

A Young Noblewoman is Presented at Court (1882–83)

Abstract

This excerpt from the memoirs of a young German noblewoman, Marie von Bunsen (1860–1941), describes her introduction at the imperial court in Berlin. The pomp and ceremony of court balls, along with their elaborate protocol, never failed to awe participants. Nevertheless, the extent to which such displays shored up monarchical and aristocratic traditions is unclear. These traditions still found their place in society, even in an era of bourgeois ascent, but were not accepted everywhere.

Source

The following winter [1882–83] we experienced the court and the court balls. For the parents, it was a real exertion. But I am thankful to them for the sacrifice; a celebration like this at the Berlin court combined splendor, historical tradition, and a kind of fantastic beauty.

As far back as Unter den Linden, the column of carriages advanced slowly; at every stop there were benevolent or cheeky remarks from the packed crowd and excited constables on horseback. Diplomats and dignitaries had special passes, overtaking us on the side; such patronage annoyed the rest of us, as our coachmen had only the regular tickets attached to their hats. At last, we drove through the massive portal and found ourselves in the courtyard; the light barely allowed us to make out the deep gray of the walls, the mass of snow, the rows of palace guards. It was difficult to make any headway, but eventually the coach came to a halt in front of a brightly lit door; the carriage door was thrown open, and our own servant took the overcoats. Wardrobe rooms were only introduced under the new regime.^[1] Slowly we walked up the stairs and warmed ourselves in front of flickering fireplaces. A vast, magnificent series of halls opened up. They had not changed much over the centuries: walls covered with damask and featuring ancestors' portraits; heavy chairs, carved and gold-plated, dating from the time of the first king. Each door was guarded by two *Gardes du Corps*. They were specially chosen rich farmers' sons; the white and red uniforms spanned their marvelously built figures perfectly. Ladies rustled closely by, with diamonds on their bare shoulders; Excellencies walked by, with their stars and medal ribbons, but they [the *Gardes du Corps*] just stood there, massive and still, wearing their silver eagle helmets, their sabres drawn. Young and slender were the pages in their frocks embroidered in red, with their lace folds—they were handsome *Selektaner*^[2] handpicked from the Lichterfelde cadet academy. The gold-embroidered uniforms of the officers, high civil servants, and courtiers were everywhere. Today people don't have the slightest idea of the elegance, the beauty of that thousand-fold candlelight, and amidst the dazzling shimmer, all the diamonds sparkled, the colors of the silk and velvet dresses shone brightly. However, the contours of the ladies at the formal introduction at court were not particularly flattering; their trains consisted of two or three strips of cloth about three meters in length, and they were carried across one arm as a big bundle. With Prussian correctness, the guests were dispatched to different halls according to category: the female Excellencies, the rest of the married women, those already introduced, those still to be presented. The last group, which included me, numbered between 20 and 30 because the *Cour* had been cancelled the previous year; at that time this was considered a lot, but one generation later, about 100 were on hand each year. Things were quite relaxed among us newcomers. Some of us knew each other or got to know each other, everyone had a bit of "*Cour* fright"; in one corner or another, behind the pillars, ladies rehearsed the big bow or asked apprehensively whether the neckline was really not too low? The chamberlain assigned to us, Count Oeynhausen, was friendly and kind. As we started moving, the Princess of Ratibor went first with a cousin; in fact, the two young Miss Maybachs, the daughters of the railway minister, would have taken precedence, but they tactfully restrained themselves. Now the

dreaded exercise was about to come—the long, notorious “picture gallery,” the mocking lane, which had already been lined for hours by wedged-in military officers. Only a narrow path remained, through which we had to walk; and as those ladies who were obviously frightened or uncomfortable passed by, the lieutenants often emitted snide, semi-audible comments. This sounds rather ill-mannered but is actually quite human. An acquaintance had advised Berta and me to “look as harmless and contented as possible.” And that seemed to work: our dancers saluted us in a friendly way, and we only heard them murmur our names as we walked down the endless lane.

In one of the next halls the generals were waiting, just dripping with medals, and suddenly there stood [Chief of the Prussian General Staff Helmuth von] Moltke. I passed very close by him and looked at him with overflowing excitement. Children are always told, “It is not proper to stare at people,” but I am afraid this is exactly what I did. Probably he told himself, I must know this one from Silesia—he made a deep bow to me. Absolutely enchanted by this, I returned the sort of reverential bow that is really only due to crowned heads.

Then, as we had reached the chamber of the Queen, each one of us dropped the train of her dress; the chamberlain, Count Kanitz, had the task of spreading them neatly; and we advanced slowly. In the throne room, quiet music played, and we were greeted by shimmering light, the sparkle of gold, and a truly unbelievable glitter of diamonds. Under the canopy stood the Kaiser, tall, imposing, and kind, and beside him was the Empress Augusta, frail with age, partly sitting, partly lying. On both sides, all the princes and princesses were lined up and bestowed smiles on all their acquaintances passing by. These were returned with respectfully cordial facial expressions, because bows were reserved for the imperial couple. The radiance, the glorious sparkle of all the crown jewels was incredible! Now my predecessor’s train moved away, my name was called, and I made the slow, deep bow!

What followed was a concert in the White Hall. Again we were seated according to category, with us newcomers under the musical gallery. No doubt the artistic performances were excellent, but everyone was so distracted: there was just so much to see. [...]

NOTES

[1] Probably meaning the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm from 1888 onward—ed.

[2] Talented students in higher classes—trans.

Source: Marie von Bunsen, *Die Welt, in der ich lebte. Erinnerungen 1860–1912*, new edition. Biberach, 1959, pp. 90ff.; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 359–61.

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