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Aleksander Åkerlund

Risto Blomster and Raluca Bianca Roman

Aleksander Åkerlund (March 4, 1893–December 1, 1944), and also known as Saska Chaaro and Alex Aulo, was a Finnish Roma musician and lecturer, who was active between the 1910s and the 1940s. Åkerlund combined his talents as a singer, violinist, actor and book editor to pursue Roma civil rights during his long and varied career, building on the idea of ‘Gypsy romanticism’ meets ‘Roma activism’. On the one hand, he exploited the popularity of so-called ‘Gypsy music’ – a Romani-related music played in a characteristic ‘Gypsy style’ and composed by non-Roma composers – for his cause and, on the other hand, he dismantled and renewed this image by combining with his art an active action in Romani affairs.

Much like Nikkinen, Åkerlund started his public work in the circles of the Roma-focused Evangelical organisation the Gypsy Mission, first selling newspapers then working as preacher, actor and musician, from 1911. After his years in the Gypsy Mission, Åkerlund was involved in the non-religious Roma civil rights movement in Finland of the time, which crystallised at the end of the 1910s in the activities of two key institutions: *Suomen Romanien Sivistysseura* (the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society), established in the spring of 1917 and *Suomen Mustalaisteatteri* (the Finnish Gypsy Theatre), which performed in 1917 and 1919. However, Åkerlund’s true career was that of an independent lecturer and violinist, without any commitment to associations or artist groups. Calling himself “the only Roma Enlightenment speaker in the Nordic countries”, Åkerlund and his non-Roma wife, dancer and reciter Tilda Åkerlund (who also used the forename Milda and the surnames Aulo, Jouni; 04.02.1894 – ?), organised, between 1914 and 1938, hundreds of Gypsy

evenings (*Mustalaisilta*), and later also Hungarian evenings (*Unkarilais-ilta*), all over Finland and Sweden, with music, dance and lectures on Roma issues and on the importance of art in civilising the Finnish nation.

Aleksander Åkerlund was born in the parish of Säkkijärvi (today Kondratyevovo/Kondratjevo), located next to the Karelian city of Vyborg, into a travelling Kaale family. In the 1890's in Säkkijärvi, there were about 90 registered Roma mainly from the Åkerlund kin (Helsingin Sanomat, 1944a, p. 3, Helsingin Sanomat, 1944b, p. 11; TA, K 9, 1895).

The transfer of the activities of the Gypsy Mission to Vyborg in 1911 had far-reaching goals concerning Kaale families in the country: education, employment, colonisation (i.e. sedentarisation) and christianisation. The Gypsy Mission planned special firewood production facilities as workplaces for men in Vyborg, and initial capital was needed: from 1912 to 1913, they organised groups of performers and the Senate of the Grand Duchy of Finland issued railway freehold tickets for them to perform in different parts of Finland. This action involved Kaale, too. Named are, for example Åkerlund himself, as well as Antti Palm, Ferdinand Nikkinen and Ida Blomerus (whose portraits can also be found in this chapter).

Åkerlund is known to have been in a fixed relationship with the Gypsy Mission and its executive manager, Oskar Johnsson (later Oskari Jalkio; 1882–1952). Many major and minor details suggest that Åkerlund's position in the Gypsy Mission and his importance to Jalkio was special. For instance, his necrology tells that he had received initial education in the Jalkio family, Oskari and Helmi. Further on, there are mentions of Åkerlund in the Gypsy Mission's *Kiertolainen* journal under the nicknames "our Saska" (probably from the Russian diminutive "Sashko" for Aleksandar) as well as "Caro". Åkerlund later used the "Chaaro" name as part of his artist name. As a side note, this nickname is thought to have been used also within the circles of the Mission, including by the Jalkios, but it is unclear what the exact meaning of the term, from Romani language, would be. Interpretations can also be drawn from Jalkio's writings that he contributed to Åkerlund becoming a prominent and influential continuator of his work, the "torch-bearer" of the Gypsy Mission (Kiertolainen, 1912a, p. 4; 1913b, p. 18; Helsingin Sanomat, 1944b, p. 11; Blomster & Roman, 2021, pp. 197–221).

There is no precise information as to why "torch-bearer" Åkerlund became slowly detached from the operations of the Gypsy Mission during the 1910s. There are hints that the reasons may have been, on the one hand, connected to a personal spiritual crisis and, on the other hand, connected to his opposition to assimilationist positions emphasised in the Gypsy Mission's early-stage activity. The separation may also have been partly the result of continued financial difficulties in the Gypsy Mission and even an outright inability to pay commissions to its employees. Some reasons can possibly be found in Oskari Jalkio's acrimonious writing in the *Maakansa* (Country People) newspaper (1914, p. 3) entitled "Beware of the Fraud!" (*Varokaa petosta!*). In it, Jalkio warned against a Gypsy youngster who, despite bans, did not stop performing and raising funds in the

name of the Gypsy Mission without permission. It remains unclear who the youngster Jalkio accused was, even though Jalkio's inscription fits temporally with Åkerlund's first detachments from the Gypsy Mission. At least from newspaper accounts of his own, Åkerlund had, coincidentally, over the course of 1914, just ended up in holding a series of appearances with speeches and music.

A good example of the concerts and presentations organised by Åkerlund at the time was the one held in the Rantasalmi Workers' House, of which the newspaper *Vapaus* (Freedom) wrote as follows. As can be seen in the written text, Åkerlund did not appear in this particular case as the representative of the Gypsy Mission, and performed as an independent artist, without Oskari Jalkio:

Gypsy youngster A. Åkerlund gave a presentation at the Rantasalmi Worker's House on 8. Day of this month. He presented his own tribe's ways of life and how it travels all around the world: exchanging, selling and buying, telling fortune, predicting and begging. This all they have as thousands of years of inheritance passed by generation to generation, and they have that so adapted in their blood, that few of his tribe can save themselves from these ways of life. He told that he himself, who has already has entrant to a better position, often gets to turn his eyes on the ground and shed tears for the reason that he was born dark and that the blond tribe still misunderstands him. The speaker hoped that blonds would evoke, his tribe from such a legacy of the hobo's life by spreading knowledge and enlightenment wherever they could be given.

Finally, he performed Gypsy violin tunes and Gypsy songs by singing. It can be also mentioned that the audience very moderately listened to Gypsy's performances. (*Vapaus*, 1914, p. 2).

The text is an interesting perspective on the emphasis of Åkerlund's speeches during the early stages of his career. Thus, here he seeks very empathetically to evoke compassion and even pity for 'Gypsies' and thereby arouse the desire to help. Also, four general points can be made of it: 1) Åkerlund's appearance took place on the premises of the local labour association's Workers' house, a practice which came to be common in the next stages of Åkerlund's career. Further on, meaningful is that 2) Åkerlund positioned himself as an "entrant to a better position" outside his "tribe", and 3) he firmly believed that the knowledge and enlightenment spread by non-Roma would improve the status of the Roma in the country. Also meaningful is the mention, that 4) Åkerlund was, already in 1914, at 24 years old, a noticeably good violin player. These themes were central to Åkerlund's future career as a free artist in Helsinki as well as his long career going into the late 1930s. That said, although his later presentations more widely talked about the history of the Roma, the same undertone that had already been expressed in this speech remained: civilisation efforts, namely education and integrating into majority society through work and housing.

It is also important to point out that Åkerlund's detachment from the Gypsy Mission and movement into left-wing circles favoured by Helsinki artists did not lead to a definitive separation from the Gypsy Mission and the values it represented. A clear indication

of this is the book *Features of the Life of Gypsies* (Piiroteitä mustalaisten elämästä, Aulo, 1934; for more information about the book, see Blomster & Roman, 2021) edited by Åkerlund, which included religious texts, such as religious poems and excerpts from the Holy Bible. It is also clear that, from the direction of the Gypsy Mission, the relationship would seem to have been open: the Gypsy Mission supported the “Mission’s former working man, musician Åkerlund” by donating to his wife, in 1926 (when, due to illness, he was in financial difficulties), 100 pieces of *Kiertolainen* to sell. And, just before the Second World War, when Oskari Jalkio returned to the Gypsy Mission’s governing bodies after his work abroad, in the Dominican Republic of Haiti (1931–1938), Jalkio joined the board as its chairperson, and Åkerlund’s name can be found in the list of board members (RMA, Protocol of the Executive Board Meetings, November 12, 1926; Viita, 1967, pp. 121–122).

Even before settling in Helsinki, Åkerlund was an experienced performance violinist. He had started his studies most probably when living in Vyborg. Vyborg was an international and vibrant music city and the centre of entertainment life, where Russian Gypsy bands performed regularly. However, according to the known Gypsyologist Arthur Thesleff, the Finnish Roma’s own involvement in public music life in early 20th century Finland was extremely limited. A few local musicians were known by name and, in the parishes of South-West Finland, a Gypsy band comprised mainly of members of the Roos family performed, playing the dance music of the countryside (Finsk Tidskrift, 1922, pp. 307–318; Blomster, 2010). When moving to Helsinki in the late 1910s, Åkerlund became involved both with the Finnish Gypsy Theatre (1917 and 1919) and the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society (spring 1917). How this all happened is not clear down to the details. In this portrait, the Finnish Gypsy Theatre is explored in more detail, while in Ida Blomerus’s portrait more focus is placed on the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society.

The Finnish Gypsy Theatre (1917 and 1919) was a Helsinki-based troupe performing nationwide as a touring theatre, led by actress and recitation artist Helinä Svensson-Timari (1887–1953). The Theatre’s repertoire was in both years of its activity a stage adaptation of a romantic tragedy written by Swedish writer Victor Rydberg (1828–1895) on *Signoalla*. *Signoalla*, which was first published in Swedish in the Aurora calendar 1857 under the subtitle “romantic fairytale poem”, was translated into Finnish, by Finnish Novelist Juhani Aho (1861–1921; translation published in 1895). In the history of Finnish theatre and literature, the Finnish Gypsy Theatre and *Singoalla* resurfaced as a project of Helinä Svensson-Timari theatre project, or one of Elvira Willman-Eloranta’s unfinished effort to extend her own artist work’s audience: *Singoalla*’s preserved manuscript recounts the fact that it was envisaged as an opera (Seppälä, 2012, p. 35; Hyttinen, 2012, pp. 120, 123).

The stable staff composition of the troupe playing *Singoalla* included six people in 1917, of which two were Roma: Aleksander Åkerlund and Ida Blomerus, or Ida Cingardy-Ora, as it was printed in the year 1917 handout, who a couple of years before had performed two shows, *The Entry of Civilisation among the Gypsies* and *The Black Wrath (Musta viha)*, on the occasion of the Gypsy Mission. The theatre was planned to consist of Gypsy actors

alone; however, this goal had to be haggled throughout the theatre's operation: the other actors named in the handout of the play year 1917 were Toivo Kivihalme, Onni Puro, Helinä Svensson and Lidja Assik. Åkerlund's role was to play the role of Assim, the son of the Gypsy King, in this romantic tragedy between Signoalla and Erland, the son of the knight of the castle. Cingardy-Ora appeared as Assim's sister, Ciria (KA, Senaatin taloussosasto, F3 174/3, Eb 3439).

The connections behind the Theatre were multiple. The dramaturgy of the play was done by Elvira Willman-Eloranta, a leftist feminist and writer and founder of Touring Theatre of Labour People (Labour's Tour Theatre). The choreographies of the dances in the 1917 performances were done by either Hertta Idman (1890–1942), the pioneer of Finnish modern dance, or Bertha Corander (1864–1955), a choreographer at Swedish Theatre (*Svenska Teatern*) in Helsinki 1914–1916 and Apollo Theater 1916–1917, both mentioned in the sources (Uusi Suometar, 1913, p. 4; Lahti, 1917, p. 3; Seppälä, 2012, p. 35; Mikko. Olavi Seppälä 22 September 2020).

The societal nature of the Finnish Gypsy Theatre also manifested itself in several ways. It was articulated clearly in newspaper writings, as well as in the play itself. In one article published in *Työmies* (Working Man), one particular point was raised about the content of the play: “the ambivalence between the love between the Gypsy girl and the knight, the right of nature, and the schematic societal nature” (Työmies, 1917c, p. 5). Thus, the restrictions imposed by society and class on people's relations, the theme which was now raised together by the non-Roma artists and Roma in the early Roma rights movement, was included in the play itself as an unadjusted and tragically concluded love story between lovers from different backgrounds.

Of great interest is that, according to the remaining draft of the script of the play, Elvira Willman-Eloranta had preserved some scenes, in which emancipatory themes were featured. In one scene, Singoalla and her lover's mother find each other through the subordinate status of a woman, and Singoalla cries that out in her own words: “Blessed be the mother, wonderful, you are, as I am, an unsafe woman”. The insight into these breeds a bond of solidarity between them. Signoalla ends up handing over the “free flower of love”, a new-born baby which they called “Child of Sorrow”, as a foster daughter to her own grandmother (KA, Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan arkisto).

There were diverse critiques of the Finnish Gypsy Theatre's *Singoalla*. Without going deeper into this matter, it can be noted that in *Kiertolainen* a rather positive review of the Finnish Gypsy Theatre was presented, allegedly written by Oskari Jalkio (Kiertolainen, 1923, p. 11), pointing that Åkerlund and others had been coping with the “difficult task quite brilliantly”. It was also noted sarcastically with the hope that “even this one more worthy endeavour on the Roma side would remain pending as a counterbalance to any degrading trickery and camping vilification of the Roma tribe” (Ibid.).

In any case, the years as a Roma actor in Finland in Aleksander Åkerlund's career were boundary breaking. Reportedly never-before were the Roma themselves performing within the theatre in Finland, in the roles of Gypsies, or in any other roles for that matter.

For Åkerlund, the opportunity was not a once-in-a-lifetime one. During his career, he appeared as an actor in Gypsy roles at least in Joensuu Theatre's *Preciosa* (1922) based on *La Gitanilla* by Miguel de Cervantes (1613) and in the Lieksa's Workers' Theatre's play *Kylän heittiö* (1925) based on a play by the Hungarian writer Edvard Tóth (Falú rossza, Village Scamp, 1875) (Suur-Karjala, 1922, p. 3; Kansan Voima, 1925, p. 4).

Åkerlund's career as an independent campaigner for Roma issues began after the Finnish Gypsy Theatre ceased operations. That period, from the 1920s to the end of the 1930s, could be characterised as a time when Åkerlund transitioned into a professional artist-activist: Åkerlund organised hundreds of Gypsy evenings (*Mustalaisilta*), Propaganda evenings (*Propaganda-ilta*), and Hungarian evenings (*Unkarilais-ilta*), the latter of which was a popular musical topic in Finland in the 1920s, with presentations about Roma and performing as a violinist all over the country. Alongside the social aspect, the history and culture of Roma rose to be a key theme in his lectures, as well as comprising more general questions about the importance of art. It was still the time when the religious content of Åkerlund's lectures, noticeable during his Gypsy Mission period, was narrowed down, only to rise again, to some extent, in the 1930s.

Prior to this, however, he focused on his self-improvement as an artist: like Ferdinand Nikkinen some years before, Åkerlund applied to become a music student in Helsinki Music College (*Helsingin musiikkiopisto*, predecessor of the Sibelius Academy). According to the Sibelius Academy Archive's documents and the newspapers, during the year 1919, Åkerlund was studying subjects like singing, theory of music and violin playing with well-known violinists of the time Heikki Halonen, Elis Jurva and Arvo Hannikainen. Alongside his studies, Åkerlund was actively growing his repertoire as a violinist. For example, the 1925 concert programme was already fairly international: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) *Mustalaisromanssi* (Gypsy Romance), Riccardo Drigo's (1846–1930) *Serenade*, Jules Massenet's *Élégie* (1842–1912), N. R. Bakaleinikov's (1881–1957) *Ole armollinen* (Oh, Mercy), Enrico Toselli's (1883–1926) *Serenade*, Ernő Kondor's (1881–1951) *Vanha mustalainen* (Old Gypsy) and W. Prosofski's (1861–1917) *Réverie*. There were also two adaptations of Finnish composer Oskar Merikanto's (1868–1924) arrangements, a Finnish folk song *Voi äitiparka ja raukka* (Poor Mom) and Elemer Szentirmay's (1836–1908) *Mustalainen* (Gypsy) composed 1875. These combined the core of Åkerlund's repertoire for years thereafter (SAA, List of given lessons during semesters 1918–1920 in the Helsinki Musical College; Aamulehti, 1927, p. 4; SM, Alex Åkerlund's tour poster 1925).

With his new repertoire and lectures Åkerlund now headed on long performing trips to different parts of Finland, acquiring performance sessions through his own contacts, and through newspaper announcements. Below is a text published in the newspaper *Perä-Pohja* (a newspaper published in Perä-Pohja province) (Perä-Pohja, 1932, p. 3) describing important aspects of Åkerlund and his wife's, Milda Åkerlund-Aulo, organised evening in the Tornio region, in 1930. Åkerlund's wife had joined his tour in 1925:

Interesting Occasions in the Tornio Region

In the Tornio area, Mr. Axel Åkerlund-Aulo and his lady are currently holding interesting presentations and art sessions. The first of these occasions was yesterday at the Civic College of Peräpohjola and those will continue probably in schools and in other properties in the parishes of the valley of Tornio river. Mr. Åkerlund-Aulo presented the history his own nationality, Gypsies, their status in Finland and other European countries. The journals write about these presentation sessions include the following:

“When hearing of Mr. Åkerlund-Aulo’s factually exhaustive, interesting and descriptive speeches of his tribe’s hard fate under the centuries, the listener as if he awakens from his long-term slumber and begins to feel understanding and pitiful sympathy for the ideas of the person who performs the programme”.

The presentation gives you an excellent and clear picture of the fate of the Vagrant people wandering from place to place.

Except for the presentation, Mr. Åkerlund-Aulo plays also violin: Gypsy and Hungarian folk tunes as well as other playing numbers. He has studied his art under the guidance of qualified teachers and achieves an excellent technique, complemented by emotional sensitivity.

Mrs Milda Åkerlund-Aulo is mainly assisting as a reciter of poems. Her director in her art has been our well-known reciter Arvi Mansikka and Mrs Aulo’s interpretation of poems specially written by Petöfi are refined.

Yesterday’s audience at the People’s College was very pleased with what they heard. (Perä-Pohja, 1930, p. 3).

Two things can be read from the text above when comparing it with the 1914 presentation.

1) *Audience*. Broadly put, Åkerlund had now moved also into locations of other associations, restaurants, cafes, schools and even localities of universities – and to radio performances. 2) *Diverse content and Hungarian theme*. Interestingly, Åkerlund brought his own Roma background out as an international construction which was cleverly connected to Finnishness and ‘Finno-ugrianism’ via the Hungarian-Gypsy theme – a theme which, at the time, was fairly popular on the music scene in Finland. It is worth mentioning that there were also Hungarian and Romanian Gypsy orchestras and musicians visiting and performing in Finland throughout the 1920s and 1930s; for example, Banka Bista Gypsy Orchestra and Veres Károly Gypsy Orchestra and Mago Károly Gypsy Orchestra. Also, a long career on the Finnish music scene was achieved by the Romanian musician Basil Bourtenau, who also performed with Finnish Roma musicians, Ferdinand Nikkinen and Mimmi Deivali Zehai Borg (Deivali Zehai comes from the Romani language, *deuleski/deulali čaj*, and means The Daughter of the God of the Skies). Borg also performed under several other names, like Dinali Zchai-Borg (*dinali zchai*, meaning ‘silly girl’ in Romani language, thus Silly Borg’s girl) (Uusi Aura, 1923, p. 1; Helsingin Sanomat, 1925, p. 10; 1929, p. 3; Jalkanen, 2006, p. 106)

There is not much to say about how his fellow Roma took issue with the emphasis found in Aleksander Åkerlund’s lectures and playing. In the oral history of the Finnish Roma collected in the 1960s, Aleksander Åkerlund is remembered as a prominent violin player (TYKA, AK 2685/1973). Conversely, the reception of Åkerlund’s appearances as a

speaker, actor and musician was on average favoured in the newspapers by the non-Roma writers. Only to mention two: Nils Robert af Ursin (1854–1936), the first chairman of the Finnish Labour Party and the second one, whose name is not known but who signed with the pseudonym *Nuorisoseuralainen* (Member of the Finnish Youth Association, a youth movement established in 1881). Ursin, MP of the Social Democrats, wrote a speech encouraging Åkerlund and inspiring the public in the provincial newspaper *Hämeen Kansa* (Häme people) (1924, p. 3). In his writing, Ursin called for a financial support of the Roma according to Åkerlund's argument of "rising from their state of discount", as "the present society is, as with the Jewish people, to blame for their miserable social condition in large numbers". Åkerlund's activities might also be defended by arguments related to Finnish cultural nationalism. That happened when *Nuorisoseuralainen* compared Åkerlund to Väinämöinen, the wizard of the Finnish national epic, *Kalevala*, who, with his Finnish national instrument kantele, "lit a tune in our souls", the idea of the power of knowledge. Åkerlund appears in this depiction as a saviour figure of Roma, similar to the "dark Väinämöinen" (Räisälän Sanomat, 1927, p. 2).

No direct literary documentary or text written by Åkerlund himself could be found concerning the presentations Åkerlund made in connection with his public appearances. Also, so far, only one article has been found in Finnish newspapers, where Aleksander Åkerlund himself tells, in his own words, his thoughts on Roma life in Finland. In an interview from 1941, Åkerlund comments on the situation of the 1,000 Karelian Roma, who were evacuated to Finland from parishes transferred to the Soviet Union under the Moscow Peace Treaty of 1940 (a total 420,000 evacuees from the district). Åkerlund ends up presenting a series of measures that would allow the Roma, according to him, to settle, with "a sense of home and a joy of work". Below is a quote from the aforementioned:

It is sad that our enlightened country has 3,000 citizens, according to Gypsies, who are illiterate and unskilled. They will never be reached, or better said, will never become established citizens unless the state takes vigorous action against them. In Finland, the work of the Gypsies is currently at zero. Admittedly, the Gypsy Mission has been here for 20 years (after 40 years), but for the last 10 years it has been in recession. (Helsingin Sanomat, 1941, p. 9).

The realities proved to be much more challenging for Roma in Finland after the Second World War than Åkerlund had expected. Many of the evacuees across Finland ended in Southern Finland's cities and, in particular, in the suburbs of Helsinki. Finland gained its new 'Gypsy problem', an official statement which would become a key issue throughout the 1950s and again in the 1960s and led to the new rise of the Roma civil rights movement.

Aleksander Åkerlund died of pneumonia in Helsinki, on December 1, 1944, at the age of 51. In his final years, he had given up playing due to rheumatism and made a living as an itinerant art dealer, selling his wife Tilda Åkerlund's Lapland-themed paintings. However, the unknown author of the text on Åkerlund's tombstone had far-reaching

hopes. The text inscribed reads as follows: “Roma tribe Enlightening-lecturer Aleksander Åkerlund”. This indicates the hope that Åkerlund’s work on civic activism and enlightenment would be remembered (Pohjolan Sanomat, 1938, p. 3; Helsingin Sanomat, 1944a, p. 3; 1944b, p. 11).

The story of Aleksander Åkerlund, however, did not end up in the canon of Finnish Roma civil rights movement and there are only scattered references about his musical career in the writings on Roma history in Finland. In this respect, the gatekeepers of the source materials of the history and historiography of this issue had a significant role. That said, Åkerlund’s story raises the question about the frictional relationship between the non-Christian Roma civil rights movement and the Roma movement which operated on Christian grounds from the start of the 20th century. Thus, if a Roma civil rights activist represented alternative views to the hegemonic Roma elite, as Aleksander Åkerlund’s partially did knowledge about them may remain absent from the official writing of history, as well as from oral history.