

# Noblewoman Cuts Paper With Art

By JOAN PERKOLUP  
Of The Bulletin Staff

Margaretha Luther has to be either a European aristocrat or an artist.

She is a small woman, fragile and almost diminutive in size, who looks out of clear blue eyes. Her fine blonde hair is pulled away from soft, velvety skin and tucked high in a single knot at the back of her head. She speaks in a quiet, lightly accented voice and sits erect, but at ease, her checkered skirt falling in graceful folds around her.

Mrs. Luther is both, born 61 years ago to what she called one of the foremost families in Estonia, a Baltic Sea country, she works in an art form she calls "art silhouette."

She first started as a young girl and worked at it throughout a life she describes as one of "flight, revolution and war." She once was marked for assassination by the Bolsheviks.

ALL THIS behind her, Mrs. Luther today works in the living room of an almost European-like cottage in Torresdale. She and her husband, Fred, 63, an artist who works with inlays of wood carvings, moved to the cottage this summer from Ohio where they had lived since coming to this country in 1955.

The cottage is on a 17-acre estate called Glen Foerd, located behind an iron grille entrance way at 5001 Grant ave. and owned by Mrs. Florence Tonner, an 88-year-old widow who has willed the property to the Lutheran Church upon her death.

The Luthers—he is a direct descendant of Martin Luther's uncle—were hired by the church as caretakers. Mrs. Tonner lives in a "mansion" on the estate with her own household staff, according to Mrs. Luther.

Mrs. Luther's art silhouette pictures often have been mistaken for fine pen and ink drawings.

She uses tiny scissors (the blades are only a half inch long) and every figure in each picture is what remains after she has cut away the "background." The pictures resemble, to a limited degree, the negative of a photograph. The technique is similar to the old-world art of shadow-cutting, but the results are much more intricate.



Photos by Joseph Trifsch, of The Bulletin

**LETTERING IS ANOTHER ART** perfected by Mrs. Luther which she learned as a young college girl in Germany. She and her family fled Estonia during the Bolshevik Revolution.

**MRS. LUTHER** starts with a piece of drafting paper. She lightly sketches a scene or portrait on one side and sprays the other side black or another color.

Working from the sketched side, she begins to clip, slowly and carefully, first from the inside of an object then around the outside. After weeks, a fragile, latticed design forms on the dark side of the paper, a web of unbroken lines.

The finished product, gently mounted dark side up on rice paper, is breathtaking.

Mrs. Luther admitted she has chosen an art which is "nerve wracking."

"It takes great concentration. If you are drawing, you can wipe it (a mistake) out, but if you cut, you can't. You have to be completely precise," she said.

"When I was young, I could cut 12 hours a day, but now I can't do that. If I do it late at night, I get all worked up and can't sleep."

Mrs. Luther said, however, that she has "lots of orders" from area customers to add to the thousands scattered all over the world. Her works have been exhibited in Estonia, Denmark, Germany, Ohio and West Virginia. Some friends are trying to arrange a one-woman show in the Philadelphia area, possibly this spring.

"They (the customers) come with ideas but if they are merciful they say, 'Do what you want.'"

**"SOMETIMES THEY** come up with strange ideas. One wanted a tree, a snake, a snail and a frog all in one picture so I worked out the three animals intricately and put the tree as a shadow in the background."

Mrs. Luther, formerly Margaretha von Glehn, was a 13-year-old school girl in Germany when she first tried art silhouette.

"I saw one in a window and it entranced me so I had to do it, too," she said. "I've always been painting and drawing. I just got black paper and cut out a fairy. It was horrible but then I started to train myself."

She was five when World War I broke out and eight at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution.

"We belonged to one of the foremost families and were all on the black list," Mrs. Luther recalled. In the late 1800s, her grandmother was a lady-in-waiting to an imperial princess and two great aunts were ladies-in-waiting to the wife of Czar Alexander II.

"We learned later that we were to have been killed on Feb. 25, 1918, about eight months before the Czar (then Nicholas II). The revolution was already on then." But the assassination of her and her family was averted when the Germans invaded the Baltic States a few days earlier. The Bolsheviks "left in a hurry," according to Mrs. Luther, leaving their records behind. It was from these records that the von Glehns learned of what they escaped.





**USING TINY SCISSORS**, Margaretha Luther, of Torresdale, cuts away the white "background" of her unique art silhouette pictures. The picture takes form in unbroken lines on dark underside of paper.

**SHE, HER FATHER**, grandmother and aunts fled to Germany, where her father later died of consumption. She attended school there, but returned home in 1929 to work as a bookkeeper for an American car agency. Six years later, in 1935, she was married to Luther who was working for his uncle's plywood concern, the largest in Europe at the time.

"We thought we were all set, but then World War II broke out and again we had to flee," she remembered, still with disbelief in her voice. "The Baltic States were given to Russia in a treaty between Hitler and Stalin."

The goal was to make it to neutral Sweden. Afraid neighboring Finland might fall to the Russians, they sought a route through Germany. "We lost our heads," Mrs. Luther said. "We got caught under the Nazis and Fred was drafted as an interpreter because he knew Russian."

The years ahead were hard. Mrs. Luther, by that time the mother of two small boys, ran a bookstore in Deutsch Eylau, then a small town in Eastern Germany and now a part of Poland. But the Russians were pressing closer and again they had to flee.

**"WE CAME** to Gdynia (then in Germany, now Poland) and there my husband met us by accident. He was searching for us. He knew an organist there and asked if he knew us. He didn't think we were there, but just wondered if the organist knew anything about us. And there we were."

She said her husband, who had to return to duty, put them on a ship bound for Kiel, a German port. "I just wanted to get out (from Eastern Germany). I didn't want to fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks because that would mean certain death," she said.