

HER ETERNAL CROWN: QUEEN MARIE OF ROMANIA AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

Author: Della L. Marcus

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The extraordinary story *Her Eternal Crown* narrates began 30 January 1926 in Bucharest, Romania, when two great souls met for the first time: Martha Root and Queen Marie. Martha, that archetype of Bahá'í itinerant teachers, had been traveling in Eastern Europe and felt inspired to send a note to the queen requesting an audience, along with a copy of *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. A few days later, at noon, Martha found herself at the royal palace in the presence of the queen herself, responding to her questions about the Bahá'í Cause and learning of her great affinity with the Bahá'í teachings—a historical moment not only for what would transpire over the next few years, but also because of the queen's close link to the sovereigns addressed by Bahá'u'lláh—her grandparents Queen Victoria and Czar Alexander II of Russia, the only two monarchs of their day to receive favorable letters from the Manifestation Himself.

For Martha this visit was “one of the most splendid events” (51) in her life, next to her visit to Bahíyyih Khánúm, the Greatest Holy Leaf. For Marie, the “beautiful truth” (63) she received from Martha served as a comfort and inspiration to her; her heart overflowed with gratitude for the Revelation Martha had brought her.

Only three months later that year, 1926, we read, Queen Marie spontaneously wrote an appreciation of the Faith, which appeared in the 4 May edition of the *Toronto Daily Star* (and later in over two hundred newspapers). It stated in part: “If ever the name of Baha'u'llah or Abdu'l-Baha comes to your attention, do not put their writings from you. Search out their Books, and let their glorious, peace-bringing, love-creating words and lessons sink into your hearts as they have into mine” (58).

It was to be one of the many encomiums Queen Marie would pen over the course of the next dozen years. The queen's statement, along with that initial visit in Bucharest, marks the beginning of a strong friendship between two kindred spirits, a fascinating and compelling story.

Della Marcus has given us a wonderful gift: an intimate account of Marie's embrace of and service to the Bahá'í Faith. She has written an important book as well. Here for the first time we have the full story and written record of this royal's Bahá'í journey from day one.

Marcus covers the nine audiences Martha enjoyed with the queen over this period, along with the often dramatic events leading up to and surrounding these meetings, and we are there through the personal correspondence and diary entries of Queen Marie and the letters of Martha Root and Shoghi Effendi.

Marcus stitches them together to make a marvelous quilt, a pattern of belief and devotion.

The author's persona is present minimally. She recedes to allow the main players tell the story in their own words, which gives the work immediacy and intimacy. An illustration of this quality is found in Martha's words in a letter to Shoghi Effendi describing her second audience with Marie. It took place at the queen's Palace in Sinaia in the Carpathian Mountains. In these passages we get a sense of her earnest preparation to meet the queen. Martha had arrived the night before her audience, staying the night at a nice pension (a boardinghouse): "I prayed many hours even if I did not have a Prayer Book"—her bag containing what she described as her little black prayer book had been stolen the day before.

Next morning [14 October 1927] I felt happy and thankful and READY. I was so Clean . . . my hair was perfectly curled, my nails perfectly manicured, pure water baths night and morning. . . . I wore a white silk dress with a white silk tunic made from a scarf. . . . Everything I wore was white (cream).

The nice porter from the pension carried the flowers but I carried the Bahá'í book, the Voice of 'Abdu'l-Bahá [Martha brought a record of His voice for Marie's daughter Ileana, who had deep interest in the Faith as well] and the Sacred Lock of Bahá'u'lláh's Hair (I trusted them to no one) and we started to walk up the beautiful Carpathian Mountain to the palace. . . . It was all so BEAUTIFUL! I never dreamed that anything in Rumania was so beautiful as the approach to the great palace. (113)

Martha's letters are not only rich in detail, but particularly forceful, inspiring, and sweet as well. One feels the passion and love of this star servant of Bahá'u'lláh, her sacrifice for the Faith and her unassuming nature. We witness the pure, tender love she showered on Marie. In a way, we are transported back to those early days; we get a sense of the obscurity of the Faith then (1929–1938), and the fewness of its numbers. Marcus does regularly interject important information to orient us and provide us with context and perspective.

The dominant story told is clearly the Bahá'í story, so the widespread admiration Queen Marie received then, her fame and popularity on the world scene, and the symbol of beauty and success she became for her generation, are not fully evident to the reader. Nor is it entirely apparent in the text the reputation she had gained in Europe as a kindhearted, approachable, humane, activist monarch, a reputation she earned for her war work during World War I, when she tirelessly worked in her country's army hospitals and on the front lines: that is a story in itself.

Reading Marcus's book was quite a satisfying experience, and a fascinating and inspiring one as well. As the work proceeded, at times I would catch myself anticipating those audiences and wonder what those moments would be like. Other questions would arise too as the story progressed. In those royal

encounters, what did these two women from entirely different backgrounds discuss? On these relatively informal occasions, what did the queen have to say about the teachings to Martha, face to face; and what did she have to say about the Bahá'í Faith off the record, so to speak, in her personal diary entries? How did Shoghi Effendi react to that initial meeting and subsequent ones, and what impetus did this lend to the Cause then? With both Marie and Martha often traveling about Europe, how did Martha manage to catch up with her spiritual daughter for those audiences? Lady Blomfield met with Queen Marie at some point, I had learned; did this actually occur and what transpired and when?

At the outset of reading the book, I had to shift from expecting a narrator to tell the story, to reading largely primary material—personal correspondence and diary entries; the latter I found, though, to be quite engaging and a far richer experience. An added dimension to this work is provided by the stunning photographs of Marie and facsimiles of her hand-written appreciations. All in all, for an entirely engaging, inside story of the only queen to enlist in the Faith to date, for an edifying and endearing account of Martha Root, for a fascinating look at those very early years following the Heroic Age, *Her Eternal Crown* is a fine choice.

ROBERT POSTLETHWAITE