

Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn Papers
A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress



Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
2018

Contact information: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact>

Catalog Record: <https://lcn.loc.gov/mm2008085409>

Additional search options available at: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms013142>

Prepared by Karen Linn Femia

Finding aid encoded by Library of Congress Manuscript Division, 2013
Revised 2019 July

Collection Summary

Title: Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn Papers

Span Dates: 1880-1994

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1910-1992)

ID No.: MSS85409

Creator: Severn, Elizabeth

Creator: Severn, Margaret

Extent: 5,600 items

Extent: 16 containers plus 1 oversize; 209 digital files (6.34 GB)

Extent: 6.8 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

LC Catalog record: <https://lcn.loc.gov/mm2008085409>

Summary: Elizabeth Severn, psychotherapist, author, and psychoanalytic patient of Sándor Ferenczi; and her daughter, Margaret Severn, ballet dancer and vaudeville performer. Correspondence, writings, printed matter, and photographs concerning Elizabeth Severn's private life and her career as a psychotherapist. Correspondence, writings, art work, printed matter, photographs, and digital files relating to Margaret Severn's life as a dancer in New York theaters, in traveling vaudeville shows in the 1920s, and with European ballet companies in the 1930s.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

People

Albertieri, Luigi.

Armstrong, Harriet Mann, 1856-1956--Correspondence.

Beebe, William, 1877-1962--Correspondence.

Benda, Wladyslaw T. (Wladyslaw Theodore), 1873-1948.

De Mille, Agnes.

Federn, Paul.

Ferenczi, Gizella, 1866-1949.

Ferenczi, Sándor, 1873-1933.

Fokine, Michel, 1880-1942.

Gygi, Ota.

Iskoldoff, Eugene 1892-1957.

Jooss, Kurt, 1901-1979.

Nijinska, Bronislava, 1891-1972.

Nijinska, Bronislava, 1891-1972.

Rubinstein, Ida, 1883-1960.

Severn family.

Severn, Elizabeth.

Severn, Margaret. Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn papers. 1880-1993.

Sparling, H. Halliday (Henry Halliday)--Correspondence.

St. Denis, Ruth, 1880-1968.

Steinert, Alexander, 1900-1982.

Stravinsky, Igor, 1882-1971. Perséphone.

Waelder, Robert.

Organizations

American Field Service.

Ballets russes.

Dancers' Club (New York, N.Y.)

Subjects

Abortion.
Ballet companies--Europe.
Ballet dancers--Europe.
Ballet--Europe.
Ballet.
Choreographers.
Dance--Europe.
Dance--New York (State)--New York.
Dance.
Dancers--New York (State)--New York--Societies and clubs.
Dancers.
Impresarios.
Masks.
Music-halls (Variety-theaters, cabarets, etc.)
Musicals--New York (State)--New York.
Musicians.
Off-Broadway theater.
Psychoanalysis.
Psychotherapy.
Revue.
Theater--New York (State)--New York.
Vaudeville.
World War, 1939-1945.

Places

Germany--History--1945-1955.

Titles

Elizabeth Severn papers
Margaret Severn papers

Occupations

Analysts.
Authors.
Ballet dancers.
Psychotherapists.
Vaudeville performers.

Provenance

The papers of Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn, psychotherapist and psychoanalytic patient of Sándor Ferenczi and her daughter, ballet dancer and vaudeville performer, were given to the Library of Congress by Arnold Rachman in 2008 and 2016.

Processing History

The collection was first processed and described in 2013 as the papers of Elizabeth Severn. The addition to the papers was processed and described in 2018 and the name of the collection changed at that time to the papers of Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn.

Transfers

Some photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division and a video tape was transferred to the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division where they are identified as part of the Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn Papers.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Digital Format

Digital files were received as part of the papers of Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn. Reference copies were created from the original digital media. Advanced notice is required for access to digital content; consult reference staff in the Manuscript Division for more information.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container or Digital ID number, Elizabeth Severn and Margaret Severn Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note for Elizabeth Severn

Date	Event
1879, Nov. 17	Born Leota Brown, Milwaukee, Wisc.
circa 1900	Married Charles Kenneth Heywood (separated 1905)
1901	Gave birth to daughter, Margaret
1906-1907	After history of mental and emotional illness, treated for nervous breakdown by a medical doctor using "power of positive thinking"
1907	Determined to become a mental healer, she obtained a divorce, changed her name to Elizabeth Severn, and with her daughter moved to Texas
circa 1908-1912	"Metaphysician and healer," traveled in the United States, including Colorado, Nebraska, Texas, and Washington, D.C., seeing patients
1912-1914	Moved to England, started a psychotherapy practice in London
1913	Published <i>Psycho-Therapy: Its Doctrine and Practice</i> . London: Rider
1914-1924	Returned to the United States and established psychotherapy practice in New York City; was increasingly troubled herself and sought help from several psychiatrists, without cure
1917	Published <i>The Psychology of Behavior</i> . New York: Dodd, Mead
1924	Traveled to Budapest, Hungary, to undergo analysis with Sándor Ferenczi
1924-1933	Analysand of Sándor Ferenczi; traveled frequently between Europe and New York for analysis while continuing her own practices in New York City and London, England
1933	Death of Sándor Ferenczi; Severn resumed her psychotherapy practice in London, England

1933	Published <i>The Discovery of the Self</i> . London: Rider
1933-1939	Traveled between London, England, and New York City; gave lectures and taught courses on psychology while continuing to see patients
1939-1959	With the advent of World War II, moved permanently to New York City; continued to write, lecture, and see patients
1959, Feb.	Died, New York, N.Y.

[Biographical note based in part on Christopher Fortune, "The Case of 'RN': Sándor Ferenczi's Radical Experiment in Psychoanalysis," chapter 6 of *The Legacy of Sándor Ferenczi*, Lewis Aron and Adrienne Harris, editors. (New Jersey: Analytic Press, 1993)]

Biographical Note for Margaret Severn

Date	Event
1901, Aug. 14	Born Margaret Heywood, Birmingham, Ala.
1909	First dance performance, Denver, Colo.
1912-1914	Lived in London, England, with her mother; studied dance with Eduard Espinosa
1914	Moved to New York City, ballet student of Luigi Albertieri
1916	Summer student of Ruth St. Denis and performer with the Denishawn School of Dancing, Los Angeles, Calif.
1916-1931	Professional dancer in a variety of cabarets, theater revues, and traveling vaudeville companies
1920	Performer in the Greenwich Village Follies dancing with masks made by artist Wladyslaw T. Benda.
1924-1925	While traveling on the vaudeville circuit, became intimately involved with Hungarian violinist Ota Gygi who also became her manager; had abortion in April of 1925
1926	Traveled to Budapest to visit mother; had several sessions with psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi; relationship with Gygi ended
1927-1928	Returned to U.S.; dancer with traveling company
1929-1932	Dancer and dance teacher, New York City; involved with a variety of productions, concerts, and recitals.
1930	Opened the Dancers' Club, New York, N.Y.
1932	Moved to Paris, France
1932	Ballet dancer with company of Bronislava Nijinska
1934	Dancer with Ida Rubinstein's ballet company working with choreographers Michel Fokine and Kurt Jooss
1935-1937	Principle dancer, Ballet Russes de Paris; toured throughout Europe
1937	Moved from Paris to Prague, Czechoslovakia, with Vasilli [unknown surname], a Russian journalist
1938	Returned to Paris, moved to London; miscellaneous dance engagements
1939	Returned to New York City to live with her mother; continued to perform and teach dance
1971	Moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
1997, July 7	Died, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Elizabeth Severn (1879-1959) and Margaret Severn (1901-1997) span the years 1880-1994, with the bulk of the material dating from 1910 to 1992. The collection is in two parts. The part processed in 2013 is focused on Elizabeth Severn's activities as a psychotherapist. The 2018 addition consists primarily of material related to dancer Margaret Severn, Elizabeth Severn's daughter. The collection contains correspondence, writings, photographs, printed matter, sketches, and digital files consisting of two video documentaries, edited correspondence, and draft writings. The digital files are related to Margaret Severn.

In the first part of the collection, focused on Elizabeth Severn, the correspondence is almost entirely incoming letters, mostly from patients of Severn. There are also some carbon copy letters written by World War II American Field Service volunteers giving descriptions of wartime activities and postwar Germany. Other correspondents include William Beebe and H. Halliday Sparling. Also of interest are the notes made during lectures and seminars by Paul Federn and Robert Waelder. Although Elizabeth Severn and her daughter Margaret maintained a long correspondence, Elizabeth Severn's portion is not represented. Margaret, reportedly, in accordance with her mother's wishes, burned her mother's letters in 1986. Elizabeth Severn's speeches and writings files include drafts of three unpublished books as well as a set of typescript essays and speeches. The printed matter includes publicity material for Elizabeth Severn's psychotherapist career. The leaflets and cards advertise her lectures or her availability for therapy sessions and document her travels. Newspaper clippings concern Severn lecture appearances, news about psychoanalysis, and clippings of people who were close acquaintances or patients of Severn. Reference copies of some photographs transferred to the Prints and Photographs Division, including those with substantial writing on the back, have been kept with the papers. Photographs include travel pictures, snapshots, and portraits of Elizabeth Severn, as well as photographs of friends, family, and patients, including a group of photographs of Severn with her analyst Sándor Ferenczi and his wife, Gizella Ferenczi.

The 2018 addition is substantially larger than the original collection. Material concerning Elizabeth Severn in the addition includes addressed envelopes tracking her travels and residency changes from 1907 to 1935, received correspondence, writings, and miscellaneous documents and printed matter. The bulk of the 2018 addition consists of family correspondence: Margaret Severn's letters to her mother and grandmother (Amma). In her responses to her mother's letters, information can be gleaned about Elizabeth Severn's activities, travels, opinions, and her ongoing psychoanalytic relationship with Sándor Ferenczi.

Margaret's letters to her mother and grandmother provide a detailed description of her dance career and her personal life from 1919 to 1939. She often wrote daily letters and was surprisingly frank with her mother concerning all aspects of her life including sexual activity. Margaret Severn performed at the highest professional level of the dance world in the United States and Europe. Trained as a ballet dancer when there were no ballet companies in the United States, she spent years performing in vaudeville, cabarets, and in the New York theater. In 1932 she moved to Paris and danced ballet in a professional world dominated by Russian émigrés. Over the years, she danced with many of the top dancers and choreographers of her time, and her letters provide an inside view of the world of dance from 1920 to 1939. Dancers, choreographers, musicians, and impresarios who worked with Margaret Severn, often appearing multiple times over the years, and who figure in her letters are many but include the following: Luigi Albertieri, Agnes De Mille, Michel Fokine, Ota Gygi, Eugene Iskoldoff, Kurt Jooss, Bronislava Nijinska, Ida Rubinstein, Ruth St. Denis, and Alexander Steinert. An abortion in April 1925, fully described in the letters, was the result of her 1924-1925 affair with Hungarian violinist and fellow vaudeville performer, Ota Gygi.

Margaret Severn had her first major critical acclaim in 1920 when she performed in the Greenwich Village Follies using masks created by artist Wladyslaw T. Benda. After the success this performance, Benda taught Severn how to make her own masks for dance performances. Her mask dances remained a signature performance piece throughout her dance career. Two small masks of Margaret Severn are in the collection. In addition to an active performance schedule, Severn opened the Dancers' Club at 347 W. 56th Street in Manhattan (1930-1932). The club provided living accommodations, mail and laundry services, practice facilities, an employment register, and social activities for professional dancers, teachers, and students. Margaret sometimes included newsletters from the club with her correspondence to her mother. In 1932, Margaret traveled to Budapest to visit her mother and subsequently settled in Paris. She danced with Bronislava Nijinska's ballet company in 1932 and with Ida Rubinstein's company for the 1934 Paris Opera House production that included the premiere of Stravinsky's *Perséphone*. Her letters to her mother provide lively backstage descriptions of rehearsals and performances. Margaret Severn performed as principal dancer and ballet master for a traveling company called the Ballet Russes de Paris, 1935-1937. The company participated, with Margaret Severn as lead dancer, in the July 1936 outdoor spectacle in Nymphenburg Park, Munich, Germany, called "Nacht der Amazonen" (Night of the Amazons). For the performance, Severn was kidnapped by horseback-riding Cossacks and later saved by Amazons (played by German women) on horseback. "Nacht der Amazonen" was an annual event, 1936-1939.

The letters have many editorial marks, usually in green ink, that were made years later when Margaret Severn was working on her memoir. Envelopes have been inscribed with notes about the contents of the letter. The original writing in the letters and on the envelopes, however, is still legible even with the edits. Although she never completed her memoir, she did publish three articles in *Dance Chronicle* based on parts of her correspondence. The articles are in the autobiographical writings file. The digital files include her draft memoir and typed and edited transcriptions of many of the letters, including

early letters for which the original paper copy is not in the collection. Presumably, the transcriptions of these early letters are edited versions. Margaret Severn was also an artist. In addition to a folder of her sketches, many of her letters are illustrated.

Peter Lipski's two film documentaries on Margaret Severn, *Dance Masks: The World of Margaret Severn* (1980) and *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman* (1992) are both available as digital files.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in two sections: the original collection of Elizabeth Severn papers that was processed in 2013 and an addition processed in 2018 that includes some Elizabeth Severn material but is predominantly composed of the papers of Margaret Severn. Within each section, the files are arranged alphabetically by name of person or type of material and alphabetically or chronologically therein.

Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 1	Beebe, William, 1934
BOX 1	Correspondence
BOX 1	General
BOX 1	Received, 1913-1956, undated (6 folders)
BOX 1	Sent, 1943, undated
BOX 1	World War II American Field Service volunteers, received and sent, 1943-1945
BOX 1	Drawings of Elizabeth Severn by Margaret Severn (daughter), 1921, 1935-1938
BOX 1	Federn, Paul, lecture notes and writings, 1949-1950, undated
BOX 1	Miscellany, 1928-1959, undated
BOX 1	Photographs, circa 1880-circa 1955
BOX 1	Printed matter
BOX 1	Miscellany, 1911, 1936-1954, undated
BOX 1	News clippings, 1937-1959, 1986-1989
BOX 1	Severn publicity material, circa 1910-1938
BOX 2	"Private library of Elizabeth Severn," 1949-1954, undated
BOX 2	Severn, Margaret, 1939-1942, 1960, 1978-1993, undated
BOX 2	Sparling, H. Halliday, 1918, 1924, undated
BOX 2	Speeches and writings
BOX 2	Book drafts
BOX 2	"65 Degrees of Psychological and Mental Healing," undated (4 folders)
BOX 2	"An Analysis of Love and Sex," undated (4 folders)
BOX 2	"Crystals, a novel," circa 1922 (1 folder)
BOX 3	"Crystals, a novel," circa 1922 (2 folders)
	Books published
BOX 3	<i>The Discovery of the Self</i> , 1933
BOX 3	<i>Psycho-Therapy: Its Doctrine and Practice</i> , 1914
BOX 3	Essay drafts
BOX 3	"Difference Between Mental and Spiritual Healing," undated
BOX 3	"For the Development of Wisdom," undated
BOX 3	"Magnetic Healing," undated
BOX 3	"Some Important Points in Regard to Magnetism," undated
BOX 3	"Spiritual Healing," undated
BOX 3	"Worry: Its Cause and Cure," undated
BOX 3	Speeches to Practical Psychology Club
BOX 3	"Mental Catharsis: A Means of Cure," 23 Nov. 1937
BOX 3	"What is Psychic Injury?," 16 Nov. 1937
BOX 3	Thompson, Clara, "Ferenczi's Contribution to Psychoanalysis," 1944

Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 3	Waelder, Robert, seminar notes, 1950-1951
BOX 4	Addition
BOX 4	Elizabeth Severn
BOX 4	Addressed envelopes, 1907-1935
BOX 4	Correspondence received, 1914, 1936-1948 (2 folders)
BOX 4	Ferenczi, Sándor, 1933, 1961, undated
BOX 4	Miscellany, 1934-1938, 1967, undated
BOX 4	Passports and identity cards, 1930-1935
BOX 4	Photographs, undated
BOX 4	Printed matter, 1905, 1934-1958, undated (2 folders)
BOX 4	Writings
BOX 4	Book draft, "The Psychology of Love," undated (2 folders)
BOX 4	Miscellaneous, 1914, 1933, undated
BOX 5	<i>The Psychology of Behavior</i> , 1920-1925
BOX 5	<i>Psycho-Therapy: Its Doctrine and Practice</i> , 1913
BOX 5	Margaret Severn
BOX 5	Autobiographical writings
BOX 5	Dance Chronicle journal articles, 1988-1993 (2 folders)
DF	Digital Files: Edited correspondence and draft memoir, 1979, 1987 Correspondence: 1919; memoir, chapters 1-5: 1901-1917 Digital ID: mss85409_128_001 Correspondence: 1919-1922; memoir, chapter 6: 1920 Digital ID: mss85409_128_002 Memoir, chapter 7: 1922-1923 Digital ID: mss85409_128_003 Memoir, chapter 7: 1923-1924 Digital ID: mss85409_128_004 Correspondence: 1924-1925 Digital ID: mss85409_128_005 Correspondence: 1925-1927; memoir: Feb. 1927 Digital ID: mss85409_128_006 Correspondence: 1928-1929 Digital ID: mss85409_128_007 Correspondence: 1929-1930; memoir, chapter 8: 1929 Digital ID: mss85409_128_008 Correspondence: 1930-1931; memoir, chapter 8: 1930-1931 Digital ID: mss85409_128_009 Correspondence: 1931-1932; memoir: 1932 Digital ID: mss85409_128_010 Correspondence: 1932-1933; memoir, chapter 9: 1932 Digital ID: mss85409_128_011 Correspondence: 1933-1934; memoir, chapters 10-11: 1933-1934 Digital ID: mss85409_128_012

Container List

Container

Contents

	Correspondence: 1934-1936 Digital ID: mss85409_128_013
	Correspondence: 1936-1939; memoir, chapters 12-13: 1936-1939 Digital ID: mss85409_128_014
BOX 5	"The Sixth Sense," undated
BOX 5	Dance costume and photograph, undated
BOX 6	Family correspondence
BOX 6	Aug. 1919-Sept. 1922 (12 folders)
BOX 7	Oct. 1922-Oct. 1923 (12 folders)
BOX 8	Nov. 1923-Feb. 1925 (13 folders)
BOX 9	Mar. 1925-Apr. 1927 (15 folders)
BOX 10	May 1927-June 1928 (14 folders)
BOX 11	July 1928-Sept. 1929 (14 folders)
BOX 12	Oct. 1929-Jan. 1931 (14 folders)
BOX 13	Feb. 1931-Dec. 1932 (13 folders)
BOX 14	Jan. 1933-Mar. 1935 (16 folders)
BOX 15	Apr. 1935-May 1937 (17 folders)
BOX 16	June 1937-Mar. 1939, undated (8 folders)
BOX 16	General correspondence, 1921-1928, 1983-1994, undated (3 folders)
BOX 16	Lecture notes on dance history, undated (2 folders)
BOX 16	Lipskis, Peter, film documentaries Dance Masks: The World of Margaret Severn (1980) and Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman (1992)
DF	Video files, 2011 Digital ID: mss85409_127_001
BOX 16	Promotional material, circa 1980, circa 1992
BOX OV 1	Masks, undated
BOX 16	Miscellany, 1922, 1929, 1937, 1947-1972, undated
BOX 16	News clippings, 1928-1931, undated
BOX 16	Passport and vital records, 1928, 1959, 1966
BOX 16	Photographs, 1920-1932, 1960-1968, 1987-1988, undated
BOX 16	Sketches by Margaret Severn, 1923, 1945, 1994, undated