

Honor and Dishonor: British Royalty

by Michael Curtis



All visitors to London, young and old, want to see Buckingham Palace and the Changing of the Guard, symbols of the existence of the British Royal Family. The members of the Family have no political or executive role, are non-partisan and play no part in party politics. Yet, they have a valuable role in the system by embodying the unity of the country and political stability, and by carrying out functions suggested by the prime minister and government ministers.

By chance two different versions, past and present, of the royal role have been on view in one week in July 2017. The helpful and civilized one, in accordance with expected royal norms, is the behavior of Prince William and his wife Catherine, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, undertaking a five day good will tour of Poland and Germany, a recognition of British friendly relations with the two countries.

Most meaningfully, the visit began on July 18, 2017 with a tour of the concentration camp of Stutthof, about 20 miles from Gdansk, formerly Danzig, and of the local museum with its forbidding pile of thousands of shoes of victims murdered there.

Stutthof, less well known than Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, was the first camp set up outside Germany, on September 2, 1939, originally as an internment camp under the Polish Danzig police chief, then a labor education camp by the German Security Police, and then in January 1942 a concentration camp run by the Nazi SS.

It was the last liberated camp, on May 9, 1945. By then 65,000 people, nearly a third of them Jews, had died as a result of typhus epidemics, lethal injection, and murder by gas. It was also notorious as the place where soap was made from human corpses.

Prince Charles, in a speech in London in January 2017, said the horrific lessons of the last war are in increasing danger of being forgotten. He had previously made a number of references about the lessons of the Holocaust. His son and daughter-in-law are uttering similar warnings. The younger couple signed the visitor's book at Stutthof saying that they were intensely moved by their visit, and that "All of us have an overwhelming responsibility to make sure that we learn the lessons and that the horror of what happened is never forgotten and never repeated.

This would have been good advice to the former royal Duke of Windsor, former King Edward VIII who had no such understanding of or concern about the Nazi atrocities, horrors, or extermination of Jews. Compared to the two Cambridges, "O what a falling off was there" in the behavior and life of Windsor. Reminders of this have been reawakened by the opening on July 20, 2017 of formerly top secret files at the British National Archives in Kew, London.

These files tell the story of the efforts of Prime Minister Winston Churchill to suppress information about the wartime behavior of the Duke of Windsor and of a Nazi plot offering him the British throne as a puppet king if Britain lost the war. This unusual uncharacteristic behavior by Churchill is only explicable by his love of the monarchy and his fear that revelation of the files, with intimations of bloody treason flourishing, might bring down the House of Windsor.

Churchill's action concerned the Nazi files, mostly written by Joachim von Ribbentrop in summer 1940 to German ambassadors in Madrid and Lisbon. The new revelations show the extent to which Churchill went to prevent their dissemination. A memo of August 12, 1953 from Winston to his cabinet marked Top Secret, proposed that publication of the German correspondence, captured at the end of World War II and kept secret, be postponed for at least ten or twenty years. He held they would "give pain to the Duke of Windsor and leave an impression on the minds of those who read them entirely disproportionate to their historic value."

The correspondence resulted from the fact that the Duke of Windsor had left Paris when the Nazi offensive in France began, and went with his wife first to Spain for a month and then to Portugal. The Nazis saw an opportunity as Churchill realized.

Churchill urged President Franklin D. Roosevelt to block publication of the German telegrams on the subject because they showed a Nazi-German intrigue to entangle and compromise Windsor. The publication he thought might leave the impression that the Duke was in close touch with German agents and was listening to suggestions that were disloyal to Britain. A telegram on July 11, 1940 from Von Ribbentrop to Lisbon explained the Duke must be told that Germany wished for peace with the British people and "it would be a good thing if the Duke were to hold himself in readiness for further developments." The implication was "accession to the British

thone by the Duke and Duchess.”

Churchill was aware of the danger. He made Windsor Governor of the Bahamas to get him out of Europe. The British government correctly thought Windsor, a kind of liaison in Paris between the British and French armies, was getting useful information and passing it on directly or indirectly to the Germans.

Controversy has raged over Windsor, even before his anger at pressure for his abdication as King on December 11, 1936 because of his determination, against all governmental advice, to marry Bessie, Wallis, Warfield Simpson, twice divorced American from Pennsylvania. The overriding problem was that Windsor, as Prince of Wales, had expressed sympathy for Nazi Germany. Even more, Mrs Simpson was regarded by the FBI as exceedingly pro-German in her sympathies and connections.

One of those connections was Ribbentrop, German ambassador in London, who apparently became her lover in 1936, and who continued to send her 17 carnations a day, supposedly a reminder of the number of days they were together. Before the outbreak of World War II, the Duke and Duchess often entertained Nazi sympathisers in France where they lived, as well as the British Fascist leader Oswald Mosley. Windsor saw Josef Goebbels, who thought the Duke “had made a complete fool of himself by abdicating.”

Windsor even had in April 1936 sent a telegtram to Adolf Hitler wishing him “happiness and welfare” on his 47th birthday. After their marriage in France in June 1937, he and his wife spent their honeymoon in Germany and later visited Hitler at the dictator’s lair at Berghof on October 22, 1937. He saw Hitler as “a very great man,” Later, in an interview in *Liberty Magazine*, March 22, 1941, Windsor remarked that “Hitler was the right man at the right time.”

However one assesses Windsor as naive, stupid, an intriguer, or as a traitor, Churchill was aware of both the danger of

Windsor becoming a Nazi puppet, and the harm done to the British monarchy. What a contrast with the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge who went to Berlin after Poland and visited the underground museum with materials of the Holocaust, the ghettos, slave labor camps, concentration camps, and death marches. They saw the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the large sculpture designed by Peter Eisenman of 2711 concrete slabs or "stelae" in rows evoking a graveyard. Again, Prince William spoke, as he had done in Poland, "It is important to learn about what happened here and others like this." Unlike Windsor, the young royal couple upheld values of honor, decency, and loyalty.