



Chapter 6

Child Collectors

Thousands of Roma children are born into communities heaped with solid waste. From their first moments of life they are surrounded by both the domestic solid waste of their communities and by the ‘economic’ solid waste collected by their parents and siblings. Some children know little else. Their view of the outside world begins with waste bins and waste dumps. Those who leave these communities with their parents, to accompany them scavenging, see the streets of Belgrade and their future opportunities in terms of the ‘economic’ waste to be collected. Only gradually are they exposed to the possibilities of schools and sports, but most will never participate. Their world begins with solid waste, then they learn how to be Collectors themselves, and the short cycle of about 15 years continues again with their own children.

In the streets one can frequently see Roma children at work as scavengers. Other children offer various kinds of services to drivers stopped at traffic lights, such as washing the windshields or selling small items. In order to understand better how these children perceive their own worlds, we interviewed children between the ages of six and seventeen in their own focus groups. During these discussions, they proudly spoke of their “involvement in the business.”

Children’s collecting activities

Most children confirmed that they collect items from solid waste or help out in shops in return for food or other items. They claim they collect “everything that could be found and could be useful.” More specifically, “everything that’s nice” or “what I find attractive for me.” “When I have nothing to do and all the other children leave to go collecting, I leave too and collect what is useful.” The children at the Vinca dump say they collect from early morning until about 5 pm.

Children below 11 years of age usually pick solid waste together with their parents, mostly with their mothers or elder brothers. Girls of all ages go only with their parents. Children say that when they collect alone, they go only nearby. “We go to the surrounding area where it’s close, visit repairmen and shops.” When they go with their parents or elders, they go further away. “I only go with my mother and she sometimes goes very far away.”



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Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 17. Child Collectors

Older children and children who can manage money often collect and sell cardboard on their own. Other children take the goods to their homes to have their parents sell them. Parents sometimes give money back to the children so they could buy shoes and clothing in the flea markets. While children mostly collect for themselves, they do know the value of various items that their parents collect. For them the most profitable is the collection of 'finished goods' that they can keep for themselves, whereas the rest goes to the marketplaces. "It's good when I find something I need, some toys and the like." Old paper is also attractive for them because it pays off well, "but it is subject to long waiting and it is all sold by dad." There are examples of 'early independence' in the business. "A buyer comes around with a car, so I wait for him." "Sometimes I take things to the flea market in Novi Beograd." If they happen to sell the goods on the street, they keep a part of the money for themselves. "I buy a thing or two for myself and treat the friends." "I collect for myself because now I am a grown-up. I am 12, and I shall get married soon." "My uncle allows me to keep the money from the things I collect. I collect the egg-packing material and it sells rather well." The children selling on their own mostly keep the money for their own needs. "I buy sport shoes and jeans at the flea market." They proudly claim that they all 'understand money'.



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Even the children who are not involved in scavenging speak clearly and in detail about the business. They know what is collected and what pays the best. They emphasize they “have never been to a marketplace or to a dump.” Their parents do that job. Children say they do other jobs. “I assist my parents in selling.” “I help when someone is having his courtyard cleaned here in our vicinity. They give me chocolate or money.” “I also provide help for the old people, like buying or bringing things for them.” “I help my family members when they sell at market counters.” “When it’s available, I chop the firewood and carry it in.” “I carry in the coal for households.” “I wash windshields.” “I clean up cellars.” “We do household jobs. We clean homes, feed pigs and look after the courtyards.” “I help in selling in the marketplace and a bit around the house; we wash dishes and clean.”

Children emphasize that they do not eat the food from street bins. “No, we can poison ourselves. We never take the waste food.” However, they do not hesitate to eat the food collected in some other way, because they can’t afford to buy. “We do not eat exactly straight from the bin, but some of the people who know us leave food in a bag, whatever is left over from their meals.” Children mostly take food from marketplaces. “People give us fruits and vegetables, cheese, etc. We go around with bags. Sometimes we provide them with some kind of help. They know us. We bring them water and do other tasks. We wash the counters and so forth.” Relatively few Roma children said: “We don’t do anything, we play.”

Most of the children interviewed have rather modest funds available. Whether they ‘earn’ independently or get an ‘award’ for helping their parents, the amount ranges between 20 and 50 dinars per day. Some children spoke of earning bigger amounts. “Yesterday I got 100 dinars for the egg-packing cardboards. You have to know what sells well.” “I earn around 100 dinars for the paper daily, but not every day.” “I earn about 600 dinars when I wash cars. With my dad I earn 3 to 4 thousand dinars in two weeks, or four to six thousand dinars per month. If you are lucky, you can earn even more. Per day I can earn between 100 and 200, sometimes 200 to 400, more or less, it all depends.” Most of them, however, have no clear idea about their earnings. Their answers are, “We don’t know.” “It varies.” “There is no specific price for these odd things.”

A number of children don’t receive any money from their parents. They report that from an early age, they are on their own and have to feed themselves. “I go mad when I ask mom and dad for money and I have to wait and wait, so I tell them I won’t wait and I leave for school.” Or, more drastically, “Frequently I go to school without breakfast and sometimes we borrow from others to eat, and yet sometimes even that much is not available.” “I get nothing, my parents keep all my earnings. I sometimes take some for myself, but without dad seeing it.”

Children do not seem to be in doubt about whether scavenging is allowed. “It is going to be collected for sure.” “It’s allowed, quite definitely.” “It’s definitely allowed, why should it not be?” “It’s not prohibited; people threw it away so why shouldn’t we take it?” “We don’t steal, we take things people discarded, so why should they prohibit collecting?” “I think it is not allowed, but when someone has to do this job (to survive), then it is allowed.” Even if there



is an impression of some kind of ‘prohibition’ or restriction, it’s usually in the form of norms that come from one’s family and refer to the ‘rules’ that should protect children from hazards or stigma: “You can’t work in the night.” “I think it is not allowed. You can get infected or cut yourself.”

Risks to children

Children admitted that there are risks to scavenging. “You have to be careful,” “You can hurt yourself,” “There are needles (syringes).” “Sometimes you cut yourself a hundred times per day.” Children said that insults are their biggest problem. “They call you names; they insult us.” “Children throw things at us in the streets.”

The children also appreciate the support they receive from other people when collecting. “At the marketplace the people are good, they help us. We sort out the goods for them, throw their waste away, and they help us.” “The people in the *C-market* also help. They give us cardboard and whatever they have.”

Injuries are frequent among children, however they talk about them as something quite normal. “Once I fell down with the cart.” “Once I was hit by the bin.” “One of my friends was hit by the lid.” “Sometimes we suffer cuts.” “We like to take syringes so we can sprinkle each other with water, and sometimes you get pricked.” “Once I got cut on glass.” “I got cut by a saw that had been thrown into the can.” Children explain their injuries as being caused by their own carelessness rather than as risks that exist in scavenging. “Sometimes I get cuts or pricks when I do not take care.” “I get hurt when I cut myself sometimes because I am not careful.” “Sometimes there is even a bomb in the can. One man had his arm shattered.”

As for their illnesses, the children said they mostly become ill from colds, but they do not link the colds with their work conditions: “I get a cold just like that, not because of the work.” “I get a cold when we get rained on throughout the day.” “I was ill during the winter. I had a high temperature but I recovered, but that’s on account of the winter.” “I get ill when it’s cold.” Our impression is that children visit physicians more frequently than do adults. Most of them answer, “We go to the doctor when we are sick.” Some children even go to the dentist.

How children learn the business

Children learn the business of scavenging through participation. Mothers take along their children from an early age to “keep them safe” while they work. Later on, the children are allowed to ‘assist’, depending on their age and capabilities. While on the streets of Belgrade one can see parents scavenging with their small children, it is relatively rare. Mostly one observes older children and adults, so when we asked parents about the ages at which their children start scavenging or accompany them, their answers were consistent with our observations.



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Milos Petrovic



Photograph 18. Collector children

Roma children are expected to become independent relatively early and to support themselves fully by age 12. At 8 to 12 years they begin to work seriously in scavenging with others, or they 'assist' at the marketplaces, in shops, or with skilled workmen for which they are compensated in goods or money. At this age the children are also included by teenagers in washing windshields at traffic lights. Adolescents 13 to 16 years of age work as the 'team members', or they start their 'independent' activity in scavenging. By this age, their 'education' has already been achieved through their own experience.

Some of the fathers insisted that their children do not scavenge. "The children don't collect." "I don't allow the children to work through the bins. There are all kinds of things in there - worms and everything." Most of them, however, do not deny that their children collect. "The children sometimes go, sometimes don't go." "The big ones go, and the small ones don't." "They like to go on their own, around here." "The older children who have completed their elementary school go with us and help." "The small children don't go; it's mostly those from 10 years of age, but also from 7 when there is no one at home to look after them." "They can only go to the marketplace."



The mothers were more honest; they rarely denied the involvement of their children in scavenging. They emphasized that the older children mostly do this. "The children collect junk from 7 years of age." "The children go with us when they reach 10 years. I have to make them accustomed to work." "The children go with us, what's wrong with that - they are big. We don't take along our small children of 5-6 years." "The children of 12 to 15 years of age go with us to help us, but mostly from 15 years of age." "Well, they start collecting at 14 years of age, because we fear the trucks and other hazards." "My son started at 22." "These big ones go alone, they learn from us. Even when we don't allow it, they go." One mother's answer seems to summarize the entire situation. "Well, they go a little with us, and thereafter in their own company. Nobody forces them to. They like to go all by themselves."

School attendance

We asked parents about whether their children go to school, and if not, why not. While a few said their children go to school. "The children attend the school regularly." "I urge and beat the children to go to school so they wouldn't be like me. Who is to ask them if they want to go? They have to go!" However, most of the parents agreed that not all the children go to school. "No, they don't like to go. They refused to go." "Some of them do go, but others do not." "All the children ought to go to school, but we have no conditions* for that." "They don't go on regular basis because their addresses have not been registered." "This boy of mine runs away, he doesn't like the school and now he is 18. I have the conditions to have him educated, but he wouldn't go. He goes and works together with us."

A number of parents alluded to the fact that Roma children get beat up at school. "They go as far as Class 5, and then they drop out because the 7th and 8th grade pupils beat them up." "I am able and want to have my boy educated, I'll collect the money, but ... they (other children) beat him and the teacher would not protect him. It's perhaps better to have a Gypsy school."

All parents said they thought education was important, even though few of their children attended school. When we asked children, "Does anyone in your family think that school is important?" they mostly answered, "Yes, both mom and dad." "Everybody does." "My dad told me - 'First the school, then everything else' - so I wouldn't have to live like this, but rather to do something else." "My mom is strict in that respect because she wants me not to be stupid, but to learn something instead."

The children also thought school was important because of the knowledge obtained ("So you can read and write"), the reputation ("So I wouldn't be ridiculed by others" and "It's not good when you are illiterate"), and the employment ("So you can find a job" or "So you can have

* The conditions that parents refer to are money for books, school supplies, shoes and school uniforms, a space to study at home and electricity to do homework at night.



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a company and a truck"). The reality, nevertheless, is different. Children explained why they were not in school: "Everybody thinks, and I think myself, that it is important for you to go to school, but this is not possible. My mother believes it is important, but in vain - I won't go because they like to fight over there." "I and my mother think that it is most important, but I am not in Leskovac anymore."* "I am bored there." "I don't go. I used to go in Surdulica, but here I can't because I don't have the registration." "I am not registered as living in this community." "I dropped out because over there the big guys take narcotics in the toilets." "We are orphans, there is nobody to take us there, and our sister is very small. Who will take care of her?" "My father didn't enroll me - now I am going to earn money so I can pay for evening school."

At the time of this research, no children living at the City dump (Vinca) were going to school, mainly because of lack of transportation. This settlement is located a couple of kilometres away from the nearest main road. To reach the road, the children have to walk or use the trucks of the Public Sanitation. Usually the drivers accept them, but sometimes they either can't or do not want to. One child said, "The drivers say it is prohibited to take us along." Another said, "We can't go to school, we have no transportation. The first truck arrives at 8 o'clock in the morning, that's when the school starts. You can't be late for school every day."

Overall we found that children of 'native Belgraders,' long-term residents of Belgrade, have a higher level of integration into the school system than 'newcomers'.

Children's ambitions

We asked children what they wanted to be when they grew up and whether they had any role models. They answered that they would like to be nurses, hairdressers, sales women, bankers, counter salesmen, taxi drivers, car mechanics, painters, a flute player, an accordion player, chauffeurs, football players, singers, carpenters, a train conductor ("like dad used to be when he didn't drink"), a tram or bus driver ("you just take rides"), the president, a mason, a tire repairman, a Public Sanitation worker, a crane operator, a factory worker, a soldier, and a postman. Very few children didn't have any wishes for the future. It is significant, however, that only the children from the dump in Vinca did not have any answers for this question. The limited dwelling space, inadequate social contacts and communications reflect adversely on the socialization of the children and the formation of their ambitions.

Children said they admired and wanted to be like Tarzan; Eddie Murphy; Bruce Lee ("He is always the strongest and nobody can do anything to him, whereas he defends everyone and attacks nobody"); employees at McDonalds ("because they have nice uniforms and may eat what they sell"); actors and singers ("They live well and have everything nice", "They sing

* Collectors told us that in the town of Leskovac, in southern Serbia, books and school supplies are free and they are less strict about clothing, as this area is much poorer than Belgrade. Thus more poor children attended school.



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well and wear nice clothes”). They also mentioned particular adults they know: a painter; a taxi driver; a teacher; my sister who is a hairdresser; our baker; the soccer player Kezman.

The role models are, therefore, mostly from the realm of film and singing stage, but also from the ranks of ordinary people. They reflect the ‘better life’ symbolized through beauty, strength, plenitude and comfort. This yearning for a better life or life without deprivation was most picturesquely expressed by a boy who said, “I would like to be a monkey, because monkeys can eat as many bananas as they want.” The children from the Vinca dump could not name a single role model they admire nor even any image of who they would like to be when they grow up. They couldn’t name a single person in their own community whom they admired. However, three children said they would like to be a singer, a doctor and a hairdresser when they grow up.