

mentoring leadership

A Roma success story

by Sasa Milic

Editor's Note: This article is the story of an important mentoring relationship that developed in spite of many obstacles. The impetus was an effort to train assistant teachers who, by sharing language and culture with families in the program, could help children overcome barriers to their education. In the process of mentoring and being mentored, each person learned about self and others, and about the importance of such a mentoring relationship for creating and supporting new teachers. It is a story with many insights for us all; among the lessons is the story of a man who wanted to work with young children against all odds.

January 2006, a cold winter day. After my lectures in college, I decided to take a stroll around the centre of the town of Niksic to get some fresh air. In high street, right next to Onogost Hotel, I came across Sokolj who was doing his job — sweeping dry leaves and dirt off the streets. He was a second-year student at the University of Montenegro at the time. I came closer to him only to see, to my great surprise, that he was pretty embarrassed that I stopped for a chat. He soon interrupted me saying, "Professor, please do not stand here and talk to me, a Roma, as this will tarnish your reputation as a university professor." I was totally surprised to hear his reaction and his idea that he could do harm in this way.

I soon pulled myself together and said, "Dear Sokolj, my reputation can never be tarnished by my talking to a Roma, a street sweeper, as you are my student,

and street sweeping is a decent job. My reputation as a person and professor would have been tarnished had I gone past you without saying hello." He was still embarrassed as we walked down the street for some 150 m together; me and Sokolj in his street sweeper's orange vest.

A major improvement in Roma inclusion in Montenegro's education system was the result of the Open Society Institute Budapest regional project, the Roma Education Initiative, implemented in Montenegro from 2002 to 2005. As a result of the project, there was a greater public awareness of the challenge of Roma education, the need to include Roma children in schools, as well as the need to preserve Roma culture, tradition, and customs. In addition, the number of RAE children out of schools dropped and the activities of Roma NGOs improved.

And yet, maybe one of this project's major contributions was introducing

the position of a Roma teaching assistant, a person who assisted preschool and primary school teachers in their work helping them better understand the specific features and needs of Roma children and overcome the language barrier.

A serious challenge in educating Roma children is that few of them speak Montenegrin. Most Roma children speak Albanian, some speak Roma, and teachers in our schools are proficient in neither of the two languages. Roma teaching assistants are selected upon proposal of the Roma NGOs, the key requirement being that they are high school graduates. The first group of informal Roma teaching assistants was formed; among them was Sokolj Beganaj, a street sweeper from Niksic.

Working simultaneously as a street sweeper and a Roma teaching assistant in a Niksic kindergarten, Sokolj soon showed a lot of interest and dedication

in his work with children. After working in the kindergarten for almost two years, Sokolj enrolled at the teacher training college. In the meantime I completed my master and doctoral studies in pedagogy and started working as a professor at University of Montenegro. There we were, Sokolj and me, together again after our cooperation under the Roma Education Initiative, this time me taking the role of his professor and mentor.

It was rewarding to know that we had aroused in him the desire to strive for knowledge, and yet I knew that the road before us was not easy for a number of reasons. Sokolj had to continue working as a street sweeper to support his family (wife, a daughter, and a son); he was not received well by a number of students and some professors; he had to work hard to meet the requirements of the program of studies, and there was also the language barrier as he communicated mainly in Albanian while his Montenegrin was not standard or grammatically correct. There was another problem posed before me as his mentor. Namely, mentorship is defined as: *an education process where a person having more skills and experience serves as a model and teaches, encourages, advises, and helps a person with fewer skills and less experience.* I was supposed to be a mentor to a person who had much more life experience than me and was somewhat older than me.

Nevertheless, right from the start I believed in success and knew that one of the first steps to be taken was paving the way towards students' acceptance of Sokolj. I devoted a lot of our time in early lectures on preschool pedagogy to introducing Sokolj into the group, focusing not on his Roma origin but on the benefit of having some male students with a lot of life and work experience in a 100% female student population. I also told them about the

Roma Education Initiative and Sokolj's experience of working in a kindergarten for two years. As I came to realize soon, this proved to be a very good strategy of 'introducing' him into the group. Many students were around him, spending time with him and working closely together, helping one another, working together on their essays and project assignments. I was relieved as I realized that in addition to myself there were at least ten students to offer support and assistance to Sokolj as well as prevent him from giving up his studies. Indeed, the first exams and grades showed Sokolj was among the top 20% of students in our department.

Being an educationist and adult-education specialist, I know that the learning process of adults is based on the assumption that learning develops in stages as the learner progresses towards new opinions. This is exactly what was noticeable with Sokolj — any new success led to a better foundation in knowledge, and an ever greater commitment to successfully completing his studies. Mentorship also required full commitment on my part over a long period of time and setting common targets, the driving forces being cooperation and joint success.

I felt it was best to rely in my mentorship on his strengths and abilities while at intervals touching upon the issue of education of the entire Roma population in Montenegro and the issue of leadership in this demanding task. I feared that burdening Sokolj with this issue on top of his own education would be too much for him and would lead to burnout syndrome and his giving up his future studies. In technical literature I came across another definition of mentorship where mentor is defined as: *a person helping us in the process of exploring different paths in life, a person wishing us all the best.* I believe that in my work with Sokolj I have met at least some of the listed expectations and

fulfilled the purpose of mentorship. My next major mentoring assignment involved work with my colleagues among university professors. Luckily, many of them were fully aware of the significance of Sokolj's education, were willing to help, and adjusted their work to his circumstances. Unfortunately, it must be noted here that there was a small number of colleagues who were pretty open in showing their resentment by such words as "There we are, teaching even Gypsies," and were prejudiced against the Roma population. Some showed no understanding that Montenegrin was not Sokolj's mother tongue and that he was not always able to express what he knew in a good and grammatically correct language. The only tool with which to fight these obstacles was discussion. I had many of them with such colleagues of mine. At times these discussions were exhausting, but I was guided by an idea that I was to help them overcome their own prejudice as well as help Sokolj have his work objectively assessed by those professors.

My mentoring relationship with Sokolj also had a positive effect on me. I truly believe that in addition to an emotional and professional personal benefit, this experience improved my knowledge and mentoring skills. I realized that in mentoring the key goal was to promote the professional and personal development of my protégée and that it developed in a context of a permanent and caring relationship between a mentor and his protégée. I also learned that the best results of mentoring could be achieved provided we developed Sokolj's capacity in the area of independent decision making, expanding his knowledge, sharpening his skills, and improving self-confidence. Being a very independent person myself, I felt it was important to guide, prompt, and encourage him to express his ideas freely, to take the questions and assignments as problems that he would dwell

upon himself and find a response, rather than expecting to get these from his mentor. Our work together for three years and our eventual success were filled with utmost commitment, absolute trust, and active participation of both sides.

Here we are today with Sokolj Beganaj working successfully as a preschool teacher in "Dragan Kovacevic" preschool institution in Niksic, teaching, among others, tens of Roma preschoolers and also supervising the work of older Roma children attending one of the primary schools in their hometown. In addition, he is to soon enter into office as the executive director of the coalition of NGOs called "Roma Circle," officially established in 2006 and networking 22 Roma NGOs in Montenegro.

I have the pleasure of welcoming another future educator, Sokolj's daughter Fatima, who has been my student in the Preschool Education Program since the beginning of this academic year. Sokolj's education hasn't ended either. He decided to take a postgraduate specialist course in preschool education and is still my student. The two of us continue pondering upon many challenges of preschool education in a course on



PHOTOGRAPH OF SOKOLJ BEGANAJ AND HIS FAMILY PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR

Experimental Early Education Programs. Maybe the best message at the end of this article may be sent by the words of a renowned Nobel Prize winner Mother Theresa:

"The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and abandoned by all."

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