

# Czech Wall of Shame

By Tony Wesolowsky

PRAGUE

**M**ore than a year ago, ethnic Czechs living in the northern Bohemian town Usti nad Labem petitioned city officials to do something about the Roma, or Gypsies, living in two tenements on their street. The Czechs complained that the buildings housing 39 Roma families on Maticni Street were a constant source of noise and filth. The mayor decided the only way to mend relations between the feuding neighbors was to build a wall between them. In the early hours of Oct. 4, construction workers, escorted by police, came to carry out the controversial task.

Critics of the plan, including Human Rights Watch, say the wall smacks of racism and symbolizes the further marginalization of the Roma, who already face state-sponsored discrimination and racially motivated violence in the Czech Republic.

The wall could set a dangerous precedent. At least one other Czech town—the Moravian city of Vsetin—is debating a similar proposal, and last year an even more drastic plan was drawn up in Plzen, where Roma would have been forcibly moved to portable cabins on the city outskirts with ground-the-clock police supervision. That plan was scuttled.

More than 5 million Roma live in Central and Eastern Europe, 300,000 of them in the Czech Republic. Originally from northeastern India, they began a slow westward migration about 1,000 years ago. Historically, the Roma have been Europe's most disadvantaged ethnic group. During the Holocaust, half a million Roma were killed. Under Communist rule in Czechoslovakia, the Roma were forced to end their nomadic way of life. Police killed all Roma caravan horses and removed the wheels from their wagons. Many were settled in dreary industrial towns in the western fringes of the country. Emptied of Germans who were accused of supporting the Nazis, the towns faced labor shortages, which the Roma filled. Usti nad Labem was one such place.

Recently, Roma have been hit hard by the Czech economic downturn. In some towns, Roma unemployment is as high as 99 percent. Like most of the industrial north, economic prospects in Usti nad Labem are especially bleak. Most factories have either closed or drastically

complained to authorities of Roma loitering on the street at all hours, yelling or drunk. Mayor Ladislav Hruska says opting for the wall was not an easy decision. "This was not an ideal solution for me either," he says. "But what is going on there is a tragedy. It is a tragedy for those people, including Roma, who want to live normally." Hruska notes that the city downsized the original proposal for a 13-foot-high concrete wall to one 6 feet high and that a new playground was built for the Roma children.



DAVID BRAUCHLIN/NEWSMAKERS

Roma at the wall on Maticni Street.

scaled back production. Across the Czech Republic, the grim economic outlook has fed the rise of neo-Nazi groups that target the Roma as scapegoats.

Caught in a perpetual web of poverty, many Roma live on the dole or work in low-paying jobs. Unable to speak Czech fluently, 70 percent of Roma children are sent to schools for retarded children.

Many Roma have packed their bags and left the Czech Republic for the West. This year alone, some 2,000 Czech Roma have fled to Britain seeking political asylum. The influx of refugees has strained bilateral relations, with London threatening to introduce visa requirements for Czechs.

Problems on Usti nad Labem's Maticni Street date back to 1992, when local authorities herded Roma families unable to pay rent elsewhere into two tenements. Ethnic Czechs living nearby have

As workers arrived to begin construction, Roma families on Maticni flooded the street and lay down to form a human blockade. Police moved in to remove them. Many Roma say they were manhandled by the police and have filed lawsuits against the city. With construction dragging on for days, Maticni Street became the focal point for Roma protests against Czech racial intolerance, attracting the attention of the media across Europe. Roma say they will now picket city halls across the Czech Republic. Recently, a group of Roma met with Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.) and other U.S. officials to urge Washington to pressure Prague on their behalf.

The Usti nad Labem incident has cast a pall over the Czech Republic, which has been hailed for its seemingly smooth transition from Communism to a market-based economy. Czech officials are

most wary of the criticism from the European Union, which, like other former Communist countries, they are desperate to join. The wall went up the same day the European Union published a report on Eastern European hopefuls, which showed the Czech Republic slipping behind other front-runners to join the bloc. European Commission president Romano Prodi condemns the situation in Usti nad Labem outright, evoking images of the Berlin Wall. "Europe will never accept new walls separating European citizens from one another," he says.

But many Czechs resent what they consider Europe's hypocritical finger-wagging. They say the same Western countries lecturing them on how to treat

the Roma have a less than exemplary record on race relations. In Britain, there have been public calls to deport the recent wave of Czech Roma immigrants. The Czech weekly *Respekt* recently reported that CSA, the Czech national airline, has been engaging in racial profiling, noting with a "G" any passengers resembling Roma and then passing the lists on to British immigration officials. In October, Slovakian Roma in Belgium were sent back home after officials turned down their requests for asylum.

Czech President Vaclav Havel has been one of the more vocal government critics of the wall, but others in the Social Democrat-led government have been less forthcoming. Leading Czech powerbroker and former Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus

casts the issue as merely a squabble between a local authority and the central government to settle a "terribly complex social problem."

This lack of urgency in Prague reflects Czech society's refusal to acknowledge its own racism. Markus Pape, spokesman for the European Roma Rights Center, says the Czech government has dragged its feet over the issue for more than a year, first by denying the wall amounted to segregation and then arguing that, as a democracy, the Czech federal government was powerless to demand that Usti nad Labem rescind its decision. "If the wall was one isolated incident no one would care," Pape says. "Unfortunately, it isn't." ■



# Appall-o-Meter

By David Futrelle

## Spook.com 8.3

After years spent watching Silicon Valley capitalists make instant millions (and produce an astonishing variety of cool and/or useless gadgets in the process), the Central Intelligence Agency has decided to get in on the action—forming a nonprofit venture capital firm to invest in tech startups that might be able to develop James Bond-worthy technology to help the CIA with whatever it's supposed to be doing these days.

The agency has hired a former toy company executive to do it: 39-year-old Gilman Louie, formerly of Hasbro. Some might worry that a government agency with the CIA's, ah, reputation might have trouble gaining the confidence of Silicon Valley natives, but Louie says he's sure the \$28 million in taxpayer money he has spread around will open a lot of doors. "There's a psychological barrier people have to overcome," Louie admitted in a recent interview with the *San Jose Mercury News*. "But the valley is practical. If they can get

equity appreciation by working with the CIA, it doesn't bother them."

## Licensed to Kill 8.6

But James Bond-style gadgets aren't always a good thing to have around the house—as one Argentine man recently learned. Playing with what he thought was a pen, but which was actually a disguised gun, the 29-year-old man inadvertently shot and killed his mother. According to Reuters, relying on local reports, the man "was sitting in the kitchen of his Buenos Aires home trying to work out why the weapon would not write when it went off." Oops.

## Breaking the Chains 3.2

A rare bit of good news here in Appaloland: Alabama's revival of the chain gang as a regular part of prison life—the topic of at least one *Appall-o-Meter* item in recent years—has finally come to an end after four less than glorious years. What's appalling is the *reason* it came to an end: not because prison officials or

politicians recognized it for the retrograde travesty it was, or even as the result of a lawsuit or court decision—but because they couldn't spare the guards. Alabama Department of Corrections spokesman Tom Gilkeson told The Associated Press that his department didn't even have enough guards to properly watch those inside prison walls, much less those put on parade outside of them. "We didn't have enough people for it," Gilkeson explained. However, (un-chained) gangs of minimum security prisoners will continue to put in time on work details outside.



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