

Destination Weddings

The Literary Club

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My train rumbled slowly out of Nuremburg around 3 in the morning. Exhaustion was starting to set in. I had left Cologne by high-speed train eight hours earlier and changed trains several times, laden with baggage. My final change at Nuremburg allowed me enough time to get a photo strip for the work visa I was to apply for the next day. I was finally going to start an internship with a German company, a process I had started during my senior year of college. The plan was to finish a six-month internship, then decide if my wanderlust had been satisfied. My mother was a surprise supporter of this journey; she said to come back when I was ready. I found a company in New York that specialized in German internships for Americans. I arrived in Frankfurt in September, travelled hard to Munich, Marburg, Brussels, and London, before arriving for immersive German language classes in Cologne.

My first eight weeks in Germany were everything I had hoped for. After spending my life reading about Western history, specifically European history, I was finally seeing it. I was slugging back steins at Oktoberfest, climbing the spires of the Kolner Dom, taking an architectural tour of Brussels, and spending a rainy day in the British Museum. I drank in the sights and culture of Europe as zealously as the beer that fueled my train excursions. Each weekend was a new adventure, using the accessible Deutsche Bahn train system.

As my language program ended in Cologne, my placement company managed my employment expectations. I requested an assignment in a large Bavarian city, ideally Munich. I was hoping for a placement in a historic place; perhaps I would have to settle for a toy manufacturer in Leipzig. The one thing I did NOT want was employment in a tiny German town in the middle of nowhere. I wanted my home base to be the center of it all, Munich, Nuremburg, Regensburg, Augsburg; a place

friends would come to visit. Each day, I checked my email with anticipation of where I would be assigned. Each day went by without closure. With four days left in my language program, I was informed I was moving to Coburg to work for Brose, an automotive parts manufacturer.

“Coburg?” Where the hell is Coburg? It sounded like a nothing little town...never heard of it. It’s not even an interesting sounding German name! I finally found it on a map. It was NOWHERE near any desirable large cities. However, my placement company came through on their end of the bargain. I had to report to duty in short order. I just hoped Coburg was easy to travel from.

I arrived at my new city around five in the morning. My first sight from the train platform was an immense castle on a high point in the distance. It was not yet dawn, and the walls of the stronghold were lit by powerful floodlights, giving it a ghostly appearance over the quiet, dark town below.

The castle, I soon learned, was the Coburg Veste, which lays claim to the title of largest fortress in Germany. Located at the highest point for miles around, this site has been settled since the Neolithic era. In the 10th century, a fortification was started around a chapel to St. Peter. Over the centuries, the castle was expanded. During the Reformation, Martin Luther lived in the Veste for several months, safe from the Pope’s army while he finished the translation of the Bible from Greek to German.

Leaving the train platform, I had no directions or map. It didn’t matter much, because I couldn’t check in to my apartment for three hours. The street cleaners weren’t even up yet; the town was still and empty. I lugged all my possessions aimlessly through the cobblestone streets. The sidewalks and roads ended in a pedestrian only zone, spattered with tiny cafes, fountains, and shuttered kiosks. I reached the city center, a large square fed by six cobblestone alleys. The old-world character was everywhere. Steep roofs covered medieval three-story, half-timbered buildings. The

backlighting of the handsome structures, each unique in size, color and detail, gave a sense of safety, soft envelopment, and welcome. In the center of this square, facing the town hall and made of bronze, stood Prince Albert, Royal Consort to Queen Victoria. Exhausted, confused, and disoriented, I didn't even question why Prince Albert was out of his can and plunked on a pedestal in a little nowhere town in Germany. I eventually found my lodging, my work, and my bearings. Over the next six months I also found my new home was not only full of character, but had produced characters central to the history of Europe.

Tonight, we will explore the influence this lovely, quiet, remote town of Coburg and its ruling family exerted on the century between Napoleon and the Great War. It could be said that the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was the last vestige of monarchical power in Old Europe; one last chance to create peace through marriage and royal ties before the terrible war of technology and magnitude obliterated Old Europe forever. So pervasive were members of this house in the imperial courts of the continent, that Otto Von Bismarck referred to Saxe-Coburg-Gotha as the "Stud farm of Europe."

Coburg lies along the Itz River and at the fork in the trade road from Nuremburg to Leipzig or Erfurt. The free City of Coburg has been a notable place since the 13th century and serves as the capitol of the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg. The first Duke of Saxe-Coburg, Johann Casimir, was a great builder, and, through fastidious preparation and expansion of the Coburg Veste, could survive the Thirty Years' War. However, his mighty fortress set the stage for centuries of financial difficulties for the Duchy. By 1800, the Duchy was up for sale and desperately needed a bailout.

That bailout came in the form of Franz Friedrich Anton, Duke of Saalfeld. After his acquisition, he became the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. By most accounts, he was heavy on delegation, weak on finances, and spent much of his energy maintaining mistresses and Copperplate engravings. Yet behind every boorish man stands a powerful woman. Duchess Augusta von Reuss zu Ebersdorf was born in 1757; she married Franz Friedrich at the age of 20 and bore seven healthy children.

Augusta's life calling was to bring her children into higher European prominence. In 1795 she answered the call of Catherine II of Russia, who sought suitable brides for her grandson. The Duchess set out on the arduous journey to St. Petersburg with three daughters. She returned to Coburg with two daughters, a 160,000 ruble dowry, and direct access to the immensely powerful Romanov dynasty. Not a bad return on investment. One could speculate that this first of many destination weddings in 1795 provided the down payment for Franz Friedrich Anton's new home of Coburg in 1800.

The Duke passed away unremarkably in 1806, at which time his son, Ernst, became the head of the House of Coburg. Following Duke Franz's death, the now Dowager Augusta served as young Ernst's adviser in state matters through the Napoleonic Wars. She was motivated by preservation, but she was also very astute in the realities of the world around her. Her husband was dead, and her inexperienced son was the duke of a tiny duchy with no chance to fight a war of either self-defense or expansion.

Augusta raised her children to be striving, practical, resourceful...and patient. Ernst I eventually became Duke in his own right, and ruled over Saxe-Coburg-Gotha happily from Ehrenburg Palace. Augusta's youngest surviving son was Leopold. He was not the heir apparent, but he still assumed the assertive attitude that was instilled by his mother, and internalized the goal of power through marriages. Leopold was dashing, strong, strategic, and wise. During French occupation of the Duchy, Leopold secured a position in the Imperial Court of Napoleon. He eventually left Paris and served as a cuirassier in the Imperial Russian cavalry. He met Napoleon's troops at the Battle of Kulm and left military service with Russia as a lieutenant general. Without the responsibilities of his older brother Ernst, Leopold could build a broad and distinguished resume at a young age.

By 1815, Europe's ears were ringing from over a quarter century of uprisings, revolution, and open continental war. Leopold had known nothing but this chaotic world since birth. The din of Napoleonic battle ended at Waterloo, and those left as victors swore to do everything in their power

to safeguard against another open conflict. The Congress of Vienna, which ended in June 1815, defined a balance of power and influence in Western Europe, seeking to set up open communication between sovereign states towards consensus, rather than war.

Now twenty-five-year-old Leopold saw the map of Europe as an opportunity to expand the influence of his line through marriage and politics. The world was in flux. Even though a monarch was no longer God-given and approved, a King gave free people a feeling of consistency, safety, and status, while a government elected by citizens ran the shop. Having active royal houses also enabled countries to speak with each other more fluidly, so much the better to maintain the status quo of peace in Europe.

Leopold immediately sought a wife and a crown. While a guest of his sister in Romanov Russia, he locked eyes with another visitor, a princess. Charlotte was the only child of the Duke of Wales, the eldest son of King George III of England. *This* was the opportunity Leopold was waiting for. No garden-variety royalty, Charlotte was of the House of Hanover, and by marrying in, Leopold would eventually be the Prince Consort of the United Kingdom, husband to the Queen of England. Mother Dowager would be so proud. Charlotte and Leopold were, by all accounts, a match made in heaven, and very much in love with each other. British society adored the new couple and saw a promising future for them and Great Britain. They married in 1816. The highly-anticipated pregnancy in 1817 ended tragically with a stillborn child and poor Charlotte's death during childbirth. Leopold, and Great Britain, were devastated. Leopold mourned; he never got over his death of his wife. But the drive to advance in Europe could not be stifled long, and he sought another path to a throne. His loss seemed to strengthen Leopold's resolve to find his place on the map. It became his lifelong compulsion. While Leopold could not reach the throne of England, he was still well known in high society and very well liked. He remained unwearingly confident in his goal of Coburg rule somewhere in Europe.

Augusta and Leopold were critical to my second home of Coburg, but the final and most influential supporting actor in this power play is Christian Stockmar. The Stockmar family had been friends to Leopold's family for generations; Christian's grandfather was a benefactor to Franz and Augusta during the lean times of war. Christian was an educated man influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution. He was driven by two goals: the unification of Germany under the leadership of Prussia, and a strong alliance between Britain and Germany. He worked as a military doctor in Coburg during the Napoleonic Wars, and became Leopold's personal physician in 1815. By 1817, Stockmar was also Leopold's legal representative and adviser. Stockmar's influence, either in counsel or by education, affected all others in this story. Although he did write concise memoirs, Baron Stockmar preferred to stay in the shadows and in the service of the sole purpose: to expand the reach of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. He seemed to move between borders effortlessly and be available for advice or instruction to the right person at the right time. If Leopold was Don Corleone, Stockmar was the Consigliere Tom Hagen.

By 1817, Stockmar and Leopold had mapped networks of royal families and were constantly in search of a match in need of making. Charlotte's tragic death meant they need not look far. The House of Hanover in Great Britain provided a once-in-a-lineage opportunity. George III, despite losing a badgering, protracted guerilla war halfway across the world, managed to breed an impressive brood of nine sons and six daughters. This was most likely because he is one of the few royals in this story who never took a mistress. One would think this would have generated centuries of viable leaders and successors. However, the position of the Hanovers is truly remarkable for its sheer disarray. George III was succeeded by his eldest son, George IV. We know George IV's only child Charlotte died giving birth to Leopold's child. George IV was unlikely to father another child before his death, and the Hanover line was in dire straits. The rest of George III's children's situations were as follows:

- a. Two of his sons died in childhood
- b. Three princesses never married
- c. The Dukes of York and Sussex were both married without legitimate issue
- d. The Duke of Cambridge was uninterested in marriage, kids, or ruling
- e. The remaining princesses were married with no issue
- f. Ernest Augustus was already the King of Hanover
- g. The Duke of Clarence had no legitimate issue, but did have ten children by a common actress.
- h. The Duke of Kent was living the dream in Paris with his mistress of 20 years.

The Duke of Wellington (not a Hanover) spoke for the people of Great Britain when he described the whole family as “the damndest millstones about the necks of any government that can be imagined.” Leopold and Stockmar went into covert coordination. Leopold introduced the Duke of Kent to his sister, the widowed Victoire, and introduced the reviled Duke of Clarence to his less fortunate cousin. Responsibility to the Hanover line won over these two reluctant royals, and each brother married in 1818, as Leopold had arranged.

In a masterful arbitrage of matrimony, the house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha now had a corner on the market for the crown of Great Britain. Duke of Clarence or Kent, the offspring did not matter; the bloodline of Dowager Augusta would be on the throne eventually. On George IV’s death, the Duke of Clarence became William IV, but no legitimate issue came. The Duke of Kent, recently of Paris, was married in Coburg at Eherenburg Palace in the Hall of Giants. Edward and Victoire had one child, Alexandria Victoria. The stage was set for a lifetime of guidance and education the Coburg way.

While Victoria lived the life of an English princess, Leopold rededicated himself to obtaining a crown. The first opportunity developed in Greece in the late 1820’s. After a guerrilla style uprising against

the Ottoman Empire, Greece finally won her independence with the direct help of Russia, England, and France. As a condition of their intervention, Greece was expected to establish a Christian hereditary monarchy to balance their governmental assembly. Leopold politicked hard and was offered the crown, but the final acceptance of terms between England, Russia, France, and Greece proved elusive and the Greek President duplicitous. Sensing instability and dangerous waters, Leopold regretfully declined. Despite criticism and disappointment from his backers Leopold remained steadfast in his decision. His decision to decline the crown of Greece proved wise.

The newly created country of Belgium, free from the Netherlands and wanting to maintain neutrality with the great land powers of the continent, wished to have a king. Leopold was thought to be the most qualified man to bring balance and leadership. This was a far more stable and attractive opportunity, and Leopold jumped at the throne. Leopold had three final obstacles to become King. One: France wanted assurance that supporting a new country and king would create a friendly border. Leopold solved this easily by marrying Louise-Marie of Orleans, solidifying Belgian-French relations. Two: Leopold was already married to a common German actress Caroline Bauer. Leopold and Stockmar solved this by somehow convincing all Europe the marriage was invalid, much to Fraulein Bauer's chagrin. Three: the stubborn Dutch would not ratify the treaty separating Belgium, and England and France undertook several military actions in defense of Belgium to leverage the treaty to a physical reality, if not ratification.

Leopold took the crown of the Belgians in 1831 when Victoria was 12. Victoria was, as we already know, the only daughter of the Duke of Kent and King Leopold's sister Victoire. Victoria's cousin Albert was the second son of Leopold's brother Ernst, and grew up on the battlements of the Coburg Veste and the great baroque halls of Eherenburg Palace, hunting stag and boar in the forests surrounding Rosenau castle. The omnipresent Stockmar was physician and educator to both children, and rich Uncle Leopold was often arranging trips for the young royals and their cousins to

Coburg, to England, or Belgium. Leopold doted on Albert like a favorite son. Victoria and Leopold wrote to each other voluminously, Leopold acting here again as a father figure. In 1837, the King of England died, and Victoria became the heir apparent. Abruptly the correspondence changes from niece/uncle to two heads of state. Leopold was in a sensitive spot; he was the king of a new country with an unratified treaty, and was in a subservient position to the offspring of a marriage he orchestrated in an empire he very nearly served as Prince Consort! Ever the Machiavelli, he trod lightly and kept his compass true to the House. Victoria did her part to solidify Leopold's crown in 1839 when the Treaty of London was finally ratified, ensuring Belgium was a neutral and separate entity from Holland.

Over the many childhood reunions and vacations Leopold organized, Victoria had slowly confessed her affection for Albert. On Victoria's coronation, Leopold and Stockmar crafted the courtship carefully, over years. When the young, headstrong queen decided to marry, she could not deny her true love for Albert, nor could Albert think of a life without Victoria. They married in 1840 at St. James's Palace, and visited Coburg frequently.

Albert and Victoria captured the fascination of England and its empire; a young couple married and in love, devoid of the baggage Englanders were used to from the House of Hanover. Queen Victoria expanded the British Empire to its extent, and became the longest-ruling monarch until Queen Elizabeth II. Royal Consort Albert was content to father their 9 children and involve himself in a myriad of interests about state, industry, education, arts and medicine. He was a progressive and held many intellectual and cultural interests. While taking great pains to hold his position of Royal Consort "above politics," he was a significant reformer as the Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, and most notably masterminded the Great Exhibition of 1851, as president of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition. The statue I started my paper with, a gift to Coburg from Queen Victoria in 1865, portrays Albert holding the plans of the Exhibition in his right hand. Our modern

perception of Christmas and weddings were heavily influenced by Victoria and Albert, and the Victorian Age left an indelible mark on England that we can still see today. This England, and the world it influenced, was a product of the Coburg stud farm, the Dowager's son, and Stockmar.

For the next 80 years, Europe's royal weddings were a steady sequence of Coburg-line grooms or brides. While not all to the influence of Albert and Victoria, the line had a remarkable string of successful marriages with issue and succession. Each generation came to expect their eventual marriage as a duty to further the family line. In return, the countries served by these royals enjoyed an era of monarchical stability and relative peace. Not all Coburgers used the family's values of advancement and drive wisely, however. Leopold's son, Leopold II turned ambition into a monstrous exploitation of the Belgian Congo, raping the land of resources and causing millions of deaths. Albert and Victoria had nine children, seven of whom would marry and have children in a royal house or become head of state. To this day, the royal families of Greece, Spain, Great Britain, Norway, Romania, Sweden, and Denmark, can all trace their lines back to Albert and Victoria. Many more royal houses of states and duchies can do the same.

In Barbara Tuchman's seminal book, Guns of August, she famously sets the stage with the funeral of Edward VII, the son of two scions of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. While she does not delve into the specifics of the House, we are given a tour of Europe through relation, in order to frame WWI as a Greek tragedy via Armageddon. This 1910 funeral was preceded by an 1894 wedding in Coburg. Many of the same people were present. A photograph of the occasion framed future Kaiser Wilhelm II, Tsar Nicholas II, and King Edward VII surrounding Queen Victoria. Wilhelm, grandson of Victoria, is conspicuously gazing off camera, as if deliberately choosing a separate focal point from his family. And so, ominously, we reach the beginning of the decline of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

We recall that Stockmar was idealistically driven to effect a Europe of alliance between Great Britain and Germany, and German unification under Prussia. If Victoria and Albert represent the triumph of the former goal, then Kaiser Wilhelm II represents the tragic consequence of the latter. Wilhelm II

was born to Queen Victoria's daughter Vicki and Prince Frederick III. His Germany was indeed unifying under Prussia and its Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. Frederick and Vicki disagreed with Bismarck's *realpolitik*, and Bismarck distrusted Vicki as a British spy. When Kaiser Wilhelm II took the crown in 1888, the German Empire found they had an impatient and insecure Emperor surrounded by the new-age machine of politics and alliances created by Bismarck. While a childhood admirer of Bismarck, Wilhelm wanted more vigorous expansion to flex German dominance, and soon parted ways with the dexterous Chancellor.

Wilhelm would often write to his "cousin Nicky" in Russia and lament the oppression he felt from England, and the yearning he had to challenge England and France for the greatest power in continental Europe. Germany, although a common land of birth for many European royals, was the new kid on the Imperial block. The Kaiser compensated for his lack of experience with aggressive growth of the military state. The great fear of general continental warfare became a temptation of grandeur for the Kaiser, and the intricate preparations for engagement were spun as strictly defensive actions. When called to the defense of Austria-Hungary in 1914, Kaiser Bill not only pulled the pin on peace, but on the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

The Schlieffen Plan engaged. A force as large as Napoleon's entire Grand Armee —750,000 men— was to invade France via the loosely fortified, yet neutral, fields of Belgium. The land of Leopold. 1839's Treaty of London —forgotten or dismissed— ensured Belgium would remain neutral under protection from the greatest naval power on earth; Great Britain. In order to slow down the advance of the German army, King Albert I, the Kaiser's cousin, took personal command of the Belgian Army, and opened sluices at the Battle of Yser, flooding the bountiful plains with brackish seawater.

Discounted by many of the Kaiser's advisers, the tiny British Army eventually showed up and valiantly stopped the advance of the preprogrammed and mechanized German Army. The German military machine had calculated an attack plan of such higher math that train axles were timed

across trestles. No amount of familial correspondence or association by marriage could counteract this momentum. In the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, cousins took arms against cousins, and millions were about to die. In less than 18 months, heads of state in Europe were tactically useless, and by the end of 1918, several were in exile or dead. The British ruling family now took the decidedly un-German name "House of Windsor." The world had turned again.

Following the Great War, Coburg was physically untouched, but once again near financial ruin, like most of Europe. In a 1919 referendum, the peoples of Coburg and Gotha decided to part ways. Gotha would join the newly formed State of Thuringia, while Coburg would become the northernmost point of Bavaria.

In the interwar years, Coburg became the first "Brown" city, electing a national socialist candidate. The local elections were marked by brutal street fights in the medieval town, and the Nazi Party's first medal was the "Coburg Badge," given to those who fought for the cause. Hitler himself gave speeches from the town hall, which was draped by the crooked cross of the swastika.

Despite giving its name to a Nazi medal, Coburg was a relative non-factor during WWII. It was a manufacturing town of war materiel, and was taken on April 25, 1945. American tanks rolled through the city center under the bronze gaze of Albert. As the Allies split Germany into four zones, later to be two countries, the 1919 referendum became critical. Coburg was to be the beneficiary of West Germany while its sister Gotha was held captive by East Germany and the Soviet Union's influence. Once a nexus of power, by 1949 Coburg was relegated to a border town of the most dangerous boundary in history.

Fifty-six years later, I fell in love with this nowhere little town of Coburg and its story. The concentration of history I had to access to was not immediately apparent to me. I travelled outside Coburg most weekends to take in a new city or country, but my happiest memories are those when I stayed in Coburg and explored my new home. Everything I needed was within walking distance: the

architecture and culture was rich and satisfying. The market square was always full of activity and seasonal festivities. One block away, Ehrenburg palace is still the residence of the Duke, and was a frequent residence of Queen Victoria throughout her life. Opposite the palace is the Landestheater, the only Bavarian State-sponsored opera house outside Munich. A nearby arcade wall creates the boundary of the huge English-style garden that gradually, and then steeply, reaches up to the Veste. The Veste itself could take a week to explore, with three separate museums along with the massive grounds and battlements. I reluctantly left in May of 2006 and spoke of Coburg as my European home. After my own marriage, I could think of no better destination for us than Coburg. I returned in 2012; everything just as I had remembered, just as it has been for hundreds of years. My wife Marie was increasingly amazed as we walked through the city, as I explained the age and history of each charming and untouched building.

In the center of the country that mastered exporting, Coburg's greatest export will remain the destination weddings of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The City of Coburg is physically antebellum, the familial capital of old Europe. The buildings and streets you see today are those of Dowager Augusta and Christian Stockmar, untouched by the destruction of WWII. While the practical reason for Coburg's preservation might just be oversight, the popular explanation is much more poignant. The City of Coburg, birthplace of the "Uncle of Europe" and favorite vacation spot of Queen Victoria, was spared by decree of George VI of Great Britain, the great-grandson of Prince Albert, who forever holds court between the State House and Town Hall.

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