



Chapter 2

Roma in Serbia

As the great majority of people involved in scavenging in Serbia are impoverished Roma, it is important to understand in some greater detail the historical circumstances that led to and maintains the poverty in which so many Roma today find themselves.

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 4. Group of Roma children





Origins

On basis of linguistic research ³ it could be claimed with great reliability that Roma originated from India. There are various opinions about the specific parts of India where they originated and about the time of their initial migrations. Some⁴ claim that Roma have come from Punjab, while others⁵ say that they originated from the province of Kabul, now in Afghanistan. Mongolian intrusions were frequent in the parts of India inhabited by ancestors of today's Roma, so their migrations were most likely due to the cruelty of the Mongolian conquests, or they were taken as prisoners and slaves to service these armies. According to 'linguistic guideposts,' different groups of Roma passed through Persia and Armenia, and later on they continued westward with Turkish armies and the Ottoman conquests of Byzantium and the Balkans.

The beginning of Roma migrations is dated from the 11th century.⁶ The movements of large groups of Roma toward the Balkans came at the time of Turkish penetration into this area beginning in the 14th Century, at first through trade.⁷ During the Turkish occupation of the Balkans, starting in the 15th Century and lasting five centuries, Roma were an integral part of the social structure, serving the needs of the Turks in metal working and other service jobs. However, Roma presence in Transylvania, France, England and Denmark was also recorded in the 15th Century and in Poland, Russia and Sweden in the 14th Century. Today Roma are present even in North and South Americas and Australia, that is, on all the continents and in most countries of the world, but they are most numerous in the Balkans. In the past Roma were called Gypsies. For most Roma, the name Gypsy is insulting, so it cannot be found in the Romani language. Today, the name Roma is used throughout the world.

The Roma population is not a homogeneous culture. Both among the public and in literature Roma groups have various names, mainly according to their faith and the occupations they are engaged in. In Serbia there are more than 50 occupational names, such as blacksmiths, wedge-makers, spindle-makers, spoon-makers, bear-tamers, musicians and carders. These names reflect the jobs Roma used to do in Serbian society when they were more nomadic and served the rural communities with agricultural and domestic items and with entertainment.

According to the directions of their settlement into the Balkans, Roma are classified into 'Vlach' and 'Turkish'.⁸ Vlach Roma were enslaved for four hundred years in Romania and came to Serbia mostly after they received their freedom in the mid-nineteenth century. They are more common in the northern part of Serbia, and the Romani language among this group has almost totally vanished. Turkish Roma are those who arrived in Serbia with the Turkish army. Today they live mostly in the southern regions of Serbia and Macedonia. A large number of them also inhabit Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.



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Demographic and cultural features

There are between 8 and 14 million Roma people in the world today. About half a million reside in Serbia. The percentage share of Roma in the overall population on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia is something between five and ten percent, with the largest number living in Macedonia and the rest in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia. In Serbia most Roma live in the south of the country. In some Serbian municipalities, Roma are one-third of the population (e.g. in Surdulica, Bujanovac, Bojnik, Vladicin Han).

Demographers estimate that 62% of Roma are below the age of 25 and 41% are under the age of 15. Only 4% of Roma are 60 years and above. Roma birth rates are higher than that of the majority population, and their average life span is at least twenty years shorter. These differences are due mainly to poverty, discrimination and a lack of formal education.

The Roma in Serbia have a distinctive but varied culture, yet some, perhaps many, have totally assimilated into the dominant Serbian culture. Many have retained their distinctive language, called Romani, though it is not uniform. In the area of ex-Yugoslavia there are three main dialects: Lajesian, Arlian and Tamarian.⁹ Roma have some traditional stories and songs in their own language, which they cherish, but they do not have an oral or written history. Roma are known to be good musicians, and the artistic skill in playing various instruments (violin and trumpet in particular) is transferred from one generation to another. This skill has become one of the important recognisable features of Roma ethnicity. As for religion, Roma have adopted the religion of the country or community where they settled. Today in Orthodox communities Roma are Orthodox, in Catholic communities they are Catholics, and in Moslem communities they are Moslems. Traditions and customs are numerous and varied among Roma, but all Roma in Serbia practice *slava*, the Serbian celebration of a saint's day, and St. George's day, another Christian holiday, whether they are Moslem, Orthodox or Catholic. All Roma in Serbia also celebrate *New Year's Day*, which they call St. Vasil (Basil), Vasilija, Vasulyitsa, or Lacho Divé, in a manner that cannot be found among any other ethnic groups in Serbia.* Most Roma believe in and pray to a unique female Roma 'saint', called 'Bibi' or 'Bibija', who looks after mothers and children. Roma also have their own beliefs about ritual purity and pollution and associated ways of bathing, washing clothing and touching other people. Their culture encourages them to remain separate from non-Roma. Largely, however, today Serbian Roma share Serbian and European values, and they consider themselves to be a Serbian or European ethnic group. While many Roma have assimilated into the larger society, many others live isolated in chronic poverty. No one knows how many are assimilated and how many remain socially isolated. Those who remain socially isolated can be found primarily in poor settlements in and around the cities of Serbia.

* St. Vasilija, the Wonderworker, was an Orthodox Christian priest, born in the early 1600s in Herzegovina and served as Bishop in Montenegro. He is one of the most revered Saints in Serbia and venerated by Orthodox, Muslims, Turks and Albanians, which explains why he is equally celebrated by Roma of every faith. He is loved and respected to this day for his lifetime of protecting the weak. His relics are said to work miracles.



A PAPER LIFE

Roma have a different marriage pattern from the dominant society. Traditionally, Roma marry early: boys at 14-15 years of age, and girls at 12-14. As the legal age of marriage in Serbia is 18, municipal authorities do not recognize many of these marriages. Endogamous marriage is still predominant, although more and more marriages are occurring with members of various other ethnic groups. Young married couples frequently live together with the bridegroom's family, creating an extended family. Since Roma society is patriarchal, the husband is regarded as the family's breadwinner and decision-maker, while the wife's role is to have children and run the home.

The unemployment rate of Roma in Serbia is estimated to be 38% and among the majority population, 10%. This factor maintains and deepens the differences and the socio-economic gap between Roma and the majority population. Employed Roma frequently work at poorly paid and stigmatised jobs, such as public sanitation and cemetery maintenance. More recently Roma have started to deal with the collection of waste, picking medicinal herbs and reviving their old craft of wickerwork. Serbia was under a socialist system from 1948 until 1999. In other Eastern European countries with communist and social systems, it is reported that the lives of Roma improved due to more employment and social housing. However, this was not the case in Serbia. Roma during the socialist period continued to remain outside the economic system because the socialist system of employment required a minimal level of education that Roma did not have.

The problem of integration of poorer Roma into the education system is one of the most acute, especially from the standpoint of their overall integration into society. Many Roma are not able to get formal employment because they lack education, and they lack education because they lack the appropriate conditions for their education due to poverty. This results in a vicious cycle. Roma have the highest rate of illiteracy of any ethnic group in Serbia, 34%. Only about 21% of Roma have completed elementary education and a mere 0.4% have university diplomas.¹⁰ From the Roma perspective, education is too long, too expensive and results in uncertain benefits. Poor Roma children have no conditions for studying because they live in extremely difficult economic and social conditions. Those who attend school are sometimes harassed or beaten up by other children for being Roma. All of these reasons contribute to early drop-out from school and poor grades, as well as for poor knowledge of the language used in school. Roma children also face prejudice from teachers and from the system at large. A great majority of children assigned to special schools for 'children disturbed in development' are Roma. This is mostly due to their inability to pass language exams in Serbian when entering the first grade. Modest and low-level ambitions of the parents also contribute to the overall adverse condition in the education of Roma children.



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Self-organizing

Some sixty years after the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Serbia, Roma began to organize in order to improve their lives. Roma organisations emerged in Belgrade in the 1930s, and more emerged in the second half of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, there are Roma societies (associations) operating in most of the municipalities inhabited by Roma. One of the oldest is the Bibi Society in Belgrade, started around 1918 and dedicated to Roma education, culture and the arts.¹¹ In Belgrade alone there are over 150 such organizations today. They deal with social issues such as poverty, education, political participation and on preserving cultural traditions. Many of these organizations are members of the Federation of Roma Societies. Under the single party system of the communist era, the Roma had no separate political voice. The situation changed considerably during the 1990s with the fall of socialism and the emergence of a multi-party political system. Roma now have their own political parties and present their own candidates for elections.

In the past few years European countries have given greater attention to Roma issues. The efforts of many meetings, research efforts and activities of Roma organizations have paid off. For the first time in the history of Yugoslavia, Roma were granted the status of a National

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 5. Leader of a Roma women's group – Rakovica village



Minority in 2002. Before that they were treated only as an ethnic group. This new status means that, by law, all government institutions must practice 'affirmative action' in employment and education and must make a special effort to help solve Roma problems associated with poverty and discrimination. As a direct result of this new law, the first Serbian National Council of Roma was formed in 2003. Also in 2002, the Republic of Serbia drew up a Draft Strategy for the Integration and Empowerment of Roma. In 2003 the Serbian government adopted a Strategy for the Reduction of Poverty. In this strategy the Roma are treated as a special group for health, work, housing and education, and there is an explicit budget for Roma poverty alleviation. Also in 2003, the Republic of Serbia drew up a draft document for improving the education of Roma children.

Discrimination and isolation today

The Roma in Serbia today are mostly urban dwellers.¹² Since the Turkish army and population mainly occupied towns, the Roma also stayed primarily in towns. The Turks had special decrees that regulated the settlement of Roma, obliging them to stay in the outskirts of towns and separately from the houses of the local Serbian population and Turks, in communities called 'mahalas'. Thus each ethnic group had its own quarter. Later on it was decreed that Roma had to live separately even from each other on basis of their confessions: Moslems at one end and Orthodox at the other end of a settlement. These locations of Roma settlements are almost identical in Serbia and other parts of former Yugoslavia today.

Today poor urban Roma tend to live in a limited and strictly bordered space, usually a slum that is not recognized as a legal settlement, even though it may be decades or even centuries old, and thus they are segregated from the dominant society. This is one of the more significant determinants in their inability to improve their living conditions. These communities are crowded and they lack modern infrastructure. The result of such isolation is that the slum inhabitants have the feeling of a *different living*. In the congested space of the settlement and cramped space of their homes, the family has no possibility to achieve privacy or independence.

From Turkish times until the present, Roma have been regarded as foreigners and in a most negative sense. Among the peoples of the Balkans, Roma are frequently mentioned as negative examples, even among themselves. There is probably no other social group mentioned as frequently as Roma in everyday negative connotation. The causes of such prejudice against Roma could be found, above all, in the fact that they are considered *to be 'newcomers' from unknown regions*, although they have been in the Balkans about 600 years. They are foreigners or strangers who furthermore arrived with the conquering Ottoman Turks at the end of the 14th century. The conquering army withdrew in 1867, but the Roma have remained and some have continued to live in the slums allocated to them during Turkish rule. They are thus still negatively associated with Turkish rule. Many remain spatially isolated and have become involved in occupations that do not bring any significant profit. On the other hand, unlike



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some other European countries, Roma in former Yugoslavia have never been exposed to collective condemnation or to repression. But the prejudice has remained. Roma are stigmatised in two ways: that they are Roma (Gypsies) - implying that they are strangers and idlers - and by poverty. Thus, poor Roma share the fate of other poor people, and in addition they are the lowest and least respected social group in society.

In the past, the settled Roma used to make houses of rammed clay and thatched roofs. These simple shelters were built without any pattern and were crowded together. Today the construction of most Roma settlements is similar. According to the 2002 survey, two thirds of the houses are of rammed clay, and almost 15% of them are from other improvised materials: old railway cars, old buses, metal sheets and other scrap. The settlements are recognisable by their appearance: the houses are dilapidated and tending to collapse (new houses are very rare), without domestic or community sanitation. The lack of hygiene contributes to their bleak appearance. Roma continue to build their own houses; few of them live in the so-called 'social flats', government subsidized apartments. The families enjoying the latter benefit usually have someone employed permanently and for a rather long time.

There is a close connection between the communities of Belgrade's Collectors and the scavenging life. Collectors' communities are secondary dumpsites by necessity. They are placed where the solid waste is brought, sorted and stored until sale. Collectors need to live in illegal communities without urban services or modern infrastructure, for if their communities were legal and they had these things, their activities inside their own communities would by definition become illegal. While Collectors wish for a better life and cleaner more organized communities, they know that such places would prohibit the scavenging way of life, unless, of course, an arrangement could be worked out with City authorities. It is useful, therefore, to take a closer look at some of the communities we visited and held focus group discussions with the inhabitants.

