‘Charity begins at home’

Remembering Charlotte Rickert Stengel

The Cairo Food Pantry

By Sylvia Hasenkopf

Whenever one asks about the founder of the Cairo Community Food Pantry, the first name from everyone’s lips is Charlotte Stengel. Universally recognized as the founder of the Cairo Community Food Pantry, Charlotte labored tirelessly to help others who were struggling financially to provide the basic necessities for their families.

The late Claude Hatton wrote an article about Charlotte and the Cairo Food Pantry for the Daily Mail’s October 8, 2005 edition. He quoted a favorite saying of her hers in the article, “Charity begins at home.” And Charlotte practiced what she preached.

George Ernst Stengel married Lieselotte “Charlotte” Rickert on May 15, 1947, in Wiesbaden, Germany where George was stationed after World War II ended. George returned to the States and arranged for Charlotte to fly from Frankfurt on June 3, 1947 to meet him in New York City. The couple settled at 20-12 41st St., Long Island City.

The Stengels moved to Cornwallville, NY permanently likely in the early 1950s and George established the Star Synthetic Manufacturing Corporation in East Durham. The factory manufactured high quality nylon rope.

Charlotte was very proud of the fact that the company was chosen by NASA to supply rope for one of its moon missions. Shortly after settling in Cornwallville, Charlotte began to notice that many of her neighbors were struggling to clothe and feed their families and farm...
animals, so she began to collect items in her home and distribute them to those in need.

Once the Resurrection Lutheran Church opened its doors in 1959, Charlotte moved her charitable work to Cairo. The Cairo Community Food Pantry was born. Although Charlotte lost her beloved husband George on March 2, 1995 and her only child Georgie on May 30, 2000, Charlotte’s irrepressible humor never wavered.

She operated the Cairo Community Food Pantry until she retired in June 2008 at the age of 89.

Charlotte passed away on January 20, 2013 at the Pines in Catskill, NY. She will be forever remembered for her loving embraces and parting words, “Give me a hug, and then pass it along.”

A interview with Charlotte Rickert Stengel
By James Goldwasser, 2010

Charlotte Stengel is a strong woman. She’s endured a lot over the course of a long life: a nomadic childhood, a world war, the losses of her husband and only child. Yet she remains a remarkably upbeat, cheerful, and active woman with a wicked sense of humor. And at the age of ninety, she can still juggle. More than a strong woman, Charlotte Stengel was once famous as the strongest woman in the world.

When I meet Charlotte, she is sitting in her living room having recently twisted an ankle. I urge her not to get up, but she quickly answers in her thick German accent: “But I have to ppeepee!” Charlotte is accompanied by a home-aide, who quickly leaves, and her neighbor Ray Houghtaling, a broad-shouldered, open-faced man somewhat older than I through whose efforts we have arranged this meeting.

Ray found me when, while searching Google for information about Charlotte’s former show-business career, he came across my scrapbook.

As a dealer in rare books and manuscripts, a number of unusual items cross my path each year. And as a former scholar of modern Germany, I have maintained an interest in items emerging of that rich and intriguing culture.

A while back I bought the scrapbook from a fellow Germanophile, a book-scout whom I have known for many years, and who as a young M.P. was once “Checkpoint Charlie” in Berlin. The scrapbook is fairly unassuming: a blue buckram volume with a tasseled gold cord, the cover stamped in a gilt design by the once-renowned Berlin showplace Winter-Garten Theater.

Inside are twelve cardstock leaves mounted with clippings, cards, and photos documenting the 1935 season of a youth variety-show, along with tickets, a program

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Photo courtesy of the Cairo Historical Society
Charlotte Rickert, at fifteen, was prominently billed as the world’s strongest woman.

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and seating plan, and a color kiosk poster advertising the show. The revue featured an array of performers ranging from singers, dancers and musicians, to acrobats and circus performers, all of them children.

This particular scrapbook belonged to one of the performers: a young girl named Charlotte Rickert who, at fifteen, was prominently billed as the world’s strongest woman and who performed feats of strength, highlighted by her challenging the strongest men that could be found in the audience to pull a high-tension spring expander. I was charmed by the evocative quality of the scrapbook, which seemed to me to contain something of the doomed headiness of Berlin in the interwar years.

So I was doubly surprised when Ray Houghtaling contacted me out of the blue. Did I know that Charlotte Rickert Stengel was alive and well and in upstate New York?

Taking a seat next to Charlotte, I take out the scrapbook and we begin to look at it together. Soon we are looking through tubs of photographs, clippings, autographs and memorabilia which are all that is left of her life in show business.

Born in Germany to a family of acrobats and circus performers at a time when such acts were a wildly popular form of entertainment, she spent her childhood traveling throughout Europe with a very busy troupe led by her father. Charlotte Rickert and her sister would perform acrobatic tricks and feats of extreme flexibility. As a young teenager, she discovered that she also had unusual strength.

While performing with the family in Switzerland, the fourteen-year-old Charlotte became curious about the props of one of the other acts in the show, a weightlifting strongman with a skin-tight bodysuit. Backstage she dared to try picking up some of his weights. For her, it took little more effort than picking up a basket of bread, so she grew indignant. “This guy’s a crook,” she thought to herself. “Here he is making three times as much as the rest of us,” she thought to herself.
but it’s all a fake.” At that point her father and the theater manager appeared, and she feared punishment for having breached unspoken protocol by fooling around with another performer’s things. But the men asked her to pick up the weights again. She did so effortlessly and handed them to the two men, who quickly let them drop, unable to hold them up. From that point forward, Charlotte Rickert was the new main act – receiving top billing and a hefty raise in the process.

With her family, Charlotte toured Europe and performed in circuses and variety shows all over the continent. Her father was a stern taskmaster, but as her own star shone more brightly, Charlotte found that her strength also gave her courage.

One night in the northern city of Kiel, after a long show in a smoke-filled theater, he ordered the women to clear their lungs by walking back to the hotel through the night air. Before long, a trio of sailors out for a good time set their sights on Charlotte’s mother.

“My mother was a very attractive woman... I beat the hell out of them. The police were standing there wondering, how can she do that. I was just a young girl.”

Charlotte joined a national show called “Nachwuchs am Varieté” or “Up-and-Coming Talent.” The idea was to celebrate the abilities of German youth in a variety show including dancers and singers, jugglers and acrobats, and of course the strongest woman in the world.

It was all a buildup to the Berlin Olympics of 1936. The show played to large crowds at the Winter-Garten Theater, a hotspot of Berlin nightlife since the turn of the century. And they performed in the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games, an honor for which Charlotte received a special gold medal. The Olympic performance kicked off another whirlwind tour and Charlotte and her family were very busy indeed. In the summer of 1939 she was in Denmark performing with the great American movie cowboy Tom Mix just before the outbreak of war. A plan emerged for Charlotte to appear in a movie with the American star, and she seemed on the verge of a breakthrough to a new dream. On the eve of war in Europe, she would escape to Hollywood. But back in California, Mix killed himself in a drunk-driving accident in 1940, the plan died with him and Charlotte and her family were stuck.

They continued to perform through the war years, and they were sent to entertain German
regiments, even in active combat zones. One day in Ludwigshafen, an allied bomb landed on the roof of the house they were staying in, but did not explode. Charlotte’s father ordered her to the roof to get it off. Making use of her nimbleness and strength, she climbed to the top of the house, picked up the bomb and tossed it as far as she could. It was a dud.

The family was sent further eastward to perform for troops at the front. The darkest moment of the war for the family came when they were compelled to perform in Poland and encountered an active firefight. Charlotte’s mother was shot and wounded in the darkness, and young Charlotte, again using her extraordinary strength, picked up her mother and carried her overnight, through the forest to the relative safety of a hospital.

At the end of the war, having survived intact, the family found itself in the western city of Wiesbaden. As the victorious American forces marched into town, Charlotte greeted them with bouquets of flowers. One of the soldiers, a young American officer, took an interest in her and she was quickly charmed by him. George Stengel was working for Army intelligence, and while he was wooing Charlotte, he was also using her to gather information for the occupying forces. She laughs recalling that she knew him for almost a year before she realized that he was fluent in German. The pair married in Wiesbaden, and in 1947 he brought her home to the United States. She recalls her relief when her new father-in-law told her “war is hell, but something good came out of it: my son found you.”

Charlotte set out to reconstruct her performing career, joining a circus that travelled the eastern U.S. But again her dream came up against hard circumstance when she was badly burned in an explosion and fire in her trailer. Retreating to home in Queens, New York, she recovered from her injuries, but was no longer fit nor driven to perform. In a storefront in Astoria, she opened a school for circus artists, to train jugglers and acrobats. But by now, her husband was becoming quite successful in business and the couple began to spend more and more time upstate in the Catskills. As we walk near her house, she guides toward an especially scenic bluff, and remembers her husband walking with her, asking how she liked it, and informing her that he had bought it for her.

Charlotte embraced a settled life away from the city and show business. She drew deep satisfaction from her family and her community and has for more than five decades been a dedicated volunteer, managing the Cairo Community Food Pantry. She carries with her a lesson from her father: “Always remember” he told her, “nobody is better than you, and nobody is worse than you.” Charlotte devoted her late years to providing for other less fortunate than she and is a beloved member of her tight-knit upstate community.

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