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Oct 20, 2008 04:30 AM

[Comments on this story](#) (2)**SHABNAM JANET JANANI**
STAFF REPORTER

Jeanette Heller, who grew up in Paris, Ont., with dreams of being a dancer, high-kicked her way into becoming the oldest living Radio City Rockette.

Heller died last Thursday at age 97 at Toronto's St. Michael's Hospital.

"She had a colourful life and will be missed," said Patty Gail, the administrative supporting cast of Toronto's Performing Arts Lodges, where Heller lived for the last seven years.

"Doctors said she was suddenly in kidney failure," said her only surviving sibling, Mickey Heller, 86. "She was hospitalized (two weeks ago)."

She had been in good health prior to her hospitalization.

Heller began her career as a Roxyette, the precursor to S.L. "Roxy" Rothafel's Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall soon after she moved to New York City in early 1930s.

The only girl of seven children, Heller grew to only 5-foot-4, short for a dancer. But she made her dream come true, becoming a line-dancing beauty in one of the most renowned shows in showbiz.

Radio City Music Hall has been open for more than six decades and is the largest indoor theatre in the world. America's most popular entertainers, from Frank Sinatra to B.B. King, have performed there.

"It wasn't what most young Jewish women did," said nephew Aron Heller, who works as a reporter in Israel. "For the time and where she came from, she had a very untraditional kind of life."

After 11 years of demanding stage performances, Heller returned to Toronto for three years to take care of her mother while her brothers were fighting in World War II.

"She worked in the circulation department at *The Globe and Mail*. Meanwhile, organizing dance events to keep herself busy," her nephew said.

On Jan. 11, 1944, she wrote a letter to *The Globe and Mail* about her dancing experience and how she was discriminated against by a figure-skating club after she introduced herself as a Jewish-Canadian.

She wrote: "Night after night I have danced at canteens ... without pay of course, and work all day at the office. Probably some of those boys are sons and brothers of members of this same skating club."

Toronto didn't welcome Heller as warmly as a Rockette as New York did, so she returned to New York.

She also produced *Guys and Dolls*, and *The King and I* as well as some television shows, such as *All My Children* and *One Life to Live*.

Heller eventually became a member of a travelling dance show. She toured the world. She never married and never had children, citing the conflict between Judaism and her career as one of the



FAMILY HANDOUT

Toronto's Jeanette Heller, shown in the 1930s, spent 45 years in show business including a stint as a producer.

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obstacles.

"A Jewish fella should pick a Jewish girl," she said according to her biography, written by her nephew, Aron.

"Although she wasn't very traditional, Judaism was strong part of her identity," said her nephew, who visited her last April.

"She was in show business (and that means) dancing, travelling and being with celebrities in New York, but at the same time she was a great family person."

Heller left the Radio City stage in 1975 when she was 64, and returned to Canada.

For nine years, she commuted between Toronto and Florida, working as a wardrobe manager in Florida during winter.

In all, Heller spent 45 years in showbiz.

"She continue(d) to insist that she never wanted a family of her own; showbiz was and will always be her only real love," wrote her nephew.

Heller's funeral was held last Thursday at Dawes Road Cemetery.

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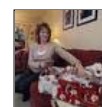
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World's oldest Rockette...

God bless and Rest in Peace Jeanette. You WILL always be missed kicking up your heels.

Submitted By joeyh at 8:20 AM Monday, October 20 2008

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Photography

as a photographer, the portrait chosen speaks volumes to the quality and thought process of that era. It is a beautiful piece of work with good tones, personality and a touch of sexiness. Truly professional.

Submitted By hobemoa at 7:34 AM Monday, October 20 2008

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