Romanipe – The Roma Identity

The all-Roma identity is denoted by the term *romipen* (romanipen, romipe, romimo, cikánství) - "gypsyhood" and reinforced by a slogan: "Sem (hem, isem) Roma sam" ("we are of course Roma", ie. we are not gadže). I have heard this expression in all the Roma groups with whom I came into contact. (Declaring Rom identity does not mean that sometimes some Roma, not being able to bear the stigma of "gypsyhood", do not pretend to be Italians, Hungarians, etc.).

The gadžo societies, for whom "all gypsies are the same" and who in their laws and policies concerning "gypsies" were not able to differentiate between the groups, (although sometimes they tried), were on the one hand (ideologically) petrifying the all-Roma identity in opposition to gadže. On the other hand, in practical life, they were strengthening the need and wish of Roma to stress the identity of their own specific group amare Roma in contrast to aver/cudza Roma (different/foreign Roma), ie. usually to Roma of other sub ethnic groups.

The amare Roma who have lived for a longer period of time in a certain gadžo community have usually achieved a modus vivendi with "their gadže ". For amare gadže (our gadže) they became naši Cikáni (our Gypsies). When for one reason or another cudža Roma have come to the region (country), the naši cikáni-amare gadže balance was disturbed and the revived antagonistic attitude towards "gypsies" afflicted all Roma without differentiation. This outer factor helped to perpetuate the law of "jati (cast)-distinction" which is rooted in the Indian caste system. Its formal manifestations, observed by Roma until today, are still very much "Indian"-like (endogamy, prohibition of comensality, avoidance of contacts, etc.).

The "jati-distinction", which in India was a distinction between different professional groups, has in the course of the Roma’s history in the diverse European environment developed into the subethnic diversity of various Roma groups.

According to Sutherland (1972), the Lovara and Kalderara in the U.S. denote a subethnic group by the term nacija . The Roma in Czechia and Slovakia have no such term, but they are still aware of the group boundaries between amare Roma (our Roma) and aver Roma (other Roma). Though according to different contexts these terms may relate to the unit of one extended family, to a "Roma settlement", or to a specific region - basically amare Roma denotes a group which shares the same Romani dialect (cluster of close regional varieties), similar habits, the same folklore, and a cluster of the same traditional professions. Aver Roma differ in all or at least in some of these properties.