

Hidden: Life with California's Roma Families

Cristina Salvador Klenz

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As many as one million Americans of Romani descent are “hidden in plain sight.” Pejoratively known as gypsies, Roma are among the most marginalized and misunderstood communities. Cristina Salvador Klenz’s 1990s black-and-white photographs of California Roma are a fascinating, rare cultural portrait of an exuberant people.

Romani scholar Ian Hancock points out that Roma were among some of the first American immigrants, with some on board Christopher Columbus’s 1498 third voyage to Hispaniola. Klenz and Wendy Thomas Russell expand upon Roma culture and history, starting with their exodus from northern India in 1000 CE, when they were enslaved and displaced to Turkey and Eastern Europe. Their subsequent diaspora, stretching from Bulgaria to Great Britain, left them ostracized, ghettoized, and limited to certain occupations, such that they became insular, nomadic “travelers”: “they were welcome nowhere.” Roma were the first ethnic group targeted for elimination in Nazi Germany, with an estimated 1.5 million people murdered.

Klenz describes how she gained trust among California Roma families, leading to invitations to celebrations and everyday events. She documents five very different communities, with disparate languages, religions, and cultural traditions, who share a similar uninhibited passion for self-expression.

The photographs are dramatic evocations of weddings, family meals, dancing, evangelical baptisms, and birthdays, where nothing seems to have been off limits to Klenz’s lens. Intimate scenes of parents comforting their children after an outburst contrast with images of parents beaming at children in party finery and cradled in their arms. An alarming number of striking photographs show young children quaffing beer, sneaking smokes, and even chomping down on cigars. Klenz’s end notes share the stories and sociological factors that underlay these scenes.

Hidden is an expert example of visual and verbal storytelling that concentrates on a little known American subculture.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March / April 2022)

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