

## On Rediscovering Maria Laidoner's Secret



*Irena Wiley and John C. Wiley.*



*Maria and Johan Laidoner in 1936. (Eesti Filmiarhiiv)*

In 1938, Irena Wiley fell in love with Estonia. While her husband John C. Wiley served as the last U.S. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to pre-war Estonia and Latvia, the Polish-born Mrs. Wiley worked on her sculptures and drawings. She even managed to get a young John F. Kennedy to pose for her when he was passing through Riga – as a result, the future U.S. President ended up carved as an angel in an altar piece now housed at the Vatican. Although the Wileys resided in Riga, they traveled to Estonia every chance they got. In her memoirs *Around the Globe in 20 Years* published in 1962 recounting her life as a U.S. diplomat's wife, Mrs. Wiley recalls how “we used to shuttle back and forth between the two capitals with our car filled with flat silver, pots and pans, bed linen, pillows, as the government did not furnish our legations and our household equipment did not suffice for two establishments.” Appointed Minister on July 18, 1938, Mr. Wiley was finally able to present his credentials to Konstantin Päts on November 24, 1938 – in time to enjoy Estonia's last year and a half of freedom before the World War reached the Baltic shores.

As Mrs. Wiley recounts in her memoirs, “Estonia was a smiling country, full of joie de vivre and generous gestures. It had 1,500 lakes, 72 night clubs, the oldest pharmacy in the world, men who looked like Vikings, and golden-skinned, bronze-haired women with violet eyes. It is

understandable that Tallinn was a favorite post of the Foreign Service bachelors. But, regardless of one's marital status, life in Tallinn was easy, gay, and carefree."

A gifted artist, Mrs. Wiley was particularly impressed with the beauty of Estonian women and even managed to discover one of their secrets: "It was in Tallinn that I learned a secret formula for preventing baldness. In Tallinn we made very close friends and among the closest were General and Mrs. Johan Laidoner, commander-in-chief of the Estonian Army. A former czarist officer, he led the movement for national independence and thus, for the Estonians, became sort of a George Washington. He had a commanding presence; Mrs. Laidoner was a short woman with calm gray eyes and magnificent long gray hair. It was Mrs. Laidoner who gave me their secret recipe for the care of hair, a recipe that had been in her family for generations. I have used it ever since and can vouch for the magic of this formula. Here it is: heat two onions in the oven, squeeze the juice, mix with a cup of hot castor oil, rub into the scalp and leave overnight. You may lose your husband, but you will retain your hair."

In another place, Mrs. Wiley recalls a visit to Narva-Jõesuu where "the beach was filled with attractive Estonians. We and the British Minister went there once as guests of the Estonian Foreign Minister. We all went bathing in a normal sort of way – everybody wearing conventional bathing garb. We did not know that to the right of us the beach was reserved for men, and to the left for women, all in the nude. After our swim, John and his British colleague started strolling up the beach, completely engrossed in their conversation. Yes, they found themselves in the midst of the female bathers. John says there must have been a thousand or so, ranging from a few months to antiquity. Among them, of course, were the most lovely-looking girls in Europe. John claims that females in the nude, when seen en masse, look just like females and there is no seismic shock, no reaction, either exotic or erotic, involved."

But the Wileys would not escape a real seismic shock before they were forced to leave the Baltics on July 25, 1940: namely, the Soviet occupation of Estonia and Latvia which began on June 16, 1940. For Mrs. Wiley, the shock would become deeply personal as it engulfed her Polish-born Estonian friend, Maria Laidoner. As Mrs. Wiley explains, "I own a black scarf of lovely Chantilly lace, and every time I put it over my shoulders, it is like the wedding dress of Nessus. The scarf is light and soft, but for me it is a hairshirt because woven in the intricate design of human despair is the recollection of my inadequacy, my failure, in keeping a promise. It has to do with our friends, the Laidoners, who lived on a small country estate outside Tallinn. A few days after the Soviet occupation, they let us know that they wanted to see us. We drove immediately from Riga to their place. Their three boxers greeted us joyously at the door. The General and his wife were as urbane outwardly as though nothing untoward had happened. The General took John for a walk to show him more than a thousand young trees he had

planted. He gave no indication that he did not expect to see them grow to maturity. In the meantime Mrs. Laidoner talked to me alone in the garden. [...] When we were left alone, Mrs. Laidoner handed me the lovely black scarf, and said: 'This lace has been in our family for three generations. I will never be able to use it again. I want you to have it and to think about me when you wear it.'

When Mrs. Wiley was unable to understand why Mrs. Laidoner was giving her such a precious gift, Mrs. Laidoner explained: "Don't you understand, don't you see that this house, this garden are already our prison, that any minute we will be deported? But, you know, I have had a full life, such a happy life, I am so thankful for the past that I have to accept any future that is my lot. But I will tell you a secret. I have poison hidden on my person, enough for both of us, and if the life we have to face proves unbearable, then there will be a simple way out."

Mrs. Wiley reacted: "I was stunned. I begged, her, "Please don't kill yourself, wait, even when things are bad. We are going back to the United States. I will see President Roosevelt, and he will surely ask Stalin for your release. I promise to help you. When things are very bad, they are never unbearable, while there is hope.' At that moment, the General and John rejoined us and the conversation turned to generalities. When we were leaving she kissed me and whispered in my ear, 'I will wait.' We left the Laidoners and returned to the Legation. That night they were deported. They entered the Communist darkness at midnight." Although the Wileys attempted to intercede on the Laidoners' behalf both before and after their return to Washington going all the way to President Roosevelt, it turned out to be impossible to do anything for them. As Mrs. Wiley explains, "There was no charge, no indictment, no trial. They were simply eliminated, obliterated. General Laidoner's crime was patriotism."

Mrs. Wiley (1900-1972) would never get another chance to go back to Tallinn. But her bitter-sweet memories of Estonia and of her friend Mrs. Laidoner would haunt her all her life. Unknown to Mrs. Wiley, Mrs. Laidoner would actually survive her Soviet imprisonment and exile and return to Estonia in 1961 where she would live until her death in 1978 at the age of 89.