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75 years of the Swiss National Circus

Make way for Circus Knie!

Very few countries have as many circuses as Switzerland. But one of them is really famous: Our Knie National Circus. It is now on its 75th annual tour.

The circus dynasty actually started in 1803. But the artistic and dancing company founded by a medical student in that year performed in the open only. It was on June 14, 1919, that the "Cirque Variété National Suisse Frères Knie" first appeared before the public on Berne's Schützenmatte in a two-masted tent for 2,500 people. The performance was a sensation, the impact overwhelming. The programme



The first performance of the Swiss National Circus took place on June 14, 1919, on Berne's Schützenmatte.

was acclaimed by the press. Special mention was made of the trapeze artists and jugglers. From that moment on, the circus did not have to worry about the future. Most of its performances were sold out.

Today – with Géraldine Knie – the Swiss National Circus, which despite its name has never received a government subsidy, is into its seventh generation. Talent, hard work, stamina and amazing gravity defiance have made the name

Knie the alpha and omega of circus artistry.

Love showed the way

The history of the Knie family dynasty is exciting and full of adventure. The famous play by Carl Zuckmayer, "Katharina Knie", does not really correspond to reality. But it does reflect the tension between the settled citizen and the travelling artist which nourishes the chronicle of a family now nearly 200 years old. For the founder of the dynasty, Friedrich Knie, himself came from a family regarded as highly respectable. His father was an Austrian military doctor. As a medical student, the son fell in love with a passing circus horsewoman and then founded his own troupe of trapeze artists. Later, the impetuous Friedrich eloped with Antonia Stauffer of Innsbruck and led her to the altar, although her father had violently opposed her marriage with a travelling artist and banished her to a nunnery.

The Knie circus artist and dance company travelled widely in Austria and Germany, but also often came to Switzerland, which was to be its home. As early as 1866, the Knies applied for Soleure citizenship; but it was only in 1900 that they finally became Swiss by being naturalised in the Thurgau village of Gerlikon.

Since then their history has taken them back to their origins. After 93 years, a sixth generation descendant, Louis Knie, has taken over the Austrian National Circus.

Fame under the big top

For many years, an appearance with Switzerland's Knie has been, and indeed still is, the highest ambition of any circus artist. Over the last 75 years, the most famous performers in the world have appeared in the Knie big top. These include the manège rider, Therese Renz, the Rivel and Cavallini clown troupe, the Caroli family, the Rastellis, the animal tamer and trainer, Otto Seiler-Jackson, Alfred Court, Voitek Trubka and Gilbert Houcke, the Japanese trick cyclist, Lilly Yokoi, the

prince of pickpockets, Borra, clown Dimitri, cabaretist Emil Steinberger, as well as groups of artists from all over Europe, South America, Russia, Mongolia, China and North Korea. In addition, the 74-year old clown, Nock – who has already performed with Knie on several of its tours – is now a guest star for the company's jubilee year.

Members of today's Knie family like Rolf and Fredy senior are also remarkable circus artists in their own right. And Knie has also gained much favourable attention by its animal-friendly performances with elephants, horses and the great carnivores. One of the most sensational was a dressage act featuring a tiger riding on the back of a rhinoceros. Knie posters have been designed by many famous artists, such as Herbert Leupin, Donald Brun, Hans Erni, Hans Falk and Jean Tinguely.

In the war they never closed

Knie's public has included many of the world's greats, such as Charlie Chaplin and Emperor Akihito of Japan. Throughout the Second World War, the Knie circus troupe carried on relentlessly. During the great frontier vigil, the soldiers of the Swiss army learned to appreciate the wonderful entertainment they could get for just one franc. The circus never closed, although its horses, and even its camels and elephants, were mobilised for military transport and national defence.

In 1991, the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad celebrated its 75th anniversary with a special performance by Circus Knie.

The feelings of one childhood visitor to the great Knie tent were described like this by Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss: "Every year with pounding hearts and butterfly stomachs we took our places on the benches and waited in a state of terrible excitement for signs that the mysterious ceremony would soon take place. Ladies and gentlemen, the performance is about to begin. In the brightly lit circle of sawdust, the best circus in the world springs back to life..."

Hans Gerber