

A LIFE OF SCANDAL AND INTRIGUE

Heinrich Von Ripper was the only member of his aristocratic family to declare himself female.

The scandal ripped through the Prussian community of Baden-Baden at the time. Several generations later the impact of this momentous decision on her part is still keenly felt by her descendants.

In common with other Prussian families, the life of Henrietta (as she had decided to call herself) changed profoundly after the First World War. The 1920s was an ideal decade for someone like Henrietta, liberating her from the stultifying influence of the rigid Prussian environment. She was able to move to Berlin and as "Ripper the Stripper" she became a role model and mentor for many in the growing transexual community.

Christopher Isherwood used Henrietta's life experience as a major influence in his well-known novel, "I am a Camera" which eventually became the highly successful film and musical, Cabaret. Observing Henrietta and other transsexual performers in the nightclubs of Berlin inspired Isherwood's idea for Sally Bowles and her contemporaries at the decadent Kit Kat Club.

However, by the end of that glorious decade the ripples of fascism had turned into waves of hate and Henrietta was sadly forced to revert to her original identity of Heinrich Von Ripper. He travelled to London and began life afresh, living in Maida Vale.

Whilst working as an account executive in the growing advertising industry Heinrich met his wife, the model Natasha Debonne. The two became the darlings of London and can still be seen in old photos alongside the celebrities and royalty of the day. At work, Heinrich was responsible for the Wall's ice cream account. The client was so delighted with Heinrich's dedication that they named an ice cream after him, The Raspberry Ripple.

Although already in his 60s at the start of the Second World War, Heinrich felt he still had something to offer. Using his various influential contacts, he managed to become a double agent ostensibly working for the Nazis but, in reality, his true efforts were for the allies.

At the end of the war, Heinrich returned from Prussia to London as Henry Ripley. His war exploits became an inspiration to many film directors in the new wave of post-war British cinema.

He and Natasha had no children. After Natasha passed away in 1962, Henry retired to a life in a suite of rooms at the Savoy, where he was able

once again to happily embrace his old identity of Henrietta until his death from cancer in 1969. The repercussions of his/her career as a spy are still rippling through MI5 all these years later.

If you should read her Wikipedia entry or her obituary from that time, Heinrich/Henrietta's life reads like a work of fiction. But maybe, that's just what it is.