

Of Kings

A Chapter of My Life, by Kristine Trever

What do you think of when you think of kings? Cards, poker? Drinking games? Bedtime stories? Fat men with big guts and even bigger senses of entitlement? All the kings were fat, right?

I think how there aren't a lot of kings left in our existence; that in the last two hundred years, kings have slowly risen up the endangered species list devoured along the human food chain; queens are no doubt nearly extinct. Only one-third of the now 47 countries in Europe have a monarchic connection, half of which are significant in name only. I think of the whole wide world, of history, of how kings are made and queens are shafted. I get a little hot about this. Pissed. Then the calm comes when I remember to breathe; whispering itself softly through my core as I chew on my cuticles a little less. I remind myself that the Queen is the most strategically important figure in Chess. Lose your Queen, lose your game. Lose your Queen, lose your mind.

A few power-wielding kings and even fewer queens exist in today's world, the constantly shifting political present, with what would be considered presidential or official powers. Figureheads abound, no doubt loved and revered, but likely fulfilling

roles that require less decision making than your local representative or union delegate. I'm curious about His Majesty King Abdullah II, King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan because he is not only King but a qualified frogman, pilot and a skilled free-fall parachutist. Recently, Saudi King Abdullah (a totally different Abdullah) appointed Noor Al-Fayez, a woman (this is huge), to the council of ministers for the first time in Saudi Arabian history as part of a Cabinet overhaul. Al-Faiz, according to CNN, says she's confident she won't just be a token member of the council. "I think by being the second person after the minister, I think I have enough power to work in the improvement of girls' education," she said. She's thrilled and so am I.

I also reminisce on the holy union between the sorely matched Prince Charles and Lady Diana of England and how my oldest sister Kira, then 11, obsessed about the 25 foot long train of Diana's billowing, super-dated-looking poofy cake of a dress; the opulent and ostentatious wedding performed before us on our giant wood block of a television. I didn't know they were political puppets, in a way. That Charles really can't declare war or invasion or break a treaty. I was a doll loving child then, a million years ago in 1981. My doll and Barbie weddings have never been the same since. And he still isn't the king, maybe never. And I am not married.

So I also think of the princes and princesses that are an integral part of any monarchy or likely any feudal system in a nation; those that never made it to the throne and for better or worse were tethered by blood and name to one House or another. And the song “Someday My Prince Will Come,” both the Snow White/Disney version that I sang at the tops of my lungs at my ever more luxurious doll weddings and later, that of another ostentatious figure, Miles Davis and how he might be some kind of King in the world of jazz, blasting the same song about princes from his own lungs in a totally different and more profound way . I think of how sometimes I’ve been called “princess” by a fan or two.

I also think of the potential kingly ancestry of my Hungarian mother and mom’s mother; my grandmother Valeria Kiraly.

The Hungarian surname Kiraly means “of Kings.” Istvan Kiraly, the Grand Prince of the Magyars, the first King of Hungary, as one might know it before the ravages of WWI and WWII, became King of the Hungarian empire in the year 1000. The son of Arpad, most call him Szent Istvan, or Saint Stephen. Yes, the Saint Stephen whose mummified hand rests as mythical piece of interest, the claw creepily entombed inside

a hyper-sealed glass rectangle the size of a small aquarium, in an intimate, light sensitive room in the architecturally ornate and visually sumptuous and crowded church, or Basilica, named after him in Pest. I have seen the kingly hand, still adorned with precious stoned rings to be kissed. A gruesome and fascinating exposure of bone and jewel that draws crowds from all over the world. Through Szent Istvan's legacy and perhaps by a soft stroke or two of the now mummified and viscerally charged hand that you too can pay homage to, Hungary flourished as an agricultural and artistic epicenter. From the wave of Szent Istvan's hand forward, the large and ever growing Hungarian region developed its fertile farm land, fertile women, hill-top castles, salt production and therapeutic baths all the while continuing to build its thriving two-sided capital on the Danube (Duna), Buda and Pest.

In Szent Istvan's stead, the Hungarian monarchists remained active rulers in the dramatic playing field of European history for generations; they did not bow out, they did not screw around, they fought and fought back, even through Mongol and Ottoman devastations. The nation generally operated as a republic, quite stable in the central continental roundtable of intrigue and exploration. Growing beyond - and despite - famine, invasions, crusades and inquisitions, Hungary was blessed and cursed with a kind of middle placement that expanded and contracted in every cardinal point.

There's a sizable appendix on the lineage, luck, lives and loves of the Hungarian kings and queens in my favorite reference resource, picked up in Richmond at Black Swan Books, called Made In Hungary by Andrew L. Simon. The book reveals, if only in the subtext I attach to it, the hush-hush, dirty, underhanded workings of the Hungarian court and its players. On the family tree provided, a key to symbols and details such as "**in bold**" or "*in italics*" delineates between true kings and other ill-intended, darkly cloaked monarchic figures known as "pretenders and usurpers." Stephen III was usurped by his two wicked uncles, who sought and utilized the forces of Byzantine backing to overthrow the young teenage boy-king. Andrew II heisted power over his younger brother by means of revolt. Wretched Andrew II would then famously lead a disastrous monarch where the royal patrimony was squandered into near oblivion. He was repeatedly excommunicated even after his wife, Gertrude of Meran, was assassinated for her inability to close her bottomless purse. Okay, maybe not Showtime Tudors-esque material with beheadings, Pope denunciations and religious overhaul, but scandal abounds nonetheless. There's bits of murder, hints of foul play, tawdry affairs and shocking betrayals peppered spicily about the appendix as if it were true Hungarian fare and I can't help but eat every detail up, sopping up the very last drop of rich diabolical sauce with a generous slice of thick, hearty bread.

The crown of the Kiralys, also referred to lovingly and more accurately as the House of Arpad, reigned supreme like Iron Chef cuisine from Szent Istvan's coronation in 1000 to 1301, until the Arpad lineage died out with Andrew III, the last male of the House. For the next 200 years, various dynasties battled for the crown, but not until 1526 would a secret back room treaty between two feuding royals be struck between the two that split the kingdom in half; John would rule east and north east of the Duna and Ferdinand ruled in the west and northwest. For less than a generation, the egos of two power driven men divided the country. Upon John's death, the nation was reunited under Ferdinand and for the next 400 years, Hungary thrived with a truly stable monarchy, able to thwart and live through even Napoleon's nasty messes and tyranny among many other catastrophic strife. The powerful and well-known Habsburg dynasty reigned supreme until moments after WWI. The Habsburg's fused mass expanses of lands and resources in their near five centuries of rule, proliferating rapidly via marriage, mergers and war benefits, furthering into outer regions including Russia, Austria and Germany.

After nearly a millennium of medium-cool monarchic turbulence, I trace the loss of the royal significance of my grandmother's maiden name to the ultra tragic story of the last of the Habsburgs. Lovers and friends who vacationed at their

sprawling chateau in Gödöllő¹ often remarked on the union of Ferenc Jozef (Francis Joseph) and his emotionally complicated queen Erzsebet (Elizabeth); while she was often considered unstable and unpredictable, their love was fairytale-esque, uniting lands and resulting in prosperity for the country. Their seemingly wonderful life together ends horribly in cold blooded murder. Erzesbet, a saintly figure in Hungary today, considered Queen of the People expired unwillingly at the hands of Lucheni, who aimed first for the Duke of Orleans and when that attempt failed, vowed to assassinate someone, anyone, with ties to an aristocracy or monarchy, all under the guise of fighting for the working class. Lucheni, a bored anarchist with nothing better to do as far as I'm concerned, stabbed the Queen and the report of her death comes as such:

On September 9, 1898 she (Erzsebet) was assassinated by an Italian anarchist, Lucheni, while walking on the shore of Lake Geneva in the company of her Hungarian lady of honor, Countess Irma Sztáray. They say that for fifteen minutes the Queen was able to walk with her escort and board a ship without realizing that she had been fatally wounded. Elizabeth died an hour later in a local hospital in Geneva after receiving last rites.²

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%B6d%C3%B6ll%C5%91>

² <http://www.hungarian-history.hu/lib/hunspir/hsp35.htm>

With no living heir between Ferenc Jozef and Erzsebet, their daft and ill-prepared cousin, Charles IV, was no match for the Regency, an anti-monarch alliance who swept in forcefully with stalwart shouts of upheaval and reform after WWI and exiled vacuous Charles to Austria, where he was treated like dirt; a kind of Traitor with a capital T for siding Hungary with the losing team of Germans. The Regency's power was short-lived and within months supplanted by the even shorter-lived Bolsheviks who would then be replaced by a Parliamentary Republic, until WWII -- ending but in no way erasing, my fantastically hopeful linkage to the Kings and Queens of Hungary.
