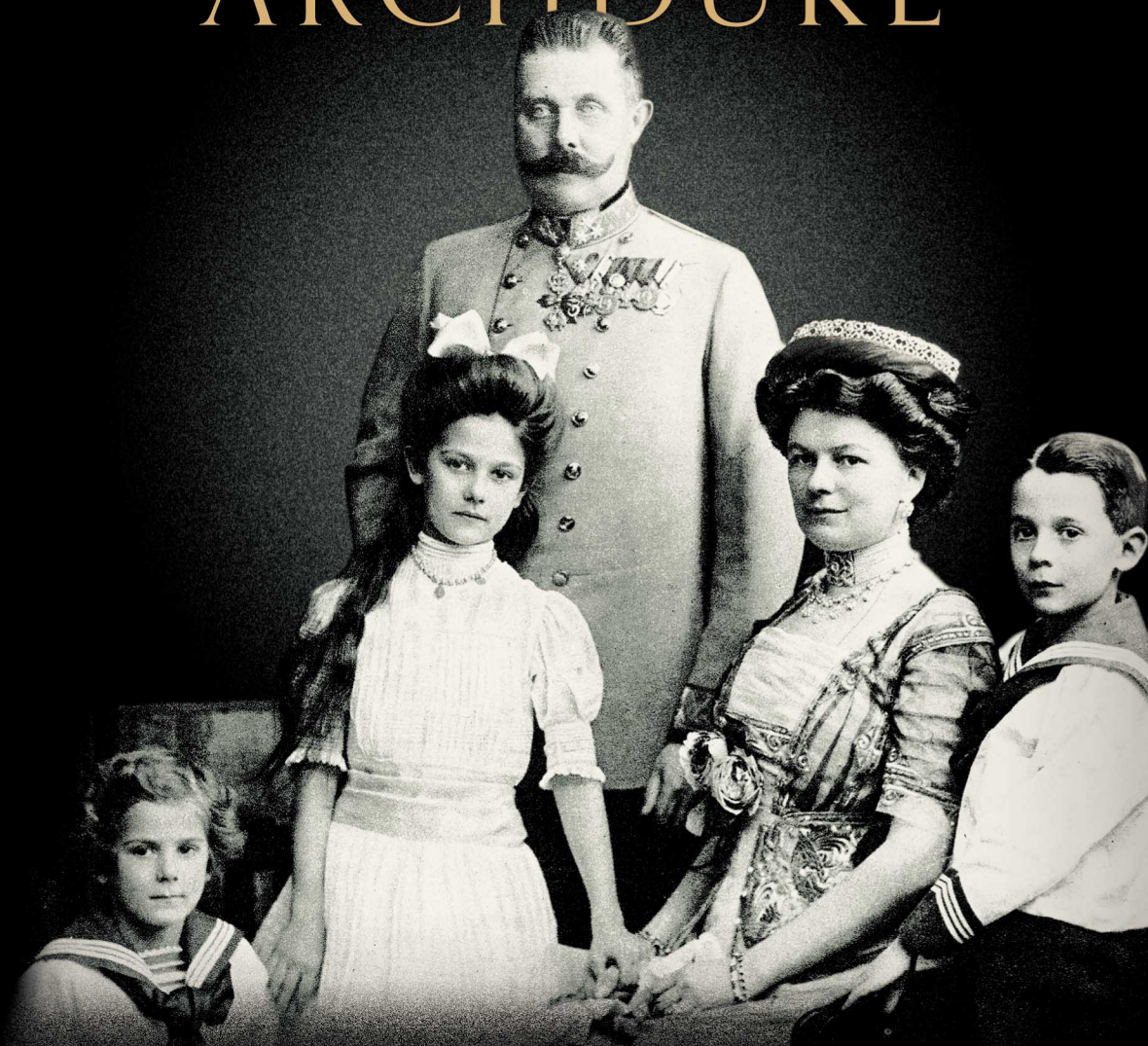


SARAJEVO 1914 AND THE MURDER
THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

The
ASSASSINATION
of the
ARCHDUKE



GREG KING AND SUE WOOLMAN

The
ASSASSINATION
of the
ARCHDUKE

*Sarajevo 1914 and the Murder
that Changed the World*



Greg King
and
Sue Woolmans

MACMILLAN

FOREWORD

BY SOPHIE VON HOHENBERG



I vividly remember the first email I received from Sue Woolmans and Greg King. I sat back and thought, Should I answer? Then I remembered an old story.

I believe it was at my sister's wedding. I was standing on the terrace with my grandmother, and we were watching Aunt Sophie, (daughter of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Este and Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg), who was patiently answering the questions of the journalists. I commented to my grandmother, 'How can she stand it?' My grandmother answered that she herself had once, years ago, asked her sister-in-law why she bothered answering all those questions. 'The journalists don't listen, and write what they want anyway, so why bother?' Aunt Sophie had an amazing answer. As if it were the most normal thing in the world she said, 'But I must defend him,' 'him' being her father.

Since then I have read many books about my great-grandfather, and few have done him justice. Sue and Greg's book was different: it was to be a book about my great-grandparents, their private life, and the repercussion of Sarajevo on the Hohenberg children.

The destiny of my grandfather and his siblings is remarkable. They led lives strewn with tragedy and hardship, but they strode through it,

⇒ *Foreword* ⇐

their heads held high, with courage, resilience, and faith. They were happy, good-humoured, joyful people, and I admire their stance after all. They were the first orphans of the First World War, and the first victims of the young Czechoslovakian Republic, chased from their home and their country. Their possessions were illegally confiscated without any compensation. The Hohenberg brothers were the first Austrian aristocrats in Dachau concentration camp. They struggled against prejudice, discrimination, and injustice. Their home, Konopischt, was seized almost one hundred years ago, just after the First World War. This larceny was perpetrated by a state before any legal basis existed, right under the nose of the Allies, who did not budge, even when Prince Jaroslav Thun-Hohenstein, the children's legal guardian, tried to protest and started a legal battle. My grandfather Max Hohenberg continued, and I have tried to follow suit after the Iron Curtain fell, picking up where my grandfather had left the battle for our heirloom and for justice, but success still evades me.

I thank Sue Woolmans and Greg King for this book, and for their work in researching this tribute to the people I admire and that are so close to my heart.

Luxembourg, January 2013

INTRODUCTION



‘Once upon a time,’ begins the fairy tale: a dashing young prince, heir to his country’s historic throne, meets an impoverished young lady whose grace and beauty steal his heart. Captivated, he pursues her against the wishes of his powerful family, who deem her unsuitable as a future queen. Against all odds, romance blooms and the prince weds his love. Creating an idyllic existence, the couple shies away from a censorious court where wagging tongues condemn their actions, determined to wrest from a cynical world the personal and romantic fulfilment for which they had so nobly fought.

The personal love story of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and Countess Sophie Chotek begins in mystery, exults in marital victory, and plays out against incessant adversity. In many ways, it undeniably mirrors mythic elements of the traditional fairy tale. We have Franz Ferdinand as Prince Charming, born to power and privilege and seeking forbidden love; Countess Sophie Chotek is his Cinderella, beautiful, impoverished, and not at all a proper consort for the future ruler of a great empire. Franz Ferdinand’s stepmother, Archduchess Maria Theresa, acts as Fairy Godmother, encouraging the romance in the face of unified Habsburg opposition; the belligerent Archduchess

Isabella serves as the quintessential wicked stepmother, employing Cinderella to labour for hours at humiliating and menial tasks. In Prince Alfred de Montenuovo, Lord High Chamberlain of the imperial court, we find an ogre of epic proportions, inflicting petty insults on the graceful and resolute Sophie. As in every good fairy tale, the heroes even get to attend a glittering ball, where a stunned audience watches in disbelief as the forbidden romance becomes public.

Real life unexpectedly subverted this particular fairy tale in the summer of 1914. Two bullets, fired by nineteen-year-old Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, abruptly denied Franz Ferdinand and Sophie the happy ending promised in countless romantic stories. JOINED IN MARRIAGE, THEY WERE JOINED BY THE SAME FATE, reads the inscription on their twin white marble sarcophagi. United in death as in life, this most famous Austrian couple passed into history as mustard gas, trench warfare, machine guns, and U-boats subsumed the comfortable world they had known.

A century has passed since that fateful day in Sarajevo. Has any other couple of the last hundred years so inadvertently shaped our modern era? Those two bullets not only ended the lives of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie; they became the catalyst for the First World War and all of the horrors that followed. Without Sarajevo, would there have been a Russian Revolution, a Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, a Second World War, or a Cold War? History reverberates with the effects of this couple's deaths that Sunday in 1914.

Why, then, do Franz Ferdinand and Sophie seem so elusive? Why is it that their private lives and real characters remain shadowed? Perhaps this owes something to the Habsburgs themselves. Franz Ferdinand's was a proud dynasty with an illustrious heritage, but it lacked glamour and scandal when compared to the Romanovs of exotically mysterious Russia. Revolution came to Russia with a bloody vengeance; in Austria, the Habsburgs passed into the obscurity of exile with little notice. Romantic nostalgia envelops the story of Nicholas II, the last Tsar, and his wife, Alexandra. Their Austrian contemporaries, just as devoted, just as

in love, and just as tragic in their end, have been overtaken by their notorious assassination.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, it must be said, was scarcely anyone's idea of a Prince Charming – ill with tuberculosis, armed with a disagreeable temper, and often impetuous. Few people liked him. In his own lifetime he was an enigma. Some younger, less conservative elements and those who personally knew him hailed the archduke as a thoughtful man, with an eager mind and a willingness to listen to opposing voices. Franz Ferdinand had plenty of years to think about the country he would inherit and to ponder possible solutions to its many problems. Rather than cling to unimaginative tradition, as his uncle Emperor Franz Josef did, he was determined to enact sweeping and dramatic reforms. By heritage and by inclination Franz Ferdinand was no liberal, but he was smart enough to embrace ideas of political modernization to save the crumbling empire. If anyone could save the archaic Austro-Hungarian monarchy, his supporters believed, it was the archduke.

Most contemporary opinion was not so generous when it came to the mysterious archduke. Many regarded him as an astonishingly brutal, bad-tempered man; 'narrow in outlook', complained one princess, with a 'suspicious, irritable, and capricious nature', 'overbearing manner', 'bigoted piety', and 'aggressive and fanatical clericalism'.¹ Once on the throne he would oppress religious and ethnic minorities, people whispered, and embark on a grim and backward reign that would be nothing short of tyrannical. This has largely been history's verdict. Franz Ferdinand, it is often said, was a man of autocratic inclinations, a militaristic warmonger, 'a reactionary', a buffoon devoid of personal charm or any semblance of ordinary human emotion.²

Everyone was stunned, therefore, when this apparently aloof and stern man showed that he was indeed human by falling in love. Countess Sophie Chotek came from a distinguished Bohemian aristocratic family. She might be pretty and charming, but to an imperial court obsessed with matters of tradition and etiquette, she lacked the titles and noble

ancestry necessary for equal marriage to such a rarefied creature as an imperial Habsburg archduke. He would one day become emperor of Austria and king of Hungary; she could never share his throne because, as Franz Ferdinand put it, ‘of some trifle in her family tree’.

Princes and kings usually find a way around romantic difficulties. Whether it was the future Tsar Nicholas II insisting on marrying the dangerously unsuitable Alexandra, King Edward VIII and his obsession with American divorcee Wallis Simpson, or even the archduke’s uncle Emperor Franz Josef ignoring his mother’s warnings to wed his immature and melancholy cousin Elisabeth, passion usually triumphed. Caution goes hand in hand with royal romances; issues of character or controversial temperaments have made many consorts unsuitable. Not so with Sophie. Reasons advanced against Franz Ferdinand’s marriage to Sophie Chotek were at once monumental to a Habsburg monarchy steeped in tradition and trivial to many others. There was no flaw in her character, no question about her behaviour; instead, the imperial court deemed her distinguished ancestors, who had loyally served Habsburgs for centuries, not quite distinguished enough. With an egalitarian stance born of necessity as royal ranks dwindled across Europe, the dynasty recognized many aristocratic families as equal when it came to marriage. Not so the Choteks. They might be accomplished, but they weren’t good enough to join this illustrious circle.

Unwilling to let this ‘trifle’ stand in his way, Franz Ferdinand persevered, alternating between mournful pleas and dramatic threats of suicide. When he finally won permission to wed his countess, the victory came at a terrible price. Sophie was forever condemned as morganatic, unequal to her husband. She could never share her husband’s titles or his throne; their children would be barred from the imperial succession. She couldn’t even be buried next to him, viewed as unfit, even in death, to share eternity with any Habsburg in their crowded Viennese crypt.

Such insults – and there were many over the years – won Sophie sympathy from the less critical segments of society. Others, including members of the imperial family and the Habsburg court, painted her as

a scheming, power-hungry, ambitious woman intent on seeing herself one day crowned as empress.³ The archduke, insisted a courtier, was ‘goaded by his domineering wife’ on all issues, while famed writer Rebecca West venomously depicted her as a ‘small-minded fury’ hell-bent on seeing her morganatic sons recognized as heirs to the throne.⁴

The truth was different. If Franz Ferdinand had a brusque public persona and lacked either the desire or ability to charm his future subjects, he was quite a different man in private, and Sophie’s only real ambitions seem to have been to make her husband happy and to provide a loving home for their three children, Sophie, Max and Ernst. It’s hard to escape comparisons to the more famous Nicholas and Alexandra. Time has slowly revealed the flamboyantly idealized domesticity of the last Romanovs as something of a fiction. The demands of ruling limited the Tsar’s interaction with his children, while his wife’s morbid character and incessant illnesses increasingly left her an irregular, melancholy presence in their lives. Franz Ferdinand and Sophie, on the other hand, eagerly embraced their love of family life. It was an era of nannies and isolated nurseries, yet Sophie, Max and Ernst were adored and indulged, joining their parents at meals, chatting with the most important and distinguished guests, and enjoying childhoods free from strife and worry. Life was tranquil, and there was never any hint of infidelity or marital unhappiness. Sadly, the halcyon days were not to last.

Today it is easy to look back upon the years before 1914 with a kind of gauzy, romantic nostalgia. It seems a simpler time, when innovation enthralled and peace predominated. The truth, though, was somewhat different. All major powers had fought in at least one war since 1860, usually several, and the modern arms race had begun in earnest; incursion, revolution, revolt and repression were rife. The fifty years preceding that golden summer of 1914 witnessed constant violence. Assassination was common: the sultan of Turkey was killed in 1876; American President James Garfield and Tsar Alexander II of Russia in 1881; President Sadi Carnot of France in 1894; the shah of Persia in 1896; the prime minister of Spain in 1897; the empress of Austria in

1898; King Umberto of Italy in 1900; American President William McKinley in 1901; King Alexander and Queen Draga of Serbia in 1903; Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich of Russia in 1905; King Carlos of Portugal and his son Crown Prince Luis Felipe in 1908; Russian prime minister Peter Stolypin in 1911; and King George of Greece in 1913. Royalty and politicians alike fell in precipitous numbers to bombs, bullets and knives in these 'golden' years of peace.

This litany of political assassinations culminated in events at Sarajevo. Perhaps no one anticipated the actual event, but much of Europe harboured a vague uneasiness that the continent was but a mere spark away from total conflagration. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany had predicted as much, warning that 'some damn foolish thing in the Balkans' would sooner or later plunge all of Europe into a devastating war.⁵ His prediction came true that summer of 1914 when the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie at Sarajevo ushered in an era of unprecedented mass slaughter. 'No other political murder in modern history', wrote Vladimir Dedijer, 'has had such momentous consequences.'⁶

Like every other event that changed the course of human history, that fateful day is still wreathed in ambiguity, subject to nationalist arguments and surrounded by a swarm of historical fallacies. Franz Ferdinand, it is said, only attended the army manoeuvres in Bosnia so that his wife could receive public acclamation. Against all common sense, he insisted on visiting Sarajevo on 28 June. This was St Vitus's Day, the Serb national holiday commemorating the Battle of Kosovo, when in 1389 an unwelcome foreign intruder, in this case the Ottoman Empire, had conquered the land and reduced the Serbs to vassals. It was, said many, as if Franz Ferdinand were seeking to deliberately provoke a recently annexed Bosnia full of anti-Austrian revolutionaries. The archduke, insisted author Rebecca West, 'brought his doom on himself by the tactlessness and aggressiveness of his visit to the Serbian frontier at the time of a Serbian festival'.⁷

None of this was true. As myth surrounds the lives of Franz Ferdinand

and Sophie, so, too, does it swirl – even after a century – around events in Sarajevo. Franz Ferdinand didn't want to make the trip; he repeatedly tried to escape this unwelcome duty, but his uncle Emperor Franz Josef forced him to go. Authorities in Sarajevo compelled the archduke to accept the incendiary date for the visit; officials on the ground in Bosnia certainly lacked all vestiges of common sense when it came to planning the trip. Very real concerns about the couple's safety were received and ignored; threats of potential violence were dismissed, and security was almost non-existent.

Conspiracy theories always enshroud momentous events, from the fate of Grand Duchess Anastasia and the death of President John F. Kennedy to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. It is not surprising, then, that the assassination that sparked the First World War has also led to controversy and speculation. This stretches beyond arguments over the role of the notorious group the Black Hand in organizing the attack or the complicity of the Serbian government. There have long been whispers that something more nefarious was afoot, a plot engineered by officials in Austria-Hungary who wanted the troublesome archduke and his equally troublesome morganatic wife out of the way. Without doubt there were those who trembled when they thought of Franz Ferdinand as emperor. His plans to reorganize the empire threatened conservative notions, and many worried that despite his renunciation, the archduke would find a way to crown his morganatic wife empress and name his eldest son as heir to the throne. Others were certainly looking for an excuse to wage war against the perpetual menace that was Serbia. What better way, it has been suggested, than to provoke some incident in Sarajevo that would justify Austrian aggression against Belgrade?

It is a startling idea, but one that Franz Josef's own daughter-in-law, the former crown princess Stephanie, believed. The assassination in Sarajevo, she insisted, had been nudged along by certain elements in Austria who looked the other way when warnings of danger were raised. Then there are charges that imperial Russia, Serbia's most powerful ally and a country determined to eliminate Austria as an influence in the

Balkans, actively promoted the assassination. According to this theory, Russia feared that when Franz Ferdinand came to the throne he would unite the disparate southern Slavs under the Habsburg flag and thus prevent Romanov expansion in the Balkans. These two ideas form an inexorable part of the Sarajevo story and demand a serious hearing.

Some questions will always remain, but the trauma that quickly followed from that day in Sarajevo is undeniable. By the first week of August 1914, Europe was at war; if Franz Ferdinand and Sophie fell as its first victims, so, too, did their three children become its first orphans. Sophie, Max and Ernst suffered from the chaos unleashed by their parents' assassination, enduring all of the horrors that flowed from that Sunday in 1914. War and revolution, loss of homes and exile, terrified flight from invading armies, and torture at the hands of brutal dictators all became unwanted companions as the twentieth century progressed. Their tragic story echoes the plight of millions, mingling heartbreaking loss with faith and resilient love.

All of these elements – the forbidden romance, the happy family life, the struggles against an oppressive system, assassination, and the ultimate triumph over dark adversity – make the story of Franz Ferdinand, Sophie and their children a modern fairy tale that has, in ways large and small, affected the lives of hundreds of millions of people. Many have previously told the archduke's story, and even more books have dealt with the assassination in Sarajevo. The problem has always been bias, as authors projected onto Franz Ferdinand, Sophie, and the terrorists who killed them their own conceits and nationalistic views. Cutting through a century of popular misinformation is difficult. 'When I arrived in Austria,' says Princess Anita von Hohenberg, Franz Ferdinand and Sophie's great-granddaughter, 'I was a young woman, and the archduke was completely misunderstood. The image is still not perfect, but we're trying to change it.' As for Sophie, Princess Anita comments, 'She was a very down-to-earth person. She was very cheerful, and she was very devoted to her husband and to the children. She was satisfied, very calm, pious, and happy with the way she lived.'⁸

Breaking through old stereotypes is always difficult. There have been a few attempts at accurate portrayals of the couple, notably Gordon Brook-Shepherd's 1984 work *Victims at Sarajevo*. Although focused to a large extent on the archduke's political career, it tried to offer a balanced look at the couple's lives but often ended up repeating erroneous stories. Many others have offered fragmented glimpses of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie in works devoted to their assassination, but the results have been decidedly mixed.

The hundredth anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination calls for a fresh look at Franz Ferdinand and Sophie. Here, we have tried to focus on the personal over the political, to resurrect the couple as they were with each other and with their children. This is the story of the couple's romance and marriage; it is also the story of how the public and the imperial court saw them, how Franz Ferdinand and Sophie came to be viewed during their lives, and how these views often conflicted with reality. Finally, it is the story of their three children and how their lives became, in many ways, emblematic of the trauma unleashed with their parents' deaths.

The task of understanding the couple and bringing them to life is made somewhat more difficult by a rather surprising lack of reliable information. We have drawn on many of the archduke's unpublished letters and papers in the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, including correspondence within the Habsburg family, but for the most part these reveal only tantalizing glimpses of his private life. Franz Ferdinand was a great letter writer, and his intimate correspondence with Kaiser Wilhelm II would surely provide invaluable insights into his marriage. Sadly, while we possess numerous letters from the kaiser to the archduke, those from the archduke to the kaiser have simply disappeared. Despite extensive searches, no historian has been able to locate them.⁹

Nor is the situation any better when it comes to personal letters between Franz Ferdinand and Sophie. We know that the couple regularly wrote to each other in the years before their romance became public and throughout the lengthy negotiations with the powers that be over their

marriage. Surely this correspondence would offer unique personal glimpses into their characters and their love affair. However, their son Max, perhaps hoping to preserve the sanctity of his parents' private thoughts, later destroyed nearly all of it. Their daughter, Sophie, managed to salvage the few scraps that remain, a postcard here or a brief note there, but sadly the confidences, love letters, and intimate exchanges that define the relationship are lost to history.¹⁰

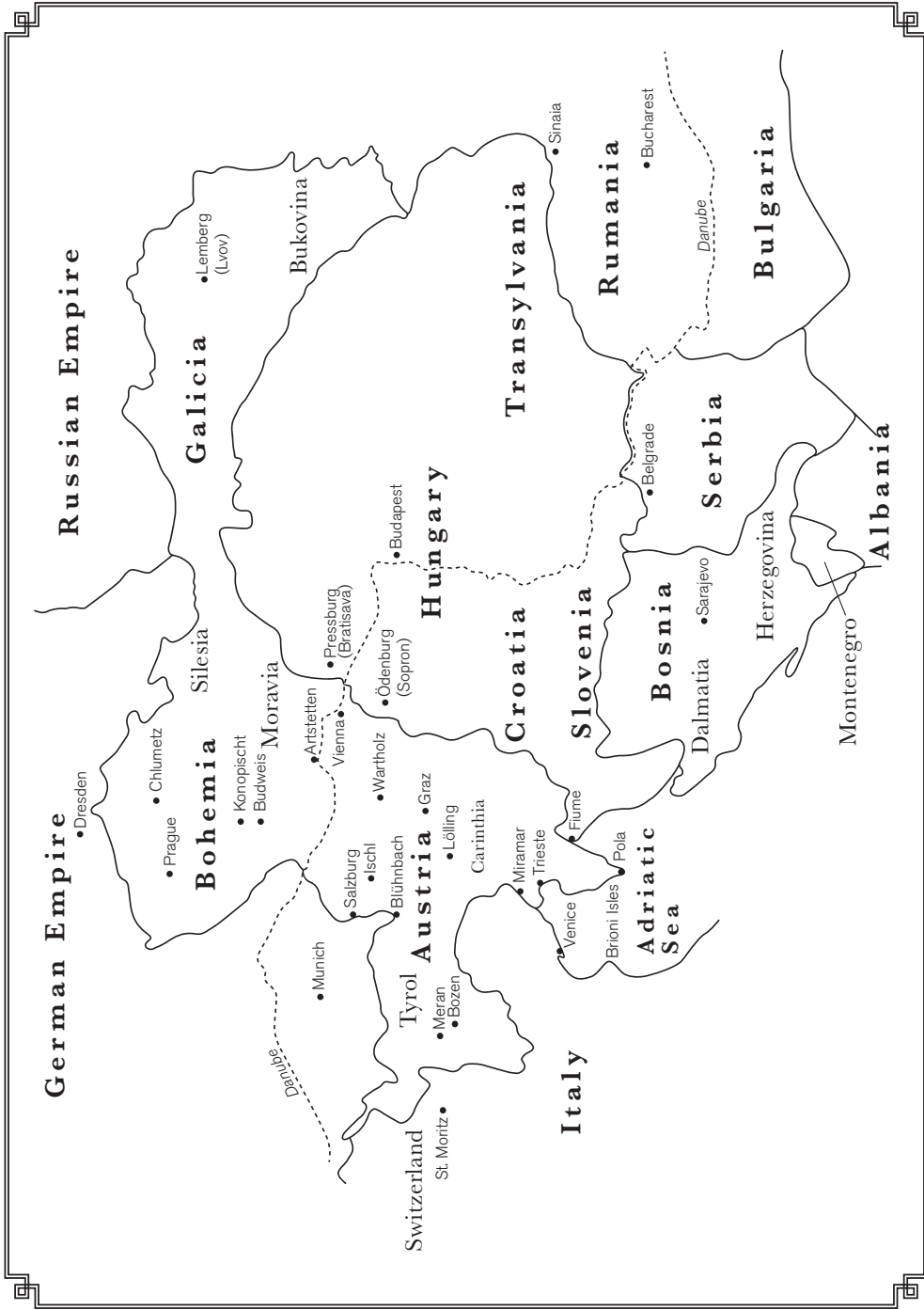
Most royal and aristocratic personages of the era diligently maintained journals from their youth; it was a way of recording events and, perhaps more important in the Victorian age, demonstrating that time had been usefully occupied. These would be invaluable in establishing dates, particularly of early contacts between Franz Ferdinand and Sophie, and noting their passing feelings on the tumultuous developments they faced. Unfortunately for history, neither Franz Ferdinand nor Sophie kept regular diaries. For the archduke, the only real diary that survives is the one he wrote on his journey around the world in 1892–93. This was later published in a limited edition and revealed very little of his personal thoughts and nothing of his as yet non-existent romance with Sophie. As for Sophie, she never acquired the habit of a daily journal. Although she tried several times to do so, inevitably she abandoned it, and months passed without any entries. One of her diaries for 1891 survives at the couple's former home of Konopischt in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, it contains only a few isolated lines.¹¹

Several of the couple's intimates wrote occasionally observant, occasionally guarded, memoirs; a few isolated letters or passages by friends, relatives and courtiers offer some intriguing glimpses of the archduke's character, marriage and family. Sophie, in particular, remains something of an enigma, at least in terms of her personal feelings, hopes, joys, or frustrations. Few of those close to her ever talked, and those who did viewed her through a prism of grief after she had been effectively canonized by her death at Sarajevo. Even the couple's three children rarely spoke about their parents to their own families.¹² Fortunately, a cache of

→ *Introduction* ←

previously unpublished letters that Sophie wrote to her sister Oktavia finally give her a voice in her story.

In this book we have drawn on archival materials, family anecdotes, memoirs, contemporary press accounts, and other divergent sources to weave a tapestry of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie's life together. At times, owing to a lack of letters and diaries, the picture remains frustratingly vague, but we have attempted to offer insights without indulging in too much speculation. The story stretches from glittering Bohemian castles and gilded Viennese palaces to the unrelenting horrors of Nazi concentration camps, from the Victorian era to the modern age. At its heart, this is the chronicle of a family, who in their triumphs and tragedies not only shaped but also embodied much of the tumultuous twentieth century.



The Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1900 showing the places that were important in the life of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

The
ASSASSINATION
of the
ARCHDUKE



PROLOGUE

Vienna, January 1889



Thick white snow swirled from a night sky, scattering across Vienna's tiled rooftops and shimmering in drifts against the wide boulevards. Slumbering in the Danube Basin against the foothills of the Vienna Woods the city seemed sedate and at peace. A drive between the Ringstrasse's rows of lime trees, made bare by winter, revealed the captivating scene: the neo-Gothic Rathaus, the imposing Court Opera House, immense museums with their marching colonnades, the Parliament building glowering in neoclassical severity, the sprouting spires of St Stephen's Cathedral, and the green-domed Karlskirche. Seemingly suspended between banks of snow and opalescent sky and illuminated by the flickering shadows of ghostly street lamps, Vienna looked impressive, dignified, and magisterial, all that the capital of a great empire should be.

For centuries Vienna had provided the Habsburg dynasty with a theatrical stage set from which to dominate Europe. They ruled from the Alps to the warm waters of the Mediterranean, from the sunshine of Trieste to the dark, mysterious forests of Transylvania, Bohemia, and the edges of imperial Russia. As the pre-eminent Catholic royal house in Europe, Habsburgs had fought, invaded, and married to unite far-flung principalities and provinces beneath their flag, bedecked with a fierce,

→ *The Assassination of the Archduke* ←

double-headed eagle. The glories were undeniable. For centuries Habsburgs had been Holy Roman Emperors; they had provided kings to Spain and consorts to Europe. There were illustrious ancestors: the great Emperor Charles V and the influential Empress Maria Theresa ranked among the most distinguished rulers.

Habsburg influence waned when Napoleon swept across Europe and shattered the Holy Roman Empire. A loose confederation of German states fragmented old loyalties and left the dynasty pushing against a rising tide of nationalism and frequent revolt. Only forty years had passed since the Revolution of 1848, when the Habsburgs nearly lost Hungary. Rebellion in Budapest was crushed only with the assistance of Russian soldiers. Twenty years later, Hungarians had sided with an increasingly powerful and militaristic Prussia in the Seven Weeks War; defeat of Habsburg forces at the Battle of Königgrätz marked the end of Austrian domination and inaugurated an uneasy alliance. Budapest blackmailed Vienna into the *Ausgleich* of 1867, which split the realm into two equal halves and established the Dual Monarchy. Maintaining the right to renegotiate the agreement every decade, Budapest continually wrested from a weakened Vienna new concessions that seemed to foreshadow inevitable Hungarian autonomy.¹

At least Hungary remained a Habsburg domain. By 1889, the dynasty had lost Tuscany, Parma, and the Italian provinces of Lombardy and Venice. Their empire was an anachronistic remnant of a previous age, ‘a dynastic fiction’, as one wit noted.² Some fifty million diverse subjects – Austrian Germans, Magyars, Bohemians, Italians, Rumanians, Moravians, and Poles – were collected beneath the black and yellow Habsburg flag. None were bound together by common ties, languages, or nationalities; lacking allegiance to Vienna, many increasingly yearned to break free of what they deemed Habsburg oppression. Year by year, it seemed, the last vestiges of power were slipping away from the proud Habsburgs. What remained was a ruling family rooted in tradition, its past glories supplanted by a string of failed monarchs, highly incestuous marriages, and a depressing family tendency to weak chins.

At the head of this conflicted nation stood Franz Josef I, Emperor of Austria and Apostolic King of Hungary; King of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slovenia, Galicia, and Jerusalem; Archduke of Austria; Grand Duke of Tuscany, Krakow, and Transylvania; Duke of Lothringia, Salzburg, and Bukovina – a string of titles that went on and on and spoke more of the past than they did of modern realities.³ Middle age was behind the emperor now; the once dashing and svelte Franz Josef was balding and slightly stooped, with bushy white whiskers and sleepy blue eyes. He was the only ruler most of his subjects had ever known. People spoke of him as ‘almighty, a being of a higher order, enthroned in regions beyond human aspiration’.⁴ Stung by the constant rebellions and loss of power, Franz Josef retreated to a world of archaic tradition, a universe of perpetual waltzes and sugary confections where he could ignore the unfamiliar and unwelcome modern age. He rode in a motor car only once, and then only at the behest of a visiting King Edward VII; at the age of eighty-four Franz Josef climbed six flights of stairs rather than entrust himself to a suspiciously modern lift.⁵

The idea of change became anathema. Franz Josef preferred to keep to himself, isolated and unchallenged in his opinions. ‘A wall of prejudice severs the Emperor from all independent thinking political personalities,’ commented one insider. A ‘ring of courtiers, military, and medical personnel’ shielded Franz Josef from unpleasant views or unwelcome reality. ‘The powerfully surging life of our times barely reaches the ear of our Emperor as distant rustling. He is kept from any real participation in this life. He no longer understands the times and the times pass on regardless.’⁶ All that mattered was preserving the old order; disagreeable ideas were ignored, left to Franz Josef’s successor. The emperor was content to bury himself in petty paperwork, obsessing over bureaucratic details rather than facing contentious problems.⁷ His was a universe of absolutes. For Franz Josef, said a courtier, ‘only primitive concepts exist. Beautiful, ugly, dead, living, healthy, young, old, clever, stupid – these are all separate notions to him and he is unable to form a bridge leading from one to the other . . . His ideas know no nuances.’⁸

No one ever accused the emperor of being temperamental. Franz Josef was invariably pleasant, guarded and restrained, but his courtly manners concealed a cold, suspicious and intolerant character. He disliked confrontation and did not tolerate contradiction. Everyone feared his displeasure. When the future King George V visited Vienna in 1904, he was surprised that courtiers and members of the imperial family alike all seemed to be ‘frightened of the Emperor’.⁹ A wrong word, a missed bow, a button undone, a medal out of place – these minor infractions against tradition were enough to send him into paroxysms of inner rage. One night, Franz Josef suffered a choking fit and could not breathe. A doctor, hastily summoned from his sleep, rushed to administer aid only to be met with a glacial look from the gasping emperor, who somehow managed to berate him for not appearing in the customary tailcoat.¹⁰ When it was once proposed that guards on duty at the imperial palaces abandon the practice of presenting arms and saluting Habsburg babies, Franz Josef rejected the idea as an attack on the dignity of the imperial house.¹¹

In his private life Franz Josef was a man of dull habits. He lived in regal rooms in a kind of studied Spartan luxury, sleeping on a military cot fitted with the finest mattress and linens. The emperor customarily arose at four each morning to begin his work, took lunch alone, walked in the afternoon, and dined at the unfashionably early hour of half past five.¹² His was a solitary existence, made more lonely by the frequent absence of his wife. More often than not, Empress Elisabeth was away from Vienna. The two first cousins had married when the Bavarian Princess Elisabeth was just sixteen, and much against the wishes of Franz Josef’s powerful mother, Archduchess Sophie. The Bavarian royal family was often flamboyant and occasionally eccentric, with a tendency to high-strung temperaments and disconcerting bouts of depression – scarcely promising qualities in a possible empress of Austria. No arguments, however, could stop the passionately enamoured Franz Josef in his quest. It was all breathtaking romance at the beginning, but then the darkness set in.

Elisabeth, known as Sissi, has become a figure of romantic nostalgia, nearly worshipped in modern Vienna, but truth is not as sentimental.

The new empress was a selfish, immature young girl who found life at the imperial court distasteful and confining. Adoring as he was, Franz Josef was never averse to other feminine charms, particularly when his wife evinced horror at the sexual side of married life. Horror soon turned to disgust when the emperor reportedly infected his wife with venereal disease.¹³ Ashamed and feeling betrayed, Elisabeth became a virtual stranger at her husband's court, doing everything she could to avoid her loathsome ceremonial duties. Deprived of a happy marriage, the emperor turned to a series of mistresses; there were even illegitimate children, despite his image as a staunchly conservative Catholic.¹⁴ The most famous of his relationships was with actress Katharina Schratt, who became his closest confidante and the sole source of emotional comfort in his later life.

The emperor's contemporary subjects were less forgiving of Elisabeth than her modern admirers. They resented her for the endless, extended sojourns in foreign resorts, as if she despised her adopted homeland. Obsessed with her famed beauty, she starved herself into a state of dangerous anorexia, indulged in self-pity and morbid fantasies, and spent her days composing volumes of questionable poetry.¹⁵

Perhaps Elisabeth had reason to flee. Life among the Habsburgs was scarcely a pleasant swirl of Strauss waltzes and smiling faces. There was also tragedy. Franz Josef and Elisabeth had lost their first daughter to childhood illness, and misfortune seemed to envelop their family. The emperor's younger brother Maximilian had unwisely accepted the Mexican throne only to be overthrown and executed by firing squad. Thoroughly unhinged by her husband's death, Maximilian's widow, Carlotta, wandered Europe, blaming everyone for his execution until she was finally locked away in a remote castle. Ludwig Viktor, the emperor's youngest brother, had been exiled from Vienna amid rumours of his indiscreet attraction to handsome young men and his penchant for wearing elaborate ball gowns.¹⁶ Even Franz Josef found his family trying. He 'liked only a few of his relations', recalled his valet; 'he quite rightly considered that many of them acted incorrectly'. As a consequence, the emperor 'did not want to see some members of his family at all', and 'others only as seldom as possible'.¹⁷

Then there was Rudolf, Franz Josef and Elisabeth's only son. His birth in 1858 was a moment for celebration, ensuring the continuation of the Habsburg dynasty, but Rudolf's childhood was anything but joyful. Franz Josef was a stern, aloof and disapproving father; nothing Rudolf did or said ever seemed to please him. He worshipped his mother, but Elisabeth was too self-absorbed, too melancholy, and all too often absent to shape her son's character. In one respect, though, Rudolf was his mother's son: he grew up to become a self-absorbed, melancholy young man, with a predilection for the darker pleasures of sexual liaisons and political misadventure.

His father tried to impose some measure of order onto his son's life by marrying Rudolf off to Princess Stephanie, daughter of King Leopold II of Belgium. A year passed between engagement and wedding, when it was discovered that the fifteen-year-old intended bride had not yet begun to menstruate.¹⁸ Rudolf was glamorous and charming; Stephanie was somewhat less than beautiful and scarcely the kind of woman to keep her husband in marital thrall. It all ended badly shortly after the birth of their daughter, Elisabeth, in 1883, when Stephanie suddenly fell ill. In an ironic twist, Rudolf had infected his wife with venereal disease, just as his father had done with his Elisabeth. Angered and left unable to have any more children, Stéphanie sulked, and Rudolf turned to more convivial company.

Rudolf was the antithesis of his father. Although he fancied himself a gifted political intellectual, he was more of a dilettante. He played in what his father deemed dangerous liberal circles, encouraging dissent and opposing Franz Josef's staunch conservatism. Rudolf's plight was the plight of princes everywhere: he had no real function except to await his father's death. Lacking responsibilities, distrusted by his father, and denied any role that might have kept him usefully occupied, Austria-Hungary's crown prince sank into depression. Morbid and morose, he plunged into a spiral of mistresses and morphine that left him alienated from his family and suffering from gonorrhoea.¹⁹

The conservative emperor consumed with bureaucratic rule, the reclusive and melancholy empress, and the disturbed and disreputable crown

prince – they all formed a triumvirate where impending disaster seemed to simmer just beneath the pleasant surface. The imperial court that January of 1889 somehow seemed to reflect this dichotomy. To the casual observer it was as buoyantly splendid as ever, a universe of eternal waltzes and carefree pleasures. To one visiting sovereign, though, the court, reeking ‘of death and decrepitude’, was an ossified universe filled with ‘archaic countenances, shrivelled intellects, trembling heads, worn out bladders’.²⁰

It was a world precariously balanced on tradition and ironclad etiquette. Only those who could boast sixteen quarterings – unbroken descent from eight paternal and eight maternal noble ancestors – were admitted to the highest court functions. The rules were stringently enforced. The wife of Austria’s ambassador to Germany could be received at the kaiser’s court but not in Vienna if she lacked the necessary string of noble ancestors. On more than one occasion distinguished aristocratic ladies were politely but firmly turned away from palace ballrooms, told that they weren’t distinguished enough to join the enchanted circles within. Officers, no matter their rank, were snubbed if they couldn’t meet the requirements; the young niece of a prominent English duke once attended an imperial ball over the protests of other guests, who complained that, as she herself had no title, she shouldn’t be let through the doors. Husbands were asked to attend without their wives and wives without their husbands if the imperial court decided that they had married beneath their rank.²¹

This undisguised snobbery was yet another dichotomy. The Viennese, said a diplomat, were ‘cheery and easy-going’, dedicated to ‘music and dancing, eating and drinking, laughter and fun. They were quite content to drift lazily down the stream of life, with as much enjoyment and as little trouble as possible.’²² Pleasantries couldn’t disguise the aristocracy’s ruthless insistence on its own privilege and the exclusion of those deemed socially unacceptable. ‘The present generation of the upper aristocracy’, the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse* commented, ‘still wants to dominate the middle class, but they want to dominate the middle class without becoming acquainted with it . . . The aristocracy here is sterile and sequestered.’²³ They passed their days, insisted one

→ *The Assassination of the Archduke* ←

visitor, in shallow pursuits, ‘discussing the births, marriages and deaths of their acquaintances and friends and the sayings and doings of the Imperial Family. They scarcely ever read; their knowledge of art is exceedingly limited; they have absolutely no general interests; politics remain to them a closed book except when they concern the welfare of the Austrian Empire, and even then occupy them from the arrogant, but not from the instructive point of view.’²⁴

That January of 1889, mourning for the empress’s father had cancelled the usual round of imperial balls; instead, aristocratic Vienna threw itself into a round of superb and deliberate indulgence. It was fitting that the city of Strauss waltzes seemed consumed with the pleasures of the ballroom. There were merchants’ balls, the Housekeepers’ Ball, the Coiffeurs’ Ball, the Master Bakers’ Ball, and the Laundresses’ Ball – every conceivable association and organization used the winter social season to celebrate with joyous abandon. This taste for hedonistic excess reached a zenith that month in the Fourth Dimension Ball, where women dressed as witches moved through the crowd, and a rose garden set with twinkling lights bloomed from the ceiling.²⁵

All seemed pleasant and pleasurable. Vienna appeared as splendid as ever, the empire secure, the Habsburgs surveying all from a glittering height. However, illusion cloaked reality. Beneath the image of traditional *Sachertortes*, *gemütlich* comforts, and endless Strauss waltzes lay another world, where Vienna led Europe’s cities in annual suicides.²⁶ This was the universe of Freud and Mahler, of sexuality and passion, of intellectuals and artists who haunted smoke-filled coffeehouses with their philosophical worries, of anti-Semitism and impoverished workers crowded into disease-ridden tenements. ‘There is a general air of discontent,’ one paper had declared as the new year began. A ‘breath of melancholy brushes through our society’.²⁷ Before the month was out, this discontent erupted in unsuspected tragedy that tore the veil of Habsburg complacency forever.