

BECK, Martin

1869? - 1940

(1)

NYT Nov 17, 1940

OBITUARIES

MARTIN BECK DIES; OWNER OF THEATRE

Builder of Palace, Vaudeville
Mecca, Veteran Manager and
Producer, Stricken Here

BEGAN ORPHEUM CIRCUIT

Headed Variety Group in West
for 27 Years—Came to U. S.
as Immigrant at 18

Martin Beck, who built the Palace Theatre, once the goal of all variety actors, and the theatre on West Forty-fifth Street that bears his name, died at 6:30 A. M. yesterday in Mount Sinai Hospital after an operation for a stomach ailment. The veteran producer and manager, whose career dates back to his childhood appearances as a Shakespearean actor in Germany, was about 71 years old.

Mr. Beck entered the hospital on Nov. 9, according to Dr. Harold Hyman, his personal physician, and was operated upon last Thursday by Dr. Ralph Copp of 111 East Eighty-eighth Street. His death was caused by complications following the operation. Mr. Beck underwent a similar operation in the same hospital in January, 1937, but had been active and in apparent good health until shortly before his admittance to Mount Sinai.

At his bedside when he died was his wife, Mrs. Louise P. Heims Beck. Also surviving are two daughters, Mrs. Nicholas Ranschoff of this city and Mrs. Paul Ladin of Los Angeles. His home was at 166 East Sixty-fourth Street.



MARTIN BECK
Blackwall Studio, 1939

MS 1879

1923

Also N.Y. Herald July 14, 1923



Martin Beck

(2)

A funeral service will be held at 2 P. M. tomorrow at the Campbell Funeral Parlor, Madison Avenue at Eighty-first Street. Burial will be at Salem Field Cemetery, Brooklyn.

Leader in Vaudeville Field

Long before he built the Palace Theatre or his own Byzantine structure that defied theatrical tradition west of Eighth Avenue, Martin Beck had attained fortune and some fame as founder of the Orpheum circuit, which he headed for twenty-seven years.

A bald and fat little man, whose sense of humor was undying, he came to New York out of the West in 1907 to establish himself as one of the leading figures of the theatrical world that centers on Broadway. In the years that followed he had his finger in many a theatrical pie and grew so opulent that he might have retired long ago. But he preferred the activity of the life he had known from childhood to a life of contemplation of the books and pictures he collected with his wealth.

An immigrant, his career followed a familiar pattern, except that he always managed to keep hidden the place and date of his birth. His associates believe he was older than the 71 years credited to him in "Who's Who in American Jewry," the only record book into which his birth date seems to have crept. There it is given unqualifiedly as 1869.

He was born somewhere in what until recently was Czecho-Slovakia, went to school in Vienna, acted Shakespeare with a traveling troupe in Germany, and arrived, traditionally penniless, in New York when he was about 18 years old. His first experience here was with a forgotten group of German actors with whom he went to Chicago, where he soon was jobless and again broke. In that city a friendly proprietor of a Biergarten let him put on a show on an improvised stage. When this made a hit he transferred it to a large music hall, where he earned the stake that took him to San Francisco.

Opened First Theatre in 1889

Mr. Beck was in his early twenties when, in 1889, he opened his first theatre, the Orpheum Concert Hall. From the management of this playhouse grew the Orpheum circuit that numbered some sixty or more theatres, headed by Mr. Beck and dominating the variety scene west of Chicago, when Mr. Beck came to New York in 1907 to start booking his acts here. He kept on directing the Orpheum circuit. In 1913 he built the Palace.

This precipitated a war with the dominant Keith-Albee interests, which was settled when the Palace began talking Keith acts, with Mr. Beck directing the shows and the bookings at the theatre that soon became the Mecca of audiences and the paradise of actors. Ed Wynn, in an act called "The King's Gesture," was on the first bill shown. Later Charlie Chaplin made his first American appearance there and Buster Keaton had his start on its stage. Other headliners included the Four Marx Brothers, Gallagher & Shean, Douglas Fairbanks, Nazimova, Beatrice Lillie, the sisters Ponselle, Fannie Brice, Sophie Tucker, Will Rogers and Elsie Janis.

Mr. Beck became president of Orpheum Circuit, Inc., in 1920, and was associated with Keith-Albee-Orpheum and Radio-Keith-Orpheum in the ensuing years. He resigned as adviser and managing director of the latter, however, in 1933.

In 1923 Mr. Beck decided to "retire" and gave up his active interest in the Palace he had built. But after taking a trip around the world, he returned to Broadway to announce: "I'm going to build a theatre." Broadway-wise eyebrows raised in amazement when he said it would be 302-14 West Forty-fifth Street. To cross Eighth Avenue westward was considered theatrical suicide.

No Mortgage on Theatre

Disregarding tradition, he erected the theatre, with its bronze doors and soft mosaic designs within, giving it one of the city's largest stages. He owned the building, familiar to Savoyards as the New York home of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, until his death, and his proudest boast was his claim that he was the only manager in the world without a mortgage on his theatre.

When the Martin Beck opened in 1924, Madame Pompadour, starring Wilda Bennett and produced by Mr. Beck and Charles Dillingham, was the first attraction.

For a time the Theatre Guild presented its shows there. Although Mr. Beck preferred to be known as a theatre owner and manager, he had been associated financially with the production of many shows. Among them "Personal Appearance" was the most successful. He was openly interested in "Chrysalis," which he helped produce with Theresa Helburn and Lawrence

Langner in 1932. It was a failure. He also had a financial interest in the Beck's current occupant, "Cabin in the Sky."

Other offerings at the Martin Beck, some of them successes of the first magnitude, were "The Shanghai Gesture," "Reunion in Vienna," "Winterset," several Katharine Cornell's plays and the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company's importations of Gilbert and Sullivan, beginning in 1934.

Mr. Beck loved action and occupied an office at his theatre with three telephones on his desk.

"I am the staff of the Martin Beck Theatre," he used to say.

Was An Ardent Golfer

In his vaudeville days he traveled frequently to Europe in quest of talent. He played golf on all the better European courses and his love for the game caused him to help establish the Norwood Country Club at Long Branch, N. J. He had a Summer home at near-by Elberon until last year. Bridge and pinochle were his other avocations. He spoke German, French, Italian, Portugese and Spanish and long before the present crisis had a wide knowledge of international affairs. He collected paintings and books.

Like most entrepreneurs, he figured in several litigations. Hope Hampton sued him and Mr. Dillingham for \$36,000 for removing her from the leading role of "Madame Pompadour" before it opened here. Last year he was the central figure in the trial of his nephew's wife, Mrs. Lillian Schrein, his former secretary, who was convicted of forgery and theft of \$60,000 from the Beck theatrical interests. Mrs. Schrein made accusations against her uncle-in-law which he denied. She was sentenced to two to four years in prison.

In recent years, Mr. Beck had been interested and active in the affairs of the League of New York Theatres, the producers' organization, of which he was a member of the board of governors. Lately he had been a member of a subcommittee studying the code to prevent ticket-scalping. He also was a member of the national panel of arbitrators of the American Arbitration Association.

Mr. Beck married twice. His first wife died several years ago.

