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VICTORIA
In Germany

BRANDENBURG-
Bayreuth

CHRISTIAN
& Elizabeth



Prince Christian of Hesse and Elizabeth Reid Rogers

by Richard Jay Hutto

Following World War I, there was great speculation about which royal German relation would be the first to be entertained privately at Buckingham Palace. The Royal family had changed its name in 1917 as a result of anti-German sentiment during the war which was particularly prevalent after London was bombed.¹ The family name, Saxe-Coburg & Gotha, had been that of Queen Victoria's German husband. The new name of "Windsor" came from the family's castle and was suggested by King George V's private secretary.

For King George V, there were many German possible invitees, including numerous cousins, aunts, and uncles, and he knew his choice must be above reproach. The opportunity arose when his mother, the dowager Queen Alexandra, died of a heart attack at Sandringham on November 20, 1925. Her coffin rested at the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace, until it was taken to Westminster Abbey for a short service- She was interred on November 28 next to her husband at St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. One of the mourners who attended her service was Prince Christian of Hesse whose mother was a first cousin of the late queen whom he called, "Aunt Alix". He was listed as having visited her alone in 1905 when he was only 18.² He also visited Queen Alexandra in 1914 when Empress Marie Feodorovna and Queen Olga were staying with her at Marlborough House. It was that relatively unknown prince who was asked, along

with other royal guests, to dine privately with the king and queen on November 30 at Buckingham Palace as announced in the Court Circular.³ What was the reason to give a little-known minor prince – a second cousin of King George V - such a public recognition?

Prince Christian was born at Louisenlund Castle in Güby, Schleswig-Holstein on June 16, 1887. His father, Prince Wilhelm, of Hesse-Philippsthal-Barchfeld, was married four times. The branch of Hesse-Philippsthal, was created at the death of Wilhelm VI, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel in 1663, when his younger son Philipp was created Landgrave of Hesse-Philippsthal. At the death of Landgrave Philipp, the branch of Hesse-Philippsthal was again divided, his younger son Wilhelm becoming the Landgrave of Hesse-Philippsthal-Barchfeld.

Prince Christian was the only child of his father's last marriage to Princess Augusta of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, by whom he was a distant cousin of Dona, wife of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Prince Christian's lineage through his mother's first cousins was much stronger. Through her father's brother, King Christian IX of Denmark, Princess Augusta was a first cousin of King Frederik VIII of Denmark, Queen Alexandra of Great Britain, King George I of Greece, Empress Maria Feodorovna of Russia, Crown Princess Thyra of Hanover, and Prince Valdemar of Denmark. Additionally, Prince Christian's half-sister, Bertha, was the



wife of Leopold IV, head of house and Prince of Lippe.

Christian's father, Prince Wilhelm, married as his first wife Princess Maria of Hanau-Hořowitz. She was the daughter of Friedrich Wilhelm, Elector of Hesse, by amorganatic union with Gertrude von Hanau, which meant their children were not acknowledged as Hessian princes and so neither were those of Wilhelm and Maria. They divorced in 1872, and in 1876 Kaiser Wilhelm I created her Princess of Ardeck, a title which was extended to their children, who were excluded from the Hesse succession (the eldest son would marry American heiress Anne Hollingsworth Price).

Wilhelm's second wife was Princess Adelheid of Bentheim-Bentheim and Bentheim-Steinfurt, and their only surviving son. Prince Chlodwig, would eventually become head of the house. In 1905, he inherited the family's wealth and assets when he succeeded their uncle Landgrave Alexis as head of the House of Hesse-Philippsthal-Barchfeld. Prince Chlodwig in 1925 succeeded his distant cousin as Landgrave of Hesse-Phillippsthal giving him a seat in the Prussian House of Lords. Even though Prince Christian, our subject, was the eight child, he was second in line until his brother, Chlodwig, had a son.

Prince Christian joined the Imperial German Navy in 1905. During the summer of 1912, he was Lieutenant Commander onboard the cruiser SMS *Stettin* when she joined the battlecruiser *Moltke* and the cruiser *Bremen* for a goodwill visit to the United States. They arrived in New York City⁴ on June 9, 1912, accompanied by four U.S. battle ships, and anchored in the Hudson River between 80th and 100th Streets. There was a lengthy list of prominent citizens appointed to a committee to ensure they were properly entertained.

On their way to New York City, however, they would first be entertained in Washington. After docking at Hampton Roads, Virginia, on June 3, the men were hosted by the Atlantic fleet. On June 5, the officers traveled to Washington, DC, where they were received by President Taft and enjoyed dinner at the White House. They visited the Naval Academy at Annapolis and toured George Washington's home, Mount Vernon, before departing for New York City. In anticipation of their Washington visit, it was noted that, "Prince Christian von Hessen-Philippsthal-Barchfeld and Prince Heinrich XXXVII von Reuss [actually Prince Heinrich XXXVIII] are coming with the squadron. They are both young, unmarried, and desirous of seeing New York society, of which they have heard so much."⁵ Earlier reports said that the Kaiser's third son, Prince Adalbert, was "certain" to accompany the group, but he did not.⁶

Among the dignitaries invited to host the group in Washington was attorney Richard Reid Rogers who in 1906 had been appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt as Counsel for the Isthmian Canal Commission that built the Panama Canal. Later that year the President abolished the office of Governor of the Panama Canal, placing all of his duties in the hands of its Counsel, effectively making Rogers the unnamed Governor. Rogers was permitted to operate from Washington, DC, where he lived with his wife and their only child, daughter Elizabeth Reid Rogers. Her father for decades also served as general counsel for the Metropolitan Street Railways that operated the surface transit lines in New York City. He was influential and prosperous but certainly did not have a conspicuously large fortune as that of the Vanderbilts or Astors that would attract penniless princes.

At the time Prince Christian met Elizabeth, she was described as, "a Kentucky beauty [actually she was from Tennessee], just out of her teens [who] was a leader in the small circle of society girls with a fondness for athletes and the bachelors of the diplomatic corps. She was the youngest and the star woman fencer in society, her rapier having won her conquests over some of the most accomplished masculine fencers in Washington."⁷ During the Navy visit to Washington, Elizabeth was, "a belle in her set, and when the German naval officers from the visiting squadron were in Washington she was the life and soul of the impromptu gayeties into which the officers plunged with exhilaration."⁸

After an exciting sojourn in Washington, the German officers and men continued to the festivities waiting for them in New York City. "Among the officers of this ship [*Moltke*] is Ensign Prince Henry XXXVIII, of Reuss. Prince Christian of Hesse-Philippsthal-Barchfeld is one of the junior officers aboard the *Stettin*. Baron von Senarclens-Grancy, who is the Executive Officer, and Baron von Liebenstein, who is a midshipman, are also among the officers of the *Stettin*."⁹

It is likely that Prince Christian and Elizabeth Rogers corresponded with one another after their initial meeting in Washington. She was educated in Paris, presented at the Court of St. James's, and made her debut in Washington "at a brilliant ball."¹⁰ She was traveling with her parents on a world tour in 1914 when they visited Cairo, Egypt, where they not only were reacquainted with Prince Christian but also met his half-brother, Prince Chlodwig, who was head of his Hessian family branch.

"Prince Chlodwig was charmed with Elizabeth. He decided that she would be the ideal wife for his younger



Prince Christian as a young Navy officer, 1914

brother...At the time, Prince Christian was desperately ill with typhoid fever...Christian did recover, but by that time Elizabeth was in England. The brothers Hesse lost no time in locating her and within two weeks Christian proposed.”¹¹

Although the *New York Times* reported that Elizabeth’s father’s consent was “hard to obtain,” the bride was delighted when her parents gave their approval conditioned only upon the consent of his mother, Princess Augusta. Mrs. Rogers and her daughter were received by the Princess at her “widow’s seat” in Hesse, Schloss Rotenburg an der Fulda, where the princess, “was enchanted by the vivacious American girl.”¹² It was noted that the prince, “is willing to make all needful sacrifices to marry the young American, even to renouncing his title of prince and his place at court.”¹³

Once the American media became aware of the relationship between the young couple, their uninformed reporters began repeating their own mistakes. Because Prince Christian was a distant cousin of the Kaiserin of Germany, he began to be referred to as her great-nephew and that error quickly spread until the prince was eventually identified in newspapers as a nephew of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The engagement was said to be subject to the approval of the Kaiser, even though Prince Christian was not a member of the Hohenzollern family although he was in the Kaiser’s navy.¹⁴

Media assumptions did not end there, however. Because the prince’s mother was a first cousin of the Russian Dowager Tsarina Maria Feodorovna, reports insisted that,

“it is well-known in court circles that the German empress had planned that Prince Christian, who is her favorite nephew, should marry the Czar’s oldest daughter, Grand Duchess Olga, and thus strengthen the influence of Germany in Russia. The union obviously could not take place during the war, but it is no secret that even now the empress has not abandoned all hope of bringing it about later. To her great annoyance, the prince insists on giving up rank, wealth, the possibility of endless power in Russia to marry a comparatively penniless American girl. It is amazing!”¹⁵

The widely-reprinted article carried a large photo of the prince in uniform between photos of Elizabeth Rogers and Grand Duchess Olga, with these subheadings:

“If Prince Christian of Hesse, the nephew of Emperor William, marries Miss Rogers he loses his rights to the throne of Hesse and the family castles and estates and his present rank as member of a reigning house. If the Prince marries Olga, he gains imperial rank and a great position, enormous wealth and possibilities of unlimited power in the coming rearrangement of the European map.”¹⁶

Prince Christian’s grandson, Prince Alexander, recalls, “Empress Augusta was known for her passion for matchmaking in European royalty. However nothing



The Hesse couple at the Pimlico races in Baltimore, 1923

came of it in the end.”¹⁷ Of course, even allowing for the multiple errors, the Grand Duchess Olga and all her family would be dead within three and a half years. The article correctly recounts that Prince Christian’s “head of his family is the Grand Duke of Hesse, who is a grandson of Queen Victoria and whose sister married the Czar of Russia...His only brother is the head of [his] branch, and is very rich. Prince Christian does not have much money of his own beyond what his family allows him.” His intended bride, “Miss Rogers is a pretty and accomplished society girl, but without large fortune, such as might perhaps reconcile a royal family to her defects of birth...There is nothing in Miss Rogers’s fortune to prove an overwhelming attraction to a Prince, and it is plainly a case of youthful ardor on his part.”¹⁸

Knowing that the groom would be sacrificing a great deal in order to enter into an unequal morganatic marriage, the article warned, “The position of a morganatic wife or of a wife who is a detriment to her husband is one that reverses all the ideals of the typical American girl [who] is not trained to endure humiliation, degradation and self-sacrifice for the sake of a husband.”¹⁹ At the time their engagement was announced, the prince was a submarine officer stationed at Kiel and she was “passing the winter in Berlin.”²⁰ The engagement was, “a culmination of a romance that began when a German squadron visited American waters. Again last winter they met in Cairo, Egypt, and since that time the Prince has pressed his courtship with vigor.”²¹

Duly warned, Prince Christian married Elizabeth Rogers at Berlin’s (Protestant) Holy Trinity Church on January 14, 1915. Only hours before the wedding, Elizabeth was given by the Grand Duke of Hesse the title of Baroness von Barchfeld. She lost her U.S. citizenship and was aware that she and her children would not be able to share or inherit her husband’s titles.



Prince and Princess Christian with their children, from left, Waldemar, Olga, Richard, and Augusta in 1924

Their first child, Elizabeth Augusta, was born in Berlin on 2 November 1915. They were expecting again in 1917 when something else of great importance changed their lives. By 1917, Germany had 140 U-boats and had destroyed about 30 percent of the world's merchant ships. Germany had substantially halted its practice of unrestricted submarine warfare but in early 1917 announced it was returning to its earlier policy. U-boats resumed their unrestricted attacks against all ships plying the Atlantic, including civilian passenger cruise liners.

President Woodrow Wilson formally broke diplomatic relations with Germany in February of 1917 as a direct response to its resumed policy. Prince Christian, a submarine officer, wrote an open letter to Kaiser Wilhelm II opposing Germany's return to unrestricted submarine warfare. In fact, he resigned his commission in protest.²² Several years later on a visit to the US, Elizabeth reminded a reporter that her husband had predicted the downfall of the empire over the issue, "And events proved that my husband was right."²³

Queen Louise of Denmark, Queen Olga of Greece, the Grand Duchess Marie Feodorovna of Russia, and Prince Christopher of Greece were the godparents at the christening of the infant daughter of Prince and Princess Christian of Hesse, which took place recently at Nice. The Bishop of Gibraltar officiated. The child received the names of Marie Louise Olga Victoria. Among those present at the ceremony were the King of Sweden, the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess Cyril of Russia, and Princess Alexis Karageorgevich.

Many illustrious godparents for youngest child, Olga, who was called "Tita" in the family

The family wisely left Berlin and moved to Switzerland where their second child, Wilhelm Richard, was born near La Tour de Peilz on Lake Geneva on 14 October 1917, followed by the birth of Waldemar there on 20 September 1919. Daughter Marie Louise was born in France on 30 December 1921. That year would also bring a change in the family's status. On November 14, Prince Christian's elder half-brother and head of house, Prince Chlodwig, officially permitted Elizabeth and her children to bear the title of prince and princess although the marriage was still considered morganatic.

The family also spent time in the United States. In August 1923, the prince and princess were being driven with her parents on the way to Locust Valley when they suffered a serious accident. The chauffeur was badly injured while his passengers received only cuts and bruises.²⁴ Later that year they were staying at the Plaza Hotel in New York City where they gave a large Christmas reception for Sir John Maxwell and his American-born wife, Lady Maxwell (née Louisa Bonyng), that included an impressive guest list.²⁵ They spent the winter season that year at Aiken, South Carolina where a newspaper headline again got it wrong, declaring, "Late Kaiser's Nephew is Staying at Aiken."²⁶ Seeking a permanent home, in 1925 her mother purchased for them the palatial 28-room Villa Mariposa in Cannes and it became their home for years. They continued to be listed in the U.S. Social Register at Villa Mariposa.

It was also that year, on November 30, 1925, when "Prince Christian of Hesse visited the King and Queen on Monday and remained to luncheon."²⁷

Having resigned his Navy commission and written a critical open letter to the Kaiser, no one could accuse Prince Christian of harboring pro-German sentiments. A few months later their Villa Mariposa was broken into and thieves stole several valuable items.²⁸ During Cannes' annual Battle of Flowers early in 1927, the prince and princess hosted a luncheon party at Villa Mariposa that included Prince and Princess Paul of Serbia, the Earl and Countess of Oxford and Asquith, and other titled guests.²⁹ On February 25, 1928, they hosted a luncheon party there for Christian X, King of Denmark, and Queen Alexandrine at which Sir Henry Norman, 1st Baronet, and Lady Norman were also guests.³⁰ Only two months later their guests included the "ex-Shah of Persia."³¹

Although there is no indication that Elizabeth joined her husband for his historic visit to the king and queen at Buckingham Palace in 1925, by 1934 Prince and Princess Christian both appeared regularly in the royal retinue. When Maharaja Vijaysinji of Rajpipla's horse won the historic Epsom Derby in England in 1934, there was a large royal contingent, including,

"Prince and Princess Arthur of Connaught, and Prince and Princess Christian of Hesse and their young daughter, Princess Augusta, also attended. The King wore morning clothes and a silk hat. The Queen was in a dress of delicate pearl grey wool georgette with a vest of chiffon – with a toque to match..."



Left: Elizabeth in middle age Right: Prince and Princess Christian peruse a newspaper article about her

Prince and Princess Christian of Hesse with their daughter, the dark-haired 18 year-old Princess Augusta, who was seeing the Derby for the first time.³²

In January of 1939, Princess Christian was joined by her children skiing at St. Moritz.³³ Obviously they no longer considered Germany their home. “Christian had been an outspoken anti-Nazi and dared not go back. Elizabeth’s two sons were held by the Nazis in Berlin. After ten months, they were permitted to join her.”³⁴ In 1941, Berlin radio announced that Prince and Princess Christian of Hesse “and their four children have been deprived of their German nationality”³⁵ “...and their property confiscated. Competent German informants said they did not know the reasons for the withdrawal. The Hesse names were among those of 148 persons, most of them Jews, similarly deprived of nationality and property.”³⁶

Quite a few other members of the Hesse family joined the Nazis as party members. Prince Christian’s elder brother, Landgrave Chlodwig, had five children, three of whom joined the Nazi party. They were Wilhelm, Alexander Friedrich, and Viktoria. His third son, Prince Alexander Friedrich, suffered from epilepsy. Despite being a loyal party member, he was sterilized (*Unfruchtbarmachung*) as genetically deficient by the Nazis on September 27, 1938, and died one year later.³⁷ Chlodwig’s eldest son and heir, Prince Wilhelm, was a Nazi head storm leader (equivalent to a captain) who was killed in action in Russia in 1942 and was eventually succeeded by his son, Wilhelm, as head of house and Landgrave.

Prince and Princess Christian were able to obtain Swiss passports as she had lost her US citizenship

at her marriage. After World War II they wished to re-settle in the US and she actively sought to have her citizenship restored. Thirty-three years after she left her country, “She knocked at Uncle Sam’s door and asked to come in. She had sat out two wars as a citizen of a defeated nation, known hunger, physical want and heartbreak. She wanted back her American citizenship.”³⁸

She formally sought for her new name to be, “Elizabeth Princess Hesse,” because, “my friends all call me Princess.”³⁹ As society gossip columnist Count Igor Cassini wrote, “Whether the former Elizabeth Rogers could come back to the sheltering arms of Uncle Samuel, merely by voicing the simple oath of allegiance, is a matter that has given the State Department a problem. Because, as is generally known, when she applied for the precious change [in citizenship], the Princess requested that the title be contained within her name.”⁴⁰ “Friends of Elizabeth said she was a stickler for protocol, immensely proud of her Royal connections, frequently referred to ‘my cousin the King,’ and insisted on having the place at formal dinners to which her rank entitled her. So they quite naturally wondered if she would be willing to give up all of that.”⁴¹

She recalled, “It was a happy world we lived in before the first war. One enjoyed life. Even between the wars there was freedom of thought. Then came Hitler. Now the Hitler era is ended. But we have the Russians, another threat to world peace. The United States is the last real bulwark against Communism.”⁴²

Elizabeth was successful at having her citizenship restored. When she died at Villa Mariposa in France, on February 2, 1957, the official “Report Of the Death of

An American Citizen” issued by the American Foreign Service listed her as “Elizabeth de Hesse.” Their sons earned economics degrees at the University of Geneva before moving to Texas. They became independent oil producers and lived in Texas and Mexico where they used the family name, “de Hesse,” while the daughters returned to Europe and married. Prince Christian wed in 1958 an Australian widow, Ann Pearl Field, and died in Geneva, Switzerland on October 19, 1971, then joined his first wife in the Cimetière du Grand Jas de Cannes. He has several male descendants to continue the family line.



Notes

- 1 London was a primary target because the River Thames made it simple to navigate from the air. Between 1914 and 1918 there were 52 German aerial raids on London.
- 2 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 8 Mar 1905.
- 3 “British King Dines German Prince First Time Since War,” *The Sunday Vindicator* (Youngstown, OH), Dec 20, 1925.
- 4 “To Greet German Squadron,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1912.
- 5 “Society at Home and Abroad,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1912. Prince Henry Reuss XXXVIII would be killed in action at Liny, Brabant, Belgium, on Mar 22, 1918, having never married. He was buried at the Helenen-Paulownen Mausoleum at Ludwigslust Palace.
- 6 “Prince Coming in June,” *New York Times*, 13 Feb 1912.
- 7 American Society Woman Becomes Morganatic Wife of Nephew of Kaiser Wilhelm,” *The Youngstown Daily Vindicator*, 18 January 1915. p 7.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 “German Squadron In Hudson Today,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 1912. Baron Alexander Ludwig von Senarclens-Grancy (1880-1964) was a German naval officer and diplomat. He joined the Imperial German navy in 1898 and was transferred to the diplomatic service as military attaché in 1913. He served as naval attaché in Rome August 1913 to May 1915, and was then stationed in Greece, Romania and Turkey. From 1920 he served as aide-de-camp of the exiled former German Emperor Wilhelm II. Around 1920, Senarclens-Grancy became confidential agent and honorary aide de camp of the abdicated former German Emperor in his exile in Doorn, the Netherlands. (Walter H. Kaufmann: *Monarchism in the Weimar Republic*. p 211). Baron Gustav von Liebenstein (1891-1967) was a highly-decorated officer who received the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for his actions in World War II.
- 10 Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader, 17 Jan 1915.
- 11 Frances Spatz, *Homecoming of a Princess*, *The Esoteric Curiosa*, 21 Dec 2012; <https://theesotericcuriosa.blogspot.com/2012/12/german-princess-with-american-roots.html>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 “Will Wed German Prince” *New York Times*, 16 Dec 1914.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 “Which One Do You Think The Prince Chose?” *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington), p 22, 31 Jan 1915.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Email to the author from Prince Alexander of Hesse-Philippsthal-Barchfeld, 12 Aug 2024.
- 18 See footnote 15.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 *New York Herald* (European edition), 8 Jan 1915.
- 21 *Lexington Herald-Leader* (Lexington, KY), 17 Jan 1915, p 1 (her father was from a prominent Kentucky family).
- 22 “A nice family to have”. *Toledo Blade*. 19 Apr 1923. p 5
- 23 “Prince Christian Here With His Wife,” *New York Times*, 10 Apr 1923.
- 24 *New York Times*, 14 Aug 1923.
- 25 “Hosts to Sir John and Lady Maxwell,” *New York Times*, 24 Dec 1923. Lady Maxwell’s half-sister, Virginia Daniel, was Viscountess Deerhurst and mother of the 10th Earl of Coventry who was killed in action.
- 26 *The Observer* (Aiken, SC), 11 Mar 1924.
- 27 *Western Mail* (Glamorgan, Wales), 1 Dec 1925, p 7. *Sunday Vindicator* (Ohio), 20 Dec 1925
- 28 *Lincolnshire Echo* (Lincolnshire, England), 19 Apr 1926, p 3.
- 29 *The Sketch: A Journal of Art and Actuality*, vol. 137, Jan-Mar, 1927; p 398.
- 30 *Surrey Advertiser-County Times*, Guildford, Surrey, 25 Feb 1928. The Villa Mariposa was demolished in 1973.
- 31 *The Tatler* (London, England), 11 Apr 1928, p 60.
- 32 Indra Vikram Singh, *A Maharajah’s Turf*, *Sporting Links*, 2011, p 19. The maharajah was the only Indian owner ever to win the Derby. They also attended two days of Royal Ascot that year
- 33 *The Tatler* (London, England), 18 Jan 1939, p 24.
- 34 Spatz.
- 35 *The Montreal Gazette* (Montreal, Canada), 17 Jul 1941.
- 36 “Nazis Deprive Prince of Reich Citizenship,” *New York Times*, 17 Jul 1941.
- 37 Jonathan Petropoulos, *Royals and the Reich: The Princes von Hessen in Nazi Germany*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p 250. “Members of the Hesse-Philippsthal family maintained – and continue to do so to this day – that there was no hereditary illness in the family and that Prince Alexis’s condition was caused by a fall from a horse as a child.”
- 38 Spatz
- 39 Spatz.
- 40 Igor Cassini, *Reading Eagle* (Reading, PA), 4 Dec 1948.
- 41 Spatz.
- 42 Spatz.