

Historical background: From Vienna to Quebec – An itinerary of the imperial family of Habsburg-Lorraine and its private jewellery ("Privatschmuck")

By Richard Bassett

The House of Habsburg-Lorraine was created in 1736 through the marriage of Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria to the Duke of Lorraine, Francis-Stephen. This line provided all the Holy Roman Emperors from 1745 to 1806 and the emperors of Austria from 1804 to 1918. The items of jewellery discussed here have historically been a part of the private property of the imperial family.

Among the items of jewellery are a diamond encrusted Order of the Golden Fleece, the House Order of the Habsburg family, and the so-called "Florentine" diamond. Both these items along with the other objects were always listed in a separate inventory to the state crown jewels of the Habsburg Monarchy, confirming their status as items which were not part of the monarchy's crown jewels.

The First Austrian Republic recognised the "personal" nature of the family jewellery in official documents, first by Karl Renner, who was the Austrian chancellor at the time, in 1919 who referred to them as the "private property of the ruling house" and then, in 1922, when the Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold Hennes wrote to the Italian government confirming that the diamond had "never passed into the possession of Austria" and that there "is no legal basis on which Austria could bring a lawsuit with a view to recovering the objects."¹

The objects' status was further confirmed in 1921 by the then "Finanzprokurator" in Austria who declared all the items in the collection discussed here as "reines habsburg-lothringisches Privatvermögen", separate private property, of the Habsburg-Lorraine house.² Later in 2001 the jewellery was again labelled as "Privatschmuck", (private jewellery), the personal property of the Imperial house.³

The "Florentine" diamond came to be a Habsburg possession when, with the extinction of the male Medici line, Tuscany passed to the Duke of Lorraine, Francis Stephen, who had married the Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria in 1736. The Treaty of Vienna of 1738 confirmed the transfer of Tuscany in its entirety to Francis Stephen who, in exchange, surrendered his title to the Duchy of Lorraine and was, with the support of his wife, later crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1745.

The diamond later was integrated into a brooch. It remained in Vienna until the first week of November 1918 when amid the uncertainty of the end of the empire and with mounting threats by Bolsheviks and anarchists, all items listed as "Privatschmuck" were transferred, at the command of the last Habsburg emperor, Charles I, out of Austria,

¹ A.S.E. Rome: Karl Renner to Tommasi della Torretta 30th December 1919. Leopold Hennes to Orsini 16th March 1922

² Schweizer Bundesarchiv Bern: Swiss Legation Minister's memorandum to the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs of 8th and 14th February 1921. P.10 B44/142/2

³ Letter from the Director of the Kunstkammer in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, Dr Rudolf Distelberger dated 7th November 2001 in which the Director states the items were always listed in a separate inventory as "Privatschmuck des Kaiserhauses".

and to safety in Switzerland. The crown jewels in their entirety remained in Vienna where they are still on display to this day.

In 1919, after Charles I had left Austria for exile in Switzerland, the First Austrian Republic passed legislation (The First and Second Habsburg Acts) expropriating the Habsburg family of all their private property in Austria without any compensation.⁴

The last emperor died in Madeira in exile in 1922. As tensions across Europe increased, his widow, the Empress Zita, and his eldest son, Crown Prince Otto resolutely opposed the growing Nazi (National Socialist) threat. Despite several invitations from Berlin, Crown Prince Otto refused to meet Adolf Hitler after the latter came to power in 1933, citing the "total incompatibility of my family's traditions with the ideology of the Third Reich".⁵

Throughout the 1930s, Otto offered his services to the increasingly fragile Austrian First Republic. He was prepared to risk his life to return to Austria on the eve of the Nazi "Anschluss" but although the First Austrian Republic partly restituted expropriated Habsburg family property in 1937, the increasingly demoralised Austrian government believed acquiescence to Nazi demands preferable to resistance. Otto's overtures were rejected and the Anschluss took place on March 12th 1938.

That the Nazis regarded the Habsburg family a mortal foe was illustrated by the swiftness with which they moved to seize all Habsburg property in Austria. Two days after occupying Vienna, the Nazi government passed on the 14th March a law "nationalising" all Habsburg property in Austria declaring it to be the "property of the Third Reich".⁶

When war broke out, a year later, in 1939, the family were living in exile in Belgium. With the Nazi invasion of Low Countries in May 1940, they quickly fled the Nazis just before the *Luftwaffe* bombed their Belgian home. They headed first to Portugal and then, with American help, to Canada where they campaigned throughout the war for Austrian independence and the liberation of Europe from Nazi tyranny.

While the family left behind most of their belongings on their escape from the Nazis, they managed to save parts of the family jewellery, which they brought to Quebec in 1940, when they made Quebec City their new home.

Although an independent Austria was re-established after the war by the victorious allies, the fledgling Second Republic passed on 6th July 1954 a law automatically incorporating into the Republic all property seized by the Nazis "per Gesetz" (as a result of Nazi legislation) passed during Austria's incorporation into Hitler's Reich.⁷ This act, which also covered expropriated Jewish property, confirmed the expropriation by the Nazis of all

⁴ Habsburgergesetz as constitutional law of Austria (see Art. 149 BV-G)

⁵ ORF radio interview with Otto Habsburg 22.10.1995

⁶ Gesetz vom 14.3.1938 Gesetzblatt für das Land Oesterreich Nr 311

⁷ Stiftungs- und Fonds-Reorganisationsgesetz vom 6. Juli 1954 BGBl 197/54

Habsburg family property in Austria. This legislation, together with the earlier confiscatory Habsburg Acts of 1919, remains part of the Austrian Constitution to this day.

Such legislation, however, has no relevance to the lawful ownership of the private jewellery items discussed here, as they were, at the time these laws were passed, outside Austria. The First Austrian Republic had attempted to put pressure on the Swiss government to surrender some of these items in 1921. Documents in the Swiss archives show how these attempts all failed on purely legal grounds.⁸

In 1953, when Zita returned from America to Europe during the Cold War with all its risks and uncertainties, she left the family jewellery safely in Quebec, where it remains until today. It took until 1982 for the Austrian government to allow the former empress to visit the country she had left in 1919. Zita died in Switzerland in 1989, at the age of 96.

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Note: This document was updated in August 2026 based on new findings.

⁸ Schweizer Bundesarchiv Bern: Swiss Legation Minister's memorandum to the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs of 8th and 14th February 1921. P.10 B44/142/2