

Historical reconstruction and media representation of the earliest known demand for Romani linguistic rights

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In May 1850 a delegation of Romani people from Hungary gathered in a small town on the border of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Archduchy of Austria. They intended to present a petition to the Emperor, demanding equal linguistic rights for speakers of the Romani language. This event took place over a year after the announcement of the Imposed March Constitution, which sought to ensure equal rights for all nationalities throughout the empire while re-establishing a centralist and absolutist monarchy, and more than half a year after the Hungarian Revolution and War for Independence from the Habsburg dynasty had failed.

This intention was covered briefly in numerous newspapers in the Austrian Empire, which was also echoed in the Hungarian press. The event, which, despite its lack of success, can be considered a crucial milestone in the history of the Romani civil rights movement seeking recognition of the Romani language, has remained largely overlooked by scholars. Only a few books and papers, such as Tomka (1983: 51), Stolberg (2005: 100), and Marushiakova and Popov (2022: 11) mention it in passing, relying either on the brief newspaper reports or on a short reference found in Schwicker (1883), published over thirty years later.

Based on newly collected data, we attempt to reconstruct the event and place it in the historical context. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to locate the petition submitted by the Romani delegation; therefore, we will primarily rely on secondary sources to explore the event, including newspaper reports, eyewitness accounts and a memoir, while also considering books referring to this event.

We will adopt an interdisciplinary approach, examining the discourses through the lenses of sociolinguistics, historical research, sociology, and political science. Through an analysis of contemporary sources and drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2015), we will examine the media portrayal of ‘the Gypsies’, ‘the Gypsy language’, and the event itself, shedding light on the linguistic manifestations of prejudice against the Roma and on the significance of this attempt to gain linguistic rights in the unfavourable historical circumstances. Finally, we show that this deputation was not an isolated case, as similar demands continued to emerge from the Romani community in subsequent years.

References

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