



## 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



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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.”

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\* 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.



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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.”





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Mayling Simpson-Hebert



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.





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Milos Petrovic



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.”



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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.”