The Austria of Maria Theresa

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The first time a traveler sets his feet toward Europe he starts out with feelings of awe and anticipation. Awe, because he knows from hearing it said and reading extensively that he is about to discover cultural treasures far surpassing those found in America; anticipation, because he wants to discover for himself whether all he has heard is true. He wants to walk where poets walked, see the inspired art works, and tread the paths where royalty ruled from their medieval castles. He even hopes to recapture some of the romanticized past. These things are not impossible to the first time traveler, for as soon as he sets foot in England, France, Italy, or wherever he goes, he is overwhelmed with the quaintness, the age, and the sense of familarity. It is all there just as the travel books and color slides have said it would be. After the initial realization that he is really in Europe, and it is there to be sampled, the traveler begins at once to absorb everything he can. This is a slow process at best when one can only see and feel the excitement. Almost at once the traveler realizes that his college French or German has little in common with what he hears going on about him. This is of little consequence though. Adventure lies ahead and the best one can do is to be swept up in the current.

As the first impact is absorbed, the next shock for

the traveler is the discovery that not only do European cities have the ancient buildings and landmarks he might expect, but they have a modern look which is a far cry from the old world of his history books. The familiar Kleenex boxes, the American cosmetics, the yellow Kodak signs, as well as Listerine and Delsey all make the traveler wonder why he stuffed his precious luggage space with these items.

Europe may still have her antiquities, but she has been quick to adapt American products and display methods to lure the tourist dollar into ever open palms. So it is that the first time traveler finds himself walking in two worlds, always with the choice to make. Shall he follow the travel agency tours or strike out on his own? Whichever he does will prove to have both joys and disappointments.

Once the traveler has accepted the beauty of the country: the forests with farms running to their edges, the mountainsides with castles and villages on them, the lakes, the rivers, and the lushness of fields and forests, he is then ready to step back into the centuries. How has all of this survived the cruelties of wars? How have the treasures of architecture, music, and art survived the past? In these questions lie much of the fascination of Europe.

As a recent traveler to Europe, I found all of these things. Yet most outstanding to me was the country of Austria, former empire of the Hapsburgs. Here is a country that in

forty-seven years has had to take seven league steps in order to approach the twentieth century. It is truly an anachronism in the modern world - at least it was one until after the first World War. Perhaps a clue to the present existence of Austria can be discovered by a look at the house of Hapsburg which ruled uninterruptedly for six hundred years.

Viewing the rise and fall of various royal houses, one appreciates the tenacity and courage the Hapsburgs displayed in their ability to retain their crown. They were heirs to The Holy Roman Empire which was established in 962 A.D. by Otto the Great, creator of the Babenberg dynasty which contributed greatly to the growth and influence of Austria. Under these rulers Austria began to makes its weight felt in the world, and by the end of the twelfth century Vienna had become one of the most important cities in Europe.[1]

The Babenbergs developed a ruling system which did much to develop the Austrian philosophy of life which we so often hear referred to as Austrian "gemlisch" - roughly translated it means "live and let live." This philosophy is still most evident among Austrian people, contributing,no doubt, to their carefree attitude toward life.

In 1273, after the Babenberg line died out, Rudolf of Hapsburg was chosen by the church electors to rule The Holy

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[1]Ernst Marboe, The Book of Austria, p. 19.

Roman Empire. From that time until 1916 no one but a Hapsburg sat on the throne of Austria. The history of the Hapsburgs is by no means a peaceful one, for the political fortunes of the ruler were constantly challenged by the nobles and the Archbishops.

Rudlof IV, who ruled only eight years, during the early fourteenth century, marks a milestone in Austrian history. Under his rule Austria became independent of the Holy Roman Empire, and through the acquisition of the Tyrol secured a bridge to the Hapsburg possessions in south west Germany and Switzerland. He was also able to conclude agreements affecting the right of the Hapsburg dynastic succession.[2]

At his death he left a rich country; one to be reckoned with in the development of south east Europe, and one that was a center of culture. However, the division of Austria into lower and upper provinces after his death proved to bring about years of unrest and decline in power for Austria. Not until 1452, when Fredrick III was crowned German King and also Emperor of Rome, did the first Hapsburg wear the Imperial Crown. The crown remained in the Hapsburg line until the Holy Roman Empire fell in 1806. It remained, however, to Maximilian I to create a sense of unity in the expanding empire. He further increased the power of the Hapsburgs by his marriage

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[2] Ibid., p. 35.

into the House of Burgundy. It was this dazzling personality who established the Hapsburgs as rulers of an empire on which the sun would never set. Also under Maximilian the arts and sciences flourished in Vienna.

In the sixteenth century, during the counter reformation, the stamp of Catholicism became indelible. The Jesuits were established in Vienna at this time by order of the Emperor to open schools and inculcate the faith. They utilized theatre as a means to do this, thus preparing the way for literature at a later date.[3] By 1661 the Jesuits had become so firmly established that they had taken over the University of Vienna where they were able to influence the lives of the cultured classes.

With the firm hold of the Catholic Church and the continuing feudal rule of the Hapsburgs, it is easy to understand the almost complete lack of social reform and progress in Austria.

During the seventeenth century, Austria, fighting for her life against the Turks, emerged victorious and again rose to a position of power in Europe. Thus, the way was prepared for even greater glory and power in Vienna under the Hapsburg rule.

The last part of the seventeenth century marked the

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[3] Ibid., pp.60-62

the rise of art, music, and architecture under the patronage of Leopold I. During his reign and that of his successors, a great period of the arts flourished. The period became known as the baroque and influenced the lives of everyone throughout south east Europe.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw Vienna as the favored diplomatic post, for the city boasted a culture and an affluent society that was the envy of all Europe. During this period Europe was going through the age of enlightment and was embroiled in social reform and change brought about by the industrial revolution. However,Austria, under the Hapsburgs was still ruled with the assurance of the divine right of kings.

The revolution which swept the American Colonies made no ripple in the dynasty of Austria. In fact its only consequence as far as that country was concerned was the inconvenience of not having British and French support in her own Seven Years War against Fredrich I of Prussia.

In the midst of changes which transformed a world, we see a woman ascend to the throne. A woman who despite overwhelming forces upheld her corwn with a dignity peculiar to herself. She ruled as the only woman ever to sit on the Hapsburg throne, and achieved the goal of creating a great State without suffering the loss of her feminine qualities.

She accomplished the incomparable accord between woman and queen.[4] It is little wonder that Maria Theresa captured the minds and love of her subjects because she ruled with the belief that she was the mother of her empire.

At the time Maria Theresa inherited the throne (1740), Vienna was the aristocrat among European capitals. No other city could boast such painting, such music, such luxury, for Maria Theresa's father, Charles VI, had done everything in his power to create a city which was a shrine of beauty. Vienna was this shrine, nurturing artists and musicians, and no aspiring artist or musician amounted to anything until he had won recognition there.

The aristocrats lived in an idealized society which was an endless round of delightful card parties and enterainment. Their lives were one round after another of self indulgence and pleasure. However, there was sharp social distinction among the aristocracy, and only those with the necessary sixteen noble quarterings could hope to penetrate the circle of the Imperial family.[5] The story is often told of how the "prater"(Imperial Park) was opened in April and May so that the lowly people could see the aristocrats at play.

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[4]Constance Lily Morris, Maria Theresa, the Last Conservative, p. xxi

[5]Arthur J. May, The Hapsburg Monarchy, pp. 156-157.

Despite the outward appearance of verve of life displayed among the aristocrats, under Charles VI they were governed with the rigid and formal etiquette of the Spanish Court. He forced his standards and tastes upon his subjects as he lived in the truly grand manner. His court existed in an atmosphere of beauty and learning, for Charles VI was a generous patron of all the arts. He did much to improve opera in Vienna during his life time, and it was no doubt the impetus he gave music that made Vienna the music capital of the world.[6]

During his reign, the baroque period, which he inherited from his father, flourished; and Fischer von Erlich, the foremost architect, left the indelible stamp of Italian influence upon the buildings of Vienna.[7] This baroque was to know the softening influences of Maria Theresa, and from 1740-1780 a type of rococco known as the Maria Theresa style was to become popular.

It is interesting to note that despite the similarities and closeness to the Germans, Austria drew all her inspiration for music and art from Italy to the south. She even embraced the religion of the Latins rather than the protestantism of the north.

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[6]Morris, op. cit., p. 11.

[7]Ibid., p. 10.

It was Charles VI, a true Hapsburg,who subjected all other interests to the interests of the family, creating for the first time a line of succession through a woman. Thus did Maria Theresa come to the Hapsburg throne.

The matter of birth was greatly respected in Austria (and is even today) with every person of any standing having a peculiar title of his own. Even the order of precedence was strictly observed,such as speaking to a person of higher rank in the third person. Prestige rested on the wealth of rural properties which aristocrats ruled like petty kings. They tried to shun any industrial enterprise and ignored the rising bourgeoisie, for they were brought up on the notion that they were selected by the Almighty to rule, and that . . . "riches are an ornament, not the cause of nobility."[8]

The nobles actively disliked learning and learned men who were not afraid to think. In most aristocratic circles the popular opinion was that serious study made people stupid. A nice superficial education was quite sufficient for them.

These aristorcats lived a social existence of peculiar charm despite the stratification among them. Pride and clannishness marked high society in Vienna, making it the most exclusive in all Europe. Their young ladies were carefully chaperoned and either married very young or withdrew to a

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[8]May, op. cit. p. 159.

nunnery by the age of twenty. The aristocratic ladies presided over benevolent societies, holding charity balls where they deigned to fraternize with Vienna's wealthy and fashionable bourgeoisie.[9] However, even among the noble aristocrats the necessary sixteen royal quarterings were a requirement to mingle with the Imperial Family at the Hofburg Ball.[10]

Taken as a whole, Austrian upper society, while charming and pleasant, was saturated by moral indolence and was without much initiative or sense of public responsibility. The class as a whole was astonishingly ignorant and narrow minded; shallow, pompous, and aimless; there was much marital infidelity and unconventional licentiousness.[11] Even Maria Theresa's husband was known to have kept several mistersses, and she herself did not escape the tongue of gossip. Thus we see the members of Austrian high society were apparently . . . "irresponsibly frivilous, irresistibly gay, fundamentally ignorant devotees of sports and fashion, hopelessly gregarious, and extremely class conscious."[12]

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[9] Ibid., p. 162.

[10] Morris, op. cit., p. 97.

[11] Ibid., p. 99.

[12] May, op. cit., p. 163.

In such a stratified society it was easier to confine one's association to one's own class than to learn the complicated scale of social priority and ceremony; thus, professors kept aloof from their students, scholars from merchants, merchants from artisans, and artisans from peasants. These same barriers and prejudices are evident today in modern Austria, and the visitor must be aware of this attitude if he is to gain any understanding of the people.

During Maria Theresa's rule court etiquette was strictly observed at the Hofberg in Vienna, but at Schönbrunn she relaxed the rules and lived a simpler life where she rode and danced with great zest. Schönbrunn is so closely identified with Maria Theresa that even today it is her personality which dominates that ornate and exquisite palace.

Maria Theresa turned Schönbrunn into a magnificant estate that served as the Imperial summer residence. It became the scene of important affairs of state as well as providing a pastoral idyll in the carefree summer life of the court.[13]

Special care was lavished on the design of the park, which is an excellent example of a typical baroque garden. Stylized flower beds, clipped shrubbery, vast expanses of garden crisscrossed by dead straight avenues provide frequent

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[13]Josef Glaser and Heinz Glaser, Schonbrunn, p. 6.

glimpses of the palace and fountains as well as the statuary ornamenting the park. At the insistence of Francis I, Maria Theresa's husband, a botanical garden containing rare plants from all over the world was built. For the amusement of guests a zoo was built in the park and is still a focal point of entertainment.

All the palace was Maria Theresa's home, and she gathered into its dazzling rooms ornaments from all over the world. All the decorations were gilt, "the kingly color".[14] The thousands of candles in porcelaine and crystal chandliers created a marvelous fairyland of light for the handsome rococo style.

The interior of the palace is remarkable for its beauty. The rooms all have exquisite inlaid floors, paneled walls, with magnificent paintings and intricate carved plaster ceilings. The chandliers are breath taking, but even of greater interest are the number of ornate stoves found in the palace. These stoves are made of elaborate tiles and are so arranged that the servants could take care of them from the hallways.

The queen's apartments were decorated to represent an arbor with distant scenes of Schönbrunn decorating the panels of the walls. Evidence of her admiration for fine painting is seen in the works of Martin von Meytens who not only decorated some of thepalace walls, but was responsible for

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[14]Morris, op. cit., pp. 170-172.

the great number of portraits of the royal household.

Two of the most outstanding rooms of Schönbrunn are the Great and Small Galleries where Gregoire Gugliemlé painted his great fresco ceilings. These rooms were the scenes of many great state and social functions, and even today are used for state entertaining.

While Italian art was the chief influence in decoration at Schönbrunn, Maria Theresa imported Chinese Poreclain and had Chinese painted paper put on some walls. She was especially fond of the lacquer work and devoted one whole room to this motif.[15]

In the apartments of Empress Elizabeth, the last Hapsburg Empress, the exquisite flower arrangements are on view. These arrangements consist of flowers made of precious and semi-precious stones. Each piece again illustrates the elegance and refinement of court life.

Adding to the romantic and colorful quality of the court was the manner of dress. The ladies were gowned in the richest fabrics embroidered with gold, silver, and precious stones. The men too were garbed in elaborate silks and satins ornamented with fine lace, magnificant buttons, and handsome jewels. Yet with all this elegance bathing was a rare thing. Indeed one only bathed upon the advice of one's physican.

In fairness to Maria Theresa it must be said

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[15] Ibid., pp. 95-97.

that she did not encourage extravagant dress for herself or for her family.[16]

Parties at Schönbrunn were famous for their gaiety. Maria Theresa liked to dance and spent much time organizing balls or garden parties which often lasted through the night. Besides these forms of entertainment, high society indulged in gambling and heavy drinking. They did not believe in taking life too seriously.

Despite this background and influence, Maria Theresa did not neglect her duties as a ruler. She was sorely tried throughout her life time in political struggles with Fredrich I of Prussia. However, besides preserving her power, Maria Theresa was well aware of the need for social and political reforms within her empire.

The areas in which she allowed herself liberal reforms were justice, education, and medicine. She showed surprising enlightenment in rescuing the schools and universities from pure Jesuit dictatorship, which had wielded power since the middle of the 16th century. Reforms in administration created, for the first time, a strong central government in which the nobles were no longer exempt from taxes. A high court was established for the whole state, but elements of feudalism still existed in the continued existence of the estates.[17]

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[16] Ibid., p. 197.

[17] G.P. Gooch, Maria Theresa and Other Studies, p.6.

In law, her reforms were liberal and extreme. She freed peasants from what was really polite slavery imposed on them by landowners and priests, and she standaradized the code of law and punishments throughout the whole state.

Despite her far reaching reforms, which affected the church power as well as the power of the nobles, she still remained devoted to the church and its institutions of cloisters and monasteries. They had become shrines of beauty and intellectual life rather than shrines of the spiritual life. For all her religious piety, Maria Theresa carried out unmerciful pogroms against the Jews, and was also severe in her persecution of protestants.[18]

Most biographers note that throughout Maria Theresa's rule she never lost her womanly characteristics. She had married for love and during her life time she presented her husband with sixteen children, nine of whom survived her. She delighted in her family, allowing them simple childhood family life, but by the time the children reached their early teens she began to plan their marriages. In true Hapsburg fashion she subordinated everything else to what she thought was for the good of the family. She is reported to have said that others could gain power through war; she would gain power through marriage.[19]

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[18] Morris; op. cit., p. 162.

[19] Ibid., p. 88

She succeeded so well in the marriage plans that her children were married into all of the ruling houses of continental Europe. Politically this may have been expedient, but genetically it perpetuated the most disagreeable physical and mental deficiencies found among the royal houses of Europe.

When Francis I died in 1765, Maria Theresa withdrew from the gay public life she had enjoyed. Indeed, her middle years, overshadowed by the loss of her husband, led her to impose a most rigorous regime upon herself and her court. These included five A.M. risings, open windows all year round, long prayer sessions, and tedious personal grooming details.

While one is impressed with these somewhat spartan aspects of Maria Theresa's life, the other side must also be considered. As Empress she tried to increase her splendor as a sovereign, and certainly was not immune to the often vulgar display of wealth so prevelant among royalty of the 18th century. One of her magnificant displays of ornament was the gold table service which cost a million and a half gulden. (This service is on display at the Hofberg today - a most breath-taking extravagance.) The princes in her court, in order to emulate her and retain her favor, often spent all they had to live on the level dictated by the Empress.[20]

The various biographies of Maria Theresa tend

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[20] Ibid., p. 167-169.

either to picture her as a political inept, or idealize her as a tender, encouraging mother figure for her empire. Both of these extremes tend to blur the true character of this powerful, ambitious woman. Her reforms were instituted not from humanitarian concern for her subjects, but rather for the welfare of her state and her family. She guarded the welfare of the House of Hapsburg as jealously as had her father.

Maria Theresa's religious piety was really nothing more than middle class respectability in a society which permitted its members the most licentious behavior. All religious duties were performed according to strict ritual by prescribed men of the church. She recognized only two kinds of mankind, Roman Catholic and infidel; even lower than infidel in her eyes was the Jew. Yet for all her religious devotion she would yield nothing to the church. ". . . the church is already well established and does not need more power . . .(it) does not use what it has for the benefit of the people. . . ."[21]

In the 1750's German literature was introduced into Vienna. This Maria Theresa permitted for she hoped to produce a purified language for her babel of tongues in Austria. She encouraged the improvement of the theatre in order to acquaint her subjects with the common language, and by 1776

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[21]Sidney, Whitman, The Realm of the Hapsburgs, p. 382.

German theatre had influenced the dramatic taste of Vienna so that it turned from French and Italian plays.

She gave discriminating patronage to all the arts, encouraging the child prodigy Mozart, drawing Glück into court life, and taking Hayden as her own protegé. She encouraged these talented subjects as an indulgent patroness, but she never permitted her appreciation to obscure her discretion. Her answer was often, no, to requests that seemed tedious.

Behind this apparent indulgence in the arts was always a purpose. She brought opportunities to artists and musicians in an effort to improve her people, but her greatest love was for music. It formed a basic part of court life. In fact one cannot imagine Vienna without music. However, the more one looks into the cultural life of Maria Theresa's time, the less definite becomes the figure of the Empress.

Most biographers condemn Maria Theresa for what they consider her heartless attitude in the disposition of her children. However, the customs of 18th century Austria were still those of the antiquated feudal system. Maria Theresa upheld the idea of absolute ownership as far as her children were concerned, and the principles of monarchy instilled in her by her ancestors justified in her disposing of her family for political reasons.

She saw her duties in terms of history, and saw herself

as guardian of the past. Although she fostered reforms, she opposed the changes she knew they would produce. Thus, she and her son, Joseph II, were often bitterly opposed to each other, for he was passionately fond of change and had a vivid conception of the future. Her life closed upon a theme of courage; a courage that even survived the open enmity of her beloved son, Joseph II. Even though historians may belittle her judgment in military and political events, no one can detract from her great spirit and courageous actions.

On November 29, 1780 an Empress and an age passed into history. On this date the great power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire passed into the hands of Maria Theresa's successor, Joseph II, who was now free to liberalize and reform the monarchy.

The seeds of decay of the empire were already sown, but it was another one hundred thirty-eight years before the House of Hapsburg was tumbled from the throne which it had held for six hundred years.

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