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Hedy Lamarr Was Not Just Another Pretty Face

By NORM ALSTER, INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY
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Lamarr in the 1949 blockbuster "Samson and Delilah," in which she delivered the line "No man leaves Delilah." AP [View Enlarged Image](#)

As World War II approached, Austrian arms merchant Fritz Mandl held dinner parties for the likes of Mussolini and Hitler.

At his side was his Jewish-born bride, the actress who years later — as Hedy Lamarr (1913-2000) — would be called Hollywood's greatest beauty.

With furs and jewels, Hedy was swathed in luxury.

She also had to deal with Mandl, a domineering husband who often tracked her movements.

"He was outrageously powerful and controlling," Ruth Barton, author of 2010's "Hedy Lamarr: The Most Beautiful Woman in Film," told IBD.

"I had every luxury except freedom," Lamarr wrote in her 1967 autobiography, "Ecstasy and Me."

So, she decided to escape. Dressed in a maid's uniform, she slipped out one day in 1937 and began a journey that took her to the heights of Hollywood stardom.

Hedy claims she took only some jewels when she fled Austria. But history suggests she may have taken something less tangible too.

Lamarr's Keys

The film star co-invented frequency-hopping tech that helps the military ward off radar detection. "Many times I found life a jungle and fought to succeed."

Privy to all that talk between Mandl and his military clients in Italy and Germany, Hedy learned all about the weapons industry.

"I know a great deal about munitions, some of which I've invented myself," she later told a friend.

Sparkling Novelty

Hedy picked up enough nuggets in those fancy dinner parties to earn a patent years later on a technology that would find wide use by the U.S. military.

Her 1942 patent also paved the way for wireless phone advances.

"This is a technology that has revolutionized global communications between individuals," said David Hughes, a researcher in wireless technology.

A winner of the Electronic Frontier Foundation Pioneer Award, he nominated Lamarr for the same award, which she won in 1997.

Nobody is certain exactly how much Hedy learned at Mandl's meetings with military leaders. But biographers believe that one concern of the fascists before WWII was the poor performance of torpedoes fired from submarines.

The Italians and Germans knew radio control would help with accuracy. But they feared that the signals would be jammed.

A spare-time inventor all her life, Lamarr came up with a scheme for radio-controlled torpedoes that could resist enemy jamming.

In 1942 — a year into America's entry into the war — she and partner George Antheil won a patent for what they called a secret communications system to guide torpedoes.

They conceived of frequency hopping — a technique for breaking up transmitted signals over multiple frequencies in order to defeat enemy jammers seeking to home in on a single frequency. The key was to program transmitter and receiver with the same frequency-hopping instructions.

Even though America didn't use the Lamarr-Antheil technology in the war, the military eventually employed frequency hopping — later called spread spectrum communications — in weapons and radar-evading systems.

During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, American ships used a jam-proof communications system based on Lamarr's concept.

Frequency hopping also provided signal security for a range of wireless technologies, including mobile phones.

Who would have expected all this from a Hollywood star known mostly for her looks?

For many years, much of the world thought of Hedy Lamarr as a gorgeous actress specializing in vampish, femme-fatale roles.

"She is without a doubt the most beautiful woman in motion pictures," wrote gossip columnist Louella Parsons.

The actor George Sanders said Lamarr was so striking that when she entered a room "everyone would stop talking."

Said Hughes: "She basically showed that just because you're beautiful, you don't have to be dumb."

All this might have surprised Mandl. "He only married her so she'd stand around and look pretty for the German military," said Hughes. "He had no idea she had a natural technical aptitude."

Over the years, others learned not to trifle with Hedy Lamarr.

Born Hedwig Kiesler to middle-class Austrian parents — her father was a bank director — Hedy became a teenage actress in Austria.

She gave up acting when she married Mandl. Even before the 1938 German annexation of Austria, Nazis edited and banned films with Jewish actors.

"The Germans were pretty much calling the shots on Austrian filmmaking," said Stephen Shearer, author of "Beautiful: The Life of Hedy Lamarr."

On the run from Mandl and Austria, Hedy scored an interview with Louis Mayer, the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer honcho who was on a recruiting tour in Europe.

Joining MGM

Impressed with her looks and elegant bearing, Mayer offered her an entry-level contract at \$125 a week, according to Shearer. Hedy said no. Mayer, sensing she was a hot property, countered with \$550 a week, worth \$7,500 today.

Mayer knew she was already an actress of some notoriety. At 16, she'd been filmed running naked in the Czech movie "Ecstasy."

Years later Lamarr claimed she was told she'd be filmed only from afar. She felt tricked when learning the director had used a telephoto lens, she wrote in her memoirs.

Mayer was not interested in such lurid use of Lamarr. He did see her playing the exotic roles.

Lamarr, accepting Mayer's offer, hit Hollywood fast. Already in 1938 she played alongside Charles Boyer in "Algiers." From there she springboarded opposite Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, James Stewart and other leading men.

By 1947 — two years after the war's end — Lamarr took another stand. Wanting to produce her own films, she told Mayer she wanted out of her MGM contract.

He relented. Lamarr did have to make three MGM movies in the next five years, but she'd won, becoming one of the few actresses, along with Greta Garbo and Bette Davis, to defy the studio system.

As an actress, Lamarr had "limited range," opined Barton.

On the plus side, the actress had a gift for flirtatious and witty repartee. And she had box-office appeal. In 1940, the Institute of Public Opinion named "Boom Town" — with Lamarr, Gable and Tracy — the most popular American film of the year, wrote Shearer.

"Samson and Delilah," starring Lamarr and Victor Mature, became Hollywood's biggest moneymaker of 1949. Her hot line from that flick: "No man leaves Delilah."

Yet Lamarr left lots of men. Married and divorced six times, she was also linked to many others.

Cool Concepts

Biographers say Lamarr was always producing ideas — even an ice cream maker. But what motivated Lamarr to develop military technology? Shearer's theory: "She had an extremely huge ego, an extremely huge need to be appreciated for something more than her beauty."

She also had strong patriotic feelings toward her adopted country. Lamarr was active in war-bond drives, raising \$25 million during one tour of 16 cities in 10 days. She also performed for troops at the Hollywood Canteen, Bette Davis' theater that put on free shows for soldiers during World War II.

Lamarr won fame for her beauty and grace. Barton notes that apart from inventing, the actress pursued painting and jewelry design.

In today's world, said Barton, Lamarr might never have become an actress: "She was somebody born at the wrong time. If she had the opportunities that young women have now, she might have had an extraordinary career in technology and design."

As is, Hedy Lamarr did well lighting up the silver screen and moonlighting as a weapons designer.

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