and bike culture enthusiasts.

Couriers also participate in social projects. On 27 September 1992 in San Francisco,⁶ the first Critical Mass took place. It involved a parade of bicycles through the city, most preferably the city center when the traffic is bad. In this way cyclists wish to make a point of stating that they are rightful users of roads, similarly to car drivers.

Why would bike couriers accompany other cyclists in this cyclical event? There's not just one clear explanation. For some the Critical Mass is a symbol of the utopian vision of a city without cars and the dangers involved. Others voice their concerns regarding the increased degradation of the natural environment, the increased amount of pollution and the widely understood ecological threats. There are also those who participate in the Mass in order to man-

⁶ <http://www.scorcher.org/cmhistory> (12.06.2007).

ifest their presence on the streets and hence let others know that the roads do not belong solely to cars. Their postulates include the creation of bicycle paths; a demand for increased funding for public transportation and more efficient infrastructure. Generally speaking, their motto is: we don't block the traffic; we create it.

Their objectives are vividly displayed in the Manifesto⁷ of cyclists participating in the Critical Mass in San Francisco:

WE ARE SORRY! We are sorry that you are stuck in your car or in a traffic jam. Gridlock is more and more common these days...it will probably go on getting worse, unless we do something.

We're sorry if we've contributed to your delay, but please recognize that we bicyclists are ignored, obstructed and physically threatened ALL THE TIME, EVERY DAY.

We're sorry that absurd and mean-spirited decisions about how we live are made behind closed doors of the corporate and government elite, leading to a suicidal dependence on the automobile and the oil industry, a cancer epidemic and general ecological catastrophe. We know there are better alternatives, and our monthly ride demonstrates one of them.

⁷ <http://www.scorcher.org/cmhistory/wesorry.html> (12.06.2007).

We're sorry that we go on reproducing this silly and self-degrading way of life, instead of throwing it over and making a life worth living. Why should we do jobs which make our lives worse due to toxic waste or pollution? Why are our best intentions always corrupted by the need to 'make a living'? These questions have complex and difficult answers, answers worth looking into. But for now...

We're sorry you're not already out here on your bicycle riding with us! But we heartily invite you to join us next time. Remember, every day is a good bicycling day! Meet us on the last working Friday of every month.

Translated by Justyna Chada