



National Library of Serbia as the coordinator of the European Romani Digital Collection

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Abstract:

The initiative for this project was accepted at The European Library (www.theeuropeanlibrary.org) board meeting in The Hague in March 2006, and approved at the Conference of European National Librarians (<http://www.cenl.org>) in Sankt Petersburg in September 2006. The initiator and coordinator of the project is the National Library of Serbia (NLS). The main aim of the project is to create a digital collection of Romani literary heritage from the European countries. Romani minority is the biggest minority in Europe, about 8 to 10 million of people, but they do not have their own country, and neither their own national library. Other goals are also to strengthen the awareness of readers of Romani that the Romani language is socially and culturally equal to all other European languages; to attract researchers and the reading Romani community to read various texts published in Europe in Romani language; to introduce innovative methods for preservation of the Romani heritage; to create the richest point of access to Romani language content; to promote the Romani literature heritage as part of the European literary treasures.

The readers of this digital collection are geographically spread worldwide, mainly in Europe and these are all Romani speaking: young Roma, Romani language teachers, researchers, Roma students at a higher level of their studies, students and professors in Romani studies departments, wide audiences of Roma readers that have access to the Internet. In the first phase, the aim was to collect the bibliography of Romani books and periodicals from the European national libraries. In the second phase selected materials in Romani language from these bibliographies will be digitized. Digital materials will offer integrated tracking of and access to the Romani materials, collections, and archives of the participating national libraries. The NLS, as the coordinator of the project, collected about twenty-five bibliographies of European national libraries and created a

common database and web site for the project – www.romi.nb.rs. The NLS also digitized about fifty books as a demo version which is accessible in full format on the web site. In the next phase, the NLS will prepare the virtual exhibition on Romani culture for The European Library portal, will digitize more materials from private collections of Serbian Romani experts and post them to the web site, this time not only books and periodicals, but also postcards, photos, posters, manuscripts, audio and video records.

Key words: *Romani cultural heritage, European Romani digital collection*

Romani people and Romani language

The Roma people have lived as a diaspora spread across all over Europe for centuries. Their number is estimated to be at least twenty million worldwide and about eight to ten million in Europe. Unfortunately, the official number of this minority is unknown because many Roma refuse to register their ethnic identity for fear of discrimination. Romani people speak a variety of Romani language which makes Romani a genuinely cross-border European language. Although the environment and conditions under which the Roma live differ from country to country, they are united not only by common cultural roots, but also by a history of social discrimination and racial persecution, which peaked during the Holocaust but still persists today. Efforts to overcome poverty and discrimination, and to improve Roma social and political participation, an integral part of the European Union mission, cannot succeed without parallel efforts to strengthen Roma positive self-identification and enrich the understanding of European citizens of their Roma neighbors.

There are different names for the biggest minority people in Europe: Romani, Romany, Roma, Gypsies, Tsigani, Tzigane, Cigano, Zigeuner... The Gypsy and Traveler cultures include those traditionally known, or referring to themselves as Rom, Romanichels, Cale, Sinti, Ludar, Romungre, Irish Travelers, Scottish Travelers and many others. Although the Romani people are often referred to as "Gypsies" (and prefer to be called by their more proper designation Roma), not all "Gypsies" or nomadic peoples are Roma. The Roma are descendants of the ancient warrior classes of Northern India, particularly the Punjab, and they are identifiable by their language, religion, and customs, which can be directly linked to those of the Punjabi in Northern India. They speak Romani, an Indo-Aryan language. There are many different dialects (Mechkari, Kabuji, Xanduri, Drindari, Ursari, Spoitari, Xoraxane, Sinto-Manush, Chergari, Gurbeti, Machavano, etc.) and different mixed languages (Calo, Romungro, Basque-Romani, Lomavren, Angloromani), but one Serbian Romani expert said, "We can understand each other in all dialects".

Publishing in Romani language

There are people without historiography, but there are no people without memory. Having memory means existing, losing memory means disappearing. Memory is living in language, in myths, legends, stories, and poems.

In addition to an older, mostly oral tradition, recent decades have seen the emergence of a multilingual written Roma literary tradition that discusses contemporary issues and a new aesthetic phenomenon that gives insights into the contemporary life of the Roma and their unique cultural experience. But to date, many Romani works of

literary merit appear only in very limited numbers, and are rarely translated into other languages.

First mention in Europe of “Gypsies” we can find in Andrew Borde's “The First Book of the Introduction of Knowledge” and “A Compendious Regiment; or A Dietary of Health Made in Mountpyllier”, published at 1547 in Great Britain. The author describes the customs and manners of various nations, from the English and their neighbors to the Moors, the Turks, the Egyptians, and the Jews. Mr. Borde was a doctor and the author of books on medicine and on astronomy, and it seems the “Introduction of Knowledge” was intended to focus mainly on physics, but only the first book, on the peoples of Europe and the Mediterranean, saw the light. For each nation Borde provides a satirical description in verse and a few phrases in the local language. So, in the chapter on Gypsies he wrote fifteen sentences in the Gypsy language and it is the first written document with some sentences in this language.

The first book about Gypsies published in Serbia dates from the year 1803. Its author, Petar Asi-Marković, describes the origins of these people, its population in Hungary, and provides the names of about fifteen eminent researchers of this period who wrote about Gypsies in Latin, German and Hungarian. In the second part of the book, he relates some thirty-five stories, legends and anecdotes about Gypsies.

Publishing in Romani dates back to the early 20th century. Romani is increasingly being used today as a written language both in print and in written communication on the Internet and is becoming the center of positive self-identification for the European Romani community. In the past, the majority of printed publications in Romani were newspapers and magazines. Nowadays, however, the number of publishers or NGOs publishing books in Romani is growing. Particular emphasis is put on materials presenting the traditional culture - stories, tales, songs, poems and legends. These materials have been gathered through the years and currently play an important role in shaping the Romani cultural identity.

The largest Romani speaking population is in Southeastern Europe, especially in Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as in Greece, Slovakia, Moldavia and Hungary. Sizable Romani-speaking populations exist in most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Although the language takes different forms described as dialects, most of them can be used and read by the Romani people worldwide. However, access to Romani language materials is limited because of the lack of proper distribution of Romani books or because of the lack of access to printed materials and publications that were published decades ago, but are kept in archives and are not available to the public. There is also no consistency in the records of Romani publishing in national libraries, no rules for cataloging, no ISBN numbers, etc.

Decade of Roma inclusion 2005-2015

The Decade of Roma Inclusion (“Deshbersh le Romengo Anderyaripnasko” in Romani) is an initiative of twelve European countries to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of the Romani minority across the region. The initiative was launched in 2005, with the Decade of Roma Inclusion running from 2005 to 2015, and represents the first multinational project in Europe to actively enhance the lives of Roma.

Twelve countries are taking part in the Decade of Roma Inclusion: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia,

Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Spain. All of these countries have significant Romani minorities, and the Romani minority has been rather disadvantaged, both economically and socially.

The governments of the above countries have committed to closing the gap in welfare and living conditions between the Roma and non-Roma populations, as well as putting an end to the cycle of poverty and exclusion that many Roma find themselves in. Each of these countries has developed a national Decade Action Plan that specifies goals and indicators in the Decade's priority areas: education, employment, health and housing. A thirteenth country, Slovenia, has observer status.

The founding international partner organizations of the Decade of Roma Inclusion are the World Bank, the Open Society Institute, the United Nations Development Program, the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Development Bank, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the European Roma Information Office, the European Roma and Travelers Forum, the European Roma Rights Centre and the Roma Education Fund. In 2008, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also became partners in the Decade Of Roma Inclusion.

The Roma Education Fund (REF), a central component of the Decade, was established in 2005 with the mission of expanding educational opportunities for Romani communities in Central and Southeastern Europe. REF's goal is to contribute to closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma through a variety of policies and programs, including the desegregation of educational systems. REF receives funds from governments, multilateral organizations and private sources. It finances projects that are proposed and implemented by governments, non-governmental organizations and private organizations.

Planning for the Decade is guided by the International Steering Committee (ISC), which is composed of representatives of the participating governments, international partner organizations and Romani organizations. Each year, one of the participating governments holds the Decade's Presidency. Serbia currently holds the Presidency (from July 1, 2008 to July 1, 2009), and Slovakia is expected to assume the Presidency on July 1, 2009.

Interest in the Romani culture

There has been a significant increase in the interest in the Romani language heritage among Romani studies and research networks (different field such as linguistics, anthropology, pedagogy, history, cultural studies, etc.), Romani language teachers, students and researchers. In addition, the younger generations of Romani language speakers that use the Internet on a daily basis are also interested in reading in their mother tongue and exploring the opportunities of the latest developments in IT. However, a collection comprised of a variety of materials to be used by teachers, students and readers of the geographically spread Roma minority is still unavailable. Teachers of the Romani language often face the lack of sufficient and diverse language materials to facilitate the teaching and learning of Romani. By taking advantage of the new developments in

technology, a large number of Romani language publications can be used as readings worldwide regardless of the year and place of their publications.

The most appropriate solution would be to digitalize materials in the public domain and to make them accessible on a single portal. Copyrighted materials would be added too, as the copyright holders - publishers, NGOs and authors would agree that digitalization is complementary to their publishing mission, and, they would readily offer e-publishing permissions for free.

The European Romani Digital Collection project

The Next Page Foundation (NP) from Bulgaria and the National Library of Serbia (NLS) discussed in early 2006 the possibility to digitize part of the treasures of Romani literature heritage. The idea of the cooperation in creating digital Romani collection resulted from the current activities of both partners. The NLS has already created more than fifty digital collections of valuable library materials. These results were marked excellent among experts and public and NLS joined The European Library (TEL) as a full partner in 2005, making a valuable contribution to the development of TEL digital collections. Next Page Foundation's VORBA project (Viable Opportunities for Romani Book Access) already aimed to assist the development of Romani language by supporting publications and the improvement of professional skills of Romani publishers, as well as to foster the exchange and cross-border networking and distribution of Roma publications. To enable broader access to the supported print publications, the VORBA project has provided access to their texts in a small on-line library.

After the discussion between NLS and NP, the initiative for the project European Romani Digital Collection was presented by the director of the National Library of Serbia and accepted at the TEL Management board meeting in The Hague in March 2006. The initiative was also accepted at the CENL (Conference of European National Librarians) meeting held in September 2006 in Sankt Petersburg. The TEL emphasis has been on collections and services in the national language, literature and culture while minority language groups were of secondary interest. The suggested project initiative was meant to inspire a joint effort and cooperation between the TEL partners to work on a "themed" Romani collection, demonstrating the TEL contribution to diversity and linguistic pluralism including minority languages and cultures. It was the first pan-European project within the European library. NLS, a full partner of TEL, became a coordinator of the project.

Goals and objectives

The main goal of the project is the creation of a European bibliography and a European digital collection in Romani language from all European countries.

The objectives are:

- developing a new TEL digital collection and meta-data of Romani written resources available in the TEL libraries;
- providing equal and integrated access to combined resources in Romani (books, magazines, journals) from the TEL partners' collections;
- encouraging cooperation among the national libraries in the field of preserving European Roma heritage (the libraries will collaborate with respect to the Romani collection development);

- strengthening the awareness of the Romani readers that their language is socially and culturally equal to all other European languages;
- attracting researchers and the reading Roma community to read various texts published in Europe in Romani language;
- introducing innovative methods for preservation of the Romani heritage;
- creating the richest point of access to Romani language content;
- promoting the Romani literature heritage as part of the European literature treasures.

The four stages of the project have been planned:

- 1) creation of the bibliography of Romani books and periodicals from the European national libraries,
- 2) selection of material to be digitized (by Editorial Board of Experts),
- 3) digitization of selected books and periodicals in Romani languages (in NLS and other national libraries),
- 4) long-term preservation and access (in TEL central register and in servers of TEL and NLS).

Within the first stage of the project, NLS and the TEL Office in The Hague sent a letter to all libraries asking them to create from its databases the bibliographies of books and serial publications in Romani language.

Using a Wiki Environment

At the TEL contact group meeting held in Rome in December 2006, NLS accepted suggestion to experimentally develop a wiki for the project. All CENL libraries could easily access and post their bibliographies and other digital documents on the wiki without sending them first to NLS or TEL office in Hague. The proposed methodology has been used for the first time within TEL and presented an opportunity for the members to communicate and work in a new and simple way. All digitized documents created within the project would be in the NLS storage system and accessible through TEL portal.

The Wiki website on European Romani Digital Collection was successfully created in NLS Digital Library Department soon after the meeting in Rome. The website included a sample collection of ten digitized book, all done in NLS (www.digital.nbs.bg.ac.yu/romani/wiki).

Unique bibliography

However, the tempo of the project activities that started in late 2006 was slowed down. For more than five months NLS received just a few responses with bibliographies. Most of libraries had problems searching their catalogues and making a list on Romani language publications. Some e-catalogues cannot be searched by language, and in some cases, there is not consistency in the records for of this type of material in national libraries, no CIP and ISBN, or literature published by different Romani associations was not collected regularly.

NLS received bibliographies from about twenty-five national libraries. NLS created a bibliography of books and periodicals on Romani language in Serbia (300 titles) and

Bibliography on Romani people in different languages (1300 titles). The other bibliographies created in different European libraries were sent by email to NLS or TEL office in several formats. The NLS had a lot problems with these bibliographies from different national libraries, since their records were in different format (UNIMARC, MARC, MARC21, COMARC, XML, card format, brief records, etc), with different subject headings, in original languages and not in English, with different classification systems (UDC, DDC, etc.). At the TEL Contact group meeting, held in Copenhagen in 2007, it was decided that the NLS will enter all bibliographic records manually in its database, export them in UNIMARC, convert them in XML OAI records and send them to the TEL central index. The NLS finished this task and now the unique bibliography of about 1200 titles is accessible at the web site of Romani collection of the NLS (www.romi.nb.rs) and will be soon accessible in the TEL portal.

Digitization of material

The next stage would be the selection and digitization of publications listed in the Bibliography and creating the unique and searchable database of digital documents. The Next Page Foundation, had already developed cooperation with experts on Romani literature heritage across Europe, and proposed experts for an Editorial Board whose members would select materials to be digitized. The NLS had digitized ten books as a demo collection for the TEL meeting in December 2006. For the TEL meeting in May 2008, the NLS had digitized fifty-five books all selected by Serbian experts. There is now the problem with digitization of other material from the European bibliography. There are two options for the digitization process: all material will be digitized in the NLS, or, different material will be digitized in different CENL libraries. The NLS has the capacity to digitize all selected books, but, in this case, they have to be collected in the NLS by interlibrary loan. The NLS is still waiting to hear about the proposal about the digitization process from other national libraries.

Long-term preservation, access and presentation

The goal is to preserve all digital items in the TEL portal, as well as in the special Romani portal at the NLS. The portal of the NLS is already created. At the website (www.romi.nb.rs) allows you to search the central bibliography, but you can also search by different countries. The digital collection consists for the moment only of the fifty-five books digitized by the NLS. The presentation is in the software package created by the NLS. We expect that other CENL libraries will help us to add more digital material in very near future. The national libraries play an important role in the European integration issues such as participation in cultural activities, equal access to cultural heritage, respect for minorities' culture and diversity.

Development of a new TEL digital collection and meta-data of Romani written resources available in the European national libraries will create the richest point of equal and integrated access to combined resources of Romani language content (books, magazines, journals). This will strengthen the awareness of the Romani readers worldwide that their language is socially and culturally equal to all other European languages and promote the Romani literature heritage as part of the European literature treasures.

Introducing innovative methods for preservation of the Romani heritage and the cooperation among national libraries in the field of preserving minority language written resources will be encouraged. The Romani Digital Collection at TEL will display the richness and diversity of the European literature heritage and support innovative ways of preserving and disseminating the written culture of the biggest European minority.

With the European Romani Digital Collection, we will show that Romani heritage is equal to other European countries heritage, that Romani language is equal to other European languages, that Romani literature heritage is the part of the European literature treasures.

Serbian presidency of Decade of Roma inclusion July 2008- July 2009

During the Serbian presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, from July 1, 2008 to July 1, 2009, with the support of the Serbian Government and the Ministry of culture, the NLS organized the “physical” exhibition “Written Romani Word” (“Alav e Romengo”) in the National Bank of Serbia. The Exhibition was opened on the April 8, 2009, for the World Roma Day. The exhibition’s author, eminent Serbian Romani expert, Mr. Dragoljub Ackovic, said that “unfortunately” it was the first exhibition of Romani written heritage in the whole world. However, the European Romani Digital Collection Project will provide access to a rich collection of materials. Mr. Ackovic was so kind to give to the NLS many materials from his private collection (books, journals, photos, postcards, audio and video records), mostly in Romani language, but also in all other languages. The NLS is now in the process of digitizing all this material (about 30,000 items). As soon as the NLS finishes digitizing this material, it will be posted on the Romani portal of the NLS as a private digital collection of Mr. Ackovic. The NLS will also have the right to post this digital collection to the TEL Romani portal.

Virtual exhibition “Romani cultural heritage” at TEL portal

As the TEL office and the NLS are not completely satisfied with the cooperation of other CENL libraries on this project, at the TEL contact group meeting held in Prague in December 2008, it was decided that the NLS will organize the virtual exhibition on the TEL portal. This virtual exhibition, “Romani cultural heritage”, will be posted on the TEL portal in September 2009 with the digital collection of the NLS. It will include not only books and periodicals in Romani language, but also photos, postcards, audio and video records on Romani culture already digitized in the NLS. We hope that this virtual exhibition will motivate other CENL libraries to add more digital content for the TEL European Romani Digital Collection.

"There are some 15 million Roms dispersed across the world. Their history is one of suffering and misery, but it is also one of the victories of human spirit over the blows of fate. Today the Roms revive their culture and are looking for their identity. On the other hand, they integrate into the societies in which they live. If they are understood by their fellow citizens in their new homelands, their culture will enrich the society's atmosphere with the color and charm of spontaneity."

Indira Ghandi,

Opening speech at the International Romani Festival in Chandigarh, India on October 28, 1983.