

INC's Lady in Red Attends Royal Wedding



Julia Vlasenko and her husband, Oleg, had the pleasure (and pressure!) of attending the May 22 wedding of Prince Felipe (Julia says he *really* is a Prince Charming) to Letizia Ortiz. As the Ukrainian Ambassador is not yet in Madrid, the invitation to represent the Ukraine went to Oleg, who as Charge d'Affaires is the Acting Ambassador. On the Sunday after the big day, Julia talked with us about the day of days.

The pleasure of receiving the engraved invitation from the royal palace was fleeting. Julia admitted that more than feeling delighted about the prospect of attending the most important Spanish royal wedding of the century, she was worried about not “staining” her country's reputation by looking “stupid or extravagant”.

The pressure on, Julia redoubled her continual efforts to diet and succeeded in losing five kilos before the event. She also fretted long and hard over what to wear, particularly as the invitation only said “vestido corto”. Exactly how that should be translated was not clear. Early on, Julia checked the royal palace website for dress code clues. It didn't give any until a few days before the event—far too late to be of any help. In fact, it only caused her to worry more as it suggested light colors when she had already bought a fire engine-red suit! She was later relieved to read an article that said bright colors were perfectly fine as it was, after all, a spring wedding. The fact that the Dutch Ambassador's wife was also wearing red helped calm her nerves.

Julia said she was also grateful to Susan Milla for introducing her to the Honduran Ambassador. Her tips were helpful to Julia, particularly her suggestion to wear a hat. “Ninety-nine percent of the women wore something on their head. About 70 percent wore a hat and the other 29 percent wore flowers or a hairpiece,” she said, adding, “Once I saw I wasn't looking stupid or too extravagant, then I felt confident and relaxed.”

While the royal palace was vague about dress, it was explicit as to transport. Guests would be bused to the cathedral, with the exception of visiting royal families. Julia and her husband had to meet the diplomatic corps bus in Moncloa at 9:15 am.

Julia's group entered the Almudena at 10. “We were one of the first groups into the church,” Julia said. “The least important came first, the most important were last.”

There was confusion about seating arrangements as Julia and Oleg found they were not seated with the other ambassadors and their wives. As acting ambassadors, they were ushered to a different spot in the church. “Our seats were better than those of the real ambassadors,” Julia said. “We were placed near the political figures and had one of the best places to see everything.”

In fact, during the wedding mass when participants passed greetings of peace to one another, former President Aznar nodded and smiled at Julia.

From Julia's perch, she had a terrific view of the entering guests. She said the Spanish women were spectacularly dressed, like they came from a “garden of paradise”. Julia said there was an unofficial “best dressed” competition going on! “Ninety-percent of the suits and dresses were designed and made specially for the occasion. No one dress was the same.”

Julia could see the Prince waiting for the arrival of his bride. When the wait dragged on for about 20 minutes, people around her began to joke that perhaps the former journalist had gotten cold feet. Delayed by the downpour, which forced the bride to mix the red-carpet walk from the palace and to take a car instead, Letizia finally arrived.

“She could have looked better. I think she was on the edge of collapse” with the tension of all the events and the late-night gala dinner the evening before, Julia said. “She was not looking like the happiest bride in the world.” Julia could see Queen Sofia give Letizia repeated reassuring smiles throughout the ceremony.

The wedding was a solemn, traditional religious ceremony where emotions were obviously constrained. “I would not want my daughter to have such a wedding,” Julia said, adding that it was different from other Spanish weddings she had been to where the bridal couple freely expressed their emotions. And it was a far cry from her own Ukrainian wedding, which involved three days of dancing, singing, drinking and “absolute fun”!

Julia said the highlights of the ceremony for her were the hijinks of the pages - the couple's young nieces and nephews, and the masterful reading of the Gospel by Letizia's grandmother.

The rain, the uninvited and uncouth protagonist of the day, continued to fall as the wedding ended. Julia said the painstakingly slow exit from the cathedral was a “disaster.” She overheard one of the dozens of guards utter the word “chaos”, as hundreds of guests waited for buses to take them the short distance across the courtyard to the palace for lunch, particularly the women who wanted to save their fabric shoes from complete ruin.

Julia and her husband, both in leather shoes, opted for one of the umbrellas offered and they walked to the palace.

As part of the diplomatic corps, Julia and her husband were directed to the upper level of the palace where they had drinks, aperitivos and a light lunch of seafood in pastry, capon and wedding cake.

Queen Sofia's personal physician, a military doctor who wore his dress uniform, sat at Julia's table. Julia and her husband enjoyed talking to the doctor, who confirmed that Queen Sofia is a vegetarian, though she eats fish, cheese and eggs. And no, she doesn't do yoga.

While they couldn't see the royal wedding party from their table, they could hear the emotional toasts of the King and his son, Prince Felipe, to the new Princess Letizia.

Lunch ended promptly at 5 pm, as scheduled, but the party wasn't over as guests queued up to personally congratulate the couple and say goodbye.

“People had no mercy for the prince and princess! No one wanted to leave without shaking hands and saying, 'Goodbye!' It wasn't until after 7 that they left the palace. And yes, Julia and Oleg did shake hands with the royal family. Oleg told the Greek-born Queen Sofia that they were awaiting her visit to the Ukraine and perhaps she would enjoy seeing the Orthodox Cathedral Sofia in Kiev. Julia said the Queen lit up at the idea and said, “Si!”

Julia was most impressed with Prince Felipe, who gave each person a warm smile. “I had the feeling he had been waiting only for me. He was so open and friendly.” And this he managed to do when Julia knew he was practically “falling down” with exhaustion.

Julia and Oleg got home about 8 pm and spent the rest of the evening watching the wedding on TV, trying to catch a glimpse of themselves. A friend told her she had seen the couple on TV twice, but Julia wasn't as lucky. As lunch was “not to get full”, Julia and Oleg had pizza and wine while they watched TV.

