

A PAPER LIFE

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**Belgrade's Roma in the underworld
of waste scavenging and recycling**

*Mayling Simpson-Hebert, Aleksandra Mitrovic,
Gradimir Zajic & Milos Petrovic*



Water, Engineering and Development Centre
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2005



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Paper is a very useful material. You can write or print on it important information. You can use it for wrapping food and gifts or to make boxes for packing and shipping. Thus, paper makes an important contribution to society. Paper is also a fragile substance. It can easily tear and it will dissolve in the rain. So it is with the lives of people who collect paper and cardboard, scavenging the wastes of society for survival. They do a useful job for society and the environment, recycling discarded resources. But they also have a fragile life that, with any small change in public policy that might further exclude them, can melt into deeper poverty.

*This book is dedicated to all the children,
past and present, who have been born into scavenging.*

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Map of Serbia

Foreword

*“Sing him a song, dear pal,
still the gypsy Jesus awaits,
to have the blood washed off his hands,
to be freed from the holy cross”*

Antonio Machado

(1875-1939)

This message of the famous Spanish poet Antonio Machado has still not been fulfilled. ‘Gypsy Jesus’, after Auschwitz, Gulag, Bosnia and Kosovo, waits to be freed from the Holy Cross.

A Paper Life speaks the facts about the life of a people at the bottom of the social scale in Belgrade, who lack even bread and water. Transformed into garbage, together with their children, they have only one choice: to use garbage as a source of survival.

Their stories and lives are at the same time stories about us and our world, a world in which people are forced to live as animals at the threshold of the 21st century!

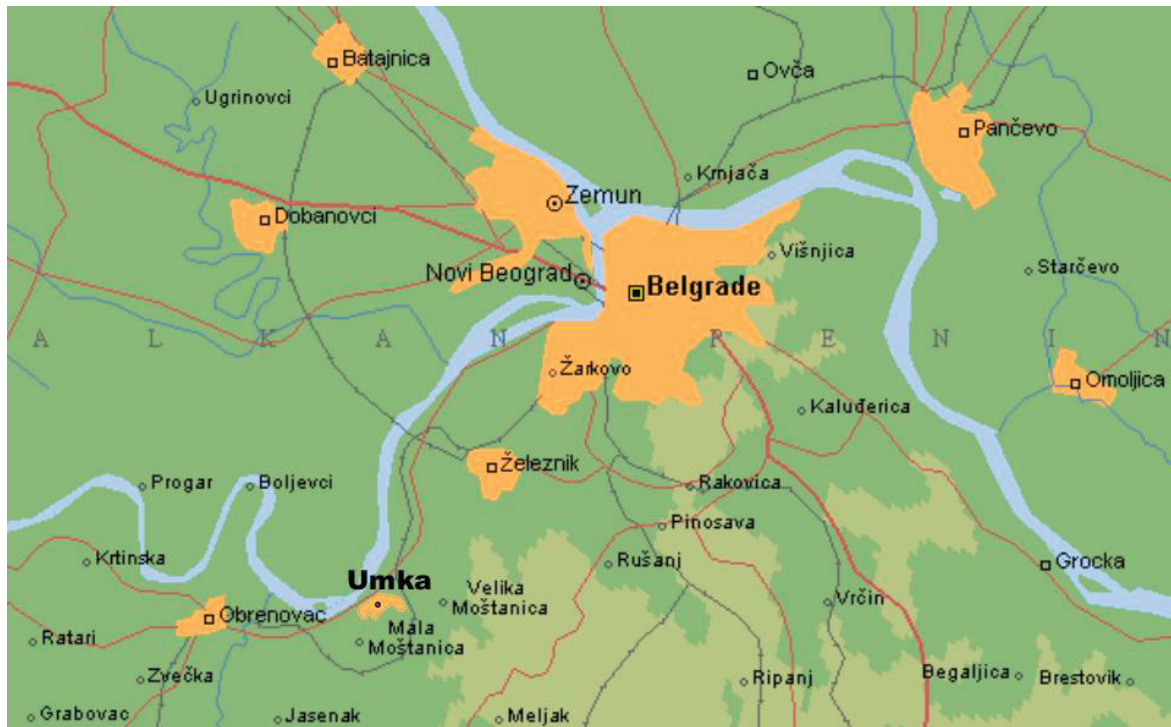
Let’s imagine those people and their children, having spent a night in cardboard homes, tiny houses whose walls and ceilings are covered with the darkest misery, in which mother’s milk transforms into ice on infant’s lips, where childhood dreams freeze of severe coldness, in which a right to live is defended with scream and whine. Let’s imagine those people, that feel no longer human, whose children are daily sentenced to a verdict: “You have no right to the future”.

The authors state that “...thousands of Roma children are born in communities filled with garbage. From the first moments of their lives, they are surrounded with ‘domestic garbage’ of their community as well as with the ‘economic garbage’ collected by their parents, brothers and sisters. Their view of a world begins with a garbage container and a dump.”

If we are aware of a concept of humanity, and if we know that righteousness before all is a responsibility towards others, we have to ask ourselves: is there any hope that this decay of human souls in the pits of our dumps will ever be stopped?

I share the authors' belief that "this research is a first step in establishing and developing a dialogue between garbage collectors and city officials". Because of that, I sincerely recommend *A Paper Life*, so that the readers will be convinced, as Jean-Paul Sartre has said, that the truth is always on the side of those least privileged.

Rajko Djuric
President of the Romani Centre of International PEN.
Former President of the International Romani Union
Beograd, 6 March, 2005.



Map of Belgrade

Preface

I moved to Belgrade, Serbia at the end of the recent Balkan Wars and occupied an apartment on the seventh floor of a building in the heart of the Old City that faced a small oval-shaped park with trees, benches and a statue in the middle. On cold nights elderly homeless men huddled around small fires fueled by cardboard. On the edges of the park stood large grey metal solid waste containers, all within sight of my small balcony. Their swiveling lids covered a morass of mixed waste, sometimes smoking or steaming, always smelling, and frequently overflowing into the street. Several times a day, adults and children would come along and sift through this quagmire of garbage to find food, cardboard and other treasures, such as bags and backpacks. The elderly, poverty-stricken from years of wars and economic sanctions and whose pensions had reached catastrophic depths, old women in their fur coats, old men in tattered wool manteaus, came with their handbags and filled them with stale bread and old fruits and vegetables that other residents had hung in sheer plastic bags on bolts on the outer surface of these containers. The Roma Collectors came also, but they, I observed, operated as professionals. Equipped with homemade carts, having sides of interwoven ropes, they neatly stacked cardboard inside the cart and hung bags and other items around the edges. Small children often peeped over the top of the rope sides, ready to be lowered into containers to extract something difficult to reach. In rummaging through this trash, the Collectors would occasionally leave a mess of unwanted items at the base of the containers.

What a picture this was and what a commentary on urban life in the 21st century – poor people in a post-war economy doing what they can to survive, and the entire system of mixing all domestic, business and restaurant waste in one container was the antithesis of orderly collection in a modern society. Obviously no thought was being given to the working conditions of those who were collecting and selling for recycling. Just throwing all solid waste, no matter how wet, dangerous or contaminated into one container was acceptable to the society, even if it meant greater hardship and less efficiency for the Collectors. It seemed bad enough that people needed to survive from scavenging solid waste, but to do nothing to make it safer, healthier or more efficient seemed worse.

By day the containers were picked through, and by night the City Sanitation Department trucks collected the remaining refuse. Sanitation workers lifted and emptied the containers into a common pile at the back of the large truck. The sanitation workers were also Roma, it seemed, and it was their job to clean up the mess around the containers left by the Collectors. This solid waste was moved to the outskirts of Belgrade and dumped in the City's waste disposal site called Vinca (also the location of one of the world's oldest Neolithic farming settlements dating back to 4,500 B.C.).

That is not the end of the story. As one drives through Belgrade, one can see various slum communities with houses made of temporary materials, such as packed mud, sheet metal, wood scraps, and flattened tins, and surrounded by stacks of cardboard and piles of other collected items. These communities are composed of the poorest of the poor of Belgrade, people mainly of Roma origin, formerly called Gypsies, or in Serbian, Cigani. The word cigani comes from a Greek word meaning, 'do not touch'. Also, at the edges of Belgrade's largest solid waste dumps are more houses, some which have been there for decades. At these sites, where hundreds of people live, City sewage trucks dump 12 to 15 tanker-loads of raw sewage per day. The sewage is released into the unpaved streets, near water taps and showers and on top of the solid waste itself. Yet, despite these dismal survival odds, scavenging is the survival strategy of scores of men, women and children in Belgrade.

With these observations and emotions, I approached the Society for the Improvement of Local Roma Communities, a non-governmental organization, to ask if they would like to join me in a study of the lives and working conditions of Collectors. I am a medical anthropologist. I thought the findings of such a study might open the hearts and minds of those responsible for City waste management services.

Mayling Simpson-Hebert
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
2005

The Society for the Improvement of Local Roma Communities

The Society for the Improvement of Local Roma Communities is a non-governmental organization whose main goal is aiding in the development and improving the living conditions of Roma communities. The Society brings together experts, scientists, and social activists willing to help.

Among its many activities, the Society carries out scientific research in the fields of socio-economics, education, culture, ecology and environment, and architecture and urban planning. The organization strives to develop optimal solutions for the improvement of Roma communities, to promote sustainable development, and to develop cooperation between the Roma community and the larger society to achieve improvements.

We engage in our projects and programs researchers from this country and abroad. Mainly the Society has an “open door” for all kinds of cooperation with those researchers who want to work on projects which are interdisciplinary and which have a practical application. For some researchers, this approach and style of work is a real challenge. Sometimes they write to us and other times they visit our office.

So in December 2001 in the modest office of our Society, Mayling Simpson-Hebert came with a proposal to work on a project together. The topic of this project and ideas seemed to me very interesting, because I had no experience on this topic of Collectors. Also, the way she talked about the project, the experiences she has had, and primarily her curiosity for research, which she showed with great confidence, was even more interesting to me than the topic itself. When I was listening to Mayling, all my vows to reduce my workload disappeared. Isn't the human factor the most important motivation for work?

I decided to join with Mayling in this project because it fitted in well with our Society's objectives. We hope that this study will provide greater understanding about the lives of Roma and offer ideas for helping them to improve their lives.

*Aleksandra Mitrovic
Belgrade, Serbia
2005*

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Various government officials gave their time for interviews: Branislav Bozovic, Municipal Secretary, Milutin Komanovic, Deputy Secretary, and Beba Golubovic, Deputy Secretary, Municipal Secretariat for Protection of the Living Environment, Belgrade, Petko Cucula, Manager of the Dump Plant in Vinca, Milos Kostic, Director of Operations Sector, Public Utility Enterprise 'City Sanitation', Belgrade, Vladomir Macura, Director, Institute for Urbanism, Radmila Mikasinovic, The Public Employment Agency, Rade Sarcevic, Director, Dusan Jakovljevic, Consultant, and Dragana Mehandzic, Professional Associate, Agency for Recycling, Republic of Serbia, and Zlata Vuksanovic, Sector for Social Housing, Institute of Urbanism, Belgrade.

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Definitions

Collectors, scavengers and waste pickers. What should we, those of us who do not scavenge solid waste, call people who live by sorting through, collecting, transporting, bundling and re-selling the garbage of the more affluent? Would they be happy with a label like ‘waste picker’ or ‘scavenger’? We think not. Both terms sound derogatory, even though according to the American Heritage Dictionary, to scavenge means to collect and remove refuse from, to clean up, to search through for salvageable material, and to collect by searching. All of these definitions apply well to the activities that our research subjects carried out, but the term scavenger still does not seem appropriate to describe who they are as people.

In writing this book, we authors struggled with these terms. The Roma of Belgrade who scavenge solid wastes call themselves *sakupljaci*, ‘Collectors’. To the ears of English-speakers, the term collector sounds like a label we would assign to an art collector, an antique collector, an old book collector, or a stamp collector. In English we also often refer to people employed by a city sanitation department as ‘garbage collectors’, (while they often refer to themselves as ‘sanitation workers’). At first, for this reason, we resisted using this term. Upon further reflection, we decided that ‘Collectors’ is the most appropriate word, and we have consciously chosen it to refer to these people. Collectors is a respectable term, and by using this word we feel we are giving our research subjects what they said they wanted most of all – respect.

We retain the term ‘scavenging’ to describe the informal economic activity of sifting through solid wastes to find items to collect for resale or consumption.

Roma is the term that people, who were formerly called ‘Gypsies’ or ‘Cigani’, today use for themselves. The term refers to their quite variable ethnic group. It includes people who speak the Romani language as well as those who do not but who know they are of Roma origins. Sometimes Roma is spelled Rroma, to distinguish them from the people of Rome, Italy. For more information on Roma origins, see Chapter 2.

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

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.

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 1. Olgica's former cardboard house

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 2. A Roma woman collecting from a city container

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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.

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 3. Roma hand-carts

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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 long 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

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

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.

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.

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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.

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.

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.

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

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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.

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

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.

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



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.



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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Milos Petrovic



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.



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.

3. BELGRADE'S SCAVENGER COMMUNITIES

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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

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

3. BELGRADE'S SCAVENGER COMMUNITIES

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

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.

Chapter 4

The Economics of Scavenging

Collectors say they go collecting every day. As they explained it, “solid waste is produced everyday and by collecting everyday, we can earn everyday.” For those who rely upon scavenging for food, collecting everyday is important for survival. Most work a hard day, starting early in the morning and working until late in the evening. In the summer it can be hot; in winter, bitter cold. Some travel long distances from their home communities to the center of town, and then they have to transport the goods collected back to their homes, pushing a cart or by some improvised motorized vehicle or tractor. Men tend to work alone while women often work in pairs or bring their small children along with them.

Most Collectors say that they got into this business as children. A few men said they do scavenging because they have been in prison and now nobody will employ them, so they do this to survive. Many of the men do have some elementary education and have worked at other jobs in the past. However, they believe that among the choices they have in life to earn a living, given their various circumstances, scavenging is their best choice at the moment. Some men remarked that “if my children learn to do this, they could always survive no matter what else life brings them.” Men display diverse skills in their work. They have a special knowledge of the worth of various materials and of the market. They also have skills for manufacturing handcarts, bicycle carts and motorized carts.

According to the men, scavenging is their ‘main’ business. No Collectors we interviewed were currently employed at another job on a full-time basis. However, they take other jobs too, if they are available, mostly ‘day-laboring’ jobs. For example men said, “You run into loading coal; sometimes its work at a construction site.” “We dig graves at the Old Mirijevo Graveyard.” “We chop the firewood for the farmers.” “We do physical work at construction sites and seasonal farm jobs and masonry work.” “When there is digging work available, I go to dig ditches.” “I go to lay bricks and to whitewash. I have mason qualifications. It’s rather rare, but I go when it’s available because I am given safe money right away.” “I work for the farmers when it’s available; I carry sacks - this is my other main activity.” “I clean up cellars or carry in coal.” The men said that most find a day job only once or twice a week.

Most of the men we talked with had other work experience. Many of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) used to have permanent jobs before they fled their homes in Kosovo or south Serbia. A musician from Prizren (in Kosovo) said, "I was a rich man in Prizren but now I am poor. But fortunately even today when some music job pops up, I can earn money. But, it's more difficult over here." Five IDPs from Kosovo said they had more than 12 years of work experience in their careers. Among those not displaced by war, many said that they had 'permanent' jobs earlier in the railroad, in City Park Maintenance Service, in Public Sanitation, and in construction companies. One man had worked for a private company in Germany. They said they left these jobs mainly due to low salaries.

Many of the women emphasized that they have no time for another job because they have to take care of their children. Others said they earn more selling items they have taken from solid waste at the Flea Market than they could from formal employment. One woman said, "Tidying up the home for a lady from 8 AM until 8 PM pays 700 dinars (about US\$12) so it's better for me to work at the Flea Market because, when I have good merchandise, I can earn more." However, several women said that the primary day jobs they get are doing housework and cleaning cellars.

Women said that it is sometimes hard to get another job because of discrimination. "If people know who we are, if they see our collection carts for example, then they won't hire us." "We used to do seasonal jobs with the farmers, like land tilling and fruit picking. They will hire us when they do not know who we are" (meaning hiding their Roma identity).

What is collected

Collectors say that they take all kinds of things: paper, cardboard, copper, aluminum, brass, bottles, footwear, clothing, pencils and ballpoint pens, pictures, broken-down appliances, technical parts, postcards, tableware, automobile parts, car batteries, glass, jars, dolls, second-hand lighters, antiques, lamps, cassette players, video recorders, TV sets, iron scrap, books, bread, worms, plastic material, metals, linen, sponges, bicycles. From street bins they mostly collect old bread, paper, cardboard, cardboard egg-packages, machinery parts, toys and car batteries. The main purpose of collecting is to re-sell the items for income. Some few Collectors specialize in cardboard or other items, but most said they simply take anything saleable. "We collect everything we find, if we can sell it. If we don't take it first, someone else will come and grab it."

Many Collectors claim they have a special relationship with certain shops and warehouses. One man said, "*C-market* (grocery) helps everybody; they give us cardboard, goods, everything." Another said, "*C-market* and *Jabuka* (grocery) leave cardboard and paper for us and sometimes fruits. They call us to take it." A woman said, "We have our favorite shops, both for cardboard and for other goods." Another woman confirms, "The people call us from the shops." They said that the warehouses of *Pekabeta* (grocery), *Jabuka*, and *Srbijateks* (textile

stores) call them to come and take away what is available. “*Dunav Insurance* gives us the archive paper; it’s big money when you find it.*

A specific ‘exchange’ is established with small, private shops. “We clean up and help them, and so they help us.” “I know the people in the shops, so they leave goods for me.” “*C-market* help us a lot. We help them a little and they help us. We all have our favorite shops. People give all kinds of things.” “The market people are nice. You clean up their counter and they give you 2-3 kilos of cheese.” “You clean up the butcher’s shop, and they give you meat, minced or whichever you need.”

Collection of food

While the main purpose of collection is for re-sale of valuable solid waste materials, some Collectors also take clean food either for themselves or for their pigs. Occasionally discarded frozen food, tinned foods and packaged foods are discovered while scavenging. Some people, both Serbs and Roma who are particularly hungry, scavenge for food, but food collection is not usually the main purpose of scavenging unless the family is very hungry.

Most men in the group discussions at first said that they do not take food from solid waste bins, with the exception of old bread left in plastic bags on the sides of bins. Men said that eating food from solid waste can cause food poisoning. However, after further discussion they began to qualify their answers. They explained that they take food which is clean and unopened, such as food in packages, even if the date is expired, unopened tinned food, and unspoiled food discarded by stores, restaurants or the fresh market and discarded warehouse food. One man said, “We do take the food if it is a write-off from a warehouse.” Another said, “Flour, oil and bread - we never sell that; we keep it for the home; we need that.” A third man said, “The food from the warehouses is good. All of us eat that. There is always someone who tells us when the warehouse would be getting rid of it. We go and take it if we are lucky enough.” One forthcoming man said, “What? Take food from the waste bins? My children would starve to death if I didn’t have that!” Another confirmed, “All of us do that – we wash and eat.”

The men claimed that one of the parents tastes the discarded food first (chocolate, biscuits, marmalade, cream and the like), and then they give it to their children. They consider macaroni and other food that needs to be cooked as being fit. They bring semi-rotten fruits discarded from warehouses, shops or market stands, clean them (remove the rotten bits) and eat the rest. “I collect for lunch the fruits and vegetables that fall on the market ground or that are abandoned on the stands.”

* The shop keeper may send someone to inform Collectors or telephone those who may be fortunate or successful enough to have secured a cell phone, which Collectors consider to be a great asset to their business.

Belgrade citizens know that poor people collect food from the solid waste bins, so there is a custom in Belgrade to leave still edible food and dry bread in a clean plastic bag, hanging on the side of a solid waste bin. All Belgraders know that within the hour, someone who needs food will come along and take this sack. These sacks of bread can add up to large quantities. The men say they readily take it because it could be sold to the farmers for pig and poultry food, but sometimes they use it for themselves. They said: "People directly give us the bread and we take clean bread for eating." "Some good people keep leaving for us by the can and in bags because they know us. We try to take the clean stuff."

Bakeries also set aside food for Collectors. "Bakers give us pastry and burek (Serbian salty pie). Sometimes there is excellent *burek* for the whole family to eat; you only need to warm it up. We eat yesterday's crescent rolls or we make bread-mash from it." And another man told a little story. "For several days I watched a baker throw in the morning whatever hadn't been sold from the day before, and I asked him nicely to let us have it, if he doesn't need it, because it means a lot for our children. He gave us some bits of leftover pizzas and all kinds of things, but all clean. So, he kept leaving it for us for some time, but then he stopped, although we didn't make any mess. When a new baker came to work for him, he intentionally threw it away. I didn't want to ask him anymore. I didn't want to humiliate myself anymore."

In the Mirijevo municipality (a peri-urban municipality) there are a large number of households that raise cattle and pigs. From this settlement they claim they collect frozen meat, and there is a lot of it "entire hens, sausages, loin roasts and the like".

Roma have strict rules of purity and pollution, what is clean and unclean, and they use this to distinguish between themselves and non-Roma. Therefore we received some interesting answers when we asked men and women whether they have seen other people eat food directly from solid waste bins. Some claim that nobody does that. "I've never seen anyone eat from the bin." Nevertheless, most Collectors believe that *other* people (non-Roma) do that. According to them, these include refugees, Serbs (mostly older people), and men waiting to be hired for physical work at the Danube Railway Station. One man said, "They are construction workers, mentally retarded, abnormal, you know, they stare at you strangely, the homeless - both Serbs and Gypsies." Another said, "At the Palilula Marketplace I saw the refugees from my settlement (Deponija) doing that. Two Roma from the settlement were eating from the bin, but they are not normal. We know them, we watch them every day." They emphasize that Serbs take the street-bin food. One said, "Yes, Serbs eat from the bins, especially around Zeleni Venac Marketplace." And another, "We collect at daytime but the Serbs collect at nighttime with battery lamps. I am told that by the people working for the Public Sanitation who work at night." A third said, "Serbs take daily what is on top for eating." Others claim that Romanians eat from solid waste bins. "There are people like that - they are Romanians; we don't need to." "There are people who go just for food in the waste bins, but not in our environment; it's these Romanians, they are so poor, but there are also old people around the town that I notice, and they are Serbs."

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Women talk much more readily about collection of food and say they are always selective. “We collect frozen meat.” “Yes, many of us nourish ourselves that way.” “Some people leave bagsful of food hung up for us.” “We eat clean meat or something else when it is available.” A woman displaced by the war in Kosovo said, “There are those who only go searching for food. I coped with hunger a whole day and then ate food that I collected and gave it to my children, because for four days we had been without food.” Another woman said, “Many people from our settlement nourish themselves that way. There are times when you can’t even find that. We take, so help me God, all of us take it. We take anything worth taking.” “You can find all kinds of things. The people are crazy; you can find a whole chicken in the bag. We take bread too. If it is good, we eat it, otherwise we sell it. In the marketplace we also take fruits and vegetables, whatever is available. The Lord is generous all the time.”

Collectors living in Vinca particularly emphasize they do not eat the food from the solid waste. “It’s very dirty. We take only canned food.”

When discussing food, the Collectors expressed empathy for other people in distress. The Roma said that in recent years, Serbs in particular have been suffering from lack of food and they take pity on them. One man said, “Once it happened that some Serbian woman said to me, ‘Wait, son, let me take a little bread for myself’. So I gave her everything because I was just collecting it for my pigs.” Another man said, “Once I gave 10 dinars to a Serb child so he wouldn’t eat from the solid waste because it is dirty.” A young scavenger told the following story. “A (Serbian) lady, wearing a fur coat and lipstick and holding a nice handbag, took bread from my basket. I shouted at her, but she said she hadn’t had anything to eat for three days. I gave her the bread and then I bought some salami in the shop for her. She was a hungry soul.” One woman said, “You can see poor old people, blind from hunger. When we have something, we give them. It’s a pity! I saw a young Serb woman pushing a handcart with the baby and eating the food from the street bin. I saw it; people eat all kinds of things. They, particularly Serbs, eat everything.”

Profitable items

Scrap metal, car batteries, and motors are considered to be the most profitable items. “Copper, aluminum, brass - they pay off the best in financial terms, but they are harder to find.” “Car batteries, motors and the like sell fast. You clean it up, take it out and get the money right away from contractors and mechanics.” For some it is profitable to collect scrap metal in the villages. Some drive a car or a bus to such locations, buy the items from the farmers in ‘bulk’ at 30-40 dinars per kilo, and resell to buyers at the City dump at 60-80 dinars per kilo.

Paper, cardboard, newspapers, and clothing are also profitable mainly because they are always available. Vehicle parts and electric installation and plumbing parts also bring a fair income. Particularly profitable are old (antique) newspapers, archive documentation, books and magazines. “That is cleaner and pays off well in quantity.”



Photograph 13. Scrap metal stacked in a yard

Transportation of items collected

The most significant factor in profit is the type of transportation. Collectors said that having a truck or other motorized vehicle, or a horse and carriage, meant that they could collect larger, heavier items. Many wished they could have such vehicles. Most, however, go on foot and transport the items on their backs or by handcart. Those who have no carts can collect only a small quantity of articles in one tour. Good handcarts for town use are manufactured and cost around 50 Euros. Such an investment normally results in better profits, as more and better items can be transported.

Poorer settlements and settlements with more ‘newcomers’ have poorer transportation. Transportation determines the territory covered and the type goods to be collected. In the Roma settlement Rupe in Zemun that has a great many internally displaced people from Kosovo, for example, women and children use sacks, and they only collect whatever can fit into the sack and what they can physically carry themselves. Some men own small motorized carts,

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Photograph 14. Old truck at the back of Rakovica Village used for storing sorted items

but they tour a rather small area to bring home a small quantity of items because they cannot afford much gasoline. On the other hand, in the old Belgrade dump Deponija, now closed, where families have lived for decades, all have carts with motors, which make it possible to tour a rather large area. Those who have more reliable vehicles go as far as the town of Smederevo (about 40 kilometers from Belgrade). In fact they tour all the surrounding villages that do not have Collectors, but gasoline can be a limiting factor.

In one older Roma settlement, the Collectors use bicycles, handcarts, automobiles, horse carriages and donkeys. The radius of the collection zone is directly connected with transportation possibilities. Some go as far as 100 km.



Photograph 15. Horse-cart at Deponia

How products are sold and their prices

There are two categories of waste and scrap buyers: professional buyers (companies) and individual citizens. Scrap metal is sold at industrial waste dumps. Old paper is sold to the company called 'Paper Service.' Cardboard is sold mostly to 'Kartonka Avala' whose buyers come to the settlements. Empty bottles are sold to wine and spirits-producing companies. Collectors sell second-hand articles at the various open markets in the City.

Most settlements are also the 'sale' sites. All the companies buying waste items in large quantities have their staff come to the settlements for this purpose. Collectors said: "They come with their own trucks and we sell to them. We do not know where they drive afterwards - perhaps to the Railway Station."

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Photograph 16. Cardboard stacked and ready to be collected in Cukarica settlement

The price *per kilo* that Collectors got for their items in January and February 2003 are as follows (exchange rate 1 US dollar = 55 dinars): cardboard-1.80 to 2 dinars; iron-1 to 2 dinars; aluminum-30 to 40 dinars; lead-10 to 15 dinars; motors-4 dinars; paper-2 to 2.5 dinars; copper-40 to 50 dinars (35-40 if it is not pure, 50 dinars if not fired or 60 if fired); car batteries-1 to 2 dinars; plastics-8 dinars; and bottles-2 dinars.

The prices of other items were: paintings and other antiques-no fixed price (subject to negotiation); clothing and shoes-no fixed price, but mostly 100-200 dinars per piece or pair; old bread-50 dinars per sack or 5 dinars per kilo; other metal objects-20 dinars per piece; magazines and books-50 dinars per piece. One woman said, "Clothing sells differently, piece per piece, and it depends what it is like. Trousers and skirts sell for 100, sometimes 200 dinars, but occasionally I give for 50 dinars when I notice the ladies like them, and I do not want to return it home unsold."

The Collectors are especially fond of selling rare articles at marketplaces. “What I sell best are books. I state the price when someone is interested. Sometimes I sell at 10 dollars apiece. People buy all kinds of things. The most expensive are old books. Old magazines with pretty covers and pictures also sell well at 50 and 60 dinars apiece”.

We encountered a few women who do not know the prices because their husbands sell whatever they have collected. But most women and their husbands do know the ‘sale system’ and the market prices.

Until 2002, the Public Sanitation Department used to buy valuable items from the Collectors who reside at the Vinca dump. Then the City lowered their offered prices for various types of items and the Collectors did not accept this. Thereafter relations between Vinca residents and the City workers deteriorated considerably. When Collectors approached the dump, City sanitation workers chased them away and the City has fenced the closer approach to the dump. They used to allow Vinca resident Collectors to ride into town on the City garbage trucks, especially the children who needed a ride to school each morning, but now they refuse to transport them. Some authorities have threatened to tear down their houses existing around the location. Women say that they constantly live in fear that some bulldozer would come and take away their homes. They claim they have no other place to go. At the time of this study, the two sides were in a ‘stand-off’ over the prices for recyclable items and even whether the Vinca Collectors who were resident there could remain living there.

Income from scavenging

Collectors were reluctant to talk about how much they earned. Most of the men claimed that they do not know how much they earn from scavenging. The most frequent explanation is that they spend everything they earn, so it is difficult for them to indicate total earnings per month. They said “Ah, we do not know the answer to that”, or “I am never able to add that up”. Others said, “It varies according to the season. In the winter we do not go working every day, the cold kills us.” However, after some discussion, they estimated the ‘winter earnings’ (which would be the lowest due to cold and shorter work days) to be between 1000 (\$15) and 3000 (\$45) per month.

One man said he earned 6000 dinars (\$100) per month. Others claimed that in the summer they can earn up to 5000 or 6000 dinars. One of our group interviewers wrote: *“When one of the men said he was earning thirty thousand dinars per month, the others started shouting at him and corrected him, saying that such an amount is earned by the entire family. Still, he confirmed that he alone could earn 30 thousand dinars (\$500) per month.”*

In any case, the usual earning level is around 4 to 6 thousand dinars per month or, as many of them say, “You can’t really earn some big money. You can’t tell how much you earn because you keep spending every day - whatever you take you leave in the shops.” “You earn like the smallest salary,” or “Just to survive.”

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Women were more open and sincere when talking about their incomes, so their estimates of earnings were somewhat higher. “When I collect cardboard and newspapers with my husband, I earn up to 15 thousand (\$250) per month.” Another woman claims, “Alone I earn between 7 and 8 thousand dinars, sometimes 10 thousand per month.” Sometimes their answers were in terms of ‘bad business days’: “Here, today I was hanging all day in the streets and found nothing. That’s the luck level today.”

The Collectors more often spoke of their income in terms of daily earnings and expressed this in terms of consumables. “My daily income pays for bread and cigarettes” or “I buy the bread and the salami, and that’s it - no more”. Most claimed that whatever they earned in a day would be spent the same day. “Whatever I earn in the market I spend in the market for the lunch at home, so I return penniless”, or “Today I earn and today I spend. All goes for food.”

Some of them claimed that the daily earnings were between 100 and 200 dinars, but they pointed out “not every day”. One man said, “Daily, if you happen to sell right away, you can get 200 dinars, but frequently I get nothing because you have to accumulate a good quantity and then transport it.” Another explained, “It all depends, it’s a lottery. When it’s a nice and good day, a person can earn between 600 and 1000 dinars. But, not every day is like that, and you spend a part of the money for the bus.” One said, “In the winter there is almost nothing.” A woman said, “Those with trucks earn the most; it’s men that earn.” Others said, “Everyday is different, I can’t estimate. Today you have, tomorrow you don’t.” “It adds up to having the money for the market supplies (food) and sometimes a bit more. Sometimes it reaches 500 in one day, on other occasions 700, or just 100 to 200.”

From these discussions we tentatively conclude that the average monthly earnings are around 6000 dinars per month.

Most Collectors know about the buyers of their items, but they don’t know what happens to the goods after that. They said, “We know the redeemers: Karaburma, Zemun, Visnjica, Kotez, Borca.” “It likely goes into some factories of raw materials, but we don’t know where.” “I know it is processed in this City - the Avala Paper Plant.” “We know the materials are processed, but I don’t know how it is otherwise resolved financially.” “Once it was processed as raw material in the Bulevar Revolucije Street. We don’t know whether it’s still working.” “The sale goes from one hand to another until it reaches the processing plant. Some people live well from it. Some of our own people have become rich on that.”

Paying taxes on earnings

We asked respondents whether they paid any taxes. Most said that they did not pay taxes, but they believe the taxes are paid through reduced prices for products. “The Paper Service has reduced the paper prices paid per kilo and explained that this was due to the taxes incurred.” Or, “You negotiate the price with the master handicraftsman and there is no tax involved there.” “They blackmail you through the prices and taxes and pay whatever they want.”

Any deduction is regarded as taxation. One man explained, “On wood, there is the price per kilo, and then they deduct an amount which they claim to be the tax if the goods are nice. If the goods look bad, they deduct for the humidity, and that’s it.” Another added, “Depending on the quality, they deduct as much as they please.” Others saw taxation in terms of corruption. One man said, “They steal on us on the scales, if you consider that to be the deduction. They wouldn’t let us see the weight and, if we insist to see it, they could not steal; they tell us they wouldn’t buy then or just kick us out.”

Chapter 5

The Working Conditions

Problems

Collectors say they face mainly three types of problems: (a) stigma, such as scolding, insults, maltreatment and violence; (b) bad conditions, mishaps and accidents; and (c) prohibitions. The problems are best described in their own words.

Scolding, insults, maltreatment and violence: “The citizens get angry when we disperse things around the solid waste cans. They are right; we sometimes do not take care either.” “They take aim at us with flower vases, eggs, bricks, with air guns. Children pelt us with potatoes and bags full of water. The aggression itself does not bother me, but if the child and the wife are with me, we take refuge. They are all drunkards or rascals.” “They aim at us intentionally from the buildings, they shove us and swear. They intentionally turn over our carts.” “The police maltreat those that have no registration.” “We sometimes have fights with the rival Collectors.” “We Gypsies do not quarrel over the containers. Whoever comes first, he collects, but the refugees stand in front of the warehouse and do not let anyone approach. They are despicable and dangerous. All the problems we have come from them.”

We asked Collectors what types of people pose the most problems for them. They said that all kinds of people harass them: ruffians and skinheads, ordinary people, and police. They claimed that ordinary people cause most of the problems. “I go with my bicycle, but a man comes out in front of me, ‘..... A time will come to chase you out too’.” “The drivers keep insulting us when you push your cart down the streets.” “In the Miljakovac district they swear and throw things at us, so we women don’t go alone to collect but rather together with men, or several of us women together.” “In the Konjarnik district, the rascals snatch the paper and the carts from us, so we don’t go at night anymore.” “Children urinate on us from buildings, but they are children, so we don’t complain to them.” “At night we don’t go collecting. There are big problems. I was once hit in the head with a stone by someone.” “Children throw empty bottles and eggs at us.” “Children say all kinds of things, swear and aim at us.” “Citizens shout all kinds of things, like ‘You Gypsies are dangerous’.”

They say drunken people hurl insults at them, and skinheads attack and chase them. "It's the crazy people who maltreat you." "They throw bottles at us from a fence or a high story." "From the bridge they throw bottles from their cars." "In the evening we don't go out because these rascals turn the carts over, and yet it's the time when the shops close down and the cardboards are most numerous. Once I left my cart behind to let them destroy it, just to save my life. Fortunately, they were spotted by the police and it saved me." "Some madmen had once chased me from Slavija Square to Sarajevska Street" (a distance of five city blocks).

Attacks against Roma in Belgrade, around Serbia and throughout Europe are common knowledge and may be increasing. Literature on this subject confirms what our discussion groups told us and confirms that most Roma who are attacked are poor; many are attacked while doing their various jobs in cities, such as peddling items on the street or scavenging. These attacks are usually carried out by a group of young males looking for some excitement, but occasionally by a single older male, and the attack begins with cursing the person's Gypsy origins and his Gypsy mother. Cursing one's mother is the worse way you can curse someone in Serbian society. Then the person is beaten up, sometimes until he falls unconscious. One incident reported to the European Roma Rights Council describes a typical incident:

"On April 17, 2002, Mr. Avdi Berisa, a 31-year-old Romani man from the Romani settlement Deponija in Belgrade, told MRC that at approximately 10:00 PM on an unspecified date in early February 2002, he was attacked by a group of approximately 10 non-Romani young men, while he was collecting scrap paper on 29 Novembar Street. The young men reportedly laughed at Mr. Berisa and cursed his 'Gypsy mother'. According to Mr. Berisa, the young men then ordered him to throw away the paper he had collected in his cart, and one of the young men ordered him to drive them in his cart. Mr. Berisa reported to MRC that he did not resist because he was afraid that they would beat him up. Three of the young men then entered his cart, and he drove them around for about one hour, during which time the other young men took turns getting in the cart. According to Mr. Berisa, at the end of the hour, the non-Romani young men left. According to MRC, the incident was never reported to the police."

Collectors said that they are sometimes harassed by police who accuse them of stealing. "When you find some good thing, the police first beat you and then you have to prove that you did not steal it." "The police don't let us work. When you drive they ask for your license and vehicle registration." "The police take us to jail if they find goods that, according to them, were stolen." "If you run into something good, the police accuse you first that the goods were stolen." "They immediately take us to the investigation department. It's a matter of luck to find someone who would acknowledge we haven't stolen, but thanks to God - such people can be found." "On one occasion I found computer keyboards. They were all in good order but were discarded, and yet they sent me into jail right away. The man who threw them out came to defend me; my wife found him and asked him to. He told them that they were all

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obsolete from a warehouse, so they got rid of them. It was indeed so, but I had already gotten a beating from the police. I even had to prove to them that I had been treated for alcoholism and cured and that I do not drink anymore. I gave them my health booklet.”

Most of the Collectors believe that they do not have any support or protection. They are exasperated by their situation and feel that nobody cares to help them. “Nobody takes us under his protection.” Still, others recognize the people of good will and quote the situations in which they get the support from them. “It’s the ordinary people that sometimes defend us. They say, ‘don’t bother them, they don’t offend you and don’t steal - they just collect.’” “Those who know us also protect us; they know we do this for a living.” “Sometimes individual citizens defend us, and yet, on other occasions they do not dare to. When dangerous people are around, they will beat up whoever defends us. They say to our defenders, “What’s the matter, is that Gypsy your brother?” “Gentlemen defend us, they shout from their windows to defend us, but it’s no use for these rascals.” “The women walking down the street defend us and tell the rascals to let us go, but sometimes even they do not dare to speak.” “There are good citizens also and even the police sometimes offer their hand to protect us.”

Bad conditions, mishaps and accidents: “Traffic accidents, you get hurt. The bin hurts your fingers, breaks them, sometimes the swivel top even captures your head if you are careless.” “It’s cold in the winter.” “Our problem is the smell, the cold, the wind, the winter, and also big heat in the summer.” “It’s not easy. We don’t have regular meals; we have to walk a lot. I can’t do any physical work anymore although I am just 32, and it’s dirty. We have nowhere to take a bath. Even our wives hardly bring the water in the evening to have our legs washed (because of lack of water in their communities). We get to bathe once in a month.” “Last year I found a dead boy, small child, in a banana box. I called the police and they questioned me. I don’t know whether it is more painful to see that child, your soul aches, or to waste your time with the police.”

Prohibitions: The situation with regard to whether scavenging is allowed is nebulous. Since scavenging is openly practiced in the City, most people assume that it is allowed. City officials we interviewed said it will soon be against the law when city garbage services are privatized. We asked Collectors about their perceptions and experience with regard to the legality of collecting. “When we worked for the Public Sanitation at the Vinca dump, they took good care of us, but now they fence in the space and chase us away. That’s our sole problem.” “The police do not let us drive slow vehicles in the streets.” “They wouldn’t let us use horses and donkeys in the city. Most of us believe that scavenging is allowed or, at least, is not prohibited.” “So far it has not been prohibited” or “I don’t know that it is prohibited, it is allowed.” “As long as the dumps exist - that means this work of ours is allowed.” “It is allowed. Nobody from the police has tried to stop us. It is allowed as far as the authorities are concerned. We have no problems with the police. They understand we don’t have anything, so they do not bother us.” “Nobody has kept us from doing it, sometimes they just tell us - both

the people and the police - not to scatter the waste from the cans around when we work.” “It is allowed, it’s only prohibited to scatter the waste around.” “People sometimes obstruct and say, ‘come on, you Gypsies, go away!’ but they are nothing, they are not authorities, they are just like us.” “It’s not prohibited; you got to have a source of food.” “It’s not prohibited as long as you don’t steal.” “Well, sometimes these people from the Public Sanitation chase us away, but it’s not prohibited.”

We discussed with Collectors that the City of Belgrade may in the future prohibit scavenging. They expressed surprise as to why it should be prohibited: “Why should it be? Everyone strives for his own existence. It is allowed.” “Why should it be prohibited when that stuff is thrown away and yet it is useful for someone? I can use it or sell it, then buy whatever I need – medicine or food.”

When we asked them about the consequences of a ban on scavenging, they replied: “Then, that will be another thing they will prohibit us from doing.” “If it is prohibited, it is taking the bread from your mouth.” “Well, what are we to live from if they ban us? Then we would have to go and steal, kill, whatever. We don’t want that.” “How will we support ourselves from if this would be prohibited?” “We hear that they are going to prohibit us to collect solid waste. Shall we go and steal? They should allow us to work, or let the municipal authorities find a job for us.” “What then? Are we to steal? That would be chaos!”

The risks

Scavenging is certainly a business with plenty of risks. *Most Collectors confirm that they have hurt themselves or become ill by scavenging.* The injuries are frequent both among the adults and the children. Men speak more about their injuries and women more about their illnesses.

The injuries are diverse - broken bones or serious bruises from falling bin lids, cuts from glass, burns and syringe punctures. Women said, “Sometimes I cannot work for a long time because I had a heart procedure, so my legs and veins hurt, but I have to, my pension is so small.” “My legs hurt from much walking, the spine too. It’s not easy to push all this weight on the cart.”

The Collectors emphasize that they take care not to get injured. One said, “I have gloves.” They claim that if they are careful about their hygiene, they won’t get sick or infected. One man said, “We leave the rags (collected) outside the home and we wash ourselves.” Others said that they frequently get cuts, but that is ordinary and to be expected. “I am an old woman and don’t work anymore. When I did work, I never injured myself because I took care. I just had colds sometimes and my legs and spine also ached from walking and pushing the cart - they hurt me even now.” “We get ill in the winter from the colds. We never got infected. We despise the dirt and infective diseases, so we work with gloves on and with sticks to protect

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ourselves.” “It’s the newcomers that get hurt - those who are new to collecting and who do not know how it is done. We teach them how the scrap is handled.” “We have not been ill. Sometimes you catch cough. A wind blows here all the time.”

Collectors also complained of bad smells, traffic accidents, dangerous objects, rats, stress from finding dead children in bins and poor clothing for their work. They said the bad smells usually come from dead animals thrown into bins. One man said, “You inhale the smell, and in the summer it is so strong that your lungs ache.” Some claimed that occasionally a scavenger is hit by a vehicle. Dangerous objects also exist in garbage bins, such as discarded land mines and small bombs, and various poisons and chemicals. One man said “During the bombing (of Belgrade in 1999), I felt hot metal. We immediately collected it to sell. That heat was probably what they call now radiation. We’ll see in the future if it will affect us”. Rats are a problem they encounter daily. One woman said, “In my home I have rats, and in the bins you can find them in awful numbers. That’s really terrible.” Collectors reported the stress of finding the occasional dead infant or child in a garbage bin. One woman said, “Dead babies are found in the cans; it’s a big distress when you find that.” A man said, “I found a healthy but blind child of 3 years and two small dead babies in a cradle, together with diapers. What can you do? I called the police and I cleaned up the child.” Finally men and women reported the stress from having to work in the winter with inadequate clothing and shoes. “The winter is cold and we are naked (without coats) and barefoot.” But they remarked that despite all these risks, they must continue working. “What can you do?” they said. “You must continue working!”

Health care

Most Collectors we interviewed have access to the health services. They say they go to the health centers and they specifically indicate where they are located. However, the access to the health services is not without problems. Not all the Collectors have proper papers they need (verified health insurance booklets or refugee file-cards) to be eligible for free services by the physicians. Without them the examination costs 200 to 400 dinars. The reasons for being ‘without the papers’ lie in the lack of the dwelling place registration. “We are not registered at a specific address.” “They ask us for 25 Euros to register us, and we have no such money to pay, so we have no medical booklets.” Health authorities ask for unemployment registration, but they are not registered as unemployed. This problem is resolved through a ‘soft control’ procedure by the health center, accepting them for consultation without the insurance booklet. “They are good doctors, so they treat us.” Sometimes they use other people’s health booklets to gain admittance and care.

Problems occur when they need examinations by specialists that are partially payable (the mandatory fiscal participation) or when, due to the financial crisis prevailing in the health services, one has to bring his/her own medical materials already purchased (X-ray film, for example). That is why “such analyses and imaging are not done because there is no money for

that.” They also lack money for medicines but have to manage somehow to get them. “You can find the medicines in the bins, so I take them when I need them. I know their validity is expired, but who cares, sometimes they help me.”

On the whole, the level of the health care for Collectors is relatively low because most of them rarely visit physicians. The causes are as follows: “You rarely go the physician, only when you really have to, or you can’t work anymore.” “We go when we have some fracture or other serious injury.” “I went because I had a heart attack; they carried me over there.” “We have the (health) booklets for extreme needs only.” “You only go when you have signs you might die.” “When we know we need some medicine, we purchase it without prescription or a physician; it’s less expensive that way. A medicine is only bought for children, if it is a real necessity.” “You go to the physician when you can’t bear it anymore.” “We rarely go to the physician. By the time I get an appointment, so much time has elapsed that I start thinking I am getting well.” “I frequently get the appointment, but I fail to show up because I don’t have the money for transportation.” “The examinations cost 500 to 600 dinars (US\$10). If you don’t have the insurance, you better watch out!” “If I have the money, I go, but mostly I do not go.” “I only go to the gynecologist when I have to.”

Access to health services is not blocked for the Roma. Most of the Collectors have good opinions about the physicians’ attitudes: “They receive us nicely.” The attitude of Collectors toward their own health and their use of services differs significantly among settlements. In the City center and ‘old settlements’ the residents are more likely to use health services than in communities where people are mostly newcomers and less integrated into the system.

The Collectors’ health is not only endangered by the risks at work or the obstacles to the use of health services, but also by their overall poor living conditions. Most have no water supply or sanitation, they are undernourished, crowded into very small houses and have poor heating in the winter.

Desires for a better life

We asked our focus groups if they sometimes hoped for any changes in their lives. The men said: “To have a house.” “To get away from this settlement.” “To stay in the settlement, but provided I can have a house.” “We want electricity.” “To have better hygiene in the settlement.” “To have a sewage system.” “To have a normal apartment for us.” “Minimum of safety.” “A house with electricity and water.” “To buy myself a plot and build a house on it.” “If we only had electricity and water; that would be enough for us.” “I’d like to have a nice house.” “A better life, work, to have some employment and safe salary - you are strong then.” “I don’t need to live like a king, just to have the basic needs for the family every month.” “To have jobs and salaries that one could live from normally; to have regular meals and hygiene.”

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The women said: "Our lives are just miserable; you are neither living nor dying." "To have a better life so we don't suffer anymore." "To have houses for ourselves, to eat, to drink, to live." "To have jobs for us and salaries that we could live from." "Not to suffer humiliation like this." "To have the money for health treatment." "To go occasionally to the sea to see it." "To go somewhere for the children's benefit." "To have a house for myself, to live in another place, to have a (water) tap, to have appliances, to have a bathroom, to have jobs, to have the children go to school." "I would like something to change for the children's sake, I don't need anything. They need jobs." "To have adequate housing, as we live in a community with many children, it's several families together; if we all could only have our own separate dwelling."

Women, to a larger extent than men, desire better employment: "To be employed in some small firm, and my husband too." "To be a maid somewhere." "At least to have one of us employed, and I can wash and cook." "I wouldn't support myself from the bins if I could get employment too. It's only my husband who has a regular job, and that's not enough for our big family."

Women also say: "I would change my entire life. To be spruced up and clean - like a lady." "To have some education." "If I could just be healthy and live a normal life, I wouldn't exchange my Gypsy life for the Serbian or European." "To have my entire life and destiny changed so I don't have to search the bins anymore." "I would not have given my child away for adoption if I only had the money to support him." "To have the municipal service people explain to me whatever I ask them and to receive me as a human being." "Just to be respected."

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."



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.

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.

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.

Chapter 7

Improving Collectors' Lives

The main purpose of this study was to identify ways that the lives of Belgrade's Collectors could be improved, not to identify ways to improve City waste management. The City can improve its waste management system through various means of mechanization and privatization without regard to its thousands of chronically poor citizens who scavenge waste for a living. It is our obligation, however, to consider first the lives of our people and secondly the efficiency of our waste disposal services. This book is about achieving social justice for those forced to scavenge solid wastes simply to survive. As Rajko Djuric says in the Foreword, "If a man is still aware of a concept of humanity, and if he knows that righteousness before all is a responsibility towards others, he would then have to at least ask himself: is there any hope that this decay of human souls in the pits of our dumps will ever be stopped?"

Those closest to the problem usually can suggest the best solutions. But there are two sides to this coin: the side of those picking solid waste and the side of the City of Belgrade. These two groups working together can probably find solutions that would help the Collectors and improve City services. We asked both groups for their opinions.

Collectors' viewpoints

The Collectors we interviewed did not see themselves as part of the City's waste collection system but rather viewed their work as their private businesses. As such, they made suggestions in terms of improving their own working conditions and making investments in items such as trucks and protected community recycling centers to improve their income. Many would like to have permanent employment in waste management, but they realize that the City would be unlikely to hire all who scavenge waste, therefore for them the better option, considering the almost complete lack of other income-generating options, is to remain independent collectors and simply improve their work conditions.



Photograph 19. Cukarica family

Both men and women claim that scavenging would be improved, above all, by good transportation (better carts and trucks) and by the separation of solid wastes into separate bins, such as bottles, aluminum, paper, cardboard, clothing, and so forth, and by cleaner solid waste bins. Many have been to Germany and worked in public sanitation and see the German way of solid waste separation and collection as being superior. They said with these improvements, scavenging would be safer and more efficient, and they could specialize in particular items.

They also would like to have their ‘own dump.’ That is, they would like to be owners of dumps where solid waste is deposited and they would operate it as a private business. They would pick through the solid waste and sell the recyclables privately. They would be in control and could improve their communities. Collectors said they would like to have a safe, fenced location where they could store items that they bring to their settlements while waiting to sell them. They would like to have canvases to cover the goods so they would not get scattered around and not ruined by the rain. Several said they would like to have their own recycling plants erected for various types of goods.

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Collectors said would like to have protective clothing and shoes and to have uniforms so that people would recognize them as workers and stop harassing them. They would also like to have permanent employment with solid waste collection companies, or to have work permits issued to them, legalizing their informal work, and to have fixed prices for each type of item. They would like to be able to buy a vehicle or even just a motor that can be repaid in installments. They would like to have their 'payments' free of taxes.

They also said they would like to be respected because they are honest, knowledgeable about the job and are capable of doing it well. They would like protection from the dump authorities. Some said they would like to have their own 'trade union'.

In addition women said they want to "enjoy respect from the citizens" and some kind of protection and safety. For them the 'protection and safety' is very important, and most of them believe that the job would be much easier and better if there existed "some care and protection" and if they could have "work permits and uniforms - protection clothes" and "free medical checkups from time to time". They also hope for permanent employment "at least in this type of job" or at least "so we can be sure of selling whatever we manage to collect".

Those who pick through solid waste at the City dump have some more specific expectations. They are now barred from working and they want to be able to work. As the road leading from the dump is closed to them and any vehicles they might own, they have to carry their loads on foot a couple of kilometers to a main road. They want the road opened to them and they want water and electricity in their settlement. They also want protective clothing, masks and gloves and better settlement hygiene.

Viewpoints of the public service institutions

From the viewpoint of the City of Belgrade, there are at least three issues related to solid waste. One is how domestic solid waste should be removed from unhygienic illegal settlements. A second is how to deal with the 'economic' solid waste (recyclables) that is brought to these same settlements by Collectors for re-sale to buyers. A third issue is how to modernize solid waste collection in the City and for the City to get the profit from the discarded items that can be recycled.

For the first and second issues, the City has plans to allow certain currently illegal settlements to remain, to demolish other illegal settlements, and to build some new settlements with modern amenities. The City authorities are determined to accomplish these changes. The Secretariat for the Protection of the Living Environment has proposed a pilot project in the unhygienic settlements to improve the overall standard of living. The draft suggests the following:

For settlements that would be retained, they will pave the streets with asphalt, have domestic solid waste removal services, would construct public bathrooms and toilets, and establish

mini-collection centers for 'economic' solid waste in cooperation with Public Sanitation. Thus Collectors in some settlements would get recycling centers that would be owned by the City of Belgrade in which they would either be employed or they could sell their items to the City.

For settlements to be demolished, the City would set up temporary large containers for the collection of recyclables and the City would buy the recyclable items from the Collectors. Also, domestic solid waste would be collected on a daily basis. After these settlements are demolished, Collectors would have to move elsewhere, ideally to new planned settlements.

New planned settlements will replace the settlements to be demolished. Candidates for new housing would be people who can prove they were born in Belgrade, who accept a job in one of the City's public utility services, such as GSP (Public Transportation Enterprise), Gradska Cistoca (City Sanitation), Gradsko Zelenilo (City Park Maintenance), and who agree to keep their children in school. Residents will not be allowed to be Collectors or to bring recyclables into the new settlements.

This plan leaves out all Collectors who were not born in Belgrade, which might include up to half of all people scavenging. The City does not want the Roma displaced by the recent wars and by poverty in south Serbia to remain in the City. They are hoping to be able to send them back to their original towns.

As for the third issue of modernizing the City's solid waste management, they plan to privatize solid waste collection services. *Different officials interviewed offered their opinions that it would be desirable, in some way, to legalize the activities of some or all Collectors.* The City feels that informal Collectors need permits and protective clothing.

For the City dump at Vinca, the City feels that Collectors working informally there now should be hired and given protective clothing. They feel that somehow the solid waste collection services of the City of Belgrade have to be made more profitable by modernizing equipment, proper separation of solid waste materials, and fixing prices for items between sellers and buyers. The City could make contracts with Collectors to collect certain items, such as hazardous wastes or car batteries. These are ideas that the City is thinking about. The only firm plan is to privatize solid waste collection. What will happen to the informal Collectors is not clear. It is unlikely that all current Collectors could be hired by a private City sanitation service.

Authors' viewpoint

The primary objective of improving the lives and work of Roma waste Collectors should be to end the cycle of chronic poverty among them, not simply to incorporate them into the existing waste management system or to outlaw their practices altogether. On the other hand, Collectors do have many skills, and indeed are proud of their knowledge and skills, and the City could put such knowledge and skills to good use within a program to generally uplift the economic and social status of Collectors.

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The opinions of Collectors and City officials for improving Collectors' lives, including their settlements, are not far apart. With so much common ground, clearly some very good solutions can be found and implementation could start.

We estimate that approximately 9,000-16,000 people in the City of Belgrade, mostly Roma, who live in chronic poverty, today *survive* on the collection of useful items from solid waste for re-sale and for some of their food, but not all of these people are Collectors. Included in this number are infants and small children, disabled people and the elderly who are supported by Collectors. If our estimate is correct, then this means that the number of people who could be helped *out of scavenging* is very manageable. *Assisting the children involved in scavenging, who might number between 5,000 and 8,000, to become educated and prepared for a different livelihood is also quite achievable.*

Not all Roma are Collectors nor do all Roma live in informal illegal settlements. The proportion of Roma who live in illegal settlements may be about 50% of all Roma residents of Belgrade*. It seems apparent that the remainder of Roma in Belgrade has integrated into the majority population, do not live isolated, and hold regular jobs or are successfully self-employed. The Collectors and other poor Roma are the last of this National Minority that need to be successfully integrated into the wider society.

Scavenging is primarily a 'family business', in that all members of the family participate: husbands, wives and children. Together a family can earn 12,000 or more dinars per month, on average more than the income of a single employee working for the City. However, most Collectors would prefer a steady job and might accept a somewhat lower pay in return for some job security, benefits, safer working conditions, dignity and freedom from harassment.

The City of Belgrade needs to consider the potential consequences of privatization on the lives of thousands of nearly destitute people who now survive from scavenging. When the City of Belgrade sells its solid waste collection services to a private company, and if it prohibits informal Collectors from taking items from solid waste containers and the City dump, many of these people will lose their main source or only source of income. This is because *it is unlikely that a new solid waste service or the City of Belgrade can employ all of the people who are now picking solid waste*. Some who will be prohibited from picking solid waste may still be able to receive food from market vendors for cleaning stalls and from C Market and other groceries in return for small chores, but this will not sustain them. Another group may continue cleaning out cellars and doing other odd jobs having to do with discarded items.

* These are our estimates based on the 2002 survey of all illegal Roma settlements of Belgrade, compared with a 1991 census of the City by ethnic group.

However, the great majority, who depend upon scavenging as their main source of livelihood and survival, may be thrown into greater destitution. This may create a humanitarian crisis involving many thousands of people in the City of Belgrade, especially the ‘newcomers’. *At least half of these people at risk will be children under the age of 15.* Former Collectors may be compelled to beg or even steal to feed their families, unless the City of Belgrade and other government authorities immediately set up some kind of social safety net for these families.

The City of Belgrade is currently giving considerable thought as to how to improve the living conditions of poor people, mostly Roma, who live in the 152 illegal and unhygienic settlements around Belgrade. The City is also considering various options for improving solid waste recycling and finding a continuing role for the waste Collectors. It is important for government authorities recognize the position of Collectors in society and to protect them from a catastrophe if informal scavenging is banned. Immediate action is required, before the solid waste collection services are privatized.

In this era of ecological consciousness, most European cities are now moving toward recycling of all solid wastes. To enter the European Union, the City of Belgrade should be thinking in the same direction. There already exists a workforce for this important work – Belgrade’s indigenous waste Collectors – who would welcome well paid jobs in a well-organized, clean, and safe environment.

As an alternative to employing these people, the City of Belgrade could support an improved private system of solid waste collection that would help Collectors achieve a more decent quality of life. Like the Collectors themselves say, garbage containers could be changed to encourage separation at the source. The citizens of Belgrade already show a tendency to separate out good items and edible food and to set them outside the bins, ready for taking. With a little additional public education and encouragement, it is likely that the people of Belgrade will for the most part comply with a new system of garbage separation.

Improvements to support an improved private system of solid waste collection and recycling could include:

- *Legalizing* Collectors’ activities, giving Collectors permits, selling them official uniforms and other protective clothing, and making it illegal to abuse Collectors either physically or verbally.
- Setting up a *system of solid waste separation* into categories such as cardboard, office paper, clothing, shoes and bags, bottles and glass, plastic, food and so forth, to keep these items clean and to make it easier and safer for Collectors to take these items, rather than having to search through mixed solid waste to find desirable items.

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- Assisting Collectors to set up *recycling stations* in their own communities that are fenced and locked and have cover from rain. This will keep their communities cleaner and will protect especially cardboard and office paper from being spoiled by rain. The City could collect recyclables from these community recycling stations.
- Providing *loans to Collectors* to improve their means of transportation. Transportation is the single most important factor in their earning ability. Loans for improved vehicles could be repaid quickly from the increased income.

In addition the City could reach out more to *children* who are Collectors to attend school. The Ministry of Education should consider allowing and encouraging such children to attend school without registration papers and should, at the same time, assist their parents in obtaining all required legal documents. The City should provide school books and school materials free of charge to poor families to encourage school attendance. Children should be protected from abuse by other children and teachers. This will help break the cycle of poverty faster than any other single action.

The City could also reach out to *women Collectors* to help them empower their lives. Currently they live under a system of patriarchy, which gives them little decision-making power within the family. Such women should have easier access to family planning and basic education.

Assisting Collectors to have better working conditions is one side of the coin. The other side concerns the conditions in their settlements. Wherever possible, it would be best to legalize existing Roma settlements and assist them in obtaining electricity, water supply, sanitation, domestic solid waste collection, schools, and essential social services. We recognize that some settlements clearly cannot be improved, primarily because of various difficulties with their locations. The City might consider giving such settlements new locations near the old ones and providing the minimum of infrastructure, such as roads, water supply and sewerage, telephone lines, and electrical lines. They might also be provided loans to build better structures than they can now afford.

Social housing, which is now planned for a number of families, is a lofty goal, but not all poor people will be eligible for these houses or apartments. Furthermore, such social apartment buildings will also need schools and programs for employment. Otherwise these apartment buildings will become again a scavenger community with sorted garbage and poverty. One can expect many new migrants of poor people from the south of Serbia into Belgrade over the coming years who will be seeking any means of income, unless, of course, the economic situation of the country makes a dramatic turnaround. The City would do well to plan for more very poor migrants by setting up basic infrastructure for such communities and allowing people to settle on these sites for a minimum rent or sale price. At least then the City can keep such sites hygienic and provide fire and ambulance services, even if the residents are poor. It

is usually not necessary to provide new housing for Roma. They are capable of providing it for themselves. What they need is legal tenure to the land they occupy and support from the City to improve their settlements.

This study was a first step toward developing a two-way dialogue between Collectors and City officials. Through a continuation of this dialogue, the City could create something positive both for City garbage collection and recycling and for the Collectors who need this work. The way to help Collectors improve their lives will require interdisciplinary action. We suggest that the City of Belgrade set up an interdisciplinary committee involving urban planners, ecologists, sociologists, educators, and representatives of Roma organizations and other non-governmental organizations to address this issue of the poor quality lives of Collectors.

* * * * *

If you would like to contribute to the work of improving the lives of Roma in chronic poverty in Serbia and elsewhere in Europe, please contact:

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