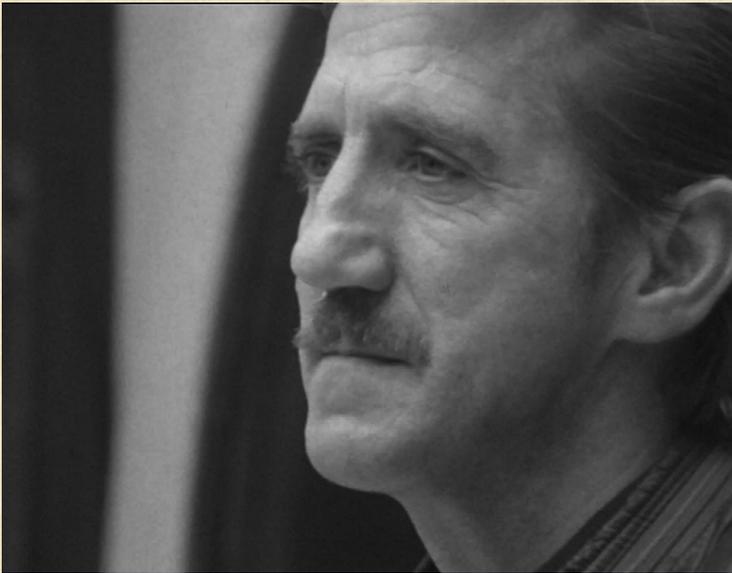




JOHAN LAURITZEN

(Norway, 1934 - Norway, 1974)



Portrait of Johan Lauritzen
© Vibeke Løkkeberg.

Johan Lauritzen was fundamental to the abolition of forced assimilation of the Romani group, Resande, in Norway, thanks to his brave televised testimony in 1973. However, he has remained anonymous in research and commemoration.

Guided by the racist thinking of Eilert Sundt, from 1907 the Christian foundation, Norwegian Mission for the Homeless (Norsk Misjon blant hjemløse), ran a state-sponsored program of forced assimilation against the Norwegian Romani people, also called Reisende

(or *Tater*, which is a contested term¹). The explicit goal was the **extinction of the group's culture**. This was carried out by way of forced child foster care and labour camps for Reisende families in Svanviken and other locations. **Forced sterilisation and lobotomies** were also used.

Early attempts in the interwar period by Resande to oppose forced assimilation were suppressed.² In 1973, one of the victims, Johan Lauritzen, decided to speak out. He had spent 12 years in the mission's orphanages. In a newspaper interview published in April 1973, he is quoted as saying, "The Tater have never marched in a united herd to make the authorities listen to their demands. This seems to be the only solution to be heard." He added, "We are desperate about our situation. But few dare come out into the light, because they know that they will be discriminated against. If we only could find some able people to help us in our sake, to start an organisation, we will be able to rise."³ This was unique. But Lauritzen got real impact only when he contacted freelance journalist, Vibeke Løkkeberg, who decided to make a TV-documentary in Svanviken.

1 E.g. an article by an anonymous Reisende, signature Olin, "Tater -73", in Adresseavisen 27. December 1973, who refers to and affirms Lauritzens critique of the mission and adds a critical note on the pejorative character of the word "Tater" as does also the interpellation in Norwegian parliament by Torild Skard, 23. April 1973, who quotes another Resande on this.

2 Fagerheim Kalsås, Vidar (2019), Norway. Narrating essay, in RomArchive.eu.

3 Harnag, Harald, "Taterne bitre. Vi må reise oss." (The Tater are bitter. Vi have to rise up.), in VG 7. April 1973.

Løkkeberg recalls Lauritzen was marked by great despair and anger.⁴ In the documentary, Lauritzen is interviewed, as is the head of the assimilation camp and a number of anonymous Reisende, who were still in the hands of the mission. **All expressed fear and disillusionment**, especially over the fact that they were isolated from their family and friends by force. Again Lauritzen agitated, “We must **get rid of the Mission**, make our own organisations. As long as we are afraid, we will not become free; I call on all Resande to stand up and tell the truth.”⁵

Shortly after the broadcast, Lauritzen fell off a roof and died. But the debate in the press following **Løkkebergs documentary made the mission a parliamentary issue**. In 1980, a public report demanded the assimilation program be stopped, which took almost nine more years. It took until 2015 for the successor of the mission, the CRUX, to publicly apologise. Regarding the doubtless importance and bravery of Lauritzen, he is strangely unknown, to the extent that not even his biographical details can be found. This, of course, invites further research, but also raises the question, who is remembered and who forgotten? And why a PhD candidate, specialised on Svanviken describes it as a circle: “He remains forgotten because there is no information about him. Researchers who have worked with interviews as a method have been depended on as the gatekeepers”.⁶

Historian Per Haave, who in 2011-2015 was a member of a major state commission for the scrutiny of forced assimilation policy writes, “I have no explanation why Johan Lauritzen has not come to hold the place that he deserves in this part of history. I regret that the commission, which I was part of, did not give him this. As far as I can recall, nobody mentioned him”.⁷

Sources and further information:

1. Løkkebergs TV-documentary, including the interview with Lauritzen is available on NRK (in Norwegian only), <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/vindu-mot-vaar-tid/1973/FOLA08002873/avspiller>
2. Contextualization in RomArchive.eu essays (2019) by Jan Selling, “The politics of historical justice and combatting antiziganism”, and Vidar Fagerheim Kalsås, “Norway. Narrating essay.”

This biography has been written by Jan Selling

4 Vibeke Løkkeberg, p.c. 14. July 2020.

5 Løkkeberg, Vibeke (1973). Vindu mot vår tid. Tater i Norge (Window to our time. Taters in Norway), documentary in Norwegian Television NRK. Note that Lauritzen himself used the term Reisende, and not Tater in the quote.

6 PhD Candidate Madeleine Stenhammar Zetterlund, Volda University, Norway, p.c. 6. August 2020.

7 Per Haave, p.c., 14. July 2020. The report of the commission published as NOU 2015:7, Assimilering og motstand (Assimilation and resistance)