Constructing the Past

Volume 12 | Issue 1 Article 6

2011

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Recommended Citation
Ridley, Chelsea (2011) "Mayerling Revisited: The Short Life and Death of Mary Vetsera," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol12/iss1/6

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Mayerling Revisited: The Short Life and Death of Mary Vetsera

Chelsea Ridley

Mary Vetsera died suddenly in 1889, seemingly caught up in a whirlwind romance gone terribly awry. However, was this romance what really led her to the tragedy at Mayerling, or were there other circumstances that contributed to her decision to accept the suicide pact with the Crown Prince Rudolf? Why did this seventeen-year-old woman, with ostensibly everything to lose, allow the Crown Prince to kill her that night? Mary's family expected a lot of her and from the time she was born, her entire life was dedicated to marrying into a family of importance. When the attention of her love was set on Prince Rudolf, a married man, her options for traditional marriage suddenly became slim. Thus, the offer of eternal love and marriage in death from Rudolf was the perfect solution to the dilemma Mary had found herself in.

Mary Vetsera was born on March 19, 1871 to Albin Vetsera and Helene Baltazzi. Helene was a rich woman and had come from a long line of wealth, while Albin was a diplomat twenty-two years her senior. This marriage was not one born out of true romance; rather, it was one of advantageous matching. Both of Mary's mother's sisters had married Counts, and the Emperor Franz Joseph had named Mary's father a Baron in 1870.[1] The expectation was that the women of the family would continue this tradition of marrying into families of importance; this was evident to all who knew the Vetseras. They knew that this family wanted their daughters to marry men of a similar or better social class and also to strive to raise the family's social status. In his article, "The Mayerling Tragedy: How and Why did Prince Rudolf and Mary Vetsera Die?" Peter Tosoni explains Mary's upbringing, "…Mary was brought up strictly by her mother who seems to have been a rather ambitious social climber."[2] Instead of attending a school or the gymnasium, Mary "attended the 'Institute for Daughters of the Nobility'… where she was to be prepared for 'life in the big world.'"[3] Thus, she "had no intellectual pretentions" and was prepared to be an ideal wife for a nobleman.[4] To find a suitable mate for her daughter, Helene held parties and tried to socialize with the royalty of Austria. In his book on Mary Vetsera's life, Georg Markus quotes from Empress Elizabeth's diary in 1877: "Madame Vetsera wants to come to Court and gain recognition for her family."[5] Thus, Helene's striving towards greatness and the furtherance of the family's legacy had become evident even to the wife of the emperor.

This pressure to marry into a higher class was felt heavily by Mary. Marie Larisch, one of Mary's closest friends at the time, illustrates this pressure in her memoirs, recounting an affair between Mary and an English officer in the summer of 1888. She writes, "[S]he told me all about the young man when we met, and rather lamented that his lack of money and prospects had prevented a marriage between them."[6] Mary had other love interests, but because of the pressures from her mother to advance the Vetsera name, she thought she had no choice but to

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[1] Marie Larisch, *My Past: Reminiscences of the Courts of Austria and Bavaria; Together with the True Story of the Events Leading up to the Tragic Death of Rudolph, Crown Prince of Austria* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1913), 215. Georg Markus, *Crime at Mayerling: The Life and Death of Mary Vetsera* (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1995), 23.

[2] Peter S.Tosoni, "The Mayerling Tragedy: How and Why Did Rudolph and Mary Vetsera Die?" *The Durham University Journal* 84, no. 2 (1992): 204.

[3] Markus, *Crime at Mayerling*, 22.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 23.

[6] Larisch, *My Past*, 219.

marry someone of whom her mother would approve rather than one in whom she was truly interested. Mary also knew about her mother's wishes for her and that she had been groomed her entire life to achieve a marriage with the greatest benefit to the family. She confided this to Marie Larisch after one of her first rendezvous with Prince Rudolf, which is also printed in her memoirs. Mary cried, "Mamma has no love for me…Ever since I was a little girl she has treated me like something she means to dispose of to the best advantage."[7] This quote illustrates that Mary could tell that her mother was only using her for a means to raise the family's social status, and it had an effect on Mary's mental state at the time of her affair with Prince Rudolf.

The burden of her mother's fascination with climbing the social ladder of Vienna was complicated when Mary met and fell in love with Prince Rudolf in 1888. While it seems like this was a quick romance for a young woman, Mary took love tremendously seriously. An American friend of hers, Maureen Allen, recalled Mary's passion after her death, saying that she "was very serious…people gave her credit for not taking love lightly, but rather quite seriously."[8] Thus, when Mary and Rudolf met in November of 1888, their relationship became very serious, very fast. As Georg Markus describes, "Three months of happiness followed, with many secret meetings…"[9] Her family and friends found this relationship to be foolish, considering the wishes of her mother and the marital status of the Crown Prince, who was married to Stephanie of Belgium, and had a child with her. Marie Larisch remembered a scene in which Mary's sister Hannah had teased Mary about the situation saying, "[Y]ou will never believe Mary could be so foolish. Fancy, she is madly in love with…now…I'll break this to you *very gently*—she is in love with the Crown Prince! Oh Marie you can't imagine anything so silly, and she has no idea how ridiculous it is!"[10] Hannah only thought that the situation was ridiculous because Rudolf was an unattainable man. Mary's mother did not take news of the relationship as lightly. After Mary sent the Crown Prince a personally engraved cigarette case and Mary's mother found out, she reacted with rage exclaiming, "She is compromising herself when she is scarcely seventeen years old and so is ruining not only her life but also that of her brothers and sisters and mother…."[11] If he was not married with a family, this relationship would have been welcomed and congratulated rather than mocked and ridiculed. While Rudolf had other lovers and a wife, Mary had no one else but him. She focused her full attention on the love affair and took it extremely seriously. In contrast, her family saw it as a silly game or a liability to their social mobility. Mary was attempting to have a relationship with a married man, who would not be able to raise the family name, but instead ruin it, if the affair ever became public.

Mary was also not pursuing any other relationships with other eligible men at the time because of her love for Rudolf. She realized that she was facing a threat from the Crown Princess, but she thought herself a worthy adversary, possibly even able to usurp the Crown Princess's title. Marie Larisch recounted a conversation in her memoirs where Mary laughed, "[T]hat stupid Crown Princess knows I am her rival."[12] She didn't realize, however, that Rudolf was not only married and having an affair with Mary, but was also having a relationship with another woman, Mitzi Caspar. Unfortunately for Mary, the relationship with Mitzi seemed to be serious too, as he had first proposed the idea of a suicide pact to her a month earlier, which she

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[7] Larisch, *My Past*, 241.
[8] Markus, *Crime at Mayerling*, 25.
[9] Ibid., 27.
[10] Larisch, *My Past*, 221.
[11] Markus, *Crime at Mayerling*, 30.
[12] Larisch, *My Past*, 237.

had rejected with a laugh.[13] Mary was the second victim of his search for a partner in death, and seeing no other way to be with the man she loved, she did not interpret the proposal as the idea of a desperate man not wanting to die alone, but rather as an opportunity for the two to be unified in death.

At the time before the murder/suicide at Mayerling, Rudolf had grown bored with this domestic life. He would not, however, petition for dissolution of marriage from his wife, which ultimately left Mary as nothing but a mistress.[14] Thus, when he presented the idea of being together for eternity in death, Mary was thrilled with the idea. While she thought that she could be a threat to Stephanie, her family and friends constantly warned her of the consequences that would follow the breaking up of this royal relationship. As Markus explains, "Mary only thought of death because she saw that a lasting relationship with her beloved 'in this life' was impossible."[15] According to Mary, not only would death bind the two together and finally bring them into a legitimate relationship, it would also bring the fame to the Vetsera name that her mother had worked so hard for Mary's entire life. In a telling quote from Markus's book, Mary said, "[I]f I could give him my life I should be glad to do it, for what does life mean for me?"[16] Because she could be with him in a legitimate way and had to marry someone that her mother had approved, Mary found little worth in her life and saw the greater value in death with the Crown Prince.

Thus, on the night of January 30, 1889, Mary Vetsera died at the hands of her short-time lover. While the Crown Prince's death was a reflection of a disappointing life and many problems he could not fix, Mary saw opportunities in death in which she could not find in life. The pressures she felt from her mother her entire life made Mary feel inadequate and unwanted, while her love for the Crown Prince was forbidden and something that she took exceedingly seriously. Consequently, the suicide pact was finally an opportunity for Mary to fulfill all of her wishes, as well as the burdens from her mother, because it was the only way she could be legitimately unified with the Crown Prince.

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[13] Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor* (Boston: Penguin Books, 1979), 219.
[14] Tosoni, "Mayerling Tragedy," 204.
[15] Markus, Crime at Mayerling, 28.
[16] Ibid.