



Andy Manhart/Daily Nebraskan

Toy testers practice torture

GAITHERSBURG, Md. -- Even Scrooge, on his worst bah-humbug days, might have shed a tear at the sight.

What appears at first glance to be a jolly Santa's workshop in this Washington suburb is actually a torture chamber for Christmas toys that is worthy of the Spanish Inquisition.

Working behind closed doors in a small room stacked high with Yuletide goodies, Bob Hundemer, the Torquemada of the toy business, is gleefully wrenching the nose off a cuddly teddy bear.

Nearby, a bespectacled helper is dismembering a stack of dolls with blonde tresses, yanking off their arms without a trace of emotion. At his elbow are the shattered remains of dump trucks, airplanes and baby rattles, and bits of stuffing from disemboweled toy animals.

They are working in the toy testing laboratory of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, and their tables are crowded with diabolical devices specifically designed to fold, spindle and mutilate -- or worse.

Clamps and torque wrenches are applied to the eyes of lovable

toy monkeys. Teething rings are dropped in pots of boiling water. Stuffed bears are battered with finger-like probes.

Is this guy the Grinch who stole Christmas?

"No, I feel more like the good witch of the North," says Hundemer, chief of the two-man laboratory housed in the drab former barracks of an abandoned Nike missile site, about 15 miles northwest of Washington.

With extra help for the Christmas rush, Hundemer and his assistant, Garfield Jenkins, work full-time testing about 900 toys annually for potential safety hazards to children.

Hundemer estimates that more than two-thirds -- many of them mass-produced imports from Mexico or the Far East -- flunk the commission's stringent standards. They are either recalled for redesigning or banned from the market as unfit for putting under the Christmas tree.

Last year, 245 toys were voluntarily recalled by manufacturers at the agency's urging. Some of the worst offenders will be displayed at a Dec. 1 news conference, when the commission gives its annual

Christmas warning to parents.

By far the biggest threat posed by hazardous toys, which accounted for 142,000 injuries and a minimum of 22 deaths last year, are small parts that children can easily detach with their teeth or fingers and put in their mouths, causing choking or asphyxiation.

Most choking deaths involve balloons, marbles and other small balls, says John E. Preston, a mechanical engineer who designed many of the agency's toy-testing procedures. But balloons and marbles are exempt from government safety regulations because of their universal popularity.

"Can we tolerate the 10 deaths of children every year from choking on balloons?" Preston asked. "On the other hand, we don't believe the world is ready to accept a ban on balloons and marbles. We're perplexed about what we can do."

Hundemer, as the parent of two small children, says he has "compelling reasons" for his personal interest in toy safety.

The government can't begin to test all the 150,000 different toys on the market, he said, "so don't depend on the government to provide you with complete safety."

Czechs demonstrate; demand resignations

PRAGUE, Czechoslovakia -- About 30,000 demonstrators Sunday denounced police brutality and demanded that the government and top Communist officials resign. Authorities arrested 10 dissidents but left the marchers alone.

The government denied reports that police killed a student in bloody clashes Friday, when hundreds were beaten, tear-gassed and attacked by dogs in the largest demonstration in 20 years.

Sunday's rally began with a few thousand protesters gathering on downtown Wenceslas Square, but the crowd grew to 30,000 as demonstrators reached Narodni Street, where white-helmeted riot police beat demonstrators Friday.

"We don't let you murder us!" the crowd chanted. They also chanted such slogans as "Write Truthfully," "Free Unions" and "Jakes to the dustbin."

Milos Jakes is the hard-line leader of the ruling Communist Party and, unlike other East bloc leaders, has resisted reforms orchestrated by Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

Jakes is joined in his intransigence by Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's leader.

About 2,000 demonstrators split away and crossed a bridge over the Vltava river in an apparent attempt to reach the hillside presidential residence.

Police did not interfere in the march but did block access to the hill. The smaller group eventually returned to Narodni Street, from where some 10,000 streamed back into Wenceslas Square.

Those arrested included Petr Uhl, a leading human rights activist, who was charged in connection with the spreading of news about the alleged death of Martin Smid at police hands Friday. The state news agency CTK said he was charged with "the crimes of harming the interests of the republic abroad and spreading alarming news."

Uhl, a veteran member of the Charter 77 group, is associated with VIA, a dissident news service active in several East European countries. If convicted, he could be sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison.

Dissident sources in Prague and Vienna told The Associated Press that police also arrested Drahomira

Drazska, who said she was Smid's girlfriend. She claimed he was killed by red-bereted special police Friday.

Some prominent dissidents such as Hana Marvanova of the Independent Peace Association, Emanuel Mandler of the Democratic Initiative and Anna Sabatova, a senior member of Charter 77, also were arrested, the sources said.

Protests also took place in at least eight East German cities Sunday and in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. As in Prague, the demonstrators demanded democratic reforms but also punishment of recently ousted leaders. Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria and Erich Honecker in East Germany.

Plainclothes police in Prague prevented several reporters from attending a scheduled news conference on the Smid case in the home of Charter 77 spokeswoman Dana Nencova.

According to dissident sources who spoke on condition of anonymity, police picked up some of the arrested people as they left or sought to enter Nencova's apartment.

The Washington Post reported Sunday that a 20-year-old man named Martin Smid died after being beaten by two riot policemen near Wenceslas Square on Friday. Police notified his parents that he had died in an accident, according to the newspaper, which quoted friends and witnesses it did not name.

"The information we have so far indicates that it was an unfounded rumor," government spokesman Miroslav Pavel told the AP.

Informed unofficial sources said there may be three people named Martin Smid in Prague, so the identity of the alleged victim was difficult to determine. Authorities spoke only of two Martin Smids.

Czechoslovak state television on Sunday evening showed the two, both identified as students of mathematics at Prague's Charles University.

The first one was said to be from the town of Beroun near Prague. The other was identified as a Prague resident, who said "I was shaken" when told of the report he was dead.

The first Martin Smid said he did not take part in the protest, while the other said he did. The broadcast said he would be allowed to continue his studies.

East Germans continue protesting Communists

DRESDEN, East Germany -- Tens of thousands of protesters in at least eight cities braved icy winds Sunday to keep the heat on the Communist leadership, despite open borders and the election of a reform-minded Cabinet one day earlier.

Nearly 3 million East Germans crossed into West Berlin and West Germany between Friday and Sunday, the second weekend since the government opened borders to the

West, border police said. Most were just visiting for the day.

Ferry service across the Elbe River, which forms part of the border, resumed Sunday at Hitzacker, about 80 miles southeast of Hamburg, for the first time since April 23, 1945.

In another change, the official ADN news agency reported that the roles of the party and the government in East Germany's armed forces will be separated.

ADN said 50,000 people participated in Dresden's first officially authorized protest rally. Other estimates of the crowd size ranged up to 100,000.

"Lord don't forgive them because they knew what they did," said one banner in the southern city, making a biting play on words from Jesus Christ's agony on the cross.

In East Berlin, thousands participated in an unauthorized march from

the Alexanderplatz square to Parliament, calling for sweeping reforms and abolition of the Communist Party's guaranteed monopoly on power.

Parliament on Saturday confirmed a reform-minded Cabinet of Communist Premier Hans Modrow and created a committee to study possible constitutional changes, including dropping a law guaranteeing Communist rule.

"We won't let ourselves be blinded by the open borders," said one protest banner. "Swap DDR (East Germany) for Mickey Mouse," said another.

One sign suggested, "Honecker to court," and speakers called for prosecution of the country's former leaders, including ousted president and party chief Erich Honecker, who was replaced by Egon Krenz on Oct. 18.

Man rescued from quake dies of respiratory failure

SAN FRANCISCO -- Buck Helm, the longshoreman rescued from a flattened freeway 3 1/2 days after the Oct. 17 earthquake, was mourned Sunday as a gutsy symbol of endurance. His death raised the toll from the quake to 67.

Helm, 58, died of respiratory failure Saturday night at Kaiser-Permanente Medical Center in Oakland, said hospital spokesman Ron Treleven. No other details on his death were available.

"Buck's passing pretty much took everyone by surprise because he was improving," Gary Frischer, a spokesman for Helm's family, said in a statement.

Helm had been taken off a kidney dialysis machine, and doctors had hoped to wean him from the respira-

tor that had enabled him to breathe.

His death raised the toll from the collapse of the double-deck Nimitz Freeway in Oakland to 42. Overall, the 7.1-magnitude quake killed 67 people, injured more than 2,800, left more than 14,000 homeless and caused an estimated \$7 billion in damage.

"To many, Buck had become a symbol of survival and hope," Frischer said. "For the Helmses, the thousands of cards and letters from all corners of the world gave Buck and the family strength and encouragement, and for that they are forever grateful."

Others were rescued from the 1 1/4-mile collapsed section of Interstate 880 shortly after the quake hit, but Helm was the only person to be

pulled alive from the rubble after rescue crews began searching the wrecked road.

Rescuers had given up hope of finding more survivors when an engineer testing the structure's stability saw Helm wave from inside his small car Oct. 21. A large beam that fell in front of Helm's Chevrolet Sprint saved it from being flattened.

The 220-pound, 5-foot-10 Helm suffered a fractured skull, fractured neck, three broken ribs, nerve damage to his leg and kidney problems caused by dehydration. He already had diabetes and high blood pressure.

Helm, a longshoreman's clerk who worked the docks in Oakland, commuted 250 miles each weekend to visit his family in the small town of Weaverville.

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