

CHRISTINA OXENBERG

aka

KRISTINA KARADJORDJEVIC

Royal
DYNASTY

AN INSIDER'S HISTORY
OF THE SERBIAN
ROYAL FAMILY

■ Laguna ■

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This book is dedicated to
Karadjordje
&
All his descendants
&
With a special salute to my beautiful,
courageous & ageless mother
HRH Princess Elizabeth of Yugoslavia
(Jelisaveta Karadjordjevic)

It is easy for me to be grand with our well experienced army and vast financial resources, but down in the south, in the Balkans, there is a General who has arisen from the simple peasant folk, and who gathered his sheepherders, and without sophisticated weapons, with just the small cannons, shook the foundation of the almighty Ottoman Empire thus freeing his enslaved people. That is Karadjordje, to him goes all the glory of being the greatest General.

Napoleon Bonaparte

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FOREWORD

Princess Myth

Girls all over the world dream of being a Princess. Not unreasonably they imagine wearing the finest frocks and being squired by the most desirable bachelors, to be pampered in palaces of marble and to live lives of unimaginable splendor. Why not such a dream, indeed? They would be wise, however, to beware and never forget beneath the surface are veins of boiling vengeance. Behind the glory lie heaps of mutilated bodies, rival brothers hanged or hacked to death, tremulous fathers mercilessly shot. The founder of this dynasty met with a grisly end, decapitated, his head sent to the Grand Sultan in Constantinople. All this so that one day Serbia's children might exist in tranquility, free of repression from Turks or their vassals, and with the gory past politely swept aside. From a mountain geyser spouts the first droplets of a widening river of descendants linking eventually to the sea. The sea of civilized life where they could become noble patrons of the arts and esthetes.

I look at footage of King Alexander I, 1934 Marseilles. He is dapper in an open car in formal military dress. He

is smiling at the thronging crowds that welcome his official visit. He is visibly pleased. And then he is shot, dead instantly, and his skull reclines slumping sideways, blood oozes down his jaw. It was shocking to me to watch this. What a way to meet a relative.

How does such a dynasty begin?

Christina Oxenberg, 2015

PROLOGUE

Serbia, Why Now?

Despite my research into the story of my Serbian Karadjordjevic family past, and while I have nothing but respect and admiration for all they accomplished, my intentions are not to dwell on these last two hundred years. I doff my hat, I reverentially remember them and restore their stories here as best I can. But my objective is forward looking. My goal and my hope is to carry on in their name for ways how I and my generation and the others of the Karadjordjevic clan can continue the tradition of humbly serving the country of Serbia and help the needy and promoting the sciences and the arts, of which there is an abundance. My vision if for the present and for the future. I tip my hat to the past, I curtsy respectfully to my ancestors, and I stride proudly forward hand in hand with the Serbia of the twenty-first century. That is my most sincere wish and intention. Please join me on this quest.

As is the way with my life unexpected turns present themselves and switch my direction sending me down unpredictable routes. So why now Serbia? Perhaps because

I've spent the first half of my life sorting out who my father was, and recovering from the collateral damage attached. Now, at the midway mark of my life, I have decided I will spend my remaining years studying my mother's side of things, this Serbian side. Then, surely, I shall be done! I would never have decided this in any strategic way, rather a trove of good luck fell into my lap, glittering gifts. Gifts that include a crypt of my own at the family mausoleum in Topola, central Serbia, a land of mountains and forests thick with poplar trees and the sweetest air. When the time comes I will be all dressed up, and I will have somewhere to go.

By birth I am an American, born in New York City, on the upper east side of the island of Manhattan. All my life I attributed much of my personality to this single fact. Gradually I learned the same truths as do so many children and grandchildren of immigrants born in the "States", that there is a past, there is a story, but everyone has done their best to forget it, to eradicate it. It is typical of an American, somewhere around middle age, as I am now, to look up from gazing at the ground beneath one's feet, after years of sifting the soil and hoping for local answers only to look up, blinking at the brightness of the hugeness of the world and to begin a search for explanations on a horizon that goes beyond the world as one sees it. The world of the past. It is equally typical for an American to begin this enquiry by asking questions of parents and grandparents only to discover they have chosen to have forgotten everything. In many cases the grandparents, if they were the first to board those rickety ships and cross the fierce unforgiving Atlantic Ocean,

they might not have learned English and cannot even communicate with grandchildren. They will deny their religious heritage. They will obscure their origins. The only thing they might hold dear are recipes for favorite food. This “origin-washing” is so thorough, all information so bleached that the “seeker” is as likely to give up the quest before they start.

As my friend and professional photographer Leigh Honey Vogel says, “If I tried to research my family roots I’d hit a dead end somewhere in the Bronx and that would be the end of it.”

I am well aware and very grateful that my situation is unique because instead of a willfully reluctant relative who claims airily, “We come from somewhere in Russia, it’s all long ago now, don’t ask questions. Have some more soup”. In my case I can fire up the internet and research my family. At least my mother’s side of the family. This is a luxury for an American, and I have only just begun to take advantage.

I ask you, what do you think an American is? I ask this because when I travel abroad I am often privy to hostility and judgements. So I like to pose this question which is what do you think an American is? Do you think they sprang out of the ground? I will tell you they are the descendants of people from all over the world, they are your ancestors’ lost grandchildren, and they do not know who they are. They are rootless. They have no personal identity. From house to house they have no bond. That is why they obsessively ask of each other, “Where are you from?” and inevitably the answer is the name of a town and a State. But the real question is far subtler than they

even realize, and the correct answer is not known to them. The truth is they have no idea where they are from or who they are. So their identities are being fashioned on the spot, like an anvil miraculously thrown up in their paths, they create themselves. America is the great experiment. Many have thrived from this experiment, however, in the eyes of some this is an experiment that has not faired so well.

Having never been to Serbia in my entire life, in the summer 2014 I traveled to Belgrade to attend a party. Sure, it is a long way to go for a fiesta but the circumstances were appealing to me. The soiree was in honor of the restoration of a property taken from my Serbian family after they were thrown out of the country all those years ago. Obviously, the family lost far more than just this property, they lost their homeland. We have all been wandering ever since.

When the current government (of 2014) restored ownership of this property to my mother and her brother Prince Alexander, this was for us a very big deal. The first true welcome home after half a century of exile, oh and death threats. To me, along with many family members, this was more than a respectable reason to celebrate. Karadjordjevic cousins from all over the world converged on Belgrade in the summer of 2014, magnetically drawn and instantly bonded together for the first time and for the same cause. We recognized each other instantly, we all look exactly alike. This was an exhilarating experience.

I am half Serbian. I was born in New York City and raised in England resulting in a mishmash of an accent.

Americans assume I am British but I have not a single drop of English blood and all my life, in America anyway, I have to continually explain that despite my ludicrous accent, “I am not a Brit!” (which I like to deliver in the manner of Nixon declaring “I am not a crook!”). To a real Brit, however, they never think I am one of them, instead they tell me my accent is “An American accent they can understand!” Consequently, I have never felt that I belonged anywhere, and this feeling has been reinforced by the reactions of others. Countless times an American has asked me, “Where are you from?” and I reply, “New York City,” and they respond by laughingly declaring, “No way! Not with that accent!” It is quite something to be scolded by a complete stranger as to my own origins, and it has repeatedly reinforced my sense of rootlessness. After all I know where I was born, New York City, yet no one believes me, and I know I am half Serbian but I have never visited the country. So my personal tapestry is threadbare, nearly see-through. The bad side of this is it has made for a lifetime of feeling alien wherever I am, the good side is equally I can feel comfortable anywhere. But the proof of the deep-rootedness of this confusion is I have never lived anywhere for very long, and I have never returned to any place I have lived. I have only ever moved forward. Though now that I examine things I see it was never forward, but rather lateral. This investigation into Serbia and the story of the Karadjordjevic family is indeed, finally, a step forward.

It has been my experience through the years to be asked a question that has increasingly shredded my already

minimal patience, mostly because it is boring to have repeated this conversation ad infinitum. Here's exactly how it goes: (Picture smoky loud bar scene):

Where are you from?

I'm from New York.

No you're not!

You know better?

But you have an accent!

You must be a musician with such a fine ear.

Australia?

No.

South Africa?

No.

Canada?

No.

New Zealand?

No.

Ok, I give up, where are you from?

I already told you a fucking hour ago, I'm from New York. Born in New York City. Would you like to see my ID?

But you have an accent?

I'm a combination of Brooklyn Jew and Serbian Princess.

What?

What?

What?

What?

So, where is Siberia?

But on a deeper level this excruciating and predictable exchange has bothered me because it reminds me of my

very real dislocation. Why am I never welcomed, why am I always challenged to prove my identity?

When I showed my passport to the customs man at the Nikola Tesla airport outside Belgrade he looked up and said to me, “I know who you are”. I was shocked. This has never happened to me before. I asked him, “Why don’t you say welcome home?” He said, “Welcome home!” That was the beginning of this new life for me.

When I told Serbs this was my first trip to the fatherland, they said, “What took you so long?” Unsure and hesitantly I replied, “Politics?”, but I had to wonder and I realized I had no idea. I have felt rootless all my life. Partly I blame my sensibilities on knowing about my family’s harsh punishment, and I did not want to forgive a country that had so brutally wounded people dear to me. I had a great deal of ambivalence as Serbia was not a country I had any desire to visit as a tourist. I have been waiting a long time for a good reason, and along came this party. It seemed a fit. I bought myself a round-trip ticket for a five day stay.

My initial concerns were petty, such as how I would get to the party and if my dress wouldn’t be too crushed from so long in a suitcase, and if I could learn a couple of Serb words to toss around. My first twenty-four hours were blearily devoted to sleeping in the lovely modern hotel at the center of Belgrade, and lotsa room-service. Then the coup de grace, the party, was fabulous and well worth traveling for a thousand hours. I was very glad I went. With me were my traveling companion former US diplomat Henry Bisharat and Rasko Aksentijevic, my first ever real live Serbian friend who I happen to know from

my life in Key West, Florida. Rasko was by chance in Belgrade at the same time as I so the three of us attended the party and had a wonderful evening, each from our own perspectives. I saw people across the room, strangers effectively, but I knew who they were, because our faces are all the same with these huge intense dark eyes. I crossed the room and time after time I said, “You must be a Karadjordjevic!” Invariably they would be and we would introduce ourselves, untangling the complications of dead uncles and aunts and grandparents who were cousins, and it was with raucous delight that we found one another. I have never experienced a quantity of family before and it was such an intense pleasure. What I have known is being a periphery member of someone else’s family, a welcome guest of sorts, but nothing much closer than that. I have always acutely felt the chilly separation and observed the difference between my connection and those of the others, so much more intimate and closer and I have never been invited in, never asked to step inside anyone else’s circle. I have never spoken about this, but I have felt it. In the case of the night at Villa Olga, us cousins had never so much as heard of each other’s existence and yet we could spot one another in the crowd. We came together like homing pigeons, quite naturally, and I believe we will not lose touch. This was a turning point for all of us. Long overdue and much needed. Being in Serbia was an overarching issue that was almost more than I could comprehend at the time. This looming umbrella of meaning, so invested in us, so much more than we could even understand. At that party we were all reacting out of gut instinct, some sort of irrefutable genetic mode. It was not

until I returned to America after my five day visit that the significance began to gel, and I started to realize I was done with America for now. I wanted to be in Serbia. I was hooked.

But still on that first trip, the next day after the party, my friend Rasko insisted on showing me Belgrade. Rasko is from the south of the country, from the city of Kragujevac, the largest city in the District of Sumadja, my people. Rasko is naturally a historian and he gave me a thorough tour of Belgrade. I would point at a good looking building and ask, “Can I live there?” and he would say, that is the Students Cultural Center. I loved everything I saw. I started to think about needing to stay longer. All day I was introduced to my ancestors one statue and one monument and one building at a time. The significance impressed me profoundly and I started to think about wanting a lot more time here.

My cousins, Crown Prince Alexander and Crown Princess Katherine were out of town that week I was visiting, but they very kindly arranged for me to visit the Royal Palaces at Dedinje, and this was scheduled for the afternoon. I took Henry and Rasko with me and as soon as the car made its way past the tall gates manned by guards with guns, and we wound up driveways surrounded by enormous pine trees and sweet smelling air, we were all hushed. We toured the Palaces and we each saw what meant most to us. Henry and Rasko took endless photos while I, still in my flip-flops, gaped at objects and rooms I had heard about since I was a child, images

of mythical proportions to me. The room where my mother was born. I knew about this room, I had heard about it all my life. My mother's life was a confluence of misdirection. She was born in a palace. She had her own bodyguard. She was the little Princess. And when she was four years old, an age where one is cognizant, her parents went into a mode of chaos, and she and her nurse would have been swept up in this. Her bodyguard had to stay behind in a changing Serbia. He would be imprisoned for this service he performed for my family. He would be punished by the new regime, one of many of Tito's casualties. But my mother would not know about that, she was a tiny child and she would have been stunned into some sort of trance as the family suddenly sprung into an extended traveling escapade with changing landscapes and an element of terror in the air. She would have realized things were very different when suddenly they were all living in Africa and she was offered a mongoose for a pet, which she liked and named. But life as she had known it was over, forever, even if it would be many years before she could hope to understand what the hell had happened. During my childhood, which was mostly spent in London, I often heard my mother speak about the house she was born in, this Palace we all spoke of by its name of Beli Dvor. Our first Serbian words, even though it was merely a name to us. It would be fifty years before I thought to ask if that name even meant anything, and it turns it does, it means White House. How about that! I knew about this house, this Palace if you like, and I knew there was a room where my mother was born. It must have meant a lot to her because otherwise she

would not have mentioned it, instead she spoke of it frequently enough that when I saw it with my own eyes I was stunned silent. Chills ran through me. I stopped, poised on the doorstep, and stared. Stared at the mute quiet blues of the room. It was enormously significant to me, dredging up so many emotions. This room, I had never entered in my life and yet I knew it intimately. It was a part of my own childhood as much as my mother's because she spoke of it. Simple words keep the past alive. As Nikos Kazantzakis said, you keep the dead alive by speaking of them.

When you walk into Beli Dvor you enter first a hall of quiet cream marble with mirrors and flags, and then into a large square foyer of a room, topped by glass skylights and flanked with sweeping stairs to the second floor, visible as a balcony, perhaps from which to make a very spectacular entrance in formal attire. The focal point of the room is a fireplace over which hangs a large portrait of King Peter I. The floor is diamonds of black and white marble, each stone the size of an elephant's footprint and the tall walls are hung with portraits of ancestors, including my beautiful grandmother Princess Olga. It is a painting I have never seen before, she is young, in her twenties, in a green dress to match her eyes, and she wears no jewelry whatsoever, a modest rendition of an otherwise grand lady. Tucked somewhat beneath one of the sweeping staircases is a black grand piano and I easily could picture my grandfather sitting there, lost in the sounds of beauty echoing off the marble floor and the glass ceiling, and surrounded by his paintings on the walls, the Tintoretto's and Canaletto's, all of which he had painstakingly and lovingly

sought out and bought. How could he know as he played that piano, probably Chopin's Nocturnes, that everything would be ripped away from him one day?

Henry photographed methodically, Rasko went wild when he saw a particular canon, an item he knew from history lessons from when he was a child. And I, well I looked at everything, and sucked it in, and it floored me. Everything for me was drenched in significance. There are men on the Palace staff who care for the house, in the winter they move the paintings around so they do not gather mold, and I shook their hands and told them on behalf of my grandfather I was grateful, and I thanked them.

On that first voyage to the homeland I had blinked and it was Friday, my last day, but my flight out wasn't until the evening so I decided to visit my Facebook friend Zeljka Milanovic. If only just to prove her wrong, because for years now she has been telling me she does not believe I will ever show up. Honestly, I didn't know when it would happen, though I was certain it would one day. I was just waiting for the right time. And here it was. "Operation Serbia" so far was fairly threadbare, attend a party and if possible, visit my friend, and then get home and blog about it. Until I got there, and very quickly the blinders fell away and my eyes opened wide on the overwhelming pixilation. My curiosity proliferated exponentially, in fast-forward footage, and I wanted to stay.

Friday morning Henry and I hired a car and driver and motored off to meet my internet friend. A girl I've been writing to for years. The drive took about an hour past rolling green fields and hay barns and distant hills and trees filled with magpies. Gradually slowly up into

mountains dark with poplar forests blasted with beams of sunlight. I found it beautiful, and I began to consider I still had no clue where Zeljka lived, even which direction from Belgrade we were pointed.

Over the years I have always promised that one day I would come to her home town, I would show up and say hello for real. The years passed and my plans dragged and changed and she was very tolerant and understanding, but she also let me know she didn't really expect me to ever show up. For my side, it has been a fraught emotional conveyor belt and getting me there, slowly, very slowly, was like melding molten pig iron into something tangible.

But I did show up, and as planned we met at Oplenac. We saw each other and after the tiniest hesitation we ran and hugged and said hello. When we met up Zeljka was slightly remote, visibly dazed and maybe even a little soured. She told me she got so nervous she almost didn't show up.

"Why?", I asked her.

Because she never expected this to happen!

And then we laughed and I gave her another hug and we walked, and talked. Zeljka's English is excellent, she writes to me in long paragraphs. Shamefully, my Serbian is nonexistent.

Zeljka is smart and she is a philosopher and she is funny. In our years of writing to one another she told me more than once that when my cousin Prince Tomislav lived nearby apparently they took long walks in the gorgeous sweet smelling poplar forest. I knew a Prince Tomislav

from my childhood in England. I never really understood how we were related, most of my childhood was so confusing to me I just gave up trying to understand it. I remember Tomislav as a looming figure with frightening angular cheekbones, but equally I remember his tenderness and warmth. I remember liking him. I remember his daughter Katerina. Equally I remember being confused that he was from the murky Serbian side and yet he lived in Kent, southern England, on a farm. I remember him wearing muddy Wellington boots. It made no sense to me. My memories are faded sepia tones and sometimes double exposed. My life never really got any less confusing and many people got lost along the way. Now, however, many of them or their descendants are starting to show up. After the time capsule!

I was never entirely sure if Zeljka and I were referring to the same Tomislav. Because it didn't make any sense to me. How had he had been in both of our lives? I just didn't get it.

And there was the matter of the family crypt, Oplenac, which Zeljka regularly visits. She was the one to explain to me that it was a mausoleum for the Karadjordjevic family, with room for me! She told me it was not in her village, but nearby. For the most part I didn't know where the hell I was, like I'd been spun around and let loose in zero-gravity.

And then she said, "Want to see the crypt?" This was my first introduction to many relatives, some I had never heard of before like Kleopatra! And some I miss, such as my grandparents. And then the tears began to burst free, from somewhere deep in my heart, I melted.

“Wanna see the family museum? You know Karadjordje was from here”, Zeljka told me. I had to confess no, I had no idea.

She took me to the crypt, to the museum, to the King’s winery, where I was given a box of bottles. “You know”, Zeljka told me, “The Sumadia District is Karadjordje’s land. This is your home. Look, your name is on the family tree”.

Sure enough my name is there, printed on a poster hanging on the wall at the entrance to the museum. Here in a country I had never before visited, far from anywhere I had ever been, and yet there I was. On the wall. It was profound.

At Oplenac, the family crypt, an impossibly huge mosaic church of Byzantine excess and splendor, Zeljka sat outside on a bench, she said she’d smoke a cigarette and let me have my time to myself in there. “Go on”, she said, “I’ll be right here. You need to experience that by yourself”.

At the family crypt of Oplenac a guide introduced me, one deceased family member at a time, to my Serbian background. I discovered I had known next to nothing, or what I did know was wrong. This learning experience felt like entering an alternate universe. Turned out I didn’t even know the head of the family’s name, let alone what he was famous for, or who his descendants were, or how we were all related.

I had heard of Karadjordje, the founder of the dynasty, except it turned out most of what I thought I knew was incorrect. I did not know his real name was Djordje Petrovic. Loosely, he grew up in eighteenth century feudal Serbia and developed a reputation for his lack of regard for authority. His enemies derided him as swarthy, using the

Turkish word for “black” (kara), and they nicknamed him Black Djordje or Kara Djordje. Somehow the backhanded compliment stuck and he became Karadjordje. Descendants maintained the name as Karadjordjevic, and so began the House of Karadjordjevic, Serbia’s royal family.

In the Karadjordjevic museum I saw Karadjordje’s clothes, everything from his scythes to his swords and guns. I heard tales of his ruthlessness, his uncompromising positions, his military brilliance and his overbearing side during times of peace. He was designed for war. Stories of murdering fathers and brothers peeked my curiosity further. I had not known any of this, however, I liked the sound of it. I liked the lack of hypocrisy. I felt intense pride for this man and all he had done, to the extent that the people of Sumadia today still revere him. His image hangs on every wall in town. To be there as his representative was a heady honor.

Our final stop was the bar where Zeljka works because no one there believes her that we are friends. For years she’s been telling them we are friends and they tell her she is a crazy drunk. So I had to go show myself. A portrait of Karadjordje hung on the wall of this establishment, and I pointed at it and placed a hand on my heart, and gave the owner a smile and a nod. It doesn’t hurt that I happen to look rather exactly like this great Kara Djordje, just a smaller version. The proprietor was palpably dazed.

Though not more dazed than I already was. Filled to the brim with so much new information, such an overload of new concepts. When I was told Karadjordje killed a lot of people I was the opposite of horrified. In so many ways, I thought I felt a connection.

Guiltily and secretly I've long suspected if I was a man I would be in prison for murder charges. I was told Kara-djordje ate very simply, as do I, and again I felt a connection. He was unpretentious, not interested in titles nor in medals. I feel the same. He was brave and principled and motivated by righteousness, and right or wrong I see myself that way too.

Gradually I began to understand why Tomislav had moved here in 1991 to this central Serbian village of Topola, after Kent in England. This was not the "middle of nowhere", some place he had come to hide. This was home. England was exile. I was born in New York City and raised in England, and brought up hearing and speaking a dozen European languages. Everything but Serbian. All us Karadjordjevic cousins grew up all over the world, connections lost.

And Zeljka was Tomislav's walking companion. Oddly this girl was our connection. Although it had not sunk in how they were friends or why they took their walks until I went to Topola and saw this village, where Zeljka lives, and where my family is from. I had come to this town to have lunch with my girlfriend and we did, in the lobby of the restaurant of the only hotel in town. Gradually it sank in, Zeljka was my people. By virtue of visiting her I had stumbled upon the mouth of the river of the Karadjordjevic dynasty. I am ashamed to admit it was by happy accident I went home.

For the first time in my life I became curious. Who was this Karadjordje? Who was this ruthless killer liberator and founder of the country? It was time to have a look.

I started to think about where I was headed with my life and I suddenly realized I had just arrived, on so many levels.

All this opened up more questions. On that last day of the short trip I finally felt it all and I cried so much that day. Tears of relief, an amazing sensation. I felt I knew who I might be, after so long and so many questions, and so many moves. I already knew I was returning soon, there was just way too much still to discover.

I wanted to learn about Djordje Petrovic, the founder of modern Serbia. This is a story known to all Serbs, taught to them in elementary school. However, to me, and to most others not familiar with Serbian history here are the facts as I found them. With the transfixed stupor that comes from staring at oneself in a mirror, the closer I examined my Slavic background the more infinitesimal details came to view. Layers of stories unfurled.

After that first journey I returned to my home in Key West and I knew my life in Key West was decidedly altered. It was no longer the end of the line for me, but merely another scenic lookout on the road to somewhere. I had fallen in love. With Serbia. I was hooked. I immediately made plans to return and to learn about Serbia and my Serbian family history. The entire journey back to America I cried and cried and cried, not unhappiness, far from it, more like from a sense of relief, cleansing saline tears washing away years of uncertainty. Those tears floated me downriver from a place of stagnation to a new landscape. My future.

I knew my grandfather and my grandmother intimately, and while I was raised on disparate mentions of this land named Serbia it was all as indistinct as any

fairy tale. My only direct connection was to my grandparents. I was too young to eye them critically, but I was not so young that I could not respect their graciousness and impeccable good manners, and applaud their sense of humor and love them for the warm kind people they chose to be. All that I have learned about them, in this research, has only deepened my profound esteem for them. They shielded all of us, their grandchildren, from the hardships they endured. We knew nothing but love and tenderness from them. For this I thank them, redouble my admiration of them, and humbly pray to do them justice in the pages of this book.

CHAPTER 1

HRH Prince Paul of Serbia (Part One)

(27 April 1893 – 14 September 1976)

Paul Karadjordjević, Serbo-Croatian: *Pavle Karađorđević*, Serbian Cyrillic: Павле Карађорђевић
English transliteration: *Paul Karadjordjević*

Paul was my grandfather, all the grandchildren called him
Apapa (pronounced Ah-papa)

When I think of my grandfather I see him in suits of tweed, his neck wrapped in scarfs, and a hat covering his freckled yet otherwise balding head, and walking in the park of his Villa Demidoff, pacing slowly along to the syncopations of his walking stick. This Italian house and grounds were a comfortable safe place where he passed the summers of his youth and then again in old age. He would inherit this marvelous jewel after the death of a favorite Russian relative, in 1955, his Aunt Moina.

My grandfather's Aunt Moina was his mother's sister Marie Pavlovna Demidoff, Princess di San Donato (1877–1955) wife of Prince Semyon Semyonovich Abamelek-Lazarev (1857–1916). It was through Aunt Moina that

Paul received not only much needed emotional support but also an introduction to the finer things and eventually an inheritance to a most splendid fortune.

This villa was a home Paul cherished and knew intimately from many visits to his aunt since his early childhood. It was therefore fitting he should be the recipient of this stately structure already filled with priceless treasures of paintings and antiques from a family member to whom he was emotionally attached and to whom he owed far more than this mere material composite, this villa of hers with all its worldly goods. It was love he learned from her, and a few others like her, who showed up throughout his chilly childhood and graced him with the nurturing warmth of concern and affection. Although, sadly, by 1969 he would be obliged to sell the grand estate, as it was unmanageably large and too expensive to run, he had her in his heart until the last of his days on earth. She was one of those many angels that fluttered through his otherwise sternly cold existence.

The Villa Demidoff was a building in the Italianate style of wide smooth dark terracotta walls and tall elegant windows flanked by dark green shutters, and the second story encircled by graceful balconies. The garden surrounding this house was really a park as it was immense, and inside this house were wide corridors and endless rooms and secret passageways. In today's world, for example the McMansions of California, the owners know the number of rooms and proudly recount such trivia, but in my grandfather's time no one counted rooms or would consider evaluating a true mansion in terms of numbers of rooms, or any such mundane issues. There

were rooms we never even entered, servants' quarters we could not have located on an architectural map. A different world to today I understand, but none of us, my grandfather included, knew this yet.

Rain or shine in the afternoons, after lunch, my grandfather would lead the way, walking slowly with his cane and his formal suits and always a hat, as well as an umbrella if there was rain. We may have called it a garden but it was enormous and the exterior walls were farther off than the eye could even see. He would lead us, his six grandchildren running around him as he moved slowly and methodically, while we flittered about and down wide sandy pebbled paths bordered with gracious hundreds of years old trees. Play was encouraged, imagination was inspired, ignited. As we strolled he told us stories to try and make us laugh or sometimes scary stories accompanied by terrifying grimaces to make us shriek with panic and run off. A favorite was to walk down paths to leafy a tufted area of the garden with a giant gray stone statue beside a pond of huge white lilies. To us this was a favorite toy. Here we played in the oversized statue of a man crouched in front of a pond home to floating white lily petals and their vast bright green pads where patient frogs squatted, waiting on meals of insects. This statue was of a crouched man the size of a modest cottage with a door at the back, at the base of his spine so to speak. My grandfather would usher us through this door and carefully we followed him up the cold and dank and tightly narrow staircase with a musty smell of spiders webs and the croakings of lost frogs, that wound up and curled inward inside that massive statue until one was behind the

face of the rock carved figure. From his eyes, which were big as portholes, my grandfather encouraged us to sit, and with our legs swinging over the gargantuan eyelids, we could see far off across the green landscapes of meticulous gardens and orchards of fruit trees, and also down, if we dared, and did not suffer too badly from vertigo and into the reflection of the lily pond far below us, the lily pads looking so tiny from that great height.

The design of the original villa was overseen and conceived of by Francesco I de' Medici the Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1581, and he built this villa supposedly to impress his mistress. By the eighteenth century the estate was deserted. Grand Duke Ferdinand III was born in Florence in 1769 and he engaged throughout his life in a multitude of marriages to ladies of high rank and would be bestowed with a great many spectacular titles ranging from Prince-elector of the Holy Roman Empire and later the Duke of Salzburg and other impressive names that were taken away as fast as they were given due to the shifting histories of the day. Yet despite a flourish of titles and jobs running principalities and realms, he was born and he would die, in 1824, as the Grand Duke of Tuscany. When he bought the Villa Reale he decided to demolish the existing villa with the help of explosives. For some unknown reason the debris from this explosive detonation was never cleared away, which would prove, more than a century later, a tremendous boon to my cousin Dimitri and me.

This Habsburg-Lorraine Grand Duke Ferdinand III of Tuscany redesigned the garden before seemingly losing interest in this project. Luckily for us, he left intact a

large building near the front gates of the enormous park, a building known simply as the Paggeria, or “pages’ lodging”, of the former Villa Reale. In 1872 this deteriorating and unkempt compound was sold to Prince Pavel Demidoff who restored the “Paggeria” and transformed it into the extremely comfortable Villa Demidoff di Pratolino.

This Villa Demidoff di Pratolino, which in the family we only ever referred to simply as Pratolino, for my cousins and I was a time of a certain amount of pomp, with uniformed servants lined up and awaiting ones arrival or departure. It was also the scenes of wild play where we, the grandchildren that is, tore around playing with everything, dragging each other in tiny carts and hiding in the autumn hay bales patiently restored by laborers. Playing in the endless gardens and the vast statue called the Appenino, to us merely a playground though later in life I would learn it was a famous work of art memorialized in etchings and paintings, and sadly known as The Appenine which to my ear is sheer butchery. But that was all still many years off.

At that time, when I was not yet ten years old and everything was a game and there was a lot of laughter and gaiety. Perhaps the best days of our childhoods. We were extremely fortunate to experience such a luxurious fantasy. From the long hallways where we played with the servant’s wheeled trolleys, one child laying on the top level, and another child pushing it with all their might and letting go near the end of the corridor so that it would smash dramatically into a wall. This to us was enormous fun. Walls were hung with tapestries and the upstairs corridors, off of which were bedrooms, lined as they were

with deep wide wooden coffers, treasure chests, and if we could find the strength to lift the heavy lids inside were troves of swords and other booty upon which to feast our eyes and our imaginations.

One particular room, known simply as the “big room”, was a sitting room the size of a ballroom where my grandfather would play his grand piano. He was a talented musician. Music, for those it speaks to, can save your sanity. I remember a piano in this room, and my cousin Dimitri remembers our grandfather expertly playing the soulful charm of Chopin, and as I write these chapters I listen to his Nocturnes, replaying and lingering on the 8th, and I wonder if this is a sensual time travel taking me back to a place where I knew only joy and coziness. To us children this room was a favorite vast space where I remember we made forts from pillows taken from sofas the size of boats. In that great room we played for many hours, mixing everything up into make believe, and encouraged to do so. Little did we know how accurate this notion of “make believe” would be, how these halcyon days were fleeting and would never be repeated in our grownup lives. But it was not for us to know such things yet. There was plenty of time still for the undoing of these fairy tales of childhood. At least we had a childhood, unlike my dear grandfather, who had none.

These Italian summer holidays always included trips to the gelato shop in the little local town, a huge treat. Just as exciting, I remember frequently climbing the fruit trees in the orchards of our garden and sitting astride the limbs of fig trees and feasting on the bursting ripe fruit. Equally thrilling were the elixirs delivered in crystal pitchers,