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The Royal Road to Sustainability

Czech Prince William Lobkowicz
revives noble wealth, and
pays it forward

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Royal Road to Sustainability

William Lobkowitz turns paupers back to princes in daring modern-day initiative

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Lobkowitz Palace rises up over Prague, just under the gothic St. Vitus Cathedral.

Boston-born, Harvard-bred William Lobkowitz is no ordinary East Coast real estate broker. Behind the unassuming exterior of a modest European History graduate is a strain of noble blood with lofty aspirations. The bygone Prince of Prague, armed solely with his father's donated pension fund, has returned to his ancestral city to reclaim property confiscated by the Nazis during World War II. But unlike the lords of yore, he's paying it forward in cultural sustainability.

Castles in Bohemia

When the Lobkowitz family escaped from the Communists in the 1940s, the New World was their destination.

Leaving behind the foggy streets and dreamy architecture of one of the world's most enchanting cities was little compared to the extensive property they lost. After the Velvet Revolution, Lobkowitz was able to reclaim 10 of the family's 13 castles under the Czech Republic's restitution laws, the first of which was passed in the early 1990s. The last Lobkowitz restitution was done just last year. Up until 1939, the family had maintained their possessions just like any other noble lineage, without thought of opening it up to the public. "It was ours, that's it," explains Lobkowitz from his offices in Prague, "but war caused our perspective to change a lot."

In addition to extensive lands, the family recovered some 1,500 paintings, including Pieter Brueghel's celebrated *Haymaking*, a treasure trove of decorative and sacred objects dating from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries, and an extensive firearms collection that speaks to the family's power and wealth.

A fast talker and born leader, Lobkowitz is first-generation American. He speaks Czech and German, and is competent in Czech culture. "Our family always kept our heritage very close to us," he says, recalling the endless funds his father doled out to Czech refugees over the years. "It was a natural thing to do, but also a connection to our roots." Admiration for his parents, for



Chinese Belvedere Room

the life his father left behind, but also for their commitment to a stolen heritage eventually drove the young prince to leave Boston behind and return to Prague around the fall of the Iron Curtain, after an absence of forty years that he calls "nothing in a 700-year family history". A Bohemian in every sense of the word.

Stalemate riches

Acquiring past possessions is one thing, maintaining them is another. With the family absent for almost half a century, things were in a state of dire neglect. Much of the Lobkowitz lands had been located in Sudetenland, where coal mining had produced an acid rain, ru-

ining thousands of hectares of forestry. "Castles are unbelievably expensive to maintain," he says. "And the land, forests, and businesses that sustained living in them for centuries is all cut off now." The property needed restoration and upkeep, but without the traditional financial underpinnings to keep the massive estate running, Lobkowitz faced a challenge unknown to his predecessors.

What was once a symbol of wealth and power had become a millstone. With no trust funds or resources to draw on, most people would be justifiably daunted. Not Lobkowitz. Completely on his own, he says, he found the monumental task exciting.



Heir to the noble estate, William Lobkowitz

Retrenching

It became quickly evident that the bill and debt making would be enormous. The decision was made to overturn tradition and open everything up to the public, which, Lobkowitz gambled, would build a new financial foundation for cultural tourism by turning castles into destinations. How so? "By making culture relevant," he says, citing the new family tagline.

The Czech Republic boasts 297 castles and historical monuments visited by some 11,000,000 visitors annually, up 13 sites from 2010. But with a lagging economy and an unemployment rate of 7.7 percent, the country struggles against a pre-revolution mentality that has left its mark on a culture struck twice by an iron hand in the last century. Do you feel you bring something to the Czech Republic that is absent from the former Soviet-bloc country? "Anybody can make it anywhere as long as you work hard," says Lobkowitz. "Maybe my American upbringing helps with that; we're grateful to America for giving us another chance. But mostly we just try to get through. We improvise."

By making culture relevant, Lobkowitz mirrors a kind of 'Made In' movement meant to answer a looming question for emerging generations: Why is this important? And why is it relevant to me? Diligence, he hopes, will pay off as cultural destinations become more popular in a distracted world. The prince has divided his *modus operandi* into two distinct paths: the business »»»



The Lobkowitz Palace Café

side of keeping things running and non-profit commitments.

Business before Pleasure

Keeping the four main castles generating income —Lobkowitz Palace, and Nelahozeves, Roudnice, and Strekov Castles— means charging for museum tickets, curating fine gift shops, and providing daily music concerts on the grounds. In Prague proper, Lobkowitz Palace is set among pristine gardens that make idyllic settings for more elite possibilities, such as renting lavish halls for conferences, weddings, cocktail parties, or gala dinners with a Four Seasons-trained chef.

“People today, particularly emerging generations and certain cultures, are not only drawn to museums to see the art, they go because there’s an event there. They go because there’s a wine tasting, and they like wine. While they’re there, they drop by the museum. This inverts the museum focus slightly

but we try to be flexible and make the whole experiences for the client interesting and compelling,” says Lobkowitz.

Compared to nations like Great Britain, where officials have been monetizing heritage sites for decades, the Czech Republic is still wet behind the ears. London’s Hyde Park, one of the royal parks belonging to the British Crown, is just one of many examples of leveraged real estate; but that’s in a country with a decent amount of disposable income. Despite the 8.1 million tourists that visited the Czech Republic last year, Czech citizens aren’t so lucky.

There’s the question of selling the occasional work of art to supplement a thin income. But if Lobkowitz wanted to unload a piece or two, Czech Cultural Heritage legislation prohibits works of art from leaving the country, and Czechs who can afford to buy the art are scarce. But the Lobkowitzs aren’t selling. “Our management policy with regard to these collections is to create

foundations to preserve and protect things for the future. We are all about keeping this collection together.”

Lobkowitz Events Management is an active way the family generates funds to preserve the estate. Offering bespoke event planning and destination management for individual and corporate travellers, Lobkowitz designs personalized trips to the Czech Republic at a price. Walking the high wire with no net to catch a fall, he multitasks to keep it all running. The prince will meet with or speak to groups, provide fine dining in luxurious castle venues, bring guests behind the scenes. “Income generated from offering my time goes to the foundation, and ultimately to making these sites available to the public.”

In May 2014, the events management company organised a weeklong 450-person social and educational ‘University’ for the Young Presidents’ Organization. With 22,000 members in more than 125 countries, YPO honoured Lob-



The Lobkowitz Palace Museum Shop

kowitz’s management company in 2014 with two ‘Best of the Best Awards’: Best University and Best Event.

Non-profit dedication

In addition to lending their works to prominent galleries worldwide, the estate preserves music archives of over 5,000 items. As a major patron of Ludwig van Beethoven, who dedicated his third, fifth, and sixth symphonies to the seventh Prince, Joseph Franz Maximilian, the Lobkowitz family is dedicated to opening the archives to specialists in the field. Scholars and students —about 60 annually— spend eight-week periods studying and organising the uncatalogued archives. Lobkowitz, who likes to think of archival research as a kind of treasure hunt, a search for King Tut’s tomb, says that the archives are intact, untouched, and full of virgin materials. They have never been opened to the public before.

“We’re managing a history and heritage that has many components: move-

able objects, real estate, and a living family, which is a continuum that lives on,” says Lobkowitz. “Then we have the 21st-century, or modern, part. This is how we are going to move forward in the post-Velvet Revolution era. We’re using our business acumen to make things ‘sing again’ by having the castles and other assets out in the open in a way that attracts people, in ways that make culture relevant.”

Plans to ensure the safety and preservation of these collections are being worked out through the creation of a non-profit centre for European cultural heritage at Nelahozeves castle, about 35km north of Prague. More than just a dream of further development, the project embodies the family philosophy of extracting centuries of cultural wealth and investing it in the future by making it available to the public.

A seventeenth century priest’s house will house scholars and students, while plans for a new building to house the library and archives together (as was his-

torically done at Roudnice Castle) hangs on a US\$4 million funding project. Information mined from the study of these documents will be also redirected toward the public by being incorporated into tours and museum guides.

Beyond the fairy-tale

Lobkowitz is not content to have reclaimed his family’s heritage. Instead he continues to test the boundaries, to push the limits of the feasible. The battle cry for 2015 is *Communications*, he says. “We now have hospitality, shops, museums, but only few know we’re here,” he says. “It’s time to get the world’s attention!”

The Lobkowitz tale doesn’t end with a carriage ride into the sunset. But while the customs of war have changed drastically over the last century, causing noble families to peter out, Lobkowitz nobility shows no fear in the face of a swelling natural selection. “““

For more information
www.lobkowitz.com