

Bess Myerson tells story of her life

By Carolyn DeMarco
staff writer

To a generation of Americans, Bess Myerson is Miss America. Forty-two years after she wore the national beauty crown, the tall, tassy brunette is still easily the most recognizable former Miss America ever, by name or by face.

Millions have followed her career in show business and politics as well as her personal woes. But winning the title in 1945 — at a time when American soldiers who fought against the Nazis were returning from war — was a trial for her. She was barred from the hospital room of an amputee by his mother who shouted, "He lost his legs for Jews." She was banned from appearing at a country club because of restrictions.

Not so, Monday, when Myerson was greeted by an overflow crowd at the 35th annual Jewish Book Fair at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. The speech had to be delayed until a separate room could be set up with closed circuit television so everyone could see and hear.

THOSE WHO CAME to hear an explanation of her current troubles, an indictment on conspiracy to bribe charges, were disappointed. Bess Myerson has been "muzzled by the judge," and Dworkin has been "gagged by the lawyers," Dworkin explained.

Instead the pair concentrated on the life of Bess Myerson as outlined in the book, a history of the years as Miss America. "You'll find the rest in volumes, two, three, four and five," Myerson quipped.

Dworkin and Myerson have much in common. Both are Jewish, New York liberals interested in music. But Myerson, Dworkin said, is a beauty queen who believes the pageant helpful to young women, while Dworkin, nearly 20 years younger, is a feminist. "We came across a great distance," she said, bringing different points of view to a combination biography/autobiography.

In 1945, it is said Myerson was the second most famous American Jew, next to Albert Einstein. The first and only Jewish Miss America was se-

lected at a unique time in American history for women, Dworkin began, "in between Rosie the Riveter and the Happy Housewife of the '50s."

MYERSON TALKED of her early life in the Sholem Aleichem apartments in the Bronx. With 250 Jewish families in a four-story high complex, "we were insulated," Myerson said. "The whole world was Jewish. We were safe."

Her father was a house painter, proud of his profession. Her mother, a beautiful woman saddened by the death of her only son. "She was determined her three daughters would succeed," Myerson said. Each became a concert musician.

"She didn't know Bach from boogie-woogie," Myerson said, "but as we practiced from the kitchen, we would hear, 'wrong!'"

Myerson's entry into the world of the beauty queen was the result of a push by her sister, Sylvia, who first entered her into a Ginger Rogers lookalike contest to see how the contests were run. She lost but entered another contest in New York that paved the way for Atlantic City.

The 1945 Miss America contest, for the first time ever, offered a \$5,000 scholarship, and Myerson, a Hunter College student, desperately wanted to buy a baby grand piano. That motivation was important, Dworkin added.

As it became apparent that Myerson had a chance to win, she was advised to change her name to Betty Merrick. She refused. "Nobody's going to know it's me, Bessie, whose mother brings the soup to the neighbors," she protested.

AT A TIME when anti-Semitism

was in the forefront, Myerson said, "I think people didn't want me to win. I never felt safe again."

But Jews did want her to win. They waited in numbers outside the contest studios, she said. "They said, 'You have to win. You have to show Jews can win something.'"

"In 43 years I've gone from being everyone's daughter, to everyone's sister, to everyone's mother," Myerson said.

"Being Jewish is the most important thing in my life. I've had many careers. Being Jewish has sustained me. We are all a sisterhood."

MISS AMERICA 1945
BESS MYERSON'S OWN STORY
BY SUSAN DWORKIN



Bess Myerson and Susan Dworkin combined to write the story of America's best-known Miss America.

Cable lauded

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that cable television should be involved in," Whitman said.

"It was nice they got the numbers as early as they did. I think there was a lot of interest generated. You know how people were doing," he continued.

WHETHER THE next local election will be covered from the television studio or from the city halls is undecided. Coverage was moved to the cable studio "to iron out technical problems," Whitman said.

"We received some complaints that we weren't live from city hall. They felt it would have been a little more convenient," he continued.

Also yet to be decided is whether Channel 12 staff should provide coverage for next year's presidential election. "That question has been raised before. I'm not sure it is as necessary. We don't care to be in competition with the big television stations," he said.

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