

HISTORY OF THE CROWN OF ST. LOUIS

Louis IX King of France reigned 1226-1270. His reign, full of glory and spiritual pageantry, gave to France much splendour and national pride besides the aura of sanctity. St. Louis has in France the laurels of a national hero.

In the year 1245 the King visited the Dominican Monastery in Liege, which was under his special care and seeing the splendid work in religious and national fields that was being done by the friars, as a proof of his appreciation he took from his head his crown, which contained a relic of the Holy Cross, richly studded with precious stones, and donated for all time this Crown.

The Crown is made of pure gold; the stones which beautify it are so cut and polished that they show angels with spread wings in the Gothic style.

For 544 years the Crown of St. Louis was in possession of the Dominicans of Liege. The principality of Liege at that time belonged to France.

In 1789 France went through political upheaval. The Revolution of 1789 beside democratisation, brought the rapier of death and destruction. When the revolutionary army approached Liege, one Dominican escaping on his horse to Germany, took with him the Crown of St. Louis, to Leipzig in Saxony. There Dominicans possessed the University founded by them. In 1811 the Napoleonic Army in its victorious advance in the East already occupied Saxony. To Leipzig came panic. The Rector of the University sought an audience with Prince Max of Saxony, who was one of the Bourbons. In conversation it was agreed that Prince Max should be custodian of the Crown and after his death, all descendants of the King of Saxony, the Family Weitin. There was written a special script on parchment and the Crown was officially given by the lawful owners, the Dominican Fathers, to the hands of Prince Max of Saxony; in this way the Crown of St. Louis came for 134 years into possession of the Royal Family Weitin. During this time the Crown went from hand to hand with the conditions of personal responsibility for its safe keeping.

At the end of world war 1918, during the last days of the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Crown of St. Louis was in possession of the unmarried Princess Matilda and was the main jewellery and principal attraction in the old fashioned salon in the Palace of Hosterwitz. Before she died in 1933, (after Hitler came to power) Princess Matilda transferred the Crown to her nephew, Prince Ernest Henric of Saxony, who took it to his castle in Mauritzburg, where it remained until almost the end of the second World War. The Crown of St. Louis was in great peril in the year 1944, when the war front approached Saxony. Prince Ernest Henric decided to hide the Crown in a less endangered Castle, the most suitable being in Sigmaringen in South West Germany near the Swiss border, which belonged to his sister Princess Margaret Von Hohenzollern: There it was hidden. In August 1944 the Nazis imprisoned all members of the Hohenzollern Sigmaringen family and confiscated this Castle, which the Nazis handed over to the Government of Vichy.

On the 8th August 1944 the French General Petain took up residence with all his staff, as Vichy had become endangered from the south by the Allied Army. The Crown remained in Sigmaringen Castle without any real protection.

At last Prince Ernest decided at all costs to remove the Crown from the Castle. For realisation of this plan, he rented a room near the Castle where he stayed. He contacted one of his sister's servants who had remained in the Castle and persuaded him to help in his project to get the Crown out of the Castle. Late one evening this servant took the Crown under his coat and handed it to the Prince, who immediately took it to an old place in Mauritzburg, where it remained until January 1945. In the beginning of 1945 the war position everyday became worse. The Crown of St. Louis remained near Dresden. The Soviet Army already occupied Silesia. Prince Ernest took the Crown from Mauritzburg to Dresden, thinking it would be much safer there and together with other precious things, he placed it in a safe deposit of the Weetin Family estate, on Parkstrasse 7. On the night of the 24th-25th February 1945 Dresden was heavily bombed by the R.A.F. The Palace near Parkstrasse was laid in ruins from this attack. Among the smouldering ruins of the Palace, Prince Ernest and his son found the safe; it was so hot that for twelve hours it could not be opened and when the heavy steel doors were opened all were speechless at the strange sight. From Dürer etchings and drawings and historical documents there only remained ashes; slabs of gold, platinum, golden jewellery and silver-ware all melted together in a mass, but the Crown of St. Louis remained unscarred. Prince Ernest lifted it out most carefully and put it in the cellars of Mauritzburg Castle and went on a journey to Sigmaringen. In Wertemburg, freed from Hitler's jail, Princess Margaret took up residence in an estate called Kranchenveis. Brother and sister had decided after a discussion, to transfer what they could from Mauritzburg Castle. Prince Ernest after long searching found in the nearest little town a lorry. Its owner, Andelfingen, was willing to help. Two hours later they went to Mauritzburg in Saxony. The journey there and back through nearly all Germany amid wartime difficulties lasted fourteen nightmarish days. At last with remaining strength they came back to Kranchenveis, having with them the saved Crown. Here they hid it in a linen cupboard of Princess Alice, daughter of the last King of Saxony. It seemed the safest place.

Shortly after came the French and American Armies. The Commanding Officer of the first French army, General Marquis Demontsabert, paid a formal and private visit to Princess Margaret Von Hohenzollern. With the highest tact and courtesy he gained the full confidence of the Princess and all members of her family. Before the end of the visit Princess Margaret excused herself and left the General for a moment, returning from the next room with Crown of St. Louis. Magnificent and spontaneous was this moment. General Marquis Demontsabert, like a man from old culture with chivalrous tradition, kneeled and kissed the Crown of St. Louis. After negotiation with official representatives of France, it was decided that Prince Ernest of Saxony and all his Family of Weetin should give and transfer forever the Crown of St. Louis to liberated France. Preparations for the journey, formalities and decisions took several weeks. The last custodian of the Crown, Prince Ernest was leaving Germany to go to Ireland and start the life of a farmer. He was not now owner of vast estates and wealth; from all his fortune there remained only a few cases of personal belongings and a case with the Crown of St. Louis. The journey to Ireland went through France. For a few hours he stopped in Paris, he took one case with him, the rest was left in a luggage office. The Prince went to the Palace of the President of France for an audience. Most touching was the moment of the transferring of the Crown to the President of the French Republic. So was closed a long period of exile of the Crown. It is now kept in the Treasury of Nôtre Dame Cathedral, Paris, where it can be seen and admired.