

Princess and Heir of Franz Ferdinand Fights to Repeal a Law and Gain a Castle

By CRAIG S. SMITH

KONOPISTE CASTLE, Czech Republic — When a young Serb named Gavrilo Princip stepped forward on a Sarajevo street and fired a pistol at a middle-aged couple 93 years ago, he sent history stumbling down an unexpected new path.

The couple, of course, was Franz Ferdinand, archduke of Austria-Este, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife, Sophie. They were killed. The world went to war. Millions of people died and the political map of Europe was redrawn.

Now, Franz Ferdinand's great-granddaughter, Her Serene Highness Princess Sophie von Hohenberg (or Sophie de Potesta to her neighbors) is trying to right what she sees as one of the wrongs from those years. She hopes to get Franz Ferdinand's castle back in the bargain.

The 1919 Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye carved up the old Hapsburg empire into new states: Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and parts of Poland. The Hapsburg family, which had ruled that part of Europe for more than 600 years, was stripped of its properties and titles. Franz Ferdinand's children had already been turned out of their parents' beloved home, Konopiste Castle, in the empire's province of Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. It was taken by the state.

The problem, Princess von Hohenberg says, is that Franz Ferdinand's children — Sophie, Maximilian and Ernst — were not Hapsburgs and so the castle and its dependencies — nearly 15,000 acres of woodland and a brewery — should never have been seized.

That is because Franz Ferdinand married a woman a rung below his royal status. His uncle, Emperor Franz Jozef, would only allow the union on the condition that Sophie and any children she bore never be considered heirs to the throne. He gave the young bride her own title and a new name instead: Princess von Hohenberg, which has been passed down to her great-granddaughter today.

In part because of the tension caused by his marriage, Franz Ferdinand preferred to stay at Konopiste rather than at his official residence, the Belvedere in Vienna.

Using bloodlines as an argument against property seizure.

When he and his wife left for Sarajevo that fateful June, they intended to return in just a few days. The children were left behind in the care of nannies.

But Franz Ferdinand and Sophie died at Sarajevo and his children inherited Konopiste Castle, which he had bought with money from the sale of properties in Italy that he had inherited from his uncle, Francesco V d'Este.

By the time the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye was signed, Princess von Hohenberg argues, the castle was a Hohenberg, not a Hapsburg, estate.

But in 1921, Czechoslovakia passed law No. 354, whose Article III mandated the seizure of royal properties from the Hapsburgs, including Franz Ferdinand and "his descendants."

"What happened in Czechoslovakia was an overenthusiastic way of interpreting the Saint-Germain treaty," Princess von Hohenberg said recently over tea at an elegant Brussels hotel. "They associated my grandfather Max with the Hapsburgs, though he was not a member of the family any more."

Princess von Hohenberg's Czech lawyer, Jaroslav Broz, said the law refers to the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye but betrays the treaty's principles.

The newly minted Republic of Austria seized all of the Hapsburg palaces there but left Franz Ferdinand's children with the Hohenberg properties, which included the Arstetten Castle where Franz Ferdinand and his wife are buried and where Princess von Hohenberg's sister, Anita, lives today.

The children were sent to live in Arstetten Castle. The eldest, Sophie, was 17 at the time. She lived until 1990 and Princess von Hohenberg remembers her stories.

"They had to leave Konopiste with a small little suitcase and the suitcase was searched to be sure that they didn't take any souvenirs," she said. Her grandfather tried at one time to recover some of the family's personal belongings but was refused. "What has always shocked my family is that our whole history, our private history, the letters, the photos, is all in Konopiste," she said.

The family fought the Czech law, even after the Communists came to power, to no avail. They made diplomatic enquiries after the collapse of Communism, but got nowhere. Then, in 2000, the princess's mother entrusted her with the battle. In December, Princess von Hohenberg finally filed a lawsuit at a court in Benesov, the town nearest the castle, hoping to successfully challenge the law.

"What I'm trying to do is attack this law which is unjust and wrong," said Princess von Hohenberg, 46, dressed in a gray flannel hunting coat over faded blue jeans, her auburn hair pulled back and secured with a black velvet-covered elastic hair tie. "If I win my case, they have to give back what they confiscated, logically, but my first wish is to make this article of law disappear."

She recalled her first visit to the castle after the Velvet Revolution, which brought about the fall of the Communist government. She was ac-



The Konopiste Castle in the Czech Republic, which was taken over by the state after the end of World War I.

companied by her husband, Jean-Louis de Potesta, who has a graying beard and twirled moustache in the style of Czar Nicolas II.

"I was very, very moved," she said. "I suddenly knew where I belonged, which I never felt before. I suddenly knew where my roots were."

On her second visit, she identified herself and refused to pay the \$9 admission.

Konopiste Castle is one of the most beautiful of the 90-odd castles owned by the Czech Republic, and is certainly the most elaborate in its furnishings. The walls of the castle's public halls are mounted with some of the roughly 300,000 animals that Franz Ferdinand shot during his lifetime.

It is a phantasmagoric display of bison heads and deer antlers and boar tusks and wood grouse tail feathers, each mounted on a wooden plaque inscribed with the date and place where they were shot.

The collection is interspersed with Franz Ferdinand's extensive collection of 15th-century polychrome wooden religious statues. Several rooms are devoted to a collection of medieval and Renaissance armor, much of which he inherited from his uncle.

Hitler's Schutzstaffel, or SS, took over the castle during World War II and sent much of its contents to Aus-

tria, where they were discovered after the war, stored in a salt mine.

Almost everything was recovered except for objects made of gold, which were melted down by the Nazis. The children's toys are also missing, distributed to kindergartens during the Communist era when the castle was used by the Czech Ministry of Agriculture.

Princess von Hohenberg's interest in recovering the building has sent tremors through the small community that depends upon it for a living.

"We've bet our existence on this," said Helena Nohejlova, 34, the castle's deputy caretaker. She has lived at Konopiste since she was 18. Her husband is the castle gardener and her two teenage daughters have grown up there. "Our children consider this their home," she said.

But Princess von Hohenberg says she is not interested in closing the castle to the public.

"I could not live in Konopiste like my great-grandfather did," said Princess von Hohenberg. "But this place belongs to my family and I have a moral responsibility toward the past members of my family as well as towards the ones still to come, to fight for what is ours."

There have been several royal restitutions in Europe since the fall of Communism. The Czech Republic itself has returned a lot of property seized by the Communists after 1948.

But the courts in countries in this historically turbulent part of the world have been reluctant to address property claims before then.

Crossing that line could open the way to others seeking to right the wrongs that followed regime changes of the past — not the least of which was the expulsion of Germans and the confiscation of their property after World War II.

"One has to ask how far back to go," said Vaclav Pavlicek, a constitutional-law expert who heads the constitutional-law department at Charles University in Prague.

The Ministry of Culture spends more than \$800,000 a year to maintain the castle, about the same as the property earns from ticket sales and rental fees for occasional functions. The castle's chapel is popular for weddings.

It is classed as a national cultural historic monument, which means that were Princess von Hohenberg to recover the castle, she would not even be able to move the furniture without approval from the state landmark authorities.

"A number of such castles have been returned to the families of their former owners," said Pavel Jerie, head of the institute that administers the property for the state. "But it's a burden for them. If they were completely rational, they would never want the property back."



Jock Fistick for The New York Times

Her Serene Highness Princess Sophie von Hohenberg, the great-granddaughter of Franz Ferdinand, who was assassinated 93 years ago.

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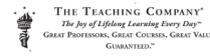
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