



Gustav V, King of Sweden (1858-1950)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A photograph of Crown Prince Gustav V of Sweden created in 1874. Gustav ascended to the throne in 1907.

The last Swedish king to exert direct power over his nation's government, King Gustav V was a memorable personality and a bisexual. Though his reign ended under a cloud of scandal, he was instrumental in keeping his country neutral through two devastating world wars, passing progressive social legislation, and maintaining economic prosperity.

Oscar Gustaf Adolf, who would later become Gustav, or Gustavus V, was born on June 16, 1858, in Stockholm's magnificent Drottningholm Palace. He was the eldest son of Oscar II, King of Sweden and Norway, which were united under one monarch until 1905, when Norway asserted its independence.

Though a member of the royal house of Bernadotte, Crown Prince Gustaf was an unassuming young man who did not value regal pretensions. He was educated at the University of Uppsala. On a trip to Britain in 1878, he learned the game of tennis, which became a life-long passion. He often played incognito, under the pseudonym "Mr. G."

In 1881, Crown Prince Gustaf married Victoria of Baden, a political union that united the Bernadottes with the former Swedish royal house of Vasa. Though they had three sons, the couple did not have a close relationship. Victoria's health was not good and she spent many months each year at the Swedish resort island of Solliden, Öland or on Capri in Italy.

As Crown Prince, Gustav frequently served as regent for his father when he was ill or absent from the kingdom. Upon Oscar II's death on December 8, 1907, Gustav became the constitutional monarch of Sweden, taking as his royal motto, "With the people, for the motherland."

True to his democratic ideals, Gustav had no official coronation and never wore a crown. He did, however, make his influence felt in the political arena, and he worked hard to maintain Sweden's neutrality during both world wars, even rejecting pleas from Finland for support against Soviet invaders during the so-called "Winter War" of 1940. He also supported a wide range of progressive legislation, including an eight-hour workday, child welfare, and government subsidized low-income housing.

Although Sweden maintained its neutrality during World War II, when German forces captured Norway and Denmark, Sweden was forced to allow German troops and supplies to cross its soil. However, Swedish sympathies--including that of Gustav V--gradually shifted toward the Allied Powers. The country sheltered more than 200,000 refugees from Germany's Nazi government, and Gustav has been credited with helping save Jews in Nazi-occupied countries by authorizing such measures as the distribution of Swedish passports and the creation of "safe houses." At the urging of diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, in 1944 Gustav strongly protested the deportation of Hungarian Jews.

Gustav died on October 29, 1950, in Drottningholm Palace. In 1980, he was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

After Gustav's death, during the 1950s, as cold war hysteria rocked the West, a series of scandals involving homosexuality among government officials brought to light another side of the simple king, "Mr. G." A former restaurateur named Kurt Haijby made public the fact that he and the king had been lovers from 1912 until 1932. Not only did the king's bisexuality become public knowledge, but Haijby also revealed several attempts made by the Swedish crown to buy his silence.

First, in 1932, when the relationship ended, the crown paid Haijby 170,000 Swedish crowns not to reveal the king's sexuality or speak publicly about their relationship. Later, Haijby was arrested and imprisoned for pedophilia and was once again contacted by court advisors, who offered to pay him 400 crowns per month if he would leave the country. Haijby agreed, but in 1940, he broke his promise and returned to Sweden to write a book about his relationship with King Gustav. The book was published, but members of the court bought and destroyed every copy.

However, other national scandals began surfacing, notably the Kejne affair, in which a clergyman made startling accusations that members of a "homosexual mafia" had threatened his life after he had spoken out against homosexual prostitution. The charges, picked up by several newspapers, led to a witch hunt in which a cabinet minister, Nils Quinsel, was accused of homosexuality and of protecting other highly-placed homosexuals in the government. Among those engaged in the witch-hunt was leftist novelist Vilhelm Moberg, who, in an effort to expose governmental cover-ups of high-level homosexuality, helped Haijby make his experiences public.

The bisexuality of their king must have been shocking to conservative Swedes, but even more stunning was the fact that the royal family had tried to cover up Gustav V's indiscretions by paying Haijby thirty times what a Swedish laborer earned in a year.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.