

*'Olympia' in America, 1938: Leni Riefenstahl,
Hollywood, and the Kristallnacht*

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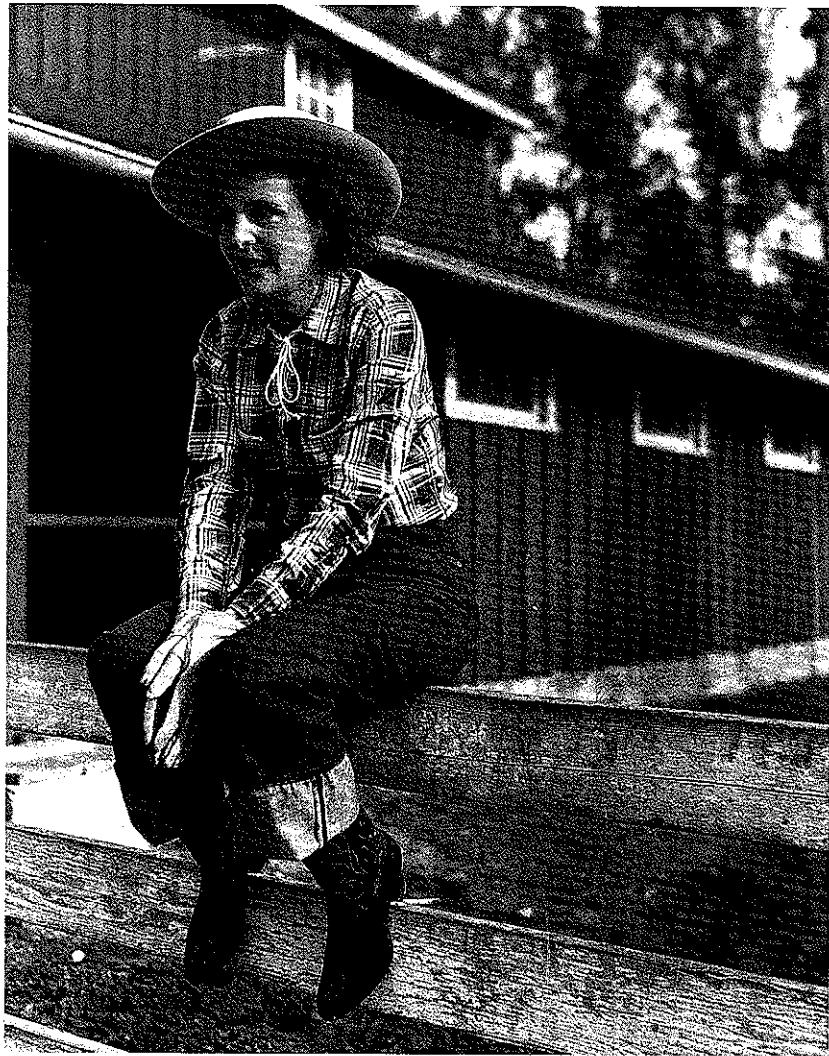


FIG. 1. Photo: UPI/Bettmann

By the fall of 1938, *Olympia*, Leni Riefenstahl's film on the 1936 Olympic Games, had opened successfully throughout Europe. She decided to travel to the USA to try to persuade the film industry to show *Olympia* in America. Her trip from November 1938 to January 1939 occurred as relations between Germany and the USA became more strained than at any time since World War I. Never did a saleswoman for Nazi Germany face a more hostile reaction. Riefenstahl's trip, doomed from the start, reveals less about unsuccessful film distribution than the power of the political Left and Right and pro- and anti-Jewish sentiment in America in the 1930s [1].

Why did she make the trip to America? *Olympia* was already a smash hit in Europe; no need for American receipts to break even. Since her contract did not provide her with a percentage of the gross, it was of no advantage to her financially to get the film released in America. Ernst Jäger accused Riefenstahl of wanting to circulate National Socialist propaganda:

Leni's intentions in New York were first of a business nature: she wanted to sell the Olympic film. She was not so much interested in the purchase price of \$325,000, as in winning converts. It seemed logical to her that her propaganda-through-sports would attract sports-loving America to the man behind the picture —Hitler.[2]

Riefenstahl disagrees. She insists *Olympia* was not a propaganda film. Her explanation of her trip in her memoirs defies all reason and logic:

I had no idea how great the danger of a war was at that time. Otherwise I would not have chosen America for my long desired vacation. For years it had been my wish to get to know the United States, and now I could fulfill it.[3]

Were this simply a vacation trip, why would she have been accompanied by a press secretary, Ernst Jäger, an important member of the German Olympic Committee, Walter Klingeberg, have received funding from the Propaganda Ministry, and been briefed and debriefed by Dr Goebbels himself? Riefenstahl does not deny any of this in her book, resulting in an odd juxtaposition of stories. We can nevertheless be sure that she was proud of her film, and wanted to show it to as wide an audience as possible, certainly an understandable impulse. And Riefenstahl may have enjoyed the challenge. She had managed to sell herself to a very tough group of men in Germany, and may have wanted to do the same in America.

Leni Riefenstahl sailed for America on board the *Europa* with her two travelling companions, Ernst Jäger and Werner Klingeberg. Her friendship with Jäger extended back to the 1920s in Berlin. He had been the editor of *Film-Kurier*, one of the best film trade journals in Germany. He had ghost-written her book on the making of *Triumph des Willens*, and Riefenstahl had hired him as press chief for the Olympic film.

She picked Jäger in part because he was an old friend and needed the work, but also because he knew the film world and Hollywood. He had been dealing with the agents of the big Hollywood firms for years, and he had visited Hollywood in November of 1935.

Werner Klingeberg, the official leader of the trip, had been active in preparations for the 1936 Olympic Games, and he had been chosen as international secretary for the 1940 Olympic Games. He also knew America quite well. He had been at Los Angeles in 1932 where he had attended the Games. Then he spent year studying at Berkeley before returning to Berlin. He spoke English with an American accent. Klingeberg had been a National Socialist since 1931 and was possibly a member of Reinhard Gehlen's Secret Service as well [4]. "Klingeberg had seen few films in his life and never

one of Riefenstahl's. Jäger had seen every picture made and too many of Riefenstahl's", according to Jäger [5]. The film director was to be incognito—she was listed in the passenger manifest as "Lotte Richter" so that her 17 pieces of luggage, stamped with her initials, would not go astray. In her luggage were three different 35 -mm versions of *Olympia*, numerous copies of her book *Schönheit im Olympischen Kampf*, and other publicity material. Her cover quickly blown, she became a shipboard celebrity. She made friends with some American businessmen and their wives [6]. She sought prominent Americans who might be able to help her in America. Having started marking up a map of the USA, she inscribed names beside several large cities. Next to New York, she wrote:

Ernst Oberhumer, important connections in Washington, perhaps road show
... Frank T. Ryan, brother in law of President of Chase-National Bank,
which controls 20th Century Fox. [7]

She would be making similar lists for Chicago and Detroit. Two members of the German Embassy in Washington, Dr Tannenberg and Baron Ulrich Kurt von Gienanth paid their respects and expressed their shock that the trip had been so haphazardly organized. Riefenstahl had told von Gienanth that the "Ministry of Economics" had given her 8,000 dollars for the trip that was to last for two months. Besides, Goebbels had sent only a brief statement to all the German consulates in the USA, stating that she was travelling privately and was to be approached only if she requested their help.

'Besides, Dr Goebbels has already washed his hands of me for whatever happens over there', she laughingly rejoined. 'He was always against this trip.'
[8]

Dr Goebbels' instincts were sound. The last thing that Riefenstahl needed in America was anything that looked like an official endorsement of her trip by the Hitler Government. The line that she was a private citizen was the only one that had a chance of success, and any red-carpet treatment by German consulates would have backfired.

The *Europa* docked in New York on 4 November 1938, and Riefenstahl was immediately besieged by the press. She made an initial good impression on some of the journalists at least, and Inez Robb of the *Daily News* reported that Riefenstahl denied a romance with Hitler with such vivacity that "... an army of veteran newspaper reporters, photographers and newsreel men decided Der Reichsfuehrer [sic] had overlooked a far more attractive bet than the Sudetens ... the gal ... has charm and to burn" [9]. Riefenstahl took up residence at the Hotel Pierre, and waded enthusiastically into New York night life. She spent an evening at the Stork Club and El Morocco, and Walter Winchell mentioned her in a column, saying that "she was pretty as a swastika" [10].

Some persons were determined that the Olympic film would be boycotted in America. On Monday 7 November 1938, the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, claiming a membership of 100,000 persons, opened a campaign against Riefenstahl, claiming that her film was part of a Nazi campaign "to flood the United States with Nazi doctrines". The League stated that it already had the support of leading film distributors and that it was going after the support of the major Hollywood companies and all New York distributors. Judge Jeremiah T. Mahoney, head of the US Amateur Athletic Union, had led the fight against sending an American team to the Berlin Olympics in 1936, but had been lost to Avery Brundage, President of the American Olympic Committee. Now the League had enlisted the Judge's support.



FIG. 2. Leni Riefenstahl and Werner Klingeberg (with trenchcoat and Leica), New York City, 4 November 1938, being greeted by the press. Photo: UPI/Bettmann

Mahoney has criticized the Hitler-Riefenstahl films on the ground that the games themselves were merely Nazi propaganda. "The importance of the games from an athletic standpoint were forgotten", said Mr Mahoney, speaking as former President of the US Amateur Athletic Union. "The games were for Nazi propaganda." [11]

League officials already claimed the support of many foreign film exporters, including World Pictures, Atlantic Films, Garrison Films, Franco-American Pictures and Seiden Pictures. These companies may have been small beer to the giant Hollywood companies, but the men involved in the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League were not. The vice-presidents included Mayor F.H. LaGuardia of New York; Bishop Francis J. McConnell, presiding bishop of the North Atlantic States of the Methodist Episcopal Church; Clarence H. Low, treasurer of the New York State Democratic Committee; Frank P. Walsh, labour lawyer, head of the the United States Commission on Industrial Relations under Wilson and appointed chairman of the New York Power Authority by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Samuel Untermeyer, the noted labor lawyer and spokesperson for European Jewry, had been the League's president.

At first, Riefenstahl had no reason to be dissatisfied with the progress that she was making with the selling of the film. According to Jäger, she first contacted "O.E. Otterson, former director of Western Electric, called in Germany an Anti-Semite" [12]. Jäger referred to John E. Otterson, a vice-president and general manager in 1927 and

1928 of the Electrical Research Products, Inc., a subsidiary of Western Electric. In 1928, Otterson became a director and president of Paramount Pictures, replacing Adolph Zukor, but he was forced out in a 1936 proxy fight. Because Paramount had maintained its contracts and distributorships in National Socialist Germany, Otterson was highly familiar with the German film industry and in a position to help Riefenstahl in America. His advice was quite sensible:

The film should first be shown to the men behind the anti-German boycott. If they declared the film contained no propaganda, the matter of a 'release' would be simplified. In this event, he himself would be interested. Since the Hayes Office respected her position as a "private producer", and since one of the three still-active studios in Germany (Paramount) let her understand that they were perhaps interested in buying the film; and since the prospects of a deal with RKO were favorable too—Leni was optimistic.[13]

She visited the Radio City Music Hall, not entirely as a tourist. G.W. van Schmus, the Dutch director of Radio City, wanted to sign a contract to show *Olympia*, which certainly would have made a splashy American première. Van Schmus said that they would discuss the matter further in Hollywood. Riefenstahl had some other powerful help in the USA. In Berlin, she had become friendly with Avery Brundage, the President of the American Olympic Committee, as well as other members of the IOC.

The Role of Avery Brundage after Kristallnacht

Brundage was one of the most influential men in American athletics, a stickler for the maintenance of strict amateur standards in Olympic sports, and often a controversial figure. He sent a team to the Berlin Olympics in 1936 over powerful opposition. He remained pro-German even after World War II started, and largely because of the controversy over the Berlin Olympics, became an anti-Semite. He had previously written Klingenberg that *Olympia* could not be shown commercially in America because "unfortunately the theaters and moving picture companies are almost all owned by Jews" [14]. (See microfiche supplement No. 1) On Brundage's orders, the Committee did everything it could for Riefenstahl in America. A letter from Gustavus Town Kirby, treasurer of the American Olympic Committee to Brundage on 10 November 1938, the day after *Kristallnacht*, reveals how much the Committee wanted to help German American relations and what it was up against. Kirby and his wife lunched with the German Consul Dr Borchers, and Kirby and Riefenstahl had a long conversation. Kirby then went to try to talk to John D. Rockefeller to enlist his support to obtain Radio City Music Hall for the premiere of *Olympia*. This did not work out. Kirby then wanted to show the film at the fiftieth anniversary of the AAU or at the annual convention of the NCAA. However, Kirby was pessimistic because of the strong anti-Nazi feeling in New York (see microfiche) [15].

While Riefenstahl was in New York, she contacted the Museum of Modern Art. The correspondence files of the Museum disclose that the Reichsfilmkammer notified John F. Abbott, the husband of Iris Barry, that Riefenstahl was on her way to America and that Abbott contacted the German embassy to obtain a copy of the Olympic film for projection [16].

Events in Europe soon intruded upon the distribution of *Olympia*. On 7 November 1938, a young Jew in Paris named Herschel Grynszpan had shot and killed the Third Secretary of the German Embassy. The retaliation in Germany was terrible. On the

night of 11 November, synagogues were burned and Jewish stores all over Germany were looted and destroyed. Because the sound of breaking glass could be heard everywhere, this nationwide pogrom was called *Kristallnacht*, an ironic name dreamed up by Goebbels [17]. Jews were rounded up, beaten, tortured and sent to concentration camps. The pogrom was so awful that different groups among the National Socialists and the regime blamed one another for the excesses. In a further cynical gesture, the German Government ordered the Jews to pay for the destruction of their own property. And the stories that leaked out of Germany did not die down. They became worse.

The world press and world opinion, a month after the Czech crisis, paid attention. Tolerance for the regime had run out. The media, Republican as well as Democrat, heaped abuse on the German Government. President Roosevelt recalled the American Ambassador in Berlin, Hugh Wilson, "for consultation". Wilson never returned to his post. Hans Thomsen, the German Chargé d'Affaires in Washington, advised that all secret files at the Washington Embassy be returned to Germany; if the Embassy were seized, there would be insufficient time to burn them. Hans Dieckhoff, the Ambassador in Washington, reported to Berlin, "A hurricane is raging here" [18]. On 11 November, The German Consul General in New York, Johannes Borchers, declared to Riefenstahl that not since the World War had there been such a feeling of animosity in the USA against Germany. Before, Borchers and other diplomatic personnel could reassure those still friendly to Germany that the Jewish question would be regulated by the Nuremberg laws and that the government would not tolerate any excesses. Now that even the synagogues were burned down, the Germans did not have a leg to stand on [19]. Another high official cried out that Berlin had undone in one day what it had taken five years to accomplish, and it would be better if Riefenstahl returned to Germany [20].

Any hope of getting *Olympia* shown in America had been destroyed in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*. Dr Borchers, Heinz Bellers, the Propaganda Ministry representative, and Ernst Oberhumer, the Wall Street broker who represented sizeable German investments in America, advised Riefenstahl to go home. She decided, instead, to keep trying.

She was urged by pro-Germans to speak to important officials at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Hearing this, she must have remembered that she had done herself some good at the Paris Exposition of 1937. She was given an elaborate luncheon by John Hartigan, foreign commissioner for the Fair, who tried to persuade her to get Hitler to change his mind and to have Germany participate in the World's Fair. Riefenstahl explained in some detail Hitler's refusal to participate, and Hartigan successfully countered these arguments, persuading her to take photographs and other documents to show to Hitler. She was also greeted by Grover Whalen, the president of the World's Fair. But the reaction against her and Germany continued to grow.

On 15 November, Riefenstahl flew to Washington. She stayed at one of the Vanderbilt houses that had been rented by Ambassador Dieckhoff, about to be permanently recalled from Washington as retaliation for Roosevelt's recall of the American Ambassador from Berlin. Dieckhoff advised her to go to the Midwest, which because of its isolationist and pro-German sentiment, was likely to give her a far warmer welcome than the East Coast. He also advised her to see Henry Ford, who admired Hitler and just stirred up a lot of controversy by accepting a German decoration. After a brief tour of Washington and Mount Vernon, Riefenstahl left for Chicago.

The Chicago Reception

Riefenstahl arrived there on the sixteenth and immediately felt the increased warmth toward her. She checked in the Drake Hotel and had her first lunch with Avery Brundage. Brundage was already acquainted with Klingeberg. Riefenstahl was quickly introduced to a number of prominent Chicagoans, and Mrs Claire Dux-Swift and Mrs Henry Bartholemew invited her as "Lotte Richter" to the Women's Athletic Club, which impressed her enormously [21]. She toured the Opera House and decided to rent it for the première of the Olympic film. Riefenstahl was heartened by her reception in Chicago, and happy to learn that *Triumph of the Will* had played there 120 times to "select audiences" [22].

On 18 November, she went to Detroit to meet Henry Ford. Ford was known to be sympathetic to Hitler and Germany. He received her graciously, but they were never alone together. Also in the room were the German Consul Fritz Hailer and Ford's general manager, the notorious anti-Semite and strike-breaker, E. G. Liebold. According to Jäger, although Ford was gracious, Riefenstahl felt that the interview had not gone very well. She did not even ask Ford whether he wanted to see the Olympic film. But according to Riefenstahl, Ford did tell her that when she returned to Berlin and saw Hitler, she should tell him that Ford admired him very much and hoped to meet him at the next Party Day Rally in Nuremberg [23].

Riefenstahl returned to Chicago, and at last, Brundage arranged to show *Olympia* at the Chicago Engineers Club.

Its president, W.A. Mann, had placed the hall at Leni's disposal, at the instigation of the Olympic Committee. A club room was transformed into a projection room. Transformers for supplying sufficient current were set up with great difficulty. A transportable screen was fixed according to Leni's strict orders. Besides, the entrepreneurs took precautions in two dimensions; it was to be an ultra-private party. And Leni, a guest, was in no way to conduct the showing with a view to finding purchasers for the film.[24]

Avery Brundage announced that the film had been accepted by the Olympic Committee. He predicted that the film would be superb. Then Riefenstahl spoke, saying that the audience would be able to verify that the film contained no propaganda but instead represented a bridge between the peoples of the earth, and she hoped that the film would be freely shown in America.

On the 20th of November, at 4 o'clock, two small, noisy movie projectors rattled away the first reel of a five hour, 25,000 foot view of the Olympics. The entire audience numbered 35 people, seven of them from the consulate.[25]

The showing was a great success. "A few older women cried. The Hitler pictures, the international flags, Richard Strauss' hymn of peace, the negroes, the German Officers, the Olympic Flame . . . all of it moved them" [26].

Brundage wrote to William May Garland, the American member of the International Olympic Committee in Los Angeles that he had seen the greatest Olympic film ever made and he expressed hope that Garland would be of the same opinion. The next morning, Riefenstahl telephoned Ambassador Dieckhoff who was about to leave for Germany. She asked him to tell Hitler that she was beginning to have success, and that she was leaving for California. She told her travelling companions that she had other Hollywood connections that no one even dreamed of and that she must be in

Hollywood by the end of the week. With high hopes, and still accompanied by Ernst Jäger and Werner Klingeberg, she went to California.

The Hollywood Reception

Riefenstahl arrived in Hollywood on 24 November 1938 on the *Super Chief*. Her welcoming committee was pitifully small. She was met by the German Consul, Dr Gyssling; Hubert Stowitts and his brother, and Hans Wolfram. While Warner Brothers was producing *I Was a Captive of Nazi Germany*, the first overtly anti-Nazi film that came out of Hollywood, Dr Gyssling alienated the film community by sending letters on official government stationery to both the authoress and the actors, warning of German reprisals against those participating in pictures "the tendency or effect of which is detrimental to German prestige" [27]. Gyssling was to be a big help to Riefenstahl, since he knew everyone in Hollywood who was pro-German [28]. Hans Wolfram was the representative from the *California Staats-Zeitung*, a German-speaking newspaper and had been in Berlin in 1936.

Hubert Stowitts had been a good friend to Riefenstahl over a number of years, and shared much of her aesthetic viewpoint. Stowitts was an American from Nebraska. Like Isadora Duncan, whom he resembled in many ways, Stowitts was a pioneer American dancer who emphasized personal style over classical training. He had been a good athlete in his youth, and in later years was interested in the combination of athletic motives with dance forms. Stowitts had been a famous partner of Pavlova, but he had retired, and then taken up painting seriously.

As a painter, he was especially interested in the male physique. In 1936, in conjunction with the Olympics, he had painted a series of UCLA and USC male athletes, and called the series "The American Champions". Stowitts had had hopes that the exhibition would be approved by the US Olympic Committee for inclusion in the American Art exhibit in Berlin, but the lovingly painted portraits of nude models shocked the Committee. Stowitts had sent the painting to Berlin for exhibition at his own expense. National Socialism has always had a penchant for explicit nudity, and his work was quite well received by some. Significantly and perhaps inevitably, one admirer of his work was Riefenstahl. She took him under her wing, got him jobs in Germany, and it is possible that his nudes influenced the style of the prologue to *Olympia*.

Stowitts had been involved with the Olympic film in another way. In the spring of 1938, before *Olympia* had even premiered in Germany before Adolf Hitler, Riefenstahl had given Stowitts a print to take back to California. Stowitts had shown the film at the some of the most exclusive clubs and sports groups in California.

Others actively sought to thwart Riefenstahl, particularly the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. This organization should not be confused with the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League in New York. The Hollywood League had been formed in 1936 by a group in the motion picture industry that encompassed Frederick March, Oscar Hammerstein, Dorothy Parker, Rupert Hughes, Donald Ogden Stewart, Eddie Cantor, Dudley Nichols, Viola Brothers Shore, Gloria Stuart and others. Its membership included Democrats and Republicans, but its real leadership was furnished by its president, Donald Ogden Stewart, as well as Herbert Bibermann, Alan Campbell and Marion Spitzer, and it was soon attacked by Martin Dies as a Communist organization [29]. How much real power it had was debatable, but it claimed a membership of 5,000. It published a weekly paper, sponsored a radio program, and held frequent mass meetings [30]. In addition, there were other organizations in Hollywood such as the Motion



FIG. 3. Leni Riefenstahl, wearing a fur hat, has tea with German Consul, Dr George Gyssling, Hollywood, CA. The original caption read: "Riefenstahl feted in Hollywood—by German Consul, Hollywood, Calif.—Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's favorite movie actress wasn't entirely snubbed in Hollywood. Here she is having tea with Dr George Gyssling, German consul there. Leni, who hasn't had much social success in the movie capital, announced yesterday that the United States would be denied the pleasure of viewing her official moving picture of the 1936 Olympics", 7 December 1938. Photo: UPI/Bettmann

Picture Artists Committee and Walter Wanger's Americanism Committee which had little reason to welcome Riefenstahl. Dr Gyssling informed her that there had been demonstrations all over Hollywood to protest her presence, including one at the Garden of Allah where she was originally to stay.

Hubert Stowitts tried to help. He had worked on the costumes, set designs and choreography and had danced in MGM's *The Painted Veil* (1934) starring Greta Garbo.

**Post This On Your
BULLETIN BOARD!**

Over A Year Ago

On September 24th, 1937, this LEAGUE called attention to the presence in Hollywood of VITTORIO MUSSOLINI, son of Il Duce, collaborator of Adolf Hitler.

Hollywood demonstrated its unwillingness to entertain emissaries of Fascism.

Today

LENI RIEFENSTAHL, Head of the NAZI FILM INDUSTRY, has arrived in Hollywood.

There Is No Room In Hollywood For LENI RIEFENSTAHL

In this moment, when hundreds of thousands of our brethren await certain death, close your doors to all Nazi Agents.

Let The World Know

There Is No Room In Hollywood For NAZI AGENTS!!

Sign The Petition For An Economic Embargo Against Germany!

THE HOLLYWOOD ANTI-NAZI LEAGUE FOR THE DEFENSE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

FIG. 4. Advertisement, *Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety*, 29 November 1938

Riefenstahl was especially interested in meeting Louis B. Mayer and Joseph Schenck, probably because MGM was anxious to maintain its distribution system in Germany. Stowitts had also promised an invitation to the Disney Studios. Leopold Stokowski was an old friend of Stowitts, and had been working at Disney Studios on *Fantasia* since January of 1938 [31]. In addition, G.W. Van Schmus of the Radio City Music Hall, who was in Los Angeles at the time looking for films to book, called to make an appointment.

On Tuesday 29 November 1938, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League ran advertisements in the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety* stating that Riefenstahl was the head

of the Nazi film industry, and calling on the Hollywood community to make clear to Riefenstahl that she was not welcome [32].

The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League's claims were not entirely accurate. Riefenstahl was certainly not the head of the Nazi film industry. On the other hand, *Olympia* did enjoy official status as a Reich-sponsored film. Itemized accounts of her expenses on the American trip appear in Propaganda Ministry files.

The announcement of the Anti-Nazi League was reported in many countries. Riefenstahl was extremely upset. Klingeberg urged her to stay. He reminded her that even if she had not got far with official Hollywood, she had made some friends in America, not the least of whom were the Olympic officials and athletes. The American Olympic Committee had promised to show the picture, and William May Garland, the American member of the IOC and host of the Los Angeles Games in 1932, wrote Avery Brundage from the Bohemian Club on December 2:

Dear Avery:

Thought of you while spending a day or two at this club—Taking Leni and Werner to the Notre Dame—SC football game tomorrow at the Coliseum—they have a duck dinner next Tuesday eve at the house. I hope a few days later to see the Olympic film and ask a few friends—the Jews of Hollywood are hostile to Leni.

Well time marches on and perhaps some time in America they may get what is coming to them—San Francisco is looking very attractive—am attending Calif. State Chamber of Commerce.

Kind regards,

Bill [33]

Louis B. Mayer did call her and agreed to meet, but warned that feeling was strong against her, and suggested that they not meet at MGM. Riefenstahl angrily refused [34]. *Variety* ran an article reminding the Hollywood community how the American newsreel companies had been treated in Berlin during the Games:

Leni Riefenstahl is not expected to get far with efforts to interest American companies in her Olympic films which runs [sic] nearly 20 reels. Aside from the fact that all look askance at the box office potential of the subject, the manner in which the American newsreels were taken over the bumps at the Berlin Olympics also is an unfavorable factor . . .

The Nazi Olympics Picture record is regarded as a well edited and fairly comprehensive subject by those who have viewed it but industry chieftains fail to see what place it has in the American scene at the present time.[35]

On 8 December 1938, Stowitts and Riefenstahl met Walt Disney, who gave them a three-hour tour of the studio, showed her sketches for *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and explained his cartoon techniques.

Riefenstahl later wrote that Disney wanted to see both parts of *Olympia* in his screening room, but after thinking it over, was afraid that his union projectionists would spread the word that he had projected it, and as an independent producer, with no means of distribution and no theatres of his own, he could be effectively boycotted [36].

William May Garland turned out to be helpful as he had promised. Garland, besides his ties with the Olympic movement, was also a friend of Georg Gyssling [37]. At the Garland family dinner, Garland's brother-in-law, Harrison Chandler, son of the *Los Angeles Times* owner and an acquaintance of Riefenstahl from the Olympics, was

present and promised to help, and Garland made arrangements to show *Olympia* at the California Club on 14 December 1938.

Riefenstahl had three versions of the film at her bungalow. The one she chose to show was the one with all shots of Hitler deleted. More than 140 people were at the performance, including Marjorie Gestring, the young diver who had been so popular with the Germans in Berlin, Kenneth Carpenter, the gold medallist in the discus, the pole vaulters Bill Graber and Bill Sefton, as well as Johnny Weismuller and Glenn Morris. Representing the press were Grantland Rice, Henry McLemore and Bill Henry. The rest were friends and club members. Garland made a short speech asking that no publicity be given either to the California Club or to the parties responsible for the showing [38]. The film began at 7.30 p.m. and the second half began at 9.30 p.m. after a half-hour intermission for a light dinner. Garland wrote Brundage:

I was much impressed with the artistry. It seemed to me that she had so arranged the events, contests, winners, etc., that it really appeared to be *American* propaganda rather than German.[39]

The film was well-received. Henry McLemore of the *Hollywood Citizen-News* gave an extremely favorable review that was widely reprinted:

Los Angeles, Dec. 16—(UP)—Last night I saw the finest motion picture that I have ever seen, and you must not dismiss my opinion lightly, because as a man who dates back to John Bunny, Flora Finch, *Broken Blossoms*, and *Birth of a Nation*, I am qualified to speak as a fairly competent critic . . .

It is not propaganda, but a magnificent filming of the greatest meeting of athletes in the history of the world . . . If it not shown to the youth of this country, the youth of this country will be the loser. From start to finish—and it runs for almost four hours—its only message is the joy and the glory that comes from the development of a superb body.[40]

On 17 December 1938, the *Los Angeles Times* also reviewed the film enthusiastically:

While it is not to be released in America, according to present plans, because of anti-Nazi controversies, the motion picture record of the XI Olympiad, produced by Leni Riefenstahl, a visitor here, was given a private showing this week in Los Angeles, and revealed itself as far more than simply a chronicle of world renowned competition, but a triumph for the camera and an epic poem of the screen.[41]

But nothing happened. The boycott remained in effect. Hal Roach threw a party for her, but Budd Schulberg remembered in 1973:

She told me of the wonderful party that Hal Roach had given for her during her visit to Hollywood in the middle 30s. I remembered, but did not feel it necessary to tell her that that 'wonderful party' had been bitterly resented by Hollywood's anti-Nazi community and that a widespread boycott led by anti-Nazi stars and directors involved an overwhelming majority of the leading Hollywood personalities. They set up a telephone campaign, urging other celebrated invitees not to attend the reception for Riefenstahl. As a result, her reception was a fiasco. [42]

Riefenstahl received one more chance. Winfield Sheehan was a well-known producer and, according to Consul Gyssling, a friend of Germany [43]. Maria Jeritza, who was famous in Europe for her singing of *Tosca*, was married to Sheehan. The Sheehans held a reception on 28 December 1938 and invited Klingeberg, Riefenstahl and Gyssling.

The Sheehans saw part one and two reels of part two and were terribly impressed. Jeritza promised to call Louis B. Mayer, Joseph Schenck and Eleanor Roosevelt(!) Riefenstahl gratefully sent her flowers, but still nothing happened.

Riefenstahl had been in San Francisco on 30 December, where the newspapers thoroughly quizzed her on the Goebbels-Lida Baarova scandal, which had just broken. Several World's Fair managers saw the film, but they lost interest when she refused to make any cuts, or as Riefenstahl and Klingeberg maintained, because of the boycott.

On 4 January 1939, President Roosevelt made his annual state of the union address to Congress. In an extremely aggressive speech, and obviously alluding to the recent Czech crisis, he warned of "international lawlessness" and the increasing aggression of the dictators, and proposed a three-point defence programme, revision of the neutrality laws, and especially to the point, he hinted at economic sanctions against German goods. He probably did not have Riefenstahl in mind, but part of his speech certainly did not help her:

We have learned that long before any overt military act, aggression begins with preliminaries of propaganda, subsidized penetration, the loosening of ties of good will, the stirring of prejudice and the incitement to disunion.[44]

Klingeberg later wrote Brundage on January 23:

The Worlds Fair in San Francisco made certain political reservations and by winning time with the excuses of the Congress Message of President Roosevelt, inquired in Los Angeles, where the movie industry gave them "friendly" advises which resulted in discontinuing our negotiations.[45]

On 13 January, the day of Riefenstahl's departure from Los Angeles, Hedda Hopper started campaigning on Riefenstahl's behalf:

Leni Riefenstahl is the only woman who writes, directs, acts in and cuts her own pictures. She came to fame in Germany years ago through a venture called "The Blue Light" taken in the Dolomites. I met her the other day. She's perfectly charming, and I believe her picture made with the Olympics as a background, and without propaganda, will be shown here in the next six months.

After all, our American boys cleaned up during those games and the best shots of their deeds are in Leni's picture. Why shouldn't we be allowed to see them?[46]

On the fourteenth, Hopper reported that three publicity agents in Hollywood had turned Riefenstahl down as a client, echoing a very old story in the *Hollywood Reporter*.

Riefenstahl left, but Jäger defected, remaining in America until the 1950s. He remains an ambiguous figure. His behaviour during the trip does raise certain questions. When Riefenstahl and Klingeberg returned to Germany, Klingeberg filed a notice of disclaimer for certain expenses run up by Jäger, especially for a trip to Cleveland that Jäger had allegedly taken between the third and fifteenth of January, 1939:

The payment of the above amounts was necessary since Herr Jäger, without the knowledge or the approval of Fräulein Riefenstahl or me, advanced money and spent it. These expenses are not part of the purposes of our trip, and I cannot be responsible for them. Herr Jäger left Los Angeles just when life had become too expensive for the three of us, and we had to be exceptionally careful with the funds left for the trip, which had been extended by fourteen days. Herr Jäger was completely knowledgeable about the financial situation

when he left Los Angeles. Neither the raise of the daily allowance to the figure of \$25.00, nor the general outlays for a secretary, nor the trip to Cleveland were necessary. Herr Jäger informed us that he was supposed to have a special assignment regarding the chain of theaters in the USA given to him by the Director of Tobis Lehmann, and he was to report to Tobis directly. I therefore decline responsibility for the following documents of the Olympia-Film Company pending further clarification.[47]

But the Tobis Company was not assuming responsibility for Jäger either:

We would be extremely interested in seeing the original text of your submitted statement, according to which Herr Jäger . . . "had a special assignment regarding the formation of a chain of theaters in the USA, and that he was to report to Tobis directly". Herr Jäger had no such assignment from us, and never reported to us on a matter of this nature.[48]

But Klingeberg may have been playing a double game, and he apparently knew that Jäger was going to stay in America well in advance of their departure for Germany. On the occasion of Jäger's death, Klingeberg wrote Mera Jäger, Ernst Jäger's widow, on 5 April 1976, in his rather uncertain English:

Ernest and I were good friends, because we knew, what was going on. Knowing that he did not intend to return to Nazi-Germany, I also risked some and did pay him everything due him. I am sorry that he had to eat the dry bread of an emigrant hoping so much of God' own country. As soon as it was possible we contacted again: Man to Man. After going through all my files, I didn't find a foto from Ernest and me together. I only can and will remember him as one great and courageous Journalist whom I could help only very little. But he was a MAN! [49]

Jäger stayed in Hollywood and wrote "How Leni Riefenstahl became Hitler's Girl-friend", the series of articles for the *Hollywood Tribune* on Riefenstahl that have been so often cited (see microfiche supplement No. 2). But even after America entered the war, Jäger's status in the USA remained insecure. If his former Jewish wife and Social Democratic past made him untrustworthy to the Nazis, he had written too many Right-wing articles in Nazi Germany for the German émigré community in Los Angeles to trust him either [50]. In 1942, he was reportedly working in a Jewish tuberculosis sanitarium, and reportedly wrote a friend that serving Jewish patients was a pleasure because it was a response to Nazi race hatred [51].

In spite of all the problems that Riefenstahl and Klingeberg had in America, the two very nearly got the film distributed. Riefenstahl was informed in New York, just before she and Klingeberg left for Germany, that British Gaumont wanted to sign a contract for England and America. It looked as if her film had been a success, even if she had got nowhere in Hollywood. But the film never did get a general release in England or America before the war. This was not because of the failure of Riefenstahl's powers of persuasion, but because of the sequence of events in Germany. After Munich and *Kristallnacht*, no one wanted a German product. Nazi anti-Semitism undermined the distribution in America of *Olympia*.

The trip raises other questions. Riefenstahl's trip suggests strongly that Thomas Mann was accurate when he described Fascism as the errand boy of capitalism. What successes she enjoyed in America came from mainly affluent and conservative circles, and while Allen Guttman points out that there was some truth in Avery Brundage's

allegation that the motion picture industry in America was controlled by Jews, one is still struck by the ugly tone in Garland's and Brundage's letters, some of which were written after *Kristallnacht* [52].

On the other hand, the element that seems most hostile to Riefenstahl is the Left, in some cases American members of the Communist party. Riefenstahl in her memoirs attributes her failure in Hollywood to the boycott by the Anti-Nazi League. The League appears to have been a Popular Front Organization. After the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August of 1939, when many CPUSA members quickly became pro-German, the League collapsed when its leaders tried to adhere to the new Party line [53].

Was the boycott justified? There is no easy answer. I have argued elsewhere that *Olympia* was propaganda, if only what Jacques Ellul calls sociological propaganda [54]. But *Olympia* did not represent a clear and present danger to the peace and order of a democratic society; it did not yell "fire" in a crowded theatre. It was propaganda in the sense that it put the best features of its society on the screen, just as Hollywood films did. Riefenstahl reports that audiences in France and Scandinavia applauded Hitler whenever he appeared on the screen in *Olympia*. Given the virulent aspects of Hitler's regime, which were becoming increasingly apparent, should a film that showed National Socialist Germany as a normal, happy and healthy society be shown? On the other hand, censorship, even if not by government edict, is always dangerous. It should be remembered that many who called for a boycott of Riefenstahl's film would find their own work boycotted in Hollywood 10 years later.

Olympia's commercial run in America before World War II was not what Riefenstahl had in mind. In 1940, an entity called the Marathon Film Company released the film for German enclaves in large American cities. In New York, part I ran at the Eighty-Sixth Street Theater in Yorkville on 9 March 1940. Part II began its run on 30 March. Jay Leyda told me that he saw the film there and that there were loud cheers for every German victory. The film also ran in Chicago at the Sonotone theater at the end of May 1940 [55]. George Pratt remembered seeing the film in Chicago, but he had to cross a picket line to do so. Evidently Riefenstahl did not know that *Olympia* had been distributed in America before the war [56], and when Avery Brundage requested a print of *Olympia*, the German Railroad responded on 17 October 1940, that it had never heard of the Marathon Company. According to the newspaper ad for the film in Chicago, Avery Brundage called it "unbelievably beautiful, the greatest sport picture ever filmed".

On her return, on 5 February 1939, Riefenstahl met with Dr Goebbels to talk about the future of Olympia-Film GmbH and to discuss her own plans. Dr Goebbels reported the meeting as follows:

5 February 1939 (Sunday) In the evening, Leni Riefenstahl reports to me on her trip to America. She gives me an exhaustive description, and one that is far from encouraging. We shall get nowhere there. The Jews rule by terror and bribery. But for how much longer?[57]

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NOTES

- [1] Some of the material in this article appeared in *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (1986, Seacucus, Scarecrow Press), and is reprinted with its permission. I want to thank many people for their help:

John Graham, an ardent Riefenstahl scholar, generously shared his research with me and put me in contact with Ernst Jäger's widow, Mera Jäger, whom I also thank; Anne Holliday, an expert on Hubert Stowitts; Allen Guttman's excellent book *The Games Must Go on* (1984, Columbia University Press); John Fraser in England, who sent me a mass of Riefenstahl material; Dace Taube of the University of Southern California Library; Maynard Brichford, University Archivist, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana; and Susanne Klingeberg. I would like to dedicate this article to John Graham, who died of AIDS on 19 August 1990.

In addition, of course, I did not have Leni Riefenstahl's *Memoiren*. Many reviewers have expressed displeasure with the memoirs, but unfortunately, most of them have been general reviewers, and have been unable to criticize her very specifically. I hope here to indicate to what extent Riefenstahl has unsuccessfully attempted to sweep important issues under the rug.

- [2] E. JÄGER (2 June 1939) How Leni Riefenstahl became Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VI, p. 10.
- [3] L. RIEFENSTAHL (1987) *Memoiren* (Munich) p. 322.
- [4] Berlin Document Centre. Ernst Klingeberg file. K. ULLRICH (1961) *Olympia und die Deutschen*, (Berlin) pp. 87-88, citing M. SEGNI (20 August 1960) *Operazione OR: I nazi a Roma*, *Vie Nouvelle*, 15, pp. 16-17.
- [5] JÄGER, *ibid.*, part VI, p. 10.
- [6] Mr and Mrs Conkey P. Whitehead, large shareholders in Coca-Cola; Mr and Mrs Frank H. Powell, President of the Southwestern Portland Cement Company; and Frank T. Ryan, youngest son of the New York family of cotton exporters who had business interests in Berlin.
- [7] E. JÄGER (9 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VII, p. 14.
- [8] E. JÄGER (2 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VI, p. 10.
- [9] I. ROBB (5 November 1938) Not Fuehrer's girl friend and not Jewish, says Leni, *Daily News*.
- [10] W. WINCHELL (9 November 1938) Walter Winchell on Broadway, *Daily Mirror*, p. 6.
- [11] Anti-Nazi protest Riefenstahl's visit to circulate Olympic film, *Motion Picture Herald*, 12 November 1938, p. 19.
- [12] E. JÄGER (2 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VI, p. 11.
- [13] *Ibid.*
- [14] Brundage to Werner Klingeberg, 16 May 1938, [A]very [B]rundage [C]ollection, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Box 31, cited in Guttman, A. (1984) *The Games Must Go On* (Columbia University Press, New York) p. 91. Maynard Brichford, University Archivist, kindly granted permission to reproduce relevant Brundage correspondence (microfiche supplement 1) 19 Main Library, 1408 West Gregory Dr., Urbana, IL. 61801. Tel. 617-333-0798.
- [15] Gustavus Town Kirby to Avery Brundage, 10 November 1938, ABC, Box 29. While Kirby to some extent admired Hitler and Germany, he was not particularly anti-Semitic. See A. GUTTMAN (1984) *The Games Must Go On* (New York) pp. 66-67 and 72-73. It appears that Kirby was impressed by Hitler when they met during the 1936 Olympic Games. G. T. KIRBY (1954) *I Wonder Why?* (New York) p. 160.
- [16] Gienanth, Baron UK, Press Attaché to the German Embassy in Washington to John E. Abbott, 20 December 1938, Museum of Art Correspondence Files. Jäger mentions the "Film Art Museum", but appears to have had the Museum of Modern Art in mind. Judging from Dr Goebbels' diaries, Gienanth was Dr Goebbels' agent in America. Abbott, at a private dinner party, also told Riefenstahl that King Vidor, who had just finished *The Citadel*, and had seen *Olympia* in Paris, wanted to pay his respects.
- [17] For more information, see W. BENZ (1988) *Die Juden in Deutschland, 1933-1945: Leben unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft* (Munich,); A. READ (1989) *Kristallnacht: the Nazi night of terror* (London).
- [18] Department of State (1951) *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945* (Washington, DC, Government Printing Office), Series D, Vol. 4, p. 639.
- [19] E. JÄGER (9 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VII, p. 13.
- [20] E. JÄGER *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- [21] E. JÄGER (9 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VII, p. 14. Claire Dux was a famous Polish lyric soprano who had sung often in Berlin, where she had been married to Hans Albers. She sang with the Chicago Civic Opera and married the food magnate Charles H. Swift in 1926.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- [23] L. RIEFENSTAHL *Memoiren*, p. 325.

- [24] E. JÄGER (9 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part VII, p. 14.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] J. CUNNINGHAM (8 August 1936) Hitler Makes US Olympic Films Advertise Germany, *Motion Picture Herald*, p. 15.
- [28] On 5 April 1940, Dr Gyssling gave a reception for The Duke of Sachsen-Coburg. Among the guests were Harrison Chandler, Mr and Mrs Gary Cooper, Mr and Mrs Walt Disney, Mr and Mrs William May Garland, Mr and Mrs William Hays, William Randolph Hearst, Mr and Mrs William (Bill) Henry, the Janss Brothers, Mr and Mrs Frank Powell, Mr and Mrs Winfield Sheehan, and Hubert Stowitts. Most of these guests were involved with Riefenstahl's trip to some degree or another. And while it is not necessarily damning to be invited to a party, even to be on Consul Gyssling's guest list seven months after the outbreak of World War II seems significant. [D]epartment [o]f the [A]rmy. United States Army Intelligence and Security Command, Fort Meade Maryland. Georg Gyssling file.
- [29] D.O. STEWART (1975) *By a Stroke of Luck!* (New York) p. 231. For a good general discussion of the League, see L. CEPLAIR & S. ENGLUND (1980) *The Inquisition in Hollywood* (New York) pp. 104–112.
- [30] L. ROSTEN (1941) *Hollywood: the movie colony, the movie makers* (New York) pp. 140–144.
- [31] A. HOLLIDAY 4 December 1992 to author.
- [32] *Hollywood Reporter*, 29 November 1938, p. 5; *Daily Variety*, 29 November 1938, p. 5. Riefenstahl responded: "Already in New York I have said that my trip is absolutely private and that I have no official orders to carry out . . . I have never held an official position in Germany and could never have been called the head of the Nazi film industry. I am an independent artist. On the strength of my film, *The Blue Light*, I was engaged as producer and director for several important documentary films, including two of the Olympic Games". E. JÄGER (23 June 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part IX, p. 13.
- [33] ABC, Box 56. William May Garland to Avery Brundage, 2 December 1938.
- [34] C. HIGHAM (1993) *Merchant of Dreams: Louis B. Mayer, MGM, and the secret Hollywood* (New York) p. 287.
- [35] LENI RIEFENSTAHL Still getting business' brushoff, *Variety*, 7 December 1938, pp. 1, 55.
- [36] RIEFENSTAHL, *Memoiren*, p. 327.
- [37] DOA. Georg Gyssling File. Gyssling listed Garland as one of his character references in his statements to the American Army in 1946 when he was suspected of being a war criminal.
- [38] E. JÄGER (10 July 1939) Hitler's girlfriend, *Hollywood Tribune*, part X, p. 13.
- [39] William May Garland to Avery Brundage dated 17 December 1938. ABC, Box 56.
- [40] MCLEMORE, H. (17 December 1938) Henry goes to bat on Berlin Olympic Film—no propaganda, *Hollywood Citizen News*.
- [41] (17 December 1938) "XI Olympiad" thrilling record of great games, *Los Angeles Times*, part 2, p. 7.
- [42] B. SCHULBERG (23 May 1973) Budd Schulberg Re Riefenstahl, *Weekly Variety*; BBC Television, *The Late Show*; Interview with Budd Schulberg, 18 December 1992, pp. 90–111, copy courtesy of Martin Davidson.
- [43] DOA. Georg Gyssling File. Winfield Sheehan was another character reference Gyssling gave the American Army after his arrest.
- [44] *New York Times*, 5 January 1939, p. 12.
- [45] ABC, Box 31.
- [46] H. HOPPER (13 January 1939) Hedda Hopper's Hollywood, *Los Angeles Times*, p. 19.
- [47] Bundesarchiv, Coblenz, Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, PA, R55/1328, p. 51.
- [48] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- [49] W. KLINGEBERG to Mera Jäger, 5 April 1976, copy in author's possession.
- [50] Gero Gandert of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, conversation with author in Washington, D.C., December 4, 1992. Microfiche Supplement 2 in this issue of *HJFRT* prints the entire Jäger series for the *Hollywood Tribune*.
- [51] *Variety*, 21 April 1942.
- [52] GUTTMAN, *The Games Must Go On*, p. 91.
- [53] L. ROSTEN (1941) *Hollywood: the movie colony, the movie makers* (New York) pp. 140–144; STEWART, *Stroke of Luck*, p. 252.

[54] C. GRAHAM *Leni Riefenstahl and 'Olympia'*, pp. 251-259.

[55] *Chicago Daily News*, 29 May 1940.

[56] Letter from Riefenstahl's secretary to author dated 16 September 1981.

[57] E. FRÖLICH (1987) *Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente* (Munich) Vol. 3, p. 569.

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