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Giving Space to the Tabooed Trauma: Sofia Taikon's Testimony in *Katitzi Z-1234* and *Sofia Z-4515*

Then for the first time we notice that our language lacks the words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. Suddenly, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we have reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this: a more miserable human condition is unthinkable. Nothing is ours anymore; they have taken our clothes, our shoes, our hair too; if we speak, they will not listen, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will take away even our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, that behind the name, something of us, of us as we were, remains. (Levi 26–27)

*auschwitz is my coat
are you afraid of the dark?
i'll tell you where the path is free of people,
so you don't need to be afraid.
i'm not afraid.
my fear remained in auschwitz
and in the camps.
auschwitz is my coat,
bergen-belsen my dress
and ravensbrück my vest.
what should I be afraid of?
(Stojka 2014: 7)*

1. The Porajmos: a concealed and tabooed trauma

Unresolved collective trauma never passes, more so, Holocaust survivors unconsciously pass on their traumatic experiences to their descendants (Cohen; Danieli; Schwab).¹ Thus, many children, grandchildren, even great-grandchil-

1 It should be mentioned here that the theory continues to be the subject of controversial discussions. However, the numerous studies show that collective trauma has lasting

dren of Holocaust survivors who have kept silent for decades suffer trauma without knowing why. However, the scientifically proven connection between trauma and repression does not only concern the survivors of the Shoah, but to the same extent those of the Porajmos—only this and the associated trauma of all the members of Europe’s largest minority all too often continues to be an excluded part of the Holocaust:

The other genocide under the Nazis, the genocide of the Sinti and Roma, is still marginal in the public perception. The Nazi genocide brought death to approximately 500,000 European Roma and almost all Sinti living in Germany. (Bauer 2018: 87)²

As the moving mottos of this contribution by Primo Levi and Ceija Stojka show, the memories and injuries of surviving Jews and Roma are very close. And yet there are differences between the Nazi extermination campaigns against the European Jews and Roma. In fact, the implementation of the Romani genocide took place very differently in the occupied countries of Europe and those allied with the Nazis.³ Little known to this day is the fact that most Roma from Poland and the Soviet Union were not killed in concentration camps, but in mass executions carried out on site by the German police, Wehrmacht and ss Einsatzgruppen. In the Auschwitz concentration camp, the third largest group of victims among the Roma came from occupied Poland. During the Second World War, about one third of all Roma who had lived on Polish territory before the outbreak of the war died. Exact figures cannot be determined, the perpetrators did not document their barbaric crimes against the Roma in detail, but estimates put the death toll at at least 500,000.

While the denial of the genocide of the Roma⁴ was for decades the prevailing opinion of politicians, jurists and the public in Europe, and despite the differences regarding the motivation and implementation of the “Final Solution of

effects especially in those groups where the traumatic experience is systematically repressed or concealed.

- 2 “Der andere Genozid im Nationalsozialismus, der Völkermord an den Sinti und Roma, ist in der öffentlichen Wahrnehmung immer noch marginal. Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord brachte ungefähr 500.000 europäischen Roma und nahezu allen in Deutschland lebenden Sinti den Tod.”
- 3 For comprehensive information on the Romani genocide see, e.g. Central Council of German Sinti and Roma; European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma, <https://www.roma-sinti-holocaust-memorial-day.eu/de/>.
- 4 The term Roma is used here as an umbrella term for all subgroups of the minority.

the Jewish Question” and the “Final Solution of the Gypsy Question” (*Zigeunerfrage*), it is nowadays considered completely undisputed that both the Shoah and the Porajmos were genocides (cf. Wippermann 2005: 141–146). With the “Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered Under National Socialism” in Berlin, designed by Dani Karavan and inaugurated in 2012 after long debates, the Porajmos was officially recognised as genocide by the German government (cf. Fings).⁵ However, the continuing public ignorance of the genocide of the Roma is shown by the fact that the term “Porajmos” (in addition to the spelling used here, the graphic “Porrajmos” can also be found), in contrast to the Hebrew term “Shoah” (שואה = “catastrophe,” “downfall”), is little known. The term in itself is a neologism coined in the 1990s by the US activist Ian Hancock from Romanes, which means “the devouring.” Although the term is not entirely uncontroversial,⁶ it has become widely accepted among minority activists as well as in the research literature on the Nazi genocide.

However, it is not only the European majority societies that have not addressed the issue of the Porajmos. Although virtually all Roma in Europe are descendants of survivors of the Porajmos, knowledge about it is not widespread even among their children and grandchildren. What was endured was experienced by the survivors as an insurmountable humiliation, which remained visible in the concentration camp imprisonment numbers as a physical stigma for life and was therefore hidden as far as possible. Likewise, the trauma itself was all too often experienced and repressed as a psychological stigma, so that speaking about the unspeakable was and is a kind of taboo for a large number of affected families. Knowledge about the Porajmos was therefore rarely passed on to the next generations through communicative memory.⁷ However, the children and (great-great-)grandchildren feel the trauma of their (great-great-)grandparents, which remains unarticulated, and have to deal with it. Due to

5 For more detailed information on the genocide of the Roma, see, e.g. Bastian, Thelen and Zimmermann. For a collection of eyewitness accounts, see the “Voices of the Victims” section of the RomArchive online platform curated by Karola Frings: <https://www.romarchive.eu/de/voices-of-the-victims/>.

6 Matras (2004: 195) points out that the term is virtually unknown to the victims and their families. The French linguist Marcel Courthiade, on the other hand, prefers the neologism “samudaripen” which means “mass murder.” Cf. also Auzias.

7 Of course, this does not mean that there were not also voices that spoke about the unspeakable, but since discrimination against Roma was the order of the day almost everywhere in Europe after the Nazi dictatorship, many of those affected tried to conceal their Roma identity. An open reappraisal of the many forms of extermination of Roma was thus denied. The contributions in Donert and Rosenhaft (2022) provide

the lack of institutionalisation of remembering, for example through consistent treatment in school lessons, the lack of knowledge among the members of the minority is at least as great as among those of the majority society. This is a problem that is particularly serious because of the transgenerational transmission of trauma mentioned above. This is all the more serious in the case of the trauma that has hardly been dealt with in the minority and the majority in view of the fact that there are hardly any survivors alive today who can bear direct witness. This lack of knowledge about a diffuse family trauma can have a deeply destabilising effect and massive psychological consequences. It is therefore all the more important to talk about the Porajmos. This educational work is relevant both for the affected descendants of the eyewitnesses and for the majority society. Only when the descendants understand, can the process of coming to terms with the past begin, and only when the majority society is aware of what happened, can acceptance take place.

2. Breaking the silence: Female voices on the Porajmos

But in fact, they do exist, the eyewitness accounts of survivors of the Porajmos. Even if the majority of these reports “slumber” in oral archives and therefore remain unheard for the vast majority (Brooks), there was a courageous and committed woman who was the first (at least in the German-speaking countries) to speak and write openly about her painful experiences in the concentration camps under the Third Reich: Philomena Franz (b. 1922 in Biberach, Germany) published her memories of imprisonment in Auschwitz in her autobiography *Zwischen Liebe und Hass. Ein Zigeunerleben* in 1985. Only three years later, Ceija Stojka’s (1933–2013) autobiography *Wir leben im Verborgenen: Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin*, the first eyewitness account by a representative of the minority was published in Austria. Asked about her motivation to paint and write, she explained: “I had to open up, I had to scream.”⁸ (Kleine Zeitung) Thus, contrary to the stereotype of oppressed Romani women, they are the ones who first broke the silence and tried to articulate the unspeakable and thus counteract the taboo trauma.⁹

a differentiated insight into how the horrific experiences shaped the lives of Romani survivors and their families in Eastern and Western Europe after the Second World War.

8 “Ich musste mich öffnen, musste schreien.” The translation of this excerpt—as well as in case of Taikon 2016 and Taikon 1976—by M.O.H.

9 Of course, there are also male representatives of the minority who dealt with the trauma in literature. An important German-speaking male representative of the minority who broke the silence and articulated his very personal trauma was Otto Rosenberg, who,

While Philomena Franz and Ceija Stojka fought for their rights as engaged women and actively worked to make the genocide of the Roma known, Sofia Taikon, who was born in 1931 in an unknown place in Poland as Sofia Brzezinska, is one of the non-silent but quiet voices who spoke out about the Porajmos. Like so many other concentration camp survivors, it was difficult for her throughout her life to deal with the trauma and memories of dehumanisation and to talk about them with her children and grandchildren. And yet her memories of the trauma were brought up by people close to her in fictional form especially for a young readership: As early as 1976, Katarina Taikon told Sofia Taikon's painful story in the children's book *Katitzi Z-1234*, and in 2005, Gunilla Lundgren and Amanda Eriksson created a graphic memoir about her traumatic experiences.¹⁰

3. Fictionalisations of Sofia Taikon's memories of the Porajmos

3.1. *Katitzi Z-1234* (1976)—a children's book by Katarina Taikon

From Sofia's husband's Stockholm-based Kaldarash family, Katarina Taikon (1932–1995) is one of the best-known personalities. She was not only a prominent activist and leader of Romani civil rights movement in Sweden (Mohtadi), but also author of the autobiographical children's book series *Katitzi*, which was published between 1969 and 1979 and became known far beyond Sweden in translations into Czech, German, Hungarian, Romanian and in 2008 also into Romani. In the 1970s, Katarina Taikon took the children's books to Swedish schools in order to raise awareness and tolerance for Roma through educational work.

The first volume of the series begins with a brief explanation of how the Polish Roma-family Taikon came to Sweden at all:

It was winter 1940. World War II was raging in Europe, but in Sweden there was peace. *Katitzi* arrived with her family in Vännäs, a small town in the northern Swedish landscape of Västerbotten. Her father, Johan Taikon, was very worried. Like many others, he feared that the war might spread to Sweden. But it was not only the war that frightened him. Right now he was worried that he might not get permission to settle

with the help of Ulrich Enzenberger, published his autobiographical memoirs of the Porajmos in 1998 under the title *Das Brennglas*. In 1999, his memoirs were also translated into English (*A Gypsy in Auschwitz*) and into Polish in 2010.

¹⁰ For the genre of the Porajmos comic in general and a critical analysis of different examples, cf. Hertrampf.

here. Katitzi and her family were Gypsies and always had problems with the authorities because of that. (Taikon 1976: 5)

Although the family has escaped the war, Katitzi encounters racist discrimination that is completely incomprehensible to her in her childlike naivety. A parallel is drawn with the persecution of the Jews. For example, in a scene where Katitzi goes from house to house selling bowls:

Another had shouted “Jew pig” after her. Startled, she had turned around and said, “I’m a Gypsy!” Then the man shouted even louder: “Gypsy devil! You are the same pack! Just wait until the Germans come! They’ll put an end to you!” Katitzi was scared and frightened, she didn’t understand the whole thing. (Taikon 1976: 21)

Even though the series brings up the social disadvantages of Roma, 12 of the 13 *Katitzi* books tell the adventures of the wild girl Katitzi in the style of Swedish children’s books à la Pippi Longstocking (Zahova). Only the ninth volume, entitled *Katitzi Z-1234*, deals with the commonly tabooed subject of Porajmos and tells the story on the basis of Sofia’s experiences (Snelling), without this becoming explicit, however. Katarina Taikon merely uses the real testimonies of Sofia Taikon as a factual basis to weave them into the story of her protagonist Katitzi. In contrast to the other volumes in the series, the focus here is on a look back at the time of the Third Reich, the persecution, torture and extermination of the Romani people. This is triggered by the fact that the twelve-year-old Katitzi is worried about her much older cousin Zoni, who seems desperate. When the fun-loving girl asks the reason for Zoni’s deep sadness, she begins to tell her about her youth, which is anything but carefree:

Still smiling and with trembling lips she said: I will never get over it... I will always be afraid. They won’t even let me go in my sleep. They come in dreams. They haunt me. With their uniforms... contemptuous, cruel. These people are devils. (Taikon 2016: 24)

As a daily physical reminder of the horrors suffered, the concentration camp number takes on a special significance:

Zoni stretched out his bare arm and Katitzi saw the tattooed number on her arm. In front of the numbers was a Z. Why did they do that? Katitzi asked. For the pleasure of humiliating us. To make us feel like

animals. Marked as cattle, we were driven to the slaughterhouses, the gas chambers. (Taikon 2016: 25)

In fact, the stigma of the tattooed concentration camp number becomes a sign of her own identification with the fate of her ethnic group for Katitzi, who is deeply shocked by this chapter of her minority's history. In a mixture of empathetic attachment, the childlike instinct to imitate and the desire to visibly belonging, Katitzi decides to paint a Z on her arm as well: "You know, I think I want a number like that too. Because if someone wants people to be different, I want them to see that I am Rom." (Taikon 2016: 31). Without the theories of transgenerational trauma transmission having been widespread at the time of its creation, reference is made here—admittedly in a child-friendly, simple manner—to precisely this phenomenon. At the same time, the episode of the Katitzi story reflects the survivors' children's ignorance about the Porajmos. The fact that this volume of the series, which was otherwise so popular in the 1970s and 80s, is the least known also illustrates the deliberate suppression of the topic in public discourse. This may also be due to the fact that Taikon's descriptions of the unspeakable in their direct embellishment hardly correspond to child-friendly narration. The author lets Zoni tell openly about the atrocities of the soldiers in Poland:

From our hiding place we could see the Roma being lined up and shot with machine guns. Babies were thrown into the air and shot at close range. Mothers tried to hide their infants under their skirts. The soldiers thought this was very funny and shot the children right through the skirts and into the mothers' abdomens. It was a terrible slaughter. (Taikon 2016: 29)

The focus precisely on the inhumane murder of children and mothers makes the narrative almost unbearable—even for adult readers: "In Auschwitz I once saw an officer slash a pregnant woman's belly with a bayonet. The foetus was fully delivered and fell out.... onto the ground... the officer he.... Zoni fell silent." (Taikon 2016: 30) Although Zoni is aware of the extremely disturbing effect of her account, Katitzi urges her to continue telling of the unspeakable trauma that is thus given space in an otherwise light-hearted children's book in a disturbingly drastic way.

3.2. *Sofia Z-4515* (2005)—a graphic memoir by Gunilla Lundgren and Amanda Eriksson

The graphic memoir *Sofia Z-4515* was created by the Swedish renowned children's author Gunilla Lundgren and the illustrator Amanda Eriksson in three years of work with Sofia Taikon.¹¹ The comic, published in Swedish and Romanian in 2005, was very positively received by the public due to its historical, but also socio-political relevance: "This is an important graphic novel, retelling the incredible life of a courageous and, although living through hell, constantly positive and generous person. A story that as many as possible should read" (Strömberg). In 2006, the book was awarded a prize by the Swedish Foundation Artists against Nazi Fascism (*Stiftelsen Hela Sverige. Artister mot Nazister*). The prize money made it possible to produce a comic book edition that is distributed by Roma in street sales together with the magazine of the Roma Interest Association in Sweden *Folk är Folk*. In addition, the comic was published in English translation in 2012 and in a Romanian/Romani bilingual edition in 2016. *Sofia Z-4515* is primarily to be understood as an educational medium: as is usual with documentary and educational comics, it contains maps, overviews and panels explaining the historical background. In addition, the comic is followed by an information section, in which private photographs of Sofia Taikon, who died in 2005—shortly before the comic was published—are included along with linguistically simply formulated background information on the Holocaust.

The short comic is divided into a frame narrative and an interior narrative. The narrative frame of the comic is anchored in 2005 and begins with Sofia Taikon's refusal to face her own past and talk about the traumatic experiences—a problem that Gunilla Lundgren also encountered in her conversations with Sofia Taikon. The fact that talking about the trauma was a taboo for Sofia and her husband is shown on the one hand quite explicitly in the manner in which, when asked about the origin of her tattooed concentration camp number, she reacts almost automatically with the defensive sentence "Let's talk about

11 Amanda Eriksson (*1970) is an illustrator and author of more than 60 picture books and children's books. Gunilla Lundgren (*1942) came into contact with children and young people of the Roma minority in Sweden as early as the late 1960s through her work as a teacher. Inspired by Donald Kenrick's school programme for Roma children in England, she herself became actively involved in educational work for Roma in Sweden. In 1972 she wrote her first book, *Maritza en zigenarflicka* ("Maritza a Roma Girl"), co-authored with three young Roma girls, Nina Taikon, Senia and Gino Tan-Mercowic. In the following decades, Gunilla Lundgren published a number of books for children and young people with, about and for Roma (Lundgren 130–134).

something else!". On the other hand, the repression is also expressed in the fact that only 16 of the total of 31 pages report on the Porajmos and that the countless brutal atrocities are hardly mentioned or shown. Even though, at the request of her grandson—and Gunilla Lundgren—Sofia Taikon agreed to articulate what had been concealed and repressed, at least in rudimentary form, it was important to her not to shock either her children and grandchildren or the potential readers of the book too much; the worst physical and psychological injuries and humiliations are thus left out.

The trigger for the look back into Sofia's childhood and youth is the persistent insistence of one of her grandchildren to learn more about the origin and meaning of the tattoo "Z-4515" on Sofia's left arm (cf. fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Taikon, Lundgren, Eriksson 5.12

In the following internal narrative, Sofia reports on her life that began in Poland. The family's simple but content everyday life is abruptly interrupted by the German invasion. Persecution, deportation and terrible years in the Auschwitz and Ravensbrück concentration camps follow before Sofia is rescued by the Swedish Red Cross and arrives in Sweden, where she starts her own family with the young Roma Janko Taikon. At the end of the comic, the narrative returns to the initial scene: the mood between Sofia, her husband and grandson is depressed by the terrible stories. To her husband's reproach that she should not have told this story, the boy replies that he really wanted to know and thus speaks for the part of the grandchild generation of Holocaust victims who deliberately want to break the silence in order to get to the bottom of the causes of transgenerational traumatisation and come to terms with them.

12 Reprinted from the English edition with kind permission of Gunilla Lundgren, Amanda Eriksson and Janna Eliot.

Sofia's biography is presented in short, highly fragmentary episodes, whereby the series of images hardly describe sequences of action, but rather have a descriptive effect. This becomes particularly evident on the first page of the internal narrative, which appears to be a simultaneous image. What is striking is the strongly belittling, childlike, naïve imagery of the drawings (cf. fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Taikon, Lundgren, Eriksson 6.

This simplifying imagery is deliberately chosen to a certain extent. On the one hand, it illustrates the mechanism of repression of any negative memories. There is no doubt that life before persecution and deportation was difficult and full of privation. The protagonist is well aware of the alterity of her family:

As I grew older, I realised that my family weren't as ordinary as I'd thought / Other Polish children went to school. But me and my sisters didn't. / Other Polish children spoke Polish to each other. In my family we spoke Romani. (Taikon, Lundgren, Eriksson 8)

Yet in retrospect and against the background of what she subsequently endured, this time seems almost carefree. On the other hand, the way the story is presented reflects the naïve, ignorant perspective of the experiencing child ego. This can be seen in the fact that the imagery changes with the increasing horror (deportation, arrival and "life" in Auschwitz). The simple character stroke continues to recall children's book illustrations, but loses much of the trivialising elements. Just as the child Sofia Brzezinska became the "Zigeuner" with the number 4515 (cf. fig. 3), the experiences turned the gaze of a child into that of an adult who wanted to survive. With concentration camp internment and the loss of all individuality, idealising representations have become impossible. All victims of the Holocaust are the same and can only be distinguished by their patches and tattoos. The imagery now makes frequent use of images of



Fig. 3: Taikon, Lundgren, Eriksson 18.

the Holocaust that are anchored in the collective visual memory (e.g. the view of countless rows of camp barracks or the entrance gate to Auschwitz with the “Arbeit-macht-frei” grille).

Finally, the comic also shows that Sofia’s life is permanently marked by the traumatic experiences despite her rescue and the possibility of a new start in Sweden (cf. fig. 4). At night, she is plagued by terrible memories. The fact that she is permanently stigmatised by the tattoo, that she cannot talk to anyone about what she has been through, and the fear that her stories of the unimaginable would not be believed anyway, gradually set in motion a mechanism of repression that eventually leads to silence and talking herself out of it.



Fig. 4: Taikon, Lundgren, Eriksson 30.

4. Conclusion

The study of the children’s book and the graphic memoir shows how deep the trauma resides in the survivors. It is interesting to note that the tendency of omission and silence about the horror that is taboo is very pronounced in the explicitly autobiographical book. In contrast, Katarina Taikon lets Zoni, Sofia’s fictional alter ego, speak out about the crimes in all their inhuman brutality and thus breaks the taboo.

Thus, the trauma of the Porajmos is still a taboo subject in the majority as well as in the minority itself. Especially in view of the fact that only a few of the survivors are still alive and the trauma of the Porajmos continues to have an identity-destabilising effect on younger Roma generations, it is of central relevance to educate especially younger generations about the atrocities committed against the Roma by the Third Reich. Therefore, it seems an essential task to make the voices of the survivors of the porajmos audible, who dared throughout their lives to articulate what had been repressed and tabooed for so long. Whether the autobiographical texts of Franz, Stojka, Taikon or many others, it is important to enable their transnational circulation.

In conclusion, it can be stated that both works make a central contribution to closing the void of memory and creating the basis for a conscious postmemory (Hirsch). By contextualising the all too often only indirectly passed on, barely comprehensible fragments of memory of the Porajmos and reconstructing them with individual stories and concrete images into a comprehensible narrative, the overwhelming inherited memories of experiences that preceded one's birth can advance the understanding of intergenerational trauma and its inheritance. At the same time, the autobiographical testimonies enable the later generations to "remember" the Porajmos and make it part of their consciousness. The knowledge of the Porajmos and the transgenerational traumatisation of Roma is the *sine qua non* for overcoming trauma and establishing sustainable understanding and mutual recognition.

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| Abstract

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Giving Space to the Tabooed Trauma: Sofia Taikon's Testimony in *Katitzi Z-1234* and *Sofia Z-4515*

Repression and concealment of one of the worst traumatic experiences of the 20th century affects Europe's largest minority in a massive way. In contrast to the Shoa, the Porajmos is little known to many people of both the majority and the minority. Often repressed as a taboo, breaking the silence about this trauma is of central relevance for the self-confidence of the Roma, especially those born afterwards. In fact, in the case of victims and their children and grandchildren, there is a tension between repression and concealment on the one hand and the need to overcome trauma on the other. Using the example of two educational works for young minority and majority readers in which the painful memories of Polish Romani Sofia Taikon,

born Brzezinska, are fictionalised, the article illustrates how this tension is dealt with and how space is given to the long-tabooed trauma.

Keywords: Porajmos, Holocaust, testimony, taboo, repression, educational work, children's book, graphic memoir

| Bio

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