



Was Gregor Mendel imprisoned in 1849 by the order of the young Emperor François-Joseph?

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Abstract

The appreciation of Gregor Mendel's discovery in 1865 of what we now know as "genes," occurred long after his death in 1884. The difficulties during his life that may have contributed to this have been much discussed. I here propose that Mendel was imprisoned by order of the young Austrian Emperor Franz-Joseph after a public reading of a petition seeking that monks be given the same civic rights as normal citizens. Including Mendel, this was signed by six monks of the Saint Thomas monastery of Brünn and was formally presented to the Kremsier Austrian Constitutional Parliament in January 1849. The impact of its adverse reception long influenced Mendel's life.

Introduction

In 1843, the Abbot Cyril Franz Napp, who directed the monastery of St Thomas (in Brünn, a town in the Hapsburg province of Moravia), hired Gregor J. Mendel, not only to become a monk, but also a teacher [1]. The Abbot was following imperial orders [1,2], a plan that happily happened to match the vocational desires of Mendel [3]. It was understood that by the end of his theological studies he would be sent to a university at the expense of the monastery to become a professor of natural history [4]. But on July 22, 1848, in the absence of Abbot Napp, Mendel was appointed curate for life by Count Schaffgostsch, Bishop of Brünn. Napp had no direct opportunity for input, since he had been elected representative of Moravia in the Constituent Assembly that met in Vienna the same day. The Count's decision did not suit Mendel, who expected to occupy the post only on a transitional basis while waiting for another monk [6], hired for this purpose, to reach the required age.

We can understand the double bitterness of Mendel: not only was he not to become a teacher, but also, to be accepted by Napp, he had first to pursue two exhausting years of so-called Philosophy studies (at that time a prerequisite for attending university courses, but totally useless for becoming a parish priest). Moreover, he had to combine this with the heavy work of Corvée to which his family was exposed [3].

In these circumstances, Mendel decided to write a petition to the new parliament with the assistance of three older monks who help him to acquire knowledge about the

laws which regulated the religious life of the austrian monasteries. He had also the support of two other monks who were also in charge of the parish church. Employing strong language when addressing the imperial authorities, the monks asked for full rights of citizenship and the possibility of personally opting for the professorial path. Sent on August 8, 1848, it was received on the 16th, but was not read publicly before the parliamentarians until several months later – at the end of January 1849 [7]. Shortly thereafter Mendel is reported to have fallen seriously ill and did not leave the monastery for many months did not leave the monastery [19].

To understand Mendel's story, we have to know political and geographic changes that took place between the opening of the newly elected Constituent Assembly in Vienna in July 1848 (time of victorious revolution) corresponding to the time the monks were writing the petition) and the dismissal of this assembly in March 1849 in Kremsier (near Olmutz, Moravia) which correspond to the revival time of conservatism [10]. In between, we can date the petition as being formally communicated to parliament on 27 January 1849 [1].

Political changes

In early October 1848 there was a revival of revolutionary violence in Vienna [11], which drove for their safety, the Emperor Ferdinand and the Imperial Court to Olmütz where the troops who had recently returned from Italy were stationed.

Schwarzenberg, diplomat and soldier, now becomes the new head of government [13]. Under its influence, at the beginning of

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December 1848 the Emperor Ferdinand who, according to the conservative nobility, had ceded far too many advantages to the Viennese people, was pressed to abdicate in favor of Franz-Joseph who was not deemed responsible for the liberal concessions made by his uncle.

Franz-Joseph is therefore made Emperor in Moravia [13]. Like his mother, the young sovereign is very pious. He has an extremely strong sense of order and monarchical authority as well as an eternal hatred of revolutionaries [10-12]. Consecrated Emperor at age 18 by the Archbishop of Olmutz at the end of December 1848, he symbolizes conservative values and ensures the restoration of the Catholic Church and its control over society. In this regard, he extols military virtues and praises the effectiveness of the army in Italy when it intervened energetically on troublemakers [10]. Whoever they were, aristocrats or member of a religious order, troublemakers had to go to jail for three years (stated in letters to his mother april 1848). For the young Emperor, the army is an exemplary social system where everyone's place is defined, and absolute obedience is expected. But in 1849 Emperor Franz-Joseph is still very young and has yet no direct real political power which is in Schwarzenberg's hands.

At the end of November 1848, the Constitutional Assembly is convened in Kremsier (near Olomutz) and resumes its work, attended by the new government of Schwarzenberg. The Assembly presents a draft constitution which is tabled in early January 1849 but is badly received by the members of the new government, who reject it.

On January 27, 1849, a public reading of the petition of the monks of the monastery St Thomas in Brünn occurred before the members of the constitutional parliament. Was it as a precaution that this petition sent in August 1848 was not read publicly until the end of January 1849? I could not find any information related to the response that the particularly virulent tone of the petition towards the authorities' power could have triggered and have probably triggered. Here is a translation from German of the actual petition itself which to our knowledge has yet never been published in English (see appendix).

Responses to the petition

It is certain that the tone of the petition [7], which I commented on in an earlier article in French [5], must have upset, not only parliamentarians, but also members of the high clergy, when they were informed. Contrary to the account of Marantz-Henig [17; p.36], they did not omit following up on this petition because they were seeking (in vain) to close the monastery a few years later (in 1855), when the ties of the Church and the Austrian state had been redefined by a Concordat [1; p. 85]. As a matter of fact, the Bishop of Brünn himself tried to get Rome to close the convent, which the fame of its teachers had long protected [1, p.86]. However, Napp successfully defended the existence of the monastery and its scholarly aspirations, including the plant breeding experiments Mendel was beginning [1].

Did the idle new Emperor Franz-Joseph have a personal reaction?

One may wonder on Franz-Joseph reaction to the petition's direct criticism of the monastery organization that seemed to well suit the needs of the Empire. One may also wonder on the reaction of the citizens of the region where he had undergone military training in his childhood [10,12]. Given his character, Franz-Joseph, who was presently living in Moravia, could not have overlooked the scandal that followed the petition's loud public reading, and he was probably terribly outraged by the text

of the petition when his existence had been locally reported.

In 1955, on searching, the text of the above petition was finally found in the military part of the parliament archives [14], which leads me to suppose that it was Franz-Joseph who ordered a member of his staff to carry out investigations in Brünn (Moravia) where the monastery is located. The Bishop of Brünn, Anton Ernest Schaffgotsch, was the most suitable interlocutor because he shared authority over the monks of St. Thomas with Abbot Napp [1].

Since nothing in the petition specifically named Mendel, it was probably the Bishop who denounced Mendel's rebellion against his life appointment as parish priest. The Bishop was not aware of the agreement between Napp and Mendel on his future as a teacher, nor that Mendel had only agreed to be a temporary parish priest for the sake of the monastery (after the simultaneous death of three monks in charge of the parish church and the nearby hospital).

But all that Franz-Joseph thought when he learned of the monks' petition was that, by refusing the post of parish priest, Franz-Joseph was disobeying orders. Indeed, Mendel wrote to his mother: "whether you are a noble or a religious person, one who disobeys is arrested and severely punished" [12].

Sanction of Mendel

As a punishment we infer that, on the orders of Franz-Joseph, Mendel could have received an immediate prison sentence. The Emperor's aversion to revolutionaries was even greater when these were teachers who could transfer their liberal ideas to their pupils [18]; it is therefore probable that the Emperor decided that this revolutionary monk would never be allowed to become a teacher – which might explain the two surprising failures of Mendel when he presented himself before the secondary education accreditation committee.

Intervention of Abbot Napp

I suggest that following the survey conducted by the Bishop, under an order of Franz Joseph, Mendel received an immediate prison sentence, whose subsequent implementation is surprising! Here is how I envisage it. Father Napp, an elected member representing Moravia, having taken cognizance of the petition at the same time as the other parliamentarians, immediately understood the outcry that all this was going to trigger. Taking the lead, he returned to Brünn and to protect Mendel, to avoid his being incarcerated in the dreadful Brünn Spielberg citadel [20], he locked him up in the monastery jail (which he had the right to, as an Abbot punishing an insubordinate monk, which here was Mendel's case) and declared Mendel seriously ill.

Mendel is declared ill

Neither Iltis [19] nor Orel [1] knew the name of this so "serious" disease – which, in my opinion, has never existed, hence the title of my first article on Mendel "an enigmatic disease" [4]. I do not believe in the myth of an illness that begins right after the public reading of the petition, and which ends with the need for new teachers at the start of the school year 1849-50. Since Mendel could have been contagious for other prisoners, this so-called sickness prevented him going to the sinister Spielberg prison.

Hence, the aim was to lessen the severity of this disproportionate punishment. Life in Brünn has nothing to do with an army in campaign, and the punishment of a monk who protests an unjust decision does not put the rest of a battalion in danger! I suggest that, regarding the place of this imprisonment, Abbot Napp arranged with Governor Lazansky that Mendel spend all his jail

time in the monastery, which could explain the fine-tuning of its application that may seem difficult to understand.

What supports this hypothesis is the fact that, when an increased need for teachers arises at the end of September 1849 (following an unforeseen reform, which extended the course of all secondary establishments in the Empire by a further one year of education), the Governor of Moravia, Lazansky, sent a letter to Mendel stating that "with regard to the zeal that you have shown, I think it is appropriate to appoint you as substitute teacher for the Gymnasium of Znaim" [19, p57]. This officially indicates Mendel's good reputation with his Brünn parishioners. Franz Joseph left Moravia in March 1849 after dismissing the Assembly, before the draft Constitution was completed [12].

Mendel substitute teacher at Znaim 1849-50

Thanks to the support of Napp and the governor, Mendel is appointed deputy to the gymnasium of Znaim (another city of Moravia). At that time, for Mendel, surveillance and denouncement replaced prison: to confirm that Mendel was under scrutiny by the police we note the investigation reported by Iltis [19 p 60], where the local police of Znaim asks all fellow teachers to testify in a collective letter about "Mendel's behavior all year round and under all circumstances"!

Mendel teaching in Brünn

In fact, Franz-Joseph could never exclude Mendel from teaching because in Brünn, (Moravia, Czech province), Mendel began with several substitute stand-ins for teachers of natural sciences and was highly esteemed by his fellow teachers who appreciated his skills and knowledge [1]. Thus, in May 1854, Mendel was finally hired by Auspitz, the director of the new school in Brünn (the Reale-Schule). However, without the consent of the Viennese authorities, it seems that in Brünn, Auspitz could hire only substitute teachers. From 1854 to 1866 Mendel became, therefore, substitute professor of physics, mathematics and natural sciences [1]. Auspitz had to demand its renewal each year from the local commission [19]. Nevertheless, Mendel managed to cover the education costs of his three nephews [1], perhaps finding another way to get money... maybe selling new strains of fuschias?

Fate of Mendel's relationship with François-Joseph

I have here proposed a hypothesis which suggests that a strong antagonism is born between emperor Franz Joseph and Mendel, following the description by Bishop Schafgotsch of Mendel as a monk in revolt. Then, throughout his life, the Emperor took care to exclude persons suspected of liberal political affiliation by checking the lists of candidates for university education [18]. Thus, he would have been able to systematically oppose Mendel's professorial aims and may also have been responsible for the delay of popularity of Mendel's 1866 paper on plants hybridization.

Conclusion

To strengthen my hypothesis relating to the identity of the one person, above all the others, who would have systematically opposed Mendel, I have looked for "when the tribulations of Mendel's life in connection with Franz Joseph were initiated." I now propose that this took place at the beginning of 1849.

It is probable that the tribulations continued throughout Mendel's life, even including the occasion of his death [19], when all his personal papers were burnt by the order of the new Abbot Rambousek who had entered the monastery at the same time as Mendel (1843) and had been a source of trouble during Mendel's life... but this is another long story.

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Appendix

"To the High Assembly of the Empire"

"On the occasion of the political restructuring of our fatherland, the undersigned feel it is their duty, in the name of humankind, to draw the attention of the High Austrian Chamber to the fact that it is only with bitterness that an entire, non-negligible class of men, in the Provinces of the Austrian Empire, totally excluded from the conquests of March and May, can share the jubilation of those peoples who feel fully satisfied."

"According to the Austrian civil law, the regular monk is lower than the criminal - whose civil rights have only been suspended - in that he is a person civilly deprived of rights. The rights of an Austrian citizen are refused to the monk. According to the texts of the law, he is civilly dead. Like the insane, the child and the person under trusteeship, any contract into which a monk enters does not count; he does not have the right to stand as a security, or to bear witness before a court, or to act as a witness or assistant at a wedding, or to play the role of godfather at a baptism or a communion. Furthermore, the monk has no right to inherit or to bequeath his meagre possessions, often laboriously acquired, to his often-needy family; legally, it is only his monastic order that inherits, exclusively, what comes from him or to him."

"Until the present, the civil statutes of the absolute monarchy came down in favor of religious communities but were deliberately prejudicial to monks taken individually. These monks unfortunately only realized the practical implications of these laws years later, at the cost of many painful experiences. These laws are still in effect after March 13. To this day the right to constitutional citizenship has not been extended to the regular monk. In France, a monastery is viewed as a free association between citizen and monk. The monk's freedom of rights, as a citizen, are constantly acknowledged and protected by the State. They are untouchable and above the private contract which constitutes his ties to the order."

"A closer examination of the ecclesiastic and social signification of 19th century Austrian monasteries obliges the impartial observer to acknowledge that these refuges and institutions of Christian love are nothing, morally, but compulsory seminaries; they have purely and simply fallen into the role of almshouses for poor, short-sighted youths. The enforced isolation from the population, the withdrawal from the family circle, the focus on the inner life, the deficient and biased education he received, the peculiarity of his garments, attitudes and comportment, the absolute obedience demanded of him, all reveal the fatal blow dealt to the citizen in the monk and represent the nadir of degradation."

"Since the right of free citizenship is stolen from the entire regular clergy, and since the later only counts as a blunt tool in the hands of the hierarchy, and since the State, by its civil laws, has given its consent, then, because of this, the clergy could only be seen by the intelligent portion of the people as a dead limb on the social body, bereft of significance. That is why, to this day, monks count as little, with no rights, no will of their own, excluded from the great golden register of free, dignified citizens! Thereby, the monks are excluded from every provincial or imperial Austrian election, such as the elections to the German parliament, since the active and passive ability to elect any representative body has been denied to them, whereas it is granted to even the most destitute worker. "In the great Constitutional State of Austria, in this State of citizens standing free before the peoples of Europe, how can there still be slaves, exposed to the scorn, derision, and mockery, of the free civilized peoples of the world? When compared to the great, structured edifice of its constitutional liberty, this puts Austria to shame. The monk buried alive in his cell should be called upon, by the reverberating trumpets of the first Austrian Parliament, to rise up and act as a citizen."

"The undersigned professors and caretakers of souls, priests at the Augustinian Abby of Saint Thomas at Alt-Brünn, hereby take the liberty to present to the High Imperial Assembly the just demand of the recognition of their constitutional rights as citizens, with the request that they be allowed, to the extent of their aptitude and past merits, to devote all their spiritual energy entirely to the public teaching and to free, unified and indivisible citizenship. They are profoundly honored to assign themselves, for their entire lifetime, the task of promoting Science and Humanity, in conformity with the spirit of constitutional progress.

Brünn, August the 8th, 1848

Pr. Mattheus Klacel, former Professor of Philosophy.

Dr. Philipp Gabriel, Professor of Mathematics at Brünn, Director of the Thurn Institute.

Benedict Fogler, Professor of French Language and Literature and certified professor of Italian.

Josef Lindenthal, Vicar of the parish of Alr-Brünn.

Chrysostomus Cyganek, candidate for professorship.

Gregor Mendel, Vicar, candidate for professorship.