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## Margarethe Luther von Glehn

BY CHRISTA WEBER 21 NOVEMBER 2009

\* 28.06.1909 in Narva

Died 28.12.2001 in Bethlehem

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"... time is rushing in the quickest steps ..." – but not for the collector, which Busch did not think of. The collector stands quietly between times, trying to organize the past and living in the present with his own speed. In retrospect, he will painfully have to accept again and again that two World Wars did not allow or displace countless great talent of German artists.

The turmoil of both wars also shapes the life of the highly gifted artist of paper cutting, Margarethe Luther von Glehn, who I would like to present here not only by the hand of two works from my collection.

It seems more important to me that her varied life should be remembered and recorded. The latter succeeds mainly because the cut "The Ricercare" (cf. later) was accompanied by a detailed CV of her old friend Lieselotte Cardinal v. Widdern. Ms. Cardinal v. Widdern had written the CV on March 15, 1997 in the form of a letter in German to a good acquaintance of the artist and kept a copy of it.

This CV was obviously compiled in close coordination with Mrs (von Glehn) Luther, who at that time was unable to write herself due to an eye condition. It contains a lot of very personal details and is equipped with so much warmth and vibrancy that I quote it as an important document of the times, unabridged except for a few passages that alone concern the letter itself:

"Margarethe was born on 28 June 1909 in Narva (Estonia, Ed. of the author). Her mother died nine days after her birth. Margarethe was first raised by her mother's parents in Reval. She stayed with her grandparents Bernhard until her fifth. Age. During World War I in 1914 she joined her father and sister Agnes v. Glehn in Reval. All glehns lived together during the First World War. She grew up in a very musical family. Her grandfather Glehn had composed enchanting waltzes, her great-uncle Alfred v. Glehn was a famous cellist and taught at the Moscow Conservatory. Piatigorski was one of his students. Her father played the violin ready for concert, as did his youngest brother Walter. Agnes was a pianist, Margarethe had her first piano lessons with her.

She grew up with four languages: German, Russian, French and Estonian. They fled the Bolsheviks in 1918 with the retreating German army and initially lived in Gdansk. Agnes v. Glehn was then taken with little Margaret he on a estate in the later Polish corridor with a family of my mother, distant relatives of my mother. At that time, my parents were looking for me, as an only child, an equally old girl to raise. So Margarethe came to my parents in 1919 after the knighthood Zigahnen. We were taught by private teachers until we were 16 years old and went to the piano lesson once a week after our next town of Marienwerder with an excellent teacher, Miss Erika Gibbe, who had studied music at Breithaupt in Berlin.

From 1926 Margarethe attended the Upper Lyceum in Marienwerder and graduated with distinction in 1929. At the age of 14, she saw a silhouette in a shop window in Marienwerder, she was so fascinated by it that she hardly arrived at home, immediately grabbed scissors and tried her own silhouette. Since then, she has used every spare minute to perfect herself in this art.

After graduating from high school, she went back to Reval to her much-loved uncle Erwin Bernhard, brother of her mother. In addition to her job as an accountant, she took drawing lessons with a well-known Russian painter, Kaygarodoff, who had fled the Bolsheviks to Reval. She continued to make paper cuts. In Reval as well as later in Europe she is known only by her maiden name and has also later always signed her silhouettes with M.v.G. She started with fairy tale pictures and later also cut portraits, even of dogs. Paper cuts of flowers and grasses are later works. In 1935 she married Ferdinand Luther, a descendant of Martin Luther's uncle.

The eldest son Lars was born in 1936 in Reval. In 1939, all the Baltics were brought to Germany by Hitler. They first lived in Gotenhafen near Gdansk, where their second son Holger was born in 1940. Luthers had a huge international plywood factory owned by Ferdinand's uncle and where he also worked. After his move to Germany, his parents gave him a job in a large wood factory in German Eylau. Ferdinand was drafted in as an interpreter soon after and was in the Russian War. In 1945 Margarethe fled the Russians with her girl and the two children on an open wagon and horses in -30 degrees cold. They were woken at 2 o'clock at night and then it was said: in 1 hour the Russians are here, making you flee. Despite overcrowded roads due to flooding military and refugee treks, they managed to get to me to Glücksburg on the Danish border. I had already moved there in 1944 because my husband was an instructor at the torpedo school in Flensburg-Mürwik as a naval officer. She lived with me at first. In 1947 Ferdinand returned from captivity, completely exhausted, because he had been in one of the notorious hunger camps – see James Bacque "Other losses" – in France.

They then found their own small apartment in Glücksburg. Margarethe was the one who kept the family afloat through her silhouettes. She became very famous in Glücksburg, her silhouettes were bought by the Danish royal family as well as by the princes of the Glücksburg Castle. The paper cut "Michael in battle with the dragon" is at the Kunstmuseum in Bern, Switzerland.

In 1955, the family emigrated to Marietta, Ohio, Fred worked in a factory there and Margarethe in the Marietta Library, where she continued to cut paperins. In 1971, they moved to Torresdale, near Philadelphia, where Fred oversaw the management of the large garden of a millionaire woman who had bequeathed her property to the Lutheran Church after her death. Margarethe registered the artworks in the castle, a collection of about a thousand valuable engravings that the owners had acquired. They remained there until 1977. From 1977 to 1992, they lived in a retirement home in Basking Ridge, where their eldest son Lars lived.



Lars then moved to Bethlehem and because Fred had cancer, he took his parents to his parents until Fred's death in 1993. Margarethe was then briefly in a retirement home near Boston, and when the retirement home was dissolved, she came to me in 1993 and has lived with me in Ottawa ever since. As a result of an incurable eye disease, she had to give up her scissor cutting art at the age of 80.

In both Philadelphia and Basking Ridge, she was well known and received the Benjamin Franklin Medal in Philadelphia."

According to her son Holger, Margarethe Luther v. Glehn died on 28.12.2001 in Bethlehem in a retirement home near her son Lars. Her artistic focus was definitely on the silhouettes, but she also drew and watercolored and painted colored coats of arms. In 1990, she was made an honorary member of the Guild of American Papercutters.

Now to the two paper cuts mentioned above:

The Tryptichon with St. Francis and the animals was acquired in northern Germany. It was probably intended as a window picture. Provenance is likely the immediate post-war period.



The second silhouette, described by Margarethe von Luther-Glehn as "The Ricercare", is interspersed with deep symbolism. The Ricercare for 6 voices comes from the Musical Sacrifice, BWV 1079, which was created in the course of the memorable encounter of the old stream with Frederick the Great and was dedicated to it by Bach.

She left a handwritten interpretation of this silhouette, a very personal work that shows its innermost image, which was also attached to the cut and can be dated to about 1986.

She wrote in English, which I rewrite in a free translation as follows: [Note that this was originally in English, was translated into German and then re-translated back into English.]

"My son Holger once asked me to make a representation of Ricercare for him. An infinitely difficult task. I thought about it for over two years until I found a way to express what this music means to me.

To do this, I first had to go back to my childhood. When I was six years old, my father, who was a master on the violin, practiced the Great Chaconne for Bach's solo violin every morning. I listened breathlessly. I felt that this was a frighteningly great and exciting thing to me, something that moved above my head and belonged to a distant spiritual plane – as I would say today: the cosmos. That's always how I was at the music of Bach. I studied Bach for twelve years.

I couldn't take any angels for the six voices, as these winged creatures have been seen as sentimental and almost banal since The Victorian era. So I invented beings that do not exist on our earth, but which are nevertheless meaningful and also frightening. They also belong to the spiritual spheres and have great importance. Together with stars, they represent a spiritual cosmos.



Counterclockwise:

1. the shaman
2. the phoenix
3. the Venetian horse dragon
4. The Big Bird Skirt
5. the Chinese Dragon
6. the unicorn

In the circle outside I wrote the first seven bars of *Ricercares*, which form the theme. What the individual instruments have to play is indicated by the corresponding note key." This impressive silhouette is an expression of the personal emotional world of the sensitive and highly musical artist Margarethe Luther von Glehn and can certainly be counted among her most important works.