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The Heartfelt Anger of a Scorned People

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Province of Austria

It was a Sunday morning in winter when I arrived at the town of Pavlovce in southeastern Slovakia. At the edge of a hollow that serves as a dump is a tumble down house. It has two rooms. Eight people live there. A young mother with a babe in arms comes out to meet me. I follow her into a small room where there are two beds, two chairs and a little stove. On the stove is a steaming pot. The woman lets me lift the cover off — only boiling water. I ask the woman what they are going to eat for lunch. She shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t know yet. My husband is in town begging for food. Maybe he’ll bring something.”

In Slovakia live a half million Roma.¹ They belong to that despised minority that, since the shift in Eastern Europe, does not know how it is going to subsist. Under the Communists, they all had work, some minimal income, and a place to live. They were no better or worse off than the rest of the people in those countries. Today, however, they have neither work nor enough money to live with dignity and no perspectives for the future. Unemployment is almost 100%. Not long ago, the Slovakian government reduced to 35.7 euros per person the subsidy, which in any case was not enough to live on. Families receive 100 euros regardless of the number of children. This forces them to look for work. It is pure cynicism. They are relegated to starvation.

In Eastern Europe, for the first time since the French Revolution, hunger has sparked an insurrection. Sadly, the anger of the poorest of the poor in Slovakia led to aggression. They sacked supermarkets and took the food home. And only a police prohibition against their leaving the towns prevented a planned protest by all the Roma of the country. Now they are totally alone with their misery. Even the

¹ One branch of the Gypsy population.

Minister of Social Affairs, Kanik, showed understanding for the anger of the Roma. The President also manifested his displeasure with the government's handling of the situation. Nevertheless, the decision was upheld.

The history of the Roma — today between eight and ten million (nobody knows the exact number) — begins around the year 1000 of our era. At that time they emigrated from India to Eastern Europe. By the 15th century there is evidence of the Roma throughout Europe. Their captivity begins in southeastern Europe around 1300. They were expelled from France and Germany. In the 15th century the Emperor Sigismund declared them vagrants. In England in the 16th century they are reduced to servitude and branded with a “V.” There, just as in Spain, the nomadic way of life was punished by the death penalty. In Bohemia and Moravia it seems all adult Roma were hanged. Both girls and boys had an ear cut off to show they were Roma. In the 18th century, the Emperor Charles VI of Austria promulgated a decree ordering all Roma to be rooted out of Austria and Hungry.

Between 1933 and 1945 Hitler annihilated half a million Roma in the concentration camps. In the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, 4000 Roma were gassed to death on 2 August 1944: it was the Night of the Gypsies. When the war ended, the lot of the Roma was forgotten. Not one monument, not one compensation nor lobby² to aid this people. Even in the decade of the 70s of the last century they were the objects of deportation in Czechoslovakia. And they were subject to sterilization programs. In Poland the Roma who refused to settle down were expelled from the country. Since the collapse of communism racist violence against the Roma has increased. Attacks against them are commonplace. The guilty parties, when they are identified, remain unpunished.

Today the Roma live isolated and in miserable conditions in all of Slovakia. They are uncultured, dirty and uneducated. They wander through cities and towns with handcarts picking up what others throw away. A study by the UN program for development assesses the situation of the Roma as “a third-world island in the first world” — worlds between which the breach grows ever wider. Infant mortality among the Roma is triple that of the ordinary population. Their life expectancy is seven years less. In a good half of the Roma population hunger and malnutrition are clearly seen.

² A legal entity whose purpose is to influence legislators.

Discrimination Creates Isolation and Isolation Creates Discrimination

Nikolai Gheorghe, a sociologist and one of the intellectual leaders of the Roma, says: "For us the social subsidy is the greatest threat. We grew up with parents who struggled in menial jobs to feed their children. Our parents were manual laborers, merchants. But their children, what do they learn today when they only see their parents collecting the subsidy?" It is the trap of "dependence." "The ghetto culture is systematic: discrimination creates isolation and isolation creates discrimination." Once the pattern of behavior and mutual mistrust bond together they are difficult to escape. Even when they can pay, the Roma will not find anyone outside the ghetto to sell them land. And even in the cemeteries there is a small corner just for Roma.

It is in the educational field that the depression can be best observed. In Svinia, Roma children have their own classes — poorly equipped — and there is a school building where they have to bring their own silverware to eat in the lunchroom. According to a study by the United Nations Development Business, three-quarters of the children go to special schools. Only a third of them finish elementary school. And scarcely 6% go on for further schooling. In Slovakia it is rare for a Roma child to pass the psychometric aptitude test. And so all the prejudices become fulfilled prophecies. The Roma are illiterate because of lack of access to schools. They drop out of the job market because they can go for years without anyone giving them a job. They are delinquents and they rob the stores because the insidious social parasitism no longer maintains them.

In the collective consciousness of the Roma the horror of the Third Reich continues to live when the census of its population was used only to extinguish them. As a result many Roma refuse to state their ethnic affiliation in the population censuses. The Slovak Minister of the Interior has in mind the formation of a section of the police department exclusively for Romas.³ This idea makes them very nervous; it reminds many of the racial persecution of National Socialism.

On only two occasions does the face of these people light up: when they recall the happy times of communism and when they dream of emigrating to the European Union. In the western countries many of them seek, either in clandestine jobs or by begging, an income that will ease their unfortunate situation. Often they cannot even cross the frontiers; they are detained there. Their passports are

³ Roma or Romas is the plural. The singular is Rom. In the British Isles they are called Romany.



A Roma beggar in Graz (Austria): "I am hungry. Thank you."

stamped with a seal making it impossible for them to emigrate for several years; it is purely arbitrary with no legal basis.

In 1996 about a 100 Roma beggars from Slovakia showed up in Graz. They came in small cars unfit for traffic. They passed the day kneeling in front of the large department stores or on crowded corners stretching out a plate to passers by without saying a word. Many wore a sign that said *I am hungry*. Even in the winter as many as five of them passed the night in one of their cars or in the public lavatories. It was a hopeless situation. No one was moved by their plight. The majority of the population ignored them. A minuscule fraction linked to the National Socialists used the media to stir up people against them.

The Vincentian community at Eggenberg began by inviting the beggars to a meeting. There they would have the opportunity of identifying what it was in the city of Graz that oppressed them. The obvious contempt by many citizens, the mistreatment by the police, the lack of places to sleep — these were the gravest problems. We began to house the beggars in a pavilion of the establishment, the Vincent Nest.⁴ By Easter of 1997 no one had to sleep outside. The first thing we did was to give each beggar a document which stated his identity. And it also said: *The Vincentian community is aware of my situation*. This helped the beggar to be treated like a person. Then we made known through different media the situation of the Roma in their countries of origin. There were positive responses, but there were hateful ones as well.

In 1999 the Vincentian community and the mayor of Graz agreed on an assistance project for the Roma. Forty beggars would do simple jobs in the different parishes. By way of compensation, the Council agreed to pay a minimum amount to “beggars who work.” Then came a media campaign with the slogan: *Graz for beggars’ wages*. As a result the city of Graz withdrew its support for the financial plan. The project has continued, but since that time it has been financed by donations.

Spurred on by several businessmen, the police took further actions which finally resulted in the expulsion of some beggars from Austrian territory. The reason given was: *Grave danger to public order*. On 13 December 2002, the Vincentian community lodged a complaint before the Supreme Tribunal of Austria and received a favorable sentence. Since that time the police know they cannot act as they wish against these poor people. The beggars feel protected by the Vincentian community and have the surety of being provided for during their stay in Graz. They receive food and lodging from us.

⁴ Vincent, of course, refers to Vincent de Paul; but it sounds close to “Winzig” which means “small.”

The majority of the beggars of Graz come from Hostice, a town in the district of Rimavska Sobota. About 800 people live there, half of them belonging to the Roma minority; the other half is a Hungarian minority. The Vincentian community has acquired a house in the area. Its sign reads: *Vinzi Dom* or *Vincent House*. Together with the Slovakian aid organization META, the house takes in girls who drop out of school and cannot find work. There they learn sewing, take a course in computers and are prepared, thanks to short programs, for employment in the tobacco harvest, etc.

A former beggar from the area who was helped by the Vincentians in Graz was elected mayor of the town. Together with him and with the guidance of *Vincent House*, the Vincentian community tries to give life to the town. Some reporters from Austria visited the town and wrote about the poverty of its inhabitants. Those people know they are no longer forgotten or lost. They see how others help with their struggle. A reporter from the Austrian magazine *Profil* wrote on the occasion of his first visit there in 1999: *Hunger on the edge of well-being*. In his judgment life had ceased to exist in the town.

Today there is once again life in Hostice. It can hardly be called impressive. But with the inhabitants being backed by the Vincentian community of Eggenberg and with ever stronger ties between them and Graz, there is hope their life is not going to be lost quite yet.

(JOSEPH CUMMINS, C.M., translator)