



Chapter 1

Introduction

A scavenging family

Olgica, 38, Radomir, 42, and five of their seven children live in a wooden box on the side of a street in a middle-class neighborhood in central Belgrade. The wooden box replaces a cardboard box they occupied for the first six months after their illegally-built concrete-block home was demolished by city authorities. There are very few other Roma in this neighborhood and those that do reside there live in houses. By City codes, their residence is illegal. All around them are high-rise apartment buildings, some still under construction, and middle-class homes. They live across from a new sports stadium where Olgica's 11-year old son longingly watches other children play soccer. He is barred from joining in because his family cannot afford the monthly fee of 1000 dinars (\$18). They are also just a block away from an elementary school and a pre-school, but Olgica's children do not go to school. The children have no official address and no birth certificates, so they cannot register. "Anyway," says Olgica, "I cannot afford the books, papers, pencils and other things I would have to pay for."

Olgica and Radomir are waste collectors. Olgica picks through city garbage containers for saleable items, and her husband sells the better items at the edge of a local fresh market, displaying his wares on the sidewalk. He used to work in construction but now he has a serious hernia and cannot do heavy work at all. Both Olgica and Radomir completed second grade and can barely read, write and do math. At home they speak Romanes (*Romski* in Serbian) and with Serbs they speak Serbian. Olgica describes her family as being 'Serbian Roms.'

The couple with their three older children migrated to Belgrade about 12 years ago from Lescovac, a city in south Serbia that formerly had a large textile factory and other factories. However, after economic sanctions against Serbia were imposed in the early 1990s, these government-owned factories began to be closed, causing the economy there to fail further. South Serbia had always been the poorest part of Serbia, but now with the closing of the factories, the area became even poorer. Many people migrated elsewhere for work. Olgica and Radomir's lives were indirectly affected by the economic downfall of their city because, as cardboard collectors, they lost their source of income – factories were no longer around



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to discard cardboard. Even though they were born, raised and married in Lescovac, she at 14 and he at 18, they felt they needed to leave. “There are too many poor people there,” says Olgica, “and there is not enough solid waste to go around for everyone collecting. We were always hungry.” She claims that life in Belgrade is much better for them. “At least here we can find enough food to eat and my husband can sell in the market and we can have some income. When my husband was well, he earned a good income from construction work.”

Their home provides only the basic shelter for survival. The wooden box is covered with a heavy waterproof tarp, donated to them by an international welfare organization. Inside is a cast iron wood-burning stove for heat and cooking, a sofa and a double bed. These items completely fill their small house. They have no water supply, toilet or electricity. Olgica begs water from the neighbors. She complains that she can never get enough to bathe often enough and to wash their clothes properly. Her three smallest children have scabies, lice and another skin infection.

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Photograph 1. Olgica's former cardboard house





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Each morning Olgica rises early, cooks breakfast for her family, and then begins her workday. She takes her three youngest children, ages 2, 4 and 6, with her scavenging. She pushes a handmade cart with sides made of rope from bin to bin in her neighborhood and digs through the solid waste with a stick. If there is something she wants but cannot reach, she lifts her six-year-old daughter, who is small and lightweight for her age, into the bin to retrieve the item. Olgica takes whatever is good: clothing, clean food items, bags, paper, toys, but what she wants most of all is cardboard. A City cardboard container sits beside their house and the family is paid for what they collect. She also collects bits of wood to use in their wood burning stove, which she scavenges from the many construction sites in her neighborhood. After 3 to 4 hours of collecting, she returns home to prepare a mid-day meal and she rests. In the afternoon and evening, Radomir watches the small children while Olgica again goes scavenging until late in the evening.

From this work Olgica claims they earn about 3000 dinars per month, on average. Olgica says life was better when her husband worked in construction, and he would like to have his hernia repaired so he can go back to construction work. For the moment, that operation is beyond what they can afford.

Olgica and Radomir want what all families want: a good house, water, toilet, shower, electricity, and a secure income. They expect their children to become Collectors or construction workers or whatever life may offer them. Their three eldest children, two boys and a girl, are already scavenging. Their 11-year old son so far refuses to collect solid waste. He hangs out with middle-class boys in their neighborhood and has their aspirations. Together they play computer and video games. Mostly he wants to play soccer and become a professional. However, now he just hangs around his small wooden house all day waiting for his friends to come home from school.

Scavenging among Belgrade's poor

The Urban Sanitation Department of the City of Belgrade collects around 1500 tons of solid waste every day and delivers it to the City's only active solid waste dump located in a neighborhood called Vinca on the outskirts of Belgrade. There are no reliable data on the amount of solid waste that goes uncollected in the City of Belgrade each day. However, a substantial amount is collected through informal scavenging by an estimated 9,000 to 16,000 poor people, mostly Roma, who resell the useful items, particularly cardboard, for their daily income. Also, most (60%) of the 750 employees of the City of Belgrade's Urban Sanitation Department are Roma. The percentage that is Roma may be even higher, since the remainder declared themselves Serbs, Muslims, or Egyptians.

Olgica's family is one of perhaps two thousand Romani families in the City of Belgrade who scavenge solid waste for a living. However, such scavenging is a way of life for poor Roma living in every Serbian city and town, and collectively they must number several thousand



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or tens of thousands of families. Some non-Roma poor also engage in scavenging, but much more rarely. 'Collecting' is viewed as a particularly Roma profession.

The Roma in Serbia sit at the bottom of the social scale, a situation similar to that of many other Eastern European countries. Brought into Serbia with the Turkish army as servants and slaves, primarily during the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans in the 15th and 16th centuries (although they are reported a hundred years before this), to this day many Roma still are not integrated into Serbian society. They are the least educated and literate members of society, the most unemployed, and the least likely to possess necessary legal documents, such as birth certificates, national identity cards, and municipal registration cards. As a group they are the poorest people in Serbia, and these poor families tend to live together in isolated communities called 'mahalas,' a Turkish word for settlement. When the Turks were pushed out of the Balkans in the 1800 and 1900s and most returned to Turkey, the Roma who had been closely associated with them had no where to go. They stayed in Serbia and the region, and they have been

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Photograph 2. A Roma woman collecting from a city container



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trying ever since to be accepted by a society that associates them historically with the enemy and occupation. In general their skin color is darker and the way they speak Serbian is such that non-Roma can identify them. It is well known that they suffer from discrimination.

While the Roma of Serbia are not a homogeneous culture, they are often viewed as such by the majority society. First of all, not all Roma are poor. Many have entered the majority society, become educated, and live a middle class lifestyle. They no longer identify themselves as Roma and keep their Roma origins a secret. Secondly, family and clan are more important than being Roma, so they identify more with family and clan names than with the term 'Roma.' Many still speak the Romani language, a language derived from Sanskrit, but most do not think of themselves as being of Indian origin. For the most part, they do not see themselves as a nationality or ethnic group. Most Roma have adopted the customs and surnames of Serbian culture.

From the time of the earliest censuses in Serbia, it has been very difficult to count the number of Roma. Many will not admit to census-takers that they are Roma, as this term has, in the past, had a negative connotation for them. Depending upon the official attitude toward them over the past few decades, the numbers who have reported themselves as Roma has risen and fallen in a demographically impossible way. Fearing further discrimination, they often identified themselves as Serbs or Muslims. Equally, Roma who no longer spoke Romani nor identified anymore with the culture of their parents, often chose to change their ethnic identities. That said, Roma experts in Serbia estimate that there are at least half a million Roma in Serbia and perhaps over 100,000 in Belgrade, though no recent census has been conducted.

Many of the Roma in Belgrade are newly arrived from Kosovo. During the 1990s the former Republic of Yugoslavia, consisting of six separate small republics, fell apart. The Republic was nearly fifty years old when it began to disintegrate. The charismatic President Tito held together Yugoslavia's non-aligned socialist state during most of the first fifty years. Major difficulties began in 1989 under the leadership of President Slobodon Milosevic. One by one Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia declared and fought for their independence, and ethnic Albanians in the southern Serbian province of Kosovo began in 1998 a movement for independence. Some of the wars were bloody and there were many human rights abuses. Caught between fighting factions in all these conflicts were the Roma, who were accused of always aiding the wrong side and were attacked by all other ethnic groups. Many Roma were displaced from Kosovo and south Serbia, where 'cleansing' of ethnic Albanians took place, and many fled to Belgrade.

Through most of the 1990s, the United Nations placed economic sanctions on Serbia to try and stop her aggressive actions against break-away countries. The on-going conflicts, the economic sanctions, and finally the NATO bombing of Kosovo and Belgrade in 1999, eventually brought Serbia to her knees. In 2000 President Milosevic was ousted from power, and the international community joined with Serbia and Montenegro, the remaining two countries



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of Yugoslavia, to begin rebuilding. In 2000 Serbia had about 800,000 refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons) and an unemployment rate of about 40%. Much of the middle class had now fallen into poverty and the already poor were now even poorer.

With this recent history in mind, we found that Collectors generally fell into two main groups: newcomers and natives. Newcomers, those who have arrived since 1999, are the poorest. They scavenge for food, clothing, blankets and building materials, merely to survive. They include Roma from South Serbia and Kosovo displaced by the 1999 conflict, refugees from the other Balkan Wars of the 1990s with Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Roma recently deported from Germany and other European countries as part of a 2002 international agreement to return war refugees to Serbia. This 'newcomer' group has fewer vehicles, including handcarts, for collecting, and they normally do not know or have access to the best places to collect. Their children are less likely to be in school. And this group is less selective about what food to take from solid waste because they are the most hungry.

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Photograph 3. Roma hand-carts



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A second group is 'native Belgraders.' These are Collectors who have lived in Belgrade long enough to know the City and where to go to get the best items. Many were born and raised in older Roma settlements ('mahalas') that were formed during Turkish rule of Serbia from the mid-1500s until the late 19th Century. This group is less poor than the 'newcomers'. Most of them have specially designed hand-made carts for collecting. These carts may be seen easily on the streets of Belgrade day and night pushed by men and women of all ages, including older children. Sometimes these carts are attached to bicycles or are motorized. Some few Collectors have small or large trucks. Their children are more likely to be in school, or to have tried to go to school at some point, even though few complete elementary school. This group is also more selective about food taken from solid waste because they are less hungry, and also because they know where they can get better food on a regular basis (such as from groceries, bakeries, and markets). Some of the men in this group are also permanent employees of the City of Belgrade's Sanitation Department, working on the large trucks that collect solid waste throughout the city. Others are employed by the City at the City dump site at Vinca, where they collect items for recycling that the city will sell to professional buyers. In their off-work hours, these same men collect recyclable items informally. Thus, some men in this group we called 'native Belgraders' are both employed for wages in the formal sector and collect informally for their own additional economic gain.

There is a third group, businessmen, involved in the recycling business that may or may not be Roma. They buy in large quantities from those who collect, going with their trucks from settlement to settlement. These businessmen are the richest of the three groups involved in the collection and recycling of solid wastes. Some of them may live in middle class neighborhoods.

Citizens of Belgrade, shops and restaurants dispose of their garbage in the numerous large containers situated along the streets throughout the city. Every kind of mixed waste goes into these containers. They are high enough to prevent dogs, rodents and children from going inside, but this height also makes it difficult for adults to reach inside.

Collectors pick up items at several different locations. Most collect from the street side containers. Others (about 70 people) live at the City's dump site in Vinca and work only there. Many Collectors specialize in working at fresh markets at the end of the day, helping to clean out stalls and receiving some fresh food, such as fruits, vegetables, cheese, eggs, or meat in return. Others have personal relationships with grocery stores, such as C-Market (the national chain of grocery stores), or with restaurants, to collect, at the end of each day, discarded food. Some of this food may go to feeding pigs, while the family may eat other food, such as tinned or frozen food and still edible fresh fruits, vegetables and stale bread.

Collectors for the most part live in illegal and unhygienic settlements located near the City center. They take what they have collected back to their homes, sort them, bundle them with rope and store them near the house until a buyer comes along to purchase the goods. They



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take special items, such as toys, clothing, jewelry, small appliances and antiques, to flea markets around Belgrade to sell these individually. This 'economic solid waste,' stored near their homes, makes these communities look very untidy, even though there is an order in this seeming chaos. These communities look messy also because the City sanitation services do not collect domestic solid waste in illegal settlements, even though they may be decades old. This domestic solid waste, particularly plastic bags and bottles, tends to be strewn all around the settlement. Collectors hate this situation but have learned to live in it nonetheless. What they want most are proper recycling centers where collected items can be sorted and stored, and City garbage collection services.

The total quantity and overall percentage of the raw materials removed by Collectors is not known, but the scope of the materials collected is broad. Practically everything is collected: iron, paper, aluminum, copper, food, car batteries, pictures and antiques, footwear and clothing. According to the Collectors, the quantity of the scrap collected varies much from one day to another. Sometimes, they simply do not find anything, but on other days they find more than they can carry. The quantity they can collect also depends on the season. Sometimes, especially during cold winters, they do not go out to work every day. The quantity of the raw materials collected also depends on the type of vehicle they have at their disposal, whether a home-made pushcart or a motorized cart or small truck.

Some Collectors, especially those who are 'native Belgraders,' have other sources of income, such as a social welfare payment or a small pension. Still, they collect from solid waste to supplement their inadequate incomes.

It would be interesting to know more precisely both the number of people in Belgrade scavenging from solid waste and the total amount of solid waste they remove each day for recycling. However our research project was too modest to make these estimations with any certainty. A 2002 survey of illegal settlements estimated that about 24,000 people live in 96 informal unhygienic settlements where scavenging is an important economic activity of the community, that is, where more than 30% of households are engaged in scavenging. Some, perhaps hundreds, of scavenging families do not live in settlements but rather live as single family units on vacant lots and along the sides of streets throughout the City center, such as Olgica's family. These single families are not included in the 2002 survey of illegal settlements and do not appear in any statistics for City of Belgrade because they have no legal addresses. Equally, because of this situation, they are not included in our estimates of the number of households active in scavenging. However, based on findings from the 2002 survey, roughly 9,000-16,000 people are probably dependent upon scavenging for income and some of their food.

It is clear from the 2002 survey of illegal settlements that about half the Roma in the City of Belgrade do not live in unhygienic illegal settlements and even fewer scavenge. This is a very important point to bear in mind. Many of Belgrade's Roma have managed over time to



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integrate or assimilate into the wider society. In 1991, there were 114,000 Roma living within the City limits of Belgrade¹. If this figure is still roughly true, then clearly, therefore, perhaps 10% of Belgrade's Roma, engage in scavenging. Those who collect solid waste are probably the poorest Roma and the poorest non-Roma.

Purpose of the book

Serious efforts are now underway in Serbia to foster the integration and empowerment of Roma who have not already integrated. As a part of this effort, we undertook a study of the lives of Roma waste collectors in the City of Belgrade during 2003. This book is based on focus group discussions with Roma adults and children in nine settlements around Belgrade, the 'case study family' of Olgica described above, and interviews with City officials (see Study Methods below). The findings are offered as a contribution to understanding how Roma Collectors survive and what they want for the future. We hope it will result in greater social justice for a people who contribute a great deal to the recycling of solid wastes in Belgrade and throughout Serbia.

This project was originally conceived as a contribution to the City of Belgrade so that the conditions of Collectors could be improved and made more profitable. However, during the course of the research, we learned that the City plans to privatize its solid waste collection services and make scavenging illegal. This book, therefore, has now expanded its purpose. One immediate purpose is to help the City of Belgrade consider the potential consequences of privatization on the lives of thousands of nearly destitute people who now survive from scavenging. The book will also be useful to organizations and individuals working with Roma and other waste scavengers around the world who wish to understand their lives in more depth. Many of the Roma in Serbia live in chronic poverty born from discrimination and lack of education. This study should contribute to the Poverty Reduction Strategy of Serbia and the Strategy for the Integration and Empowerment of Roma. Whilst we hope this book will be of special interest to the Government of Serbia Ministry for Human and Minorities Law, Belgrade City Council, the Institute of Urbanism of Belgrade, and the private company that will take over the City solid waste collection services, importantly, it may have lessons for other cities in the world where large numbers of people are engaged in urban scavenging. This rich and detailed information on Belgrade's waste collectors is the first study of this type in Serbia. We end the book with our suggestions, as neutral observers who are researchers, not politicians and not Roma, on how to improve the work of Collectors and their communities with a view toward ending the cycle of chronic poverty.

Study methods

We interviewed focus groups of men, women and children in nine informal settlements around Belgrade, including the dumpsite at Vinca. The study is mostly qualitative in nature and provides a rich body of information based upon Collectors' own views and reported



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mostly in their own words. We also interviewed City officials, who were very supportive of the study, buyers of materials and other knowledgeable people. The research team consisted of an anthropologist, a sociologist, an economist, an architect, and four mature interviewers, two of whom were Roma.

Settlement selection was made on the basis of findings from the 2002 study of all Roma settlements in the City of Belgrade (*Review of Roma Settlements in Belgrade*)². This study discovered that there are 152 illegal settlements of poor people in 16 municipalities of Belgrade with a total population of about 60,000 people, most of whom reportedly are Roma. Of these 152 settlements, a large proportion of people in 96 settlements work in waste scavenging. These 96 settlements became the base sample from which the nine study communities were chosen. The other 56 settlements were excluded from our sample because they have little activity in scavenging (less than 30% of households are engaged in scavenging). The degree of activity by the population dealing with waste is directly related to the settlement's level of poverty. The poorer a settlement, the more extensive is the activity of its residents in waste collection.

We selected settlements that would be representative of settlements highly involved in scavenging (90-100% of residents scavenge), moderately involved (70-89% scavenge) and less involved (30-69% scavenge). The percentage of families whose main livelihood is scavenging was discovered through the 2002 survey. In that survey, settlements were classified into three types according degree of scavenging and according to settlement features and conditions: (1) solid waste dumps: the Vinca Dump, a settlement situated closely to Belgrade's only active solid waste dump, (2) slums, which are totally unplanned and very poor communities, and (3) 'other' urban settlements, which may have planned and unplanned elements and tend to be somewhat less poor. Most of these settlements are 'illegal' and do not receive City services. Until recently, they did not appear on any City map. But in the new urban plan of Belgrade, they do now appear. A 'settlement' is the unit used for municipal planning (General Zoning Plan, regulation plans, etc.). Some characteristics of these settlement types pertaining to this research are summarized in Table 1.

Table 2 lists the names of the settlements selected and their sizes. As Table 2 shows, we selected the Vinca dump, four settlements classified as 'slums' and four other urban settlements occupied by the urban poor. We felt this gave us a good representation of the lower income Roma population who may work in scavenging.



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Table 1. Informal settlement types in Belgrade

Settlement type	Number of settlements in this category	Population number in 2002	Estimated percentage of households working in solid waste	Estimated no. of people dependent upon solid waste for income & food	Number of settlements in the sample
Active dump	1	70	100%	70	1
Slums	29	5,782	70-90%	4,000-5,200	4
Other urban	66	18,014	30-60%	5,400-10,800	4
Total	96	23,896	-	9,470-16,070	9

Table 2. Types of settlements selected

Type of settlement	Settlement's name	Population number
Active dump	1. Vinca city dump	70
Slums	2. Deponija (former dump in City centre)	750
	3. Gazela bridge	2000
	4. Rakovica selo	205
	5. Zarkovo bridge	34
Other urban	6. Orlovsko naselje	750
	7. Rupe	1300
	8. Vojni put	1200
	9. Marinkova bara	380



Table 3. Number of focus group participants

Type of settlement	Settlement name	Number of participants			Total participants
		Men	Women	Children	
Active dump	1. Vinca dump	10	7	6	23
Slums	2. Deponija	7	7	14	94
	3. Gazela bridge	7	8	8	
	4. Rakovica village	9	8	7	
	5. Zarkovo bridge	7	6	6	
Other urban	6. Orlovsko naselje	13	7	9	94
	7. Rupe	6	6	15	
	8. Vojni put	6	5	6	
	9. Marinkova bara	7	7	7	
Total		72	61	78	211

Usually when a family engages in scavenging, all members collect. Thus, we formed three focus groups in each settlement: a focus group of men, one of women and one of children. The number of participants in each focus group per each settlement is shown in Table 3. A total of 72 men, 61 women and 78 children participated in these discussions. Adults who participated in the focus group discussions ranged in age from 17 to 62, but the great majority of participants were in their 30s and 40s. It may be concluded that scavenging is done by the labour force having its most productive working period.

Two Roma members of the research team organized the focus group discussions. One of the settlement selection criteria was whether either of our Roma focus group leaders, both of whom are prominent activists in Belgrade, was known in the community. If so, then a community was more likely to be selected. This is because trust and good will are important in this type of research.

The two Roma researchers went to the communities to set up the date for the focus group discussions. They met with a community leader, explained the purpose and methods of the



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research and asked the leader to invite men, women and children who collect solid waste for a living to participate. We limited the number of participants to 12 people per group. On the appointed day, a Roma and non-Roma discussion leaders arrived at the settlement. At this point it was the job of the Roma discussion leader to explain to the focus group again the purpose of the research and to encourage discussion. They served the participants drinks and snacks and had a relaxed discussion on any topic before beginning the more formal part of the structured questioning. An additional role of the Roma researcher was to explain questions further, translate between Serbian and Romani when necessary, and generally maintain a trusting atmosphere during the one to two hours of discussion. In every settlement the goals of maintaining good will and trust with the community were achieved, and this remained the case some months later when the first author went back to these communities to visit and photograph. She was received in a very friendly manner.

The discussions in the target groups were accomplished with the help of discussion guidelines. The questions were the same for men and women, but the questions for children were somewhat different, as we also focussed more on their ambitions in life.

Topics for the focus group discussions were:

- Who scavenges solid waste: age, sex
- Why they do this activity
- Other occupations of the Collectors
- What they collect
- Main products collected
- Where they sell
- Where the waste is processed
- Economic system, incomes
- Obstacles in the informal collection
- Their knowledge of scavenging regulations
- Health hazards
- Health care
- Collectors' opinions about improvement of safety
- Food taken out of solid waste
- Children: health, work, school, ambitions
- General living conditions
- Desires for a better life

Overall discussions were friendly and lively. At times, everyone talked at once and when someone made an obviously boastful or untruthful remark, they were shouted down by the others, often with laughter. People came to the meetings dressed as nicely as they could manage. They felt honoured to have been invited to talk about their lives and work. Many of



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the groups were delighted that someone was taking an interest in their lives. They expressed the hope that this study would somehow begin communication between City officials and themselves. They hoped that the City would better understand their lives and listen to their suggestions. The children were particularly forthcoming about their work. They were always polite and respectful at the meetings and never attempted to leave before they were excused. Like the adults, they were so happy that someone was interested in their lives that they were very forthcoming with information.