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Macedonian Roma: Hidden in Plain Sight



Quietly but ardently, Roma rights activist Saniye Jasaroski, right, works against negative stereotypes. She is organizing the Foundation for Roma Education and Equality, or FREE. Alexandra Oprea provides legal assistance to fellow Romani Americans. ©Evelyn Hockstein



Wander around the neighborhood north of Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, near the famed Arthur Avenue Market, and you could be forgiven for assuming you are in the midst of the Little Italy of New York City’s northernmost borough...

...until you see the little mosque and Islamic Center tucked in a neighborhood dominated by Italian restaurants. You hear snippets of a Balkanesque language emanating from a tiny sports bar down the street. And perhaps you realize you have stumbled on a different ethnic conclave.

It is a Macedonian Roma community, but unless you are familiar

with this unique ethnic culture, you may not recognize it.

A tight-knit group of about 350 families, the Bronx Roma are not so easy to find — and they prefer it that way. They are proud of their culture and traditions, but still wary of facing the discrimination and critical stereotypes many endured before coming to the United States. A lot of people assume they are Italian or Greek, and some Roma let the misperception continue, worried about defending themselves against negative assumptions regarding “gypsies,” a moniker the Roma dislike.

“Here, you can stay under the radar,” Saniye Jasaroski, a Roma

rights activist, said. Jasaroski helps keep the community connected by organizing cultural celebrations for International Roma Day (April 8) and through a community website, Romano Ternipe.

While Roma residents say they feel they have many more opportunities — especially for their children — in the United States,

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Shazije Jasaroska says Roma women enjoy socializing in each other's homes and sharing their food, especially traditional Romani stew, as an automatic gesture of hospitality.

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they are still fighting misconceptions about Roma people as uneducated and unemployed. Even the more benign stereotypes — that of a smiling woman in colorful garb telling fortunes for a living — do not remotely define this Roma community in the Bronx, residents say. They came to America, after all, to pursue economic and educational goals they felt were unavailable to them back in Europe.

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– Sadet Jasaroska

Defined by Negative Beliefs

The Roma people originated in India, emigrating to Europe as early as 1,000 years ago. Early Europeans presumed them to be Turkish or Nubian, Egyptian or *Gyptian*, giving rise to the name “Gypsy,” according to a historical account by Ian Hancock, Roma expert at the University of Texas at Austin. The Roma dispersed

throughout Europe, where they frequently encountered discrimination and even violence.

Many moved to Canada or the United States to seek better lives. But the individual Roma communities, while bound by a common struggle and culture, are very different, Jasaroski said. For example, the Macedonian community in the Bronx is Muslim, but other Roma are Christian — and some Roma are becoming Pentecostals, she said.

Nor is it clear how many Roma live in the United States. In 2000, the last year the U.S. Census Bureau conducted a long-form survey asking people to name their ancestral origins, just 10,036 people identified themselves as Roma. But since Roma do not have their own state, some may have called themselves Hungarian, Czech, Romanian or — in the case of the Bronx community — Macedonian. The number may well be an undercount. And the different Roma communities around the country do not necessarily communicate with each other.

“You don't have the state-level structural discrimination that you have in Europe, but you also don't have [in the U.S.] the kind of state-level recognition that you're an actual group,” explained Rutgers University professor Ethel Brooks, who is from a Roma family. In America, “the level of invisibility is much higher, and people can use that to their advantage,” she said.

In helping to keep the Bronx community together, Sadet Jasaroska strikes a balance between Roma tradition and American social norm by allowing her daughter to date — within (Romani) limits. ©Evelyn Hockstein





Fully employed, stable, the owner of two homes and active in the community as a soccer coach, Farat Arifov defies numerous misperceptions that have superficially associated Roma with the word “gypsy.” ©Evelyn Hockstein

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[But] education
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– Farat Arifov



Sustaining Their Culture

In the Mt. Carmel neighborhood in the Bronx, a middle-class conclave near the Bronx Zoo and the popular New York Botanical Gardens, the Roma are indeed invisible to those who don't know their background. They live in well-kept brick homes alongside non-Roma families. There are no special Roma restaurants or businesses (in fact, the area's “Roma Cafeteria” is an Italian dining spot). But they adhere to their traditions: close-knit families, marriage within the Roma community and a strong commitment to visiting with and helping other Roma families.

“We keep that togetherness,” Sadet Jasaroska, Saniye's sister, said while sitting around a table laden with food for their visitors at her sister's house. Such hospitality is an automatic gesture common among Balkan people. While Roma don't always like to reveal their ethnicity, “we don't want to lose our sense of community,” she said.

That means keeping to Roma social traditions. Sadet Jasaroska knew her husband just three days before

After a soccer practice, Macedonian Roma cousins Mohammed, Arifov, 12, Aydin Osmanov, 14, and Azis Neziroski, 13, display the Romani flag in a park near their homes in the Bronx. ©Evelyn Hockstein

she married him in Macedonia. She says she allows her daughter to date “but there is a limit.

“She can only date certain people,” she said, referring to keeping the Roma unified.

Shazije Jasaroska, another of the sisters, said that women tend to socialize in Roma homes, while men sometimes participate in popular community “social clubs.” Weddings are not unlike American nuptial celebrations, complete with bridesmaids and a song, *O Borije* (“Oh, Bride”).

The Roma have their own flag, created at the First Romani World Congress in London in 1971, which features an Indian-style “chakra,” or spirit symbol, in the center. The flag is unusual in the sense that it does not reflect a country, but a culture whose members have dispersed throughout many countries.

They also maintain the Romani “Kris.” A culture-based court, it does not take the place of the American jurisprudence system, but rather serves as a less formal way of consulting Roma elders to solve disagreements among families.

Unique but not Unusual

In many ways, the Roma are like any other immigrant group in America: they are eager to keep their cultural traditions but equally bent on embracing the American values and opportunities that brought them here. They are deeply upset about unflattering depictions of Roma people in such so-called reality TV shows as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, and *Gypsy Sisters*. If anything, the Roma in the Bronx are aggressively determined to counter negative stereotypes of their people.

Do Roma go from job to job and live in temporary homes? Hardly. Farat Arifov, Shazije’s husband, is an electrician who coaches soccer for teenage Roma boys. He owns not one but two homes — one of which he rents out. And what about the idea that Roma do not want to educate their children? The families here put a premium on education, noting that the girls especially are focused on their studies.

“We hope our kids will continue the lifestyle we live,” Arifov said. But “education — that is our main goal” for the children, he said.



The Islamic Center of the Bronx, where members of the Macedonian Roma community worship, occupies a corner of Little Italy. ©Evelyn Hockstein

Meanwhile, Roma leaders strive to educate the public about their culture and to stand up for fellow Roma facing discrimination. Alexandra Oprea, 32, believes she may be the first member of her community (a Romanian Roma community in nearby Brooklyn and Queens) to graduate law school. She provides fellow Roma with legal assistance.

Petra Gelbart, a Harvard graduate and principal coordinator of the Initiative for Romani Music at New York University, is a Roma activist and walking example of the value Roma immigrants put on education. And Saniye Jasaroski is organizing a new Roma rights group, Foundation for Roma Education and Equality, or FREE. An apt term, she said, for a community finding its way as a proud culture in American neighborhoods.

Susan Milligan, a Washington-based freelance writer and adjunct professor of journalism at Boston University, contributed this article.