



Visiting Anton Kutter

PROLOGUE

Granted, the title seems slightly odd, but in due course the reason for this choice will reveal itself more clearly.

For the last two years I had the opportunity to visit many people who made their mark in the world of both amateur and professional astronomy in our low countries.

Those were, in order of appearance, Bruno Ernst, Kees de Jager and finally the children of Anton Kutter. Those three famous names are inextricably linked.

Bruno Ernst (Hans de Rijk) and Kees de Jager worked together for years to give the Simon Stevin observatory (Netherlands) its fame, and worked tirelessly and incessantly to popularize astronomy. They also became life long friends.

The Kutter family were harder to approach, but we corresponded a lot via e-mail and I sent them the video of the special Belgium-Holland Kutter days at the Tivoli observatory, which finally brought them around.

But my story was so complex that I decided to split it in three separate parts. The first part is this prologue, which will introduce the Kutter family. The second part will discuss Anton Kutter's life. The third part is the cherry on the cake and will be called 'a glance into the future'.

But back to the subject at hand: I asked Adrian Kutter to answer all my questions; this is his story.

The Kutter family story: PART ONE

*About 100 years of movie theater in Biberach and a century of family history serving and loving cinema, movies and astronomy
Adrian Kutter, 14th of November 2016*

My grandfather on my mother's side, Gottlob Friedrich Erpff, was born in 1877 in the Swabian town of Gmünd; he was the son of a fabric dyer. Destined to follow in the tracks of his father, he learned the trade between 1893 and 1895. He then worked as assistant dyer in Leuterhausen-Ansbach until his graduation in 1897.



Anton Kutter 1926

On the 1st of October he was enlisted in the infantry regiment 123 in Ulm for military service. But soon, after his father passed away in December of that same year, he was relieved of military duty to allow him to take over his father's business.

In 1906 he married his wife Louise, and this marriage gave them their daughter Else in 1907. In that same year he established in Gmünd a factory for steam cleaning, chemical cleaning and dyeing, and led the company until 1911, when he fell ill; his doctor attributed his illness to poisoning by his professional exposure to dangerous chemicals and advised him to change occupation.

Since he had already been involved in a number of "light spectacle" theaters in Stuttgart, Göppingen, Ravensburg and Friedrichshafen, he sold his company and purchased what would become the 'Eden Kinemotographen' movie theater on the Viehmarktstrasse in Biberach, in a building next to the Krone hotel. On the first floor was the ballroom of the hotel and on the ground floor were the former stables and storage lockers and rooms for the hotel guests. There he built a true film theatre with 200 seats, expanded to 300 seats in 1915; even that capacity proved to be too small due to the overwhelming success of the theatre with the people of Biberach. In 1925 a contract with the city council allowed him to open the "Stadttheaterlichtspiele" in the City Theater, with shows every

Saturday and Sunday. He was sent to fight in the Great War, his wife Louise running the theatre in his absence, and returned badly wounded after two years.

Until 1912 shows would last for an hour and a half, showing several short films. Only in 1920 did the first full length films appear. On some days a 5-man orchestra would play music to accompany the film.

Louise Erpff was a kindhearted woman who became known and loved throughout the city. The theatre was especially popular with the young, and many kids lacking the money would be allowed an occasional peek at the movies: Louise Erpff was manning the ticket office herself, often with her daughter Else, a beautiful girl with long black hair who was popular with the boys...

Else also caught the eye of a certain Anton Kutter, born in 1903 in the Kleeblattthaus on the main Biberach market square as the son of the merchant Viktor Kutter, who regularly arranged to meet her to play on the market square.

But Anton was also interested in the stars and the Moon: as a 12-year old he rigged a refractor from a spectacle glass and a toy projector, which he used to gaze at the heavens from the top of the Kleeblattthaus.

He was also a regular visitor of the movie theater, and not only because of Else; he was genuinely interested in film: when he was only 10 years old he handcrafted his first own film camera, and he started a "career in film" at age 15. In his first movie "Tom Sawyer" he directed (who else?) Else (then 11) playing the part of Becky.

That mutual attraction between Anton and Else continued to grow as they did, even during their school years and adulthood, even though they often did not see each other for quite some time. Else attended school in Friedrichshafen and Anton in Ravensburg, since there was no suitable school in Biberach. Else returned to Biberach in 1923, worked part time and played in many theatre plays for the "Dramatische Verein".

Anton graduated as an engineer in 1922. As a student he had still also occupied himself with astronomy, and from 1923 till 1925 he was assistant in the Stuttgart Popular Observatory.



After finishing his studies, his first job was with the photo laboratory Labor Epkems in Köln in 1925. After half a year he swapped jobs and worked for the film production company Arthur Böhm Film, also in Köln.

There he made his first three professional films, amongst which the Wieland film “Dying Romanticism”. This featured some of the actors of the “Dramatisches Verein Biberach”: Heinrich Sembinelli, Gustav Lump (playing Wieland) and, of course, Elise Erpff as Sophie Gutermann (later La Roche).

In 1927 Anton Kutter went to Paris for a year, invited by the French film producer Petitjean. There he created four experimental films.

In 1928 he was commissioned by director general Adolf Pirrung to make three movies about the “Oberschwäbischen Elektrizitätswerke” (OEW, “Upper Swabian Electricity Plant Company”). The full length film “Grosskraft der Berge” (1926-1930) showed the building of the Vermunt hydroelectric power plant in Montafon. In 1928 he directed “Licht und Kraft”, showcasing several hydroelectric plants of the OEW in Iller and Donau and the steam plant in Ulm-Donautal. Finally, in 1929, the film “Kuriert” was a merry publicity film about a pig-headed farmer tricked by his son and his son’s future wife and father in law (another farmer) into using electricity on his farm.

In 1931 EMELKA, the large film studio in München-Gesielgasteig (which later became Bavaria) convinced Anton Kutter to join them to direct documentary and feature films and to write scripts.

The first two films, “Rythm of the World” (1931) and “Moonlight” (1932) were so successful that he was hand-picked as script writer and director of the first Swiss ‘talkie’ and German-Swiss co-

production “The Golden Glacier” (1932). After the success of this film in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, he then directed the second Swiss ‘talkie’ “White Majesty” (1934) which was also situated in the Oberland around Bern. That film was also recorded in parallel in a French version, with a partially French cast and French co-directors, as “Un de la Montagne (Mountain Man)”.

Anton took his beloved Else from Biberach to München in 1931 and they married in June 1933 in Bern, during the filming of the Swiss films.

Anton Kutter was a fervent detractor of Nazism and did not hide his contempt while on the film set; he was snitched on by one of the German actors, Carl de Vogt, who told the Reichsminister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. That prevented a third Swiss film from being completed, and forced Anton Kutter to return to München, where he was at first barred from working in the film industry.

Because of the success of his full length feature films and the two gold medals received at the Venice film festivals, after a year that prohibition was turned into a prohibition only against scripting and directing full length feature films; Anton Kutter then applied himself to organizing the culture department and special effects department of the Bavaria studios from 1936 till 1945. The first big success was the first German science fiction movie “Weltraumschiff 1 startet” (“Space Ship One Launches”).

That one year he had been barred from working, though, allowed Anton Kutter to focus on his hobby, astronomy and telescope making. With his friend, the astronomy professor Anton Stauss, he built an observatory in the München district of Pullach im Garten. This cooperation later led to the development of the legendary “Schiefspiegler” or “Kutter-telescope” in 1936-1939. That observatory was later relocated to Biberach, to the roof of the Gropff-Kutter film theatre.

In 1937, Kutter’s first son Claus was born in München, followed by their second son Adrian in February 1943. Later that year, their house was destroyed in a bombing raid; Else and the children moved to stay with grandfather Gottlob Erpff in Biberach, while Anton, who still worked in München, stayed in with his friend and astronomer Stauss in Pullach. Finally, at the end of the war, the film studios in Geiseltal were destroyed, allowing Anton to move back to Biberach to join his family.

Meanwhile in Biberach at the Erpff film theater a lot of other events had unfolded...

Despite the capacity increase and the second film theater in the City Theatre, the capacity was insufficient to satiate the hunger for films of the Biberach city dwellers, and that became even more so when ‘talking movies’ were introduced in 1930 in the City Theatre and 1931 in the original film theatre.

Since a second capacity increase was impossible in the original theatre, Gottlob Erff started looking out for a venue in which he could build a 600 seat theatre. Finally, he managed to buy part of the grounds of the Schmitt wood factory located at Waldseerstrasse 3.

When the Nazi party seized power in 1933, films and film theatres were strictly controlled by the new regime as instruments to spread the Nazi ideology. The “Reichsfilmkammer” gained complete authority over which films would be shown at the film theatres. To keep his licence to operate a film theatre and to be granted permission to build a new film theatre, Gottlob Erpff was forced to become a member of the Nazi Party, which allowed him to start building his new theatre.

Despite the official permission to build the theatre, his rather lukewarm support for the party earned him a lot of resistance from the Reichsfilmkammer, which frequently intervened to deny him access

to the necessary building materials; the “Filmtheater Biberach” (with 650 seats) finally opened only on the 24th of October 1941 with the film “Annelie”. The old film theatre in the Veihmarktstrasse was closed but the screenings continued in the City Theatre.

After the French took Biberach in 1945, Gottlob Erpff received permission to reopen the film theatre and City Theatre after a couple of weeks, on condition that he would show French movies several times a week for the occupying forces.

Given his old age Gottlob Erff was planning to cede his film theatre company to his son in law Anton Kutter, but the French military command seized his film theatre in 1946 and commissioned Norbert Nusser to run it, which means that Anton Kutter only started to run the film theatre in 1949.

Given the gruesome second World War and the disrupted state of postwar Germany, still partially occupied by Allied troops, no one could surmise that film production would pick up so rapidly. Anton Kutter was the first to obtain permission to produce a short documentary film about a model farm, “10 Bauern unter einem Hut” (“Ten Farmers under One Hat”).

In 1949, he was asked by the Musikgemeinde Altötting to make a film about the long history of the Shrine of Our Lady in Altötting: “Unsere liebe Frau” (“Our Dear Lady”). This film was shown from 1950 onwards in a specially built film theatre and is still being shown to this day (after 62 years!) to pilgrims visiting the Shrine; by now more than 50 million people have viewed the film!

In the fifties Anton directed four more films in Austria, the last and most successful of which was “Das Lied von Kaprun” (“the Song of Kaprun”). That was a dramatic feature film with an international cast, with the building of the huge Grossglockner hydroelectric plant at Kaprun as a backdrop. While Anton Kutter was filming, in 1949-1955, Elsa took the reins of the “Filmtheater”, which Anton Kutter expanded with a second theatre called “Urania” after he returned in 1955.

After 1955 Anton Kutter ceased making films and directed his energy exclusively towards the exploitation of his film theatres and towards astronomy.

Adrian Kutter studied management sciences and took over the reins of the theatres in 1972, and built two more smaller theatres. In March 1978, the legendary “Sternchen” (“Little Stars”) opened its door and it has since been used for screenings for the Biberach Film Festival established in 1979, which in 2016 had its 38th edition under Adrian Kutter’s direction.

In 2005, the cinema complex at the Waldseerstrasse was completely renovated and expanded with a large foyer and 4 theatres: the “Sternenpalast” (“Star Palace”).



Because of Adrian's age, the complex was sold in 2007 to the Lochamm film theatre management company from Rudersberg. Adrian Kutter still continues to lead the film festival and the Film- and Cinema museum of Baden-Württemberg, which is also housed in the "Sternenpalast".