

RESTORING THE SPLENDOR OF GUZÓW PALACE IN POLAND

Q&A WITH COUNT MICHAL SOBAŃSKI

BY AVA ROOSEVELT

The sight of the dilapidated, French Renaissance-style palace in Guzów, near Warsaw in Poland, has remained etched in my memory since 2001, when my-then 26-year-old nephew-in-law, Michal Sobański, proposed a visit. Dark clouds threatened that day as we pulled in front of the Sobański's family residence.



Above: Rendering of Guzów Palace shows final look of restoration. Right: Before and after photos of windows and doors.



Count Feliks Hilary Sobański

The Palace was in virtual ruins. Anywhere in the U.S., the site would have been condemned as unsafe to trespass. We stepped inside the hollow-sounding ballroom and promptly opened our umbrellas as rain began pouring through holes in the roof. Wind howled through the damp interior and what was left of the windows and doors were crudely barred by plywood.

Since 1856 when Feliks, Count Sobański (Michal's great-grandfather) purchased it at auction, Adolf Hitler's visit in 1939, the German occupation, post-war communist nationalization in 1944 and time itself have reduced the palace's once-grand interior to a bare skeleton of despair and neglect. Gone were all the paintings, sculptures, silver and furnishings embossed with the Sobański coat of arms. Centuries of tradition were stripped away with cruel strokes of sheer greed and ignorance.

The Sobański family's ancestral title dates back to Pope Leon XIII and so does Michal's determination to preserve its legacy. He decided to regain ownership and restore Sobański Palace to its former glory.

We listened in disbelief when Michal began detailing his vision, which included control of the family chapel, the sugar factory and the restoration of an adjacent park and numerous fishponds. Amidst sheer jealousy and contempt for the Sobański family, fierce

battles with the Guzów local government lasted for years. In 2010, the Ministry of Culture declared Guzów worthy of historical distinction and partook in the restoration of the parks, leaving the rest of the project in Michal and his sister Isabela's hands.

AVA: *The fact that you, your father Marek and your sister Isabela had to buy back in 1996 the totally devastated property, which rightfully belonged to the family for centuries, must have been demoralizing. How do you feel about this today?*

MICHAL: We were outraged. The process was very costly, both financially and emotionally. Poland is the only country behind the former iron curtain which does not carry out the Act of Reprivatization. In addition, the law established after 1945 by the Communists prohibited us, the owners, from approaching our former estates from a distance closer than 30 km. Today, in a free Poland, this decree is still enforced. After 20 years, our bitterness wore off. Now we strive to save the palace and the park by all means available, but even time cannot easily erase the memory of these shameful facts.



Count Michal Sobański

During my recent trip to Warsaw, Michal invited me again to visit Guzów. What a difference 16 years make! Upon our arrival, the once ghostly-looking Guzów Palace was bustling with activity. Amidst a full-fledged construction site, employing dozens of locals, men were working on the roof, scurrying on the scaffolds, installing new handmade windows and massive oak doors. The reinforcement of the old structure, waterproofing the basement, installation of an indoor swimming pool, was completed, and all done to the original specifications. The adjacent park was lined with freshly planted trees. The fishponds, cleaned and restored. The progress, a testament to Michal and his sister's unwavering determination to accomplish the impossible, took my breath away.

AVA: *Please tell us about the financial and emotional burden Guzów's restoration may have caused you.*

MICHAL: It took nearly 10 years to gather resources to start the renovations. My own savings and a modest allowance from the Ministry of Culture provided funding for the entire project to date. With the renovation of Guzów far from completion, I think daily about securing the necessary funds to realize my dream.

AVA: *You named your son Feliks after your great-grandfather Feliks, Count Sobański, the family patriarch. The public sentiment seems more favorable to your title and your personal accomplishments. As the heir apparent, does your son Feliks share your enthusiasm for these projects?*

MICHAL: Certainly, the time when all you needed was a title to achieve a social prominence are gone forever and rightfully so. I inherited my title and the requisite responsibility, which comes along with it. It is a force which I target to ensure the legacy of my name. The prominence of a family is created by individual acts, so that part of their achievements inspires other members and motivates them to take positive action, too. Feliks must choose for himself the direction for his life. Deep in my heart, I hope both my son Felix and daughter Zosia will be a part of Guzów. In the meanwhile, I will continue my journey. ●

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