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The Sorrows of the Prince Charming: The Tragic Life of Crown Prince Rudolf

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He was "more than handsome, he was seductive…"[1] He was the Prince Charming from fairy tales, with his slim figure, his elegant gestures, his moist eyes, and his melancholy expression. He was the Crown Prince of Austria, Archduke Rudolf, and although one might have felt the urge to wipe away his sorrows from his delicate face, they could not be so easily washed away. It was his sorrows more than anything that people later remembered and prompted them to wonder: What caused him to drive on his last trip to Mayerling? Why did he choose such a tragic ending to his short life? As a start to solve these questions, Crown Prince Rudolf's early life will be examined. These experiences serve as a basis for the later analyses of the Prince's sorrows, which include his relationships with his parents, particularly with his father, his frustrations with the politics of his country, his notion of connecting love and death, and finally, his love affair with Mary Vetsera, who shared the road to death with him.

The prince was born in 1858 to the imperial family of Austria. As the only son of Emperor Franz Josef and Empress Elisabeth, Rudolf was named Crown Prince of Austria and received an education befitting a future emperor. He was a gifted student of all subjects, ranging from history to science, from economics to languages.[2] He was a scholar, a man of the old Renaissance tradition, with well-rounded understandings of the world. He possessed everything that was expected in a prince, including his good looks. Indeed, he was widely admired in Vienna and abroad. It is hard to imagine why a young man with such potential would suffer such deep sorrows. But sorrows he did have, and his relationships with his parents were among them.

Rudolf's birth brought such great happiness to his father, the Emperor, that he knelt by Elisabeth to thank her for delivering a son; however, the young prince did not please his mother at all.[3] The Empress remained detached from her new baby, and this detachment was never wholly removed throughout the life of their relationship. In fact, Rudolf was largely spoiled by his grandmother, instead of his mother.[4] Nevertheless, however distant his mother may have been, Rudolf adored her. He was like her in appearance, as both had delicate faces and elegant figures, and in soul, for both loathed the dull court of the Emperor and longed for freedom. This freedom was granted to the mother, but not to the son. For example, the Empress was allowed to travel abroad frequently, and in fact, she spent most of her time outside of Vienna. She was equally famous for her beauty as for her trips throughout Europe. Her son was not so lucky.

Although Rudolf was similar to his mother, he was completely different from his father. The Emperor symbolized the old regime. His ruled in an aristocratic nature and his court was composed of members of the upper-class who were unaware of or unwilling to recognize the progress made by the most advanced countries in Europe: France and England. The Emperor's son proved to be the very opposite of his father. As a student, Rudolf liked Descartes and Voltaire.[5] He admired France, a country most famous for its Enlightenment, and later, for its revolution. In addition, as a talented scholar and an acute politician, Rudolf recognized that the

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[1] George R. Marek, *The Eagles Die: Franz Joseph, Elisabeth, and Their Austria* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), 257.

[2] Joseph Redlich, *Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria: A Biography* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1965), 410.

[3] Joan Haslip, *The Lonely Empress: A Biography of Elizabeth of Austria* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 210.

[4] Marek, *The Eagles Die*, 256.

[5] Marek, *The Eagles Die*, 255.

world was becoming more industrialized and modernized. He was a liberal thinker, one who was ready to lead the Empire into a new era, one with advanced technology and reformed government; however, the Emperor was reluctant to embrace such an era.

The Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud once suggested that neurosis can be attributed to the difficult relationships with one's parents, and Prince Rudolf is a perfect example of how such neurosis can manifest itself. He feared his father, and this fear grew even more in 1888, just a year before the Mayerling incident, when Rudolf almost shot the Emperor during a hunting outing. The rage of the father drove the son even farther away from his side.[6] Indeed, the prince hated his father, for his father was the one who was responsible for the prince's meaningless life and for changing him from a promising youth to a rusted, chained Prince Charming.[7] As further evidence of his hatred for his father, Prince Rudolf left no letter to his father after his death.

The gap between the father and son grew wider, and the main reasons were political. Rudolf was an idealist, and he was full of desire to reform the old Vienna. For example, at the opening of the International Electric Fair, he announced: "Let an ocean of light and progress pour forth from these streets…."[8] Like the French philosophes of the century before, Rudolf too longed for an Enlightenment, but this time, in Vienna. He wanted modern Voltaires and Descarteses in Vienna to turn the stagnant monarch into a new, middle-class society. Rudolf mocked the hierarchy of the Church, and he suggested that the estates of aristocrats should be divided among the peasants.[9] He had a sense of equality that was far ahead of his age, and indeed, far from reality. He was a dreamer, and no doubt a talented one with a fine brain. However, his empty plans turned into dust because, after all, he was *only* a dreamer. Thus, part of Rudolf's sorrows came from his unfulfilled desire to better his country. The Emperor was aware of his son's liberal ideas, although he probably did not know that the young man was expressing his ideas in the newspaper, *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, using a pen name. But, the articles in the paper would never turn into actions, for the ambition of the Prince would be forever waiting. He was not given any real task by his father; his only duties were to attend balls, to smile, and to convey his charm to people who were largely enchanted by him but never truly listened to him. The frustration of his unfulfilled goals caused him great distress, for he was "prematurely ripe" as a prince as long as his father was still in command.[10]

However, the Emperor was not the only one who caused Rudolf great frustration, for even the Viennese people baffled him. The old Vienna was simply not ready to accept a middle-class lifestyle. The nobility was ancient and exclusive, and the bourgeoisie was nowhere near the dominate class.[11] Furthermore, the unsatisfying egalitarian notions of liberalism that Rudolf favored cast too much burden on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the privileges of the nobility. However, Rudolf did not understand the deeper reasons behind his failure to bring modernization to the old Empire. Instead, all he saw was his own failure and the dim prospective of the future. He might have often asked himself, as was asked in Voltaire's famous work *Candide*, "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?"

Rudolf's distant relationship with his parents may have contributed to his yearn for love, and indeed, Rudolf never lacked partners, either before or after his marriage. While love could

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[6] Joan Haslip, *The Lonely Empress*, 385.
[7] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor: Vienna 1888/1889* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 115.
[8] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 37.
[9] Marek, *The Eagles Die*, 260.
[10] Joseph Redlich, *Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria*, 413.
[11] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 68-69.

mean different things to different people, to Rudolf, love always had a mysterious relationship with death. For example, one of his early loves, the Princess Maria Anna of Tuscany, died of tuberculosis.[12] If this event in his younger age did not affect him too deeply, an experience he suffered in Prague when he grew older certainly did. Various sources tell the tale of a Jewish girl living in Prague, who fell in love with the Prince and watched him from under his window every night. Unfortunately, the Prince had not known of the Jewish girl and her love toward him until after she died of disease.[13] This tale could have ended very differently, but all Rudolf could do was drop his too-late roses on the girl's grave, and mourn her short life and his own disappointed love. Rudolf fantasized the girl he had never officially met, and the connection he drew between death and love impressed him greatly.

To link death with love was one step, and to link death with suicide was still another one. It was quite natural for Rudolf to make such a connection between love, death, and suicide, for he was in Vienna, a city that seemed fascinated by suicidal events and claimed the highest suicide rate in Europe.[14] In addition, he was not the only one who thought of suicide in the family—the suspicious death of a relative on his mother's die, King Ludwig of Bavaria haunted him.[15] Rudolf understood that he could end all of his frustrations through suicide, but he never wanted to die by himself. As fate would have it, Mary Vetsera offered herself as the perfect companion.

Echoing the engraving on the cigarette case that Mary gave to Rudolf, it may really have been "kindly fate" that brought her into Rudolf's life. It is too presumptuous to say that she was the only reason he committed suicide, but she surely served as a final impulse. While Rudolf's former mistress Mitzi Caspar, a cheerful, sweet girl, never took his idea of death seriously, Mary Vetsera did. Indeed, she was quite a different character. Just as Rudolf was not merely handsome, Mary was not merely pretty. By the age of seventeen, she was already a fashion icon and a social celebrity. Brought up by a mother who was very shrewd with respect to social climbing, Mary too had her own ambitions. She knew what she wanted—to be at the top, to be not only noticed, but remembered, by *all.*[16] Mary wanted greatness and in contrast to the Crown Prince, she was sure that she would achieve it.[17] The pride and certainty in her dark eyes may have attracted the prince, but he also found another reason to stay -- she resembled his lost love, the Jewish girl from Prague.[18] Mary was Rudolf's second chance at love, and he would not let her go.

Nor did Mary intend to go. She was ready to make any sacrifice in the name of love, for like Rudolf, she too linked love to death. Mary knew that she and Rudolf could never live happily ever after, for Prince Rudolf's wife, the Crown Princess Stephanie, whom Mary called the "Belgian peasant,"[19] presented an obstacle. However, if they could die together, they could have an eternity of happiness.

Rudolf and Mary traveled to Mayerling on a wet and cold January night in 1889. He left for the hunt, as he said, forever.[20] On this night, he ended all his sorrows, and Mary joined him in his

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[12] Marek, *The Eagles Die*, 257.
[13] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 131.
[14] Ibid., 134
[15] Marek, *The Eagles Die*, 262.
[16] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 79-82.
[17] Ibid., 82.
[18] Ibid., 130-131.
[19] Joan Haslip, *The Lonely Empress*, 390.
[20] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor*, 225.

decision to take his own life. Rudolf would never again be disappointed by his distant mother; he would never again be frustrated by his powerful father; he would never again lead a routinely but empty life as a charming but useless prince; and he would never again miss the love of a girl. He would be forever remembered, not as the prince of greatness, but the prince of death, of love, and of sorrows.