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### **Helping the Roma Gypsies Czech Out Heifer International**

Imagine you are a gypsy living in a very small, poor, subsistence-farming village. Your diet consists of potatoes and what meats you can afford to add to them. You have a family to raise, but you have no set job or means of support. You try to find food to grow that can help you get by, but you are not educated on what plants grow best in the area or when is the best time to grow them. You are not accepted by any country or other group, so you have no real chance of government help. The people in the neighboring areas shun you and think of you and your family as being thieves or of having poorly made goods. There are few people who will buy any of the handmade products you sell, so you have very little to no money for food. If you have no money for the food, you cannot feed your family, and must resort to stealing or to someone else's kindness in order to eat. So parents are faced with a very difficult choice: steal to have food for their families, or have their children go hungry. Small groups of them will go to tourist attractions like the astronomical clock in Prague to wait for tourists to look up and take pictures. That's when they will be easy to pickpocket. That is an everyday occurrence for some people living in the Czech Republic. The Roma gypsies have faced many hardships in recent years, and most of their problems actually are caused because the country is no longer communist. I have seen these people in their daily lives and have had personal interactions with them. In July, 2008, my family and I went on a twelve-day trip, with the Grand Circle Travel group, to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, and Hungary. The Romas were in every one of these countries, and we were around them in each country. In the Czech Republic we briefly visited many different parts of the country, including the Romas' living area. It seemed to be more run-down and dirty than other areas. In Slovakia we went to an open market and interacted with them there. I bought a wooden bead necklace from one of the women working there. We also went past a group of the Roma men on break from one of their hard labor jobs. In Austria the Romas were trying to sell goods like sweaters and scarves to tourists. In Hungary, as part of our trip, we ate at an outdoor area and were served goulash by the Roma gypsies and had a group of them playing traditional music and trying to sell my family cds of their music. Being around them so much made me very curious about their way of living, and made me want to know more about their lives in Eastern Europe and how they interacted with the rest of the area.

Most people would not think of Europe as being very poor. Europe is looked up to by many other areas as being wealthy and having people that are of a higher class rather than rural and poor. There is a very sharp contrast in the living conditions though. Some areas of the European Union have some of the best living conditions in the world, but others in Eastern and Southern Europe are increasing in poverty. One out of five Europeans are under the poverty line, and most of these people are rural families from central and Eastern Europe, and almost all of them are part of an ethnic minority. According to a radio broadcast centered out of the Netherlands, unemployment is as high as 70% for the Roma people. Poverty is more severe than it used to be, so it poses a much higher threat than it used to. The poverty of one area affects 5 times more people now than it did 10 years ago. The rural poverty is the worst part. It ranges from 1 to 3 times the urban poverty depending on the area, because of the distance from the Western European markets, and because of the lack of employment in rural areas. Many farms that were collective farms during communism have not been made private, which has taken away job opportunities. This leaves people with hard choices of either trying to stay rural and find some source of income, or moving to an urban area and trying to seek employment there.

The Roma gypsies are one of the biggest groups affected by the rural poverty of Southern Europe. In the Czech Republic, families have an average of about 2 children per household, but for the Romas the average is around 4 children per household, which can be more than what a Roma gypsy can afford to

feed and house in small run-down apartments. Many families have extended family members living in the same apartment so that they can afford the rent. The apartments are overcrowded and not in good condition to begin with; and when you add in the fact that these people cannot afford upkeep on the property, it makes for a very poor living environment for everyone involved. The Romas are the biggest minority, but they are also the most discriminated against and poorest of the groups living in the Czech Republic.

Strangely enough, one of the biggest reasons for many of the Roma gypsy's problems is the fall of communism in the Czech Republic in 1989. Since then the people have undergone many hardships including severe poverty and extreme segregation done in forms such as building walls around their sections of town. They even have had their citizenship taken away, meaning that they could not receive welfare, have secure employment, have set health benefits, or even obtain a passport. They were trapped in a country that did not claim or want them, and when they tried to go to other countries for help and shelter, they were either ignored or denied. Throughout the years, Roma people have faced many ethnic problems. They have been enslaved, been part of ethnic cleansing, children have been abducted, and they have been put in forced labor. If you think of the Holocaust many people immediately think of the Jews, but the Romas were also a huge minority group that was targeted. In what is now the Czech Republic they were so greatly killed that an entire dialect of the Roma language was made extinct. Other groups thought of the Romas as impure and degrading, so countries including the Czech Republic had state policies saying that women had to be sterilized so as to reduce the population of the Roma people and try to wipe them out of existence. Possible cases of this sterilization were still occurring up until 2004. Other countries passed immigration laws that forbid Romas from entering. There are still ways that they segregate the Roma people. An example of this is that Roma children are placed in schools for children with learning disabilities, just because they might not be as fluent in the Czech language as a non-Roma child. Now many census numbers for population of the Roma people are not accurate because they refuse to register their ethnicity correctly for fear of discrimination.

Many of the working Roma men do hard labor for little pay. There are many men who don't have jobs, but not always for lack of trying. So many other groups are against the Roma people that they have trouble being hired for anything. Their reputation as thieves does not help them find work either. Other people are very wary of dealing with the Romas. We, as tourists, were warned by local guides not to buy any of the products that the women sell in the cities because they are not always of the best quality from lack of materials and time.

An agricultural extension program that is tackling the Romas' poverty is the Heifer Project International. Heifer International is a group that goes into areas of extreme poverty and helps give them both a means of food and income. The headquarters for Heifer International is located in Little Rock, Arkansas and was established in 1947 by a dairy farmer who sent a heifer to Puerto Rico to help a poverty family. I had a phone interview with a 40-year volunteer and supporter of Heifer International, Bette Clark. Bette has traveled the world, helping to educate and train people on how they can use the land they already have, and the gifts they receive from Heifer, to support their families and help their communities stay strong. She explained to me in depth some of the finer mechanics of the heifer program and how it is set up to succeed. Heifer, unlike many other programs, is dependant on individuals taking small steps. This makes the program very strong and practical so that it can stay together and not fall apart. The main focus of the Heifer Program is to put the best of animals in the hands of very poor and needy individuals living in poverty stricken rural areas. Then those individuals can have a source of food and income, and can help spread the wealth by passing on the offspring of the animal they were given. The Heifer Program is built on 12 cornerstones, which make an anagram that spells Passing Gifts. The 12 cornerstones are Passing on the gift, Accountability, Sharing and caring, Sustainability and self-reliance, Improved animal management, Nutrition and income, Gender and family focus, Genuine need and justice, Improving the environment, Full participation, Training and education, and Spirituality.

Passing on the gift is the first, and main idea of the Heifer International Program. When you receive an animal from the Heifer International Program you are expected to pass at least one offspring of your animal to another needy family, and to help pass on your knowledge and education with the animal. This helps communities to become strong by sharing with each other. In my interview with Bette, she said; “the bottom line is community building, even more than it’s about animals. A family on its feet wants to share with its neighbors. We say; ‘Come as a group to us.’”

Accountability is based on communities learning to document their work and showing that they are following the rules set forward by the program. The groups set goals to help themselves, so that they are more willing to follow through with the ideas and make it work. They also must have ways to achieve their goals, so that they have a set plan. They report to Heifer personnel who make periodic visits and arrange to be available to them.

Sharing and caring is a very important cornerstone, but also one of the harder ones to achieve. The people are expected to share at least an equal number of animals as they received with other disadvantaged families. They also are expected to treat the animals kindly and take care of them the way that they are taught when they receive the animal.

Sustainability and self-reliance at first shows the people how to take care of the animals and land, but then the people must learn how to do this themselves. It helps them to become independent, so that they don’t have to rely on the good fortune of others or government help.

Improved animal management is about making sure that the animals are properly cared for. It also makes sure that families have animals that work with the environment and don’t hurt the land in any way. The animals cannot be a burden to the family.

Nutrition and income is one of the main reasons of the Heifer International Program. The animals that are brought in can provide food for the family. The family can also sell extra animal products to help obtain income. The animals can also help with needs such as transportation and manure to fertilize the land.

Gender and family focus helps to incorporate everyone in the household. It encourages shared ownership of the animals, and group decision-making. Heifer International stresses equality for both sexes when it comes to caring for and owning the animal.

Genuine need and justice is about helping those who need it the most. The communities that are chosen must decide themselves who is the poorest and needs help the most. Heifer gives priority to ethnic groups that are usually in the minority and have been neglected, such as gypsies. Then the first family to get animals from Heifer is expected to pass on the offspring to the next poorest family, and so on until the entire community is self-reliant.

Improving the environment helps people to understand the problems and needs of the land that their animals are on, and learn ways to fix those problems. They should not let the animals harm the environment in any way. Gifts of trees, to help curb erosion, are the only non-animal gift that the Heifer Program gives.

Full participation gets everyone in the community involved. It helps start leadership roles and organization skills. Everyone is allowed to be a part of the decision making process so that people can feel more a part of what is going on and be informed on everything that is happening with the animals.

Training and education helps local people learn how to vaccinate the animals, and how to properly raise them. Heifer Directors give both formal and informal trainings to make sure that the people understand how to care for the animals and keep them healthy. The communities are allowed to choose what trainings they need, and then request more in-depth trainings if needed.

Spirituality is a very interesting but necessary cornerstone. It is something that all groups have, so it is easy for people to use. It helps communities to feel stronger as a group and closer together, and helps get rid of discrimination. It teaches people to have faith in the future, and to celebrate the gifts they have been given. It also is about how those gifts can help them to have better lives.

Heifer International not only strengthens a person physically, but emotionally as well. It gives the people a sense of self-worth, which will ultimately help them have a much more bright and happy future. It helps people to trust that they can depend on themselves and be self-reliant. It offers hope of a better life to people, and lets them dream of bigger and better things in their futures. There are so many possibilities that are opened up to people of the world by the Heifer International program. It is an agricultural extension program that works, and will continue to work.

This program has already helped the Roma gypsies in other countries in the area such as Romania and Slovakia. In Romania there are projects that give goats, sheep, cattle, poultry, fish, and horses. The projects are used to help a wide variety of people, including the Roma people. When talking to Bette, she mentioned a trip that greatly moved her when she was helping set up a program in a Romanian orphanage. While she was there she learned that the children living there were not really orphans. They were living in the orphanage because their parents were too poor to be able to feed their own children, so they were sent to the orphanage in order to survive. That is something so sad that many people would never imagine it to be true. In Slovakia there are at least 5 current projects made specifically for Roma people. The Heifer Program has given them gifts of goats and rabbits. According to the Heifer International Project profile, there is a Roma settlement near the village of Velka Lomnica where “about 1,350 settlement residents live in huts, and the unemployment rate is 98 percent.” That is an alarming number of people with no income. In this settlement the Heifer Program gave rabbits to 12 children. Then they helped teach the children and their parents how to care for the rabbits so that those rabbits could be a source of nutrition and income for the family. The rabbits were chosen for the area “for their ease of breeding and value as a protein source.”

The Roma people living in the Czech Republic could greatly use the Heifer Program. They would actually be able to have a source of income, and could then help each other as a group to grow strong and happy together. They would not have to fight for jobs that are underpaid, and they would be able to afford simple necessities such as food and water. Their self-esteem would improve. They as a group could then be thought more highly of by others, and may finally be able to feel at home and comfortable in the Czech Republic. It would not be very difficult to start programs in the Czech Republic. The Roma people already have a communal group that stays together and helps each other with problems, so Heifer International would just strengthen that bond of community and make them feel that much closer to each other. Since the Heifer Program has already worked for the Roma people in the surrounding areas, it would not take very much added work to start one in the Czech Republic. There are other reasons that the Czech Republic would be a great place to start a Heifer International Project. According to the CIA government web site, the land in the Czech Republic is 38.82% arable, but only 3% of that has permanent crops and only 4.1% of the people living there are in agriculture related occupations. If the Heifer International group can help the Roma people to obtain animals and secure a farming lifestyle where they understand how to use the land through different trainings, then their country could benefit from the knowledge as well, and could grow more of their own food products instead of having to import them. That would help the economy of the country as a whole and lower the food prices, making them more affordable. This would affect everyone in the Czech Republic, including the Romas and other poor

minority groups. Using the Heifer Project International is not something that makes huge changes or that gives overly large amounts, but in the long run it changes lives and gives people more than they ever dreamed they could have.

The Heifer International Program has greatly motivated and inspired me. I have talked to others about the program and how it helps those less fortunate than us, and the motivation to help others has spread across my community. My high school human relations class is required to do a service-learning project before we can pass the class, and now we have decided to help fund the Heifer Program. We are teaming up with the foods class to have a bake sale to make money, all of which will be donated to the Heifer Program. We believe that the Heifer Program is a wonderful program because it is so easy for the average person to help others and make a difference in someone else's life. There are so many different gifts of animals that you can give ranging anywhere from goats and sheep to honeybees and chickens. It is also very easy to afford to donate to the program. Prices range from as low as \$20 for poultry, up to \$500 for a pure bred heifer, or you can pay for a share of an animal for just \$10. We are very happy to know that we actually can make a difference, and feel like we have accomplished something worthwhile.

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