

The poor will always be with us

by: Savio Wong

There are beggars in Europe.

"Do you have any spare change?" A young man with a forced smile accosted me while I was curling some seafood linguine on a fork. I shook my head slightly and pretended that he was not less than a foot from me.

"But I am asking you very nicely." He was wearing a grey T-shirt one size too small for his slim body. I also noticed his running shoes were mismatched.

I shrugged my shoulders and he walked away to the next table on the sidewalk on this lovely, warm Saturday evening. Soho was a great place for supper except, including this young man, I had been approached by three uninvited visitors. Although they probably meant no harm, their demeanor still made me uncomfortable. I hurried to finish the delicious pasta and vacated my table.

A few days later, across the Irish Sea, I was looking for a restaurant recommended by my Dublin guidebook. I was sitting on a sidewalk looking at my map when a young woman, who could pass for any age between sixteen and twenty-eight, asked if I would give her some money to buy cigarettes.

"No," I said. Although I wanted to tell her smoking was bad for her health, I kept that thought to myself.

A few minutes later, as I got up to continue my search for the restaurant, another woman accompanied me for twenty to thirty steps with her open hand in a midst of a huge crowd hoping that I would change my mind. I did not.

After Dublin, I travelled back to London and then took a train to Toulouse in Southern France. On my first morning in the city, I visited the tourist office at The Capitole in the heart of Latin Quarter. It was a fine, sunny Monday morning. I just stepped out of the tourist office and while finding my bearings, a group of colourfully dressed people sitting on a park bench caught my eye. They had surrounded me. Four young kids probably not older than eight were pulling on my pants. Two older women, probably their mothers, one with an infant on her left arm, were tugging at my shirt. It all happened so suddenly that I had no time to react.

In a moment of shock, I shouted, "GET LOST. GET AWAY FROM ME." I then ran away quickly.

In Paris, I relied on the inexpensive and efficient Metro to get around the city. For every single trip, it was an exception if I did not encounter a beggar. Most of them were the conventional ones, sitting passively in the underground with an open hand; often a piece of cardboard with writing sat in front of them. Many of them would have with them infants or young children, usually in rags.

The more creative ones rode the subway. The time between successive stations would just gave them enough time to move from compartment to compartment. Typically, they would ask for money after playing an instrument or singing a song. A few of them simply made toneless and passionless plead. None of them could be considered buskers since there were all pathetic.

On my last morning in Paris, I was riding a RER train towards Gare du Nord to catch the Eurostar to London when a woman with a distorted and wrinkled face was visibly angry when I declined her request for money. The train was practically empty at those early hours. She wobbled down the aisle and was ignored by the only other passengers in the compartment, a

family, mom and dad and two kids all in their Sunday best. I heard her curse as she hopped off the train.

Things were similar in Barcelona. A man held a bottle in his right hand, stood in the middle of a narrow pedestrian passage, moving side to side and pestered everyone who walked by. I did not give him anything either. When I was confronted with a succession of beggars near the central food market on Ramblas, I thought I was back in Paris.

I don't remember any beggars in Prague, partly because one incident on the night I was leaving the city made other encounters insignificant. I was walking toward Hlavni Nadrazi station from Wenceslas Square on a deserted street. A man approached me and asked where he could change some money. Despite my assurance that he would have no problem finding a money changer in the Wenceslas Square area two blocks away, he continued his questions ... How about traveller cheques? ... Do they take cash? ... Where is it did you say?.... Before I realized it, his partner came from nowhere

"Show me passport. Now." The second man demanded. "It is illegal to change money without permit. You pay fine now."

I was, once again, in a state of shock. "GET LOST. GET AWAY FROM ME."

Beggars present a difficult challenge for me. I do not believe the myth that most beggars have thousands of dollars stashed away somewhere. In fact, I think the presence of beggars is an indication how people, for whatever reasons, can not function in the economic system we have created. I actually believe they have a right to beg. It is just another job. Besides, if we can tolerate phone calls from strangers trying to sell us circus tickets or storm windows, dealing with a beggar should just be a fact of life. However, the difficulty comes when they threaten my personal space. It is quite unnerving.

I did give some money. For a while, I used a quota system. I would give away about \$5 a day. But each time, as I took the money from my pocket, put it in an unknown hand, I said to myself, "there have always been beggars in Europe."