



Interview:

Derek R. Reisfield is the great nephew of the legendary actress Greta Garbo. He is the son of Gray G. Reisfield, the only daughter of Greta Garbo's brother, Sven. Gray Reisfield is the sole heiress of Greta Garbo's estate. She, together with her three sons, Greg, Scott and Derek and one daughter, Gray, is the main caretaker of the Swedish star's legacy.

Swedish Press: What are your earliest memories of your great-aunt?

Derek Reisfield: I have a lot of memories. She would come to our home in New Jersey fairly frequently and she would come often for Christmas and/or Thanksgiving. She would very often come in the late spring, early summer or the early fall after she came back from Europe. She would come out on hot days. We had a swimming pool and she would be there with my mother when we came home from school very often. One of my memories is her teaching us how to do cartwheels when we were little kids. She was probably in her early 60s at that point. She was in fantastic shape. She would sometimes come with some funny gifts. She was always very generous. She would joke a lot. She was extremely funny and humorous and liked practical jokes and funny things and gadgets and things like that. She would joke around with us. She would do imitations of people or she would do things like "I am an old sailor", be something. She was very funny that way. She often talked about her childhood. What the neighbourhood was like and the various people and also going to work at PUB and taking film roles. And about my other great aunt, Alva who died in her 20s after a tragic life. And she told funny stories about my grandfather. And in later years she talked about being in Hollywood and her film career. She was a fascinating person. She adored small children. I know that when each of us was born, she went to the hospital to visit my mother. She loved small children. She liked children when they were a bit older as well. She was probably not so fond of the middle years.

SP: How old were you when you realized who your great-aunt was?

DR: I guess I was probably about 12 or so and there was an article in a magazine about my mother and great aunt being on vacation together. The article appeared while they

>>> as she had by then, at the height of her career, gone into a secluded retirement.

Among the many directors who tried to talk her into a come-back, was Ingmar Bergman who wanted her to play the role that Ingrid Thulin later got in *The Silence*.

At the time Greta Garbo

ended her career, she was the highest paid woman in the United States. She bought a seven-room apartment at 450 East 52nd Street in New York and lived there for the rest of her life. For a while she jetsetted with the likes of Onassis, Winston Churchill and Salvador Dali, but eventually she settled down to a quiet routine that included southern Europe in the summer, the same hotel in Klosters, Switzerland, every year, fall in California and winter in the Caribbean, often with her niece, Gray Reisfield at her side.

Wherever Greta Garbo went she enjoyed long walks and this gave many a paparazzi a fuzzy shot of "the recluse" with the dark sunglasses and slouch hat. In New York she visited the Salvation Army, having sold *Stridsropet* to earn extra money as a youngster in Stockholm. Even if she seldom visited Sweden, she kept up with Swedish news and shopped at Nyborg & Nelson. She kept in touch with friends all over the world and was known for making fun imitations.

"I never said 'I want to be alone,'" declared Greta Garbo of her most cited line from the film *Grand Hotel*. "I only said 'I want to be left alone'. There is all the difference."

Throughout the years, the tabloid press has speculated about Garbo's bi-sexual love life.

She has reportedly been romantically linked with Mimmi Pollak and Marlene Dietrich, the lesbian actress Louise Brooks as well as socialite Mercedes de Acosta.

Garbo resisted all the romantic offers from Clark Gable and Aga Khan III, in the end getting so tired of the latter that she sent all the fabulous jewels he had given her back.

Her relationship with the Russian-born entrepreneur George Schlee lasted nearly 25 years, while he simultaneously remained married to Valentina who designed Garbo's clothes. Garbo had an on-again, off-again romance and was even engaged to the mostly homosexual photographer Cecil Beaton.

The closest she ever got to marriage was with John Gilbert, but she stood him up at the very last minute, as he, together with the wedding guests, waited for the bride to make her grand entrance into the church.

"She wants to buy whatever state that has no people in it and turn it into a wheat farm and raise wheat and children," John Gilbert later complained in an interview before he drank himself to death. "She keeps saying 'You're in love with Garbo the actress'. And I say 'You're damn right. I don't want to marry some dumb Swede and raise wheat and kids miles from civilization.'"

Greta Garbo died in April 1990, at the age of 84. She succumbed to renal failure after undergoing years of dialysis. She had also been operated and treated for breast cancer.

She left her entire SEK 700 million estate to her niece Gray Reisfield, who took all of 11 years to find a final resting place for her aunt at Skogskyrkogården in Stockholm. ♦

Gray and Derek Reisfield. Photo © C. S. MacLane

were on vacation. That's how I found out. She was an extraordinary person but you just did not think or worry about what she or who she was. She was my great aunt.

SP: What was Greta Garbo's home like.

DR: When we were in New York we would stop for a coffee. She had this fantastic apartment with a fantastic collection of art and furniture overlooking the East River. That made an enormous impression on me. It was a very special spot. Very colourful, wonderful French furniture, a couple of pieces of Swedish furniture. We had to be careful with her furniture. It was like visiting a museum. Fantastic expressionist and impressionist paintings because she was quite active as a collector. She went to auctions all the time. She did not have any pets. She had a housekeeper, who came five days a week. For about 20 years she had a secretary who would come two or three afternoons a week but that was it. She did not have an entourage. She had a lot of friends and I met people through her, either at her apartment or at their home. She had a circle of friends, a very large list of friends. She was constantly going for lunch or dinner or for the weekend to people's homes. She just did not do it in places where she did not know people or it was going to cause a commotion. We would go out to dinner with her in New York and I went several times to Nyborg and Nelson. We also went to Aquavit. She liked it. She did have a certain routine. She went to Switzerland and France and Italy and sometimes to London. She also visited Spain. That would be in the summer. She would leave in early June and come back late August or early September. Then she would go out to California in the late fall. Then she usually went back to California in the winter. Then she went to the Caribbean with my mother. Then she would go back to California and then back to Europe. All the other times she would be in New York. She had a set travel schedule and she was probably travelling half of the time. She went to Sweden several times up until the late 70s but that was the last trip.

SP: So she was not as much of a recluse?

DR: There was a man who stalked her for 20 years outside of her apartment and it was awful. Nobody should have to suffer that and I also remember being followed by a van when people were filming through a one way glass. That is very intrusive. She loved to walk. She would walk most people into



Greta Garbo's great nephew Derek Reisfield:

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the ground and she walked miles everyday. I went with her several times when she was running an errand or to take a walk in Central Park. She would often take a walk with my mother. They were very close. My great grandmother died in 1942. My grandfather died in the late 1960s. My grandfather was the person closest to her for the first two-thirds of her life and my mother was the person closest to her the last third of her life. My mother's family moved over here when she was a little girl and they first stayed with my great-aunt in California and then eventually moved to New Mexico. My mother was the only child. She spoke Swedish as a child and she kept up her Swedish. My grandparents spoke Swedish at home and my mother spoke to my great aunt in Swedish very often. My mother also kept up many of the traditions. She made saffron bread at Lucia and we would dress up with the candles. My mother always sent Great-Aunt the *saffransbröd*. And for Christmas dinner my mother would cure her own ham some years and we would have an abbreviated traditional Christmas dinner with salmon, herring and eel and ham and meatballs, which was fantastic. And Great-Aunt would come over for a day or two. Those were great occasions and great fun. When I lived in Sweden for a while I felt very comfortable because I was very familiar with a lot of Swedish traditions, a lot of Swedish foods.

SP: How does one take care of her legacy?

DR: It's very very difficult and very frustrating. We have certain intellectual property rights, the rights of publicity and then we own various trademarks and copyrights so we try to police those and have use of those so that we can enforce them. It's very expensive. We've gone after people and sued them to stop them. And that's not pleasant

and not fun. We try to keep it as upmarket as possible. Over the years we have come to an appreciation and are able to articulate why Greta Garbo is such an important cultural figure. Unfortunately she suffers from not having a decent biography written about her and I think there is more myth than reality. The myth and the legend are important in terms of her status as a cultural icon but a lot of myth and legend that has sprung up really is off-base and in a way they don't focus on why she is so important. My belief is that she really is in many ways one of the first modern woman. If you read every biography that is written you never find that sentiment in any one of them. And she was so independent and so talented and she was just at the right place at the right time. So in that way she was very fortunate. She came over to this country and really revolutionized acting. She was really the first, what is now called, method actor. She really changed what people did on the screen. Before you had these exaggerated movements that came from the stage. And although she was trained as a stage actress, through Mauritz Stiller's tutelage, she had a completely different style. She really was revolutionary with what she did on the screen in terms of her acting style but more than that she was revolutionary in terms of the effect on people that she had with this kind of magic. It almost did not matter what the script was, she just totally captured everybody's imagination. People would project into the Garbo image on the screen what they wished and she had this almost one to one connection with everybody in the audience which is quite extraordinary. With Garbo there was a portrayal of a woman on the screen and in film roles that was very different where women could be feminine and confident at the same time and that was a total departure. ♦