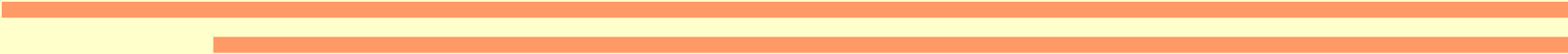# BACKGROUND
FOR ROMA IDENTITY
FROM THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL
VIEWPOINT

Spišská Nová Ves 2009

Lýdia LEHOCZKÁ

Objectives of the presentation:

1. To define background for Roma identity search

2. Relationship framework concerning correlating inter- and multi-disciplinary discourse

3. In practical level an optics of social inclusion support (communication without Roma stigmatization)

Structure of the presentation:

1 BASIC THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND TERMINOLOGY

- constructivist identity background

1.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

1.2 SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

1.3 ROMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

2 PRACTICAL LEVEL – OUR EVERYDAY ROUTINE

1 BACKGROUND AND TERMINOLOGY (constructivist notion of identity)

1.1 Fundamental categories/notions:

- **Discourse:** rational discussion on given topic, communication, etc.

- **Identity** as a „project"
  * constant generation of identity is crucial
  * tested, re-created, confirmed, updated and re-defined
  * acquired multiple forms (multiplicity, multiple layers = plurality of identities)
  * determined by social changes and processes (adaptation, acculturation, assimilation, integration), etc.
  * created by social reality

1.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

There is no universal theory for identity search

- psychological sciences maintain their primacy
- according to psychological science, definition of identity denominates **permanent internal status of reconciliation** with ones' self

Human „I" is constructed internally and externally (interpersonal and intrapersonal framework of self-definition,

It tackles the contents of „our I" and existential questions like: who am I?

1.2 SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Constructing personal and group identity in **relation to the environment** (micro-, macro- ...)

- Influences existence, functioning and objectives of persons in interaction...
- in terms of political science, we perceive regimes (totalitarian, democratic) and related identity preferences

1.3 ROMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE I.

- what are possible disputes about collective/group identity of Roma in the basic identification lines:

In terms of **traditional Roma culture** these lines contain:

- **sub-ethnical Roma differentiation** (division, definition) **–** reflection of internal division into various communities based on criteria of traditional handcrafts, ethnonyms, spiritual and religious identity, regional, territorial, language and other connotations …

- **Identity of ritual purity and impurity ...** defining borders in relation to „other" Roma and non-Roma world while defining basic attitudes, communication and evaluation of symbolic Roma purity („romipen", „romima")

- **structure of relatives** defining tribe-family identity

… as possible *reflection of plurality in Roma identity in the context of their traditional culture*

TRADITIONAL ROMA CULTURE
... a set of spiritual and material values...
nomadism as basis of identity (currently, identity of voluntary and „forced" nomadism)
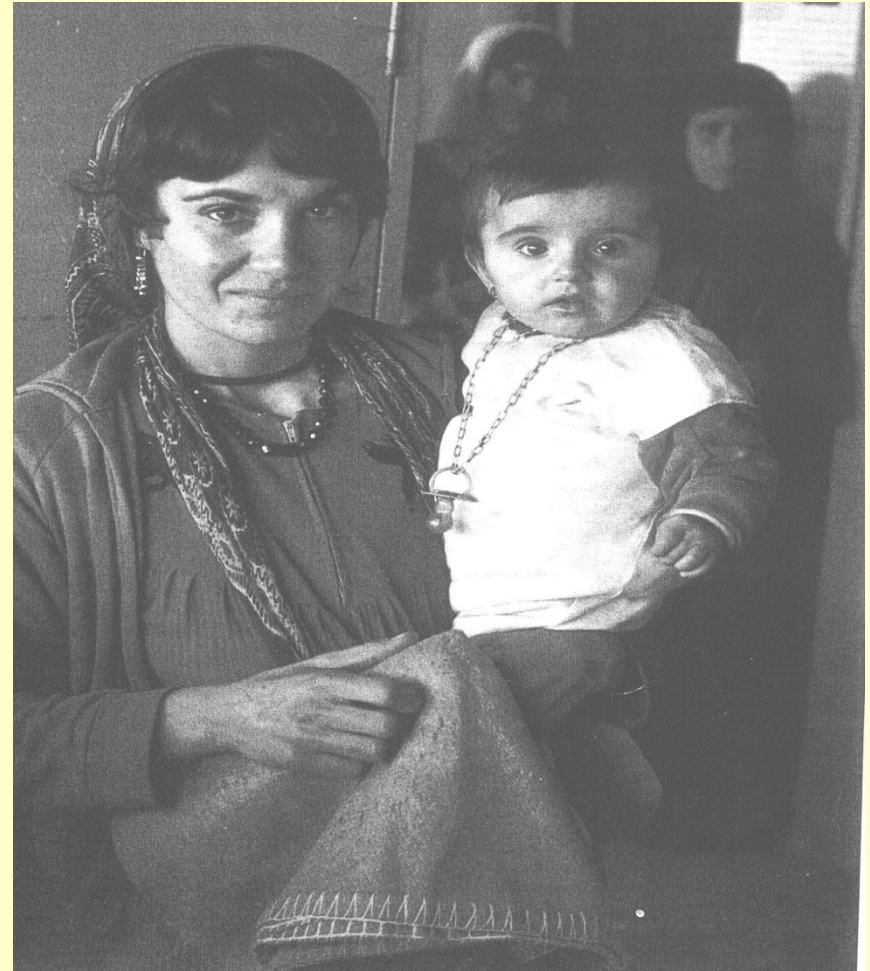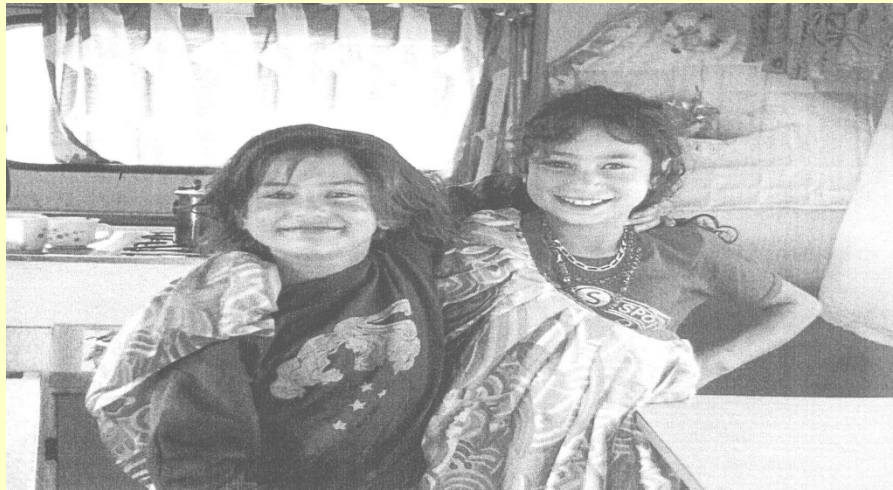
1.3 ROMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE II.

Roma national identity:
 * self-identification of Roma around the world, in Europe, in individual countries
 * their national identity

It is mainly strengthened by international and national representatives and various social events as well as strategy of overall revitalisation
- (focusing on education and Roma language, etc.)
- oriented on more significant Roma self-identification

… concrete mechanisms: ethnical conversion and diction

1.3 ROMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE III.
Reflection of social reality in Roma settlements:
- **marginal identity** ... residing in suburbs, residential and other types of stigmatisation, surviving from one day to another, poverty, resignation

…"in vivo" – socially undesirable phenomena

Conclusion of discourse on identity:
- **multivocal character of the identity notion**
- **objective in public discourse:**
- communication in precise context and relations
- use of notions and words to provide best possible response to the current situation or identity relations
- subsequent support of reflection of multiplicity and situational conditionality of identity
- alteration of fixed, stereotype schemes on Roma and their identity
- overcoming an issue of closed notional categories of „ethnicity", „identity", „culture" (from primordialism towards constructivism)
- i.e. orientation towards social cohesion of modern complex societies
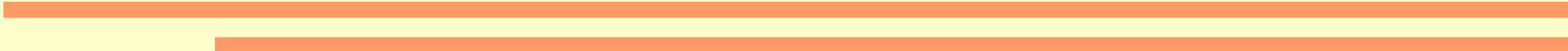
New conceptual notion (discursive) model = a space for life of citizens without discrimination

Effective practical policy (educational and social policy) – legislation – economics – communication (discourses)

= support for plurality of identities
(human, global, European, national, religious, ethnical, social, cultural, etc)

- its two basic forms:
personal and group one

2 PRACTICAL LEVEL – COMMONNESS
Optics focusing on social reality:

* Stigmatized ("ascribed") Roma identity

…   fixed stereotypes concerning values and cognitive schemes on Roma like: ..."Roma criminality", ..."Roma defaulters", … „it looks like in a Gypsy house here", ..."you look like a Gypsy", ..."it is in their blood, already" …

= reflection of life and Roma identity, simplified viewpoint (who they are, what they are)

= strengthening of various „differences" and position based on „we" versus „them"

= barriers which may weaken even self-identifying framework of Roma in relation to categories nationality

fears from various -isms ... ethnocentrism, xenophobia, discrimination, racism, extremism, etc. and connotation of Roma being a „lower caste" ...

- **New conceptual notion (discursive) approach to Roma identity in public discourse = space for identity of civil status equality**
- self-identification of Roma without barriers (without stigmatisation of Roma minority)
- and vice-versa so that self-identification does not create barriers in civil identity, etc. (ethnical separatism, particularism)

- The objective is to create space for quality of both forms (Roma and civic identity)
- one should not be let absorbed by the other, but links between these strategies and interest of identity paradigms should be strengthened (plurality of identities),
- mutually not contradictory and supportive of social discourse in Europe and its integrated identity in 21st century, etc.

Conclusion – brief overview of **opinions from the field** (from the environment of marginalised Roma communities in Central Slovakia)

Research tasks:

Focus on Roma identity in marginalised environment – on their Roma character („romipen")
its construction

What it is that creates central categories for individual levels of Roma cultural identity? What do they relate to?

Research study No.1
To be Roma means to be poor
Tribe identity (via crafts), memory of the tribe
To be Roma means to be discriminated against

Research study 2
Historical Roma identity (in relation to genealogy)
"Roma and "white ones"
What does it mean to be Roma (Gypsies) in negative connotations
To be Roma means to be poor

to the tribe, to the family
to reflection of traditional crafts

construction of Roma cultural identity in relations:

to stigmatization, discrimination
by exclusion from the world of
"white people" to poverty

CENTRAL CATEGORIES

TRIBE IDENTITY, TRIBE MEMORY
TO BE ROMA MEANS IDENTIFICATION WITH POVERTY
TO BE ROMA MEANS TO IDENTITY WITH DISCRIMINATION
TO BE ROMA MEANS TO REFLECT TRADITIONAL
CRAFTSMEN IDENTITY OF ROMA
"in vivo" – IDENTITY OF SOCIALLY NON-DESIRABLE
PHENOMENA
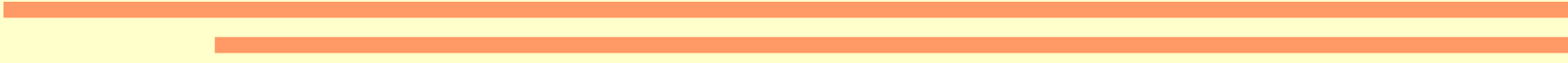
Torso of statements:

Response to the question of **self-identification with Roma nationality:**

XY-man: ..."I do not care, why not and what ... Slovaks will give me the same as Gypsies, ... it does not matter ... now, you live a life that you live, ... and what" ...

(notion of indifference to group identity, existential issues suppress it ...

Roma nationality in negative connotations (connected with feeling of discrimination):

*„Roma face difficulties trying to be included into society of white people, they put us all into one bag" ...,*

„Roma must endure twice as much as "white ones"",

„Roma may try as hard as they want, wear fine cloths, and be educated, nonetheless they will still be perceived as lower-class" ...
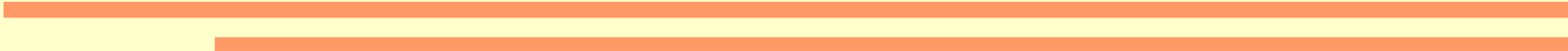
Roma nationality in historical and present context in positive connotations

Reflecting Roma pride over their identity:

* due to Roma celebrities (writers, poets, musicians and artists)
* due to widespread families nourishing their culture, customs and traditions...
* due to love of nature, freedom, unrestrained nature ... (nature heals and pacifies) ...
* due to Roma language,
* due to Roma crafts in statements like:

„Roma have been great musicians, they excelled in many industries, crafts, but mainly, they were nice people"...
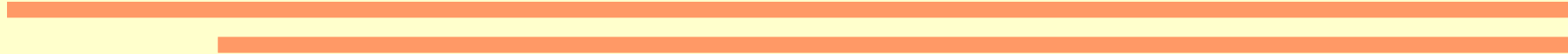
Let us deepen what connects us,
Let us get over things that divide us,
and preserve what differentiate us.

Bernard z Clairvaux (1091-1153)

Thank you for attention!