

Catherine “Bunny” Lang’s 1936 Canadian Olympic Team Jacket

When Canadian Olympians marched in the opening ceremonies of the 1936 games in Berlin, Germany, there was a group of dancers among their ranks – members of Boris Volkoff’s ballet company from Toronto. Thanks to P.J. Mulqueen, the Canadian Olympic team organizer, Volkoff was invited to bring his dancers to Berlin for the cultural activities that accompanied the Olympic games. The Internationale Tanzwettspiele, or dance festival, was organized by well-known German choreographer, educator and movement theorist Rudolf von Laban and featured theatrical and folk dance troupes from around the world including the famous German Expressionist artists Mary Wigman and Harald Kreutzberg.

I’m Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse. Welcome to our first artifact of the month podcast. This edition features the Canadian Olympic team jacket worn by Catherine “Bunny” Lang, one of Volkoff’s dancers. Tags within the jacket indicate that the red wool blazers were purchased from Simpson’s but sent to Deacon Sport Wear in Belleville, Ontario, where the embroidery was added and quite likely the white grosgrain ribbon trim on the jacket.

The development of ballet in Canada was in its nascent stages when Volkoff’s dancers boarded the Canadian Pacific liner *Empress of Britain* and steamed across the Atlantic Ocean to Germany. By 1936, it would still be two more years before Gweneth Lloyd and Betty Farrally immigrated to Canada and established what would later become the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Another fifteen years would pass before The National Ballet of Canada was founded. Boris Volkoff was among a handful of Russian émigrés who had left their homeland after the Russian Revolution; he eventually made his way to Canada in 1929. His arrival followed on the heels of several tours to Canada by the great Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova, which had triggered a thirst for ballet in Canada. Based in Toronto, Volkoff choreographed the dances presented at Loew’s Uptown Theatre on Yonge Street in the waning years of vaudeville. He opened a school in 1931 and in 1932 he set his first ice ballet on skaters of the socially elite Toronto Skating Club. By the mid-1930s, he was presenting regular recitals and it was his more senior students who made up the group that he took to Berlin, known as the Canadian Olympic Dancing Group.

In May 1936, Volkoff presented the ballets he was planning to show in Berlin to Toronto audiences. The dancers set out for Germany in mid-July and on July 15th, they performed in the *Empress of Britain*’s Mayfair Lounge sharing the bill with the Vimy Ridge Pipe Band. The band was on its way to France for the unveiling of the Vimy Ridge Memorial for Canadian troops. Volkoff’s dancers performed in Berlin on July 24th and their concert comprised six choreographic works: *Ecstase*, a modern ballet; *Mala*, a solo based on an Inuit myth set to music arranged by anthropologist Marius Barbeau; *Petit Polka*, a ballet solo; *Entrance*, a duet; *Peasant*, a solo danced by Volkoff; and *Mon-Ka-Ta*, a group work based on an Iroquois myth.

Volkoff was under the impression that the festival was amateur in nature and had not planned to perform; however, when the company arrived and realized that there were professional artists involved, he quickly added himself to the bill performing his *Peasant Dance*. It was a non-competitive festival but accolades in the press upon the company’s return home cite them placing fifth in the honourable mentions at the festival.

Letters from the dancers to home comment on the state of Nazi Germany. While some remark on the eeriness of seeing so many swastika-enshrined flags flying, others have left comments to history that are shocking to twenty-first-century western ideals. Dancer Mary Wilder wrote to her mother on July 19th, “One nice thing about the place is that there are no Jews and all the people are so nice to each other. There is a lot of discipline here.” The Nuremburg Laws of 1935 had stripped German Jews of their citizenship, excluded them from many jobs and government positions, did not allow them to ride on streetcars or sit on park benches reserved for Aryans, and decreed that it was a crime for a Jew to have intercourse with a German. Two years after these Olympic games, the windows of Jewish businesses were smashed and synagogues were burned during Kristallnacht. As shocking as these laws seem, one must remember that North American society in the early and mid-twentieth century practiced its own institutionalized racism preventing Jews from living in particular neighbourhoods or joining certain clubs. And while many western governments condemned Germany’s persecution of its Jewish population, these same countries were also unwilling to loosen their own immigration laws to accept Jews fleeing Europe.

Bunny Lang’s 1936 Olympic jacket is a special artifact that reminds us of pivotal moments in world history but also in Canada’s dance history. It reminds us of a dark period as the world edged ever closer to the reality of war on a near global scale, and the voracious racism led by Adolph Hitler would eventually result in the annihilation of millions – entire lines of families gone forever. While these Canadian dancers were preparing to leave for their trip, Berlin’s criminals, vagrants, mentally ill, homosexuals and Romani were being rounded up and removed from the city; while the dancers were abroad, the Spanish Civil War began. And within three years of their trip, Germany invaded Poland and Canada joined Great Britain in war against Germany and the Axis Alliance.

For the development of theatrical dance in Canada, this jacket is a symbol of a germinal period. Boris Volkoff would later be known as the father of Canadian ballet. He was seminal to the creation of the Canadian Ballet Festival movement, which aided the professionalization of ballet in Canada. For over forty years he trained dancers who would make their mark in the profession such as Melissa Hayden of New York City Ballet fame, as well as many of the charter members of The National Ballet of Canada. Volkoff and his company were the only dancers to represent Canada at this international festival and they made their mark inciting pride in home audiences and contributing to the rise of ballet in Canada.