

Further Reflections on Roma in Český Krumlov

from the First Freely Elected Mayor,

Jan VONDROUŠ

At our recent CESR winter seminar, after a tour of the Old Town of Český Krumlov, participants joined in a question and answer session in a local coffee house with the first freely elected mayor, Jan VONDROUŠ. The following is a reflection from this session, with information given by the mayor.

The earlier lecture and tour from Bryce BELCHER and the session with the former mayor were extremely inspiring, providing a first hand witness to conference participants of successful development work, involving both the minority and majority, as well as showing how efforts, throughout history, influence integration and development today.

I. Sustainable Development

1. Past and Present

Left a ghost town after the Second World War, no significant efforts were made to rebuild the old town of Český Krumlov. Eighty percent of the town was destroyed in 1990, as no efforts of urban renewal had been made to the area during the Communist regime. After the Velvet Revolution, one of the first challenges the townspeople faced was to learn how to develop the town in the current economic situation.

Then, in retrospect, as a result of their efforts, by 1995 and 1996, eighty percent of the houses in the old town were rebuilt and the town thrived off both the tourist industry and the paper mill. Today, it is one of the most important centres for tourism in the Czech Republic, with a population of about 14.500 and with between one and two million tourists annually.

The development process did not occur randomly, but the town had a relatively good master plan that was created in 1988 and

adapted since. In 1993, an American professor visited Jan VONDROUŠ in his office, saying he had a development plan and would need one hundred thousand US dollars to implement it.

The mayor said no. He came back in 1994 and asked for sixty thousand US dollars, and Jan VONDROUŠ said no again. Then, he came back a third time, and offered to implement the plan for free, as he now had a foundation to sponsor his strategic plan. This plan was then implemented and lasted for three years, also aiding in the renewal programme.

2. In Progress

In the renewal process, the town of Český Krumlov did not receive help from the state in the beginning. Jan VONDROUŠ considered this to be their greatest help at first, that the state did not get involved but allowed the town the opportunity to design the renewal process itself.

The property in the former town centre belonged to the state, under the communist system, but in the spring of 1991, this property was given away for free. In this way, the town was given ownership over its historical centre, but privatisation was made increasingly difficult as the buildings were over one hundred years old and in desperate need of repair.

UNESCO was very helpful in this process, leading the Czech government to grant subsidies for new apartments for the city. In the early nineties, in efforts to renew the town, foreign investors were not allowed in.

Instead, loans were given by the town administration to townspeople to rebuild their own homes and businesses. In this way, in addition to providing low cost loans to support residents and small businesses, the money and interest stayed within the town, creating more sustainable funds for continuous renewal projects.

The townspeople themselves benefited even farther, as they were given head starts for their businesses. Rather than having to compete with foreign franchise restaurants for business, for example, they had the opportunity to learn to run their own restaurants themselves.

Today, in the old town, one only finds businesses owned by locals, with no interruptions from multinational companies (there are no glaring yellow McDonald's). In addition to its robust tourist industry, the paper mill, outside of the town, also provides jobs to townspeople and is another locally owned business, keeping the profit within the locality.

Today, all of the proceeds from the town's parking lots go to the Český Krumlov Development Fund, which continues to work on the sustainable renewal of the city.

II. Minority Integration: A Unique Heritage

After the Second World War, many Roma families settled in the run-down historic centre of Český Krumlov. As the town was left empty after the war, the Roma were among the founding families.

Other young Czech and Slovak families also settled there, but often on the outer edge, in the hills around the centre. In Český Krumlov, there was no “ghetto”, or separate Roma community; Roma housing was in the city centre.

For Jan VONDROUŠ, it was never a question of whether or not the Roma would be involved in the development of the town; he had grown up with them and they were a natural part of the community.

Other factors also helped to make the integration smoother. In the 1960s and 1970s, a couple from Praha came to work with the Romani people in the town, and this set an important precedent leading to the successful integration and development occurring in the 1990s.

In this way, the initiation of efforts for the integration of the Roma did not begin with the new town administration after the revolution, but the efforts throughout the previous twenty years helped the cooperation later.

All was not easy, however, and Jan VONDROUŠ did face opposition in his efforts to involve Roma in the development process, thus also insuring that the Roma would not be excluded from the social structure and community.

When he started the discussion about the town's technical services, desiring to give the cleaning responsibility for the old town to a Roma business, he had to be firm, insisting on his role as mayor.

Others in the council at the time eventually agreed with his decision. In the beginning of these development efforts, he met every week with community leaders from all groups, all working together to plan the development processes.

For Jan VONDROUŠ, with a background in sports himself (namely volleyball), it was essential that the development efforts be cooperative and that all important decisions receive support from the majority of all groups involved.

The brief summary above was reported by Rachael WEBER (weberrl@gmail.com), from the information given from Jan VONDROUŠ in response to participants' questions.

