

EVA PAWLIK AND RUDI SEELIGER TRIUMPH AND TRUE LOVE

By Susan D. Russell

When Eva Pawlik and Rudi Seeliger first met on a skating rink in their hometown of Vienna, Austria, they were two young singles skaters with big dreams.

But the onset of World War II forced those dreams to be put on hold.

Pawlik's greatest desire was to become a great figure skater, but the Nazi occupation of her homeland curtailed any hope of the young star fulfilling her true promise on the international stage.

Seeliger was drafted by the Nazis to fight in the war and for six long years no one knew his fate.

Years later, destiny reunited the childhood friends at the same ice rink where it all began.

There is a story of triumph and true love as seen through the eyes of their son, Dr. Roman Seeliger.

FIRST STEPS

Pawlik was born into a family of modest means in 1927.

Her father worked at the local water company, earning a salary that barely sustained his family. Pawlik, her parents and maternal grandparents lived in a small two-room flat that had no hot water.

Her grandparents took her to the local ice rink when she was 4, but before the teacher could give the youngster her first lesson, Pawlik was already skating around by herself.

She began imitating the moves of the world-class skaters who trained at the Vienna rink. "Within a few months, my mother was able to land a single Axel and do fast spins," Roman Seeliger said. "That was in the early spring of 1932."

Her parents enlisted Angela Hanka, the 1914 World silver medalist, and Rudolf Kurzer to coach their daughter. By age 8, Pawlik was rising at 4 a.m. to train in the bitter cold on the outdoor rink before she went to school each day.

Rudi Seeliger began skating at age 7. His father was a post office clerk and his mother was a cook. "The financial situation of my father was perhaps a bit better than my mother's, because both his parents worked," the couple's son explained.

A SHORT-LIVED PAIRING

In 1936 Pawlik, 8, and Seeliger, 12, made their pairs debut in a local club show. Their improvised parody of the 1936 Olympic pairs champions from Germany, Maxi and Ernst Baier, was a big hit. Pawlik and Seeliger added pairs skating to



PHOTOS COURTESY DR. ROMAN SEELIGER

their competitive repertoire.

Two years later in the midst of World War II, Austria lost its independence and was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938, an event that heavily affected many Austrian athletes.

The Nazi regime forbade Pawlik and Seeliger from competing internationally. Undaunted, Pawlik and Seeliger continued to train. "My parents could take part only in German domestic competitions," Roman Seeliger said. "They became the German youth champions, each as singles skaters and together as a couple."

Pawlik attended grammar school from 1937 to 1945. She was forced to take the final exam twice, because her initial school report was destroyed when her school was bombed. She went on to study medicine and after graduating in 1949 switched to philosophy in which she earned a doctorate in 1954.

Rudi Seeliger apprenticed as a draper, successfully completing his education before he was drafted into the German Army.

DIVERGING PATHS

Seeliger's life came to a grinding halt in 1943 when the 20-year-old was sent to fight in the war. "My mother tried unsuccessfully to get an exemption from the compulsory military service for him," Roman Seeliger said. "Some sportsmen were exempted,

but my mother did not have the connections to get such an exemption. So my father had to go to war."

That same year, Seeliger was captured by the Soviets at the Eastern front. He was sent to work as a slave in a coalmine in the Donetsk Basin in the Ukraine.

Pawlik immersed herself in training. As a quiet political statement she always chose Viennese music, especially waltzes, for her free programs. "That was her careful signal of believing in Austria's resurrection," Roman Seeliger said. "My mother never gave up hope."

COMPETITIVE RETURN

Despite the end of the war in 1945, Austrian skaters were not permitted to compete at the European or World Championships until 1948. Pawlik watched the 1947 World Championships in Sweden from the stands. "It was one of the most difficult moments in her life, knowing she ranked among the elite European skaters and had a good chance of winning a medal," Roman Seeliger recalled.

In 1948 Pawlik was finally permitted to compete internationally. She claimed the silver medal at Europeans, the Olympic Games and the World Championships, each time behind Canada's Barbara Ann Scott.

"It was hard for my mother to accept that the European crown went to a non-European skater," Roman



After a boot heel broke at the 1949 World Championships, Eva Pawlik saw her dream of becoming the World champion slip away. She turned professional shortly after.



A jubilant Rudolf Seeliger and Eva Pawlik celebrated their wedding day in February 1957.

Seeliger said.

Austria suffered enormous economic shortages at the end of the war. Pawlik was awarded a box of lump sugar after performing in a local skating exhibition, but officials viewed it as a "prize," something that could endanger her amateur status. Pawlik was forced to return it.

Scott turned professional at the end of the 1948 season, and Pawlik became the No. 1-ranked female skater in the world.

Restrictions relaxed enough to permit her to train in the United States with Colorado Springs-based coach Edi Scholdan. Pawlik had her first taste of stardom when she appeared in a Broadway ice Revue produced by Scholdan.

Pawlik celebrated her 21st birthday in Hollywood, where she was performing in a figure skating exhibition. MGM offered her a starring role in a Hollywood movie alongside Gene Kelly. Pawlik declined. Her dream was to win the 1949 European and World titles.

DREAMS AND DRAMA

The 1949 European Championships in Milan brought their own drama. Pawlik suffered acute

Eva Pawlik and Rudi Seeliger thrilled audiences with their dramatic routines during their career with the "Vienna Ice Revue."



but the resilient athlete refused to give in to the pain. She claimed gold, winning both the compulsory figures and the free program, but immediately following the competition was rushed to the hospital for an appendectomy.

Her son recalled his mother telling him that it was perhaps the most wonderful day of her amateur career.

At the 1949 World Championships, Pawlik ranked a narrow second behind the Czech skater Alena Vrzáňová (later known as Aja Zanova) after the compulsory figures. As Pawlik warmed up for the free skate, one of her boot heels broke. The judges refused to allow her to borrow a pair of skates from a companion.

"Sabotage was suspected but not proven," Roman Seeliger said. "As a result of the shortages in Austria, my mother unfortunately had no second pair of skates, so she could not compete in the free program. That was the greatest disappointment in her career." Vrzáňová won.

Pawlik had had enough. The great Austrian champion Karl Schäfer implored her to remain in the amateur ranks and contest the 1950 European and World Championships, but Pawlik was adamant. She turned professional.

"My mother wanted to give financial support to her parents, whom she loved very intensely," Roman Seeliger recalled. "She had to seize the chance to support them financially and that

chance lay in the opportunity to earn a lot of money in Karl Schäfer's 'Vienna Ice Revue' show."

Benjamin T. Wright, the noted American skating historian, agreed with Schäfer. In a letter written to Roman Seeliger in 1999, Wright noted: "Karl was indeed right when he urged [your mother] to stay on. [Eva] was a better skater than Vrzáňová and probably could have beaten her in 1950."

LOVE STORY

For six long years no one knew what had happened to Rudi Seeliger, but in December 1949, more than three years after the war ended, the Soviets freed him.

Upon his return to Vienna, he immediately went to the skating rink. "After a few steps on the ice, he knew that he could still do it. One of the first things he did was tell my mother that he had not forgotten how to skate," Roman Seeliger recalled.

"He had had a terrible time but never gave up hope," Roman Seeliger said of the inhumane conditions of his father's captivity. "It was by no means easy for him to accept that his youth and his skating career had been destroyed by World War II and the Nazi regime."

"He confessed there had been moments when he could no longer believe that he would survive, but he was thankful that he did. In his dreams, he was thinking about skating with my mother."

Had Pawlik known Rudi Seeliger was alive and would return, she would have heeded Schäfer's advice. "Looking back she said she was not happy with her decision to turn pro in 1949," her son said. "That [feeling] not only had to do with her losing the chance to become the 1950 World champion, but also the fact that her decision prevented her from participating in the European and World Championships in pairs skating when my father returned home."

Rudi Seeliger returned to the competitive arena with a new partner, Susi Giebisch. With only two weeks of training, the duo won the 1950 Austrian pairs title.

He turned professional shortly after and joined the "Vienna Ice Revue." At first he and Pawlik were partnered with different

He confessed there had been moments when he could no longer believe that he would survive, but he was thankful that he did. In his dreams, he was thinking about skating with my mother."

— Roman Seeliger

people, but that arrangement soon changed.

"Six months after my father joined the show, it was clear that artistically, he and my mother belonged together," Roman Seeliger said. "Their first vaudeville number was 'A Little Flirt.'"

NEW CHAPTER

The couple fell in love and married on Feb. 12, 1957. They retired shortly before Roman's birth in 1962.

Rudi Seeliger took a job as the manager of an advertising company. Pawlik became a full-time mother. "At one point she was offered an enormous fee to return to the 'Vienna Ice Revue,' but she said no because she did not want to leave me alone," Roman Seeliger recalled.

Pawlik took on a new career, becoming the first female sportscaster in German-speaking countries. From 1963 to 1972, she was the voice of figure skating in Austria.

For a few weeks every year when the European and World Championships were held, and during the Olympic Games, Roman was permitted to watch television. "My grandmother and father allowed me to watch TV during those times so I could hear my mother's voice before going to bed," he said.

Austria was a dominant force on the international stage during that decade. Emmerich Danzer won the World titles

in 1966-68; Wolfgang Schwarz claimed the Olympic crown in 1968 as did Trixie Schuba in 1972. Two-time European champion Regine Heitzer (1965-66) claimed silver at the 1964 Olympic Winter Games.

A SUDDEN END

In 1983 Roman Seeliger's life was turned upside down. "My parents died in the same year. My father died of a sudden heart attack, and my mother, who had become severely ill in 1979, passed away four months later," Roman Seeliger said. "It took the doctors a long time to discover what was wrong with her."

Pawlik suffered from collagenosis, a rare and incurable autoimmune disease.

During her career, Pawlik starred in a number of movies including "Frühling auf dem Eis" (Spring on the Ice, 1950) and "Traumrevue" (Revue Of Dreams, 1959).

Roman Seeliger said the movie "Spring on the Ice" is his most treasured memory of his parents. "For me, it is a historical figure skating document," he said. "The main female role is played by my mother, and my father is also presented as a skater. The movie is, from a personal point of view, far more valuable to me than any other thing in the world." ●



Married for 26 years, Eva Pawlik and Rudi Seeliger died within months of each other in 1983.