

The life of Rukeli Trollmann

A closer look at one person's life can often give us a deeper understanding of events in the past. Studying Nazi Germany is no different.

Born in 1907 in Hanover, Johann Trollmann, a champion boxer, should have been hailed as a hero. Instead he was persecuted by the Nazi regime before being murdered in 1944. His story reveals the nightmare of living in Nazi Germany for anyone who was considered different. In Johann's case, he was a Sinti. This was a group of the Romani people and so Johann was considered *untermensch* in the eyes of the Nazis.

The dancing tree

During the 1920s, Johann or Rukeli, which was his boxing nickname (*rukeli* means 'like a tree' in Romani), became a famous fighter, developing a dancing style that at the time was seen as un-German but today is common among boxers. In 1933, Jews were banned from boxing, which led to the light heavyweight title coming up for grabs.

The champion

On 9 June, Rukeli seized his chance when he faced the Aryan champion Adolf Witt for the title. He landed blow after blow against his opponent and was clearly winning the fight. However, the pro-Nazi referee stopped the bout and called a draw. The Nazis could not let a Sinti win. The supporting crowd was furious and the referee was forced to give Rukeli the title.

Three weeks later, however, Rukeli, the 'Gypsy in the ring' as the Nazi press called him, was told that the title had been taken from him and he would have to fight again to prove his worth.

On 21 July, Rukeli would fight the Nazi favourite, Gustav Elder. Rukeli knew he would not be allowed to win so decided to make a stand. Stepping in to the ring with his hair dyed blonde and his face whitened with flour, Rukeli was directly mocking the Nazi ideology. Knowing he had no chance of victory, he allowed his opponent to land punches without defence. He lasted five rounds before collapsing. Rukeli's career was over. Unfortunately, the sad story of Johann Trollmann was not.

Obscurity

There is little evidence of what happened to Johann in the years 1933–38 as it appears he went into hiding to avoid persecution. In the late 1930s, Sinti increasingly began to suffer persecution similar to the Jews. Some Sinti, including Johann, were given a straight choice: either go to a concentration camp or be sterilised (an operation that stops you from having children). Records show Johann took the latter option and, in 1938, divorced his non-Sinti wife to protect her and their daughter.

Duty

In 1939, Germany invaded Poland and the Second World War began. In what could be considered a surprising act, Johann joined the *Wehrmacht* (German army) and spent the next three years fighting for the country that had treated him so badly. Johann was not the only Sinti to join up, showing that the Nazi obsession with race could be turned aside when strong fighters were offering their services (although this was never the case for Jews).

Rejection

1942 was a turning point in the Nazi treatment of Jews and Gypsies, who were no longer tolerated and would now be exterminated.

Johann was discharged from the army and sent to Neungamme concentration camp in Germany, where all the prisoners were forced to complete back-breaking manual labour tasks. Johann's task was harder though. Recognised by one of the camp guards who was a boxing fan, he was forced to train troops at night after the hard day's work. Doing double the work of any other inmate, Johann was soon near breaking point.

Twice dead

Seeing him deteriorate, the prisoners' committee pulled off a remarkable feat by faking his death and getting him sent to another camp under a false identity. Unfortunately, it was not long before he was recognised again. A fight was arranged between Johann and Emil Cornelius, a hated Kapo who helped run the camp for the SS guards. Cornelius was no match for the ex-boxer and walked away with his pride severely damaged after a severe beating. It was not long before he took his revenge, forcing Johann to work so hard that he was physically exhausted. Waiting until Johann was at his lowest, Cornelius attacked and murdered him with a shovel.

Restoration

There is no happy ending to a story this sad. But there is some justice. In 2003, the German boxing authority posthumously returned the 1933 title to Rukeli. He was once again the victor.



◀ Johann 'Rukeli' Trollmann, c.1933