

Bella Steinmetz In A Ball-Gown



This photo was taken here in Marosvasarhely, in the Weintraub studio. It was a great hall, with old cameras, I couldn't describe them now. It had supports, and the box was covered with a black material, there was the hole they looked through. There was this hole, one could rotate it and set the image. There was a spotlight, they gave light with that. There was a chair or a couch, flowers, there was a palm - there was a floral garden in the City Park -, and it wasn't anything special [about the studio]. I didn't have many photos taken.

When I think back, my life was quite vivid before 1940. I was living as a young is supposed to live. I had a decent marriage, I was dancing, because I liked it, I went in for sports, because I enjoyed it. I was a housewife, I didn't like it, but I did what I had to.

In Marosvasarhely it started in autumn, and we had a ball almost every week. Every association organized a ball once in a year: we had Bethlen Kata ball, the MSE [organized] the sports ball, then the Lorantffy Zsuzsanna [Women's Association] ball, that was the Hungarian women's society, four or five balls were kept each year. The Jewish Women's Society [the WIZO] organized a ball once in a year in the Palace of Culture. One could go to a ball with invitation, and the snack-bar was always supported by the respective association: drinks, meals, meat. The snack-bar was very well provided, and this produced quite a lot of money. One wanted to surpass the other, well, all of them wanted a more and more beautiful ball. So that I had my specialty as well [at the ball of the Jewish Women's Society], cake a la Almasi. For me it was the simplest thing to prepare. It was a simple cake, but of course I put whipped cream on it, and all kinds of colored, green, red, violet

little jelly on the top. I chopped up almond and hazel-nut, and the top was sprinkled. It looked so nice, like a flower garden. And that was all with the cake. People always looked for it, for Mrs. Almasi's cake. We had discussed that five of us would bring cakes, three, four, five would bring meat dishes, men drinks. We also prepared fine punches.

We received invitation for everywhere, and participated at every ball, because my husband was a young lawyer, and he had to show himself, so that people would learn about this young lawyer. We never went just the two of us, there was always a little company, two or three families besides us. We always went everywhere together. We had our own society. My evening dresses were extraordinary. I had my dresses from Pest, the material came from Pest, and the dressmaker made it here for me. This was created by her, this is made of velvet. [Editor's note: Bella Steinmetz refers here to the dress she wears on the photo.] She used to say: 'Listen to me! I will make you an evening dress, I won't endure any remarks that I shouldn't do it like this... I will do it. If you like it, you take it, if not, I won't work for you anymore!' I always had my dresses made by her. However I didn't order many, because I bought ready-made dresses in Pest or I had dresses made there. My sister-in-law took me to an elegant saloon, so I saw these dresses there. That's how I brought myself this kind of velvet. This is a special, very expensive velvet, as velvet can be coarse and soft as well. The dress was black, and it had a backline. The whole town was saying that what a 'thrifty' person this Mrs. Almasi was, that she had saved half a meter of material just to show her back. But I had a cape for that dress. I put it on only when we set down to the table. If we set down, I took up the cape. Whenever I danced, I took it down. In the evening we were going to the ball, and I put on the dress. My husband said: 'Oh well, but my dear...' I say: 'Why, what should I be hiding? What is it I should be ashamed of?' 'Well, after all...' I say: 'Don't worry now, look, I have a cape, I will put it on if someone finds it too flagrant.' We addressed each other formally with my first husband as 'maga', I don't know why. Not with the second one, but first-name informality didn't work at all with the first one. We always addressed each other with 'maga'. Although it was such a great love, my God...

For example in Pest a bulky gossip journal, the 'Szinhazi elet' [Theater Life] was published. One could read about theatres, plays, one could find crosswords, and this kind of who-with-who, who-to-who... What is interesting, that after the war books were sold here at the flea-market, and Szinhazi elet as well. We had an acquaintance who always bought it, that was his 'literary' lecture, and who told me: 'Hey Bella, do you know that you appear in the Szinhazi elet?' It was written there that 'There was in Marosvasarhely a very pretty young woman whose fame is due to that she was saving dress materials...' It was then that I found out what they had written on me. It wasn't interesting anymore. This was after the war.

Before the war all kind of music was played one after the other at balls. In the evening, at the beginning there was a short performance, let's say until eleven, then the ball started, the dance started. The czardas dances were towards the morning, after five o'clock. People used to joke: 'Well, Mrs. Almasi has swept again the hall.' Since I was always the last one to leave the hall. Oh, I danced so much... I got used to, as I frequented clubs that people would gaze at me. Sometimes I liked it as well that people stared at me.