

Celebrating 100 Years of the Baroness Ada von Manteuffel Bequest¹

Translation of an address delivered by Baron Ernst-Dietrich von Mirbach to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the United Kurland² Bequests (VKS) on 21 June 2014

The German government official based in Munich who assesses Bavaria's not-for-profit sector for tax compliance was more than surprised when she came to realise recently that the United Kurland Bequests (*Vereinigte Kurländische Stiftungen* or VKS³) were going to be 100 years old in 2014. That's what the VKS's managing director put in his report in vol. 20 of its *Kurland* magazine in 2013. While the VKS might not be Germany's oldest endowment, few can match its success in bringing so much of its seed capital unscathed through the last 100 years of revolution, inflation and tumult. That same tax official would be still more surprised to discover just how many of us have turned up today here in Dresden at the *Kurländer Palais* to celebrate the Bequest's 100th birthday. And it's not even an endowment that has its roots in Germany! Rather, it springs from a generous gift made to the Kurland Knighthood (or Noble Corporation - *Kurländische Ritterschaft*) in Nice back in 1914. Getting the legacy paid out in 1921 in the face of nigh insuperable odds was the biggest achievement. That's been the remarkable success of some particularly determined Kurland Knighthood members. No need to wonder, therefore, about also being able to celebrate this 100-year anniversary in this remarkable venue, full of associations for so many of us, and not least because of its historic name.

The last Grand Master of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order, Gotthard Kettler, had himself invested with the newly created feudal duchy of Kurland by the King of Poland in 1561 when the Teutonic Order ceased being a force in old Livonia, a large territory it had ruled for several hundred years until that time. 'Kurland' was the name given to the strip of land south of the Daugava (*Düna*) River in old Livonia and running westwards all the way to the Baltic Sea coast. Remarkably, the duchy lasted some 234 years. That's quite as long as the United States of America has been with us and is longer than the kingdom of Prussia lasted. There was only a non-resident relative⁴ to inherit the dukedom when the sixth and next to last Kettler duke, Frederick William, died aged 19 in 1711 on his way back from St Petersburg where he had just married the Russian grand duchess Anna Ivanovna, Peter the Great's niece. The constitutional provisions in Kurland provided that the Kurland Knighthood's own 'senior advisers' (or *Oberräte*) would govern the duchy during any interregnum and there was thus no role for the duke's widow. When Anna herself subsequently became Empress of Russia in 1730, she prevailed upon the King of Poland to install her favourite, Ernst Johann Biron (or just plain Herr von Bühren in those days), as Duke of Kurland in 1737⁵. Biron's son, Peter, duly succeeded to the dukedom but eventually abdicated in 1795. His abdication enabled the Russian takeover of Kurland by the same empress, whom we now know as Catherine the Great.

¹ 'Bequest', 'endowment', 'foundation' or 'trust' are all good translations of *Stiftung*. We choose 'bequest'.

² With 'Kurland' and 'Courland' both used in English literature, we opt for the German Kurland, Kurlander, etc.

³ Using the German abbreviation VKS for 'United Kurland Bequests' throughout makes for easier reading.

⁴ Ferdinand Kettler lived in Gdansk (*Danzig*) and was prevented from returning to Kurland because of the Great Northern War. He had been regent during Frederick's minority, succeeded as duke in 1711 and died in 1737.

⁵ Biron fell from grace when Empress Anna died in 1740, was banished to Siberia with his family for the next twenty odd years and not re-installed as duke until 1763, the year after Catherine II became empress in 1762.

We owe this second ducal dynasty of Biron our special thanks for the superb baroque palaces they bequeathed us. The first is the splendid ducal palace in Kurland's old capital, Jelgava (*Mitau*) (now Latvia's agricultural university), and the second is the beautifully restored summer palace and gardens at Rundale (*Ruhenthal*), just north of Bauske, and now open to the public. We also have the Biron to thank for the beautiful porcelain table service they commissioned and that is still made and sold to this day at KPM (*Königliche Porzellanmanufaktur*) in Berlin as the so-called "Kurland Service".

With the extinction of the Kettler dynasty (in 1737) and no obvious successor, several contenders presented during the eighteenth century for the ducal widow's hand or, more to the point, for elevation to the ducal dignity. Among them were several younger sons of German princely houses. They sought to capitalise on the new interregnum created when Duke Ernst Johann Biron was banished to Siberia in 1740 and looked to start splendid careers of their own. The prize was not inconsiderable because Kurland was about the size of Belgium today. One of the contenders was Prince Charles of Saxony (1733 – 1796). He was the fifth son of the Elector Frederick Augustus II of Saxony, concurrently King of Poland, and the third of his sons to survive him. That also made him the grandson of Elector Augustus the Strong. But obstacles dotted the path to the Kurland ducal throne. On the one hand, there was opposition from the Kurland Knighthood – the Knighthood had an acknowledged part to play in selecting the next duke and was very well aware of it. If Prince Charles was to win over the Kurland Knighthood, he would need to make large concessions and defuse fears about his Roman Catholicism. More pressing, on the other hand, was the issue of the Russian elephant in the room and what to do about it. Kurland had a long land border with Russia and there was never any doubt about Russian ambitions. Nor could anybody ignore the strength of Russian influence in the region, nor how Russia might choose to use it. A counterweight was needed. The only likely prospect measuring up as a significant regional power with broadly matching capabilities was Saxony, and her ruler then was also king of Poland. As if that weren't enough, there was another Saxon contender for the Kurland ducal throne muddying the waters further for a time with his antics, but he had already wrecked his otherwise promising prospects by overplaying his hand in a silly adventure. This was Count Maurice of Saxony, an illegitimate son of Augustus the Strong.

Supporters gathered around the two principal contenders as the contest for the ducal throne grew more intense. Those in favour of Saxon Prince Charles were known as 'Karlists'. Those who wanted the banished Duke Ernst Johann Biron back on the throne were known as 'Ernestines'. In a career rise quite as spectacular as that of his patron, Anna, who had risen from ducal widow to Empress of Russia, Biron had also risen rapidly to become the mightiest man in Russia before he fell from grace. Telling the two camps apart was easy – the Karlists wore blue and the Ernestines red. Interestingly, fourteen of the Karlists were immortalised in portraits by the Kurland painter, Leonhard Schorer, which Johann Ernst von Schoepping op dem Hamme had commissioned. The portraits survive to this day as an improbable gift to posterity and they are, in most cases, still the only likenesses we have of these men. Portraits from this series were included in the Kurland Knighthood's 'Kurland' book⁶ in those cases where the subjects had become notable or memorable for other reasons.

⁶ Kurland und seine Ritterschaft, 1971, Iltgau Verlag W. Ludwig, Pfaffenhofen/Illm

Notwithstanding that Prince Charles of Saxony had been duly chosen by the Kurland Knighthood as its new duke in 1758, he was soon under strong pressure from Russia's new empress, Catherine II⁷, to vacate the throne in favour of Ernst Johann Biron returning. He ultimately and reluctantly yielded to the pressure in 1763. He had been duke for only five years when he succumbed to the urgings of his feudal overlord, the king of Poland, Stanislaus Poniatowski. The bitterness he felt about the shabbiness of the treatment he had suffered never left him and he persisted in calling himself Duke of Kurland until the day he died. He named the palace he bought in Dresden in 1774 from the counts von Wackerbarth 'Kurland Palace' (*Kurländisches Palais* or *Kurländer Palais*) and lived there until he died in 1796. The interiors had been badly damaged in several fires. He therefore redecorated them and also remodelled the exterior at the same time to create a transformed ensemble by adding more buildings, a park and an orangery. In his lifetime the palace became one of the most beautiful and elegant in all of Dresden. The Baltic-German painter, Wilhelm von Kügelgen, who had been one of the duke's close friends, described in detail what the suppers the duke served his close friends there were like. It was also with this same palace in mind that the duke commissioned the 'Kurland' porcelain service in Meissen in 1774 that is mentioned earlier. The Meissen service he ordered differs from the one KPM still makes today by its decorative green border around the perimeter and the golden staves banded in green. He used Saxon green to echo the green of his Saxon homeland.

The palace was put to various uses after Duke Charles died. Initially, it was a meeting place for the freemasons of the 'Three Sword' lodge. It then became a hospital during the Napoleonic wars. Later it was a training institute for midwives. The mother of the German author, Karl May, was trained there. The palace was almost completely destroyed in the Dresden bombings during World War II and was one of the very last buildings to be rebuilt after the war. It was only just finished in time for us to use today to celebrate the 100th anniversary of our Baroness Ada von Manteuffel Bequest.

That urge to give back to the community and help those less fortunate, the generosity and caring we often associate with philanthropy and to which the ancient term '*milte*'⁸ might be applied, has been classed as a knightly virtue since medieval times and has continued to be encouraged for that very reason. Many of the bequests and endowments familiar to us in the centuries that followed were guided by similar noble and philanthropic impulses, even if they were founded for all kinds of different reasons. Religious sentiment was often a key motivator but the desire to honour a worthy former community elder or leader was no less common. The Renaissance re-channelled perceptions to a degree, and religious motivation then declined as a result. But transformed thinking also opened the door to new kinds of philanthropy, and we still recognise some of them to this day. Patrons of the arts are just one dimension of philanthropy familiar to most of us today.

Owning property was seen by most people as a privilege that also imposed a powerful obligation to help those less fortunate. By the same token, such obligations were invariably also deeply felt. The notion that the state should be responsible for meeting the welfare and social security needs of those in need is at best a quite recent phenomenon. We can judge just how recent by how quick many of us still are to respond to calls for help when a catastrophe strikes and how generous we will then often also still be in our donations. Germany's oldest charitable endowment is the Hospital

⁷ Catherine the Great became Empress of Russia in 1762 and died in 1796,

⁸ The German original makes no reference to 'charity' and we accordingly avoid its use in the English as well.

Fund of St Benedict in Lüneburg, in continuous existence since 1127. Some 20,000 endowments operate within the law in Germany for a variety of philanthropic and charitable purposes as at 2013.

We are familiar with many of the altars and epitaphs that were donated to churches in the Baltic provinces over the centuries, as well as some of the endowments for hospitals and hospices set up to care for the sick. The endowments in such cases were often supplemented with additional funds to help keep them running. Caring generously for needy family members, as well as all those others within one's social circle, who might also be needy, was perceived as an ever-present and real obligation. The caring obligation was also always seen in its broadest context. It wasn't just charity then when hospitality was extended to the notorious *Krippenreiter*⁹, often for weeks at a time!

While many of the endowments and bequests set up by nobles or burghers in Kurland were to support needy family members, there were also many others directed at meeting more general community and other charitable needs. Once an endowment exceeded a certain size, the Knighthood in the person of its Receiver (or *Obereinnehmer*), would audit its operations in the public interest and apply a keen eye to ensure the endowment was meeting its stated aims and delivering in an efficient and cost-effective manner. The Knighthood performed these audit functions in an honorary capacity and delivered the service free of charge.

Most of the endowments and bequests we know today date from the first third of the nineteenth century, but there were some that were older. A particularly notable older bequest is the Katherine Bequest (*Katharinenstift*) in Mitau. It goes back to 7 November 1775. It was set up by the widow of General Ludolph August v. Bismarck, who was a sister of Duchess Benigna Gottliebe of Kurland. By 1890-91, the Kurland Knighthood was oversighting some thirty-three endowments and bequests with total capital running at around 1.5 million rubels and producing annual income of around 50,000 rubels. The number of bequests and endowments would have grown considerably by 1914, as would have their capital face value and the incomes they were producing.

We need to remember that the Baltic nobility was not, in the main, a wealthy group *per se*, despite what some might suppose. Their income relied on each year's harvest and could be as good or as bad as the seasons. In addition, the nobility also bore the cost of delivering free local and community services in the countryside via the 'contributions' (or *Willungen*) they imposed upon themselves at their regular diets or *Landtage*. Every owner of a knightly manor (*Rittergut*) thus undertook to pay their share or 'contribution' towards meeting the cost of providing roads, schools, hospitals etc. at no cost to other users, as well as funding any further outlays the Knighthood might choose to incur.

Our biggest Kurland bequest, and the one that still flourishes and blesses us to this day, is the "Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Bequest". We merged the "Dondangen Bequest" with this bequest in 1966 and changed the name to United Kurland Bequests (*Vereinte Kurländische Stiftungen* or *VKS*) in 1980 after we had incorporated some further bequests.

⁹ *Krippenreiter* were fellow members of the nobility who lacked means and subsisted by travelling from one manor to the next (ie. from *crib* to *crib*), often staying for weeks and reliant upon the largesse of their hosts.

Baroness Alexandrine (Ada) von Manteuffel, née Countess Apraxin (1849-1914), was a very wealthy woman in her own right. She was also the daughter of the fabulously wealthy Princess Troubetskoy. Contemporaries describe her as remarkably pretty, intelligent and possessed of a very engaging manner even if she could be a little contrary from time to time. Her parents preferred to live in Nice and used Nice as their base for their frequent and usually prolonged travels. At age seventeen in 1866, she married Baron Georg von Manteuffel-Zierau, who was 25 years her senior. There were no children of the marriage nor was it a very happy one. When her husband died in 1874, she became sole heiress and had the right to live at Zierau until the end of her days. The testament also provided that the estate would revert to Manteuffel family ownership after Ada died and would then become an entailed estate. Ada spent every summer living at Zierau. Of all her properties, Zierau was much her favourite and she continued to beautify it in many ways through the years. A contemporary describes how she would get about in the countryside in a carriage drawn by splendid Arabian horses with “her coachman resplendent in Russian uniform and the Moorish servant wearing a fez sitting beside him”. She continued to spend every winter in Nice. She owned the Villa Bellanda in Nice and another villa besides. She preferred to be surrounded by animals. Her little monkey, Miss Molling, slept in her bedroom and had his own miniature closet stocked with silk and velvet outfits.

Baroness Ada von Manteuffel died in Nice on 14 August 1914.

When Ada von Manteuffel’s estate was first assessed for probate on 12 September 1914, it was said to be worth 1,068,233 rubels and 93 kopeks, not counting the two villas in Nice. Extrapolating that sum into today’s money gives us a worth of about 18 million Euros. That is a staggering sum of money, even after making allowances for how unreliable such currency conversions can be. Ada made numerous bequests to private individuals and to community institutions like the Katharine Bequest in Mitau, and to deaf and dumb institutions in Nice and Mitau. She appointed the Kurland Knighthood as her principal heir.

Section III in her will reads:

As soon as my executor shall have paid out all my bequests as provided for in my will and testament and will have done so without deductions or other changes, he is to allocate a sum not exceeding 400,000 rubels (to the Kurland Knighthood) for the purpose of setting up and running an institution for (the care and support of) Kurlandic and Russian (noble) widows, modelled upon the Katharine Bequest that already delivers similar support services in Mitau, and with terms and conditions (the Kurland Knighthood) shall determine at its sole discretion. I further stipulate that any interest earned on capital remaining after all my bequests have been disbursed should be directed at benefiting members of the Russian and Kurlandic nobility, if there are not also members of the Apraxin and Troubetskoy families, who still stand in need.

It was the remarkable and singular achievement of the last elected head (*Landesbevollmächtigter*) of the Kurland Knighthood, Count Paul von der Pahlen, to clinch the bequest for the Kurland Knighthood. The struggle lasted for several years and the effort he put in was enormous. There was of course also much luck involved. He had to overcome some quite unimaginable difficulties.

His first problem was that the executor Ada von Manteuffel had appointed had died during the war years. His next problem, as a newly minted Latvian citizen, was to get permission to travel to Nice and Switzerland: he needed to secure the necessary paperwork in Nice to access the funds that had been deposited in Switzerland. This was a nigh impossible feat. Few in France wanted to help him.

Count Pahlen was at a great disadvantage gaining access to so large an inheritance because he was both German and a person acting for a noble corporation. Then there were the travel costs, which were high and remained an impediment, even if the Kurland Knighthood was paying for them. The Knighthood had displayed great foresight by taking out a mortgage on the manors it owned in Kurland in anticipation of imminent dissolution as a legal entity and seizure of its assets by the new Latvian state. Last but not least, the new Latvian state, having seized what was left of the Kurland Knighthood's assets upon its dissolution in 1920, saw itself as heir, in its own right, to the large Ada von Manteuffel inheritance. It would become a race to see who could reach the finish line first.

The Kurland Knighthood had also been very prescient in acting quickly to put its assets beyond reach of the new Latvian state bent upon dissolving it by divesting itself of its assets and transferring them to an innocuous third-party before any seizure could take place. The dissolution of the Kurland Knighthood went into effect on 29 May 1920. What the Knighthood had done some two months earlier, on 20 March 1920, was to erect a new body with an innocent-sounding name, the Kurland Community Association (*Kurländischer Gemeinnütziger Verband*), and to duly register it in Riga. On the strength of the Association's new registered status, the Knighthood then called a 'Brothers' Conference' (*Brüderliche Konferenz*) in Riga at short notice from 6 to 7 April 1920 for the purpose of putting to the Conference a resolution about transferring its assets to the new Association. That resolution was of course duly carried and the mechanism for transferring assets proved effective. But the threat had not entirely dissipated and the sword of Damocles still threatened proceedings.

Members of Ada von Manteuffel's own family, mainly the Apraxins, but also the Troubetzkoy, then attempted to challenge the will, despite the limited prospects they might have had. What their legal action of course did is postpone grant of probate on the will. That delay then played into the hands of the Latvian government by giving it more time to intervene. In the end, a significant sum was settled on the Apraxin family to neutralise their challenge and, in 1924, the Troubetzkoy family received a similar settlement. It was only possible to start assisting some of the needy Kurlanders with payments from at least the interest earned on the remaining capital once these claims had been settled.

But it wasn't plain sailing quite yet. Members of the Kurland Knighthood, who had remained behind in Latvia, disputed the right of the Knighthood's successor organisation in Germany, the new Kurland Association of Enfranchised Nobility (*Kurländischer Stammadelsverband*), to inherit the bequest. They refused to accept that the Kurland Knighthood had been empowered to transfer its assets to a body like the Kurland Community Association that comprised burgher members as well as noble Knighthood members. They argued that they alone were the legitimate heirs to the Knighthood's assets, and that any bequest to the Knighthood should thus flow only to them. Their argument of course overlooks the reality that the only possible mechanism for rescuing the Knighthood's assets from seizure by the Latvian state in 1920 was to transfer them to the Kurland Community Association. Vigorous differences of opinion such as this are not uncommon when communities and the organisations that support them fall prey to rapid and unforeseen changes, such as had happened in this case. The difference of opinion was subsequently laid to rest.

Registering the Ada von Manteuffel Bequest was finally able to be completed in the Administrative Court in Rostock on 20 March 1930.

Architectural plans for a freestanding residence to be built in Birkenwerder, a northern suburb of Berlin, to give effect to the commitment to house Kurland Knighthood ladies and widows within the spirit of the Ada von Manteuffel bequest were drawn up in 1931 by the Baltic architect Zimmermann. The plans were formally unveiled on 15 June 1931. The proposal was that the home would be called the Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Widows Home (*Witwenstift der Ada Baronin von Manteuffel*¹⁰) and accommodate some 21 ladies. That made it bigger than the Katherine Bequest, which offered accommodation for only 16 ladies. Baron Karl von Manteuffel-Katzdangen set about designing and manufacturing the badges¹¹ he would donate for residents of the home. His design was for a white Maltese cross in which the badge obverse would feature the Manteuffel coat of arms encircled by the motto '*Nil sine Deo*' while the reverse would bear the Kurland Knighthood coat of arms encircled by the words '*to the Kurland Knighthood from Bar. Adda von Manteuffel*'.

Our *Kurland* magazine No. 4 was dedicated to the Birkenwerder Home and describes in detail what life was like for the ladies who lived there. The description was penned by Baron Rudolf Mirbach, who had presided over the Bequest's affairs from 1931 to 1945. The story one resident, Baroness Käthe Stromberg, tells about the Soviet occupation of the Home in May 1945 is painful reading. She describes the dreadful things the Soviet troops did and how they simply took what they wanted and cast the residents out onto the street without so much as a day's notice or a chance to prepare. Without any idea where they could go, the ladies made their way to the cemetery where they knew there were at least benches they could use *pro tem*. Some kind people then offered them shelter in their cellar and they stayed there for perhaps some eight days. The Soviets weren't any kinder to Baron Rudolf Mirbach. They detained him when they arrived and sent him to the Oranienburg concentration camp without further ado.

The Home was quite uninhabitable when the ladies were able to return to it. The Russians had left every tap running and water had flooded rooms to a depth of two and a half feet. The Russians had also blocked every drain and toilet. Every stick of furniture had been smashed and left to float upon the water, along with discarded clothing and miscellaneous household items. Baron Mirbach had been an imperial Russian navy officer and his model three-master vessel, decorated in gold, was found rocking forlornly to and fro in the devastated pond in the garden. Mahogany drawers had been converted into feed bins for the sheep the Russians had happened to bring with them. While emergency repairs had helped make the Home liveable again to a limited degree, the food shortages and the trauma the ladies had been through soon took their toll. Watching them expire was like watching a candle go out quietly. Just five of the ladies survived the horrendous experience and were able to relocate to western Germany. The Home was then let to a nearby sanatorium for use as a nurses' residence and the Home's former curator, Baron Walter Koskull, and his daughter, used the rent money they received to assist Kurland Knighthood members still living in the Russian zone. The generous commitment and caring he displayed lives on in his grandson, Baron Harald Koskull, who maintains the tradition today as a member or trustee of the VKS management committee.

¹⁰ In this context, translating *Witwenstift* as a 'widows' home' or 'shelter' gives the best rendering in English.

¹¹ Similar badges distinguished other comparable endowments in the Baltic provinces. They were usually in the form of an enamelled silver-gilt Maltese cross with a distinguishing feature and motto at its centre, front and back, and worn on formal occasions from a silk moiré bow on the chest, like a proper Order or Decoration.

Quite unexpected was that the communists had failed to nationalise the Birkenwerder house and land. The 'Ada Baronin von Manteuffel Widows Home' thus continued to feature as the registered owner of house and land after German reunification. Nothing therefore stood in the way of the VKS re-letting the property to yet another user on a 99 year lease, which is exactly what the VKS did. The income from the new lease now funds much of the VKS core outlays, including the care and support of needy Knighthood members and advancing various cultural and restoration projects.

In addition to the Birkenwerder property, the Ada von Manteuffel Bequest also owned further properties in Berlin. These properties were all in West Berlin and there was therefore never a problem about their ownership. With the cost of repairs after all the war damage the properties had suffered, keeping them wasn't prudent or worthwhile and they have all been sold years ago.

The 'Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Widows Bequest'¹² was re-established in Berlin on 8 September 1950. In 1966 it was merged with the Dondangen Bequest, which had been founded in 1927 but which had lost much of its capital through the ravages of war.

The Dondangen Bequest was established by Baron Ulrich von der Osten-Sacken, who had been the last owner of the large Dondangen manor in Kurland. Dondangen had been an estate of quite princely proportions comprising some 72,700 hectares of manorial land and 18,800 hectares of peasant land. Ulrich Osten-Sacken was entitled to the same 50 hectares of remainder landholding after the new Latvian state nationalised his Dondangen estate in 1920 but had been unable to take up his entitlement because he had already moved to Germany in the meantime and become a German citizen. In an exceptional move that sought to acknowledge just how big his former manor had been, the German Weimar government awarded him a modest amount in compensation. It was this compensation payment that Osten-Sacken channelled into his Dondangen Bequest.

Baron Osten-Sacken's generosity hardly ended there and we need to say more. He gifted funds on more than one occasion to help save the Baltic School at Misdroy¹³ from collapse and closure. We know he made at least one large payment in 1928 for 10,000 German marks. Such generosity among Kurlanders was hardly unique at that time with many Kurlanders displaying the same strong sense of shared responsibility towards others in good times and bad. Their motto '*let us put back into Kurland what she has given us*' (*Aus dem Land für das Land*) sums up their attitude and sentiment very well.

Further growth in the Manteuffel and Dondangen Bequests was achieved over time thanks to the generous further legacies of Baroness Adelheid v.der Ropp, Baroness Cecilie v.Oelsen and Frau Sophie v.Hunnius. In 1980, in an attempt to bring all bequests and legacies properly under one roof, so to speak, it was decided to adopt the new name we still know and use today, viz. the United Kurland Bequests (*Vereinigte Kurländische Stiftungen* or VKS). Importantly, it has also been possible to extend VKS support to a wider catchment of Kurlanders, such tertiary students who might need

¹² The term 'Bequest' rather than 'Home' is used here to reflect the support being given to a dispersed population of widows and needy people for whom no residential accommodation is now able to be provided.

¹³ The Baltic School at Misdroy (Miedzzydroje in Polish) on the isle of Wolin on the Polish north western Baltic coast was founded by émigré Kurlanders in 1919 and dissolved in 1944 to forestall an imminent Nazi takeover. The school had a good reputation, developed a diverse student body as a result and offered boarding facilities.

help but who aren't widows and needy older persons, and to do this without breaching the rules about the support being only for Kurlanders. In this way the VKS is doing more to help lift the burden of support on the larger Association of Baltic Knighthoods (*Verband der Baltischen Ritterschaften*).

VKS management is in the hands three key office bearers. They are the First Chair (*1. Vorsitzende*), the Manager (*Geschäftsführer*) and the Vice Chair (*3. Vorsitzende*). They are supported by fourteen VKS board members or trustees (*Stiftungsräte*), who are elected for five year terms, along with three substitutes (*Substitute*). To serve as a constant reminder of the ideals and purpose of the original Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Bequest, and for the term of their board membership, each VKS trustee is issued with one of the badges created in 1930 for the ladies of the Birkenwerder Home. These badges had been mostly buried for safekeeping before the Soviets arrived and were then recovered and returned to the custody of the Bequest's curator, Baron v.Koskull. It does seem fitting that board members should continue to be custodians of the badges for the duration of their board membership in light of the fact that Manteuffel capital still makes up the bulk of the VKS funding.

It is remarkable too how former board members remain as committed to the work of the VKS as do current, sitting board members. The tireless work Baron Peter Korff continues to perform across a broad spectrum is just one example. Board members aren't paid and act in an honorary capacity. Their personal contributions are therefore substantial, not only in terms of the time they devote to VKS business but also for the travel costs they happily shoulder each year to attend annual board meetings in Fulda in January. These board meetings decide the coming year's work program. Project leaders bear the burden of additional costs because they fund their own travel to Kurland as often as needed to monitor the progress of projects they have responsibility for.

Let me add some explanatory remarks about efficiency and cost-effectiveness in running not-for-profit (NFP) organisations.

There was a call recently for public disclosure about just how much of the money donated to charities and NFPs actually ends up benefitting those for whom it is intended and how much is consumed in administration costs. The resulting enquiry was very thorough and scientific in its scope. It concluded that NFPs should be judged as efficient and cost-effective if they spend no more than 35 per cent of their income on administration costs. That sets the bar at 35 per cent for administration costs: NFPs that spend less than 35 percent rate as efficient and well-run, becoming increasingly efficient and cost-effective the less they spend, while those NFPs that spend more than 35 per cent fail the test for efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The fact that VKS board members meet all their own costs and operate in an honorary capacity means that the VKS has negligible administrative overheads. The VKS thus achieves a top rating for efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The VKS can thus also claim in all honesty that no donations and bequests are ever trimmed for administrative costs and that every penny of every bequest and donation goes in its entirety to benefit those for whom it is intended.

That we can so happily enjoy the festivities today in the Dresden *Kurländer Palais* in spite of all the difficulties planning and executing the various events is the signal achievement of everyone on the VKS board. Leading them is their current First Chair, Baron Heinrich Stackelberg, with the father and son team of the Barons Howen in the respective second and third executive positions.

The VKS provides financial assistance across a wide spectrum of needs and causes. In the category of providing financial assistance to needy individuals, the VKS paid some 30,000 Euros in 2013 alone to support some 13 needy Kurlander men and women of all ages.

The VKS has also made grants to:

- Fund the travel and stay of selected researchers investigating topics of historical interest in the Baltic states;
- Support the publication of the subsequent research findings of such researchers in the field of Kurlandic history;
- Publish the genealogies of some Kurland families that had never been in print before in a special edition of its *Kurland* magazine;
- Install library shelving at a cost of about 30,000 German Marks (the German currency pre-Euro) as its contribution to the fit-out of the Schloss Höhnscheid Function Centre the Association of Baltic Knighthoods operates at that site; and
- Help the Carl Schirren Society (*Carl-Schirren-Gesellschaft*) purchase the 'Brömsehaus' in Lüneburg.

And not forgetting just how much of their capital they owe to Baroness Ada von Manteuffel's generous legacy, the VKS of course also tends Ada's grave in Nice.

It became a matter of honour to also publish Count Pahlen's memoirs in another of its *Kurland* magazine special editions. Without his exceptional and determined efforts, the Ada von Manteuffel legacy might have never reached the Kurland Knighthood at all.

The annual *Kurland* magazine series is a VKS initiative that commenced in 1991. It is a professional-looking, quality publication and is distributed free of charge to every Kurland member of the Association of Baltic Knighthoods and to some other interested persons as well. Its pages are used to share articles on a range of interesting, Kurland-based historical topics in addition to providing illustrated progress reports about the many projects the VKS supports in Kurland. The VKS has no publishing costs because subscriber donations cover the magazine's publication costs in full. Baron Wolf Buchholtz also kindly continues to manage magazine despatch in an exemplary fashion.

It is pleasing that the VKS continues to draw new bequests and legacies. Frau Olga v. Timroth has already made a sizeable bequest and two more Kurlanders, Baron Haaren and Countess Mohl, have kindly nominated the VKS as heir to their estates in their respective wills and testaments.

Significantly, there has also been a decision by the Family Association of the Barons von Hahn in 2006 to support the VKS with a regular, annual donation of the same fixed size every year.

Many objects and valuable archival materials have also kindly been gifted to the VKS for safekeeping. The VKS has accepted them gratefully on behalf of the Kurland Knighthood. Among such items are:

- The valuable objects Princess Irene Lieven left the VKS in her will and which are today exhibited at Schloss Höhnscheid;

- The silver plate donated by Frau Brigitta v.Bremen née Baroness v.Hahn, which bears the engraved coats of arms of all the Kurlanders who fought with her father in the *Landeswehr* in 1918-19 when he was the commander of the Hahn Squadron;
- Valuable genealogical works and old family portraits donated by the Swedish Baroness Ingrid Wrede af Elimä. Her mother had been the Baroness v.Fircks who had set up and paid for her manor's own community care centre (*Sozialstation*) at Samiten in Kurland and who had been known as the 'Samiten Angel' (*Engel von Samiten*). The portraits now hang in the 'Eulenburg' part of Schloss Höhnscheid for the benefit of every Kurlander;
- A copy of the invaluable Klingspor Baltic armorial donated by the Westfalian Baron Sigismund von Elverfeldt-Ulm. This gift is all the more remarkable because Baron Elverfeldt is not a Kurlander. The armorial is housed in the library at Schloss Höhnscheid.

The VKS always gratefully acknowledges those who donate to it at the request of a deceased person rather than buying flowers. The willingness to seek, and then make, such donations leaves no doubt about just how strong the sense of fellowship still is among Kurlanders and how readily that fellow feeling extends to its philanthropic arm, the VKS. The VKS is keen to recognise such generosity and gladly publishes photos of the deceased in its *Kurland* magazine every time such a gift is made.

A rule change was agreed in 1994 to allow the VKS to start directing up to ten per cent of the value of any payments it makes in Germany to equivalent projects beyond Germany borders. Until that time, the financial assistance the VKS had been providing to needy Kurlanders and students had been available only to residents of Germany. The change also made it possible for the VKS to start taking on projects of similar dimensions in Kurland on the basis of 'Kurlanders for Kurland' (*Kurland in Kurland*). On that basis, the amount the VKS was able to dedicate to its Kurland projects in 2013, including some purpose-specific donations and the grants received from the Federal Government totalled 70,000 Euros.

The list of projects in Kurland is notable in its length (*see separate listing in the Kurland magazine*).

The first requests for help were pleas for modest, practical items, like a pizza oven for the patients of the self-same psychiatric institution in Latvia that the Kurland Knighthood had itself once founded. Requests then progressed to farm implements that would occupy inmates gainfully. Herr Gert v.Grandidier subsequently put enormous personal effort into getting a complete commercial kitchen transferred to Kurland. A community care centre was also established in Saldus (*Frauenburg*) and provided with a VW bus that the VKS then helped to maintain over the following three years.

The VKS gifted equipment for a workshop to repair church organs to the pastor of Ugahlen¹⁴ church because he is also trained in repairing church organs. The basis on which the VKS made the gift was that the pastor should also use the tools and his skills to repair church organs in other manor churches (*Patronatskirchen*) as and when the need arose. The VKS also voiced its hope that the pastor would proceed to train other interested members of his congregation now that the tools were available to him. There is a reference to the pastor in the Riga Cathedral (*Rigaer Dom*).

¹⁴ Ugahlen was one of several, large, entailed manors in the northwest corner of Kurland belonging to the prominent Baron v.Behr family.

The VKS has also contributed to repairs of the organ at Trinity Church (*Trinitatiskirche*) in Libau, and to efforts to strengthen the church tower at the Trinity Church (*Trinitatiskirche*) in Mitau. More than 500,000 Euro has now been invested into church and manor house restoration projects in Kurland and most of that money has gone into re-laying and repairing rooves. The Federal Government has contributed some 400,000 Euros of that sum in special purpose grants and payments.

Another particular achievement has been the restoration of six of the sarcophagi of the Kurland dukes that lie in the crypt of the ducal palace in Mitau. These sarcophagi are of great artistic and historical value. Some were damaged and others destroyed during the Revolution and in the subsequent Soviet period. Their repair has been a painstaking, slow and difficult affair. Baron Nicolas Behr, Professor Rüdiger Zellentin and a few others have kindly met all the associated costs.

No VKS restoration project in Kurland proceeds before the responsible people in the Latvian Office of Historic Monuments or the pastors of affected churches have been fully consulted and their consent given. Consultation is thus the hallmark of every VKS restoration project. For three years now the VKS has been working closely with the Latvian Lutheran Church's Construction Office, and this office now also supervises all works and completes all the required paperwork. Both have also joined forces to rebuild the former memorial at the Tuckum hilltop cemetery that once commemorated the eighteen Kurlanders who were murdered nearby in 1919. The memorial was destroyed in Soviet times.

The VKS board achieves effective project management by making the one board member or trustee, to whom the project has been allocated, fully responsible for delivering on every aspect of the project from start to finish, including monitoring its progress, signing off when work has been completed and overseeing the payments. In that way, we can be confident that the best possible levels of supervision and control have always been exercised. In every instance, the VKS also commissions a commemorative tablet for affixing at the site to record the assistance the VKS has provided. Much behind-the-scenes work goes into making sure that correct processes have been duly followed in every instance and it is hard to imagine how so many wonderful outcomes could have been achieved without the exceptional personal commitment and engagement Baron Otto Grotthuss brings to the task, nor without his wealth of contacts, or his ability to so successfully tap into the near inexhaustible coffers of the Federal Government. It comes as no surprise therefore that Baron Grotthuss is often also asked to represent the VKS and the Kurland Knighthood at so many of the hand-over events in Kurland. He did this again most recently when yet another of the ducal sarcophagi was being re-consecrated after it had been successfully restored under VKS auspices.

With the benefit of purpose-specific donations over several years, it has also been possible to get a Latvian photographer with an historical bent to faithfully photograph every known family grave stone and site in Kurland and to compile the results into a comprehensive photographic register. At the very least, the aim has been to ensure that all the available information on damaged gravestones was carefully transcribed in the worst cases and thereby saved for posterity. Many of these damaged gravestones have since decayed completely. As always, our objective remains to be 'Kurlanders working for Kurland' (*Kurland in Kurland*). In the same spirit, and funded through yet more purpose-specific and generous donations, it has also been possible to translate into German and publish Dr

Lancmanis's¹⁵ well-documented and well-illustrated Latvian histories of so many of the Kurland manors. The additional work involved to get this done was prodigious and we have the former Kurland Knighthood genealogist, Herr Klas Lackschewitz, to thank for delivering it.

It has also been pleasing to note how increasing numbers of Kurland families are now realising their own family projects in Kurland with the help of the VKS, whether it be to restore manor houses, churches and cemeteries the family might have once owned or been connected with, or to arrange for their continuing care and upkeep. The way such families go about it is to channel the funds they wish to direct to such projects through the VKS. This delivers them a welcome tax deduction, but the benefit of VKS project oversight is more important. The hard work involved in planning, coordinating and delivering on every project, prioritising its urgency and completing sign-off when the work has been done and payment is due all falls to the VKS. The leads here over many years have been Baron Peter Howen, a most talented organiser never daunted by any challenge, and Baron Grotthuss.

Many members of the Kurland Knighthood clearly still feel the connection to the Kurland of old in today's Latvia and we see that best when we note just how many of them have already taken part in group bus tours to Kurland. These bus tours have been arranged and led by VKS board members and the focus during scheduled stops has been as much on VKS projects, whether completed or in train, as it has been about visiting manor houses and other sites of particular interest to the bus travellers.

That Kurland's emotional pull on so many of our bus tour participants should remain so strong is amazing indeed. Not a one of them can have still been born there! And, contrary to what some older folk might suppose, visiting Kurland isn't just about a detour to quickly embrace the links their families might have once had there before proceeding with their lives. No, they perceive visiting Kurland in a much more dynamic way. What they seek are unique personal insights and they also want to grow more self-aware. Immersing themselves in their shared Kurland past is their way of deepening their appreciation. If we put it in grammatical terms, we could compare it to the difference between operating in the imperfect versus the past perfect tense: for those in imperfect tense, it is unfinished business; for those in past perfect, it's as though they've long since drawn their line in the sand.

The VKS took a novel approach last year when it purchased 40 hectares of farm land in Brandenburg and promptly re-let it for farming. Not only has this been a productive and wise investment of capital in these uncertain times but it has also enabled the Kurland Knighthood to become a landowner once again, the first time since it was stripped of its assets after the First World War. The size of the acreage is almost as big as the land parcel remainders afforded former landowners by the Latvian government after the manors had been seized in 1920.

The VKS have never seen themselves operating in isolation – their many connections to the Kurland Knighthood are too personal, too strong and too diverse for that. But they do see themselves as the ones discharging its broader philanthropic mission to reach out into the community and beyond, and to build bridges wherever they can. None of the other Knighthoods has access to capital of

¹⁵ Dr Lancmanis is the director of the Rundale (Ruhenthal) palace museum mentioned earlier.

anywhere near the size the VKS still commands. VKS board members might delight in the good fortune they enjoy in that regard but it is certainly not a matter of pride for them.

So, what's still to say about the Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Bequest on its 100th birthday?

The first thing to say is that it remains our commitment to always proceed wisely with this generous bequest and to always use the money in ways that remain consistent with what the founder would have wished. Our commitment is driven by our deep sense of gratitude and VKS board members won't stop being scrupulously diligent in the discharge of their obligations. That said, we also can't look past the army of generous benefactors and supporters who merit our continued thanks.

We therefore thank those, who opt to donate money in lieu of wreaths, those who fund our *Kurland* magazine publications, those who give gifts, and of course those who are generous in remembering the VKS in their wills and bequests. The VKS would never be able to meet the ballooning demand on its resources, both here and in Kurland, if it were not for the generous inflows of new monies like these. There are still more ways of making donations and these are described in detail in the publication the German Trust for the Preservation of Monuments (*Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz*) puts out periodically, called 'Monuments' (*Monumente*). The suggestions include occasions like birthdays, weddings, expressions of sympathy and more.

As Baron Howen noted once in a piece he wrote for one of the *Kurland* magazines:

"no need to remember us at birthday time – we have everything already, thanks – but not the VKS" (*"bitte keine Geburtstagsgeschenke, wir haben alles – aber die Stiftungen haben nicht alles"*).

I think of Thinking and Thanking as closely related concepts. Thinking about Ada Baroness von Manteuffel today in 2014 in this *Kurländer Palais* in Dresden only makes us want to Thank her all the more for her exceptionally generous and blessed bequest 100 years ago.

A clever little line in Hans Sedlmayer's well-known book, 'Loss of the Middle' (*'Verlust der Mitte'*) springs to mind. It reads:

"stay close to your origins and you'll stay young" (*„Denn jung ist, wer seinen Ursprung nahe ist“*).

What we've achieved by merging all our other bequests with the Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Bequest and setting up the overarching VKS is to magnify our capacity for delivering on the Baroness's very core aim of helping Kurlanders in every material kind of way. We feel it is how we can best stay true to the vision and motivation that once guided her. That's why we can also say that we're not just celebrating a bequest today that's turned 100 years old but we're also celebrating just how young and evergreen the principles still are that have been guiding us for these past 100 years.

Translated by:
Jens v. Brasch,
July 2015

Translations of the captions to the photographs

1. The Kurland Palais in Dresden (photo by Peter Baron von Korff)
2. Alexandrine (Ada) Baroness von Manteuffel, nee Countess Apraxin
3. The founder's grave in the *Cimetiere de Caucade* in Nice. The VKS cares for the grave
4. Paul Count v. der Pahlen (1862 – 1942)
5. The Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Widows Home at Birkenwerder near Berlin
6. Ulrich Baron v. der Osten-Sacken (1882 – 1946)
7. Renewing the roof of the church at Nurmhusen
8. Duke Ferdinand Kettler's restored sarcophagus