

Episode 28 - The Jewish Queen - Magda Lupescu and King Carol II of Romania

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 28, where we'll be discussing the interesting personality of interwar Romania, Elena (Magda) Lupescu.

By-the-way, you just listened to the song "The Royal Anthem", fragment from the Romanian Poem composition by George Enescu. A link to the full song is provided in the episode notes.

Elena (Magda) Lupescu was born in 1896, the daughter of Elise Lupescu née Falk a dancer, and of Nicolae Lupescu, an apothecary. Her mother was an Austrian-born Jew who converted to the Roman Catholic Church prior to her marriage. Nicolae Lupescu was born Jewish as well and adopted his name upon conversion to Orthodox Christianity, the established religion in Romania. His surname prior to conversion may have been Grünberg or it may have been Wolff. Many of Magda's close relatives also chose to change their surname to Lupu, which corresponds to Wolff in Romanian. The Wolff family had been living in Romania for only a generation at the time of her birth. The origin of her nickname "Magda", by which she was later known, is obscure. According to Elena Lupescu herself, it was originally a mistake of an Italian journalist; but according to an alternative version, "Magda" was, at the time, Bucharest slang for "reformed prostitute". She had a younger brother, Constantin Schloim Lupescu.

Elena Lupescu was raised from birth as a Catholic. She was educated at the Deaconesses, a Bucharest boarding school run by Bavarian nuns of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Nymphenburg, and one of the best girls schools in the country, where she excelled in her studies. She was not just a pretty face, but a sharp and exceptional student. Her proud parents and teachers envisioned a rosy future for her, but even in their wildest dreams did not predict that Magda would one day become a royal.

In February 1919, in Iași, Elena Lupescu married Ion TâmpEANU, an officer of the Romanian Royal Army. Elena did not adapt well to garrison life and had several affairs. The marriage ended in divorce, but she was still married to TâmpEANU in 1923, when she first encountered Carol. After the divorce, Elena took again her maiden name, Lupescu.

In 1923 Carol II, the heir to the Romanian throne, entered the royal photographer's dark room. He was rifling through dozens of pictures when he came across a photograph of a young girl with shining hair and magnetic green eyes. He immediately asked to meet her and – when he saw Magda for the first time – he could not take his eyes off her legs. "She has the most beautiful gait in Europe" he told his associates and from that moment, the fates of Carol II and the young Jewess were entwined.

But before we continue, a few words about Carol II's royal heritage. In 1866, Carol von Hohenzollern, who established the Romanian monarchy, was smuggled by ship down the Danube and crowned King of Romania. A cold and rigid man, Carol I's entire life focused on his

sole passion, artillery. When he heard the canons thunder during his first war as a commander of the Romanian army he said, "That is the most beautiful music I have ever heard in my life". When Carol I died in 1910, his nephew Ferdinand inherited the throne. Unlike his uncle who derived satisfaction from the smell of ashes, Ferdinand was interested in botany and considered an expert agronomist and botanist.

In 1893, a young heir to the throne was born to Ferdinand and his wife Maria, and named Carol II, after his illustrious uncle. The young Carol II did not share his uncle's and father's interests in artillery or botany – he was interested in women. From a young age, Carol the younger developed a strong affection for the fair sex and engaged in affairs that irked the family. When Romania was at war with Germany, in World War I, Carol went AWOL to spend very sweet hours in the company of a fair young lady. His mother, Maria, could not bear the shame. She sent him a letter in which she dismissively rebuked him for being, "nothing more than an overgrown boy and wasting his time". A year later, in a royal luncheon, he declared, before his parents and relatives, his intention to marry a common local noblewoman, in breach of the Romanian royal family's laws. Carol and his lover fled to Paris, where they lived on a royal stipend. Later Carol came to his senses and toed the line, marrying a Greek princess named Helena. They had a son, Michael, and it seemed that Carol had finally settled down.

According to Elena Lupescu's memoirs, the first meeting of Elena and Carol took place in an innocuous setting, when Elena was just a nine-year-old girl and Carol, a 19-year-old prince. It all started with a seemingly banal gesture, a candy offered with tenderness. Carol was captivated by Elena's red hair, and she was won over by his boldness. the young prince. In her memoirs, Elena recounts how, at that childhood meeting, the prince offered her a candy directly with his hand, a gesture that remained deeply imprinted in her mind.

Years later, fate brought them together again in a different context, at a reception, where the heir to the Romanian crown, visibly affected and depressed, asked her to resume "the old friendship." From there, the flame of love reignited with even greater intensity. Despite Carol's marriage to Princess Helena and the fact that Elena Lupescu had meanwhile married an officer, the 1925 reunion was a turning point. When King Ferdinand, Carol's father, learned of his son's love affair with the beautiful Jew, he ordered that Magda be deported from Romania at once.

But even the King's wrath could not extinguish the flame of passion. Carol took the first opportunity, an invitation to the funeral of Queen Mother Alexandra of England, to forego offering his condolences to the royal family in London. The two chose to ignore social conventions and royal obligations, fleeing together to Venice. Carol was then spotted in the company of his beloved in Milan. The local press jumped on the windfall and photographed the loving couple from every possible angle. The pictures spread throughout Europe the following day, and the city of Bucharest was shamed.

Carol, blinded by love, requested to be removed from the Royal House register, and granted the right to live under another name, Carol Caraiman. The prince's gesture caused a huge scandal, and Queen Mary, Carol's mother, wrote him a harsh farewell letter, calling him "a prodigal son" and denouncing "the image of sin crowned in red locks."

The fact that Carol engaged publicly in an extramarital affair should have been unforgiveable. But the Romanian monarchy decided to give him one last-chance. To that end, one of his close

friends, a pilot named Mogor, was dispatched to his side. Mogor received an order: do not return to Romania without the heir to the throne. Carol's wife Helena also wrote her husband a letter begging him to come home. She tried to rouse his sense of guilt, noting that their son, Michael, was constantly asking where Papa was. But nothing helped. Carol's and Magda's connection was not a fleeting infatuation, it was real, deep love. Carol replied to his friend Mogor that he would relinquish the Romanian crown and, in his words, "only return to Romania in a coffin."

The final plot twist took place in 1927, when King Ferdinand died. Because Carol II had relinquished the crown, his son Michael was crowned King. There was one sticky detail, Michael was only six-years old. In the past, the King of Romania was no mere figurehead, but an active leader in the nation's political life. That sparked a protest movement calling for the original heir's reinstatement. The tense political context in Romania offered Carol the chance to return to the country. Although this meant leaving Elena in France, he accepted the conditions imposed, to temporarily abandon her and try to remarry Princess Helena. Carol was carried on the wings of the nation's adoration back to Romania on June 8, 1930 and crowned King in a lavish coronation.

What happened to Magda? She was devastated, begging her life partner not to step on her: "If you loved me, you wouldn't do this. Be good! Don't cheat on me!", she wrote to him desperately. However, the separation was short-lived. Elena returned to Romania in secret, and their love was reborn stronger. In noteworthy political wisdom, Magda convinced her lover not to make her the official queen. She quietly and affectionately returned to Romania, where she established a small court and remained at Carol's side.

Carol bought her a villa in the most exclusive area of Bucharest, and that house would become the center of major political decisions of the era. Elena, called "Duduia" by the king, "Lupeasca" by the press, and "the gray eminence" by political circles, became an influential figure in the shadow of the throne.

The fiery redhead was accused by the antisemitic press of manipulating the king's decisions, influencing the appointments of ministers and bringing her relatives into key positions. Some historians claim that "Lupeasca" amassed a considerable fortune (two houses in Bucharest, two villas in Sinaia, a villa on the shore of the Black Sea, jewelry), and the camarilla she led had become a real instrument of power around the king.

Here is what King Michael, Carol's son, said of "Lupeasca": "if my father refused a favor, she would start crying with a tap turned on at full speed. And the scene would only stop when he finally gave in. She was a born actress."

Even so, Carol never gave it up. "Whoever is against this connection becomes his enemy, whoever is for it, his friend", Constantin Argetoianu, Romania prime minister, wrote about Elena Lupescu's influence on the king.

The popular opinion thought "Lupeasca" slept her way to the top, going from officers at provincial garrisons to the royal palace in Bucharest, where she solidified her influence with a cohort of crooked industrialists desperate to maintain control of the Romanian nation.

King Carol II was a thief and a sex maniac whose arrogance was matched only by his venality and priapism. Romanians were willing to swallow his faults to a degree, but they refused to digest his

long-running affair with a red-headed Jewess, although, let's not forget, Elana Lupescu was raised Catholic.

What was the truth? How much was envy and politics and what role antisemitism played? Elena Lupescu called her memoir "M-au denumit jidoavca cu parul rosu" (They called me the kike with red hair).

I recently had the opportunity to review newspaper articles of the time, like the 1928 newspaper Lumina Satelor (The villages' Light) where an article entitled "Jidoavca i-a luat mințile cu totul" (The kike turned him crazy) ends with "Pe noi ne doare această istorie văzând cum o jidoavcă strică un suflet de creștin și de român; un suflet mare, nădăjdea unui neam întreg" (This story hurts us, seeing how a kike ruined a Christian and Romanian soul; a great soul, the hope of an entire nation.) I repeat, this article is from 1928.

In 1965, almost 40 years later, I was in high school in Bucharest and with some friends decided to go for a hike in the Bucegi mountains. We took the train from Bucharest to Comarnic, where one of my friends' grandparents lived, to sleep overnight at their place and start the hike in the morning. At dinner, we talked about Romanian leaders and, at some point, the grandfather said "Carol II would have been a great Romanian king if not for Lupeasca, that kike's influence". I had no idea who Lupeasca was and my friend's grandfather did not know I was Jewish but the hatred in his voice and the choice of words left me, a high schooler, with a bitter taste in my mouth.

In 1940, after Carol was forced to abdicate, the two left the country together, in a train with 12 wagons loaded with goods and paintings. They arrived in Portugal, in Estoril, where they settled and lived out the last years of their lives.

In 1947, after almost 24 years of dating, they were married civilly in Brazil and religiously in France. Elena was 50 years old and in poor health. Carol formalized the relationship to fulfill her dream, to become his wife. This made the common girl from Bucharest the first Jewish Princess since the destruction of the Second Temple.

After Carol's death in 1953, Elena was devastated. "Adieu, amour de ma vie!" she said through tears. Although crushed by grief, she survived him for 20 years, refusing to rebuild her life. She died in 1977, in Portugal, at the age of 82, wishing that her ashes be buried at the feet of the man she loved. In 2003, Carol and Elena's remains were repatriated and buried in Curtea de Arges, although not as Elena had dreamed. The two were buried in separate places, 450 meters apart, again defying their desire to be together even after death. Her tombstone reads, "Here lies the daughter of Apothecary Ze'ev [Wolf] Schwartz."

More than just a simple love, their relationship profoundly influenced the political and social history of interwar Romania. The "Red-Haired Dudaia" was not just a woman with seductive hair, but a complex figure, capable of love, manipulation, sacrifice and devotion.

In the end, history remained divided: some consider Elena Lupescu a femme fatale, others a heroine of love. What is certain is that their love, born from a simple candy, irreparably marked the destiny of a monarchy and became a legend.

"It is the essence of my life, it is the divine talisman and in moments of difficulty it is my ultimate refuge. This love is such that I cannot even conceive of life without it. I have

an urgent need for it, moment by moment. "She is indispensable to me. She is flesh of my flesh. This woman brings me infinite joy!", is the statement that Carol II made to Elena Lupescu, the woman for whom he gave up the Romanian throne.

Elena Lupescu remains a deeply negative character due to the critics of the interwar period, but especially those of the communist regime.

This concludes this episode.

Until next podcast episode, be well.