

#367: SONJA HENIE - FIGURE SKATING QUEEN



Image: Norsk Industriarbeider Museum (The Norwegian Industrial Workers Museum), prior site of the Vermork Hydroelectric Power Plant.



Sonja Henie once said, "It's a sense of power, of command over distance and gravity, and an illusion of no longer having to move because movement is carrying you." She knew how to harness that power, rise to greatness and become the 'Pavlova of the Ice.'

Henie was a Norwegian figure skating celebrity, an Olympic gold medalist and a Hollywood movie star. She achieved international fame by doing what she

loved, ruling the international figure skating scene throughout the 1920's and 30's.

She was born in Kristiania (now Oslo), Norway, on April 8, 1912 to parents, Wilhelm Henie and Selma Lochmann-Nielsen. Wilhelm was a successful furrier, a one-time World Cycling Champion and Sonja's manager. Sonja's parents came from wealth and raised her and her brother, Leif (1907-1984) in the same lifestyle. The children were encouraged to get involved with sports and early on Sonja began skiing, swimming, tennis and ballet, but she excelled most at figure skating. She had found her passion at age six.

Henie left school to focus on skating and quickly became a Norwegian sensation. At the young age of 10 she won her first Norwegian Championship. At age 11 she placed last in a field of eight skaters at

the first ever Winter Olympic Games in France in 1924. This proved to be a valuable learning experience, which significantly influencing how she trained. She won the first of an unprecedented ten consecutive World Figure Skating Championships in 1927 at the age of fourteen. Sonja went on to win 10 world championships and three Olympic gold medals in 1928, 1932 and 1936.



Sonja stood out among the competitors because she dressed in a short skirt instead of the traditional long, black skirt that other female skaters wore to be modest and warm. Since she was so small, the black skirt tended to act like a sail and tangle in her legs. Her mother created a short skating dress that not only looked different, but gave Sonja the freedom to do jumps and other movements that had only been done by men. Later, Sonja introduced choreographic design into her free skating program. This meant she was able to tie together the elements in her routine in way that had not been done before.

Henie's career was not only memorable because of her amazing talent but also because there was the perception that she was a Nazi sympathizer. Prior to the war, she performed often in Germany and was a favorite of German audiences and of Hitler personally.





Sonja Henie appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in July 1939.

During an exhibition in Berlin prior to the 1936 Winter Olympics, Henie greeted Hitler with a Nazi salute for which she was strongly denounced by the Norwegian press. She did not repeat the salute at the 1936 games, but did shake Hitler's hand. In addition, she also accepted an invitation to lunch with Hitler at his resort home in nearby Berchtesgaden after the Olympics.

Henie became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1941. She supported the war effort by participating in the USO and similar activities, but she was careful to avoid supporting the Norwegian resistance movement, or making public statements against the Nazis. For this, she was condemned by many Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans. However, she made a triumphant return to Norway with the Holiday on Ice tour in 1953 and 1955.

Sonja loved the spotlight. She once said, "I want to do with skates what Fred Astaire is doing with dancing [in the movies]." Her hard work, natural talent and desire for fame led her to Hollywood after leaving the world of competitive figure skating. Her first big film debut came in the film *One in a Million* in 1936 followed by, *Thin Ice* (1937), *Happy Landing* (1938), *Second Fiddle* (1939) and more. Her films were romantic comedies and always featured a couple big ice skating performances. Her contract with Twentieth Century Fox made her one of the highest-paid actresses at the time.

During her illustrious Hollywood career, Sonja also owned, with a business partner, and performed in a touring ice show called "Hollywood Ice Revue." She was a pioneer in establishing ice skating as a popular new form of entertainment. Touring ice skating shows were not heard of before this and Sonja was on the forefront of their creation. She made millions from these extravagant shows that traveled around the nation. At the height of her fame, her films, touring activities, numerous lucrative endorsement contracts and deals to market skates, clothing, jewelry, dolls and other merchandise branded with her name made her one of the wealthiest women in the world in her time.

Sonja officially retired from ice skating in 1956. Her third marriage to rich Norwegian businessman and art patron, Niels Onstad (she was previously married to Dan Topping and Winthrop Gardiner Jr.) brought her back to Norway. The couple made their home in Oslo where they pursued their passion for art. They compiled an art collection that ultimately paved the way for the Henie-Onstad Art Centre (1968) in Bærum, Norway. It would also house all of Henie's skating memorabilia.

Sonja died from leukemia in 1969, a disease she kept hidden from the public for nearly a year until her death in October, 1969. She was 57 years old. She is buried alongside Onstad on an Oslo hillside overlooking the Art Centre.