

Chapter 54 : Princess Märtha of Sweden-Norway (1901-1954).

Princess Märtha Sophia Lovisa Dagmar Thyra of Sweden and Norway (1901-1954), later Crown Princess of Norway, was born March 28, 1901, in the Heir Prince Palace at Gustaf Adolf's square in Stockholm. March 21, 1929, she married her cousin Crown Prince Olav (V) of Norway (1903-1991) and had three children with him - two girls and a boy.

Since Märtha married 10 years later than her sister Margaretha, she lived at home in the “happy 20s” and was known both as Fridhem princess (the summer home) & as part of her mother Ingeborg's coterie the Farrier gang (Hovslagargänget; the Stockholm address). The interest in her was never very great and after her marriage it declined. There are three long biographies (Berggrav 1955; Møller 1990; Norén Isaksen 2003), family memories (Wig 1977; Hegge 2006; Norén Isaksen 2007), nine short biographies & features (Anonymous & Krohn 1929: ss. 7-21; Swahn 1930: ss. 228-234; Ohlmarks 1979: ss. 122-123; Normann 1983: ss. 103-134; Skott 1996: ss. 258-261; Grosvold & Diesen 2002: ss. 46-107; Langslet 2005; Mørch 2010; Ramsay Herthelius 2010: ss. 265-268; Norlin 2015: ss. 153-154) and three depictions of her time in America 1939/45 (Anonymous 1939; Schive et al. 1939; Ulalteig 2011: ss. 129-137). Five of her speeches have been published (Berggrav red. 1955: ss. 121-126). The narrative below is based on these sources and supplemented by additional information.

There are no letters, however: “Mothers enormous letter collection was a living and interesting history book. During her entire life she corresponded with royals all over Europe. When she died she left two big trunks full of them. ‘To be burned. Do not leave one single letter to posterity’, she wrote on the trunks. We had to follow her last wish. But seeing it burn, we realized the tragedy. It was a piece of interesting history now gone forever.”¹

She never sat for a painting, but 1957/58 Henrik Sørensen made an impressionistic portrait - “a vision” called - after a photograph of her and Folke Bernadotte on the dance floor. In the painting Märtha dissolves into a kind of haze, which is also the impression when reading her biographies. The authors grope around, it boils down to her *curriculum vitae* + supposed virtues. Not even her husband & children remember her as a living being with a life of her own. Possibly an older generation of women are no longer comprehensible.

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There is no record of Märtha's birth, but her baptism was a minor affair. In 1908 - she was then five years old - she started in the “Princess school”. The class consisted of two age groups: The two years older Margaretha + three peers and Märtha + a peer. Märtha's classmate was Marika Lagerbielke (1902-1988; m. Lagerbielke). During the two closing years 1915/17, only Märtha & Marika remained. Diligence was so-so and Märtha was bratty. March 24, 1918, she was confirmed at the Royal Chapel by Archbishop Nathan Söderblom. She was interrogated for half an hour about her Christian faith and left straight answers with a loud and clear voice. In 1918/19 she attended *Jenny Åkerström's household school*, 1919/20 *The Society for Children's Care Education in Infant Care*, 1922 *Nordberg & Peterson's Art school* (porcelain painting & batik) and 1925/27 (?) sewing instruction in the *Saint Birgitta school & Femina sewing school*. She was also the co-founder and patron of the *Märtha school for fashion & sewing* (1928-1975).

¹ Møller 1990: ss. 270-271.

1921/23 her health was shaky. She fell ill with scarlet fever and jaundice, was treated for an abscess in the inner ear and her appendix was removed. Märtha recovered at the spa resort Mösseberga outside Falköping. Parts of 1923-1926 she spent in Italy as a guest of Queen Victoria, a “princess school” for real, and in Paris with Prince Eugene who supervised her “art studies”. Probably it meant walking around with her in museums and lecturing on good vs bad art. In 1927, she was invited to attend the Rome Congress for domestic work, but she was never that interested in standing in the kitchen. There was a lot of free time between courses. Märtha walked the dog, took a driving license, traded fabrics & clothing, was received into the Amaranter Order, visited concerts, fished at Fridhem and dug in the garden. She had no literary interests, but she read newspapers, photographed, played the piano and embroidered. According to one acquaintance, her reading consisted of cookbooks, seed catalogues & music scores.

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Olav & Märtha knew each other since childhood. The first time they met was at a family reunion in 1904. The emotions are said to have awakened during another family reunion in 1921, and they became engaged on August 11, 1928, at the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam. The engagement was secret and so it actually remained until both parents and governments approved it. The friends noticed something was going on but the couple kept quiet and looked mysterious. There is a “Ernst Rolf”-couplet about Märtha from this time named “I’m silent like the wall”. The engagement was announced on January 14, 1929. There were both political and genetic objections: Although it had been 23 years since the dissolution of the Union, Norway's relationship with Sweden and its own royals was still tense. After all, the reason for the dissolution of the Union was mainly the desire for national autonomy. It rhymed badly with first choosing a Danish king, an English queen and now a Swedish crown princess. It was also the case that 21 percent of the voters wanted a republic and that cousin marriages had a bad reputation. Olav actually consulted a geneticist Otto Lous Mohr who explained that the risk in their case was insignificant. Mohr's investigation was never made public, but the Glücksburg & Bernadotte intermarriages and kinships were hotly debated. The crux of the matter was that the intermarriages were recent.

The announcement took place in Sweden, but the wedding was in Oslo. Märtha arrived in Norway on March 17. There were lots of people in the streets to pay her tribute. More people than there ever had been. However, there were some malcontents: The Norwegian Labour Party (36.8 percent in the 1927 general election) issued a ban on its delegates attending the wedding and a bottle of dynamite + fuse was found at the Royal summer palace Oscarshall.² When the bride and groom's newly renovated residence Skaugum burned down shortly after the wedding, there were rumours, but it was due to an electrical fault. Much burned, but Märtha had time to save the baptismal clothing. Like her sisters, she refused interviews, but there is a statement after the wedding: “My sister got a fantastic welcome from Belgium three years ago, she said, and I never thought I would get it too, but this trumps it all! It is as if I had returned after a long absence! I never dreamt of such warmth and kindness...”³ Something of a whitewash. In Brussels, Märtha was caught in a crowd, had her clothes torn and her purse stolen. In Oslo, things were a little calmer but the procession was stormed by several hundred people who wanted to kiss her hand.

² [Dynamitflaska.] Svenska Dagbladet 1929-03-10; [Norska arbetarpartiet.] Svenska Dagbladet 1929-03-15.

³ Normann 1983: s. 109.

Märtha's Swedish background was a sore point and she tried to appear as Norwegian as possible. However, she never went as far as accepting the rigid 19th-century style of her in-laws, but downplayed the ceremonial. The parents-in-law demanded subservience even for breakfast, Märtha wanted the home to be a bourgeois free zone. The children came in 1930, -32 & -37. When she was not busy with them, she travelled with Olav around the country to get acquainted with the inhabitants & them with her. She became the patron of *Den Norske Husflidsforening & Norges Husflids- og Husindustrilag* (handicraft), *Eugenia Stiftelse* (household education), *Femenes Nyfelfond* (financial assistance), *Landsforeningen mot Poliomyelitt* (polio-injured), *Utdannelsesfondet for Unge Døve og Tunghørte* (hearing-impaired), *Norges KFUK-speidere & Norsk Speiderpikeforbund* (scouting), *Norges Lotteforbund* (civil defence) and other organizations. Upon Queen Maud's death November 20, 1938, she became first lady of Norway, Queen in all but name. Märtha was unsure if she was up to it, but shirking was not an option. She complained of her shyness, lack of public experience etc. but was nevertheless forced out into the open.

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Since 1925, it had been talk of Olav visiting America & the Norwegian diaspora. April-July 1939 the journey finally came about. Märtha & Olav spent 69 days visiting 29 states. The welcome committee on the New York docks counted thousands of Norwegian-Americans hooting and singing and so it continued. They met with the Presidential couple Roosevelt, inaugurated the Norwegian pavilion of the World's Fair in New York, visited the Norwegian areas around Chicago & Detroit and toured Colorado, Hollywood and other places. The Press Attaché was Hans Olav, editor of the Norwegian language *Nordisk Tidende*, but in reality it was the Embassy that decided what was printed and not. The New York press didn't get any interview but a typewritten message: "[T]he Crown princess and I represent the whole Norwegian people regardless of class, political party or age and we extend our most hearty and cordial greetings to the United States, begging you to consider our visit as a handshake from the Norwegian democracy to the American nation".⁴ At her arrival Märtha let escape that she looked forward to shopping American clothes. In San Francisco, it came to a 30-minute press conference. Olav & Märtha were clamped down on a sofa, the journalists were told not to ask political questions and the couple was then left to fend for themselves. Axel spoke about his interest in sailing and his life as a gentleman farmer. Märtha spoke "about her garden, of which she was really proud and about her two girls and son, who like a true Norwegian went skiing on his 2-year birthday."⁵ When asked about what she thought was best about America, she replied "my husband!"

On November 30, the Soviet Union attacked Finland and it was taken for granted that Norway would soon be involved in the conflict. Märtha attended a medical course and made a study visit to Stockholm to find out how Swedish and Finnish women helped out in the civil defence. On December 16, she summoned a number of women's organizations to the castle to organize something similar in Norway - *Femenes Arbeidshjelp*. Each woman would indicate the duties she could perform when the men were called up. The meeting led to a radio appeal on January 26. A nation-wide organization was being organized - 585 local councils had been appointed - when the Germans struck.

The Danish royal family stayed in the country. Not so the Norwegian. King Haakon and Olav joined the Norwegian forces and Märtha & the children made their way to Sweden. There are

⁴ "Norways Royalty gets ovation here." New York Times 1939-04-28.

⁵ Vestkysten 1939-04-06. [Intervju med kronprinsparet av Norge.]

a lot of stories about this. The children Harald (V) and Astrid claimed long after that the Swedish border guards did at first not want to let them in because they had forgotten their passports, that they had to hide under a blanket and that the motorcade had to force their way in. Co-passenger Einar Östgaard, at the time 10 years - Harald was three years & Astrid eight - remembered nothing in particular. Harald's first biographer Haugstøl tells that the border guards asked if they had anything to clear.⁶

The family first spent a week at Sälens Högfjällshotell, then they were accommodated at Carl Bernadotte at Frötuna and then at Drottningholm Castle. On August 16, at Roosevelt's invitation, they continued by boat to America. Meanwhile, King Hakon and Olav had been evacuated to England. There was a story circulating that the Germans for that reason considered that they had abdicated the throne and that the Germans through Gustaf V tried to pressure Märtha to return to Norway to proclaim Harold as heir with Vidkun Quisling as guardian.⁷ Östgaard thinks the rumours were caused by a discussion about the appropriateness of the American trip and the possible alternatives - England, Sweden or returning to Norway. There is a telegram from Märtha to Olav dated June 24:

[...] Strictly confidential from the Crown Princess to the Crown Prince: I am willing to make all sacrifices necessary to preserve the country's independence. Have considered all options including returning home with the children if it can be of any use. Maybe this will sit well with the people as we know there is agitation against us leaving the country. What do you two think? Telegraph your position as soon as possible as everything develops fast. Afraid that travelling to America in the current situation can seem unfortunate and will be portrayed as us abandoning the country. Mrs. Harriman travels America end week or next week but the journey can probably be postponed. Otherwise everything well. Martha (sign).⁸

The telegram appears to have been prompted by fears that the American trip would be perceived as a surrender and desertion of duty, and by fears that the lack of Norwegian government would force the Germans to accept Quisling as the only remaining political alternative. There were discussions that Olav would return to Norway and form a legitimate government since the Norwegian government in exile had difficulty asserting itself - for example, the Swedish government was unsure of its legitimacy. The reason for Märtha's America trip is unclear but probably Olav wanted her and the children safe. Gustav V was critical: "To the extent that this matter can be judged from here, it must raise strong fears for your and your family's future in Norway."⁹ Afterwards, the exile has been criticized as undermining the Norwegian state's legitimacy and thereby facilitating the Jewish persecution and other abuses.

There is also a longish story by Älmeberg (2017: ss. 238-243) based on Märtha's statement that the reason her husband Olav did not stay in Norway was that neither King Haakon nor the English minister wanted it, but that the country, like France and others, would continue the fight against the Germans through an England-based government in exile. The Swedish ambassador in Berlin telegraphed the Foreign Ministry that this placed Norway in a limbo under international law. The Parliament

⁶ Haugstøl 1947: s. 71; Rosenberg 1988: s. 12; "Kung Harald får mothugg om Sverige." Dagens Nyheter, 2005-11-20; Johansen, Marianne & Torvik, Line. "Kongefamilien tar feil." VG Rampelys, 2005-11-20; Östgaard 2005; Hegge 2006: s. 54.

⁷ "Plot to seize Martha." New York Times 1940-08-23.

⁸ Östgaard 2005: ss. 151-156.

⁹ Telegram från kung Gustaf V till kung Haakon 1940-07-27. I: Östgaard 2005: s. 238.

that remained in Norway could not surrender, even though the country was defeated. I did not have that authority. Norway was therefore governed from the outset by German collaborators under martial law. Haakon has been praised for his willingness to resist the German occupation, but was actually the cause of the Quisling regime.

Märtha's American stay was afterward depicted as an important part of the war effort – which seems an exaggeration. She was Roosevelt's personal guest and the first time even lived in the White House. The stay lasted from August 28, 1940, June 7, 1945. Because America was not at war with Germany, she initially refrained from making political statements. She settled on the Pook's Hill estate outside Washington, where she had regular receptions. Olav was several times over visiting and they travelled the country to all the places they had missed the first time. Olav gave talks about the war and Märtha was his secretary. She also travelled herself: Visited hospitals, churches, schools & military bases. Named ship & aircraft. Helped Norwegians who got into difficulties. She even received the green light for a fundraiser for the Norwegian Air Force “Wings for Norway”. She was Norway's highest ranking “diplomat” & Norway was due to its large merchant fleet - 3rd largest after the UK & USA - an important nation. The Norwegian minister Wilhelm Morgenstjerne stated after the war that she was an important channel into the White House and that it was due to her that the United States often gave priority to Norway's needs over those of others. Maybe so.

The new life changed her. In Norway, she had been a kind of royal homebody. Here she dressed elegantly and blossomed. She was often invited as a guest to the White House and he to Pook's Hill. So often that rumours got going that she and Roosevelt had a relationship. From their preserved correspondence it seems rather like a father-daughter relationship - he godfather, she godchild – but Mrs. Roosevelt thought otherwise and it spread.

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Upon her return, Märtha's health took a turn for the worse - hernia, hepatitis & migraine - and on April 5, 1954, she died. Possibly it was the same hepatitis that she was infected with in Rome in 1923.¹⁰ Her legacy in different wordings was that she was unusually easy to deal with. No more haughty or formal than the situation required. Had both wit, temper and the ability to switch between her three roles as Crown Princess, Mother & Fellow human being: Calm, friendly, patient, never forgot a friend, attentive & interested. Dignified when it was necessary. Never facetious or sarcastic. She was good at languages and her initially shaky foreignness with the years improved most significantly. She had a pleasant voice and spoke fluent & idiomatic Swedish, Norwegian, Danish & Oxford English. Her German & French wasn't much to brag about though.

She showed no understanding for changing times and changing expectations. In 1953, she deprived her daughter Ragnhild of her princess title in connection with her marriage to the ship owner Erling Lorentzen. The couple's marriage was criticized in such a way that they settled in Rio de Janeiro. Her children Astrid and Harald also married outside of Gotha. The time in America seems to have affected all the siblings in a bourgeois direction. Maybe that was why they had difficulty understanding her. They were bourgeois. Märtha was royal. A dying breed.

¹⁰ Berggrav 1955: ss. 93-97.