

PRINCESS ELISABETA OF ROMANIA

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Abstract

An artistic, timorous and hesitant personality concealed by a taciturn figure of classical majesty, Elisabeta, the eldest daughter of Queen Marie and King Ferdinand of Romania, suffered the lack of understanding and even compassion from her contemporaries and posterity alike. She had to steer her life, often alone, through the difficulties of two world wars, two exiles and was torn between two countries - her native Romania of which she was ardently attached and an unfamiliar, convulsive Greece as its tormented queen consort.

Key words: Princess Elisabeta of Romania, Queen Marie, King Ferdinand, King George II of Greece, Queen Elisabeta of Greece.

Elisabeta Josefina Carlota Victoria Alexandra was born on 29 September 1894 at Foi or Castle in Sinaia. Lisabetha or Lizzy, as she was called by her family, was baptised in the Greek orthodox religion of her country, as the Romanian Constitution required. The Vatican reacted adversely to the Orthodox christening of the second child of Ferdinand, the catholic Crown Prince of Romania, and as a result he was excommunicated.

She had an English nurse and governess and was educated at home with British tutors. Being the oldest sister among her siblings, she was often entrusted with their care while her parents were for long periods abroad, a demanding formative duty, consciously carried out. Her favourite studies were literature, piano, singing, painting, and embroidery. Like her father, King Ferdinand, she was keen on botany and very fond of flowers. Elisabeta was a favourite of Carmen Sylva (Queen Elizabeth of Romania's pen name), and like her, she was an avid reader.

The sufferings induced by the tragedy of the First World War on Romania deprived the young princess of vital further instruction: "she has not been what one could call really well educated, education in this country is difficult and war came on the top of it and we were refugees in very difficult

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and adverse circumstances”¹, is how her mother, Queen Marie characterised Elisabeta’s situation of those terrible years.

During First World War she did charitable work as a nurse at hospitals in the region of Moldova, the only bit of Romania left unoccupied by the invaders, together with her mother and sister, princess Mignon. Elisabeta used her spare time during refuge drawings and painting a variety of subjects; many printed in “Calendarul Regina Maria”, sold for the war relief effort in 1918. Immediately after the war, in 1919, the princes studied painting and music for one year in Paris.

Princess Elisabeta was also very fond of her grandmother Maria Alexandrovna spending many a holiday with her in Switzerland. In May 1912 the Duchess started to make plans for a suitable marriage for her and advised Marie of Romania: “she will be 18 next autumn! She ought to be quite out by this time, otherwise one never gets really accustomed to receive, talk and behave as a grown up person and for a princess it is indispensable”². Maria Alexandrovna admitted that her granddaughter must be observed: “don’t let Elisabeta flirt too much with young Romanians, patriotic as she is, she might so easily fall in love with somebody and then you could easily have to face *la mère à boire*. Young princesses in our times have wills of their own and become obstinate. But I always come back to the same conclusion: Elisabeta must soon go out *dans le vrai grande monde*”³.

Elisabeta was “much more classically beautiful ... always solemn, unable to express her feelings. Her look was straight, almost defiant, full of ardour, fantasy and imagination and fond of being alone”⁴. Among the Romanians Elisabeta “appeared to be most popular among all classes” as Mrs Martineau, one of the visitors to the Romanian Royal Court, remarked.

Maria Alexandrovna was the first to suggest a marriage with George the crown prince of Greece, an idea quickly embraced by Queen Sophie who wrote to Marie in November 1919 about Elisabeta: “We found her lovely most sympathetic and charming. Upon our dearest son Georgie she has made a deep impression. We are most anxious to know whether Nando and you would have any objections to a marriage between the two young people, who seems to have a deep feeling for each other”⁵. Queen Marie confessed to her mother that: “Lisabetha ought to marry – war set Princesses at such a disadvantage and here

¹ Arhivele Na ionale Istorice Centrale (Romanian National Archives; RNA), fond *Regina Maria* (Queen Marie; QM), dosar V/2741.

² RNA, QM, V/2134.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Queen Marie of Romania, *The Story of My Life*, vol. II, London: Cassell, 1935, p. 271.

⁵ RNA, QM, V/3192 bis.

is her chance having someone of her class, her religion and who is sincerely attached to her, not an arranged political marriage”⁶.

Finally the marriage ceremony was organised in Bucharest on 27 February 1921. Elisabeta “was simple and dignified, the traditional *golden thread* of the Romanian brides making her perfect beauty show up in a wonderful way... After the religious service there was a huge, huge lunch; in the evening an enormous reception, fearfully crowded”⁷, as the Queen of Romania recollects the event in a letter to her Canadian friend Colonel Joe Boyle.

When Elisabeta arrived in Greece, the country was in political turmoil, engaged in a devastating conflagration with emerging Turkey, not an auspicious sight for a young and hopeful royal bride. She wrote to her mother: “I have just taken an enormous hospital under my protection. Lately I have been terribly homesick and if it should come to Georgie going to the front I have nothing to cling to. Georgie of course as everything that one can wish for, with a heart of gold and the natural tact that comes from real kindness. I will have to get accustomed to others though and time will help me through; at present I hate going to parties etc, for them I feel a terrible longing for all my friends”⁸. Mrs Martineau also noted Elisabeta’s sentiment that “she was mentally starved in Greece, and was hungering for the music and art and affection that were showered on her in Romania”⁹. There were however some cheerful moments like when she was asked to put herself at the head of an active musical section of the conservatoire, designing her small garden or the trips to the stunning countryside around Athens.

Unlike her native Romania where the sovereign family was immensely popular among all classes after a victorious war that saw the achievement of country’s national unity, the monarchy in Greece was on shaky grounds, constantly harassed and besieged by increasingly powerful and hostile republicans bent on seizing every opportunity to diminish its role, situation aggravated by the worsening war in Asia Minor against a resurgent nationalistic Turkish army. There was also the incongruity in character with the rest of the Greek royal family, where her husband, the person capable to mitigating that, was often missing, sadly despatched for long periods to the war theatre.

Elisabeta’s health was shaken in the spring of 1922 because of a typhoid fever and then pleurisy, being operated twice in dramatic conditions, without anaesthesia in May 1922, a poignant reflection of the trying circumstances in Greece as a whole at that particular moment in history. Very touching are George’s letters to his mother-in-law, giving detailed information

⁶ *Idem*, V/2739.

⁷ *Idem*, V/3904.

⁸ *Idem*, V/714.

⁹ Mrs Philip Martineau, *Roumania and her Rulers*, London: Stanley Paul & Co. Ltd., 1927, p. 191.

on Elisabeta's precarious health. On 17 May 1922 Elisabeta's parents came to Athens, fearing the worse for their daughter. Eventually she recovered but remained with a heart weakness and other dreadful lifelong sequels that undoubtedly contributed to the shortening of her lifespan.

In those circumstances she was thus not able to attend Mignon's wedding in June in Belgrade, but managed to gather enough strengths to participate at the Coronation festivities of her parents in Romania, in October 1922. Prince George had to stay in Greece because of the complicating political situation that led to the abdication of his father King Constantine I in September. Elisabeta burst in tears when she got the news in Bucharest about this event that so suddenly thrust her on the perilous throne of the Greek kingdom.

The tense environment in Greece of that time, coupled with the misunderstandings with her Greek relatives, made Elisabeta quite bitter even toward her mother, who tried in vain to suggest ways to alleviate her anguish, such as producing an offspring. In March 1923 she wrote to her mother: "You say of only I should have a child? Yes, Mama dear, I would like to have one, but for the moment there are three obstacles in the way. First of all, my nerves are not quite in the condition they ought to be; 2). The situation combined with both our shaky nerves makes things very risky; 3). There is a question of money"¹⁰.

Material life was terribly difficult in Greece for the royal family. Elisabeta confessed to her mother: "The only luxury I have allowed myself was to remount some of my things to make a small and indispensable diadem, and even that I have not been able to pay for yet. Yes it is true that at moments I feel it hard, even very hard to be a queen and to have to think ten times before I dare to buy a dress and at other moments there is a little envy when I see the tremendous riches of Mignon who does not know how, or even desire to see them. It is not that I am greedy and that I want more than I have, but it hurts to see the little we possess going to ruin because we don't have means to save it. What Mignon has as pocket money, for sweets, etc – a month is more than I have in two years to live upon. So it is forgivable if at moments I feel a little sad"¹¹.

There was not only gloom and doom for Elisabeta in Greece, as some authors suggest. Elisabeta had first of all a loving relationship with her husband, King George II and tried to get involved in the events and things that surrounded her. In August 1923 at Tatoi palace, she improved the garden and made drawings for the front terraces, writing to her mother that "I have made a dream of restoring one of the burnt houses after my own plans keeping the standing walls and using the existing material"¹².

¹⁰ RNA, QM, V/732.

¹¹ *Idem*, V/741.

¹² *Idem*, V/765.

Elisabeta also fulfilled her role as a queen, for example when in October 1923, appealed on behalf of the refugees from Asia Minor who had fled to Greece during the conflict with Turkey, in a message to dr. Carroll from the American Friends of Greece: "Despite valuable assistance until recently given by the American Red Cross and Near East Relief to the destitute refugees and their families so cruelly expelled from Asia Minor, thousands will die this winter for lack of food, shelter, clothing and medicines, unless there is relief. Knowing the philanthropic feeling of the American people, I would be grateful and so would be the Greek people, for any help you may be able to give in this tragic hour of our history".

On 15 December 1923 Elisabeta was able to realise that the end of her reign was near: "...The situation is more critical for us than it has ever been these last two days... Things here have reached beyond the control of any responsible people and are in the hands of republican officers... We are expecting a 'coup d'etat' from one moment to another, and then ... God knows"¹³. Those moments "has become such an agony that our only comfort is at night when sleep comes"¹⁴.

The royal couple went on 19 December 1923 into exile in Romania and took residence at the Cotroceni Palace. The American professor George Huntington, who visited the royal family in Bucharest and met Elisabeta, characterised her as "naturally shy, and her unhappy experience in Greece has darkened the face of the world for her"¹⁵. Almost twelve years of exile followed, with George spending long periods in England. The royal couple increasingly grew apart and Elisabeta finally divorced in July 1935, decision taken when it also became apparent that the restoration of monarchy in Greece was again on cards and she "never would have gone back" in that country again.

Elisabeta asked for the Romanian citizenship, lost through marriage, to be restored to her and as a princess sought a quiet and more comfortable life in her native country. In that regard she benefited from Romania's economic flourishing after the general crisis of the early 1930s and the help of an able, though controversial, business adviser in the person of Alexandru Scanavy, her chamberlain. In March 1935 she bought the Banloc domain in Western Romania, a magnificent country property that became one of her main residencies where she was for the first time free to properly pursue her own ideas in matters of house decoration and develop a farming enterprise.

The Elisabeta Palace in Bucharest, a large and well designed Italianate villa with overtones of Art Nouveau, was inaugurated on 19 December 1937 in the presence of the princess and her siblings Carol and Mignon, together with

¹³ RNA, QM, V/748.

¹⁴ RNA, QM, V/749.

¹⁵ Diana Fotescu (Mandache), *Americans and Queen Marie of Romania*, Oxford-Portland, 1998, p. 20.

Romanian officials. This house was for Elisabeta the achievement of a long elusive dream, heightened during the dearth years spent in Greece: “Perhaps the only thing that I really want is a house of my own something that I can call mine. It has always been my greatest longing since the age of 17. My house to create, to improve, to make perfect and love, offering hospitality to and rejoicing with all those who would love it too. I think the possession of a house would really make me happy. I lived on that hope when I came back to Romania”¹⁶.

She also had established at her own expense a hospital and home for children in Bucharest one of the most modern institutions of its type. For poor children she maintained two canteens. Elisabeta was childless and through those charitable activities she tried to express her maternal sentiments: “Children interest me most. Teach them humanitarianism, to help their neighbours. Give them the right basis for life, not the stupid illusion that everything is perfect”¹⁷. She continued to participate during late 1930s and through the war at official royal events and ceremonies in Romania, dividing her time between her residencies in, Bucharest, Banloc and also Copaceni, north of the capital.

In August 1944, King Michael achieved one of the greatest watershed moments in Romania’s history, when he succeeded in overthrowing the pro-German government, firmly placing Romania within the allied camp, saving the country from the catastrophe of an imminent and destructive invasion. Inevitably the Soviet Union became the main player in the country in the ensuing period. Elisabeta with her known patriotic ardour tried to do her bit for the cause of her country though it soon showed that she was close to naivety and certainly lacked the political skills and experience to steer through the difficult landscape in which the Soviet interests became gradually entrenched in Romania.

She stands thus accused by some authors of trying to advocate a close Romanian-Soviet economic collaboration, entertaining designs contrary to the interests of the Romanian dynasty, or being put forward as a potential regency member in case the Soviets decided to remove the king or substitute his attributions during the royal strike. The documents and notes kept at the National Archives of Romania do not feature her in that sort of actions, mentioning her only in the chatter and that just occasionally between some diplomats and politicians. The most significant notes are those of the Romanian intelligence services between 1945-1946 that talk about cold relations between the King and his aunt prompted by her moves, but only as a succession of temporary misunderstanding.

¹⁶ RNA, QM, V/752.

¹⁷ Interview in ‘The New York Times’, 1934.

The forced abdication of King Michael on 30 December 1947 at the pressure of the pro-Communist government and their Soviet sponsors found Elisabeta in the same situation as the other members of the royal family resident in the country, being forced to leave Romania at a very short notice. The communist confiscated all of her properties, also jewels and the numismatic collection. A part of the jewellery is still kept at the Romanian National Bank, with other items illicitly sold by the communists, stolen or given as present to so-called fraternal communist party delegations from abroad.

Elisabeta died in exile on 15 November 1956 at Cannes. She was buried at Sigmaringen according to the wish expressed in her will. There are plans to bring her remains back to Romania to be interred in the royal tomb at Curtea de Arges, where her parents are also buried. Her dream house, Elisabeta Palace, a beautiful building with a balanced design, set in a green area of Bucharest, is today the official residence of King Michael of Romania. Elisabeta's royal cipher is still preserved as part of the diverse decorations of the palace, welcoming and reminding the visitor about the princess' long sought after and never attained ideals of harmonious and peaceful life.



DIANA MANDACHE



1.Princess Elisabeta and Prince Carol.



2.Princess Elisabeta in the Golden Room, Cotroceni Palace.



3.Romanian Royal Family with the German Crown Prince.



4. Princess Elisabeta of Romania.



5. Princess Elisabeta of Romania.



6. Elisabeta as Queen of Greece.



7. Elisabeta with her husband, George II, King of Greece.



8. King Ferdinand of Romania, Elisabetha and George of Greece, Scrovi te, 1926.



9. Victoria Melita, Queen Maria, Princess Elisabetha, King Carol II at a commemoration for King Ferdinand, July 1933, Curtea de Arges.



10. Elisabeta and the Romanian Royal family, Pele Castle, September 1933.