

Adolf Stein, “Germany’s First Fashion Queen” (1925)

Abstract

The passage below described the December 1925 competition at which judges from Berlin’s top fashion houses crowned “Germany’s first Fashion Queen,” Sonja Jowanowitsch. It came from the pen of the influential rightwing journalist Adolf Stein, who published a weekly column on Berlin’s culture and society under the pseudonym “Rumpelstilzchen.” Germany’s most powerful conservative press baron, Alfred Hugenberg, published these columns, under the heading “Berliner Allerlei,” in nearly three dozen local and regional newspapers around the country, and Rumpelstilzchen’s columns also appeared in a single bound volume every year, which gave his voice an even more far-reaching and lasting impact.

Rumpelstilzchen described the competition in his characteristically sardonic chauvinism, deriding the way in which the female contestants conformed to the fashion and beauty standards of the day. He criticized their faces as making them look “like alleyway boys,” a note that he hit again when he said that the women lacked an appealing innocence, because they had likely seen too much of Berlin. The current fashions drew his barbs, too, and he mocked the straight-line dresses—very “in” at the time—as “little work shirts.” Rumpelstilzchen purported to speak for all of the men in audience when he insisted that they wanted a “full-figured” woman, not the current fashion world’s ideal type. His brief conclusion did present Jowanowitsch, though, in an a-star-is-born manner, as someone whose worries about making a living as an immigrant in Berlin were now over.

Source

December 17, 1925 (Thursday)

Berlin is a major export city for ready-to-wear. Now the ready-to-wear industry has chosen a queen for its huge empire.

In the facilities of the Sportpalast, thousands of people are bustling and moving around very lively. One would think that the modern rulers of the world no longer need this. Rathenau says in his reflections: “Shrugging the shoulders and gesticulating with elbows and palms are old fear reflexes that served to ward off the blow.” Here, it is probably just the excitement about which fashion house might have sent the winner of the Fashion Queen contest. No fewer than 89 mannequins – ladies modeling clothes – pass the judges’ chair in a two-and-a-half-hour voting process. It is not beauty that is judged, but grace, i.e. the overall impression in movement. Most of the girls have ragamuffin faces, if you’ll forgive the harsh expression. The gamine look is modern. Some of the faces already show too much knowledge of the Berlin frenzy. Each one is angling for the judges’ favor with a wiggle of the hips and an imploring look of victory, because fancy outfits don’t count here: they all appear in little work shirts.

The audience participates by applauding and shouting. The audience is cruel. They clap their hands in obvious irony when one of these crafty, emaciated women appears. No one judges as an expert, who would have to choose slimness above all, but everyone judges as a man. For in the end, everybody screams: number 10, number 10! Number 10 is not the “ideal type” of the fashion magazines, that blonde thing that has been photographed so often for the magazine *Die Dame*, but a “full-figured” young lady with a round, feminine face and calm, almost casual movements.

Thus it is Sonja Jowanowitsch who is crowned. She is of Serbian descent, was born in Semlin in Hungary, her father was a court apothecary in St. Petersburg, and she attended grammar school in Gatchina. She wants to buy herself a fur coat with the 1000 Mark coronation gift. The fashion house she represents is bombarded with requests for leave for the Queen. Tonight, Sonja Jowanowitsch is appearing in a revue

for the first time.

She no longer has to worry about how to make her livelihood.

Source of original German text: Adolf Stein, *Mecker' nich! Rumpelstilzchen*, Bd. 6, 1925/26. Berlin: Brunnen-Verlag, 1926, p. 119. Available online at: <http://www.karlheinz-everts.de/rmp25-13.htm>

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