



'Polish princess' abdicates Utica, mansion 'completely gutted'

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UTICA — In the end, this city would have no glass slipper for Diana Lenska.

The self-proclaimed Polish princess – recovering from throat surgery and smarting from her treatment by the media and local officials – moved out of her 19th century Genesee Street mansion last week and doesn't plan on coming back.

In her wake, Lenska leaves two years of intermittent controversy and little evidence of the fruition of her grand plans, which included a cultural embassy run by the organization she started in the 1980s.

"Why are people in such an uproar?" said Frank Coiro, Lenska's spokesman. "All she did was come to Utica and want to bring money and culture."

Lenska also leaves behind major question marks for the mansion at 294 Genesee St. It technically is owned by Lenska's organization – the Royal Order Kingdom of Poland – and the organization of her Hong Kong-based sponsor – A Better Tomorrow Limited. They bought it in October 2009 for \$202,000.

The mansion was built in 1850 by Orasmus Matteson, who represented the region in Congress. More recently, it was home to the Catholic Women's Club of Utica.

Now, the buildings' mirrors, fireplaces, mantelpieces and chandeliers have been sold, Coiro said.

The action was taken to protect them from vandals when the house was left vacant, Coiro said. Currently, only Cassandra Harris-Lockwood, who runs a local nonprofit and weekly newspaper and was formerly Lenska's spokeswoman, has the contact information for the person in possession of the items, Coiro said.

Harris-Lockwood said the items are being "cleaned and catalogued" and then the owner of those items will get back to her. She penned her own lengthy account of the situation at the Utica Phoenix's website.

"I am in touch with the owner of the fixtures," Harris-Lockwood said, via email. "It is a one-sided conversation in that I must wait until he contacts me in order to speak again, but we have spoken and (he) is aware that there is a local interest in returning the property to Utica."

Whatever the final result, the stripping of the building has local preservationists seriously concerned.

Michael Bosak, president of the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica, said fixtures original to the building could net the seller "a small fortune" and are possibly worth more than the building as a whole. He acknowledged it is the owners' right to do what they want with the building, but said stripping a historic mansion has serious moral implications.

"It's just mind-boggling that she'd do this," Bosak said. "The only reason we supported her is because we were trying to avoid this very thing."

And he said selling the building without those fixtures could turn out to be extremely difficult.

Harris-Lockwood said she hopes to isolate an offer or price for the items, which she will pass on to the Landmarks Society "or anyone else who has a legitimate interest."

Additionally, the fate of the building's ownership is unclear. It is currently zooming toward a November foreclosure date for roughly \$17,500 in unpaid city and school district property taxes. Coiro said the Hong Kong backer is expected to pay those taxes before the foreclosure date.

But then he warned that negative media reports could convince them to let the property ownership lapse to the city.

Lenska's troubles

Local officials met Diana Lenska with enthusiasm upon her arrival in 2009, supporting her plans for an embassy to promote Polish history and awareness.

Lenska founded the Royal Order in the 1980s. She has designated herself as a princess within that order, saying the title is deserved because she is the organization's grandmaster.

But after subsequent O-D articles questioning her credentials as a princess, she said investors threatened to abandon her project. She sued the O-D for \$25 million, though the suit was dropped in June.

She also had been warned by her financial backer, whom Coiro described as a billionaire, to leave Utica, Coiro said. She stayed, but “lost his money,” Coiro said.

Paul Kan, chairman of Hong Kong's A Better Tomorrow, has been named by Lenska on the past as a sponsor. His organization appears on the deed for 294 Genesee St.

Lenska did receive a \$9,780 façade grant from the city's federal allocation for exterior work on the mansion. The city received a voucher for reimbursement for that work from Adorino Construction, indicating it had been done. Lenska also received a “couple hundred dollars” from the Landmarks Society in December to help with utilities.

But just last month she was denied tax exempt status by City Assessor David Williams and then by the city Board of Assessment Review.

Williams said that denial was based on the fact that both owners did not qualify and also other concerns.

“We had questions about the use of the property,” Williams said.

Coiro said the Royal Order had been accepted as a nonprofit by both the state and federal governments and criticized the city for not recognizing it as tax exempt.

In addition, Lenska has been diagnosed with sarcoidosis, a disease that required surgery and rehabilitation, Coiro said.

During a recent visit to 294 Genesee St., curtains were pulled over the windows and nobody answered the door. The solitude of the building's grounds stood in contrast to the constant presence of pedestrians and cars downtown, heading to bus stops and office appointments and jobs.

‘Completely gutted’

If Lenska's flight from the city has caused a stir among preservationists, it's because of the first-hand observations of the city's former economic development chief.

Robert Sullivan, who was fired by the city along with several other high-ranking officials in January, stopped by the house last week to recover some supplies from his private catering business.

“I walked in the front door and froze in shock,” said Sullivan, who wrote about the situation at his nascent blog, Around the City with Bobby Sullivan. “She had the whole place just completely gutted.”

The observations by Sullivan, a Landmarks board member, quickly became a source of emails and other blogs.

In her time in Utica, Lenska held several events, including an open house fundraiser for the Royal Order – tickets were \$25 in advance or \$30 at the door – and a historical exhibit about a World War II battle that took place in Italy in 1944.

Brian Thomas, the city's Urban and Economic Development commissioner, said he hasn't yet verified reports of what happened at 294 Genesee St., but pointed out the mansion is a “critical structure within the city's Scenic and Historic district.”

“It would be disturbing and upsetting to know that a property owner had done that to a signature building, if that in fact happened,” he said.

Coiro blamed Sullivan for the “uproar” and criticized those who are publicly worried about the fate of the mansion's fixtures.

“This is our stuff,” he said. “This is stuff that belongs to us.”

So what's next for Lenska?

“The princess has been working toward full international recognition, which is a process that takes time and proper backing, which you and all the other people in Utica, N.Y., interfered with happening,” Coiro wrote in an email.

Coiro said Lenska and her staff were moving out of the state, and the organization is being relocated to another country.

“There are several possibilities for relocation we are considering, including Europe,” he wrote. “That is all anyone needs to know for now.”

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What a mess! With all due respect, it looks like those that supported her the most (Roefaro, Sullivan, Lockwood) all have egg on their faces. But they'll now act like they're the ones most outraged. The OD had it right from the start and they didn't want to listen. She's a scam artist and thought she could exploit Utica to benefit her little made up world. Also, where else in the country can you literally buy a historical mansion for \$202,000, and then get another \$10,000 from the city to help improve it? Don't get me wrong, that's great for anyone interested in purchasing these properties and I think it should be promoted more, but it doesn't say a lot about our city and our property values. We should be marketing these properties nationwide, with a REAL marketing/advertising plan. Not the friends and family plan.

By the way, when is Roefaro's term up???

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Tick Tock tick Tock Roefaro will soon be off the clock.

This is why the Founders of this country did not want people to have titles, though this Princess was self appointed to the role. Just call her what she is a Fraud or a con artist.

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