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“THE MISSION PRINCESS”

Wally brought a precious commodity back from Europe: a diamond for Dolores.¹ He had every intention of marrying her, but things did not go as planned. He never even had the chance to present her with the ring because the two ended their relationship soon after he returned. Since his intentions were thwarted, he decided to continue his education back at the University of Utah instead. In addition to his schooling, he obtained a job as a bookkeeper and office manager at the LDS Hospital.² Around that time, another young woman would enter his life: Martha Sharp.

Unlike her future husband, Martha Sharp grew up in a highly privileged situation. Because of her circumstances, in comparison to Wally's, she seemed like somebody from another world, even another planet. As she grew up, she became the stable one in her family

1. Carma Toronto, interview, February 26, 2004, 10.
2. Martha Toronto Anderson, *A Cherry Tree Behind the Iron Curtain: The Autobiography of Martha Toronto Anderson* (Salt Lake City: Martha Toronto Anderson, 1977), 12.

as far as the gospel was concerned. Her brothers and sisters were not very solid. According to Carma, Wally's sister-in-law, nothing but a testimony of the gospel would find a girl like her ending up with a guy like Wally.³

Martha was born in Salt Lake City on February 27, 1912, to John and Sally Luella Ferrin Sharp.⁴ She was named after her grandmother, Martha Bronson Ferrin, and would someday endure the same experience that her grandmother had once endured: bearing the difficulties of supporting her husband, Josiah, when he was called to serve a mission.⁵ Like some of the experiences that her future granddaughter would have, Martha Ferrin's experiences were "hair-raising and showed how the Lord took care of her and the family during those years."⁶

Grandmother Ferrin would often "give all the food in her house to Indians, both hostile and friendly." She learned their language and could talk to them as they made demands. "They always came when she was at home alone with the little ones. These were often terrifying experiences for her, but she was always kind and generous to the Indians. She was courageous, and very spiritual as well, in bringing up her family of eleven children."⁷ Martha Sharp would also someday experience the Lord taking care of her and her family while her husband served a mission. Martha's mother, Luella Ferrin, was youngest of those eleven children in the Ferrin family. Little is recorded about her except that she was extremely talented, especially in singing.

Martha's father, John Sharp, grew up in Salt Lake City. As a young man in his twenties, he went to New York City to study medicine at New York University. While there, he studied voice with Madam Von Klenner. He had a beautiful baritone voice and sang in groups and quartets as "an outlet from the rigors of his medical studies." By

3. Carma Toronto, interview, February 26, 2004, 7.

4. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 1.

5. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 1, 4.

6. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 1.

7. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 1.

no coincidence, Luella also took lessons from Madam Von Klenner. Through this association John and Luella met, "fell in love, and after a brief courtship . . . were married in the Salt Lake Temple on September 18, 1903." The couple first lived in New York City, where John obtained his MD. They then returned to Salt Lake City, where he practiced medicine.⁸

Martha was the second of John and Luella's five children. During her childhood, her father "worked out of [their] home in caring for the sick and delivering babies." Her father also served in the Army Corps during World War I, eventually going overseas and taking care of wounded troops in France from 1917 to 1919. After the armistice, Martha remembered her father being a little more stern but still loving. After World War I, he frequently took her on hunting and camping trips, and he established offices in the Deseret Bank Building. "He was very busy." In fact, "he was known as the best surgeon in the west."⁹

While her husband practiced medicine, Martha's mother continued to pursue her musical career as much as possible while raising her children. She performed in leading roles as a member of the Salt Lake Opera Company. She was also a soloist for several years in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. She directed and produced operas, a hobby that would have a great bearing on Martha's future interests, as Luella encouraged her children to develop their talents.¹⁰

Martha went to grade school at Columbus and junior high school at Irving. In high school she "loved being in the operas and plays, dance reviews and pageants at the school." And, like her future husband, she particularly enjoyed being on the swim team. She later attended LDS High School, where she graduated in 1930. Once graduated, she enrolled at the University of Utah, where she mainly studied French and German for a degree in modern languages. Martha also took up private lessons on the harp and became a gifted harpist. She danced in church-sponsored shows and operas and was asked to do

8. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 1, 3.

9. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 4–6.

10. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 7.

choreography for several productions. She also joined the Lambda Phi Lambda sorority and had an active social life. The Sharp home on Ashton Avenue in Salt Lake City became a wonderful place for the university to have parties and formal dances because the home had four rooms that opened up into a beautiful ballroom.¹¹

In the summer of 1932, Martha took a vacation with her sister, Marion, and some other friends to a resort in Emigration Canyon, called Pinecrest. They had a wonderful time hiking, playing tennis, throwing horseshoes, and singing around the campfire at night. It was there that Martha met a certain young man who directed the activities at night and worked in the office during the day. His name was Wallace Felt Toronto. As the two became acquainted, she learned that her oldest brother, Harlow, who likewise had attended LDS High School, knew Wally when he was the student body president and the captain of the swim team. Harlow had been a favorite speed swimmer as well. When Martha met Wally, Martha was still studying the German language at the university, and Harlow was on a mission in Germany, where Wally had originally served. The couple had much in common and had no problem finding things to talk about. “[Wally] was funny and we joked a lot, and he even broke the blisters on my fingers that I had from plucking the strings of my harp. He was interested in my playing, and we talked about it quite a bit as he was dressing my fingers.”¹²

About the first week of September, after Martha returned home from Pinecrest, she got a phone call from Wally. He had finished his season at Pinecrest and had helped the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, close up the resort before returning home to register for the fall semester at the University of Utah. Martha was delighted to talk with him again. She grew especially excited when he invited her to go to the Peach Days celebration in Brigham City. She had never been on a date that lasted all day long before, but after talking about it with her parents, they thought it would be okay.¹³

11. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 9.

12. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 11.

13. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 11.

Wally picked Martha up early on the morning of their first date. She remembered as the day progressed that she had “never been treated so nicely by a young man before.” Peach Days with its carnival atmosphere thrilled her. The festivities ended with a big dance that night. But it was what happened after the dance that Martha tells us was the most memorable:

Driving home late, after midnight, we rounded a curve on the highway and witnessed an accident that was quite a shock to us both. The car had rolled over several times and some of the young people had been killed. We pulled over to help, and as other cars came along we were able to get injured and dying young people wrapped in blankets and into cars and ambulances. I held up fine while we were working there, but after we started home I began to shake. Naturally we drove home slowly because it was such a shock to us both.¹⁴

Experiencing such trauma together brought the young couple closer to one another. From that first date on, they dated only each other, eliminating former boyfriends and girlfriends from their dating schedules. Martha took Wally to sorority parties, and he took her to missionary frat parties. On September 15, 1933, a year after they first met, Wallace Felt Toronto married Martha Sharp in the Salt Lake City Temple with David O. McKay, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, officiating. After the wedding, Martha dropped out of college in her junior year, but Wally continued studying at the university and working as a bookkeeper and office manager at the LDS hospital. Together they managed the apartment house they rented that was owned by the Chapmans, who had been Wally’s employers at Pinecrest.¹⁵

Their first child, Marion, was born on November 5, 1934. When she was barely a year old, Wally and Martha were called into the First Presidency’s office for an interview with President David O. McKay, then of the First Presidency. Neither of them had any idea why a member of the First Presidency would want to see them, and both were in

14. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 12.

15. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 12.



<< Marion, Martha, and Wallace Toronto passport photo, 1936. Courtesy of Church History Library.

shock when President McKay asked if they would preside over the Czechoslovak Mission. At only twenty-four years old, Martha remembered feeling that “it was a distinct honor to be included in this calling, because [she] would, as a mission president’s wife, have a great responsibility—not only as a leader in the auxiliary organizations, but as a mother to many missionaries. It was a sobering thought.”¹⁶

After much preparation, many goodbyes, and a missionary farewell, President and Sister Toronto left Salt Lake City in May, traveling by way of Nauvoo and other LDS historical places. They also spent a couple of days at Niagara Falls before they boarded the SS *American New York*. Martha had never traveled before, and even though she was pregnant and had a small child in tow, she grew to love traveling because she was with Wally. They landed in Amsterdam and then stopped in Paris and later Berlin, where they visited with other mission presidents on their way to Prague.¹⁷ They arrived in Czechoslovakia on June 1, 1936.

The first experience Martha had with using her French and German skills outside of the classroom differed from her expectations. “I’ll admit I was thoroughly confused, but the languages did look and sound familiar, at least, which is more than I can say about the Czech language, which I had to learn from scratch. That language was something I can’t quite describe.” Wally tried to teach her a few phrases, but it still sounded very strange to her. She enrolled in a language class at the Berlitz School. As she studied, worked, and prayed, she surprised herself when she found that she learned the language quite well.¹⁸

Wally felt that her Czech was improving daily.¹⁹ She had a talent for language. After all, she had learned French and German at the

16. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 13.

17. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 13.

18. Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 14.

19. Toronto, journal, August 15–21, 1937, 138.

University of Utah.²⁰ He was especially proud of her when she bore her testimony well without using any notes.²¹ Not only did she need to learn a new language, but she also had to learn a lot about the Church from an organizational standpoint. Before this calling, she had just been a bystander; now she was part of a leadership team. Early on, she admitted to Wally that because of the experience she was facing, she had really begun to recognize for the first time in her life the meaning and depth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. She realized how much there was for her to learn.²²

The sense of humor that Wally developed growing up did not change with his calling to be a mission president. While Martha was more refined, he still nurtured his funny bone. She often felt his humor was inappropriate for his station. For instance, one night in a particularly tender moment during an opera, he began whistling. Marion, their daughter, later described similar experiences that her mother endured on more than one occasion. Even though her father seemed to appreciate the arts,

His devotion to opera was suspect, even though he went with us. He wasn't especially interested in the lyric quality of the singers or the tonality of the orchestra. He seemed to enjoy the performances, but his greatest pleasure was in watching my poor mother's ecstatic sufferings as she watched. She responded to every strain of pathos with tears of sympathy and understanding. Father would always lean over and pat her knee at a crucial moment and say, "Now, Mamma, it isn't real." And she would glare at him through tear-filled eyes and wish he hadn't come.²³

Wally's bird imitations also irritated Martha. He often practiced them at the most inopportune times. One time was during a perfor-

20. Bob and David Toronto, interview by Mary Jane Woodger, August 20, 2013, Sandy, UT, transcription in author's possession, 8; and Anderson, *Cherry Tree*, 14.

21. Toronto, journal, April 4–10, 1937, 94.

22. Toronto, journal, November 1–7, 1936, 51.

23. Marion Toronto Miller, "My Story: The Dream (The Early Years)" (presentation, December 1998), printed copy, 12–13.

mance of the opera *Madame Butterfly*. The death scene commenced, with its sadness and grief, when all of a sudden, everyone could hear the twitter of birds above the orchestra. Everyone in the house started looking around, except for Martha, who was both fuming and weeping. Wally had decided to add a little "special interest into the orchestration." Martha did not speak to him for some time after the performance.²⁴

While Wally refused to act more mature and dignified, Martha struggled to appear older than her years. At the age of twenty-four, she was younger than most of the missionaries she was supposed to mother, and she had grown up in provincial Utah. Suddenly she was thrust into an unfamiliar world, new and frightening in its challenges. She squared her shoulders and met the task before her with a dignified grace that Wally found remarkable. The missionaries started calling Martha the "mission princess." The typical title of "mission mother" did not seem to fit since she was younger than most of them. She was an attractive woman and so very young for such a position of responsibility, and both the members and missionaries alike came to revere her.²⁵

When September of 1936 arrived, the Torontos celebrated their third wedding anniversary and recorded, "So many blessings have come our way. We have a delightful child, and expect another one in a short time; we are in Czechoslovakia, enjoying the greatest call that can come to a person, officiating in missionary work; somehow or other our bills seem to be paid up. We rather married on a 'shoe string'. And most delightful of all, we seem to become happier as the days, weeks, months, and years go by." Wally then described what a wonderful companion Martha had been. "No finer companion could one find in the world. She has been willing to cooperate, to sacrifice, to work, to study diligently—and all in the spirit of love and devotion. My greatest blessing is my darling sweetheart. How can I help but love and cherish her. May we have many more wedding anniversaries together."²⁶

24. Miller, "My Story: The Dream," 13.

25. Bob and David Toronto, interview, August 20, 2013, 25.

26. Toronto, journal, September 13–19, 1936, 38.



Wallace, Marion, Robert, and Martha Toronto, Prague, 1940. Courtesy of Church History Library.

Martha's main Church responsibility was with the Relief Society. Each of the large branches had a Relief Society, and she was the one who assigned local sisters to leadership positions, who in turn did very well. Martha decided that when they had literary lessons about American authors, they would instead substitute Czech authors and writers. Such lessons had to be very clear; many concepts could be lost in literal translation. Martha transplanted some fun ideas from the activities that her Relief Society implemented in Utah, one of which was having bazaars. At one bazaar hosted under her direction, more than 150 attended, and every bit of food and handiwork was sold. The bazaar also included an outstanding program of music. Under Martha's direction, they were able to bring in over 1,100 crowns to fund future Relief Society events.²⁷

27. Toronto, journal, December 5–11, 1937, 168.

One of the problems that Martha faced in the Czech Relief Societies was gossip. Wally called it a “great evil from within” among the sisters.²⁸ At one point, when the Boleslav Relief Society president and a few other sisters had generated some problems, he told them that he was going to “close the branch and send the missionaries into more fruitful fields” if they did not stop gossiping. “There were tears shed, and statements made that it was the ‘other fellow’ who was to blame.” Speaking right to the point, Wally reminded them that the Church had a bad reputation because of the gossip in Boleslav, which started in the Relief Society.²⁹ He told them that he would come after the New Year, hold a special meeting, and give them a definite decision; if things did not change, the branch would be closed.³⁰ The gossiping ceased after that.

There was one other constant worry for both Martha and Wally: their finances. Quarterly mission allowance from the Church was about \$180, but the bills continually stacked up. They would have to do some “tall stretching” to make the budget work. Although the allowance had been set at \$180 per month (\$20 less than President Gaeth and his wife had received), they had been told they would receive \$200. Wally always wondered why their budget had been reduced. The most probable reason was the Great Depression back in the states. The Torontos consequently had “to ask the First Presidency to take care of Martha's confinement” as she prepared for their next baby.³¹

Both of the Torontos were happy about the prospects of a new baby, and Baby Marion, whom they called “Knoflíček” (Buttons), was growing up quickly. She was even beginning to speak a few Czech words. The change of climate and country had not bothered her in the least.³² However, Martha did struggle with some difficulties being pregnant in a strange land. At one point, she suffered a terrible sore throat and called on a throat specialist for help. She then developed a bad case of sinus

28. Toronto, journal, July 26–August 1, 1936, 21.

29. Toronto, journal, January 10–23, 1937, 67.

30. Toronto, journal, December 20–26, 1936, 61.

31. Toronto, journal, June 28–July 4, 1936, 11.

32. Toronto, journal, July 26–August 1, 1936, 21.

trouble, possibly because a doctor in Prague punctured her sinus bones.³³ She was miserable, and within a week she had two more operations on her nose.³⁴ Her troubles with the doctors yielded a yearning for home. To her great sorrow, her mother also passed away while Martha was still across the ocean, which made her only more homesick and “blue.”³⁵

On November 28, 1936, while the Torontos were at a member’s home for dinner, Martha fainted at the dinner table and moaned about some pain in her side. Thinking it might be appendicitis, she went to the doctor, who put her to bed and said that the new arrival would come that evening. He gave her a few pills to stimulate labor pains, but nothing happened. Then they gave her an injection to induce labor. Because of her limited Czech language, an interpreter had to assist with the childbirth.³⁶ By 8:30 in the evening, she was in full labor, and at 9:30 “a fine healthy seven pound son was born.” The baby’s “cries could be heard all over the hospital. And Marty took it all like a ‘brick’—as brave and as fine as anyone could have done.”³⁷ They decided to name their new son Robert Sharp Toronto.³⁸

Although Wally and Martha were serving a mission, they did not neglect to enjoy many things that, as a young family, they would not want to miss. Like any ordinary Christian family, they decorated a big pine tree for Christmas. They filled stockings and put the gifts beneath the lowest branches of the beautifully decorated tree, and they played Santa Claus.³⁹ Little Marion woke up at the crack of dawn and, in ecstasy, played with her new dolly. The Torontos’ Christmas was completely normal, except for the myriad of missionaries that accompanied them in all their festivities.⁴⁰ It was a great ending to a wonderful year.

33. Toronto, journal, February 14–20, 1937, 80.

34. Toronto, journal, February 21–27, 1937, 81.

35. Toronto, journal, March 14–20, 1937, 89.

36. Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries Enter Eastern Europe*, 67.

37. Toronto, journal, November 21–28, 1936, 56.

38. Toronto, journal, December 15–19, 1936, 60.

39. Toronto, journal, December 19–25, 1937, 176.

40. Toronto, journal, December 25–31, 1938, 307.

5

“HOW CAN OUR BRETHREN BECOME MORE ZEALOUS?”

When Wally first presided over the mission, he had grave misgivings about being able to carry on the successful work of mission president Arthur Gaeth. Wally called Gaeth “a man of great ability, foresight and humility.” On arriving, Wally voiced his fears and apprehensions to the newly released mission president. President Gaeth’s reply to Wally’s concerns “sunk deep into [his] heart.” He told Wally, “Just remember, Wally, that one and the Lord are always a majority.”¹

Wally was less flamboyant than Gaeth and decided to continue only a portion of Gaeth’s public activities, which included serving as secretary for the English Club Union and lecturing frequently. “Overall, [Wally] spent less time in social activities and more time nurturing a growing membership.”² As he energetically visited

1. Wallace F. Toronto, “Lord’s Help Indispensable,” *Hvězdička* [*The Star*, Czechoslovakian Mission newsletter], July 1938, found in Jiří Šnederfler papers, Europe Church History Center, Bad Homburg, Germany, transcription in author’s possession.

2. Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries Enter Eastern Europe*, 67.