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COLIN FARMER  
takes a look behind the scenes of  
the Swiss National Circus Knie

# The big top that tops them all



The man who started it all – Friedrich Knie

WHEN teenage Friedrich Knie gave up his medical studies in 1803 to join a circus and be near a beautiful girl performer, his only thoughts were of love.

He never got his girl (she turned out to be unfaithful, it seems) but his romantic intent did result in the eventual founding of what is now one of the world's most famous circuses – the Swiss National Circus Knie.

When young Friedrich did eventually marry a few years later, it was to a girl whose parents – horrified at the idea of their daughter becoming a circus bride – had tried to hide her away in a convent. But the romantic, athletic Knie, operating with the same bravado and good judgement that was later to earn him fame and fortune, abducted the young lady and married her in 1807.

Friedrich Knie, his children and their children were tightrope artists, and became famous for their mastery of the highwire. Eventually, in 1919, four Knie brothers made the big decision to set up their own travelling circus.

Now, 62 years later and six generations after Friedrich Knie, the amazing success and popularity of this family show still show no signs of flagging. The circus is a real family affair.

Its joint directors are brothers Fredy and Rolf Knie, who are both in their early 60s. Their sons – Fredy, Rolf, Louis and Franco – all perform in the ring and hold top positions in the circus management. All are married, their wives and offspring all contributing in one way or another to the continuing success of the circus.

The statistics are staggering.

Even excluding the Knies, the entourage comprises some 250 performers and their families plus personnel (from cooks to carpenters, from plumbers to public relations men) from nearly 20 countries, as well as a travelling zoo of more than 300 animals – believed to be the largest of its kind in the world.

This month the show sets off from its headquarters in Rapperswil for its annual eight-month tour of some 60 towns and cities covering all four language regions of the country.

In one season there are nearly 400 afternoon and evening performances and the circus occasionally ventures outside Switzerland – a few miles across the frontier into the neighbouring pocket-sized Principality of Liechtenstein.

The circus gets through some 300 gallons of motor and heating fuel – every day. At every stopover, there are some 15 miles of electricity and telephone cables. More than 2,000 lamps are needed to light up the show.

The circus has its own kitchen, serving performers and personnel with nearly 100,000 meals and snacks every season. The show also has its own travelling school, open to all the performers' children up to the age of 12 – whatever their language or nationality.

The big top seats 4,000 spectators. It weighs four tons (double if wet). Erecting the tent – it is made up of some 500 elements – can take up to six hours in bad weather. Taking it down requires about half the time.

The travelling zoo, with more than 300 animals from every continent, poses particular prob-



*Members of the fifth, sixth and seventh generations of the Knie circus family*

lems. Some animals – including gorillas and orangutans – have to have specially heated accommodation.

For the elephants, the Swiss Federal Railways provide specially constructed transport enabling the animals to stand upright in comfort. Giraffes are transported in another special carriage with an adjustable roof.

The day-to-day food requirements of the animals necessitate massive supplies of locally-purchased cereals, fruit, vegetables and meat – plus yoghurt for the monkeys. In a single season the animals eat their way through 10 tons of carrots, five tons of apples, seven tons of bananas, 26 tons of meat (including 500 chickens), 4,000 heads of salad – and 13 tons of vitamin cubes.

The cost of keeping the show on the road? Currently around Sfr30,000 or nearly £7,000 per day. And even in low-inflation Switzerland, the costs creep up every year. Rail transport alone sets back the circus some Sfr 600,000 (or £130,000) every season.

But the fame and fortunes of this amazing enterprise show no signs of flagging. As an admiring American journalist once put it: "There is probably no other circus in the world quite like Switzerland's Circus Knie."

(Reprinted by courtesy of the *Balair Bord-Zeitung*)



*Antonia Knie-Stauffer (1786-1833), wife of circus founder Friedrich Knie*