



## INTERVIEW ARCHIVES

JUNE 2011

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WITH LAURA MABEE

**From novice to academic**, Romanov historians recognize the name Sarah Miller (a.k.a Sarushka) as one of the most helpful and knowledgeable members of the Alexander Palace Forums. She is an accomplished author, researcher, and helping hand. She has contributed much already to those interested in the Romanovs, and soon (June 14th, 2011) she will be contributing yet again with her new novel *The Lost Crown*. *The Lost Crown* captures the spirit of the last Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia in a remarkable way which has not been done before. Ms. Miller has kindly agreed to share some time with us here at Frozentears.org and answer some questions about her upcoming book.

**LAURA MABEE [LM]:** Welcome Ms. Miller! Thank you for taking the time to answer some questions! So tell me, what was your first exposure to the Romanovs? What got you hooked?

**SARAH MILLER [SM]:** I \*think\* it must have been the Unsolved Mysteries segment on Anastasia and Anna Anderson. Which is funny, because Unsolved Mysteries used to scare the pants off me - the theme song was enough to send me out of the room. I know that when I read the Anastasia Krupnik series in 4th or 5th grade, I was already familiar with the Romanovs on some basic level. When Anastasia's father says that she's named after a Russian princess, I knew who Mr. Krupnik was taking about.

**[LM]:** What inspired you to write about the Grand Duchess of Russia: Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia? (OTMA)?

**[SM]:** I seem to be attracted to the unheard voices in a story. Anastasia's had starring roles in film and print over and over again, but her sisters have been overlooked. In the movies, they generally don't rank much higher than the scenery. Yet these girls had their place in the world literally torn out from under them at an age when most of us are still trying to forge a sense of identity. For the grand duchesses, all of that vanished overnight.

**[LM]:** There are a number of young adult books written about the children of Nicholas II. How do you feel *The Lost Crown* fits in with these publications? Do you feel *The Lost Crown* will bring something new to the table?

**[SM]:** Much of the Romanov fiction for this age group revolves around fantasy, romance, or survival theories. I wanted to take a more realistic and personal approach. Over the years the portrayals of the family in general and the girls in particular have become almost caricatures of their real personalities, so I've done my best to make them more rounded characters. I am also a stickler for accuracy, so the level of detail will likely stand out.

Carolyn Meyer's *Anastasia: The Last Grand Duchess* is probably the most similar to *The Lost Crown*. Both books are first-person narratives that open in 1914 and follow the family into exile, but Meyer's features just one of the grand duchesses, and ends in April of 1918 when Anastasia burns her diary before being transferred to Ekaterinburg.

[LM]: Having taken the Russian language, did you find this helped you when researching for *The Lost Crown*?

[SM]: The majority of the imperial children's letters and diaries have been published only in Russian, so in that sense it was a big advantage. While I was working on *The Lost Crown*, three directly relevant books were published in Russian:

- *Avgusteyschie Sestry Miloserdiya* / [Royal Sisters of Mercy] Which contains extensive excerpts of the grand duchesses' letters and diaries during WWI.
- *Dnevnik Nikolaya II i Aleksandry Fedorovny: 1917-1918* [Diaries of Nicholas II and Alexandra Feodorovna] Which gave me a day-by-day view of the Romanovs' lives in captivity.
- *Ispoved' Tsareubiits* / [Confession of Regicide] Where the testimony of many of the imperial family's guards and executioners were published in full for the first time.

The downside is that my vocabulary isn't very broad – I'm fond of saying that know just enough Russian to royally frustrate myself. Fortunately I had a lot of people willing to help me translate.

Then there was the issue of the Russian names, words, and phrases I grafted into the novel. There are about half a dozen systems for transliterating the Cyrillic alphabet into Latin script, and of course, my sources weren't consistent. For example, Olga and Tatiana were friends with a nurse named Валентина Чеботарева - Valentina Chebotareva according to the transliteration system I used. But in his English memoir, Valentina's son specifically states that he chose to spell his last name Tschebotarioff instead of Chebotarev because he believed it gave English speakers a better chance of imitating the proper Russian pronunciation. In a case like that, how do you decide which spelling is 'correct'? I'm enough of a nitpicker that these kinds of issues drove me bonkers. I wanted the Russian names and words to be as easy as possible to pronounce, but I didn't want a random hodgepodge of transliteration, either..

[LM]: What kind of research and resources were used to help you write *The Lost Crown*? What items were key to help you understand the Grand Duchesses?

[SM]: The internet often gets a bad rap where research is concerned, but in this case the Web was key. If I hadn't stumbled across the Alexander Palace Time Machine and its discussion forum, *The Lost Crown* would have been a much thinner, paler story. The site itself is a treasure trove of photographs and out of print memoirs. Beyond that, the discussion forums got me in touch with Romanovphiles the world over, which in turn increased my access to books, films, and photos exponentially. I have thousands of scanned photographs because of people like you and Lanie Achenbach. People in Quebec, Serbia, and Russia helped me with translation. Enthusiasts in Austria, New Zealand, and England shared scans and photocopies of rare print sources. One New Year's day, an AP member whose real name I don't even know sent me a link to a store where a copy of *The Complete Wartime Correspondence of the Emperor Nicholas II and the Empress Alexandra* was available for \$40 at a time when most places were selling it for upwards of \$300. I've traded books with women from Paris and St. Petersburg. And of course, you yourself have been my go-to girl for dozens of obscure Russian documentaries. All five of the authors and experts who vetted the manuscript were contacts I'd made on the AP. It's a bit of a leap of faith, shipping a rare book or film off to someone you've never met, or giving your credit card information to a Moscow monastery's gift shop, but so far I haven't been burned.

The grand duchesses' letters were my best source for getting a feel for their frame of mind. Their diaries tend to be disappointingly terse, but in the letters they're so effusive that you can't help beginning to hear their voices. Unfortunately, most of the letters have not been published in English. Although I often bemoan the blandness of the Romanovs' diaries, *The Diary of Grand Duchess Olga Nikolaevna - 1913* gave me a clearer sense of the imperial family's daily routine than any other source. Aleksei's 1916 diary (printed in Tsesarevich) also brought to light some of the contrasts between his life and his sisters'. *The Last Diary of Tsaritsa Alexandra* outlined the final seven months of the Romanovs' captivity - in English, thank goodness.

And of course, there are the photographs. Tens of thousands of photographs, many of them taken by the tsar and his family themselves, chronicling virtually every aspect of their lives. They fairly sparkle with personality, so you can't help poring over them. They're also loaded with minute details, from the pattern of empress's embroidery project in spring of 1917 to the shape of the tsar's tattoo.

[LM]: What is the significance of *The Lost Crown* as the title?

[SM]: Heh. The marketing department didn't think much of my working title, which was *Daughters of the Tsar*. In retrospect I have to admit that's...dull. (Before that I'd lobbied for OTMA: *Daughters of the Tsar*, but I didn't get far.) They wanted something snappier and more evocative, so my editor and I started throwing around combinations we hoped would convey some combination of loss, sisterhood, and royalty:

- The Lost Grand Duchesses
- Russia's Lost Daughters
- Lost Daughters of Russia
- The Last Crown
- Imperial Falls
- The Last Imperial Palace
- Royal Ends
- Sisters of the Crown
- Losing the Crown
- We Are Still Romanovs
- We Seven

I was partial to *The Last Crown* but my bookshelf was already loaded with titles that included last, end, fate, fall, and final, so we tweaked it one more time to settle on *The Lost Crown*.

For a little while I was apprehensive because:

- A. As females, the grand duchesses were never in line for the throne, so none of them technically "lost" the crown
- B. It sounded kinda like a story about a treasure hunt

But (as usual) I shouldn't have worried, because so far the reaction to the title has been overwhelmingly positive. People who aren't familiar with the Romanovs are intrigued by it, and those who are haven't put up a fuss about the technicalities of imperial succession.

[LM]: Why choose the time frame of 1914 to 1918 for *The Lost Crown*?

[SM]: I don't know who it was that said, "Start with the day that is different." Nicholas II and his family stand out in the popular

imagination because of the drastic changes they experienced. Even though the Romanovs themselves didn't realize it at the time, 1914 marks the moment when things were just beginning to crumble. By starting when I did I had to sacrifice some significant events in the girls' lives – Aleksei's near-fatal illness at Spala, the tercentenary celebrations, Tatiana's bout with typhoid, Olga's crush on Pavel Voronov and her coming-of-age ball in Livadia, for example – but prior to World War I life for the imperial family was essentially static. Although those carefree, opulent years are what draw many people to the Romanovs initially, that period lacks the escalating dramatic tension that fuels a compelling story. Even so, it was hard to limit myself to only a glimpse of the Romanovs' idyllic family life in the opening chapter.

[LM]: Of all the Grand Duchesses, is there one you relate to the most? Did that have an effect on how you wrote each chapter?

[SM]: Nope. I relate directly to the distinguishing qualities in each of them, but there isn't one grand duchess that's more "me" than any of the others. Early on I made myself a chart of the emerging qualities of OTMA's voices and narrative styles, but it wasn't long before I didn't need it. Tatiana's voice came easily. That surprised me. She's very formal, so I didn't expect the experience of writing her to be so relaxed. Olga, on the other hand, came hardest – which makes no sense, because her style is probably closest to mine.

[LM]: How many drafts did you end up writing of *The Lost Crown*? Was there anything cut/edited out that you wish could have stayed in the final version?

[SM]: Three, I think. But I revise constantly as I go, so counting drafts is a dicey task. I couldn't tell you how many times I've gone over the first four chapters.

Nothing that got cut really pains me, although I'm disappointed on principle that the Easter scenes for both 1917 and 1918 didn't make it. Easter is the most High Holy Day in the Orthodox calendar, so it feels like something that should be represented. However, those scenes didn't contribute to the forward motion of the story, so I let them go. I can always put them on my website if there's interest in the extras.

[LM]: With *Miss Spitfire*, you had the chance to travel to the Helen Keller homestead. You said in one interview that this had helped you write the novel. Having not had the chance to travel to Russia, do you feel you were able to still see Russia through the eyes of the Grand Duchesses?

[SM]: Russia has changed so much since the grand duchesses' time that it's hard to say. I'm not sure how much of the Russia they knew remains, or where to find it. The Alexander Palace still stands, but as you saw yourself, very little of the interior would be familiar to OTMA now. As devoted as they were to their country, I suspect that the grand duchesses themselves did not have a realistic view of Russia. The Russia they saw was an ideal - as Anastasia says in *The Lost Crown*, "... with everything scrubbed and painted especially for [Papa's] arrival." So to a certain extent, seeing Russia through the grand duchesses' eyes has more to do with understanding their frame of mind than viewing the place itself.

[LM]: You've mentioned "Romanov Mythology" in the past. Is this the same Mythology that Wendy Slater wrote about in *The Many Deaths of Nicholas II*? What are your thoughts and perspective on Romanov Mythology?

[SM]: I haven't read Wendy Slater's book yet, but from the description it sounds like the mythology I have in mind might be similar to the "Family Portraits" chapter. There's no denying they were a loving family, but I think the popular view of Nicholas II is too often awash in sentimentality. We can blame the courtiers' memoirs for much of that. Although they offer valuable first-hand glimpses into OTMA's personalities, I had to take their portrayals with a grain of salt. Writing in the 1920s, these tutors, friends, and servants were still shocked and grieved by news of the Romanovs' murder, so their recollections were inevitably rose-colored. Yet that version of the Romanovs has prevailed for decades. As they say in Russia, a truth is found between two lies, so it's no surprise that the Soviet accounts of the Romanovs are heavily biased against the imperial family. They're also disturbingly anti-Semitic. Likewise, the things people still believe about Rasputin are downright outlandish. Fortunately, recent scholars have dug deeper into the story, sifting through the conflicting viewpoints to expose a more realistic middle ground.

The mythology that gives me the willies surrounds the popular view of the imperial family's captivity, where grim anecdotes that read like urban legends have been passed off as fact for generations. People seem almost eager to believe them. The melodrama is very appealing - the once proud Romanovs remaining meek and pious in the face of Bolshevik humiliations. But the reality was much more complicated. The imperial family was treated fairly well overall, often winning the sympathy of their guards, which lends the petty insults more sting than outright cruelty.

[LM]: Your first novel, *Miss Spitfire*, is having great success. How does the writing and publishing process feel with *The Lost Crown*? How has it compared to *Miss Spitfire*? Has anything changed?

[SM]: It is different this time – a lot more public. Fans of *Miss Spitfire* are paying attention. Fans of the Romanovs are paying attention. That made *The Lost Crown* much harder to write. It's one thing to wonder hypothetically what the reaction to this book will be, but it's quite another to know that people are already thinking about it. And not just a faceless mass of theoretical readers, but specific people – many of them Romanov fans with exacting standards.

[LM]: Do you have any future projects planned after *The Lost Crown*?

[SM]: Of course. But I won't tell.