

The Prom Dress and the Sewing Machine

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, March 2014

Prom frenzy invaded the graduating class of 2014 early in January as the winter winds continued to blow. Things heated up as a Facebook page was developed so girls could showcase their dresses "so nobody buys the identical one" my 17 year old daughter informs me. Prices were also sometimes being posted, prices which gave me a headache. "Hey, I can sew you a gown, a one-of-a-kind, trust me. It will be so unique that nobody will have the identical one," I tell my daughter, as she scrunches up her nose.

Since the age of 11 my relationship with the sewing machine has been a one of love and hate. On again, off again, if you know what I mean. The dark brown wooden Singer machine sits in the corner of our living room collecting dust, although it does function quite well as a decorative table. The leather strap around the pulley has snapped from years of use. Every once in a while my dear husband threatens to move it into the basement, but just the sight of it is nostalgic to me, comforting in a sense, a reminder of a much simpler time in my life.

In Home Economics class in Grade 7 as the teacher taught us about the different types of fabrics, I was already bored to tears. Cottons, cotton blends, polyesters, twill, seer sucker, denim, synthetics, wool, wool blends, gingham, jersey knits, velvets, flannel, duck, and silk and corduroy were already part of my daily vocabulary. Approximate prices per yard were tucked in my memory as a trip to the dry goods store several times a week was a highlight for me. My mother always measured in meters, and so I already had a basic knowledge years before Canada adopted the metric system. I knew about carefully cutting out the thin tissue paper patterns and laying the pieces out on the fabric, keeping in mind the nap and the selvedge edges of the fabric piece I was working with. My mother always made sure that we cut large enough to have "room to grow," especially at the hem line. Adding hooks and eyes, snaps, zippers, ribbons, elastic casings and buttons and buttonholes were routine. My dad regularly sharpened the Singer scissors and oiled the machine as we basted hems, measured inseams, added top stitching, cuffs, and ruffles at the neck lines, sleeves and the hem. Large spools of invisible thread were added to our notions in the sewing basket as smocked tops became all the rage in the 70's. Thimbles, tracing paper, interfacing, tape measures, chalk from Germany for markings, an array of needles, a large thread collection, as well as my Oma's assortment of darning threads and large darning needles for socks. We zig-zaged edges, made rows of gathers, added colorful rick-rack, bias tape, seam bindings, sorted through our button jar, and added perfectly pressed pockets with plackets and corners at exactly 90 degrees. As we pressed and steamed, and steamed and pressed again, I learned the exact rhythm of the treadle.

I am in Dillard's dept. store in Orlando, Florida as my daughter and her cousin are overwhelmed by the dozens of elegant prom dresses on display. "I want blue," my daughter tells me, as her eyes scan the sea of colorful dresses. "Well, that's fine, but I hope we find something here. I am not dragging you all over Orlando and Detroit. And keep the budget in mind. \$100 or so. This is a onetime deal." She seems overwhelmed and sighs, as I laugh. A female customer is standing at the till holding a full length baby blue feathery type of gown. Glancing in my direction she asks, "Do you know anything about sewing?" As I stammer in surprise, "Well ...yes. I most certainly do," as she asks for my opinion about cutting the dress to a shorter length for her young daughter who is standing at her side swooning over this dress which she has just chosen but appears to be the wrong length.

We had zippers of all lengths and colors, elastic by the meter, linings and patterns galore, and handfuls of bobbins. I sewed skirts, dresses, jumpers, long vests, quilted jackets and coats, slips, and fabric totes out of our old blue jeans. I could fashion darts into dresses and tops, carefully tying off the ends, and I knew how to back-stitch. "In Leipzig we would dye the wool and then spin it," my mother would relay to me as I ploughed through our growing fabric collection stored in the suitcases in the basement. Every September as my young friends tore through the Sears catalogue for new outfits, I headed to our basement. We went through the phase of miniskirts, always a hotly debated topic in our home as my mother brought out her meter stick and a hemming device, which blew chalk onto the bottom on the garment to ensure accuracy. Mothers all over the world blew a sigh of relief as the mini soon gave way to the midi and maxi. 3/4 length sleeves, hot pants, cut off jean shorts, shirt dresses, bell bottoms, plaids, puffy sleeves, bell sleeves, pleated skirts, kilts, jumpers, skirts with suspenders, long crocheted vests, drindel skirts, hip-huggers, plaid and paisley pants, sailor dresses, elephant pants, and smocks and pinafores. The latter looked like maternity wear, and was also a hotly debated topic in our home. In the early 1980's, with high aspirations, we tried to replicate some of Lady Di's designer maternity wear, with limited success. We went through peasant styles, the hippy look with go-go boots with platform shoes, frayed blue jeans and witnessed the debut of panty hose.

We are in another dept. store as my eyes catch sight of an elegant blush one shouldered gown with lots of bling on the strap. The bodice is gathered, and the skirt flows like organza, or chiffon, although I know it is a synthetic blend. The tag must be wrong, I surmise, as it states \$9.99. The tag also states irregular. "Hey look at this," I excitedly call out to my daughter. "I know the size is a little too big, but we can alter it. For sure. I can even add some more bling," as I see my daughter scrunch up her nose and ask "What does irregular mean?" "Well, somewhere in the garment there is a flaw, but where is unbeknownst to us. I can't see one. I am buying this dress. For that price it will surely fit someone we know. I will gladly give it away," as I carry it to the till.

"Yes, take that zipper out," my mother instructs me as I moan deeply. "Do I really have to? Nobody can even tell that the stitching is a little crooked..." "Yes, no one but you alone will know, that is correct, and you will always know that it is there," she adds, as I slowly start to methodically start to rip out the seam.

As the children were young, I sewed aprons, shorts, p.j.'s, fancy dresses, pillows, hats, and Sunday clothes, and continued to do mending for co-workers. I fixed ripped knees of ball uniforms for the team and regularly called my dad over to oil my new machine, as he arrived with his small can of Singer oil.

Upon leaving the dept. store my daughter has now decided that she "absolutely loves" the new dress and wants to keep it, as she prepares to don it and post a photo on Instagram and Facebook. The billowy skirt graces her 5' 10" frame as she sways back and forth in front of the mirror. "Pale colors like this were all the rage on the red carpet at the Oscars this year," my sister-in-law adds, a tidbit I would not have known since I did not watch the Oscars. I go to the kitchen and retrieve the large plastic clip on the potato chip bag and use it to clip the bag of the gown tightly. "See, this is how it will look," I confirm to my daughter as she beams in the mirror at the sight of herself.

I am in a small local dry goods store run by a local Old Order Mennonite church. It is one of the few local places to buy fabrics and notions, and I nostalgically walk down the dark narrow aisles. Several women with head coverings and dressed in black huddle in the aisle and are whispering as they discuss their purchase. They glance at me, and my blue jeans, and then quickly look away, appearing to avoid eye contact. I feel somewhat out of my comfort zone but the man at the till is familiar to me and measures out my fabric as Low German hymns play

on a recorder in the background. "Yes, our fabric now comes from Winnipeg," he announces, as I comment on some new stock. German newspapers from Mexico are for sale at the cash, and I flip through his assortment of German books and Bibles, picking up a small devotional for my mother, which I can read to her at the nursing home, I surmise. Near the door are stacks of tortillas for sale, locally made. I get into my van and glance at the new window display of expensive and fancy prom dresses for sale in the upscale boutique next door.

Today, I open one of the side drawers of the old Singer machine for the first time in decades. There are handfuls of cut off hems, a ring of old keys and several small orange mini Christmas lights. The hems are of wool and corduroy. There is also an old American silver dollar with the face of John F. Kennedy. A small green box which I recognize from my childhood is held together with tape. It holds an assortment of buttons and bobbins. There is a pair of stainless steel Singer scissors, which are dull I assume. Oh...the stories they could certainly tell.

"I don't think that this dress needs more bling," my daughter decides. "I will accessorize. Simple, understated elegance is the name of the game. Oh, and I want my hair in a side bun, like Taylor Swift, you know. But the bun has to be on the opposite side of the strap..." she declares, as her fingers run through the billowy long flowing skirt.

My daughter asks "Mom, what's Bohemian style? We are all going to dress Bohemian for the Ellie Goulding concert next month." "Oh, I think it's sort of loose, flowy garments, sort of 70's fashion," I surmise. Goulding, a 20-something singer songwriter from England is known for her folksy music, vintage attire and breathy voice. My daughter emerges from the dept. store dressing room wearing a long, black knit skirt which falls to her ankles. "Yep, this should be good to wear. I think I will wear it with a long top. You know, something peasant-like. And maybe some sandals..." as her voice wanders off and she appears to be in deep thought.

My husband meanwhile is also in deep thought. "I think we should all go back to that discount dept. store and look for more deals on prom dresses," he muses. We can sell them on-line for profit..."



Bargain of the century - the \$9.99 prom dress.



My mother Maria, born May 3, 1919, Bessarabia, myself, and her great granddaughter Mya (4). Maria was born in Leipzig, Bessarabia (photo taken 2013) and is 95 (2014).



The old Singer sewing machine, made in 1955. It was the only large item my parents brought along with them when we immigrated to Canada in 1961.