

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2312 Whatever Happened to Ida?

by Kerry Close

Whatever Happened to Ida?’

Ida Rita Rosenfeld, my 1st cousin 2 x removed, was born in Sydney, NSW, on August 1, 1883¹, to Jewish parents, Rene Armand Martin Rosenfeld, an importer/exporter, and his wife Bertha (nee Marks),² my great-great aunt.³ Their son, Archibald, was born in 1885.⁴ Bertha was a talented pianist who, in her first concert, had accompanied the well-known violinist, Signor Ortori, in Melbourne when she was 23.⁵

The Rosenfelds lived at ‘Roma’ in Darling Point, a house filled with ‘very costly and superior household furniture and appointments specially imported by the proprietor from the most celebrated ateliers in Berlin’, including a ‘magnificent concert grand pianoforte...the finest instrument in the Sydney International Exhibition, 1879.’⁶ Rene’s business must have been doing well.

But in 1887 tragedy struck the family with the deaths of Archibald in January⁷ and Bertha in July.⁸ Although Rene remarried soon after⁹ and another son was born¹⁰, his life was beginning to unravel. His business failed,¹¹ he was charged with the desertion of his wife and son¹² and then with non-payment of their maintenance.¹³ For a once respected businessman this was devastating. Then, in 1891, 8-year-old Ida was shipped off to England aboard the ‘Oruba’¹⁴ unaccompanied by her father. She must have been a very frightened little girl, anxious about her uncertain future. Rene distanced himself from his troubles as soon as he could and as far as he could... I found him in an 1895 Argentina Census living in Buenos Aires¹⁵ and I wonder if Ida ever saw him again.

The myth surrounding Ida’s whereabouts grew as my research into her life continued without much success. Where and with whom had she ended up? Had she had a happy life or one of struggle? Had she ever returned to Australia? What *had* happened to Ida?

Eventually I stumbled upon an entry for an Ida Rosenfeld in a 1903 London Electoral Register in Norroy Street, Wandsworth,¹⁶ in what appeared to be an establishment for single women when Ida was about 20. From 1903 onwards there was no sign of her until WWII broke out in 1939 when her name appeared on a list of UK alien internees in November that year as ‘Rita Ida Rosenfeld, alias Aurel, Rita; Bedford Way, W.C.1., Nationality-German’ with the correct details of her birth.¹⁷ She was, however, given exemption from internment as being ‘Australian by birth and divorced from husband in 1909’.¹⁸ Finally, I was making progress.

With the surname Aurel, I was then able to trace Ida back a month to the England Census of October 1939 where she is listed as a visitor, a divorcee, and, interestingly, an authoress, at the Cleveland Hotel, Bedford Way, London.¹⁹ She was still at this address in February 1940.²⁰ Suspecting that Ida had lived in Germany after her marriage, I managed to uncover several phone directory entries for Rita Aurel in Berlin in the years 1929, ‘30, ‘31 and ‘34.²¹ If not a hausfrau, how then had Ida supported herself since her divorce?

Further research teased out a fascinating and unexpected career for Ida as Rita Aurel, exotic/erotic dancer, a rather risqué entertainment popular in Europe in the early 1900s. Karl Toepfer’s book on dance, *‘Empire of Ecstasy – Nudity and Movement in German*

Body Culture 1910-1935' (1997), mentions Aurel as 'a sort of freakish dancer' performing, in the years 1916 – 1920, '...solo parodies of Oriental dances, using her contortionist abilities to produce bizarrely distorted serpentine movements of the arms and belly. Aurel did a piece in which she represented a woman injecting herself with morphine.'²² Perhaps Ida's interpretation was based on her own experience.

Hans Brandenburg in his book, *'Im Feuer unserer Liebe'* (*'In the Fire of Our Love'*) (1956), identifies Aurel as 'die Australierin Rita Aurel',²³ while in *'Der moderne Tanz'* (1921) he describes her as 'a strange, super-tall, super-slender, hysterical, graceful and very worldly personality'.²⁴ According to Karl Toepfer, Aurel 'regrettably left behind very little of herself'²⁵.... except for an image of her in 'sinister' costume in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* dated June 14, 1914, promoting possible future performances in the United States after much success in Berlin and 'other German art centres'.²⁶ WWI broke out a month after this publication and those plans were probably dashed, as I have found no record of her ever having been in the US.

Our last sighting of Ida is her application for re-admission to British Nationality in 1940.²⁷ According to the 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens (BNSA) Act, the wife or ex-wife of an alien was deemed to be an alien herself and consequently Ida had to apply for naturalisation to the country she had entered as a child.

She had seen the war clouds gathering in Europe and, being Jewish, had escaped in the nick of time, only to be living in a London subjected to the terrifying bombing raids of the Luftwaffe.²⁸ The Blitz began in September 1940 and continued to May 1941.²⁹ At the start, London experienced 57 consecutive nights of bombing and often during daytime as well. Over 18,000 civilians in London were killed in the war³⁰ and maybe Ida was one of these unfortunate victims as I could find no trace of her in any subsequent records.

Or could it be that she was recruited as a spy by the British Government due to her German connections...an Aussie Mata Hari for Britain's cause? A rather thrilling thought.

Gradually removing some of the veils of myth and mystery that had shrouded Ida's life has revealed a tantalising glimpse of an independent woman, one who drew on her remarkable talent to not only to survive in pre-war Germany, but to make a name for herself. Perhaps though, there is more to expose as my investigations continue.

1. Ancestry.com, *Australia, Birth Index, 1788-1922*; Registration Number 8463
2. Ancestry.com, *Australia, Marriage Index 1788-1950*; Registration Number 1728
3. Ancestry.com, *marks Family Tree*
4. Ancestry.com, *Australia, Birth Index*; Registration Number 4427
5. TROVE *The Argus (Melbourne, Vic: 1848-1957)* Mon 11 Mar 1878 p.6
6. TROVE *The Sydney Morning Herald (NSW: 1824-1954)* Wed 13 Feb 1884 p.13
7. Ibid., Mon 10 Jan 1887 p.1
8. Ibid., Mon 4 Jul 1887 p.1
9. Ancestry.com, *Australia, Marriage Index 1788-1950*; Registration Number 269
10. Ancestry.com, *Australia, Births and Baptisms, 1792-1981*; FHL Film Number 992733
11. TROVE *NSW Government Gazette (Sydney, NSW: 1832-1900)* Tue 16 Mar 1886 [Issue no.120] p.1842
12. Ancestry.com, *NSW, Australia, Police Gazettes, 1854-1930* 27 Nov 1889 p.370

13. Ibid., 12 Nov 1890 p.353
14. Ancestry.com, *The Colonies and India: London, Greater London, England* – Saturday October 31, 1891
15. Ancestry.com, *Argentina, National Census, 1895*; FHL Film Number 701122: Folio Number 490-499
16. Ancestry.com, *London, England, Electoral Registers, 1832-1965* p.104
17. Ancestry.com, *UK WWII Alien Internees, 1939-1945*
18. Ibid.
19. Ancestry.com, *1939 England and Wales Register*; Borough-Holborn; Registration District-13/1
20. *The London Gazette*, 9 Feb 1940 p.787
21. Ancestry.com, *German Phone Directories, 1915-1981*
22. *'Empire of Ecstasy-Nudity and Body Movement in German Body Culture-1910-1935'*-Karl Toepfer, University of California Press 1997 pps.200/201
23. *'Im Feuer unserer Liebe' (In the Fire of Our Love')* Hans Brandenburg, Published by München, Herbert Neuner Verlag 1956
24. *'Der modern Tanz'* Hans Brandenburg, Published by Georg Muller, München 1921
25. *'Empire of Ecstasy-Nudity and Body Movement in German Body Culture-1910-1935'*-Karl Toepfer, University of California Press 1997 p.201
26. Newspapers.com, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* June 14, 1914
27. *The London Gazette*, 9 Feb 1940 p.787
28. *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com>topic>Luftwaffe>
29. *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org>wiki>London_in_World_War_II
30. Ibid.