

**XII: SEA CHANGE<sup>1</sup>: 1928-1931**

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Little Nannÿ “raced along until all that was left of Berlin was a blurred vision seen through the window of a speeding train.”<sup>2</sup> I wonder though if it dawned on my grandmother that the acrobat shows she had just completed that winter of 1928 would be her first – and last – on German soil?

Of course, she hadn't left all she loved behind in her *Heimat*. Four years younger sister, Margot, was with her now – and would be for the next decade or so, a period during which the bond they shared grew stronger. Now it was her turn to enjoy a taste of moving ‘station to station,’ alongside four other ‘athletic beauties;’ Helena Seifert and Ilse Wassman of *Breslau* – their father's *Heimat*, Silesia – Margarethe Bathon of *Coblense* on the *Rhein* and Rosa Heidrich of *Kustrin*, at today's border with Poland.<sup>3</sup> Collectively they would be applauded as ‘The Six Rockets.’

Setting sail with the Hamburg America Line (also known as HAPAG), a day and a half later, in the chilly early March air, they approached the English shoreline.<sup>4</sup> Standing side by side at the railing of the boat deck, they peered through the mist getting their first exciting glimpses of the shadowy silhouette of the English coast. Spring would soon be here and they had the opportunity to visit the heart of what until what recently was known as the British Empire (see textbox overleaf).

I believe they landed in Southampton, which was a key stopping point for HAPAG on its route to New York, where the rockets were ultimately headed.<sup>5</sup> Arno Büttner, well-versed in English, was in charge, since his father, Oswald, a renowned German *Konzertunternehmer*<sup>6</sup> and the gentleman who had managed Little Nannÿ during her last four years' in the United States, was back at home in Leipzig, trialling out a second troupe of wannabe acrobats.<sup>7</sup>

For the next two and a half months, the sextette would join the UK's showtime scene known as ‘music hall.’ Music hall then involved a mixture of popular songs, comedy, speciality acts and variety entertainment. The term itself is derived from the type of theatre or venue in which such entertainment took place. British music hall was similar to American vaudeville, which featured rousing songs and comic acts. In the UK ‘vaudeville’ referred to rather more working-class entertainment which in America would have been termed ‘burlesque.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “A change wrought by the sea” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, often used to denote a metamorphosis or alteration. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea\\_change\\_\(transformation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_change_(transformation))

<sup>2</sup> Pola Negri. *Memoirs of a Star*. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 185

<sup>3</sup> All of whose next of kin was their father.

<sup>4</sup> An assumption based on an average speed of 16 knots and a distance of 571 nautical miles. See: [ports.com](https://ports.com)

<sup>5</sup> The full routing was Hamburg-Boulogne- Southampton-New York. See for instance:

[www.norwayheritage.com/p\\_shiplist.asp?co=haaml](https://www.norwayheritage.com/p_shiplist.asp?co=haaml)

<sup>6</sup> According to the 1926 entry in the *Leipzig Adressbuecher* online here: [adressbuecher.sachsendigital.de](https://adressbuecher.sachsendigital.de)

<sup>7</sup> *Das Programm's* June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1927 issue noted that their US representatives were ready “to take on another troupe of women or a family act under ...Herr Oswald Büttner.”

<sup>8</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_hall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_hall)

### 12.1: Dawn of a New Era: From Empire to Commonwealth

By the time the Tjyrallas' crossed England's fine shores, the older concepts of the 'British Empire' were rapidly evolving into what since 1924 had been known as the 'British Commonwealth of Nations.' The period up to 1929 was a formative period in the history of this new bloc, whose image as a new 'Liberal Empire' was just emerging.

The rockets' home and host countries had long been inter-linked, and not only through conflict. Their economies had been inter-dependent, leading British economist, John Maynard Keynes, to note in 1919: 'We sent more exports to Germany than to any other country in the world except India, and we bought more from her than from any other country in the world except the United States.' After the war, the UK strove for firmer cooperation and good relations with Germany, which remained marred by occasional outbursts of animosity.

Employment, while high since 1927, still struggled, with an official jobless rate of 9 or 10 percent. Nevertheless, the rockets had found work and briefly joined the UK's emancipation movement which was no less pronounced than in other parts of the world. Here it took on a multitude of forms: from lighter clothing and shorter hair and skirts to more open indulgence in drink, tobacco and cosmetics, from insistence on smaller families to easier facilities for divorce. The 'schoolboy shape' of the earlier twenties became the 'schoolgirl shape' of the later twenties. The 'flapper' became the more attractive and less inhibited successor to the young Edwardian ladies that had just won them vote. By the 'flapper election' of 1929, the first in which women over 21 could vote, the fairer sex had swelled the electorate to nearly 29 million.

In terms of population, the UK grew by five percent during the 1920s, reaching 46 million by 1931. Much of it gravitated to the 'Home Counties' and to south eastern England in general, away from Lancashire, South Wales and other 'depressed areas' with 'Greater London' growing to more than 8 million. To cope with citizen needs for housing, dreary new suburbs and impersonal estates sprang up around London, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and other large cities.

During 1928 and 1929, economic conditions and social life took a turn for the better, with the masses catered for in countless new ways. Technological advances such as the motor car and aeroplane, cinema and radio gave birth to an 'Americanisation' of English life and culture. Civilisation was felt to be advancing towards great new benefits and material wealth whilst enjoying increased mobility, transport, communications and entertainment. In place of the vanishing horse came buses, lorries, vans, family cars and motor-cycles: nearly 1 million of them by 1922, more than 2 ¼ million by 1930 (not surprisingly, road safety became a national concern). Consumer goods, standardized in quality, price and packaging, filled stores, Woolworth's above all (pictured) conveying the benefits of cheap, mass-production. Hire-purchase made it possible for small wage-earners to buy more costly goods such as furniture, sewing machines, bicycles and the new vacuum cleaners while 'Moderns' were the young urbanites benefitting from or working in the new industries producing these innovations.

Popular entertainments too reached a more 'massive' scale. Sport assumed a new dimension with the first football association cup final being held at Wembley in 1923 (between my favoured team, West Ham, and Bolton Wanderers). There was also a rapid growth of greyhound tracks. 'Community singing' became popular while cinema too assumed a big place in English life. By 1929, there were some 3000 and the British film industry was just then beginning to assert itself in productivity. From 1923 on, radio also competed with the pubs to entertain the working man and his wife along with the populist press who waged a circulation war with their weapons first being free insurance, then large cash prizes in competitions and finally free gifts on a lavish scale.

Little Nanný could hardly have known the Tjyralla sisters' first visit to the British Commonwealth would hardly be their last. On the contrary, it would set in motion a link that lasts to this day.



Sources: *England in the Twentieth Century*. David Thomson. Second Ed. By Geoffrey Warner. 1981.  
Pgs: 22, 87, 90-91, 101-102, 118, 121, 123, 126. Photo: F.W. Woolworth. [www.alangeorge.co.uk](http://www.alangeorge.co.uk)

The good old days of music hall, however, were fading as fast in Britain as vaudeville was in the US. According to a 1927 article in the German variety performers' weekly trade paper, *Das Programm*, whereas there had been: "two dozen or more music halls which London could boast of in pre-war days, but six remain, and in the provinces where in ante-bellum days over 150 halls catered to the vaudeville demands of the British public, barely 30 now supply this form of entertainment, with little hope for betterment."<sup>9</sup>

Bucking a trend more typically found in the US, where vaudeville halls were being converted to cinemas, the owner of the 'Moss Tour' (a renowned venue circuit) had announced that his halls – 34 in number, now mostly playing revue or variety – would gradually be converted to 'legitimate' drama theatres.<sup>10</sup>

It's largely thanks to *Das Programm* that we know many of the venues the rockets' performed at during their spell in the UK, the first of which was *The Palace* in Plymouth on England's south coast, a theatre built in Flemish Renaissance style whose interior featured nautical Art Nouveau.<sup>11</sup> There they joined six other variety acts in a programme that ran during those first weeks of March.<sup>12</sup>

Following Plymouth it was on to the country's capital via a six hour journey<sup>13</sup> with Southern Railway trains, that company which typically linked the Channel ports to London.<sup>14</sup> By this time the UK's railways had entered a period of slow decline thanks to a lack of investment, changes in transport policy and lifestyles which reflected the increasing popularity of the automobile (see text box on the previous page).<sup>15</sup>

Fast forward 84 years, however, and it was Little Nannö's grandson who was on his way to London to visit 'British Library Newspapers.' My intent was to discover how the act had gone over in Britain, thanks to archived copies of the UK's variety and entertainment industry magazine, *The Performer*. Alas, there was no critical review of the Plymouth show, although I did learn *The Palace* was 'one of the handsomest and best-appointed theatres in Europe' during spring 1928.<sup>16</sup>

But back to Little Nannö. Upon reaching the capital, much as in Berlin or in her city of birth, Leipzig, she and her fellow troupers were spoilt for choice in terms of how to get about the city, thanks to London's buses, trams and subterranean railway – more fondly known as 'The Tube.' Curious to know more, I googled 'London Underground 1928' expecting to learn about the capital's increasingly popular form of public transport and could hardly believe my luck when I discovered a recently restored 1928 British film, aptly enough entitled 'Underground.' A silent flick set on and around Waterloo's newly enlarged station, it tells the story of a handful of

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<sup>9</sup> *Das Programm*. Fremdsprachiger Teil. Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>, 1927

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. NB: Legitimate theatre referred to 'serious' performances and 'spoken drama' that according to the Licensing Act of 1737 had been permitted at two 'patent' theatres after the English Restoration in 1662. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legitimate\\_theater](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legitimate_theater)

<sup>11</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace\\_Theatre,\\_Plymouth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_Theatre,_Plymouth)

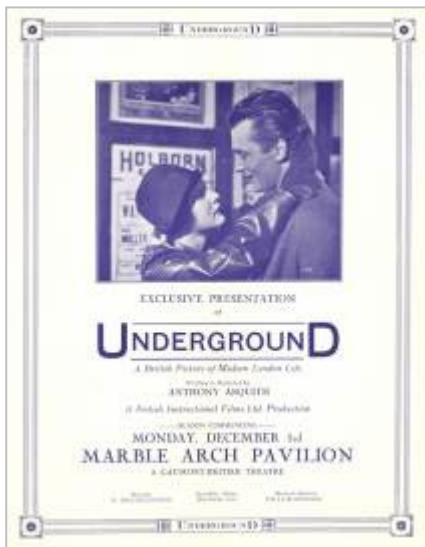
<sup>12</sup> *Das Programm*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

<sup>13</sup> See: [www.norwayheritage.com/p\\_shiplist.asp?co=haaml](http://www.norwayheritage.com/p_shiplist.asp?co=haaml)

<sup>14</sup> One of four groups established in 1923. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern\\_Railway\\_\(UK\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Railway_(UK))

<sup>15</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_rail\\_transport\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain#1923\\_.E2.80.93\\_1947:\\_The\\_Big\\_Four](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_rail_transport_in_Great_Britain#1923_.E2.80.93_1947:_The_Big_Four)

<sup>16</sup> *The Performer*. 'Next Week.' March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1928.



Souvenir Programme for  
'Underground' subsequently released  
on Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1928.

Source: [BFI Special Collections](#)

Londoners and their romantic dalliances.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to the film and its special features, it's remarkable to see how much of the network's art-deco subterranea has survived the intervening years, Piccadilly, for instance. The movie of course also shows a number of the sights our esteemed visitors will have encountered during their passage through the city, which coincidentally occurred exactly when the picture was shot.<sup>18</sup> It's most odd then that my usually snap-happy grandmother photographed none of the capital's sights, which leaves me wondering whether she (or the British postal service, Royal Mail) lost those particular rolls of film?!

The starlets of course were not light on luggage so I imagine their lodgings will have been in the vicinity of their next engagement, the enduring Victoria Palace.<sup>19</sup> A West End musical theatre situated in the City of Westminster and a stone's throw from *Southern Railway's* Victoria Station (as I discovered during a snap visit in November 2014), they played there from the third week of March.<sup>20</sup>

And it was in regards to the Victoria Palace show that I discovered my first review. According to *The Performer*, their March 19<sup>th</sup> "1st House" performance (there were typically three per day) was critiqued as follows; "*To round off a fine bill, the Six Rockets concluded with an unusual athletic posing act. The Six Rockets are members of the fair sex, strikingly gowned, and are versatile performers.*"<sup>21</sup> So far so good! The merest mention of 'unusual' and 'strikingly gowned' fills me with both pride and curiosity!

From London it was on to Birmingham's 'Grand' for the last week of March.<sup>22</sup> They will have travelled either via the Great Western Railway or the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (the corridor was fiercely contested).<sup>23</sup> The Grand belonged to the Moss Tour Circuit (as did the Victoria Palace) and according to the 'Archives and Heritage' webpage of Birmingham City Council, its outside was decorated with amazing metal statues and other features in a popular French style, while the interior was decorated in elegant crimson and gold fashion.<sup>24</sup> As in the US then, theatres were meant to portray opulence and it was here at the Grand that they joined eight other acts.

<sup>17</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground\\_\(1928\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_(1928_film))

<sup>18</sup> April-June 1928, according to the inlay sleeve of the British Film Institute's 2013 de-luxe dvd/blue ray release of the beautifully restored (and scored) movie (BFIB1036) and short essay entitled "Asquith and the real Underground" by Simon Murphy. See: [www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/bfi-news/underground-souvenir-programme-1928](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/bfi-news/underground-souvenir-programme-1928)

<sup>19</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria\\_Palace\\_Theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria_Palace_Theatre)

<sup>20</sup> *Das Programm*. April, 1<sup>st</sup>, 1928. *The Performer*. 'Next week.' March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

<sup>21</sup> *The Performer*. March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1928. Pg.10. Credited to U.N.O.

<sup>22</sup> *Das Programm*. April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1928. *The Performer*. 'Next week.' March, 21<sup>st</sup>, 1928.

<sup>23</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London,\\_Midland\\_and\\_Scottish\\_Railway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London,_Midland_and_Scottish_Railway)

<sup>24</sup> See: [www.birmingham.gov.uk/cs/Satellite?c=Page&childpagename=Lib-Central-Archives-and-Heritage%2FPageLayout&cid=1223092751838&pagename=BCC%2FCommon%2FWrapper%2FWrapper](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/cs/Satellite?c=Page&childpagename=Lib-Central-Archives-and-Heritage%2FPageLayout&cid=1223092751838&pagename=BCC%2FCommon%2FWrapper%2FWrapper)



About a week later, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1928 (Easter Sunday oddly enough!), Arno Büttner registered the rockets, presumably so as to legally found a fully licensed performing act in the UK.<sup>25</sup> It was either a formality that had been overlooked and was necessary to avoid penalty – or he was looking ahead to a time when he (or his booking agent), might bring the act back, if not with the same personnel, then in name at least.<sup>26</sup>

The following week the troupe performed at London's Metropolitan Theatre,<sup>27</sup> another West End music hall in Paddington's Edgware Road.<sup>28</sup> Their "2nd House" show on April 10<sup>th</sup> was also rewarded column space in *The Performer* and reflected on as follows; "*The Six Rockets, who close the bill with clever stunting on ladders, mingle their acrobatics with musical efforts, and were daintily clever in all their items.*"<sup>29</sup> Clearly they were receiving reviews on a par with those they had gotten in the US.

Staying in the capital, it was on to the Moss-rival, the Stoll Circuit's Alhambra, on Leicester Square,<sup>30</sup> billed in the week's programme as 'The Premier Theatre of Varieties.'<sup>31</sup> They performed for a week starting Monday April 16<sup>th</sup> with daily shows commencing at 1430, 1810 and 2045.

The programme also reveals their tagline was that previously used in the US, i.e. '*Athletic Beauties in Picturesque Posing,*' while their early evening performance was respectively reported in *The Performer* on April 18<sup>th</sup>: "*The Six Rockets, all girls, opened with quickly executed evolutions on two ladders, and introducing instrumentalism.*"<sup>32</sup> With opening (as opposed to closing) the show, I suppose they could hit the pubs earlier than usual!



The Six Rockets play the Alhambra, from April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1928.  
Source:  
© The Archivist, Victoria and Albert Museum

At the end of that week, the troupe paid a visit to the US embassy in preparation for their upcoming trans-Atlantic voyage, since according to earlier announcements three years vaudevilling awaited them there. The embassy visit was necessary in order to complete their immigrant examination and qualification and of course get their visas.<sup>33</sup> With all in order, a week or so later they were heading west, not quite as far as the US, but to the Palace Theatre<sup>34</sup> in Reading!<sup>35</sup>

It was then on to Glasgow in Scotland, riding the London, Midland and Scottish (LMS) Railway which during the late twenties benefited from a efforts to make train travel more attractive including faster services, better quality rolling stock and from September 1928, sleeping cars for third class ticket holders.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>25</sup> According to an ad which appears in *Das Programm* roughly a year later on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1929.

<sup>26</sup> Which begs the question, who booked them their engagements? Textbox 12.2 considers the most likely option.

<sup>27</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Metropolitan\\_Theatre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Metropolitan_Theatre)

<sup>28</sup> *Das Programm*. April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1928. *The Performer*. 'Next week.' April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

<sup>29</sup> *The Performer*. April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1928. Pg.8. Credited to F.A.

<sup>30</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alhambra\\_Theatre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alhambra_Theatre)

<sup>31</sup> See also *Das Programm*. April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1928. *The Performer*. 'Next week.' April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

<sup>32</sup> *The Performer* April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1928. Pg.10. Credited to A.C.E.

<sup>33</sup> See also: [www.libertyellisfoundation.org/ellis-timeline#1900](http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/ellis-timeline#1900)

<sup>34</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theaters/34962](http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/34962)

<sup>35</sup> *Das Programm*. May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1928. *The Performer*. 'Next week.' April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

<sup>36</sup> From 1937, for example, the 'Coronation Scot' hauled a nine coach train between London Euston and Glasgow Central in as little as six and a half hours. Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London\\_Midland\\_and\\_Scottish\\_Railway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Midland_and_Scottish_Railway)

Speaking of sleeping, as well as providing catering on trains and refreshment facilities at stations, London, Midland and Scottish Railways also operated a chain of hotels throughout the United Kingdom, under the auspices of the 'LMS Hotels & Catering Service.' In fact the company claimed it operated the largest chain of hotels in the British Empire, which ranged from large resort and city centre hotels to smaller provincial establishments.

By early May, 1928, the rockets were being appreciated by audiences at one of Glasgow's oldest entertainment venues, the 'Pavilion Theatre.'<sup>37</sup> Whatsmore, it is one of a number of UK music halls which still stands today. The then-owners described its decor as 'pure Louis XV' for it featured Rococo plasterwork across a proscenium arch and boxes, terrazzo flooring, leadlight glazing and rich mahogany wood finishing, while the facade was designed in French Renaissance style.<sup>38</sup>

Not long before The Six Rockets concluded their UK 'residence,' during May's second week<sup>39</sup> the girls headed south to Manchester's 'Hippodrome,' another Stoll Circuit venue.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps then the girls' slept off their athletic workouts in the vicinity of the Manchester Central railway station – at the LMS Midland Hotel?!

In his critically acclaimed diary, the German diplomat, Count Harry Kessler, painted a dreary picture of the city's neighbouring environs during a visit he made in February 1925. In relating a route east of Manchester, he portrayed a: *"cold, harsh, treeless landscape" that "resembles a sharply etched pitiless face. Here is the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, world-wide industrial capitalism, and English radicalism. It has an archaic grandeur, grey and somber, a soul compounded of coal dust, and yet...a hard, untamable energy...This is the real England, without the mask it wears everywhere else. Rarely has a landscape impressed me so deeply in such a short a space of time."*<sup>41</sup>



The rockets probably rode a similar route out of Manchester for their final return to London, where they subsequently performed at Stoll's 'Hackney Empire,'<sup>42</sup> another theatre still standing today (and a grade II listed building to boot).<sup>43</sup> Saving the best for last, however, their final UK show was nothing short of a headline in itself since they performed alongside 'The Greatest Living Comedienne,' Sophie Tucker at London's 'Palladium.' According to Christopher Woodward, author of *The London Palladium: The Story of the Theatre and Its Stars*, she was so special that she was the only act ever to have had her name appear above that of the films on the theatre's marquee.<sup>44</sup> Yet according to Little Nanný's eldest daughter, she also remained approachable, to the extent that my grandmother and she became good pals!

<sup>37</sup> *Das Programm*. May, 13<sup>th</sup>, 1928. Oddly enough, the show is not referenced in *The Performer*.

<sup>38</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavilion\\_Theatre\\_\(Glasgow\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavilion_Theatre_(Glasgow))

<sup>39</sup> *Das Programm*. May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1928. *The Performer*. 'Next week.' May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1928.

<sup>40</sup> See: [www.arthurloyd.co.uk/ManchesterTheatres/HippodromeTheatreManchester.htm](http://www.arthurloyd.co.uk/ManchesterTheatres/HippodromeTheatreManchester.htm)

<sup>41</sup> *Berlin in Lights. The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. Translated by C. Kessler. Grove Press. 1999. Pg. 252 (Entry of February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1925).

<sup>42</sup> *Das Programm*. May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1928. NB: Curiously, this show too was not referenced in *The Performer*.

<sup>43</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hackney\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hackney_Empire)

<sup>44</sup> *The London Palladium: the Story of the Theatre and its Stars*. Christopher Woodward. Northern Heritage Publications. 2008. Pg. 84. Online at: [tinyurl.com/4p3pj7d](http://tinyurl.com/4p3pj7d)

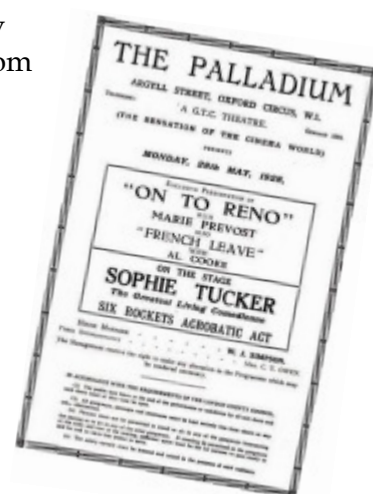
The theatre, lying off Oxford Street, remains a popular venue today and is arguably the most famous in London and the United Kingdom for musical variety shows.<sup>45</sup> However, as the advertisement right reveals, unlike all other theatres the troupe visited on their UK sojourn, the Palladium had begun to embrace cinema alongside variety. It was a move soon to be regretted by its management.

The rockets' performed from Monday May 28<sup>th</sup>,<sup>46</sup> and careful eyes will note within the ad that the house manager was a 'J. Simpson' (okay, so I've omitted the preceding W...), also that as with their US engagements, they were accompanied by a Wurlitzer organist.<sup>47</sup>

Not long after they packed their trunks, however, the Palladium temporarily closed, in so doing suspending its dalliance with cinema, before reopening in September 1928. By that time it was under the management of so-called 'born publicity machine,' George Black<sup>48</sup> (who would eventually go on to control the Moss Empires group of theatres). Margot and Little Nannÿ won't have been long gone when he took over as manager, although I suspect neither will have had the faintest inkling that Black would one day manage Margot's husband-to-be too!

Following their UK 'tour of duty,' the girls look to have 'laid off' for a month, since no further shows have been noted (whilst the troupe neither appears to have solicited further UK appointments, given the absence of any ads in *The Performer*). I wondered then whether the rockets' may have put in some performances in France before setting sail for New York via *Boulogne-sur-mer*, although none in our family could recall such a stint, not even a tourist trip to Paris. It was in effect, the calm before the storm.

Before saying 'Goodbye' to Europe, however, one more deed was necessary. Namely, Arno handed responsibility for the troupe back to his returning father. I suspect that occurred in early July, before he himself headed home to Leipzig, among other things, to celebrate his third wedding anniversary with former rocket, Annedore Frenkel, but also to nurture a second acrobat troupe with which he'd been entrusted.



Grand Finale:  
The Rockets close  
their UK tour at  
the London  
Palladium  
(pictured on the  
opposite page in  
1912) with none  
other than Sophie  
Tucker  
Sources:  
C. Woodward and  
[theatretrust.org.uk](http://theatretrust.org.uk)

<sup>45</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London\\_Palladium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Palladium)

<sup>46</sup> *The Performer*. 'Next week.' May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1928.

<sup>47</sup> A Wurlitzer 2Manual/8Ranks organ. Once films ceased to be shown, that very organ was transferred to the Plaza Cinema in Allerton, Liverpool.

<sup>48</sup> See: [www.express.co.uk/expressyourself/215518/So-many-nights-at-the-London-Palladium](http://www.express.co.uk/expressyourself/215518/So-many-nights-at-the-London-Palladium)





Little Nanny, centre, and Margot to her left in polkadot sail from Hamburg-New York, July 6-15<sup>th</sup>, 1928

The rockets' themselves sailed on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1928 aboard the *SS Cleveland*,<sup>49</sup> travelling tourist class (also known as steerage). Little Nannj was just shy of her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Margot; sweet 16. For her big sister of course, the voyage marked a return but I wonder whether Margot's thoughts were at all akin to those of the then popular film star Pola Negri, the first time she herself left Europe:

*"I stood at the ship's rail watching the coast of France disappear and wondering why I was crossing three thousand miles of ocean to a strange country where I would be friendless beyond the barrier of an alien language."*<sup>50</sup>

Nine days later they reached New York. In describing her companion's impressions upon arrival (whose name I've changed to Margot), Pola Negri continues in her autobiography; *Memoirs of a Star*:

*When the New York skyline slowly emerged out of the mist, Margot began to cry... "What holds them up?" she asked. "Don't they fall down?"*



Welcoming Scene:  
New York's Battery  
Park and Lower  
Manhattan from the  
Hudson to the  
southwest.  
Photographed on  
August 13, 1928.  
Source: Museum of the  
City of New York at:  
[collections.mcny.org](http://collections.mcny.org)

Harbour sirens will have welcomed them along with an escort of tugs, however, it turned out not to have been the welcome they'd have hoped for, Margot, landing in trouble from the get-go by being detained for missing an immigrant visa ('IV') and bond.<sup>51</sup> Hadn't all of that been arranged properly in London? Or had hers mysteriously gotten mislaid along the way?<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> The ship had quite a history. During the blockade of World War I she was grounded in Hamburg before being seized by the United States Navy in 1919 as reparations payment and renamed the USS Mobile. She was purchased back by HAPAG in 1926 and in service until being scrapped in 1933 in Hamburg. She typically carried 2,841 passengers (239 first class, 224 second class and 2,378 third class) over three decks plus a shelter deck and had a service speed of 16 knots. See also: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS\\_Cleveland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Cleveland)

<sup>50</sup> *Memoirs of a Star*. Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 197-198

<sup>51</sup> "A documentary obligation to pay a sum or to perform a contract" according to: [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/bond](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/bond). Validity or existence of such was a challenge for travelling artists. An ad within *Das Programm* on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1931, for instance, reveals booking agents typically offered to: "arrange transportation and bond with 'play or pay' contracts."

<sup>52</sup> Arno, who supervised the rockets when the visas were arranged, didn't collect one for himself as he had no need at the time, thus leaving the necessary due diligence in the girls' hands alone. His father meanwhile was issued a Residence Permit (RP) from Washington on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1928, according to the ship's manifest.



Negri too recalls an occasion she was detained: “I was taken off the boat at quarantine and sent to Ellis Island, where, with hundreds of other immigrants, awaited permission to land.”<sup>53</sup> There she was separated from the rest, detained for hours on a technicality before a tender brought her from Ellis Island to Manhattan.<sup>54</sup>

I discussed Margot’s case with Barry Moreno, author of *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Ellis Island* and historian at the Ellis Island Foundation, since she had collected her visa together with her fellow troupers in London that April. He told me in no uncertain terms, however: “If there was any uncertainty they [her contracting agent] would have [had] to post a bond here on Ellis Island.”<sup>55</sup>

Margot was eventually held up for a day before her papers were put in order, I suspect by the troupe’s executive ‘Vaudeville Managers,’ Johnson & Lowenstein, reputedly ‘America’s best-known impresarios for foreign acts,’ since it was they who had arranged the rockets’ and Büttner’s performing contract. Their offices were located downtown at the Strand Theatre Building at #1560 Broadway on 7<sup>th</sup> avenue and West 46<sup>th</sup> Street (today the site of the Times Square Visitor Building).<sup>56</sup> Talk about making a splash upon her arrival. Now the joke was on her, and not her sister!



A typical street scene from June 1928:  
Park (Fourth) Avenue looking north from 39<sup>th</sup> Street  
showing the New York Central Building, then under  
construction. Source: [wirednewyork.com](http://wirednewyork.com)

Readers of earlier chapters will appreciate that remark, also that Büttner’s and the rockets’ experience with the pair stretched as far back as 1921 and that not many years prior, Little Nannÿ had herself performed at the Strand Theatre. According to an announcement published in *Das Programm* by the two impresarios the previous summer,<sup>57</sup> Büttner’s rockets had been committed “upon his return” for three seasons on the Keith Albee Circuit. That announcement had referred to a ‘binding contract,’ which in principle meant they were booked until summer 1931. Careful scrutiny of their immigration papers reveal, however, that their visas only guaranteed them right of entry until July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1929. Had they been promised three years, only to arrive and receive one? And if so, why? Büttner probably already knew the answer.

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<sup>53</sup> *Memoirs of a Star*. Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 398. NB: The text refers to summer 1941

<sup>54</sup> Following the 1924 Immigration Act, the main function of Ellis Island changed from being that of an immigrant processing station, to a center of the assembly, detention, and deportation of ‘aliens’ who had entered the US illegally or had violated the terms of admittance. See also: [www.libertyellisfoundation.org/ellis-timeline#1900](http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/ellis-timeline#1900).

<sup>55</sup> Personal correspondence of December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 (Email: [barry\\_moreno@nps.gov](mailto:barry_moreno@nps.gov))

<sup>56</sup> According to the ship’s manifest, while ads appearing in *Das Programm* (see for example the June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1928 issue) refer to suites 1005, 1006 and 1007. Note however that a year earlier their address had been the same Strand Theatre Building but at #1579 Broadway. See also: [www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/StrandTheatre.html](http://www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/StrandTheatre.html)

<sup>57</sup> See: *Das Programm*. June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1927.

The USA was at the tail end of the roaring twenties, where the only constant was change. In one commentator's eyes *"it was vorsprung durch technik set to a backdrop of blossoming jazz music."* The flapper, as in the UK, was redefining modern womanhood while sports heroes and movie stars were increasingly celebrated. Art Deco, characterized by its rich colours, bold geometric shapes and lavish ornamentation,<sup>58</sup> may have been peaking, but it was cinema that was beginning to steal vaudeville's patrons.<sup>59</sup>

As early as the mid-1920s, thanks to its growing popularity and the arrival of films like *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 with its synchronized sound, accompanied by the so-called 'talkies,' vaudeville performers were beginning to see the writing on the wall. Critics meanwhile had begun to wonder whether cinema would replace live theatre altogether. Consumers, on the other hand, were among the first to know.

Take the following example for instance. In the mid-1920s, the vaudeville troupier later known as Gypsy Rose Lee, arrived in Los Angeles looking for work. She asked directions from a policeman to the Metropolitan Vaudeville Theatre, to which he replied the only vaudeville theatre left in LA was the Orpheum. *"It's the talking pictures"* he said. *"They've taken the place of vaudeville!"* Gypsy's mother retorted: *"They said the same thing about radio! Vaudeville weathered that storm and we'll weather talking pictures too. Nothing will ever take the place of flesh."*<sup>60</sup>

She had a point. But come January 1927, Gypsy herself was ready to admit: *"There is no more vaudeville. It doesn't exist any more."*<sup>61</sup> By this time the talking picture enjoyed top billing while a diminishing number of vaudeville acts appeared beneath. Whatsmore, *"The dates were for three or four days each with long lay-offs in between."*<sup>62</sup>

Back in vaudeville's heyday, Gypsy had been booked for 42 consecutive weeks at USD 1,250 per week while she worked another circuit called the Orpheum, one of the biggest in 1920. It controlled houses from Chicago to California<sup>63</sup> and included as many as 45 vaudeville theatres in 36 cities throughout the United States and Canada.<sup>64</sup> Yet by 1927, Gypsy's fellow troupier, Tessie, would add: *"There ain't no more Orpheum Circuit. It's gone, dead and buried."*<sup>65</sup>

With so many theatres turning into cinemas, the only way forward was for the vaudeville market to contract. In late 1927, just ten weeks after *The Jazz Singer* opened in New York City (in early October), the rockets' hosts, the Keith Albee Circuit merged with the Orpheum Circuit to form Keith-Albee-Orpheum.<sup>66</sup> It was owner, E.F. Albee's first attempt to stem the decline of 'high-class' vaudeville.

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<sup>58</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_Deco](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_Deco)

<sup>59</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Roaring\\_20's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Roaring_20's)

<sup>60</sup> *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 158

<sup>61</sup> *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 180

<sup>62</sup> *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 141

<sup>63</sup> [www.britannica.com/oscar/article-9074912](https://www.britannica.com/oscar/article-9074912)

<sup>64</sup> *Orpheum Circuit*. L.M. Surhone, M.T. Tennoe, S.F. Henssonow (Eds.), Betascript Publishing, 2011.

<sup>65</sup> *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 195

<sup>66</sup> Formally on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1928, according to [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith-Albee-Orpheum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith-Albee-Orpheum)

Jerome Charyn, author of *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, the Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway* goes as far as to describe 1928 as “*The beginning of the end.*”<sup>67</sup> That May, vaudeville’s major player evolved once more, when Albee sold USD 4,500,000 worth of stock to film magnate, Joseph P. Kennedy. The Keith-Albee-Orpheum then combined with Kennedy's Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in October 1928 to form Radio-Keith-Orpheum; ‘RKO Keith’s’ or more simply ‘RKO.’

“*The new agenda,*” according to Frank Cullen, author of *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*, “*included RCA’s development of an improved system for sound motion pictures, the adaptation of the Keith-Orpheum operation to distribute and exhibit movies within the coast-to-coast network of theatres, and the utilization of Kennedy’s Film Booking Offices of America studios to produce talking pictures.*”

Albee subsequently lost his control over the organization and films became the primary entertainment, although vaudeville survived as an accompaniment to feature films through the mid-1930s. Motion pictures not only became integrated into vaudeville bills, they effectively took them over.<sup>68</sup> Robert Snyder goes a step further when he writes; “*A major force in the American media had risen out of the ashes of vaudeville.*”<sup>69</sup>

Those rapid developments within RKO Keith’s tentively explain why the rockets were thus booked for a year and not three. The market for vaudeville was obviously not yet dead and even Pola Negri notched up her own vaudeville theatre tour as late as 1932. What might she have said to those girls about to take their first steps on the American stage?

In her autobiography she soliloquayed: “*Every week brought a new town, new personalities....a new experience of that special warmth vaudevillians had for each other,*” whilst at the same time recalling “*the gratification of coming face to face with a responsive audience*” and the “*wonderful opportunity to see every part of this beautiful country and to meet and experience the warm hospitality of the American people.*” Mind you she added, “*All of this was so exhausting that I was beginning to think it might well end in total physical collapse.*”<sup>70</sup>

Little Nanny won’t have been oblivious to the warning signs (indeed she probably warned the other girls what to expect) but for now she had little time to contemplate what tomorrow would bring. At least that part of their representatives’ 1927 statement was true, when it noted they were set “*to begin work immediately upon...return.*” As the ad right reveals, the rockets were back in action within five days of their arrival!



Building Brand Awareness: A Six Rockets ad which ran from August 1928 until the end of 1929

<sup>67</sup> *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, the Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway.* Jerome Charyn. Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.61

<sup>68</sup> See: [www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/MSC/ToMsc400/MsC356/msc356.html](http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/MSC/ToMsc400/MsC356/msc356.html)

<sup>69</sup> *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York.* R. W. Snyder. Oxford University Press, 1989. pg. 159 (in Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies*, Pg. 201).

<sup>70</sup> *Memoirs of a Star.* Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 361-363





Troupes' Astride: The Six Rockets and the six *Shinnecoeks*.  
Probably late September 1928

Little Nannÿ's first appointment, however, appears to have been with the coiffeur, since after arriving in New York she went back to being blonde, as one of the first US-based photographs of the troupe reveals. Whatsmore, it shows them posing alongside natives. Little Nannÿ would often regale her meeting with 'real Indians,' and as if to underline its importance to Europeans, Pola Negri described her own encounter in Albuquerque as a 'childhood dream came true.'

I wondered whether I could determine their nation (and in so doing the location) from the costumes they wore, and so put this question to staff of the *National Museum of the American Indian* in Lower Manhattan, New York in April 2011.<sup>71</sup> My 'mini-survey,' however, drew a mixed response, ranging from "they've got very dark skin, they most probably are Shinnecock"<sup>72</sup> to: "Impossible to identify. If they were part of the vaudeville scene, they could have been Indian entertainers from any part of North America who donned a costume that checked all the typical Indian stereotypes."

I also talked to Steve Cowley, who manages the 'Theater Project' of the *American Indian Community House*<sup>73</sup> on the other side of that famous street, Broadway, and he agreed it's a difficult one to call. *Wampanoag* and *Montaukett* Indians were suggested alongside Shinnecock, notwithstanding their traditional regalia with its tassles and feathered headdress.



Rockets' After-Party:  
Prohibition-era alcohol was more readily available on Indian reservations where federal law was less strictly enforced (the rockets' manager stands in the centre, the Shinnecoeks' right)

Another photo from the same occasion reveals a disused sign bearing the word 'Queens.' Could it have referred to the New York City borough that occupies part of the eastern end of Long Island? Since the island is also home to the Shinnecock Reservation<sup>74</sup> (albeit about 80 miles from Queens), it's not inconceivable those natives were Shinnecock (the Montaukett reside at the far eastern end of the island while the Wampanoag live further northeast in Massachusetts). Whatsmore, Long Island was within easy reach of Manhattan.

<sup>71</sup> See: [www.americanindian.si.edu](http://www.americanindian.si.edu)

<sup>72</sup> In 1903, the Shinnecock Indian Nation had a population of 150. By inter-breeding with African Americans they helped sustain their numbers. Today in 2011 there are over 1300 Shinnecock, according to Bevy Deer Jensen, the *Shinnecock Nations Communications Officer*. See also: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinnecock\\_Indian\\_Nation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinnecock_Indian_Nation)

<sup>73</sup> See: [www.aich.org](http://www.aich.org)

<sup>74</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinnecock\\_Reservation,\\_New\\_York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinnecock_Reservation,_New_York) as well as [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long\\_Island](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Island) also [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poospatuck\\_Reservation,\\_New\\_York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poospatuck_Reservation,_New_York)



Aside from the location, what was the occasion which brought the Germans and Indians together? One explanation might be a county fair, the sort of event the rockets often performed at, albeit those were more traditionally held during the summer months and between theatrical seasons.

Talking to the American Indian museum's librarian, she suspected they might have been together for a 'pow-wow' – an outdoor gathering where a tribe meets to dance, sing, socialize, and honor American Indian culture.<sup>75</sup> Those typically last anywhere from five to six hours to as long as three days. Noting the Indian pictured centre carries a drum and that on the right holds a rattle, it could indeed be that the two groups 'shared' the stage. Furthermore, non-Native American people including stage acts were often invited to participate in pow-wows, and we ought not to overlook the tent standing behind the rockets in the second photograph, which could well have served as a changing room.

So had it been pow-wow showtime in the native's reservation? That's a tough one and enquiries to other potential sources of information have gone unanswered.<sup>76</sup> However, the fact that the girls and their manager swig from bottles of beer, which during prohibition tended to be more widely available in areas where federal law was less strictly enforced (such as Indian reservations<sup>77</sup>) I would have to say 'yes.' The museum's reference desk staffer, who herself had visited the reservation not long prior was also reasonably convinced the photograph was taken there and my own limited pictorial research tends to affirm this.

And regarding the occasion, if we recall the mutual respect between artists referred to by Pola Negri, I am inclined to believe the Indians posed alongside the girls because they were all performers. But as to how the Queens signboard ended up in the reservation, well that's one riddle that's just going to have to remain unresolved!

Not many weeks later, the rockets wound their way by train to Iowa in North America's Midwest. Mind you, one would never have guessed that's where they were from the picture, right, which reveals the troupe out in 'the stix' or the boondocks, a little 'bump of back country.'<sup>78</sup> I actually discovered the location quite by chance, however, whilst thumbing through old editions of *Das Programm* at Berlin's *Stiftung Stadtmuseum* in November 2011 and literally gasped when I saw my grandmother, at that point roughly half my age, smiling back at me in the October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1928 edition! The picture in the newspaper was identical to one we held in our scrapbooks – one whose location had long eluded me.



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<sup>75</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Powwow>

<sup>76</sup> See also: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Indian\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Indian_Movement), [aimovement.org](http://aimovement.org); [.../Bureau\\_of\\_Indian\\_Affairs](http://www.bureauofindianaffairs.gov) and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_reservations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_reservations). Emails to: [AIMGGC@att.net](mailto:AIMGGC@att.net) went unanswered.

<sup>77</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prohibition\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prohibition_in_the_United_States)

<sup>78</sup> *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, the Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Jerome Charyn. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg. 37



All Set to Rock 'n Roll:  
Littly Nanný, centre back with Margot sat to her left

The only real clue up until that point had been the identical dress worn in a second photo taken on board the *SS Cleveland*, which suggested the photograph had been made around 1928. The occasion it captured incidentally was the presence of three German variety acts in a single theatre programme. Namely, the *Mann Family*, the *Helen Bach Trio* and Oswald Büttner with *The Six Rockets*, who performed together at the 'KAO' Orpheum Theatre in Emmetsburg, Iowa. Thank heavens for that slice of German pride!

Luckily, from this point on *Das Programm* becomes something of a bellwether of the rockets' itineraries (although there are plenty of photographs for which I will never likely determine the location of, some of which are included in the montage overleaf). Later that month they performed in Chicago, Illinois<sup>79</sup> at the New Palace<sup>80</sup> and a week later they were on stage at the newly (1927) opened Orpheum Theatre in Madison, Wisconsin.<sup>81</sup>

Before they knew it, Christmas had been and gone and they had moved on into 1929 – a year in which more films with sound would be made than silents thanks to a sufficiently large number of theaters undergoing the expensive conversion process to make creating and distributing talkies profitable. Further competition for the rockets' art arose from network radio, which was available free of charge to those who'd purchased a receiver. Neither of those milestones, however, would put vaudeville out of business just yet – even if the grim reaper was already knocking at its door.

Towards the end of January the rockets returned to New York State performing at Loew's Rochester Theater.<sup>82</sup> Its local newspaper, the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* reflected on the programme, noting on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1929: "*The olio was opened by the Six Rockets, all girls, in skillful balancing and tumbling feats.*"<sup>83</sup>

By early February it was Utica's residents' turn to enjoy the 'olio,' which saw The Six Rockets return to the town after a four year absence, albeit this time to its brand new 'refrigerated' Stanley Theatre (which opened its doors to patrons just a few months after they landed in America on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1928).<sup>84</sup> It remains popular today.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>79</sup> *Das Programm*. October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1928.

<sup>80</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theaters/7331](http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/7331)

<sup>81</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theaters/233](http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/233); [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheum\\_Theatre\\_\(Madison,\\_Wisconsin\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheum_Theatre_(Madison,_Wisconsin)); and [madisonorpheum.com](http://madisonorpheum.com)

<sup>82</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theater/5228/](http://cinematreaasures.org/theater/5228/)

<sup>83</sup> An 'Olio' was "A collection of various musical, theatrical or other artistic works; a miscellany" and "By extension... Vaudeville or similar miscellaneous musical or theatrical entertainment skits presented between the main acts of minstrel or burlesque shows." See: [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/olio](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/olio)

<sup>84</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theater/1071/](http://cinematreaasures.org/theater/1071/)

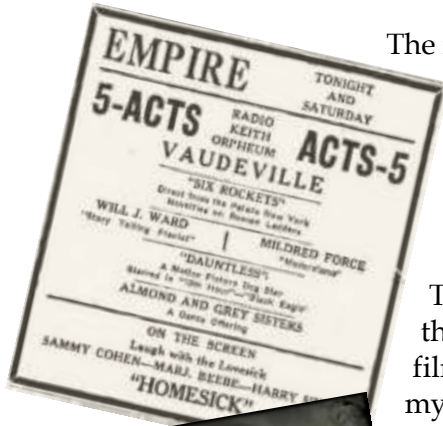
<sup>85</sup> See: [www.thestanley.org/](http://www.thestanley.org/)



Girls on Film: Flappers make the rounds during what is presumed to be spring-summer 1929 (NB: The top two are the same occasion, as are the middle left and centre, besides the middle right and lower pair)



By March the rockets were back where they began, in New York City, to play the Palace Theatre. That means Margot, like Nannÿ before her, got to 'play the Palace' too.<sup>86</sup> It was not only the premiere venue of the Keith-Albee circuit, but of vaudeville full stop (see textbox 10.2). So far 1929 was turning out just fine!



The rockets followed their gig at the Palace with a performance at what was probably the next biggest vaudeville venue in New York, the Empire Theatre at #1430 Broadway between 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> streets. Having first opened its doors in 1893,<sup>87</sup> on March 15<sup>th</sup> they lined up alongside four other acts as shown in the ad on the right and prior to a movie called 'Homesick.'

That rather makes me wonder whether Little Nannÿ, Margot and their co-stars ever got to drop in and watch the accompanying films free of charge following their performances? It is known that my grandmother became a lover of the movies so if there was half a chance, I daresay she and the other girls did. Their own shows took place on Friday and Saturday as the ad indicates. In between, the rockets got a new set of promotional portrait photos made, and that of Little Nannÿ, once more with dark hair, is shown right. I only regret that the one of Margot is no longer in our possession (although plenty more of her would follow in due course).



Nannÿ Tyralla 'autographs' the results of her 1929 New York photoshoot

From Broadway it was on up to Massachusettes and determining the location of their next theatre (pictured overleaf) was nothing but a labour of love. Not surprisingly, the photo is one of my all time favourites. The venue turned out to be 'RKO' Keith's Theater in Lowell, which lies some 40 km northwest of the state capital, Boston. A typical small-city vaudeville house, it came with a very large stage house, pit, orchestra level, and two balconies, plus a mezzanine.<sup>88</sup>

The marquee advertises 'Children of the Ritz,' which was a movie initially released on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>89</sup> Strictly speaking a 'silent' flick, it relied on a so-called 'Vitaphone' soundtrack, which meant that the sound effects were recorded on phonographic records and then played alongside the picture.<sup>90</sup> Painted on the canal side of the building then was the sign, "B.F. Keith's, the house of perfect sound...VITAPHONE."

<sup>86</sup> According to page 5 of the March 15<sup>th</sup> issue of the *North Adams Transcript*, online at: [newspaperarchive.com/north-adams-transcript](http://newspaperarchive.com/north-adams-transcript) which reports: "The Six Rockets in Novelties on Roman Ladders who made such a hit at the Palace Theatre New York City last week are featured on the RKO Vaudeville program at the Empire Theatre this evening."

<sup>87</sup> It went on to operate for as many 60 years before finally closing in 1953. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire\\_Theatre\\_\(41st\\_Street\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_Theatre_(41st_Street)) and the Internet Broadway Database at: [ibdb.com/venue.php?id=1144#1144](http://ibdb.com/venue.php?id=1144#1144)

<sup>88</sup> See: <http://cinematreasures.org/theater/13362/>

<sup>89</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children\\_of\\_the\\_Ritz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children_of_the_Ritz) and [www.imdb.com/title/tt0019762/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019762/)

<sup>90</sup> Vitaphone was a sound film process used on features where the soundtrack was not printed on the actual film, but was issued separately on 12- to 16-inch phonograph records. The discs would be played while the film was being projected. Many early talkies, such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), used the Vitaphone process. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitaphone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitaphone)



The marquee also reveals The Six Rockets topped the vaudeville bill and confirms the prices patrons paid in the spring of 1929 to enjoy a variety programme: in the afternoons 20 cents for children and 30 cents for adults while in the evenings, 30 cents and 50 cents respectively – not dissimilar to what visitors paid to see a still relatively unknown Gypsy Rose Lee in 1926 in Yuma, Arizona: 25 and 50 cents. The theatre clearly left an impression on the rockets, but what is left of it today? Like so many others, it closed in the 1960's and lay abandoned until it suffered a major fire and was razed, later being paved over for parking in 1976. Its front office building survives, albeit barely recognisable.



*"Quick! Get out your camera and take a picture of it!  
That'll be worth something one day!"*

Still, their visit yielded another vintage photo which tells it's own tales. For example, the way in which the rockets' promotional materials were used by theatres to pull in potential customers. The location shown left can be seen on the previous page's picture, just in front of the car to the right. Upon the vertical banner within the vitrine, the rockets' portraits can be made out at top. Beneath, the act's name is accompanied by text that advertises the now familiar tagline; *"Athletic Beauties in Picturesque Novelties on Roman Ladders."* The poster beneath shows an image first used by the rockets in the mid-1920s and reveals the acrobatic stunts the troupe performed on stage. Büttner, posing for the camera, sublimely captures the mood of the moment – lest we forget, it was the era of gangsters and 'the mob.' Indeed, barely a month earlier, the famous 1929 Saint Valentine's Day Massacre took place over in Chicago, for which Al Capone was widely assumed to have been responsible,<sup>91</sup> while a couple of months later in May, he was arrested in the lobby of Philadelphia's Stanley Theatre for possessing weapons.



How much is that rocket in the window?

By then, however, the rockets, who quite rightly will have felt on top of the world at that moment in time, were zipping around southern USA. Around May 12<sup>th</sup>, *Das Programm* reports they'd been on stage at the Orpheum Theatre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, while two weeks later it was the Majestic Theatre in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>92</sup> A month on, by mid-June they were in action at the Orpheum Theatre in New Orleans, Louisiana,<sup>93</sup> and come early July it was Keith's Georgia Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>94</sup> (For interested readers, *Chapter X* details the trials and tribulations of vaudevilling across the country, whether by train, boat and even cart)!

<sup>91</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al\\_Capone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Capone)

<sup>92</sup> Indeed some photographs reveal Texas-based photographer's stamps

<sup>93</sup> See: [www.historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/movietheaters/orpheum/orpheum-1928.html](http://www.historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/movietheaters/orpheum/orpheum-1928.html)

<sup>94</sup> See: [cinematreasures.org/theaters/10331](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/10331)

Around about the same time that the rockets were in Georgia, Arno Büttner returned with his new troupe, a crop of acrobats who hailed from Leipzig, Friedrichroda in Thuringia and Hamburg. They arrived on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1929, having sailed from Boulogne, coincidentally with the same ship the rockets travelled with the year before, the *SS Cleveland*.<sup>95</sup> The ship's manifest discloses they'd all been in London three months prior (when on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1929 they collected their US visas), implying the troupe completed a similar UK tour to that the rockets had in 1928.<sup>96</sup>

Clearly there was still money to be made from vaudeville, even if long term contracts were not in the offing by their regular booking agent, Max Lowenstein. The troupe Arno brought over were called '*The Six Marinelli Girls*,' according to an ad placed by the Büttners in *Das Programm* a year or so later. It's an obvious nod towards the well-known acrobat, H.B. Marinelli, whom I suspect once shared a mutual acquaintance with Büttner, if not more, as the text box below suggests.

**12.2: Who Was Marinelli?**


H.B. Marinelli was a German acrobat and contortionist from Thüringia, southwest of Saxony.

He came to the US in 1885 and became known as 'the boneless wonder,' the *Marinelli Bend*, an extreme backbend, subsequently being named after him. In 1894 he quit the stage and became a booking agent of European stars for the US, later securing an exclusive contract with the Keith and Orpheum Circuits.

He also happens to have been boss until 1914 of a chap called Herman Blumenfeld who managed the H. B. Marinelli Talent Office in London. In *Chapter IX*, I surmised it was Oswald Büttner's links to Blumenfeld that helped bring him to the US in the early 1920s (see text box 9.6), so it's perhaps little wonder that Arno went on to establish a troupe called the Six Marinelli Girls!

Marinelli died in January 1924 although his talent office continued to support Keiths (as RKO) until late 1929, while his legacy was carried on by Arno into the early 1930s. I suspect that was undertaken in collaboration with the talent office, which I daresay was responsible for both the six rockets' and the marinellis' UK engagements too.

Sources: *The Papers of Will Rogers. Volume 2 Wild West and Vaudeville*, April 1904, September 1908. Ed. By Werheim & Beir. Pg. 388. Online [here](#). See also: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marinelli\\_bend](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marinelli_bend)



The Büttners' and their representatives' secret to success appears to have been that while Oswald's troupe plied the East Coast circuit, Arno's toured the west, perhaps as far inland as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Nevada. By divvying up the country this way, both acts avoided the so-called 'Death Trail' - a string of cheap routes that spun out from Chicago to the last web of deserted towns on the Pacific Coast,<sup>97</sup> where according to vaudeville authority, Frank Cullen, one played to "sparse, indifferent audiences...for the lowest salary."

<sup>95</sup> According to the ship's manifest dated July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1929 (and courtesy of the Ellis Island Foundation), they included Marga Bräur of Friedrichroda (Thuringia); Alma Kroll from Hamburg and Marie Trommer, Dora Wege, Helene Voigt and Melanie Elisabeth Geidel (the only returning rocket), all from Leipzig.

<sup>96</sup> Confirming that would obviously require a return to British Library Newspapers!

<sup>97</sup> *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, the Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Jerome Charyn. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.37

Pola Negri painted a bleak picture of her own as regards the route faced by those performers attempting to travel from east to west:

*"A trip across the country via the railroad took three days. Travelling from New York via a change in Chicago...I was enthralled by such scenery. Never had I experienced such space and ever changing vistas. The country was breathtakingly beautiful and I was thrilled to be crossing it. Then we hit the desert! The heat became so unbearable that it drove all other thoughts from my mind. Those were the days before air conditioning, and the inadequate little fans in our compartments did nothing but circulate the hot air. I tried opening the windows, only to be inundated by waves of coarse grainy sand. There was no escape."*<sup>98</sup>

Back then, however, in September 1922, Hollywood was nothing more than a small town of squat and undistinguished buildings.<sup>99</sup> Of course it rapidly grew thereafter and come the end of the decade I am sure the marinellis were having a blast. Recalling once more Negri's words, *"the clear cool mountain air, and following that, the Pacific coast, stretching down to the sea in mile after mile of olive groves"* enthralled. I'll wager that vista of perpetual sunshine beat the summer humidity and winter chills along the east coast and Midwest anytime! Too bad neither Little Nannÿ nor Margot ever made it out to the West Coast during their trouping days.

With the Six Marinelli Girls taking to the stage from July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1929, it was around the same time that I suspect the rockets returned to New York, not only to hook up with Arno and his troupe but in order to extend their visas.<sup>100</sup> The statutory maximum according to the immigration laws of the time was a further six months,<sup>101</sup> which entitled them to stay through to January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1930. Had the rockets themselves then been awarded another one year contract by RKO? In all likelihood, yes.

Later that July, the act performed at the newly opened<sup>102</sup> RKO Showboat Theatre on the Atlantic Coast's, Ocean City, in New Jersey.<sup>103</sup> Although Little Nannÿ didn't take the photo right, it was, however, taken that same week she and her fellow troupers arrived, on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1929. The marquee teases; 'Paris bound with Ann Harding' and '5 Great Acts,' while I suspect the sandwich board at the box office bore a picture of the rockets, the same as that displayed in Lowell. Those other acts, according to *Das Programm*, were Silver King; Rodney Gould, Orville Stamm and Company and Primrose and Seaman.



The Showboat Theatre in Ocean City, pictured the same week the rockets' arrived

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<sup>98</sup> *Memoirs of a Star*. Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 203

<sup>99</sup> *Memoirs of a Star*. Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 204

<sup>100</sup> Writes Barry Moreno of the Ellis Island Foundation on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014; "They could do this by going to Ellis Island if in the New York (district) or to the nearest Immigration Office (...in Chicago, Boston or Los Angeles)."

<sup>101</sup> See for instance Pg. 310 of *Chapter X*.

<sup>102</sup> Saturday June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1929, according to:

[www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM9HAZ\\_Showboat\\_Theater\\_Ocean\\_City\\_NJ](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM9HAZ_Showboat_Theater_Ocean_City_NJ)

<sup>103</sup> *Das Programm*. August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1929.





The engagement at Ocean City was followed a week later by a return, at least for Little Nannö, to Atlantic City in early August, where the girls performed at the Young's Pier Theatre.<sup>104</sup> In between the girls worked out and unwound on the sand, a suite of photos revealing their backdrop to have been none other than the 'Million Dollar' pier. Little Nannö undoubtedly explained to Margot and the others this was the very spot she'd visited in 1926, using the opportunity I expect to introduce her sister to Fralinger's 'Salt Water Taffy' too. Leipzig suddenly seemed a long way away!

The Six Rockets work out in Atlantic City, summer 1929

### 12.3 Fralinger's Salt Water Taffy

Photos suggest Little Nannö was more inclined towards fruit when she needed a snack. However, it's well known that she also had something of a sweet tooth. Whilst visiting Atlantic City, if diet (and the chaperone) permitted, the rockets surely savoured its good old fashioned candy called 'Salt Water Taffy.' Fralingers is the name of a store that still graces Atlantic City's Boardwalk today, as it did in the 1920s (see textbox 10.10 for a photo). Today it continues to produce its well-renowned candy as it has since the 1880s.



Legend has it that Salt Water Taffy received its name rather by accident. A young candy merchant, opened a sweet stand on the first Atlantic City Boardwalk - then just two steps above sea level. One night a generous tide brought in a lively surf which sprayed sea foam over his establishment and dampened his stock of candy, so says the *Website of Fralingers*. The next morning, the merchant was dismayed to find his goods wet and when requested by a customer for some taffy, sarcastically responded, "*you mean Salt Water Taffy?!*" The name, stuck!

At the same time, Joseph Fralinger, a former glassblower and fish merchant, opened a retail store on the boardwalk. Within a year, Fralinger had added a taffy concession and spent the winter perfecting the Salt Water Taffy formula, first using molasses, then chocolate and vanilla, eventually reaching 25 flavors. As Fralinger's presence grew to six locations, he decided that Salt Water Taffy should return home to resort visitors. Using experience from his fish merchant days, he packed one pound oyster boxes with Salt Water Taffy, making it the first "Atlantic City Souvenir."

The one pound box still remains the most popular souvenir almost 125 years later. By 1899 Salt Water Taffy had become a household word across America! Enoch James then helped extend the product line to chocolate dipped Salt Water Taffy, filled centers, chocolate taffy pops, macaroons and boardwalk fudge, packaging it within seashore novelties such as the 'barrel' and 'satchel' that are still popular today.

Apart from glowing customer reviews, ("*If you're down the shore, make sure you stop there for a tasty gift - or snack for the ride home!;*" "*Best spot in AC If you are staying in one of the casinos and need a good thing to do other then gamble*)," Fralingers has also featured in episodes of *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Saturday Night Live* as well as *Boardwalk Empire*!

Source: [www.fralingers.com](http://www.fralingers.com)

<sup>104</sup> *Das Programm*. August, 11<sup>th</sup>, 1929.



It'll have been a real treat if the girls departed Atlantic City aboard the 'Blue Comet,' a blue deluxe coach train that had launched earlier that year on February 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>105</sup> The Central Railroad of New Jersey began operating its most famous train twice daily to and from Jersey City, which proved in turn to be a huge success. From Jersey City the girls would have crossed over into Manhattan so as to ride the New York Central Railroad on to their next stop in Schenectady, eastern New York State.<sup>106</sup>

Little Nannÿ was no stranger to *Schenectady* neither, having last visited during the 1923-1924 season. According to its *Gazette* of August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1929, she and her fellow acrobats were on stage at the RKO Proctor's Theatre.<sup>107</sup> The paper reviews their performance as follows:

*"The Roman ladders are used by the Six Rockets, Europe's surpassing acrobatic sextette, to good advantage in a vaudeville oddity. The Six Rockets, all of them attractive young women, have developed a varied and different athletic routine. They are experts in riskey work, Arabian pyramid building, ground tumbling and the feats on Roman ladders."*



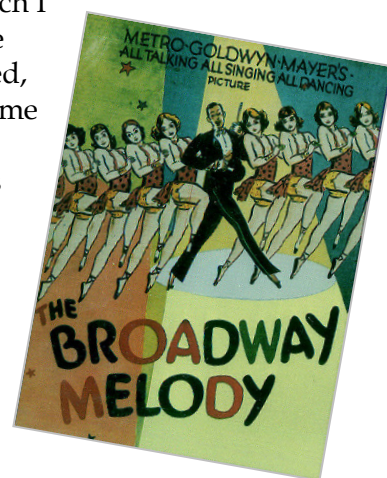
Still Standing:  
Proctor's in  
Schenectady  
Source: B.G.  
Lewandowski  
/Theatrescape

I daresay the rockets enjoyed performing at Proctor's, whose ad in the *Gazette* features a logo doused in snow while the sub-title woos patrons with: *"Our mammoth cooling system will have you cool and comfortable."*

Somewhat trivially, the movie that followed the rockets' performance was 'The Rainbow Man,' whose by-line announced it as another *"All Talking, All Singing Broadway Melody."* I thought I'd look up The Rainbow Man to see whether it is still available, in order to appreciate better the kinds of films being screened at the time. It wasn't, although The Broadway Melody most certainly was.

Rather hoping it to be a film version of the musical 'Broadway' (which I reflected on in *Chapter XI*), I was disappointed to learn it was not the 1927 Berlin-based stage show in which Dietrich had originally starred, then toured (and which was subsequently made into a film of the same name). Alas, that's hard to find. However, The Broadway Melody turned out to have been released on June 6<sup>th</sup>, just a couple of months prior to the rockets' shows at Proctor's.

It tells the story of a vaudeville sister act that went up to The Big Street as a favour to a friend who needed them for one of 'Francis Zanfield's' shows (his name being a take on Broadway legend, Florenz Ziegfeld Jr). Although such fate never befell the rockets (*sic!*), I was delighted to discover the film on Amazon.com since it obviously offers an insight to that era.



<sup>105</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jersey\\_Central\\_Railroad](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jersey_Central_Railroad) and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue\\_Comet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Comet)

<sup>106</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central\\_Railroad\\_of\\_New\\_Jersey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Railroad_of_New_Jersey)

<sup>107</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theater/53/](http://cinematreaasures.org/theater/53/); [www.proctors.org/about/history-proctors](http://www.proctors.org/about/history-proctors) and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proctor's\\_Theatre\\_\(Schenectady,\\_New\\_York\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proctor's_Theatre_(Schenectady,_New_York))

According to the Internet Movie Database, *The Broadway Melody* was the first all-talking musical feature to win an Academy (Oscar) Award for Best Picture. While early musicals tended to be filmed vaudeville performances, the film broke with this tradition by actually incorporating musical numbers into its plot, even featuring a Technicolor sequence.<sup>108</sup> Not surprisingly, it went on to become 1929's top grossing film. Despite its technical advances, however, a silent version was also released, since many cinemas still hadn't acquired sound equipment.<sup>109</sup>

Once a wrap in Schenectady, by August 15<sup>th</sup> the rockets were on stage at the Strand Theatre in Niagara Falls, marking another return for Little Nannÿ. It's noticeable from the ad how RKO sought to inject new life into vaudeville, redefining it as 'Vodvil'! In the August 15<sup>th</sup>, issue of the *The Niagara Falls Gazette*, The Six Rockets are labelled "premier athletes" that "offer some sensational acrobatic feats." From there it was back to New Jersey and the B.F. Keith's Capitol Theatre in Trenton.<sup>110</sup>

Their next stop was special, however, since it lay 200 km beyond the US border (as the crow flies) and required an outdoor performance in Nova Scotia (Latin for 'New Scotland'), Canada's so-called 'Ocean Playground'.<sup>111</sup> They performed from August 24<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> in its capital, Halifax (a town of some 100,000 inhabitants),<sup>112</sup> at the Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition.

After discovering by chance an Official Souvenir programme at a small US bookshop in January 2011, my disappointment was understandably huge when the owner cancelled the order, apologising for the item having disappeared from the shelves! According to its catalogue record it contained 48 illustrated pages while of special interest, wrote the seller, was "the Vaudeville Programme (acrobatics), with illustrations, including the Six Rockets."<sup>113</sup> Grrr. Apart from being "Rubbed" with a "top edge lightly soiled" it was otherwise in "very good" condition.

I just wonder whether the following unlabelled photos might have been from that show, given the outdoor stage graced by the rockets with their Roman Ladders.

In each photo Margot can be found upper right, while Little Nannÿ is in the upper middle on the left and right photos and to the left on the centre shot.



<sup>108</sup> See: [www.imdb.com/title/tt0019729/?ref=nm\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019729/?ref=nm_sr_1)

<sup>109</sup> See for example Pg. 420 within this chapter.

<sup>110</sup> *Das Programm*. August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1929.

<sup>111</sup> So described on the province's vehicle-licence plates today.

<sup>112</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halifax,\\_Nova\\_Scotia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halifax,_Nova_Scotia)

<sup>113</sup> They performed alongside the Sensational Jacks, Five Casting Campbells, the Bell-Thazer Trio, the Eurica Troupe, Kanazawa Japs, Les Eldons, and the Gaudsmidt Brothers.

With putting in as many shifts as they did, it's worth considering for a moment whether any of the rockets were ever forced to take 'sick leave'? Obviously they were all young and physically in their primes, but what if one got a cold, or worse, contracted the flu? Had they been performing in Germany, the manager had the right, if one of the members was sick, to demand the rest of the troupe to play the engagement as best it can, with the salary then being reduced proportionately.<sup>114</sup> It seems likely Büttner adhered to much the same ethic in America.<sup>115</sup>

But what if the individual remained sick for a number of days, for example, because of an injurious fall from a ladder? As Gypsy Rose Lee's mother would say: "*We'd be in a fine fix if one...God forbid... should break a leg.*"<sup>116</sup>

In Germany, an act got five days before it was cancelled and in those days a 'no good' reputation spread very quickly along the US circuit grapevine. No manager, especially a father and son partnership responsible for two acts in a foreign land (and in turn, Johnson & Lowenstein), wished to be followed by such. Despite health insurance and a minimum quantity of dollars in the girls' purses, theatre managers could ill-afford to wait for an act to recover. Neither could the Büttners, so keeping the girls healthy, safe and in their sights remained paramount.

A second challenge Oswald had to be prepared for was that of a troupier wanting 'out' altogether. Obviously he risked plenty when taking half a dozen teenage *Fräuleins* to the other side of the planet, especially in an era of gangsters and gold diggers.

*Das Programm* reported in 1926 on the rights of German female troupers abroad, remarking that members were entitled to leave and demand transportation home, if they so wished.<sup>117</sup> But in the manager's defence it also recognized that "*he cannot, without ado, change the girls ad libitum in the middle of the month.*" Accordingly therefore, both parties were expected to give two week's notice. Mind you, a manager was neither entitled to confiscate a girl's passport (much less her clothes, trunks etc.) when relations turned sour – the passport in particular being personal property and an important means of identification. The only bargaining tool he had then at his disposal – albeit a pretty important one – was to retain salary due.

In the end a great deal hinged on trust and we know both Büttners' were keenly credited for the fair manner in which they treated the stars of their stage. Let's also not forget, however, that those girls will have not only depended on their managers for their safekeeping but on each other too. It only took a slip from an understander to bring a topmounter tumbling down. Fostering team spirit among the members of their acts will therefore have been critically important too.



Team-building Day Out:  
Atlantic City, summer 1929

<sup>114</sup> *Das Programm. Fremdsprachiger Teil.* December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1926.

<sup>115</sup> Although US law may have taken precedence, the contracts between Büttner and the girls and/or their next of kin were drawn up in Germany and ultimately will have adhered to its laws in case of any dispute, according to Johnson&Lowenstein's June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1927 announcement in *Das Programm*.

<sup>116</sup> *Gypsy: A Memoir.* Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 27

<sup>117</sup> *Das Programm. Fremdsprachiger Teil.* February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1926

Whilst no catastrophic event ever appears to have floored the rockets, one was on the horizon that would eventually spoil the act's run – with little regard for its reliability or reputation.

On Sunday October 6<sup>th</sup>, it was still business as usual. *The Pittsburgh Press* claimed the rockets were “one of the fastest dancing acts in vaudeville” and “veritable whirlwinds in acrobatic stunts”<sup>118</sup> when they played Sheridan Square Theatre in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia.<sup>119</sup> Less than three weeks later, on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1929, however, the New York Stock Exchange dragged the world economy into the deepest depression it has ever known. Black Thursday it was dubbed, and was in turn succeeded five days later by Black Tuesday on October 29<sup>th</sup>, when the market crashed.

The Great Depression which followed pinched everyone's pocket. It crippled the theatre and nightclubs, ravaged the billboards and chased whatever capitalists there were away. Unemployment ensued and the performer's playground grew grim. Instead of a consumer culture there was chaos, with products and services no-one could afford to buy<sup>120</sup> - including tickets for theatre shows.

Bryson in his book, ‘1927,’ traces the crash's origins back to a conglomerate of bankers<sup>121</sup> who met, oddly enough, beneath the flightpath Charles Lindbergh had flown just a few hours prior to his trans-Atlantic crossing. On that occasion they had agreed to further cut interest rates in the United States by a half point as an additional spur to European economic recovery.

That though “*was just enough to light the fire that sent the market through the roof,*” says Bryson during an interview with Diane Rehm that was broadcast on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013. “*The numbers were great for awhile. But as always happens, there has to be a correction and in 1929 the correction came very suddenly and the market...collapsed so severely that there was no recovery from that and the Great Depression followed.*”<sup>122</sup>

The crises quickly spread throughout Europe due to the combined effect of the withdrawal of US assets from European banks, the drying up of trade and of protectionist reactions from governments – first in the US, then Europe.<sup>123</sup>

Pola Negri would later remark the crash “*drove a great many to suicide and mental breakdown,*” and herself mourned the end of an era: “*What a wonderful decade the twenties had been for us! There would never be another like it!*”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *The Pittsburgh Press*. October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1929 (online at: [news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1144&dat=19291005&id=10sbAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=A0sEAAAAIIBAJ&pg=3967,2496176](https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1144&dat=19291005&id=10sbAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=A0sEAAAAIIBAJ&pg=3967,2496176))

<sup>119</sup> See: [cinematreasures.org/theaters/16551](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/16551)

<sup>120</sup> *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, the Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Jerome Charyn. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg. 61

<sup>121</sup> The Bank of England, Bank of France, the Reichsbank in Germany, and the New York Federal Reserve Bank.

<sup>122</sup> See: [thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2013-09-30/bill-bryson-one-summer-america-1927/transcript](http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2013-09-30/bill-bryson-one-summer-america-1927/transcript)

<sup>123</sup> The same causes, however, do not produce the same effects on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, a strong democratic culture propels Roosevelt to power with his New Deal. In Europe, the crises is often presented as the failure of democracy, and the alternative outcomes in the form of totalitarianism, red, black or brown. *America: It's Also Our History!* (An exhibition which ran in Belgium until July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011). See: [www.expo-europe-usa.be/en](http://www.expo-europe-usa.be/en)

<sup>124</sup> Pola Negri. *Memoirs of a Star*. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 345 and pg. 405.



In its November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1929 issue, *Das Programm* published a news piece that had first been reported in *Billboard* magazine on October 12<sup>th</sup> entitled: „*Bad Prospects for Small-time Acts in America.*“ In it, the magazine had claimed times were never as hard as today, with both unemployment and competition high and re-invention the key to survival. *Das Programm* was none too impressed, retorting with the adage, that's easier said than done for an act that has toured its brandname for years.

For the time being, all the rockets could do was kick-on and fulfil their engagements (after all, they'd only just got their second season underway). They were next on stage at the Palace Theatre in South Bend, Indiana at the end of October.<sup>125</sup> Now listed on the US National Register of Historic Places, it had been built in 1921 as part of the Orpheum Theatre chain and was subsequently known as the „*Pride of South Bend.*“<sup>126</sup>

In early November the troupe returned to New York where the order of the day appears to have been a trip to the photo atelier in order to pose for the camera. A picture of elegance, her bubble appears not yet to have burst and it falls to Frank Cullen, host of the American Vaudeville Museum, to tell me why;

*“In show business, performers wished to look prosperous to theatre managers, press and even the public. And they wanted their families to be happy for the real (or faked) success.”<sup>127</sup>*

Judging by the message beneath the portrait, Little Nannj had her mother in mind when she mailed it, although I suspect that was not the only copy she had on herself, the rest being intended to ensure their diaries remained fully booked.

Several more shots of my grandmother in the same apparel turn up and in one she stands alongside the other rockets, almost as if to prove the six were indeed a touring act. Regrettably the locations are not disclosed, although I would fashion a guess they too were in (if not close to) New York State.<sup>128</sup> The shot of the troupers alongside their trunks reminds me of a Dietrich portrait taken by Martin Munkácsi not many years later in 1941. It's only a shame elements of mine are over-exposed!



Top:  
„*Meiner Lieber Mutti zum eurigen Andenken and Deine älteste Tochter, Nannj. New York, 7 Nov. 1929.*“  
Right:  
(Post-photo shoot):  
„*But I like this coat. No I want to give it back!*“  
Bottom:  
Hardly „*bundle actors* – light travellers without baggage.“

<sup>125</sup> *Das Programm*. Aus der *Auslandspresse*. Amerika. November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1929. Nr. 1439.

<sup>126</sup> See: [www.historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/movietheaters/orpheum/orpheum-1928.html](http://www.historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/movietheaters/orpheum/orpheum-1928.html)

<sup>127</sup> Personal correspondence with Frank Cullen on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2011

<sup>128</sup> Not quite convincing enough to claim the location was Old Queens Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ

From Iowa  
to Missouri  
in a month,  
November  
1929



The rockets' next stop saw them return to Wisconsin, only this time to Milwaukee in the Great Lakes Region where they performed at The Riverside Theatre which had only been open since April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1928.<sup>129</sup> From there it was on to the Palace Theatre in Rockford, Illinois, about 100km northwest of Chicago,<sup>130</sup> and after that the RKO Iowa Theatre in Cedar Rapids, according to *Das Programm* on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1929, another newbie, in business since June 1928.<sup>131</sup>

Des Moines in Iowa, 150 km west, followed, where the rockets jointly headlined the variety show at the Orpheum Theater.<sup>132</sup> Like most other newspapers reciting from the 'notes for editors,' in its preview *The Pella Chronicle* announced: "*The Six Rockets are Europe's surpassing acrobatic sextette...six young ladies whose routine is varied and particularly noted for speed.*"<sup>133</sup>



Possibly the most enduring piece of memorabilia inherited from my grandmother is an advertisement used to promote the girls' engagement some 250 km south in Kansas City, Missouri at Loew's Midland Theatre.<sup>134</sup> Although it is undated, its reverse refers to the release of a talkie entitled: '*The Taming of the Shrew*' featuring Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks which screened from November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1929.<sup>135</sup> In the ad, Little Nannö is bottom left while Margot is bottom right.

That engagement marked something of a watershed for the girls. Until now the act had performed almost exclusively at RKO theatres. Bar a turn on a Loew's stage earlier that year in January in Rochester, the sojourn kicked-off a run with Loew's that would last the best part of the next six months. It suggests something greater was already happening behind the scenes. Had the troupe picked up an extra date on account of their photo shoot? Or was RKO cleaning up its roster?

Hinting at the nascent crisis, *Das Programm* reported on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1929, of the reorganisation of RKO's central booking office by the president himself, Hiram S. Brown.<sup>136</sup> Three new booking departments were being created; one covering New York and the eastern states, one for the territory west of Cleveland (Ohio), plus a third for 'the rest.' His aim? Under the monicker, „now or never,“ it was ostensibly to bring the good old days back to the Keith Orpheum circuit.

<sup>129</sup> *Das Programm*. November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1929

<sup>130</sup> *Das Programm*. November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1929. See also: [cinematreasures.org/theaters/5984](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5984)

<sup>131</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre\\_Cedar\\_Rapids#Modern\\_era](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_Cedar_Rapids#Modern_era)

<sup>132</sup> *The Pella Chronicle*. November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1929. Online [here](#).

<sup>133</sup> The act performed hot on the heels of the then popular Ziegfeld show, '*Rio Rita*,' many of whose players appeared in the original Ziegfeld Follies production.

<sup>134</sup> *Das Programm*. December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1929 (revealing the paper was usually two weeks behind the show).

<sup>135</sup> See: [www.imdb.com/title/tt0020479/?ref=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_5](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020479/?ref=fn_al_tt_5)

<sup>136</sup> See: [mppda.flinders.edu.au/people/74](http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/people/74)

*Das Programm*, however, cast doubt upon the pedigrees of those appointed to fulfill that mandate, and readers of its December 8<sup>th</sup> issue won't have been surprised to learn of the dismissals (by the new appointees) of 10 long-serving RKO agents, 13 booking managers and 11 producers.<sup>137</sup> Although there were no immediately familiar names (such as Max Lowenstein, whom I suspect brought the rockets to 'Keith's'), those who were had played key roles in bringing German acts to the US. Leo Fitzgerald, for example, who had managed the US-based *H.B. Marinelli* talent office since the latter's death in January 1924. How much might that hurt The Six Marinellis, I wondered?

Change was evidently at hand and yet Büttner was ahead of the curve. After all, the crash had hardly heralded any particularly new surprises for vaudeville (other than making it harder for patrons to find 50 cents for an evening's entertainment). Assuming it was another of Büttner's tactical *nous*, he (or his representatives) saw to it that they were booked by Loew's before the competition got there first. Especially important since their visas expired in less than 12 weeks.

Loew's Midland Theatre<sup>138</sup> in Kansas City belonged in fact to a chain of some 200 theaters which were hosted by Marcus Loew that spread across the eastern US. According to theatre enthusiasts' webpage, *Cinema Treasures*, he owned entertainment venues from New York to Georgia and from Louisiana to Missouri.

In Frank Cullen's words, Loew's was 'good' small-time and it was on account of the market shake-up, noted *Das Programm* on December 8<sup>th</sup>, that Loew's had been seeking acts for tours lasting as long as 39 weeks! Furthermore, an article published in the same German trade paper in April the following year notes Loew's had actually been given the freedom to engage Keith acts, frankly because RKO could no longer afford to pay their high salaries. Frank Cullen elaborates:

*"The two-a-day policy of the big-time theatres did not long survive the success of sound movies or the collapse of the economy in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>139</sup> The once grand flagships of the premier circuits could no longer afford the high weekly talent costs and the overhead because their audiences could no longer afford high ticket prices. Theatres turned either to a grind policy of four to six shows a day while some majestic vaudeville houses adopted a presentation-house policy, offering four or five acts of vaudeville preceding a major motion picture. Acts that had become accustomed to 40 weeks a year of big-time vaudeville bookings learned to accept the reality that relatively steady work in vaudeville meant going back to the (good) small time like Loew's."*

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<sup>137</sup> Among those who may have had German origins were Max Hart (an agent and manager since 1911 according to Frank Cullen), Leo Fitzgerald (a vaudeville broker and agent in the business since 1917), Charles Bierbauer (who had worked with Max Hart in 1919), Max Flamm, Geo Oberland and songwriter/producer, Alex Gerber.

<sup>138</sup> The Midland opened in 1927 and was immediately celebrated for its oriental rugs and thick carpeting covering the floors, as well as its ornately decorated lobby and art objects. The theatre survived the economic downturn and has been listed on the National Registry of Historic Places since 1977. It stopped showing movies in 1981 after becoming a venue for stage shows, concerts, and other performing arts. Today it remains one of the grandest US movie palaces. See also: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midland\\_Theatre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midland_Theatre) and [cinematreasures.org/theater/2612/](https://cinematreasures.org/theater/2612/)

<sup>139</sup> Frank Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. Under: 'Circuits and Theatres.'



Until the end of the year, however, it would seem the rockets honoured their gigs at those RKO theatres for which they had been booked. From Kansas the girls' trouped north for shows at the 1927 RKO Orpheum Theatre<sup>140</sup> in Sioux City, Iowa<sup>141</sup> and from there it was east to Pennsylvania, where on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1929 *The Pittsburgh Press* reports the act performed at the downtown Harris Theatre.<sup>142</sup> "In the vaudeville" noted the reviewer, Karl B. Krug "the Six Rockets are the leaders, cutting up acrobatics on a ladder." (He was much less positive about the next act, whom he describes as 'ancient,' revealing not all reviewers were compassionate about the artists they reported on)!

Following Pittsburgh it was west once more to Toledo, Ohio (south of Detroit) where they performed according to *Das Programm* at the RKO Rivoli Theatre around December 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>143</sup> I suspect it was back then to the Big Apple (a New York City nickname increasingly bounded about by the late 1920s)<sup>144</sup> and on to Ellis Island to renew their visas for another six months, based I suspect on a 20 week (half-season) contract offered by Loew's, that helped extend their stay (and their incomes) to July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1930.



Among their Christmas mail they will have discovered greetings from their 'sister' act, the Six Marinelli Girls, whose all-smiles photograph, right, tells us they were in San Francisco on December 10<sup>th</sup>. A second photo, presumably included in the same package, was taken on Long Beach in Los Angeles suggesting California was affording them an enviable base! Having caused no end of confusion, it was eventually thanks to my coupling of these two pictures that I was able to confirm the appearance of the returning rocket, Melanie Elisabeth Geidel. At the same time, however, the picture threw up a new mystery; namely, what was another former rocket, who was presumed to be back in Leipzig, doing alongside them?<sup>145</sup>

Top: "Zum freundlichen Gedenken von dein 6 Marinelli Girls. San Francisco. 10.12.29" (obviously missing a couple of their personnel)

Bottom: Interspersed within the same line-up one sees former rocket, Melanie Elisabeth Geidel, second from right. The 'marinelli' on the left is another former rocket, namely, Gertrud Tafel.

<sup>140</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheum\\_Theatre\\_\(Sioux\\_City,\\_Iowa\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheum_Theatre_(Sioux_City,_Iowa))

<sup>141</sup> *Das Programm*. December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1929.

<sup>142</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harris\\_Theater\\_\(Pittsburgh\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harris_Theater_(Pittsburgh))

<sup>143</sup> See: [cinematreasures.org/theaters/10923](https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/10923)

<sup>144</sup> Following its introduction by John J. Fitz Gerald, a sports writer in reference to New York horse-racing in 1921.

See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big\\_Apple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Apple)

<sup>145</sup> Searches of shipping manifests for entry via New York add to the mystery by confirming she sailed just the once, in 1923. Had she sailed Hamburg-Miami-Havana-Panama-LA in order to substitute another marinelli? It was noted in Chapter XI that she lost her mother in April 1928, which may in turn have 'freed' her to return to the stage, in case she had been obliged to care for Mrs. Tafel. A more plausible explanation is not forthcoming.



Despite their new arrangement with Loew's, the rockets' first performance of 1930 was given at the Binghamton Theatre in Upstate New York<sup>146</sup> from January 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> (marking incidentally another 'return' for Little Nannö, who had last visited the town in 1926). A slightly ironic preview appears in the *Binghamton Press* on January 8<sup>th</sup>, however, when its correspondent writes: "*The Six Rockets...open the vaudeville program at the Binghamton theatre tonight for the last times*" – continuing fortunately, "*inasmuch as an entire change of program takes place tomorrow*"!

By the end of February, the rockets were back in New York, on stage at Brooklyn's Loew's Metropolitan theatre.<sup>147</sup> Its history, like so many former vaudeville venues today, is a fascinating one and is described in more detail in the textbox below.

#### 12.4: Secrets to Sustainability

Loew's Metropolitan theatre first opened its doors in 1918 after which it presented vaudeville alongside movies until 1935, when Loew's discontinued the former in all of its New York area theatres except the *State* on Broadway in Manhattan. In December 1978 it was converted into a four-screen theater by Cineplex-Odeon and in July 1996 closed its doors for good.



During the following years the theatre fell into a sorry state of disrepair. The ceiling bore holes, seating rotted from mildew and rainwater, and the building began to fall apart. It was about to be demolished when the Brooklyn Tabernacle, "*A Church for Worshipping God and Loving Others*" purchased the building and extensively renovated and restored it to its original form. In June 2002, it reopened and today is at the heart of a thriving community.

I had the pleasure of receiving a tour of this amazing facility in April 2011, and the 3,000 seater former palace is as popular today as it was in Vaudeville's heyday. In fact the church has grown since it opened its doors and members of the community flood in three times every Sunday to worship in this majestic place. The gentlemen who showed me around, Sam and William, told me that the Sunday offering collected during each service (at 9, 12 and 6) tends to be enough to cover the maintenance costs, which suggests a potential business model for sustaining other theatres, assuming the funding can be secured to first renovate theatres in similar condition.

I asked whether the theatre rents out its space in the mid-week for concert events or traditional theatre shows, to which my hosts responded "*So far we've not needed to – although that option remains.*" Certainly that tends to be the model followed by other theatres such as the *Bardavon* in New York State (which I might add, does not have the benefit of a Sunday collection).

Sources: [cinematreasures.org/theater/1373/](http://cinematreasures.org/theater/1373/); [www.nycago.org/Organs/Bkln/html/LoewsMetroTheatre.html](http://www.nycago.org/Organs/Bkln/html/LoewsMetroTheatre.html) and [www.brooklyntabernacle.org/](http://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/)

Troupe engagements followed throughout March, including a return upstate to Loew's State Theater in Syracuse,<sup>148</sup> where The Six Rockets "*start[ed] the bill with a crackerjack acrobatic routine*"<sup>149</sup> (whilst more curiously accompanying the theatre's first talkie – the upcoming Oscar winner, 'The Broadway Melody'.)<sup>150</sup> A couple of weeks later our "*European girls*" returned to Loew's Rochester Theater to "*do attractive posturing on ladders and the floor.*"<sup>151</sup>

<sup>146</sup> See: [cinematreasures.org/theaters/11360](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/11360) and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binghamton\\_Theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binghamton_Theatre)

<sup>147</sup> See: [cinematreasures.org/theater/1373/](http://cinematreasures.org/theater/1373/)

<sup>148</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landmark\\_Theatre\\_\(Syracuse,\\_New\\_York\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landmark_Theatre_(Syracuse,_New_York))

<sup>149</sup> According to the Syracuse Herald on Sunday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1930. Pg. 37. Online [here](http://www.syracuseherald.com).

<sup>150</sup> It won the award on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1930. See: [www.imdb.com/event/ev0000003/1930-1](http://www.imdb.com/event/ev0000003/1930-1)

<sup>151</sup> *The Phelps Citizen* and the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* on Monday, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1930.

As if timed to coincide with their visit to the city, a pair named 'Elisabeth and Arno' arrived in Rochester, referred only to as 'guest actors'.<sup>152</sup> Could the marinellis' have been passing through on their way to New York? It would certainly appear so since on April 12<sup>th</sup> they were booked as part of "a vaudeville show of popular headliners" at New York's RKO Hippodrome, in an event billed a celebration of its 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>153</sup> With notable gigs at the Palace too,<sup>154</sup> I had to wonder, were the marinelli's West Coast touring days nearing the end too? According to their members' shipping manifests, their visas, like those of the rockets, were only valid until the summertime, in their cases, July 6<sup>th</sup>.



Above:  
Film Poster for 'The Blue Angel'  
released in Germany, April 1<sup>st</sup>,  
1930 Source: Wikipedia

Below:  
Bay Ridge Theatre, Late 1920s.  
Source: digitalgallery.nypl.org

Still, not all was doom and gloom. Spring 1930 was an exciting time to be in 'the city that never sleeps' – another well-known New York City monicker, and the title of a 1924 movie too<sup>155</sup> – although it may have escaped most of our acrobats' attention, construction of the then world's tallest skyscraper,<sup>156</sup> *The Empire State Building*, got underway on March 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>157</sup> Designed in Art Deco style, with all 102 stories completed and a skin sheathing its skeleton come November, it already stood head and shoulders above New York's other skyscrapers. Furthermore, a month after that project got underway, Little Nanny's career 'twin,' Marlene Dietrich, who herself was now riding on the success of the European release of her 'Blue Angel' movie, arrived in New York on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1930, under a new contract to Paramount. There's no doubt as to who was the bigger star by now, what with four days of publicity shoots and 'meet-the-press' moments to follow before she took a train to the West Coast.<sup>158</sup> But I wonder whether my grandmother paused for a moment and thought that just maybe Dietrich was following in her footsteps?!



A few weeks later, on Sunday May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1930, it was the rockets turn to be in New York, where they put in a show at Brooklyn's Bay Ridge Theatre on Third Avenue. The theatre used to be part of Keeney's chain until Loew's bought it in 1927 or 1928.<sup>159</sup> Although it closed its doors in 1963, it still stands and today plays host to a McDonald's, a pharmacy, a drug store and fitness centre! In 2011, I loped atop the building to relish a grand view of Manhattan sprawled before my eyes. From my vantage point I could pick out the Empire State and Chrysler buildings too.

<sup>152</sup> According to what was recalled to have been an *ancestry.com* file (since misplaced)

<sup>153</sup> According to *The New Leader*, a New York Paper. The theatre meanwhile was at 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. See also: [cinematreaasures.org/theaters/534](http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/534)

<sup>154</sup> An assumption, since adverts appearing in *Das Programm* on October 19<sup>th</sup> and October 26<sup>th</sup> do not indicate when the Palace shows were undertaken.

<sup>155</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_City\\_That\\_Never\\_Sleeps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_City_That_Never_Sleeps)

<sup>156</sup> A skyscraper was originally the monicker for those sails found at the top of a ship's masts

<sup>157</sup> *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, the Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Jerome Charyn. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg. 42

<sup>158</sup> Dietrich. Malene Sheppard Skærved. 2003. Online [here](http://here). Pg. 62-63.

<sup>159</sup> According to Warren G. Harris at Cinema Treasures via his posting at the Bay Ridge Theatre: [cinematreaasures.org/theater/1270/](http://cinematreaasures.org/theater/1270/)

The Bay Ridge engagement almost marked the end of the rockets' Loew's tour, however. A month earlier, *Das Programm's* April 6<sup>th</sup> issue, had already announced the circuit was struggling to fill houses, reporting that;

*"After the painful experience in which RKO played and overpaid 'Attractions' or so-called 'name acts,' Loew has now fallen victim to having committed a large number of these 'Top Guns,' confident that they would result in sell-out shows."*<sup>160</sup>

Two and half months later the same paper wrote: *"Schlechte Zeiten für Loew-Agenten"* (*Bad Times for Loew Agents*), revealing they too were feeling the pinch:

*"Even a year ago, the possession of a Loew franchise was a real privilege to which New York agents bounded towards. Today business is such that most Loew Agents are miserably poor and cannot even pay their rents, mainly because of the talkies."*<sup>161</sup>

Frank Cullen was also melancholy about the demise of Loew's 'small-time,' explaining what it meant for the artists it had engaged;

*"Eventually, that option shrank," he writes "and as circuits and individual theatres abandoned vaudeville to book movies, acts either found something else to do in show business or they relied upon independent agents to find them work. For many, it was a case of taking whatever was offered; often a single night's booking at a fraternal hall."*<sup>162</sup>

Gypsy Rose Lee's recollections of making the agent's rounds in the early 1920s offer a stark reminder as regards the unpleasantness of that business and one can imagine they were even less welcoming come 1930. She recalls the process to have been:

*"Boring and sometimes humiliating. The agents never stood up...[but] mostly glared at us over their stubby cigars and went right on barking into a telephone. There were always two or three telephones on their desks and we would pretend we weren't listening while they shouted and yelled into one after the other." They would take along their photographs, a few newspaper clippings and evidence of a contract. But, she adds, "the agents never looked at them."*<sup>163</sup>

Whilst in Brooklyn, however, Büttner experienced a stroke of luck. He spied a poster of the 'Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus,' which filled him with hope for securing several more months' work. After all, the rockets weren't due home until summer 1931, which meant their 'girlpower' remained at his disposal. So before heading north for a last Loew's gig at its 'Yonkers Theatre'<sup>164</sup> from 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> May,<sup>165</sup> Büttner left the girls to their own devices and headed for Broadway. He took up with Lowenstein, insisting that for all the act's positive reviews opportunity had to lie somewhere, kindly asking him to try those who'd brought him to the US in the first place - they'd all had circus connections after all, and a cut on a rockets' booking could still be worth their while.

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<sup>160</sup> *Das Programm*. April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1930. Nr.1462

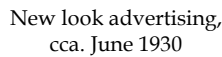
<sup>161</sup> *Das Programm*. July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

<sup>162</sup> *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. F.Cullen. 2006. In 'Circuits & Theatres.'

<sup>163</sup> *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 106.

<sup>164</sup> See: [cinematreaasures.org/theaters/6874](http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/6874)

<sup>165</sup> Where according to Pg. 11 of the *Yonkers Statesman* on Wednesday May 14<sup>th</sup>, the European acrobats, tumblers and musicians were second in the vaudeville billing "do[ing] difficult feats on ladders and other aerial contrivances, besides tumbling stunts on the stage and musical numbers."



Their manager was left with a choice: either throw in the towel and take the troupers home, or lay-off in the hope work picks up. The latter option required another six month 'temporary stay' *Besuchsvisum*, but without a contract, they had no alternative but to leave and re-enter the country.<sup>166</sup> In

Today when we think of Cuba, we imagine the ailing Castro, his brother, and Che Gevuera who together overthrew the US-backed Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. But in the years up until then, and especially during the 1920's and 1930's, Cuba was 'regarded as the US's backyard.'<sup>167</sup> So when the rockets visited, American-owned hotels and restaurants were doing their best to lure its tourists who took time off to 'escape' prohibition.

*"So near and yet so foreign,"* a popular tourist postcard at the time proclaimed, while residents of Cleveland, Ohio were noted for saying: *"and think, it's so close to home."* Another in St. Petersburg (near Tampa in Florida) pointed out Cuba was: *"only a few hours ride from the States."*<sup>168</sup> The island was chic, in vogue and had already been the setting for scores of films. Yet at the same time it was a den of vice and prostitution, with the Wall Street Crash leading to falls in the price of sugar and contributing to a rise in political unrest and repression.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Barely months after the rockets' visit, on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1930, the republic's constitution was suspended. Cuba descended into instability with protesting students, known as the Generation of 1930, turning to violence in opposition to the increasingly unpopular Machado. From 1933 Batista, supported by the US, led Cuba until 1959 in various guises as President, dictator, and military leader. More: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba)



For the rockets, the trip also appears to have been an opportunity to take Billboard magazine's advice in reinventing themselves. As the photo right shows, the girls' wear grass skirts and stand before a mock-Hawaiian mud hut, mimicking the 'Hula' dance.<sup>170</sup> It looks every bit the classic publicity portrait, contrived for an 'all singing, all dancing' musical act, looking to secure new bookings.



"My dear mother, greetings from Havana, from your Nannj."  
July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1930

But is it possible the troupe went to Cuba for more than just to renew their visas? Both Little Nannj's eldest daughter and grandson recall the fun and jokes made of the occasion with the girls having sang that well-known ditty of the era; "Yes we have no bananas. We have no bananas today!"<sup>171</sup> Throughout the following years, Little Nannj's singing of it became something of a joke.

Curiously, around the same time, *Das Programm* ran a piece entitled: "No More Illusions over the Hawaiian Hula Hula Dance,"<sup>172</sup> in which it notes the 'pikant' dance, often performed in variety shows, on the cabaret stage, in films and in the circus as well as in spectacles at fairs and in markets, no longer has anything to do with the Polynesians, in fact. On the contrary, notes the author, they are quite modernly dressed, with *Bubikopf* hairdos, silk stockings and swank evening dresses. Grass skirts, he adds, are worn only by Japanese tourists – and my grandmother and her troupe, it would seem. But having looked into Havana's theatres at the time, it becomes clear there were no RKO or Loew's institutions, casting doubt over any suspicions they may have traveled to Havana to perform.

Perhaps most notably, the portrait above was the last to have been signed and dated during Little Nannj's years spent vaudevilling, although of course they still hoped to work throughout their visa extension. Another photograph shows my grandmother aboard a ship, suspected to have been the *SS St. Louis* in summertime (the sun casts short shadows),<sup>173</sup> which implies she was sailing the return leg of her journey from Havana to New York.<sup>174</sup> As the text box overleaf reveals, the ship itself would later become a media star, albeit for the wrong reason.



Textiles was a key sector of the Cuban economy in 1930, according to Leslie Bethell in 1993's ['Cuba: A Short History'](#)

<sup>170</sup> Hula dancing is a complex art form, and there are many hand motions used to represent the words in a song or chant. For example, hand movements can signify aspects of nature, such as the swaying of a tree in the breeze or a wave in the ocean, or a feeling or emotion, such as fondness or yearning. Foot and hip movements often pull from a basic library of steps including the kaholo, ka'o, kawelu, hela, 'uwehe, and 'ami. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hula](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hula)  
<sup>171</sup> In Berlin it was sung in 1929 as: "Ausgerechnet Bananen," See Otto Friedrich. *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* from 1972. Pg. 289.

<sup>172</sup> *Das Programm*. *Aus der Auslandspresse*. Amerika. October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

<sup>173</sup> The *SS St. Louis* made her maiden voyage on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1929, according to: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MS St. Louis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MS_St._Louis), regularly sailing the trans-Atlantic route from Hamburg to New York for the Hamburg America Line, but also making cruises to the West Indies.

### 12.5: The SS St. Louis: A Refugee Ship Desired by None

The luxury liner was made infamous by history when on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1939 it carried 937 Jewish refugees from Germany hoping to reach the US via Cuba. Upon reaching the Caribbean, however they were refused entry. Captain Gustav Schröder tried without success to find homes for his passengers elsewhere (being prevented entry to the US for example via the US Coast Guard), before being forced to return to Antwerp a month later.



Eventually 288 passengers were taken in by Great Britain, all of whom survived World War II bar one who died in an air raid in 1940. The Netherlands took in 181, Belgium 214 and France 224. Some 87 of those who remained on the continent emigrated before Germany invaded and of the 532 left, 278 survived while 254 perished in concentration camps.

The event was the subject of a 1974 book, *Voyage of the Damned* and was adapted for a film of the same title, released in 1976.

Source: [www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27373131](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27373131). Image: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MS\\_St.\\_Louis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MS_St._Louis)

When the troupe returned to the US, they learned that Johnson and Lowenstein had secured the rockets a final return to Utica's Stanley Theatre.<sup>175</sup> There they shared the bill with two other acts and a vitaphone movie called *'Bride of the Regiment'* which ran until July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1930.<sup>176</sup>

Had the acrobats seen the final shows' preview, I wonder whether they'd have cared to take notice of the following announcement which appeared alongside:

*"A topic of timely interest – one that has been featured in bold type in newspapers above everything else and has been the chief item of conversation of the office boy and millionaire – ...the inside machinations of the New York Stock Exchange; Wall Street."*



In other words, Colombia Pictures had dramatised that event responsible for bringing about *'the Great Depression'* within a movie entitled, *'Wall Street.'* Ralph Ince and Aileen Pringle took on the leading roles whilst the film was scheduled to screen at Utica's neighbouring Lincoln Theater that same day. Did the troupe actually care enough to understand what exactly had happened on Wall Street during that one week in the previous year, or was home finally beckoning?

<sup>174</sup> Oddly enough I have not been able to obtain details of either Little Nanný's or the ship's 1930 arrivals to New York. Alternative sailings from/to Havana were possible via Miami, Tampa, Key West (all Florida) as well as San Francisco, Boston and New Orleans. Another popular routing from the 1920s was with the Ward Line whose ships (incl. the Havana, Orizaba, Siboney, Mexico, San Jacinto and Monterey) all sailed from New York (via Miami). The Cunard Line began advertising a departure from New York for Havana every Saturday at the end of 1928 with its Transatlantic liner, Caronia while Florida ports also saw regular sailings to Havana from the American P&O Co., with daily overnight sailings from Tampa and Key West (90 miles away), and later from both P&O and the Clyde Line, with nightly sailings from Miami. See: [www.cybercruises.com/cruisecolumn\\_nov23.htm](http://www.cybercruises.com/cruisecolumn_nov23.htm). The Panama Pacific Line was notable for taking 16 days (with the Mongolia, Pennsylvania, California and Virginia) from San Francisco via the Panama Canal and Havana to New York (see [www.atlantictransportline.us](http://www.atlantictransportline.us) and [here](#)).

<sup>175</sup> See: [cinematreasures.org/theater/1071/](http://cinematreasures.org/theater/1071/)

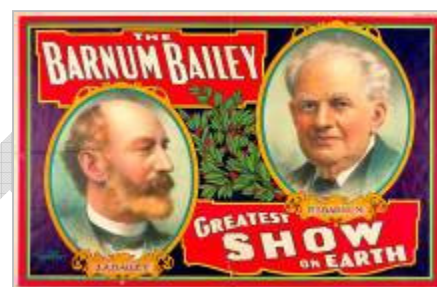
<sup>176</sup> Utica Observer Dispatch. July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1930

Certainly *Das Programm* bore more bad news over the coming weeks, with many US vaudeville houses set to close over the summer.<sup>177</sup> The New York Hippodrome had already put up the shutters for the season, the Palace too pulled the plug on its Sunday shows, while the paper announced just 40 exclusive acts had succeeded in winning a 35 week booking on the RKO circuit. Even Eva Tanguay, a Canadian singer and entertainer billing herself “the girl who made vaudeville famous,”<sup>178</sup> was said to be earning USD 100 per week instead of the weekly USD 2,500 she had commanded over the past five years.<sup>179</sup> The only way to stay working it seems was to take significant cuts in salary.

*Das Programm*'s August 10<sup>th</sup> issue evidenced a further shift in theatre programming towards the talkies when it disclosed that *Keith-Orpheum-Vaudeville* was to become *RKO-Varieties*. Come October 1930, the trade paper reported that vaudeville theatres were fighting a losing battle with movie theatres over entry ticket prices, and by March 1931, the best Loew's was able to offer acts was no more than a nine and half week tour.<sup>180</sup> By all accounts the vaudeville industry had practically collapsed.

The rockets' days of marquee stardom were over. But if every cloud does have a silver lining, then the rockets soon learned theirs had accompanied them upstate. As the troupe completed its Utica show, Büttner, wearing a smile from ear to ear, announced they were joining the circus. And not just any, but the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey® Circus,<sup>181</sup> renowned for the so-called ‘Greatest Show on Earth.’ A colossal enterprise, its 1600 personnel carted 23 displays acts that season throughout central and eastern USA on 90 railway wagons (two of which were used for advertising alone).<sup>182</sup> Within the rockets' specialist domain, there was ‘tightrope and acrobats,’ ‘comedy acrobats’ and ‘vaulters and acrobats.’

The following day, July 17<sup>th</sup>, the rockets and Büttner would join the circus in Elmira, some 125 km from Utica. Touring the Midwest and the Deep South before concluding at Montgomery, Alabama would at least ensure them work until October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1930.<sup>183</sup>



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1930 Route

John Ringling, proprietor

March/April	August
Mar. 27 - Apr. 5 New York City, Coliseum	1 Sterling, Ill.
Apr. 7-27 New York City, Madison Square Garden	2-10 Chicago (Grant Park), Ill.
Apr. 30 Boston, Mass.	11 Milwaukee, Wis.
	12 Madison, Wis.
	13 Rockford, Ill.
May	14 Clinton, Ia.
1-10 Boston, Mass.	15 Dubuque, Ia.
12-17 Brooklyn, N. Y.	16 Waterloo, Ia.
19-24 Philadelphia, Pa.	18 Fort Dodge, Ia.
26-29 W. Philadelphia, Pa.	19 Albert Lea, Minn.
29 Camden, N. J.	20 Estherville, Ia.
30 Atlantic City, N. J.	21 Sioux Falls, S. D.
31 Reading, Pa.	22 Sioux City, Ia.
	23 Sheldahl, Ia.
June	24 Norfolk, Neb.
2-3 Washington, D. C.	25 Omaha, Neb.
4-5 Baltimore, Md.	26 St. Joseph, Mo.
6 Wilmington, Del.	27 Kansas City, Mo.
7 Lancaster, Pa.	28 Chillicothe, Mo.
9 Jersey City, N. J.	29 Moberly, Mo.
10-11 Newark, N. J.	30 Quincy, Ill.
12 Allentown, Pa.	
13 Wilkes-Barre, Pa.	September
14 Harrisburg, Pa.	1 St. Louis, Mo.
16-17 Pittsburgh, Pa.	2 Jefferson City, Mo.
18 Youngstown, O.	3 Lexington, Kan.
19 Akron, O.	4 Pittsburg, Mo.
20-21 Cleveland, O.	5 Springfield, Mo.
23 Buffalo, N. Y.	6 Joplin, Mo.
24 Niagara Falls, N. Y.	8 Topeka, Kan.
25 Rochester, N. Y.	9 Wichita, Kan.
26 Syracuse, N. Y.	10 Enid, Okla.
27 Utica, N. Y.	11 Tulsa, Okla.
28 Albany, N. Y.	12 Oklahoma City, Okla.
30-Pittsfield, Mass.	13 Shawnee, Okla.
July	14 Amarillo, Tex.
1 Worcester, Mass.	16 Lubbock, Tex.
2 Salem, Mass.	17 San Angelo, Tex.
3 Portland, Me.	18 Temple, Tex.
4 Manchester, N.H.	19 Gainesville, Tex.
5 Springfield, Mass.	20 Wichita Falls, Tex.
7 Providence, R. I.	22 Dallas, Tex.
8 New London, Conn.	23 Fort Worth, Tex.
9 Hartford, Conn.	24 Waco, Tex.
10 Waterbury, Conn.	25 Austin, Tex.
11 New Haven, Conn.	26 San Antonio, Tex.
12 Stamford, Conn.	27-28 Houston, Tex.
14 Poughkeepsie, N. Y.	29 Beaumont, Tex.
15 Middletown, N.Y.	30 Lake Charles, La.
16 Binghamton, N.Y.	
17 Elmira, N. Y.	October
18 Olean, N. Y.	1 Shreveport, La.
19 Jamestown, N. Y.	2 Alexandria, La.
21 Canton, O.	3 Baton Rouge, La.
22 Columbus, O.	4-5 New Orleans, La.
23 Springfield, O.	6 Mobile, Ala.
24 Dayton, O.	7 Meridian, Miss.
25 Indianapolis, Ind.	8 Tuscaloosa, Ala.
26 Danville, Ill.	9 Birmingham, Ala.
27 Peoria, Ill.	10 Montgomery, Ala.
28 Davenport, Ia.	End of season
29 Oskaloosa, Ia.	
30 Des Moines, Ia.	
31 Cedar Rapids, Ia.	

From Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus 1934 Route Book. Provided by John Polacek.

Above:  
1908 postcard.  
Source  
[www.awesomestories.com](http://www.awesomestories.com)  
Below:  
1930 circus routing.  
Source:  
Circus Historical Society

<sup>177</sup> *Das Programm*. July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1930

<sup>178</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eva\\_Tanguay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eva_Tanguay)

<sup>179</sup> *Das Programm*. August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1930

<sup>180</sup> *Das Programm*. August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1931

<sup>181</sup> The Ringling Brothers purchased Barnum and Bailey in 1907 but only merged in 1919 following the downturn in circus entertainment. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling\\_Bros.\\_and\\_Barnum\\_&\\_Bailey\\_Circus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling_Bros._and_Barnum_&_Bailey_Circus) and [www.jugglenow.com/circus-history.html](http://www.jugglenow.com/circus-history.html)

<sup>182</sup> *Das Programm*. April 20<sup>th</sup> 1930

<sup>183</sup> See: [www.circushistory.org/Routes/Ringling30.htm#1930](http://www.circushistory.org/Routes/Ringling30.htm#1930)



Little Nanný's middle daughter, Irene, picks up their story:

*"I remember my mother always told me about the time she worked for Barnum and Bailey in America, never in Europe." It was a circus with three rings (piestas) and the middle included the best acts. The Six Rockets always performed in the middle. That was the important ring."*

During the 1920s, the famous touring circus had introduced the three rings concept, and brought it over to Europe. Yet despite its 'phenomenal success,' *Das Programm's* editor was none too impressed, rising in defence of the spectator to argue in 1926 that they gets less, not more value for money.

*"What good is it, if seven acts work all at once?"* Max Berol Konorah quipped.<sup>184</sup> Because of the greater choice of visual spectacle, viewers' attention is continuously diverted whilst the vast size of the oval makes it impossible for those seated at one end of the ellipse to see much of what's going on at the other end. Quality is being traded for quantity, he resounded. For the artists too, he saw little good in the three ring system. To acts like the rockets, music was of great importance:

*"With the help of the trap drummer, the effect is increased and improved [while] the rhythm of the orchestra 'carries' the act."* Yet all this is missing in the grand circus. Worse, *"the programme is so arranged that...three Risley acts are doing their acts at the same time and are doing the same tricks simultaneously. Vaudeville or circus acts owe part of their value and of their effect to their uniqueness, real or pretended, and to see three troupes doing the same feats, makes it appear to lay the mind as if 'anybody' could do these tricks."*

The editor concludes the artist would shed nary a tear were the old system re-introduced. But for the rockets, this work was better than none at all and I would dearly have liked to confirm the rockets' performances for Barnum and Bailey, perhaps via a contract or a photograph, since none of the latter appear to have survived among my grandmother's memorabilia. And although there were many press clippings available for that season, explaining which acts had been engaged, none made any reference to The Six Rockets, I suppose because they joined mid-way through the circus season. Enquiries to the Ringling archives<sup>185</sup> and the Circus World Museum<sup>186</sup> also proved fruitless. At least Frank Cullen could verify the circus was a typical route for vaudeville acts, once opportunities dried up elsewhere:

*"Many performers moved their acts to nightclubs, circuses and carnivals, wherever somebody would book them" he writes.*<sup>187</sup> *"Rope dancers and tumblers were welcomed by circuses and their audiences...there, acrobats had skills that could not be faked...[while] the circus...offered a certain camaraderie."*<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *Das Programm*. Fremdsprachiger Teil. For our English Readers. Current Continental Comment. July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1926

<sup>185</sup> On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012 & November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 emails to: [archives@ringling.org](mailto:archives@ringling.org) for information concerning the 1930 programme and the acrobats the circus employed went unanswered. See also: <http://www.ringling.org/contact-us-0>. An alternative might be to seek out newspaper clippings for show reviews during the period they were engaged.

<sup>186</sup> Circus World Museum, Library/Research Center, 550 Water St., Baraboo, WI 53913. [efoley.cwm@baraboo.com](mailto:efoley.cwm@baraboo.com)

<sup>187</sup> *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Frank Cullen. Routledge, 2006. Preface.

<sup>188</sup> In 1930 the Al G. Barnes Circus also toured the USA. It worked the West Coast in tandem and itself was renowned for five rings. See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al\\_G.\\_Barnes\\_Circus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_G._Barnes_Circus)



So who did the gratitude go to for the opportunity with Barnum and Bailey? Lowenstein's business address at 1560 Broadway happened to be shared by former business partner Frank Wirth as well as his associate, circus-owner wannabe and booker George Hamid,<sup>189</sup> so he didn't exactly have to go far to knock on their doors!<sup>190</sup> Blumenfeld on the other hand was still camped out in Chicago.<sup>191</sup>

Although *Wirth and Hamid Fair Booking Inc.*, concentrated on attractions for fairs and parks,<sup>192</sup> both agents had their own histories with the circus. Wirth's wife, Mae, had been one of the stars of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus between 1924 and 1927 with her equestrian show, after which she toured county fairs and indoor circuses under her husband's management.<sup>193</sup> Hamid on the other hand tells us in his semi-autobiographical work that besides having established his own travelling company of performers, until 1936 he worked as an exclusive booker for the Ringling Circus.<sup>194</sup> I'd therefore be inclined to believe their opportunity there came through Hamid. After all, he was once an acrobat too.

October, however, soon enough arrived, and with the last show the circus returned to its winter residence in Sarasota, Florida, on the far side of the bay from Tampa.<sup>195</sup> Her stint with the circus brought Little Nanny's career full circle and all that was left now was to hope for the odd engagement until hers and the other girls' visas expired.

In case Büttner had entertained the idea of staying with the circus for the following season (which kicked off in New York the following March), *Variety* magazine put that idea to bed when it spoke of "*retrenchment [in] the white top world...in 1931.*"<sup>196</sup> Wirth and Hamid were in no position to assist either, their own business relationship being on the brink of collapse, a consequence of debts partly accrued through attempts to complete the construction of their New York 'Queensboro Theatre Beautiful' at a time when such houses could clearly not be filled.<sup>197</sup>



Thru' The Flowers:  
Mississippi's nickname is 'The Magnolia State' while it is also the official state flower of Louisiana. Were these snaps made whilst on the road with the circus?



<sup>189</sup> See *Das Programm* ads pages from early January 1930 until late 1931.

<sup>190</sup> Even the US representative of the *International Artisten Loge* - and thus principal liaison for artists seeking visas - was in the same building, more precisely Room 308. See *Das Programm*, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

<sup>191</sup> Come 1930 Blumenfeld was employed by Barnes-Carruthers, a fair booking association affiliated with the World Amusement Service Association (WAMA), according to his obituary published in *Billboard* magazine on March 29, 1952, having joined them after his spell at Gus Sun came to an end in November 1928 (while Gus Sun expanded his Chicago office in 1929, reports *Das Programm* on 26<sup>th</sup> May). Cf. *Variety*, March 4, 1925 for the link between Barnes-Carruthers and WAMA.

<sup>192</sup> See: [casetext.com/case/wirth-hamid-fair-booking-inc-v-wirth-1](http://casetext.com/case/wirth-hamid-fair-booking-inc-v-wirth-1)

<sup>193</sup> See: [www.circopedia.org/May\\_Wirth](http://www.circopedia.org/May_Wirth)

<sup>194</sup> George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Comteq Publishing, 2004. Pg. 213. NB: Hamid actually remarks he was 'retained' by Sam Gumpertz, who according to [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Ringling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Ringling) was put in control of the circus from 1932.

<sup>195</sup> In 1927, John Ringling had made Sarasota the Winter Quarters of the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey® Circus, many of the performers moved to the immediate area. See: [www.ringling.org/history-circus-museum](http://www.ringling.org/history-circus-museum).

<sup>196</sup> *Variety* magazine, January 7, 1931

<sup>197</sup> During the first half of 1931, Hamid bought out Wirth's share of their booking association, intending to concentrate on theatres and amusement parks. Although Wirth signed an accord with Hamid to stay out of the booking business for seven years (commencing roughly April 1931), it was already being reneged upon by August, following which Hamid pursued a lawsuit in February 1934. See: [casetext.com/case/wirth-hamid-fair-booking-inc-v-wirth-1](http://casetext.com/case/wirth-hamid-fair-booking-inc-v-wirth-1). On December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1931, for example, Wirth posted a Christmas greeting in *Das Programm* as the 'Frank Wirth Circus: USA and Canada,' whilst during the winter of 1931 his wife, Mae's troupe, was featured within the short-lived St. Leon Bros. Circus, partly owned by her husband, and her brother-in-law, Phil St Leon Wirth (see:



Top:  
Before 'The  
Blackstone'  
in Miami?



Middle  
and Bottom:  
Florida or  
Los  
Angeles?  
Another  
mystery  
location  
remains  
'TBD'



The rockets could well have drawn their days in Florida to a close by taking the train to Miami, some 350km southeast of Sarasota as the crow flies. A handful of photographs were taken in what might well have been the period following their engagements (since their hair has grown in length)!

Regrettably none of those shown left and below disclose their whereabouts although I began to wonder for instance whether the first might have been taken in Miami's Hotel District. I approached Dawn Hugh, Archives Manager at 'History Miami' in October 2014 and she got back to me within a couple of days. Regarding the building in the background, her colleague, architect and historian, Antolin Garcia Carbonell, wrote it "*does hint at the Blackstone*" on Biscayne Boulevard.<sup>198</sup> It was perhaps taken from Bayfront Park in Miami, however, its thoroughfare was far wider than the one pictured. Antolin remarked upon another photo I sent which was taken at the time and which reveals hydrangeas (common to southern, eastern and central USA), agreeing; "*They look like something that could grow in South Florida.*"

The portrait left on the other hand led the archivists to proffer:

*"Los Angeles, since that kind of palm grows there as well and there seems to be a mountain in the background."*

All photographs, however, appear to have been taken on the same occasion (note the identical hats, shoes and clothes) which would have to suggest an identical location. Whatsmore, the middle portrait's border is identical to that which was sent by the marinellis to the rockets almost a year earlier. So could the girls have been in San Francisco (or if not, somewhere else in California, like LA)? Christina Moretta, Photo Curator at the San Francisco History Center at the San Francisco Public Library was adamant:

*"Based on the architecture in the background, none of the photographs appear to be taken in San Francisco."*<sup>199</sup>

Cross-checking historic postcards of Los Angeles' parks yielded no obvious match and it fell to Michael Holland at the Los Angeles City Archives to confirm: "*The photos are not recognizable as having been taken in Los Angeles,*" albeit adding "*There is not enough information to make any educated guess.*"<sup>200</sup> An inconclusive result that just goes to show how frustrating archive work can often be!

[www.circopedia.org/May\\_Wirth](http://www.circopedia.org/May_Wirth)). It appears that during 1931, Hermann Blumenfeld on the other hand, rejoined George Hamid and would subsequently work for him for over 20 years, before retiring shortly before his death, according his obituary published in Billboard magazine on March 29, 1952. See: George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Comteq Publishing, 2004. Pg. 202-215

<sup>198</sup> Personal correspondence with Dawn Hugh, Archives Manager at History Miami and architect/historian there named Antolin Garcia Carbonell on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Email: [DHugh@historymiami.org](mailto:DHugh@historymiami.org)

<sup>199</sup> Personal correspondence on Nov. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014 with [Christina Moretta](http://www.sfmuseum.org/moretta) at the San Francisco History Center.

<sup>200</sup> Personal correspondence with [Michael Holland](http://www.lacountyhistory.org/michael-holland) at the Los Angeles City Archives on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014.

The American adventure was almost over and in lieu of their now inevitable voyage home, Büttner ramped up the promotion back in Germany of both 'family' acts – hoping circumstances might offer greater opportunity there. Besides the ad right, which was published fortnightly in *Das Programm* from August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1930, a half page Six Marinelli Girls ad ran twice (at a cost of Reichsmarks 45) during October with the tagline: 'European Offers Wanted.' The acrobats were not alone, as myriad artists now competed for the few available opportunities.



Büttner's Enterprises: European offers wanted. October, 1930

Their livelihoods were probably not the only concern. From January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1931 a new law entered into force in Germany that abolished all private employment agents.<sup>201</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the *International Artisten Loge* (the German artists' body) had established its own agency, GEFA, as a means of ensuring the booking business didn't collapse in its entirety, I daresay Büttner already recognized he'd have to diversify those sources through which he got his acts booked – if need be, those abroad too.<sup>202</sup>

Büttner's efforts aside, Margot had other ideas. Thumbing through the latest issue of *Das Programm*, she came across an ad calling for young attractive dancing girls aged 16 to 18.<sup>203</sup> It was posted by the so-called *Dickson-Ballett*,<sup>204</sup> whose 'home' was the Casino Theatre in Rotterdam. "Holland," she mused to herself, with its canals and windmills, "that was surely more exciting than a return to Berlin – and mother!"<sup>205</sup>



"The Dickson Ballett was hardly a revered name on the scene," Büttner retorted, somewhat offended, after Margot showed him the ad. The touring act had been the brainchild of 38 year old Simon Dekker-Dickson<sup>206</sup> and as the '10 Dikson Girls,' it had kicked off its first ever tour of Germany from Hamburg in November 1927 (roughly the same time The Six Rockets had arrived in the city).<sup>207</sup> A year later it toured Switzerland and then France, he vaguely recalled, by that time being billed in *Das Programm* as the 'Dickson Ballett: 10 Girls.'<sup>208</sup> The act's manager was a chap called Johan Köhler who simultaneously managed a second touring Dutch troupe called the '8 Jorosity Girls,' a 'dancing, fencing, singing, acrobatic' act.<sup>209</sup> Sounds familiar?

<sup>201</sup> An unspecified mid-1925 labour law referred to in the July 18<sup>th</sup> 1926 issue of *Das Programm*

<sup>202</sup> The June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1930 issue of *Das Programm* makes it clear that any bid to work in Holland for instance also had to be through an agent recognized by the *Niederländische Artisten-Organisation*, its equivalent to the IAL. On July 20<sup>th</sup>, the paper published the names of the recognized agents and their fees ranging from 5-10% depending on the price.

<sup>203</sup> *Das Programm*. September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1930

<sup>204</sup> See: [wiki.theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Dickson\\_Ballett](http://wiki.theaterencyclopedie.nl/wiki/Dickson_Ballett) and [.../Riëmke\\_van\\_der\\_Voort](http://.../Riëmke_van_der_Voort)

<sup>205</sup> I've often wondered how it happened the Tjallas' wound their way to Holland in 1931. What follows is an educated guess, based on the information subsequently gathered.

<sup>206</sup> Born 1892, according to: [trio-lescagno.it/pdf/Virgilio\\_Zanolla\\_Portino\\_Eva\\_il\\_Ballett\\_Dickson\\_e\\_le\\_Sunday\\_Girls.pdf](http://trio-lescagno.it/pdf/Virgilio_Zanolla_Portino_Eva_il_Ballett_Dickson_e_le_Sunday_Girls.pdf)

<sup>207</sup> *Das Programm*. November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1927

<sup>208</sup> *Das Programm*. November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1928

<sup>209</sup> *Das Programm*. December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1928



Poor Oswald already sensed he was not likely to be in a position to offer both his troupes work, either in the US or in Germany, and knew that one answer would be to consolidate the two into one and let some girls leave. So following an exchange of telegrams with the Tjyrallas' mother, he responded on the girls' behalf to the Dickson Ballett's call for photos/sizes/offers (even if they were aged 18 and 23 and not 18 and 16)! He may just have been swayed to approve of Holland thanks in part to an article which appeared in the August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1930 issue of *Das Programm* entitled 'Saison in Scheveningen,' in which it extolled the benefits of a year's cheap living on the Dutch shores (in no small part thanks to its herring)! On the other hand, the Dickson Girls were clearly a success and Holland wasn't in quite the sorry state Germany was by that time – economically never mind politically.

The Büttners' sustained their advertising campaign until year end, which suggests the 'European offers' they hoped for did not materialise. Opportunity in the US too was in short supply, while I doubt expectations grew very high on the back of a mid-December announcement purporting: "New Variety Circuit in America?" Apparently a new Pantages tour was on the cards which sought to offer (no more than) eight acts 'full weeks' coast-to-coast three times daily, in accompaniment to film.<sup>210</sup> "That's wishful thinking," Büttner surmised.

With the rockets' visas close to expiry, it was almost time to put out the lights. I wonder, did Little Nannö or Margot give a second thought as to how much they'd miss the US? Had they begun to consider it 'home,' notwithstanding the language barrier?<sup>211</sup> Could they ever imagine sharing a little more in the American Dream, the idyllic house with a white picket fence to boot (just check the photo of the pair on pg. 407)? Or was that truly it? They'd only ever heard of California's dry, sunny shores but did they fantasise of returning one day, maybe to work in the movie industry? According to Cullen, "Hundreds, perhaps thousands, hopped a train to LA, where a few became stars and many more filled less-featured parts in the industry, often behind the camera or as coaches or in the wardrobe and shop departments or in offices as agents."<sup>212</sup> To think what Hollywood and the movie industry went on to become...

"In dresses  
[once] white, all  
set for sail  
A little girl  
dreams of taking  
the veil"  
David Sylvian:  
*Taking the Veil*



An actor who 'took the veil' was one who retired from the circuit. The photo left appears to have been taken around Christmas time, and I'll hazard a guess it was northeast USA since a Yale University<sup>213</sup> pennant can be seen mounted to the rear wall whilst close to it one can pick out a second portraying a Native Indian, perhaps of the Cayuga People ('Cay...' is just visible). Their homeland was the Cayuga Lake in the Finger Lakes region of New York State<sup>214</sup> - a

favoured 'playground' of the acrobats, of course. For all intents and purposes, it could have been the rockets' farewell party.

<sup>210</sup> *Das Programm*. December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1930

<sup>211</sup> By 1930 just three percent of German immigrants to the US couldn't speak English. Pg. 206

<sup>212</sup> *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Frank Cullen. Routledge, 2006. Preface.

<sup>213</sup> Yale is in New Haven, Connecticut, east of New York State.

<sup>214</sup> See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cayuga\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cayuga_people)



Ultimately four of the rockets set sail mid-January, just as their visas expired; Margot and Little Nannj being accompanied by Helena Seifert and Rosa Heidrich, escorted by Oswald Büttner. It was exactly as my grandmother had always said; three and half years were spent on her second vaudeville tour.

Two of her fellow troupers stayed behind, including Margarethe Bathon and Ilse Wassman. They went on to substitute two of the marinelli girls, whose visas, together with Arno's and the remaining marinellis (according to their original ship's manifests), were extended to early 1932 and late 1931 respectively – obviously based upon new contracts. The two retiring marinellis therefore joined the rockets on their voyage home and it's no surprise that one was Melanie (Elisabeth) Geidel, who alongside Helene Voigt, were both Leipzigers.

The end was far from in sight for at least of one of Büttners' vaudeville troupes and it's a credit to the duo that they sustained an act for as many as three more seasons. The Six Marinelli Girls notably performed on Friday November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1931 at the 'Park Theatre' in Reading, Pennsylvania, while the following season, re-branded as The Six Rockets, they performed in April 1932 in Greeley, Colorado. A year after that, The Six Rockets could be seen displaying "*dances of sensational ability by popular and beautiful girls*" at the Strand Theater in Endicott, part of the metropolitan area of, where else but Binghamton in Upstate New York.<sup>215</sup>

As Frank Cullen writes; "*Vaudeville did not burst like a bubble. After the early shocks that rocked and reduced it, vaudeville took its time dying.*" Pola Negri too regarded "*vaudeville ...still an extremely important form of entertainment,*" when she undertook her own tour in 1932.<sup>216</sup> Gradually though, as Alison Kibler writes in 'Rank Ladies,' it "*receded into the shadows of a new mass culture in which entertainment was increasingly generated or mediated by technology.*"<sup>217</sup>

Little Nannj, Margot, the girls and the Büttners had played their parts in "*an industry that helped recast the social and cultural landscape of the United States from the turn of the century. And from a raunchy male-dominated popular entertainment, vaudeville crafted a respectable culture that catered to the female consumer.*"<sup>218</sup> That was something they could rightly be proud of, not least because they had also contributed to the *variété* scene in Germany and the UK's 'music hall' too.

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Sadly no photographs mark the troupers' return voyage – probably winter was not the only reason they weren't snap happy. Pola Negri recalls her return to dry land

*"was always a magical moment...for it marked the end of those sweet, suspended-in-space days of the crossing between two continents, two worlds, two ways of life."*<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *The Binghamton Press*. April 6, 1933. Pg. 20.

<sup>216</sup> Pola Negri. *Memoirs of a Star*. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 361

<sup>217</sup> M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 204

<sup>218</sup> M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 5

<sup>219</sup> Pola Negri. *Memoirs of a Star*. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 301

The German trains, however, with their hard wooden benches compared to those of the US will have ensured that 'sweet sensation' didn't last very long. For the Tjrralla sisters, they only had to travel as far as Berlin and at the *Lehrter Bahnhof* they bade farewell to their colleagues, promising to visit them soon, before taking a taxi to *Niebuhrstraße 1* in Charlottenburg.

The stock market crash had not been kind to the girls' *Heimat*, largely heralding the end of the 'Golden Twenties.'<sup>220</sup> Writes Otto Friedrich; *"No nation was so vulnerable to the contraction of trade and credit as Germany. Foreign investors started calling in their loans and German capital began flowing out of the country; companies started laying off workers, or closing down entirely. During January alone in 1930, the number of unemployed soared from 1.5 million to almost 2.5 million, and every month the figure kept climbing."*<sup>221</sup> Bankrupt businessmen committed suicide, pawn shops were packed with people looking for cash. Hundreds of young men and women stood around on street corners. In Berlin alone, there were 750,000 unemployed.<sup>222</sup>

To make matters worse, the crash bred further support for extremist parties resulting in Berlin being increasingly ruled by political and gang violence. The National Socialists or Nazis had already been making political in-roads, and denounced hedonistic Berlin within two months of their shallow May 1928 electoral victory as *"A melting pot of everything that is evil – prostitutes, drinking houses, cinemas, Marxism, Jews, strippers, negroes, dancing and all the vile offshoots of so-called modern-art."*

A succession of weak governments had failed to manage the city – and country – successfully, and in March 1930, with depression heightening and democracy crumbling, the social democratic government collapsed. Hindenburg used his emergency powers to circumvent parliament and appoint a new chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, who typically ruled by emergency decree. Over the next two years, he deflated an already shattered economy and while the country was once more on its way to becoming a nation of beggars, he forced down wages and destroyed whatever savings – and faith – the middle class might have built up after the last economic debacle. It earned him the epitaph 'the Hunger Chancellor.'

The general election on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1930, saw the Nazi party win 107 seats in the *Reichstag* (from 10 previously). Adolf Hitler (described invariably as a brutal, raging, nervous tyrant and war veteran) surprised everyone when he polled 6.5 million votes, making his the second strongest party in the country behind the social democrats on 143 seats. Count Harry Kessler called it *"A black day for Germany."*<sup>223</sup> The Communists too were in the ascendance with the moderate parties of the centre all faring badly. A day later Kessler counted *"220 deputies who are radical opponents of the German state in its present shape and want to do away with it by revolutionary means."*<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> See: [de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldene\\_Zwanziger#Goldene\\_Zwanziger\\_Jahre](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldene_Zwanziger#Goldene_Zwanziger_Jahre)

<sup>221</sup> Otto Friedrich. *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* from 1972. Pg. 300

<sup>222</sup> Otto Friedrich. *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* from 1972. Pg. 301. This figure is disputed by Alexandra Richie in *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin*, Pg. 391, where she writes *"By the end of Sept. 1931, it was 323,000."* In Rodney Livingstone's Introduction to Erich Kästner's *Going to the Dogs*, he notes 350,000 unemployed in September 1930 and 650,000 two years later, whilst one Berliner in four depended on welfare payments.

<sup>223</sup> *Berlin in Lights. The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. Transl. by C. Kessler. Grove Press. 1999. Pg. 396

<sup>224</sup> *Berlin in Lights. The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. Transl. by C. Kessler. Grove Press. 1999. Pg. 323

Among those who had voted Hitler into office were women, adolescents, the unemployed, the traditional conservatives and the peasants of Schleswig-Holstein.<sup>225</sup> To them he was something of a 'Pied Piper,' who marched the masses towards rejuvenation. Not surprisingly, by 1931 almost 40 percent of the Nazi's members were under thirty years of age.<sup>226</sup> A doctor at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute described Germany's reaction to have been: "*a neurotic defense against loss of identity on a national scale.*" To Kessler, National Socialism was more simply "*a delirium of the German lower middle class.*"<sup>227</sup>

Following its election success, the Nazis ordered the SA or *Sturmabteilung* – its paramilitary wing – on an impromptu rampage, beating up any Jews they encountered and smashing up department store windows.<sup>228</sup> Blind hatred ruled the streets, with the result prompting the great cellist, *Emanuel Feuermann*, to announce on September 14<sup>th</sup>: "*It's all over with Germany; all over with Europe.*" Kessler supplanted; "*The impression created abroad must be catastrophic.*"<sup>229</sup> How prophetic it was when he wrote: "*The poison of its disease may however bring down ruin on Germany and Europe for decades ahead.*"

Those prospects made for quite a homecoming – hardly the 'welcome' Little Nannj and Margot will have hoped for. Memories will have come flooding back when the next day the pair took the *U-Bahn* from nearby *Uhlandstrasse* to *Nollendorfplatz* so as to make the obligatory visit to *Onkel Albert* in *Neue Winterfeldstrasse 35*. English poet, novelist and essayist, Stephen Spender (who had been drawn to Berlin at the end of the twenties as "*a place where young Germans enjoyed extraordinary freedom in their lives*"<sup>230</sup>) reflected in 1972 on 'Nolli' then as:

*"an eyrie of concrete eagles, with verandas like breasts shedding stony flakes of whatever glory they once had into the grime of soot which caked the walls of this part of Berlin. The bridges, arches, stations and commanding noise of the overhead railway had taken possession of the square and the streets leading... eastwards to the ever more sordid tenements which never quite lost their claim to represent the Prussian spirit, by virtue of their display of eagles, helmets, shields, and prodigious buttocks of armored babies. A peculiar smell of hopeless decay (rather like the smell of the inside of an old cardboard box) came out of the interiors of these grandiose houses."*<sup>231</sup>



Passing through Nollendorfplatz, "an eyrie of concrete eagles," between 1924 and 1938. Source: [www.drehscheibe-online.de](http://www.drehscheibe-online.de)

<sup>225</sup> Otto Friedrich. *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* from 1972. Pg. 324

<sup>226</sup> Alexandra Richie. *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin*. London, 1998. Pg. 397

<sup>227</sup> *Berlin in Lights. The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. Transl. by C. Kessler. Grove Press. 1999. Pg. 397

<sup>228</sup> Anthony Read and David Fisher. *Berlin Rising. Biography of a City*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1994

<sup>229</sup> *Berlin in Lights. The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. Transl. by C. Kessler. Grove Press. 1999. Pg. 396

<sup>230</sup> See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Spender](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Spender)

<sup>231</sup> Otto Friedrich. *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* from 1972. Pg. 305

Curiously though, while I suspect Germany was becoming less and less the place the Tjrrallas cared to call 'home,' Kessler wrote in his diary in May 1930 how many of his acquaintances reported, "*Paris has become boring and Berlin is now the city where true amusement is to be had.*"<sup>232</sup> So while some saw grey skies, others saw sunshine including another celebrated English author, Christopher Isherwood, who also moved to Berlin in late 1929 because of the sexual freedom it afforded.

It certainly offered a daunting backdrop for fiction too, with another well-known author, Erich Kästner, reflecting on the city in 1930, albeit less favourably in his novel, *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist*. Its leading character, Fabian, pitifully remarking:

*"The better you know this huge city of stone, the more you think it's an insane asylum. In the east live criminals, in the center, the swindlers. In the north, there's misery; in the west, it's prostitution. And in every direction under the sun, things are collapsing."*<sup>233</sup>

Closer to home, things were much the same as they had always been – or so it seemed. The girls' mother, hardly prepared for their premature return, continued to eke out a supplement to her war widow's pension by taking in lodgers, whilst she still swanned about the city's boroughs such as *Tiergarten*, acting like one of those 'society women.' She was feeling the economic pinch too. The rigid deflationary policies which Brüning's government followed involved drastic reductions in public expenditure alongside progressively tougher criteria for benefit entitlement, to the point they barely afforded a meagre subsistence. Increasing numbers of unemployed were turning to charity, while those still fortunate enough to have jobs faced increased working hours alongside the ever-present threat of summary dismissal and higher taxes.<sup>234</sup> Something had to give as the tensions rose.



Before the Deluge:  
Mama frolics on the  
steps of the Bismarck-  
Denkmal in front of the  
Reichstag.



<sup>232</sup> *Berlin in Lights. The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. Transl. by C. Kessler. Grove Press. 1999. Pg. 388

<sup>233</sup> *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist*. Erich Kästner, 1931. Chapter X.

<sup>234</sup> See also Chapter 7.2: 'The Rise and Fall of the Sozialstaat' in Peter Stachura's contribution to *Germany since 1800: A New Social and Economic History* edited by Ogilvie and Overly. Pg. 238



*Onkel Albert* nervously explained to the Nitty Sisters he was attempting to ride out the hard times through his small firm's inventions. It had registered several more between late 1930 and February 1931, among them utility models for protective rubber packaging.<sup>235</sup> They do say necessity is the mother of invention, although I do wonder, was anyone backing (much less buying) *Albert's* ideas?

The banking sector was facing a fresh crisis both in terms of confidence and capital. Mergers intent at staving off foreign competition alongside generous concessions intended to lure larger (typically industrial) customers in 1929 beckoned a great trauma in the history of the German lending sector come July 1931, when the *Darmstädter und Nationalbank* froze its respective loans. That subsequently unleashed a run on all other banks, in turn forcing their closure.<sup>236</sup>

The young *Fräuleins'*, whose own salaries had of course dried up, grew more and more nervous by the minute. Thank God *Theo* lay safe beyond the capital, surrounded by family at the *Hinsch* fortress. The last *Little Nannö* and *Margot* had heard was that despite the rising unemployment in Leipzig too, he had become a journeyman. The home scene, however, had seen quite some changes during the sisters' absence, and it fell to mother to bring *Little Nannö* and *Margot* up to date on all that had passed during their absence.

On November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1928, *Onkel Fritz* (who still traded art and antiques) married *Martha Rennfranz*, an event which itself occurred two months after his son (cousin *Frits*), had married *Veronika* who around the same time had given birth to a daughter. A year later, *Frits Lothar Egon*, had been born in September 1929, rendering *Little Nannö* and *Margot* aunties!

Then, after *Theo* moved out of the *Hinsch Villa* in March 1929, *Frits* and his young family had gone to live with the cousins' now 72 year old grandmother, *Oma Hinsch*, who was faring as best as she could, now that she was widowed and alone. She'd meanwhile given up on taking in lodgers, following that debacle with *Hanns Fischer*, now almost ten years ago.

But *Frits* and his family's tenure was relatively shortlived and before long, *Onkel Fritz* was spending increasing amounts of time there at the Villa so as to keep an eye on his mother (although his permanent residence continued to remain *Beethovenstrasse*).<sup>237</sup> In February 1930, cousin *Frits* and his family had relocated to Leipzig *Paunsdorf*,<sup>238</sup> and if *Frau Tjrralla* was not mistaken, shortly before her daughters had arrived home, they'd moved on to Leipzig *Eutritzsch*, a little farther

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<sup>235</sup> In late 1930 *Albert* registered atear-off matchbox flap as a hygienic form of protective rubber packaging (*Abreiß streichholzülle, als Verpackung für einen hygienischen Gummischutz*), followed in February 1931 by a rubber panelled hygienic sales table (*Schauverkaufstafel für hygienischen Gummi-schutz*) and a bag for use as hygienic rubber protective packaging (*Tasche als Einzel-packung für einen hygienischen Gummi-schutz*). Come May 1931, he had registered a polishing device for fingernails (*Fingernagelpolierer*). Data courtesy of *Carmen Wilfert*, Administrative Clerk at the Enquiry Unit of the German Patent and Trade Mark Office, February 2012.

<sup>236</sup> For further information see: *V. Wellhöner and H. Wexforth* in Section 5.4.2 of 'Finance and Industry' entitled, *Banks and Industrial Financing after the Inflation, their contribution to Germany: A New Social and Economic History Vol. III. Since 1800. Edited by S. Ogilvie and R. Overly*, 2003. Pg. 172-173

<sup>237</sup> His residential record indicates: "Hält sich öfter vorübergehend in Machern bei der Mutter auf. Anschrift u(nd). feste Wohngebiet bleibt *Beethovenstr. 19.Eg(Erdgeschoss)*"

<sup>238</sup> His residential record indicates: 14.02.30 (19.02.30 Abm. Sch. v(om) *Dögnitz* m. Fam. s.17.02.30 *Pau(nsdorf)*, *Riesaer Str. 17. E(rd)g(eschoss)* b. *Lindner*.

north of where the girls themselves had grown up, towards the edge of the city's boundaries. To the best of her knowledge they were done with moving, intending to make their apartment in *Eythstrasse 7/I* a permanent family home. Most ideally, its convenient location offered Frits work in the garden colonies nearby, while Veronika managed the kids.<sup>239</sup>

Cousin Martin meanwhile, who was done with his travels even before the sisters left for the USA, had just left to Altenburg for a year,<sup>240</sup> a working-class city in *Thüringen* of cca. 40,000.<sup>241</sup> Third eldest cousin, Heinz, almost two years older than Margot, had since graduated the *Thomas Schule*. He was still studying at Dresden's Academy of Fine Arts, while the last of the boys, youngest cousin Hans continued to apprentice at *Bamberger und Hertz* in Leipzig, whilst living at his mother's; '*Tante Hedy*.' She still lived with Walther Martin, doing her bit to support his shoe trading enterprise.

That brought the girls more or less up to date as far as she could remember. But what of Theo, Little Nannö and Margot clamoured? They had not heard from him since July 1929, more than a year now, and they were keen to know his news. Had he qualified yet? Was he fully recovered? Was he keeping himself out of trouble?

Mama put on some more coffee before candidly informing them of Theo's untimely death. The Nitty Sisters sat there in silence, gobsmacked. Little Nannö had been particularly fond of Theo while Margot and he had always shared in such mischief. They'd heard about the subsequent court appearances in Leipzig of course thanks to Theo's letters, but neither could hardly forgive nor forget the fact that their mother hadn't told them of his passing sooner, despite all her well-reasoned arguments to the contrary.

The girls wished to be alone to grieve. Although their mother insisted it best to get back to work right away (notwithstanding the fact it first had to be found), Little Nannö began to agree with Margot that it would be no bad thing if that happened to be beyond Berlin after all. There were many in Germany she was beginning to resent and reasons to call the country 'home' were diminishing faster than she cared to count.

According to world war one historian, Andrew Donson, daughters had traditionally turned over a larger portion of their earnings to their parents, who in turn only surrendered full control over those earnings some three or four years after their wage-earning brothers.<sup>242</sup> With Theo now gone, the responsibility upon Little Nannö and Margot's shoulders to support her would run on, well, conceivably forever. "*Eight years we've been supporting mother,*" grumbled Little Nannö to herself. "*Surely we're entitled to lives of our own?*" she reasoned. Mother's selfish callous nature was pushing her beyond her limits of patience. Margot needed no telling twice.

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<sup>239</sup> According to Chapter 5 of '*The Challenge of Urban Democracy: Municipal Elites in Edinburgh and Leipzig, 1890-1930*,' by Michael Schäfer in Robert Beachy and Ralf Roth's '*Who Ran the Cities?: City Elites and Urban Power Structures in Europe and North America*' from 2007, new tenement housing was erected in Leipzig *Eutritzsch* around 1925 – see Pg. 109 and a picture referenced as City Archive of Leipzig BA 1988/26626. The book is online [here](#). NB: Their new home also lay about a kilometre away from the 1929-1930, 16 hectare construction project of apartment housing in new Gohlis, described at: [de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krochsiedlung](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krochsiedlung)

<sup>240</sup> Left on 9th November 1930 and returned on November 12th, 1931

<sup>241</sup> See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altenburg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altenburg)

<sup>242</sup> Andrew Donson. *Youth in the Fatherless Land...1914-1918*. Harvard, 2010. Pg. 150.

Resigned to those facts, the sisters boarded a train to Leipzig in early February, chiefly to pay their last respects to Theo.<sup>243</sup> In Erich Kästner's *Going to the Dogs*, lead character, *Fabian*, recently made job-less, similarly takes the train from Berlin to Saxony (albeit its capital). Along the way, we find him musing to himself. The next paragraph is an extract, in which my grandmother substitutes Fabian:

*"Little Nannij sat by the window and looked out. The fields and meadows swirled past like objects on a turntable. The telegraph-posts dropped curtsies to her. Sometimes the little peasant children, standing barefoot in the dancing landscape, waved mechanically. In a meadow a horse was grazing. A foal was prancing along the fence, swinging its head. Then they passed through the gloomy pine-woods. The trunks were overgrown with grey lichen. The trees stood there as though they were stricken with leprosy and had been forbidden to leave the wood."*<sup>244</sup>

Upon arrival their first port of call was *Beethovenstrasse* and *Onkel Fritz's*, who had agreed with their mother to escort his nieces up to Machern, where they would stay while in Leipzig. Before leaving they said a short hello to their step-Aunt; Martha. There wasn't much conversation to be had, and the reunited family members struggled to get beyond pleasantries. A short while later they were grouped around the hearth in Machern where spritely Oma Hinsch served them tea while they tried to entertain her with tales of Native Indians, the Caribbean and touring with the Barnum and Bailey circus. Their moods, however, were as glum as the weather.

The following day they set off by foot to Machern's train station, Margot less fondly recalling the many times she and Theo had cursed that same stretch. The train brought them swiftly down to Leipzig's ever colossal *Hauptbahnhof* from whence they boarded a tram for the *Neuer Johannisfriedhof*. Many tears were shed. The city wasn't the same without Theo being there to welcome them, replete with beaming smile and flowers. Both girls knew their destinies lay elsewhere, and not only beyond Leipzig. For the time being though, they couldn't say where.

The next day they went north to *Eutritzsch* to say hello to Frits and his family. Little *Vera* was all smiles, a coo-ing two and a half year old. It was then on to Gohlis to visit the Büttners as well as to see former rocket, Annedore Frenkel, once more. Dear Oswald hadn't known of Theo's death, but he did his best to support Frau Tjyralla's position in the interests of the act. After learning there'd been no news on their bid to join the Dickson Ballett, he put in a call to *Johann Köhler*. It was the least he could do for the pair, especially since prospects for re-launching the rockets on homeground were frankly, abysmal.

Better than any, he knew it was time to retire although it was hard to call it a day on what had been till now a successful career. He tried to shift his attentions to his son's and the well-being of his grandson, *Lester*, who Annedore had given birth to in early 1930 whilst Arno had plied the West Coast. Vaudeville wouldn't last forever and "*cans filled with movie reels were now playing the theatres*,"<sup>245</sup> he reminded himself. Perhaps he'd be best off managing a theatre, he mused. "*Still, there's plenty of life in the old dog yet!*" he assured them.

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<sup>243</sup> The lack of a complete Leipzig residential record (for obvious reasons) cannot confirm whether they actually returned to their home city. *Einwohnermeldekartei* by that time were neither being kept regularly in Berlin.

<sup>244</sup> *Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist*. Erich Kästner. New York Review Books. 1990. Pg. 156

<sup>245</sup> F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Circuits and Theatres.'

The following day sunshine broke through their gloom. They returned to Leipzig for a rockets' reunion in one of their parents' former favourites, the *Riquet-Haus café*. Gertrud Tafel was back too and came down from *Leipzig Lindenau* to meet them at the *Hauptbahnhof*, before sauntering over to *Brühl* to meet *Melanie Elisabeth Geidel*.

That was of course the Tjëralla sisters' father's former workstead and they couldn't fail but notice that in spite of the economic hardship, the fur trade was still bustling, Leipzig having regained its international reputation following the war. Indeed, by 1930 it had become the third largest fur trading centre in the world,<sup>246</sup> with a grand fair for fur traders having been hosted from the end of May to the end of September the previous year.<sup>247</sup> By that time, some 329 fur firms could be found in the *Nikolai, Reichs* and *Ritterstrasse*, the same locales which so many had always inhabited.<sup>248</sup> Little Nannö could only wonder how different things might have turned out had father still been around. But by now, all the Leipzigers who passed through its streets were but strangers to her, notwithstanding Elisabeth and Gerda. Margot's ties on the other hand were even more tenuous.

A little later, Oswald and Anna Büttner joined the former troupers, together with Annedore and Lester. As Oswald walked in, he joked he'd been offered a contract to reform the Six Rockets and that he was counting on the Tjërrallas, Gertrud and Elisabeth along with Helena Seifert and Rosa Heidrich to take up their former roles and return with him to the US.

They didn't take long to twig he was teasing. But having seen the smiles return to Nannö and Margot's faces, he proceeded to pass on more serious news. Namely that *Johann Köhler* awaited the Tjërrallas in Rotterdam for an audition on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Köhler had several slots open for new personnel, some of whom would also be considered for a new revue. Gertrud and Elisabeth squealed with delight for Little Nannö and Margot, both of whom sat there shell-shocked. What strings had Oswald been pulling to make that happen, they wondered? But the more they dwelt upon it, the more they liked the idea of going abroad to tour the Netherlands and who knows where else, assuming they passed the auditions.

As they bid farewell to their best friends, promising to write, they left their birthplace behind feeling a little better than when they'd arrived, far from realizing that would in fact be the last time they'd ever return. As the textbox overleaf explains, there were further reasons to be convinced now was a good time to move on from Saxony.

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<sup>246</sup> Martina Güldenmann in *Das war das 20. Jahrhundert*, 1999. Pg. 36

<sup>247</sup> By 1931 many fur traders were beginning to go bust, thanks to the ongoing global economic crisis. See: [de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brühl\\_\(Leipzig\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brühl_(Leipzig))

<sup>248</sup> Martina Güldenmann in *Das war das 20. Jahrhundert*, 1999. Pg. 37



### 12.6: Saxony's Liberal Democracy Falters

The Saxon *Landtag* elections, which preceded the 1930 federal elections, took place on 22 June. They saw the Nazi's achieve their greatest electoral breakthrough in an important German state. As at the national level, the Nazi's became the second largest party, receiving 14 seats, having polled 14.4 percent of the vote, behind the SPD with 32. The KPD or communists won 13 seats, the middle-class *Wirtschaftspartei* (WP); 10; DVP 8; DNVP 5 (both established bourgeois parties); the German State Party (or DStP) 3; whilst the remaining 11 went to a mixture of others.

Even the 'last-minute' establishment of the Saxon VNR (*Volksnationale Reichsvereinigung* or People's National Reich Association) by the Young German Order as a means of fusing a badly fragmented German middle into a cohesive political force to prevent the threat of National Socialism had little impact, which, argues Saxon historian, Larry Jones, reflected Germany's middle class voters' deep-seated confusion.

According to Jones, those elections represented another important milestone in the dissolution of its party system with the dramatic electoral breakthrough of National Socialism three months later across the *Reich* being a direct consequence of the fragmentation and dissolution of the Saxony's bourgeois party system. It had been, however, a process that was well underway long before the full impact of the world economic crisis was being felt there, but which ultimately rendered it more vulnerable to Nazi penetration. Politically speaking then, writes C.C. Szejnmann "*Genuine parliamentary democracy came to an end in Saxony in mid-1930.*"

Sources: C-C. Szejnmann: *The Development of Nazism...1918-1933 in Saxony in German History: Culture, Society, and Politics, 1830-1933*. Edited by J. N. Retallack. Pg. 368 and L. Jones: *Saxony, 1924-1930 in Saxony in German History: Culture, Society, and Politics, 1830-1933*. Retallack. Pg. 35-351 and 354-355; and [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saxony\\_Landtag\\_elections\\_in\\_the\\_Weimar\\_Republic#1930](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saxony_Landtag_elections_in_the_Weimar_Republic#1930)

By the time the girls reached the capital, the "*sensation of doom to be felt in the Berlin streets*" was palpable, recalls Spender:

*"The poverty, the agitation, the propaganda, witnessed by us in the streets and cafes seemed more and more to represent the whole life of the town, as though there were almost no privacy behind doors. Berlin was the tension, the poverty, the anger, the prostitution, the hope and despair thrown out on the streets. It was the blatant rich at the smart restaurants, the prostitutes in army top boots at corners, the grim, submerged looking communists in processions and the violent youths who suddenly emerged from nowhere into Wittenbergplatz [beyond the eastern end of the Kufürstendamm] and shouted 'Deutschland erwache!' ['Germany awake!']."*<sup>249</sup>

In no uncertain terms it was time to leave and with eager anticipation the girls looked forward to meeting Meneer Köhler. They promptly arranged their travel passes, so much so that their mother grew alarmed at their disregard for her. "Goodness," they cried. "*Let us first pass the audition, and then ask us not to forget you!*"

Köhler, they had learned was about 20 years younger than Büttner but boasted a CV that including producing operettas, revues and popular theater. He had started out in the revues of his brother-in-law, Henry ter Hall, who subsequently handed over responsibility for *Ter Hall Revues* to him.<sup>250</sup> Before the girls had departed Leipzig, Büttner had dug out the ad which had appeared in *Das Programm* in 1928 to reflect on the Dickson Girls' success, who in no uncertain terms were a well-established and first-class act, one of the most popular among a programme of twelve.<sup>251</sup>

<sup>249</sup> Otto Friedrich. *Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s* from 1972. Pg. 306

<sup>250</sup> Köhler was born in Groningen, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1887. He later worked for 'O. and O.' and after the Second World War was also active as an actor, especially for companies in and around The Hague. Source: [wiki.theaterencyclopedia.nl/wiki/Johan\\_Köhler](https://wiki.theaterencyclopedia.nl/wiki/Johan_Köhler). See also: [wiki.theaterencyclopedia.nl/wiki/Henri\\_ter\\_Hall](https://wiki.theaterencyclopedia.nl/wiki/Henri_ter_Hall)

<sup>251</sup> *Das Programm*. November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1928

Applause rocks the house after every performance of the

**10 DICKSON GIRLS**

who have taken the art-loving and educated Basel by storm.

**Such a stage sensation must be seen by all!**

Popular dance in Dutch costume. Outstanding individual strength. Virtuoso techniques. Seamless vitality. Grace and charm. Original dance ideas. Exceptional control of their faculties. There is only one opinion.

**The impressionable, disciplined corps of girls!**



On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1931, the sisters arrived as expected in Rotterdam. They were promptly ushered to the stage and quickly proved that in the couple of months that had passed since they took centre-stage at Barnum and Bailey's they hadn't lost their touch. Little Nannÿ impressed being dainty yet agile, Margot combining strength with charisma. Their application quickly transformed into a season's offer which I suspect led to the tongue-in-cheek remark six months later when a *Dickson-Ballett* ad appeared in *Das Programm* informing revue managers: "You need not go to America to book an acrobatic dancing act."<sup>252</sup>



Top and Above: *Das Programm*. November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1928 and October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1931.  
Bottom: The Six Rockets: An 'American' Act?

Life had turned a corner and its pace quickened as the girls now genuinely prepared to bid farewell to Berlin.<sup>253</sup> In many ways their departure couldn't have been timelier. Writes Lisa Pine of early 1930s Germany; "The ideological image of women promoted by the Nazis...was completely at odds with women's emancipation."<sup>254</sup> Obviously their roles in the theatre would soon be frowned upon both by women and men alike. That is, if there would actually be a role for them to return to.

Little Nannÿ and Margot said their goodbyes to *Mama* and *Onkel Albert* on April 6<sup>th</sup>, Easter Monday. Following their arrival in Rotterdam, the next day they learned from Köhler they would be part of a *revue* now being put together called *Hallo, Hierheen!* best translated in English as 'This Way Please.' It would subsequently be billed as the first 'National Revue,' owing to the fact that it was the first production of the eponymously named company recently founded by a chap called *René Sleeswijk* together with ambitious producer, *Bob Peeters*, and a popular comedian and singer known as *Lou Bandy*, who would take on revue's leading role.<sup>255</sup>

<sup>252</sup> *Das Programm*. October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1931

<sup>253</sup> For a good while I had suspect their move out of Germany was down to an operetta called *Die Blume von Hawaii*, especially considering the grass skirts donned in Havana. The show premiered at the Neues Theater in Leipzig on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1931 and after a winning run at Berlin's Metropol moved on to Amsterdam's Carre Theater in 1932.

<sup>254</sup> Lisa Pine, *Women and the Family* in her contribution to *O&O Germany Since 1800: A New Social and Economic History* edited by Ogilvie and Overly. Pg. 367

<sup>255</sup> Peeters managed to borrow enough money to stage a revue while Sleeswijk acted as a technical leader. 'Rido' wrote the script. Together they made the company a success. See: [www.historici.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn5/sleeswijk](http://www.historici.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn5/sleeswijk)

*Hallo, Hierheen!* was in fact hotly anticipated by the Dutch media, who reported on the arrival at Amsterdam's municipal airport, *Schiphol*, of the show's stars, an article which appeared in the *Het Vaderland* newspaper on June 5<sup>th</sup>,<sup>256</sup> curiously reflecting on the engagement of a number of foreign artists, which allegedly would breathe some much-needed life into the Dutch revue scene.<sup>257</sup>

*Het Vaderland* also tells us the show would premiere in *Eindhoven*, south Netherlands, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1931 which meant Little Nannÿ and Margot had plenty of time to rehearse their roles. The photo below right, courtesy of the *Theatre Institute Holland* shows Margot, fourth from right as one of '10' Dickson Girls. Naturally that left me wondering, where was my grandmother? Had she (besides the tenth Dickson Girl) been omitted from the publicity shots, and if so, why? Subsequent photographs published in a history of Dutch revue by *Dries Krijn*<sup>258</sup> as well as various press clippings, reveal an identical line up, which implies there were only ever eight to begin with.<sup>259</sup>



10 Dickson Girls (Minus 2?)

Had Little Nannÿ then been given a principal role? She was, of course, too old to be a Dickson Girl and it was daughter, Irene, who eventually reminded me she'd become a 'show girl.' And not just any it would appear, since she eventually fell in line alongside René Sleeswijk's fiancé, *Rietje de Haas* (which helps to explain why they went on to become such close friends).

By all accounts, my grandmother stood out on the stage. According to a statement which appeared in an article written by Dutch journalist, Lou Polak as late as 1957: "*She was a most charming dancer, who worked in one of Köhler's shows...*"<sup>260</sup>

Life was beginning to look good. Like a number of their US vaudeville counterparts (as is explained in the textbox overleaf), the Tÿrallas too successfully moved on to revue and into the chorus line.<sup>261</sup> But shocks were neither hard to come by during 1931 and it was shortly after *Hallo, Hierheen!* got underway that news reached Little Nannÿ and Margot of another death, this time that of their former manager who had passed away in Hamburg on June 18<sup>th</sup>. Oswald was 64. She suspected he'd been scouting for work.



Unsere lieber Kollege...gestorben ist

<sup>256</sup> *Het Vaderland*. Zaterdag, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1931

<sup>257</sup> Other performers included Roosje Köhler Van Gelder (an opera singer, wife of Johan Köhler), their daughter, Jettie, Aaf Bouber, Simon Maris, Peter Köhler (brother of Johan), Henri ter Hall (Johan Köhler's brother-in-law) and wife (Henriette Köhler, sister of Johan), Max van Gelder, Louis and Hakkie Davids, Stella Fontaine, Gerrit van Wezel.

<sup>258</sup> *Geschiedenis van de Revue in Nederland*. Dries Krijn. De Walburg Pers, 1980. Pg. 123

<sup>259</sup> A *Das Programm* ad from January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1928 also announces ten girls but pictures only eight in traditional Dutch costume

<sup>260</sup> *Cor Carre Veertig Jahr. Tussen touwen, doeken en lichten*. Lou Polak. November, 1957 (source unknown)

<sup>261</sup> See for instance, M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 202.



*Das Programm* shared that news twice, first on June 28<sup>th</sup> and then July 12<sup>th</sup>, on behalf of his wife, son, grandson, the *Internationale Artisten Loge* and it could be said, The Six Rockets. "Goodness," Little Nannÿ reminded herself, "*Life can be short as well as cruel.*" She'd probably spent more time with Oswald during the last nine or so years than he with his own wife.<sup>262</sup>

It was probably her exotic charm combined with the occasional twinges of sadness that held sway over one particular *Hallo, Hierheen!* crew member. With the show barely a month in, Little Nannÿ turned 24. She turned bright red, however, when she received a golden bracelet for her birthday bearing her birthdate and the current year, together with an opal of sorts.



Lessons in Love: Give her gold!

More importantly, however, her name was engraved on it alongside that of its bearer; a chap called 'Cornelis.' Okay, she had hung out on occasion with the show's stage and lighting manager, but he in no uncertain terms was bewitched by her. He, who had himself barely put down in Amsterdam a month earlier, had only gone and asked my grandmother's hand in marriage! She'd not even seen Amsterdam yet!

<sup>262</sup> Hoping that Oswald Büttner's death certificate may give a clue as to why he died in Hamburg and owing to what causes, on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Helga Mügge of the *Lesesaal/Beratungsdienst* at the *Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg Staatsarchiv* instructed me to seek the document in the last town where he lived („Bezüglich des Todes von O. Büttner müssten Sie die Sterbeurkunde an seinem letzten Wohnort finden).“ I therefore turned to the archives maintained by [Claudia Hinz](#) at the Mayor's office in STADT LEIPZIG, who in early June 2013 in turn reverted me back to Hamburg's record office. There I was subsequently suggested to engage a professional researcher (despite not having any specific details as to the impresario's whereabouts when he died, which is rather a pre-requisite, whilst a thorough scan of Hamburg's address books online at: [agora.sub.uni-hamburg.de/subhh-adress/digbib/start](http://agora.sub.uni-hamburg.de/subhh-adress/digbib/start) yielded no result). All parallel attempts to retrieve archive *Internationale Artisten-Loge* data also failed. In May 2013, Angelika Ret of the *Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin* responsible for artistic disciplines (*Fachbereich Geschichte/Artistica*) told me that the museum holds details on IAL members up to #1550 only. She recommended approaching the *Archiv der „Vereinten Diestleistungsgewerkschaft“ der Bundesrepublik* (the international trade union archives). Its representative, Dr. Hartmut Simon referred me to the *Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* which is based in Bonn. It took until November 10, 2014 to receive a reply from Andreas Marquet ([Andreas.Marquet@fes.de](mailto:Andreas.Marquet@fes.de)) who in turn informed me that the IAL records they hold do not stretch back as far as 1931. On Dec. 26<sup>th</sup> 2014 I asked whether he might be able to tell me where information on members from #1550 and over may be kept.



### 12.7: What happened to Broadway after the Tyrallas put the lights out?

With vaudeville's steady demise, the 'Great White Way' faltered too. The depression profoundly affected its theaters, causing the number of productions to decline dramatically, in turn putting many theater people out of work. As early as May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1929, *Das Programm* had ran a news item entitled 'Broadway's now CineStreet' in which it reported that all its so-called 'Legitimate' theatres between 42<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> street had become venues for talkies, except The Palace, which survived until November 1932, when it was converted to a cinema.<sup>1</sup>

As a result "The Big Street grew dark and dirty during the Depression" writes Jerome Charyn. "By 1932, Broadway, from Times Square [Forty-sixth] to Fifty-seventh Street, resembled a frontier town with its honky tonks, dance halls and cheap bars." Before long it was being sentimentalized, limping along in more and more predictable ways, rather than serving as a "moving target."<sup>2</sup>



Not everything fell apart in the wake of the crash, however. The Empire State Building opened shortly after the Rockets departed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1931, and has since gone on to become an American cultural icon.<sup>3</sup> A little over eighteen months later, on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1932, the world-famous Radio City Music Hall opened too. It's probably merely coincidence that an act called *The Rockettes*, a precision dance company founded in 1925 in St. Louis, Missouri that had originally performed as the 'Missouri Rockets,' went on to become one of its mainstays, following its opening night.<sup>4</sup>

For vaudevillians meanwhile, a number went on to become lesser known chorus girls, some of them even striptease artists in US burlesque houses. According to Rachel Steir of Chicago's DePaul University, by the early 1930s burlesque was "the lowest form of theatre on the theatre food chain."<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, vaudeville performers had looked down on Burlesque since for an act to have played such a theatre in the 1920s was deemed professional suicide,<sup>6</sup> whilst by the 1930s Burlesque was even being ridiculed as "the poor man's Follies." It threw a lifeline, however, to a number of fading stars, including Gypsy Rose Lee, who made her reputation as a stripteaseur. Mind you, those who became chorus girls alongside Gypsy worked eighty hour weeks, counting rehearsals and Saturday midnight shows – all for a total of 21 dollars a week in 1931.<sup>7</sup>

Others among the Tyrallas' peers wound their way into Broadway's revues, which 'borrowed' vaudeville performers and offered them starring roles. It expanded upon spectacles that had been popular acts on vaudeville bills, allowing a number of its stars to continue their careers. Hollywood too stole its stars, whilst incorporating elements of the vaudeville aesthetic, having done so since the comedies of the 1920s and early 1930s, which anyway brought something of vaudeville with them.<sup>8</sup>

In closing their US chapter, the Tyrallas departed with memories of an epoch I personally would have relished any opportunity to be part of, much like my namesake, Jerome Charyn. Second best would have been to discuss it with them. But had I done so, like Charyn, they too might have told me it essentially remained "A culture that worshipped teenage goddesses, but [which] wouldn't allow them to grow into anything but appendages and pussycats...A world that gave women, beautiful or not, so little room to breathe."<sup>9</sup>

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5. *The G-String Murders.* Gypsy Rose Lee. Afterword (Gypsy Rose Lee: "Striptease Intellectual") of Jan. 2005 by Rachel Steir of DePaul Univ, Pg. 212;
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