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# Education for Survival: Roma and Hopes for the Future

Keevan Labowitz  
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# Education for Survival: Roma and Hopes for the Future

Keevan Labowitz

Student of the School for International Training

Mentor: Rashid Kurtic

Academic Director: Dick Mann

Dedicated to Rashid Kurtic

for his selfless pursuit of Roma equality and his concern for the future of  
Romani children.

## Table of Contents

1. **Foreward-** Page 4
2. **Roma Origin: A People with no Home-** Page 8
3. **Never Given a Chance: Segregation in a  
Multi-Cultural Society-** Page 15
4. **Education for Survival-** Page 29
5. **Works Cited-** Page 34

## Foreward

When I applied to the School for International Training: Central Europe's spring program I had many expectations: conducting research concerning Romani rights was not one of them. I assumed, because of my family's history with Germany, I would explore my family's past. When lecturers and professors asked me why I had come here, I replied that I was hoping to conduct some kind of soul searching journey: searching my soul, *my reasons for existence*, was exactly what I ended up doing.

Having learned so much about the Holocaust before I came to Germany, I was ashamed at how little I knew about the Roma. I knew them as *Gypsies*: a traveling people, infamous pickpockets, musicians, fortune tellers; not as a single people expelled from societies across the world, nearly exterminated by the Nazis in World War II. I had no idea what it meant to be Roma; I had not even heard a *Gypsy* called this until I arrived in Germany. Even after hearing about atrocities committed against them I could not grasp the truth until I traveled with the SIT group into the Former Yugoslavia for an educational excursion; it was both educational and inspiring.

When we arrived in Nis, Serbia, we met a man who went by the name Rasko, his formal name is Rashid Kurtic; this man would become my friend, guide, and mentor during my future research in Serbia. He opened a door into realities of life I had been ignorant to my entire life; me, Keewan Labowitz: man of the world, Californian liberal, history lover: *ignorant*.

Rasko took us to a Roma settlement in Nis called Red Star Mahala. Here I saw first hand and understood for the first time, what it meant to be Roma. Red Star had about two-hundred and fifty people living in an area smaller than a normal city block. It

was surrounded on all sides by normal Serbian suburbia except for an incendiary standing on the other from which black smoke poured out over the Roma homes. The houses were shanties built out of scrap materials and piles of trash and animal feces crowded the settlement completely. Across the street from Red Star stood an empty preschool with a locked door and sign celebrating its construction: no children inside learning, no children outside playing. I learned later that it had been shut down a few years before our arrival in Nis due to lack of funding. It had been successful in educating children; students who had attended it were showing low-drop out rates and an increase in a Roma average grade percentage. No one was benefiting from it now. The entire program's lectures and readings concerning the Roma situation could do nothing to prepare me for seeing the reality first hand.

It was a while before I decided I wanted to investigate Serbian education policy and its effects on Roma integration. I originally wanted to help get the school up and running again, but I realized that that was much more of a long term commitment, not a two week independent study project. I still hope in my future that I can figure out the means to help get that preschool running but for now I only knew I had to have my ISP involve Roma.

There were so many issues surrounding Roma and their rights that I was changing what I thought would be my project focus daily. I decided that I wanted to find the core reason for Roma separation from society; what was the cause of this apartheid? I came to the conclusion that obtaining an education was the only way the Roma people would be able to begin to lift themselves out of the gap in society they found themselves living in. Even education was too broad of a subject though; one could do an entire ISP on the

so called Serbian “special schools”; I wanted to know the source of failure and a solution to this breakdown. I concluded that it was a lack of an educational foundation before a Roma even begins primary school that sets them up for a swift failure in the mainstream system. I left for Nis with my friend and colleague, Shane Branon, by train April 22, 2006.

We met with Rasko upon arrival and filled him in on our hopes for the trip; we wanted to interview students, people in charge of policy, himself and anybody he felt we should meet. Rasko had no problems satisfying our objectives. Shane had already set up a meeting in Belgrade with a woman from the Open Society Institute before we arrived, but by the time we were finished in Serbia we had interviewed people from: the Ministry of Education of Sport in Nis, a representative for the Roma National Strategy Secretariat, a representative for the Ministry of Education in Belgrade, Rasko, and a Romani student who is currently attending a University in Nis.

The amount of information we received was overwhelming and conflicting statements were hard to analyze. It seemed that every time the interviewee we were with found out who were seeing next, warned us not to believe everything that was said because that person was known to spin the truth. I explained this to Rasko and he told me, “It is not your job to find the truth, only to present what you have seen.” I have tried to present the truth nonetheless, but it is accurate to say that it is the truth I found to be true and might conflict with what some Roma or Serbs believe; perhaps even Rasko.

It was hard to present my results in this investigation not only because the massive amount of information I took in, but also because of the massive amount of information I didn’t receive. In addition I feel that this project could and should maintain

being researched due to future events that will take place throughout time. This paper can continue to be added upon seemingly for as long as I live, because I do think this issue will outlive me. It is scary to for me to state this considering as I am still so young, but the problems Roma face have existed for generations, and the steps forward will be taking place for generations more. I hope that through policy change and increased education Roma will begin to gain full equality in society, but the road to get there is long and there are many stops along the way.

## Roma Origin: A People with no Home

The history and origin of Roma has constantly been debated and the discussion still continues today. Society has designated the Roma as *Gypsies*, a wandering people, but in reality the majority of Roma today are settled. Even the Council of Europe's division designated to work on Roma issues is titled: Roma and Travelers. The general public will not let the Roma move past stereotypes that have been given to them because of ancient practices, forcing the Roma community to live their lives hundreds of years behind present standards of living. In order to understand the present attitude towards Roma it is important to examine their past. I propose to do this in chronological order beginning with the first research conducted about this community and ending with present day historical findings, and societal investigations.

Toward the middle of the 15th century it is believed the first scholarly investigation about Roma origin began. Previous presumptions, such as the idea that Roma were involved in a religious pilgrimage escaping persecution, were widely accepted. As the numbers of Roma increased across Europe, the interest in their source was an important debate: it wasn't until this time that where and what they were escaping from were investigated<sup>1</sup>. The origins that were agreed upon by scholars pointed to two places: one location in what is presently Turkey, dubbed Little Egypt, and the other one Egypt itself<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg. 26 Note: This book is a compilation of articles written by members of the IDEA. This particular article used in this section is titled, *The Present and Future of the Gypsy past*, and was written by Sir Angus Fraser.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Crowe. A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia. New York: St. Martins, 1994. pg. 32

The word *Gypsy* originated from the association with Egypt, and in a variety of locations Roma were called: *Egyptenaars*, *Gitanos* and *Egipcans* which morphed over time into merely *Gypsies*<sup>3</sup>. In almost every location the Roma settled, politicians passed laws to force the Roma out of the area or create suffering in their daily life. The Byzantine word for the ancestors of the Roma studied during this time was *Athinganoi*, which was derived from the Roma's reputation for heathenish practices. This expression paved the way for terms used to describe the Roma, still used today, such as the German *Ziguner*, French *Tsganes*, and *Zingari* in Italian<sup>4</sup>.

Around the late 1700s two anthropologists began to link Roma origin with an Indo-Aryan root. Johann Rudiger and Heinrich Grellman traced Roma migration patterns and also mapped out family histories in order to discover their closest relatives. By tracing these migratory routes and ancestral associations the two were able to come to the conclusion that the Roma were descendants of the *Jats* of India who left around the 10th century<sup>5</sup>. This was a breakthrough in Roma studies because now future researchers had a more distinct area to investigate further. It was over one-hundred years later that the importance of Rudiger and Grellman's research was put into practice.

In 1888, a group calling themselves the "Gypsy Lore Society" was founded in England. The society consisted of sixty-nine members, twelve of which were operating out of renowned institutions, who aimed to, "target the conundrum of Gypsy origin."<sup>6</sup>

Most members were based in England and Austria-Hungary, but seven of them came

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg.32: Note: Both Sir Fraser and Crowe discussed the origin of Roma from Egypt and Little Egypt, but I felt that Crowe went into more detail as he discussed the evolution of the word Gypsy and later the evolution of Athinganoi. The Roma origin of Little Egypt was also discussed in the lecture given by Dr. Wipperman on February 28, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg.23

<sup>5</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg.31

<sup>6</sup> Ibid pg.32

from the United States. They expanded on Rudiger and Grellman's work by studying Romani dialects with analysis of old and new vocabularies, folktales and music. Their historical surveys also included anthropological studies of both physical and cultural traits. As much beneficial work as they did perform, there was never any discussion of existing social and political problems having an effect on the Roma's everyday life<sup>7</sup>.

In many predominantly Christian countries policies about Roma, prior to this time and during, were centered on making the Roma into new citizens. Roma children were removed from their families and placed into Christian homes where their differences were educated out of them<sup>8</sup>. The "Gypsy Lore Society" was mainly concerned with the origin and ancestors of the Roma, because the members believed blood-descent an adequate way to rationalize differences found in human beings. John Sampson, a librarian at Liverpool University, was one of the principle researchers in the study of Romani speakers who left the group to continue his research independently<sup>9</sup>.

In 1894, Sampson began thirty years of research which accumulated into a massive publication titled, "The dialect of the Gypsies of Wales." This research still stands out as one of the most in depth studies of the Romani vernacular. By studying the word structure, tonal qualities and sentence composition Sampson determined that Romanes was an evolution of Sanskrit. Further research led him to conclude that the Roma left northwest India as a group known as the Doms around the ninth century, possibly earlier<sup>10</sup>. Dom is an Indic form of the word we know today as Rom: the name

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid pp.32-33

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Wolfgang Wipperman. Lecture. School for International Training. Free University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany. 28 Feb. 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg.33

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pg.34

given by Roma to themselves<sup>11</sup>. The Doms were a lower caste group known for their commercial nomadic practices, who left as a single people speaking a single language. They later split into two branches one heading north toward Armenia and the other southwards into Syria<sup>12</sup>. Sampson's research was groundbreaking but its importance was not fully recognized until recently because of the nature of debates during the period it was written in: the 1920s brought about an extreme debate regarding the scientific authenticity of eugenics.

It was a common belief by many educated people from this period that one could improve the quality of the human race by means of cleansing the human gene pool. It was these beliefs that led to an attempt by Nazi Germany to "purify" the German race. Nazi officials at the research Centre for Racial Hygiene and Population Biology were convinced human imperfections were genetically transmitted and that the Roma inclination towards a nomadic lifestyle could also be passed on<sup>13</sup>. They feared that if intermarriage between pure Germans and Roma took place within their society, the pure German race would fall victim to contamination within their gene pool: already 90% of Roma in Germany were of mixed blood<sup>14</sup>. Heinrich Himmler was aware of the Indo-

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<sup>11</sup> Rasid Kurtic. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006: Note: While talking with Rasko, he gave me his theory of Roma origin. He said he did not believe that Roma originated in India, but rather that they migrated to that location from Mesopotamia. I found no sources to support this theory, but I did find sources that definitely believe indeed Roma were at one time settled in Mesopotamia. I came to a few conclusions from this discussion: one that either Rasko, or my other sources, had reversed the order in which migrations actually happened or that Rasko is talking about some of the earliest forms of man migrating to other parts of the world. It is not unsafe to say that the Roma are direct descendants of these people because it is my opinion that all people of the world are. Whether or not these ancient men were solely Roma I cannot say, but I do believe that even if the Roma migrated out of Mesopotamia originally, they returned generations later as ancestors of an Indic tribe.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg34

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Wolfgang Wipperman. Lecture. School for International Training. Free University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany. 28 Feb. 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg34

Aryan ancestry found in the Roma and suggested creating a “Gypsy reservation” to the *Fuhrer*; Hitler vetoed this idea: he preferred the complete destruction of the Roma race. By the end of World War II, 86% of the Roma population had been murdered<sup>15</sup>.

The majority of post-war Roma found themselves living in countries with communist governments. This was not necessarily negative for Roma, because the communists believed that their states would run more efficiently if its citizens were all placed on the same level. This enabled many Roma to become relatively integrated into society through education and employment. Educated Roma in many countries, not only communist, began to insist on having a better say in how their race, including their history, was treated<sup>16</sup>. Roma formed political and non-political organizations, often with only Roma members, whose organizational methods were to begin locally, then move out regionally, nationally and finally internationally. By the 1960s the Roma were steadily receiving international attention from groups such as the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the European Union, and the CSCE<sup>17</sup>.

These new organizations were not interested in negating previous findings but only expanding on the research and making more connections. Having certain ethnic connections, such as an Indian origin, supports the Roma’s case for ethnic minority status in both communist and non-communist countries<sup>18</sup>. Being recognized as a national minority is extremely important for all minorities because this often results in more cultural rights being granted. Unfortunately a certain ethnic connection could not be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid pg.34

<sup>16</sup> David M. Crowe. A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia. New York: St. Martins, 1994. pg.103-7

<sup>17</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg.36: This organization, CSCE, was later known as the OSCE.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid pp.35-36

proven because research was uncovering only *possible* Roma migrations, which often included a number of early locations. Roma were persecuted and migrated in every setting they could be found, but which location was their original site? Ian Hancock, from the International Romani Union, decided to explore the evolution of migrations and the evolution of the Roma themselves<sup>19</sup>.

In his research of Roma in Persia, he was interested in Arab literature where Roma were discussed. His focus was to learn about the cultural similarities the Roma displayed that might have been inherited from their believed Indian ancestors<sup>20</sup>. His findings acknowledged that indeed the Roma may be descendants of the *Doms*, referred to in earlier findings by Sampson, but the *Doms* were only one fragment of an Indian exodus that took place because of war between Islamic and Hindu forces. Muslims from the Turko-Afghan region, *Ghaznavids*, invaded northern India and were met by Indian forces known as *Rajputs*. The *Rajputs* suffered a major defeat in 1192 causing the *Ghaznavids* to gain the advantage in the lengthy conflict. The defeat caused a diverse collection of *Rajput* Indians to flee westwards towards Persia; the group was composed of mixed social ranks ranging from the lowest castes to the untouchables<sup>21</sup>. Hancock states that the mixed class ranks, and thus mixed Indian ethnicities, formed what we know today as Roma because:

[a]s the Roma became more and more remote from their homeland, moving along the eastern periphery of the Islamic expansion, we may assume that the awareness of their shared origin in India overcame whatever newly acquired jati or caste distinctions had divided them socially; and in time, the population became one, losing its mixed, occupational identity to acquire its emerging ethnic one<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid pg.36

<sup>20</sup> Ibid pg.36

<sup>21</sup> Ibid pg.37

<sup>22</sup> Ibid pg.37

Hancock's theory of Romani movement westwards into the Middle-East was backed-up in a report submitted by Donald Kenrick to the European Commission in 1993 called, "Gypsies: From India to the Mediterranean." Kenrick likewise had researched literature, including writings from both the Middle East and India; he focused on texts in which the word *Zott* appeared. *Zott* was the name given to the Indians by their Arab invaders and it appeared that the *Zott* not only fled west on their own accords, but were also brought by force as captives<sup>23</sup>. Over time these Roma moved north through Armenia and then into the rest of Europe, many settling as farmers in the Balkan area.

The discussion of Roma origin and evolution is not over and many scholars disagree with these finding entirely. Extensive knowledge about the Roma is not common, or advanced, because there is little to no educational focus on Roma history in schools across the globe. It is hard to be completely certain about any findings because of the time spans involved, including the huge gaps of time between research breakthroughs and the lack of concrete evidence provided through research. Evolution of the Roma people has also made it difficult to trace origins because of intermarriages with non-Roma which make certain Indian origins difficult to prove due to the many non-Indian cultural elements that have been absorbed by Roma over the years as a result of their massive Diaspora. The only certain way to study Roma origin is to further study their language. Though the Roma may appear somewhat different across the world, somehow Romanes is the mother tongue of most Roma communities and can be understood by the majority of Roma people.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid pp.38-40

## Never Given a Chance: Segregation in a Multi-Cultural Society

For centuries Roma have been seen as aliens within European societies causing them to fall victim to financial crisis, unattainable assimilation, and exclusion from the educational curriculum. Roma want to raise their educational, economic, and social status so they can live as equals in their own society; laws passed across Europe to ensure this development, have not been unanimously upheld in favor of the Roma. In this section I will discuss problems Roma face integrating into the Serbian school system and in addition the Serbian government and governmental organization's failures to respond appropriately to these problems. The Roma dilemma is present in all Eastern European countries, but currently Serbia is behind many eastern states in working at correcting the situation.

Serbian society works on a monolingual level, and an inability to speak, read or write the primary language results in failure by any minority to integrate successfully<sup>24</sup>. Roma unemployment has reached levels of seventy percent or above in Serbia with illiteracy rates reaching nearly eighty percent<sup>25</sup>. Sadly the reality for many Roma parents is that the chance to become educated and employed has passed: their children still need the opportunity to break out of this sequence of failure. Roma themselves are very cynical of the Serbian school system not only because many parents lack awareness of its importance but because of the depressing history between Roma and the educational system.

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<sup>24</sup> Pestic, Mirjana, Iboja Gera, and Tatjana Pavloski, comps. Quality Education for All: Early Childhood Education Reform in Serbia. Jan. 2002. Preschool Education Expert Group: Belgrade. 15 Apr. 2006 <[http://www.seeeducoop.net/education\\_in/pdf/quality\\_educ\\_for\\_all\\_06\\_pre-yug-ser-enl-t02.pdf](http://www.seeeducoop.net/education_in/pdf/quality_educ_for_all_06_pre-yug-ser-enl-t02.pdf)>. pp.2-3

<sup>25</sup>"Roma in Serbia: Introducing Romany Language and Culture into Primary Schools." Minority Rights Group International. Minority Rights Group International. 2 Apr. 2006 <[www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)>.

The view by many Roma that school systems steal their children and create them into *Gadje*, Romanes for non-Roma, comes from a history of efforts by governments who used their education system to educate the Romani culture out of the children<sup>26</sup>. Some Christian government's used methods in the past of removing children from their families; Communist governments too used school as a way to implement assimilation. Families were settled against their will and required to exhibit complete loyalty to the existing government. Communist governments believed that through systematic schooling, the social disadvantage of Roma would be cleansed<sup>27</sup>. A contributing factor to this lack of trust by Roma towards schooling is the fact that school systems throughout Eastern Europe have a history of physical and mental abuse towards Roma students which can and has been inflicted by: teachers, administrators, non-Romani parents, and non-Romani peers.

Education on tolerance is seldom regarded as an important part of Serbian mainstream schooling, and when a Roma is humiliated or physically abused in the classroom authorities notoriously fail to intervene in an effective manor. Annemarie Kovacs, a former primary school student in a small town outside of Budapest, gave an account to the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) that can be related to numerous stories across Eastern Europe. Her description follows:

One day we laughed at the maths teacher in class. The maths teacher told Ms Ciboja, our form-teacher, about it. Ms Ciboja came to punish us for laughing at the maths teacher. She told us, 'You stinking little Gypsy whores!' Everyone heard it- she said it in front of the whole class. Ms Ciboja said all sorts of bad things about us and slapped Anita, the other Romani girl in our class, on the face. Then she told us to go home. I didn't go to school for about a month after that...why should I? I won't go someplace where they humiliate me like that. The headteacher

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<sup>26</sup> Claude Cahn ed. *Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality*. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg.71: Note: This article is titled *Roma in the Educational Systems of Central and Eastern Europe* and was written by: Claude Cahn, David Chirico, Christina McDonald Viktoria Mohasci, Tatjana Peri and Agnes Szekely

<sup>27</sup> Ibid pg.71

didn't know about the incident though, and the school wanted us to pay a fine because I didn't go. So my mother went to the school and explained why I hadn't gone. Still nothing happened to that teacher. She wasn't reprimanded and she never apologized. I started to go to school again, but I didn't go to Ms Ciboja's classes and they failed me because of my absences<sup>28</sup>.

Kovacs' account can be further reiterated by another interview conducted by the ERRC with a Macedonian boy. He stated that he desired to remain in German schools because, "in Macedonian schools, teachers hit me."<sup>29</sup> The collapse of communism in Eastern European countries not only created vast economic difficulties for their citizens, but it also led to this increase in racism<sup>30</sup>. These hardships are detrimental to the success of Roma in the schooling systems and until administrators bring an end to this abuse in schools, Roma who suffer the abuse will fall victim time and again to a decrease in attendance and grades.

Instruction in Serbian schools is exclusively taught in Serbian and has a great emphasis on teachings surrounding Serbian culture. Serbian teaching methods are demanding and are often centered on memorization of facts in large quantities. The system works on a structure of streaming, where the curriculum's aim is to not the best education for all but rather to quickly divide students into groups of weaker or stronger levels of ability; the system makes no attempt to adjust to the wide variety of minorities that exist in Serbia such as Roma, Albanians, and Bulgarians. By the time a student reaches eighth grade his or her future is often clearly marked out<sup>31</sup>. A lack of Serbian language comprehension by Roma children causes Roma students to be streamed out of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid pg.72

<sup>29</sup> Ibid pg.73: Note: A project in Macedonia funded by the European Centre for Minority Issues, is working on bringing perpetrators of hate crimes within the classroom such as the stories related here, to justice.

<sup>30</sup> Crowe, David M. A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia. New York: St. Martins, 1994. pp. 111-117

<sup>31</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002. pg.74

the mainstream curriculum starting at an early age, frequently sending the children into what is known as “special schools.”<sup>32</sup>

Serbian “special schools” are schools provided for the mentally and physically handicapped. Because Roma students most often do not have the Serbian language mastered, teachers and school authorities view them as synonymous with educational inability<sup>33</sup>. Teachers time and again have opinions about Roma students before the student begins class thus building the foundation for an unequal opportunity. According to Aleksandra Ognjanovic, a Roma woman who successfully graduated high school and is currently enrolled in a University in Nis, Roma students must be persistent and, “work ten times harder than regular Serb students” because any mediocre work “results in an immediate bad mark.”<sup>34</sup>

Roma represent eighty percent of students enrolled in these so called “special schools” which clearly reveals the discriminatory methods used to stream children<sup>35</sup>. A prime example of insensitive streaming is the primary school entrance exam in Serbia. When a child begins primary school, oral examinations conducted by Serbian psychologists are given to students which are used to determine the learning abilities of these incoming students. The test involves puzzles, picture identification, and oral

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid pg.72

<sup>33</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006. Note: When Shane and I met with Mrs. Ackovic, we had no intentions of interviewing her. We had come to interview her husband who was a member of the Roma National Council but he was unavailable by the time we arrived. This slip-up couldn't have worked out better for us and especially my project. I found Mrs. Ackovic's interview to be the most valuable interview I conducted.

<sup>34</sup> Ognjanovic, Aleksandra. Personal interview. 27 Apr. 2006. Note: Rasko relayed his experiences with this racism too. He agreed that he worked ten times as hard for the same grade as the other students. He was at the top of his class in many subjects including English. When his teachers addressed other Roma in class, they told him that those instructions were not meant for him: he was different. They basically told him he was not a Roma because he was smart and was doing well in class.

<sup>35</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002 pg.74

questions entirely in Serbian, most often lacking a translator; the questions regularly pertain to Serbian culture<sup>36</sup>.

Many Roma students have had no previous schooling, such as preschool or kindergarten, and thus have not had much contact with either the Serbian language or Serbian culture through peers; they have learned only what was to them taught at home by family. Even if a student has a fundamental grasp of the language one can often be confused by the content of the question due to a cultural misunderstanding<sup>37</sup>. In an interview I conducted with Vesna Ackovic, a Roma woman who works for the Ministry of Education in Belgrade, the entrance exam is the largest source for segregation in the classroom and that questions asked are discriminatory in nature. A question that seems simple enough for a Serb child can be very confusing for a Roma; often the answers provided by Roma children are not wrong but not exactly the answer the examiners were looking for<sup>38</sup>.

One example of a question asked on these tests, provided by Ackovic, has to do with fire safety awareness. An examiner would ask the child: *what do you do if you see smoke coming from the kitchen?* A Serbian child would answer: *call the fire department*. This is the answer the examiners expect, but for a Roma child fire safety has been taught differently; thus while their answer to the question may not be incorrect, it is not the answer sought after by the examiners. Akovic says many Roma respond: *Find out what is wrong in the stove*. A Roma child who answers this has been taught to look for the source of the fire in order to solve the problem. Roma do not often call the fire department not only due to a lack of telephones in their homes, but also due to the lack of

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<sup>36</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

response by Serbian firemen. The Roma child who answers “find the source” has not misinterpreted the question but merely answered what he or she perceives as the correct course of action. A mere cultural misunderstanding such as this could cause a Roma to be recommended to a “special school.”<sup>39</sup>

Once placed in a “special school” children are rarely transferred back into the traditional school system. There exists a period of “diagnostic stay” where a child could spend up to six months under analysis to decide if that school is where he or she belongs; this “diagnostic stay” rarely sends a child back in to the mainstream system<sup>40</sup>. Roma children are more often than not considered “borderline students” because psychologists are not confident of Roma student’s abilities to be successful. Once the six month diagnostic period is over, a “special school” student’s future becomes very bleak. Graduates from these schools are barred from continuing their education past primary school unless they decide to go on to technical or vocational schools aimed at training them for low-skilled labor<sup>41</sup>. These schools merely destine them for a poorly paid future with high chances of unemployment: it is discrimination to the highest degree that causes this substandard education not a lack of Romani mental capacity. Roma parents are not all aware that they are not obligated to send their children to these schools, but even if they were, there are financial motives behind sending their children to such schools<sup>42</sup>.

In standard schooling, the cost of sending your child, or more commonly children, can be financially devastating. As many Roma parents are unemployed, they rely on

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid Note: The preceding paragraph’s information was taken from my interview with Mrs. Ackovic. I did not use direct quotes about the example questions because her broken English was at times difficult to understand. I wrote down what I heard and interpreted my findings later.

<sup>40</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002 pg.75

<sup>41</sup> Ibid pg.75

<sup>42</sup> Cukovic, Annemarie. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006. Note: Ms. Cukovic represented the Roma National Secretariat during our interview.

welfare payments of 4,100 Dinars per month: an amount constituting to no more than fifty Euros. For a student in eighth grade, school materials, textbooks, pencils, notebooks etc, can cost over 3,000 Dinar. Serbian schools likewise make it compulsory to own separate clothes for gym class<sup>43</sup>. At “special schools” many materials such as textbooks are provided by a state budget and students also receive a small snack during the school day. Authorities convince parents to take the “special school” route rather than spend close to a full month’s wage just on school materials: thus one mechanism for educational segregation is implemented<sup>44</sup>. Laws intended to increase participation by Roma in Policy making and end discriminatory practices in all aspects of society are becoming more common and more effective.

On February 1, 1998, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) was placed into force having been signed by thirty-eight member states of the Council of Europe in 1995<sup>45</sup>. This document became the first legally binding system to protect national minorities. The Convention hoped to, “promote the full and effective equality of national minorities by creating appropriate conditions enabling them to preserve and develop their culture and to retain their identity.”<sup>46</sup> This was an important preliminary step to achieving equality, but its contents provided too many loop holes for the Serbian government to jump through.

When a law is given to provide jurisdiction, it is necessary to define that authority; this law gave jurisdiction to minorities but never stated any distinct minorities

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<sup>43</sup> Claude Cahn ed. Roma Rights: Race, Justice, and Strategies for Equality. New York: The International Debate Education Association, 2002 pg.78

<sup>44</sup> Stojanovic, Jadranka. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Frame Work Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Council of Europe Treaty Office. 29 Apr. 2006 <[www.coe.int/treaty/commun](http://www.coe.int/treaty/commun)>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

that it applied to. The Convention promised political independence for minorities, but independence means having money, influence, and decision making powers in relation to minority issues: Roma have none of these<sup>47</sup>. According to the FCNM all minorities need to be represented in parliament: the Roma have no members in parliament and thus can not solve Roma problems through the government. The aspect causing this is the fact that Roma were not even recognized by Serbia as a national minority until 2001<sup>48</sup>.

In order for the Serbian government to be forced to allow participation in parliament the national minority must make up three percent of the total population<sup>49</sup>. Within Serbia, not including the republic of Kosovo, there are approximately 700,000 Roma with some sources saying closer to one million<sup>50</sup>. Serbia has a total population of seven million people, but its last census there were only 100,000 Roma counted; Rashid Kurtic claimed that there are close to 50,000 Roma in Nis alone<sup>51</sup>. Consequently even though Roma actually make up close to ten percent of the total population, the Serbian government conveniently recognizes a number far less than the three percent needed to join parliament. Rashid Kurtic explained the political motives behind census deception, declaring that politicians were merely trying to get their next vote. Serb nationalists want an exclusively Serb country and won't admit that there are other ethnicities living legally in Serbia. If Serbian politicians integrate parliament, they can kiss the nationalist vote goodbye; therefore Kurtic says, "The Serbian parliament is not the parliament of all the

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<sup>47</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Stankovic, Bojana. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006. Note: Ms. Stankovic is the Assistant to Head of Department for the Ministry of Education and Sport and Nis

<sup>50</sup> Stojanovic, Jadranka. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006. Note: Ms. Stojankovic is the Program Coordinator for a Fund for an Open Society: Serbia. Rashid Kurtic claims that there are closer to one million Roma living in Serbia.

<sup>51</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

people now living in Serbia legally.<sup>52</sup>” This is a direct digression from Article 15 of the FCNM which states that there must be:

Effective participation of persons belonging to national minorities in cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs, in particular those affecting them<sup>53</sup>.

The Roma need someone in power who understands Roma problems, and Roma are the only people who fully understand the Roma situation. The Serbian government won't accept a Roma parliament member unless that member has a PHD: there are only two Roma in all of Serbia with this level of education and they are not willing to play watchdog for Roma issues such as fiscal support from the government<sup>54</sup>.

A new more promising law, the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, went into effect February 27, 2002. This law had a small number of articles that addressed solely Roma issues such as Article 4 which outlines measures for ensuring equality<sup>55</sup>. Article 18 of this law states:

The Federal Government of Yugoslavia shall establish the Federal Council for National Minorities (hereinafter: the Council) for the purpose of preservation, promotion, and protection of national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural specificity of the persons belonging to national minorities and exercise of their rights.

The Federal Government shall determine the composition and responsibilities of the Council.

The representatives of the national councils of national minorities shall be members of the council<sup>56</sup>.

A Roma National Council was established in 2003, but this council has had many problems becoming effective, especially in the area of education. The Roma National Council's job was delineated in Article 19 section 7, as to how their work must

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Frame Work Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Council of Europe Treaty Office. 29 Apr. 2006 <[www.coe.int/treaty/commun](http://www.coe.int/treaty/commun)>.

<sup>54</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. OSCE Mission to FRY. Official Gazette of FRY No. 11 of 27, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

correspond to their minority<sup>57</sup>. It states that they must represent the Roma in the fields of:

Language, education, information in the language of the minority, culture, and participate in decision-making or decide on issues in these fields, as well as establish institutions in these fields<sup>58</sup>.

There are many disagreements within the Council as to how to perform these duties. Vesna Ackovic explains that many of the disagreements that happen within the Council have to do with the fact that the members of the Council are people who are specialized in only a few areas but are found working on all of the areas at once. Ackovic believes the Council should have someone from the medical field working solely on health issues and a specialist in the education field dealing only with educational topics<sup>59</sup>. As of now there has been no decent work done in the field of education as there is no one in the National Council who has experience working with children; meaning there has not been any advice that can be applied to all Roma children.

An additional problem faced within the Council is that the members still do not know their place within the Serbian state because the Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities did not clearly specify the jurisdiction, the *power*, the Council had to enact these responsibilities. The topics they are focusing on now have not been approved by the government and thus the Serbian government will not recognize the outcomes of their work. The Serbian government needs to specify exactly how much

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<sup>57</sup> Cukovic, Annemarie. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. OSCE Mission to FRY. Official Gazette of FRY No. 11 of 27, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

funding the council has to work with and elucidate the exact authority they have to make changes<sup>60</sup>.

The Council appears to think they are a government within a government who is in charge of deciding the direction they take themselves; they are not successfully working on topics that they have actually been given the right to take on. At the same time the government too has failed to uphold its part of the negotiation<sup>61</sup>. Article 19 section 8 of the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, states that the National government must “request opinions” about matters within the jurisdiction of the Council such as education initiatives involving Roma: the government has not requested any insight into plans that the government hopes to put into action<sup>62</sup>. How can the two facilitate action plans together as partners when both are busy working behind each other’s backs? Often the greatest success has happened outside of the governmental sphere.

The Open Society Institute (OSI), founded by the well known philanthropist George Soros, is a beneficial, “privately operating grant making foundation” whose mission is to, “shape public policy to promote democratic governance, human rights, and economic, legal, and social reform.”<sup>63</sup> Their approach to education and health is all inclusive and has donated, with contributions from the World Bank, forty-one million dollars to all countries in the Former Yugoslavia. The money is directed towards state

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Law on Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities. OSCE Mission to FRY. Official Gazette of FRY No. 11 of 27, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> "Building a Global Alliance for Open Society." Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation Network. Open Society Institute. 4 Apr. 2006 <<http://www.soros.org>>.

institutions and monitored by the Roma Education Fund (REF) which is situated in Budapest<sup>64</sup>.

There is forty-one million dollars invested in the Former Yugoslavia but that does not mean that five million of these dollars is designated solely for use by the Serbian government: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and state ministries must apply directly to the REF to acquire money for programs. Serbia must apply for this money while it still exists; it is provided on a first come first serve basis and many countries are better organized to attain this money. High-quality organization is the key feature the REF is looking for when deciding which education proposals to fund or not<sup>65</sup>.

The Roma Education Initiative began being funded by the OSI in 1997, and its main goal was to make integration obtainable to Roma by endorsing equal opportunities in the education system. Their operation aims at preparing young children for primary school by adjusting to the needs of Roma children; they wish to limit the language gap and other social deterrents and prepare the students for the significant entrance exam that they will take in the future. They form databases to monitor the success rates among targeted ages. In addition they want to force the Serbian government to truly begin thinking about conceivable education plans for the Roma children in Serbia. The initiative is a constructive organization, but Serbia has yet to take advantage of the opportunities the funding could provide for education programs in Serbia<sup>66</sup>.

The REF wishes to fund only stable projects with long term goals and development potential. The Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP) has been given jurisdiction by the REF to decide on the legitimacy of applications for funds submitted

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<sup>64</sup> Cukovic, Annemarie. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

within Serbia<sup>67</sup>. A negative feature of the CIP is that there are no Roma involved in the core team<sup>68</sup>. These two organizations are looking for programs that visualize decent safeguards against failure and provide the REF and the CIP with good exit strategies for the future<sup>69</sup>. Programs supported by CIP have successfully helped Roma in some areas pass entrance exams and integrate them into mainstream primary school systems. From 1996 until the present, 4,466 children have entered the mainstream system with drop-out rates remaining remarkably low<sup>70</sup>. Unfortunately, when the CIP cuts its funding, most of these successful programs fall apart within a few of years. This was the story for the preschool found across the street from Red Star Mahala<sup>71</sup>. REF and CIP support development in areas such as Roma inclusion but they do not want to be financially responsible for a project indefinitely. When a program proposal presents itself as having a plan for independent success in the future they are willing to get involved. At times what seems like a sound proposal still ends up falling apart as soon as the REF and CIP withdraw their contributions<sup>72</sup>.

Problems within education policy and Roma integration in the school system are affected greatly by lack of funds, but it appears that lack of organization and communications is the key problem. When all organizations and Serbia's parliament meet at the same level, more valuable progress will be accomplished. If the OSI gives money to the Serbian government without a Romani middleman, how can the government expect the funds to be used for Romani purposes effectively? Who will

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>69</sup> Cukovic, Annemarie. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Cukovic, Annemarie. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

make sure the money is allocated towards Romani education projects? Parliament must include Roma in decision making because it is they who understand most what must be done; Roma organizations and the Roma national council must stop working against each other likewise. A coherent plan can not be developed when each group is trying to solve the problem completely alone. The parliament will continue to not recognize work done by Roma organizations independently and the Roma organizations will continue to say that the Serbian government never gave them a chance to work together mutually. Unfortunately, the Roma children and future generations of Roma will be the ones who suffer most from their unwillingness to join forces.

## Education for Survival

In order to break free from the endless cycle of failure on hand in Eastern Europe, the Roma must meet head-on the issues that keep them cut off from society. A lack of integration in all facets of society cause economic crisis and a continuous cycle of desolation for future generations. It is my opinion that initiation of quality education early on in a child's life will provide the essential element to a solution of the majority of problems that Roma children are faced with; quintessentially this should happen before a student begins primary school.

When a Serbian child starts primary school the child is usually seven years old and has some previous schooling experience. When a *Roma* begins, he or she is often beginning his or her first experience with schooling *and* integration: forty percent of Roma under the age of eight have no educational experience at all<sup>73</sup>. Having no previous organized instruction conducted in the Serbian language or participation in any organized curriculum, essentially sets the child up for failure and most likely a drop-out from the school system.

A Roma parent has every right to educate their pre-school aged children in their own home using their own methods. Unfortunately, when the only instruction a child receives is separate from the rest of society, the child not only suffers a poor education due to lack of resources available in an impoverished surrounding, but they also miss out on ethnic mixing which most often is their only chance to become multilingual and multi-culturally aware. Preschools and kindergartens are available as a method for primary school preparation. Kindergartens can be considered similar to a day care center, where

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<sup>73</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

beds are provided for naps and regular snacks supplied throughout the day<sup>74</sup>. Roma rarely attend kindergartens because they must pay for this day care; humanitarian organizations fund 20 Roma kindergartens but only one percent of Roma children at preschool level benefit from these schools<sup>75</sup>. Preschools are free and last three to four hours a day, but regrettably even integration into a preschool at age six can cause problems for young Roma because they are behind Serbian children in ways not exclusively related to academic achievement<sup>76</sup>.

While interviewing Vesna Ackovic, we discussed the strategies she saw as the best means of integrating Romani children. She explained that assimilating Romani children straight into preschool at age six was, “better than, but almost as negative,” for a child’s success as it was to start primary school at age seven<sup>77</sup>. Ackovic added that it was her opinion that having segregated kindergartens was not a bad idea for education at a very young age before preschool. She realizes the importance of integrated schools, especially at ages where race is not understood, but she accepted that both Romani parents and children regularly lack knowledge that is common in households not found living in extreme poverty as true: Romani, both young and old, need education about hygiene<sup>78</sup>.

Her suggestion was to provide continuous schooling that begins with pre-preschool, then mainstream preschool, and finally primary school. The pre-pre-school would be for children of the ages two or three years old and would incorporate parents into the curriculum. It would hopefully teach families about: using soap, taking care of

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<sup>74</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

their teeth, and other bathroom hygiene skills. Here teachers could teach both parents and children how to take care of themselves so when the children did enter the mainstream pre-school at ages five or six, the families would not be behind in areas that most Serb families are adapted to. It is my opinion that someone like Vesna Ackovic should be a member of the Roma National Council because she clearly understands the needs of Roma and Roma children<sup>79</sup>. Unfortunately, Mrs. Ackovic works for the Ministry of Education in Belgrade where she is allowed only to monitor projects: not offer advice. The Serbian government is finally beginning to realize they have an obligation to provide education to all people living in Serbia, and starting next year they will make it an obligation for all children to attend preschool<sup>80</sup>.

Attending and completing primary school alone will provide Roma children with further education than most Roma parents: continuing past primary school into secondary school and into universities will guarantee a superior prospect for a successful future. Current statistics state that the Roma have 78.7% dropout rates in primary school; only ten percent of female Roma students complete primary school. Thirty percent of Roma children never attend school, with a female percentage ten percent lower than their male counterparts; no more than four tenths of a percent of Roma in Serbia have completed university level education<sup>81</sup>. The principal means of achieving success in these systems is to set up a solid foundation for them to enter into school systems. The goal of the law requiring preschool education is to guarantee that all children, including Roma, enter

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> "Roma in Serbia: Introducing Romany Language and Culture into Primary Schools." Minority Rights Group International. Minority Rights Group International. 2 Apr. 2006 <[www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)>.

primary school with some previous schooling<sup>82</sup>. This law is good on paper but in reality it is difficult to foresee the effectiveness within the Roma community.

Part of this law dictates that there will be legal consequences to parents who do not enroll their children; it is difficult for Serbian policy makers to understand why Roma parents might not force their child to go to school. First of all a Roma parent might not understand both the lawful and educational consequences that relate to a failure by their children to attend school<sup>83</sup>. Roma organizations should be obligated to explain the consequences to Roma families, because Roma may not be able to read or even have access to laws that are passed that which involve them. Rashid Kurtic believes that if a parent fully understands the consequences related to these laws then punishment is necessary; he believes that all parents should push their children to the next level<sup>84</sup>. He states that if they have the knowledge but neglect to act upon it, then it is:

...good for Roma parents to be punished if they do not force their child to go to school. Six year olds can not decide for themselves. They must be forced. If the parents don't force them this means they don't care so they deserve to be punished<sup>85</sup>.

Kurtic does not believe that the theory of parents needing these children to help make money applies to preschool aged children; Roma parents do not promote education adequately because they do not grasp its importance in their child's future<sup>86</sup>.

Rashid Kurtic asserted that this law existed already but only now are they promising to truly enforce it; his confidence in this enforcement is plain skepticism. Pre-school is financed by the government so it is free to attend school: materials are not

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<sup>82</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006.

<sup>83</sup> Kurtic, Rasid. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006 and 27 Apr 2006.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Ibid

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

free<sup>87</sup>. A problem with Roma integration into school systems is that they are not considered when curricula are laid out. Families have been able to buy second hand books but the Ministry of Education changes the curricula so often that it is sometimes impossible to use old books; Roma children are not able to pass books down to their younger siblings and parents have to repeatedly buy different scholastic books that are at the same academic level<sup>88</sup>. One of the jobs of the Ministry of Education should be to help find funding for textbooks and other materials instead of waiting for Roma to find money that doesn't exist. The ministry did give 200,000 Dinars donated by OSI, about two and a half thousand Euros, to preschools but this was not nearly enough to cover all the missing pieces found in Serbian preschools<sup>89</sup>.

A contributing factor to the repeated failure of laws passed to enforce school attendance is the fact that not enough articles in the laws that have been created, address Roma issues; in addition the school curriculums are not designed around the needs of Roma. The unwillingness to let Roma help in both the creation of legal declarations and the design of school curricula will continue to cause Roma segregation from school systems and repeated failure these in school systems. All countries who signed the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities must create effective laws that will help educate Roma. The first problem is not to find funding but to provide structure. My good friend Rasko repeatedly tells me, "I don't want to be given a fish, I want a fishing pole." When well thought-out laws are passed, laws that have included Roma in the creation, only then will effective policies be established.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ackovic, Vesna. Personal interview. 26 Apr. 2006

<sup>89</sup> Stankovic, Bojana. Personal interview. 25 Apr. 2006.

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