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**Impact of serial religious conversions on identity of Roma in Eastern Slovakia
(draft paper)**

I will focus my attention in this paper towards the chain of the religious conversions among Roma. As an example I will use one Roma family from a locality in Eastern Slovakia where I conduct my research. Using example of their religious odyssey I will describe some mechanisms that are typical for religious conversions of Roma in this specific locality. From several active religious movements and denominations, for Roma the most important are Catholicism, the Watchtower Society (Jehovah's Witnesses) and Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (Word of Life and Romani Evangelical Church called Devleskhero Kher = House of God).

In the district of Sobrance in Eastern part of Slovakia where I did my fieldwork there is a significant percent of Romani population. A part of these Roma are segregated, living apart from the Slovak majority and attracting all sorts of ethnically based stereotypical behavior and concepts. These socially excluded Roma mostly live in an urban settlement on the borders of the town of Sobrance and there are some smaller segregated settlements in nearby villages, too. On the other hand, there are many integrated Roma in the district, mostly living in villages around Sobrance. Thus, in my research locality, I can work with socially excluded Roma and Roma that tend to be integrated in Slovak majority. This diversification provides my research with good comparative material regarding the ethnic and religious self-identification of: a) segregated [mostly urban] Roma, b) integrated [mostly village] Roma, c) Non-Roma urban population, d) Non-Roma village population.

Roma in this area are mostly Catholics. However, the attitudes of Roma in the studied area toward the Catholic churches (either Roman Catholic or Greek Catholic) could be described as dynamic. At the end of nineties most of the Roma were only formally attached to either of the two Catholic Churches. Neither of the Churches were interested in Roma in the area. In 2000 the Greek Catholic church started focusing activities on Roma in one of the villages. This proselytizing was initiated by a priest who managed to raise interest in few Romani families. Gradually they started prayer groups, worshipping and set up construction of church building in this village. The proselytising activities of the catholic priest took place in the village common room, lately the local authorities have offered one room, where an

improvised oratory has been established by the church. These activities were quite successful and in two years, from the amount of 506 inhabitants of the village, 280 people, mostly Roma, identified with the Greek Catholic church. This priest was replaced in 2002 by the church officials, however, those active Romani families continued in their church going under the new priest, who was Roma himself. He now systematically tries to work with all Roma in this area, however the success is only partial.

At the same time the Watchtower society is quite active in this area. There were some Jehovah's Witnesses (non-roma) in this district already in the period of socialism, however, persecuted for their belief. In the beginning of the nineties, after the fall of socialism, they could conduct missionary activities freely without persecutions and significant number of new believers joined the movement. Many of the new converts were Roma as well. Interestingly, in the locality of my research, most of the Roma converts to Jehovah's Witnesses come from the integrated Roma.

The Charismatic movements (Word of Life) began their mission in this locality in 1997. The first "missionaries" were women who were born in the locality, but had lived in Czech Republic, where they got into contact with the Word of Life. They had met pastor of Word of Life, Ján Vihonský, who had origins in the locality, too and together they visited the area and inspired many local people – mainly via family bonds – to enter the Word of Life. Ján Vihonský, not a Rom himself, then systematically continued with proselytising in this area. He organised evangelising gatherings in local households or in rented premises. In a short period of time approximately 100 people were already been visiting these gatherings. Interestingly, only Roma converted and attended the gatherings and prayer groups.

The Word of Life, however stopped its activities in the region in 2002. There were several reasons for their departure. The pastor who lead this charismatic mission could not dedicate so much time for the mission due to some personal and family problems. There were also problems with distribution of local leadership among the most active Romani individuals in the area so the officials of the Word of Life in Slovakia decide to terminate this mission and to pass converts and prayer groups in this locality on another – solely Romani charismatic movement – called Devleskhero Kher (House of God). This movement was established in Slovakia (Košice) in august 2002 by the Roma missionary Stefan Horn, who originated in German Evangelical *Bund Freier Pfingstmeinden* (Federation of Free Pentecostal Churches) Devleskhero Kher focus on evangelising in the towns and villages of Eastern Slovakia with relevant population of Roma – Turňa nad Bodvou, Sabinov, Medzany, Pavlovce nad Uhom, Iňačovce. In Iňačovce, near Blatné Remety, is now a small group of believers – all former

members of Word of Life. Interestingly most of the converts who were active under the Word of Life did not accept the new missionary and gradually stopped attending their gatherings. The fact that the new charismatic church and the new pastor responsible for the Roma evangelical converts in this area did not have time to visit the locality frequently because he had other missions in some other localities did not help to increase and revitalise their activities. Believers had to attend church activities in Kosice (80 km of distance) and the interest of the converts, once active, gradually ceased. Presently only one prayer group continues attending the gatherings and identifies with Devleskhero Kher. Even the first missionary of Word of Life tried to help and introduced the new pastor to the believers, but it did not help much. As I analyze in this paper, the situation resulted into an interesting phenomenon – a significant number of converted individuals stayed without any denominational affiliation, formally identifying themselves with charismatic evangelicalism, however not practising their religion. Many of these people had undergone multiple conversions through Catholicism to Jehovah’s Witnesses and to Charismatic Christianity finally to end in an ambiguous state of converted-but-not-practising evangelicals without any formal confessional identity.

As my recent research indicates a portion of these people now considers its conversion / come back to Jehovah’s Witnesses, what would be, in some cases already fourth religious (Catholic – Jehovah’s Wintesses – Word of Life – Devleskero Kher – Jehovah’s Witnesses) switching since the late nineties. Interestingly, the most of the conversions followed the same path and direction: Catholicism (passive) – Jehovah’s witnesses – Pentecostals (Word of Life and Devleskhero Kher). Of course, the number of Roma had never converted and stayed within their original confession. As well, not all of them had come through all mentioned churches. These schemas are typical for all conversions:

1. Catholicism (passive) – Jehovah’s Witnesses – Word of Life – Devleskhero Kher
2. Catholicism (passive) – Jehovah’s Witnesses – Word of Life
3. Catholicism (passive) – Jehovah’s Witnesses
4. Catholicism (passive) – Word of Life / Devleskhero Kher

What is interesting and it becomes quite recent phenomenon, some of the converted and “abandoned” Pentecostals is now in the process of joining the Jehovah’s Witnesses again:

Catholicism (passive) – Jehovah’s Witnesses (JW) – Word of Life / Devleskhero Kher – JW

In order to describe and analyze this religious dynamics I have chosen the story of a particular family. My decision to choose this family is grounded in the fact that the most of the family members followed the mentioned schema in their religious conversions and switching. Furthermore, now they are not active in any of these churches, what means that they have returned to their former state of a religious passivity and ambiguity, however their passivity has undergone a deep significant transformation as I will describe later. And, finally, some of them are deciding to join Jehovah's Witnesses again.

The family consists of:

Vojtech (64) and his wife Anna (60)

Their four sons with their wives and their children: Vojto (39), Daniel (36), Tomas (27), Peter (26)

Both youngest brothers live with their parents in the same family house – each family occupies one room. Son Daniel lives with his family in a neighbouring house and the oldest son lives with his family in a close village. The family lives in the village where Roma lead similar living standard than Slovaks, being considered as integrated socially and economically. However, the analyzed family is considered to be the poorest in the village.

Passive Catholics

In the beginning of the nineties most of the Roma around Sobrance were passive Catholics. This situation has partly changed in Blatné Remety in 2000, when Eastern-catholic church started with evangelisation of the Roma in the village. Before, only a few elder people attended worships in the neighbouring village.

As the most of the people, also Vojtech, although he was baptised catholic, had not attended the church in the neighbouring village, and was not interested in any religion too much. He admits, however, that occasionally he used to read the bible:

“Here are many Catholics here. But who had attended the church? ... Nobody. Only few. ... I did not go to church. I did not know God, I did not see God, do you understand, I did not serve Him, I did what I wanted to do. But as I learned about the God, I was tamed. ... I used to go with horses, here to one woman, and she gave me Bible. And I started to read. But I did not understand it.”

Conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses

It seems that Voojtech's brother played an important role in Vojtech's conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses:

"They came to convince us. They went from house to house. And my brother was in that belief, too."

However, they did not convince him immediately. He relates his conversion with the change of his previous life. I will aim my attention towards this change later, while discussing the Pentecostals:

So, when they repeated their visits to your house, finally, did they convince you?

"At that point we wanted to go, didn't we? Because I have thought – we did so and so, we were thieves, we did lot of stupidities. And you could go there, sit with them, you could read the book, and you forgot all these things. You stopped doing it. And my son, too. And she (his wife), too. She was Jehovah's witness."

The church of Jehovah's witnesses generates many stereotypical beliefs and prejudice among the people not knowing the church. There are two stereotypical pictures about them spread to a large extent and almost all informants told me, regarding the Jehovah's witnesses, that, first, they pay money to gain new converts, and second, they have a ritual called "mixing of blood". The belief that Jehovah's witnesses pay to their converts is for sure the hyperbolism of social policy of this church. JW claim that they are able to offer minor helps to their weaker brothers and sisters, for example, with the reconstruction of their house – mainly with manual work, or could gain cheaper building material. Many non JW people (Roma including) told me, that the Roma convert to JW with the intention of JW building a new house for them, or repairing the roof on their house etc., what is still only the variation of the stereotypical picture of paying their converts. Vojtech strictly refused this idea, and he argued that Jesus did not buy his disciples, too:

“No, not that. It is not true. God does not want people like that. He would not buy people. Jesus didn’t buy anyone. They followed him because of their own mind. Alone. Yes. ... “

Another widely spread stereotype regarding the JW is the annual ritual of “mixing the blood”. It is said that after a group prayer they switch the lights of in the room where they are gathered, and men and women start to have sex – what is called “the mixing of blood”. The blood-mixing, and the name particularly, seems to resemble incest representations, but only a few informants spoke about the incest – most of the people told me that the choice of the sexual partner is coincidental – they simply pick up the closest person of opposite sex, it is dark in the room so they do not see who it is. This picture of JW as a sect conducting sexual rituals is almost identical as the picture based on the prejudice against early Christians spread in Rome among the non-christians. The extent of the spread of this concept among Roma in Sobrance is astonishing. Everyone I spoke with about JW told me about this “practise” – I did not asked them any guidance questions before. Of course, speaking to JW members, no such practise exists. However, all of JW members know that other people think they do this “ritual”. One elderly woman that was the JW member almost nine years, even told me, that when she had converted to JW she did not believe the “blood-mixing ritual” existed, but still she was somehow curious whether it might be true. We can notice the traces of the first prejudice regarding the social help among JW in her testimony, she alone was the object of more gossiping about reconstructing her house:

“I was baptised after the two months. Because they (JW) used to come here, I liked it, I saw that there is nothing bad present, because many people talked, that JW switched the lights off, and that men grabbed another women, some said that even their mothers. And I had decided to prove that myself and to see it myself. But it never happened, because we learn from the Bible that adultery is wrong, thievery is wrong, hurting others is wrong, we need to help each other when we see that someone is weaker, if there is a widow with her children we have to help her, financially or with something else.”

The family of Vojtech had spent 5 years among Jehovah’s Witnesses. The church activities were organised by the Romani Elder brother and there were 30 – 40 believers in that time, two third of that amount were Roma:

“He used to come here, to our house sometimes, to teach. He, he is Roma. ... He is Elder brother of the congregation.”

Did you attend regularly?

“Every Sunday. On Thursdays we had small gatherings at our house and in Sundays we were at his (Elder Brother) place. And occasionally we went to Michalovce. To the sport hall...”

Now Vojtech associates the church of Jehovah’s witnesses with hypocrisy of their members:

“Lord praised Jesus, because he gave life. To all. And who can save us? Only Lord. We were Jehovah’s witnesses for five years. Five years. But it was no good, so we came (converted) here (they still identify with the Pentecostals, although they are not active any more). Because everybody did what he pleased. He (the Elder brother) spoke that he had God, but it was not the truth. Yów, there are many like that. But God is only one. Who obeys him? Who serves him? Nobody! Nobody! Its necessary to obey God, it is in Holy Scripture. You need to keep it.”

The main reason he left this church was according to him the hypocrisy of some believers, but mostly, the hypocrisy of the Elder Brother who emphasised the virtue of modest poverty and the danger of gathering of material goods in his sermons. However, Vojtech’s family lived almost in poverty, all of them were unemployed, they hardly managed to make their living only from social welfare and occasional jobs. Thus, the words of emphasising the “virtuous poverty” in the Elder Brother’s sermons were not the seeds that fell into a good soil, especially when Vojtechs family were in constant existential problems. The tension stemming from this contradiction grew with the time and was fed with small details. The second-hand video-recorder played the crucial role in this conflict. The family managed to buy an older video-recorder, which indicated slight improvement in their material conditions and it was almost a symbolical artefact of the only form of “luxury” that Vojtech’s family could afford. Thus, the video-recorder, in other households in the village quite common, was an important psychological factor for them – the possession of this hi-tech object equalised the material differences between them and other families in the village.

But the possession of this video-recorder got under the criticism of the church authorities – and the mentioned the Elder brother. The video symbolises the worldly life for the church authorities of JW, it is the personification of the bounds to the world of sin. The time spent by watching video films could be much better used by the prayers or reading the Bible. Moreover, the films that were popular among Roma in the village were mostly the action and fighting movies full of violence, and, of course, also sexually explicit films meant the great danger for the religious and spiritual endeavour of the JW believers. What is important, this critique by the Elder Brother came in the same time, when Vojtech had learned

about the business activities of the Elder Brother – that was something much more contradictory to the church ethics:

“So, in the beginning it was good among the JW, yes, because we prayed a lot. But then, when they forbade us, that you could not have this and this, and they had it. And they started doing these things. To set their fortunes. They forbade us this, that we could not have lot of money. Who does have a lot of money now? Do Roma have lot of money? But I had a video. But I did not have such tapes, like here some people, those porns or such. Just proper films. And he came, and told: ‘you can’t have this!’ You can’t have this! You can’t have lot of money. And he started the business. He started the pub, secretly, you understand. And he told me! And he is the Elder Brother.”

The description of the situation by his son Vojto, as he told me about it three months before the previous interview, is almost identical:

“When we were those, Jehovah’s Witnesses, all my family, father, mother, brothers, all. Five years we were there. Jehovah’s witnesses, but they lied to us. They say that they do not gather treasures on earth. So, how should I tell you? We were new to this church, we did not know about these things. And we did not know about God too much. But we were hungry for the Word of God. That is the expression, yes. And then we had bought the video. And one came, and told us, that we could not have it. And father replied him. But then we learned, that they have such wealth, you would not believe. And then I started researching the Bible, and I found out that they exclude some verses from it.”

This tension then lead to the explicit conflict when Vojtech came to the gathering. He interprets the situation:

“I left JW when I saw that he started his pub. But he was my teacher, at that time. Here. And I had drunk, because my brother was killing his pig that time and I was helping him. And I went to the gathering. And I told everyone. He was just preaching his sermon. And I said, ‘put the Bible down, because you committed a sin. I have committed a sin, too, but yours is worse than mine. Why do you take it? It is the Holy Scripture. Put it down!’ All were silent. Nobody said a word. ‘Why, why?’ He asked. ‘He forbade me this and this, and he could do these things? Does he preach the sermon to you? About God? Isn’t he afraid, that something bad can happen to him?’ Because God sees! And then he came, and asked ‘did you drink?’. ‘So, you see, you can tell that I am drunk, and that is why I came, drunk! Because you drink, too, and you tell people not to do that. And you do that! We learn from you!’ He blushed. Finish. He left. And I returned home.”

This conflict had been concluded by “mutual excommunication”. The Church of JW excluded Vojtech, at the same time Vojtech with his family had pointedly left. It should be said, that Vojtech was not the most exemplary member at all. He was and still is a heavy smoker, he did not refuse drinking alcohol, mostly in family celebrations etc. His split with the JW was definite. He describes it using these words:

“Well, I could not speak when I was sober, I could not explain it well. ‘You do this. And you forbid to us what you do. And we learn it from you. Don’t we? Do we serve God? We do not serve God! We serve the Devil!’ So I have explained it to them.

And then you converted to Word of Life?

“Almost six months. I haven’t been learning (active in a church) for six months. But I’ve kept the Bible.”

So for six months you had not had any faith?

“But we read the Bible all the time, we have not left the faith. I said to them that I stopped being the Jehovah’s Witnesses, good bye.”

Interesting is, that his second son Daniel, who lives with his family in neighbouring house, stayed in the Church of JW, however, after a period of time, he was suspended, too. He still identifies himself with the JW and had never converted to Word of Life. Vojtech interpreted the reason of JW suspending his son, after a pause for thinking, in this way:

“They measure it strictly, these Jehovah’s witnesses. Strictly. You don’t leave it, your problem. They can’t drink (alcohol). They will suspend you for one year, or for six months. For six months you can’t touch the Bible with your hands.

This religious conflict that Vojtech had experienced with JW had not influenced the relationship within his family, especially the bonds to his son Daniel living next door, who stayed in the church. They meet daily since they are neighbours, communicate on a practical family basis. However, from time to time there are some intense theological debates in the family, and I have witnessed exactly that kind of debate. The point is that the actors on both sides of these debates, advocate those confessions in which they are no longer active any more: Vojtech – Pentecostalism and His son Daniel – JW.

What is it that makes them to identify with their former confessions? The whole family is not active in any religion for a longer period of time (since 2002) – their need to attend the religious activities is very feeble now (if they wish, they could). But there are some moments, that triggers their need to identify with a religion and the identity that they identify

with becomes their primary identity for the moment. In the case of Vojtech it is his identification with Pentecostals. When this occurs, the feelings could be very strong, it is demonstrated by the fact that two years after leaving the Pentecostals they still use the present tense to describe this confession “we attend”, “we meet”, “we believe”, they still call their former pastors “our pastor”. What is more interesting, they were not able to tell me the exact name of the church, and when they wanted to refer to Word of Life or Devleskhero Kher in their communication, they used the terms like “that our faith”, “our truth”, and asked me the question “are you in the same truth than we are?” It was obvious that it was mostly my presence (unknown Non-Roma, student studying religious life) that triggered the needs of self identification with their former confession, and that this intensive identity lead to theological debate with the former Jehovah’s witness, Vojtech’s son Daniel.

Devleskero Kher and the Word of Life

Vojtech’s family converted to Word of Life among the first Roma in the village. His oldest son, together with some of the newly baptised converts, started to attend the Bible school and prepared systematically to positions of leaders of local Bible study groups. They organised the gatherings once a week and the pastor Ján Vihonský visited them frequently, and occasionally the head pastor from Bratislava, too. However, the initial zeal had weakened after a period of time and in the area stayed only a few devoted Roma believers faithful to regular gatherings.

The interesting thing about this substitution is that the Roma believers did not accept the Roma charismatic pastor at first. They highly esteemed the authority of Non-Roma Ján Vihonský, everybody referred to him only in diminutives (‘our Janko’, ‘our good pastor Janko’). When he introduced to them the Roma pastor Stefan Horn, they did not accept him at first. Vojtech’s son describes this situation in these words:

“... Word of Life is dismissed now. But we thank to God that God has sent us one guy, you understand, and our pastor Janko arranged it. ... And he that came here, that Stefan, he took over all the paperwork. And this pastor Stefan, he dismissed everything, the local leaders.... When, I think a year ago. But we did not know him. We did not know that he is God’s servant. ‘And I do not know you at all,’ I said to him. ‘We know only our pastor Janko,’ I say, ‘thanks

God for our Pastor! He is Gadžo among the Gypsies, you know (...) He is Gadžo. He is God's servant, perfect man. ... He has also the wife, and the children, too. He is good."

Devleskhero Kher did not accept the positions and the Bible schools of the local leaders passed under the Word of Life. That is what Vojtech's son refers with the dismissing the leaders. They had to attend the Bible schools of Devleskehero Kher, then, but actually no one did.

The conversion of Vojtech's family

When Vojtech left the church of Jehovah's witnesses he visited few evangelising gatherings organised by Ján Vihonský in the village. His eldest son had converted as first. He comments his conversion with these words:

"Pastor Janko Vihonský. He came, and started speaking. But we were harsh on him at those times. Because we were Jehovah's Witnesses, weren't we? And he started studying the Bible with me and I believed! I started to believe, but not so much! And then he invited us to Humenné (the city 50 km north). Something like congress. (...) And he started speaking now. And I was sitting and he started speaking about Jesus, about God, about Holy Spirit, about all that Jesus had done for us. And I was thinking about it. And suddenly something like touched me! Yes, very lightly, yes, and he started calling for the redemption. And I even do not know who lifted me. I do not know who lifted me from that chair. And my heart spoke to me: 'Go!' Go for the redemption! And I did not ask anybody, my wife, my parents, anybody! I just stood up and went for the redemption. And he preached the prayer of redemption. And I have put this prayer deep into my heart. And since that I started to attend (gatherings)."

His father converted later, but he also describes intense emotional experience from the contact with the Holy Spirit that changed him completely:

"And I saw like the pastor laid his hand over a man, and prayed over him. The man fainted. He fell down. I thought for myself that I will go and try. I am stronger than his hand, am not I? And it was not true. (...) Yes, as I went there, I told him I want to accept Jesus, I will admit him for my Lord. But she (his wife) did not want, at first. So I went to the front and I said 'Janci, pastor, I want admit Jesus! I want myself to be redeemed. In the name of Jesus.' He

laid his hand over me and started to pray and I did not even noticed when I was down on the ground. (...) The Holy Spirit worked. Holy Spirit, do you understand? Because every man has also the evil spirit. Every man. He dwells inside, and makes evil deeds. Evil deeds. With every person. Every person, he does not know what he wants to do. Because of this or because of that. To steal, or something else. 'Go, go, do it!' But when you have Holy Spirit, you do not commit that! Because he protects you."

Many converts to Pentecostalism describe this qualitative moral transformation as radical break in their lives before and after their conversion. The radical process of the religious change is documented by all informants by an example of the baptism in the water. The most important for them is that after the sinking into the water their old spiritual essence stays in the water and the new person, filled with God's presence, comes out of the water:

"The priest (Catholic) only pours the water, but we sink into the water! Old man stays in the water, but outside comes the new man – Christian!"

"It is not good that I would return to my old life after the baptism."

We should understand the significance of the baptism among the Roma converts to Pentecostalism in according this testimony:

"An infant can not understand God's Word! It is necessary to know the God's Word at first and after that the man can be baptised!"

Such understanding of the baptism fundamentally demonstrates the significance of the religious change of these Roma converts. It is documented that in many Roma communities the Christian baptism of a child does not primarily represent the act of entering the church, but many Roma perceive the baptism as an act, that protects the child against various negative magical and superstition impacts. Even the passive Catholics, who do not attend church rituals let their children be baptised by the priest. There were all children baptised in Sobrance, even though most of their parents have almost deprecating attitudes towards the local Catholic church. Micheal Stewart (1997) described the similar situation in Hungary. It is obvious that Roma thoroughly care to baptise the newly born infant. Therefore, the claim that it is useless to baptise the infant indicates the intense religious change.

“There is born something completely new in the heart of the convert during the conversion and it changes his life. The sinner is reborn in unique, majestic manner” (www.devleskherokher.sk). Vojtech’s son speaks about his personal experience regarding his religious change. In a way it could be generalised for the other converts, too.

“Well, they (non-believers) asked, because they could see something on us. They pointed at me, that I was drunkard, that I was scoundrel, and now, why is he so changed? And they asked how I managed to do it?”

“I have a cousin, and he is heavy drunkard. We played (music) and I decided to tell him something about God. And he came back afterwards and he said angrily: ‘And you? What a drunkard you were?’ I said to him, ‘you see, that is the word! You have just exactly said it! What a drunkard you WERE! You see, I was, but I am not now. ‘Just remember this word you have just said now. ‘What a drunkard you WERE!’ And I will say to you sometimes ‘what a drunkard you WERE!’ He did not understand what I wanted to tell him. ... But I pray for him and I believe that God will help him.”

It is obvious that these informants’ descriptions of old and new way of convert’s life reflect only the ideal state. The reality in many instances differs a lot. Barbara Rose Lange, American ethnomusicologists who researched the Roma Pentecostals in Hungary says that the transformation from the worldly life to the spiritual can happen in an instant, but it is very complicated, mostly for the Roma converts who live in family and social bonds with people who are not believers. She noticed that many of the believers came through intermediate states between worldly and holy – they have converted, but privately followed the forbidden behaviour, mostly smoking or, if women, wearing make-up (LANGE 2003, s.96). It was exactly the addiction to smoking that Vojtech viewed as a serious defect in the religious life that he was not able to eliminate. He emphasises that it was problem already when he was member of Jehovah’s witnesses:

“From Jehovahists. The person that does not smoke. And you smoke, you see, and he smells it. You see. And he tells you ‘stop smoking, or he tells you to leave the room. Or, they expel you.”

He was not able to stop smoking even after the conversion to Word of Life. He realises, that his former position of “usher” (he had to welcome people coming to gatherings, to organise

the seats etc.) could have been a strong motivation to stop the habit of smoking. However, it was the church position that he had eliminated, not the smoking:

“Usher. That means when they come to the hall and we shake the hands, I welcome them. And I organise the chairs. However, I did not stop smoking, so I stopped doing it (the position). And they offered it to her (points his head in the direction of his wife). She was after me. So I stayed humiliated. Hahaha. But I never raised myself (over other people).”

The intense bonds to worldly life were a serious obstacle and it overweighed the religious experience that many believers had in contacts, as they say, with the Holy Spirit. When the Word of Life finished its evangelising activities in this area, its head pastor dismissed the local leaders. Vojtech relates this decision to the incompetence of local leaders to fulfil the elementary moral demands of church doctrine. He does not see the problem only in the leaders’ mutual rivalry – in the fact that they “raised over each other” – but also in the fact that they were not able to eliminate their habit of smoking. He probably only transmits his personal feeling of own religious failure (rationalised by his disability to stop smoking) into this latter reason:

“But the leaders did not do good deeds, you know. (...) They wanted to be elevated at once. One wanted to be elevated, also the other one, just like the apostles. As Jesus had departed, they started to argue in that moment. That one wanted to be elevated, to be a more powerful leader, so these (the local Roma leaders) were the same. Jesus preaches, that we have to be so small like children! And do not raise one over each other. ‘When I do not elevate you, so you do not elevate each other.’ So they did. Our leaders. And they started smoking, too, and they preached at the same time. When you smoke, you can’t be a leader (position). I was an usher. Usher.”

It is obvious that the departure of the Word of Life in this locality was a serious breakpoint in the religious spectre around Sobrance. There are several interpretations among locals regarding this. The converted believers usually connect the departure with their moral failures. The non-believers, when talking about the departure of the charismatic movement express their beliefs that the Church has left the region because the local people are so poor that they could not pay their tributes and the church could not earn a lot of money on these

people. Vojtech and his family attended few gatherings of Devleskhero Kher, but they were not aware of any radical change in organisation, however in that time, he and his family already had lapsed. Finally, the pastor of Devleskhero Kher stopped visiting the area, too, and he focused mainly on the villages where the small gatherings still continued thanks to charismatic local leader.

The contemporary state of the religious identity of Roma in the locality who came through all the chains of religious conversion and ended up in passivity is very ambivalent. Vojtech's family do not attend any sermons, all members of his family are considered to be apostates by other local people in the village. They themselves they interpret their own passivity in justifying manner by own moral imperfections. However, at the same time, they consciously dissociate their present state and the state of religious ignorance before the chain of the conversions. They describe the present state with the expression "we are all saved here", however it is in a perfect opposition to their own subjectively perceived moral imperfection which they would not be able to eliminate after their conversion to the Church of Jehovah's witnesses and then to Charismatics. Although, we need to be careful interpreting the expressions like "we are saved", because, it might only point to their perpetuating identification with Evangelicals – it is probably one of more euphemisms of the name of their Evangelical church like "we are all in the same truth," or "this our faith" etc. (When I asked them to which church they belong / belonged most of the people were not able to tell me the name, instead they used these euphemisms, or used the expression the non-believers used "Aleluya"). The next Vojtech's words characterise this ambiguity:

"Now we are afraid to do miracles. Because we smoke. We do not do that what should be right. We are afraid to lay hands over anybody. We are afraid to pray over anybody. Because I do not know whether I have the Evil Spirit (in me) and should he go from me to the other person? (...) Yes, the Evil Spirit. (...) And therefore we do not do it. You can do it, if you repent and God would listen to you and would forgive you those sins, and then you can pray."
— *And now, are you in any faith?*

„We have left our faith. Absolutely. (Long pause) We are alone. Jesus have not left us, but the pastors. Pastors. Pastors have left us. I tell you just one thing. There are many faiths. And there are many gods, too. Many. Even this is god. Also the cat is the god (a cat was passing

by randomly). But the right God, there is only one! Up there. In heaven. And Jesus is his mediator. He is the second god.”

— *And the Holy Spirit?*

“And Holy Spirit. But they are in one. Not more, it is not possible.”

Conclusion

The situation of Roma Charismatic Evangelicals in the area of my research is similar to the process of the religious progression of the Roma converts to Word of Life and later to Christian Assembly (another Pentecostal church) in western part of Slovakia in the village Plavecký Štvrtok. Tatiana Podolinská who described the situation there claims that the converts in the Romani community went through the development from the Jehovah's Witnesses to Word of Life and finally to Christian Assembly (PODOLINSKÁ 2003: 168). Elsewhere she points out that the pastor Ján Vihonský, who proselytised among Roma around Sobrance, describes his experience with Roma converts: “Since all of them were former Jehovah's witnesses, it was not necessary to guide them in a special way with evangelising.”

In a formal way, the direction of the religious progression is identical in both localities. However, I have not noticed the explicit understanding of their own religious progression like the transforming to a higher level of education, as Podolinska describes in Plavecký Štvrtok, or Mináč in Rankovce on an example of the conversions from Catholics through Adventists of the Seventh Day to Lutherans (MINAČ 2003: 38-39). Vice versa, I have met rather strong opposition against converts' previous denominations. It does not mean, however, that this conscious controversy negates also the deeper inner sensibility to some religious themes that evolved in the converts thanks to the chain of conversions. One of the characteristics of this type of the multi-layer religiosity is also the increased limits of religious tolerance, respectively the tolerance towards religious seeking (“everybody has his own faith”) and it is influenced mainly by own experience with the various types of religious conversions in the process of gradual conversions.

Kováč and Mann explain the inclinations of Roma to convert to new religious movements by various factors, but they emphasise, that new religious movements “offer to them new identity - the identity on the confessional basis, the identity with which they could find needed self-esteem and which makes them equal with Gadjes” (KOVÁČ, MANN 2003, p.12). Of course, also the majority churches can offer them this kind of identity, however if

Roma do not feel welcoming atmosphere in the dominant churches, they tend to look for their religious realisation in new religion movements.

Their claim could be supported by the situation I found in Sobrance: Mostly the Roma living integrated among the Slovak majority convert to Jehovah's witnesses (Blatné Remety, Nižná Rybnica, Veľké Revištia, Sobrance - integrated) – and not the Roma that are segregated or separated in camps, like in Sobrance. The integrated Roma, who have Gadjes for neighbours and communicate with them on a daily basis incline more than the segregated Roma to try to equalise those many “differences” that constantly appear in their way of life and that constantly ascribe the lower social status to them (from their subjective point of view). They equalise these differences by preferring other identity than ethnic, because the ethnic identity brings them into the serious social disadvantage. Furthermore, integrated Roma are partly free from the controlling mechanisms of life in traditional homogenous community, what is still more or less the social environment of segregated Roma. This factor is also “helpful” for integrated Roma to fulfil a religious conversion.

Hungarian sociologist Éva Blénesi, regarding the identities of Roma cites Castells, who recognises three types of identities – legitimating identity, resistance identity, project identity. “Resistance identity is generated by those actors who are in positions or conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, therefore they built trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles which are strikingly different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society. ... project identity ... social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, built a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, they seek the transformation of the overall social structure” (BLÉNESI 2003, p.205) Using this language we could claim that the integrated Roma tend to create the project identity and the segregated Roma the resistance identity.

“Social theorist Meredith McGuire (1987) regards religious conversion as a consequence of rapid social change in a world that is now dominated by pluralism (that is coexistence of competing worldviews) and privatization – the process by which certain institution become removed from effective roles in the public sphere. McGuire suggests that these processes (both of which have occurred on a local as well as a national scale) have undermined community and weakened the norms governing social interaction.” (HOLDEN 2002: 48-49)

Significant, from this point of view is the fact that recent waves of conversions among the group of Roma in Sobrance district occurs only in a communities that tend to lack firm social structure typical for traditional family-based Romani communities. The communities that undergone the decay of their traditional social structures, the communities in which traditional social control seems to be weakened. This decay of traditional values and norms could take place on several scales. Either it occurs among Roma that live more or less outside of their communities and logically, their bonds with the original communities are reduced. On the other hand, this decay of traditional culture and community is visible even inside Romani settlements and occurred gradually with relocation and displacement of Romani settlements during the period of socialism, as well as with the impoverishment, unemployment and social and material segregation in Romani settlements during the nineties. One of the effects of this social decay is also decay of the traditional family bonds and hierarchy which might result in a conversion to a religious movement. Thus, the affiliation to a religious movement can become a way of constructing new forms of social relations.