

CONNECTIONS, by Conan Kennedy.

Finglas, and St Petersburg

On the face of it, any connections between Dublin's Finglas and Russia's St Petersburg are not immediately obvious. Certainly Finglas takes its name from a stream, and St Petersburg has been likened to Venice, so there is some kind of watery parallel. But fairly tenuous that, and, on its own, a connection not really worth my while pounding this keyboard for much longer. The birds are singing outside.

No, I think we'll have to go further, to Serbia, and drift back in years to the early part of the last century. And hang around for awhile outside the station in Belgrade. There, eventually, we will spot a young woman. That happens, if one hangs around continental railway stations for any length of time. But this is a particular young woman, by the name of Florence Irwin. And she has arrived here from Belfast, where her father is a solicitor. She has come to Belgrade to work as a governess/nanny for a very important family, that of Princess Elena Petrovna, daughter of Petar, the king of Serbia and of his wife Zorka, Princess Petrovich Niegosh of Montenegro. How did Florence get this gig? Well, the British Ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro around that time had been a Belfast man, most likely that connection helped.

Florence arrives into a readymade family. Elena Petrovna, best known as Princess Helena, has in recent years married Prince Ionn Konstantinovich, Grand Duke of Russia. She now has two children, Prince Vsevelod, and Princess Ekaterina, pictured here. It is 1914, and soon the whole of Europe is at war. Princess Helena's family retreat back to Russia, to her husband's family home in St Petersburg. Not at all a modest premises, it is actually the Palace of Pavlovsk. Ekaterina had been born there some years before. There the family live, and there Florence Irwin looks after the children. And then the Russian Revolution comes. Princess Helena and her husband Ionn are arrested by Bolsheviks. As a close relative to the Tsar, a nephew in fact, he is carted off to Yekaterinaberg and imprisoned. Helena, although a Serbian, a foreigner, she is also locked up along with him. Their future is not at all positive. But, back in St Petersburg, the children are being cared for by Florence Irwin who, in the chaos of the times, is passing them off as her

own. She, regarded as 'English' by the Bolsheviks, is more or less left to her own devices and her own devices soon wisely advise her to leave the country. She and the two Russian royals make their way to Sweden. Back in Yekaterinaberg things have gone very bad. The Tsar's family is murdered by the Bolsheviks there on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1918. Two days later, in Alapaevsk, where he has been moved, Ionn himself is murdered, having been herded with other royals and a nun and some servants into a mineshaft and grenades thrown in after them. No, revolutions are never glorious. The children's mother is still alive though, her Serbian nationality just about protecting her. There is a civil war going on, the Bolsheviks remain in a fairly precarious position militarily and decide that alienating Serbia might add to their problems. Nonetheless, Helena does remain languishing in prison.

Penniless and homeless in Sweden, Florence Irwin decides to make her way back to Ireland. But not to Belfast, no, rather to the home of her sister in Dublin. Yes, in Finglas in Dublin. Her sister, a widow, is living in Scribblestown House which, while not exactly the Palace of Pavlovsk, was not a corpo house either. It stood in midst of fields and tree lined lanes, the M50 a distant dream, or nightmare. And there the children lived, and were brought up, Florence Irwin acting as surrogate mother. Their birth mother Princess Helena of Serbia was eventually released from prison but, instead of rushing to Finglas, she set herself up in a villa in Cap Ferat. Many readers can perhaps understand that decision. In effect, though, Helena appears to have abandoned general mothering duties to Florence Irwin. And so Ekaterina grew up in Finglas, moving through various identities in people's eyes. Known as 'Catherine' with the nickname 'Kitten' in her Irish circle, amongst her Russian and Serbian families she was familiarly known as 'Kissie'.

Princess Ekaterina Ivanovna Romanov, pictured above, died in Montevideo in 2007, at a great age. She was actually the last surviving member of the Romanov family to have been born in Russia. I was in touch with her in the weeks before she died. Connections, you see. The 'Gerry' in the photo's inscription was my father. He too lived in Finglas at the time.

Such is the way we get these connections.

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