

By Haris Huremagić

„THE ABSENCE OF WAR IS FAR FROM BEING PEACE“

The Habsburg-Legacy in the 21st Century

- An Interview with Eva Demmerle -

Eva Eleonora Demmerle studied History, Politics, Economics and Theology in Bonn, Siegen and Paris. From 1995 until 2011, she was Otto von Habsburg's closest political assistant. She is author of many books about the House of Habsburg, such as the biography of Emperor Charles I of Austria-Hungary and of Otto von Habsburg.

Otto von Habsburg-Lorraine (1912-2011) was Member of the European Parliament and as the oldest son of Emperor Charles I, the last Crown-Prince of Austria-Hungary. After the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire he lived in exile until 1966. During the Second World War he offered resistance to the NAZI-regime, while being in the US. After the war he put his political effort into the process of European integration.



Otto von Habsburg in 2010



Emperor Francis Joseph and Archduke Otto

HH: The commemorative year of 2014 primarily stands for the beginning of the First World War 100 years ago, but also for the beginning of the Second World War 75 and for the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago. All these events are linked with the biography of Otto von Habsburg, the last Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary.

A key event on the threshold of World War I was the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip. The following July Crisis was of great importance as well.

How do you see the role of the Habsburg-Monarchy in July 1914?

ED: Let's have a general look at the Monarchy and how it was set up at that time. Before the war, the Habsburg Monarchy experienced a very positive development and an unexpected heyday. There had also been enormous economic and political stability during the last hundred years and in that golden age the crisis occurs in July 1914. One must say that the assassination of the Archduke was the occasion and not the cause. It could have happened a few years earlier during the Moroccan Crisis. The problem was that the initially elastic system of alliances, which Bismarck had established, had become rigid, at the latest at the non-renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia by Emperor William. Since the alliance system had become rigid, it was only a matter of time until it set off somewhere. Well, regarding the situation in 1914:

The political and military leaders of that time did not know what kind of war they would face, but they did play a little bit with the idea of war as an option. So there is the question if it really was necessary to add the point into the ultimatum to Serbia, according to which Austrian investigators should have had the right to investigate in Serbia. This point had been inserted by some warmongers also in the Austrian government, and of course such a point cannot be accepted by any sovereign state. It is not that clear if there really was an absolute will to war in all parties. Certainly many toyed with the idea of war, especially the Germans. The Germans had indeed rearmed their military enormously in the previous 20 years, which of course had triggered some displeasure in Great Britain. However, two days before the declaration of war of England against Austria-Hungary, the Austrian ambassador, for example, was invited to tea by the Queen. So, hardly anyone was geared up to war. Emperor Francis Joseph never had any illusions about that war. He knew that this military conflict would have a huge explosive impact on the Danube Monarchy.

HH: What I would now touch upon is the relationship between Emperor Charles and Archduke Francis Ferdinand and the trialistic reconstruction of the Monarchy, of which Francis Ferdinand was rumored to have been in favor. What did Emperor Charles think of this specific idea and generally of the Monarchy's future?

ED: We know that both had a very good and lively contact with each other. We know that they had been communicating extensively about the future of the Monarchy. They both agreed that the sole compromise with Hungary of 1867, positive as it may have been, did not achieve a final solution for the Monarchy's problems. It left the Slavic peoples out of account. We know that Francis Ferdinand thought of a coronation with the Bohemian crown of St. Wenceslas to give the Slavic peoples appropriate compensation. Both agreed on that issue.

HH: Are there concrete records of Emperor Charles of what he would have done with the Monarchy if he would have had the opportunity?

ED: He would have sought a settlement with the Slavic peoples. He was indeed a very great friend of the Slavs. In the course of time the development went in the direction of federalism. He developed ideas of a much more federal structure of the Monarchy.

Federalism would have been an ideal shape to create a political equilibrium among the fourteen different peoples within the Monarchy.

HH: Could the Monarchy have survived at all during that period of nationalisms?

ED: Without war: Yes. The war definitely triggered the collapse of the Monarchy. There had been incredible problems within the Monarchy, such as the nationality problems. These problems could have been solved without the war. There had already been an attempt to solve the nationality problems with the famous Moravian Compensation in 1905, which was a good thing but it came too late.

And there is also this quote from Henry Kissinger, if Austria had won the war or if there had not been a war, 15 years later Austria-Hungary would have been one of the most modern countries in Europe or the world. And that cannot be denied.

HH: What happened with Emperor Charles and his family after the First World War?

ED: Well, a tragic fate. On the 11th of November 1918 the family left the Schönbrunn Palace and then went to Castle Eckhartsau where they spent almost half a year. The situation was of course a bit difficult. At that time the Republic of German-Austria was founded. The Revolution of November 1918 in Austria never really was a revolution from the streets. It was rather a revolution from the party offices. The new government under Karl Renner was well aware of the fact that it was a very sensitive young Republic. Austria was practically disintegrated at that time.

Can we imagine an Emperor of this residual Austria? Actually not. The task of the Emperor was actually fulfilled, tragic as that may be. In March 1919 the imperial family went from Eckhartsau to Switzerland by train, to the family of the Empress, to Castle Wartegg, near St. Gallen. The exile lasted a little more than two years up to the tragic events in Hungary. Two times, Emperor Charles or King Charles attempted to gain the throne in Hungary. Both attempts failed and finally after the second attempt, the Allies sent him into exile to the island of Madeira, where the Emperor finally died of exhaustion on the first of April 1922.

HH: After the Second World War, Otto von Habsburg began with his commitment for the European integration. Why?

ED: He always used to say that in the United States he became a European. Secondly, during the 30s he got to know Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, founder of the Pan-European Union. Otto von Habsburg was a political realist and knew that the issue of Monarchy was over. He always represented the motto: not the question how the state is organized is of importance, but rather the political contents. Thus he became one of the motors of European integration. He translated the principles and foundations of the multiethnic Monarchy to the process of European unification. Principally, he translated the task of the Habsburgs into the 20th and 21st century.

HH: So the European unification was for him a matter of stability, which was simply necessary after the Second World War.

ED: Absolutely. First of all, because we belong together culturally.

Secondly, because we are too small as individual nation-states to keep pace with global developments and we would not be able to cope with them. Thirdly, Europe has been a continent of war for many centuries. We should be happy and grateful that we are enjoying a period of peace thanks to the European integration. As in 1991 the Yugoslav Crisis went off, I can remember how quickly the political assessment of the Yugoslav crisis exposed how the old front lines appeared in Europe again. Who supported Croatia? Who supported Slovenia? And who was against them? Who stood by the Serbian side? There were the ancient constellations very fast and very quickly: France and England for Serbia, and Germany for Croatia. How lucky that we had the European unification. We have moved the battlefield to the conference table. What luck and blessing. If we had not had a unified Europe, there would have been a possibility for a new major war. In this sense, Europe is a question of stability. Europe is really a question of peace. We see this again in these days.

HH: How important was the Pan-European Picnic for the European integration?

ED: That was of course a top event. Otto von Habsburg went to Hungary in 1988 for the first time after 1914 and there he had contact with many members of the opposition. Together they proposed a unifying action at the border. Then they contacted the government and Interior Minister Pozsgay. They gave the permission for that event, but they said that we should not provoke the Russians too much. This was the reason why Otto von Habsburg was not present at the Pan-European Picnic. His daughter Walburga said that she knew that something would happen since this corner of Hungary was full of Germans from the GDR. The Hungarian border officials then opened the fence as agreed and in this moment 660 refugees from the GDR simply went across the border. This was the first major mass exodus since 1961, since the Berlin Wall had been built. Erich Honecker then claimed that Otto von Habsburg and the CIA prepared all this, but this was not the case. That was on 19th August 1989, and no one thought that the GDR would implode that soon.

HH: What can the European Union learn from the Danube Monarchy?

ED: Thereto two quotes from Emperor Francis Joseph:

"I governed well when all my peoples are equally dissatisfied."

The total compensation that all are satisfied cannot be made, but you have to seek compromises. It is necessary to be open for compromises and we cannot govern everything patronizingly. Sometimes we have the feeling that in Brussels a kind of juggernaut has emerged, which rules into all areas of human life. This reproach is justified in some areas, in some not. What would be important is the principle of subsidiarity. This is even determined in the European treaties. That was also a principle after the Monarchy has functioned. There were only a few things which were governed from joint ministries. The Foreign Ministry was a joint ministry as well as the Ministry of Finance and Military, and everything else was

governed by smaller units. This would be a very important principle for the European Union. Something more is important and I may quote the Emperor Francis Joseph again. Teddy Roosevelt traveled through Europe in 1913 and, of course, he also met the Emperor Francis Joseph. And he asked him: "What is the meaning of the monarchy in the 20th century?" Francis Joseph replied: "To protect my peoples from their governments." It would certainly be useful if we could have greater protection from our governments and this protection should give us today our parliament. Otto von Habsburg always put it that way: today it is us, the deputies, who are committed to protect the peoples from their governments.

HH: The last years of crisis have strained the European Union immensely so that many are opposed to an enlargement of the EU. How important was it for Otto von Habsburg to bring the countries of the Western Balkans into the European Union?

ED: Absolutely important. He really cared for Southeastern Europe. Just before he died, news came that Croatia would be joining the EU in 2013. And that delighted him. I told him, and back then he was no longer able to speak, but he was very glad about this news. For him, the European Union was really a factor of stability for the Balkans. When he traveled to Sarajevo the first time, which was in spring 1996, Sarajevo was still completely destroyed by the war, and it was a very moving trip. We also had a wreath-laying ceremony at that spot where the Archduke was shot. Otto von Habsburg very much appreciated the multiculturalism and multi-religious society of Bosnia. He also said: "Bosnia can also give us something not only we can give something to Bosnia, but Bosnia to us." He committed himself to that area especially to Kosovo, where we made three very impressive trips.

HH: 100 years after the assassination of the Archduke in Sarajevo, the situation in Bosnia is so utterly desperate, there have been nationwide mass demonstrations, especially in Sarajevo. Should the European Union devote more attention to Bosnia-Herzegovina and the region?

ED: Yes it should. We bear responsibility for that. Above all, we and those responsible should realize that the Dayton Agreement is not a peace agreement, rather a "non-war agreement". The absence of war is far from being peace. The Dayton Agreement organized the state in a non-functional way, with these entities, one of which always obstructs further development. We simply cannot afford a hotbed of instability on our doorstep. That's the point. Moreover, it would be irresponsible to continue with this unstable situation. Eventually, something has to change in Belgrade. The Serb entity is following orders from Belgrade and as long as there is no change in Belgrade, it is hard for us to change something. I think that they are going to realize that cooperation is slightly better in the long run.

HH: In Ukraine, an armed conflict is developing. How should the European react in this crisis?

ED: What happened to Ukraine is a scandal, and we Europeans are made to look like a fool by Putin in Moscow, because he knows very well that we are not in a position to do anything militarily and probably unwilling to act. We notice here, of course, that Europe does not speak with one voice and apparently politicians have been surprised by these developments. I can again rely on Otto von Habsburg, who said: "A politician does not have the right to be surprised by any kind of development." We have to continue to insist on the issue of democracy and self-determination of peoples and sovereignty and especially the inviolability of borders, which is ensured by various international treaties. We must be aware of the new kind of warfare here: the infiltration of guerrillas, the infiltration of small warlords aiming for a durable destabilization. Putin wants two things: destabilization of Ukraine and destabilization of the European Union, and he exploits our weakness. I do not think he would risk a war, that means an open armed conflict between two states but this infiltration of guerrillas is enough to destabilize a region.

HH: And Europe has not found so far a way to deal with this?

ED: Unfortunately not. The drama is that we cannot oppose anything militarily. In the past 20 years we all have conducted a huge disarmament and we cannot oppose a military threat-potential anymore. This might sound very martial, but certain people just understand only a certain language. If I have a threat-potential, it does not mean that I will use it. But you have to be able to say: "Friends, so far and no further!" But at the moment we are not.

HH: How do you see the future of Europe and what are the most pressing problems?

ED: I'm still very optimistic. The European integration of this kind cannot be reversed. And I am very pleased and happy about that. Of course, we have very urgent problems. We need to redefine our foreign policy. We simply need to be more confident as Europeans. We have a great history and we can also have a great future. Only if we develop a European self-confidence, we can cope with future challenges.

HH: Thank you very much for this interview!