

The Croatian language in Austria

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1983 was the 450th anniversary of the Croatian settlement in Burgenland. They came from Slavonia, Moslavina, the Sava-Kupa-Una triangle, Krbava and Lika to what was then West Hungary, Lower Austria and Moravia.

The Croatians left their former homeland due to economic reasons and their vulnerability to Turkish attack. Approximately 150.000 people were settled in more than 200 villages by their landlords. Today there are about 30.000 Croatians in Burgenland; 15.000 in Vienna and 10.000 in Western Hungary and Southwest Slovakia. Burgenland Croatian is a term which encompasses the descendants of the original settlers.

The fact that the Burgenland Croatians have preserved their own culture and language was an essential part of the celebration of this anniversary. *They have maintained their identity in spite of strong pressures to assimilate.* And an increasing number of the young generation has acted to preserve their language, not only in the villages but also away from home.

In 1982 the first Burgenland Croatian dictionary was published, an event which helped the language to achieve international recognition.

The census of population in 1981 provided data on the Croatian language in the Austrian province of Burgenland. Its findings showed that only 7 per cent of the population of Burgenland/Gradišće speak their native Croatian language. The censuses of 1951, 1961, and 1971 told an inexorable and predictable story - that, in the face of outside pressures from an increasingly germanizing world beyond, the proportion of those speaking Croatian was declining steadily. The eventual extinction of the Croatian language in Burgenland/Gradišće within two or three generations is very probable. Croatian monoglots have completely disappeared. *We are in the same miserable situation as many other minority languages fighting for their existence.*

Germanization has proceeded, as the census statistics amply demonstrate. The statistics unfolded a remorseless story of decline of the Croatian language, especially as far as the younger generation is concerned.

We cannot say that there have been any major changes in the situation of the Croat minority in Burgenland/Gradišće. The erosion of the Croat identity continues at a fast rate owing to the following factors:

—the German-orientated educational system still prevails, refusing to allow our children access to our rich language and culture. Croatian is not widely taught as a basic subject in schools, it has only the status of an optional subject

—*Austria is the only country in Europe which officially acknowledges and supports declared assimilants as representatives of our ethnic community and practices a policy of splitting minorities by the old principle of “divide et impera”*

—there is an overall decline in the number of Croatian speakers

—German alone can be used in the administration of the law.

There has been no substantial improvement in the status of the Croatian language in Austria.

Croatian for many people is a domestic language, rather than one of law and administration. There are no Croatian road signs in Burgenland/Gradišće. *The Croatian language is not available to all children and adults who would like to learn it.* The status of the Croatian language is marginal. TV and all German print media bring a ceaseless flood of German into Croatian-speaking homes. The Croatian language, *in spite of the 1955 Austrian State Treaty*, is not to be used for any official purpose in all public administration. German, and only German, is the official language of Burgenland/Gradišće. This policy aims at destroying the Croatian language in Burgenland/Gradišće entirely. People are conditioned to using German, so, for instance, the procedures of the courts in Burgenland/Gradišće are conducted in German only. A Croatian speaking party or witness has no right to use his preferred language. The Croatian language is often ignored by industry, business and commerce. The decline of the language has been accelerated in this century by various factors, for instance, the spread of the mass media, and in particular television. The Croats have always been tempted to leave home, often from economic, social, political reasons. The USA seem to have been the most attractive destination, Chicago became one of the most popular centres for the Burgenland Croats/Gradišćanski Hrvati.

The educational system in Burgenland/Gradišće is, knowingly or unknowingly, an instrument of German linguistic imperialism. Human beings are divorced from their roots; their emotional, physical, spiritual beings are considered not to have a relationship with a national background but to exist independently. There was much protest by members of our organization at the closing of small village schools in rural communities.

THE CROATIAN CULTURAL ASSOCIATION

Our main objectives all concern the protection of the Croatian language, including the making of Croatian an official language in the Austrian province of Burgenland, recognizing it as an obligatory medium in government administration, and using

it as a medium of instruction in education at every level from primary schools to the university. The purpose of our movement is to infuse among the young people a love of the native language and culture —the basic emphasis is on non— political national consciousness. We urge the more extensive use of Croatian in broadcasting, and fight against the economic, cultural and social factors which promote germanization. *We are the oldest and largest ethnic organization of the Burgenland Croats* and a pressure-group on behalf of the Croatian language in Burgenland/Gradisće and want to ensure a future for the Croatian language. This demands a concerted campaign within schools and in the education of adults. The Croatian Cultural Association has to work in very humble circumstances, based on a declining constituency of Croatian speakers. Our demands are:

—Croatian-language programmes should be given a much larger share of broadcasting time

—The use of Croatian for governmental and official purposes with a status equal to that of German

—All signs and official forms should be made bilingual in Burgenland/Gradisće (the use of Croatian in village names and road signs)

—Equal validity for the Croatian language with German

—Ignorant attacks on the Croatian language as an obstacle to culture and enlightenment should be punished

—Courses on Croatian language and history should be made available in schools.

All our above-mentioned demands are minority rights, guaranteed in Article 7 of the 1955 State Treaty for the Reestablishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria. Since 1955 the Austrian authorities have been unable and unwilling to fulfill these basic rights necessary for the survival and development of our small ethnic community. Our organization does very much to promote Croatian national consciousness and to preserve, enhance the Croat identity, an essentially Slav identity. Our basic aim is the achievement of equal status for our native language. We are a nationally and internationally acknowledged ethnic movement in favour of increasing the use of Croatian or increasing the facilities available for its use.

Article 7 of the 1955 State Treaty for the Reestablishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria deals with the rights of the Slovene and Croat minorities in Austria. This article has the status of constitutional law. But the governmental agencies from the Post Office upwards do not give full recognition to the use of Croatian. The ruling Austrian parties and the Viennabased institutions are not sensitive enough to the language situation and to the ethnic problems in Burgenland/Gradisće.