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# The Princess and the Stamp Collector

By Don Brandt

*Once upon a time* there was a beautiful princess named Martha who, during very difficult times in her own country, accepted an invitation to live in America, and her king gave his blessing. Her husband, the prince, chose to accompany his father who needed his services into exile to a different country far from America.

Now, in fairy tales, most beautiful princesses are not only beautiful but also young and unmarried. Martha, however, was 39 years old and the mother of three children. After a long and difficult ocean voyage, Martha and the children landed at New York and were escorted to the private home of their host, who was a famous stamp collector. It is said that the stamp collector immediately fell in love with the princess.

Usually dressed in her favorite shades of grey, Martha always sat upright in her chair with a smile on her face whenever the stamp collector spoke, gazing upon him like a little girl. At every opportunity she would tell him how beautiful and wonderful he was, and would bat her eyes and put on a “little girl” act by looking adoringly at him and giggling. Everyone else believed that the princess was flirting with him.

The princess’ lady-in-waiting, a countess with a tattoo on one arm, and the princess’ three children were invariably present, too. The stamp collector’s mother fell in love with the fair-haired, attractive children, whose excellent manners reminded her of her son’s when he had been their age. Everyone agreed that the princess had a vivacious personality, not at all formal or stuffy as one might expect from royalty.

After a few days the stamp collector invited the princess and her children to live in a large white house in another city until she could find a permanent home elsewhere. In this house Martha and her children lived on the second floor in a private suite of their own. Now you must know that the stamp collector was married, but his wife was seldom at home.

Every day the princess would join the stamp collector for afternoon tea, and in the evenings for a cocktail. On weekends she accompanied him on his yacht for river and ocean cruises. The stamp collector always kissed Martha hello when she appeared from anywhere and kissed her goodbye whenever she departed. All the stamp collector’s friends believed they were having a romantic relationship and started calling the princess his girl friend (although never when he or the princess could hear).<sup>1</sup>

The stamp collector would ride out into the country with the princess while she was searching for a place to live. He could not drive himself because of a physical handicap; in fact, he could not even walk or do most things that other men could do. But he could collect stamps. This was his most passionate hobby and his collection became famous worldwide.

Whenever time permitted from his responsibilities he would sit for hours in the den of the big white house, and the princess’ children would join him for conversation and to help him sort through stacks of stamps, always fascinated by what they learned from the pictures on stamps. Later, after the princess moved into her own 24-room stone house a few miles away, she wrote a warm letter to the stamp collector,



Figure 1. Olav, then Crown Prince, married Martha on March 21, 1929. The NOK 8.50 stamp on this maxi-card was among a set of three issued June 20, 2003 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Olav’s birth. He died January 17, 1991.



expressing her gratitude for his kindness and mentioning in particular the pleasure her children had experienced when they shared his hobby.

“I don’t think I will ever be able to express my gratitude for your kindness toward me and my children,” Martha wrote to the stamp collector. “The way you talk to my three little children and make them happy by collecting and finding stamps also makes me very happy.”<sup>2</sup>

The stamp collector visited the princess many times in her stone house and his wife never interfered in this relationship. She probably knew the truth anyway and always remained close friends with the princess. The stamp collector’s first Christmas present to Martha was a surprise visit from her husband, the prince. This same Christmas present was given two or three more times until the prince was able to stay longer than just over the holiday season. Even the prince knew of the close relationship between his wife and the stamp collector and thought nothing wrong with it.

The time has come, my reader, to reveal the identity of the main characters in this story — unless, of course, you have already guessed who they were. You already know the princess’ name: Martha. Her husband and prince was Olav, and his father was King Haakon of Norway. The three children were named Ragnhild, Astrid, and Harald. Even the tattooed lady’s name should be given: Ragni Ostgaard.

The famous stamp collector, of course, was the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who lived mostly at the White House in Washington, DC but relaxed at his home in Hyde Park, NY, on the presidential yacht “Potomac,” and often at Martha’s house in Bethesda, MD. The President’s understanding wife was Eleanor, the world-renowned author, humanitarian, and diplomat.



Figure 2. Crown Princess Martha died April 5, 1954, after a long illness at the age of 53. Two semipostals (a 35-øre+10-øre and a 65-øre+10-øre) were issued March 28, 1956 to raise funds for her memorial.



Figure 3. A number of countries have depicted Franklin Roosevelt working on his stamp collection, including this 1950 issue from the Philippines.

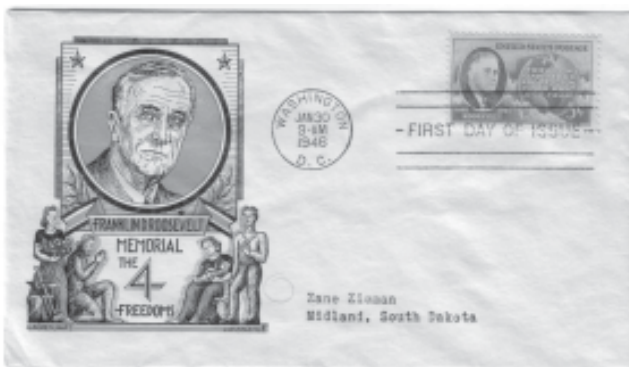


Figure 4. Norway’s Crown Princess Martha was in the presidential box when Franklin Roosevelt delivered his Four Freedoms speech to Congress in 1941. This cachet and U.S. stamp recognize the speech on the FDC from January 30, 1946.

On January 6, 1941, when President Roosevelt gave his great Four Freedoms speech to the U.S. Congress — a call for freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear — there were four women seated in the presidential box. They included his wife Eleanor and Crown Princess Martha, elegantly dressed in a black coat and silver fox.



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The writer of this tale does not know if Martha's son Harald grew up to become a stamp collector, but as King Harald V of Norway he has never forgotten the many pleasurable evenings he spent with the friendly stamp collector in America. ■

#### Endnotes

- 1 See Kearns Goodwin, Doris, *No Ordinary Time*, Simon & Schuster, 1994, pages 153-154.
- 2 Ibid, page 153.