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Vienna, July 18, 1935.

No. 607

SUBJECT: DEATH OF MRS. SCHNECHNIGG, WIFE OF THE FEDERAL
CHANCELLOR, THROUGH AN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT.

The Honorable

The Secretary of State,

Washington.

Sir:

I have the honor to inform the Department that on Saturday, July 13, at about 12:25 p.m., Mrs. Schnechnigg, the wife of the Federal Chancellor, was killed in an automobile accident.

The Chancellor and Mrs. Schnechnigg, accompanied by their nine-year old son, left Vienna at about 2:30 on the morning of July 13, for St. Gilgen where Mrs. Schnechnigg intended

to spend several weeks. The Chancellor was accompanying her to remain with her a few days before returning to his duties in Vienna. The party consisted of two automobiles, in the first of which were the Chancellor and Mrs. Schuschnigg and their son, with the boy's nurse and two of his bodyguard. In the second automobile were officers and several men from his bodyguard.

The accident took place on a straight piece of road in the vicinity of Linz. For an unexplained reason the chauffeur lost control of the car which ran off the road into a tree. The Chancellor was thrown out of the car and was unconscious for some moments, but he suffered no serious injury. Mrs. Schuschnigg was killed instantly, her head having struck a part of the top of the half open car and concussion of the skull and a break in the spine resulted in immediate death. The little boy was injured, but not seriously, and is expected to be out of the hospital in the near future. The chauffeur was seriously injured and his life was for a time despaired of, but it now appears that his recovery is practically certain.

The remains of Mrs. Schuschnigg were brought to Vienna, and the funeral was held here on July 16. The members of the diplomatic corps in Vienna attended and those who were on holiday for the most part returned for the funeral. While the ceremony was kept as simple as possible due to the wishes of the Chancellor, tens of thousands of people were gathered in the vicinity of the church and the cemetery and on the day of the funeral there were extraordinary indications of mourning in Vienna and throughout the country.

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The Chancellor himself is a young man and his wife was still younger, being thirty-four years of age. She was a charming, simple, very intelligent, unselfish, and much loved woman. There was an extraordinarily deep attachment between the Chancellor and Mrs. Schuschnigg and his bereavement under these extraordinary circumstances has undoubtedly greatly affected him and his hair, which had been slightly gray, has noticeably turned almost white in the few days following the accident.

The accident took place on July 13, at 12:25 p.m., and I learned of it a few hours afterwards and was able to learn through my French and Italian colleagues that they had already satisfied themselves that it was an accident. In view of the premeditated and deliberate murder of Chancellor Dollfuss in the same month of last year, the news of the accident immediately aroused suspicions that it might have been due to other than accidental causes. I was therefore able to inform the Department in my telegram No. 86, of July 13, 3 p.m., concerning the death of Mrs. Schuschnigg and that it was practically already determined that it was an accident.

Although every endeavor has been made to determine through careful official investigation what actually caused the accident, the circumstances are such that it will probably not be possible to definitely establish the cause. The chauffeur has sufficiently recovered to be able to say that it could not have been due to his being taken suddenly ill and through this having lost control of the car. The car itself was so damaged through the impact with the tree and also started

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to turn so that the most careful examination of the wreckage has so far not made it possible to determine what mechanical defect actually resulted in the accident. It is believed here, however, that the accident was due to a defect which developed in the steering gear of the automobile.

The possibility always exists that someone may have tampered with the steering gear of the automobile, but this possibility is discarded here in view of the fact that the car had been running from 5:30 a.m. until 12:15 p.m. over a road parts of which are not too good and at a fair speed. It is believed here that if there had been any tampering with the steering gear it would have resulted in an accident at an earlier stage of the journey.

There have been articles in the foreign press indicating that the Chancellor might, as a result of the accident and the loss of his wife, wish to retire from public office. There is no ground for these reports. It is well known that the Chancellor is not an ambitious man and that he would prefer a less conspicuous position in the Government. He is, however, a man of strong determination and of a keen sense of what he believes to be his responsibilities during the difficult times through which Austria is passing. The loss of his wife will undoubtedly strengthen the feeling which he has had of preferring a position of less responsibility, but knowing him as I do there is every reason to believe that he will only devote himself more closely than ever to his duties as Chancellor.

The reports which have appeared with respect to the possible retirement of the Chancellor on account of the loss of his wife do not take into account the present situation in Austria

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and in the Government. Should the Chancellor have a real desire to retire to a less responsible position his associates in the Government, including Prince Starhemberg, would wish him to remain and would undoubtedly be able to prevail upon him to do so. The circumstances are such, as reflected in my previous despatches, that a change in the position of Chancellor now would be undesirable and only a most grave illness on the part of the Chancellor would be considered as justification for his retirement.

Reports are also appearing to the effect that the Chancellor's condition, physically and mentally, as a result of the accident is so serious that he may be obliged to retire. These reports are, so far as I am able to determine, entirely without foundation. I have seen the Chancellor on several occasions since the accident and although he has suffered from a severe contusion of the shoulder, he is apparently physically otherwise uninjured. That he suffered a serious nervous shock is unquestionable and that the loss of his wife is a serious blow to him is clear to anyone who knows him as I do. The ordeal of the public funeral was exceedingly difficult for him. There is, however, no ground to believe that his effectiveness has in any way been impaired physically or mentally by these unfortunate developments.

The bereavement of Chancellor Schuschnigg not only aroused the deepest sympathy for him in Austria, but there was a continuous stream of telegrams of condolence from other countries. The Ministers of Great Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, and a number of other countries, were instructed by their Governments to call and to express official sympathy. Anticipating this in

- 6 -

my telegram of July 13, 3 p.m., I took the liberty of suggesting that a message of sympathy should be addressed to him. The Legation did not receive any reply to this telegram and I have deemed it advisable not to make an inquiry informally in the Foreign Office as to whether a message has been received directly from our Government, but I gather from the published statements of messages received that there has been none from our Government. I, however, called at the Chancellor's office on the afternoon of July 13, and inscribed my name in the list opened for that purpose, and in view of the friendly contact which I have had with the Chancellor and Mrs. Schuschnigg, I addressed to him a personal note of sympathy.

The possibilities are, so far as any forecast may be made at this time, that the accident of the Chancellor and his benevolence will not have any effect in Austria other than to strengthen his position both officially and personally.

As of possible interest to the Department I am sending herewith a translation of the two radio broadcasts of Colonel Adam which give an official version of the accident which is confirmed by all of the information which I have been able to get from other responsible sources. There is also transmitted herewith a photograph of the Chancellor and Mrs. Schuschnigg and their son, taken from a Vienna publication.

Respectfully yours,

George B. Messersmith.

Enclosures:

1/2/ Translations of broadcasts by
Colonel Adam.

3/ Photograph of Chancellor and Mrs. Schuschnigg.