

**Europe's Heads, Crowned and Otherwise, Bury Zita, the Last Habsburg Empress
By Michelle Green, Ellen Wallace, Jonathan Cooper**

The 8,000 mourners filed out of Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral and fell in line behind the catafalque drawn by six black horses. Two hours later the procession ended at the Capuchin Church, where, in keeping with tradition, a member of the funeral party knocked on the door and a priest asked, "Who goes there?"

The titles were read aloud: "Queen of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galicia. Queen of Jerusalem. Grand Duchess of Tuscany and Cracow..."

"I do not know her," said the father.

A second knock and "Who goes there?" brought the response, "Zita, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary." Again the reply, "I do not know her."

When the inevitable question was put a third time, the answer was simply, "Zita, a sinning mortal."

"Come in," said the priest, opening wide the door not for royalty, but for a faithful member of the Church, whose life had finally reached its end.

Obscurity had long since claimed the deceased, but to those who gathered for her funeral Mass two weeks ago, the Empress Zita was a link to the days when kings ruled by divine right and "the crowned heads of Europe" was more than a quaint phrase. She was the last surviving member of the Habsburg family to wear a royal crown. The dynasty traced its origins back as far as Guntram the Rich, an Alsatian count of the mid-10th century, and included dukes and princes, kings and Holy Roman Emperors. Their vast holdings were centered in Austria and Germany and at times stretched across most of Europe. At its peak, the imperial grand family held Spain, parts of Italy and the Middle East, and colonies in the New World.

Born a princess of Bourbon-Parma in 1892, Zita had the misfortune to marry into the world of the Habsburgs just as its breakup began. She and her husband, Emperor Karl, were crowned in the middle of World War I; two years later, in 1918, they were unceremoniously deposed following the defeat of Austria's forces. Zita spent much of her life hoping to win back the throne. The attempt was fruitless, but she persevered with dignity and a tenacious will that the old Habsburgs would have admired. She never relinquished even one of her 52 titles, and it would have pleased her to know that she was sent to her rest with the pomp befitting a reigning Empress.

It seemed that all Vienna, and much of Europe's fallen royalty, turned out to say goodbye to Zita, who had succumbed to old age at 96 in a Swiss convent home. At least 200,000 mourners filed past the coffin during the two days it lay in state at St. Stephen's, and

20,000 spectators lined the streets on the day of the funeral. Said one: "I vote Socialist and I'm no monarchist, but she was our Empress and I wanted to pay my respects." Millions more sat through the 4½ hours of pomp broadcast by Austrian state television.

At the front of the church were the remaining Habsburgs, including Zita's eldest son, Otto, 76, now a member of the European Parliament, and his wife, Regina. Next to them, as imperial protocol dictated, sat Otto's son, Karl, 28, a law student in Vienna. Behind them sat Zita's six other surviving children, 30 grandchildren and 60 great-grandchildren, all dressed in black, with the women in veils or lace mantillas.

Joining the two archbishops and four bishops praying for "our sister the Empress Zita" were Prince Albert of Monaco, the princely family of Liechtenstein, Prince Albert of Belgium, Sidi Mohammed, Crown Prince of Morocco, and Prince Raad Bin Zeid of Jordan. Explaining that they were "not related" to Zita, the British royals sent no representative. Austrian President Kurt Waldheim was on hand, however, and his presence reportedly kept away some dignitaries whose governments consider him an embarrassment because of his World War II activities as a German officer in occupied Yugoslavia.

When the cortege reached the Capuchin Church, the pallbearers carried Zita's casket down to the vault and laid her to rest among hundreds of her Habsburg ancestors. Her beloved husband was not among them: His body was interred on the island of Madeira, where he died, and his heart—which Zita carried throughout her widowhood—had been placed with her heart in the Benedictine abbey at Muri, Switzerland.

Bright, pretty, strong-willed, Zita Maria delle Grazie Aldegonda Micaela Raffaella Gabriella Giuseppina Antonia Luisa Agnese was born in Italy and educated on the Isle of Wight by French nuns. She and her distant cousin the Archduke Karl married in 1911 at Schwarzenau am Steinfeld in the presence of the aging Emperor Franz Josef. She was considered a highly suitable match for the archduke. The fifth of 12 children of Robert, Duke of Parma, and his second wife, the Portuguese Princess Maria Antonia of Braganza, Zita offered good bloodlines and a solid Catholic background. The marriage was more than just an alliance of royal families; introduced when she was 16 and he was 21, Zita and Karl had fallen in love at a ball, and they looked forward to a serene life together as minor players in the Habsburg court.

Five years after their marriage, the couple was swept up by history. Karl's cousin Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated at Sarajevo, helping trigger World War I. Franz Josef's death in 1916 left the gentle Karl at the helm of an empire at war. The young Emperor's one desire was to obtain peace as quickly as possible. Aided—some said browbeaten—by his wife, who helped arrange secret contacts with the British and French through her brother Prince Sixtus, Karl tried to negotiate a settlement and preserve the monarchy. He failed, and with the defeat of the Austrian forces in 1918, the Habsburg empire collapsed.

Cast out of Schönbrunn Castle and relieved of their property by the new government, Karl and Zita began their lives as penurious exiles in 1918. Given asylum by the Swiss, they moved with their children to a chateau outside Geneva. Determined to reclaim a throne for her husband, Zita twice persuaded the weary Karl to try to seize power in Hungary, one outpost of his lost empire. "Like any good monarch, she assumed that ordinary people loved her and that all she had to do was turn up at the border and the populace would flock to her support," says British historian Laszlo Peter. The people were not so inclined, and both efforts failed miserably. Fed up with, such meddling, the Swiss, in 1922, revoked the couple's asylum.

Portugal took them in, and it was on Madeira that Zita's hopes came crashing down forever. Quartered in a dank chateau, the Habsburgs and their children shivered through a bitter winter. There was no money to buy new shoes or to pay a doctor for Zita, who was carrying her eighth child. In March 1922, Karl caught a cold that quickly turned into pneumonia. Before he died in his wife's arms, he told her, "Now we will have to work on seeing each other in heaven."

Zita went into mourning and never relinquished the widow's black garb that she adopted at age 29. Always devout, she pressed Rome to beatify the deposed Emperor. She also argued tirelessly for the restoration of her son Otto to the throne. It was a hopeless undertaking, and Otto eventually renounced his imperial claims.

The Empress manqué wandered the world—living first in Spain, where she settled in the Basque village of Lequeitio, and then in the Belgian countryside, where she raised sheep. She spent World War II in Canada and Tuxedo Park, N.Y., then returned to Europe, taking up residence in the convent home in Zizers, Switzerland, in 1962. Refusing to sign a pledge of allegiance to the republic, she did not return to Austria until May 1982. When the 90-year-old Zita appeared then at St. Stephen's Cathedral, thousands turned out to cheer her.

Except for family weddings and christenings, Zita's last years were spent in comfortable seclusion. Several of her sons became successful businessmen, and she was able to afford a four-room apartment in the convent. Attended by a personal nurse and an Italian maid known as Miss Caroline, she was alert almost until the end. Remembers Austrian Countess Thurnburg of Bodszen: "She was really a simple woman who didn't put on airs. She would sit in the lounge and talk with other people."

Still, the Empress was a woman apart, and she kept about her an air of nobility. During the long years of hardship, Zita had given up all her jewelry save her wedding ring and coronation pearls. When she died of natural causes on March 14, the countess remembers, "we were all invited up to see her in her room. There she was in just a nice dress, with her pearls around her neck. They were not just any pearls—they were the kind you don't see today, the kind only royalty used to have."

—Michelle Green, Ellen Wallace in Vienna and Jonathan Cooper in London
<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20120043,00.html>