



## Chapter 3

### Belgrade's Scavenger Communities

Unlike some other cities, such as Manila, Philippines or Cairo, Egypt, where hundreds or even thousands of scavengers live and pick solid wastes at the city dump sites, very few of Belgrade's Collectors, only about 70, reside at the City's main dump site, Vinca. A greater number, about 750 people, live at the City's former main dump site, Deponija, now officially closed and located nearer the center of the City. The Deponija settlement has remained because it evolved into a permanent community over a period of about 50 years. While some of its residents still 'mine' the old dump site for salable items, most scavenge outside the dump. Most Collectors live throughout the City in 96 illegal settlements and as individual nuclear families on vacant lots, and most scavenge waste from solid waste containers along the City streets.

Most of Belgrade's Collectors live in three types of communities: old settlements, as much as 400 years old; new settlements that have arisen since 1995 and, even more since 1999, by people who have been displaced by the recent Balkan wars or moved from elsewhere in Serbia owing to extreme poverty; and settlements that are a mixture of the two. Collectors who describe themselves as 'native Belgraders' mostly live in the old *cigani mahalas* (Gypsy settlements) that were established in Belgrade during Turkish times. Most are located near the center of Belgrade, but a few are in semi-rural settings on the outskirts.

'Newcomers' settlements are located both near the center of the City and more towards the outskirts. Some newcomer settlements are composed of people from a certain location and certain religion. Families that know each other, are related to each other, or who speak the same language and have the same culture, tend to live together. For example, Serbian-speaking Roma displaced from Kosovo live in their settlements and separately from Albanian-speaking Muslim Roma displaced from Kosovo, who live together in their own settlements. Roma from south Serbia again have their own settlements, while groups of Roma families from Romania likewise live together or are mixed in older settlements.

Some newcomers have mixed in with existing older settlements that have the very poorest conditions. For example, there is a large settlement of about 2000 people under the Gazela



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Bridge, a main bridge crossing the Danube and entering the center of the old City. About half of this settlement is composed of people living there for about the last 25 years, and the other half is made up of newcomers from Kosovo. Another example is the settlement named Deponija (meaning 'dump'), the former City dump but now closed to dumping (although some private businesses still dump their waste there). It is also mixed with people who have lived there over 50 years plus newcomers from the Balkan wars.

Collectors' settlements range from being fairly nice, if they are legal, with water, sewerage, electricity, paved streets and concrete houses, to communities sitting on muddy hillsides with shacks made of tarps and scraps and no services whatever. The settlements described below represent this range from good hygienic living conditions to extremely unhygienic and hazardous conditions. The six communities described below are typical of the nine that participated in this study.

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Photograph 6. Rakovica village





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**Rakovica Village** is a legal settlement of entirely Roma families located about 20 kilometers from the center of Belgrade. This community was resettled by the City from the center of Belgrade some 25 years ago. Its 54 families were moved into nice new concrete houses with all services. Today they live like middle class families, but they still collect solid waste for a living. The reason for this is that these Roma families are very much undereducated by Serbian standards. Most adults have never been to school or have only two or three years of elementary education. With so little education they can only collect solid waste or do day-laboring jobs. Their children are now in school, but community leaders complain that the children are passed from grade to grade without learning anything or are put into special schools for children with development problems. Parents say that their children cannot compete with Serbian classmates when they go to high school, and so they drop out. The families claim that despite their nice homes and serviced community, they are still poor and struggling. We were amazed to learn that this community gets much of its food from scavenging and taking expired foods from warehouses. The community raises pigs, goats, chickens and ducks in a common area at the back of the block of about 60 houses. Also in this common area they store and sort solid waste for re-sale. Their main complaint is that now they are so far from the center of Belgrade that only families with trucks can make a decent living. Community leaders said they would like to get out of this cycle of poverty and scavenging, and they try hard to keep their children in school as long as possible. But they say their main obstacle to progress in education is discrimination against their children in school. In 2000 a small group of women in this community formed an organization for the protection and advancement of women and children, which has now grown to sixty members. They give training to couples to end domestic violence and alcohol use and to encourage couples to send their children to school.

An old settlement in Belgrade, called **Zvezdara**, also lies about 20 kilometers from the City center in a community that claims to be about 400 years old. It is an example of a '*cigani mahala*' established by the Turks. While poor and without water or sewerage, this community is built largely of permanent materials – bricks and concrete. The houses are all quite small and crowded, and the people living there are poor and primarily scavenge solid waste for their livelihood. Like Rakovica Village, the adults are largely uneducated and only some of the children are in school. They say that without education they cannot get out of the cycle of poverty. Roma NGOs are active in this community, trying to improve conditions and to help the families to have greater political voice. This community has been lobbying the City of Belgrade for several years to set aside a portion of land (all the land belongs to the City) as a proper recycling center so that the economic waste collected by families can be moved from their homes to a secure central place with a fence and a roof. The families would like to organize a recycling business and make their community more orderly. So far the City has refused to work with the community to achieve this goal because they say the plot of land in question is too valuable to be used in this way.





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Photograph 7. Vinca Dump

The Roma settlement at the **Vinca Dump** has the worst living conditions found in the City of Belgrade. The settlement began on vacant land next to the solid waste dump some 30 or more years ago for the purpose of scavenging solid waste. It is located about 100 meters from the main waste unloading spot and is separated from the dump by a secure fence to keep out Collectors. The settlement consists of about fifteen scrambled together houses, shacks, improvised shelters of materials at hand, even some types of tents, all erected illegally on City land. Most of the 70 people in this settlement are Roma. The settlement lacks electricity, clean water supply, and sanitation. The children are also far away from schools and lack transportation to school. The settlement is a scene of mud and solid waste. These people use the water from three wells that are located less than 100 metres from the main unloading spot of the dump.





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Photograph 8. A collector at Deponija, the former city dump

**Deponija**, a word meaning ‘dump’, is the site of the City’s *former* solid waste dump, now officially closed. It is located more centrally now that the city has grown. The community began there about 50 years ago for the purpose of scavenging solid waste and reselling it. Today it consists of about 150 households (approximately 750 people) and nearly all residents are involved in scavenging. The conditions in Deponija are notorious for filth and poverty. The community has no paved streets, no electricity, no water supply and no sewerage. Homes are badly made of packed mud and scrap materials. Some efforts have been made over the past decade to improve conditions there. Local and international organizations have built common showers, toilets and water points, a kindergarten and a youth center. The Deponija settlement is illegal, and therefore the City of Belgrade wants no investment there in infrastructure.





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Photograph 9. Cukarica village

**Cukarica** village is a small settlement of about 20 newcomer households on a muddy hillside located next to a cardboard recycling plant. Most of the residents of this community have come from Leskovac, a poor town in south Serbia, within the past ten years. The conditions there are as bad as or worse than those in Vinca or Deponija. One latrine serves the entire community. Residents buy water from outside and they steal electricity through improvised connections. Their houses are made of tarps, bits of wood for structure, bits of foam for warmth, and other scrap materials. Above the slippery mud is a sea of domestic solid waste. Yet next to the road are their neatly bundled piles of cardboard and office paper ready for sale. They claim that no matter how miserable this life is, it is still better than their lives were in Leskovac, where they claimed they were starving. They say that at least here in Belgrade they can make some money from solid waste to buy food and clothes.



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Photograph 10. Ratko Mitrovic

The community of **Ratko Mitrovic** is a neat and tidy community of whitewashed houses made of packed mud. It sits on the tarmac of a factory in New Belgrade. The 100 or so residents of Ratko Mitrovic came to Belgrade from their homes in the capital city of Prishtina, Kosovo in 1999, when returning Albanians turned against them and burned their houses in retribution. These Roma were accused of being on the side of the Serbian army. They lost everything and fled, leaving all their personal documents behind. They found this spot to settle and negotiated a deal with the factory, which provides them with electricity and water for a monthly charge. The residents of Ratko Mitrovic claim they had never picked solid wastes in their lives before now. Before 1999, they were middle class Kosovars who held all kinds of service and professional jobs. But when they arrived in Belgrade, they soon discovered that unemployment in the capital was high, and they also had no birth certificates or ID cards with them (due to sudden expulsion from their homes during the Kosovo war) and therefore could not enroll their children in school or apply for jobs. For a couple of years following their arrival, government organizations provided them with minimal relief food and firewood. However, by the time of our study, this help had ceased, and these Kosovo IDPs (internally





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displaced persons) were on their own. Now they were Collectors, getting most of their food from solid waste and also collecting whatever else they could sell. They were just learning the system. They were in culture shock at having to do this kind of work, but they were desperate to survive. They felt they had no choice.

Another community of IDPs from Kosovo, Muslim Albanian Roma, live in a community called ‘**Zemun**’. It sits in the city of Zemun, a municipality of greater Belgrade. This group of about 50 families arrived also in 1999 as a result of reprisals against Roma. (They call themselves Ashkalija, a term used by Albanian-speaking people who may be of Roma origin.) They were not so lucky as the Orthodox Roma of Ratko Mitrovic. They found a vacant piece of land with a polluted stream running at one end and they took it, for they explained that they could not find any other piece of land with water. They are much poorer Roma from a town in the south of Kosovo. Formerly they had worked as agricultural laborers, but now in Belgrade they also found themselves scavenging solid waste. Their homes are made mostly of packed mud and scrap materials. The pathways between the houses are strewn with domestic solid waste. Their community sits across a main road from luxury high-rise apartment buildings, beautiful shops,

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Photograph 11. Zemun







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movie theaters, restaurants and shopping malls. But the city of Zemun refuses to give them even one clean water tap since their community is illegal and the City does not want them to stay. Like the residents of Ratko Mitrovic, they also have no personal documents, no chance to get jobs, and no children in school. Their children have been denied immunizations because they have no birth certificates and so could not get a government health card. At the time of this study their emergency rations had also ended and they were scavenging to survive. They were also raising chickens, ducks, and pigs in their small improvised courtyards. They said they could never go back to Kosovo, as they were accused also of siding with the Serbian army during the conflict. They had nothing there now and had to make their lives somehow in Belgrade, but they could not see the way forward.

As briefly mentioned above, the Roma community under the **Gazela Bridge** in Belgrade is another notorious slum, comprising about 2000 people. It also is extremely poor. Houses are put together from every kind of scrap material. There is no electricity, water supply, sewerage, or paved roads. Nearly every family is involved in scavenging and the community is one big chaotic recycling center. The Gazela Bridge slum is a disaster waiting to happen – a fire

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Photograph 12. Gazela Bridge community





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or an epidemic. That so many people are so crowded together is a dangerous situation. The community is about 50 years old but has about 1000 new residents from the 1999 conflict in Kosovo. Many children from older residents in this community are in schools, though most say their children are in special schools for the developmentally challenged.

Communities that are somewhat legalized and recognized, such as the resettlement community Rakovica Village and the Kosovo IDP village Ratko Mitrovic that has reached an agreement with a factory, are much better off hygienically than communities that are totally illegal. The former two communities have paved roads, domestic solid waste collection, water supply, sanitation (septic tanks or pit toilets), and electricity. With this infrastructure, it is possible for communities to keep clean and for the people to feel some dignity in their living conditions. These conditions are unfortunately rare in poor Roma communities.

In the next chapters we let the Roma Collectors, whom we interviewed in these and other communities, speak for themselves.