

The Perils of Life as a Royal Stepmother  
*Stepmother: The Hardest Way to Become Royal*

By Janice Seto, All rights reserved  
Monday April 17, 2006

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Observing how new royal women grapple with their new roles and expectations and retinue and the press, it is heartening to know they have their husband's support. Single mom Mette Marit and Haakon in Norway, Letizia leaving journalism for Felipe of Spain, then there is Mary from Down Under & Fred, Maxima the Latina Argentina & Willem Alexander – you know their royal men are proud to show their consorts the ropes. And from their solicitous attention, the people take their cue. As Barry Manilow would echo “Looks like we made it.”

In contrast, marrying a Daddy Prince has got to be the toughest way to gain royal status. It is hard enough for a commoner single woman to take on a dad and kids – can any of us imagine adding the press and the staff and bloggers to her daily life? The people are particularly proprietorial regarding The Royal Children. This new spouse could actually become guardian in case of death, or even regent of a minor heir, if tragedy strikes. And if the first wife was popular with the people, it will never be smooth. (Who wanted to follow Princess Grace in Monaco?)

Experts in blended families say first marriages have their hard work at the beginning – marriage to a dad means the hard work begins at I do, and it never stops. The Daddy Prince (or King) often is in the middle, wanting to have a peaceful home and listening to intrigue between the new wife and the children. Stepchildren, especially stepdaughters, can cause a fuss. Princess Ingrid of Sweden was barely 10 when her mother, Crown Princess Margareta (born HRH Princess Margaret of Connaught) died in her sixth pregnancy. When her father (later Gustav VI Adolph of Sweden) later remarried Lady Louise Mountbatten (formerly HSH Princess Louise of Battenberg), Ingrid had photos of her artistic, gardening mother put up all over the walls. Years later, even as an adult and queen of Denmark, Ingrid reminded her children that their grandmother was not Queen Louise, but Margareta. Probably no coincidence that Ingrid's eldest daughter, now Queen of Denmark, was named Margarethe, in honour of her grandmother.

Similar measures to protect a mother who had been displaced was the psychological intent behind Mary Tudor's treatment of Queen Anne Boleyn. And perhaps the distant but cordial relationship between Camilla and Diana's boys, William and Harry.

Let's look at the situation of women whose status as second wives causes ink to flow.

Call her Duchess of Cornwall, call her Queen (shudder...), whatever happens, you cannot call her comfortable. She can never be that – there is too much water under the bridge. Sure you can credit Camilla for the sh\$t-eating smile on Charles' face – but then no one marries at middle age to become miserable. In keeping the man who has sacrificed so much for her happy, Camilla is just doing her job.

If Camilla became a royal as the Culpable Stepmother, then Liliane Baels could be the ultimate Stepmother Victim of Circumstance. Back in December 1941, the Belgian

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people had no notice that their widowed king, Leopold III, and de facto prisoner of the Nazis, was even dating when his second marriage was announced in the Catholic churches in the realm. Liliane Baels, whose exotic beauty was ‘deep as a Greek night’, a golf partner of the king and utterly stunning in jewels and gowns, who was this new consort for the king? This second marriage was a turning point in Leopold’s reign – from then on, his marriage was the lightning rod for dissent leading to his abdication in 1950.

In retrospect, the marriage was ill-timed, perhaps illegal, and certainly politically sensitive. A furtive secret wedding, what a contrast to the jubilation of his first. To loud cheers, Leopold married Astrid civilly in her native Sweden, and then in a Catholic ceremony in Brussels. However, in doing right by the striking beautiful Liliane, the king’s “diversion”, Leopold and his advisors decided to marry religiously and do the civil ceremony later. Unfortunately, this contravened Belgian law that the civil ceremony comes first. That law reaffirms the supremacy of the state – and citizens who flout this in the past have served time. (The birth of their son Prince Alexandre in 1942 provoked speculation Liliane had gotten deliberately pregnant to force the king to marry her.) It struck some as unseemly that the King would remarry while Belgian prisoners of war suffered under the Nazi regime, and then choose to honeymoon in Germany.

And his choice of a Flemish woman in the ethnically-divided Belgium was taken badly by the French-speaking Walloons. Unlike today’s crown Princesse Mathilde, Liliane was not a product of the aristocracy – her family was seen as parvenu arrivistes looking for a faster route up the social ladder. For almost three years, until 1940, Liliane had been engaged to a Hungarian count but was refused permission by his parliament because of her non-noble roots. And the Baels - who made their money in the fish trade - were seen as opportunists – during WWI, her father Henri Baels moved his family to London where Liliane was born in 1916. And in the Nazi invasion of Belgium, word had it that Henri left his post of governor of West Flanders for Biarritz ahead of the formal order to evacuate.

Perhaps astutely aware that forcing this *fait accompli* upon the people would have consequences, Leopold, in the same way as the current Prince of Wales, stated that Liliane would not take the title of queen. Instead she would become HRH the Princess de Rethy and any future children would not enjoy succession rights. Some people were hardly appeased, pointing out that Rethy had been a title his late wife, the warm and lovely Queen Astrid, had occasionally used in traveling incognito.

Unlike Camilla, Liliane took on three stepchildren who were approaching their teen years with alacrity. Whatever they say about her family, her background, her influence politically, no one has found evidence that Liliane was a wicked stepmother. Princess Josephine-Charlotte even asked Liliane for permission to call her ‘mother’ – enraging some in the same way many shuddered watching Lieut Harry Wales peck Camilla this week. By stepping into the shoes of Astrid, who died so young, so vibrant, so fresh, so

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highborn, so maternal, the worldly and cosmopolitan Liliane reminded people of their loss. She was everything Astrid was not – alive.

Liliane supervised the children during the war and the five years after it, in Switzerland, while negotiations between the Belgian government, the King's brother, Prince Charles, the regent, and Leopold III examined the king's conduct in WWII. There seemed genuine affection between stepmother and royal brood. But relations gradually changed after their return in 1950 and his subsequent abdication.



[http://s2.invisionfree.com/Royal\\_Jewels/ar/t11.htm](http://s2.invisionfree.com/Royal_Jewels/ar/t11.htm) - Princesse Liliane

Perhaps the influence of the royal courtiers was responsible for the cooling of relations between Astrid's children, now grown up, and Liliane. After his abdication in favour of the young Baudoin I, Leopold and his family with Liliane still lived in the royal palace in Brussels. Despite keeping a low profile, and later sponsoring a foundation into pediatric cardiac care for Belgians after her own son's Boston heart operation, Liliane is accused of undue influence on the vulnerable, shy new king. Given the sensitivity over precedent

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and seating at Princess Josephine Charlotte's wedding to the hereditary Grand Duke of Luxembourg – was Liliane first lady of the land or was it the dowager Queen Elisabeth – and how to minimize booing from the crowds – is it any wonder that George VI preferred the Duke of Windsor to live abroad?

It was only after Baudoin's marriage to the formidable Dona Fabiola de Mora y Aragon did Leopold and Liliane move out, taking some furniture with them during the young king's honeymoon – and a freezing wind blew between these two royal households.

Did Liliane miss royal life? Once established at Chateau D'Argenteuil [http://www.buildingsagency.be/realisatieberichten\\_fr.cfm?key=64](http://www.buildingsagency.be/realisatieberichten_fr.cfm?key=64), Liliane and Leopold traveled extensively, with him on scientific explorations. As a couple, they hosted gatherings of scientists in symposia – she was a gracious and interested hostess. Always active, she was a keen golfer, and even bested the Duke of Windsor. Her looks and figure made her a regular with Parisian couturiers, and Liliane even had expertise with fast cars, owning three Ferraris, including the famous one she commissioned in 1967 <http://www.millionaire.com/autos/kingsoftheroad.htm>

On the other side of the freezeup. Josephine-Charlotte led the way with shades of Ingrid of Sweden - her first daughter was named Princess Marie-Astrid of Luxembourg, in honour of her late grandmother. Albert's first daughter was christened Princess Astrid. As for the childless Baudoin, he died of heart failure at his Spanish home, the Villa Astrida.

The widowed Liliane did not attend Baudoin's funeral. The feelings were reciprocated. And Liliane defended her husband's memory, even publishing Leopold's comments on the Belgian government in exile in London, when the royal family were deported by Himmler right after Canadian and other Allied troops landed in Normandy on D-day.

Liliane's story ends up much like another second wife, Mary of Modena, the consort of James II. Although a mother of three, Liliane has no royal descendants. Her only son, Prince Alexandre, sired no children from his wife, the elegant divorcee Lea Wolman. Mirroring his own parents, Alexandre kept his marriage secret from his mother and siblings, in this case, about 7 years. The controversial Princess Marie Christine ran away to briefly marry a Toronto piano player, later a restaurateur, and gave tell-all interviews and wrote a biography accusing Leopold of neglect and Liliane of domineering. Princess Marie Esmeralda, who had been associated with Sarah Duchess of York and her financial advisor, Johnny Bryant, lives in London with her professor husband and two children.

Other traces of Liliane are left to fade – including the royal couple's home, Chateau



D'Argenteuil, which her children thought would be preserved as a museum. However with no public funding and little interest, it has now been sold. Liliane's

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spectacular collection of jewels, clothes, and fine furniture, and the Ferrari and many beautiful Belgian royal heritage pieces left to her by Leopold were sold at Sotheby's in 2003. (I have a copy of the auction catalogue, a breathtaking collection indeed!) As Liliane discretely retreated from the scene, buried with Leopold and Astrid in the royal crypt, her three children sat separately from Astrid's descendants at her funeral. Liliane, for whom Leopold gave up so much and gained during 40 years of marriage, must have been one 'heck of a woman'.