

PublicationDate: 17-02-2001
PAGE: 08

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST
KEYWORD: Princess Mathilde

HEADLINE: A breath of fresh air

SUBHEADLINE: Princess Mathilde of Belgium attracts attention wherever she goes _ but it is her genuine interest in good work and her natural demeanour that strikes a chord in the hearts of people

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There is no denying it. The combination of components such as youth, beauty, intelligence and above all great prominence generate an irresistible alchemy.

The haste, or rather the scramble in the wake of Her Royal Highness Princess Mathilde of Belgium, who was in Thailand until yesterday accompanying her husband HRH Crown Prince Philippe on an economic mission to Thailand, was another proof of the invariability of this theory.

Tens of foreign journalists _ including a few paparazzi (to the chagrin of a few) _ had come all the way from Europe to record HRH Princess Mathilde's constant smile and tender gestures. The princess' programme on February 14 had its good share of such photogenic moments.

Prince Philippe, presiding over the Belgian Economic Mission, had travelled all the way to Chon Buri on that very day to visit Belgian investments such as Bo-Win Industrial Estate and the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate, with more than 50 Belgian entrepreneurs _ Annemie Neyts, State Secretary for Foreign Trade, representatives from the BOI, Anchalee Chavanich, the governor of the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand, to name but a few. Meanwhile, Princess Mathilde concocted herself a schedule to suit her tastes and personal interests.

The royal couple both had busy days and tight schedules, but the princess' was less about big money and more about big emotions.

The princess' separate programme took her to the welfare and vocational development centre Kredtrakarn in the morning, where she met child victims of prostitution, and in the afternoon to the Setsatian School for the Deaf under the patronage of HM the Queen of Thailand, where she would also meet with HRH Princess Soamsawali.

The programme was not just for the benefit of the many Belgian and international press, but truly motivated by the princess' genuine interest in developing ways to carve out a place for marginalised people in society.

Princess Mathilde, born in 1973, the daughter of Patrick d'Udekem d'Acoz and Polish Countess Anne Komorowski, married Crown Prince Philippe on December 4, 1999 in Brussels. She was a practising speech therapist in Brussels before embracing her career as Princess of Belgium and Duchess of Brabant.

At present pursuing a degree in psychology, Princess Mathilde graduated with top honours in 1994 in speech therapy from the Institut Libre Marie Haps.

The princess is always keen to get close to people, especially children in need. A foundation bearing her name was established in December 2000 to help children with problems.

“Projects such as the foundation for the deaf are of top-level interest for HRH Princess Mathilde,” said John Cornet d’Elzies, counsellor to Prince Philippe.

Princess Mathilde can thus truly play the authenticity card, and indeed her naturalness and simplicity are among her most lovable attributes. These traits showed in the way she gently bent down towards young girls creating flower garlands at Nonthaburi’s Kredtrakarn centre, and in the way she talked with two English language instructors. She also tried her hand at fruit carving. “Isn’t she cute, our Princess, just sitting down and trying to learn the art of fruit carving from little girls?” said Belgian cameraman Eric Poncelet who works for the much-appreciated TV Belgium weekly programme Place Royale.

Between the Belgian people and the royal family, the barometer is set at fair. And most Belgian nationals would agree that the appearance of Princess Mathilde on the royal stage has brought a “breath of fresh air” to this hereditary constitutional monarchy, who as a rule never grants any press interviews whatsoever.

According to journalists sent to cover this royal visit to Thailand, economic missions presided over by Prince Philippe used to attract only a handful of reporters, mostly from specialised business media. But recently, these same missions now undertaken in the company of the princess can attract up to 40 media representatives, with many from lifestyle-oriented media.

“Princess Mathilde’s natural and beaming smile has seduced the Belgian people,” said Anne Quevrin, producer of Place Royale which features royal families from all over the world. Referring to Princess Mathilde’s first ever appearance in front of television cameras just three months before getting married in 1999, soberly dressed in beige trousers and a navy blue shirt, Quevrin said, “the people adored her straight away”.

One ought to mention that Belgium, to quote Belgian cameraman Eric Poncelet, “had been waiting for their Princess Charming for the last decade or so”. Crown Prince Philippe, eldest son of King Albert II and Queen Paola and first in line to the throne, was born in 1960 and was 39 when he tied the knot.

“Princess Mathilde was in the working life for a few years. She knows about real life. Of course she is very pretty and elegant, but it is her simplicity which strikes,” continued Quevrin.

But rest assured, behind the smiles there is no desire for stardom and even less desire to be the “new” Princess Diana.

“This is the type of comparison we avoid at any cost,” commented John Cornet d’Elzies. “There was only one Diana”, Princess Mathilde herself said.”