



The Telegraph Magazine

The secret life of Melania...

What's really going on in there?

By school friends, teachers, photographers and White House insiders

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The mystery of Melania

Small-town Slovenian girl. Glamour model. Trophy wife. And now, First Lady of the United States of America. There have been many incarnations of Melania Trump, but which, if any, reflects the real woman? In a scandalous new book the White House hates, Nina Burleigh goes in search of its most enigmatic resident. Portrait by Regine Mahaux

The road from Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, to Melania Trump's home town of Sevnica winds through pine forests and pumpkin farms, and ends at a roundabout with a giant wooden shoe hovering in the centre, which commemorates the town's shoemaking past. Like its most famous former resident, the footwear factory has gone. But the disembodied shoe is a memorial to the industry and a sort of skeleton key to the mystery of America's First Lady.

All modern presidential wives are subject to analysis, and yet two years into her role, Melania remains the most private and enigmatic of them all. She was well prepared for one of the chief requirements of the job, which is to be photographed. She trained from adolescence to achieve the posture and walk of a professional model, balancing on high shoes without breaking stride. But the paparazzi didn't follow her home when she was a model, and no one asked her to hold opinions. Nothing in her upbringing prepared her for all the scrutiny. And so Melania is arguably less equipped for the job than most of her predecessors, bad hair days notwithstanding.

Long before she became one of the most-watched women in the world, in a job with unwritten and unclear but still very pressing responsibilities, Melanija Knavs was an ordinary resident of that small factory town in Slovenia. In the 1970s Sevnica was part of Yugoslavia, ruled by communist dictator Josip Broz Tito. To its inhabitants, the West was a mythical place accessible only via magazines and occasionally TV, and exports such as Coca-Cola were considered such a luxury that when children were given a bottle at a birthday party, they passed it around, taking tiny sips.

Melania was one of the lucky ones. Because of her father Viktor's connections to local political leaders (he chauffeured a mayor, among other jobs), she, her mother Amalija and older sister Ines took occasional holidays to Italy and rode in the Mercedes cars that her father coveted and eventually collected.

Childhood friends recall that Melania, Ines and Amalija were under the control of Viktor, a fearsome presence. He was the 'big boss of the family', says one of Melania's secondary-school classmates, Petra Sedej. 'He was tough... She, her sister and her mother were very close.'

Melania has commented on the similarities between Viktor and her tycoon-turned-president husband. 'They're both hard-working. They're both very smart and very capable. They grew up in totally different environments, but they have the same values, the same tradition. I myself am similar to my husband... So is my dad. He is a family man, he has tradition.'

During secondary school in Ljubljana, Melania grew into a tall, aqua-eyed, dark-haired beauty and attracted the attention of the tiny nation's most successful fashion photographer, Stane Jerko, and from there her career went on to cross borders. But she was an average student, with no particular aptitude for world affairs or foreign languages. It has been reported that she speaks five or six languages, though French and Italian

MELANIA'S FASHION STATEMENTS, DECODED



Pussy-footing around the issue October 2016

Audio of Donald Trump's 'grab them by the pussy' approach to women, leaked by *The Washington Post* during the 2016 presidential election, dominated the headlines – and Melania's decision to wear a Gucci 'pussy-bow' blouse for the second presidential debate two days later seemed more than coincidence. But whether she was trolling her husband, his opponent, or liberal America, we'll never know.



All aflutter for Russia July 2018

'Friendly' isn't usually an adjective that would sum up Melania's style – rather, polished or elegant. Which is why her choice of a buttercup-yellow Gucci coat with butterfly-clasp belt at a tricky summit in Helsinki stood out. Was this a soft-power play intended to take the edge off her husband's image, and sway public opinion? Or to distract President Putin?



Blonde ambition July 2017

Considering her predilection for sculpted, tailored dresses in block colours, the only thing that separated Melania from a Fox News anchor was her brunette (albeit expensively highlighted brunette) hair. But in December, Melania completed her transformation with a new Republican-blonde do. Is Melania perhaps lining up her post-White House career?

By senior fashion editor Charlie Gowans-Eglinton



Natural disaster August 2017

Boarding Air Force One to visit Texas in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, Melania's *Top Gun* bomber jacket and aviators went unnoticed – the focus was on her sky-high Manolo Blahnik stilettos. While heels are one of Melania's style signatures, it was the context – en route to visit a state flooded with water – that saw Melania come under fire. Where were her waders?

The caring type June 2018

A sighting of FLOTUS wearing a £29 Zara jacket was unusual enough. But Melania's jacket – graffitied with the slogan 'I really don't care, do U?' – was worn on a trip to meet migrant children who had been separated from their parents and detained at the Texas border. Did she not care about the migrant crisis? Or about politics? Or someone closer to home?

Taking the pith October 2018

On a tour of Ghana, Malawi, Kenya and Egypt, it appeared that Melania had watched *Out of Africa* for styling tips, so faithfully did she recreate the wardrobe of Meryl Streep as Karen Blixen. But a pith helmet? If colonialism were a hat, it would be this one.



colleagues in the fashion world recall only ever speaking English with her.

She and Ines attended the city's Secondary School of Design and Photography. They lived in an apartment that her father, who had opened a bicycle and car parts shop in Ljubljana, had bought. While Amalija worked in a clothing factory and Viktor travelled for work, the sisters were often on their own, responsible enough to cook for themselves and to catch the bus to school.

Friends recall the sisters as extremely close and both introverted, but while Ines wore 'long black clothes' according to Sedej, Melania dressed fashionably, with perfect foundation and subtle eye make-up. Her social life consisted of sitting outside the school with friends, watching boys ride up on Vespas. Her first boyfriend was an older, athletic Vespa rider. 'She always liked good-looking guys,' recalls Sedej.

Friends assumed she would go into fashion and were surprised when she applied to read design and architecture at the University of Ljubljana, though she was far from a typical student. 'I remember her because she was a bomb,' says a Slovenian architect who previously worked as a teaching assistant and was assigned to invigilate

'She was a bomb, wearing jeans from Italy or Paris and sunglasses on her head'

one of Melania's early exams. 'The other girls were average-looking and when she came in, wow. She was wearing jeans from Italy or Paris, with chains, and sunglasses on top of her head.'

In one of the early exams, students were tasked with drawing a rendering of the buildings and features of their home town. The architect recalls that Melania struggled. 'After about 15 minutes, there was nothing on the paper. She was standing there... just shaking and shaking, trembling, nervous. Knowing, I think, that she couldn't pass the exam.' The architect doesn't recall seeing her on campus after that.

Three decades separate quivering, tense Melanija Knavs of Sevnica from wary, enigmatic Melania Trump, First Lady of the White House. Although, now 48 years old, she still hasn't strayed far from her roots, preferring to speak Slovenian at home with her son Barron and turning her homes with Trump into capsules of Mitteleuropean life, with her mother, father and sister. Yet she has also become fully Trumpian.

There is not much obvious daylight between her and her husband. She backed him to the hilt when he demanded to see President Obama's birth certificate. 'It's not only Donald who wants to see it, it's American people,' she told American talk-show host Joy Behar. In the lead-up to the midterm elections last year, she stayed away from campaign events but emails were blasted out in her name that parroted 'fake news' and other choice phrases of her husband's. 'Democrats and the opposition media are doing everything they possibly can to discredit Donald with false accu-

sations by spreading their fake news and making it appear that he does not have the support of America's voter,' said one email to potential supporters sent out under her name.

It is not clear whether she writes or even signs off political messages attributed to her, or indeed personal ones. The presidential couple's signatures, which appeared on the Trump 2018 Christmas card, look almost identical.

In Melania's career, the years between her leaving Slovenia and making a name for herself in New York are something of a professional lacuna. Though she appeared at casting calls in Paris,



From left A 17-year-old Melania shot by Stane Jerko in 1987; leaving the church after her wedding to Trump in 2005; on the cover of British GQ in 2000

with whom Melania shares superficial similarities. A Czech former model, Ivana's home town of Zlín was also famous for shoemaking and, like Melania, she had a lifelong fascination with branded luxury, born of a drab childhood. But Ivana had working-woman ambitions, seeded by the Manhattan divorcees and socialites she befriended.

Melania, however, was struggling when Trump met her. She shared an apartment with a photographer in downtown Manhattan, and complained that she wasn't getting good shoots. Zampolli remembers her as a hard worker, but she came to New York during the post-Pereestroika period, when Eastern European beauties were flooding the fashion world.

Trump was a connoisseur of female 'hotness', not least as co-owner of the Miss Universe beauty pageant, well accustomed to helping pretty little things get deals and photo shoots. Soon after Melania met him, she acquired a Times Square cigarette advertisement and began appearing in other ad campaigns and on magazine covers – including a lubricious photo shoot for British GQ in 2000 to



Second wife Marla looked the part but once the affair became a relationship, he seemed to find her too intense and demanding. Finally there was Melania, who looked like a supermodel but, unlike her predecessors, let him do his own thing and had no apparent interest in power. She simply wanted security. And that he could provide.

By the time they married in 2005, Melania's mother, father and sister had decamped to New York to live in buildings owned by Trump, and trailed him from Manhattan to New Jersey to Mar-a-Lago in Florida. Here, the family recreated their own miniature Sevnica inside the lap of American luxury. From her Manhattan penthouse, Melania had assistants to do the shopping, and was a lift-



Milan and New York, it's not clear whether she found work. Fashion photographer Jarl Alé de Basseville first encountered Melania while casting a photo shoot for the Paris lads' magazine *Mar* in 1996. The resulting images, a faux-lesbian shoot with another female model, were obtained by the *New York Post* in 2016, during Trump's presidential campaign. De Basseville recalls that afterwards they went for dinner at a French restaurant and on to a nightclub, where he says she told him she knew Trump. Later he added, 'Nobody knew Melania... she wanted to be famous.'

He says that he wanted to tell his editors about his model's famous friend, thinking it would increase the sizzle and value of his photos. However, Melania's agent Paolo Zampolli has maintained that the couple met at a party in 1998, and that remains the official story the couple have told over the years.

The Trump that Melania met in the 1990s was a property magnate who lived in Trump Tower in Manhattan with luxurious lairs in Florida and New Jersey. He separated from his second wife Marla Maples, with whom he has a daughter, Tiffany, in 1997. It is his first wife Ivana, however,

illustrate a story about Trump's presidential ambitions, at the time presumed to be just a jocular rich man's wink-wink. The future First Lady of the United States lolled naked in Trump's private Boeing 747, and posed in the cockpit in heels and a chainmail bikini.

Back then, Trump was known to bellow 'Where's my supermodel?' She had a precise – and clear – role to play, participating in breathy appearances on Howard Stern's radio show, discussing how often she and Trump had sex. 'We have a great time,' she told Stern. Asked if they have sex every night, Melania replied: 'Yes, even more.'

In Melania, Trump found what he had not in his previous wives: Ivana was a great beauty when he married her, lissome and blonde, but she evolved into a driven working mum after having their three children Donald, Ivanka and Eric, and a highly effective manager of Trump's holdings.

Her husband becoming president was a brutal change, exploding her Trump Tower bubble

ride from the stores of Fifth Avenue and Gucci's flagship Trump Tower shop where the shop assistants knew her better than most.

Yet even in those early pictures, before the marriage, Melania's tension and discomfort at being in the spotlight seem clear – in some photographs taken by paparazzi at events and clubs around New York, she appears to cover her body and pull away, as if uncomfortable with unposed shots.

Stane Jerko, who spotted her standing by a garden wall outside a fashion show in Ljubljana when she was 17 and produced a portfolio for her, says that she was always nervous and stiff. 'She was quiet, kind, hard-working, did not complain, which is why she did not attract attention,' he recalls.

Moments of awkwardness still occur. There was the occasion in May 2017 she slapped away the President's hand on the tarmac upon landing in Israel, which went viral, as well as their stiff first dance after his inauguration.

Inauguration day was an disaster for her, from the moment her husband leapt out of his side of the car to greet the Obamas and left her standing alone looking lost, to the famous smile-that-

became-a-frown as her husband looked to and then away from her on the dais before the swearing-in.

Her husband becoming president was a brutal change for Melania, exploding her snug bubble in Trump Tower. She was reportedly so opposed to the idea that she broke up with Trump briefly when he started exploring a run in 2000. Michael Wolff reported in his tell-all book about the early Trump presidency, *Fire and Fury*, that she cried on election night. 'She shed tears, but not of joy.'

On the campaign trail, she was a compliant but silent beauty, gliding on four-inch heels to sit, regal and still, on a chair behind the podium. She was put behind a lectern only three times (including a speech at the Republican National Convention in which she was accused of plagiarising Michelle Obama).

Two years on, she is speaking out more, at a few public events and in two recent television interviews, but she still maintains a cool distance,

She makes her feelings known through small – but unprecedented – acts of rebellion

while making her true feelings known on occasion through small – but unprecedented for a First Lady – acts of rebellion.

Shortly after *The Wall Street Journal* reported last January that porn star Stormy Daniels was paid hush money to stop her from discussing a fling she allegedly had with Trump in 2006, Melania was obliged to attend the President's State of the Union address, and pointedly arrived in a separate car from her husband. She pulled out of their joint trip to Davos that same month, and in May she mysteriously disappeared for 24 days, after what the White House said was a routine outpatient procedure.

Donald Trump's private reaction to all her humiliations is apparently apologetic. Former FBI director James Comey recalled that Trump's main concern about the fabled 'pee tape' in the Russian kompromat file, which he denied strenuously, was how it would affect his wife.

A source close to Melania insists that she genu-

inely does have an interest in fulfilling the duties foisted upon her as First Lady, and that she retains some influence over her husband. 'She is that calming, supportive, honest voice. Especially to him. And he goes to her about everything. She's unapologetic for what she says and how she says it because it's truly from her gut and her instinct. She tells him exactly how she feels about what he's done. But... you can influence only certain aspects and you can discuss only certain things.'

Melania tends Michelle Obama's garden behind the White House with local children. She delivers books to Toys for Tots events around Washington. She visits and reads to hospitalised children. She has spoken out about opioid addiction and cyberbullying, and last month she gave up Christmas with 12-year-old Barron at Mar-a-Lago, leaving on Christmas night to visit troops in Iraq with her husband.

And while she is actively involved in planning schedules and projects, she has been known to operate without prior coordination with the West Wing. Last June she took a notorious trip to Texas, where she wore a Zara jacket emblazoned with 'I really don't care, do U?' to visit immigrant children, without prior discussion with her husband's staff.

Her own staff is less than half the size of Michelle Obama's and Laura Bush's, and is said to operate separately to that of the West Wing. In that sense, her life is unchanged from the one she shared with Donald in the Tower.

Her day-to-day life revolves around Barron, who attends school in suburban Washington, where Melania's parents are said to have rented a house. She does Pilates daily and otherwise rigorously maintains herself (American fashion journalist André Leon Talley once called her 'exquisitely moisturised'). She meets regularly with her fashion stylist, former designer Hervé Pierre, who scours shops in New York and Paris for her clothes.

And yet there are elements of mystery in Melania's married life that no one has pried open. My research into Donald suggests he is squeamish about certain elements of biology when it comes to women. One of Melania's attributes, he told Howard Stern in 2005, was that she never seemed to go to the bathroom. 'I've never seen it, it's



Above Melania's parents, Amalija and Viktor Knavs

amazing,' he said. Both have commented that their marriage works because they are independent of each other, but there is more to it. According to friends I talked to, and many other accounts, Donald actually listens to her when she decides to weigh in on matters, such as the child separations at the Mexico border or the recent firing of a national security aide who had crossed Melania's staff. She picks her shots.

Melania herself has discussed their marriage and in 2015 she told Barbara Walters: 'We have a great chemistry and to be with a man like my husband you need to know who you are. You need to have a very independent life and supporting him, you need to be very smart and quick, and be there for him when he needs you.'

When Trump was elected, some of his aides predicted Melania would be a new Jackie Kennedy. And she is, in a way. Melania is the Jackie Kennedy for the Kardashian age, in which fewer and fewer people read but everyone looks at pictures. Certainly she looked the part in the blue suit she wore on inauguration day, and she took credit for restoring White House furniture in a project started 10 years ago.

In Slovenian, an idiom for finding good fortune is *moja sekira padla v medu* – literally, my axe fell in the honey. Maybe that's exactly what happened to Melania.

Golden Handcuffs: The Secret History of Trump's Women, by Nina Burleigh (Gallery Books, £18.99). To order a copy for £15.99, call 0844-871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

THE OTHER MRS TRUMP

Mary Anne MacLeod, Donald Trump's mother, arrived in New York City in 1930 on a steamship and remained there until she died in 2000. The 10th child of a fisherman, she spoke Gaelic, and had spent her childhood in a two-bedroom cottage on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.

Trump has said his mother went to the US on holiday, but an early address after landing was at the home of the widow of Andrew Carnegie, also a Scottish immigrant, who had been one of the wealthiest men in America. In the US Census for 1930, Mary Anne's name is listed among the residents at the bottom of a list of 20 butlers, footmen,

cooks and other servants working for Louise Carnegie.

The Carnegie mansion was a 64-room Georgian Revival building, covering more than an acre on Manhattan's Upper East Side. From her position inside this American palace, polishing silver and banisters, Mary Anne witnessed up close the life of a grand woman, and the experience apparently left her with a lifelong desire for magnificence – a yearning that her thrifty German husband Fred and his mother Elisabeth are said to have ridiculed.

As Fred got richer, mainly by building middle-class apartment blocks in New York's outer boroughs,

Mary Anne wore furs, drove in a chauffeured Rolls-Royce, and took to doing her hair in a swooping pompadour... which, in pictures, looks familiar.

The curious coiffeur isn't the only thing Donald inherited from his mother. The gilt T on everything from his buildings to wines, steaks and water, his obsession with all things 'classy', the gilt Versailles triplex atop the Trump Tower, even the expensive furniture he has packed into the White House...

Donald gives credit to Fred for making him the man that he is. But there is plenty of Mary Anne that is evident in her son.



GETTY IMAGES