

John Gottowt

John Gottowt was born as Isidor Gesang into a Jewish family on June 15, 1881 in Lemberg, then Austria-Hungary, now Lviv, Ukraine. In Germany he not only became a famous film and theater actor but was also in demand as a theater and silent film director. John Gottowt was his stage name.

He was married to Elisabeth Adler from Sweden, a painter who was not Jewish herself. Together they had four children, Nils, Johanna, Eva and Olaf Gesang Gottowt.

In 1905, after his acting training in Vienna (he had dropped out of architecture studies in Munich), Gottowt began to work with Max Reinhardt at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. He became famous for his roles as character actor as well as director at various theaters in Berlin, Vienna and Munich. It was Ernst Lubitsch who later took over his character roles in Reinhardt's ensemble. The family then lived in Munich, but when Max Reinhardt offered Gottowt a permanent position as actor and director at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, the family moved back to Berlin.

His first film role was the magician Scapinelli in Paul Wegener's *The Student of Prague* (1913), which is considered the first important German-language film. Shortly thereafter he directed the film *Das Schwarze Los / Pierrots Letztes Abenteuer* with Alexander Moissi (one of the most famous actors of the time). He also appeared in Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's 1922 silent film classic *Nosferatu* (for which his brother-in-law Henrik Galeen had written the screenplay) in the role of Prof. Bulwer.

Together with Henrik Galeen he took over the artistically very successful Theater an der Kommandantenstraße in Berlin in 1920 and a few years later the political-literary cabaret *Die Gondel* on Potsamer Platz, with texts by Kurt Tucholsky (under the pseudonym Theobald Tiger), among others. Gottowt made several films with Galeen and acted in a total of 30 (mostly silent) films.

As a Jew, he was banned from working in his profession in Germany in 1933. Although the couple had been divorced for some time they still shared the big flat. His wife, who was also under threat, fled to Sweden, where their adult children had been living for some time. Yet he didn't want to go to Sweden where the family might have been able to protect him. He tried his luck in Denmark but couldn't find work there and had to leave the country in 1938. He then moved to Krakow in Poland and lived in hiding for a long time.

On August 29, 1942 he was discovered and shot by an SS-officer in the small town of Wieliczka near Krakow.

Text: Harriet Williams, Sweden, granddaughter of John Gottowt and Elisabeth Adler

Sources:

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