



ROYALTY DIGEST

Quarterly

④ 2022

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



LOUIS & EDWINA
Delphinium Wedding

ALBANIA
A Family Album

QUEEN HELEN
The Final Year

Schloss Dobrau in Oberschlesien



“Aunt Muriel” - a Queen’s Mentor

by Richard Jay Hutto

Queen Geraldine had an American friend and trusted mentor she called “Aunt Muriel” even though she was actually married to Geraldine’s father’s first cousin, Count Hans Christoph Seherr-Thoss. Geraldine called the pair “Aunt and Uncle” and they have been referred to as her “Prussian parents.” Muriel White was born in Paris to American parents on October 12, 1880. Her father, Henry White, would become secretary of the U.S. embassy in London before being appointed Ambassador to Italy and to France. He was described by Theodore Roosevelt, who was president during the peak of his career, as “*the most useful man in the entire diplomatic service, during my Presidency and for many years before.*”¹ Woodrow Wilson’s top advisor called White “*the most accomplished diplomatist this country has ever produced.*”² White is perhaps best remembered for serving as one of five Peace Commissioners who signed the Treaty of Versailles on behalf of the United States.

Muriel’s mother, Margaret “Daisy” Stuyvesant Rutherford, scion of several of America’s most revered families and an Astor grand-niece,³ was a full partner in his success. Her childhood friend, Edith Wharton, wrote of her, “*It is hard to picture nowadays the shell-like transparency, the luminous red-and-white, of those young cheeks untouched by paint or powder, in which the blood came and went like the lights of an aurora.*”⁴

The writer Henry James, who was devoted to Daisy, wrote from London, “*The happy American here, beyond all others, is Mrs Henry White, wife of the First Secretary of the American Legation - who is very handsome, young, rich, splendid, admired, and successful, to a degree which leaves all competitors behind.*”⁶ John Singer Sargent was relatively unknown until he burst onto the international scene after painting Daisy White’s life-size portrait in Paris. The Whites took a chance on a young unknown artist. By the time they were ready to have Sargent paint Henry White, he was already overloaded with commissions and had to suggest someone else.⁷

Muriel White was presented at several courts in Europe. In fact she met her husband while attending social events at the royal palace in Berlin. She spoke several languages and newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic tracked her many suitors. Among the prominent names linked with Muriel was Nobel Prize winner Austen Chamberlain, son of radical politician and self-made millionaire Joseph Chamberlain. When she finally married at almost the age of 29, her husband was Count Hans Christoph Seherr-Thoss, known as “Manni”, a lieutenant in the Cuirassier Life Guards and formerly a military attaché at the German embassy in Vienna. A handsome eldest son, Manni was heir to his father’s extensive estates as well as a hereditary seat in the Prussian House of

Lords. As one newspaper reported, “*Miss White...ought to know her own mind and men pretty well. She has been abroad so much that she is half-foreign, anyhow, so it doesn't much matter.*”⁸

Manni's father was a brother of Margarete “*Mutti*”, Countess Lajos de Nagy-Apponyi, who was the mother of Count Gyula de Nagy-Apponyi, Geraldine's father, who died when she was only eight. Geraldine's widowed mother, the American-born Gladys Steuart (1891-1947),⁹ variously spelled Stewart, quickly married a French officer, Gontran Girault, and had other children. Little Geraldine was devastated.

*“For long nights I lay awake in my bed and thought of Mother. How could she forget Father so quickly? I thought that I could never love this strange gentleman as my father, and in the wickedest moments of my childish worries and anxiety I thought that I could never forgive Mother what she had done. But time makes us understand everything. I have often asked Mother's pardon in my heart for the dark, wicked thoughts of the little girl I was.”*¹⁰

*“The Girault family lived under rather modest circumstances... Julius Apponyi's estate left a comparatively small residue for his widow and children, hardly sufficient to keep up the standard of life for the children.”*¹¹ Geraldine's sister's son, Count André de Baghy, recalls, *“The family council estimated it was not proper for the daughters Apponyi to be brought up in France by Gontran Girault, an officer in the French army who on his military income was not wealthy enough to care for them.”*¹² Muriel Seherr-Thoss recalled how she became such an integral part of the future queen's life. As she was organizing a charity event,

*“My husband's aunt, Countess Margaret Apponyi, nee Countess Seberr-Thoss, widow of Count Louis Apponyi, the last Marshall of the Hungarian Court, asked me to visit her on my way to the Riviera. This dear old lady, then begged me to persuade her daughter-in-law, the widow of Count Julius Apponyi, who had remarried a French officer living in Nice, to allow me to educate her eldest daughter Geraldine among her mother's people. Countess Apponyi's younger granddaughter Virginia was already under her charge and had urged that her elder sister be educated with her.”*¹³

Muriel was successful in her mission and Geraldine's family was very grateful. After immersing the two girls in the German language, Geraldine and Virginia were enrolled as boarders in a Sacred Heart convent school at Pressbaum in lower Austria. Evidently the two sisters needed a higher level of discipline than what was offered there. Muriel wrote to her husband's Aunt Mutti:

“Has Adèle done anything about finding another school for Geraldine and Virginia?...I don't see how we can leave them at Pressbaum...Countess Rumerskirch and several other ladies told Adèle and me that they took their daughters away because they learn so little at Pressbaum...



Muriel and Hermann von Seherr-Thoss

*Neither of those two children [Geraldine and Virginia] have any idea of discipline and they must learn it besides learning lessons. They are also fearfully untidy so they need a really strict school.”*¹⁴

Despite these fears, the girls thrived at Pressbaum¹⁵ and Muriel recalled, *“During the next few years, I mostly saw the child whom I had come to regard as an adopted daughter, clad in the dark blue uniform worn by the scholars of the Sacred Heart Convent.”* Muriel advised wisely (perhaps because her own daughter, Margaret, was five years older and had experienced some of the same coming-of-age issues) and the sisters thrived. As Muriel wrote, *“The Apponyi sisters look back to this time in their lives, as a most happy one. The atmosphere of that abode of religion, refinement, learning and peace was everything that the most exacting parents could wish for their daughters' upbringing.”*¹⁶ Financial issues were always a worry. As Geraldine recalled:

*“My mother was an heiress but her money was held in trust in America until the day of her marriage when she gave over everything to my father to manage. He being a patriot put it all in bonds in Austria and Hungary from which he recovered nothing after the sinking of the two monarchies and the inflation that followed. My parents managed to exist through my grandmother's help. It was fortunate that my father went into exile as when the Bolsheviks pillaged the family house they also hung up an effigy of him as he was on the list of prominent aristocrats who were to be killed.”*¹⁷

Before his death Geraldine's father *“could live in Budapest in reasonable comfort”* with financial assistance from his mother, *“but he brooded on his misfortunes.”*¹⁸

After Geraldine and Virginia finished at their boarding school, *“the girls prepared themselves with great pleasure for their new lives as young ladies of society...They were grown-up girls now and had to be introduced to society. Their aunts gave many a large, gay party for them, other invitations followed, and after a series of dances came the great Opera Ball with its exciting preparations.”*¹⁹ *“The Apponyis...subsidized her lifestyle in order to help her make a good match, but her ideas on matrimony appeared to owe too much to the sentimental*

novels which were her favourite reading.”²⁰ Geraldine and Virginia’s beloved paternal grandmother, “Mutti”, died in 1931 while the girls were teenagers and their Aunt Muriel tried to ease that loss by offering her continuing guidance.

Geraldine went home with Muriel to Dobrau, Silesia, where she spent a few weeks pleasantly...at the castle of her Austrian aunt.²¹ It was there Geraldine had an emotional experience she related to her eventual lady-in-waiting:

*“In the library of my aunt I found a family album and in it a picture of my parents; Father in uniform, Mother in a nice summer frock; probably a photograph taken at the time of her engagement. At the bottom of the picture I saw Father’s handwriting, only two words: ‘For ever.’ So theirs was a love match which was destined to last for ever... No, I did not fall in love with anyone in Dobrau – but with the idea of eternal love.”*²²

Geraldine was also developing a strong sense of independence. She was invited by Aunt Muriel, Countess Seherr-Thoss, to the winter Olympic Games at Garmisch-Partenkirchen [1936]. During a walk in the town Geraldine found a ravishing ski suit which she simply had to buy. She entered the shop and asked the saleswoman the price of the suit. Although she first said ‘Guten Tag’ to the woman, the saleswoman’s sharp reply was that she should have first said, ‘Heil Hitler!’ Thereupon Geraldine promptly told her that she was not a German and would not do so. She left the shop without the ski suit.²³

Geraldine and the Seherr-Thosses stayed at the family’s Gröben Palace,²⁴ where “Geraldine noticed that

in the evenings the Seherr-Thosses told the domestics to leave the castle and they invited some friends [to join them]. In fact these friends were Wehrmacht high officers opposed to the Nazi regime.”²⁵

When Geraldine’s father had finally been able to reach Hungary after the war, “He returned penniless so my paternal grandmother sold her court jewels and made three dowries for my sister, Virginia, our cousin who was the daughter of Uncle Anthony Apponyi, and myself... My dowry enabled my parents to buy a lovely villa with a large garden in the suburbs of Budapest.” After her mother was widowed, she sold the villa but, “the notary who sold the house in Budapest vanished and by the time he was found and charged he had gone through all the money.”²⁶

Geraldine took a job out of financial necessity selling souvenirs at the Hungarian Historical Museum (now the Budapest National Museum) which she obtained through the intervention of her kinsman, Count István Zichy, who was the general director. “Fortunately, she greatly enjoyed her work. This was immense joy for her! The first decisive step towards an independent life was made. She threw herself into her work with heart and soul.”²⁷ Muriel wrote that Geraldine,

*“was working in a library in Budapest, when she was suddenly caught up in a modern edition of the fairy-tales which used to charm our childhood. A country neighbor in Hungary, of her Aunt Countess Karolyi, was greatly attached to Geraldine, like most people who came in contact with her. This lady was invited by friends in Albania to visit them during the festivities which took place there in the autumn of 1937. She then showed King Zog a photograph of the chief belle of Budapest.”*²⁸

The photograph had been given by Geraldine to the sisters of King Zog of Albania whom she first met at a diplomatic reception and then again when visiting her grandmother on the Riviera. They exchanged letters and Geraldine had forgotten about the photograph, by the time the letter of the princesses arrived, saying how happy they would be if they could see Geraldine again.²⁹ The proud but newly-poor Apponyi family, accepted the funds sent by the King to meet all the expenses during the journey. “He also offered to pay for a small travelling trousseau but this the proud Hungarians refused. The whole family got together to provide a modest wardrobe so that Geraldine would not feel obliged to anyone, and certainly not to her host.”³⁰

The trip went very well and Geraldine was swept off her feet. Muriel was pleased at the news of the engagement, but she did however have one concern:

*“what I had heard, before arriving in Tirana, as to difficulties with the Vatican. These I was assured by my radiantly happy young hostess, had been most satisfactorily arranged as there would be a private Catholic marriage besides the public ceremony.”*³¹



Countess Muriel Seherr-Thoss with her two eldest children



Many Hungarian nobles attended the wedding of Countess Geraldine Apponyi to King Zog. The couple fifth and sixth from the left, looking at the camera, are Count and Countess István Károlyi identified by their granddaughter, Countess Kinga de Nagy-Károlyi, wife of Prince Johannes of Liechtenstein.

Rather than returning home before their wedding, the king insisted that Geraldine remain in Tirana where she would begin to be taught Albania's history and its difficult language. Muriel, who had played an integral role in the process, was invited by the future Queen of Albania to stay with her at Tirana in the charming villa which King Zog had placed at her disposal until their wedding.³² Muriel wasn't quite sure what to expect, but:

"As soon as I met the monarch of that most endearing little country, I was not surprised that he had won my Geraldine's heart. King Zog's charm, good looks and intelligence, as well as his record as a national hero for daring courage and his chivalrous devotion to his beautiful fiancée, entitled him in every way to be the most perfect hero of romance."³³

Muriel told someone else, "He was not mysterious but only reserved and had a great deal of self-control and was always polite."³⁴

In the absence of Geraldine's mother, Muriel remained with her to help with the bridal preparations. On the night before the formal wedding, a gala dinner was held at the palace for family members including those who had come from Budapest and Vienna.

"There was Geraldine's American grandmother, Mrs. Virginia de Strale d'Ekna, her aunts, Countess Muriel Seberry-Thoss and Countess Adele Apponyi, and her sister, Countess Virginia Apponyi and her husband, André de Baghy. Her mother, who had remarried, was unable to be present... The King's six sisters, a bevy of dark-haired princesses,

represented his side of the family."³⁵

However, Virginia's son, Count André de Baghy, confirms that the article was incorrect. At the time of Geraldine's wedding, his mother, her only sister, could not attend because she was pregnant with her first child who did not live.³⁶

After the wedding celebrations Muriel was able to return to her own home, Dobrau, in Silesia, secure in the knowledge that she had performed her duty to her husband's family and to Geraldine. Less than a year after Queen Geraldine's marriage to King Zog, Muriel was summoned to Tirana again to await the arrival of what everyone hoped would be an heir to the Albanian throne. Geraldine's sister, Virginia, could not be present because she was expecting her own child. In fact, their babies would be delivered only hours apart. Muriel was pleased by what she saw when she arrived on March 12th,

"I found my dear little Queen quite blissfully happy; so there could be no doubt that King Zog was proving to be the best and most devoted of husbands. I spent many happy hours with her, during which she told me of the plans which she was making for the welfare of the Albanian people. I also admired the beautiful christening robe, all trimmed with lace, which the young Queen's clever fingers had fashioned; as well as many other dainty garments for the tiny stranger."³⁷

Unknown to them at the time was that Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, who was one of the offi-

cial witnesses at the wedding of Geraldine and Zog, was already planning an Italian invasion of Albania. “Ciano finalized a plan he had been developing for months to bring an end to Zog’s rule and annex Albania to the Italian crown in pursuit of the Fascist dream of rebuilding the Roman Empire.”⁴⁶ He knew that Geraldine was very near to her due date for the baby, and confided to his journal on March 25, 1939:

*“It is not possible to foresee what will be the development of events but it seems probable to me that Zog will yield. I am counting on the birth of his child. Zog loves his wife and in general all his family. I think that he will prefer to ensure a quiet future for his dear ones. And, frankly, I cannot imagine Geraldine running around fighting through the mountains of Unthi or of Mirdizû in her ninth month of pregnancy.”*³⁸

Muriel had excellent sources at several embassies. As she recalled:

*“My first intimation that all was not well with this apparently peaceful little country, was on Friday evening March 31st. His Excellency the Turkish Minister, whom I met at dinner, then told me that the Italian fleet was off the port of Vallona and that an ultimatum would shortly be presented to King Zog by the Italian government, making extensive demands on Albanian independence.”*³⁹

Muriel secured an assurance from the U.S. ambassador that the heavily-pregnant Queen would be safely housed under his protection if the need arose.⁴⁰ After learning that several diplomats had tried and failed to get word to King Zog, Muriel wrote him a personal letter and hand-delivered it to his suite. The King sent his young nephew down to reassure her, but as she recalled:

*“The young officer in question looked very pale and upset, and admitted that the Italians were making extensive demands on Albanian independence which must be refused. He said there was no fear of hostilities or any danger to the Queen. I retired to rest somewhat reassured, though I still had my doubts!”*⁴¹

There was temporary joy when, “On Wednesday morning, April 5th, at 3:30 A.M., a fair-haired, blue-eyed prince was born. The delirious joy of the Albanians knew no bounds when they were informed of the happy event at sunrise, by the discharge of 101 cannon shots. Soon after his birth, the King’s youngest sister placed her nephew’s tiny hand on a loaded revolver. She explained that this was an Albanian custom to ensure that a boy should be brave and strong.”⁴²

That very morning the Italian government sent an ultimatum to King Zog demanding capitulation within 24 hours. Queen Geraldine had been sheltered from any distressing news during her delivery and was shocked when her husband told her she and their 24-hour old son must be ready to flee at a moment’s notice. Muriel

was allowed into her bedroom where she presented a lovely and pathetic picture, with her baby boy lying beside her and the King’s miniature under her pillow. With admirable calm and courage, this poor young mother told me that she must leave that afternoon for Greece, over a very rough mountain road, in an ambulance; which involved a trip of about thirteen hours. “Queen Geraldine was fully aware that her enforced flight might cost her her life in her condition; but her only real dread was lest anything should happen to her beloved husband who was remaining in Tirana.... Their Majesties both expressed their thanks that I had been willing to stay for as long as they could keep me, and I was thus obliged to bid my dear one and her baby a very anxious farewell.”⁴³

King Zog insisted on providing a car and driver for Muriel so she could evacuate immediately. As a parting gesture of appreciation he conferred on her official Albanian citizenship, a gift she would try to access when she was behind German battle lines and had lost her U.S. privileges and funds because of her marriage to an enemy alien.

Muriel later learned that the back seat of a limousine had been removed so that Geraldine and her three day-old son could lie on a mattress as the car traversed dangerous rocky roads taken to avoid detection. The doctor who delivered her son had made a necessary incision to allow a Caesarean birth and she lost blood during the process. With good reason, there was fear that the difficult escape might prove fatal for her. “As the car was about to leave, the King bent and kissed the baby on the head. His last words to the Queen were, ‘Oh, God...It was so short.’ The Queen replied, ‘God bless you.’”⁴⁴ So hasty was the departure that Geraldine left Tirana in only the nightgown she wore – the maid had packed her furs but overlooked the need for dresses and underwear. After the King’s exit, despite years of intrigue and machinations he would never again set foot in Albania although his wife and son would.⁴⁵

Count Ciano was furious when Geraldine, Zog, their newborn son, and the entire family escaped just before his arrival at the palace.⁴⁷ He went immediately to the Queen’s suite where he found the birthing room and “saw linen that indicated a birth, and a hasty departure. Kicking the linen across the room, Ciano exclaimed:

“The cub has escaped!”⁴⁸

Muriel remained in intermittent contact with Queen Geraldine during the ensuing years, usually writing coded letters that were transmitted by her many diplomatic contacts, including her brother. Her opposition to the Nazis became known by too many to be kept quiet, particularly after she helped two British pilots escape from prison. After she safely sent her daughter and two draft-age sons to safety in the United States, she was ordered by the Gestapo more than once that she must present the sons for military service, according to a friend

*“she was hounded by the Gestapo, which during the war visited her very often in the palace. Officers of the secret police demanded that she bring her children back to the Third Reich. The Countess claimed that she was being followed and that there were strangers in the garden – that’s why she spent most of her time in the palace chambers. Her biggest fear was being deported to a concentration camp.”*⁴⁹

Fearing torture and believing that she might be forced to reveal the location of her sons, Muriel acted quickly when she saw a Gestapo car turn into Dobrau’s entrance. As its occupants walked up the drive, on March 15, 1943, Muriel White climbed to the second floor of her palace and jumped out of a tower window to her death. Her eldest son, heir to his father’s titles, finally did return – as a naturalized U.S. citizen and an officer of the U.S. Army.

Rick Hutto is writing a book about Muriel, Countess Seherr-Thoss, an American woman’s personal war against the Nazis.

Notes

- 1 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1971), p 388.
- 2 *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 1930; p 36.
- 3 She would serve as a financial guardian for her Chanler first cousins who were referred to as “the Astor orphans.”
- 4 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, 1964), chapter 3.
- 5 Elizabeth Covell, a paper read before the Newport Historical Society in January, 1933; reprinted in the *Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society*, #86.
- 6 Henry James to Grace Norton, 1888, quoted in Jane, Lady Abdy, *The Souls* (London, 1984), pp 160, 162.
- 7 Letter to Henry White from John Singer Sargent, London, 12 Mar 1919; Columbia University. Sargent recommended Joseph DeCamp but they chose Leon Bonnat who also painted White’s grandfather, Henry White.
- 8 *The Pittsburgh Index*, vol. 20, number 14, 3 Apr 1909; p 5.
- 9 daughter of U.S. diplomat John Henry Steuart (1831 – 1892) and his wife, Mary Virginia Ramsay Harding (1871 – 1950), member of a wealthy family from Virginia and North Carolina.
- 10 Antoinette de Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years, Ten Months, Ten Days* (London, 1940), p 36.
- 11 Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years*, p 39.
- 12 Email to the author, 19 June 2022, from Count André de Baghy.
- 13 Unpublished memoirs of Muriel Seherr-Thoss, Hampton National Historic Site (National Park Service), Towson, Maryland, p 1.
- 14 Muriel Seherr-Thoss to Margaret Apponyi, 28 Jun 1930. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, National Archives of Hungary. Countess Karl Rumerskirch was born Maria Theresia, Countess of Khevenhuller Metsch (1877-1968).
- 15 From 1939, more than 100 children and young people with disabilities were housed in the Sacre Coeur in Pressbaum, which was occupied by the Nazis. All were eventually murdered at Am Spiegelgrund in 1941. <https://noe.orf.at/v2/news/stories/2985512/>
- 16 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 3.
- 17 Gwen Robyns, *Geraldine of the Albanians* (London, 1987), p 20.
- 18 Jason Tomes, *King Zog: Self-Made Monarch of Albania* (New York, 2011), p 197.
- 19 Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years*, pp 46-47.
- 20 Tomes, *King Zog*, p 198.
- 21 Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years*, p 49.
- 22 Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years*, p 54.
- 23 Robyns, Geraldine, pp 27-28. They were often referred to as “The Nazi Olympics.”
- 24 Email to the author from Joséphine Dedet, Geraldine’s biographer, 25 Sep 2022.
- 25 Email to the author from Joséphine Dedet, 25 Sep 2022. Their cousin was Countess Theresa “Resy” Apponyi (1913 – 1944); she died unmarried.
- 26 Robyns, Geraldine, p 22.
- 27 Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years*, p 57.
- 28 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 3.
- 29 Szinye-Merse, *Ten Years*, p 58.
- 30 Robyns, Geraldine, p 31.
- 31 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 4.
- 32 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 4.
- 33 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 3.
- 34 Robyns, Geraldine, pp 41-42.
- 35 Robyns, Geraldine, p 14.
- 36 Email to the author from Count André de Baghy, 19 June 2022; “our mother was not there, she was expecting her first child, who did not survive.”
- 37 *Manchester (Conn.) Evening Herald*, 27 Apr. 1938; pp 1, 13. Other sources insisted that Geraldine’s mother did not attend the wedding.
- 38 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 4.
- 39 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 4.
- 40 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 4.
- 41 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 6.
- 42 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” pp 6-7.
- 43 Seherr-Thoss, “Memoirs,” p 8.
- 44 Robyns, Geraldine, p 91.
- 45 Lloyd Jones, *Biografi; A Traveler’s Tale* (Toronto, 2010), p 55.
- 46 Albert Lulushi, *Operation Valuable Fiend* (New York, 2014), p 19.
- 47 http://www.albanianhistory.net/1947_Ciano/index.html; accessed 28 May 2022.
- 48 “Good King Michael,” *The National Review*, 16 Jan 2018.
- 49 Eadoslaw Dimitrov, “Good through the 7th centuries” by Erwin Filipczyk. Erwin Filipczyk, Fr. Norbert Zawilak; *Good for Seven Centuries*. Opole: Litar sp. Zoo, 2002; p 40.