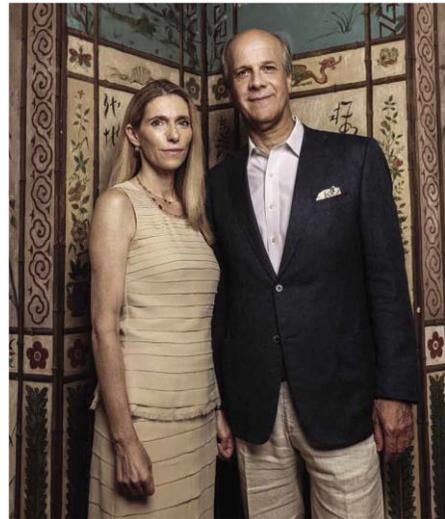


We Lobkowiczes Are Not Just Beer

William (59) and Alexandra (57) Lobkowicz have been living in the Czech Republic for 30 years, but so far have rather avoided the media. Fortunately, for Marianne they made an exception. Meet the couple standing behind four significant cultural sites — Nelahozeves and Roudnice castles, Střekov Castle, and Lobkowicz Palace. Moreover, the Lobkowiczes have also found a recipe for a happy marriage!

text: Klára McMahon and Petra Šroubek Pohlová / photo: Petr Kozlík

They arrived at the photo shoot perfectly dressed, but they laughed, that a formal outfit is definitely not the norm. Uniform jeans-shirt is common today even in aristocratic circles. Alexandra, who the man lovingly calls Sandra, walked obviously very carefully in her heels. Otherwise, it is still true that noblesse oblige. Even in 2020. The Lobkowiczs are incredibly kind and nice not only to each other each other, but also to everyone around. When they accompanied us during the photo shoot in the Palace at Prague Castle, it turns out that they know the name of all employees, including the cleaning staff.



You've been avoiding the media for a long time, why the change?

William: Honestly? We had a survey of what Czechs remember when they hear the name Lobkowicz. And the most common answer was - beer! However great it is that our brand has in the Czech Republic such popularity, we definitely don't want people to remember us just as a family brewing beer.

Alexandra: It's not good that people don't know much about us. Especially when we have such a valuable collection in the Lobkowicz Palace, for example Beethoven's handwritten sheet music. So, for us this was a wakeup call.

I'm very interested in your collections, but I admit I'm a little more interested in how you two met.

Alexandra: We have a similar background. My father is a historian, William's too. My grandfather was a diplomat, just like William's, and our grandfathers even knew each other!

William: Our acquaintance is one of the reasons we believe that there is "something" above us. Because what are the chances that you will meet someone with such a similar background? And on top of that in Boston, USA? To whom will something like this happen? It's a funny coincidence.

The common origin is certainly beautiful, but where exactly did you meet?

Alexandra: We were introduced by mutual friends at the celebrations of the Day of the Conquest of the Bastille. Some parts of Boston turned into a French city, filled with French food, music... William walked me home after the celebration and sang French songs to me. It was very romantic.

William: I wanted to become an opera singer, so I thought it was the perfect opportunity to also impress a beautiful woman.

A few years later you moved from America to Prague.

Alexandra: While we dated for five years, William was going for a few months to Czechoslovakia. And then he added, "Why don't you actually come with me and help me? "I had a summer off, so I went. And it was a great summer! But then William realized we should get engaged, because this project will be a long one and he won't return to America.

What were your professions before you came to the Czech Republic and started to manage the family property?

Alexandra: I taught in Massachusetts and William worked in real estate. When we arrived, we didn't have huge financial underpinnings like our ancestors did. We returned as a normal working family and tried to figure out how to restore and preserve these beautiful things.

William: People didn't understand me much then. They asked: "You graduated from Harvard, you worked for a successful real estate company, so why are you coming back here?"

It's easy - because it's home. These are our roots. It is 700 years of our history.

Alexandra: After returning, we started with Nelahozeves, because it was in the best condition of all the returned properties. Even though it was in relatively the same state as when the ancestors left, it still needed millions of dollars' worth of renovation.

You probably didn't know Czech then, did you?

William: I started from scratch when I arrived in 1990. I could only say "stick your finger through your throat," "Three hundred and thirty-three silver quails..." and similar funny things my grandfather taught me in America. I could also say "bread" and "beer" – and other few words. But we speak Czech (transitions from English to Czech). We understand about 80 percent. Our children speak much better than us, but everything we do we do in Czech.

Alexandra: I admit that I understand a lot more than I speak.

You arrived thirty years ago. What do you remember being the most difficult challenge when you first arrived?

William: It was horror in many ways. Restitution, work, communication...

Alexandra: Yes, communication, because then we didn't have cell phones. William may have gone all day to work somewhere far away and I had no idea when he would return. People often forget.

What was the biggest culture shock?

Alexandra: I remember a lot of weird things, for example, waiting in line to buy something. You had to wait in front of the store before you could get a cart and enter. It was very unusual. But fortunately, that changed quickly, and I fell in love with Prague. My brother lived in Bucharest and kept telling me how lucky I was to live in Prague. "Prague compared to Bucharest is like New York!" he claimed.

William: I was lucky to have a nice group of people around me: aunts, uncles, people who grew up here, older expats. "You have to understand the specifics of the Czech nature," they said. So I knew it would be a challenge. Prague is so magical that it is almost a cliché. Of course in the nineties, it recovered from a hangover of more than forty years and was damaged, but even so, her beauty was still visible.

The beginnings must have been very chaotic.

Alexandra: They were. Mainly due to restitution. People didn't know if we were returning just to pick up the property and leave again. I think it took a while for people to gain our trust, before people realized that we really wanted to stay here long term.

William: Perhaps people here after thirty years understood what we mean.

I'm interested in William's visit to the Czech Republic in the 1970s. That was a lot of adventure!

William: We came here in 1976 with the whole family in a VW minibus. All my brothers and sisters, my mother and father. We crossed the border near Domažlice and I remember how the police interrogated my father and eldest brother for an hour. They also took out our seats and threw all things out of the car - this is what our "welcome home" looked like. It was pretty scary. For the first time we found ourselves in a country ruled by a Communist regime. Before we left, my father informed the Foreign Ministry of our visit, to avoid possible problems. In the end, however, there were none. I think they just wanted to threaten us at the beginning as though to say "Don't play any games with us!".

How did this visit turn out?

William: We finally made it to Prague, where we met my Aunt Paula. She was 85 years old and she was the only living sister of Max, my grandfather. The first thing she did was take us to see the Church of Our Lady Victorious and the Infant Jesus of Prague in Újezd. Our ancestor, Marie Manrique de Lara, brought the Infant Jesus to Prague in the mid-16th century from Spain.

The Infant is known for performing miracles.

William: Aunt Paula also took this as a miracle, that she was still alive to see all her nephews, great-nephews and great-grandchildren. We all prayed together, we cried together, and it was a wonderful experience. I'll never forget it. Another strong memory was that we could not openly talk in the house because it was bugged. We had to go out or sit in the car and start the engine.

You have been here for thirty years, fortunately much has changed for the better. At the moment, what does a normal working day look like for you?

William: It's quite a challenge because we manage four large historical buildings: Roudnice with a chateau winery, Střekov, Nelahozeves and Lobkowitz Palace. All are open to the public. Every day is different. Before Covid, we travelled frequently to the castles and had a lot of different meetings. In the current situation, we have online meetings through Microsoft Teams.

Alexandra: We handle operational tasks, loans, monuments care, raising money... We are never bored.

William: You know, we're living with history in the 21st century. We are first generation entrepreneurs, we do not live in the castles, but with art and history. Sometimes we sit down, exhale, and say to ourselves: "Well, we didn't do so badly again." But still, we are always thinking about what to do next. And that's why it's great to have a new generation behind you.

You mean your children. Will they take over your family heritage?

Alexandra: If they want to. Fortunately, they are very interested in the things we do. They are involved in the events we organized and work around the Palace and the like.

William: It's not like the kids take it over from us one day. It is public service. We are like the conductors of an orchestra. Behind our team is a huge number of people — we have 80–90 employees. We wouldn't be able to do it alone.

What are your children actually doing?

Alexandra: We have two daughters and a son. Sophia, our youngest daughter, is eighteen and just started university in America. Our second daughter, Ileana, is twenty-three years old, and studied psychology, theology and journalism, and is an avid writer. For our family business, she writes a lot of articles, text for our website and communication networks. Our son, William Jr., also loves this country and probably speaks the best Czech out of all of us. Two years ago, he finished his studies at Harvard and started working for us in the field of media and marketing - he even does tours of the Palace in English and Czech! Now he's conducting live virtual tours for people who can't travel in person due to the pandemic.

How did you raise your children?

Alexandra: They all went international school here in Prague, then went to college in America. But in the end, they decided to come back here. They have a lot of friends here.

What do you like to do when you are not preoccupied by your family heritage work?

William: We don't have much free time, but when we do...

Alexandra: ... we love dogs! In the Lobkowitz Palace, a whole room is dedicated to dog paintings. And we have an amazing dog named Ricky. He is a Portuguese Water Dog, and we take him for long time walks in the woods. We also like to ride bikes, William plays tennis, and used to play squash, and is a good golfer.

Tennis, golf. This is what we "ordinary people" expect to be the hobbies of aristocrats. And it seems to suit you well, you both look great!

Alexandra: Thank you. We try to eat well, exercise and sleep enough. Sometimes it doesn't work out that way, but we do what we can. We know we both work better when we take the time to do these things. We also do yoga. We have our trainer and now we practice online.

After all these years, is there something you miss being in the Czech Republic?

William: The smell of the sea! We both grew up on the US coast. Whenever we travel, we try to end up somewhere by the ocean.

Noblewoman in Work:

What did the countesses wear?

When we ask Alexandra where she would invite Marianne's readers, she immediately responds:

"Men are often spoken of as emperors and kings, but rarely do we focus on women. At the same time, they were often politically active. In the New Year, we plan to open an exhibition about women from the Pernštejn family at the castle in Nelahozeves, where you can learn something about their history and the dress they wore. Ladies will also appreciate the online virtual tour of Lobkowitz Palace with our son William Jr. It's a great tour!