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*Insignia of the Royal House of Habsburg.*

## **A Brief History of the Relationship Between the Royal House of Habsburg and the Swiss Confederation**

*by Dwight Page*

**W**hen the visitor to Vienna visits the royal palace of the Hofburg, he will note, inscribed on numerous pillars and monuments, the following inscription carved into the crest of the House of Habsburg: *Austriae Est Imperare Orbi Universo* or *Alles Erdereich ist Österreich Untertan*, meaning “The Entire Earth is Subject to the House of Austria.” Never has there been a more true declaration, for in the sixteenth century, during the reign of the Habsburg Emperor Charles V, the sun indeed never set on the Habsburg Empire: most



*Virgil reading the Aeneid to the Emperor Augustus, Octavia, and Livia.*

Credit: Jean-Baptiste Wicar, painter.

of central Europe, the Netherlands, Spain and the Spanish Empire in Mexico, Central and South America were at that time provinces of the global Habsburg Empire.

Such a prestigious Empire required an equally prestigious mythological and ideological basis. Thus, just as the Emperor Augustus had commissioned Virgil to write *The Aeneid* in order to illuminate the heroic Trojan origins of Rome and to justify Rome's claim to universal lordship over the earth, so did the Habsburg Emperors for centuries commission writers and genealogists to conduct research which would demonstrate that the royal house of Habsburg, like the Julio-Claudian royal house of ancient Rome, was the descendant of heroic and valiant ancestors, predestined by the Fates to rule the earth.<sup>1</sup>

The attempts to emphasize the aristocratic and royal descent of the House, and to support the theory with genealogical legends, tales, pseudo-learned fabrications, and family trees, started at the end of the thirteenth century, just when Rudolf of Habsburg, the first of his House to attain European stature and the ancestor of Habsburg world power, established the family for the first time on the German throne of the

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Wandruszka, *The House of Habsburg* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 14-16.

Holy Roman Empire. To counteract the propaganda of the enemies of the Habsburgs, who spread about the malicious legend of the “poor Count,” his noble lineage had to be emphasized. Claiming descent from the Hohenstaufens or Salians was impossible, and, moreover, since it was necessary to maintain good relations with the Pope, would have at that time been politically inexpedient. What seemed to later historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to be the most impressive point, the ideological and political union between the Habsburgs and the earlier Hohenstaufens, or continuation of the Empire beyond the Interregnum (exemplified by the faithful service rendered to the Hohenstaufens by Rudolf, his father, and grandfather, and—of even greater symbolic force—the fact that Rudolf had been lifted from the font by the last great Emperor of the High Middle Ages, the mighty Frederick II himself), could not count in the eyes of contemporaries as an effective argument to support the Habsburg claims to royal or imperial office.

Therefore, around the beginning of the fourteenth century, and probably among the lowland Swiss followers of the first royal Habsburgs, the legend arose that the Habsburgs were descended from a Roman patrician family, the Colonna, who in turn traced their ancestry through the Counts of Tusculum to the *gens Julia* and thus to the illustrious Julius Caesar. In the fourteenth and part of the fifteenth century the Habsburgs themselves believed in this genealogy. Even in times when the possibility of regaining the throne did not seem imminent, they saw in it support for their unchanging belief in the royal destiny of their family. Like the particular form assumed by the idea of Rome and the renovation-myth (belief in the revival of the Roman Empire) after Dante and after the fall of the Hohenstaufens, the theory suited humanistic learning and modes of thought in the late Middle Ages. At the same time, it was also adapted to the attitude taken by the Popes (and by the Roman nobility dominating the Papacy) to the candidates for the German throne after the interregnum, and particularly to the Habsburgs.

Side by side with the Roman theory soon appeared the Frankish, whose relevance to political aspirations is equally evident. It traced the descent of the Habsburgs from the Franks (occasionally from the Carolingians, but usually through the legitimate dynasty of the Merovingians) directly to the Trojans, thus bypassing the Romans entirely. The propagation of this latter thesis was often accompanied by unmistakable signs of anti-Roman and anti-Italian prejudice. Whereas the Ro-

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man theory focused on the south, on Rome, the capital of the world, the Franco-Trojan theory anticipated union with the west, and the effort of the Habsburgs to legitimize themselves, in opposition to the French royal House, as the true heirs of the Carolingian and Merovingian realm.

Only in the nineteenth century did Franz Ritter von Krones, in his *Grundriss der österreichischen Geschichte*, bring to light the truth about the actual lineage and geographical origin of the royal family of Habsburg:<sup>2</sup>

The cradle of the Habsburgs lay in fact in Alamannian Switzerland; the family name and historical reputation hark back to the eleventh century. . . . The Habsburg rise to power after the thirteenth century, especially as the House took over the German royal crown and grew steadily richer in land, entailed—as it did for all other great princely Houses—an abundance of genealogical brown studies, often as artificial as they were insignificant, which lost themselves in the dimmest twilight of prehistory.

Thus the reader now understands the reason for the inclusion of this article concerning the royal House of Habsburg in the *Swiss American Historical Society Review*. Traditionally associated with Austria-Hungary, the Habsburgs were in fact world rulers who hailed from Switzerland.



*Habsburg Castle in canton Aargau.*

The Habsburgs had their first castle in their home canton of Aargau. The forefathers of these Swiss Habsburgs probably came from Alsace, but at the beginning of the eleventh century, one of them, Count Radbot, settled close to what is now Brugg and

ruled his lands from there. According to the story, Radbot had lost his hawk—*Habicht* in German—while hunting in one of the forests of can-

<sup>2</sup> Franz Ritter von Krones, *Grundriss der österreichischen Geschichte* (Vienna: Adolf Holzhausen, 1889), 302.

ton Aargau. He found it on a hill which seemed perfect for a castle, which he built and named after the bird. However, it was only about eighty years later that the name of the castle was applied to the family which resided there: this first occurs in a document of the year 1108 when the Swiss Count Otto von Havichsberg joined a campaign against the Hungarians.

One of the great paradoxes of history is that this noble family of Swiss descent became a powerful imperial family whose supranational and regal political aspirations were dramatically opposed to the interests of their independence loving homeland, the nascent Swiss Confederation, and whose aggressive policies in their native Swiss territory resulted in the birth of that unique democratic national state. How did small freedom loving Switzerland achieve this amazing triumph over the vast Habsburg Empire, to which it ironically had given birth?

The first answer to this historical question lies in the fact that the medieval Swiss did not know the name of King. Like the Romans of ancient Republican Rome (509 BC-27 BC), the Swiss of the medieval era refused to admit the concept of Kingship in their native land; rather, they would rule themselves through local cantonal councils, much like the ancient Greek city states. The second answer to the question lies in the examination of the relationship between the Swiss Confederation and the Habsburg Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

While during the reign of the first Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf the First, the Habsburgs achieved spectacular conquests in southern Germany, Austria and eastern Europe, they were unable to maintain a similar hold from their base in southwestern Germany over neighboring Switzerland. Unlike the other medieval European nations, accustomed since the time of the Roman Empire to obedience and subservience to Emperors, Kings and Sovereigns, reputedly ordained by God with divine rights, the Swiss of the late thirteenth century were unique in their passionate desire to be free and in their remarkable success in the creation of viable democratic institutions. Unlike the French, the Germans and the English, the medieval Swiss needed no Vicar of Christ in the person of a holy Monarch to rule their nation and grant Christian legitimacy to their State; the Swiss preferred to confer with God on a personal direct basis through devout prayer and pilgrimages to the many monasteries and holy shrines which abounded in their land. They sought spiritual purification and wisdom through daily Bible reading and through their expressions of hospitality to the

stranger and to the oppressed. Switzerland thus became one of the most humanitarian and egalitarian countries of medieval Europe.

The Swiss secured their independence and right to self-determination by forming leagues among themselves. Though similar to other leagues in origin, the Swiss Confederation enjoys the distinction of being the only important organization of its kind to maintain steadfastly its independence against princes and kings, and thereupon to transform a simple and loosely formed league into a unified federal state of a republican and democratic character, capable of withstanding invasion by foreign troops. Like the leagues of the ancient Greek city states, which twice repelled the invasion of Greece by the mighty Persian Empire, the Swiss Confederation has therefore always had a peculiar fascination for the student of free democratic government.<sup>3</sup>

This unique and impressive work of liberation and expansion was initially performed by German Switzerland, originally a part of the Duchy of Swabia and the Kingdom of Burgundy. The heart of German Switzerland, the three original forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, assumed an importance to the ordinary peasant community because they controlled the important mountain pass of the Saint Gotthard to Italy, which the German Hohenstaufen Emperors were anxious to control. The towns of Switzerland shared in the revival of trade and commerce because of their location on the crucial trade route from Italy through these passes to Germany, and because too they were the markets for the products of the forest cantons themselves. In the twelfth century the most important family in German Switzerland was the Zähringer, and when it died out in 1218, the Habsburgs for the most part succeeded it.

As early as 1231, the peasants of the Canton of Uri had been freed by the Hohenstaufen Frederick II's son, King Henry of Germany, from any jurisdiction of the Habsburg counts, and had been subsequently made answerable alone to the imperial jurisdiction—a privilege granting Uri a considerable amount of freedom, since in general there was no such thing as an imperial jurisdiction. Access to the Saint Gotthard may be considered the explanation of this favor extended to the people of Uri by the House of Hohenstaufen. It is also probable that with the growing confusion in Germany during the last of Frederick's reign, the

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<sup>3</sup> Edgar Nathaniel Johnson and James Westfall Thompson, *An Introduction to Medieval Europe: 300-1500* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1937), 922.

three forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden joined together in an alliance of mutual help that included Lucerne.

During the period of the Interregnum itself (1250-1273), Count Rudolf of Habsburg expanded right and left under any pretence in central and northeastern Switzerland, and inaugurated an impressive plan to centralize, make uniform and exploit his Swiss lands typical of all the feudal princes of his age. Indeed, the Swiss of today owe a great deal to Rudolf of Habsburg, for he established the political and economic foundation of the modern Swiss State. Rudolf's economic policies during this period were focused upon the control of the prosperous traffic through the Saint Gotthard pass, as is clearly indicated by his literal purchase of the city of Lucerne in 1291.<sup>4</sup>

When the Interregnum terminated in 1273 by bringing the aforementioned Count Rudolf of Habsburg to the German imperial throne in the person of Emperor Rudolf I of Habsburg, the forest cantons felt doubly insecure in their rights and liberties, inasmuch as their private lord, the Habsburg Count, was now their public ruler as well, and the latter more powerful position of new imperial authority might well be used to carry through the policies of the Habsburgs as territorial princes of the Empire.

Henceforth for two hundred years the fate of the Swiss cantons followed the vicissitude of German politics. When the Habsburgs were Kings of the Holy Roman Empire, the Swiss had to defend themselves against their crafty encroachments. When any other German royal family occupied the German throne, the Swiss strove to use that family's opposition to the growth of the rival Habsburg power in order to secure privileges from them which would circumscribe the expansion and consolidation of the powerful Swiss-Austrian family.

Generally speaking, what the Swiss of the late thirteenth century desired was the position that Uri had won in 1231, namely, the recognition of their land as a special imperial province owing no allegiance except to the Holy Roman Emperor alone. The Swiss did not mind having the Habsburgs for kings and emperors if at the same time they did not have to have them for counts and advocates. It is illustrative, therefore, of the general situation that, although unable and to some extent unwilling to take steps during the reign of Rudolf of Habsburg, in fear

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<sup>4</sup> Guy P. Marchal, "Les racines de l'indépendance (401-1394)," in *Nouvelle Histoire de la Suisse et des Suisses*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Ed. Jean-Claude Favez (Lausanne: Payot, 1986), 159.



of his much more disliked son Albert, the three forest cantons in 1291 joined together in what was essentially a declaration of peasant revolt. They thereby formed the historical foundation of the Swiss Confederation, a league aiming at joint maintenance of the public peace, military assistance against aggressors, and the exclusion of foreign officials.

From Adolf of Nassau, Uri and Schwyz secured privileges recognizing their immediacy under the empire alone. After the Swiss had knuckled under the combined feudal and royal position of Albert of Habsburg, Henry of Luxemburg extended the same privileges to Unterwalden. The three forest cantons were now definitely recognized as a single autonomous political unit exempt from all feudal control.

Nonetheless, the Habsburgs remained relentless in their quest to obtain control over their native Swiss territory. Pursuing the policies of Rudolf I, his successors worked assiduously to achieve uncontested dominion in Switzerland. With this goal in mind, these latter Habsburg rulers in the year 1303 established an inventory, *The Habsburger Urbar*, whose purpose was to explicitly declare all the possessions, rights, taxes and revenues to which they were entitled in both Alsace, Baden and Switzerland. It was this obstinate growing concentration of Habsburg power, oblivious to the rights of the Swiss people, which led little by little to the conflict with the growing power of the Swiss cities and the Swiss mountaineers, determined to preserve their independence.<sup>5</sup>

These threatened Swiss communities benefited at first from the internecine quarrels of the House of Habsburg, which culminated in the assassination of Habsburg Emperor Albert in 1308, and following this murder, the Swiss cantons profited from the benevolence of the non-Habsburg successors to Albert, who confirmed their imperial liberty, giving special privileges to all three of the forest cantons in 1309.

Nevertheless, there now began to brew a quarrel which was to explode into full fledged warfare after the double election in October, 1314 of the Wittelsbach heir Louis of Bavaria and the Habsburg heir Frederick the Handsome of Austria. In the ensuing struggle for the throne of the Holy Roman Empire between the non-Habsburg Louis and the Habsburg Frederick, the Swiss forest cantons inevitably supported the former and were in turn encouraged by him.<sup>6</sup> Incited by

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 159-160.

<sup>6</sup> Karl-Friedrich Krieger, *Die Habsburger im Mittelalter: Von Rudolf I bis Friedrich*

*III* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer), 119.

Louis, in January 1315 the Swiss attacked and plundered the cloister of Einsiedeln, which stood under Habsburg protection. The Swiss thereby hoped to intimidate the amazed Habsburgs with their audacity and bold military prowess. It was under these circumstances that the brother of Frederick, Duke Leopold of Austria, decided in November 1315 to bring matters to a head by crushing once and for all the presumption of these Swiss peasant mountaineers.<sup>7</sup>

However, at Morgarten (1315), Leopold's knightly army was so thoroughly routed or drowned in the Ägerisee that they never had the chance to fight. The victory at Morgarten guaranteed to the forest cantons their freedom from the Habsburgs. In December of the same year at Brunnen, they renewed their alliance of 1291 with terms binding them still more closely together. In 1316 the independence of Switzerland from the Habsburg dynasty was officially recognized by the Holy Roman Emperor Louis of Bavaria.

Moreover, the now universally praised prowess of Swiss pikemen and halberdiers whom no feudal army could crush so increased their reputation that by the middle of the fifteenth century the Swiss were being used as mercenary soldiers by any one who could afford to pay them.

From the above it is clear that traditionally the Habsburgs are perceived in a negative light in Switzerland. Indeed, the House of Habsburg is generally regarded as the archenemy of the Swiss nation. After all, the independent Swiss Confederation came into existence precisely as a result of its struggle against the tyrannical Habsburgs in the late thirteenth century. This struggle between Swiss democracy and Habsburg tyranny has been made world famous by Friedrich Schiller's drama *Wilhelm Tell*.

Therefore, how can we explain the renewed interest in and more favorable impression of the Habsburg dynasty and its vast Austro-Hungarian Empire in twenty-first century Switzerland? The year, 2008, for example, was designated Habsburg Memorial Year in Switzerland. That year was the nine hundredth anniversary of the first documented mention of the family name. At that time special exhibits were set up

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson and Thompson, 924-925. For an excellent discussion of the events surrounding the late thirteenth century struggle between the Habsburgs and the Swiss and the consequent foundation of the independent Swiss Confederation, please see: Albert Winkler, "The Federal Charter of 1291 and the Founding of the Swiss State," *Swiss American Historical Society Review* 50, no. 3 (February 2014): 33-50.

throughout Switzerland in order to commemorate Switzerland's historical relationship with this eminent royal family.

Obviously, one explanation for this change in Swiss public attitude toward the Habsburgs is the rediscovery and re-emphasis of the fact that the family was originally an eleventh century family of the Swiss nobility whose roots lie in the Canton of Aargau. There is thus a certain natural curiosity about and national pride in this Swiss family which rose to such extraordinary heights of world power and fame and which ruled such a vast and mighty global Empire.

Secondly, however, historians everywhere now stress in their courses the numerous profound contributions of the Habsburgs to the growth of civilization. Disciples of Voltaire's deeply respected theory of cultural progress and his profound belief in the vital role played by Kings, Queens and Emperors in the process of cultural progression, these modern historians seek to demonstrate that the various royal dynasties of Europe have been essential to the development and advancement of European civilization. This is a professional necessity, because the training of teachers of history in all graduate schools today now demands that in the classroom the teacher of history always present all the facts about any era or historical figure so that the student can make a just and accurate assessment of the era or historical figure under analysis.

In this regard, the competent professor of history in Switzerland and elsewhere must explain to his students that, while it is true that the tyranny of the Habsburg Emperor Albert I did in fact catalyze the Swiss rebellion of 1291, it is likewise true that, like Peter the Great and the Romanovs in Russia, the Habsburgs undeniably made many extraordinary improvements in the quality of the European lands under their dominion. When stressing these Habsburgs' achievements, these professors of history invariably emphasize three exceptionally beneficent and admired periods of the Habsburg Empire: the reign of Rudolf I (1273-1291), the reign of Maria Theresa (1740-1780), and the reign of Franz Joseph (1848-1916) and his beloved consort, the Empress Elizabeth.

It was of course Rudolf I who took the Habsburg family to the pinnacle of European political power and prestige. When in the year 1273 the Electors of the Holy Roman Empire met in Frankfurt to put an end to the terrible Time of no emperor, that nightmarish interregnum that dissolved middle Europe in violence and anarchy, the princes were at pains to choose an agreeable and a mediocre man, one on whose

neck they might keep a collective foot. For those reasons they passed over the obvious choice—one of their own number, the recalcitrant King Ottokar of Bohemia—to name for Holy Roman Emperor, a provincial nobleman of Swiss descent and of no particular renown, Count Rudolf of Habsburg.

The Electors had, of course, underestimated their man. Rudolf had all the attributes of the fast riser. A superb politician, a master of conniving and maneuver, a gambler and a bargain-driver, he knew perfectly how to turn his stroke of fortune to good account. He may already have bribed three of the Electors with what came to be his family's most useful bargaining tool—marriageable daughters.

Rudolf is also reputed to have been a paragon of piety and a true son of the Church. It was told that before he became Emperor, he had ridden out to hunt one day and had encountered a poor priest on foot carrying the sacrament to a dying man. Rudolf had dismounted instantly, saying, "It is not meet that I should ride while the servant of my Lord and Saviour goes on foot." Nor would he have the steed returned; it would not be right to use it again for the common services of life. The winning of the crown of the Holy Roman Empire came to be thought a divine reward for his act of piety.<sup>8</sup>



Rudolf was thus, it would appear, generous, simple, good, pious and modest; in short, he embodied all the virtues of the *miles christianus*, of the Christian knight. The alliance which he concluded with the great cities (in particular Strassburg and Zurich) helped to forge the image of a popular and pious sovereign. He became in due course the model of piety which his admiring descendants aspired to

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Gies McGuigan, *The Habsburgs* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 3-5.



*The Empress Maria Theresa in 1759.*

emulate and whom Schiller celebrated in his ballad *Der Graf von Habsburg*. In addition, a generation after his death a series of anecdotes celebrated his affable character and reflected the burghers' gratitude to the man who had put an end to the "terrible time without an emperor" and who had restored peace, law and order to the realm.<sup>9</sup>

By the time of the reign of the Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa (1740-1780), the Habsburgs still owned only a small section of Switzerland: the Fricktal area along the Rhine. And yet Maria Theresa is still much respected there and throughout Switzerland.

"Until recently at least lots of girls in the Fricktal were called Maria Theresa," says Peter Frey, one of the curators of the Habsburg exhibition in Brugg. "The reforms she introduced were beneficial for the area. For example, she introduced obligatory fire insurance, and when the Fricktal became part of canton Aargau in 1803, part of the agreement was that fire insurance must be made obligatory in the whole canton. That's why even today Aargau has the lowest insurance premi-

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Bérenger, *A History of the Habsburg Empire: 1273-1700*, trans. C.A. Simpson (London: Langman Group, 1994), 14.  
[https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs\\_review/vol51/iss1/5](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol51/iss1/5)

ums. The fund has been invested for two hundred years!" A cursory review of the achievements of the Empress Maria Theresa will demonstrate emphatically to the reader why this particular Habsburg ruler still enjoys such universal admiration and respect.

A diligent and indefatigable worker, Maria Theresa was in her office at the Hofburg or at the council table from daybreak until late at night, conferring, planning, dictating, maneuvering, literally holding together with sheer strength of will the various provinces of the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire. Her benevolent despotism did not confine itself to the physical well being of her people. Intelligent obedience in the subject, well-ordered industry in the producer, education and training in the governing classes were necessary conditions of success in the development of the new system of government introduced by Maria Theresa, and were inconsistent with the laxity of morals, rough manners, gross ignorance, and superstition which prevailed at the time of her accession to the throne. The improvement of education, emanating from a central authority, received therefore much attention and led to extraordinary pedagogical improvements. The primary schools were thoroughly reorganized, and a general order was sent out that all schoolmasters in the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire were to be chosen only from experienced and respectable men. A well-arranged and stringent system of examinations breathed new life into the secondary schools or gymnasiums, and a plan was set on foot for establishing a whole system of technical education, with the object of improving, by theoretical knowledge, the practical work of the manufacturing classes. Not only was the conception of the instruction of the working classes unprecedented and unusually enlightened, the admission of laymen to the position of instructors showed an unexpected advance in liberal thought, at a time when all education in Austria was in the hands either of the Jesuits or of the order of the Piarists.<sup>10</sup> The people of the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire rejoiced in the wisdom of their Empress, and they greatly benefited from the improvements brought about by her intelligent reforms. Indeed, all of Europe wondered at the new era of peace, intellectual refinement and enlightenment and cultural brilliance ushered in by the reign of Maria Theresa. In neighboring Swit-

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<sup>10</sup> J. Franck Bright, D.D., *Maria Theresa* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1897), 76.

zerland many officials of the government and people of responsibility in Church and State observed with profound curiosity and respect the new improved Austro-Hungarian Empire of Empress Maria Theresa, and many of her social and pedagogical improvements were used as models by the admiring Swiss and were instituted throughout the Swiss Confederation as well.

Four remarkable incidents from the life of Maria Theresa will suffice to demonstrate the high esteem in which this impressive Empress was held by her contemporaries. First, in June of 1741 Maria Theresa was crowned Queen of Hungary. That same summer a Bavarian army threatened to invade Austria—with a French army on the way to join it. Maria Theresa had virtually no army to defend her country. She therefore called the Hungarian Diet to Pressburg, and she herself appeared to plead her cause before the Hungarian magnates, men who bore bitter resentment against the Habsburgs for a century of harsh treatment since the Thirty Years' War. Still in deep mourning for her father, the Queen's dark sumptuous gown set off to perfection her fair skin and pretty shoulders. Wearing the revered crown of Saint Stephen, she arose and gave an elegant and regal address to the assembly. At the end of her moving plea for help, when she burst into very real tears, the Hungarian magnates could no longer contain themselves—her old friend Count Jean Palffy, an eye witness, recounted the scene afterward—but leapt to their feet, “as if animated by one soul, drawing their swords and shouting, “*Vitam et sanguine pro majestate vostra!*” (Our life and blood for Your Majesty.) Thus did the Hungarian noblemen, when called to defend Austria-Hungary, express their loyalty, affection and total devotion to their Queen.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, Maria Theresa always showed a high level of concern and solicitude for her people. She brushed away the formal court etiquette that had ruled the Hofburg for so long and that had kept the monarch aloof from the nation. Maria Theresa neither needed nor wanted such etiquette. She made it extremely easy for her subjects to see her. At her audiences in the Hofburg each morning at ten, anyone who wished might speak quite freely, even whisper in her ear on a very private matter.<sup>12</sup> Thus did this incomparable Queen endear herself

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<sup>11</sup> McGuigan, 228-229.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.



*The Dowager Empress Maria Theresa with her family.* Painting by Heinrich Füger.

forever to her people through her constant expressions of solicitude for their welfare.

Thirdly, Maria Theresa was a most generous patroness of the arts. When the Mozart family made their first appearance in Vienna, Maria Theresa invited them to a reception at Schönbrunn where the two children, little Wolfgang and his sister, performed for the imperial family. Leopold Mozart later wrote that their Majesties had received his family with such extraordinary graciousness that “when I describe it, people will not believe me. Suffice it to say that Wolferl jumped upon the lap of the Empress, put his arms around her neck and kissed her heartily.” What better example than a child’s love to prove Maria Theresa’s goodness as a ruler.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, one of the legends in Austria pertaining to Maria Theresa relates that, as she took her daily walk in the gardens at Schönbrunn





*Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria-Hungary.*

Painting by Johann Ranzi.

with her infant son Joseph and his nurse, they came upon a beggar woman holding a screaming baby to her empty breast. The Empress stopped at once, as was her custom, to open her purse; the woman turned away with an angry gesture, muttering bitterly that a gold piece would not quiet her hungry babe. Thereupon the empress, ever sincerely concerned for the welfare of her people, picked up the squalling child and put it to her own ample breast.<sup>14</sup>

The third period of Habsburg rule which still today in the twenty-first century commands so much admiration is of course the reign of Emperor Franz Josef and his consort Elizabeth. Franz Joseph was the longest reigning Emperor in European history (1848-1916), and during his reign the Austro-Hungarian Empire reached its greatest extent. From May 1, 1850 until August 24, 1866 he was also President of the German Confederation. In 1867 he concluded the *Ausgleich*, which granted greater autonomy to Hungary, and thereafter his domains were ruled peacefully for the next forty-five years. His reign represents a period of extraordinary economic and scientific progress as well as cultural brilliance throughout the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many important scientific discoveries, for example, were made under his generous patronage. In certain areas, celebrations are still held to-

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.



*The Coronation of Franz Joseph I as King of Hungary, 1867.*



*The Coronation of Empress Elizabeth of Austria as the Queen of Hungary, 1867*  
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day in remembrance of Franz Joseph's birthday. The Mitteleuropean People's Festival, for example, takes place every year around August 18 and is a spontaneous, traditional and brotherly meeting among peoples of the central European countries. The events include ceremonies, meetings, music, songs, dances, wine and food tasting, and traditional costumes and folklore from all parts of central Europe.

Like Catherine the Great, Queen Victoria, and Diana, Princess of Wales, Franz Joseph's consort, the Empress Elizabeth (1837-1898), nicknamed Sisi, possessed a charm, grace and winning personality which endeared her to all Europeans and indeed to the entire world. A daughter of the Bavarian royal House of Wittelsbach, the

Empress Elizabeth was one of the most impressive and physically imposing rulers of European history. She had a regal manner which immediately commanded the respect of all who approached her. She was a paragon of beauty and high fashion, and she was renowned for her compassion, being deeply involved in charitable efforts on behalf of the mentally ill.

She was unfortunately assassinated by the twenty-five year old Italian anarchist Luigi Lucheni on Saturday, September 10, 1898, as she and her lady in waiting left the Hotel Beau Rivage in Geneva on the shore of Lake Geneva, on their way to catch the steamship *Genève* bound for Montreux. The news of the assassination, like the news of the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in November 1963, sent shock waves of revulsion around the world. The city of Geneva, as all of Switzerland, immediately shuttered itself in mourning upon receiving the news of the untimely and violent death of this most distinguished, humanitarian and beloved Empress of the royal house to which Switzerland had given birth.

On Wednesday morning, September 14, Elizabeth's body was conducted in state across Switzerland back to Vienna aboard a funeral train. Crowds of distraught and anguished mourners gathered at the train stations of the various Swiss cities—Lausanne, Fribourg, Bern and Zurich—through which her coffin passed. The Swiss crowds pressed as close as possible to the imperial train, in order to be as near as possible to the earthly remains of this august Empress of the House of Habsburg whom the Swiss had so long admired. The entire Austro-Hungarian Empire was ordered into deep mourning. Enraged by what the Hungarians perceived as an affront, the Hungarian Parliament went into emergency session. The Hungarians had learned that the imperial Coffin of State would bear the inscription, Elizabeth Empress of Austria. The Hungarians insisted that the Empress Elizabeth was as beloved and esteemed in Hungary as in Austria itself; they insisted that the inscription on the coffin be changed to reflect that fact and to reflect her love for and devotion to the Hungarians. The request of the people of Hungary was immediately granted; the finalized gilded inscription on the imperial coffin read, "Elizabeth, Empress of Austria and Hungary." Eighty-two sovereigns and high ranking nobles followed her funeral cortege on the morning of September 17 to her final resting place in the Church of the Capuchins in Vienna.

A large number of chapels were posthumously named in her honor, connecting her to Saint Elizabeth, and for many years crowds of devout admirers worshipped daily in these chapels throughout Austria-Hungary and Switzerland. Various parks throughout Europe were named after her, such as Empress Elisabeth Park in Meran, South Tyrol. Finally, in order to pay respect to her rule and to preserve her memory, numerous monuments were sculpted. For example, on the lake promenade in Territet, a town between Montreux and the Château of Chillon, there stands a particularly impressive monument in honor of Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary.

A final reason that the Habsburgs command such universal respect today is that they presided over one of the most spectacular cultural revolutions in history. The Habsburgs patronized countless composers, and during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Vienna became the musical capital of the earth: Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Johannes Brahms, Gustav Mahler, and Johannes Strauss all composed there and all called Vienna home. At the end of the nineteenth century Vienna also became a center of German literature: here lived and wrote Franz Grillparzer, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Robert Musil, Heimito von Doderer, Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann. Finally, Vienna became in the nineteenth century a world capital of medical and scientific research. Here Sigmund Freud conducted his seminal studies in the interpretation of dreams and psychoanalysis, and at that time the University of Vienna came to be regarded as one of the best universities in the world, where important scientific and medical discoveries were constantly made, often in collaboration with the Universities of Zurich and Lausanne. Thus, under the patronage of the enlightened Habsburgs, the Austro-Hungarian Empire became the center and promoter of cultural and scientific achievements the likes of which the world had never seen and which have benefited all mankind.

## **Conclusion**

Originally from Alemannic Switzerland, by the end of the thirteenth century the Habsburgs had extended their possessions in the Danube basin and would go on to affirm in the fifteenth century their  
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*A map of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.*

European destiny, indeed, in the sixteenth century with Charles V, their pretensions to universal monarchy.

The Habsburgs have always been indifferent to the idea of the nation-state, preferring instead the concept of a supranational monarchy where loyalty to the sovereign forms the fundamental bond between peoples and takes the place of patriotism. Such a political principle and system of government is the antithesis of the democracy and the high level of direct popular involvement in civic affairs which has long been cherished in their native Switzerland. As the Habsburg family grew in power and prestige throughout the Middle Ages and moved their seat of government eastward from Switzerland to Austria and Central Europe, they obviously forgot the democratic principles which governed their native land.<sup>15</sup>

Instead, the Habsburgs constructed a great imperial superpower. The Austro-Hungarian Empire of course came to an end in 1918 when

<sup>15</sup> Jean Bérenger, "Introduction," in Jean Bérenger, *A History of the Habsburg Empire: 1273-1700*, trans. C.A. Simpson (London: Langman Group, 1994), 1.

Germany and Austria-Hungary were defeated by the Triple Entente of Russia, France and Great Britain, joined by the United States, at the end of the First World War. At that time the old empires which had dictated the fortunes of Europe for centuries were replaced by a patchwork of successor states, formed ostensibly in accordance with the principles of ethnic unity and national self-determination. And yet the majesty and cultural brilliance of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire remain an indelible part of human cultural memory.

Clearly, no one can erase from the Swiss public imagination the image of the diabolical Habsburg sheriff Albrecht Gessler and his tyrannical treatment of the people of Altdorf. Who can forget the cruel punishment which Gessler inflicted upon William Tell for having refused to bow to his hat which he had raised on a pole in Altdorf's central square as a symbol of his power: Tell and his son would be executed for their impudence, but Tell could redeem their lives by taking the terrible risk of shooting an apple off the head of his little son, Walter.

However, the intelligent and the well educated will surely remember that history is replete with examples of virtuous fathers who produced ignominious offspring of whom they were ashamed. Just as at the time of the Roman Empire the wise and universally respected pacifier and unifier Marcus Aurelius gave birth to the mad monster Commodus, so did the saintly Rudolf of Habsburg, a ruler of Swiss descent revered throughout all of Europe, give birth to the perfidious Habsburg Emperor Albert, who sought to trample the rights of the Swiss cantons under the boot of tyranny. And yet the sins of the son should not cause us to forget the virtues of the father.

Hence, the wise and just Swiss citizen of the twenty-first century will seek to see the history of the Swiss family Habsburg in a proper perspective and will judge the family fairly and equitably. Upon judicious reflection and weighing all the facts in the balance of history, surely Swiss people today will perceive that the many wonderful contributions made by the Habsburgs to civilization far outweigh the mistakes that some of the Habsburg kings made in their dealing with the Swiss Confederation during the High Middle Ages.

It is for this reason, so this author believes, that the Swiss government decided voluntarily in 2008 to stage exhibits commemorating the nine hundredth anniversary of the birth of the royal house of Habsburg  
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in Canton Aargau. It is also for the same reason that Swiss historians and teachers of history today seek to instill in their students a just, balanced, and accurate understanding of the history of the royal House of Habsburg, whose many accomplishments as saints of the Church and generous patrons of the arts and sciences clearly establish them as one of the most distinguished, illustrious and influential families of the Swiss Confederation.

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