

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  
Loughborough University  
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Water, Engineering and Development Centre  
Loughborough University  
Leicestershire  
LE11 3TU UK

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## About the authors

**Mayling Simpson-Hebert** is a medical/environmental anthropologist from the USA. She holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She conducted this research before and during her term as a Fulbright Scholar in Serbia. She has also undertaken anthropological research among women in Ireland, Iran and Philippines and has lived and worked in Nepal and Switzerland. She has been an assistant professor at The Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland and a Senior Technical Officer at the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. She is currently a Regional Technical Health Advisor for Catholic Relief Services in East Africa and lives in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Her email address is [mayling@fulbrightweb.org](mailto:mayling@fulbrightweb.org) and [maylingsh@yahoo.com](mailto:maylingsh@yahoo.com).

**Aleksandra Mitrovic** is a sociologist. She is Serbian and holds a Ph.D degree in sociology from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is President of the Society for the Improvement of Local Roma Communities and a High Research Fellow at the Institute of Criminology and Sociology in Belgrade. She has worked on Roma issues since 1982. Her email address is: [srbamit@eunet.yu](mailto:srbamit@eunet.yu).

**Gradimir Zajic** is a sociologist who specializes in social problems and poverty. He is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Criminology and Sociology in Belgrade and a founding member of the Society. He has worked on Roma issues since 1982. His email address is [gradaz@eunet.yu](mailto:gradaz@eunet.yu).

**Milos Petrovic** is an architect. He was one of the principal investigators of the landmark study of Roma settlements in the City of Belgrade in 2002. He is also a founding member of the Society. His email address is [M.P@eunet.yu](mailto:M.P@eunet.yu)

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 Rroma 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 mantaus, 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*



## Acknowledgements

This study was a team effort and we thank the many people who made it possible. First, we are grateful to all the adults and children in the nine communities who so willingly and seriously participated in the focus group discussions that provided the core information for this book and to the community leaders for help in organizing these meetings.

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.