

Czech Forbes Article English Translation

Article Publication: December 2020 Issue

LOBKOWICZ Family Silver

His family returned to the Czech Republic 30 years ago to build on what his ancestors had built in the Czech lands for seven centuries. Today, William Lobkowicz with his wife and children is not only the successor and heir of the famous family, but also the head of managing the family businesses which aim to further develop Czech historical and cultural heritage.

Text: Irena Cápová / Photo: Hana Knížová

This family business has been operating for 700 years. One of the founders of the family already served King Wenceslas IV — thanks to his favor, Mikuláš of Újezd acquired the village of Lobkovice, part of today's Neratovice near Mělník, which then gave the family its name. A relative of the other branch, Jan Hasištejnský of Lobkowicz, was a diplomat at the court of King Władysław II and his brother Bohuslav Hasištejnský of Lobkowicz was a famous traveler and discoverer, the author of many famous Renaissance travelogues. The family's direct ancestors, the couple Polyxena Rožmberk of Pernštejn and Zdeněk Vojtěch Popel of Lobkowicz, united the most famous and powerful old Czech aristocratic families. Polyxena and Zdeněk already lived in Prague Castle, in the architecturally rich palace, to this day called Lobkowicz. Polyxena was considered the first lady of the kingdom in the first half of the 17th century and her name resonates to this day, but later she dedicated a statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague to the Carmelite Church of Our Lady Victorious in Prague's Lesser Town. Her husband Zdeněk Vojtěch Popel was the first Prince of Lobkowicz.

Their direct descendant, William Lobkowicz, returned with his family from America, where his parents once emigrated from Communist persecution, right after the Velvet Revolution, and decided to save the family heritage — to make it accessible to future generations.

"Václav Havel said at the very beginning of 1990: Czechs, return home, you are welcome here. My father and I did not hesitate for a minute," recalls William Lobkowicz in the middle of his study at Nelahozeves Castle, one of the four residences his family now owns.

Others are Roudnice Castle, Střekov Castle, and the aforementioned Lobkowicz Palace in Prague's Hradčany, the only private palace in the Prague Castle complex. Over the past almost two decades, William and his family have built a sought-after cultural and social center. But don't think that today the Lobkowiczs still live in their family homes, which they acquired



after many years of complicated restitution proceedings. "We live in an apartment in Prague in Břevnov, we live like any normal family," laughs William Lobkowicz.

When William Lobkowicz returned to the Czech Republic with his family, they set as their main goal to rescue and restore their ancestral heritage and make it accessible to current generations. And with energy, passion, and a typical American enthusiasm for work, this descendant of the famous aristocratic family in the heart of Europe has been fulfilling his goal, step by step, for 30 years. When you talk to him and his wife and children today, they are deeply honored that they were given the opportunity to nurture and further develop the centuries-old heritage of their ancestors. William does it with patriotism, and his children, William Jr., Ileana and Sophia, are also enthusiastic patriots. Alexandra's wife, originally a teacher, takes care of the cultural and educational programs that the House of Lobkowicz develops. William himself was born in 1961 in Boston, his father had to leave his homeland as a child when he was only 12 years old. But they kept the Czech language at home. William graduated from Harvard and made a living in the real estate business in America. "We always believed at home and hoped that we would return to the Czech Republic. It was the call of the family, the roots. What the family has been building for 700 years will not be disrupted by the Nazis or the Communists in four or five decades. Even though they tried very hard," says William Lobkowicz. "Our faith and beliefs are to preserve as much as possible. Save and take care of it. We do not consider ourselves owners. We are rather custodians, caretakers. We store and protect everything for future generations. That is our task."



Did you know from childhood what family you came from? Did your parents tell you as a child about your history, about the Czech lands?

I always knew we were Czech. Our family has always had a strong love for the Czech Republic, we have always talked about the Czech Republic. My grandfather, Maximilián Lobkowicz, was a great patriot, he worked in Czech diplomacy. During the war, he became the ambassador of the Czechoslovak government in exile in London, working for Jan Masaryk. The Nazis considered him a traitor. For the second time, the family had to flee immediately after the Communist coup. Dad was only 12 years old, but his love for the Czech Republic was deeply embedded in him. Since I was a child, my parents and grandparents have instilled in me the values I live today.

What are they?

They taught us to honor the three basic pillars of life: faith, love of family, and education. Because these are the things that no one can ever take from you. And we try to pass on the same values to our children. I had very loving parents who always told me: Whatever you do, do it with passion, work hard, and let people judge you by what you have accomplished, not by what family you come from. And something else they instilled in me: People make mistakes and making mistakes is not a bad thing if you can learn from them. Never give up. When you have a passion and a creative mind, things will work out in the end.

Did you believe you would ever return to the Czech Republic, or did you not talk about it at home?

It was always talked about. I am the first generation born outside Czechoslovakia, but we believed that we would return home one day. After all, I had been preparing for it all my youth. I studied European history German, Czech, but also French and British; in short, not only Czech but also European history, because they have been interconnected for a thousand years. I studied Slavic culture, and read everything about Central Europe. Writings about the Thirty Years' War and texts by Lech Walesa and, of course, Václav Havel. In that sense, I was a little weird for my friends. I studied Czech and German; in fact, I spent my whole life preparing for my current job.

You also studied European history at university, didn't you?

Yes, I graduated from Harvard. But not because I was that smart. I wasn't. I was an excellent athlete, I always did sports, I got a sports scholarship. In addition, I enjoyed studying classical music and my hobby was singing opera.

I'm not surprised you stood out among other American teenagers. Athlete, tall, elegant, opera singer...

I tried to tell my wife, yes. I tried to enchant her with my singing.

It obviously worked.

Meeting Alexandra was the best thing that has ever happened to me in my life. By the way, this has been passed down in our family for centuries — Lobkowiczses have always married well. In our family there is a whole host of capable, influential, and strong women, thanks to whom my ancestors could work hard and diligently, and enthusiastically devote themselves to collecting, patronage, and everything they were dealing with at the time. My Sandra is exactly

like that. Look for a woman behind every successful man!

Did your future wife know who you were, and your family's history in the Czech Republic?

Not only that. She understood me. Her family comes from old Romanian aristocracy, they were refugees in America, just like us. She knew even the smallest details about Europe and, in addition to being very educated, she was always extremely practical. That came in handy later when we returned to the Czech Republic. A lady from Kansas would have a hard time coping in post-revolutionary Czechoslovakia, she would be very unhappy here. Alexandra knew what she was getting into, she could envision it. And Czech was not such a problem for her either. She took it all in strides. I'm really lucky. In addition, we found that we were predestined by fate.

How come?

It's like a movie. Sandra's father was a well-known professor at Boston College and Oxford. And we later found out from his father's diaries that his father and my grandfather knew each other because they were both diplomats at the same time. When my grandfather joined Jan Masaryk in the government in exile in London, he met a lot of European diplomats. In my father-in-law's father's diary, we found a short note — today, London, I had lunch with Max Lobkowitz. Sandra's grandfather and my grandfather simply knew each other.

When did you decide to return to Czechoslovakia?

Immediately after the Velvet Revolution, which we watched intently. We saw how individual totalitarian regimes in Europe were collapsing, the Romanian one when Ceausescu fell, the Polish one, and the one in Czechoslovakia. In the early 1990s, Václav Havel's brother, Ivan, came to Boston, and we went to dinner. At that time, Václav Havel told all of us emigrants to return home. And his brother Ivan reaffirmed this to us. You have to come back, we'll need you, he said. My father and I looked at each other — and we were clear. We decided immediately.

But returning to post-revolutionary Czechoslovakia must have been a shock to you as a 30-year-old American, right?

Not exactly. We jumped into it headfirst without knowing anything. We were going back to our roots; we were looking forward to it. We knew we would be part of the changes that now awaited our country, and that attracted us. It was an adventure. I had also been to the Czech Republic before, for the first time in 1976, when I was fifteen. And then twice more. Thanks to that, I had an idea.

What was it like for you when you came to socialist Czechoslovakia as a teenager?

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

How come?

The border guard with an AK-47 looked at the passports and said: Lobkowicz? Come with us! And he pointed to my father and my brother. They took the rest of our passports. We were afraid of what would happen if they locked us up, disappeared somewhere, and so on. My brother was in the guard's office for perhaps an hour. Then the border guards came out, smiled, and it turned out that they were asking about our family, about life in America; and it seemed that they liked it, that we were coming back. It was a remarkable experience.

Part of the family remained in Czechoslovakia even under socialism, right?

Yes. That's why it was so touching. We met the family, hugged and cried, the greatest experience was for my great-aunt, my grandfather's sister, who had not seen our part of the family for 30 years and was afraid that we wouldn't see each other again. We went to pray in the Church of Our Lady Victorious to the Infant Jesus of Prague, which was donated to the Carmelites in the 17th century by Polyxena Lobkowicz. Then we went up to Loreta, built by another woman in our family, and prayed for the future of the family. Very strong moments...

How did the Prague then affect you as an American teenager?

I remember that the city was beautiful, but gray and sad, and that we were also watched at every turn. We never talked to relatives at home, but we always went for long walks to talk, because there were wiretaps everywhere. Still, I did fall in love with Prague and wanted to return here again. And I'm glad it came true for me.

“Standing the Test of Time”

The family of William Lobkowicz returned to Czechoslovakia permanently in 1991, when he definitively left his real estate business and began to restore his family property. As it turned out, the experience of real estate and the entrepreneurial spirit of business helped him later. The complicated post-revolutionary adventure with restitution eventually dragged on for more than a quarter of a century, and most of the property and buildings that the Czech state eventually returned to the Lobkowicz family were in a deplorable state. William Lobkowicz immediately embarked on repairing and reconstructing the devastated monuments and, with his own entrepreneurship, gradually built something that he describes today as an enterprise in the cultural and tourism business. All profit is invested back into the further development of the family heritage. In addition to commercial activities, he is significantly involved in the fundraising and non-profit sector, building educational centers, developing educational programs, cooperating with schools, universities, and galleries from around the world. "We decided to open all our buildings and make them available to the public. We were the first in the history of our family to open our collections. Only in this way can we ensure the long-term development of monuments and art collections for future generations," believes William Lobkowicz. They chose their family motto from a historical quote from an old ancestor: *Inconcussa manet* — to remain unshaken. "It is a Lobkowicz slogan dating back to the time of Marie Manrique de Lara, the family's founder, and captures the whole strong story of the Lobkowicz family. Because our family history is full of stories and events that will stand the test of time, I believe that we will stand the test of time," smiles William Lobkowicz. But sometimes it takes a lot of strong will and patience.

What were your first years in Czechoslovakia like?

A big challenge. It turned out that restitution was a full-time job that we could have never imagined. We said to ourselves: We will hire lawyers and it will work out somehow. It turned out to be much more complicated. And that everything else would have to wait. The restitution process began in 1991 and the last part we didn't get back until 2017; it was very adventurous.

Did you acquire the Lobkowicz Palace at the Castle in 2007?

It was returned to us in 2003, but in a completely impoverished condition of disrepair. It took three and a half years of complete reconstruction before we could open the first exhibition for visitors in 2007.

How do you finance such a reconstruction? It must be a huge amount.

You have to realize that these are often incredibly large objects. They are repaired in stages. Individual reconstructions cost tens, but also hundreds of millions of crowns. When we decided to return after the fall of Communism, there was a consensus in the family that we wanted to restore the family collections and make them available to the public. But at that time, we had no extra resources, we were a normal working family. That's why my mother came up with the idea that we would start raising funds in America to support Czech cultural heritage. Before we acquired the first objects and works of art in restitution, the Collections were supported through the National Gallery or Antonín Dvořák's birth house. When we managed to get the works back, we invested in taking care of our collections and culture heritage.

Today, however, the Lobkowicz Palace is one of your main sources of income, isn't it?

Yes. At least in the time before coronavirus it was. Now of course everything is closed again. It is necessary to realize that we no longer live the life of our ancestors. We don't have large plots of land where you just have to cut down a few trees and fish out a pond to pay the bills. Of course, tourism doesn't pay for all the bills, but it's an important part. For the whole machine to work, it was necessary to build a cultural tourism business around the collections and buildings, which will finance the development and preservation of our cultural heritage. Non-profit organizations are an important part of our work. We have to take care of our collections. To put it simply, if we have a business, it is there to fund the non-profit sector.

How does your business work?

We get the most money from organizing events, especially in the Lobkowicz Palace in Prague. We host conferences, weddings, gala dinners, celebrations, corporate events and so on. We have income from renting space and also from catering. Other important funds are also from the entrance fee to the museum, which we have in the palace. In the future, the importance of admission will grow, 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, repairs, and reconstruction. Can some of the investment be postponed?

Some investments could be postponed, but the problem is that the buildings were in a state of disrepair for half a century, when they were taken over first by the Nazis and then for a long time by the Communists. And if, for example, a hole appears in the roof somewhere today and there is a risk that roof tiles could fall and injure someone, we must invest in repairs immediately. That's where our situation is specific. From the income, we pay the people on

our team and invest the other funds mainly in buildings, so they are in better condition for future generations.

How many people do you employ today?

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 sites. Then 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. Then we have another company focused on repairs and management themselves buildings, we include 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. This country has an incredibly rich cultural and historical heritage, I'm not afraid to say that is world unique.

That is why it is good to know more about him in the world even more than before.

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 7th Prince Lobkowitz, who was a great supporter of Ludwig van Beethoven. We lent Beethoven's other works to Bonn, where his birthplace is.

Who pays you for such loans?

Usually we try to negotiate so that the works themselves benefit from it. So, for example, renovation of a 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 is of course 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, we also publish various publications, and organize special student and research programs, either with various universities around the world or with the Academy of Chamber Music. All activities within the Lobkowitz Collections are covered by my wife, Alexandra, and it is mainly thanks to her that all these wonderful programs started. We reconstructed one of the houses, a former rectory, next to Nelahozeves Castle, to host students who can come and do research.

Is it true that you want to build a large study center in Nelahozeves?

Yes, that is our long-term goal, which my wife and I will probably pursue for the rest of our lives. This is a large investment, roughly \$10–15 million. 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 study spaces, reading rooms, a library, and the like.

Your art collections number approximately 1,500 rare paintings, mostly from old masters. Which are among the greatest treasures?

The key exhibits certainly 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. It took decades to get them all back, it was rigorous work. It's twenty

generations of family history, so it was a lot of hard work. I lost most of my hair doing it too!

On a dry autumn day, at the turn of October and November, Nelahozeves Castle is closed to visitors. The Forbes team thus gets a special opportunity to privately walk through the castle, only with its owners. We walk through ancient corridors and interiors decorated with hundreds of antiques, rare pieces of furniture, paintings, carpets, musical instruments. Our guides are the children of William Lobkowitz — Ileana and William Jr. For already a few years, both of them enthusiastically embarked on developing the family heritage, both working for the “family business” full time. When you talk to them, they both excel in terms of knowledge, you don't miss a single detail from their family history. Meanwhile, they will prepare coffee and tea for you and prepare desserts to bring to the table. "We love working here, it's something I'm really proud of, and it's a great honor to be able to help my parents with what they've already built," says William Jr., a charming, dark-haired, attractive young man, fluent in Czech. After all, this summer he himself accompanied visitors through the Lobkowitz Palace during the so-called “Meet the Lobkowitzes” as part of the Lobkowitz Summer Festival. The event series was a success. In August alone, he attracted four times more Czech visitors to the palace in Hradčany than had come in the whole previous year. Ileana, who has shown a great talent for writing since her youth, for example, takes care of the House of Lobkowitz website and manages its official social networks. The youngest, Sophia, is currently studying in the USA, but she is also in constant contact with her family and their activities here. This family business simply doesn't suffer from what many others do. They have successors here. And they're excited.

You can see that your children really enjoy working in the family business. Was it clear from the beginning that they would continue with you?

Everyone in the family has a role to play here and always has. This business is a family affair. Our kids are motivated, full of energy, and care about cultural heritage, they enjoy it, they want to build something in the future, something that will last. But it's important that they do it with their heart, they must love it. This is not a job where you count how much you've earned. If your priority is a salary, this is not a job for you. I don't pay as much as a bank, a law firm or a large multinational company. But when you feel that what you do makes sense and enriches you, there is nothing better.

So, your children don't live like a prince and a countess?

That's the assumption people have, that we live in a castle and surround ourselves with wealth. Sure, we are spoiled with our historical heritage, but it's more about its collective sharing with the world. It was necessary to find a new way to use these beautiful buildings. We no longer live in them; we do not live the way our ancestors lived. The reality is much simpler. We take care of the spaces, but we live in a normal apartment in Prague in Břevnov. We drive ordinary cars and order take-out food like everyone else. Although we have 100 employees, you would be searching in vain if you looked for personal staff and chefs among them. We live like a normal family. I am convinced that this is a way to preserve the ancestral heritage for another 700 years. We need to realize that we live in the 21st century. And adjust ourselves accordingly.

However, this year is also specific for you. How are you handling it?

The coronavirus crisis has hit tourism hard. And that is an important part of our business. Lobkowicz Palace is part of the Prague Castle complex, which is overwhelmingly visited by foreign tourists. In our country, they used to make up about 90 percent of visitors and they disappeared completely during quarantine. The Lobkowicz Palace plays a key role for us thanks to its income from international tourism. It helps us finance the long-term operations and repairs of other buildings, i.e., Nelahozeves, Roudnice and Střekov. They are also open to the public, but 95 percent of their visitors are local.

This year, however, you could not rely on income from the Prague Palace. How did you deal with that?

The pandemic showed us where our reserves were. As the only privately owned palace in the Prague Castle complex, with a valuable and unique art collection, we had a natural influx of foreign visitors and their money. We have invested it in restoring Czech cultural heritage. This is our modus operandi. Now we want to focus much more on Czech visitors. We want people to know what they can experience here. The condition in which we pass on family property to future generations also depends on the success of our work. We want to be even more open to the public, we want the Czechs to access our venues and programs associated with quality entertainment and pleasurable leisure time. We want people to feel welcome here. Because we are happy with every visitor and we believe that we have something to offer for the price of each ticket.

What are you doing for it?

The Lobkowicz Summer program was already a part of it. At the Lobkowicz Palace, it was "Live Thursdays" with music and cultural programming, and "Sunday's Meet the Lobkowicz," and at Nelahozeves we again started "Live Saturdays," which were primarily intended for families with children. There you could dress in costumes of princes and princesses, we opened the gardens for the public, we built a playground for smaller children under the age of eight or ten, and next year we are expanding a nature play area for older children as well.

What are your next plans?

Last year we got back the birth house of Antonín Dvořák, which is directly opposite Nelahozeves castle. We are working on repairing the house and its interiors, and we want to build a modern music center for professionals and the general public. We also want to organize festivals and conferences there. I look forward to it.

Where do you look for inspiration in such plans?

When we prepare such projects, we study how birth houses of other famous composers, like Verdi, Beethoven, and Mozart, are conceived. How they use modern technology, how they tell visitors stories. This is all inspiration for us. New technologies introduce huge opportunities, we are trying to invest in that. Digitization is a great opportunity, especially to bring our collections and the stories of our family closer to people in their homes. This is the future of our collections. Full access. Everyone. We strive to create a new future for family heritage. A living future.

What do you take away as a family from this year's coronavirus year?

That it is important to stick together. And to show belonging and solidarity with others. First,

we wanted to take care of our people, ensure that their families were safe, and help them overcome the problems that may have affected them. We had to make sure so that we could communicate and work remotely together. We also helped hospitals in the regions, because I think that regional hospital facilities had far more problems than reflected in the media. We supported paramedics, doctors and entire departments in hospitals in Roudnice, Litoměřice, Ústí nad Labem, which is near Střekov castle. Supporting these regions is extremely important to me, I want those people to know that they have not been forgotten. Only then did we have to deal with what to do next. Of course, we also had to watch every expense, literally every crown. This year is simply more complicated. It is easy to complain, we are all worried and afraid. But complaining doesn't help anyone. It's better to think about how to handle this year and find the good.

What good do you find this year?

The good thing about the lockdown and the whole process of slowing down, for example, was that we came together as a family business, we found new ways to communicate and collaborate, and we felt we needed each other more than ever. Doing business in tourism means taking care of your clients, creating memories for them, providing the perfect service. We show history and try to present it in a modern context. We now had time to think about it much more. But it's definitely not time to fall. We have to stand on our feet, we have to be practical. Every crisis can be a challenge, every crisis can be an opportunity. You have to be determined and love what you do. Then you can do everything. Remember our motto. Remain unshaken!