

ROMANIAN ROOTS IMMIGRANTS IN S. FLORIDA FIND IT EASY TO REMAIN A CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITY THROUGH RELIGION

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

While many of south Florida's predominantly Latin American immigrants have spread out all over the tri county area, a close-knit band of Romanian residents have concentrated in the Hollywood and Hallandale area.

Their lives are bound together by familial ties and their churches in which they can find comfort among people of their own culture and language.

"Their social groups are in the churches," affirmed Father Dimitri Sasu of Miramar, the pastor of the 350-member Holy Trinity Romanian Orthodox Church in that city. "All of our members are Romanian, or are from mixed families where a Romanian is married to someone else. All of our services are in Romanian."

Sasu's church becomes a focal point for social events and the celebration of Romanian holidays such as the upcoming National Day on December 1 that marks for unification of Transylvania, Bucovina, Basarabia and Cadrilater into modern day Romania.

The holiday is a recent innovation, established after Romania's independence from Communist rule in 1989. Prior to that, the country's national day was celebrated on August 23.

"Because of that, those Romanians who came here before 1989 do not know about the December 1 holiday, so it is really not observed here," said Monica Dumitrescu of Hollywood.

Romanian immigrants have come to south Florida in several waves, Dumitrescu explained. "A large group came around 1972, and then trickled in after that. In the 1980s many came to join their spouses. Some of them had to flee by swimming across the Danube River."

Dumitrescu said that U.S. evangelist Billy Graham held one of his evangelistic crusades in Romania in the late 1980s that brought many converts into Baptist and other evangelical churches. "Baptists were illegal in Romania then, so the United States allowed many of them to come here."

As a result, the Romanian population in this area contains many religious and other minorities who settled here.

After the overthrow of communism in 1989, Dumitrescu said that, "the flood gates opened and almost anybody could come here."

"Evangelicals are more prone to leave the country because the system there was hostile to us," said Pastor Florin Vancea of Hollywood who leads the Bethel Romanian Southern

Baptist Church. “There are three Romanian Baptist churches, one Romanian Pentecostal church and one Romanian Seventh Day Adventist church in this area,” he said.

Vancea said that evangelical Christianity was brought to the predominately Orthodox country by German Moravian and Hungarian Anabaptist missionaries around 145 years ago.

“Through them, many people were exposed to the Gospel,” Vancea said. “We discovered the differences between our beliefs and those of the Orthodox. They recognize two sources of authority, the Bible and the authority of the church. We recognize only one—the Bible.”

In addition to the difference in language, worship at Vancea’s church is somewhat different than that in neighboring Baptist churches.

“Our services reflect the Eastern Orthodox culture,” the pastor explained. “Our services are very quiet, dimly lit and with a sense of mystery.”

“Our economic problems and our culture influence how we approach God,” Vancea said. “Our hymns reflect the pain of a people and the hope of another life.”

Some of that pain includes the memories of religious persecution that members of Vancea’s church brought with them.

“I was 16 when my family came,” said Michelle Vladia of Plantation who left Romania in 1984. “My parents came for my sister and me so that we could live a better life. Baptists and Pentecostals couldn’t get jobs in Romania because they were discriminated against.”

Those experiences have helped to bond the Romanian community in south Florida. “We keep together,” Vladia affirmed. “We keep our language and teach our kids in Romanian at our church.”

“Most Romanians also kept their food that they grew up with,” Vladia said. “We do a lot of home cooking.”

Vladia explained that Romanian food involves less oil and usually is not deep-fried. “In Romania we didn’t have deep fryers,” she said. “Most people didn’t even have toasters because they didn’t have electricity.”

Mititei, a type of skinless sausage is one of the popular items on the menu of John Baleanu’s Transylvania Romanian Restaurant in Hollywood. “It’s made of beef or lamb and Romanian spices,” Baleanu said. “It’s not too hot.”

“People come here to order it because everybody wants it and it’s not easy to make,” Baleanu explained.

Stuffed cabbage and goulash are also popular favorites among the restaurant's patrons, who, Baleanu said, are not limited to Romanians. "Everybody comes here, Americans, Latins as well as Israelis and others who used to live in Europe and enjoy the food.

Baleanu agreed that the center of the Romanian community's social life is in the churches, but, he said, many of his fellow countrymen turn out for dances and performers that he has at his restaurant from time to time.

On a recent Sunday night he featured a program of Romanian music and, he said, he has scheduled a Gypsy orchestra for the evening of Sunday, December 10.

How many Romanians there are in south Florida is anybody's guess. Pastor Vancea puts the number at between 18,000 and 25,000. Most of them are reported to be here legally, but some are still struggling with residency and work visas.

"Many of them are self employed in construction, roofing or laying tile," said Father Sasu. "I have heard that there are 2,000 Romanians working in the tile business and there are 20 to 30 Romanian-owned roofing companies."

"In general, we are a close-knit community," Dumitrescu said, though she added that the Orthodox Romanians tended to stick together in their churches while the Baptist and other evangelical Christians unite around their own houses of worship.

"People are attracted to their churches, especially the newcomers," she said. "They need the tie to the old country and the church provides support."

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