



### Lea Manti (1886-1960)

#### **“Who Gives a Damn about Women’s Clothing and Whistles with Her Pinky Fingers”: A New Approach to the Life and Work of the Musical Whistler<sup>1</sup>**

Lea Manti was a successful musical whistler from Germany who was known around the world during the time of the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, and Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> While many whistlers pucker their lips to whistle, she<sup>3</sup> was an artist “who gives a damn about women’s clothing and whistles with her pinky fingers.”<sup>4</sup> Manti made whistling catchy tunes, even operatic arias, and difficult concert pieces seem effortless. Her rich repertoire included musical pieces from the opera *Tannhäuser* (Richard Wagner), the song “Dein ist mein ganzes Herz” (“You Are My Heart’s Delight”) from *Land des Lächelns* (Land of Smiles) (Franz Lehár),<sup>5</sup> a waltz from *Die keusche Susanne* (Chaste Susanne) (Jean Gilbert), “Ave Maria” (Charles Gounod), and the “favorite march of our Emperor.”<sup>6</sup> Despite her great fame at the time, she has since virtually slipped into oblivion and is nowhere to be found in theater and stage encyclopedias.

Manti liked to enter the stage wearing an elegant tailcoat suit, with her hair short and most often slicked back. Her trademark was a “Biedermeier gentleman’s suit”<sup>7</sup> that was sometimes described as “deep violet,” or later also as brown.<sup>8</sup> Those who wrote about her apparently did not know what to

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<sup>1</sup> I was able to finish this short biography of Lea Manti earlier than planned, because I was working from home due the corona virus. After it was published in German in March 2020, I received many pointers and further biographical details about Lea Manti. Many thanks to Joachim Frank (near Hamburg) for contacting the portal and providing sources and photographs (<http://lea-manti.de>). Thanks to this new information, the original article was extended, enhanced, and updated.

<sup>2</sup> The first rough account of Lea Manti’s life can be found in Heike Schader’s *Virile, Vamps und wilde Veilchen. Sexualität, Begehren und Erotik in den Zeitschriften homosexueller Frauen im Berlin der 1920er Jahre* (Königstein/Ts.: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2004); and her “Kurzportraits über Menschen, die in den 1920er Jahren lebten, in einem Buch zum Thema Butch?” in *Butches – begehrt und bewundert*, ed. Pia Thilmann (Berlin: Querverlag, 2018), 28-32.

<sup>3</sup> We do not know how Lea Manti defined herself in terms of gender, but the chosen stage name “Lea” indicates that she probably saw herself as a woman.

<sup>4</sup> *Die Fackel*, December 8, 1922, 3.

<sup>5</sup> See F. H., “Paris im Orpheum,” *Grazer Tagblatt*, December 3, 1930, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Altonaer Nachrichten*, February 3, 1915, 3. The favorite march could be a reference to “Entry of the Gladiators” by Julius Fučík. See *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon ab 1815* (2nd revised edition), ÖBL Online-Edition, Lfg. 4 (November 30, 2015), [https://www.biographien.ac.at/oebl/oebl/F/Fucik\\_Julius\\_1872\\_1916.xml](https://www.biographien.ac.at/oebl/oebl/F/Fucik_Julius_1872_1916.xml).

<sup>7</sup> *Prager Tagblatt*, March 18, 1911, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Prager Tagblatt*, January 6, 1914, 4. The color violet was regarded as a code for the subculture in the Weimar Republic. See Hanna Hacker, *Frauen\* und Freund\_innen. Lesarten “weiblicher Homosexualität” Österreich 1870-1938* (= challenge GENDER 4), revised (Vienna: Zaglossus, 2015 [1987]), 306.

do with her outfit, seeming to believe that she was too short and too thin to convincingly portray masculinity – and the color of the clothes seemed too bold, to say the least. One newspaper disrespectfully described her as the “delicate little man,”<sup>9</sup> while another wrote: “Lea Manti is known as an incomparable musical whistler (the first time one sees her, one thinks her name is Leo, because she enters the stage in a tailcoat).”<sup>10</sup>

Because she did not use any instrument other than her fingers, she was seen as a “pure musical whistler”<sup>11</sup> who “brilliantly chirps, flutes, and whistles an entire orchestra.”<sup>12</sup> Manti also confidently referred to herself as a “whistling virtuoso.”<sup>13</sup> She was able to whistle a piece of music after hearing it only once or twice. Her whistling was not shrill, but had a pleasantly deep sound.<sup>14</sup> Her performances always received rave reviews and were praised as virtuoso hits. For decades, the successful and famous artist enjoyed the reputation of an unrivalled musical whistler. Over the three decades of her career, she whistled at various vaudeville venues, performing either as a solo artist or together with ensembles with whom she sometimes went on tours of numerous cities in Germany and Europe.

Manti could be heard in major vaudeville shows in the big cities of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia, Poland, Belgium, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, and the UK. She also toured cities outside of Europe and was apparently an internationally sought-after artist. She performed in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1913, and Kentucky, USA, in 1924.

It was always assumed that the name “Lea Manti” was a pseudonym – as was the case with many other performance artists, especially those from lesbian and transgender clubs – but this had not been verified until now.

### **Martha Mandt, born in Elberfeld**

Lea Manti was born as Martha Mandt in Elberfeld (now part of Wuppertal) on August 13, 1886.<sup>15</sup> She had a twin sister Maria. Her family was protestant, and her parents were Mathilde Sebastian (1854–1897) and Franz Martin Mandt (1848 – after 1907), who was a bookbinder.<sup>16</sup> The twins were not the

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<sup>9</sup> *Intelligenzblatt für die Stadt Bern*, September 18, 1915, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Hamburger Nachrichten*, September 6, 1930, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Hamburger Correspondent*, October 2, 1909, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Hamburger Anzeiger*, August 20, 1923, 3.

<sup>13</sup> See the letterhead in a letter from May 5, 1938, in a file from the Reich Chamber of Theater at the German Federal Archives: BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, Archive no. 70720. The file has no page numbers.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Courier Journal*, January 18, 1924, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Her name is often spelled “Marta” without an h.

<sup>16</sup> Marriage certificate no. 820/1873, Stadtarchiv Wuppertal.

first or the only children in the family. Mathilde Sebastian had already been pregnant with daughter Caroline Ottilie (1874–1919) when she married Martin Mandt in November 1873. Caroline Ottilie later married young in 1891,<sup>17</sup> got divorced, and married a second time in 1905. Martha and Maria also had four other siblings:<sup>18</sup> Anna (1875–1964), Martin Wilhelm (born 1878), Franz Hermann (1890–1942), a metal worker,<sup>19</sup> and Mathilde Karoline (1892–1982), a cashier.<sup>20</sup> The Mandts therefore had at least seven children. Nothing is known of her twin sister Maria’s life.

The Mandts lived primarily in Düsseldorf from 1892 to 1894. After this, they moved back to Elberfeld. Martha’s father Martin apparently left the family, or his wife Mathilde, because, from 1896 on, Mathilde and Martin were registered at different addresses.<sup>21</sup> In the summer of 1895, Martin was living “in a municipal shelter” in Elberfeld and was wanted for embezzlement. However, the district court dropped the warrant three months later.<sup>22</sup> We do not know if he was able to avoid a prison sentence. When Mathilde Mandt died in 1897 at the age of only 42, the family moved back to Düsseldorf. About one year after his first wife’s death, Martin Mandt married his second wife Wilhelmine Kepper (born 1843).<sup>23</sup>

During this time, Martha probably attended school in Düsseldorf. Whether she also learned a profession is not known. She most likely had to earn her own livelihood very early on and was perhaps unable to afford a conventional apprenticeship for financial reasons. She began performing for audiences at the latest in 1903, and from this time forward, she apparently turned her artistic abilities into her profession. In 1911, she became a member<sup>24</sup> of the Internationale Artisten-Loge (International Artists’ Lodge), a professional association intended to provide social security for artists.<sup>25</sup> For a while, she commuted between Barmen (now part of Wuppertal) and Düsseldorf, presumably before and after each performance.<sup>26</sup> She performed in so many cities and on so many stages that we can only speculate about whether she had just one or several addresses during this time.

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<sup>17</sup> STA Düsseldorf-Mitte 1344/1891, Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf.

<sup>18</sup> Stadtarchiv Wuppertal.

<sup>19</sup> Death certificate, ancestry.de, accessed March 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf, January 23, 2020, MKD 1890-1925, film no. 7-4-1-125.0000, strips 51-52.

<sup>21</sup> Stadtarchiv Wuppertal.

<sup>22</sup> Official journal of the District of Düsseldorf: Amtsblatt für den Regierungsbezirk, 1895, no. 92 and no. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Adressbuch (Directory of) Düsseldorf 1899.

<sup>24</sup> BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>25</sup> The Internationale Artisten-Loge (International Artists’ Lodge) was founded in 1901 and became one of the most influential organizations during the years of the German Empire. While women were allowed members, they could not take part in the meetings for a long time. See Wolfgang Jansen, *Das Varieté. Die glanzvolle Geschichte einer unterhaltenden Kunst* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1990), 175f.

<sup>26</sup> Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf, January 23, 2020, MKD 1890-1925, film no.: 7-4-1-125.0000, strips 51-52.

At least one postcard from the reputation Lea Manti had postcard sent from Barmen in of a standing androgynous hair is short and parted, but it be welcoming her audience arms open wide. Below the “LEA MANTI?”<sup>27</sup>



Is this question mark a hint at – and even gender – identity? someone also wrote in pencil:

Mädchen” (The favorite of all women and girls). It appears as if the card is playing with the artist’s appearance, as can be also seen in the handwritten addition. The back of the card reveals that it was sent to a man in Velbert (close to Wuppertal) for his birthday. Five people signed it, most of them with their full names, which may indicate that they were acquaintances and not relatives. Did this group know Lea Manti, aka Martha Mandt, personally? It is surely no accident that this card was bought in Barmen and sent from there at a time when she was often, if not briefly, registered as a resident there.

1910s demonstrates what kind of apparently earned so far. The March 1916 shows a frontal view figure wearing a tailcoat suit. Her is not slicked back. She seems to with a friendly smile, with her picture is printed in capital letters:

the ambiguity of Lea Manti’s legal Under the printed question, “Der Liebling aller Frauen u.

### Performances, artistic achievements, and anecdotes

Lea Manti once wrote in a letter that she began working as an artist when she was 16 years old. That would mean that she had performed on stage since roughly 1902.<sup>28</sup> It is not known where her artistic skills came from. Many of her performances as a musical whistler from 1909 to 1943 have been documented<sup>29</sup> and her name can be found in newspaper ads for vaudeville shows in various cities during these decades. In-between international shows, she was booked many times in Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Berlin. She went on her first major tour in 1912–1913 in the UK and South Africa, during which she was represented by the Paul Schultze agency.<sup>30</sup> The four-week tour took her to several British cities, after which she sailed to South Africa with a group of artists, where her performances were a hit in Johannesburg.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Personal archive.

<sup>28</sup> See BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>29</sup> *Hamburger Correspondent*, October 2, 1909, 4. Also Sammlung Frank.

<sup>30</sup> I have been unable to find more information about this agency to date.

<sup>31</sup> Sammlung Frank.

Not even the First World War seemed to stop her many performances. In 1916, she began to be a frequent guest in Frankfurt. There, she got to know the theater director Leo Lowry (c. 1867–1918), who was an American with Austrian roots, and his wife, the American Violet G. Bennett (1875–1951), who was born in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>32</sup> The two had met when Lowry was a tobacco salesman in the US around 1900. Soon after, they got married and moved to Germany. Around 1910, Lowry became the director of at least two vaudeville theaters in Frankfurt. Then, in June 1918, Leo Lowry died at the age of only 51,<sup>33</sup> and his widow Violet was suddenly left on her own with all of Leo's business obligations. Because of this, or perhaps because they were friends, Violet made Lea Manti her business partner. In December 1918, Manti became the artistic director of Arkadia's *Künstlerspiele*, a position she held for three years.<sup>34</sup> The two women lived together in Lowry's apartment in 1920 and 1921 (perhaps longer) and did business as Lowry-Manti Theater Management.<sup>35</sup> Everything was going well. In the summer of 1920, Manti opened Mantis Weinrestaurant, with service during the day, in the same building as the Arkadia theater, which she renamed Lea Manti's *Künstlerspiele*.<sup>36</sup> The establishment of the musical whistler's own theater seems to mark the highpoint of her career. Fellow artists who performed at the theater also profited from this. Many were given engagements, including the vaudeville lecturer Fritz Junkermann (1883–1942),<sup>37</sup> whose contract was swiftly renewed by the director after his first performance.<sup>38</sup>

Just how well-known Lea Manti was at the time can be proven by anecdotes in which she is mentioned in connection with other celebrities and issues. The humorist Hans Reimann (1889–1969)<sup>39</sup> once told a tongue-in-cheek story about a mysterious robbery that happened to the political satirist Max Ehrlich (1892–1944) while he was living in a hotel room across from the *Künstlerspiele* in Frankfurt around 1921. Apparently, while Ehrlich was working for Lea Manti, he was performing so much and was so busy running back and forth between the theater and the hotel that he managed to have all his belongings stolen.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> I want to thank Shelley Morrison for her research on the personal history and family of Violet Lowry.

<sup>33</sup> See obituary in the *Frankfurter Nachrichten und Intelligenzblatt*, June 14, 1918, 6.

<sup>34</sup> See *Frankfurter Nachrichten und Intelligenzblatt*, December 20, 1918, 4. "*Künstlerspiele*" was a German name often used for a theater that showed cabaret and vaudeville shows.

<sup>35</sup> Adressbuch (Directory of) Frankfurt 1920, possibly already in 1919. My sincerest thanks to Jens Dobler for pointing out Lowry-Manti in Frankfurt.

<sup>36</sup> *Neue Jüdische Presse*, July 27, 1920, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Fritz Junkermann was later persecuted as a homosexual, castrated, and killed in the Bernburg Euthanasia Center. See <https://www.der-liebe-wegen.org/?profil=fritz-junkermann>, accessed June 2020.

<sup>38</sup> See *Die Fackel*, September 25, 1920, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Reimann published the satirical magazine *Das Stachelschwein* in Frankfurt from 1924 to 1929.

<sup>40</sup> See Hans Reimann, "Gräfin Mariza und ein Diebstahlchen, Auszug aus dem *Stachelschwein*," *Linzer Tages-Post*, August 2, 1925, 11.

The mention of Lea Manti could only have worked in such stories because readers were familiar with her name and could conjure up a mental image of her. She was also mentioned once by a sports reporter covering a soccer game in which the audience apparently applauded the game indiscriminately. In his comparison of deserved and undeserved applause and by defining self-evident behavior in sports, which does not need special applause, the author referred to the well-known artist by saying: "When a player leaves the field with a nosebleed and comes back after five minutes, people applaud. When the goalkeeper makes a save, people applaud him like Lea Manti whistling the *Tannhäuser*. Extraordinary performances are to be applauded with enthusiasm, but to clap your hands for every little thing, well that is just plain silly, and I am not being smug here."<sup>41</sup> That Lea Manti is deserving of the audience's applause is clearly due to her extraordinary skills, according to the author – hence, skills are what deserve applause in the soccer game. The ability to understand this punchline is thus based on general knowledge of the artist, whom the reporter obviously assumed was well-known even among soccer fans.

Manti's business and performing career were apparently flourishing at this time. In January 1922, she bought the Paul Jorick'schen Künstlerspiele in Frankfurt and renamed it Lea Manti's Bonbonnière.<sup>42</sup> She then sold the other Künstlerspiele in May. Everything seemed to be going her way. Violet Lowry, on the other hand, was apparently feeling homesick and applied several times to be allowed to return to the US after 1920. In late May 1922, she was finally able to return home to the US. However, she also had to apply for a permit to return to Germany again at the same time in order to finish taking care of her dead husband's estate in Frankfurt.<sup>43</sup> We can only speculate about how affected Manti's position as theater director in Frankfurt, not to mention her career. Did Violet give the business she no longer wanted to Manti? Were the two women more than just business partners? It is possibly that Lea Manti had fallen in love with Violet Lowry. In any case, she followed her to the US and combined her stay with a concert tour.

### **Stay in the US from 1923 to 1924, performances in Kentucky, and events after her return**

Martha Mandt aka Lea Manti left for the US on October 2, 1923. She sailed from Hamburg to New York on board the *Reliance*. From New York, she traveled to New Albany in the south of Indiana,

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<sup>41</sup> Excerpt from the magazine *Fußball*, no. 14, April 3, 1921. The quote can be found online at: <https://www.dfb.de/news/detail/dfb-wochenschau-pfostenbruch-und-erstes-tor-des-monats-27033/full/1/>, accessed May 2020.

<sup>42</sup> See *Die Fackel*, January 14, 1922, 3; and February 11, 1922, 4.

<sup>43</sup> This required much paperwork. Many thanks to Shelley Morrison for this research.

where Violet Lowry was living with her mother Mrs. Bennett.<sup>44</sup> New Albany, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky, are separated by the Ohio River and are very near each other. At the time, one could travel from one city to the other by carriage in only a few minutes.<sup>45</sup> There is proof that Manti performed in Louisville, when she took part in a major performance with different American artists.<sup>46</sup> She also performed for free in a local charity event, the Natiello Benefit Performance. The story behind this event began two years earlier, on January 28, 1922, when many people died or were severely injured when the roof of the Knickerbocker Theater in Washington, D. C., caved in during the screening of a silent movie accompanied by an orchestra. A blizzard had blown enormous amounts of snow onto the roof, which collapsed in the middle of the film onto the musicians and audience. The conductor Ernesto Natiello (1878–1922), who was born in Italy, was buried under the rubble and died. His brother, the violinist Oreste Natiello (1881–1959), survived but lost an arm in the catastrophe. Before their engagement in Washington, the brothers had performed with a band in Louisville, Kentucky, and Oreste Natiello returned to the city after he was discharged from the hospital.<sup>47</sup> A large benefit performance was organized to honor and support him in January 1924. As many as 18 artists performed for an audience of about 2,000 people, thereby generating a significant sum of money. That Manti was one of the performers can be seen in a prominent photograph in the press. In this picture, she is shown from the waist up, wearing a suit and bowtie, with her hair slicked back. She has her hands on her hips, elbows out, looking defiantly to the side.<sup>48</sup>

In early March 1924, the “international whistler” Manti performed as a novelty act at the Walnut Street Theater in Louisville. On the front page of the local newspaper, the casual, androgynous portrait of Manti stands out among the other major figures, like the Mexican-American silent movie star Ramon Novarro (1899–1968) and the incomparable actress Lillian Gish (1893–1993).<sup>49</sup>

Manti stayed in the US from October 1923 to June 1924. A single-page contract for an extensive tour through 26 cities in the South is also left over from this time. It is signed by P. Albert Plasche, president of the Southern States Concert Tours Corporation. Like Manti, Paul Albert Plaschke (1880–

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<sup>44</sup> See 1923\_New York list of passengers Martha Mandt\_NYT715\_3391-0727+0728, ancestry.com, accessed November 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Many thanks to Shelley Morrison for the geographic description.

<sup>46</sup> See *The Courier Journal*, March 2, 1924. Many thanks again to Shelley M. Morrison for the additional newspaper research.

<sup>47</sup> For more about the collapse of the roof, see [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/post/the-knickerbocker-snowstorm-inside-insights-on-dcs-deadliest-disaster/2013/01/28/5ce4d940-6961-11e2-af53-7b2b2a7510a8\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/post/the-knickerbocker-snowstorm-inside-insights-on-dcs-deadliest-disaster/2013/01/28/5ce4d940-6961-11e2-af53-7b2b2a7510a8_blog.html), accessed March 2020.

<sup>48</sup> See *The Courier Journal*, January 20, 1924. Many thanks again to Shelley M. Morrison for this research.

<sup>49</sup> See *The Courier Journal*, March 2, 1924, 25; 1. The artist probably brought this photograph with her to the US. Lea Manti herself filed both pictures mentioned here under 1918 in the part of her estate that still exists (Sammlung Frank).

1954)<sup>50</sup> (spelled with a “k”) was of German descent. In addition to running the corporation, he was also a painter and a cartoonist for the local papers in Louisville. And he was Violet Lowry’s brother in law. Whether Lea Manti actually went on the tour as described in the contract is questionable, for documentation of performances in these cities is yet to be found. Did she go on tour, or did she spend most of her time with Violet? Or did Violet accompany her friend? In any case, it was most likely thanks to Plaschke and Violet Lowry that Manti took part in the benefit performance.<sup>51</sup>

According to a German newspaper article from this time, Manti also performed a technical masterpiece – namely the “Scherzo Fantastique” from *Dance of the Goblins* (La Ronde des Lutins) by Antonio Bazzini (1818–1897) – together with the famous Russian-American violinist Jascha Heifetz (1901–1987) in North America.<sup>52</sup> However, there are no other sources to support this. In any case, Manti left the US in early May 1924. Violet Lowry went with her, or followed shortly after, only to return to Indiana in the spring of 1926,<sup>53</sup> this time probably for good. Did the two ever see each other again?

A month after returning from the US, Lea Manti continued her engagement at the Scala in Berlin.<sup>54</sup> In March 1925, she performed the overture from the operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld* by Jacques Offenbach at the Pavillon in Vienna.<sup>55</sup> In the winter of 1926 and 1927, she was back in Hamburg, delighting audiences.<sup>56</sup> Her career appears to have continued in the same vein for the next few years. Indeed, looking back, the stage performer and playwright Lena Düveke (born around 1887) noted in the late 1920s in a brief portrait of Manti:

As in her early years, she still has that wonderfully soft, pure-as-a-bell piano in her whistling, and yet she can drown out a full military orchestra of 60 musicians. If you have not heard it for yourself, you would never believe this about such a small, delicate, almost boyishly slender woman who is the focus of attention because of her art, if not for other reasons. Countless bets have been placed because no one believed that a woman was behind this slender, elegant young man in a purple-blue or brown tailcoat suit. One would say, “That’s not a woman, that’s a man!” The other would say, “No woman can whistle like that!” And so

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<sup>50</sup> See also C. Robert Ullrich and Victoria A. Ullrich (eds.), *German Influences in Louisville* (Charleston: The History Press, 2019), especially 96-99.

<sup>51</sup> I thank Shelley Morrison sincerely for the discussion about Manti’s stay in the US.

<sup>52</sup> Newspaper clipping, Hamburg, no date [1927] (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>53</sup> Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1850-1934, ancestry.com, accessed June 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Newspaper clipping, Hamburg, no date [1924] (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>55</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, March 5, 1925, 16. The same program also included the (lesbian) diseuse Olga Rinnebach (1899-1957), who in 1942 entered a paper marriage with the gay political satirist Robert T. Odemann (? – 1985) in Hamburg. He was later reported to the police and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. See Gudrun Holz (2000), “Die schwulen Opfer des Faschismus” <https://shop.jungle-world.com/artikel/2000/15/die-schwulen-opfer-des-faschismus>, accessed November 2019. Did Rinnebach and Manti know each other from Hamburg, and did they perhaps work together as solo artists in the same engagements? In any case, they spent at least two months (March and April) in 1925 together at the Pavillon in Vienna. See also *Die Stunde*, March 19, 1925, 5; and April 1, 1925, 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Hamburger Anzeiger*, December 6, 1926.



bet after bet was made, while the interest in this woman as a person and artist grew and grew.<sup>57</sup>

In the meantime, Manti tried to establish yet another new venue that would bear her name in Hamburg. Presumably in the fall of 1931, she opened a café and restaurant on Alsterthor Street called Lea Manti's Künstler-Club. The club was to be a place where artists could meet after their theater performances. Manti put out an ad for the club that said, "WHERE can you meet artists in Hamburg after the theaters are closed? At Lea Manti's Künstler-Club."<sup>58</sup> That people could go to Lea Manti's place to meet artists after shows,<sup>59</sup> and naturally the manager Lea Manti herself, seems to have been a novel idea in Hamburg at the time.

The folks who had placed bets on Manti are likely to have been motivated to get a closer look at the musical whistler at her cafe, so they could see for themselves. Was her club possibly also a meeting place for lesbian, transgender, and/or gay artists? Unfortunately, we do not know anything about this; nor do we know how the café continued to develop. What is clear is that, when she was in Berlin for her next performance at the Scala, Manti was hired for a job that she most likely particularly enjoyed.

### **Lea Manti makes a splash in Berlin's subculture**

In May 1932, Manti briefly took over the management of a lesbian bar, the Monokel-Diele (Monocle Vestibule), which had been opened in March 1931<sup>60</sup> by Lotte Hahm (1890–1967),<sup>61</sup> one of Berlin's subcultural networkers and co-founder of the popular women's club Violetta. At the bar, Manti worked with the performance artist Lola Gray (born 1893), who also ran the venue for a short while.<sup>62</sup> A little later, in June 1932, Manti also began to manage the Manuela,<sup>63</sup> the second establishment Hahm had opened. According to an announcement, the musical whistler also entertained guests at the Manuela. A picture of her wearing a monocle was also printed in a lesbian magazine.<sup>64</sup> Because of the way they looked, with their suits and short hairdos, Lotte Hahm and Lea

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<sup>57</sup> Lena Düveke, *Lea Manti. (15 Jahre Weltvarietés.)*, no place [Hamburg], no year [1927], (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>58</sup> Newspaper clipping, no place, no date (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>59</sup> Two newspaper clippings, no place, no date (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>60</sup> See *Die Freundin*, no. 11, March 18, 1931.

<sup>61</sup> See also [www.lesbengeschichte.org/aktuelles\\_d.html#Anchor-hahm-18888](http://www.lesbengeschichte.org/aktuelles_d.html#Anchor-hahm-18888), accessed March 2020.

<sup>62</sup> See *Die Freundin*, no. 18, May 4, 1932.

<sup>63</sup> See *Die Freundin*, no. 22, June 1, 1932.

<sup>64</sup> *Die Freundin*, no. 25, June 15, 1932; and *Die Freundin*, no. 22, June 1, 1932. Manti herself dated the photograph that served as a basis for this illustration as being from 1928 (Sammlung Frank). For more about the monocle as a lesbian symbol, see Hanna Hacker *Frauen\* und Freund\_innen. Lesarten "weiblicher Homosexualität" Österreich 1870-1938* (= challenge GENDER 4), revised (Vienna: Zaglossus, 2015 [1987]), 313.

Manti were a good fit. How did they get along? Hahm probably hired Manti as an additional attraction, and the lesbian and/or transgender audience was in all likelihood thrilled that the artist was there, not least because of her popularity.

Manti performed as a whistler at the Monokel-Diele and the Manuela for about six weeks. After that, her name disappeared from ads for the two bars. A short while later, Hahm and her life partner Katharina Käthe Fleischmann (1899–1967), who was Jewish, had to give up their businesses due to anti-Semitic pressure from the Nazis. In 1933, the majority of all lesbian, gay, and transgender subcultural venues were closed by the police.<sup>65</sup> Beyond being mentioned in subcultural magazines in 1930s Berlin, we do not know if Lea Manti had been further involved in these clubs.

### **The Nazi era: Living under the threat of poverty and receiving financial support from the Reich Chamber of Theater**

In 1933, all members of the German International Artists' Lodge (Internationale Artisten-Loge ) were forced to become members of the Reich Association of German Artists (Reichsverband der Deutschen Artistik), a subdivision of the Reich Chamber of Theater (Reichstheaterkammer). When this happened, Lea Manti was apparently quick to prove her "Aryan background," as required for membership. Starting in 1934, "non-Aryan" artists could only become members if they were able to prove special merits. The lodge was then dissolved.<sup>66</sup>

Manti continued to have engagements. Newspapers still rhapsodized about her:

The elegant semi-tall lady in a man's tailcoat suit who, without being tomboyish, puts her two pinky fingers between her lips and, with a winning naturalness, whistles melodies from Lehàr's operetta *The Merry Widow*: first a delicate cooing and warbling, rising and becoming more urgent, and finally reaching its delicate tune, until a shrill note ends the artistic roundel of whistling. Who would have thought that the lady in the tailcoat suit, with her fine-cut gentleman's profile, restlessly swaying back and forth from the tips of her toes to her heels could produce such a final dissonance?<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See Ingeborg Boxhammer & Christiane Leidinger, "It-Girls der 20er Jahre. Lotte Hahm (1890–1967) und Käthe Fleischmann (1899–1967) betrieben Lesbenbars, initiierten Vereine und brachten Lesben und 'Transvestiten' zusammen." *L. Mag. Das Magazin für Lesben*, March/April 2019, 44f. See also Ingeborg Boxhammer & Christiane Leidinger, "Offensiv – strategisch – (frauen-)emanzipiert: Spuren der Berliner Subkulturaktivistin\* Lotte Hahm (1890–1967)," *GENDER. Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft* 1/2/2021 (publication pending, paper accepted May 28, 2020).

<sup>66</sup> See Birgit Peter, "Zirkus und Artistik unter der NS-Herrschaft" in *Theater unter NS-Herrschaft. Theatre under Pressure* (Theater – Film – Medien, vol. 2), ed Brigitte Dailinger and Veronika Zangl (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2018), 161-180, here 166f.

<sup>67</sup> ska\_, "Im Odeon wird gepfiffen," September 20, 1936, newspaper clipping, place not mentioned (Sammlung Frank).

In the 1930s, Lea Manti also performed at the Rheinhôtel Dreesen in Godesberg (today part of Bonn).<sup>68</sup> Was she aware that this hotel had long become a popular destination for important Nazis? Or did she not care? Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) had been a frequent visitor of this fancy hotel since 1926.<sup>69</sup>

This engagement was followed by further appearances in theaters and on the radio.<sup>70</sup> After that, she began to receive less and less offers for stage performances. From October 1937 to April 1938, she could be found at the Café Näser in Hamburg, where she “worked as the right hand of the manager” to establish “a small, clean vaudeville show theater from modest beginnings.”<sup>71</sup> Her monthly salary from the café was 100 reichsmarks, out of which she paid 32 reichsmarks in rent, but she lost this income when the café was forced to close in April. Previously, Manti had received an annual stipend from a family foundation in Frankfurt (Oder) established by her “great uncle, a former personal physician at the court of Emperor Nicholas I of Russia.”<sup>72</sup> But this funding was significantly reduced after 1932, after which she had lived on welfare between jobs.<sup>73</sup> In the summer of 1938, she therefore applied to the Reich Chamber of Theater for “financial support from the ‘Künstlerdank’ fund.” This fund (the name of which translates as “Thanks to Artists”) had been established by the Reich Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels (1897–1945) in 1936 to provide financial aid to artists in need. The Department of Circus and Vaudeville Performers in Hamburg, the office in charge of processing applications, wrote a recommendation that favorably mentioned that, in 1933, “Mrs. Mandt had travelled from Switzerland to Germany to vote.”<sup>74</sup> Manti signed her letters to the chamber with “Heil Hitler,” although according to the form, she was not a member of the Nazi party.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See letter of confirmation and recommendation by Fritz Dreesen, May 26, 1933 (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>69</sup> See Bruno Fischer, *Köln und Umgebung 1933-1945. Der historische Reiseführer*, (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag), 2012, 100f.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, “Reichssender Köln, February 9, 1925,” *Bonner General-Anzeiger*, February 6, 1935, 11.

<sup>71</sup> This was how the head of the regional Department IV of Circus and Vaudeville Performers of Hamburg phrased this in his letter to the Reich Chamber of Theater Department of Circus and Vaudeville Performers in Berlin on May 13, 1938. BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>72</sup> BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720. Also: This probably refers to the physician Martin Wilhelm von Mandt (1799-1858), born in Wuppertal. See [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Wilhelm\\_von\\_Mandt](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Wilhelm_von_Mandt), accessed March 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Lea Manti to the “Künstlerdank” field office 4409, June 22, 1938. BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>74</sup> Correspondence between the regional Department of Circus and Vaudeville Performers of the Reich Chamber of Theater in Hamburg and the Reich Ministry of Propaganda, “Künstlerdank,” July 19, 1938. BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Lea Manti to the “Künstlerdank” field office 4409, June 22, 1938; application form for the Department of Circus and Vaudeville Performers from May 28, 1937 [= 1938]. BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

The chamber directors quickly came to an agreement based on the assumption that the “musical whistler who had been famous in earlier days” would have difficulties finding good engagements any longer because of her age (she was 51). After careful consideration, they voted in favor of a “stipend of a mid-size sum.”<sup>76</sup> Unlike them, Manti herself was still very confident of her abilities and wrote in the questionnaire in June 1938: “Despite my artistic qualities, which are the same today as in earlier days, I am unable to find an engagement. My age does not play a role, because I still look thirty. See Department Tillmar as a reference, [illegible], Hamburg.”<sup>77</sup> We can assume that the directors who agreed to grant her the funding of 100 Reichsmarks did not know about her activities in Berlin’s subculture.

### **Further success during the Nazi era and life after the war**

After the war had begun, in 1940, when Jews and other unwanted groups in society were being persistently and increasingly persecuted, as were certain social behaviors, Lea Manti’s career was on the rise again. She whistled in Würzburg, Essen, and Kassel, as well as in occupied areas in neighboring countries. That year, she performed in the Czech city of Karlsbad (now Karlovy Vary), which the Nazi regime had integrated into the newly established “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.”<sup>78</sup> In the summer of 1941, Manti performed in Riga, Latvia, where the Apollo-Theater Augsburg staged a “Parade of Sensations” for the German soldiers stationed there.<sup>79</sup> Then, in 1944, even those artists who been engaged by theaters because of the occupation could no longer perform when Joseph Goebbels issued a total “theater ban,” and all theaters were forced to close.

During this time, Manti apparently got to know the dancer Betti Scheuing (1913-1996) from Hamburg. She dedicated a quote on an autograph card to her in 1944.<sup>80</sup> Did the two women become a couple already in the 1940s? We do not know anything about their lives at the end of the war or the time immediately following. However, from the early 1950s on, we know they lived together in Langenhorn in the northern part of Hamburg.<sup>81</sup> They did not have much time together, because Lea Manti fell ill only a few years later. We know that latest in November 1958, she stayed in the tuberculosis sanatorium Wintermoor<sup>82</sup> in Schneverdingen in Lower Saxony (whether she remained

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<sup>76</sup> BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>77</sup> BArch, Akte der Reichstheaterkammer R9361-V, archive no. 70720.

<sup>78</sup> Sammlung Frank.

<sup>79</sup> See *Deutsche Zeitung im Ostland*, August 13, 1941, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Autograph card from April 1944 (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>81</sup> See Addressbuch (Directory of) Hamburg 1961.

<sup>82</sup> Wintermoor had been built by the paramilitary Organisation Todt as a hospital in 1941. In 1947–48, the hospital became a tuberculosis sanatorium. See <https://archiv-wintermoor.de/ehrhorn/waldkrankenhaus-und-endo-klinik>, accessed May 2020.

for a long time or went home and was readmitted is not known). During this time, she missed her companion and wrote longing letters to Betti, signing them with “let my hug you closely to my heart in thought, many kisses, your Lea.”<sup>83</sup> Whether she recovered again in spring of 1960 or was even discharged to go home to her girlfriend is not known. Marta Mandt aka Lea Manti died in the summer of 1960 at the age of 73. Her life partner Betti Scheuing took care of everything. She organized Manti’s burial, as well as her final resting place in the Ohlsdorf cemetery. She also lovingly kept the pictures and newspaper clippings that Lea Manti had collected about the different stations of her career. After Betti Scheuing died in 1996, her collection was kept intact, and important information about her survived.<sup>84</sup>

### **The musical whistler Lea Manti from the point of view of early twentieth-century sexology**

Lea Manti’s outfit and appearance were judged not only from an artistic point of view. Early in her career, her appearance was also used by a physician for his misogynist hypotheses about female homosexuality. Daring to publish his work only under the pseudonym Dr. Georg Back,<sup>85</sup> the physician in question, Georg Merzbach (1868–1939),<sup>86</sup> wrote the book *Sexuelle Verirrungen des Menschen und der Natur* (Sexual Aberrations of Humans and Nature), published in 1910. In it, he not only ranted about everything he saw as deviating from so-called normal sexuality, he also included a picture of Lea Manti,<sup>87</sup> probably an autograph card.<sup>88</sup>

In this photograph, Manti is in her early twenties, wearing a suit coat that reaches below the waist, a long skirt, a shirt with a collar and tie, and a large hat. She is smiling at the camera, seeming to lean on a chair, while holding her hand to her cheek. Under the picture, it says in the book: “The virile type of a vaudeville musical whistler. Virile homosexual women are often skilled in whistling, while most homosexual men cannot whistle at all.” Was musical whistling thus a sign of virile homosexual

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<sup>83</sup> Letter from Lea Manti to Betti Scheuing, November 21, 1958 (Sammlung Frank).

<sup>84</sup> Sammlung Frank. In the death registry of Hamburg, accessible online, Lea Manti is not listed as deceased in the volume in question. Registry researched online at [https://www.hamburg.de/bkm/digitalisate/332-5-standesaemter/4246100/332-5-standesaemter-generalregister-sterbefaelle/#anker\\_37](https://www.hamburg.de/bkm/digitalisate/332-5-standesaemter/4246100/332-5-standesaemter-generalregister-sterbefaelle/#anker_37), accessed May 2020.

<sup>85</sup> The physician had no qualms about repeatedly quoting himself and using statements he had made under his real name to support and legitimize the thoughts of his alter ego Dr. Georg Back.

<sup>86</sup> For more about the physician, see Richard Kühl, “Georg Merzbach,” in *Personenlexikon der Sexualforschung*, ed. Volkmar Sigusch and Günther Grau (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009), 294-297.

<sup>87</sup> Her name is not mentioned in the book, but the picture is identical to a photograph of Lea Manti in the Sammlung Frank.

<sup>88</sup> Georg Back, *Sexuelle Verirrung des Menschen und der Natur. Großes illustriertes Sammelwerk über die krankhaften Erscheinungen des Geschlechtstriebes, das echte und das Schein-Zwittertum, und andere rätselhaftige Erscheinungen auf sexuellem Gebiet*, volume 2, 2nd and 3rd edition, (Berlin: Standard Verlag, 1910), 677.

women? Or what was the picture with its accompanying caption meant to 'prove'? What was the purpose of the picture for Back/Merzbach?

Georg Merzbach had been a member of the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (WhK) (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), which was founded in 1897 before World War I. This organization represented the interests of homosexuals. He had also been the deputy director under the director, co-founder, and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935). Merzbach had served as an expert in several high-profile lawsuits and had fought for the rights of homosexuals and the abolition of § 175 RStGB (Criminal Code of the German Empire). He had done this although he pathologized homosexuality and saw it as an illness and “aberration.” He categorized homosexuality as a trait that one was born with and not as a freely chosen way of life. In Back’s/Merzbach’s eyes, homosexuality was the most important sexual affliction.<sup>89</sup> In order to prove his arguments, he referred to a wide variety of other sexologists from his time. According to his ideas, “(virile homosexual) females are filled with the inner compulsion to imitate man in their behavior and in the development of their abilities and skills.”<sup>90</sup> By “virility,” he was referring to a certain notion of masculinity that was also used in the late subculture of the Weimar Republic as a kind of distinctive mark of homosexual women.<sup>91</sup>

In Back’s/Merzbach’s mind, homosexual women were not ‘real’ women; it was not “actual, real (heterosexual) women” who demand emancipation, but only those who had a “clearly defined masculinity.”<sup>92</sup> In accordance with the ideas of those who wanted to push emancipated women back into the roles they were assigned by men, he used this assertion to declare all women to be homosexual who fought for “women’s issues” and women’s rights. Thus, his intention was to discredit these women and support fellow anti-feminists.

How did Georg Merzbach manage to get this photograph of Lea Manti in the first place? Had he been on a lecture tour in the same city and at the same time that Lea Manti was also performing as a whistler? Had he seen one of her performances and perhaps talked to her? Or did she herself contacted the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee or Magnus Hirschfeld? Hirschfeld, for his part, also used a photograph of Lea Manti (from c. 1918) a few years later in the fourth volume of his *Geschlechtskunde* (Science of Sex). In his book, her picture is accompanied by the following caption:

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<sup>89</sup> Georg Back, *Sexuelle Verirrung*, 562.

<sup>90</sup> Georg Back, *Sexuelle Verirrung*, 562.

<sup>91</sup> See also Heike Schader, *Virile, Vamps und wilde Veilchen. Sexualität, Begehren und Erotik in den Zeitschriften homosexueller Frauen im Berlin der 1920er Jahre* (Königstein/Ts.: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> Georg Back, *Sexuelle Verirrung*, 687.

“A woman appearing as a man (‘Leamanti’).”<sup>93</sup> Had Lea Manti already been so well-known in 1910 that Back’s reproduction of her photograph with his caption had outed her, which is why Hirschfeld felt inspired to use her picture as well? We do not know whether Manti even knew about the pictures, or if she reacted to them in any way.

In sum, Lea Manti was definitely one of the first female artists in the 20th century to present themselves as androgynous. Through her appearance, she made a significant contribution to cross-dressing already in the 1910s. As someone who challenged the fixed norm of two genders, she was doubtless a pioneering, if not a liberating figure.

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Suggested citation:

Boxhammer, Ingeborg. “Lea Manti (1886-1960) ‘Who Gives a Damn about Women’s Clothing and Whistles with Her Pinky Fingers’: A New Approach to the Life and Work of the Musical Whistler.” Bonn 2020. Available online at: Online-Projekt Lesbengeschichte. Ingeborg Boxhammer & Christiane Leidinger. [https://www.lesbengeschichte.org/Englisch/bio\\_manti\\_e.html](https://www.lesbengeschichte.org/Englisch/bio_manti_e.html) [DATE accessed]

Photos:

Lea Manti ca. 1918, (retouched photograph) Sammlung Frank ©

Postcard, sent 1916, personal archive

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<sup>93</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, *Geschlechtskunde: auf Grund dreißigjähriger Forschung und Erfahrung*, volume 4, (Stuttgart: Julius Püttmann Verlag, 1930), 574. Many thanks to Jens Dobler for pointing out this picture to me.