

A Marriage is Arranged

The young Archduke Franz Josef was destined to be Emperor of Austria from the moment he was born, and he was brought up and educated accordingly. Meantime, however, a princess was growing up in the neighbouring kingdom of Bavaria. One of Archduchess Sophie's sisters, Ludovika, had married Duke Maximilian in Bavaria (his exact title), another member of the royal Bavarian Wittelsbach dynasty. Their eldest children, Ludwig and Helene, were born in Munich. Then, on Christmas Eve 1837, Ludovika again gave birth to a girl, who was baptised Elisabeth Amalia Eugenie.

Duke Max let his eight children grow up naturally. They spent the winters in Munich and the summers in Possenhofen Castle beside Lake Starnberg, where they mixed and played with the peasant children with no class inhibitions. They spoke in Bavarian dialect, they were good swimmers and hardened mountaineers, and they could ride like circus acrobats almost as soon as they could walk. To the end of her life Elisabeth looked back on her youth - on the freedom and closeness to nature she had enjoyed in her childhood - as a paradise lost. This affected her whole attitude to her future status as Empress of Austria. She never became reconciled to the protocol-ridden formality of life at the imperial court in Vienna. Only in the family atmosphere of the Kaiservilla in Ischl did she feel at home.

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