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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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1927 and a release in 1928. Evidence of that release was found in one grand exposition executed in 1929. The decade of the 1930s was approached, therefore, with much optimism after a winter of domestic hell and near professional oblivion.

1 Olga Milan Lazovich

The spark was a divorce in 1927 from his second wife, Miriam. Their relationship and marriage had not been in any sense typical; their divorce even less so. Wright and Maud Miriam Noel, a divorcee from Bristol, Tennessee, had met in late 1914 or early 1915 more or less as a result of her overtures. From that moment until 1927 they dominated one another's social and domestic life with a constant and depressing irritation. It needs to be remembered that from 1916 to 1922 Wright resided for nearly half his time in Tokyo, sometimes with his mother and/or Miriam, while supervising the construction of the Imperial Hotel and other smaller commissions in Japan. His American professional practice did not recover from gross inattention until 1936, a period of two full decades. True, there were some interesting architectural highlights, especially in California around 1922 to 1924. They were exciting works if somewhat aberrant in the grand view of his career. The notoriety of proceedings over the divorce did not help Wright's professional practice or Miriam's health. With a troubled and unstable nine-year relationship it is not clear why Wright and Miriam decided to marry in November 1923. When five months later in April 1924 she left him it was probably not unexpected. In July 1925 it was Wright who filed for divorce, but only after he had met and won the affection of another divorcee, Olgivanna Hinzenberg.

There has been some uneasy speculation about early years in the life of Mrs. Hinzenberg, the bright young woman who became the third Mrs. Wright. It is necessary therefore, to briefly outline her relatively peculiar career for it reveals much of the character of the woman who was to play a decisive role in Wright's life and therefore his profession as it evolved during the critical decade of the 1930s.

Wright did not describe her in his 1932 autobiography, perhaps because he was still too close to and emotionally involved with the harrowing events of the divorce and his affair with Olgivanna. He only perfunctorily introduced Olgivanna and vaguely referred to her familial lineage (something important to both of them). After it was clear to Wright that the marriage was consolidated he impressionistically described Olgivanna; that was in the expanded autobiography of 1943. Impressions of their first meeting were vivid in his memory even at that date. Olgivanna was "a dark, slender gentlewoman Unobtrusive but lovely, I secretly observed her aristocratic bearing, no hat, her dark hair parted in the middle and smoothed down over her ears, a light small shawl

over her shoulders, little or no makeup, very simply dressed. . . . perhaps Russian? . . . I instantly liked her looks. . . . sensitive feminine brow and dark eyes. . . . a strange elation stole over me. Suddenly in my unhappy state something cleared up—what had been the matter with me came to look me in the face—it was, simply too much passion without poetry. . . . This strange chance meeting. . . . I was a hungry man.”¹ She was thirty years Wright’s junior, apparently born in 1898 in Cetinje, Montenegro, a town slightly inland from the Adriatic and about thirty-five miles from the Albanian border to the south.²

Montenegro was a proud but hapless and poor country before World War I, unable to support itself agriculturally and dependent for fifty percent of its economy on direct grants from Czarist Russia. It did not exist after the war. In the summer of 1918 the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans was defeated and the last remains of the Hapsburg Empire disintegrated into national components. Independent but vulnerable Montenegro was absorbed into Serbia as the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes formed a kingdom later united as Yugoslavia, in which Montenegro became a “republic” or province.

Olga Ivanovna Milan Lazovich, or as she preferred, Olgivanna, was born to Ivan (sometimes Ivan) and Militze Lazovich. Of her father little is revealed other than that he may have been a judge or chief justice. Of her mother it is often suggested that she was related to General Marcos Milan who organized the successful defense of Montenegro and helped retain its independence from the Hapsburgs. In any event, her family was wealthy and if not of the aristocracy well placed socially. As a young girl and as was correct for the family’s social station, she was sent to school in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. Probably as a result of the outbreak of war and threats to Serbia, she was again sent away, this time to the city of Batumi in Georgia south of the Caucasus. She lived with her married sister and obtained the Slavic education believed proper by her family. Olgivanna’s recollection was vivid: “I lived a sheltered and protected life among the Russian aristocracy at that time; everything was done for me.” In fact she “had very little idea where the kitchens were even located in our villa on the Black Sea.”³

With the defeat of Montenegro in 1918 she became an expatriate. Her parents moved to Belgrade where they remained, while her brother Vladimir emigrated to the United States. In 1916 Olgivanna had married Vlademar Hinzenberg, an architectural draftsman and family friend, ten years her senior. She left Hinzenberg probably in 1918. Around 1922 the daughter of their union, Svetlana, was sent to Hollis, a section of Queens in New York City, to live with brother Vladimir, affectionately called Vlado. (Later she was adopted by Wright but died in an automobile accident in 1946.)⁴

In search of education Olgivanna was separated from her family; her native country literally disappeared; her family dispersed to three continents; her attempt at a permanent new home through marriage with an older man failed. All this extracted an emotional toll and induced her to seek social dependence in a new and atypical family, an artificial one created by Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff.

In 1915 in Petrograd (before St. Petersburg, now Leningrad) Gurdjieff began discussion sessions for some intellectually curious urbanites. Achieving relative success he instituted more formal classes which were about the importance and character of knowledge, the Orient, art, civilization, immortality, "psychic centers," and his method for the reconstruction of the human machine. Worried about a series of murderous revolutionary events in Petrograd in 1917, he and his small group of followers moved south to the town of Essentuki in the Russian Caucasus. There in 1918 Gurdjieff more carefully defined the essentials of his training system and initiated a formal program that he called the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. War in the northern Caucasus again forced him and his students to move, this time over the mountains to Tiflis, capital of what was then Georgia, 150 miles east of Batumi. New apostles joined the twelve people who trekked over the mountains; among the neophytes was Olgivanna. After only a few months in Tiflis Gurdjieff was again on the move, this time before the red banners of the oncoming Bolshevik army. The Institute band left Georgia in 1919 for Constantinople where they remained for about a year until, for unexplained reasons, they hurriedly decided to move operations yet again, this time to a more central European location, settling in Berlin. They operated in Germany for about another year, or from spring 1921 to summer 1922. Olgivanna's travels with her new "family," therefore, proved as significant as those of her childhood, and they were to continue.

One of the more intellectually endowed of Gurdjieff's clan and a fervent follower, P. D. Ouspensky, had written a book supportive of and parallel to Gurdjieff's teachings, *Tertium Organum*. When translated into English it met with great success, especially in America's New England states and in old England. As a result Ouspensky and Gurdjieff were invited to give a series of lectures in England. Their endeavors were greeted most favorably and they managed to develop a prominent London circle. With financing from this supportive group and encouraged by the prospect of receiving students from Britain, France, and the United States, Gurdjieff moved the Institute to Paris in July 1922. He soon purchased the Chateau du Prieuré in Avon near Fontainebleau. By then Olgivanna's position in the Institute had become that of Assistant Instructor. Indeed, many Americans,

Europeans, and British did attend the Institute at Avon as did the New Zealand expatriate author Katherine Mansfield. She died at the Institute in 1923 in what were thought to be mysterious circumstances but in fact of tuberculosis. Her death created quite an international stir and did a great deal to focus public attention on what had been a rather obscure society.

Performances of dance, "movements," recitation, and "demonstrations" by Gurdjieff's people were quite unique and usually well attended. He presented these shows both to gain public attention for recruitment to the Institute and to gain money from the box office. He began offering rather modest public performances and demonstrations as early as the first months in Tiflis. By the 1920s they were rather grand affairs employing full string orchestras. It should not be surprising that a tour of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia was undertaken in early 1924, for which the company numbered forty people from the Institute plus full orchestra. These were Gurdjieff's best and most popular years; another tour was never attempted. While in the eastern states Gurdjieff acquired a booking at a theater in Chicago for the end of March. Fortuitously, in 1924 Hinzenberg apparently was living in Chicago and the Gurdjieff tour afforded him and Olgivanna an opportunity to resolve mutual problems and arrange a proper divorce. In early April 1924 the flock's last American show and demonstration, lasting nearly four hours, was held at New York's prestigious Carnegie Hall. A long trip back to France followed immediately thereafter.

When Olgivanna returned to Avon she continued to teach dervish dances, "obligatories," initiations, or whatever. American expatriate and English resident Stanley Nott began attending during that summer. He has recalled Olgivanna's story of her initial meeting with Gurdjieff in Tiflis.

G. Do you have a wish?

O. I wish for immortality.

G. What you do now?

O. I look after my house and servants.

G. You work yourself? Cook, look after baby?

O. No, my servants do that for me.

G. You do nothing, and you wish for immortality!

Nott and Olgivanna were pulling a long saw, cutting wood, when she offered her recollections.⁵ In October 1924 Gurdjieff became ill and many of his staff, including Olgivanna, and all his pupils (now reduced to eight young Americans) left Avon. Resolving to attend to her own future, with her daughter Svetlana she returned to Hollis. She then traveled alone to Chicago where her fate and

that of her daughter were with a divorce court. She settled final matters with Hinzenberg and planned to return to Hollis.

Wright met Olgivanna in late November 1924 at a matinee performance of the Petrograd Ballet Company; she sat two places away from him in a box. They were introduced, they talked, and he took her on a visit to Taliesin that November; he won her love, and in February 1925—approximately—they began living together in Wright's Spring Green, Wisconsin, home. In April 1925 her divorce from Hinzenberg became final. A daughter, Iovanna, was born to Wright and the young Olgivanna at the end of that same year.⁶

From Cetinje to Spring Green had been a long, arduous journey, one full of diverse experiences, farewells, and temporary families. But Olgivanna's familial struggles, now knitted to Wright's ego and career, were not over. When Miriam Noel learned about Wright's new mistress the situation quickly escalated to one of vengeful proportions. To the public press it became an epic soap opera. Based on substantial evidence one of Wright's biographers, Robert Twombly, has described the details of various proceedings, combats with courts, the involvement of a state governor and the U.S. Congress, machinations of banks, pursuit by federal marshals, flights to safe places as fugitives, and so forth, in combination with the loss of Wright's home Taliesin to a bank acting for creditors. The tragedy of the situation was compounded when his home was partially gutted by fire in April 1925. Suffice it to say that the affair consumed all energies, monies, and emotions. Finally, after a preliminary divorce decree in 1927 Wright was allowed to return to Taliesin so that he might work to pay his accumulated and substantial debts. "Denied work," Wright had said, "and what Freedom have you?"⁷ In August of that year, after people began to realize that Miriam's protestations and contestations were spiteful and prompted by revenge—and that she may have been ill—Wright obtained a divorce. However, he was by then incapable of paying his debts of \$43,000 or so; so his "personal effects, art pieces, and farm machinery were sold at public auction." The bank took possession of Taliesin and the farm. But all was not lost. After the marriage in 1928 Taliesin was redeemed in the name of the corporation and the "remainder of the architect's debts paid" by stockholders of Frank Lloyd Wright Incorporated. Among them was a good friend Ferdinand Shevill; the writer and critic Alexander Woollcott; designer Joseph Urban; playwright Charles MacArthur; the architect's sisters Jane and Maginel and his first wife Catherine; and his attorney Philip La Follette who became secretary of Wright Inc. and later governor of Wisconsin. Wright personally contacted many of his former clients, some of whom had remained friends,

1.2 Maud Miriam Noel Wright around 1920, perhaps on return from Japan.



stating frankly that he was in financial difficulties and urging them to buy into Wright Inc. Among those former clients who helped were Mrs. Avery Coonley, Harold McCormick, and Darwin C. Martin. As Twombly noted, legally, Wright Inc. "owned Taliesin and everything in it. Its hopes for financial return were based on the architect's ability to design buildings for profit."⁸ In October 1928 the Wrights were able to return to Taliesin.

Wright's ability to immediately raise money was limited. His liquid assets were land, buildings, equipment, his artifacts, and an art collection. To help support his various private activities he sold a significant portion of his Japanese art works. On one occasion in 1932 he offered 223 prints and a number of albums (one of eight Hiroshige "Views of Yedo" was sold for a mere \$30), manuals, folios, drawings, and sketch books for \$2,820.⁹ Clearly his major source of income was to be from fees for architectural services; but that depended on people coming to him, not on his own volition.

The extent of Wright's attempts to secure commissions so he might repay those who supported him cannot be fully known, but a measure can be implied by two examples. First, in 1929 he tried to establish a series of partnerships with architects in Chicago, New York, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and perhaps other locations. Although he may have believed they were not partnerships by using his preferred word "association," they were effectively the former. Indeed, his partner-to-be in Chicago, Charles Morgan, was exhorted to devote all of his "energies . . . to the duties and opportunities" of Wright, and he was to seek commissions. All contract documents were to be in the name of Frank Lloyd Wright Incorporated: Charles Morgan, Chicago, Associate.¹⁰ The other example was his attempt in 1930 to obtain a job as consultant or critic to those planning the Chicago "Century of Progress" exposition in 1933. He said he was thinking not of designing a building but of acting as "a good umpire."¹¹ These various cooperative plans were of no avail: more personal and direct involvement was necessary.

Perhaps in an attempt to understand the recent shattering events that controlled his life, Wright has said he began to write his autobiography while in a safe place—hiding—in a cottage on Lake Minnetonka near Minneapolis. Little was done autobiographically after that initial effort until 1927. Also in that year, after a decade when he built barely a dozen architectural commissions and prepared few other projects, a former employee contacted Wright. Architect Albert C. McArthur asked his former boss to help document the Arizona Biltmore Hotel to be built near Phoenix. This project was financed by the Los Angeles Biltmore people, and Warren and Charles McArthur were



1.3 Mr. and Mrs. Wright sometime in the 1940s.

on the board of the Arizona Biltmore Corporation. Warren had built a house in Chicago designed by Wright in 1892, and Charles was Albert McArthur's father. While in Phoenix in 1928 Wright met Dr. Alexander Chandler and they discussed a proposed desert hotel and resort to be located near the doctor's own town of Chandler, Arizona. One year after the preliminary divorce as required by Wisconsin law, Wright and Olgivanna were free to marry. On 25 August 1928 the ceremony was held at La Jolla, California, one of a number of places of refuge during the preceding few years. Moreover, the rebuilding of Taliesin that had begun in 1927 was not complete, so Wright had to work at La Jolla. Almost immediately after the wedding the Wrights were able to return to Spring Green, where he completed detailed designs for McArthur and began on the ill-fated designs for what became known as San Marcos in The Desert. Chandler approved the preliminary drawings in December 1928 and preparation of the final plans and construction documents began almost immediately. Already things were looking much brighter for the newlyweds.

The legal and emotional permanence of the divorce after years of harassment followed by a long twelve-month waiting period, or "probation" as Wright called it, was sealed and celebrated by the wedding. The woman who had entered his life four years earlier when in her mid-twenties not only became the matriarchal strength he needed after the death in 1923 of his mother, known as Anna, but pragmatically bonded shared ideals of individualism and holism. The evidence of their agreement, her strength, and particularly of his liberation was first evidenced at a small camp on a high plateau of the central Arizona desert.

2 Ocotillo Camp

Across the mesa from the camp are great low-lying mounds of black, burnt rock covered with picture writing scratched on the surface by the Indians who came there at sunrise to worship the sun, the greatest evidence of the Great Spirit they knew.

The desert is prostrate to the sun.

All life here is sun-life: and died a sun-death. Evidence is everywhere.

FLW, An Autobiography, 1932

Dr. Chandler envisaged San Marcos in The Desert as a large winter resort for wealthy tourists. The original San Marcos Hotel, or Desert Lodge, in the town of Chandler served a similar function and was Arizona's first resort hotel. Designed by California architect Arthur Benton and constructed in 1912-13,¹ it was the center of tourism in central Arizona in the 1920s. Dr. Chandler wished to create