

OPAVLOVCE NAD UHOM, Slovakia
N the night of Feb. 7, Tibor Tancos
and Vlasta Tancosova were walk-
ing along the edge of the street
with their 12-year-old son, Tomas,
when a drunk in a blue-green Honda ran
them down with his car. Tomas survived,
but his parents died.

The police in this northeast corner of
Slovakia aren't so efficient in the best of
times, but in post-Communist Slovakia,
open discrimination against the Roma, or

Gypsies, is the norm. Rather than arresting
the suspect, a well-known Slovak business-
mafia type, the police have instead threat-
ened family members and have beaten
some of them, the family says. The grandfa-
ther in the household, also named Tibor
Tancos, has complained but expects no jus-
tice. "Nothing will come of it," he said. "We
have no rights here, we Roma."

The Roma are Europe's stateless people,
at least eight million of them scattered and
mostly reviled throughout central and east-
ern Europe. While half a million Roma died
in the Holocaust, which the Roma call "the
devouring," they remain the one people in

the modern, democratic, post-Communist
Europe whom it is largely acceptable to
persecute.

Europe talks much of common aspira-
tions and a continental identity. But the
1990's made clear that Europe's most viru-
lent problem remains prejudice toward mi-
norities and their exclusion from a full
range of democratic rights.

The Yugoslav civil wars focused attention
on the dangers of a militant nationalism, but
in a misleading way. When most of Europe
goes to war with a small corner of the
continent to defend the rights of an op-
pressed people in Kosovo, it can seem as if

Europeans have learned the lesson of toler-
ance and are simply disciplining an out-
moded recalcitrant, Slobodan Milosevic.

But the worsening plight of the Roma and
the increasing intolerance in central and
eastern Europe after 1989 are bracing anti-
dotes to smugness about the post-Comm-
unist spread of shared values.

The Roma have been despised for centu-
ries as alien, thieving subhumans (or as
singing-and-dancing cartoons out of "Car-
men") with no allegiance to their countries
or the law. Their culture and habits combine
with discrimination to produce a cycle of
poverty, poor schooling, bad health care and

unemployment that are a function of preju-
dice but also feed it, contributing to crime
rates, isolation and suspicion of outsiders.

But the new Europe — west or east —
shows little interest in breaking the cycle of
isolation and prejudice. There is no offer of
inclusion in society, or even, as here in
Slovakia, much protection from racial dis-
crimination and violence, whether from neo-
fascist skinheads or the police.

The treatment of the Roma — including a
denial of asylum in countries like Britain,
Belgium, Denmark and Sweden — raises