



Against the Flow

Tom Fort

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'You have to be on your guard when you go back to special places. You may be able to locate them easily enough on the map, but maps tell only one story. Times change and places and people with them. The memory plays curious tricks, and things aren't always as you remember or expect.'

Twenty years ago, Tom Fort drove his little red car onto the ferry at Felixstowe, bound for all points east. Eastern Europe was still a faraway place, just emerging from its half-century of waking nightmare, blinking, injured, full of fears but importantly full of hope too. Things were different then. Czechoslovakia was still Czechoslovakia, Russia was the USSR and the Warsaw Pact had not formally dissolved. But what did exist then, as they do now, were the rivers: the nations' lifeblood. It was along and by these rivers that Fort travelled around Eastern Europe meeting its people and immersing himself in its culture.

Since that trip though, much has changed and in more recent years around one million Poles have settled in Britain. Fort's local paper has a Polish edition, his supermarket has a full range of Polish bread, sausage and beer and an influx of Polish businesses opened in his town centre. And it's not just the Poles, his gym has a Lithuanian trainer and the woman who cuts his hair is from Hungary.

As a tide of people began to leave Eastern Europe and settle in the UK, Tom Fort started to wonder about what they were leaving behind and whether the friends he had made all those years ago remained. And so he decided to make the journey again, travelling against the flow of the steady human stream to explore the once familiar places. As he did so, many began to return as the recession took hold of Western Europe. Tom was keen to find out what had changed and how the places, people and way of life had moved on and of course fit in a spot of fishing along the way.

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