

The Aristocracy of the Czech Lands in European Diplomacy:

*Karl Max VI, Prince Lichnowsky
at the Court of St. James's*

by Eva Kolářová

The Château of Hradec nad Moravicí in north-east Moravia is currently hosting an exhibition devoted to Prince Lichnowsky, whose diplomatic career culminated and ended as the German Kaiser's ambassador to London in 1912-14. Karl Max was born in 1860 in Krzyżanowice, Silesia, to Karl Maria, the 5th Prince Lichnowsky and his wife Marie, née Princess Croy-Dulmen. He spent his childhood at the nearby château in Chuchelná, in the district of Hlučín where the Lichnowskys had owned a large estate since 1608, also Krzyżanowice held by the family since 1775 (by then Prussian territory, since Maria Theresa lost Silesia to Frederick II of Prussia in 1763), and at the Château of Hradec nad Moravicí in the Austrian-owned Opava region. His ancestors were some of the foremost and most highly respected nobility of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and generous supporters of music and the arts (*see* Newsletter No. 11, Summer/Autumn 2014 on *Beethoven and Liszt*).

Karl Max gained his baccalaureate in 1882 at Dresden and entered the service of the Prussian Army. From there he went to the Berlin Foreign Office and two years later was sent as an attaché to London. A position as an imperial agent in Stockholm followed and in 1887 he was awarded full diplomatic credentials by Chancellor Bismarck, with whom he later became close friends. He served as a diplomat in Vienna, Bucharest, Japan and China, and in 1899 achieved the rank that entitled him to serve as ambassador, despite his reputation for holding rather liberal views and having some sympathy for democratic ideas.

While serving as an attaché in London, he became an admirer of the English way of life and an enthusiastic promoter of new, liberal views on the British-German relationship. It could have been the reason why in 1912, when he was no longer working as a diplomat, Kaiser Wilhelm II selected him as the Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Prince Lichnowsky was one of the best-regarded and richest aristocrats in Prussia, assumed to be an ideal candidate for such an ancient court with King George V on the throne. He arrived in London in November 1912 along with his much younger wife,



Prince Lichnowsky in 1912 at the time of his appointment as German Ambassador to the Court of St. James's

Mechtilde, née Arco-Zinneberg. It was she, who apart from looking after three children, made the German Embassy a sought-after meeting place for the cream of London society and the stars of the contemporary intellectual and cultural élite.

Bohemian and multi-talented, Mechtilde was the star attraction and a great aid to her ambassador-husband. Their house at No. 9 Carlton House Terrace was often visited by the English painter Roger Fry (a critic and a member of the Bloomsbury Group who defined the latest development in French painting as Post-Impressionism), Rudyard Kipling and G.B. Shaw, among many others. The walls of the embassy were hung with pictures from the Princess's growing collection of modern art, including Vincent van Gogh, Franz Marc (one of the key figures of the German Expressionist movement), Pablo Picasso and Theo von Brockhusen. The first picture by Oskar Kokoschka in Mechtilde's collection, *Portrait of a Man*, was sent to her in London and put on display in the embassy. Her collected paintings by Brockhusen and Kokoschka remain at the Château of Hradec nad Moravicí to this day.

Karl Max Lichnowsky's diplomatic mission in London lasted until the summer of 1914 when the United Kingdom entered the war. His main task of securing British neutrality in the event of conflict between Germany, France and Russia had failed. His warnings against the war went in vain. After his return from London, Karl Max Lichnowsky retired to look after his estates. In 1916 he privately



The Red Chateau, built in a Neo-Gothic style, is a counterpart to the older White Chateau of Hradec nad Moravicí, a childhood home of Prince Lichnowsky

published a short book *Meine Londoner Mission*, trying to explain his political views. Although not intended for the general public, it caused the Prince a lot of problems and accusations of pacifism and national unreliability. He lost his place in the First Chamber of the German Parliament, was subject to criminal proceedings and had to leave the civil service. He died suddenly in February 1928 in Chuchelná where he is buried in the Lichnowsky Neo-Gothic tomb.

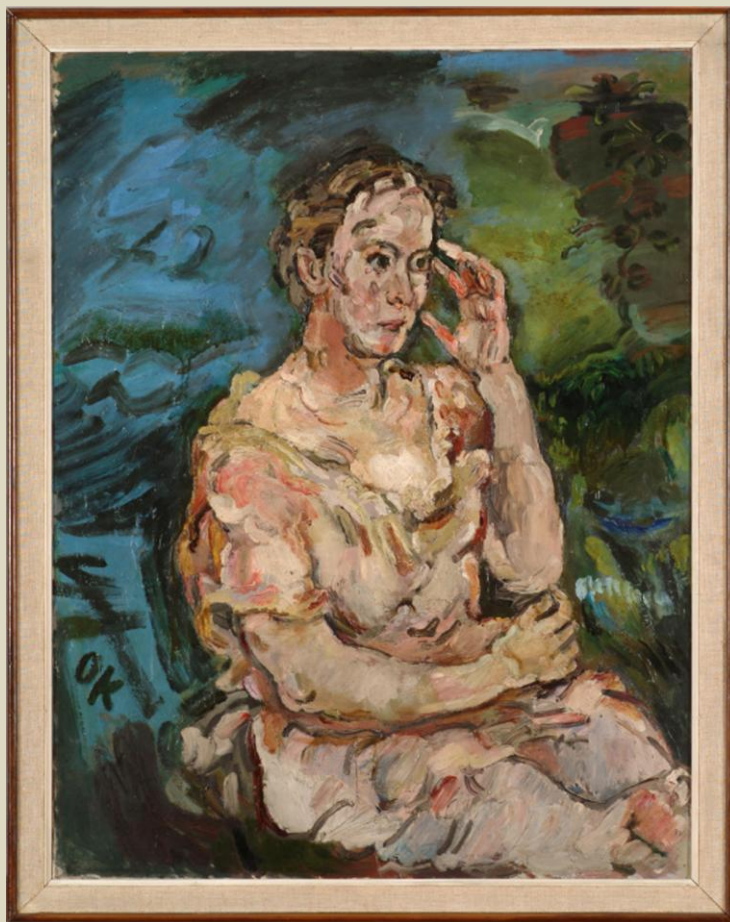
Princess Mechtilde lived in Chuchelná with her husband but frequently travelled to Berlin where the couple owned a villa. It was in Berlin where in 1916 Oskar Kokoschka painted her portrait, see page 9. During the 1920s Mechtilde was a well-known figure in the hectic life of the cosmopolitan artists' studios, editorial offices of newspapers and magazines, publishing houses and theatres. An unconventional, privileged aristocrat with progressive views, she was brought into the circle of the foremost representatives of German and Austrian cultural modernism. She renewed old acquaintances and made new friends. Poets Rainer Maria Rilke and J. R. Becher, director of the *Deutsches Theater* M. Reinhardt, playwright C. Sternheim, critic and essayist A. Kerren, and Karl Kraus, the influential Austrian magazine editor and writer, among many others, were doubtless not just friends but also influential in her own literary and dramatic work. She published eight popular books (in 1950 she was voted into the Bavarian Royal Academy of Arts), wrote drama and music for theatres in Vienna and Berlin and maintained contact with contemporary painters.

After her husband's death Mechtilde retired to the French Riviera. In 1937 she met an old friend from her youth, an English diplomat and an RAF Major,

Sir Ralph Harding Peto, whom she married two months later. During the war, when visiting her sister in Florence, her passport was withheld and she couldn't travel. Only in 1943 did she manage to return to Chuchelná to see her son, but travel to England to join her husband was impossible until May 1946, by which time Ralph had been dead for nine months and her son settled with his own family in South America. Her life in London was joyless due to the lack of funds, illness and loneliness. She died in 1958 and is buried at Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey, not far from the resting place of members of the Czechoslovak Army.

The exhibition at the State-owned Chateau of Hradec nad Moravicí is divided into two parts - *Diplomat Karl Max Lichnowsky* and *Mechtilde Lichnowsky, a quarter of a century as the diplomat's wife*. It focuses on previously unpublished biographical and iconographical material, mainly on the paintings from the Lichnowskys' collections. For the first time the public can see studio photographs of the Prince as the new ambassador, as well as many private pictures, and two volumes of his autobiography only recently acquired in an auction. On display are the portraits of the couple by Oskar Kokoschka and Max Liebermann that rarely leave the dark depository of the chateau, and also many items that belonged to Mechtilde, including her own books, her private correspondence with writers and artists, and books dedicated to her.

Eva Kolářová PhD is the author and curator of the exhibition at Hradec nad Moravicí, and is property manager of the nearby Chateau Raduň. This exhibition is one of more than forty events in the chateaux of the Czech Republic centred on diplomacy and organised by the NPÚ, the Czech National Heritage Institute, for 2018



Lichnowsky Paintings at Hradec nad Moravicí

Above, Princess Mechtilde by Oskar Kokoschka; below, Prince Karl Max VI by Max Liebermann

