

Erno Gottesmann: Chronicler and Archivist

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Half Hungarian and half Indian, Amrita Sher-Gil was born in Budapest and spent her childhood years there. To this day, the house where she was born, a turn of the century mansion, stands on the Buda side of the city and bears a plaque to commemorate her birth. Since no residents from that period survive we were not able to locate the definitive apartment where she was born but the ambient aura still remains. Another plaque outside the building says that Bela Bartok also lived there between the years 1922 and 1928.

In Budapest it was a revelation to meet some of the people in whose homes there were relics of Amrita. Among others there was the art historian Dr. Zsuzsa Urbach whose father was friendly with Amrita. In her house hung an unusual landscape painted by the artist which reflected her own perceptions of the surroundings in their curved yet somewhat edgy harmony. According to Urbach Amrita always wore a sari and excited much curiosity wherever she went. "She was a great beauty

and a rebel and caused a sensation in her sari wherever she went."

Perhaps every family has a chronicler and archivist who meticulously stores away data, memoirs and objects which records the lives and histories of individuals. In the case of Amrita Sher-Gil there were more than one who kept a record of her life. Among these Ernest Gottesmann, her brother-in-law as well as her uncle, played a very important role, largely unrecognized, in preserving her memory and her work from her childhood to the last years.

Erno, as he was known, was the grandson of the family patriarch, Adolphe and his Hungarian wife and a former film production executive. He had known Marie Antoinette and family including Ervin Baktay since childhood and had spent many long days associating with them. He had perhaps recognized Amrita's talents and kept a record of her sketches since an early period.

When we visited him in June 2004, he was 98 and lived alone in his apartment, where he did his own work, cooked for himself and looked after the flat. On entering Erno's apartment we found Amrita's works and other objects which

turned his house into a small museum. There were photographs of family members hanging on the wall including that of the patriarch Adolphe Gottesmann who belonged to a wealthy family and had served in the Austrian army. He can be seen here in his abundant mustache and full military regalia. His first wife was French but she died young and Marie Antoinette was her grand child. She was known to be a pianist and a singer and it was from her that Marie Antoinette had inherited her talents. Among the other photographs hanging on the wall was one which was possibly of Marie Antoinette's parents. A water colour made by Ervin Baktay, Amrita's uncle who had been responsible for her earliest art education, of the Dunaharaszti house where he was born, which a plaque testifies to this day was revelatory. The house with its neo-classical contours and leafy garden at Dunaharaszti was where Umrao Singh and the family moved in August 1916 at the outbreak of the First World War. We found that the 3000 square metre property which retains its garden had been considerably renovated by its present owner, an architect . But when he sought permission from the Heritage Architecture Society to rebuild the house he was told it had been the home of a famous artist called Amrita Sher-Gil!

The original wine cellar had been retained which was used as a shelter during the 2nd World War. Some of the original bricks too had been retained and these bore the Star of David sign testifying to the Jewish origin of the owners. The garden had a sculpture of a woman with her back turned towards the house. Opposite the house stands a church with stained glass windows erected to celebrate the Hungarian victory over the Turkish sultan in 1456 in Belgrade and the church clock chimes punctually at noon as a reminder of this event. It is said that while Amrita's family was staying there the clock stopped functioning and Umrao Singh climbed all the way up and repaired it. Some of the older residents had remembered Umrao Singh, dressed in his turban and clogs, taking an interest in everyday problems while he walked with the children and their big white dog to the woods.

The archivist of Amrita's life had kept her sketch books from the time she was a young girl and in one of them was a fanciful drawing of a woman wearing a flowing orange scarf and an off- the- shoulder dress revealing a breast and sent to her maternal grandmother of whom she was very fond with the words:

To my dearest Grannie with much love and heaps of kisses from her loving little granddaughter. Darling Granny, I am very sorry that I couldn't send a better picture but I have to keep all my best ones for the exhibition.

This work sent from Paris alludes to her student years at the Ecole des Beaux Arts where she was training under Lucien Simon.

Of Amrita's paintings in Erno's apartment there was one of *The Gypsy Girl* made during her visits to Zebegeny from Paris. This candid work also reflected Amrita's growing desire for the other, the non-white, the non-European persona. The imposing portrait of Viola Egan, Erno's wife and the sister of Victor Egan, Amrita's husband. could also be seen. The rather saturnine figure of Viola stared down at us from the wall in her quizzical expression which gave an idea of the personality. Almost by design just below it hung a self-portrait of the young Amrita, sparkling and charming in her youthful allure. Could the two women be aspects of the same person? Another self-portrait of Amrita reveals the winsome side of her personality.

There is a memorable portrait of Victor Egan painted by Amrita. There were also some elegant saris with brocade borders of Amrita's in Erno's possession and he seemed to be fascinated by their length as he rolled them out on the floor. When Amrita and Victor married in a quiet ceremony in Budapest on July 16, 1938, Erno was one of the official witnesses and he stated " It was a brief affair as neither of them believed in ceremony. There was no celebration after that". Two years later Erno was to tie the knot with Violet Egan, Victor's elder sister and became closely associated with the young couple who stayed at his home for some time while they were in Budapest. Six months after we visited him Erno passed away at a ripe old age, having left behind all the mementos of Amrita so assiduously collected during his lifetime.

It is only fitting to end with the visit to Zebegeny which situated on bend of the river Danube is a charming artist's town. It was the home of the famous Hungarian painter Istvan Szonyi (1894- 1960) one of the leading artists' of the post Nagybanya School. His home is now a museum and we had a chance to see his works which in some ways influenced Amrita, particularly the use of white. The works by artists hung on the walls of the café where

we sat and it reminded us of the rich folk traditions which existed in Hungary incorporated in contemporary art. This was the house where Amrita and her sister stayed when they visited Hungary in their summer holidays from Paris. It belonged to their aunt Ella and was later taken over by the Railways and then occupied by the Russians. Today this imposing mansion is in a dilapidated state with its bullet holes and peeling walls crying out for repairs. As we asked a lady for directions to this house her eyes brightened on Amrita's name. She had seen the entire film made by Sandor Sara on Amrita and having recorded it showed it to us. Kovacs Istvanne had played Red Indians with them when they came to Zebegeny as teenagers and the film bought it back to her. It is these memories which existed and did not die in Hungary which enriches the work on Amrita.

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