

MIGNON. THE QUEEN OF YUGOSLAVIA

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Abstract

A modest and apparently unassuming personality, Mignon faced with great dignity both personal tragedy and the misfortunes of her native and adoptive countries during the two world conflagrations of the twentieth century. Today old Yugoslavia does not exist anymore, it has been replaced by several independent states, but the admiration for Mignon still continues among many people.

Keywords: Princess Mignon, Princess Maria of Romania, Queen Maria of Yugoslavia, King Alexander of Yugoslavia, Serbia, King Peter II of Yugoslavia.

Maria-Mignon, Princess of Romania, was a great granddaughter of Queen Victoria, the second daughter of Queen Marie and King Ferdinand of Romania. At the age of 22 she became the queen consort of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia, and from that moment on her destiny became linked with the tragic fate of her husband and country.

Maria, better known as *Mignon*, a nickname given by her mother after an opera personage, was born at Friedenstein Castle in Gotha on 8 January 1900. Mignon had been brought up at the Romanian Royal Court in the English fashion having a nurse and a governess from Britain. Since her infancy she was extremely modest and unpretentious and her siblings were often heard saying expressions about her such as „that is good enough for Mignon” or „Voilà notre petite Cendrillon”. She was not preoccupied with fashionable clothes and was happy to wear her elder sister’s old ones. A visitor to the Romanian royal court, Mrs Philip Martineau, described her that “when well dressed looked perfectly charming, but she did not care, as a rule, how she looked... she would appear in dirty ‘oilies’, with a big smudge on her face, to attend to her motor-car or motor-plough” and was also a great chum of her brother Nicholas from whom she adopted the schoolboy slang which was “more astounding than suitable on certain occasions”¹. Mignon had an amiable character and was “always there to help in any possible way and nothing gave her more joy than to be of some use to those she loved”², observed her mother.

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¹ Mrs Philip Martineau, *Roumania and her Rulers*, London, 1927, p. 164.

² Romanian National Archives (RNA), QM V/2895.

During the First World War, Mignon was a dedicated nurse and worked for the Red Cross together with her mother and sister close to the front lines. After the war, in 1919 Maria was sent to Heathfield School, Ascot for one year. There she suffered because of the consequences of a neglected wartime education, during the difficult times when the country was nearly overrun by the enemy and the family and government had to take refuge in difficult conditions to the bit of Romania that was left unoccupied in the north-east of country. In the Report of work from the summer of 1919 at Heathfield, the teachers made only brief remarks, i.e. for English „Maria is a highly intelligent pupil; spelling weak but steadily improving”; History „an interested and keen student,” but significantly noting more. The record shows that she was also interested in French, studying piano, singing and drawing.

The engagement of Maria to Alexander, King of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was officially announced on 9 January 1922 at Pelesh castle in Sinaia. The religious betrothal ceremony took place in Bucharest on 20 February 1922.

The marriage was celebrated in Belgrade on 8 June 1922. Marie, her mother, remembered her as being „perfectly serene and happy, contemplating her future life with hope and joy... Mignon having never flirted in her life, thought it quite natural to accept the hand of a man who needed to build a home and uphold a country... A love match it can hardly be called but a bond of lovely friendship and mutual regard and sympathy it can certainly be called”³.

Shortly after the marriage, Mignon wrote: „I am very happy the more I get to know him (Alexander) the more I like him”⁴. In November 1922 she started to take lessons about her adopted country: „I have started my Serbian lessons... as well as my history ones”⁵. She usually spoke French to her husband, although she would have preferred English, a more at hand language used at her former home in Romania. Mignon’s new duties in a troubled country scared her, as she confessed: „There are moments when I am almost afraid of all I have got to do and wonder if I am strong for the work I have ahead of me”⁶. She naturalised herself rapidly, benefiting from the fact that both Romania and Yugoslavia were neighbouring countries with very similar customs and mentalities. In March 1923 Mignon confessed to her mother: „I can’t tell you how fond I am getting of my new country and people I am beginning to feel quiet one with them”. The royal couple had three sons, Peter born in 1923, Tomislav in 1928, and Andreij in 1929. They had an English nurse and tutor, and later went to British schools.

Mignon accompanied Alexander in every official visit, as in 1933 when they made a diplomatic tour of Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece. In October 1934 they were invited to pay a state visit to France. Alexander went by sea from Zelenika to Marseille. Owing to the storm conditions in the Adriatic and because of

³ Kent State University Library (Ohio), Letter Queen Marie to Leile Milne, May 7 th 1922.

⁴ RNA, QM V/2269.

⁵ RNA, QM V/2877.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

her illness (gallstones), Mignon decided against the sea voyage with the Navy cruiser and took the train instead, planning to join Alexander later in Paris. That change of travel plans saved her life, keeping her away from Marseille where the King was assassinated by a member of a Croatian organisation which sought to break-up Yugoslavia. Marie the queen of Romania recorded the shock in her diary: „Sandro died immediately... If Mignon had been with him, she would have shared his fate! Owing to ill health Mignon did not come by sea - but was to join him on the way, at Lyon, and both were to be officially received tomorrow in Paris! ... And Mignon, my Mignon, and little Peter who is here!”⁷. From now on Mignon changed into a different person, widow at 34 with three sons, living in a kingdom politically divided. Peter became king, and up until his coming of age the country was ruled by Paul, the Regent Prince.

As a queen-mother, Mignon was concerned for the stability of Yugoslavia and her dynasty: „I have put a rule to myself that I do not leave the country when Paul is not here, no more will Paul leave if I am abroad”⁸. Mignon had also taken a great interest in child welfare, and she opened and presided the first Child Welfare Congress in Belgrade in December 1935. The Queen also paid frequent visits to orphanages and children's hospitals in Belgrade and distributed gifts to them. On 1st April 1938 Mignon wrote: „this morning I started my work again quite seriously by visiting a school, an institute for blind women and a day nursery”⁹.

In her spare time Mignon was an avid reader of literature, she was interested in gardening, farming and also the redesigning of her houses (in Belgrade, Miločer, Bled, Topola). A fervent fan of automobiles, she had a passion for machinery, a quality peculiar to her Hohenzollern family, most obvious on the male line. She bought several cars; most remarkable among them was a 1931 Duesenberg Model J, one of the very best cars of its time. In the summer of 1935 the queen of Romania paid a visit to her daughter in Dalmatia, and remembered how Mignon drove “with almost masculine efficiency, unabashed by the terribly precipitous turnings... I was pleased to see her take to driving again - it is a good sign”¹⁰.

Inspired by her mother, Mignon was a keen collector of jade objects, and possessed precious jewels, among them the emeralds and diamonds received from her husband, or others inherited from the queen of Romania. According to her mother's will, Mignon was to receive: „the broche with a large round pearl in a circle of diamonds and a smaller drop-pearl; a diamond shaped pendant of large diamonds with a miniature of Emperor Alexander II in the centre with a flat diamond over the miniature, a diadem in sapphires and diamonds; a cross with a large high cabochon sapphire”¹¹, etc.

⁷ RNA; QM, III/192.

⁸ RNA, QM, V/2968.

⁹ RNA, QM, V/2985.

¹⁰ Diana Fotescu (Mandache), *Americans and Queen Marie of Romania*, Oxford-Portland, 1998, p. 116.

¹¹ RNA, QM “Anex to my Will, Sinaia Sept. 1926”.

At the end of the 1930s she bought The Old Mill House (Sandy, Bedfordshire) deciding to live in Britain, as her two younger sons were studying there. After the war, in October 1946 Mignon moved to Great Swifts, in Cranbrook, a Kentish estate of 440 acres, which she sold in March 1950. Until the end of her life she lived in London at 28 Cranmer Court, Sloane Avenue (Chelsea).

In Britain, Mignon continued her work in helping different charity organisations and attending numerous public duties, facts that contrast accounts written by some authors that she lived mostly isolated. As a chairman of the Yugoslav Red Cross Committee in London, Mignon devoted herself to the task of supplying parcels of food and clothing to the Yugoslav prisoners of war in Germany and Italy through the British Red Cross. She received letters and appeals from those camps on the name Maria K. Georgevitch.

Queen Maria spoke at the BBC in April 1941 asking her people to „Preserve Yugoslavia United!": „Because of my illness I am unable to be now with you and with my dear son and King. I know you will understand that all my feelings, all my thoughts, and all my prayers are with you, who are suffering and in pain... In your hour of trial, remember the words of the late King Alexander, King-Martyr and your comrade of war. His last words were „Preserve Yugoslavia United". I myself today send you this message. Maintain your dignity. Have full confidence in your King and his heroic Army"¹². After Yugoslavia was occupied by Germany in 1941, the king and the government went in exile to Britain.

Maria together with Peter organised in March 1942 an „Anglo-Yugoslav Week" at Cambridge, and in June „Yugoslavia Week at Bedford". In May 1942 Mignon went to the offices of the Yugoslav Relief Fund whose immediate aim was to work for the colonies of refugees in different parts of the world, also for the provision of the armed forces. In February 1948 Maria of Yugoslavia spoke in support of the Yugoslav Aid Committee, and in December 1948 she opened the Annual Christmas Sale in aid of Yugoslav disabled soldiers and children.

Mignon was a patron of arts participating at the opening of several Yugoslav art exhibitions between 1942-44 in Cambridge, Oxford and London. In March 1942 she officially inaugurated at Harrods an exhibition of sculptures named „Greek and Yugoslav Life". Mignon had herself contributed with several of her own sculptures to this exhibition.

She lived for more than twenty years in London, the last 15 of them in a Tito-imposed exile. Mignon died at her London home on 22 June 1961, and was laid in state at the Serbian Orthodox Church. Her sons Peter, Tomislav, Andreij and her grandson Alexander took over the duties of guard of honour. On 2 July the funeral cortege left at 2:15 pm for the royal burial ground at Frogmore, Windsor.

As a Queen, she was not as charismatic or energetic as her mother, but had a very strong will that helped her overcome the immensely difficult situations and

¹² BBC, 9 April 1941.

tragedies that bequeathed her family and country in the twentieth century. She also had real inclinations for charity work and knew only too well, as her mother said, that queens must have a face for every Fate.

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