

Ilona Massey
Kathy Hammel

The star of radio's *Top Secret* (1950) seemed unlikely to end up as a Hollywood personality. Born Ilona Hajmassy, Ilona Massey most sources say, was born in Budapest on June 16, 1910, though other sources put her birth date in 1912. All sources agree that her family in Budapest, Hungary was abysmally poor. However, Ilona looked beyond her humble beginnings and worked towards a dream of being an opera singer. At 14 she went to work as a seamstress for about \$12 a week and parceled out a bit of her hard-earned money for singing lessons.

It wasn't just her singing that turned heads. Blonde and blue-eyed Ilona was an exceptional beauty. Certainly that couldn't have hurt her hopes for a career on stage. As a young adult she went to Vienna to try her luck at the City Opera and worked as an understudy. According to one Hollywood biography, she got her chance when she went on for an ailing star. Others say she was discovered by a Hollywood talent agent for MGM while singing at a party. In any case, she found herself in Hollywood contracted to MGM by 1937.

Massey learned English even while performing in movies. Within two years she'd become fluent in English and was taking on larger roles. None of her movie roles were major hits, but her lovely singing voice and blonde-bombshell figure kept her working in the business whether in movies, on stage, or in some radio spots through the late 1930s, 1940s and most of the 1950s. Her sultry voice and foreign accent may have been what suggested her for the lead role of Baroness Karin Gazer in the radio drama *Top Secret*. She continued her acting after *Top Secret*, with some additional movies and television appearances.

Ilona was married four times. Three were youthful and brief marriages, but the fourth in 1955 was to a highly placed Air Force officer, Donald Dawson, one-time aide to Harry S Truman. Hollywood is a long way from Washington DC, but it may be that Ilona met Donald while picketing against Communism in the Capitol. She'd brought family members to the USA from Hungary and the experiences they shared about life under communist rule turned her into an activist.

Ilona once remarked that she was a simple girl and probably always would be. Her early years of abject poverty caused her to be content with a roof over her head, clothes to wear, and enough food to eat. She seemed unsuited to the fairytale world of Hollywood and her plain speaking was not always considered proper for a "star". This may be why, after her marriage to Donald, she made few acting appearances and settled into the life of the wife of a politically connected retired military man.

Ilona Massey passed away in August 1974 at Bethesda, MD after a brief illness.