A Young Berlin Noblewoman Recalls a House Ball, Skating, and Bicycling (c. 1890)

Abstract

German aristocrats did not eke out a meager living, as did most workers, nor did they have to worry about maintaining a thrifty lifestyle, as was often the case for members of the bourgeoisie. The activities of this Berlin noblewoman demonstrate that among this class conspicuous consumption was less a duty than an end in itself. Besides socializing with fellow members of the elite at stage-managed balls, aristocratic youths used their free time to practice sports—and set new trends.

Source

In those days, a house ball occurred as follows: the leader, a gentleman close to the family, was invited for dinner at some point before the event. The list of dancers was discussed with him at length; and if there was still a need for gentlemen—no shortage of candidates here—he told ardent dancers to call on the following Sunday. The dance sequence and the cotillion were drawn up. The next day, a number of things had to be ordered: the folded dance programs, with pencils attached to the side, which listed the dances on one half and the names on the other, and accessories for the cotillion, ribbons, flowers, etc. […] Usually, the guests arrived at the ball punctually: at about 8 or 8:30. We young girls found it especially important to have chosen partners for all the dances at least by the first waltz, perhaps already in the preceding week. If a gentleman wished for one more, he was put off until a "squeezed-in dance." Thus, I often had more than half a dozen names scribbled on the back of my card, even though only two extra dances could be fit in between the regular ones. But this made a good impression.

The first waltz sounded exactly half an hour after the scheduled time, and the leader opened the dance with the host family's daughter. The first waltz, the dance immediately following the festive dinner, and the cotillion were—in ascending order—the three "most important dances." If a dancer asked you for one or even more of these dances, this was significant; if you agreed, this constituted encouragement.

During this decade, each family in our circle that gave a ball tried to secure Mr. Neumann as the pianist. […] If I am not mistaken, he received six marks an evening and, of course, was provided with a tasty supper and a bottle of wine.

There were two variations on dinner: either a warm festive banquet was served to guests sitting at long tables by elegant servants, who were borrowed from acquaintances or hired temporarily (waitresses would have seemed petit bourgeois in those days); the dancing gentlemen felt that this arrangement was the more restful and comfortable. More common and fashionable was to have the male dancers serve the ladies sitting with them at small tables from a cold buffet; this was our preferred way. In some good families there was only red and white wine, but most of the time champagne was offered, in our family as well. After supper, the small contingent of fathers attending the ball disappeared, but the mothers remained till the very end. Mothers who danced were only found in the liveliest families; in others, the younger mothers were invited for one stationary dance at most. In our circles, however, mothers were necessary. It was only when one mother was ill that a friend's mother took a young girl under her wing. Although my sisters and I certainly had an independent bent, we were not at all suited to frequent outings with a "vice mother." One's mother was simply part of the affair; she had to wait patiently till the very end. Virtually all of the mothers were unspeakably bored—they had had their chats with the others and tried to stay awake, stoically maintaining their composure. We felt a bit sorry for them, but we did

not give them too much credit for this sacrifice—twenty years down the road we would be just as ready to fulfill the same motherly duties.

At good addresses in Berlin, there were always more gentlemen dancing than ladies. Even though the spiritless reluctance of “today’s young men” was often criticized back then—just as it is today and has been throughout the ages—it was not really that bad. The lieutenants had come expressly to dance with nice ladies; and if the ladies’ cards were full, some resorted to special measures. I still vividly recall the following scene: the “legitimate” dancer and I had spun around, and now a lieutenant was bowing before me, asking for an “extra tour.” With a smile, I also bowed, thus indicating my agreement. Thereupon, the newcomer turned to my legitimate partner and bowed to obtain permission, and once the latter had granted the privilege, we spun along. If this recurred too frequently, however, the legitimate partner rebelled, reckoning that it was his turn again. Consequently, the whole affair often turned into a breathless chase, and some heartless mothers forbade any extra tours.

Today [1929] there is much talk about the unprecedented shamelessness of modern ball dresses. Exactly the same clamoring took place back then; the great Vischer fought against the “lascivious divulgence of female charms” and tried—in vain, of course—to swat butterflies with flails. Naturally, you were only allowed to show your lower calf if you were dressed in costume as, for example, a countrywoman or a flower elf; today’s showing of legs and shoulders would have been unthinkable. Conversely, though, the bust was much more deliberately exposed and displayed. Certainly, this was not done as blatantly as in the case of Queen Luise and other ladies of that past era—in my time, only cocottes would have done that; but, nevertheless, the more beautiful, naked, delightful parts of the bosom region were revealed rather more daringly than today.

It goes without saying that all of the dancers—male and female—wore gloves; to touch with bare hands, hot and beginning to sweat, would have been indescribably plebeian.

Various surprises were always introduced at these balls. All of us mastered the required dances with confidence, which was probably fostered by the lieutenants. Once we managed a particularly successful snowball dance, illuminated with Bengali flames—through the blizzard we whirled in all directions. I wrote that the experience was fairylike, and other youthfully innocent souls apparently agreed with me. Gifts made of silver and other types of presents were unknown at the time; they only became fashionable in presumptuously rich families. At the end of the ball, bouquets and cushions with ribbons were carried into the hall. Our trained eyes soon recognized how many bouquets had been intended for each lady dancer, and it was certainly delightful and desirable to receive a few more than the normal average. Everyone was dancing, whirling all around, the tempo got quicker and quicker—it was incredibly beautiful. But after that, at two o’clock, the dance leaders, heeding the parents’ instructions, had to signal Mr. Neumann to play mort. The wonderful party was ending; hot bouillon was served, the dancers cooled down a bit and then drove home, loaded down with bouquets.

Naturally, on the following day, I was allowed to sleep in for as long as I wished, but my youngest sisters Emma and Hildegard appeared in my bedroom early, before having breakfast and heading to school. I just squinted, they counted the bouquets, examined the dance card, read the names, and made their snide comments: “X again […] and Y twice […] ! You know, I think this is conspicuous!” Mumbling from bed: “That’s what you think!”

In front of the window, the white or pink ballroom dress made of tulle lay on the armchair; it had a train and a satin waist that fit like a glove. Sitting on the floor in front were satin shoes, on the window ledge the light-colored folding fan and laced handkerchief. To be on the safe side, I had carefully placed the bouquets that now filled the room with fragrance in the bathtub. It was a young girl’s room—a still life of the era.

For us, the right dancer for a regular, proper ball was a lieutenant, namely a Guards lieutenant. We had less contact with Guards cavalry regiments; in our house and those of close acquaintances, the Guards infantryman held sway, especially the preferred Second Guards Infantry Regiment. We also accepted Czar Alexander's Regiment, but those of Kaiser Franz Josef, the Guards Light Infantry Regiment, and the Guards Artillerymen fell a bit behind. Guards Engineers and Guards Pioneers were not for us.

The importance of regiments made its mark on Berlin society. […] Outsiders regarded the Berlin court, and any circles somehow connected with it, as exclusively aristocratic; they considered pedigree and name to be of foremost importance. As is generally known, this was the case in Vienna, and to a certain degree also in Munich, but actually not in Berlin. Here, even the most recent title was sufficient; only the three little letters v, o, n were required. However, each respective regiment had a significant impact not only on its members but also on the reputation of the house where it primarily socialized. If people said of a family, "that house is teeming with dragoons from the Second Guards Regiment," this was a very good thing. If they mentioned the "Garde du Corps," that was splendid. Any daughter of a family directly allegiant to the emperor [Kaiser] would much rather dance with the newly ennobled Sir of Kramsta from the Guards Cavalry Regiment than with the Count of Schwerin from the Third Guards Infantry Regiment. Even though the latter was "ancient nobility," his family had also necessarily been sitting out there on country soil for half a millennium.

[…]

Skating played a considerable role. Since several of our dance partners were regimental and battalion adjutants, we managed things quite freely on Rousseau Island or the Neue See. Whenever we pleased the band was booked earlier; one nod sufficed and they played for a contre or quadrille. A skating dance like that required a lot of room, but the rest of the crowd did not protest; they stood crammed around us, looking on. Grouped in long chains or lines, often in double formations—a threatening phalanx—we dashed through bridges. There was one occasion when one of the gentlemen "drilled" us. We were about twelve couples, everything went smoothly and properly, and in the end the lengthy row swept like a storm across the lake. The police officer watched us—he was actually supposed to forbid such diversions—but he had not the slightest intention of intervening. He just grinned quietly to himself. That's how easygoing Berliners were in 1880. All this time, our mothers walked along the shore—shivering and freezing, turning bluer and paler, patiently and dutifully.

German women's sport is not quite as new as is often portrayed nowadays. We, as well as most of our girlfriends, swam, rowed, hiked, did gymnastics, and skated. The daughters of senior officers and landowners went riding; only some old-fashioned fathers would not allow it. […] In the winter of 1896, I began bicycling, a bold step at that time. The well-paved Knesebeckstraße—not yet built up—was the favorite spot for lessons. Like many Berliners, I had my first experience of falling off, both to the right and the left, until I eventually got the hang of it. Berlin was quite backward in this respect—of the ladies belonging to high society, the wife of Ambassador von Keudell and I were, as far as I know, the first to appear on a bicycle in public. Initially, though, this was limited to 8 o'clock in the morning in the Tiergarten[1], because one still had to put up with snide remarks from riders and pedestrians.

Bicycling, however, soon caught on and was practiced with great enthusiasm; it was at the center of our interests, and the bicycle definitely had to accompany all journeys. Berlin, however, was caught up in a storm of indignation over this danger to pedestrian traffic. Wildenbruch and others issued strong protests—every pedestrian crosswalk had supposedly become a serious threat to life! […]

By that point, I had certainly already been granted a lot of freedom, but for the adolescents in our circles, bicycling truly had the effect of tearing down barriers. Several mothers learned the new skill alongside their daughters, but many did not have the courage; and so the young girls, together with their brothers and cousins, and even with their dance partners alone, sped off into the distance.

NOTES

[1] Berlin's extensive central park—trans.

Source: Marie von Bunsen, *Die Welt, in der ich lebte. Erinnerungen 1860–1912*, unrevised new edition. Biberach, 1959, pp. 50–54, 140; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 362–65.

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