

DEATH OF AN EMPEROR

On the Friday preceding Palm Sunday, an annual memorial mass is still read today for Francis Stephen of Lorraine in the room where the Emperor died and which his widow Maria Theresa had converted into a chapel. Stop and listen, not to prayers, but to the “voices” of the eyewitnesses and of those who were responsible for the protocol that had to be followed on the death of an emperor: instructions for the lying in state in Innsbruck, embalming the body, shipping it down the Inn and Danube to Vienna, burial there. You will also hear excerpts from the correspondence of the Empress, which show how the widow managed her personal feelings in the interest of the Empire. Emotions become manifest in a legacy that continues to assert its presentness to this day.

Description of the death of Francis I Stephen on 18 August 1765 in the Innsbruck Chronicle written by Gottfried Pusch:

The Emperor “as was his wont, went to the table of the Lord [the Hofkirche], had lunch as usual with his family and was in excellent spirits during the meal, and in the evening attended the theatre to see an Italian play. [...] Towards the end [...] Francis I Stephen left the theatre” accompanied by his son Josef II, “complained of a feeling of faintness as he returned along the long corridor to the Hofburg, and was about to pass from the small staircase to the door of the antechamber [...] when he [...] suffered a stroke and collapsed, whereupon his Majesty was carried to this room and laid on the bed of the Chamberlain [...]; the Jesuit priest Parhamer and his personal physician [...] were immediately called; but no sign of life was found, and when an attempt was made to open a vein, no blood flowed. A few minutes after he had been placed on the above mentioned bed, he ended his fine life in the arms of his first-born son [...], and so [...] within a quarter of an hour – from half past 9 to a quarter to 10 – the good Emperor was healthy, living and dead.”

Hand-written report by Maria Theresa on her husband’s death and burial, undated:

“Emperor Franciscus the First, born on Saturday, 8 December 1708, at half past 2 in the morning, died suddenly of a stroke in Innsbruck on Sunday, 18 Augusti 1765, at half past 9 in the evening. On the 19th he was laid out on his bed, where Mass had already been said [...], shipped incognito from Hall [...] on the 23rd, 24th, 25th, 26th and 27th, and at 10 o’clock in the evening of the 28th brought secretly to the Vienna Hofburg. On the 29th, 30th and 31st he was again laid out in the double coffin and at 9 o’clock in the evening of Sunday 31 August was conveyed in public view to the Imperial Crypt. The three-day exequies were held by the Augustinians on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th. I arrived incognito with the current Emperor and two daughters at 8 o’clock in the evening of 5th September.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 19 August 1765:

“Meanwhile I had taken charge of the keys and other items, like the etui, souvenirs, small sacred objects etc., which the Emperor had had on his person and then [...] presented the former to the King of the Romans, whereas the latter I had delivered to Maria Theresa”. Maria Theresa’s lady in waiting was given “the commission [...] to cut a few hairs from the head of the deceased, which the Empress, following the fashion of the time, wished to have set en bracelet to wear on her wrist in memoriam.”

Maria Theresa in a letter to her daughter Maria Josepha after the death of Francis Stephen, undated:

“Alas my dear daughter, I cannot console you; too great is our unhappiness. You have lost an unforgettable father and I a husband, a friend, the sole object of my love. For 42 years our hearts, our feelings had known only one and the same goal; we were brought up together. All my setbacks in the last 25 years could be borne because I had him as my support.”

Wienerisches Diarium, 31 August 1765:

“Vienna, 31 August 1765. Last Wednesday was the sad evening chosen by God on which the local populace, still possessed of a profound grief at the sorrowful news of the [...] sudden death” of the Emperor, “was gripped by more extraordinarily poignant feelings by the sad arrival of the lifeless Imperial body on the Danube. The silent reception” of the “most serene body of this most charming and most affable monarch took place [...] outside the city in the Rossau [...].

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 2 September 1765:

“On the 2nd, our Sunday preacher Pater Fritz held the first part of the funeral sermon, which was not of the best standard because of the brief time available.”

The Imperial body was carried from the ship in the closed Imperial coffin [...], placed on the funeral bier drawn by two black-draped mules and covered with a thick black and gold cloth.” The chamberlains fetched “from the ship the two closed vessels draped in black containing the heart and the entrails and placed them in a six-horse [...] court carriage.”

The court carriage “with the heart and *intestinis*” and “the bier with the Imperial body” arrived “at the Hofburg at half past 10.”

The “supreme body” was then “carried into the Knight’s Room and there, together with the goblet with the heart and the urn with the intestines, was placed on the four-steps high catafalque under a black velvet baldachin, with six black cushions” embroidered [?] in gold “to the left and the right for the two Imperial crowns and sceptre and orb as well as the other Habsburg crowns and insignia with sword, stick, hat and white gloves.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 31 August 1765:

“On today’s dismal occasion, the people showed a true sadness. Everyone had held the deceased in honour and loved him for his uprightness, friendly manner and good housekeeping; people almost naturally accepted the idea and for him so flattering opinion that without him the confusion in universo would have been much greater.”

“Only, apart from the fact that he was by nature not very diligent and slow and indecisive”, he also lacked “the necessary fermeté in order to offer suitable resistance to the heated outbursts of vivacités of his wife”.

Maria Theresa in a letter to Countess Sophie Amalie Enzenberg, 12 February 1766:

“The calamity has an influence on all my organs: memory, face, hearing, power of discrimination; all is beginning to fail. That is making me still more despondent, since I thought only to find relief by throwing myself more than ever into my work so as to be benumbed by it and have no time left to think of my misery.”

Maria Theresa in a letter to Countess Sophie Amalie Enzenberg, 22 June 1768:

“My insides have withered, I feel extremely aged, weak and exhausted. My heart has nothing left to give it joy and consolation, it is constantly agitated and greatly depressed; my situation is more sad than one can possibly imagine. If it brought me closer to my end and made me better, it would all be tolerable, but I see that even my prayers are becoming unfeeling and I am no longer so painstaking in my duties. It all depresses me; ultimately I am letting things take their course.”

Maria Theresa in a letter to Countess Sophie Amalie Enzenberg, 26 December 1765:

“Dear Enzenberg While the company eats in the hall, I remain alone in my room, which is lined with grey cloth and lit only by two candles and is therefore somewhat gloomy. But that is as I like it. Anything that throws only a shadow of joy makes me sad and upsets me; only the most sombre things are right for me. [...] I had the good Ronchi come to my closet, where the whole family of my beloved dead are assembled and which they call the *Closet of the Dead*. He should tell you about my portrait of the Emperor, which is now my great source of joy, as large as life and in his Innsbruck uniform, very good, somewhat too young, but good. He was so moved, the good man, that he could not really look for all his tears. [...] I am in health, [...] but am becoming sadder from day to day and as if benumbed. My inner state calls for your support. Rest assured that I remain your good friend, Maria Theresa”

Diary of Prince Johann
Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch,
19 August 1765:

It “was decided that the body should be placed on the stage tomorrow in the late evening and should lie in state there for three days before being taken to Hall, embarked there and so conveyed to Vienna”.

Maria Theresa in a letter to
Prince Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-
Rietberg, [28] August 1765:

“In [...] trust I shall follow your advice, which you will continue to give me for my cheerless future. Therefore I will have myself taken to Vienna, solely in order to care for nine orphans, who are all the more to be pitied as their birth and the manner in which they have lived so far will make their fate increasingly sad and lamentable. Their kind father idolised them and could never refuse their wishes. But I cannot continue in the same way. God knows how long my miserable life still has to run.”

Diary of Prince Johann
Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch,
20 August 1765:

“On the morning of the 20th I had to attend ex officio the court function of the opening of the body. As it lasted a very long time, however, I felt quite sick, partly from the heat and smell and partly and above all from an oppression of spirit, so that I could not remain there completely.”

“When, in the further discharge of my duties, I went to the young Emperor to give [...] my report, I was again overcome by such a feeling of sickness that, had he not bid me be seated, I should have fallen to the ground at his feet.”

Laying out of the body in the Innsbruck Hofburg, 20 August 1765, just before 10 p.m.:

“After a few hours I recovered somewhat, thank the Lord, and although I was still very weak, I gathered all my strength to do him a final service and, together with the chamberlains and servants, placed his body, as is the custom, on the stage for public display. This sad act was performed just before 10 p.m.; and as the deceased, following the opening, had a very swollen head and indeed looked quite disfigured and unrecognisable, the young Emperor [...] permitted the face to be covered.”

Wienerisches Diarium, 28 August 1765:

“Vienna, 28 Augusti 1765.
Today the exalted body of the late Emperor of most blessed memory will be brought here by boat.
The exalted body will be displayed for three days under the baldachin on the four-steps high catafalque in the black-draped Knights’ Hall [...] and on the evening of 31 August will be laid, with all due pomp, in the crypt of the Serene Archducal House of Austria at the [...] Capuchins on Neuer Markt.
Work is proceeding day and night on the splendid Castro Doloris in the [...] Augustinian [...] Hofkirche in order to have it ready by next Sunday, the first of September, [...].”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 21 August 1765:

“In the evening the body, which had begun to smell excessively as a result of the heat, had to be placed in the coffin and could only remain on view on the stage in the closed coffin.”

Diary of Prince Johann Josef Khevenhüller-Metsch, 28 August 1765:

“My colleagues were of the unanimous opinion that, in view of all the talk about foetore cadaveris, the body should be secretly buried and only the empty coffin placed on the stage; but I considered it my bounden duty to protest, all the more so as all human care had been taken with a double wall to prevent sudation and noxious exhalations, and the addition of various sweet smelling herbs; and no-one thought to complain about the unpleasant smell or to withdraw or absent themselves for that reason.”

Letter from Maria Theresa to
Countess Sophie Amalie Enzenberg,
20 February 1775:

“You will doubtless hear that I am well, and I almost believe it myself since everyone says so. I spend years, months, weeks, days in the same simplicity, the same bitterness as on the first day. I often find consolation in the thought that the dead do not return and that I shall soon follow them, but I tremble at the terrible account I have to give.”

Entry in Maria Theresa’s prayer
book, undated:

“In matters of religion, the church and justice, bringing up the children and duties of rank I have not incurred much guilt. I charge myself, however, with all unknowing, unfamiliar and forgotten sins and all my shortcomings; I confess my blame before God for all the enmity shown in my life out of pride, envy, anger, sloth and weakness against my fellow human beings in speech and lack of charity.”

[Rf. the transformation into a sacred space of the room in which the Emperor died], 8 December 1765:

“On the most painful passing away of our most gracious Emperor and Co-regent, our most blissful and great Monarch had a wonderful chapel built, blessed with great spiritual treasures by his Papal Holiness and – in the place where her sovereign, most serene husband united with the eternal Glory the great magnificence of a soul displaying the greatest virtues of a regent, as revealed to the eyes of the whole world – a splendid altar from the area of the princely residence, in which her sovereign, most serene husband received the Eternal Crown, on which altar the unbloody sacrifice was made to the Lord of Lords on [...] the name day of the beloved Monarch and is to be made twice a day until the end of the world.”

Idea and planning:

NIK HUMMER

Music and sound design:

NIK HUMMER, MICHAEL MOSER

Text research:

HELMUTH OEHLER

We are grateful to

CHRISTOPH AMPFERER,

Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum,

Bibliothek

Retiraden

2015

Sound installation 6-channel audio,

Length: approx. 18:00,

Voice: Markus Meyer

Courtesy of the artist