

Kati Sandwina: "HERCULES CAN BE A LADY"

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Few women of strength have attained the fame of Catherine (Kati) Brumbach Heymann. Known to the public as "Sandwina," a distaff derivative of "Sandow," Jan Todd describes her as one of the "super-stars" of professional strongwomen in an essay entitled "Bring on the

Amazons." Kati was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1884, one of the sixteen children of Phillipe and Johanna Brumbach, and began performing in the family-run circus at age two. As a teenager she was taking on all challengers in wrestling, her father offering a handsome prize to anyone who could defeat her. Gracefully proportioned at six feet and a little over two hundred pounds, Kati eventually earned the reputation, as a touring performer, of "Europe's Queen of Strength, Beauty and Dexterity."

Upon coming to the United States in 1909, she joined the prestigious Keith's Orpheum Vaudeville circuit and then became a center ring attraction for Ringling

Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus. For the next three decades, according to Todd, she sometimes earned as much as \$1,500 a week. Her feats of strength were remarkable. An unsigned 1946 article in *Strength & Health*, possibly authored by Ray Van Cleef, credits her with a 264¹A pound continental jerk, a right hand continental jerk of 176 pounds, and a press in excess of 200 pounds on numerous occasions. As a performer she engaged in iron-bending and chain-breaking and, much in the manner of Paul Anderson and other showmen, executed spectacular feats of strength involving human beings on stage. So awesome was this strongwoman that Siegmund Breitbart, who billed himself as "the strongest man in the world" in the 1920s, occasionally cancelled or postponed engagements rather than jeopardize his reputation by appearing in the same city when she was performing.

About 1900 Kati was married to Max Heymann, an acrobat of considerable repute. They often performed together in an act in which Kati would lift Max through the manual of arms positions, with Max being the rifle. Their two sons, Theodore and Alfred, inherited their mother's physical endowments. Theodore (1909-1997) also adopted his mother's stage name and, as Teddy Sandwina, became a professional boxer of note from 1926 to 1932. In later years Kati and Max operated a neighborhood tavern in Ridgewood, New Jersey. She died of cancer on January 21, 1952.

The following article, which was written by Sidney Fields and appeared in the *New York Mirror* on December 15, 1947, is an endearing portrait of their rela-

tionship. With all due allowance for possible error or exaggeration (by interviewer or interviewee), its believability stems from what we already know about Kati's prodigious strength. Most importantly, the article reveals the human side of one of the most important icons of the iron game. For what is often missing in iron game history, amidst a profusion of facts of figures on the greats of the game, not to mention hero worship, is information on the quality of their life experiences. Much as Harry Paschall once entertained and delighted us with his Bosco cartoons, this article (replete with German accents) recaptures a bit of the afterglow of ethnic America during the strongman era.

"Hercules Can Be a Lady"
 by Sidney Fields, *New York Mirror*

December 15, 1947

Before Kati wrinkled the bar in the picture above, it was six feet long. It's one and a half inches wide and a quarter of an inch thick. Kati's father ran a little circus back in Germany. He was a strong man, too. He had such a big hand you could put a half-dollar through his



Although this yellowed newspaper picture does not reproduce well, Kati's ironbending abilities are readily apparent in this *New York Mirror* photo from 1947.

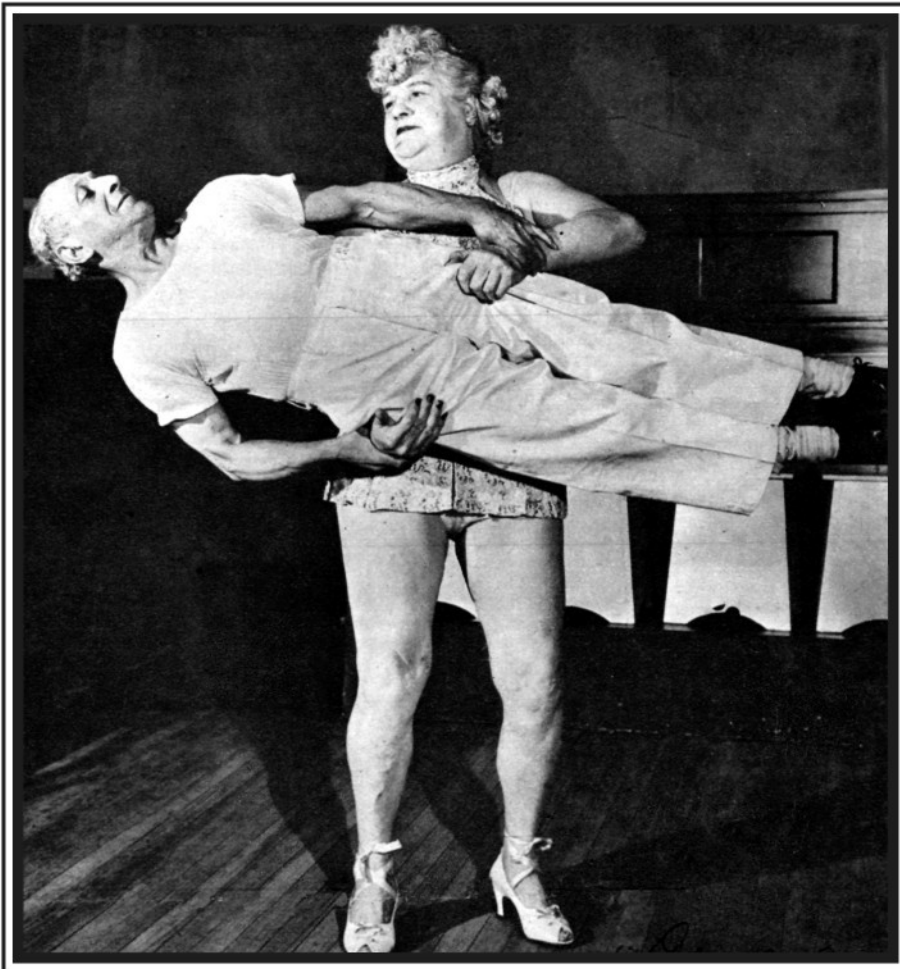


An arrow points the way to Kati's bar in this photograph from *HIT* magazine in 1947. Kati and Max Heymann ran the bar with their two sons, Arthur and Ted, and she prominently advertised the fact that she was the "world's strongest woman."

wedding ring. But Max says Kati is even stronger than her father was . . . "Vy, she's de strongest voooman ever was lifting."

Max was an acrobat out of work 45 years ago when he saw Kati at the circus. Her father had just finished announcing that he'd give 1,000 marks [other accounts say 100 marks] to anyone who could wrestle with Kati and win...

"I show him my



At 64, white-haired Kati Sandwina would occasionally entertain the customers in her Ridgewood tavern by breaking a few iron chains, bending a big iron bar with her hands, or using her husband Max as a human barbell. The New York Mirror listed her as 6'1" at a bodyweight of two hundred pounds. Max Heymann, her husband stood only 5'5".

muscles," Max recalls, "an dey ahksept me und I wrestle mit Kati. She picks me up vuns und trows me on de floor and I say Kati I luv you. Will you marry me?"

"A regular blitzkrieg," Kati smiles proudly. "I say ja und ve get married und run away to Norway. But my vater he tells de police dot Max runs away mit a daughter vot is a minor und we hav to go to da station haus. But Max he vaves de license und ve go home, und vater forgives everyting und alles is hutsy tutsy."

They put together their own act and Kati would lift three men way up with one hand with Max on top. John Ringling saw them in Paris and hired them...

"Ve come to de Younted Shtates," says Papa, "and Mama is de big attracshun frum de show. Ven de

circus zeesun is over ve are in vaudeville. In Sioux City Teddy our first son ist born. Mama gifs a performance dot same night, den she goes to hav da baby. Teddy Roosevelt vot is a great admirer frum Mama he iss de god-vater."

They trouped al over the world with their act. In 1911 Kati established the world's record for weight lifting by raising a two-handed 300-pound barbell. That was official. Papa says unofficially she lifts a 312.5-pound barbell.

Son Teddy became a boxer, had 84 fights, won 60 by kayos. Max Schmeling was once his sparring partner. Ted works around the bar and contributes to Mama's regular Saturday night show with a burlesque of his own on love, dancing, fighters and fight managers. His act is called "I am a Dope." The Sandwinas' second son Alfred spent five years in the Air Corps and is now a struggling young singer and actor.

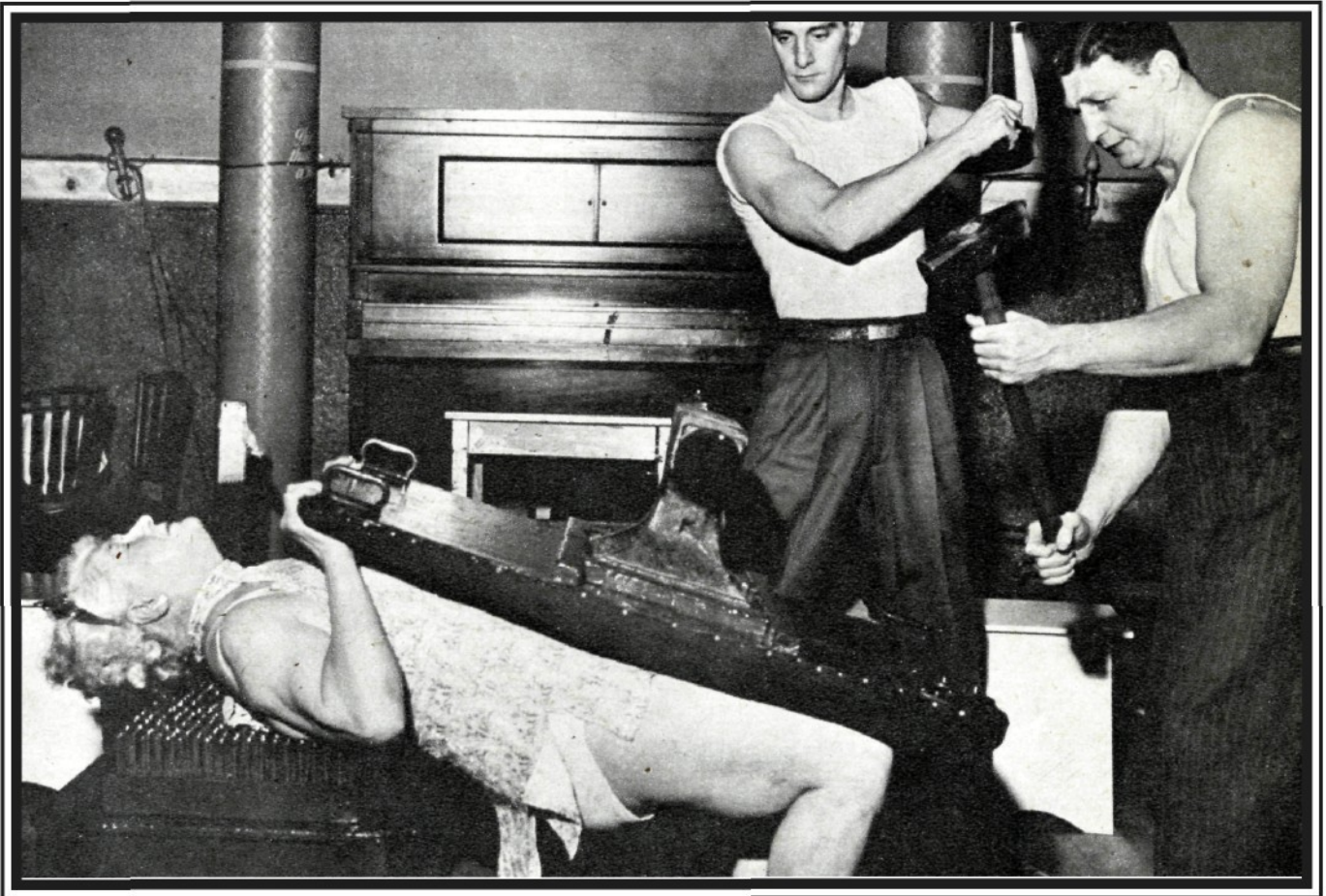
When Mama isn't weight-lifting or bending iron, she throws Papa around, al 155 pounds of him, or she lets him bang a 200-pound anvil on her

stomach while she lies bareback on a bed of nails. That's the easy life that Kati retired to from the circus five years ago...

"Only ve find out it iss not so easy. Ven it starts here de business de ferst year it iss very tough. Evvery odder day I haf to yell, 'Papa, open da door.' Ve leave a tree-ring circus for a five-ring show."

"But now," Papa smiles contentedly, "dey are al gentlemens. Mama she talks to dem nice. "Go home," she says. "No more drinks for you." Dey go. Ven dey come back de next day dey put dere head in da door ferst und ask, 'Can I come in, Kati?'"

Kati generally sits in the neat little restaurant in the rear and talks to the neighbors. Papa and Ted tend



Katie's sons, pound on her stomach with sledge hammers as she lies back on a bed of nails in a photograph taken in 1947 at her Ridgewood, New Jersey, bar and grill. Ted Sandwina, on the right, was at one time a top heavyweight boxer. Arthur, in the background, worked as an actor.

bar and serve. As soon as anyone starts getting troublesome, Papa always warns ...

"You better scamp or Mama comes in."

One day Mama was sitting in the restaurant when three of the boys got noisy at once. They were trying Papa's patience by complaining about everything from the head on the beer to the free lunch. It started to look like trouble. Mama got up, yelled, "Papa open da door," and tossed them out one by one ...

"Und de next dey stick der head in und apologize und now dey are well behaved."

One afternoon, a bruiser walked in and after berating everyone in sight, started for Papa. That always ends Mama's quiet patience. She didn't bother to yell, "Papa, open da door." She floored the bruiser with one punch for the whole count and gave him a thorough lesson as she tossed him out. And the two cops standing

right outside the door, twirling their nightclubs, cautioned Kati as they always do ...

"Mama, don't hit him too hard!"

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