

Boxer Johann "Rukeli" Trollmann



These two photos show the young boxers of „BC Sparta Linden“, the North German Champions of 1929. Among them, the face of young Johann “Rukeli” Trollmann (1907-1944) whose tragic story has been haunting me since I was gifted these photos a few weeks ago.



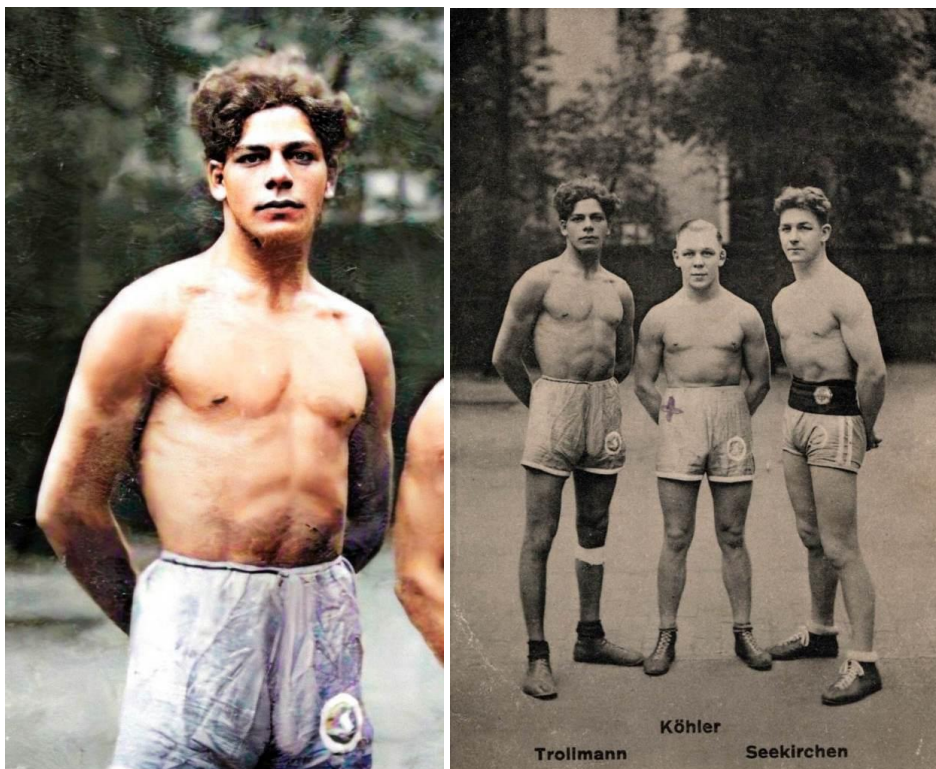
Johann “Rukeli” Trollmann was born and raised in a big Sinto-German family in Hannover, Germany. He grew up in humble conditions in the old city of Hannover. The meaning of “Ruk” in Sinti language is a “tree”, a pet name given to Johann for his long and athletic body that stood like a tree. He started boxing at the age of 8, and he was damn good at it! He went on to win four regional championships and a North German championship as an amateur boxer before he was 20. His boxing style was so unusual and “un-German”; his agility in the ring and fast footwork looked like dancing. He was also good-looking and he loved to flirt with the spectators while he beat his opponents. Everything about him was unusual and unique, and his fan-base grew.

And yet, despite his light heavyweight Championship title, he was not nominated to represent Germany at the 1928 Summer Olympic Games in Amsterdam. Because of his “un-German” boxing style. In 1933, Adolf Hitler announced himself as the new head of state and feverishly started the preparations for his propaganda Summer Olympic Games in Berlin. And it certainly did not fit with the ideology that any “non-Aryan” could jeopardise the “supremacy of German athletes”. Trollmann’s uniqueness now became a target on his back; the “gypsy dance” in the ring became an insult instead of a compliment of his technical proficiency. His clear title win over Adolf Witt at the 1933 National Championships was manipulated into a tie. The regime-followers in the National Boxing Association did not see fit that he beat his “Aryan” opponent. Some of his Jewish colleagues saw this as a clear sign that there was no future for “non-Aryan” boxers in Germany and fled. But Trollmann stayed, despite the forced end of his professional boxing career.

In 1939, he was drafted to the German Army and sent to the battlefields in Russia where he was wounded in action. In 1942, the Nazis no longer saw Sinti and Roma men worthy to serve in the German Army, they were released from their military duty. Which now put a different target on their backs – those who could not flee or hide were arrested and sent to concentration and labour camps. Trollmann once again ended up in a concentration camp, this time in Neuengamme near Hamburg where he was forced to do hard manual labour during the day, and show boxing moves to SS soldiers and box against them at night for entertainment and humiliation. In 1944, he was beaten to death after such a match against a prison functionary who had lost against him, despite his fragile and undernourished health. Imprisoned, used as forced labour, subjected to forced sterilisation, he was murdered for winning a boxing match he never wanted to participate in.

Trollmann was a pioneer in boxing, and what a shame he will never know. His fast footwork and agility, backwards dancing-style steps and timing became the epitome of modern boxing style after WWII. What a loss that Trollmann never got to meet the young Cassius Clay aka Muhammad Ali, another legend and the greatest of them all, whose early boxing style was so similar to Trollmann’s in many ways.

More light has been shone on the tragic story of the boxer Johann “Rukeli” Trollmann in the last decade, thanks to the boxer’s daughter and other Trollmann descendants’ relentless efforts. His story is so important to be told to raise awareness about the Holocaust of Roma and Sinti people during WWII.



Some of the sources to read more about "Rukeli" Trollmann:

<https://www.johann-trollmann.de/index.html>

<https://rukeli-trollmann.de/lebenslauf-johann-rukeli-trollmann/>

https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/nazi-opfer-johann-trollmann-der-tanzende-zigeuner.1346.de.html?dram:article_id=479400

<http://www.nurr.net/downloads/trollmann.pdf>

<https://www.verwobenegeschichten.de/menschen/johann-rukeli-trollmann/>

<https://www.sportmuseum.de/meta/presse/pressemitteilungen-archiv/-////rukeli-trollmann-deutscher-meister-fuer-drei-tage.html>

<https://www.neversuchinnocence.com/johann-rukeli-trollmann-nazi-persecution-second-world-war>

Photos Without Families, originally shared on www.photoswithoutfamilies.blog