

Petteri Laihonen: I also worked in the meat industry

Translated from the Hungarian by Richard Hayward

Petteri Laihonen is based at the Centre of Applied Language Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. He also works as a researcher in the Tiszavasvári project and participated in several workshops, starting as early as 2021, when he first visited Tiszavasvári as part of the translanguaging project. A long-term collaborator of the Hungarian research team, he was lead author of a chapter on non-standardised ways of speaking and language-policy regimes in the 2023 volume entitled Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities: Speaking Romani at School (Berlin: De Gruyter).

In the autumn of 2024, I took part in the Tiszavasvári workshops on two occasions. At the meeting in November, several people talked about the difficulties they face in their jobs, for example, their duties as day labourers. A Roma woman told me that she works in the meat industry and gave me a detailed description of her job there. Her story reminded me of the time when back home in Finland, after high school, I also spent a summer working in the meat industry. This is a subject that is particularly close to me, as my family on my father's side has been butchers since the 18th century. My grandfather was a butcher in a small village, and my father was a small-scale meat merchant. He transported animals from the surrounding villages to the city's slaughterhouse, and during the holidays he also smoked ham in our old sauna. We lived on a farm where there was room for various livestock, and at Christmas, for example, we slaughtered pigs in the yard. As a high school student, I did a lot of physical work around the house and in the woods, helping with construction, chopping wood, and whatever else was needed.

After graduation, I had five months of free time before the military. It wasn't difficult to find work in the abattoir, as I had good connections through my father and the summer period was also lucky as they had difficulty finding replacement cover for workers on leave. One of the workers was about to start a two-year training course, so they were happy to receive my application, and I was able to start practically immediately. The staff

were also happy to see me and told me how difficult it is to find new workers. It often happened that jobseekers referred by the job centre did not turn up or could only manage a day or two of work. Because of my family background, they trusted me not to leave the job. My tasks consisted mainly of operations that did not require a lot of skill, such as working on the belt to remove pigs or herding animals to the slaughterhouse. My main task was to transport parts unfit for human consumption to the meat grinder, used for feeding fur animals, and to operate it. I quickly got used to the work and after the first week I was doing mostly without gloves the tasks I was given.

Although I had no problem with the work itself and after a short period of practice it was not difficult, I became concerned about the thought of doing this kind of work for years if I was not accepted at university. At such times I tried to reassure myself that I would definitely be accepted (I only got in a year later) or that I would find another job with greater potential for development. During the discussion in Tiszavasvári, where the meat industry job came up, I remembered this period in my life. Even though I was the first in my family to graduate from secondary school and university, and my family saw value in practical work, I was confident in my potential beyond this.

However, the opportunities for Roma in Tiszavasvári are more limited compared to mine. The systemic discrimination in education and the labour market does not allow them the opportunity for development, and with it the kind of self-confidence that was essential for my career.

Our family history also includes the fact that my father's career was interrupted when his meat processing plant went bankrupt in 1974. After that, there was practically no point in starting a bigger business, as he could not get a loan, and he would have had to spend all his money from a potentially higher income on payments for the debt collector. My father's business was eventually taken over by my brother after my father's death in 1990. He now owns the fifth largest meat processing business in Finland. My brother had only completed the compulsory 9 years of primary school, but he was still able to build a large business from scratch based on the family's professional knowledge of butchery and meat processing.