



**HISTORY**  
**JENNI FRAZER**

**THE IMPROBABLE** combination of Jews and circuses turns out to be not just probable, but rooted in historical fact — from Jewish clowns and acrobats to Jewish-owned circuses and even dynasties of Jewish circus performers.

In the 19th century, particularly in Germany, the non-Jewish circus companies tended to be fixed in one place, while the Jewish circuses were travelling outfits.

In that way, the fame of the Jewish circus families spread across Europe. The story of one family, heirs to the Lorch Circus, has now become a remarkable one-woman show devised by Israeli-born Stav Meishar. She is a Jewish-born acrobat who learned about the story of Irene Danner-Storm, a member of the Lorch family, who was saved from the Nazis by the bravery and courage of the Althoff Circus and its owner, Adolf Althoff and his wife Maria.

The Althoffs didn't just save Irene — they hid her, her parents Hans and Alice and her sister Gerda, forging fake work papers describing them as Italian, hiding them each time the Nazis came to inspect the circus, building a hidden corridor in their caravan, abducting the family off and telling them "go fishing" whenever the Gestapo arrived. For their heroism, Adolf and Maria were named Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

Irene was a skilled circus performer whose maternal grandfather, Julius Lorch, was says Stav Meishar, "a world renowned Italian acrobat". Foot juggling — initially of small objects while the acrobat lies on the floor — is refined as a technique known as Italian games, when the acrobat spins and tosses in the air either bigger and bigger items, or eventually another person.

More than seven years of sustained research by Stav and her

# The circus acrobat's amazing escape



PHOTO BY DAN KORNBERG

**Stav Meishar (above and left) in her one-woman show**

creative team, looking at many aspects of Jews and circus, have knitted together Irene's painful story.

Julius Lorch taught his granddaughter Irene acrobatics when she was a little girl and she joined the Bianchi Circus in Germany, learning trapeze riding from the Italian Caroli family, before begging the Althoff family circus to employ her at a time when it had become illegal to hire Jews.

Adolf and Maria Althoff agreed, taking on, in the summer of 1941, the 19-year-old Irene and then, the following year, her parents and her sisters. Irene fell in love with a clown in the Althoff Cir-

cus, Peter Bento, who taught her clowning and took her into his own family troupe.

She also formed a friendship with another circus performer — Mohammed Sahroui, an acrobat known as Mohammed of Morocco. He, Peter Bento and Adolf Althoff were close friends, known as the Three Musketeers in the circus, and each of them did their best, at great personal risk, to save Irene and her family from the Nazis.

Stav Meishar discovered Irene's story when putting together a program for education through the performing arts. "I started to incorporate circus methods, too" — she had been training in circus

since 2011 — "and I wondered if anyone had done that before. So I went on Google and typed in 'circus Jews' — and one of the first results was the New York Times obituary of Adolf Althoff."

It made sense, Stav concluded, that there would be such things as Jewish circus artists because of long Jewish affiliation with the performing arts. "It became apparent to me very quickly that this was the avenue I would like to develop" — not least because she herself is the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor.

The more she learned about Irene's story the more fascinated she became. Irene did not just fall



PHOTO BY WATARIANA



Poster by Friedlander for The Lorch Family's Risley Act (c.1915)

were due to go on honeymoon in Morocco. She made contact with "Uncle Momo" and spent an enraptured day with the 9-year-old, reliving circus memories of the second World War in his Tangiers home.

There is, says Stav, a very big circus community in Israel — and still a Jewish circus presence internationally. Circus Kaite is a Jewish family circus, the biggest in Switzerland, while in the Netherlands the big name is the Straubinger family, who fled from Germany to the Netherlands during the Holocaust and still run big circuses today.

One of the best-known names in Jewish circus circles is Suzi Winson, the founder and owner of the circus school in New York where Stav Meishar trained. "She's an ex-Broadway star who appeared with Agnes de Mille and Jimmy Tuner, now she runs her circus school and she's a flying trapeze artist."

Meishar specialises in static trapeze work, where the acrobat does tricks with rope and the trapeze bar. In her show (where she also juggles and does puppetry), she uses the static trapeze to replicate some of what Irene Danner-Storm would have done in the Althoff Circus, before coming out of character to talk about her own family background and experience of the Holocaust.

"It's not that I wanted to hijack attention from Irene, but to show that generations of people are affected by what happened. It's multi-generational trauma that second- and third-generation [Jews] live with every single day."

Her maternal grandfather survived the Holocaust by jumping out of the train on which his life was being deported and hiding in a hollow tree trunk, covering himself with leaves. (Her paternal grandparents, from Bulgaria and Romania, were among the founders of one of Israel's wealthiest kibbutzim, Shamir.)

Her show is not a children's show, she says, but as a Jewish educator she was determined to make it accessible to a variety of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ESCAPE ACT



Clockwise from top: Circus Lorch 1930, Irene in South America 1924 aged one, Irene (right) and Gerda (left) practicing their points c1940, Maria Althoff with her elephants, Adolf Althoff (yes unknown), Peter (sitting on stairs), Irene (centre), Hans (shirtless) and Alice (right) with other members of the Althoff Circus (c1944-1945), The Lorch Family Risley Act at Ringling Bros. Circus performing in Madison Square Garden, NY (1909)



**Tracy Ann Oberman**  
Mother of a monster role  
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**Emily Maitlis**  
Festival time  
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audiences — younger people as well as adults.

She doesn't call herself a circus acrobat, she says. "My level is nowhere near what my peers can do. I am a theatre artist who uses circus as a narrative tool to make the story come to life."

Meishar's Israeli background is as eclectic as her show. She was born and raised in Tel Aviv. Her father is an Israeli folk dance architect; his life's work, says his daughter, is recording every new Israeli folk dance and sending them around the world to groups who want to learn the latest steps. Britain's own Israeli Dance Institute is a frequent beneficiary.

Her mother, meanwhile, Miriam Krymowski, is Israel's best-known performing arts critic, often appearing on TV and now an independent arts guide and lecturer. Meishar's childhood was a regular round of attending shows, going backstage and waiting while her mother interviewed performers. "I love her a lot," she says, while her father's work led her to be proficient in all manner of folk dances.

After attending a performing arts school in Israel, Meishar moved to New York and began taking circus classes. Today, and for the past two years, she and her husband — who also studied theatre arts — live in Bristol. She has trained at the Bristol circus school while her husband has changed direction completely, and become a cheesemaker, in Bath. "We are a home of circus and cheese," she grins.

Now with The Escape Act, Stav Meishar has developed a unique show which plays to her strengths as a Jewish educator and performance artist. The show, she says, is endlessly adaptable: she even has a version which requires no trapeze equipment and just concentrates on the story-telling.

She will be in Linn Road this year, restelling Irene's amazing story. Her show premiered this summer in Finland, where she worked for two months, and now she is taking The Escape Act around the UK at London's Jackson's Lane Theatre, (September 23 and 24), in Bristol at the Circus Media on September 26; in Birmingham's Circus MASH on October 26 and 27; and the Lowry in Salford on October 29.

There will be a presentation at the Manchester Jewish Museum before the Lowry performance.

The show includes a curated exhibition of Jewish life at the circus during the Holocaust, and a behind-the-scenes talk about the making of the show and Jewish circus experience.

"My main goal in creating this show," says Stav, "was to make an experience as close as possible to talking to a survivor. I couldn't replicate it, but I can tell Irene's story and that of others who lived through the Holocaust. That's what's important."