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Essay

Queen Marie of Romania: Royal Champion of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh

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Abstract

After having declared in 1863 to a small group of His companions in Baghdad, the first place of His exile from Persia (present-day Iran), that He was a Manifestation sent by God to humanity to unify all the peoples of the earth, Bahá'u'lláh addressed several collective and individual Tablets in 1867-1868 to all the kings and rulers. In these stunning and prophetic Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh elaborated on His Station, and bade them to recognize Him as the Manifestation promised by all the Manifestations of God who had come before Him. Not a single leader heeded His call during His lifetime. More than six decades had passed since Bahá'u'lláh had made that announcement when a granddaughter of a recipient of one of Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets, Queen Victoria, immediately recognized Bahá'u'lláh's Station, and began promoting His Message far and wide. She was the much-loved and respected consort of Romania's King Ferdinand, Queen Marie.

This article discusses how Queen Marie of Romania came in contact with the Bahá'í Faith and became one of its staunchest champions during the last twelve years of her life.

> More than ever today when the world is facing such a crisis of bewilderment and unrest, must we stand firm in Faith seeking that which binds together instead of tearing asunder. To those searching for light, the Baha'i Teachings offer a star which will lead them to deeper understanding, to assurance, peace and good will with all men.
>
> Marie, 1936[1]

It is said that becoming a believer of anything can be significantly easier if we see many others have done this before us. Social bias or the bandwagon effect can offer validation or proof that a choice we make is acceptable or not. As such, to be the first to accept something requires a tremendous amount of faith and courage because we are obliged to rely solely on our own conviction and inner voice.

Being the first

A striking example is the acceptance by Mullá Husayn, a 19th century cleric in Persia (present-day Iran), of the veracity of the Declaration made on 23 May 1844 in Shiraz by Siyyid 'Alí Muḥammad[2]

[1] Appreciation written by Queen Marie in 1934, published as a facsimile in *The Bahá'í World: A Biennial International Record*, VI: April 1934-1936 (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1937, frontispiece. Published as an illustration in Della L. Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown: Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000), between pp. 274-275.

[2] He took on the title of Báb, which means Gate in Arabic.

that He was an independent Manifestation of God whose primary Mission was to prepare humanity for the coming of a contemporary and much greater Manifestation of God. A religious teacher, Siyyid Kázim, leader of the Shaykhí School, sent his disciples, including Mullá Husayn, traveling extensively through Persia in search of the Promised One. All Mullá Husayn and the others had to go on were certain specific signs by which to recognize this outstanding Personage. What appears to many who learn of the extraordinary encounter of the Báb with Mullá Husayn as a chance meeting on the very day of the arrival of the latter in the city of Shiraz is in fact one of those moments in which an individual had to make a decision without the benefit of others having investigated and approved the Báb's claim.

Religious background

Queen Marie of Romania also distinguished herself as a first. Albeit not among the earliest to acknowledge the Station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Promised One of all ages, His Prophethood announced publicly in 1863, nineteen years after the Báb's Declaration, this queen consort openly and boldly told the world to investigate Bahá'u'lláh's Message just four months after she herself learned about the Bahá'í Faith in January 1926.

Granddaughter of Queen Victoria through her son, Prince Alfred, and of Czar Alexander II through his daughter, Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna, Princess Marie was exposed from the earliest age to different beliefs and rituals. Her mother was Russian Orthodox, her father Church of England, and being born into the British royal family meant that the infant princess was baptized Anglican. Princess Marie's marriage to Prince Ferdinand in 1893 took place at her family's home in Saxe-Coburg, Germany. The Catholic Prince, nephew of King Carol I, was heir apparent to the Romanian throne, and his union with Princess Marie included Catholic and Protestant ceremonies. The Romanian royal constitution stipulated that offspring of the royal family must be baptized and raised as Romanian Orthodox. When their first child, Carol, was born, the Holy See excommunicated Prince Ferdinand for what they considered flagrant breaking of Canon Law. At the death of King Carol I in 1914, Ferdinand and Marie became King and Queen of Romania. Only at the conclusion of World War I was King Ferdinand finally allowed back into the Catholic fold, and the Pope approved his ceremonial crowning as King of Greater Romania in 1922 at Alba Iulia.

Encountering the Bahá'í Faith

Queen Marie learned of the Bahá'í Faith on 29 January 1926 from Martha L. Root, the itinerant American Bahá'í journalist who travelled tirelessly and often in harrowing conditions for two decades around the world for the purpose of sharing Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings with all who crossed her path. Eager to meet as many people as possible, from all ranks of life, she investigated the possibility of being allowed to pay a visit to the great Queen Marie upon arriving in 1926 in Bucharest. She was told by the American diplomatic representative that it was very unlikely that she would be received by Queen Marie due to this being a particularly trying time for the royal family. Martha decided to do the next best thing by sending to her Majesty the book *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* by John E. Esslemont with several other gifts. The following day, she was invited to Cotroceni Palace, the first of nine visits she would have with Queen Marie. The Queen told Martha that she had stayed up long into the night to read the book, which she not long after very publicly referred to as the Book and recommended to her many readers for study.

Contributing to the spread of the Bahá'í Faith

Commissioned by the North American Newspaper Syndicate to submit regular columns about her life as a Queen, her homes, the country of Romania, and her activities, the first, spontaneous article about her encounter with the Bahá'í Faith was submitted to that Newspaper Syndicate for distribution around the globe. It is known to have been published in the 4 May 1926 issue of the *Toronto Daily Star*.

A BOOK OF LOVE

A woman brought me the other day a Book. I spell it with a capital letter because it is a glorious Book of love and goodness, strength and beauty.

She gave it to me because she had learned I was in grief and sadness and wanted to help... She put it into my hands saying: 'You seem to live up to His teachings.' And when I opened the Book I saw it was the word of Abdu'l-Baha, prophet of love and kindness, and of his father the great teacher of international good-will and understanding -- of a religion which links all creeds.

Their writings are a great cry toward peace, reaching beyond all limits of frontiers, above all dissension about rites and dogmas. It is a religion based upon the inner spirit of God, upon that great, not-to-be-overcome verity that God is love, meaning just that. It teaches that all hatreds, intrigues, suspicion, evil words, all aggressive patriotism even, are outside the one essential law of God, and that special beliefs are but surface things whereas the heart that beats with divine love knows no tribe nor race.

It is a wondrous Message that Baha'u'llah and his son Abdu'l-Baha have given us. They have not set it up aggressively knowing that the germ of eternal truth which lies at its core cannot but take root and spread.

There is only one great verity in it: Love, the mainspring of every energy, tolerance towards each other, desire of understanding each other, knowing each other, helping each other, forgiving each other.

It is Christ's Message taken up anew in the same words almost, but adapted to the thousand years and more difference that lies between the year one and today. No man could fail to be better because of this Book.

I commend it to you all. If ever the name of Baha'u'llah or Abdu'l-Baha comes to your attention, do not put their writings from you. Search out their Books, and let their glorious, peace-bringing, love-creating words and lessons sink into your hearts as they have into mine.

One's busy day may seem too full for religion. Or one may have a religion that satisfies. But the teachings of these gentle, wise and kindly men are compatible with all religion, and with no religion.

Seek them, and be the happier.

By Marie, Queen of Romania[3]

[3] Article by Queen Marie, published in the *Toronto Daily Star*, 4 May 1926, quoted in Della L Marcus., *Her Eternal Crown: Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000), pp. 57-58.

The significance of the open letter

In a letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of the West on 7 October 1926, Shoghi Effendi speaks of the extraordinary significance of this open letter by Queen Marie:

> In the course of the few months that have elapsed since my last communication to you regarding the appalling circumstances that have culminated in the martyrdom of our Persian brethren in Jahrum, events of the highest importance to the future welfare of our beloved Cause have transpired, and with startling suddenness conferred abiding solace upon those who still have to face the pains and terrors of unmitigated and shameless tyranny.
>
> You have, most of you I presume, read with thrilling joy in one of the recent issues of the Star of the West that illuminating account given by our beloved sister, Miss Martha Root, wherein she tells with her characteristic directness and modesty the story of her moving interview with Her Majesty Queen Marie of Roumania [sic] and of the cordial and ready response which her gentle yet persuasive presentation of the principles of the Bahá'í Faith has evoked in the heart of that honoured Queen. One of the visible and potent effects which this historic interview proved capable of achieving was the remarkable appeal in the form of an open letter which Her Majesty freely and spontaneously caused to be published to the world at large testifying in a language of exquisite beauty to the power and sublimity of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh.
>
> It was indeed a never-to-be-forgotten occasion when, on the eve of the day commemorating the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, a handful of us, His sorrowing servants, had gathered round His beloved Shrine supplicating relief and deliverance for the downtrodden in Persia, to receive in the midst of the silence of that distressing hour the glad-tidings of this notable triumph which the unbending energy and indomitable spirit of our beloved Martha has achieved for our sacred Cause.
>
> With bowed heads and grateful hearts we recognize in this glowing tribute which royalty has thus paid to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh an epoch-making pronouncement destined to herald those stirring events which, as `Abdu'l-Bahá has prophesied, shall in the fullness of time signalize the triumph of God's holy Faith.[4]

The great appeal of Progressive Revelation

Queen Marie often lamented about the challenges caused by the different religious affiliations in her family, all worshipping Jesus Christ but within disparate forms of Christianity, according to a variety of rituals and interpretations. She found the intolerance quite unacceptable.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that, according to an eternal Covenant and whenever conditions require, God provides humanity with His guidance through Manifestations that help us turn back to Him and understand His Will and Purpose. Queen Marie immediately took this concept of progressive Revelation to heart. It is very significant that she lists the most recent of God's Manifestations – Jesus, Muḥammad, and Bahá'u'lláh – in her second open letter, quoted partially below, submitted to the North American Newspaper Syndicate, and published on 27 September 1927 in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*:

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[4] Letter of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, 7 October 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, pp. 78-79

> At first we all conceive of God as something or somebody apart from ourselves. We think He is something or somebody definite, outside of us, whose quality, meaning and so-to-say `personality' we can grasp with our human, finite minds, and express in mere words.
>
> This is not so. We cannot, with our earthly faculties entirely grasp His meaning -- no more than we can really understand the meaning of Eternity.
>
> God is certainly not the old Fatherly gentleman with a long beard that in our childhood we saw pictured sitting amongst clouds on the throne of judgement, holding the lightning of vengeance in His hand.
>
> God is something simpler, happier, and yet infinitely more tremendous. God is All, Everything. He is the Power behind all beginnings. He is the inexhaustible source of supply, of love, of good, of progress, of achievement. God is therefore Happiness. His is the voice within us that shows us good and evil.
>
> But mostly we ignore or misunderstand this voice. Therefore did He choose his Elect to come down amongst us upon earth to make clear His word, His real meaning. Therefore the Prophets; therefore Christ, Muhammad, Baha'u'llah, for man needs from time to time a voice upon earth to bring God to him, to sharpen the realization of the existence of the true God. Those voices sent to us had to become flesh, so that with our earthly ears we should be able to hear and understand….[5]

The Queen's Counsel

For the remaining twelve years of her life, as Queen Consort, and from July 1927 at the death of her husband, King Ferdinand, as Dowager Queen during the reign of her grandson Michael I, and later in the period of the usurped reign of her eldest son, King Carol II, she continued to promote the Message of Bahá'u'lláh and the Teachings of His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as often and as widely as possible. Queen Marie wholeheartedly believed that the Bahá'í Teachings would bring others as much comfort and hope for a peaceful and harmonious future as they did for her. Her love for the Bahá'í Faith never waned. She shared it with her children and other relatives, with Kings, Queens, Princes, Princesses, and friends, and in many different countries, by word of mouth and in private and very public communications. Queen Marie effectively took on a role as Ambassadress of the Bahá'í Faith, wishing that people would find guidance and purpose in these Teachings.

A dearest wish dashed

Not long after her first encounter with the Bahá'í Faith, Queen Marie began corresponding regularly with Shoghi Effendi, the head of the Bahá'í Faith at that time. Receiving an invitation from him to visit the Bahá'í World Centre, she had every intention of visiting the Holy Places in 1930, while on a trip to the Middle East with her daughter, Ileana. She wished to meet the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and Bahíyyih Khánum, the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh. She also longed to pay her respects at the Shrines of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká and Haifa. Sadly, the press got wind of the Queen's plan to make pilgrimage, completely twisting information they had requested from the Guardian, and publishing a spurious article hinting that the Queen of Romania may be planning her trip specifically to become a Bahá'í. It is very likely that the publication of such information prompted the governments of Romania and Great Britain to stop what they may have

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[5] Article by Queen Marie, published in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 27 September 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, pp. 75-76

considered an all too public display of the Queen's belief in Bahá'u'lláh. Untruths were told about the Bahá'í Faith and its members, some of which were fortunately debunked a short while later. In her diary and in numerous letters to her friend, Roxo Weingartner, over a period of weeks during her travels, Queen Marie lamented the interdiction to have contact with the Bahá'ís, referring to these efforts as a way of avoiding political intrigues. She spoke of her heavy heart, her discouragement, her disappointment, and could not believe that the British government had a hand in preventing her from meeting Shoghi Effendi and paying her respects at the Bahá'í Holy Shrines. It was all incomprehensible to her, and she wrote about how difficult it is sometimes to be Queen, wishing she were free to do as she pleases.

It is very interesting to note that since the date of their intended visit had passed, Shoghi Effendi sent a telegram to ask if the royal party would be coming. The Romanian Minister in Cairo telegraphed a reply that was actually untrue. His message read that because Her Majesty would not be passing through Palestine, she would be unable to visit. Queen Marie told Roxo in a letter that she "even had to be very careful what message [she] sent to Shoghi Effendi who had invited [them]"[6]. In fact, the ship that carried Queen Marie and Princess Ileana docked at Haifa Port, where they were transferred to a car and driven immediately out of Palestine. Queen Marie's disappointment was so severe that she recorded in her diary that "her heart ached at Haifa not to be able to stop and greet Shoghi Effendi."[7] The party passed into Egypt, where the Queen and Princess spent most of their remaining time together on this trip.

On 29 March 1939, the Queen wrote in her diary that they departed from Cairo for El Cantara, ending up "suddenly in Palestine" in what she called "English care."[8] Again the Queen appears to have been told that she would not be allowed to visit either Jerusalem or 'Akká. Queen Marie was returned to Haifa on 30 March, departing sometime thereafter for Aleppo, Syria, and Constantinople (today Istanbul), Türkiye, while Princess Ileana went on to visit Beirut, Lebanon, and Jerusalem and Haifa. The Princess wrote to Queen Marie that she hoped she would be able "to see Bahá'u'lláh's grave."[9] A day later she wrote again to her mother from Jerusalem saying that she had been on top of Mount Carmel. She wished that she could visit the grave, but was certain that the Romanian authorities would not allow this. Princess Ileana wrote in her letter of their being "so convinced of the Bahá'ís wrong doings."[10] Two days later, Ileana triumphantly reported to her mother in a letter that she had been told by the head of the police that "all one says about the Bahá'is is noncence [sic] & they are what we think them."[11]

Tributes to Queen Marie at the Bahá'í World Centre

Bahá'ís around the world, especially those that make a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í World Centre, pass before Queen Marie's portraits and some of her writings, all sent by her to Shoghi Effendi, and prominently displayed in several Holy Places. Shoghi Effendi placed one of the last photographs of the Queen at the entrance to the Room of Bahá'u'lláh in the Mansion of Bahjí where Bahá'u'lláh lived out the remaining 12 years of his life and where He passed away on 29 May 1892. Another

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6 Letter of Queen Marie to Roxo Weingartner, 13 March 1930, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 171

7 Queen Marie, personal diary entry, 30 March - 8 April 1930, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 172

8 Queen Marie, personal diary entry, 29 March 1930, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 171

9 Letter of Princess Ileana to Queen Marie, 8 April 1930, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 174

10 Letter of Princess Ileana to Queen Marie, 9 April 1930, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 175

11 Letter of Princess Ileana to Queen Marie, 11 April 1930, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 175

beautiful portrait hangs in the reception area of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, beside the portrait of the first reigning monarch to embrace the Bahá'í Faith, Malietoa Tanumafili II of Western Samoa. In the House of 'Abbud in 'Akká, one of the first houses that Bahá'u'lláh was allowed to move to when he was released from prison, hangs a copy of Queen Marie's first letter to Shoghi Effendi, dated 27 August 1926, written from Bran Castle.

A precious copy of the first Romanian version of the Book, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, which she called "a glorious Book of love and goodness, strength and beauty,"[12] and whose translation and publication she herself encouraged and facilitated, has a place of honour in the International Bahá'í Archives on Mount Carmel. Its inscription reads:

> I am so happy that my people are also to have the blessings of reading this precious teaching.
>
> Marie, 1934[13]

The meaning of Queen Marie's efforts today

A determined and quite successful effort was made during Romania's 42-year Communist period to erase everything to do with its royal period from history books and education. Since the 1989 Revolution, some of the members of the Bahá'í Community have been diligently contributing to a revival of knowledge and appreciation of Queen Marie, especially her relationship with the Bahá'í Faith. Numerous recent publications, films, and documentaries bring this up as an important element in her life.

This resurgence of Queen Marie's global efforts to enthusiastically and widely promote the Bahá'í Faith is beginning to yield even greater results today. In his letter to the Bahá'ís in the West on 7 October 1926, Shoghi Effendi mentions the comfort that Queen Marie's championing of the Bahá'í Faith brought to the suffering and severely persecuted Bahá'ís in Iran:

> Moved by an irresistible impulse, I have addressed to Her Majesty in the name of the Bahá'ís of both the East and the West a written expression of our joyous admiration and gratitude for the queenly tribute which Her Majesty has paid to the beauty and nobility of the Bahá'í Teachings. I have, moreover, assured Her Majesty of the far-reaching effect which her superb testimony will inevitably produce, and of the welcome consolation it has already brought to the silent sufferers in that distracted country. To my message of appreciation and gratitude there has come lately a written response, penned by Her Majesty, profoundly touching, singularly outspoken, and highly significant in the testimony it bears. From this queenly tribute to a divine ideal I quote these penetrating words:
>
> > `Indeed a great light came to me with the Message of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá. It came as all great messages come at an hour of dire grief and inner conflict and distress, so the seed sank deeply ... We pass on the Message from mouth to mouth and all those we give it to see a light suddenly lighting before them and much that was obscure and perplexing becomes simple, luminous and full of hope as never before. That my open letter was balm to those suffering for the Cause is indeed a great happiness to me, and I take it as a sign that God accepted my humble tribute

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[12] Article by Queen Marie, published in the *Toronto Daily Star*, 4 May 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 57

[13] Inscription by Queen Marie in the first Romanian edition of J. E. Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh şi Era Nouă* [Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era], (Bucharest, 1934), held in the International Bahá'í Archives, Haifa

> ... With bowed head I recognize that I too am but an instrument in greater Hands and rejoice in the knowledge ...[14]

One hopes that the renewed and growing interest in the first royal, Queen Marie of Romania, to accept and promote the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, will bring great joy and comfort to all who serve this great Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, especially the suffering Bahá'ís in today's Iran and in other countries, where harsh persecutions continue unabated.

Some have or may argue that Queen Marie, born into the Christian Faith, did not in fact ever become a Bahá'í believer, a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. There has always been a stigma attached to people accepting another Faith, often perceived as betrayal. Such backlash towards people who decide that they wish to follow another religion is in many instances fuelled by the clergy. When we examine the core belief in the Bahá'í Faith relating to progressive Revelation, that God continuously sends divine Messengers to progressively guide human spiritual, moral, and intellectual development, we find that adopting the most recent of these Messages coming from our Creator is a completely logical and necessary step for everyone. Stubbornly clinging to one of the previous religions is like a child refusing to move on to the next step in its education, considering that this is the ultimate and final thing that it can learn. Queen Marie repeatedly and very publicly expressed that she believed the Bahá'í Faith to be a "religion which links all creeds,"[15] that "the occasion given me to express myself publicly, was also His Work, for indeed it was a chain of circumstances of which each link led me unwittingly one step further…"[16]. Indeed, Queen Marie recognized herself to be "but an instrument in greater Hands…"[17]. She did comment early on that "[s]ome of my cast wonder at and disapprove my courage to step forward pronouncing words not habitual for Crowned Heads to pronounce, but I advance by an inner urge I cannot resist."[18] She realized from the start of her encounter with the Bahá'í Faith that many people find it very challenging to accept something new, something that advances what came before. In spite of this and of growing restrictions after the death of her husband, especially once her son, Carol, usurped the Romanian throne, she used her position and great appeal to promote the Bahá'í Faith as far and wide as she could for the remainder of her life. In a letter to Martha Root, she wrote:

> "The beautiful truth of Baha'u'llah is with me always, a help and inspiration. What I wrote [for the syndicates] was because my heart overflowed with gratitude for the revelation you brought me. I am happy if you think I helped. I thought it might bring truth nearer, because my words are read by so many."[19]

Shortly before her passing on 18 July 1938, Queen Marie indirectly reiterated her understanding about the need for progressive divine Revelation by sharing the following quote of Bahá'u'lláh with her daughter, Mignon:

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[14] Letter of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, 7 October 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, pp. 80

[15] Article by Queen Marie, published in the *Toronto Daily Star*, 4 May 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, pp. 57-58

[16] Letter of Queen Marie to Shoghi Effendi, 27 August 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 67

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Letter of Queen Marie to Martha Root, 8 June 1926, quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 63.

> Know thou that in every age and dispensation, all the divine laws and ordinances are changed and altered according to the requirements of the times, except the law of love which, like a stream, floweth continually, and whose course never suffereth alteration or change.[20]

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Author biography

Della was born to parents who were early members of the New York Bahá'í Community. Perusing the *Bahá'í World* volumes during her childhood made her aware of Queen Marie's relationship with the Bahá'í Faith. While visiting Romania in October 1990, she was reading Rúḥíyyih Rabbani's *The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith*, which touches on this subject. A move to the newly-opened Romania in 1991 led to research and the authoring of two books: *Her Eternal Crown: Queen Marie of Romania and the Bahá'í Faith*, and an abridged version in Romanian entitled *Regina Maria: Un Instrument în Mâinile Divinităţii* [Queen Marie of Romania: An Instrument in Greater Hands].

[20] Queen Marie to Mignon, personal diary, undated note (1938), quoted in Marcus, *Her Eternal Crown*, p. 272