

Who Owns Czech Castles

A Guide to the development of ownership of historic houses in the Czech lands since 1918

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One of the great pleasures of a visit to the Czech Republic is a tour of the castles and great country houses, of which some 2,500 survive, and often questions arise as to whom they once belonged and what happened to them in more recent times. Nobody is better qualified than Milan Svoboda, the historian, who boasts long experience of managing State-owned castles, as Deputy Director of the National Heritage Institute, and subsequently as a member of the executive committee of the Association of Private Owners of Castles and Châteaux. In his talk in September 2022 he gave us an immensely interesting overview, lavishly illustrated, of the development of the ownership of historic houses in the Czech lands since 1918. He set out to discuss, from his personal viewpoint, the confiscations of the nobles' estates and their partial restitution within the legal framework which he emphasised was a complicated, complex and sensitive subject. The problems are by no means closed.

Svoboda told us that the end of the nobility had started under the Emperor Charles after the death of the Emperor Franz Josef in 1916. The Czech nobility owed their allegiance to the Habsburg Emperors and owned vast estates, in particular the Schwarzenbergs, Czernins, and Lobkowitz families in Bohemia and the Liechtensteins in Moravia. In fact around 30% of the land was owned by 150 families. On the creation of Czechoslovakia major changes took place with Land Reform in 1919 when "the great estates would be redeemed for home colonisation". The exact terms were somewhat confused but a great deal of land was simply confiscated and historic estates greatly reduced while patents of nobility were abolished. A whole series of laws concerning land were brought in which affected more modest family property in different ways. The Hildprandts of the Blatná Estate, for example, kept 93% of their forests and 68% of their land. What wasn't touched by Land Reform were breweries, saw mills and brick yards.

Former owners were awarded small amounts of compensation based on 1915 values; conditions



Château of Nelahozeves, north of Prague

were later imposed that were to be complied with to retain the castle in family ownership. The forfeited land was sold off to new owners, including former peasant families, municipalities, co-operatives and businessmen such as Jaroslav Preiss, the Director of the Živnostenská Bank.

March 15th 1939 saw the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis. Nazis confiscated property for their own purposes, such as Otto Petschek's Palace in Prague, which was taken over by the Gestapo. Many, like the Lobkowitz family, were forced to flee and the Nazis occupied their castle at Roudnice and confiscated their collections. Towards the end of the WW2 in 1945, President Beneš issued Decrees that all property owned by Germans should be confiscated: this affected many families such as the Trauttmansdorf family of Horšovský Týn and the Liechtensteins of Lednice and Valtice, who as Austrians had been absorbed into the Reich. The Schwarzenbergs suffered from a law in 1947 directed at them alone, confiscating their property despite their massive financial contributions to building the defences of the country before 1939.

Worse was to come in 1948 with the communist coup, when everything left was confiscated and nationalised, including movable property. It was decided to open 47 houses and castles for the public to visit and the programme to 'scientifically' furnish these was undertaken by Professor Zdeněk Wirth. One tragic but bizarre result was a photo of Jiří Sternberg, who had been made manager of his own castle, showing a picture to a group of visitors.

Stripped houses were given many uses: for example, Český Rodolec was used as a dormitory for workers and left in a terrible state. Likewise, Kynžvart, the home of Prince Clemens von Metternich, was left in a total state of decay, much of it due to rampant woodworm, but is now happily restored and refurnished. The interiors of the Lobkowitz Castle of Nelahozeves were adapted to house a branch of the Central Bohemian Gallery for the display of many Lobkowitz family portraits and important paintings such as the famous Canaletto of *The River Thames with St Paul's Cathedral on Lord Mayor's Day*.

After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 the process of Restitution began, subject to a number of conditions such as proof of Czech nationality, no collaboration with the Nazis, and that the confiscation had happened between February 25 1948 and January 1 1990. A series of Acts followed concerning the return of Jewish property, which were passed in 2000, and the restitution of church property twelve years later. Svoboda showed pictures of Kostelec nad Orlicí confiscated from the Kinský family and used by the Communists as a centre for the insemination of pigs; it was restituted and is now beautifully restored by František Kinský.

It is not known how many houses have been returned to their former owners but there are a variety of new and different owners. Today more than a hundred historic aristocratic residences are run by the National Heritage Institute under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. In 1995 the Association of Owners of Castles and Châteaux was founded to connect owners of historic buildings in the Czech lands and to promote their mutual interests.

William Lobkowitz now has Nelahozeves appropriately restored and refurnished, but at Roudnice, his family's principal residence, there is still much to be done and the cream of the Lobkowitz picture collection is now on display in the Lobkowitz Palace in Prague Castle. Their castle of Jezeří, where Beethoven composed stands defiantly above a huge open-cast coal mine with its future uncertain. Svoboda left us with the words of František Lobkowitz who, when asked "What does it mean to be a nobleman?" replied, "We shake hands on something, we don't need to sign an agreement".

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