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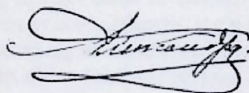
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ALEXANDRA



She was
Lutheran
but raised (after age 6)
by Queen Victoria
see p. 3
worth reading



*Her tragic, tear-lined face was
As sorrow carved in stone.*

On May 25, 1872, in the province of Darmstadt, Germany, a fifth child was born to the German Grand Duke Ludwig and Grand Duchess Alice. The baby girl, with the full name and title of Princess Victoria Alix Helena Louise Beatrix of Hesse-Darmstadt and the Rhine, known simply as Alix, was the latest addition to the growing family of the German duke and his wife.

Alix had six siblings, by the time her mother was finished. Victoria, nicknamed "Vicki," was the eldest, then came Elisabeth ("Ella"), Irene, Ernest-Ludwig ("Ernie" and "Ernest-Louis"), and Frederick ("Frittie"). Alix had a younger sister, too: Marie, "May." Her mother had formerly been Princess Alice of Britain, a daughter of Queen

Victoria of England.

The little Alix was a merry girl, a blue-eyed, golden-haired whirlwind. This attitude earned her the nicknames "Sunshine" and "Sunny", "*Prinzessin Sonnenschein*" (Princess Sunshine) in German. Alice, who was the first to give her this nickname, wrote to her mother Queen Victoria, "Sunny is the picture of robust health," and "Sunny in pink was immensely admired." Little Alix was always pretty, too. Alice reported to the Queen,

"Baby is like Ella, only smaller features, and still darker eyes with very black lashes, and reddish brown hair. She is a sweet, merry little person, always laughing and a dimple in one cheek, just like Ernie."

Unfortunately, however, her early childhood was filled with tragedies.

Firstly, when Alix was less than a year old, her brother Frittie had a tragic accident. One fateful morning, Frittie and Ernie had come rushing into their mother's bedroom. Three-year-old Frittie climbed to see out the open window, and fell twenty feet down to unmerciful earth. He seemed to be fine except for a few bruises, but died hours later from internal bleeding. Alice, always rather morbid, greived him heartily.

And in 1878, an epidemic of diphtheria swept Germany. At the time, Alix was only six, and still very much the smiling little Sunny. Alice jokingly remarked to a friend that wouldn't it be funny if the whole family got it, and of course, they did. But it was not funny.

The children got sick first, and then the grand duke. Alice, warned by the doctors not to breathe May's breath because she might catch the disease, obeyed as much as possible. However, one day, May began to gasp and choke, and began crying, "Kiss me, Mama, kiss me!" Alice, unable to stand any more, picked her up and kissed her. This resulted in her, too, catching the disease. Soon after, in late 1878, both Alice and May died. Alix could not understand it. Suddenly, all the toys were new - the old ones burned for fear of the diphtheria.

These events shaped Alix for life. After her mother died, she and her brother Ernest were sent to live with their grandmother Queen Victoria in England. There, raised by governesses hand-picked by the originator of Victorianism herself, Alix's character was molded. But her early years did something to her as well. She had an obsession, like her mother, with death and the grave. That early instilled sense of looming death was only added to with the many relatives she had. With so many royal relations or acquaintances, she was always in mourning for somebody. And, oddly enough, after the first six months of mourning, in the court at that time one could wear mauve as well as black for the remainder of the year. No wonder Alix chose her favorite color to be mauve.

Alix had golden hair with a tinge of red and blue eyes. She was shy, and when her 'Granny' asked if she would play the piano or sing for guests, a dreadful red blush would creep up her neck, and she would go through the ordeal with a hot face.

After her mother's death, Alix wore a sad, twisted expression on her face, causing her cousin Princess Marie Louise of Schleswig-Holstein to comment on her perpetual sadness. "Alix," she remarked, "you always play at being sorrowful; one day, the Almighty will send some real crushing sorrows; and then what will you do?"

But it was not play; Alix was in general a tragic, withdrawn person. She followed her mother's fascination with death, and at an early age grew deeply involved with spiritual matters. She read books on theology, classics, novels, and was generally an intelligent child. A governess, Margaret "Madgie" Jackson, taught Alix about politics, and Alix grew to be interested in it.

Another cousin, Queen Marie of Rumania, said:

"Her [Alix's] attitude to the world was perpetually distrustful, strangely empty of tenderness and, in a way, hostile.... She held both great and small at a distance, as though they intended to steal something which was hers."

Alix later used the word herself: she had been covered by "a cloud" of sadness and resignation, that she would suffer beneath her entire life. She covered herself in a protective shell that many perceived as coldness and hauteur. She had a lovely smile, people said, but no one but her closest friends and companions saw, in private situations. "It [her smile] lit up her face, it turned her mouth into a flower, it did something unforgettable to her beautiful eyes. It was a smile which, in the language of Russian peasants, 'was like the gift of a big silver coin.'"

In 1884, twelve-year-old Alix's eighteen-year-old sister Ella was going to marry Grand Duke Sergei of Russia, a brother of Tsar Alexander III. Princess Alix was swept up into the gaities of the Russian court during the time she was there for the wedding. The opulence of St. Petersburg society stunned her, and, being shy, usually only took part in dancing at the balls she attended.

At Peterhof, a tsarist resort in the Gulf of Finland, Alix met sixteen-year-old Tsarevich Nicholas, the son of the emperor. He, "Nicky," and she, "Sunny," etched their names on a window in the Winter Palace with the stone on Alix's ring. Alix developed a crush on the young tsarevich, but it did not develop into a true love until five years later.

In 1889, the now blooming, seventeen-year-old princess visited her sister Ella and brother-in-law Sergei at their estate, Iiinskoe. There, Nicholas held a ball just before Lent. Alix began to have more of a passion for Nicholas, instead of a fleeting crush.

When Nicholas proposed to her, Alix wanted to agree with all her heart. Unfortunately, the marriage required changing her Lutheran faith to Russian Orthodox. Queen Victoria, who was scandalized by the looseness of St. Petersburg society, did not recommend it. Kaiser Wilhelm, Alix's cousin, was thinking more of a German-Russian alliance - he advised it. Alix decided for herself on account of the **religion**: "No."

For the next few years, Princess Alix took the position of Darmstadt's *grand dame*, as her brother Ernie - now Grand Duke of **Hesse** - was unmarried. She thoroughly enjoyed this role, and people began to think she would be a spinster. However, she still loved her "Nicky."

In 1894, all that changed. Ernest-Louis announced his marriage to the dull-looking Princess Victoria-Melita of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, called "Ducky." Alix was horrified. Victoria-Melita was her exact opposite: tasteless, outgoing and unattractive. She began to reconsider her rejection of a Russian marriage. Her sister Ella, married to Nicholas's uncle Sergei, consoled her, saying that Orthodoxy was not so different than Lutherism.

So on the day of Ernie and Ducky's wedding at Coburg Castle, 1894, Tsarevich Nicholas proposed to her once again. With many tears, Alix accepted.

Shortly after that, also in 1894, Alix visited the Imperial family with her fiancée at Livadia Palace, in the Crimea. While she was still there, Tsar Alexander III died. She assured him that as soon as possible she would become Orthodox. (She did - she changed her name to **Alexandra** and, until her coronation, was known as "The Truly Believing Grand Duchess **Alexandra** Feodorovna.") When he passed away, Alix went about conducting herself "like a little angel of comfort," according to her sister Ella. Her wedding was only days later.

This was terribly unfortunate for the new **Alexandra** Feodorovna. The peasants proclaimed "she has come to us behind a coffin," and foreboded dire predicaments for both Russia and the new tsaritsa.

During that first year of marriage, Alix did not make a good impression on St. Petersburg society at all. She had been raised by the very conservative Queen Victoria, and considered herself English. English was the language she spoke, and she was still learning Russian, taught to her by Mlle. Ekaterina Schneider. At receptions and parties, the lovely but nervous young empress would glance anxiously down the line to see how many more were coming. She was the opposite of her frivolous society butterfly mother-in-law. Russians immediately dismissed **Alexandra** as a bore and a prude: "The heads of young ladies," she declared, quite correctly, "are filled with nothing but thoughts of young officers." The story went that at a party, she saw a woman whose neckline she considered too low. A lady-in-waiting was sent to the offender. The conversation went as follows:

"Madame, Her Majesty wants me to tell you that in **Hesse-Darmstadt** we don't wear our dresses that way."

"Really?" came the reply, as the lady in question pulled her dress still lower. "Pray tell Her Majesty that in Russia we *do* wear our dresses that way."

And **Alexandra's** choice of the Alexander Palace at the tsarist estate of Tsarskoe Selo, 15 miles from St. Petersburg, the smaller of the two Tsarskoe Selo palaces and certainly not as large as the Winter Palace in the capital, did nothing to help it. She preferred a private life to being a social butterfly. She decorated the Alexander Palace in chintzes and plants - charming decor, but out-of-date. And last but certainly not least, **Alexandra** furnished the palace through - horrors! - *mail-order* catalogues that delivered assembly-line couches, chairs, and tables from Maples in London. *That* atrocity left no doubt in the Russian peoples' minds. They moved on without her, and joined the still lively Dowager Empress Maria.

And that was another trouble with **Alexandra**. Maria Feodorovna, who did not take kindly to being relegated to dowager empress. It was she who went to the parties, who danced at balls, who went out of the room first, who had her name announced before the real tsaritsa's, who took the arm of Nicholas and left his wife to be escorted by a grand duke. She still wanted to control her son, and it was a battle. Somewhat like a typical, clingy mother-in-law today, treating her son as if he were still a child, and in essence trying to have herself be the main woman in his life, not his wife. Poor Alix was disgusted with "motherdear," and desperately wanted to get away from her.

But even at the Alexander Palace, Maria's shadow fell over her. The old empress refused to give the crown jewels to **Alexandra**, and **Alexandra** merely retorted that if she wouldn't give the jewels to her, she wouldn't take them. It threatened a minor scandal, and, unhappily, Maria handed over the jewels. From that point on, society followed either one of two people: either the pretty older empress, still gay and sociable, or the serious, Victorian, English young empress. Needless to say, not many joined up with **Alexandra**.

Among the few that the tsaritsa trusted were Julie "Lili" Dehn and Anna Viroubova. Viroubova, called "Anya," was a young noblewoman upon whom the whole of St. Petersburg society did not look favorably on. Anya was fat ("the big cow"), tasteless, not even a lady-in-waiting, simple-minded, subservient to the empress and willing to do anything for her. **Alexandra** treated her like a younger sister, a child almost. Anya would pout when she could not for some reason see the Imperial family, and **Alexandra** teased her about this by calling her "our little daughter." Lili Dehn was another of Alix's confidantes.

Alexandra was delighted to have her first child, a girl, and happily named her Olga. Even though her primary task as tsaritsa was to produce a boy, an heir to the throne (under the Pauline law, created by Tsar Paul, only males could inherit the throne), there seemed infinite time to have more children.

But then followed, at almost exact two-year intervals, three more daughters: Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia. Even though **Alexandra** loved these children, she desperately wanted a boy. It would raise her status in the eyes of

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the people, and maybe she would not be such an outsider.

So **Alexandra**, deeply interested in mysticism, sought out any type of religious or mystical doctor. She was extremely religious, and assured that these "men of God" (most often frauds) could help her.

Two friends of hers, the former Montenegrin princesses Militsa and Anastasia, introduced her to a French "doctor," Philippe Vachot, who they claimed would be able to produce a boy.

A desperate **Alexandra** followed his every command. She bathed by moonlight, drank herbal mixtures, did literally *anything* in the hope that somehow, some way, she could have a male child.

In 1903, **Alexandra** began to think that she was pregnant. However, one day she suddenly fainted, the doctors were called, and it was discovered that the empress had had a miscarriage. It was called a "phantom pregnancy" at the time - meaning that she had simply believed it was real - and today, some say that it was premature, or that it was spirited away. In any case, because of this miscarriage or "false pregnancy," **Alexandra** was deeply disappointed.

And then, on July 30, 1904 (August 12 New Style), the tsar and tsaritsa were overjoyed. **Alexandra** was ecstatic. She delivered an heir, Alexei Nikolaievich Romanov, at Peterhof.

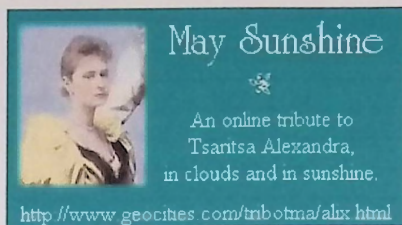
Poor **Alexandra** seemed fated for tragedies. Only days after his birth, Alexei began bleeding from the navel. Doctors diagnosed him with hemophilia, a potentially life-threatening condition that had been passed on in the descendants of Queen Victoria. (That same year, 1904, Alix's sister Irene's son died from it) Hemophilia, which can be passed on only through women and can only affect males, causes the blood to not clot properly. The slightest bruise, cut, or scrape can cause a hemophiliac to die, at the very least be in great pain.

Alexandra's gaiety turned to sorrow overnight. Only mothers of hemophiliacs can truly understand her pain, and how it grows throughout the years. To know that your child - in her case, not only child but her heir - could die any day from the simplest of accidents, is one of the worst things that could happen. A mother's natural instinct is to protect, and **Alexandra** did just that, but maybe went a little too far.

And so, wrote Nicholas, they "had got to know a man of God, Grigori, from the Tobolsk province," in 1905. Grand Duchess Anastasia, the former Montenegrin princess who had introduced Vachot, came up with this latest mystical wonder for her imperial friend.



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ALEXANDRA



★ This may be the
cure - the display
& mysticism of
Orthodoxy satisfied
a deep need.

Alexandra

The man was Grigori Efimovich Rasputin, from the Siberian village of Pokroevskoe. Alexandra took to him immediately. When Vachot had left in 1904 (with the emperor and empress's ardent blessing), he prophesied that another would come in his place. The Tsaritsa took Rasputin for this man, and welcomed him gratefully. "Father Grigori," she called him, but in reality Rasputin was not an ordained priest at all. He was a simple peasant who wandered around the country, preaching, prophesying, and sometimes, as in Rasputin's case, hypnotizing to show his "powers." The name for them was *starets*. And in that place and era, it was not unusual for the highest of Russians to associate with these people. Mysticism, occultism, those were the fads of the day. (Among other persons like Rasputin were the epileptic Koliaba who had stumps instead of arms, and "one had to have extremely strong nerves to endure the presence of this imbecile.")

Alexandra put her full trust in Rasputin after he was able to temporarily "cure" Alexei from his pain. As the years progressed, when rumors of him being a womanizer, heavy drinker, and member of an insanely loose - to put it mildly - cult, Alexandra would hear none of it. It was all "lies," she declared, every inch of it was a lie. Through Rasputin's double acting, she thought that he was being framed. Enthralled with mysticism, the tsaritsa was an easy target for Rasputin's extraordinary teachings. Outwardly a very solemn, controlled Victorian woman, Alexandra had an inwardly sensuous nature. Amazing, even unsettling revelations and outward displays of emotion were not what she had been taught, and she was fascinated with those who did.

In 1913, Alexandra again faced the problem of publicity. It was the year of the tricentenary, remembering 300 years of Romanov rule. Public appearances could not be avoided. Alexandra reluctantly made the rounds in St. Petersburg, appeared at state functions, *et cetera*, but with her typically cold, nervous demeanor. Meriel Buchanan, daughter of the English ambassador to Russia, recalled one such instance. It occurred in the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, where the Imperial family was obligated to attend Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar*.

"Her lovely tragic face was expressionless, almost austere as she stood by her husband's side during the playing of the National Anthem [God Save the Tsar].... Not once did a smile break the immobile sombreness... The Diplomatic Body had been given places all along the first tier and our box happened to be next to the Imperial one, and, sitting so close, we could see that the fan of white eagles' feathers the Empress was holding was trembling convulsively, we could see how a dull, unbecoming flush was stealing over her pallor, could almost hear the belaboured breathing which made the diamonds which covered her bodice rise and fall, flashing and trembling with a thousand uneasy sparks of light."

Shortly, Alexandra rose, whispered something to Nicholas, and departed. It was as if you could feel the tension in the air, Meriel Buchanan wrote; "men muttered disparagingly under their breath. Was it not always the same story?"

It wasn't always the Empress's fault. A modern psychologist would find her character rich in possibilities to analyze. Chronically depressed, distraught over her son's life-threatening condition, all she wanted was a happy, private family life. The only way she could manage this was to ignore events and focus on her family. This way she could have the family she had long dreamed for.

But she could not brush off politics for long. In 1914, war broke out with Germany, in what would later be known as World War I. Alexandra immediately plunged herself, along with her friend Anna Viroubova and daughters Olga and Tatiana, into war work. Even though Germany was her country of birth, she was a Russian at heart. She earned her Red Cross uniform and diploma quickly, and worked with a devotion to her task. Anna Viroubova wrote in her memoirs of the Empress's war work:

"I saw the Empress of the whole of Russia standing at the operating table with a full syringe in her hands, handing the surgeon his instruments and assisting at the most serious operations, taking the amputated extremities from the surgeon's hands, taking off the soldiers' lousy clothes, breathing in the stench and watching the horrors of a military hospital at war-time compared to which an ordinary hospital looks like a peaceful and quiet shelter."

Unfortunately, in 1916, everything came crashing down on her. The revolutionary Bolsheviks (also called Soviets/Communists), headed by Vladimir Lenin, were rapidly taking over the minds of the people. In December, a crushing blow came. Prince Felix Yusupov, a member of Russia's "parliament," a doctor, and Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich, a cousin of the tsar and Alexandra's only friend amongst her royal relatives, murdered Rasputin. Alexandra was heartbroken. On his advice she had appointed and removed dozens of court ministers. In her mind, he would help Russia through her crisis - but now he was no more. Even more terrible for her was the letter he left behind, which she felt sealed her fate.

"I write and leave behind me this letter at St. Petersburg. I feel that I shall leave life before January 1st. I wish to make known to the Russian people, to Papa, to the Russian Mother and to the children, to the land of Russia, what they must understand. If I am killed by common assassins, and especially by my brothers the Russian peasants, you, Tsar of Russia, have nothing to fear, remain on your throne and govern, and you, Russian Tsar, will have nothing to fear for your children, they will reign for hundreds of years in Russia. But if I am murdered by boyars, nobles, and if they shed my blood, their hands will remain soiled with my blood, for 25 years they will not wash their hands from my blood. They will leave Russia. Brothers will kill brothers, and they will kill each other and hate each other, and for 25 years there will be no nobles in the country. Tsar of the land of Russia, if you hear the sound of the bell which will tell you that Grigory has been killed, you must know this: if it was your relations who have wrought my death then no one of your family, that is to say, none of your children or relations will remain alive for more than two years. They will be killed by the Russian people...I shall be killed. I am no longer among the living. Pray, pray, be strong, think of your blessed family."

In March of 1917, the largest stone came down. Nicholas abdicated in favor of his brother Mikhail, and Mikhail abdicated once and for all. The Romanov dynasty was done. There was to be no more tsar, no more of the life she had once had. For Alexandra, a firm autocrat convinced in the divine right of kings, this was a horrible shattering of her life. Soon after, Nicholas arrived home under arrest by the new Provisional Government (which would shortly collapse in favor of the Bolsheviks). Ironically, the now ex-tsaritsa was arrested in the Alexander Palace wearing her nurse's uniform.

Alexandra had to bear the weights that were piled on her back after the abdication. The Imperial family, with many of their friends, were held under house arrest at Tsarskoe Selo. She busied herself with burning papers, letters, anything that might scent of a German alliance, even though she was wholly innocent. Little wonder that all the illnesses that had wracked her nervous system came crashing down on her now. A back problem caused sciatica, and she remained in a wheelchair most of the time. Her stress level rose sky-high, her eyesight began to deteriorate, and her heart kept giving her trouble.

The guards posted at Tsarskoe Selo were anything but kind. A frustrated Baroness Sophie "Isa" Buxhoeveden remembered, "The soldiers always kept close to her, listening to her talk.... They often smoked their vile tobacco straight into her face, or exchanged gross jokes to see their effect." Once, a young guard approached the blanket upon which Alexandra was seated on the grass. He sat down beside her, and asked her some questions, obviously blaming her for everything that was going on in Russia. She answered calmly, and when he stood up, he remarked, "You know, Alexandra Feodorovna, I had quite a different idea about you."

Poor Alexandra hated her imprisonment. The words of an old peasant *staritza* years before were beginning to ring true: "Here is the martyr Empress Alexandra." The martyr, however, remained true to her Orthodox faith. She wrote to Anna Viroubova in a smuggled letter from Tobolsk:

"Life here is nothing— eternity is everything and what we are doing is preparing our souls for the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus nothing, after all, is terrible, and if they do take everything from us they cannot take our souls... Have patience, and these days of suffering will end, we shall forget all the anguish and thank God... I cannot write all that fills my soul... We live here on earth but we are already half gone to the next world."

In 1918, when Nicholas was leaving Tobolsk and Alexei was ill from an accident, she was faced with an agonizing choice: go with her husband and leave her ill son or stay with her son and abandon Nicholas. Alexei was badly hurt, but then again, Alexandra thought, if Nicholas went off alone the Bolsheviks would be sure to have him sign some paper. She horrified herself with thoughts, until Tatiana came to her rescue and forced her to make a decision. "You cannot go on torturing yourself like this," Tatiana pleaded, and Alexandra decided. "I will go with my husband and share his fate."

And so, Nicholas, Alexandra, and Maria plunged themselves into the Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg, to be joined by their other four children and four servants.

Tsaritsa Alexandra Feodorovna was allegedly murdered on July 17, 1918.



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