

English

RRROMMA

Who are the Rroma?

A foreigner is a friend one hasn't yet met.

Irish proverb

The Roma in Europe

At the beginning of the 15th century, a small number of dark-skinned people, whose culture, language and way of life were different appeared in Western Europe. Neither their origins nor their true name was known. Rarely in history have so many myths been created about so few people: They were branded as thieves, witches and sorcerers, Turkish spies and as child-abductors while at the same time they were envied for their "freedom", life-style, beauty and music. The gypsies were given many names over the centuries, *Gypsies* or *Gitanos* (derived from their alleged country of origin Egypt) or *Bohémiens* in the course of the centuries (from Bohemia).

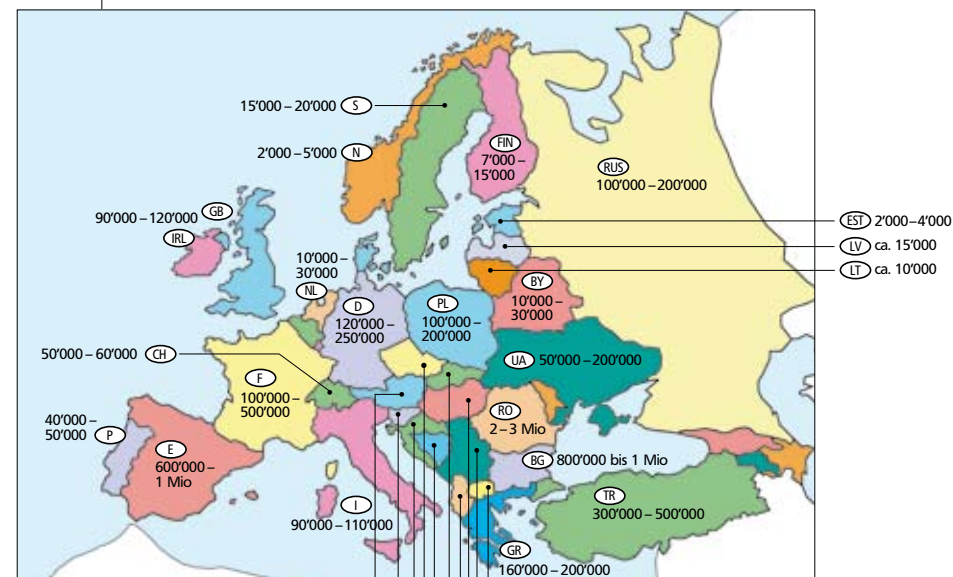
They all call themselves Roma (singular: *Rrom*, which means man or husband) although they are divided in various groups.

Belonging to a group is the basis of their identity.

Roma are a transnational European minority of Indian origin with their own culture and language. They all originated from the same wave of migration from India.

There are between 8 and 12 million Roma in Europe. The exact number is difficult to determine, as there are few reliable statistics and as most Roma are fully integrated, for example in Western and Northern Europe, in Poland, and in Russia, while in some other former communist countries such as Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, many Roma live in ghettos.

In Romania, there are between 1.5 and 3 million Roma; in Bulgaria, 0.8 to 1 mio.; in Spain, 0.6 to 1 mio.; in the Czech Republic, 0.3 to 0.9 mio.; in Slovakia, 0.5 to 0.6 mio.; in Hungary, 0.8 to 1.0 mio.



Travellers? Among the general population, clichés usually associated with Roma are nomads in caravans, campfire, poverty, numerous children, music etc. To a large extent, these are age-old prejudices, which do not reflect reality. The belief that they are travellers developed for two reasons: First, the Roma in Western Europe were not allowed to settle anywhere and were thus compelled to move from place to place. Secondly, most Roma who arrived in the German-speaking countries, were predominantly horse dealers, who travelled for occupational reasons in a predefined area. In fact most Roma are and always were sedentary.

An Ottoman tax register from 1500, listed approximately 22,000 Roma families representing roughly 150,000 to 200,000 people (at that time, there were around 2.5 million inhabitants in the Balkans). Only 11 (!) of the 22,000 families were travelling. In Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, in the Balkans, Slovakia and the Ukraine, Roma were always sedentary.

The majority are completely integrated. They work, go to school, speak the local language, are workers, salesmen, attorneys etc. and are rarely recognised in most countries as being Roma.

Rroma Origins

The Rroma originated from India. There are many hypotheses about why and when they left their homeland and where they travelled through. From their language, Romanes, and its vocabulary one can infer that the Rroma already left India before the 8th century. This is especially clear from the Armenian loanwords in Romanes, which correspond to an old phonetic form of the Armenian language, which was no longer commonly used as early as the 9th century. The Rroma must thus have left the Armenian linguistic area *before* this change occurred. They later settled in the European part of the Byzantine Empire where they remained approximately 300 to 400 years before some of them left the region due to the Ottoman invasions.

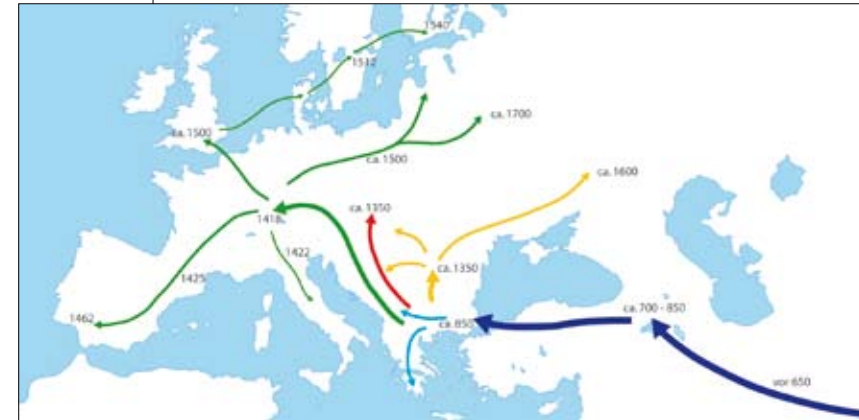
Their chiefs called themselves “counts” or even “kings” of little Egypt.

The Rroma arrived in Europe before the Magyar (Hungarians) and shortly after the Slavs and the Bulgars.

One occasionally hears the hypothesis that the Rroma left at the time of the Muslim invasions of India. On the other hand, Romanes clearly lacks any loan words of direct Arab origins. This shows that the early Rroma were not in contact with the Arabs and also clearly shows that the Rroma did not come from, or through, Egypt.

In the first European writings to most probably mention the Rroma, they are assimilated to the Athinganoi, a Christian Armenian sect. Some of the common names given to Rroma such as *Tzigan*, *Zingari*, *Zigeuner* etc. are derived from this name. In the 8th and 9th centuries, the Rroma as well as the Paulicians and the Athinganoi, were deported from Armenia to the Balkans by the Byzantines.

Europe. From the Byzantine Empire, some groups moved slowly northwards. It is proven that the Rroma had already settled in the 13th and 14th centuries in Hungary, in Slovakia, and in Romania.



- Ur-Rroma
- Balkan Rroma
- Vlax Rroma
- Carpathian Rroma
- Nordic Rroma

With the Ottoman invasions of the Balkan in the 14th century, a small group of Rroma emigrated to Germany, and later to Poland, to the Baltics and to Russia. This small group is responsible for most of the clichés about Rroma nowadays: Travellers, horse dealers, fortune tellers, etc. They usually carried documents issued by various kings, such as King Sigismund of Bohemia, and because of these papers, they were often called “*Bohemians*”.

Their leaders called themselves “counts” or “kings of Little Egypt”. These travelling Rroma told Europeans that they actually came from Egypt, that they were originally Christians, who lost their faith and, therefore, had been banished and forced to travel. This tale is the origin of the name given to Rroma in many countries: *Gypsies* and *Gitanos*, derived from the word Egyptian. In all probability, Little Egypt was the city *Modon* in Greece.

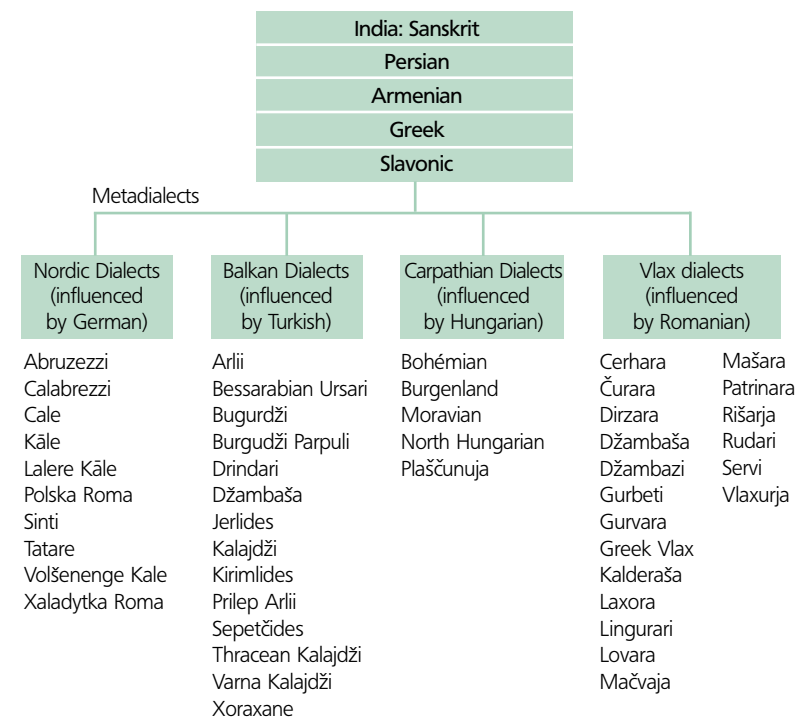
The Language of the Roma

Approximately two thirds of the Roma speak Romanes, the mother tongue of the Roma. This means that more people in Europe speak Romanes than, for example, Norwegian, Dutch or Finnish. However, Roma usually have two mother tongues, i.e. Romanes and the language of the country they live in, and are thus genuinely bilingual at least.

Romanes exhibits a large number of variants and dialects, mostly due to borrowings from the different European languages. But saying that Romanes is not a language would be totally wrong. The different dialects of Romanes differ approximately as much as the different dialects in Swiss German and much less so than the various Latin languages.

Many of the variations and terms in the Romanes dialects are due to foreign borrowings, as a result of migration. For example, *fenštra* (from the German, a window), is used by Russian and Baltic Roma, while Sinti prefer the term *voxnin* of Slavic origins. There is no variant of Romanes which can be considered as the most pure. Despite dialectic variations, Romanes is a language.

India	bal	hair	Persian	djiz	town, fortress	
	yakh	eye				
	gav	village		dorjav	sea	
	giv	wheat		vurdon	carriage, cart	
	paj/pani	water	Armenia	momeli	candle	
	kher	house		xanamik	bride's father	
	xer	donkey		graj/grast	horse	
	balo/baličo	pig	Greece	drom	road, way	
	khajni	chicken		kokalo	bone	
	mačo	fish		foro	town, market	
džukel	dog	cipa		skin, fell		
šukar	beautiful	kirvo		godfather		
terno	young	tigani		pan		
phuro	old	katun		clothes, bedcover		
manuš	human being			amoni	anvil	
khelav	to dance			petalo	horseshoe	
xav	to eat					
sovav	to sleep					
džav	to go					
kerav	to do					
kamav	to love					



Origins and Development. Romanes exhibits a layered structure, whereby each layer represents one period of its history and reflects the migration and history of the Roma. The most important layer is by far the Indian one. The whole grammar and the basic vocabulary originate from the Prakrit, a derivative of the Sanskrit. This Indian vocabulary, for example *gav* [village], *giv* [wheat], refers to a large extent to village life and to agriculture, which points to the fact that the Roma were sedentary in India. Thinner layers stem from the Persian, e.g. *djiz* [city, fortress], fortress and from the Armenian, e.g. *grast* or *graj* [horse]. Due to the long stay in the Byzantine Empire, today's Romanes was strongly influenced by Greek with the inclusion of many common words e.g. *drom* [road, way].

The variety of dialects existing today in Romanes can be attributed to the fact that Roma are always bilingual. In the course of migrations, some elements from this other local language were integrated in Romanes. Today one differentiates four main groups or Romanes dialects, as shown above.

Rroma Trades

If one speaks about Rroma and work, many assume that all Rroma are basket weavers, horse dealers or musicians. Few know that Rroma are frequently also farmers, attorneys, judges, teachers, salesmen, waiters etc. and this since their arrival in Europe. Already in the 15th century, as documented by the Ottoman tax registers, Rroma had all sorts of professions, which are not usually associated with them.

Few people know that Rroma often are also farmers, lawyers, judges, teachers, businessmen, salesmen, waiters, etc.

Their oldest traditional professions are that of a blacksmith, in particular weapon makers, coppersmith as among the Kalderaša, woodcarvers as with the Lingurara or sieves-makers as the Čurara.

The best-known Rroma profession may very well be the one of horse dealer, in particular among the Baltic, Polish, and Russian Rroma. Other professions connected with animals such as bear-baiter are usually found in the Balkans and amongst *Ursara* in Romania. Reading palms, fortune-telling, card reading, are usually exclusively practised by women and only among some Rroma groups. Among Carpathian and Balkan Rroma, this is truly unknown, and it is only amongst the Vlax Rroma and the Rroma in northern Europe that this are practised.

Rroma Music

Although Rroma are famous musicians, their music remains largely unknown. Rroma differentiate music as a profession, meaning music, which one plays for non Rroma, the *Gadže*, and the music which one plays among Rroma.

Few people know that the harp was originally the principal instrument of the Sinti and of Polish and Russian Rroma.

Rroma music influenced many composers. Brahms, with his famous Hungarian dances, Liszt, Bartók, Mussorgski are the best-known one.

Many Rroma were and are professional musicians. Very early on, Rroma musicians are recorded as working for the Ottoman army. Already in the 14th century, Rroma played at the Hungarian court in Budapest. In the 19th century, Rroma choirs were loved by the Russian aristocracy.

Rroma music exhibits different styles in different countries, styles, which are usually strongly influenced by the local music. In the Balkans the music is very Middle-Eastern, with clarinet (*Zurna*), accordion, and Turkish drums (*Tapan*). In the Carpathian Arc, in Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, the cymbalum from India, is the main instrument besides the violin and contrabass. In Russia and in Western Europe it is nowadays the guitar. It is less known that the main instrument of the Sinti, Polish and Russian Rroma was originally the harp.

The Rroma never had their own state and thus never had their own administration or codified laws. Rroma identity is thus not based on concepts such as homeland, nationality etc., but is based on their language, their culture and particularly on their traditions. As Rrom one is primarily a member of one's extended family, then a member of one's group, and finally Rrom, as well as citizen of a given country.

Traditions and unwritten laws have a very high importance for Rroma. The traditions called variously, *rromano zakono* or *rromano sakaši* and *rromano adeti*, are kept and transmitted within the families. A code of conduct, sometimes quite complex, is the most important element of the *Rromanipe* or *Rromanimos*, of being a Rrom. Central concepts there include *patijv*, the honour and respect, as well as *ladžav*, dishonour and shame.

Rroma identity is based on language, culture, and mostly on their own traditions.

Traditions have priority over religion. Rroma have mostly taken the religion of the country in which they live. They are Catholics, Protestant, Christian Orthodox, Muslims etc.

Today, as a Rrom, one lives these traditions and laws mostly at home and in the family circle.

The Traditions: Rroma have their own tribunals, which are called *Kris*, *Cilu*, or *Celo*. The judges, called *krisatora*, are selected from among the most respected Rroma of the community. Each Rrom can call a *kris*. The judges listen to both parties in order to render their judgement. Attorneys or representatives are unknown in those procedures. The heaviest penalty is the exclusion of a Rrom from the community. Physical punishments or death sentences are unknown, but fines are frequently imposed.

The concept of ritual purity and impurity (*užho biužho*) plays an important role among Rroma. Women, from their first menstruation up to the menopause are regarded as potentially impure. Eating food that fell on the ground, washing men and women's clothes together are regarded as impure. This tradition, called *pekhelimos*, *mahrimos*, *prasepen*, or *mageripen*, is still very strong and exists among practically all Rroma groups.

Elder women are highly respected and powerful

Family Life. Traditionally, Rroma used to get married very early, usually around the age of 16. In very traditional families, the bride and/or groom are selected by the parents. However, in many cases, young couples flee together and return after a while and are then wed. In most cases, the Rroma are not officially married.

The bride moves into the man's family. The bride's parents usually watch the situation of their daughter closely, and, if the situation is not so favourable, can take their daughter back. Divorce by mutual consent, or after a judgement of a *kris*, are possible. Daughters-in-law have the lowest social rank in the family and their position improves with children and with increasing age. The latter, especially as older women, called *phuri dej* or *phuri daj*, are highly regarded and respected.

The baptism of the children (*bolimos*) is an important family celebration, in which all family members participate. The baptism can be Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. Among Muslim Rroma, the ceremony is replaced by the circumcision, called *suneti*.

Rroma Persecutions

Jews and Rroma were the only people persecuted by the Nazis alone on the basis of their ethnic belonging and were destined to total extermination. Starting in 1936, German Rroma, usually Sinti were deported. With the Anschluss of Austria in 1938, Austrian Rroma soon followed and were sent to camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, Ravensbrück and Mathausen. Starting in 1941 Rroma and Jews were systematically murdered in extermination camps such as Auschwitz.

"They brought us through the door
We left through the chimney"

What is less known is that the Nazis also had special troops who murdered Jews and Rroma where they found them, without keeping careful records. How many Rroma were murdered by such commandos is difficult to estimate.

In Auschwitz Birkenau 20,943 Rroma were registered (compared to about 300,000 Jews). Most Rroma and Jews were sent directly upon arrival to the gas chambers without having been registered first. In other countries, Nazi's allies systematically murdered Rroma and Jews. For example, in Yugoslavia, where the "Ustascha", in the camp of Jasenovac, murdered thousands of Rroma. Researchers speak of at least 500,000 murdered Rroma (Jews 6,000,000). Simon Wiesenthal is of the opinion that the number is much higher, at around 2,500,000 murdered Rroma.

The Rroma Yesterday...

While not directly persecuted, Rroma in countries with communist regimes lived nevertheless under difficult circumstances. In October 1956, Russian Rroma were forbidden to travel, and they were forced to settle in selected villages and work in kolkhozes. Similar measures were taken by all other communist countries. Commerce, a traditional Rroma profession was deemed illegal, which deprived thousands of Rroma of their means of existence.

Even during the Seville World Exhibition,
the Rroma quarters
were hidden behind concrete walls.

In Bulgaria there was officially no Rroma minority between the 1950's and 1980's. The publication of books and newspapers in Romanes were forbidden, as was their music. *Mahalas*, the Rroma quarters in cities, were hidden behind concrete walls, so that tourists could not see them. The same was done in Seville during the 1992 World Fair.

After the collapse of the communist regimes, political extremism, nationalism, and racism arose and increased in all countries of the former Eastern Bloc. In the former communist states, recently, pogroms against Roma have occurred. Roma have been persecuted, beaten and killed, their houses burnt or destroyed. This occurred in Hungary, Russia, Poland, in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and in Bulgaria over the last decade.

In former Yugoslavia, the Roma were the first ones subjected to ethnic cleansing as, for example, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, etc. Where a new nation is defined on an ethnic basis, there is no place for Roma. This ethnic cleansing still continues nowadays in spite of the presence of international organisations and of all treaties and signed agreements.

The difficult economic situation, together with increasing racism and the actions and measures directed against Roma have forced numerous Roma to escape to Western European countries, where they are not truly welcome. Despite their European origins, Roma are still unfortunately regarded as "foreigners": Old prejudices and stereotypes, have been revived and used against them.

This ethnic cleansing still continues today despite the presence of international organisations and of all treaties and signed agreements.

There are between 8 and 12 million Roma living in Europe today. In most countries, they constitute a well integrated minority. Nationalism and discrimination against Roma have unfortunately increased since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Europe is now facing a dilemma: If nothing is undertaken, Europe will face a grave problem. If the situation of the Roma doesn't improve in their respective countries, most probably many of them will emigrate.

Policies centred on education and schooling can greatly improve the situation of the Roma.

The main problem for the future of the Roma is the difficulty to find work in order to support their families, be it for lack of proper qualifications or due to outright discrimination. This problem is one the most difficult and prevalent in all of Europe. Should Europe fail to resolve it, fail to educate and integrate the Roma minority and to improve their living conditions, Europe will soon be faced with a problem of serious proportions.

In the last few years, Roma decided to create their own organisations in order to systematically improve education, welfare, assistance, and culture. In all west and Eastern European countries such larger or smaller organizations exist today. The International Romani Union, a political organization with observer status as NGO (Non Governmental organization) with the United Nations and the Roma National Congress are the best-known and largest Roma organisations today.

Some Roma are very visible, some are less so. The media, as well as most Non Governmental Organisations prefer to dwell and concentrate on those who are visible, on those who correspond to the stereotypes, be it by travelling, begging, living in poverty etc.

To be Rom, does one
have to correspond to the stereotypes?
Think about the majority, the invisible ones.

This should certainly not obscure the fact that this visible part of the Roma population is not the norm. They represent a minority amongst the Roma. The immense majority is simply not seen, almost as if to be Rom, one had to live up to the usual stereotypes.

This is not to say that the invisible Roma do not suffer from discrimination. In fact, the mere fact of not being able to say that one is Rom, for fear of being associated with clichés that are more than demeaning is already a form of discrimination. And who would put “Gypsy” in his or her curriculum while applying for a job?

Nowadays, one increasingly speaks a lot of Roma migrants, for example, recently in Italy. But Roma are by and large neither more nor less mobile than the rest of their fellow citizen. If there are 10 % of Roma in a given country, chances are that there are 10 % Roma, neither more nor less, in the immigrants from that land. Only if the situation deteriorates, if the conditions for a decent life without discrimination and persecution are no longer given, will Roma have to take the road once again.

The Roma Foundation was established as an independent foundation in Switzerland in 1993 thanks to the help of Georges Soros. The goal of the foundation is to change the public perception of Roma and to raise their status, mostly through projects by Roma for Roma. The foundation is involved in several projects in Eastern Europe, schools, civil society, education grants, infrastructure. In Switzerland, the foundation focuses on Roma refugees and on information.

www.rroma.org – Information on and by Roma

The Roma Foundation has an internet site with extensive background as well as actual information on Roma in Europe. Foundations reports are freely available on the internet and can be downloaded.

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