



Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1886)

by Linda Rapp

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King Ludwig II.
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Ludwig II is better known for his enthusiastic patronage of Richard Wagner and for his fabulous castles than for his conduct of affairs of state. His withdrawal from public life, perhaps in part due to the impossibility of living openly as a gay man, led to allegations that he was mad, and ultimately to his deposition and death.

Ludwig II of Bavaria was named for his grandfather, King Ludwig I, with whom he shared a birthday, August 25. The two also shared an avid interest in the arts. From his earliest years the younger Ludwig enjoyed drawing, making model buildings, and dressing in costume to act. Upon hearing Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* for the first time when he was fifteen, Ludwig developed a lifelong passion for the composer's works.

Patronage of Wagner

When Ludwig ascended to the throne of Bavaria at the age of eighteen (upon the death of his father, Maximilian II, in 1864), one of his first acts as king was to send for Wagner, for whom he immediately provided a rent-free house and a generous annual stipend. Ludwig not only commissioned Wagner's operas, but also envisioned a glorious theater for the staging of them. This dream would be realized when the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth was built (1872-1876).

Ludwig took great joy in the presence of the composer, upon whom he lavished attention and costly gifts. Whether the two men had a physical relationship is unclear, but of Ludwig's devotion there can be no doubt.

Wagner's presence in the Bavarian capital was controversial. Members of the court feared that he might gain undue political influence over the young king, and they were alarmed at the amount of money that Ludwig was spending on him. Wagner left Munich after about a year, but throughout his life he enjoyed the patronage of the king, with whom he exchanged hundreds of affectionate letters over the years.

Ludwig's Statecraft

Ludwig faced serious political and military challenges early in his reign. In 1866 he proposed compromise measures to try to forestall a German civil war. When hostilities broke out, he allied Bavaria with Austria in the Seven Weeks' War. Their forces were defeated, and the following year Ludwig entered into an alliance with the victorious Prussia.

With war looming between France and Prussia in 1870, Napoleon III attempted to bring Bavaria over to his side. A patriotic German, Ludwig remained loyal to his ally.

Faced with the threat from France, the German states moved toward confederation into a single empire. Ludwig was concerned about the loss of Bavarian independence, but in negotiations with Prussian

Chancellor Bismarck he was able to secure a privileged status for Bavaria. He then sent a letter, drafted by Bismarck, to his fellow German princes, urging the political union, which was formally declared in 1871.

Ludwig's Romantic Relationships

Almost as soon as young Ludwig had ascended to the throne in 1864, the question of marriage and succession had been raised.

Since his early teens Ludwig had had a close and affectionate although non-romantic relationship with his cousin Elizabeth, who later became Empress of Austria. The two sensitive youngsters, who nicknamed each other the Eagle and the Dove, shared a love of nature and poetry.

The most important romantic friendship of Ludwig's early years was with Prince Paul von Thurn und Taxis. The two young men took pleasure in riding and hiking together in the Bavarian mountains and in reciting poetry to each other. Importantly, Paul shared Ludwig's enthusiasm for Wagner's operas and on one occasion played Lohengrin in an elaborate outdoor nighttime staging of the scene of the knight's arrival in the swan-boat.

Ludwig had an obsessive devotion to the handsome Paul but eventually broke with him after hearing rumors that the prince was involved in relationships with women.

Ludwig was in no hurry to marry, but after considerable indecision, he became engaged to his cousin Sophie, the younger sister of Elizabeth, in January 1867. As their wedding date, August 25, Ludwig's birthday, approached, however, he postponed the ceremony until October 12, the anniversary of both his parents' and grandparents' marriages. After another delay Ludwig broke the engagement and never considered marriage again.

It is not clear at what point Ludwig recognized his homosexuality. His diary, which he kept beginning in 1869, reveals that it was a source of inner turmoil for him. As a Catholic monarch, he felt an obligation to conform to the teachings of the Church, yet he could not deny his nature.

Ludwig developed a deep affection for Richard Hornig, a former officer in the Bavarian army who had become the chief equerry of the royal household. Ludwig gave a lake property to Hornig, whom he described in his diary as the "Beloved of My Soul." The two had frequent quarrels, though, and Hornig eventually married. He nevertheless remained in Ludwig's service almost until the end of the king's life.

Ludwig became infatuated with a young Hungarian actor, Josef Kainz, whom he first saw on stage in 1881. During a brief relationship the king gave him many expensive presents and took him on a trip to Switzerland. Ludwig rather quickly became disenchanted, however, apparently having found Kainz's performances in character in the theater more interesting than the actor himself.

Ludwig's Passion for Architecture

Ludwig's greatest artistic passion beside opera and theater was architecture. Beginning in 1869 he undertook the construction of three extravagant royal residences.

Neuschwanstein castle, begun in 1869 and never completed, is a fairy-tale confection perched high in the Bavarian mountains. Of primarily Romanesque and Byzantine architectural styles, it also incorporates late Gothic touches in its decoration. Numerous wall paintings depict scenes from Wagner's operas.

Linderhof (1869-1878) is a rococo gem based on the Trianon palace, reflecting Ludwig's fascination with the French royal family, particularly four of its members with whom he shared his first name, Louis IX, XIV, XV, and XVI. The palace at Herrenchiemsee, begun in 1878 but never finished, was likewise inspired by a French

model, the palace of Versailles.

The King's "Madness"

The elaborate building projects plunged Ludwig deeply into debt. They also consumed a great deal of his time. Never extremely interested in affairs of state, he withdrew increasingly to his refuges. There the king organized late-night picnics to which he invited good-looking stable boys and soldiers from the castles. He also gave parties at which the same guests were attired in Turkish-style costumes, at least until some of the handsomest were required to strip and dance.

Ludwig had less and less contact with his government ministers, who became concerned by reports of the king's erratic behavior, including experiencing hallucinations and issuing nonsensical orders, as well as his determination to continue building despite his dire financial situation. In 1886 a group of government leaders arranged for a psychiatrist, Bernhard von Gudden, to declare Ludwig insane even though he had not examined the king. Since incapacitation was grounds for the removal of the monarch under Bavarian law, they had Ludwig arrested and taken to Castle Berg on Lake Starnberg.

The King's Death

Only a few days later Ludwig was dead. He and Gudden went out for a walk on the rainy night of June 13, 1886 and never returned. The following morning their bodies were recovered from the lake. The circumstances of the men's deaths remain a mystery. It has been theorized that Ludwig committed suicide and Gudden tried to save him or that Ludwig planned to escape and Gudden died attempting to stop him.

The people of Bavaria mourned the death of Ludwig, who had remained extremely popular. Thousands, many of them weeping, lined the route as an enormous procession bore the king's body to church for the funeral mass.

On learning of Ludwig's death, his devoted cousin the Empress Elizabeth of Austria declared, "The King was not mad; he was just an eccentric living in a world of dreams. They might have treated him more gently, and thus perhaps spared him so terrible an end."

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