

Natalie's Brother, the Talented Vladimir Paley

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Hillwood's exhibition, *From Exile to Avant-Garde: The Life of Princess Natalie Paley*, highlights several members of Natalie's family, including her older brother Vladimir. A lot of items related to his life, including some early notebooks, sketches and other documents came to Hillwood with the [2022 acquisition of the Paley/Romanoff collection](#).

Born in Russia in 1897, Vladimir, surnamed by his family "Volodia" or "Bodya," was the fruit of his parents forbidden love story. His father Grand Duke Paul, a widower since the death of his first wife in 1891, was an uncle of the last emperor of Russia's Nicholas II. His mother Olga von Pistohlkors and Paul's mistress was married to an officer member of the Grand Duke's regiment when both fell in love around 1893. Four years later, Vladimir was born (fig.1).



Fig. 1: *Portrait of Vladimir Paley*, photograph, 1910s. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives and Special Collections.

Despite the strong opposition of the imperial family, the couple managed to marry abroad in 1902 after Olga's divorce. Emperor Nicholas II exiled the couple and Vladimir from Russia. They travelled for about a year in Italy, France, and Germany before deciding to settle in Paris in late 1903 and lease an apartment (fig. 2). Following the birth of Vladimir's siblings, Irina in 1903 and Natalie in 1905, Olga and Paul bought an elegant mansion in Boulogne near Paris. In 1904, thanks to Paul's efforts, the Bavarian court granted Olga the title of Countess Olga von Hohenfelsen. Vladimir was then known as the young Count von Hohenfelsen.



Fig. 2: Family (Vladimir in a sailor suit sits on the stairs, baby Irina sits on a table held by her mother Olga, standing next to her is Grand Duke Paul) and friends during their trip in Europe, Schlangenbad, Germany, 1903. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens Archives and Special Collections.

Life in Paris for Vladimir and his siblings was peaceful and filled with love as recalled Irina, “We had a wonderful childhood, because our parents were an exceptionally close couple.” While the children were rarely involved with their parents’ social life, when Paul and Olga were free, they spent time with them after dinner, reading or—under Vladimir’s direction—staging a play in the large drawing room. His love for plays and theatre was likely nurtured by his father’s passion for the performing arts. Paul’s library held hundreds of programs he had collected—some were historic, while others were saved from the many shows the family attended in Paris and abroad. “When he was still a baby, there was something indefinable about him [Vladimir] that set him apart from the others... His parents saw how different he was ... and wisely allowed him comparative freedom to develop his unusual abilities,” recalled his half-sister Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna in her 1931 memoirs. Early notes and a few drawings by Vladimir depicting the family childhood in Paris are now part of Hillwood’s collection. A few have been reproduced for the exhibition.

After a few years, Paul and Olga were forgiven by Emperor Nicholas II. The idea of a partial return to Russia grew in the couple’s minds, especially as their son, Vladimir, was sent to St. Petersburg to enter the prestigious Page Corps in 1908. The family built a new mansion near St. Petersburg and moved to Russia in May 1914 with the intention of spending each fall in Paris. In 1915, using a name of Cossack origin that came from one of Olga’s maternal ancestors, Nicholas II granted Olga the title of Princess Paley and allowed her children with Grand Duke Paul to be known as Prince Vladimir, Princess Irina, and Princess Natalie. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 changed the family’s plans for a peaceful life back in Russia. Vladimir and his father served in the army until the Russian Revolution of 1917. The talented Vladimir — who played piano, read, wrote, drew, and organized

plays and sketches with his siblings and friends — published his poetry in Russia in 1916 and 1918. “Volodia was an extraordinary being, a living instrument of rare sensitivity ... He had genius...” wrote Grand Duchess Maria in 1931. Some of Vladimir’s early manuscripts, part of the 2022 acquisition, are preserved in the Hillwood archives. A few have been reproduced for the exhibition.

By mid-1918, Vladimir and his father had been arrested. In July, the Bolsheviks murdered the emperor and his family; the next day, twenty-one-year-old Vladimir and other members of the imperial family were also killed in a mine shaft near Alapayevsk in Ural. Sometime after the execution, the White Army found the bodies and sent them to Beijing, China to be buried. Vladimir’s personal belongings were gathered on the murder scene and sent to his family as proof of his death. In a December 9, 1919, letter to Alexander von Pistohlkors, her son by her first husband, Vladimir’s mother Olga lists the items she had received, including a gold pocketknife, engraved with the name “Wladimir”. Hillwood acquired the piece in an auction in Paris in December 2024. It is displayed in the exhibition (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Prince Vladimir’s pocketknife, probably Paris, 1910s, gold, steel, metal. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, Museum purchase, 2025 (2025.1).

According to Princess Natalie’s French biographer Jean-Noël Liaut, she always kept with her portraits of her lost brother, Vladimir, and her mother, Olga, probably in the elegant leather picture frame by Hermès on view in the exhibition in which the two photos were set when they came to Hillwood with the 2022 acquisition.