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GREAT WAR CENTENARY SPECIAL



Princess Marie-Therese and Anthony at home in St Margarets Photo by Jack Lawson

In the family LINE

When Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated in June 1914, it triggered the countdown to war.

Princess Marie-Therese von Hohenberg, his great-granddaughter, lives in St Margarets. Here she and her husband, Anthony Bailey, talk exclusively to [Richard Nye](#) about the centenary and their vision for Europe today

There is no mistaking the sound. You hear it everywhere in this tall, imposing house, bouncing off walls that are a history lesson all of their own. Turn one way and Charles I appears; turn another and George V heaves into view. And here, in the airy main lobby, is Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria-Hungary at the start of World War I. In this high-ceilinged corner of St Margarets, the heart of Europe beats audibly in the stillness of a summer's afternoon.

No surprise there, given the identity of the lady of the house. For Her Serene Highness Princess Marie-Therese von Hohenberg, now of this parish, is the great-granddaughter of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, whose assassination with his wife in Sarajevo, on June 28 1914, sent the European dominoes toppling and ushered in the catastrophes of war.

It is a year since she arrived with her husband – Anthony Bailey OBE, the

influential interfaith campaigner and diplomatic consultant – and their young son, Maximilian, though this is not her first experience of the borough.

“On my first trip to the UK, 30 years ago, we stayed in Petersham,” she recalls fondly. “I remember Ham House and picnics on the Hill, so it was a kind of homecoming to end up living here.”

Regal and radiant, the Salzburg-born Princess worked as an architect in Vienna before her marriage to Bailey in 2007. To Richmond she brings not just the aroma of a vanished court, but a tantalising link with the pinnacles of power. Follow the path of time’s arrow, past the luckless Franz Ferdinand and back up the family line, and you come at length to the Holy Roman Emperors who, for more than eight centuries, held vast swathes of Europe in their hands. Not even the kings of England and France would have scorned the ancestors of Princess Marie-Therese.

Yet amid the 1914 fever with which Europe is currently gripped, Her Serene Highness has one particular wish: to see her famous forebear disentangled from destiny, enabling the real man to emerge from that tumultuous Balkan morn.

“I come across people who think he started the war. They don’t realise he was its first victim”

“Remember me,” pleads Purcell’s Queen Dido, “but ah! Forget my fate.” For the Princess, the bullet that killed her great-grandfather looms too large in the story of his life.

“As a child, when you first hear the family history, that’s just how it is,” she reflects. “Then you go to school and the teachers start talking about it, and you realise that it means something more. Before it was just your own story, but now you see its relation to the world. And the older you get, the more you realise how important it is to tell the next generations too. But it has to be the full story. People need to know about the whole of a life, not just one day.”

Historians are divided. For some, the Archduke was a wild and moody figure, an inveterate hunter – no fewer than 100,000 trophies were on view at his castle – and an autocrat bent on focusing imperial power in Vienna at the expense of the Hungarians. For others, he was somewhat enlightened; a champion of ethnic minorities within the empire, cold towards Hungary precisely because he saw it as oppressing those groups. If that is right, his slaying by a Bosnian Serb is one of the crueler ironies of history.

“It’s amazing,” says Anthony, “but I come across many people who think he started the war. They don’t realise that he

was actually its first victim. In fact, he was a man of peace who never had the chance to express it. He was a liberal, but he was dealing with an insufferable, outdated Austrian court and an Emperor who, though revered, had been born in 1830. History is full of ‘what ifs’, but things could have been so different if he had ascended the throne.”

He didn’t. Instead the creaking imperial machine went to work, reacting to his death by issuing Serbia with a list of humiliating demands. In the absence of full compliance, Austria invaded – and the other great powers, caught up in a web of alliances, rapidly piled in behind. When the killing ceased, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was no more, its ruling family scattered to the winds. Duke Maximilian von Hohenberg – eldest son of the Archduke and grandfather of Princess Marie-Therese – had been living in the future Czechoslovakia. Now, in the imperial meltdown, he and his siblings were exiled from their new home and ended up back in Vienna.

From the soil of calamity darker flowers sprang. In March 1938, Hitler marched into Austria in pursuit of his plan to unify all German peoples. Fiercely opposed to

the *Anschluss*, Maximilian and his brother were arrested and carted off to Dachau; where, on Hitler’s orders, they were subjected to intense degradation. Cleaning out toilets with a spoon was the level to which the imperial siblings fell.

“It completely shortened their lives,” says Marie-Therese. “It was their faith that got them through, yet that same faith also prevented them from talking about it afterwards. The Nazis had forced them to swear an oath of silence on the Bible. As devout Catholics, they couldn’t break that. Everything we know about that period, what they did, we learned by other means.”

Faith is a constant in this family tale. From Charlemagne to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperors were crowned by the Pope; and though the custom lapsed in the 1500s, Catholicism was ever the honoured guest at the feast. Anthony Bailey, inevitably perhaps, is also steadfast for Rome. But for him, as for his wife, faith is not a fortress to keep the infidel out: it is a bridge to believers on other shores. Described by *The Observer* in 2007 as *“one of the most influential men you’ve never heard of”*, the interfaith campaigner has spent years moving the mountains of mistrust. In the Vatican, in Whitehall, in the crucible of the Middle East, Bailey’s voice counts.

“I don’t believe that any one religion is the sole depository of truth,” he says. “It’s because I am so confident in my Catholic faith that I can reach out to those of other beliefs and none, and defend faith communities against secularism – often the most fundamentalist creed of all.”

But don’t missionary faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, lay claim to the very uniqueness that Bailey denies? What makes him think that the circle of contradiction can be squared?

“Because there is a commonality as to who we are as people which has an overriding energy. We need to focus on what we share, not on what we don’t.”

Commonality, in fact, is his watchword. For intertwined with his faith is a passion for the European Union. The commitment is hugely resonant: no family’s history is more bound up with the European ideal than that of the one to which he now belongs. Vienna may have lost its throne, but deep within its melancholy ashes the European dream lives on – and Bailey wants Britain to be part of it.

“We have a key role to play in Europe – always have done,” he insists. “It is being so multifaceted that makes us unique – our ties with Europe, with the USA, the Commonwealth and so on. I do not see why one should preclude the others.”

The Princess agrees.

“Imagine if Britain left the EU, and then some problem arose in Europe and the UK had no voice. I would worry deeply about that,” she muses.

It is a wholly understandable fear. After 70 years of peace, it is less *de rigueur* to see the EU as a guarantor of stability. But for the Princess, the shot that plunged a continent into chaos; the catalogue of death and displacement; the nadir of evil that followed in its wake: all this formed the prologue to her family life. Little wonder if European harmony is among her deepest concerns.

“I do hope,” reflects Anthony, “that this centenary, along with the recent D-Day anniversary, reminds people of just how close to the abyss we came, twice within 100 years. Of course the EU needs reform, but think of how far Europe has come in the past century. It’s incredible.”

“And beyond that, I just want people to know my great-grandparents as they were,” reiterates Marie-Therese. “This year has given me the chance to talk about them. People are interested, and that’s wonderful. It’s like a release, actually. A beautiful release.”

Outside it is still warm. Maximilian – oblivious, at four, to the enormity of his great-great-grandfather’s demise – plays with the family dog in the mellow sun. But in his parents’ dreams is a light that is brighter still: the lamps of Europe, extinguished so brutally a century ago, coming back to life, one by one.