

UNDERCOMMUNICATED STORIES IN BOUNDARY BUILDING PROCESSES: SUCCESSFUL ROMANIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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This text focuses on the narrations of Romani in the Czech Republic with regard to conversational topics which are usually not communicated in either conversations across group borders or in the media. The topics covered in these conversations range from everyday life issues and stories about success in employment to stories about experiences during powerful moments in the state's history that resonate for all its inhabitants. The narratives analysed in this text include the experience of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the adventures of a group of boys who tried to illegally cross the state border during socialism. The interviews were filmed with a camera. From a methodological perspective, an interesting feature throughout the project was that during the conversations the narrators did not stress their Romani identity. The dominant tone was rather that of plain interpersonal communication. Thus, these narratives can be characterised as acts of everyday communication – a mode of interaction which is not common in the communication of Roma with non-Roma – which emphasize the shared overall context in which all inhabitants of the Czech Republic find themselves.

KEYWORDS: de-ethnicization, stereotyping, Czech Republic, narratives, Romani, communication

INTRODUCTION

As in many other European countries, the Romani population in the Czech Republic is widely perceived as poor, uneducated and socially excluded. However, these characteristics should only be seen as corresponding to the situation of some members of the Romani population (approx. one-third). Many Romani have educational and professional qualifications, and experience economic conditions that are in fact comparable to those of the majority population. As a result, when members of the Romani population talk about such issues as experiences of everyday life or important historical events, they often narrate their opinions in ways that are strikingly similar to those of other inhabitants of the Czech Republic. While the Romani population is often spoken of

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primarily in ethnic terms, it is important to note that these people's everyday lives relate to their ethnic specificity only occasionally. Their lives are primarily interwoven with their families, work and the pragmatics of everyday life, issues which tend not to be given adequate voice in either academic or popular articles investigating the Romani. This text focuses on the stories of selected actors of Romani origin. In so doing, it aims to demonstrate this de-ethnicization of everyday life through practical examples of stories about work, emigration and other everyday experiences.

The first section establishes the conceptual framework by describing the historical development of research on narratives. It shows how views of narratives have developed over time, particularly with regard to how narratives are contextualized in terms of their function of creating intergroup boundaries. In the second section of the text, the Romani minority in the Czech environment is briefly introduced. This section also clarifies the reason why this text was written. In the third part, I discuss the project in which the data was collected, and at the same time talk about the methods of data collection. The fourth, empirical part presents a selection of narratives with my short comments. The fifth section completes the text with some reflections on the further implications of this study.

BOUNDARIES AND INTERGROUP INTERACTIONS IN CONVERSATIONS

The topics of how intergroup boundaries are both maintained and bridged are issues that have long been at the forefront of the interests of social anthropology. There is a long tradition of working with the processes through which people conceptualize their boundaries, exploring how they generate intergroup mental maps and cement these through narration. As Fredrik Barth already noted, construing of intergroup (ethnic) boundaries is connected both to the self-ascription of identity and to the ascription of identity by others: "A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background" (Barth 1969, 13). In this connection, Barth went on to state that although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, "they are not the sum of 'objective' differences but only those which the actors regard as significant" (Barth 1969, 14). The significance of markers demarcating intergroup boundaries is negotiated within the group and also occasionally between groups. Here, Barth touches on a topic that has long-term continuity: intergroup boundaries are, among other things, created by concepts, words, labels and agreements generated both inside and between groups of people who are interested in maintaining them. Negotiations about boundaries can sometimes be useful: on other occasions, they increase social tensions.

Reflection on the conceptual processes through which boundaries are created also has a long-standing tradition. Johann Gottfried Herder, whose work became a source

of inspiration for ethnocultural nationalism, was well aware of such ideas. However, his reflections stress that the boundaries between communities are natural: they are shaped by the long history of a community and its coexistence with other groups, and thus are internally rooted. According to Herder, a language as it is spoken cannot be written in letters, and thus a foreigner who does not live in a group will not learn its language in its entirety and richness. In order to strengthen his argument, Herder demonstrated connections between animal sounds and human speech in way that was very modern for his time, opposing the then common idea that speech is a divine gift. However, the notion of the longevity and continuous development of language also led him to assert a close connection between environment, activities, thinking and oral expression: “Every generation² will introduce a house and family into its language ... The organs of speech and, therefore, language, are influenced by climate, air, water, food, and beverage” (Herder 1927, 99).

According to Herder, therefore, the differentiated activities, perceptions and life experiences of actors lead to linguistic differences between groups; however, in Herder’s conception, these differentiations do not contradict the universal foundational role of language for humans. In Herder’s essay, we perceive a strong emphasis on actors’ practical experiences and authenticity; less emphasis is placed on intergroup communication, the malleability of groups and their intertwining, all of which are essential features of the modern industrial society on whose threshold Herder stood (notwithstanding the fact that plurilingualism is also common in pre-industrial societies). The mechanisms involved in these latter aspects of human development would be found in the germinal features of intergroup connections described in the work of Robert Redfield more than 150 years later (Redfield 1953).

Herder’s groups use only one native language. However, even the native language has many variants. For instance, Herder does show that the language of men and women in one group is not exactly the same. Compared to one’s own language, other languages are foreign. In contrast, the contemporary individual masters not only a whole range of varieties of his/her own language, which he/she mixes dependent on the situation, but he/she is also familiar with a whole range of topics related to the particular varieties of language used in different communication situations. This notion was particularly developed in the 1960s and 1970s, receiving an overall theorisation in the variationist sociolinguistics of William Labov (1966; 1970).

Variationist sociolinguistics focuses mainly on the variability of language in different contexts and less on the message’s content: the form of the message and its variability seem more important than what it actually has to say. Qualitative sociology, on the other hand, has long paid particular attention to content. In the concepts of qualitative

2 In the original German, “*Geschlecht*”. It is also possible to translate this term as “race or kin”, and these terms are also used in other translations.

sociology, the meaning of a particular act of communication is closely related to human practice and experience and to an individual's inclusion in a social group. In the works of the Chicago School, analysis of the content of speech and the practice of utterances frequently coincide. For example, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* is an interesting early example of working with the content of a message as well as with the speech of speakers. In the book, Anderson shows how street life gradually creates a new vocabulary connected to stories that can only be experienced in this specific environment (Anderson 1923). In this regard, the work of George Herbert Mead, and in particular his reflections on the role of temporality in organizing attitudes to relationships, also has a great influence (Mead 1972, 125). However, it was not until the interactionist conception of sociology and the new ethnography that emerged after the Second World War that work with the contents of acts of communication accrued a new dynamism.

Erving Goffman's symbolic interactionism provided great inspiration in the period after the Second World War. Particularly, his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* makes it possible to understand people's attitudes in everyday situations in terms of acting. People prepare the stage for their performances, look for props and rehearse collective shows. From this point, it is enough simply to take the step of bringing interactionism closer to hermeneutics and of engaging the researcher more closely in the dialogue with the actor in order to attain the perspective of the contemporary anthropologist. Among the many authors who have shaped the current perception of dialogue between actors and researchers, Foucault, Bourdieu and Hymes are particularly important. In terms of the current text, I would like to highlight Paul Ricoeur and his *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988), which has been fundamental in adding a hermeneutical dimension to many approaches and is a work whose contribution in this area has been praised many times (Ezzy 1998). I would also like to mention a work that is less frequently quoted, that of Paul Rabinow's *Reflection on Fieldwork in Morocco*, which provides not the first, but a very subtle and malleable approach to the topic of power relations. According to Rabinow, the roles of actor and researcher in terms of dominance can change and intermingle. Rabinow suggests that the researcher does not simply choose his informants, rather the informants also choose him, and in certain situations they have power over the researcher and power over the information they provide (Rabinow 1977).

The efforts of the actors concerned to control the situation that the researcher encounters and the data that he or she collects have been described many times (for instance, Whyte 1943; Shore 1999; Kandert 2004). Indeed, in Rabinow's account we can already encounter a detailed and revealing description of data manipulation, the influence of the informant's personality on his/her qualitative data collection and the relation of key informants' profiles to that of the researcher. On the other hand, it is clear that the researcher also plays various roles and can tell various stories when interacting with actors. Simultaneously, at least in the first phase, the researcher engages

a given actor as a potential source of specific information or as a teller of a particular type of story. For instance, the actor in his/her turn knows that he/she is interviewed because he/she has witnessed the Holocaust, a fire or a sporting event. If actors are asked several times about a single phenomenon by different researchers, they may get the feeling that this particular event or experience is valuable, and they will style themselves in the role of narrators of this frequently requested story. In other words, they will use this story to boost their own sense of identity. This process of moving part of one's story to a central role in one's own identity can be all the stronger and more effective if the individual is addressed by people from ruling circles or from the media, for instance through the intervention of a documentary filmmaker behind a camera. In these processes, we see how professional collectors of narratives also create professional natives. Such mutual influences have been described, for instance, by Frederic W. Gleach in his analysis of the case of anthropological research of native Americans (Gleach 2002). However, a similar process can be identified among all communities, since they all have their spokes-people, people who know their histories and people who teach about their ethics. In our case, we could talk about a similar process of creating professional (media) Romani.

An academic's individual dialogue with a narrator has parallels with the rules guiding intergroup communication and processes of stereotypization. Andreas Wimmer described a whole range of strategies for creating intergroup boundaries. He also showed that topics articulated at the macro level are transferred to the micro-level and vice-versa (Wimmer 2013). This means that, for example, topics important for a state's communication with a particular category of people, such as poverty alleviation, unemployment, crime and integration, co-shape communication between individuals and communication that concerns other issues in the local environment. This phenomenon, which has its origins in human cognitive abilities, has been described many times. As far as ethnic categorization is concerned, Rogers Brubaker speaks of it in terms of groupism (Brubaker 2004). Groupism frequently distorts interpersonal interactions: one group attributes characteristics to individuals that they do not have, and as a result individuals in the other group come to attribute characteristics to themselves that do not apply to them. As Rogers Brubaker shows, ethnic boundaries are social constructs that, as far as everyday behaviour is concerned, do not have clear contours (Brubaker 2004). The project on which this text is based works with this aspect of communication.

ROMANI AND MAJORITY INHABITANTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

In the Czech Republic, most of the Romani population is composed of first-fourth generation Romani settlers from Slovakia after the Second World War (Powell 1994; Uherek 2007). Only a very few are descendants of survivors of the Romani Holocaust

in Bohemia and Moravia during the Second World War. There are no exact numbers of how many people classify themselves as Romani now. Demographers and statisticians have made assessments that the number of people of Romani origin is about 250,000, and thus approx. 2.5% of the state's citizens (Nesvadbová, Šandera, Haberlová 2009). However, in the 2011 census only 13,150 declared their nationality as Romani (Davidová, Uherek 2014).

Some Romani in the Czech Republic belong to poorer sections of the population, and probably about a third live in localities that may be deemed as suffering from social exclusion (Čada et al., 2015). This circumstance affecting a part of the population creates a strong stereotype in Czech society that the Romani as a whole are poor, uneducated and socially problematic. This stereotype is partly true. However, if a third of the population is poor and socially excluded, it equally stands to rights that two-thirds are not. Indeed, some Romani are also rich and successful. They live as wealthy and successful citizens in the Czech Republic or abroad, and have rich and successful lives, and experiences and worries, that are not always tied to their origin, just as their Czechness does not substantially limit the lives of Czechs. However, this aspect of the lives of Czech Romani is not apparent to the majority population. When they meet Romani in public space or see them in the media, they perceive them primarily as Romani. Romani who appear in the media also primarily do so as Romani: as members or spokes-people of their minority. This reduction of Romani experience to its ethnic dimension does not correspond to how people live. The overethnicization of the relationship with the Romani is dysfunctional. It was this consideration that inspired me and filmmaker and screenwriter Martin Pátek in compiling a project supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic called "*What you do not want to know about the Romani*".

THE PROJECT "WHAT YOU DO NOT WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE ROMANI"

The aim of the project was to present topics regarding the Romani that remain more or less hidden from the majority population. As a result, we focussed on rich, successful people, among them excellent doctors, artists, musicians and other specialists. When talking about their lives, our interlocutors focussed on private and everyday concerns, and stories that are not tied to their Romaniness. They described experiences of historical events in the Czech Republic in ways that are often very similar to the reactions of other inhabitants of this state. These people do not fall under the umbrella of the dominant ethnic stereotype of the Romani: as a result, the majority population does not even want to know about them as Romani, because they do not fit with the dominant notion of "real Gypsies". This is why the project is called "What you do not want to know about the Romani".

We selected for the project twenty narrators who declared themselves to be Romani and belonged to the middle or upper strata of the population. Amongst them were people who ran their own businesses, had regular jobs or were retired; equally, the sample included both people who lived in built-up areas together with residents from the majority population and those who lived in areas that while home to a majority of Roma population were not districts that might be termed socially excluded. We did not use any probability sampling techniques. Sociologically speaking, our sample was purposive or judgemental. It was a selection of people specifically chosen to fulfil the aims of the project: some of the narrators we knew in advance as we had already been in contact with them in previous projects; other interviewees were recommended by a project advisor representing Roma NGOs in the House of National Minorities in Prague; and others were selected during the research with the aim of having a diverse generational structure, equal gender representation and a diversity of professions. We did not aim to have a statistically representative sample: it is not possible in such a research to claim for anything more than a plurality of examples. Our goal was to show how differentiated this group is and how difficult it is to grasp it through a single stereotype.

The interviews took place in narrators' apartments or offices, or in a range of establishments throughout the Czech Republic, while some of our interviewees were also interested in filming outdoors. One interview took place, for example, in Brno in the park under the Špilberk Castle, two in a museum, one in a café and a part of one in a pub. The interviews also represented a geographical spread across the Czech Republic: four narrators were from Prague, two interviews were filmed in Brno, the second-largest city in the Czech Republic, one in Ostrava, the third biggest city, three in rural environments and the others in small and medium-sized cities. The gender breakdown of the principal speakers was 11 men and 9 women. However, these main interviewees often did not perform alone. Although there were 20 selected actors, many more people joined the dialogues and expressed their perspectives. With a number of our interviewees, we arranged several meetings. Although the aim of the project was to capture the stories of the actors we interviewed, the work with them itself also became a story. Reaching an agreement on the interview and choosing the time and place for the recording became an interesting part of the research wherein the main force-exercising component – at the outset, the academic and the person behind the camera – gradually transferred power to the actor who negotiated the time and chose the situation in which the whole performance was to take place. The actors knew that we were contacting them, among other things, because they were Romani. However, especially during the dialogue, we tried not to communicate with them as representatives of the Romani population. We constructed the dialogues on other bases. Mostly, this proved a successful strategy, because these were interesting and active people who told compelling stories which usually did not have much to do with being Romani.

For the purposes of this article, I have selected three narratives: one is related to work abroad, a second to emigration and the third to the experience of a significant historical event. While many other topics also emerged during the course of the interviews, I have selected these three narratives on account of their diversity and of the universality of experience implied by their stories. Equally, all three themes – successes at work, unusual adventurous stories and experiences connected to frequently mentioned historical events – were recurrent motifs during the conversations.

DEETHNICIZED NARRATIONS

Work Abroad and Work Achievements

A subject of frequent stereotyping of the Romani population in the Czech Republic concerns their low employment status and, more widely, a perceived unwillingness to work. However, Romani often conceptualize themselves as hardworking people.

The interview I am describing took place in a terraced house in Ostrava. The narrator was at home alone. He led us into the living room, and told us his stories under the portraits of famous Marxist leaders, including Marx himself, on the wall behind him. After the interview, he took us to his basement and showed us a prototype of a device that he is developing in order to significantly save energy. The narrator, now retired, was born in Slovakia into a blacksmith's family. He trained as a locksmith in Karlovy Vary, a regional town in western Bohemia, but spent most of his life in Ostrava, the third-largest city in the Czech Republic, located in the north-eastern part of the country near the Polish border. The narrator has always had an affection for cars, so initially he took a job in Ostrava's public transport company and went on to become an excellent employee. However, he was not comfortable with his colleagues' behaviour, and denounced some of their illegal practices. The police investigated the cases, and M. Č. found himself in danger of suffering revenge from colleagues. As a result of this growing conflict between himself and his co-workers, he finally decided to flee to Germany. He had joined the Communist Party in what was then Czechoslovakia in 1955, but now found himself in West Germany, a country conceptualized as hostile by the communists, and needed somehow to establish himself there and make a living. The following sequence from the narrative is the story of a clever man who in the end turned out to be a little lucky in life:

I emigrated; I had no choice. And now, when I, a communist, came to Germany, I saw a completely different life... I arrived in Frankfurt and got off at the train station, and I went through the subway where the girls were, with all the lights and the bars, and I was just saying to myself: "Where in the world have I come to?" I can't even talk about it. Then, if I could, I would have gone back, but I couldn't. And so, I stayed on there. I couldn't speak a word of German. ... But I had the luck of the

unfortunate. I had been there for only three days, when I got a job. By a stroke of luck, I encountered a Czech German: his name was Němec.³ He was from Český Krumlov.⁴ They had been officially evicted,⁵ and he ran a petrol station there, right next to the railway station. So, I immediately got to my feet and I told him, "I'll sweep your forecourt." And he says, "Many people would like to sweep here." And I say, "I don't want anything, just not to sit around." ...!⁶ "So, here you go, can you change the clutch?" So, we became friends.

What is striking in the account quoted above is the stress on the commonality of the experience of Czech migrants to the West, regardless of their ethnic origin or political affiliation. This commonality was based in shared deficiencies: a lack of local networks, the inability to speak the local language, a tragic past in one's homeland which it seemed would never be seen again, and a desperation to become part of one's newly found home by means of having a job. In the face of such misfortunes, all emigration stories tend to downplay the boundaries existing in the motherland. Such experiences also had an emancipatory power to free the Romani from ethnic stereotypes and the crude classifications that these imply, such as that of being an unreliable worker (or, in the case of this narrator, equally from the strictures of his communist worldview).

We recorded a relatively large number of similar stories. In particular, stories from a business environment were often markedly free from stereotypes, because employees, as well as entrepreneurs, all face similar problems. In other words, business and employment are governed by a specific set of rules, wherein the quest for profit is the dominant motif. Although economic and racial discrimination do frequently intertwine, in our research we encountered examples where the work environment opened up the opportunity to overcome ethnic barriers to social advancement: employees and employers appreciate efficiency, reliability, skillfulness, the ability to manage difficult situations, diligence and perseverance over questions concerning one's background.

Emigration and Life in the West

Living and working abroad was a significant topic amongst the narratives we gathered. For our narrators, experiences abroad are usually conceived as events full of twists and turns: foreign regions are shrouded in mystery. The more distant and inaccessible a foreign region is, the more questions arise. This was all the more true of the countries west of socialist Czechoslovakia when the border was open only to a limited number of Czechoslovak citizens. At the same time, however, cultural production was constantly flowing into Czechoslovakia from Western countries, thus increasing the attractiveness of these countries as potential places to live. The youth of that time was primarily

3 "Němec" means German in the Czech language.

4 A Czech town in South Bohemia, near the border with Austria.

5 He meant evicted from Czechoslovakia.

6 The actor made a grimace of surprise.

influenced by western music and film production, which enhanced young people's desire to emigrate and live in the better conditions these destinations promised. Not knowing exactly what was behind the borders as information about life in the West was distorted, there was plenty of space for speculation. As a result, fleeing abroad was a big topic for the majority of inhabitants, and especially for young people in search of a better perspective. In anthropology, Frances Pine has dealt with this topic with regard to the example of Poland – where the more difficult economic situation made the preconditions for migration more significant than in Czechoslovakia and caused the issue of emigration to resonate in Polish society even more strongly – by exploring migration through the prism of hope (Pine 2014).

Our research shows that the theme of emigration was non-ethnic: it touched the Romani population in the same way as it did the Czech majority. We recorded a nice story in Děčín, a town of north-western Bohemia not far from the German border. The Děčín region was thus adjacent with former socialist East Germany. The narrator is a musician and to this day an admirer of many western bands. During the socialist regime, he could hear the music of foreign bands, but such bands did not perform in Czechoslovakia. Therefore, he decided to go west with his brother and cousin and launch such a band. They did not reach the border at the first attempt. The following excerpt from the narrative describes their second attempt. Unfortunately, they did not realize that they were fleeing to the wrong, East (socialist), Germany:

Then, we tried again. My cousin, he was older, he was eighteen [and he said then, full of excitement]: “And ladies, now you are afraid! Come with me, it will work this time.” And he took us to the village of Žleby⁷ [unaware that this is not the home of Western music and freedom of which they dreamed]. And it is still the East. Hřensko,⁸ right? And down that alley, it was hell, and we walked down that alley, with backpacks like spies. And there is a train station, and we got about a hundred meters towards that train station and [we saw] a “gazík”⁹ behind us. It was the customs officers or whoever, and [they started to scream] right away, “What are you doing here?” [We answered:] “We just arrived.” [Then the officer said:] “You wanted to run across the borderline.” [And he continued to interrogate:] “And where are you running to? [Wherever it is, the fact is that] you're running. Here you will be driven three hundred meters, or five hundred, and then the Germans will catch you there.” [Meaning that we are fleeing to East Germany which will immediately imprison us or hand us over to the Czechoslovakian authorities]. So, he frightened us that, to put it bluntly, we were all fucked up. [He] threw us back into the gas station and sent us off to the central railway station in Děčín.¹⁰ And I said, “I'll never try again!”

7 A village in North-West Bohemia nearby the then East German border.

8 A little spa town in the border with the then East Germany.

9 Gazík – a little military car, the Soviet equivalent of a jeep.

10 A bigger town not far from the German border.

In this account, the striking feature is again the commonality of the youthful experience of life under a strict socialist regime, regardless of the ethnicity ascribed to the story's main proponents. All young people across the region dreamed of freedom and direct access to Western cultural production, and encountered similar experiences imposed by closed borders and a constant surveillance.

Experiences of Significant Historical Events

As both a majority population and ethnic minorities live in a single state, they usually experience the same historical events. They are similarly affected by economic collapses, wars, disasters and other events that have a marked impact on social life. However, different communities do not always communicate about their shared experiences. In addition to social events, these various communities are also influenced by the same mass culture. Many interesting memories relate, for example, to the events of 1968: to the invasion of Soviet troops into the Czech Republic. This was a very traumatic experience for a large part of the population of Czechoslovakia. In particular, the subsequent process of "normalization" – the re-establishment of a dependence of life in Czechoslovakia on Soviet governance – marked a whole generation as strongly as the experience of the Second World War and German occupation had impacted on the previous one. The Soviet attack started on August 21st, and one of the narrators recalled how on August 23rd, the day of the general strike, she had to get to a maternity hospital on foot when all traffic was paralysed. This is the story of a pregnant mother who rushes to a maternity hospital during a military operation, and suddenly finds herself in the midst of silence. The narrator, now a multiple grandmother, told us the story on a Sunday morning in the garden of her family house after she had returned from church with her relatives.

At noon, when the general strike began, she was in the process of crossing the bridge across the Vltava River:

The trams stopped, all was silence – you could hear a pin drop – maybe this lasted for a few minutes. For us, it was like a year. And we just walked over that bridge, with the armed tanks and all. I can tell you that those who have not experienced it will not understand what the fear was like. But I did not understand, because I just told Fečo¹¹ here: "I don't know, will we stop? Yeah?" So should we stay standing and wait for the siren to sound for everything to move again? So we risked it, and when we got across, I don't know, a bucket of water would not have been enough for us. Well, that's how I made my way to the maternity hospital, and on the 29th, Liduška was born to me.

Through this story we wish to present an example of a commonality of human experience against the backdrop of a dramatic event. One of the most significant moments in human life, the birth of a child, happens here to a frightened woman

11 The name of her husband.

who faces tanks on the bridge separating her from the maternity hospital. At the same time, this dramatic event marked the lives of an entire generation of Czechoslovakian citizens as a historical moment: it constitutes a key node that is significant for the continuity of nationhood. In this light, the story of Liduška's birth depicts both that her individual life is forever tied to a political event of national significance, and that the experience of giving birth in uncertain, horrifying conditions is universal and thus located beyond ethnic boundaries.

CONCLUSION

There are a vast number of stories of a type similar to those we have cited above. Indeed, it is probably this type of story that predominates in family memories. Their essence is that they are de-ideologized, de-ethnicized, and are silent and useless for creating clearly defined group borders and political identities. Despite the fact that there are so many of them, these narratives are occluded by a discourse wherein the Romani act as a minority characterized by low education, poverty and unemployment. From the stories themselves, it would be unclear who the narrator is in terms of ethnicity or nationality. Of course, national rhetoric can be incorporated into them and they can become expressive of group identity: but many narrators do not want this. They want to remain secluded from social tensions, or they feel unable to create narratives that fit ideological models. They may even feel frustrated at feeling forced to navigate their lives between clearly defined ethnic or nationality positions. Nevertheless, their narratives have a specific ideological value precisely because they are de-ethnicized and the perspective from which they are narrated is not clear.

In the book *Ethnic Boundary Making*, Andreas Wimmer shows that the boundaries between groups are socially constructed, but that they are not all as intangible and fluid as social constructivists might imagine (Wimmer 2013). Wimmer agrees with Barth's argument that intergroup boundaries can be anchored in cultural differences, kinship ties and power relations that persist even as people move from one side of a border to the other (Barth 1969). We argue that this insight is important also in terms of understanding how the social construction of intergroup differences involves articulating a person's socio-economic situation in ethnic terms (and vice-versa). If individuals change their stratifying social characteristics, it is as if they have changed their ethnicity (or crossed boundaries). They no longer live as Romani: they cease to be Romani. The de-ethnicized stories presented in this article are essentially the stories of the majority population. Being told by Romani, they break the boundary whereby social characteristics are construed as ethnic ones. They show that the narrators' Romaniness lies in something other than the fact that they are poor, uneducated and unemployed. On the contrary, they show that the context that the Romani share with the majority

population has a strong formative influence, and results in similar stories which the majority, and perhaps also parts of the Romani minority, do not know about and often do not even want to know.

However, the people telling these stories did not draw any significant political conclusions from them. The excellent worker who emigrated to Germany returned to his home town of Ostrava after 1989. Despite his long experience in a German environment, he remained an Ostrava patriot and an admirer of communism. His children, however, studied in Germany and live in Frankfurt. The narrator from Děčín still lives in his hometown and in the end never emigrated. The family who in 1968 lived in Prague bought a house in the countryside.

In the above text, we tried to capture stories that do not have a strong potential to be articulated as boundary-making processes. They rather remain quiet on this issue. However, these are the stories that compose the daily lives of their narrators. They are essential both for their character and their uniqueness, and at the same time for their universality.

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