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S

he was the Lady Di of Austrian history. Married as a teenager to the Emperor, pretty, fashionable, a rebel in the royal family, mother of the heir to the throne, subject to the dictates of her mother-in-law, estranged early in her marriage from her husband, a wanderer who met an early death.

Empress Elisabeth is not widely known to Americans or those unfamiliar with European history. She is, however, a major national product of Austria, where today one is bombarded with everything from Elisabeth T-shirts to Elisabeth china, from Elisabeth key chains and candy to Elisabeth wine.

Celebrated in tours of the major palaces of Vienna, and a key figure in the history of Hungary, Elisabeth is also recalled for groundbreaking modernity in her personal style. To have been Empress of an empire that for many centuries had been variably the most powerful in Europe – and to be arguably the wealthiest, most beautiful (and most accomplished equestrian) woman among western celebrities of the late 1800s made her a figure of truly intense public interest. It also brought its own set of pressures that could be, and in her case proved to be, crushing.

Triumphant Arrival to New Reality

Elisabeth was born in 1837, daughter of Duke Maximilian of Bavaria. At age 15, she traveled to the Austrian summer villa at Bad Ischl, accompanying her older sister whose marriage had been arranged to the young Emperor of Austria, Franz Josef. The moment the Emperor laid eyes on his fiancée's younger sister, he was smitten, and the next day called off his engagement and asked for Elisabeth's hand.

Known popularly by the family nickname "Sissi," the young bride-to-be was an immediate sensation. Never before had a Habsburg bride been welcomed with such festivity

Franz Winterhalter's official portrait of Elisabeth at age 28 captures her radiant beauty.

Opposite: The elegant Schöbrunn Palace, Vienna, was Elisabeth's new home as a bride. The Great Gallery (far right) was used for grand balls and receptions.

An Empress Alone

Elisabeth lived amidst opulence but in many ways ignored it. She rejected the court of Vienna to live a life of poetry and escape.

as when Elisabeth boarded a steamer and traveled to Vienna. As dramatized in the 1956 motion picture *Sissi*, directed by Ernst Marischk and starring well-known Austrian actress Romy Schneider, the people of the Empire lined every stretch of the banks of the Danube to witness Elisabeth's journey to her new home.

As Brigett Haman explains in her popular biography, *The Reluctant Empress*, "The previous year, Napoleon III had married Eugénie and turned Paris into the center of European glamour. Now, at last, Vienna would catch up to Paris – or so it was hoped."

The splendid Schönbrunn Palace, built in the time of Maria Theresa as the Austrian answer to Versailles, would be Elisabeth's new home. The dizzied, overwhelmed youngster, often in tears during the days and weeks of ceremony and celebration, married Franz Josef on his 23rd birthday.

Rooms were extensively redecorated for the couple, their bedroom hung with blue and white silk, and appointed with heavy rosewood furnishings. Unfortunately, the room was to see use in only the first few years of their marriage.

Still to be seen in the apartments they occupied there and at Hofburg Palace is the official, imperial, Blondel style (as Neo-Rococo was known at the time) with furniture of carved wood in white and gold covered with strawberry-red damask upholstery. Although Elisabeth was to live at Schönbrunn, the summer residence of the Habsburgs, for the early years of their marriage, she had no more influence on the decoration here than she would at any of her other official residences. Such interests were not in her nature, nor would it have been easy in a house that was controlled by her mother-

in-law, the Archduchess Sophie.

Trapped by Hierarchy

A conservative reactionary, the archduchess was to be the bane of the early years of the Empress' marriage. Elisabeth's every move was observed. She was practically forbidden involvement in the upbringing of her first two children. The ladies-in-waiting referred to Sophie as "the real Empress," and Franz Joseph was too foolish or weak to take the situation in hand.

As Haman writes, "It never occurred to the Archduchess that a young wife might prefer having a household of her own. Sophie picked out the tapestries and curtains, the rugs and furniture. She placed great importance on purchasing only domestic products . . . Sissi was to have only the best and most expensive."

Portraits of Elisabeth painted by Franz Winterhalter contributed in no small measure to her fame. But it would be some years until Elisabeth learned to wield the power of her beauty and position.

By this time, Elisabeth felt that so much was expected of her as a figurehead, that she had already become enslaved to her own beauty routines. Caring for her

weight of her hair gave her headaches. She wrote in her diary that during these years, she felt her spirit strained out of her and into the hairdresser's hands. But her hairdresser, Fanny Feifalik, became one of her most intimate confidants.

Fighting for Room to Breathe

The domestic tension, and the conventions of the time, pushed Franz Joseph to dabble. From the oppressiveness of court life and knowledge of her husband's romances, Elisabeth twice fled Vienna to recuperate in Madeira and then Corfu. Both times it was with a lung affliction, thought at first to be tuberculosis but apparently psychosomatic.

Elisabeth predated trends of the 20th century in many ways. Unheard of for the time, she had a gym in her chambers at Hofburg, with a climbing apparatus and trapeze, on which she would often work-out for hours a day. Her naturally tall figure, her preference for tightly laced dresses, and her starvation diets all emphasized her slender physique. At 5'8", Elisabeth maintained a 20-inch waist and a weight of about 110 pounds her whole life. She was ahead of her time in some darker



knee-length, chestnut-brown hair, which Elisabeth usually wore piled up into an elaborate crown of plaits, took several hours a day. The ritual was draining. The

senses as well: Elisabeth suffered throughout her life from emotional and physical problems related to her anorexia.

The Marie Antoinette room was the



Courtesy of: Sclöß Schönbrunn, Vienna



Apartments at the Schönbrunn and Hofburg Palaces were lavishly decorated in the Neo-Rococo style of the times. Top: Dining Room, Hofburg Palace. Middle: Empress Elizabeth's stairway room, Schönbrunn Palace. Bottom: The Royal couple's bedroom, Schönbrunn Palace.

family dining room during Elisabeth's residence at Schönbrunn. Dinners were served in a small circle and boredom rather than witty conversation characterized them. The Emperor ate quickly and sparingly in silence; the Empress, as a rule, ate even less and was therefore even more quickly finished. They rose from the table heedless of whether the others had finished, and at that point the servants cleared the table. No one ate after the Emperor. As a result, the archdukes and duchesses had to go out to the Sacher Hotel to get a decent meal.

Along with bizarre eating habits, Elisabeth went to greater and greater lengths to safeguard and preserve her beauty. Whenever she felt that she was not looking her best, she simply cancelled her engagements, heedless of the ill will she created among the rigid Viennese aristocracy.

Independence at Last

Ten years into her marriage, Elisabeth delivered her famous "ultimatum" to the Emperor, demanding, and receiving, complete control over her children's upbringing, and freedom to choose her place of residence. Elisabeth also went on to become a key figure in Hungarian history, taking up the Hungarian cause, in part because her mother-in-law had so long disdained all things Hungarian.

In the 1860s, Elisabeth learned Hungarian and began living for periods at the baroque Gödöllo Palace near Budapest, which Hungary later presented to her and Franz Josef as a coronation gift, following the compromise that established the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy – making the couple King and Queen of Hungary. With court personalities and protocol blocking her from politics, her championing of Hungary was her only significant form of activism in her life. But for the Hungarian people, she became a fairytale Queen.

A Woman of Habits

Among her eccentricities, Elisabeth became convinced that drinking milk was key to maintaining her figure. She even insisted on taking a dairy cow with her on trips, when her entourage of travel attendants could sometimes number up to one hundred.

The table service she purchased for the private dairy she set up on the grounds of Schönbrunn palace is a great departure among today's palace collection – rugged,

woody-looking earthenware made by Holoháza and Apatfalva in Hungary. She likewise had the dining room of the dairy decorated as a Hungarian peasant's parlor with soft-wood furniture painted red with flowers in the Hungarian style.

Despite all her efforts at youthful looks and health, Elisabeth no longer permitted herself to be painted or photographed after the age 32. The admonition came from a combination of vanity and the foresight in knowing that her legend would be magnified if she was always remembered at her most beautiful. From her 30s on, she hid behind fans and veils in public.

Sporting, Outdoorsy, Lyrical, Solitary

Partly because she hated the court of Vienna, Elisabeth chose to ignore most balls and other social events, and abdicated many of her official duties. These were not the interests of a woman who had grown up in the dreamy countryside of Munich, surrounded by nature and poetry.

Instead, Elisabeth turned inward to her private pleasures, with the different periods of her life marked by a sequence of obsessive pursuits. She kept to herself, but maintained a passion for animals. She rode sidesaddle to the hounds on brutally strenuous hunts in many countries, becoming one of the most accomplished horsewomen of her time.

Poetry was a life long pastime. She was an acolyte and imitator of Heinrich Heine. In her Schönbrunn study, which was papered and upholstered in her favorite color, violet, she composed her poems, with a writing set of silver gilt and lapis lazuli. Thinking she was leaving a literary legacy, she had her writings locked in the Swiss Federal Archives until sixty years after her death. The poems have instead served as an important resource for historians.

In the latter half of her life, Elisabeth was a fanatical walker. She would stride for hours, sometimes for a day or night, through the country in all weather, scarcely accompanied and barely protected from strangers or the elements.

Briefly Touching Down in Corfu

Elisabeth lived at a level of material affluence that is astounding even by today's standard of the super-rich – to the extent that she lost touch with the extravagance of some of her expenditures. The list of her residences could take up a book, and has.

The Emperor built her Hermes Villa, a

private hide-away palace a few miles from Schönbrunn, tucked in a hunting preserve on the edge of Vienna woods. There, one can still see the original, jaw-dropping décor of her bedroom, with wall murals painted by a young and then unknown Gustav Klimt.

Elisabeth also studied Greek language and culture. Only at her villa Achilleion, built on Corfu, did she exert design influence. She was involved with its architecture, its interior appointments, and its garden plan.

The china service that she had made for Achilleion was decorated with the imperial crown and the dolphin, her favorite animal. The glass service was similarly engraved. The overall service contained more than 5,000 glass and silver items alone. Cabinetmakers in Naples produced all of the furniture according to her wishes in the style of Pompeii. She had the table linen done with scenes from Greek mythology. In her journeys through Italy and Greece, she accumulated the statues and other accouterments, some of it valuable, some not.

"When buying things, she was not very critical, because she did not know enough about antiques," says Ingrid Haslinger, who has written several books on the Silberkammer collection (see sidebar). "She acquired valuable things as well as complete rubbish."

Sadly, she could never develop a long-lasting allegiance to any of her domiciles. She abandoned the Achilleion villa and put it up for sale almost as soon as it was completed. She traveled in her latter years from one luxury hotel to another, often arriving at the height of the season with a the entire hotel.

Sadness at a Time of Change

Although Elisabeth had little relation with her son, Crown Prince Rudolph, both were examples of a last generation in the time of the royals because they were liberally educated and inclined. They were anti-aristocratic and anticlerical. They felt that monarchies were unjust and had outlived their purpose. This, even while her husband, the quintessential Austrian autocrat, worked 10 hours a day

at his desk to preserve his empire. Franz Josef was to be last important ruler of the Habsburg dynasty and the last important Austrian Emperor.

Elisabeth had been affected by the death of her cousin, the mentally unstable King Ludwig II of Bavaria, resident of Neuschwanstein and primary patron of Richard Wagner. After the suicide of her son, Rudolph, in 1889, Elisabeth wore only black for the rest of her life, giving away all her dresses, parasols, shawls,

Extravagance and Pageants in the Final Century of the Royals

For an empress, Elisabeth had exceptionally little effect on the house style of Habsburg Vienna. But the rooms open to the public today provide insight into the royal household, court ceremonies and splendor of the imperial table with which she lived. Hofburg was the sprawling winter residence (2,600 rooms) of the Habsburgs, located in the old city; the complex started in the 13th century. There, for tourists, the dining room remains set richly, just as at the time when Franz and Elisabeth took meals with extended family.

The Empress had little or no influence on the décor of these events or of state dinners. The Department of Ceremonies, headed by the Grand Master of the Household, took care of all details, right down to the seating order. Banquets held in the Great Ballroom or Hall of Ceremonies included thousands of elaborate flower arrangements. By the end of the 1800s, the court hothouses at Schönbrunn alone had more than 25,000 orchids of about 1,500 strains at their disposal. Daily, the kitchen at Hofburg had to cater to thousands of people, including staff. It maintained enough tableware for 4,000.

Hofburg's permanent Silberkammer exhibit includes culinary and table items that date back to the 15th century. One can see the imperial silver, including Maria-Theresa's golden flatware – a Milanese gilded-silver vermeil – one the most impressive services in all of Europe. The Silberkammer displays an unusual variety of articles, including the cooking pots and pans of the court kitchens, the pastry moulds of the court patisserie, and mammoth centerpieces of gilt bronze used for state occasions, as well as eastern porcelain. Elisabeth eventually would not eat what was cooked in the court kitchen, but ordered food from her separate kitchen, which she had equipped with nickel pots and pans engraved with the Imperial crown and the letter "E."

handbags, and jewelry to her daughters and ladies-in-waiting.

Elisabeth's modes of transport included the imperial saloon car, built for her just as railways were coming into wide use in Europe. She also traveled extensively by sea, primarily through the Mediterranean, on the splendid imperial yacht Miramar. So attached was she to the symbol of the dolphin that she had a special ocean-travelling table service decorated with a dolphin and crown, made by the Austrian metal works of Berndorf.

Matching table linen from Austria-Silesia was woven with the same motif.

Though physically and emotionally estranged for decades, Franz Josef continued to worship his Empress, and she continued to look after him – personally blessing his choice of actress Katharina Schratt as his long-term mistress. As one can see today on tours of the imperial apartments at both Hofburg and Schönbrunn, the Emperor kept himself surrounded by portraits and photographs of his beloved Sissi throughout his life. A miniature painted on porcelain of himself and Elisabeth at the time of their marriage was kept in the small bedroom he occupied in his later years.

The World Changes

The restless, lonely Empress could have done much more for her people, who suffered terribly from poverty, hunger, and other privations during the many years of warfare that brought heavy Austrian losses. But in a militaristic, absolutist society, it was not easy for her to work for the masses, and she was not inclined in this way.

Elisabeth was one of the last women to live at the level of finery and means she experienced in her life. Though she had many dashing suitors, and intense relations with a few, these appear to have remained platonic. It was not in her character to do otherwise, and secrets were utterly impossible in her fishbowl life.

After years of wandering, she was assassinated by an Italian anarchist, who stabbed her while she was boarding a ferry in Geneva on September 10, 1898. In 1914, Franz Josef's nephew, Francis Ferdinand, who had replaced Rudolf as heir to the throne, was also assassinated, by a Serbian nationalist, thus precipitating World War I.

The claim by historians that in Elisabeth's depressed state of mind – and in her manner of travelling without police escort or bodyguard – she was waiting and wanting to die seems plausible. Her life contained many conflicting themes but no overriding lesson. She spent her days fleeing the court, her family, and herself. ❧