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TO BE AND NOT TO SEEM

My Mother-in-Law, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna

An Interview with Olga Kulikovsky-Romanoff

Over the past two years, it has been a great pleasure for the *Road to Emmaus* staff to help unearth and translate previously unpublished materials relating to the Russian imperial family with Olga Nikolaievna Kulikovsky-Romanoff, the wife of Tsar Nicholas II's late nephew, Tihon Nikolaievich Kulikovsky-Romanoff. Our efforts centered on the fascinating and little-known life of the Tsar's youngest sister and Tihon Nikolaievich's mother, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, Olga Nikolaievna's mother-in-law. For the past two years, Mrs. Kulikovsky has generously extended her Moscow visits to work with us on this full-length interview on the life of her husband and his mother.

ROAD TO EMMAUS: Olga Nikolaievna, could you tell us a little about your own life, and your connection with the Russian royal family?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: I was born in Yugoslavia — at that time Serbia — in 1926. My parents escaped from Russia after the 1917 revolution, and they met on Prinkipo, the Greek island near Turkey. Later they went to Limnos, another Greek island, and from there to Yugoslavia. My father was a Cossack officer in the White Army, equivalent to a captain. He had loved the Cossack army as a boy, and after finishing the special secondary school for the Third Cadet Corps in Moscow, he went through officer's training and joined the Kuban Cossacks — a special Russian regiment.

RTE: How old was he at the time of the Russian revolution?

Opposite: *Grand Duchess Olga in nursing uniform with the St. George Cross for bravery.*

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: He was born in 1888, so in 1917 he was close to thirty, still a young man. After the revolution my parents settled in Yugoslavia as exiles. Many Russians felt that Serbia was the backyard of Europe, and emigration to France was all the fashion, but my parents didn't follow that idea: they preferred to stay in an Orthodox country. My father was a typical military man. He didn't have a second profession, but because he had been a talented artist from childhood, he was able to teach art in Serbian secondary schools. Mama

had finished two art schools. She was a sculptor and painter, but with a household and a young child, her art was neglected.

RTE: And you went to the branch of the Smolney Institute that emigrated from Novo-Cherkask to Yugoslavia?¹

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, I did.

RTE: And received a very traditional Russian upper-class education?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes. Today, people wonder how I have kept my Russian language so pure. Very simply, it was drilled into me from childhood. The Institute's directress was the widow of General Dukhonin, who was killed during the revolution, and she gave her heart and soul to the girls. Each class had an older lady who stayed with us day and night to make sure that there was no



Olga Nikolaievna with a photo of her mother-in-law, Grand Duchess Olga.

disorder, no cheating, and so that the teachers could not mistreat us. We were always addressed as "Mademoiselle," and when we answered a teacher, we first had to stand and curtsy. (There were two types of curtsies, you know, the very deep royal curtsy, and the *reverence*, which was used for everyday.) The teachers and class ladies themselves were very well-educated and many were from noble families. We had a fantastic education.

¹ Smolney Institute: Founded in the 18th century as a school for girls of the nobility by Catherine II, adjacent to a women's monastery. By 1868 the Institute was so successful that it occupied the entire Smolney palace until the Russian revolution of 1917, when revolutionaries took over the palace. Many of the teachers went into exile, and annexes of the school functioned abroad.



Class at Smolney Institute. Olga Nikolaievna is on the third row, fifth from left.

RTE: What kind of curriculum did you follow?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: First of all, of course, we had religion, then geography, history, chemistry, physics, mathematics, painting, music, gymnastics... and each day another language.

RTE: What languages did you learn?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Of course, it was a Russian school and Russian was the main language, but because we were in Serbia, in order to meet the academic requirements of the Serbian "gymnasium" [an intensive prep school curriculum], we had a double program: Serbian language, history, geography and literature, as well as the same subjects in Russian. We also had classical Greek, Latin, Church Slavonic, French, German, and English. We were quite busy. Also each day, we had our "duty" language. Because we were learning so many languages, we spoke a different one each day in our free time and at meals so that we could practice. The fact is, it gave a certain discipline of mind and body, and taught us that there are certain things you are obliged to do, things that cannot be avoided.

We were never allowed to talk back to our teachers, to answer back. No one would have dared. That was the way we were all raised. If my mother

told me to eat my soup, I might explode, I might have to stuff it in my nose, but it would be eaten. Saying no simply wasn't done.

RTE: How do you feel that this kind of discipline served you later in life? It is so different from the way most children are raised now.



Olga Nikolaievna, 15.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, imposed discipline ends in self-discipline. I tell you, there are many days when I get up feeling that I have a hundred and fifty years on my shoulders. I get up with aches and pains, but I get up and go on, because I have to. It's just there to do, there is no other way.

RTE: I have a sense that you've lived by what you felt you should do, not what you've wanted to do.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, we all have our duties and responsibilities and they are important.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to finish my intended education because World War II started for us in 1941. Palm Sunday, 1941 was the bombardment of Belgrade by the German Luftwaffe, which was an awful thing, and on Easter Day, the Germans marched in and Serbia was conquered. Our school was closed

because it was a boarding school, and it was considered too great a responsibility to have so many young girls in one place. We were sent to finish at a Russian day school. At the same time, my mother was captured on the street by the Germans and forcibly taken to Germany to work. For some time we didn't know where she was or even if she was alive. She had happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and was caught in a round-up. Although she was dressed up in a hat and gloves and was obvi-

ously educated, it didn't matter. Later, being who she was, the Germans offered her citizenship, but she said, "No, thank you."

RTE: Who was she?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: My mother was from the noble Polish Kopernitsky family – the Copernicus who found that the world was round, instead of flat. Her native city was a German protectorate at that time, and the Germans wanted to prove that Copernicus was German, not Polish. They thought their cause would be furthered if they could show that she was a German citizen.

Six months after her arrest, in November 1941, she was allowed to come from Germany and collect me because my father had joined the Russian army corps recruited by Germany, which had promised that they would be sent to fight the Russian communists. It was all lies, of course, and they were forced to fight on another front. I was taken to Germany then with my mother. My father's rationale was, "It's better to be in the lion's mouth than in his - - -."

RTE: So, you must have had a hard time. Were you in cities bombed by the Allies?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: I was buried alive with my mother for forty-eight hours in Stuttgart. Fortunately, we survived. A few months later, I went to Nuremberg to see a friend perform in a ballet. We were caught there on the night of the most terrible bombardment of the war. It was awful, but God saved us.

RTE: And when you were buried alive in Stuttgart, you were trapped under rubble?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes. In fact, it was only at the last second that I managed to get to the shelter. I usually went up on the roof to watch the attacks – they were beautiful to watch, but the moment you heard the bombs whistling, you ran for cover. First would come in the "explorer," throwing "Christmas tree lights" as we called them, to show where to bomb. Then you would hear the heavy roar of the bomber squadron. They were incendiary bombs, and it was awful. When you heard the whistle, you ran. The night we were buried, I couldn't get down fast enough and when I reached the top of the basement stairs, the window behind me blew out and I slid into the shelter on a sheet of broken glass, on the window frame. It was an unimaginable sight.

RTE: When you were buried, did you believe you would be rescued?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: You don't think those things when you are under the rubble. You just hope you will be discovered and that the wreckage can be removed. We had raw potatoes within reach and that was what we ate. It was bad, though.

It was a very hard time in Germany. The first year we were in a labor camp and worked in a knitting factory that made clothes for children. Then, when I was sixteen, an acquaintance in the police department helped me obtain a permit to go to school. So, I went to a German school and my mother continued to work at the factory. When they found out who she was and offered her German citizenship, she refused it, but asked instead for permission to live in a rented room rather than in the camp, and they allowed this. I will never forget those years. The lady we rented a room from used to clean and fry potatoes, and we would be sitting there as hungry as hell. When she finished, we would go into the kitchen and pick the peels out of the garbage, wash and cook them. We were like zombies during the war from hunger and exhaustion. You worked all day, and the Allies bombed all day and all night. Everywhere, people died around us.

My mother and I were separated again when my father was wounded and I went to find him in the hospital. He had been slated by the Allies to be repatriated to Russia, which would certainly have meant death in Stalin's camps, but by God's mercy he was wounded. When they repatriated the Cossacks, he and two others in the hospital were forgotten. The rest were sent to the gulag camps or executed as traitors as soon as they crossed the Russian border. I found my father in the hospital, but then I couldn't find my mother again. After six months we were reunited, and we went to Venezuela as displaced persons.

RTE: Did you have a profession?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: In Venezuela we started all over again. I had married before we left — one of the Russian cadets who had finished the army cadet school in Yugoslavia — and that voyage was our wedding trip. It was easier for a young man and woman to travel with an older couple. We were 22 and 25, and I did many things in Venezuela. I was a nurse, an interior decorator, and then I had a business of stamps and coins. After my parents died, my daughter and I moved to Canada where I worked as a court interpreter. I was then

transferred to Toronto, where I married Tihon, and where I still live.

RTE: When did you first meet Tihon Nikolaievich?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: When I came from Venezuela, I called him because I had a gift for him from the Akhtyrsky Hussar regiment in Venezuela, the regiment of which Grand Duchess Olga was the honorary colonel-in-chief. I had to pass the documents to Tihon Nikolaievich, and our families became friends. Later, we were both widowed the same year, and soon after that Tihon and I married.

RTE: Can you tell us now about Tihon Nikolaievich's mother, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes. Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna was born in 1882. Her father, Tsar Alexander III, was already on the throne and she was the only child of the family to be born "in the purple," an old Byzantine term referring to a child considered to be particularly blessed because he or she was born to an anointed monarch. Alexander III had married the Danish Princess Dagmar, who became Empress Marie Feodorovna and they had six children: Nicholas, who was the crown prince and later tsar, another child that died as a baby, then George who died in his twenties of tuberculosis, then Xenia, and finally Michael and Olga, who became my mother-in-law. Michael and Olga were particularly close because they were the youngest.

Olga Nikolaievna and Tihon Nikolaievich Kulikovskiy-Romanoff

There was a funny story from Gatchina, the palace where they grew up. When Alexander III wanted to concentrate, he would lean out of the window and contemplate the garden while he was thinking. Well, one afternoon, when the tsar was playing with the children in the garden, he sprayed Michael with the garden hose. The children's windows were above their father's office and a few days later, when the tsar leaned over the window sill, Michael poured a bucket of water straight down on his head. He looked up and shouted, "Just wait you..." but, of course Michael wasn't punished. The tsar knew he was

being paid back and he was very generous with the children. He was strict and disciplined in his office, and because he was so tall and strongly built he gave the impression of being severe, but he was actually a gentle soul... a wonderful father, and the children loved him.

RTE: How were they raised?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Well, first of all they had house rules, and these were kept. Grand Duchess Olga had a British nanny, Mrs. Franklin, so she was raised with tea, crumpets, and orange marmalade. Up to her last years she loved toast and marmalade. Her childhood was the usual round of classes, church, receptions, time to play, and so on. She and Michael sent little notes to each other during the day when they couldn't be together. Of course, there were family holidays when they would all go together to Livadia or the Crimea.

RTE: Was it true, as it has been reported, that they slept on soldiers' camp beds and ate very simply?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, and they also passed their clothes down from the older children to the younger. Not only was their food simple, but that of the tsar's daily table was almost plain. Sometimes today when I visit "new" Russians you see all this caviar and elaborate dishes. But an everyday menu for the tsar's family would have been soup, *piroshki*, poultry or meat, and dessert. That's it. Nothing else. Even the state dinners were not as lavish as some contemporary Russian meals I've been invited to. When I see these luxurious preparations I often think, "People are hungry and you have such a table as this." It makes me uncomfortable.

RTE: Did Olga Alexandrovna have aspirations of her own? We know she painted, but was there anything she wanted to become, to do?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: She loved painting, and she was even permitted to doodle during classes — it helped her concentrate. She also played the violin very well. She was very talented, of course, but people don't often know that the whole family, even Tsar Alexander, painted. Because Olga was the youngest, she wasn't invited to all of the public affairs and balls that the others were required to attend. She had time to develop, and she learned to think differently. She was often with the soldiers and the common folk around the palace, and this was her favorite pastime.



A formal photograph of Grand Duke Michael and Grand Duchess Olga.

RTE: How did she think differently than other members of the family?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: She was not different perhaps in orientation, but she had more time to develop as an individual. Her brothers and sisters were older and they were pushed into public life. People think that being born a



Watercolor by Grand Duchess Olga.

prince or princess gives you many privileges – but they forget that with the privileges come duties. Grand Duchess Olga had duties, but she was spared much of what the others had to face. She was a companion to her mother for many years, and when she was eighteen they began looking for a husband for her. The king of Romania was a possible suitor, and someone

from the Swedish royal family... but she refused to marry if it meant that she would have to leave Russia. She loved Russia; her country was her life.

Now her mother, Empress Marie Feodorovna, had a very dear friend, Countess Oldenburg, who had a son, Peter, and it was sort of arranged between the two mothers: “You have a son, and I have a daughter, why not let them be married?” And, in fact, he was the best suited Russian available because he was a prince, and it wouldn’t be a morganatic marriage.² As it turned out, he was not interested in women, which was perhaps another reason why his mother wanted to marry him off, to save his reputation. So, Olga was married in 1901. She was only nineteen and, sadly, it didn’t work out.

RTE: Yes, it was a shame that she was pushed into it. In his biography, *The Last Grand Duchess*,³ Ian Vorres says that Oldenburg left her and spent their wedding night gambling in a casino. She cried herself to sleep.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, and this was why, during the long periods they spent at the Oldenburg’s country palace in Voronezh, she slowly developed an independent life of her own. She was still very interested in rural life with

² Morganatic marriage: A marriage between a person of royal birth and a partner of lesser rank, in which the latter has no royal status or title.

³ Vorres, Ian, *The Last Grand Duchess*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, NY, 1964.

the peasants, so she bought some land near the village and built herself a house, which she called Olgino. Later, she built a hospital and a school for the villagers. She helped in the hospital and that was where her knowledge of nursing began, by studying with the local doctor and nurses. The Oldenburgs had a sugar factory nearby, so she also built a candy factory to provide employment, and organized a tapestry workshop for the village women. I visited there last year.

RTE: Are the factory and workshop still open?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Not as they used to be, but the villagers remember them. I have plans, though, and hope that something may be revived there.

RTE: This brings up another question. There are so many misconceptions in the West about the royal family, but from what you’ve said of Olga, she was democratic in the real sense. You can feel it in her letters, this deep concern and love for other people.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: I will tell you something: people often imagine things about royalty. In fact, there is a comical old Ukrainian peasant saying, “If I were a king I would eat bacon every day, I would cover myself with bacon, and I would sleep on bacon,” because bacon is a favorite food in the Ukraine and symbolizes what Ukrainian peasants imagined to be royal privilege.

I also remember the instance of a ten-year-old girl visiting Olga Alexandrovna, who was then thirty or forty. The girl later said, “I was so disappointed. I saw this older lady who looked like my mother. I thought that she would come out in robes and a crown.” And, subtly, people still have this attitude. Tihon, my husband, used to make a joke about it in Russian, saying, “People think that ‘even in *parfira* you go to *sortira*.’” (‘Even in ermine you go to the outhouse.’) But real rulers are much like anyone else: they get up earlier than they would like, eat breakfast, go to work, and work very hard. It is only a difference of rank, like the difference between a soldier and a general. Now, the general works his way up from being a soldier because of his achievement, his knowledge and expertise. With nobility, you are born into a kingly dynasty, but by being born into it, from the first day of life you have a cross to bear, and how to bear this cross is the focus of your education.

I often compare it to a beehive. You have a hive and there is an exact denomination for every bee. There are soldier bees, there are working bees,

there are bee guards, and there is a queen. It's exactly the same thing in real life. And how do you become a queen bee? It is an egg just like all the others, but this one egg is nourished with special honey and care. She is born into it. She can't help it; she was prepared and nourished even before she was born. The same thing happens in a dynasty. From infancy on, you know what is done and not done. This is why I say that discipline is lacking today

in every aspect of our lives. For the Russian nobility, there was no such thing as saying, "I don't want to do it."

People also say, "But how could the tsar govern the country? He didn't even go to university." He didn't have to go; the university came to him. Well-known professors who wrote the university textbooks came to give him individual classes. Tsar Nicholas II, for instance, besides the regular school curriculum (and he spoke Russian,



Olga and Michael in the company of sailors who looked after the rivers and lakes at Gatchina.

French, German, and flawless English), was educated in law and in military science. Later, for five years after his academic schooling, he went from one branch of the military to another. He experienced the navy, the army, different regiments, different duties. This was his education, and it was a much more rigorous education than was usual. It was the same in Olga's case, although she had more freedom. She was able to spend part of her time with the gardeners, the cooks, the servants, and was more comfortable there than among the upstairs court gossip and intrigues among the ladies-in-waiting.

RTE: This seems to be a quality that Tsar Nicholas shared with her. Although they were so burdened, Tsar Nicholas and Tsaritsa Alexandra always talked about their desire to be with the people. There was no disdain there. Many people know that Alexandra and two of her daughters nursed wounded soldiers during World War I and even assisted at surgeries, much against court opinion.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: I don't know why the idea was formed that royalty usually looks down on common people; perhaps this is from the French court and the time of the Medicis, who did feel themselves superior. But in Russia

it was not this way. For example, take Peter the Great. After he became tsar, he went to Holland to work in a Dutch shipyard because he wanted to learn to build ships. No one knew who he was, he was just one among the ordinary workers. Later, Catherine II distinguished herself, this is true, but her son, Paul I, had a mailbox on his palace door into which anyone could put suggestions or complaints. He had the only key to the mailbox, and he read it daily. There was no intermediary. Of course, with all of his duties he could not visit every home, every family. There is not time enough in the world to be with everyone, and his duties were heavy.

I know for myself, even though I am no one, that there aren't enough hours in the day for people who want to talk, who want autographs, who want me to visit their projects.

RTE: But Olga had that time and could often be with people she chose?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, she had that time because she was not the center of attention. Of course, she had to appear at court functions, and accompany her mother, but she loved the people. Whenever she returned to Voronezh, she used to visit the estate workers and many of the villagers and find out about their problems. I remember one time the local forest-master for Olga's estate — you know, the caretaker who watches over the forest, who tells you which trees you can chop and which to let grow — came to her and said, "Your Imperial Highness, could you possibly get us another cow? We don't have enough milk for the children, and then we could have fresh butter as well." Olga said, "All right, let me think about it." A few mornings later he woke up and there were a dozen cows under his window, so not just the estate workers, but the whole village had milk, butter, sour cream. This is what forms a society or family, a hierarchy and the fulfillment of duties. The grand duchess providing the cows, the forest-master watching over the trees, both represent a certain order that has to be followed.

It's the same at home. You don't just come in and start eating out of the fridge without paying attention to what is whose, and what the food is intended for. Either you have to ask, or if you have twenty cucumbers you can eat one or two, but if you have five members of the family and only five cucumbers, you have to be careful how many you eat.

This subject of food reminds me of something I often think about. I have been to Tobolsk and other Russian cities where you can go into museums and

find peasants' diaries, where they've written, "Today I have produced so and so much, and I went and sold this or that, and I got so many rubles and kopecks, and for the rubles and kopecks I bought a horse harness and some twine..." This is order. Do you think that you have this today? When I say that I have to keep accounts for my foundation and ask people for receipts, they sometimes say, "Why? You are a charity. The right hand shouldn't know what the left hand is doing." I say, "Charity is one thing, and cheating is another."

But my point is that Olga took the duties and responsibilities of her position seriously — more seriously than her privileges. She often didn't think of herself. For example, as a wedding gift she had received a large house in St. Petersburg from her brother Nicholas. She had a staff of about seventy-five people, an extremely small staff compared to other grand dukes and duchesses, and this wasn't just for the Oldenburgs' personal needs, but for the social and diplomatic obligations she had as a grand duchess. Now, much of her staff had large families, and she not only paid their salaries, but she also paid for the schooling and university education of over three hundred children, as well as medical care, retirement pensions, and so on. So, you see, she had a huge household on her hands, about 450 people including husbands, wives and children, and it all had to be provided for out of her income. I have a very interesting letter from her manager shortly after the revolution began, when it was obvious that society was falling to pieces and that her bank accounts would soon be frozen by the Bolsheviks. He wrote asking her permission to sell off the well-stocked wine cellar, so that between that and her other usable assets they could pay off the servants: wages, provision for the children to finish their educations, pensions in a lump sum, etc. He had calculated to a fine degree how much would have to be paid to each servant in respect to years of service, children, bonuses for industrious work, etc.

RTE: This is quite different from the popular view of the Russian upper class only being interested in escaping abroad with their property.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, you see, these details show that many people were not selfish. The propaganda of communists and proletariats, saying that they were living off the working class, was not the whole picture. The working class was also living off of them. It was give and take.

RTE: What happened after these first years of Grand Duchess Olga's marriage?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: She was obviously unhappy with Oldenburg: he was not a husband and it was not a consummated marriage. But, you see, she was a very caring aunt. She was a little older than the tsar's children, Olga, Tatiana, Marie, Anastasia and Alexis, and was Anastasia's godmother. She was also close to Empress Alexandra Feodorovna; she understood her problems and her worries. On Sunday afternoons after liturgy, she would often invite the children for tea along with some of the young officers, and they would play games in her enormous house in Sergeivsky Street.⁴ There are letters and notes that still exist from young Tatiana Nikolaievna, who wrote: "After church we went to Aunt O., and we had an awfully beautiful time, it was terribly gay..."

RTE: In reading about Empress Alexandra, it seems that Olga was one of the few people at the court who was really close to her.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, you see, everyone was critical of Alexandra Feodorovna because of her supposed unsociability. But there is one thing that few people, then or now, take into consideration: she was plunged into court life with no preparation. Her mother-in-law, Marie Feodorovna, lived in Russia for fifteen years as the wife of the crown prince before she was crowned empress. She had had time to find herself, to learn the language. She was also a very outgoing girl from the gay Danish court, while Alexandra was subdued and religious.

Alexandra had grown up motherless and was raised in the English tradition of her grandmother — Queen Victoria's reserved and publicly inexpressive manners. Empress Marie Feodorovna had a decade and a half to form a social base, to get to know people and to establish her place in society, but Alexandra was plunged into the role of empress almost from the moment she stepped onto Russian soil. Also, Alexandra's children were all born after she was already empress and, although she was in poor health, she nursed them herself, while Marie Feodorovna had had her whole family except Olga before she took on her duties as empress. But yes, Olga's naturalness went straight to Alexandra's heart, and Olga was one of the few who really understood her and was a comfort.

RTE: So, when did Olga meet Colonel Nicholas Kulikovsky, whom she later married and who became your father-in-law?

⁴ During the revolution Sergeivsky Street in St. Petersburg was renamed Tchaikovsky Street, which it remains today.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: She first saw him two years after her marriage to Oldenburg, during a military parade of the Akhtyrsky Hussar Regiment at Pavlovsk, of which Olga was the honorary colonel-in-chief. It was love at first sight. The two were officially introduced at a small party given by Olga's brother, Michael, and she was so overwhelmed with Nicholas Kulikovsky that she immediately asked her husband for a divorce (actually an annulment), which he refused to grant, telling her he would consider it after seven years. He simply didn't want to lose the status of being married to the tsar's sister.

Of course, Tsar Nicholas was in a bad position. He'd already had a problem with his cousin Grand Duke Kyrill, who had courted someone else's wife. That sort of thing wasn't done, and Nicholas made Kyrill promise that he wouldn't marry the woman, but Kyrill broke his promise and married her anyway. Then the tsar's uncle, Paul Alexandrovich, made a match with a divorcee and was exiled because it was against the law for Romanoff males in line for the throne to engage in morganatic marriages. A few years later, the tsar's own brother, Michael, married a divorcee, also morganatically and without his permission, so by the time Olga came with the same thing, it was too much. Olga understood this too. The misbehavior of the grand dukes was undermining and a bad example for the country, and although she had legitimate reasons for her request, she knew it would be difficult for the tsar to deal with publicly. She was also very young. She was only twenty-one and already requesting an annulment of her marriage.

RTE: You know, in Ian Vorres' biography, he says that after Olga Alexandrovna told Oldenburg that she wanted a divorce to marry Colonel Kulikovsky, Oldenburg made Kulikovsky his staff adjutant and for a few years Kulikovsky carried out his official duties in their home, where Oldenburg had his office. It would be nice to clear this up publicly, because the passage leaves you wondering if it was a *ménage à trois*, which, knowing Olga's character, I have never believed.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, that wasn't true. Possibly Oldenburg made Kulikovsky his *attache* so that he and Olga could at least see each other, or perhaps Oldenburg had a secret sympathy for Olga because he had never been a husband to her. He may even have thought that by keeping Kulikovsky around, he could observe what was going on. It may have been sympathy, self-defense, or sheer despotism; we will never know. But we do know that Kulikovsky never lived in their house in Sergeivsky Street. He

lived in the regimental barracks on the next street, and nothing improper went on. The Oldenburgs' house had seventy servants, and it would have been impossible to keep something like that hushed up. Also, Olga Alexandrovna didn't become pregnant until after she and Kulikovsky married, years later, and then she had two babies in a very short time. There were no precautions to take in those days and a pregnancy would have been immediately known, but even more importantly, her character wouldn't have allowed it. Being nearby and having a kind of platonic love was enough.

RTE: And then?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: From the Dachinsky Cuirassiers, Kulikovsky transferred to the Akhtyrsky Regiment, and in 1914 was called to the front. Olga herself went straight to the front to work as a war nurse, and so they still weren't together. He did come to visit her occasionally, and there are little notes in her diary from those years like, "I looked out the window and saw Kukushka coming, and was so happy." Things like that.

The tsar, of course, cared for his sister very much, and in 1916, when she formally requested and received a church annulment, he readily ratified it, and she and Colonel Kulikovsky were married in the cathedral in Kiev. Olga's mother and Sandro, her brother-in-law, were with her. The tsar sent a telegram that morning saying, "Today I congratulate you on your marriage. You deserve to be happy. Nicky."

RTE: At one point she was given the St. George Medal for bravery during her work as a war nurse. Can you tell us about this?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Baron Gustav Mannerheim, who later became the president of Finland, was the commander of her regiment, that is, of the Twelfth Akhtyrsky Hussars. She used to visit her regiment frequently, and often bought the men fur hats or warm coats out of her own funds. Sometimes she also visited her regiment on the front lines, and once she was in the trenches when they were fired upon by Austrian artillery, the shells dropping



Grand Duchess Olga at the front, reading hospital report.

all around them. She didn't show any fear, just quietly went to work helping the wounded, and for that she was awarded the St. George Medal for bravery. She was very modest, you know, and when she was given the medal by Commander Mannerheim she didn't think she deserved it and burst into tears, putting it into her pocket. It was only later, when the men of her regiment begged her to wear it for them that she pinned it to her dress.

RTE: It's these kinds of things that make her seem so human. What happened after her marriage to Colonel Kulikovsky?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Well, it was already 1916 when she married, and revolution was around the corner. The Brest-Litovsk separate peace treaty between the Russians and Germans had not yet been signed because Tsar Nicholas was still in power and he would not stoop to the dishonor of a separate peace. It was Lenin who later signed the separate peace because he wanted to bring the Russians to their knees, to consolidate his own power and to use the soldiers from the front to fight against the White Army. There is a belief among some historians that he was paid to make a separate peace

by the Germans and other world leaders.

Olga and Kulikovsky were married in Kiev, but once the tsar and his family were arrested the Dowager-Empress Marie Feodorovna and the Kulikovskys went to the family estate in the Crimea, where they were put under house arrest in Ai-Todor. The soldiers often broke into Marie Feodorovna's quarters and the Kulikovskys' rooms, particularly



Wedding photo of Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna and Nicholas Kulikovsky.

when they were sleeping, to search for weapons. Every time they searched, something else would disappear, even family items like the Danish Bible that the empress's mother had given her. These were the conditions under which Tihon, Olga's first son and my husband, was born.

Yesterday, in a talk I gave to a group of soldiers, I remarked that Tsar Alexander III, Olga's father (who had fought in the Turkish war), was very repulsed by war and did all he could to keep Russia out of war. The only artillery that was heard in his reign were 100-gun salutes. When Olga was born, there was a 101-gun salute. Her eldest son, Tihon was also born under gunfire, but this was not a salute, unfortunately, it was the revolution. In

order to keep the child alive, Nicholas Kulikovsky had to sell his boots in exchange for a goat because they had so little food. Olga was undernourished and didn't have enough milk for the baby. In one of her letters she writes, "We don't know how we will survive. We can't get our money from the bank. We have only a hundred rubles left and a bit of butter now costs twenty rubles. Thankfully, someone has sent us a little ham and butter... we were delirious with happiness." You see, they didn't have enough to live on.

Empress Marie Feodorovna later wrote a letter about the dangers they'd faced, and finished with "... but nevertheless, there were also happy moments... and such happiness, as for example, when almost unbelievably Tihon appeared in the world..." You see, she was saying that sometimes when life seems impossible there is always a little spot of happiness, as when a baby is born...

Of course, we know now that during this same time there was an ongoing discussion between the Bolsheviks of Sebastopol and the Bolsheviks of Yalta about who was going to have the "honor" of killing the family. Finally, when Lenin signed the separate peace with Germany, the Germans came and offered to escort Empress Marie Feodorovna to safety, but the old empress had such a hatred of Germany that she refused. So her sister, Queen Alexandra of England, persuaded King George to send the H.M.S. Marlborough for them. The Marlborough had almost reached Gibraltar, when it received orders to return; England had decided that they didn't want to accept the Russian royal family, even though this was the sister of the English queen. After much controversy, the Marlborough was sent back, and when the captain reported to Marie Feodorovna, she said, "I will leave with you on one condition, that you take anyone with us who wants to emigrate." So, the ship was full; every Russian who wanted to go, commoner or noble, went with her. But she was not allowed to stay in England; after a few weeks she was asked to leave for Denmark.

Olga did not go with her. That was how strongly she wanted to stay in Russia. She and Kulikovsky refused to leave on the Marlborough, and went instead to Stanitsa Novominskaya, the home of Timofei Xenophontovich Yachik, the personal Cossack bodyguard of the old empress, where they lived with his relatives. The White Army was still in control of the region and they hoped that here they would be safe. Olga's second son, Gury, was born in Novominskaya with only a peasant woman to help her through the birth. They rented a small hut and Nicholas Kulikovsky worked on a nearby farm, while

Olga took care of the babies. When the Bolsheviks began to push the White Army south, they fled to Rostov-on-the-Don where Olga tried to get news of her mother from the Danish consul. Traveling under horrid conditions (there was widespread typhus), they finally arrived in Novorossiysk. From Novorossiysk they left on a merchant ship — first to a displaced persons camp on the Turkish island of Prinkipo (the same one my parents met on) and then to Belgrade, where King Alexander of Serbia welcomed them. He offered them asylum, but Olga's mother was alone in Denmark and needed her.

In Denmark they lived in Amelianborg, the group of four buildings that makes up the royal palace. Decades earlier, Marie Feodorovna and her sisters had purchased a villa at Hvidore, north of Copenhagen on the seashore. In the summer the royal exiles lived there, but because it wasn't adapted for cold weather, they moved back to the palace every fall.

RTE: So they lived at the Danish court?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: As poor cousins. You have to remember that they were practically penniless at this point. When the First World War broke out, Tsar Nicholas II had insisted that all of the Romanoffs empty their foreign bank accounts and invest the money in Russia to support the economy, as an example to the rest of the upper-class. All of his personal foreign assets went to support the Red Cross effort to set up hospitals for the wounded. Of course, during the revolution their accounts were frozen, even from the time of the Provisional Government. Later, the money was simply taken by the Bolsheviks. Of the portion that was left to Empress Marie Feodorovna as the head of the family, she gave most of it away with reckless generosity to every Russian émigré who asked her help — and there were thousands who asked.

Even with the hardships the Kulikovskys had suffered, they were alive and they were together. There is one amusing story about Olga's sons from this time in Denmark. Tihon used to call it, "The Tragic War of the Tulips." It was during the summer at Hvidore and he must have been about six years old, and Gury two years younger. In front of the entrance there was an enormous bed of flowers, thousands of tulips that had been given as a gift. So when spring came all of those beautiful tulips came up like a carpet of color.

Now, as a small boy, Tihon had a passion for flowers, and Grand Duchess Olga allowed him to play with the tulip petals that had dropped from the vases. He wasn't allowed to touch the flowers in the vase, but the fallen



Grand Duchess Olga, 18.

petals were all right, and their waxy colorful surfaces fascinated him. He also knew that when the healthy ones wilted, they would soon drop. Well, here the temptation began. One summer afternoon, a section of tulips in the stupendous bed near the entrance was accidentally missed in watering, and in the warm sun they began to droop, so he decided that these could be played with. The two boys, then about six and four, dutifully armed themselves with wooden swords, and Tihon took command and said, “Off to war. We’ll cut off the heads of our enemies.” So, they went to war, straight into



Tihon and Guri. “The War of the Tulips.”

the flower bed, chopping off tulip heads left and right: Tihon, completely carried away, yelled, “Come on Gury, don’t hang back, fight like a man, we are winning the battle...” Gury was more doubtful, however, and began to sniffle, saying, “Maybe we should stop, maybe we’ve killed enough.” “Coward, we must fight to the end!” But the war ended

suddenly with the nanny grabbing Tihon by the nape of his neck, exclaiming, “Are you out of your minds? What are you doing?” Of course Tihon was the oldest, so he took the consequences.

They got lectures, first by the nanny, then by Papa, then by Olga Alexandrovna, who came down from her mother with a message that Grandmama did not want to see the vandals, not because she wanted to punish them, but because she couldn’t bear the sight of hooligans. Then, at bedtime, when the night-time nanny said prayers, she began to appeal to the “voice of the conscience” of the young boys. “How could she have done such a thing?” Tihon later said, laughing, “I would have much preferred a spanking to her appeal to the voice of my conscience.”

RTE: Were Tihon and his mother close?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, they were very close, and he was gentle and very similar in character to his mother — outgoing, happy, and quietly religious. You see, religion gives you an inner light, and with it you can deal more easily with life’s problems — you see them differently, you understand them differently, you accept them differently, and you cope with them different-

ly. It gives you hope, and even a weapon with which to solve things in a way that an unbeliever can’t. That inner light also helps you to accept things as they are. It’s the unbelievers who have to flee from life’s problems.

And, you can imagine that it wasn’t easy. After living in palaces and not having to worry about what the next day would bring, having an apparently safe life and a loving family, and then suddenly, overnight, to be deprived of your country, your home, your family, and yourself reduced to poverty, this is difficult. To not turn and rebel against society, against God, against those who did this — only a person who believes in God can accept and cope with this without bitterness.

That is why I understood them, and why I could fit into Tihon’s life. God gave me the same education, the same understanding, the same background — maybe not royal, but at least I suffered the same things as the Romanoffs. Many of my relatives were also killed. I have suffered hunger, I have suffered from cold and bombardment, from being buried alive, and the humiliation in forced labor camps of having to walk unclothed to the showers in front of German guards. Your natural indignation has to be suppressed in those circumstances, you learn to control those feelings, but it is only with prayer that you can do so.

I believe that Tihon did the same thing in coping with his situation. Being the grandson of a Russian tsar and a Danish king, and the nephew of another tsar, could have given him a swollen head or made him resentful of being a prince without a title, but it didn’t. Olga raised him very carefully.

RTE: So, as the boys grew up, what happened?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: In 1928, when Tihon was about twelve or thirteen, Empress Marie Feodorovna died, the villa was sold, and with her part of the money Olga Alexandrovna bought a small farm on the outskirts of Copenhagen, and this was where they lived. Her husband Nicholas was an expert equestrian, and was employed to manage the riding stables of a wealthy Dane named Rasmussen. They also worked the farm. The children went to school and when they came of age were conscripted into the Danish



Col. Kulikovskiy, Grand Duchess Olga, Tihon and Guri, age 10 and 8.



Grand Duchess Olga with sons Tihon and Guri in Danish army uniforms.

Army. (You see, conscription is for everyone, for princes and for commoners.) Later, Tihon graduated from officers' training school and joined the Danish Royal Guards with a commission.

Then the Second World War began. Denmark was occupied by the Germans, the Danish army was dissolved, and Tihon and Gury were imprisoned for months. The Germans set up a prisoner-of-war camp in Ballerup, near the Kulikovsky farm. The prisoners were British, Americans, French, and émigré Russians who had originally been White Army troops and now fought

on the Allied side. Although the Kulikovskys scarcely had enough food for themselves (Denmark was rationing food), Olga used to take everything she could — an extra egg, a little milk, or a loaf of bread — and pass them through the wire fence of the camp.

Later, with Germany's collapse, many of these Allied Russian soldiers came to the farm begging for asylum. Even though the Allies had won, they were asking for asylum because Stalin's troops were at the door demanding the extradition of the same émigré Russian soldiers who had helped them to victory, because they wanted to eradicate the remnants of the White Army. (Those who were extradited to Russia were immediately executed or put into camps.) Olga helped some of them escape with the assistance of a Catholic Danish bishop, and in at least one case she hid a soldier in her attic for weeks.

The Soviets also demanded that the Danish government extradite Grand Duchess Olga as the only surviving Romanoff. Although on the Allied side, Denmark could no longer protect her, and in 1948 the family emigrated to Canada. They bought another farm there, but Olga was already sixty-six, and her husband a year older, and the work was simply too much for them. So they sold it and bought a small house on the outskirts of Toronto.

RTE: How did they live?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Olga Alexandrovna sold her own paintings. They lived very simply, very frugally.

RTE: So Tihon was an officer in the Danish army, and then emigrated to Canada with his parents. What did he do in Canada?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: He greatly loved the army, and I know that he never got over having to leave it. At first he helped out on the new farm, but when the work was too difficult, they gave it up. Then he became a salesman in the art department of Eaton's Department Store. Later, he was a draftsman at the Ministry of Transportation, and then transferred to the engineering department, where he helped plan and build highways.

RTE: When did Olga Alexandrovna finally come to accept the fact that her brother, Tsar Nicholas II, and his family had been killed? Those close to Marie Feodorovna say that the empress never did.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Of course, Olga didn't want to believe that such a thing had happened, but as the years went by, she accepted the situation. Surely,



Grand Duchess Olga and Colonel Kulikovskiy, Knudsminde farmhouse, 1930's.

she suffered. Loving the Russian people as she did, it was hard to believe that there could be such cruelty.

You know, it is almost ten years now since Tihon died, and there is an expression, “I can’t believe it.” I can’t believe that so many years have passed, and I can’t believe he is dead. You see, you say that... but of course, you accept that he is not here anymore, you just use that as an expression. This is what hurts me when people say, “They never accepted it.” Of course they couldn’t accept it. Who could “accept” that twenty-eight members of their family had been murdered? But it was not in that sense that they meant it – it was just that it was so hard to believe. For Marie Feodorovna, especially, to lose both her sons, a grandson, granddaughters... When you know today how cruel that was, can you imagine being the mother and grandmother?

RTE: Not only did they have to face their loss, but Olga Alexandrovna was troubled all of her life by pretenders and imposters who claimed to be rescued members of the royal family.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, and they are still springing up today. I have been pestered many times by Nicholas III’s and Paul II’s and Anastasias, and whatever. Of course, for Olga it was more fresh and direct. In 1924 they wanted Marie Feodorovna to accept the false Anastasia, the Anderson woman from Germany. She refused, but Olga went to see the woman, for the simple reason that Tihon was taking his secondary school exams in Germany, and since Olga was accompanying him, she agreed to meet her. Of course, there was always hope. It’s like when you lose a purse, and you reconstruct all the steps, check out every clue, thinking, “Maybe I will find it.” It’s no wonder she went. Anastasia was her godchild, they were very close, and the love between them was strong. But as soon as she saw the woman, she knew that it was not Anastasia. We have the first draft of her letter stating this.

RTE: This is a different topic, but how important was Orthodoxy in her life? In the biography, Vorres doesn’t really touch on it.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: You see, Vorres is a very nice person, but at the time he wrote her biography he was a very young Greek journalist and not so religious, perhaps, as older people are – he simply wouldn’t have known how to draw that out. Then, also, every person’s beliefs are private. I don’t

explain how I believe and I don’t like people telling me how religious they are, although I do express my faith in public speeches if the question comes up. When people ask me about Russia getting on its feet, I tell them that the country has to come to God. You cannot have a godless country; that is why we have so many problems.

Grand Duchess Olga was deeply religious and she relied completely upon the belief that everyone has a destiny. Just as Emperor Nicholas II said, “Whatever is destined for me to face, I will face and make the best of it.”

RTE: You mean destiny in terms of God’s providence?

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes, absolutely. They never started a day without prayer, they never sat down at the table without praying or crossing themselves. The tsar himself went to liturgy every morning, especially when he was in Livadia at their country estate.

The way in which Olga Alexandrovna expressed her Orthodoxy was by doing good, by being charitable, by always having a consoling word for people in trouble. In Canada, as she became elderly, she couldn’t go to liturgy every week anymore because the church was rather far away, but she did what she could. She read the Bible, she prayed, and her son Tihon, my husband, was the same.

I believe that it was her faith that gave her the hope and courage to live through the horrors of war and revolution. You can see from her letters that she not only endured, but helped those around her. You can also see these qualities in her watercolors, of which she painted about two thousand. Although the outward circumstances of her life were tragic, the watercolors are bright and colorful, radiant with light and warmth.

RTE: Yes. Speaking of Tihon, how did he view himself as the nephew of Tsar Nicholas and the grandson of Tsar Alexander III? Although his father wasn’t royal, he was the closest male heir.



Olga Alexandrovna in Canada.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: He was raised as being nothing, as a nobody. You have to remember that his parents left Russia penniless. Everything in Denmark belonged to his grandmother. Even the guards who stood at attention at the royal compound in Denmark only gave him a half-salute.

RTE: Because he was half-royal?



Tihon with picture of Tsar Alexander II behind him.

OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Yes. Tihon was raised without any expectations. His mother, Grand Duchess Olga, was so very modest, and raised her sons the same way. He never nursed the thought of coming to the throne if Russia was freed.

One interesting thing, though, and few people know this...when Olga Alexandrovna and her family were alone in the Crimea at the end, she was the only member of the royal family who had not been killed or exiled abroad. She was admired as the honorary colonel-in-chief of her regiment, and even more for nursing wounded soldiers through the war and then refusing to leave the country in despair when everything fell apart. At one point the monarchists and much of the White Army wanted to proclaim her empress of Russia. That she was married to Kulikovsky, who although of royal descent, was not himself royal, was a democratic touch that they felt would appeal to the people. But Olga, with her characteristic modesty, declined. She felt she was not a leader. Maybe she made a mistake, I don't know, but she did know herself.

Although she was very capable and could manage a field hospital, she was not prepared to lead a country. She knew her own capacity and she never raised that hope in her sons, either. Tihon had the same character as Olga. He was dutiful, loving and considerate, and if anything unpleasant happened, he just stepped aside. If you are of this character, you simply don't nourish ambition.

Something that has never come across clearly in the writings about Olga, but I am certain is the most important thing about her, was her very deep love for Russia and the Russian people. They were everything to her — she gave them her heart, and she would have given her life if it had been asked. And this love was not just for Russians, but for everyone. In Denmark, no



Grand Duchess Olga's funeral in November, 1960.

matter what side of the barbed wire you were on, she was there — not as a grand duchess, but as a neighbor with a word of comfort, to do whatever she could to fill your need. This was the fruit of her life. Her motto was, “To be, and not to seem.” ✚

...To be continued in the Winter 2003 issue.

