



ROYALTY DIGEST

Quarterly

② 2023

Started in 2006, Royalty Digest Quarterly is a journal devoted to the history, genealogy and images of the Royal Families of Europe.



HOCHBERG
Pless after Daisy

THURN & TAXIS
A Family Album

TEGERNSEE
The Crypt

Princess Ella - a life richly lived

by Richard Jay Hutto

When Prince Alesandro della Torre e Tasso (1881-1937), 1st Duke of Castel Duino, of the Czech-Bohemian branch of the House of Thurn & Taxis and head of the Italian branch, died at his palatial Duino Castle overlooking the Gulf of Trieste,¹ his very wealthy American wife was by his side. Prince Alesandro, born in 1881 at Schloss Mzell/Mcely in Bohemia, was a son of Prince Alexander Johann of Thurn & Taxis and his wife, arts patron Princess Marie of Hohenlohe-Waldenburg-Schillingsfürst.

After relocating to the Kingdom of Italy in 1923, he was naturalized as an Italian citizen and created Prince della Torre e Tasso and 1st Duke of Castel Duino by King Victor Emmanuel III. Before his move, Prince Alesandro had been a member of the Privy Council of the Emperor of Austria-Hungary. After the first world war, his properties in the former empire were located on land lost to Italy.² He also owned estates in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia valued in 1925 at \$17,500,000.³ He was one of the few princely husbands of American heiresses who did not covet her wealth although her first husband did.

Helena “Ella” Holbrook Walker, born in Detroit in 1875, was a granddaughter of Hiram Walker, a multi-millionaire liquor distiller who created the company that bore his name. After distilling his own cider, in 1856 he purchased property in Windsor, Ontario, on the Canadian side of the river across from Detroit. His development became “Walkerville” and his great success threatened U.S. distillers who had Congress declare that liquor must be identified by where it was produced – thus the birth of “Canadian Club whiskey.” In the 1880s Walker moved his family back to Detroit and built both a short railway and a ferry service to connect Walkerville to Detroit.⁴

Ella Walker’s first marriage in 1897 was the biggest social event Detroit had yet seen. More than 500 guests consumed delicacies catered by Sherry’s restaurant in New York City. The couple met during Ella’s visit to Cairo, Egypt in 1895 while her future husband was serving in the personal guard regiment for Kaiser Wilhelm II. Not surprisingly, there was a “red lemonade” spiked with whiskey to celebrate the marriage of “the Canadian Club girl” to her Hungarian groom, Count Manfred von Matuschka, Baron von Toppolczan and Spaetgen

(1869-1947). The product of a prominent Silesian family, he was a lieutenant in the imperial bodyguard of the kaiser. He was attended by three fellow officers while the bridesmaids included Susie Quay, daughter of Pennsylvania’s U.S. Senator Matthew Quay.⁵ There was both a civil and a religious ceremony then the couple left for New York City where they would sail to Europe.⁶

The groom’s family had inherited Biechow Palace in 1856. They were granted the title of baron in 1715 and in 1747 the title of Prussian counts. Ella’s husband, as the eldest son, inherited the palace as a minor in 1884. At Ella’s arrival at Biechow Palace, she was described as, “a beautiful woman with a slight stature. She had chestnut hair and a light complexion. She had sparkling blue eyes and a wonderfully captivating smile.”⁷

Alas, the palace had been badly burned at one point and Ella found its rooms small and unattractive. She promptly used her extensive fortune to make substantive alterations and even added an annex on the north side. She did everything she could to turn it into a property, “in the style of a country house in England.”⁸

Ella’s husband was a naturalized German citizen and, when the first world war broke out, he fought on the side of the Kaiser. According to U.S. law at the time, she was stripped of her U.S. citizenship and denied access to her fortune, including any businesses in which she owned a joint interest. Her American family could do nothing for her as she was living behind enemy lines. There had been no children born of the union so that diversion was also denied her although she did adopt her husband’s niece, Countess Huberta Matuschka.⁹

In 1921, although still married, Ella moved to Rome where she became a confidante of the acid-tongued Princess di Faustino (an American called “Princess Jane” by everyone) and her foil, Duchess Nicoletta Grazioli. In 1925 Ella gave a luncheon party in Rome attended by both Princess Jane and Duchess Nicoletta. Another guest was the American-born Muriel, Countess Seherr-Thoss, whose father, Henry White, had been the U.S. Ambassador to France and to Italy after serving for years in London as everyone’s favorite diplomat and dinner guest. Muriel, who then lived with her husband in Upper Silesia, wrote a long letter to her father that day recounting the hurtful gossip spewed at the luncheon by Princess Jane. She also wrote of her hostess, Ella, who



Ella Holbrook Walker, Principessa della Torre e Tasso, by Conrad Kiesel

[Courtesy of the Rockefeller Foundation]



Prince Alessandro della Torre e Tasso, 1st Duke of Castel Duino 1881-1837

Right: Duino Castle is a fourteenth-century fortification on the cliffs overlooking the Gulf of Trieste.

lived apart from her husband, Count Matuschka, and, “wakes up every morning feeling as gay as a lark because she is free from her husband (who nearly wore her out with his nerves & temper...) and over the thought that she need never to go back to Upper Silesia.”¹⁰ Ella Matuschka divorced her husband at Berlin in October of 1925 and the marriage was annulled. He later married a much younger Georgian emigrant, Galla Avniely (1909-1977), whom he met in Paris.¹¹

On December 6, 1930, Ella married at Versailles American socialite James Hazen Hyde (1876-1959) who inherited from his father, at the age of 23, the majority stockholding ownership of the billion-dollar Equitable Life Assurance Company. After he was roundly criticized for hosting a 1905 over-the-top costume ball, he resigned from The Equitable and relocated to France. Hyde’s first wife, whom he married in 1913, had been Marthe Leishman, widow of Count Louis de Gontaut-Biron. Marthe’s father, John G. A. Leishman, formerly president of the Carnegie Steel Company, was the U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland, Turkey, Italy, and Germany. Marthe was given away at the wedding by her sister’s husband, the 13th Duke of Croÿ. The Croÿs created years of legal challenges because of his marriage to an American commoner, Nancy Leishman.¹²

Although the Hydys had a son, Henry Baldwin Hyde, II, who would become an early C.I.A. operative, Marthe’s strong loyalties to Germany did not sit well with her husband and they were divorced in 1918. Ella’s marriage to Hyde lasted only months and they, too, were divorced.¹³ In 1929, Ella embarked on her most ambitious project and one which would prove to be her lasting legacy. The Grand Hotel in Bellagio was housed in the palatial Villa Serbelloni overlooking Lake Como. She purchased the villa and remained in Rome during its extensive renovations. The work would take almost two years before she made it her principal residence.

Newly ensconced as the chatelaine of Villa Serbelloni, Ella married for the third and final time, in 1932, Prince

Alessandro, Duke of Castel Duino, who had been divorced from his first wife in 1919. Ella and he married at Vrana, Croatia, on October 18, 1932. Although the Gotha noted that the “mariage non conforme aux lois de la maison” and was thus unequal, Ella was allowed her husband’s style and became known as “Her Serene Highness” (although they were moved from the 2nd section of the Gotha to the 3rd section).¹⁴

Ella remained principally at her Villa Serbelloni and he at his Castel Duino but they were content and often visited one another.¹⁵ Ella had regained her U.S. citizenship in 1932 as well as access to her American fortune and she spent it lavishly on both properties. When the prince died in 1937, Ella could have lost her title, which was her husband’s, but in a 1939 royal decree signed by King Vittorio Emanuele III, King of Italy, and by Mussolini as head of the Italian government, she was granted her right to keep the title until her death in appreciation for her expenditures on renovations at both properties.¹⁶ At Villa Serbelloni, she entertained King Farouk of Egypt, Princess Jolanda (daughter of Italy’s king), and the French poet Paul Valéry. She depended upon the expertise of her friend, Hélié, Duc de Talleyrand-Périgord (whose American wife was the very wealthy Anna Gould, formerly the wife of his cousin, Count Boni de Castellane), to advise her on purchasing art and furnishings for the villa.¹⁷

Prince Alessandro’s first wife was Princess Marie de Ligne, daughter of the 9th Prince de Ligne and of Elisabeth de La Rochefoucauld, daughter of the Duc de Doudeauville. They had three children together before their divorce:

- Prince Raimundo who succeeded his father as 2nd Duke of Castel Duino and married Princess Eugénie of Greece and Denmark (formerly the wife of Prince Dominik Radziwill), daughter of Prince George and of Princess Marie Bonaparte. The only son of Princess Eugenie and of the 2nd



Princess Ella towards the end of her life.

Duke succeeded as the 3rd Duke and has two sons and a nephew.

- Prince Luigi married American heiress Frances “Fanny” Goodyear. They had one son before their divorce.
- Princess Margaret married Prince Gaetano of Bourbon-Parma, youngest of 24 children of Robert I, last sovereign Duke of Parma and Piacenza. Their marriage was unhappy and they had a daughter, Princess Diane, who married Franz Joseph, Prince of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, but they were divorced when it was disclosed that Diane’s husband was not the biological father of their son. Their marriage was annulled and she married the boy’s father and had two more children by him.

Nazi officers appeared at the Villa Serbelloni in October of 1943 and ordered Ella to leave within 24 hours so they could appropriate the villa as a rest home for the German Air Force. Taking with her what few possessions she could, the princess then was taken in a rowboat across Lake Como where she stayed for several days at Menaggio at the home of Duchess Vittoria Sermoneta. Fearing arrest, however, she walked across the mountains into Switzerland guided by smugglers who knew how to escape detection. “Her shoes were worn to shreds when she arrived and, exhausted, was taken to a clinic. There she lived in a single room for the rest of the war, sharing the income from her trust in the United States with members of her husband’s family in Italy.”¹⁸

In her room at the St. Anna Clinic in Lugano (founded by the Society of St. Anne in 1922) from October 1944 to April 1946, her great-niece confirmed that “she never complained.” She was joined by her step-granddaughter, Princess Diane de Bourbon Parma, who lived with her for much of her childhood.¹⁹ Eventually, in April of 1945 American soldiers, later joined by British troops, took control of Villa Serbelloni and began distributing food supplies to local residents.²⁰

Ella returned to her villa at the end of the war and concentrated on its extensive gardens. In her later years, her secretary described her as, “a beautiful woman of rather small stature, perfectly proportioned, with auburn hair which became perfectly white in her old age; a fair complexion, magnificent blue eyes, and a marvelous smile; most affable and winning in her intercourse, but at the same time always full of dignity.”²¹ In 1959 she began to investigate options for Villa Serbelloni to preserve it and its furnishings. Princess Diane of Bourbon-Parma discussed with her the hope that it might be a benefit, “to the world, particularly to Italy and the United States.”²²

The princess worked closely with the Rockefeller Foundation to accept her gift of the villa, its art and furnishings, plus \$2 million for ongoing maintenance. The remainder of her estate, worth more than \$8 million, was left to her first husband’s adopted niece, Huberta. Only one week after the transfer documents had been signed, Ella died at the age of 84 in her bedroom at the Villa Serbelloni on June 20, 1959. She was buried at Duino Castle, which her ample funds had benefitted, near her last husband.²³ The Bellagio Foundation, under the direction of the Rockefeller Foundation, continues to operate the villa for, “the promotion of international understanding.”²⁴



Raymundo and Eugenie of Greece

Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio



Villa Serbelloni has a very ancient history. In 1566 it was the property of the Sfondrati family, then passed on to Count Alessandro Serbelloni, who was more interested in the immense park than the villa. After having been used as a hotel since 1870, it was purchased by Princess Ella who left it as an inheritance in 1959 to the Rockefeller Foundation. Today the villa is used as a place to host assembled scholars. When it was still the property of the Sfondrati family it hosted Emperor Massimiliano I, Leonardo da Vinci, Lodovico the Moor, Bianca Sforza, and Cardinal Borromeo. In the 19th century the rank of guests was impressive: Silviao Pellico, Amanzio Moroncelli, Emperor Francesco I, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm, King Umberto I and writers such as Alessandro Manzoni, Tommaso Grossi and Ippolito Pindemonte.

Notes

- 1 Under the patronage of the prince's parents, the Bohemian poet Rainer Maria Rilke began to write at Duino Castle his Duino Elegies, a collection of ten mystical poems considered his greatest work. He dedicated them to Princess Marie.
- 2 New York Times, 12 Mar 1937.
- 3 Worth almost \$300,000,000 today. <https://westegg.com/inflation/>
- 4 Richard Jay Hutto, *Crowning Glory: American Wives of Princes and Dukes*, 2007, Henchard Press, pp 287-288.
- 5 Evening Star (Washington, DC), 15 Jun 1897; p 7.
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 Helena Holbrook 'Ella' Walker, <https://palacbiechow.pl/historia/>
- 8 *ibid*
- 9 Although called a niece, she was actually a cousin. She would eventually marry Baron Hans von Schoen and inherit a large fortune from Ella.
- 10 Muriel Seherr-Thoss to Henry White, written from Rome, 30 Nov 1925; White family correspondence at Hampton, National Park Service.
- 11 <http://www.muzeum.nysa.pl/web.n4?go=895>.
- 12 Patricia Beard, *After the Ball*, Harper Collins, 2003; pp 314-315, 325.
- 13 *ibid*
- 14 Almanach de Gotha, Justus Perthes, 1936; p 344, p 673
- 15 <http://www.walkervilletimes.com/34/cc-girl.html>
- 16 <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Bellagio-Center-History-Consolidated.pdf>; p 138.
- 17 *ibid*, p 137.
- 18 Patricia Beard, *After the Ball*, Harper Collins, 2003; p 344.
- 19 *ibid*
- 20 <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Bellagio-Center-History-Consolidated.pdf>; p 138.
- 21 *ibid*, p 138.
- 22 Memo by Charles E. Rogers to the U.S. Ambassador in Rome, 19 Mar 1959.
- 23 *ibid*, p 148.
- 24 *ibid*, p 5.

Information about her villa's history, with excellent photos, may be found here: <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Bellagio-Center-History-Consolidated.pdf>