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LIFESTYLE

Liz Elliot meets William Lobkowicz, who moved to the Czech Republic 20 years ago to reclaim, restore and open to the public his family's magnificent palaces and art collections

PHOTOGRAPHS RORY CARNEGIE

William Lobkowicz was brought up as a middle-class boy in Boston, Massachusetts, the 600-year heritage of his father's great and noble family – Princes of the Holy Roman Empire, High Chancellors of Bohemia – by then a distant memory.

Maximilian (Max) Lobkowicz, William's grandfather, born in 1888, was the son of the 10th Prince and one of the wealthiest men in the country, owning castles, land, libraries and a private art collection considered one of the greatest in the world. He became, as had his forefathers before him, a politician and a diplomat, but when, in 1918, the First Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed, hereditary titles abolished and the redistribution of certain lands demanded, he renounced his title, swearing loyalty to the Republic rather than, as other aristocratic families had done, claiming German or Austrian nationality to preserve his wealth.

In 1939, when the Germans invaded, Max and his family escaped to England. His lands, castles and possessions were confiscated – treasures and artworks were dispersed, the prize paintings being taken by Hitler for his planned Reichsmuseum in Linz – and Max served the duration of the war as Czechoslovakian ambassador to the Court of St James's.

In 1945, at the end of the war, when he could have removed much of his property abroad, Max returned to Czechoslovakia to help prop up the country's fragile democracy. However, three years later the communists took over and Max, in events not dissimilar to the last scenes of *Casablanca*, fled the country to which, against all odds, he had devoted his life. He was never to return.

By now, Max's son, Martin – William's father – was living in Massachusetts, where he initially worked as a door-to-door salesman and eventually became a stockbroker. Using what little



THIS PICTURE William Lobkowicz and his wife, Alexandra (Sandra), dance in the newly restored Imperial Hall of Lobkowicz Palace in Prague





‘I remember tales of balls given by the archduke, boar hunts and concerts’

extra money he had, he helped his extended family and newly arriving refugees; William, the youngest of four children, says his earliest memories are of huge family gatherings. ‘I used to sit on the knee of my great uncle, Prince Franz Schwarzenberg, listening to tales of my family’s past, of sleigh rides, balls given by the archduke, boar hunts and concerts – it all held an enormous fascination for me,’ he recalls.

Although very musical, William went to Harvard to study European history, then worked in banking and real estate. The course of his life seemed settled. Then, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, an event followed in Czechoslovakia by the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communism.

As William and his family watched events unfold on television, they saw thousands of East Germans scaling the walls of the West German embassy in Prague, once a Lobkowicz palace. ‘We recognised various rooms as the cameras followed the crowd,’ he says. ‘I made my mind up then and there to return to Prague and try to retrieve what had been lost.’

He took a crash course in Czech and in 1991 moved to Prague. His timing was perfect. He learnt that, as well as artworks and libraries, his family had also owned 10 castles and thousands of acres of land. He also learnt that President Václav Havel had recently signed three acts providing for the return of confiscated properties, buildings and objects, and, in order to avoid endless claims, had placed time limits for those demanding restitution. William had just 18 months in which to find tens of thousands of documents, locate the missing objects and file claims for everything the family had lost.

Nothing in his previous life could have prepared him for the challenges he was to face. The decades of neglect would have presented a monumental task to any organisation, let alone one man, but William has almost superhuman energy and commitment. He is also fortunate, as he is the first to admit, to have married Alexandra Florescu, an American whose own father the communists had expelled from Romania.

With the help of lawyers, William and Alexandra (Sandra) scaled a mountain of paperwork, reclaiming hundreds of thousands of objects from over 100 different locations. They worked in two rooms in the Renaissance castle of Nela-hozeves, the only Lobkowicz castle to be near the condition in which Max had left it. ‘For several months, in freezing temperatures, we catalogued thousands of pieces – it was physically draining and not a lot of fun,’ William explains.

Over the months, they reclaimed the finest private library in central Europe, containing 65,000 volumes, some dating back to the ninth century. The musically obsessed 7th Prince had



THIS PAGE FROM TOP Lobkowicz Palace (right of picture) commands a superb view of Prague. William’s grandfather, Maximilian Lobkowicz, photographed by František Drtikol, 1925. William and Sandra are shown in their Prague apartment, with their three children, Ileana, William and Sophia. Maximilian is presented with flowers by a local child at Roudnice Castle in autumn 1947





THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT An evening lecture is given in the Concert Hall at Lobkowitz Palace by renowned psychologist and best-selling author Dr Michael Thompson. The fairy-tale silhouettes of the buildings in Prague's Old Town are a magical backdrop for the traditional Christmas tree. Sandra and William discuss the restoration of the Concert Hall, with its mid-seventeenth-century stucco ceiling. The couple visit the city's Christmas market. Sandra contemplates the tranquil ambience of the palace's chapel, with its seventeenth-century altarpiece of St Wenceslaus by Czech baroque master Petr Brandl





THIS PAGE FROM TOP William and his librarian, Sone Cernocka, discuss the future of the 65,000 historic books in the family archive. Sandra and William look out from Arcade Hall on to the courtyard of Nelahozeves Castle

been a patron of Beethoven, and the composer dedicated his 3rd (*Eroica*), 5th and 6th (*Pastoral*) symphonies to Lobkowitz, with the world premiere of *Eroica* taking place at the Lobkowitz palace in Vienna. The prince had himself paid for and sung the part of Archangel Raphael in the Prague premiere of Haydn's *Creation*. There is a collection of over 4,500 musical manuscripts, which include Handel's *Messiah* with annotations by Mozart, an early score of *Don Giovanni* and many first editions, as well as the

original instruments used by the prince's two privately funded orchestras. Then there are the paintings: two huge canvases of the Thames by Canaletto, *Haymaking* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, works by Velázquez, Cranach and Rubens, and the finest sixteenth-century Spanish portraits outside the Prado. There are also thousands of decorative pieces, all of which had to be traced and documented.

William, Sandra and their three children – William (16), Ileana (13) and Sophia (9) – now live in an apartment near to Prague Castle. They believe strongly in their role as custodians of their inheritance, and the reclaimed family collections are now on display to the public in the magnificently restored Lobkowitz Palace in the

Prague Castle complex and at the Renaissance chateau of Nelahozeves. 'Under communism the castles suffered a lot,' William says. 'So to pay for the restorations necessary to open the buildings to the public, six of the 10 castles we worked so hard to reclaim had to be sold.'

William is the engine behind the enterprise, while Sandra looks after all the collections and exhibitions, and specific projects such as the shops, libraries and restaurants, including overseeing the menus – 'Although I am responsible for the gourmet cheeseburgers,' William claims. 'I want my staff to be part of a multilayered company,' he adds. 'They need to think how can we do this in an integrated and seamless way.'

Today, as well as the family collection of paintings, musical instruments and armoury on display at Lobkowitz Palace, daily classical-music concerts are held in the restored Concert Hall, with its seventeenth-century stucco ceilings, and visitors can sip a glass of Lobkowitz beer or wine on the terraces of the palace cafe, which offer a panoramic view of Prague.

The family ducal seat, Roudnice Castle, used as a training centre for the SS during the war, was once the symbol of the power of the

William and Sandra believe strongly in their role as custodians of their inheritance

High Chancellor of Bohemia, Prince Václav Eusebius Lobkowitz. A masterpiece of Italian baroque, it is larger than Buckingham Palace. William had the building reroofed and has already opened it for several major events.

In Nelahozeves Castle, overlooking the birthplace of the Czech composer Dvořák, you can visit a series of fascinating rooms portraying the lifestyle of the family through the centuries. William is trying to raise money to house the 65,000 volumes, 12,000 boxes and 18,000 folios of family history, in a purpose-built library next door, with accommodation for scholars. 'These unique records cover 800 years of European history and should be accessible to those wishing to study them,' he says.

The first exhibition at Nelahozeves opened on the anniversary of Max's death 30 years before. With President Havel present, William's father made a speech in which he said how happy Max would have been to see all the family back in the castle again. 'It was a new chapter in our wonderful cultural heritage,' explains William, 'and meant a great deal to me' □

Lobkowitz Collections: www.lobkowitz-collections.org



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A desk in the Armoury at Nelahozeves Castle is made entirely from antlers. Part of the family's renowned art collection is displayed in the Yellow Drawing Room. The Princess's Bedroom is home to a collection of late-nineteenth-century portraits of Lobkowitz children. Sandra sits in the Princess's Bedroom in front of an eighteenth-century desk that belonged to William's great-great grandmother. William walks across the courtyard of Nelahozeves Castle. In the Dining Room, laid for dinner, hangs a painting of the Holy Roman Emperor Franz I, husband of Empress Maria Theresa; beyond can be seen the Armoury. Frescoes of military figures in the Knights Hall date back to 1564

