

The Fabulous and Fanciful Lobkowicz Family

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Nelahozeves Castle, one of Bohemia's finest Renaissance castles

This is both a refugee story and a fairy tale, in which the prince is a born-and-bred Bostonian, lifelong Red Sox fan and proud Harvard man who returned to his ancestral palace to reclaim his family's stolen legacy. It begins in the 14th century,

when the princely Lobkowitz family of Prague emerged as one of the most influential and powerful Bohemian noble houses. Over the next seven centuries, they collected paintings by the likes of Bruegel, Cranach, Rubens, Canaletto, Veronese and Velázquez; were the patrons of both Haydn and Beethoven; and amassed one of the largest and finest collections of books, manuscripts, musical scores, instruments, decorative arts, religious objects and armaments the world has ever seen.

Fast-forward to 1939, when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and Max Lobkowitz (who renounced his title in solidarity with the first Czech Republic) fled to London to serve in the government in exile. As his grandson, William, explains, “When it looked like England would be invaded during the Battle of Britain, thousands of children were sent across the Atlantic for safety, my father and his brothers among them.” They wound up under the care of Sylvia Warren, an iconoclastic, completely deaf equestrienne/dog breeder who lived in Dover, Mass. “We owe her everything,” says William, whose father, Martin, was raised by Warren until his parents emigrated here.



The Lobkowitz family (from left) Alexandra, William R., Ileana, Sophia, William

Martin went to Harvard, served in the Korean War and became a stockbroker.

William, now 58, followed in his father’s academic footsteps and then went into real

estate, until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall. “I remember the images of Prague,” he says, “with all these people pouring into the West German embassy, which happened to be one of the family palaces.” With his parents’ support and assistance, William decided to return to Prague and seek restitution, not for personal gain, but to rebuild an irreplaceable chunk of history. “As corny as it sounds, since I was little, I’d wanted to do this. We always had refugees coming through our house, and I’d ask them about Czechoslovakia. I had an uncle, Prince Franzi Schwarzenberg, who would write me these long letters. It painted a picture that was so compelling, it lit a fire in my belly.”



St. Wenceslas Chapel, Lobkowitz Palace, Prague

Since 1990, William and his wife, Sandra, along with his parents (although Martin died in 2014), have devoted their lives to recovering the looted patrimony, and while William readily credits the enlightened democracy of late Czech President Vaclav Havel as helping tremendously, it was a Sisyphean legal and logistical feat. After reclaiming four of the family’s properties—Lobkowitz Palace (located inside Prague Castle), Nelahozeves (a nearby hunting lodge where Antonín Dvořák was born), and Roudnice and Strekov castles—there was the matter of reassembling “20,000

movable objects, 10,000 of which are now on permanent public display, and a library with 65,000 volumes.” All of it needed to be recovered, conserved and catalogued. Among the items: Beethoven’s handwritten receipt for the “Eroica” Symphony (for which the seventh prince Lobkowitz paid him 700 florins); a manuscript of Handel’s *Messiah* reworked in Mozart’s own hand; Bruegel’s “Haymaking”; a Canaletto of London when St. Paul’s Cathedral still dominated the skyline; and the jaw-dropping Hassenstein altarpiece.

“Is it an obsession?” jokes William. “Sure. I lost all my hair. But it’s a worthwhile and wonderful obsession. And I get to do it with my family, in the hope that it can benefit mankind.”

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