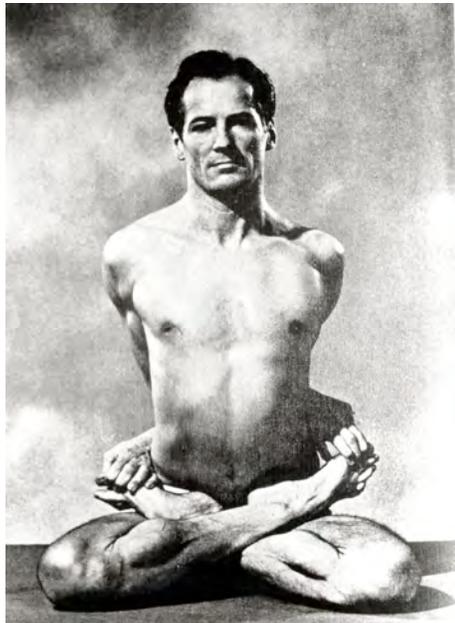


# Biography of Madame Ganna Walska



The Czar's portrait



XX. Baddha Padmāsana (locked-lotus posture)

Walska's sixth husband, Theos Bernard

undeniable allure. He proposed to her the day they met – she refused and only relented after several months and four proposals. Alec turned out to be “the most miserable man I [Ganna] have ever met,” becoming increasingly jealous of her career and continuing friendship with Harold McCormick.

Of humble origin, the eccentric and glamorous Madame Ganna Walska became one of the original international celebuitantes, with an eye for the dramatic and a penchant for collecting men. She attracted attention and notoriety for her singular beauty and fascinating life, which included a tumultuous operatic career, six husbands (including a count and a yoga guru), and a quest for spiritual enlightenment. It ended with a horticulture collection at her California estate, Lotusland, that still contains some of the most sought-after, rare and exotic specimen plants in the world.

Ganna Walska was born Hanna Puacz on June 26, 1887 in Brest-Litovsk, Poland. Upon her mother's death, Hanna was sent to St. Petersburg to be brought up by relatives. In her memoirs, she recalls how as a teenager in Russia, the Czar chose her as the most beautiful woman at a royal ball, and had what is now known as the "Czar's Portrait" painted of her. At the tender age of nineteen, she eloped with the Russian count, Arcadie d'Eingorn. While she was a dutiful wife, by 1915 she could no longer stand his drinking and carousing and the marriage was dissolved.

Though raised under the strict Catholic pretense that “nice girls” were not to be stage performers, Hanna eschewed tradition in favor of singing lessons and operatic ambitions, first in Russia, and then in Paris. She adopted the more alluring name of Madame Ganna Walska – Ganna as the exotic Russian version of Hanna and Walska derived from her love of the waltz.

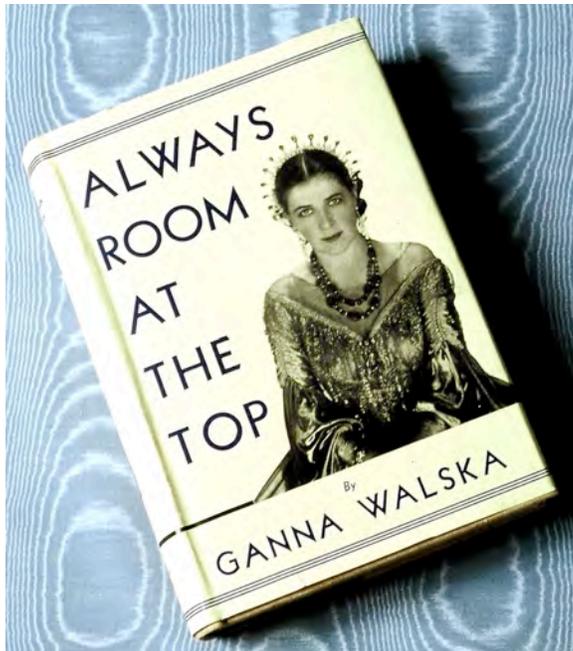
With the threat of World War I, Walska moved her singing endeavors to New York City where, due to a throat problem, she met Dr. Joseph Fraenkel. He was immediately smitten with her, and they married after knowing each other only ten days. It was at this time that Walska met Harold McCormick – heir to the International Harvester fortune and a generous supporter of the Chicago Opera Company – and began what was to become a lifelong relationship. Ganna also took up an interest in mysticism and “the meaning of life,” participating in séances, consulting Ouija boards, practicing yoga, and exploring astrology, meditation, and telepathy.



Young Madame in costume

In April 1920, Fraenkel died after a prolonged illness. Exhausted and depressed, Walska decided to holiday in Paris. While on board the *Aquitania*, she met Alexander Cochran, then known as “the richest bachelor in the world.” Even this distinction did not make him immune to Walska's

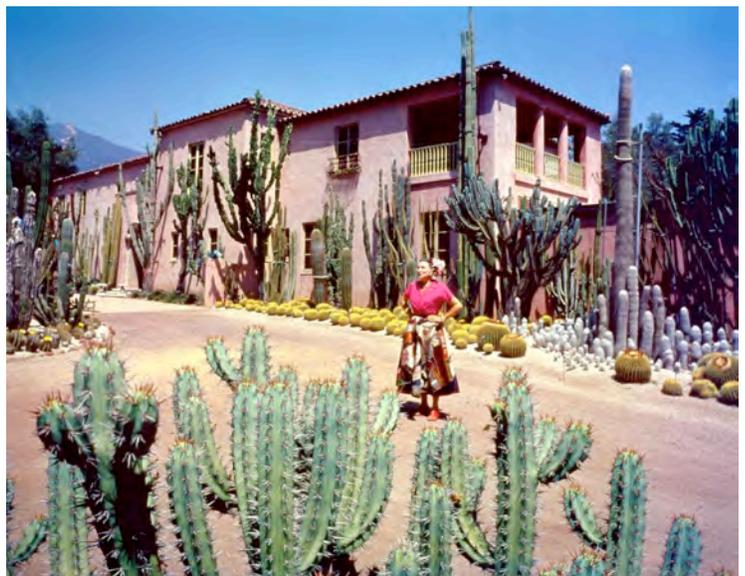
In what was fast becoming a trend, McCormick had fallen in love with Walska when they first met, and had divorced his wife, Edith Rockefeller, so he could be free to marry her. When Walska finally divorced Cochran, McCormick immediately swept her off her feet. As she recalled, “The stories of my divorce from Alec Cochran had hardly quieted when those about my marriage to Harold McCormick began.” A devoted husband, McCormick continued to support and finance Walska’s predominately failing opera career, purchasing the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris as a venue for her to perform. In 1931, as she refused to leave Paris and live with Harold in Chicago, he divorced her on grounds of desertion.



With her singing career on shaky ground, her fourth marriage over, and her youth a thing of the past, Walska’s search for “Truth” and the “Great Purpose” of her life became reinvigorated; she gave up extravagant parties and declared that there would be “no more waiting for Prince Charming!” But Walska couldn’t escape the amorous overtures of male admirers. She was introduced to Harry Grindell-Matthews, inventor of the Death Ray – an “experimental device that could disable car engines by remote control” – and while they shared a love of opera, she found him quite unattractive. He became so depressed at her rejection that he stopped working, and amazingly, government officials intervened on Harry’s behalf, “as it was feared that [Ganna’s] indifference might kill him before his invention for detecting submarines and defending London...could reach the hands of the War Ministry.” Unfortunately, he proved to be another miserable and jealous husband, so Ganna took the impending Second World War as an excuse to go back to America and was informed by telegram when Matthews died of a heart attack in 1941.

Back in New York, she began writing her memoirs, *Always Room at the Top*. She also continued to seek enlightenment by taking spiritual seminars and yoga lessons with Theos Bernard, known as “The White Lama,” a title earned from his experiences in Tibet. Twenty years her junior, Bernard quickly became the main influence in Ganna’s life, eventually encouraging her to purchase the California estate known as Cuesta Linda, and renaming it “Tibetland.” It was intended to be a retreat for Tibetan Lamas and a place for the “execution of Bernard’s sacred work.” Ganna and Theos eventually married in a secret Las Vegas ceremony, but marriage did not improve Bernard’s insecurity and fierce mood swings. After a disappointing marriage and contentious divorce, Walska was finally able to declare her independence and renamed her estate “Lotusland” after the rare Indian flowers in her lotus pond. Symbolizing spiritual renewal, the lotus flower was a fitting symbol for Madame.

Walska spent the next forty years of her life at Lotusland, dedicated to designing her gardens and acquiring an amazing variety of rare and exotic plants. Her taste for the theatrical and the extravagant carried over into her gardening and innovative landscape design. One of Madame’s landscape designers described her aesthetic in this way: “She has an artist’s feeling, using plants instead of paints for stage settings.” Madame Ganna Walska died at Lotusland on March 2, 1984, leaving her entire estate to the Ganna Walska Lotusland Foundation, to insure that her legacy would remain in her gardens.



Source: “Ganna Walska Lotusland - The Garden & Its Creators,” by Sharon Crawford 2006

Madame in front of her house at Lotusland