

FORUM

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ISSUES • INSIGHTS • IDEAS

Hard lesson in Gypsy Business 101

Denis Collins, an assistant professor of business ethics in the School of Business at UW-Madison, was among 30 business ethics professors who spent several days this summer in the Czech Republic during the annual conference of the International Association for Business and Society.

During a walking tour of Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, Collins became intrigued by Gypsies. Collins' guide, an old woman who had been a history professor prior to the Communist takeover of what then was Czechoslovakia after World War II, described the Gypsies as a disgrace to the Czech Republic.

By Denis Collins

Special to the State Journal

PRAGUE, Czech Republic — Most, but not all, of the Gypsies here were from Romania, Hungary and other central and eastern European countries. They migrated to Prague after the 1989 Velvet Revolution opened the borders.

They did not work. They only wanted to steal or beg — their tradition/habit for centuries.

One of the only good things about communism, according to my guide, was that the political leaders refused to allow the Gypsies into the country. Alcoholics and drug abusers were thrown into jail and forced to undergo treatment.

Under democratic capitalism, the flood of Gypsies could not be stopped. Also, disenfranchised teen-agers from Germany and other parts of Europe migrated to this Paris of Central Europe, only to slowly decay on its streets. Authorities could no longer demand mandatory treatment. The Gypsies, in particular, refused to submit to any government, no matter how helpful the effort.



Collins

The worst of the Gypsies presence, my guide said, was that they detracted Czech citizens from giving to the truly needy, the working poor and the unemployed. Under communism, people knew who the truly needy were and communities rallied to share their income with them. But under democratic capitalism, the sense of community had evaporated because every one was looking after only himself or herself.

Also, nobody wanted to give money to the Gypsies and the young drug abusers because they would spend money on their vices. So young people developed the habit of not giving money to anyone, even the working poor.

After my tour ended, I decided to seek out the Gypsies on friendly terrain, a bar rather than on a street corner. I decided to pay attention to them rather than ignoring or hiding from them. Basically, I saw them as the Czech version of America's homeless.

Many of the Gypsies on the streets of Prague were drunk or under a drug haze. They did not care if they bothered others by begging or being rude to passersby. Gypsy boys and girls, age 4 and up, begged tourists for money by sticking their hands as close as possible to the tourist's pockets.

Little Gypsy girls were the most pitiful to observe. They would put on an Oscar-caliber performance of a downtrodden soul, extending their arms wide for help from tourists, almost shedding tears. Then they'd have a good laugh when the generous tourist was out of sight.

I saw one very unstable Gypsy approach the wrong group of Czechs. The teenagers knocked him to the ground, kicked him in the face and stomach, and then continued on their way. He rejected my help when I pointed to the blood spilling from his nose and mouth, and the puffiness under both his eyes. He simply preferred to lay on the ground and moan.

In the lions' den

I went into a bar called the Joker Club next to the train station. The place was owned by a Czech family but populated by dark-skinned Gypsies.

I sat at the bar, ordered a beer, and waited for the action to begin. Although I was the only one who spoke complete English at the bar, Madonna and Michael Jackson blared through the radio system.

Sitting near the video poker machines and pool tables were five Gypsy men, wearing baseball hats backwards. They all stared at me and then smiled when I stared back.

Three Gypsy women soon appeared in the doorway. My guard went up. One pressed her heavily lipstick mouth on the palm of her hands and blew me a kiss. I wiped the imaginary kiss off my face and she laughed.

Another, wearing a tight, sparkling blue dress, approached me. Speaking Czech and using hand language, she demanded that I buy her a beer. She reminded me of the Gypsy girls begging on the streets, only she was about 20 years older.

I demanded that she buy me a beer. She laughed, ordered an 80-cent bottle of beer, and told the bartender that I would pay.

I shook my head no. Frustrated, she reached into her purse to get some change. She sat next to me and rubbed her hand through my beard and her body against mine. I got up and changed seats. She laughed and went away.

The Gypsy men watching from their table applauded. The obvious leader waved me over to join them. We all shook hands at my request and hugged at their request. They bought me a beer. I couldn't understand their Czech, and they couldn't understand my English, but I thought it was obvious that we understood each other.

Two of the men spoke very limited English, so we mostly communicated with hand signals. I then bought the five men a round of beer. Next, the Gypsy leader bought all of us another round of beer. During the next two hours, we played pool and video games. I tried to explain that I wanted to understand how Gypsies lived.

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One drunken Gypsy tried his best to say in English, "We are savages; we eat people, we steal your money. You should run away and hide from us. We are dangerous; we are to be feared!"

When it was time for me to rejoin the group of American scholars at a restaurant for dinner I gave the Gypsy leader and his primary disciple each a 100-crown note (about \$4) and got up to leave.

As I moved my chair back the woman in the blue dress returned. She said she forgave me for being so rude to her and told the guys to buy me one last beer with the money I gave them. After the beers arrived, she demanded that we link arms and have a final toast.

All of us sitting around the table stood up, linked arms, laughed, and struggled to guzzle the final beer. More handshakes and hugs. We agreed to meet again the next day.

I left the bar in high spirits, both spiritually and physically. When I got back to Center City I reached in my rear pocket for my wallet and found nothing. It had been there just a few minutes prior to leaving the bar. I was sure that the Gypsy woman snagged it.

I was dumbfounded. After three hours of heartfelt camaraderie, they saw me merely as someone to be exploited, someone to be played with and then robbed. I sat down against a wall and started to cry. I couldn't stop crying, no matter how hard I tried. My trust had been betrayed and their actions were insincere.

I thought about running back to the bar. If they needed more money I would share some of mine with them, but not all 4,000 crowns! What I really wanted was my credit card, health insurance card, and the pictures of my wife and children.

Now people stared at me, the newest Gypsy populating the streets of Prague. My head was spinning from too much alcohol. This must have been part of their plan. While sober, I could buy them drinks and develop trust. When I became drunk, they could easily pick my wallet. My stomach ached.

If the communists were still in charge a soldier could have locked me in jail for many years. But then again, if the communists were in charge there wouldn't be any Gypsies and I probably wouldn't have been in Prague.

A Czech woman who had given me directions earlier now asked if I needed help. All I could say was that Gypsies had stole all my money and credit cards. She seemed surprised that I didn't know this was their trademark.

I tried to explain that I thought my relationship with them was different. She laughed and offered to take me to a cafe. I said I just wanted to sit and cry. My legs felt too weak to stand.

About a half hour later, I began

searching for the restaurant where I was to meet the other business ethics professors visiting Prague. They were just finishing their dinner and heading for a bus to take them back to the Czech Management Center.

One of them noticed my distress and asked what had happened. I started to tell her how the Gypsies had robbed me, but began to cry again when telling her that I had been their friend for many hours. Several people offered to give me money, but I wanted to be penniless for a while. It was the appropriate punishment for being so naive.

Ready to forgive

That night I couldn't sleep. I kept reliving the entire episode. I tried to defend the Gypsies who had befriended me. The robbery was either an expert scam they'd done many times, or it was the willfulness of the woman in the blue dress. I preferred to believe the latter and finally fell into a sound sleep.

The next day, Sunday, I ventured back into Center City and immediately headed for the Joker Club. I wanted to meet the gang again and say I'd be willing to forgive them if they would return the photograph of my two children.

I wanted them to understand my personal life. I also wanted them to become consumed with guilt. They wouldn't expect me to come back again, so I would surprise them with my presence. But I would not drink with them again. While on my way back to the bar, I actually swore off drinking for a while.

I wasn't sure what I'd do if the woman in the blue dress was there. Maybe I would hug her, forgive her, and ask for my photographs back.

Only two Gypsies were sitting in the bar, one of them among those who had been there the previous day. When he saw me, he smiled. We hugged and shook hands. He offered to buy me a beer and I politely declined.

He shrugged when I asked about the woman in blue. When I indicated I'd had my pocket picked, he indicated he hadn't done it.

I told him I just wanted my pictures back. He expressed his sorrow for me, went up to the bar and ordered me a beer, which I once again refused.

Two other Gypsies walked into the bar, already drunk. I got up to say goodbye and one of the new Gypsies embraced me. Although I knew he couldn't understand English, I told him my wallet had already been picked, so he was out of luck.

Next, I headed for a police station to report the crime. A Czech

policeman, who could barely speak English, said he wasn't going to do anything other than to tell me to go to the American Embassy on the other side of the river.

Talking with another cop on the street, I learned that the police were unsure as to what strategy to pursue regarding the Gypsies. Some police wanted a massive round-up. Others feared this would lead to a Gypsy revolt within the city and be extremely poor public relations for tourism.

I eventually made it to the embassy, only to find out that it was closed on Sundays. On my way back to the hotel I stopped in one more time at the Joker Club. I am a strong believer in the power of guilt and wanted to remind the Gypsies as often as I could while I was in Prague that they had momentarily broken my spirit.

The Gypsy was there. He smiled, we hugged, and then walked out of the bar together. There were no other Gypsies in the bar. We shook hands and went our separate ways.

The following day I got through to my wife in Madison to cancel our credit card and send a Moneygram so I could pay my hotel bill and eat. A few hours later she called back to inform me that \$1,500 had been withdrawn from my credit card account, plus several purchases made at Prague stores. Not bad for three hours of work.