



Roma Community Centre

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RCAC fact sheet

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ROMA IN CANADA

There are an estimated 80 thousand Roma in Canada. The Canadian Census Bureau has no figures for Roma nor are there any other reliable published figures available. Canadian Roma can be subdivided into the following categories.

Original Population

Vlach-Roma: The Vlach-Roma are the most numerous, and geographically, the most widely-distributed groups of Roma today. They originated in Rumania from the slave Roma population of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania who were emancipated by decree in 1865. After this date, large numbers left Rumania and made their way to other European countries. By the 1880s, they began to arrive in North, Central and South America. Some families reached Canada via the US, others came directly from Europe and by 1910 there was a significant Vlach-Romani population in Canada. This population now comprises 5th and 6th generation Canadian-born Roma who still speak a Romani dialect and follow their traditional culture. They are integrated into mainstream Canadian society and do not constitute a visible ethnic minority even though they follow their traditional culture.

Vlach Roma are the most traditional of all Romani groups, and in Canada, the US, Central and South America, they constitute one people following the same culture. They speak mutually intelligible dialects of Romani. Canadian Vlach Roma still follow the tradition of self-employment and work at a variety of

mainstream occupations. The men often deal in new and used cars, trucks and travel trailers, real estate or various consumer commodities, or they work in a variety of other conventional occupations. The women often work as reader/advisors or psychics operating licensed parlours in Canadian towns and cities.

Canadian Vlach Roma were originally nomadic and travelled around the country dealing in horses and doing coppersmithing work. With the advent of automobiles, they travelled with aluminum travel trailers and worked on the carnivals and fairs. During the Second World War, they settled in the towns and cities and ceased to be nomadic. They then found new occupations in the urban environment. Since Canadian Roma were separated from their fellow Roma in Europe, they have had no experience of the Holocaust, nor of the Communist governments of Eastern Europe, which introduced mass education for Roma in an attempt to assimilate them. Canadian Roma (and other Vlach-Roma in the Americas) thus follow an older, more traditional culture than most European Roma, who have been subjected to massive assimilation programs.

Canadian Vlach Roma still have the family and clan structure of their ancestors and follow the Hinduism-based Romani folk religion called *Romaniya* which governs their taboos against pollution and defilement. They also retain the *kris-Romani* or Romani tribunal which governs breaches of Romani law among members of the Romani community. They are also nominal Christians and attend the annual pilgrimage to Sainte Anne de Beaupre in Quebec.

Romanitchels: Collectively, this group of Canadian Roma are the descendants of Romani immigrants from the UK, where their ancestors have lived since the 16th century. They often refer to themselves as **travellers** and are far more acculturated and assimilated into Canadian society than the Vlach-Roma. They are not as numerous in Canada as they are in the US. Romanitchels speak what linguists refer to as para-Romani, a register composed of Romani and English that is not mutually intelligible to the Canadian Vlach-Roma or Roma from elsewhere. Many still travel with cars, trucks and trailers, and live on commercial camping sites like many Canadian non-Roma. Others are sedentary and live in rural towns and villages.

Most Romanitchels estimate the travelling population in Canada to be about 20,000 at most, but there is much movement of families back and forth between Canada and the US. Romanitchels are usually self-employed and work at some conventional trade. Some have companies that employ others. Many of the younger generation are graduating from university and entering the professions. Others find regular employment and abandon the traditional lifestyle.

Immigrants

New immigrant Romani communities have been establishing themselves in Canada and have formed separate subgroups. The first large group to arrive were **Romungere**, who came as political refugees along with non-Romani Hungarians fleeing the Russian invasion of Hungary in November, 1956. These Hungarian Roma, many of whom were musicians and entertainers, formed their own communities in Canadian cities. They were then joined by others who came later as refugees from Communism. Other Roma groups, some large

and some small, also came to Canada after the Second World War, from the former Czechoslovakia, the former Yugoslavia, Poland, the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. They too have formed their own subgroups here. These groups have integrated into Canadian society, work in mainstream occupations and do not comprise visible minorities. Many of their children have graduated from university and work in the professions.

Refugees

Because all previous Romani groups coming to Canada had integrated into Canadian society without creating a national issue, the Canadian media and the public only became aware of the Roma when Czech-Romani refugees began to arrive in Canada in August, 1997. Unlike previous refugees, the Czech-Roma came as refugees fleeing persecution for being Roma in the Czech Republic. The media, for the first time, discovered that Roma were coming to Canada. They then churned out daily reports about the “Gypsy problem” until almost Christmas. Apparently the journalists were totally unaware that there were at least 80 thousand Roma already integrated into Canadian society.

The media was carried away with the mythological, racist and stereotypical image of the Romani people created by Victorian writers, and perpetuated by such recent pundits of Canadian literature as the late Robertson Davies (*The Rebel Angels*, Penguin, 1981) where Roma were portrayed as magical, surrealistic, phantasmagoric, light-fingered, characters likely to pick the pockets of Canadians in general. Based on the history of previous Romani immigrants over the past hundred years, there is little reason to doubt that the Czech-Roma refugees will also integrate into Canadian society like their Romani predecessors.