



KATARINA TAIKON

(Almby, Örebro, Sweden, July 29, 1932 - Ytterhogdal, Sweden, December 30, 1995)



May Day 1965 in Stockholm, headed by Katarina Taikon.
© Björn Langhammer /KB; published in Selling 2020

Swedish Kalderash author, Katarina Taikon, led a remarkable life. She was an **iconic rebel who never accepted the oppression of Roma**.

From today's perspective, it may seem astonishing that she was not invited to the World Romani Congress in London in 1971. At the time of the congress, the brilliant Swedish Roma activist of the 1960s was becoming a successful author of children's literature, with a specific political purpose. A biographical documentary released more recently about her life,

*Taikon*¹ was promoted as the political portrait of "a Swedish Martin Luther King".

Although Taikon's family consisted of skilled craftsmen and musicians, her mother had to give birth in a tent, and she spent part of her early childhood in an orphanage. Sweden denied the so-called *Zigenare* ("Gypsies") all civil rights and blocked access to housing and education. **Only as an adult did she learn to read and write.**

Together with her sister, the late silversmith Rosa Taikon, the two managed to break out of their social marginalisation. From that point on, Taikon used every opportunity to **inform people about the devastating conditions and unacceptable racism against Roma**. **She also contested patriarchal practices in her community**, such as child marriage.

In Stockholm, she found allies among Roma and *gadje* (non-Roma), cultural workers, individual civil servants and politicians. In the 1960s, **she published two documentary books about the social position of Roma** and became one of Sweden's most talked-about authors. With remarkable intellect and self-confidence rooted in a deep belief in equal rights, she confronted established authors, journalists and leading politicians.

Since her mother was *gadje* – in addition to the anti-Gypsyism that all Roma faced – political opponents questioned her right to speak out on such matters, based on racist arguments that she was only "*half-Gypsy*". This did not stop her. However, it was most likely the reason why she rejected ethnic separatism and instead adopted a radical human rights perspective, which was inspired by the workers' movement as well as the Afro-American civil rights activism of the time.

In the early 1960s, **she and her husband's (Björn Langhammer) apartment became the meeting point for activists and allied journalists**. A member-based organisation took shape, and they issued their first political Roma journal, *Amé Beschas*. An indication of her

¹ Gellert Tamas & Lawen Mohtadi 2015, Triart film.

growing reputation, in 1964 she was invited to meet with Nobel Peace Prize winner, Martin Luther, at a public event in Stockholm.

In the following year, **Taikon headed the first Swedish May-Day dedicated to Roma rights**, at which she carried a banner demanding adult education. She was convinced that nothing would change until the educational exclusion of Roma was overcome.

From this point on, her activism gained increasing international attention. She toured in Finland, where a similar Roma rights movement was evolving. In 1967, she started to **engage day and night to save Roma refugees from expulsion**. This included intensive talks with politicians, lawyers and the refugees themselves. In 1967, her campaign for a group of Polish and Italian Roma was successful.

Two years later her political hopes were frustrated as the Social Democratic government refused to grant asylum to a number of French, Italian and Spanish Roma, who were expelled to the French ghetto, Romainville. Her experience that her efforts had been useless was, for her, a political point of no return.

Taikon instead turned to children's literature and **wrote the successful series "Katitzi", which was highly inspired by her own life**. She wrote 13 books between 1969 and 1980. This was a political choice. As she put it, "If we want to change the world, we shall start with the children."² However, eventually, her 1969 campaign achieved success, and the expelled Roma were allowed to return in 1971 after revelations of the miserable conditions in Romainville. This is an important but often forgotten fact.³

Sadly, in 1982, Taikon suffered a heart attack and never regained consciousness until her death in 1995.⁴

Sources and further information:

1. Books by Katarina Taikon: *Zigenerska* ["Gypsy" woman] (1963), *Zigenare är vi* [Gypsies are we] (1967). The *Katitzi* series (1969-1980) available in Swedish and several other languages. The first three books were translated into Romanes by Hans Caldaras and recorded as audiobooks (Podium, 2008.)
2. Taikon biography in English by Lawen Mohtadi (2020) *The Day I am Free / Katitzi*.
3. Autobiography of Hans Caldaras (2015, orig. 2002), *I betraktarens ögon* [In the eyes of the beholder].
4. Context of Swedish Roma rights struggle: Jan Selling essay in RomArchive: <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/sweden-narrative-essay/>
5. Information site based on Gellert Tamas and Lawen Mohtadi film project Taikon (2015): <https://www.taikon.se/english>
6. See also information on Hans Caldaras homepage, <https://www.caldaras.com>

This biography has been written by Jan Selling

2 Quote from Film by Gellert Tamas and Lawen Mohtadi, Taikon, 2015.

3 E.g. not mentioned in the film Taikon.

4 This essay is based on research published in Selling, Jan (2020), Frigörelsen. Romers och resandes emancipation i Sverige och andra länder (Becoming free. Emancipation of Roma and Resande in Sweden and other countries). Text checked with Katarina Taikon's daughter Angelica Ström and with close friend Hans Caldaras.