

Chapter 55 : Princess Astrid of Sweden (1905-1935).

Princess Astrid Sophie Louise Thyra of Sweden, later Queen of Belgium, was born November 17, 1905, at the heir prince's palace in Stockholm. On November 4, 1926, she married legally (on November 10, ecclesiastically) Crown Prince Leopold (III) of Belgium (1901-1983) and had with him three children - two boys and a girl. On August 29, 1935, she died in a car accident.

After her death, Astrid was widely renowned, but as a symbol rather than as a person. Dayez-Burgeon (1995) counts 60 French, German & Flemish biographies & memorials: Before the accident (3), 1935 (19), 1936 (18), 1937-1995 (20). I refer to three summaries (Dayez-Burgeon 1995; Liebert-Vandenhove 2002; Koninckx (2005). In Swedish there are four long biographies (Wijkmark 1936; Fjellman 1968; Sparre 1985; Ramsay Herthelius & Rosvall 2005) and ten short biographies & memorials (Anonymous 1926; Swahn 1930: ss. 235-241; Prince Carl 1931 & 1936; Anonymous 1935; Cederblad 1935; Eriksson 1937; Anonymous 1945; Ohlmarks 1979: ss. 126-127; Skott 1996: ss. 261-266; Ramsay Herthelius 2010: ss. 262-265).

The narrative below is based on the sources above and supplemented with additional information.

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The commotion at Astrid's birth was according to the old protocol with the modification that the birth witnesses - four Swedish & Norwegian notables - were not allowed to enter the room but keep guard outside along with the 50 or so ladies. Astrid did not arrive until early morning and nobody was in the mood when she was finally carried out to be duly inspected & admired. The mother took a course to learn the latest and best about child care. Some years passed. Astrid had an easy time crying. An often quoted anecdote is about when, during a dip, she was frightened by the waves and her mother told her to stop making such a fuss: "Yes, but mother forgets," Astrid said crying, "that I am so small and the sea is so big." This is said to have been Astrid in a nutshell. Fear all and everything!¹ After Astrid's death, her father published additional memories:

Softer than her sisters, Astrid was perhaps the easiest to bring up, in that she never needed even the slightest rebuke, but she was so extremely sensitive that she had to be treated with great care, affection and love by us and her teachers, and such she also received from everyone who had to do with her, and she returned our love with a dedicated and self sacrificing goodness of heart.

Astrid was an unusually beautiful and affectionate child, that was the unanimous opinion of all, who at that time had to do her. Shy and extremely unassuming in nature, and therefore in the beginning unsure of herself she looked with doubtful, bewildered eyes at life around her. Four and six years younger than her two sisters - her brother was born in 1911 - she was in her first years of life and until she caught up with her older sisters, more than they dependent on herself and her mother.

By her own eager desire, she was taught alone. We offered her a lively and sweet girl, whom we thought would suit her, in the hope that this would help her overcome

¹ prins Carl 1931: ss. 13,402.

her shyness and strengthen her self-esteem, but she prayed from the bottom of her heart to be left alone with her young teacher, whom she loved. Her innate shyness made it difficult for her to accept other children as her playmates and feel at ease in their company. This was probably the very reason for her wish, which we could not deny her, notwithstanding, it was contrary to our principles regarding the usefulness of peers in teaching.²

Astrid's childhood friend Anna Sparre (1906-1993; b. Adelswärd) had a different angle. Astrid was constantly surrounded by children that her parents had chosen - a small court that was dressed up to admire her at birthdays, when she lost her first tooth etc. In 1912 she was supposed to start at the "prince school" - the mixed castle school which also Anna attended but she never showed up. Instead she attended a "princess school" with the sisters and thought it "nice to get away from all the rowdy children she didn't know". The "princess school" was not a success. Because the sisters were so much older, she had difficulty following the instruction and she became isolated from her peers. In 1915 Margaretha left school, in 1917 Märtha and Astrid remained alone. The teacher occasionally took her to the "prince school" so that she would not be completely isolated.

Meanwhile, Astrid had learned to manipulate the environment: approach the teachers and complain in the most heartbreaking way whenever there were any demands. According to consistent information, she was both undisciplined, lazy & ignorant. Isolated from her peers, she mostly met adults. Her social development was both delayed and distorted. She had a nanny until the age of seven - Miss Elisabeth Kjellén, "Nenne" - to whom she was extremely attached and who tucked her in, read fairy tales and consoled her. In 1912, when "Nenne" quit, Astrid panicked and "Nenne" had to do it by telephone.³ In early portraits she has protruding front teeth. Probably she long time sucked her thumb. At 16, she had still not slept over with a friend. She was a troublesome attention-seeking child but a good photo object. There is a widely disseminated photograph of her as a seven-year-old where she lies on the couch and enjoys being the centre of the action - not so frequent in real life.

Astrid's shyness of strangers is often interpreted as her true self. That was not the case at all. Happy-go-lucky and alternatively straightforward & sly is a better description. She had a sense of role playing, social nuances & situation comedy. Typically Astrid was *risqué* comments, gravely expressed, that hovered between the naive and the forbidden. That said, she was considered an intellectual lightweight and even her parents had difficulty taking her seriously. She had no serious hobbies - possibly some animal care during the summer - but devoted much time to music, handicraft & reading. Her piano teacher was Miss Adèle Cederschiöld (1873-1957). How good or bad Astrid was at playing is not known - as an adult she did not - but she liked to listen. Needlework was part of the school schedule and she had a talent for it. Language was as ever the most important subject. Astrid had English and German governors, but never went abroad. Probably a consequence of the war. She read a lot - as a child, folk tales & Selma Lagerlöf - as an adult, biographies, psychological novels, art books & social medical nonfiction.

In the summer of 1922, she again met Anna and got someone to unload her heart for. In the autumn, Anna was to read French at the boarding school St Botvid in Saltsjöbaden and they spoke about Astrid joining her. However, this was not possible due to the confirmation education. On March 29, 1923, Astrid appeared at the Royal Chapel with princes Gustaf

² prins Carl 1936:9.

³ Wijkmark 1936: ss. 16-18.

Adolf & Sigvard. It was her first public performance. She was interrogated for 15 minutes but spoke so low and unclear that it was difficult to hear what she was saying. At least she was approved. In the fall semester, she became a day student at St Botvids but by then Anna had moved to another school. Future journalist Margit Fjellman was a student at St Botvid and has given a lively description of Astrid's first school day there:

All other impressions fade when recollecting princess Astrid's state of mind that day. Agitated beyond measure, in an extreme of despair, shy beyond all bounds, crying, clinging to Princess Ingeborg as if drowning. Someone more beside herself could not be imagined. We girls were transfixed by the sight, filled with both awe and profound compassion.

Princess Ingeborg sought to reassure her. There, Astrid! Don't you see how nice they look? With an appealing look at us: - It's not so easy to be away from home the first time.

We knew too.

With a great effort, Astrid pulled herself together, and keeping close to Princess Ingeborg, she entered our group, pressing everybody's hand. But while doing so, still sobbing and looking the other way.⁴

Astrid wrote desperate letters to her friend. Anna summarizes: "She had practically no serious schooling, had never got used to homework, written examinations and competing with peers. She had never read grammar or searched a dictionary. She knew a little English but not a word of French. She naturally enough felt no kinship with the other students, whom she did not get to know because she did not live there."⁵ The democratic purgatory lasted a semester. Astrid was the entire time an odd feature that bore lacquer pumps instead of ski boots even in the slush. She didn't learn much French, you don't do when you enter at the wrong level, but she learned to socialize with people in general. Journalist Thyra Öhrvall commented afterwards on the home's pedagogy:

As far as the upbringing of the children was concerned, it was the Prince [the father] who was the most ardent advocate of at least the daughters not being burdened with too much schooling. He was of the opinion that "what dry knowledge they did not obtain during school could be replaced with that living knowledge that life itself provides". It might not have hurt with some more intensive studies, though, at least in language - Queen Astrid discovered that she had a lot to learn when she arrived at her new French-speaking motherland.⁶

A year passed. Anna left school and became Astrid's "maid of honour". In 1924/25 they joined the *Society for Children's Care in Infant Care* and in 1925/26 *Jenny Åkerström's household school*. Astrid was expected to behave like a princess, which meant taking the lead and being a model student. They also attended Anna Behle's ballet school where they did plastic exercises, trained dance moves and learned to perform. Astrid received extra lessons in "how to deliver a prize, receive a bouquet of flowers, to behave relaxed but correct when the national anthem is played, get out of a car, sit nicely with the legs at the correct angle during photography" etc. Other useful things was learning how to buy shoes & socks at NK. In the summer of 1924, she took her driving license. In 1925/26 she had French conversation exercises ¾ hour a day.

⁴ Fjellman 1968: s. 33.

⁵ Sparre 1985: s. 68.

⁶ Öhrvall, Thyra. "Hjärtats gentleman." *Vecko Journalen* 1951:43, ss. 26-27,31-32.

Astrid was no party girl but came when she was invited. The preparations included eating a proper meal so that she did not seem gluttonous but politely poked the food. She started catching up with herself. To accompany the parents at an event could now be “unusually pleasant, insanely amusing, colossal fun, heavenly hilarious”. No more “Do I really have to? I'm so embarrassed I can die. Can't you go alone?” In the summer of 1925 (?) she kept her parents company at the spa resort Mösseberga. Nurse Karin Olsson remembered her well: "Princess Astrid was very dashing and nice. She loved to sit and dangle her legs in a couch and talk to everyone who came by. I know she once said that she hoped to be married but not to anyone – it would have to be the Prince of Wales!”⁷

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Astrid wasn't very familiar with the man-woman relationship. There is a story about her first thought in that direction when she spent time at Fridhem thoughtfully studying the rooster hunting the hens: “Does Mom really think the hen ran as fast as she could?” At 16, Astrid was allowed to attend youth events at the castle and at home. She was no party queen. Astrid dressed discreetly, stayed in the background and worried about her height. In December 1925, she suggested that she had an admirer, but was so secretive about his identity that the sisters named him Monsieur Mystère.

One evening in March 1926 Queen Elisabeth of Belgium and her son Leopold arrived in Stockholm as Madame & son Réthy. They were invited to dinner. Leopold was shy but after dinner danced with Astrid. The reason for their visit was easy to imagine - an inventory of the marriage market. The next day Astrid confided to Anna that Leopold & Monsieur Mystère was actually the same person! They had met at a family party in Luxembourg the year before and he had presented her several compliments.⁸ However, Astrid had competitors - for example the equal age princesses Margaritha & Theodora of Greece & Denmark - so she did not believe the marriage was a given.

Kerstin Wijkmark⁹ has an alternative version where Astrid was to pour tea for Leopold during the party, but accidentally spilled some on his pants and that he then noticed her and fell in love. However, this is said to have happened two months later in May at a ball at Amélienborg.¹⁰

During the summer, Astrid & Monsieur Mystère (now under the incognito Monsieur Philippe) met at Fridhem to get acquainted. At the end of July, Astrid spent 10 days in Belgium being inspected by her parents and in August Leopold proposed. “Monsieur Mystère lived up to the name. No one really understood who he was or what he actually did at Fridhem. If there be guests, he cleaned the rose garden, sometimes you saw him sitting in the sunshine with some princess, sometimes playing with the Danish runts. But what no one saw was the walks with Astrid through the forest up to the view on the mountain. And now it was full moon.”¹¹ During the summer they met Count Hans von Rosen:

When Crown Prince Leopold of Belgium visited Sweden to get engaged to Princess Astrid, a series of events were arranged. Princess Astrid was a delightful creature,

⁷ Olsson 2016.

⁸ Sparre 1985: s. 92.

⁹ Wijkmark 1936: s. 51.

¹⁰ Dayez-Burgeon 1995: s. 71.

¹¹ Sparre 1985: s. 103.

sweet, elegant and very winning - far above the ordinary in the way of being. One felt that behind her slightly shy and cautious appearance was warmth, kindness and goodness.

Do royal figures have easy access to the people they have designated? That is possible. Perhaps a hitherto restrained need to give love and tenderness - in them more intense and stronger because it has been suppressed - insists on coming out. Certainly Princess Astrid felt strongly attracted to Crown Prince Leopold and the budding feeling quickly turned into dedicated love.

Crown Prince Leopold was not easy to understand. Like Princess Astrid, he suffered from shyness, with him even with an element of misanthropy. That orientation, which the princess could well understand, certainly helped to bring the two closer together. It was as if she had shone and smiled for them both. The Crown Prince seemed uncomfortable when one tried talking to him and he certainly seemed awkward by the side of his glorious and happy fiancée.¹²

The engagement was announced on September 21. The civil ceremony took place in the hall of state on November 4. The religious ceremony took place in Brussels on November 10. Astrid arrived by boat to Antwerp on November 8, was greeted with 33 cannon shots and stepped ashore with a great deal of commotion. Several people was trampled to death. Victoria had insisted that Astrid was dressed in white - white velvet with white fox and small white toque - which harmonized with the white-painted warship. As Astrid was a Protestant and Leopold a Catholic, the church wedding took place with a special papal dispensation. Archbishop Nathan Söderblom had hoped for an ecumenical marriage - Lutheran in Sweden, Catholic in Belgium - but had to give in. There was a rumour that Victoria had even sought an audience with the Pope to plead for this double marriage. Astrid herself was indifferent to the issue, promised to raise her children Catholic, tried to convert immediately but had to wait until 1930.¹³

The civil ceremony was performed by the Stockholm Mayor Carl Lindhagen, known Republican and in 1914 even fined for his opinions. Much was made of the piquancy of the situation and every Lindhagen's formulation was carefully scrutinized. Leopold & Astrid were not called their royal highnesses at the wedding, but only with their "professional titles" Prince & Princess. Lindhagen was interviewed afterwards by Danish National-Tidende but was evasive: "L. declared, first, that his republican soul had not been harmed by visiting the castle, and second, that it was his duty to marry whoever so desired."¹⁴

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When resident in Belgium Astrid disappeared under the Swedish radar. When she married, she was only 20 years old. The Swedish judgments about her person are therefore about her teenage years and must be assessed accordingly. Astrid never took part in interviews, but there is a contemporary description of her as a 19-year-old:

When you talk to Princess Astrid, it eventually dawns on you, what "the modern young girl" has lost with her school education, motorcycle sports and jazz. You do not have to be one bit sentimental or outmoded to feel in her something half-born and

¹² von Rosen 1952: ss. 160-161.

¹³ Fornberg 2008.

¹⁴ Lindhagen 1938.

untouched, that her comrades lack, something quiet, which is childish yet dignified, something vibrant and from the core, yet bound by tradition and culture - this infinitely delicate and intangible girl's charm, which even our grandmothers had at their prime, a calm soul, a sense of inner worth, which the rest of us have lost, while fighting for short hair and equal pay for equal work. There's only one word that fits her really well and that's: Princess.¹⁵

Staffan Skott - 70 years later - had a more brutal way of putting it:

It is apparent from the accounts of old classmates that she was an untalented, very kind girl who would gladly burst into tears over anything; When she was confirmed, she cried all the time. She was an upper class family girl of a even then old-fashioned kind that we today hardly can imagine ever having existed. The image that emerges is sweet, terribly immature and no education. At school, she made a particularly poor impression while she apparently blossomed when taking courses in childcare.¹⁶

Even even females seem to appreciate her nowadays: Birgit Persson, the Royal armoury,¹⁷ & Antoinette Ramsay Herthelius, royal librarian,¹⁸ dismiss her as a puppet & media product. A wandering gender role & uterus rather than a living person. It is probably the parallels with Diana Spencer's life that was haunting them. Her cousin Prince Wilhelm instead dwells on Astrid's understanding of what her new position required of her:

We who were close to her, witnessed not without wonder her rapid development from child to thriving young and independent woman. We knew how shy and timid she was as a girl, how extremely sensitive. An innocent squeak, a gentle reproach, a word with the slightest involuntary hint of hardness was enough to trigger a Niagara of tears that did not stop until father or mother took her into their arms and talked sense with their child. So much stronger appeared the metamorphosis when, as the Crown Princess of Belgium, she moved into her new country. It was no longer the Astrid we were used to seeing. Instead someone new, someone capable to take on the many demanding tasks and obligations of the new position - someone who, in a single moment, became aware not only of her responsibility but also of her ability to bear it. Much was expected of her, and she quickly fulfilled all the hopes that an entire people placed on their future Queen. She came, she saw and she won them over.¹⁹

From this, one might think that when Astrid landed in Belgium, she experienced a total reversal (*den Lidnerska knäppen*). Closer to the truth is that she had a lot of royal mentors. She was a combination Swedish-Danish-Norwegian-Belgian crown princess.

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Astrid's life as a Belgian citizen can only partly be recreated with Swedish sources and it took a long time before the Belgian sources tried to penetrate the official image of a perfect marriage and a beloved queen. From the outset she was perceived as an exotic import and was given the nicknames “*la princesse lointain*” (the princess from afar) & “*la princesse des*

¹⁵ Vanja. [Tora Nordström-Bonnier.] ”Prinsessan i köket.” *Bonniers Veckotidning* 1925:24, s. 27.

¹⁶ Skott 1996: s. 254.

¹⁷ Persson 1988.

¹⁸ Ramsay Herthelius 2010: ss. 262-265.

¹⁹ prins Wilhelm 1935.

neiges" (princess snow white). However, I will skip that particular aspect and stick to the everyday.

After the wedding, Astrid went to school for Queen Elisabeth to learn about Belgium, its court and traditions. She got along well with the in-laws - not so strange perhaps because she tried to please them in everything. The advice to friend Anna Sparre on a visit was: "Think about what kind of stories you're telling and stay stay out of trouble. Watch yourself every minute." She also adapted to her husband's wishes & interests: She stopped embroidering because he felt it was harmful to her eyes, stopped eating meat when he became a vegetarian and even went fishing with him - his favourite occupation. Other things she did because it was fun: long walks & golf. Beginning in 1928, she and Leopold travelled the country and were greeted everywhere by cheering crowds. Astrid was young, beautiful, well-coiffed, friendly to everyone & embraced the children. Even later, there was a lot of representation. She was known for the Astrid gesture - an energetic waving with the flower bouquet. Her main interest was child care.

She and Leopold originally spoke English to each other. Upon arrival, she received language teachers in French & Flemish. Leopold corrected her every error and after a few years the French flowed well. She also studied Catholicism in preparation for her conversion. Astrid had hoped that a signature would suffice, but the church demanded that she take it seriously. She was criticized for her dress, which showed her arms and knees. As a dinner partner, she was so-so. Anna Sparre: "She spoke to peasants in the manner of peasants, but certainly not with learned men in Latin." Astrid was embarrassingly aware of this and promised to mend her ways. Her mother had not been a great scholar when she arrived in Sweden, she either! She crammed as much of her surroundings hobby horses as she thought reasonable. All this was exhausting and after the first child she suffered a "nervous depression" by which is probably meant crying spells.

They lived the simple life in a small manor house in Stuyvenberg near Brussels. When possible Astrid behaved like an ordinary housewife. At Christmas, her father-in-law used to sit in an armchair and look on in fascination while the daughter-in-law did everything herself. She cleaned, dressed the Christmas tree, cooked the food & even walked the stroller. In 1927, -30 & -34 she gave birth. In 1929, -32 & -33, the couple travelled long distances in the colonies: Six months in the Indian Archipelago, six months in Indochina & three months in South Africa & Congo. Astrid left the children at home, toured the countries as tourists but also experienced the misery. Astrid's biographers have wanted to derive her social commitment to family traditions such as distributing Christmas presents to the poor or to her father's work in the Red Cross, but it may as well have been an effect of these trips. Confronting what the Belgians did in Congo would upset anyone. Most of her early involvement, however, concerned child care & women's education.

The mother-in-law chose a nurse for child care but Astrid had her own views on the subject. The replacement she got to choose herself. The first year she had no lady in waiting, then she got to choose one herself too. It became Madame Marie-Louise du Roy de Blicquy (1883-1957; b. Davignon). Astrid's reasons for choosing her are not known. Private socializing was minimal. Belgian politics was complicated. It seems to have been impossible to invite one party without insulting another. Astrid's mother and sisters often visited. During the summers Astrid visited Fridhem. Her children were tightly held - Astrid demanded obedience in everything - but there was no corporal punishment.

Astrid's chambermaid Greta Eriksson has given some interiors:²⁰ She doubled as a companion. Astrid was kind, talkative and caring but at the same time kept her distance: "She was somehow high above you and yet on the same plane. She herself could make others happy and create joy and sunshine in their life." Eriksson had only once seen her really angry. It was when, during a train trip, the customs officials took her incognito seriously, pretended not to understand who she was and inspected her luggage.

Astrid started the day with coffee, cream and an egg. Then a warm bath, brush your teeth & read the morning paper. Beauty care was reduced to a minimum. She powdered herself & a little red to the receptions. The clothing account and personal jewellery was significant, however. In the evening there was a concert, theatre, cinema, reading, writing letters or Russian billiards. She devoted most of her time to writing letters, not only to her family but to every person with whom she had any relationship.

February 17, 1934, her father-in-law died during mountaineering and Astrid became Queen. There was no coronation ceremony, but Leopold gave his oath of succession to follow the Constitution. The mother-in-law resigned and the responsibility for her social activities was transferred to Astrid, who made many well-publicized visits to the sick and unemployed. Her personal style of down-played royalty was well received. The winter of 1934/35 was economically difficult for the miners in particular. Astrid February 17, 1935, signed a petition to create local committees for food and clothing - over 2000 of them - her most famous achievement.

On August 29, 1935, Astrid died in a car accident. Since it was a single car accident, there was much discussion about the cause. Astrid seems to have somehow distracted Leopold, who drove off the road and collided with a tree. The car was destroyed. The driver who was temporarily in the back seat injured his leg. Leopold was knocked unconscious. Astrid was thrown head first into a tree and died of the injury. A chapel was later built there.

Her legacy was mixed. It was about her immaturity & intellectual flaws, about her beauty, noble background, goodwill & heart, about her image of perfect daughter, mother, wife, daughter-in-law & queen and finally about something strange that had briefly visited the country. She seems to have fulfilled a collective fantasy about two incompatible qualities in the same person: both frail & perfect, both bourgeois & royal, of the earth & of the myth. The religious parallels were quite obvious and candles were burnt in front of her photographs as were she the Madonna. From a political point of view, she appears by simultaneously so known (in appearance) and so uncontroversial, been a good fit as national symbol. Belgium was a marriage of reason between three regions and something was needed to unite them. Already upon her arrival she was considered exotic - that is to say, belonging to the fairy tale world rather than Sweden - and that trend was exploited after her death so that through images, memorials, historical parallels & hagiographies she was transformed into a purely Belgian icon. She is best known for her photographs by Robert Marchand. He left behind him 87 heavily retouched portraits of the family & of her alone which all seem to have been arranged by Astrid herself. She was at her best en face. The profile pictures were a little stiff. The official portraits of her in formal dress were even stiffer. It was no longer Astrid, but someone from the John Bauer forest, barely discernible in the chiaroscuro.

²⁰ Eriksson 1937.