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The Saga of the Gibson Women

By Phillip Gowan and Brian Meister

During the boyhood years of James Peter Boesen in Copenhagen, Denmark, a dazed, plain *Hausfrau* in a remote area of Austria gave birth to an illegitimate son, Alois. Maria Schicklgruber was an ungainly creature of 42 when her only child arrived in the summer of 1837, and those that knew her were incredulous that she had found anyone willing to impregnate her. Only half-jokingly, some suggested that her liaison might have been with the devil. There was never to be any conclusive evidence as to the parentage of the baby.

Peter Boesen left Denmark and arrived at the port of New York City sometime in the 1850's and there met and married a German woman, Pauline L. Hynsel. The couple lived most of their married life in Hoboken, New Jersey and raised two daughters. Blonde, blue-eyed Pauline Caroline Boesen arrived on June 30, 1866. That same year, a German woman was carrying the child that would later become the wife of Maria Schicklgruber's illegitimate son.

The Boesen girls were well educated and the family, though not wealthy, had prospered and lived in a comfortable home at 198 Bloomfield Street in Hoboken. In 1887 Pauline fell in love with a young Scotsman named John A. Brown and the two were married at the First Baptist Church of Hoboken on November 22nd. John was a "builder" and was 22 years old. Their only child, Dorothy Winifred Brown, was welcomed on May 17, 1889 in the couple's home at 320 Willow Avenue. Maria Schicklgruber's illegitimate son had become a father to his own son in Braunau, Austria a month earlier.

When Dorothy was just a baby John Brown died and she would grow up thinking of another man as her father. On February 8, 1894 the young widow Pauline married an Irish bachelor named John Leonard Gibson, the ceremony also taking place in the First Baptist Church of Hoboken. She gave birth to two more children prior to the turn of the century but both died in infancy. All of her hopes and dreams then centered on Dorothy who was turning out to be a very attractive young girl. After moving to Manhattan, Pauline saw nothing but unlimited opportunity for her only surviving child.

In the winter of 1909 Dorothy met a young pharmacist named George Henry Battier, Jr. He was a native of Memphis, Tennessee where his father had also been a well-known pharmacist with an office on historic Beale Street. The couple was married on February 10, 1910 but the union lasted only a few months. By summer they had separated and Dorothy was once again living with her mother and stepfather. That would not be the end of her romantic life--or her marital woes. (George Battier later remarried and was prominent

in evangelical Christian circles and organizations. He died in Chicago in 1942.)

Pierre Ernest Jules Brulatour was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on April 7, 1870. Married with three children, he arrived in New York in the mid-1890's and in 1911 made an arrangement to become the middleman for the disposal of Eastman Company photographic film to the motion-picture industry. Within a short time he was said to have had a substantially complete monopoly in the sale of film manufactured by the company. About the same time, he met Dorothy Winifred Gibson who was almost 20 years his junior and had become a silent screen star for Éclair Film Studios and was also an artist's model. She had attained fame as the original "Harrison Fisher Girl" due to her demure all-American look. Not long after meeting, the two allegedly began a clandestine affair and *demure* would be a word that could never again be rightfully associated with the young lass from Hoboken.



Dorothy Gibson
Brulatour in the early
1920s

Early in 1912 Dorothy completed her work on the film "The Easter Bonnet" and accompanied her mother on a vacation to Genoa, Italy. But what was to have been a pleasurable time in Europe was cut short when Dorothy received word from her film company (influenced by Jules Brulatour) to return quickly. The two ladies booked their return aboard the *Titanic* and boarded the luxury liner at Cherbourg. Dorothy had packed quite an array of women's wear and was a popular face in the crowd gathering socially aboard the ship. Among the faces she recognized was Frederic Seward who attended the same church as she did in New York. Together with William T. Sloper of Connecticut, Dorothy and Fred played a leisurely hand of bridge on the evening of April 14th. As midnight approached Dorothy felt a "long drawn, sickening crunch" and decided to investigate. Observing that the deck was slanting, intuition prompted her to go for her mother and the two women were among the first to enter Lifeboat 7. It was her determined plea that resulted in Fred Seward and William Sloper entering the same boat and both of them credited her in later years with having saved them. In the same lifeboat was French aviator Pierre Marechal shivering under a bunch of blankets and Dorothy would complain about his behavior when interviewed about her experiences of that night.

After rescue by *Carpathia* Pauline and Dorothy returned to their home in New York and Éclair quickly produce a film called "*Saved From the Titanic*" in which Dorothy played herself. The film was released just a month after the disaster.

Dorothy pursued an operatic career for a time but her acting on the silver screen came to an early end. She was next in the news when a woman named Julia Smith filed a lawsuit against Jules Brulatour relating to an auto accident involving a car he owned. The affair between Brulatour and Dorothy came to light after it was revealed that it was she who had been the driver when the accident occurred. In April of 1915 Mrs. Clara Brulatour separated from her husband, demanded a large allowance, and compelled Jules to insure his life for \$65,000 for the benefit of her and their three children. Jules traveled to Kentucky and obtained a divorce and on July 6, 1917 he and Dorothy Gibson were finally married.

Their union was troubled from the start and by 1919 the couple separated. Dorothy petitioned the court for \$48,000 a year in alimony but was granted only \$10,000 by the judge who stated that "*the court should not sanction expenditures far beyond the reasonable capacity of enjoyment.*" Mr. Brulatour alleged that the marriage was void in the first place because he obtained his divorce from Clara in Kentucky and he had not been a legal resident of that state. In a stinging personal indictment, Supreme Court Justice Luce chastised both:

"The papers contain the story of the infidelity of both parties, an utter disregard of marital obligations, and resort by both parties to the court to be relieved of matrimonial vows as if they were nothing more than a mere contract."

A divorce was not finalized until 1923, just in time for Jules to marry his third wife, actress Mae Elizabeth "Hope" Hampton. In the meantime, Dorothy and her mother began making frequent treks across the Atlantic Ocean, seeming to prefer France and Italy as destinations. Curiously, Leonard Gibson seems never to have accompanied them. It was also in 1923 that Maria Schicklgruber's grandson was responsible for what became known as the Beer Hall Putsch, a failed attempt to capture the government of Bavaria.

Over the years Dorothy and Pauline Gibson made many friends in the community of artists and actors that swarmed Paris. It was probably inevitable that at some point they would begin to encounter and interact with subversive political elements. In 1928 they left the United States for the last time and it appears that Pauline never saw her husband again. The two women alternated living in Paris, France and Florence, Italy.

The Great Depression in the United States caused money woes for Dorothy despite her continued alimony payments from Jules. Perhaps it is at this point in their lives when resentment toward their native country began to color their attitudes. Although both retained United States citizenship, consular officials were frequently involved in obtaining affidavits from the two of them affirming that they desired the protection afforded American

citizens. At times Pauline would remain in her favored city of Florence while Dorothy made extended trips to Paris and was romantically involved with a parade of personalities including diplomats of European countries not entirely friendly with the United States. But despite the geographic distance between them, a very close bond endured and their political positions and worldviews were apparently shared. Pauline lost touch with her sister, Mrs. A. W. Todd of Jersey City, New Jersey, and admitted that she did not even know whether her only sibling was still living. A consular report in 1944 stated that Pauline had heard from no one in the United States for “a number of years.”



*Pierre Ernest Jules
Brulatour in his 50s*

When Leonard Gibson died in 1938, Pauline did not return for his funeral, allowing his sister to handle the settlement of his estate. That same year, Maria Schicklgruber’s grandson consolidated his dictatorship in Germany and his bewildering fury spread across the European continent, rising with terrible violence and ominous portents of catastrophe. The stories of the evil progeny of a dazed, plain *Hausfrau* in Austria and of two American women that survived the *Titanic* sinking were about to merge into a common chapter.

The world went to war. Countless Americans fled Europe. But curiously, two husbandless females remained there while Maria Schicklgruber’s grandson angrily advanced into Holland and France and formed an alliance with Mussolini. Pauline Gibson spent most of the war in Florence, Italy while Dorothy made frequent, erratic trips between her mother’s home and Paris. She drove her own car and claimed to have traveled alone.

* * *

In the late summer of 1944, the Vice Consul of the American Consulate General in Zurich, Switzerland was informed that a woman had appeared in that country under strange circumstances and was being detained in a facility in Lugano under suspicion of spying. Her documents had been seized by the police in Bern. She claimed to have escaped from a political prison in Milan but local Swiss authorities were skeptical and ordered an investigation. It was determined that a mysterious Dr. Ugo had secured Dorothy Gibson’s release with the connivance of the German Gestapo on the promise that she would act as a spy for them. But the Vice Consul, James C. Bell, concluded that Dorothy was not guilty of spying despite the suspicions of the Swiss police. Mr. Bell went so far as to declare that “*the accused hardly seems bright enough to be useful in such capacity and was greatly alarmed when we informed her of these suspicions.*” Dorothy was released from confinement after filing an affidavit detailing her life since 1939 and the reasons why she chose to remain in Nazi occupied territories.

“About 17 years ago I became a resident of France. I was born in Hoboken, N.J., U.S.A., as were my mother and father. I married in America Jules E. Brulatour in 1917 – an American born in New Orleans, La. The marriage unfortunately was not a success, we were divorced. I had a great deal of unhappiness, and much less money. Mr. Brulatour married again, and we still had many of the same friends. I already knew Paris very well and decided to go to Paris to live. I talked it all over with my lawyer and friend Max W. Steuer, and he advised it most strongly. So my mother and I went to Paris to live. I found the life very cheap and pleasant. I went back to New York every year for at least four months. My taxes were always attended to by Max W. Steuer and sometimes by my bank. After 1932 I still had less money due to the money trouble we had in America, and then it would have been a real problem to me to return to the U.S.A. to live with my mother. My mother’s health was not as good, we had need of doctors and cures, a very expensive thing in America. I was happy and content in my life in Paris. We had always gone to St. Jean de Luz in France for the summer. In about 1934 or 1935 we went to Italy and Spain for the summer, because the weather was warmer; after that we continued for the warm weather and warm sea bathing to return to Italy for the summer, and later for a cure at Montecatini. My health also is not so good as I have a blood pressure of 260, and must take care of my health. Naturally I have always been most exact with my taxes and my passport. In 1939 I was for the summer in Italy with my mother. I left my mother in Alassio with friends about August 27th to visit friends in Spain expecting to return to Italy the 8th of September to make our cure at Montecatini and return to Paris October 1st. I was stopped from going over the border in Spain because I was with Spaniards who were in the Spanish Embassy and they were asked to return to Paris at once. I went to Paris and three days later war was declared, all the frontiers were closed. I asked for permission to go to Italy, it was not given, so I waited, but the communications were open shortly after. I knew my mother was well, had gone to Florence, was under the care of the doctor and had asked for a French visa, which was promised, but much delayed. Finally I got permission to go to Florence from the American and French government but to return by a certain time. The winter of 1939 was terrible – cold – rainy – hail – and we had little coal. I found my mother was not very well, but was most comfortable and warm and was being taken care of by the doctor, so I thought it better to leave her there and return to Paris before my permission expired on my passport, as I have always exactly followed to the best of my knowledge all rules. As soon as the weather became a little better I again got permission from the American and French government and even got permission from the French government to go in my car to Italy to get my mother and return. I had been in Italy ten days when the Germans went into

Holland and Belgium and I could not return to France. I must say I never wanted to make the Ocean trip to America at this time, as my mother and I were most timid on the ocean – we had been in a shipwreck – but I also never wanted to stay in Italy, but we just waited in Italy always hoping things would be better to travel. I particularly wanted to go to enter Portugal or Spain, but my mother was not well enough to make the trip which was very bad. In the meantime our passports were always in order. To my horror Mussolini and Hitler declared war on America – a thing I never thought possible. Two days later I wired Rome asking to be taken to America, I was advised I would be taken. My passport was good until December 20, 1941. I was told to do nothing about my passport. Finally when the boat did not seem to be ready to leave I applied for a Swiss protectorate passport. My passports and my money were returned to me saying it was not necessary as I was being repatriated. I do not know the date of this, but I have the letter from the Swiss Embassy in Rome. At the moment it is in the hands of the Swiss Police in Bern. I wish to say I never wanted to remain in Italy and that I have brought myself nothing but unhappiness and have perhaps completely ruined my life trying to do the best – as I thought – for my mother. I would never have left my mother and I only tried to escape when it was a question of a camp of concentration to be sent to Germany – or to try for Switzerland. It would have been much better for me personally to have gone to Switzerland earlier when it was easier but my mother could not make the trip, and even then when I was terribly frightened after the German s came in I did not leave her. I tried to see if it was possible to have her carried on someone's back to Switzerland. Many times I thought I had found someone to carry her, but I did not succeed. I have explained what happened when I did try to escape. I have been in five prisons in Italy and three concentration camps in Switzerland, and I am now in the San Rocco clinic in Lugano.



Dorothy Gibson Brulatour
Paris -1930s

I wish to add something about the man, Dr. Ugo, who helped me to escape. Naturally he has earned my eternal gratitude. I only heard of this man the first part of June after I had been in prison in Milan about three weeks. I do not know his real name – nobody does – but from what I have seen and heard I can only praise him most highly. His kindness and cleverness have been wonderful. It is difficult to talk to this man. In S. Vittore, Milan, it is a living death – you can speak to no one – and if you try and are caught the punishment is awful. Dr. Ugo has the right to call people for questioning. After

hearing of him it took me nearly a month to get to speak to him and it was like this I was able. In S. Vittore was an extremely well known man, arrested under a false name. The Germans were as usual very stupid and did not know his real name – or they would have killed him – only Dr. Ugo knew him and a friend of mine, also in prison, Indro Montanelli, who had twice been condemned to death. Dr. Ugo saved this man and freed him, and through this man's help Indro Montanelli spoke to Dr. Ugo, and then he persuaded Dr. Ugo to call me. Less than a month later Dr. Ugo freed me, telling all lies to the Germans. I to this day do not know what all his lies were, but something to the effect that a General Zambone, who escaped with us, and Montanelli were to be spies and that I was to help with money. Dr. Ugo told Zambone, Montanelli and me to speak to our governments in Switzerland immediately and tell them all the truth. He asked us all to refrain from giving any story to a newspaper (Montanelli is a journalist) until the Americans and English were in Milan. That is all.

I have tried to tell my story completely to Mr. Bell, my consul. I understand General Zambone has explained most fully to his Italian Embassy, and I have heard Mr. Montanelli tell the story to the Italian Embassy. General Zambone and Mr. Montanelli have the complete faith of their Embassy as they should have. They are both waiting for instructions to return to help the 5th Army. For money – nobody has asked me for money. Mr. Montanelli has money with him, and both he and Dr. Ugo have helped me with money. I have many times offered Dr. Ugo money – when I am able to get some – but he has absolutely refused. I asked Dr. Ugo why he had helped me, and he replied that he was sorry for me as he had never seen anybody look so sick and frightened in his life, and besides that he liked Americans. I am sorry to say that while for us it was a most fortunate thing our escape, for Dr. Ugo it has been less fortunate, as a man by the name of Benuzzi and a priest denounced him to the Germans, for the joke he had played on them and that the General, Journalist and American were here in Switzerland and were not spies. I know Dr. Ugo has had a great deal of trouble since our release, and that it is the first thing he has done which has made the Germans very suspicious of him.”

In a separate affidavit filed about the same time, Dorothy made similar claims.

“I had less money after I was divorced and I was not very happy as my husband and his new wife were always around. Therefore I went to Paris to live with my mother, Mrs. Pauline C. Gibson. Neither of us have ever had French or any other foreign passports. I returned to New York each year until the war for from two to four months.

I went to Italy from France in April 1940 to bring my mother who was in Florence for treatment by her personal physician back to Paris, but was prevented by the attack on France and we were compelled to remain there. After Italy declared war on the United States we were both scheduled to leave by the train provided to evacuate American citizens but were prevented from going by reason of an operation my mother was obliged to undergo and I had to remain with her. No further opportunity to leave Italy presented itself although my luggage remained packed for instant departure.

Mr. Steinhauslein the Swiss Consul in Florence sent my passport to his Legation in Rome where it was stamped for repatriation but the fee I had sent with it to obtain a Swiss Protective passport was returned and I was advised by letter that it was unnecessary as I was to be repatriated.

In April 1944 I was told by the Questura that I was about to be put in the Fossoli Concentration Camp controlled by the Germans and so I attempted to reach Switzerland, but was arrested in Cannobbio April 16 and imprisoned in Como and later in S. Vittore, Milan. From here I succeeded in escaping and reached Switzerland August 14."



*Pauline Boesen Gibson
1932 - aged 66*

Dorothy Brulatour was released from internment in Switzerland in 1944 and remained there with a friend for a time and then returned to France after the Nazis were subdued. She had been accused of spying for them but convinced the authorities that she was innocent of such a charge and had only remained in hostile areas to care for her aged and ailing mother. As stated in one of the foregoing affidavits, it was even thought that she was not bright enough to engage in espionage. Dorothy was able to visit Pauline as the war was winding down but she chose to live in an apartment in Paris while her mother remained in Florence, Italy. The two always professed total love and loyalty for one another and the allegations against Dorothy were put to rest once and for all. Or were they?

Dorothy fell in love with Antonio Ramos, a diplomat with the Spanish Embassy in Paris and carried on an affair that lasted some years both prior to the war and after Dorothy returned to France. She kept a low profile and was treated for ongoing valvular heart disease and hypertension. During the summer of 1945 she lived in Vevey, Switzerland but returned to her apartment in the Paris Hotel Ritz late in the year. On the morning of February 17, 1946 the original Harrison Fisher girl/alleged Nazi spy was found dead by a maid and the cause was officially listed as a heart attack. She

was buried in the Civil Cemetery of Saint Germain-en-Laye, France and apparently her mother did not return to Paris for the funeral. Dorothy's will left her entire estate to Pauline but provided that if her mother predeceased her, everything would pass to Antonio Ramos.

Even before Dorothy's death, things were taking a bizarre turn with Pauline in Italy. It was obvious by then that the Fascists and Nazis were about to be defeated. And after all the terrible experiences Dorothy allegedly suffered at their hands during the war, one would expect that no one would be happier to see their demise than Pauline Gibson. Instead, she began an unceasing tirade of laudatory comments regarding Nazi concepts and actions that resounded throughout the English and American colony of Florence. She expounded on her hatred of Jews and sympathy with Hitler's goal of a "final solution." She was outspoken in her destructive criticisms of the United States angering her neighbors and others that had suffered under the malevolent hand of Maria Schicklgruber's grandson. By the end of the war, the residents of the American community in Florence were demanding that the wretched old woman from Hoboken be exiled from their midst. In an affidavit by Frank C. Niccoll, the Vice Consul in Florence, it was stated that Pauline Gibson had been investigated for "security violations" and was no longer entitled to the protection of the United States and that any such protection would be denied to her unless she chose to immediately return to her native country.

But Pauline Gibson never saw the skyline of New York again. Under imminent threat of expulsion from Italy, she returned to Paris and lived out her life at the Hotel Belmont. The frail, sickly old mother depicted by Dorothy in wartime affidavits enjoyed robust health throughout the decade of the 1950's and continued to shock and alarm those she encountered with her pro-Nazi vitriol. Dorothy's former lover, Antonio Ramos, attended to her personal and business needs until, like her daughter, she was found dead in her hotel room by a maid. It was March 20, 1961. Pauline had fallen just short of her 95th birthday, leaving the enigmatic question of her daughter's true involvement with the Nazis forever unanswered.



*Pauline Boesen Gibson
in 1954*