

A People Tolerance Forgot

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serious questions about the basic principles of postwar Europe that the European Union says it holds dear. Even in NATO-occupied Kosovo, some 100,000 of the 125,000 Roma have fled or been forced to flee by the victorious ethnic Albanians, who say the Roma collaborated with the Serbs.

The Czech president, Vaclav Havel, once noted, "The Gypsies are a litmus test, not of democracy but of civil society." If so, the post-Communist world is failing the test.

Today, nearly 10 percent of Slovakia's five million people are Roma, yet they are largely excluded from the mainstream of normal life. According to a newspaper poll, 60 percent of Slovaks favor their segregation.

Slovakia and Romania are particularly vile to this minority, which represents about 8 percent of Romania's population. But Hungary and the Czech Republic discriminate widely too, especially in education and em-

ployment. According to another newspaper poll published last year, some 39 percent of Czechs still say that "only force is effective" in dealing with the Gypsies, while 15 percent say that the skinheads do a good job keeping them in line.

Roma say almost unanimously that their lives and circumstances are much worse now than under Communism, when discrimination was at least limited by ideology. The end of the Communist pledge of full employment — no matter how artificial the work in a world where it was illegal to be jobless — has meant widespread and sometimes total unemployment throughout central and eastern Europe for Roma, who are the first to be fired in post-Communist "restructurings" and who are rarely hired again for anything.

"Life is much worse for Roma than it was in 1989," said Claude Cahn of the European Roma Rights Center, an independent foundation based in Budapest. He cites official Slovak statistics showing that 80 percent of

Roma children attended kindergarten in 1989-90, while only 15 percent do today.

OVER half of Roma children in Slovakia are in "special schools" intended for the mentally handicapped. In the Czech Republic, a Roma child is 15 times more likely to be labeled retarded than a non-Roma child.

Vincent Danihel, the Slovak government's representative for the Roma, said estimates for Roma unemployment today are "between 90 and 100 percent," which he admits stems as much from "intolerance, ignorance and xenophobia" as from any lack of skill or education.

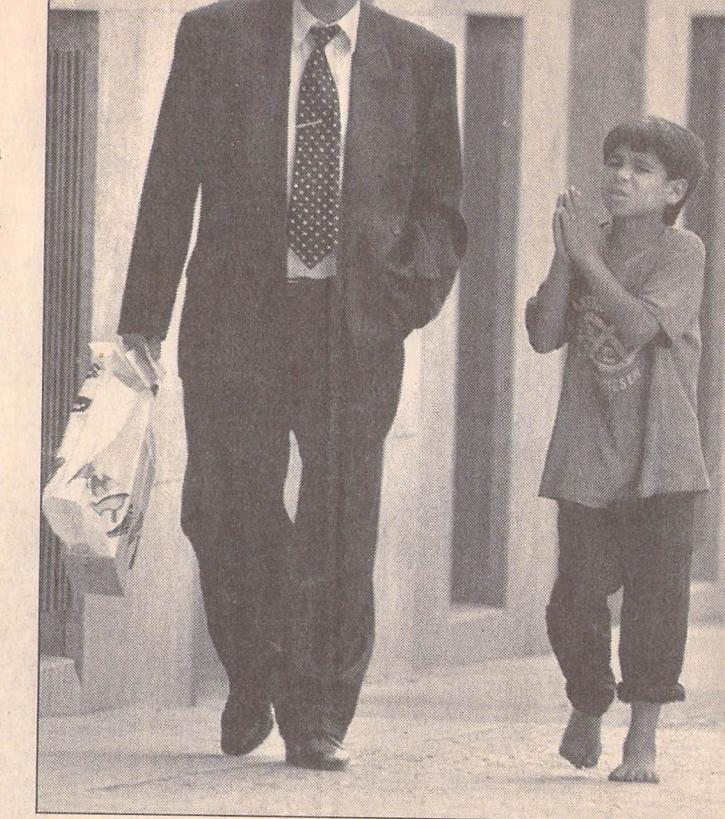
Communism had its horrors for Roma, too: In preaching assimilation, it repressed Roma language and culture, paid women to be sterilized as a method of birth control and often took Roma children from their parents to raise them in orphanages, said Miroslav Lacko, a Roma activist in Slovakia. Even today, in Romania's wretched orphanages, nearly 75 percent of the children are Roma.

Today, the economic hopelessness and a widespread tolerance for skinhead and police violence against the Roma have prompted a large exodus, at first to Canada, that began about 1997.

Ondrej Gina, head of the Roma Cultural Union in the Czech Republic, said about 20 percent of the Czech Roma have left, and many thousands have left or tried to leave Slovakia, Romania and Hungary.

But the numbers have overwhelmed international goodwill, and Western countries have responded with new visa requirements, deportations and the tightening of immigration and asylum regulations. In a report about to be released, Amnesty International says British officials are making it more difficult for asylum seekers to reach Britain, are making conditions for Roma unpleasant while they await judgment there and are "almost automatically" rejecting their appeals as driven only by poverty rather than persecution.

"The Roma have no reason to stay where they live," Mr. Cahn said. "They are excluded from employment. Their housing is an-



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palling. They are hated. Their schooling will get them nowhere. They are not components of the societies in which they exist. But Western Europe deports them back. They are what the Nazis called *luftmenschen*, people of the air, and it's hard to know on what they live."

All European societies regard the darker-skinned Roma as alien and not a component of the majority population, which tends to be monoethnic, Mr. Cahn said. Still, the desire of countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland to join the European Union has brought new pressure to improve the lives and treatment of Roma at home — so they will stay there. But in general, Roma-directed programs are vague and badly financed.

The tone of Slovakia's new government is far better than that of its nationalist predecessor, whose prime minister, Vladimir Mečiar, called Roma "mental retardates." But after 18 months, Mr. Danihel still speaks of

Behavior associated with poverty often reinforces prejudices against the Roma. A young Roma boy pursues a businessman in Prague, the Czech Republic.



The New York Times

The stereotype: Impressions of Roma, or Gypsies, hark back to prewar images.

plans and studies and strategies and approaches. "It's all talk and nothing happens," say the parents of the dead couple, Tibor and Vlasta Tancos.

Tibor's father said his whole family used to work, but now no one has a job. Skinheads force the Roma to stay in their houses at night; restaurants and bars often do not let them enter. When he complained to the police again, he said: "One officer said: 'It wasn't a government minister who was killed.' So what does that mean, that a dog or a cat was killed? Aren't we human?"

Vlasta's father, Anton Demeter, said: "You can't get justice here. Everybody complained about the Communists. But under the Communists, the murderer wouldn't be sitting at home right now, while my daughter is in her grave. And now we have democracy, and it's all supposed to be better. And they're surprised that Roma go abroad? And the Slovaks want to go to Europe like this?"