

William Lobkowicz

...so I went to take care of Palaces and Beethoven

He is the descendant of a famous aristocratic family who bothered the Nazis and the Communists. However, he considers himself primarily an entrepreneur in the culture and tourism business. “This is the only way we can ensure the long-term development of monuments and art collections,” says William Lobkowicz, a man who was born in America but has been working in the Czech Republic for thirty years to save and improve the family heritage.

text: Robert Čásenský / photo: Michal Novotný



The coronavirus crisis has hit tourism hard. What was the decline in museum visitors to the Lobkowicz Palace during the pandemic?

Lobkowicz Palace is part of the Prague Castle complex, which is overwhelmingly visited by foreign tourists. In our country, they account for about ninety percent of visitors. Of course, they completely disappeared during the lockdown. Today, a few are returning, especially those from European countries who can come by car: However, it is still only a fraction, ten to twenty percent compared to previous years.

You have four castles and palaces. How important is the Lobkowicz Palace among them economically?

It has always played a pivotal role, thanks to income from international tourism. It helped us finance the operation and repairs of the other properties, ie Nelahozeves, Roudnice and Střekov, which are also open to the public, but ninety-five percent of their visitors are local.

This year, however, you could not rely on income from the Prague Palace...

The pandemic showed us where our reserves were. As the only privately-owned building in the Prague Castle complex, in addition to a unique and very valuable art collection, we had a natural influx of foreign visitors and their money. We invested it in restoring Czech cultural heritage, but we did not communicate much about it. We have now changed this approach.

How does the change manifest itself into practice?

We want to show more of the gems we have here to the Czech public. We started with a series of various events intended primarily for local visitors. We called them “Lobkowicz Summer”. For example, we organized regular “Live Thursdays” where bands or DJs played in the courtyard of

the Palace in the evening. They are great events and a lot of people go to them. In August alone, we had four times more Czech visitors in the Lobkowitz Palace than we did the entire last year.

Do you have a similar program at any of your sights outside Prague?

At Nelahozeves, we also launched "Live Saturdays" which are primarily intended for families with children. For example, you can enjoy the castle, dress in the costumes of princes and princesses. We opened the gardens for the public, built a playground for young children under the age of eight or ten, and next year we will establish a bigger playground for older children, with giant slides and the like.

Do Czech families know about it? Do they come more than in previous years?

Definitely yes, but for us it's still just the beginning. We want to ensure that people come to us repeatedly and that the name Lobkowitz becomes a brand for pleasant and valuable leisure time. To do this, we need both creativity in the preparation of an interesting program and good marketing and communication with the public. I know that this may sound strange to some traditional aristocratic families, but in fact we are now entrepreneurs in the field of tourism. And the success of our activities also depends on the state in which we pass on family property to future generations.

When creating a program for your castles and palace, do you also look to inspiration abroad?

Practically always. For example, last year we regained the birth house of Antonín Dvořák, which is directly opposite Nelahozeves castle. We are working on renovating the house and its interiors and we want to build a modern music center there. In preparing for this project, we study how the birthplaces of other famous composers, Verdi, Schubert, Beethoven, Mozart and the like, are conceptualized. How they use modern technology, how they tell visitors stories. All of this is inspiration for us.

The coronavirus pandemic seems to have affected tourism even more than the previous crisis. Why is that?

A pandemic is a new experience. We have experienced the travel crisis after 9/11 and during the great financial crisis, but now it is something else. For example, it is much harder to plan trips if the problem is not only money, but also health risks, the development of which is difficult to predict.

What changes did you have to accept as a result of the pandemic?

First, we wanted to take care of our people, make sure their families were safe, and help them overcome the problems that might affect them. We had to make sure we could communicate and work remotely together. Then we started to deal with what to do next. How to get our stories and collections into peoples' living rooms. Of course, we also had to start looking at every expense, every crown.

Have you reduced the number of people, their wages or the like?

We also had to touch a little on the number of co-workers and the total amount of wages. We can postpone some investments because everything we earn we invest in the renovation and

development of our buildings anyway. We also had some reserves, but they are not endless in the event of a massive loss of income. We monitor the situation every week and respond accordingly. We have a number of people designed to hold hundreds of events a year, but if it looks like we will hold dozens of events, we would have to reconsider the size of the team that provides them. But only the future will reveal that.

From what sources did most of your income come from before the pandemic?

We gained most income from organizing events, especially in the Lobkowitz Palace in Prague. We have conferences, gala dinners, weddings, corporate events and so on. We have income from renting space and also from catering. Other important funds are from the entrance fee to the museum, which we have at the Palace. In the future, the importance of admission will increase, but we must work hard to be able to attract visitors with the right offers.

You invest a substantial part of your income in the renovation of buildings. Can some investments be postponed in such difficult times?

Some investments could be postponed, but the problem is that the buildings were in a state of disrepair after fifty years, when they were taken over first by the Nazis and then by the Communists for a long time. And if, for example, a hole appears in the roof somewhere today and there is a risk that roof tiles could fall down and injure someone, we must invest in repairs immediately. Then our situation is specific. In this way, we will pay for people's income and invest other funds mainly in buildings so that they will be in better condition for future generations.

You mentioned your team. How many people do you employ in total?

Altogether, there are about a hundred people across the various fields of our business. The main one is the company Lobkowitz Events Management, which operates all our monuments. We have another company focused on repairs and management of the buildings themselves, including the Roudnice Winery and also the non-profit organization Lobkowitz Collections, o.p.s, which takes care of our art collections and their accessibility to the world, whether in the form of permanent exhibitions, special exhibitions or loans to other institutions.

To whom do you lend works from your collections?

This year, for example, we lent original Beethoven scores to Vienna, including the famous Fifth Symphony, dedicated to one of my ancestors, Franz Josef Maximilian, the seventh prince of Lobkowitz, who was a great supporter of Ludwig van Beethoven. We lent Beethoven's other works to Bonn, where his birthplace is.

How are such loans paid for?

Usually we try to negotiate so that the work itself benefits. So, for example, renovation of the painting or its frame, or a contribution to some of the major projects that make the works more accessible. For example, with Beethoven's scores, we are now scanning and digitizing a section so that students and researchers can access it in digital form, which, of course, is not possible with the originals. We only have five thousand musical works in our collections, so there is still something to take care of. In addition, of course, we publish various publications, but we also organize special student and research programs, either with various universities around the world or with the classical music academy. All activities within the Lobkowitz Collections are covered by my wife Alexandra and it is mainly thanks to her that all these programs started.

You reconstructed one of the houses next to Nelahozeves castle to host students.

It's a great option for them. They can come, for example, to have a week of intensive classes with great Czech musicians, such as cellist Tomáš Jarník or violinist Josef Špaček. They improve and at the end, for example, they play a joint concert in the courtyard of the castle, which we broadcast online around the world. This moves young musicians in their efforts.

As far as I know, you want to build a large study center at Nelahozeves.

Yes, this is our long-term goal, which we will probably pursue with my wife for the rest of our lives. This is a large investment, roughly fifteen million dollars. The result should be a center that will store 65,000 books, millions of documents, five thousand musical works and six thousand graphics, so that they will be perfectly taken care of in the coming centuries. They will be stored there in the best conditions and at the same time there will be spaces for study, care for works, reading rooms and the like.

You mentioned five thousand musical works. What are the most valuable?

We have original works by Beethoven, Mozart, Handel, Haydn, all members of our family supported them in the past. We have originals of other fantastic composers. There is perhaps the world's most valuable collection of Baroque music scores for lutes, mandolins and other string instruments. All this is here in the Czech region and our task now is for the Czech public to know what world cultural treasures are here.

The art collections number about fifteen hundred paintings. Which are among the greatest treasures?

Key paintings include works by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and his sons. Visitors will also find paintings by Diego Velázquez, Lucas Cranach, Antonio Canaletto and other great masters. We could name them like this for hours, so I would rather recommend that Reporter's readers look at our website, or even better, come and see them in person.

How do you finance the care of such rare works of art?

When we decided after the fall of socialism that we wanted to return, there was a consensus among the family that we wanted to renew the family collections and make them available to the public. At that time, however, we had no extra resources, we were a normal working family. That is why my mother came up with the idea that we would start raising funds in America to support Czech cultural heritage. Before we obtained the first objects and works of art, we supported this collection, for example, through the National Gallery or the birthplace of Antonín Dvořák. When we managed to get the works back, we invested in taking care of our collections.

How long did it take to reassemble the collections?

The process began in 1991 and we got the last pieces back in 2017, so more than a quarter of a century. It was quite adventurous in places, for example, when we were already recovering works of art, and restitution had not yet been completed for any of our estates. At that time, we had part of the collections in an apartment or hidden in various safe places.

Is it at all possible to think that you would sell any of the rare paintings and use the proceeds to finance the care of other works and family monuments?

That is impossible. On the one hand, it contradicts the family tradition and it is also not allowed by law. Our art collections are a national cultural monument and as such must not leave the country. We could theoretically sell them in the Czech Republic, but there is not much market

for such works here. Therefore, we first financed the restoration of monuments by selling part of the restituted land and, in the meantime, we created a culture and tourism business so that it could work in the long run.

You were born in 1961 in the United States. Did your parents or other relatives tell you about the history of the family in the Czech region?

My grandfather died when I was seven, so I didn't experience him much. But he had a great friend Franz Schwarzenberg (uncle of the minister and presidential candidate Karel Schwarzenberg - editor's note), who was also a refugee in America. He visited us often and became my "surrogate" grandfather, telling me about the Czech Republic, our family, history. That's why I later studied European history and music at Harvard. Our family has always had a strong love for the Czech Republic, even though my grandfather had to flee twice, once before the Nazis and the second time before the Communists.

How was this emigration experience reflected in your upbringing?

Our parents taught us to value the three basic pillars of life: faith, love of family, and education. Because these are things that no one can take from you. And we try to pass on the same message to our children.

Did you also study Czech history at Harvard?

I studied European history as best I could, German, Czech, but also French and British. I attended all available classes on Slavic culture. And I learned German and Czech. In fact, I was preparing for my job today, without knowing that I would ever do it.

Your past real estate experience could also be useful for this current role, right?

Actually, yes, even this experience came in handy after 1990.

You were first in Czechoslovakia in 1976, when you were not even fifteen. How did the then socialist Czechoslovakia affect you?

It was the first time we could come since my grandfather and dad left. It was a big moment for our family. We drove in a van from Germany, parents and all four children. My father was very moved and of course he was also worried. This deepened in the first minutes at the border.

What happened there?

The border guard with a gun looked at his passports and said: Lobkowicz? You will come with me! And he pointed to my oldest brother. They took the rest of our passports. We were worried about what would happen if we were locked up and so on. My brother was intimidated for about forty-five minutes in the office of the guards. Then the border guards went out, smiled, and turned out to be asking my brother about our family, about life in America, and it seemed that they liked it that we were coming back.

What then happened in Prague?

We met my family, hugged and cried, the greatest experience was for my great-aunt Poly, my grandfather's sister, who hadn't seen our part of the family for almost thirty years. We went to pray in the Church of Our Lady Victorious to the Infant Jesus of Prague, which was donated to the Carmelites by Polyxena Lobkowicz in the seventeenth century. Then we went to Loreta, which was built by another Lobkowicz woman, and prayed for the future of the family. It was a very powerful experience.

How did the then Prague affect the American teenager?

I remember that the city was beautiful, but gray and sad, and that we were watched at every turn. And also the fact that we never talked to our relatives at home, but we always would take a walk or go in the car to talk. Nevertheless, I fell in love with Prague and wanted to come back here again.

When socialism fell, was it immediately clear that you were moving to Prague?

In 1989, we watched the news on television, we saw East German refugees jumping over the wall of the West German embassy, which was also once the palace of the Lobkowicz family. We knew the building well, because when we were in Prague under socialism, the German ambassador invited us to visit and accompanied us there for two hours. We were slowly believing that something could change. Then the Berlin Wall fell, November 17 came. The dictator Ceaușescu fell in Romania, the original homeland of my wife's family. I came for a sightseeing visit in March 1990, I was at a Mass in St. Vitus Cathedral, which was celebrated by Cardinal Tomášek. It was amazing and I knew I wanted to live here.

Although it was not clear at the time, if there would ever be any restitution and the like?

I thought if this was God's sign, I had to follow him. I started working very intensively on my Czech, prepared to quit the real estate business, and in January 1991 we moved permanently to Prague.

It will be thirty years old in a moment...

You see, I would hardly realize that in the middle of all this work.

Short Bio:

William Lobkowicz

He was born in Boston in the United States, where his family emigrated after the Communist coup. His grandfather Maximilian Lobkowicz worked in Czech diplomacy, during the war he became the ambassador of the Czechoslovak government in exile in Britain, and the Nazis considered him a traitor. William graduated from Harvard University. "I got there as a very good athlete, later I found out that my parents had to borrow from friends for my tuition," he says of his student years. Subsequently, he worked as a real estate broker. After the fall of socialism, he came to the Czech Republic with his family to save and restore family collections and take care of real estate. The family owns the Lobkowicz Palace at Prague Castle, Nelahozeves and Roudnice nad Labem Castles and Střekov Castle. Together with his wife Alexandra, who is a descendant of a Romanian noble family that also emigrated to the USA, they have three adult children, daughters Ileana and Sophia and son William Jr.

