



Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years War, 1500-1648

A Brave Woman Steals the Royal Crown – Helene Kottannerin (c. 1400-after 1458)

Helene Kottannerin (c. 1400-after 1458) composed what is possibly the earliest known autobiographical text written in German by a woman. The daughter of a lesser nobleman, she was probably born in Ödenburg (Hungarian: Sopron). In 1431, she married Johann Kottanner of Vienna. By 1436, it is thought, she was at the court of Albert II of the house of Habsburg, who was King of the Romans (and emperor-elect) (r. 1438-39) and King of Hungary (r. 1437-39). At court, Helene Kottannerin served the queen, Elizabeth (c. 1409-42). In 1439, Albert moved his court to Hungary, where he died six months later on October 27, 1439. At the time, Elizabeth was five months pregnant. After Albert's death, a powerful party of nobles urged her to marry King Wladislaus III of Poland (1424-44), who was only sixteen years old. But Elizabeth refused, and pinned her hopes for the future on her unborn child, who, according to her physicians, was sure to be a boy. To secure the legitimate rights of her son-to-be, the queen needed to have him crowned as soon as possible. That being the case, she instructed Helene Kottannerin to break into the royal stronghold of Plintenburg (Hungarian: Visegrád) and steal the heavily guarded royal Crown of Saint Stephen. Helene obliged, and on February 20, 1440, she and a Hungarian nobleman carried out a daring raid, which is the subject of the first excerpt reproduced below. The next day, Helene embarked on a dangerous winter journey and delivered the royal crown to Elizabeth at her castle in Komorn. The queen's son, known to history as Ladislaus (Hungarian: László) Posthumous, was born just a few hours later.

The second excerpt describes the other key event in Helene Kottannerin's narrative. With the infant king-to-be and the royal crown in tow, Elizabeth and Helene set out for Stuhlweissenburg (Hungarian: Székesfehérvár), the coronation city of the Hungarian kings. There, on May 15, 1440, the holy day of Pentecost, the Archbishop of Gran lifted three-month-old Ladislaus from his cradle and crowned him king. Thus, Elizabeth, aided by Helene, preserved the throne for her son, who, though eventually recognized as king, reigned only four years until his death in 1457.

[. . .]

But when the time had come when the Almighty God wished to perform His miraculous deeds, God sent us a man who was willing to abduct the Holy Crown. He was Hungarian, and his name was . . . He was loyal and wise and sensible in the way he took care of this business. We prepared the things we needed for the undertaking and took several locks and two files. And he who was to risk his life with me donned a black velvet night shift and two felt shoes, and in each shoe he placed a file and he hid the locks underneath his shirt. And I took my gracious lady's small signet, and I also took the keys to the first door; for there were three of them, because near the door-hinge there was another chain and a bolt, where before our departure from the stronghold we had attached another lock to prevent that anyone else would affix one there. And

when we were ready to go, my lady first sent a messenger ahead of us to Plintenburg to inform the castellan and the lords in charge of the ladies-in-waiting, Franz of Pöker and Ladislaus Tamási, that the ladies should pack and be ready for the carriage that would come to take them to my lady's castle in Komorn, for she had had to go to Pressburg. This was announced to all the members of the queen's household. Then, when the carriage destined for the ladies-in-waiting was ready, and the sled in which I and he who shared my concerns were to travel was ready as well, they sent us two Hungarian noblemen to accompany me to the ladies-in-waiting. Then we set out on our journey.

When the castellan learned the news that I was coming to fetch the ladies-in-waiting, it surprised him and all the other members of the queen's court as well that they had allowed me to go so far away from my young mistress who was still young and who did not like me to leave her, as they all knew very well. Then it happened that the castellan felt a bit ill and would have liked to place his bed near the door that formed the first entrance to the Holy Crown. But then his illness worsened, which was the will of God, and because that door was in the room of the women, he was reluctant to allow his servants to sleep there with him. So then he wrapped a small piece of linen cloth around the lock which we had placed near the door-hinge and pressed his seal on it.

When we arrived at Plintenburg, the ladies-in-waiting were cheerful and looked forward to their trip to my noble mistress, and they were getting themselves ready and had ordered a trunk to be made for their wardrobe. We had to wait for a long time, and the hammering went on until after 8 o'clock. To while away the time, my companion joined us in the room and conversed with the ladies. In front of the stove, there lay some firewood which was used to heat it, and he hid the files underneath this wood. But some servants of the ladies-in-waiting happened to see the files underneath the wood and began to whisper among themselves. I overheard them and immediately told him about it. My words frightened him so much that all color drained from his face, and he quickly retrieved the files and hid them somewhere else.

And he said to me: "Woman, see to it that we have light." So I asked an old woman to give me some candles, explaining that I had to say many prayers because it was Saturday night [20 February 1440], the first Saturday after Ash Wednesday. I took the candles and concealed them carefully. And when all the ladies-in-waiting and everybody else had gone to sleep, I remained in the little room with an old woman I had brought with me who did not know a word of German and who also knew nothing of our plan and was unfamiliar with the castle. She lay there and was fast asleep.

When it was time, he who shared my burden came through the chapel and knocked on the door. I let him in and locked the door again behind him. To assist him with the work, he had brought along a man, whose Christian name was . . . , the same as his, who had sworn loyalty to him. I go to them and want to bring them the candles, but the candles were gone. I became so afraid that I did not know any more what to do, and the whole undertaking almost failed only because we had no light. Then I came to my senses and went and secretly awakened the woman who

had given me the candles, and I told her that the candles were gone and that I still had much praying to do. To my great relief she gave me others which I gave to him, and I also gave him the locks to attach there later, and I also gave him my gracious lady's small signet with which he was to replace the seals, and I also gave him the three keys to the first door.

Then he removed from the lock the linen cloth which the castellan had wrapped around it and unlocked the door and went inside with his servant, and they worked so hard on the other locks, that the sounds of their hammering and filing could be heard distinctly. But even if the guards and the castellan's men had been on the alert that night and actively watching the treasure entrusted to their care, then surely God Almighty would have stopped their ears to prevent them from hearing anything. But I alone heard everything very well and kept watch while invaded by many fears and worries, and I kneeled down in deep devotion and prayed to God and to Our Dear Lady, that they might assist me and my helpers. Yet I feared more for my soul than for my life, and I begged God that if the undertaking were against His will, I should be damned for it; or if something evil should result for the country and the people, that God have mercy on my soul and let me die here on the spot.

As I was praying like this, I suddenly heard loud noises and a rumble, as if there were a great many armored men at the door through which I had admitted my helper, and I had the impression that they were about to force open the door. This frightened me and I stood up, wanting to warn them to stop the work. But then it occurred to me that I should go to the door first, and I did. But when I reached the door, the noises were gone and I did not hear anybody any more. Then I said to myself that it must have been a ghost, and I resumed my prayers and promised Our Dear Lady to make a pilgrimage, barefoot, to Zell and vowed that as long as I had not performed the pilgrimage I would not sleep on feathers on Saturday nights.¹ And on every Saturday night as long as I live I also say a special prayer to Our Dear lady, to thank her for the mercy she has bestowed on me. And I beg her to thank for me her Son, Our Dear Lord Jesus Christ, for the great mercy and compassion he has so clearly manifested toward me.

But while I was praying like this, I seemed to hear loud noises and the din of armor at the door that led directly into the apartment of the ladies-in-waiting. This frightened me so much that my entire body began to shake with fear and I broke into a cold sweat, and I thought that it must not be a ghost after all and that while I stood at the chapel door, they had gone around to the other side; and I did not know what to do and strained my ears to see if I could hear the ladies. But I did not hear anyone. Then I went softly down the steps through the room of the little princess to the door that led directly to the room of the ladies. And when I arrived at that door, I heard no one. Then I was relieved and thanked God and resumed my prayers once more and said to myself that it surely was the Devil, who would have liked to foil our plan.

¹ Mariazell in Steiermark was a popular pilgrimage place. To atone for her sins, Helene Kottanner promises to sleep on straw, or perhaps plain wood, instead of feathers, on Saturday nights. [All footnotes are taken from *The Memoirs of Helene Kottanner (1439-1440)*, translated by Maya Bijvoet Williamson. Cambridge, 1998, pp. 28-33, 40-44.]

When I had said all my prayers, I stood up and wanted to go into the vault to see what they were doing. Then he came to meet me and said that I could be pleased, because everything had gone well; they had filed the locks off the door, but the locks on the crown's casing were so tight that they had been unable to file them off and had had to burn them open. There was so much smoke that I worried that some people might ask about it, but God prevented that.

When the Holy Crown was completely free, we again closed the doors everywhere, replaced the locks that they had removed, pressed my lady's seals on them once more, and locked the outer door again and tied the piece of cloth with the seal on it as we had found it and as the castellan had put it there. And I threw the files in the privy in the room of the ladies, where you will find them, if you break it open, as proof that I am speaking the truth.

We carried the Holy Crown through the chapel of Saint Elizabeth, to which I, Helene Kottanner, still owe a chasuble and an altar cloth to be paid for by my gracious lord, King Ladislaus.² Then my helper took a red velvet pillow, opened it, removed part of the feathers, put the Holy Crown into the pillow, and sewed it back up. It was now almost day, and the ladies-in-waiting and everybody else were getting up and readying themselves for the journey thence.

Now the ladies-in-waiting had in their service an old woman who worked for them, and my gracious lady had given orders to give this woman her pay and then leave her behind, so she could return home to Ofen. But when the woman had been paid, she came to me, saying that she had seen something unusual lying in front of the stove and did not know what it was. This worried me, for I realized that it was part of the casing in which the crown had stood, and I talked the idea out of her head as well as I could, and then I went secretly to the stove and threw into the fire whatever remnants I could find and burned them completely. And I took the old woman along with me on the journey. They all wondered why I did this. I told them that I had taken it upon myself to try and obtain from the queen a position for her at St. Martin's in Vienna, as indeed I did.

When the queen's ladies and her entire retinue were ready to ride off, he who shared my anxiety took the pillow with the Holy Crown sewn inside it and ordered his helper to carry the pillow out of the castle onto the sled in which he and I were to sit. So then the good fellow took the pillow on his shoulders and put over it an old cowhide with a long tail which dangled behind him. And all the people followed him with their eyes and began to laugh. When we had come down from the castle and reached the market, we would have liked to eat, but all we could find was herring, so we ate a little of that. And when we finished singing the mass, the hour was already far advanced, and we still had to travel from Plintenburg to Komorn that day, which we did, even though this is a distance of twelve miles. When we were about to ride off and taking

² This is a direct appeal to King Ladislaus to settle his, and his mother's, debts to Kottanner. Elizabeth of Thüringen (1207–1231), daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary. She was canonized in 1235. Until 1539 her remains were in Marburg-an-der Lahn. What the reliquary in the Plintenburg chapel contained is unknown.

our seats, I quickly felt over the pillow to know where the Holy Crown was so I would not sit down on it. And I thanked God Almighty for His mercy, although I kept looking back frequently for fear that anyone might be following us. Indeed, I worried incessantly, and thoughts were crowding in my mind, and I marveled at what God had done or might still do.

During my stay at the castle, I had not had a single peaceful night because of the important task entrusted to me, and I had many bad dreams. One night in particular, I dreamed that a woman had penetrated through the wall into the vault and carried off the Holy Crown. I was terrified and got up right away and took a maid of honor, whose name is Dachpeck, with me to the vault. But there I found everything as I had left it. The Lady Dachpeck then said to me: "It is no wonder that you cannot sleep well; great things have been entrusted to you." Thereupon we went back to our beds. And about all this I was thinking during the journey.³

When we had reached the inn where we intended to eat, the good fellow took the pillow of which he was in charge, followed me carrying it to the place where we wanted to eat, and laid it down across from me, so that I could watch it while we were eating. After the meal, the good fellow took the pillow and put it on the sled again as before, and so we rode off and traveled until the darkness of night.

Then we reached the Danube, which was still covered with ice, but the ice had gotten thin in several places. When we were on the ice and had come as far as the middle of the Danube, the carriage of the ladies-in-waiting proved too heavy; the ice broke and the carriage toppled over, the ladies screamed, and there was much chaos and confusion. I was afraid and thought that we and the Holy Crown would all perish in the Danube together. Yet God came to our rescue. None of our people went under, but of the things that were on the carriage several fell into the water and disappeared underneath the ice. Then I took the duchess from Silezia and the highest-ranking ladies into my sled, and with the help of God we made it safely across the ice, and all the others did too.

When we arrived at the queen's castle in Komorn, he who shared my anxiety took the pillow with the Holy Crown and carried it inside to a place where it would be safe. And when I arrived in the ladies' quarters to see my gracious lady, I was received immediately by the noble queen who now knew well that with the help of God I had been a good messenger. But of the wondrous and truly miraculous assistance of God which had manifested itself there, her grace knows nothing, and she died before she had the opportunity to learn of it.⁴ It was never possible for me to be alone with her long enough to tell her the entire story from beginning to end, for we

³ The passage is unclear; from the foregoing one would conclude that Kottanner spent just one night at the Plintenburg stronghold before returning to the queen with the Holy Crown.

⁴ Queen Elizabeth died on 17 December 1442, only 4 days after a preliminary peace treaty with the Polish Wladislaus promised to end the civil war.

were not together much longer.⁵ And I also never had the opportunity to ask the one who shared my secret whether while working in the vault he had experienced the same miracle as I had witnessed, for he did not know much German and there was no one I could trust who could have translated for me.

[. . .]

My gracious lady sent for a golden cloth to be brought from Ofen which would be used for King Lászlá's coronation gown, but the messenger took too much time and we worried that it would take too long because the coronation had to take place on a church holiday. That would be on Pentecost, the first upcoming holiday [15 May 1440], which was not far off, so we had to hurry. But there happened to be a beautiful and large vestment which had belonged to Emperor Sigmund; it was red and golden with silver-white spots worked into it. We cut it up and made out of it the young king's very first ceremonial dress, which he would wear together with the Holy Crown. And now tell me if this would not be a sign that he was meant to rule over the inheritance of both his father and his mother, for their coats of arms both have red and white in them.⁶ I sewed the little gown, the alb, the humeral veil and the stole, the maniples, the gloves, and the shoes, and I had to make them secretly, in the chapel, behind locked doors.

When everything was ready, my gracious lady sent Lord Matthias, her Chancellor, to her cousin, Lord Ladislaus, the Ban, with the message that he should join her and accompany her to Stuhlweissenburg, because she was going to have her son crowned and that she had the Holy Crown in her possession. When Lord Ladislaus, the Ban,⁷ heard this, he was not pleased at all, but he kept hoping that it was not true, that the Crown was still at Plintenburg, and he did not join my gracious lady. When her grace learned that Lord Ladislaus was not coming, her grace sent the two lords, Matkó and Imre Marcali, to Ödenburg. And she sent with them a knight, a vassal of Cillei's named Henry of Randegg, to watch them, because Count Ulrich Cillei was at the time in charge of Ödenburg and he had placed a warden in the town, whose name was Frederick Flednitzer, and to this man's supervision she entrusted these lords.

Then the noble queen sent a messenger in utmost secrecy to the noble sovereign of Austria named Duke Albert and announced to him that she intended to have my gracious lord, King Lászlá, crowned on the day of Pentecost [15 May 1440].⁸ The noble sovereign, Duke Albert, proved to be the truly loyal friend one can count on in extremity, and he quickly mounted his horse and rode to Stuhlweissenburg in such haste that his men rode several horses to death,

⁵ Shortly after the coronation the members of the royal family went their separate ways for safety reasons; since Helene Kottanner was designated to take care of the little king, she had to take leave of the queen. They apparently never saw each other again.

⁶ Red and white were the colors of Albert and Elizabeth's families. They occur together several times in the course of the story, which Helene Kottanner interprets as symbolic of divine support for the Habsburgs.

⁷ Wojwode, like Banus, designates a function in Hungarian local administration.

⁸ Albert VI, Duke of Austria (1418–1463), second cousin of Elizabeth's husband, and brother of Archduke Frederick V.

and on Pentecost he presented himself in person to his nephew, King Lászlá. And had it been necessary, he would have sacrificed his own life for his sake.

When all the servants and lords who were to accompany my gracious lady to Stuhlweissenburg had assembled, her grace sent a message to the Archbishop of Gran, requesting him to come and ride with her to Stuhlweissenburg to attend her son's coronation. He came with a large following. And when the cradle in which the young king would be carried was ready, we needed always four men to carry his grace. And on the Thursday afternoon [12 May 1440] before Pentecost, the noble queen rode off with the young king and the noble Count Cillei and the Croatian counts and the dukes of Lindbach. And the Great Count, Lord Lawrence of Heidenreichsturn, also joined my gracious lady's train.

A large vessel of the kind called flatbottom lay prepared. The noble queen and her royal offspring, both son and daughter, as well as a great many people of quality got in, so that the vessel became very full and was so heavy that it was hardly one hand above the water, which was dangerous and risky. But then there came a strong wind, and God helped us joyously across the water.

And when we reached the other side, they carried the young king in the cradle – for there were always four armed men to carry him – and I, his servant, rode beside the cradle. But when they had carried him only a little while, he began to cry loudly and would not stay in the cradle. So I stepped down from my horse and carried him in my arms. It rained so hard that I had trouble walking, but there was a pious knight, named Hanns of Pielach, who guided me through the puddles. It was already very dark when we reached Totis, and we stayed there for the night. The next morning, I rode in front with the young king, while my gracious lady stayed in the back with her youngest daughter, because her grace had business to discuss with the Great Count, who spoke flattering words to her and said that he had led his army honorably and was willing to bring it to its death honorably as well. This was all a sham, however, for he really did not want to travel with her grace to Stuhlweissenburg and turned around mid-way and rode off to Ofen to await the arrival of the Polish king.

And as I rode in front with the young king, we arrived at a beautiful hunting lodge, the German name of which is Grintsechdel. Since we were going to stay there for the night, we would have liked to eat, but we did not find much, because it was Friday and we were supposed to fast. And we stayed there for the night and waited for my gracious lady to catch up with us.

Then we traveled on to Stuhlweissenburg. When we were almost there, the Lord of Freistadt, Nicholas Ujláki, rode out to meet us with at least five hundred horses.⁹ When we went through the marshland, the young king began to cry and wanted to stay neither in the cradle nor in the carriage. And I had to carry his grace in my arms until we were inside the city of Stuhlweissenburg. Then the lords dismounted from their horses and formed a wide circle of

⁹ Wojwode Nicholas Ujláki, whom Elizabeth had made Captain of Stuhlweissenburg shortly before.

armored men, holding naked swords in their hands, and into the middle of that circle I, Helene Kottanner, had to carry the young king, with on one side Count Bartholomeus of Croatia and on the other side someone else, and both accompanied me in honor of the noble king, and so we went through the city until we were inside the inn. That was on the eve of Pentecost [14 May 1440].

Then my gracious lady summoned the oldest citizens, who have to be present, and showed them the Holy Crown and ordered them to proceed according to the tradition and as had always been done. And there were some among these citizens who remembered that Emperor Sigmund had been crowned there too and who had been present at his coronation.¹⁰

On the morning of the day of Pentecost [15 May 1440], I rose early and bathed the noble king and prepared him as well as I could. Then they carried him into the church where all kings are crowned. And many persons of quality, ecclesiastics as well as lay people, were present there, as you have heard before. And when we had entered the church, they carried the young king to the choir. But the door to the choir was closed, and the citizens were inside, while my gracious lady stood outside the door with her son, the noble king. And then my gracious lady spoke to them in Hungarian, and the citizens likewise answered her grace back in Hungarian. They said that her grace should swear the oath on behalf of her son, the noble king, for on that day his grace was exactly twelve weeks old.¹¹ When this had been done according to their old custom, they opened the door and admitted their natural lord and lady as well as the other people, clergy and laymen, who had been summoned to attend. And the young queen, the Lady Elizabeth, stood upstairs, near the organ, so that she would not get hurt in the crowd, for she was not yet four years old.

When they were about to celebrate the Mass, I had to lift up the young king and hold his grace while they confirmed him. And Nicholas Ujláki, the Lord of Freistadt, had been appointed to dub the young king a knight and thus make him rightly a true lord of the realm. And the noble Count Cillei had a sword all mounted with silver and gold, on which was written the motto: "Invincible." And this same sword he presented to the young king so that with it he could be made a knight. Then I, Helene Kottanner, took the king in my arms, and the Lord of Freistadt took the sword in his hand and made the king a knight, but he hit him so hard with the sword that I could feel the blow in my arm. The noble queen, who stood beside me, had noticed this, and she said to the Lord of Freistadt: "Az istenért, még ne sértsd!" which means: "For God's sake, don't hurt him." Then he said: "Nem," which means: "No," and he laughed. Then the Right Reverend Prelate, Archbishop of Gran, took the holy oil and anointed the noble royal child king. Then they dressed him in the golden gown that is worn by all kings. Then the archbishop took the Holy Crown and placed it on the head of the noblest king who ever lived in holy Christendom, King Lászlá, son of

¹⁰ Sigmund was crowned in Stuhlweissenburg on 31 March 1387.

¹¹ The oath probably concerned the rights and privileges of the citizens of Stuhlweissenburg which Elizabeth had to guarantee.

King Albert, grandson of Emperor Sigmund, who was crowned with the Holy Crown in Stuhlweissenburg on the holy day of Pentecost by the Archbishop of Gran.

For they have three laws in the kingdom of Hungary, and if a monarch fails to observe even one of them, the people refuse to acknowledge him as their rightful king. The first law requires that the king of Hungary be crowned with the Holy Crown. The second, that he be crowned by the Archbishop of Gran. The third, that the coronation take place in Stuhlweissenburg.¹² All three laws were carefully observed in the case of the noble King Ladislaus, and on the day on which his grace was crowned, he was exactly twelve weeks old. And you probably know that as the Archbishop placed the Holy Crown on the child's head and held it there, he held up his head with the strength of a one-year-old, and that is rarely seen in children of twelve weeks.

When the noble King Lászlá had been crowned in my arms at the altar of Saint Stephen, I carried the noble king up a small flight of stairs to a platform, as is the tradition there. Then they read the coronation charter, which is part of the ceremony. For this they needed a golden cloth for the king to sit on, as is the custom there. Therefore, to comply with this rule, I took from his cradle a cover, red and golden and banded with white ermine. And notice how the colors red and white once again came together by chance. Then the noble king was held on the golden cloth and Count Ulrich Cillei held the Crown over his head until we finished singing the Mass. But the noble young king had little joy of his coronation, for he cried so loud that it could be heard throughout the entire church and the common people marveled and said that it was not the voice of a child of twelve weeks but rather of a one-year-old, which he really was not. Then the lord of Freistadt, Nicholas Ujláki, bestowed knighthood on behalf of the noble King Lászlá.

When the Mass was over, I carried the noble king down again and laid him in the cradle because he was tired after being held up for so long. Then they carried him into St. Peter's Church, where I had to lift him out of the cradle once more and carry him to a chair and put him down on it, as is the custom there; for every king who is crowned there must sit on that chair. Then I carried his grace down again and put him back in the cradle. Then they carried the noble king out of St. Peter's Church, and the royal family followed on foot behind him until we reached the inn. Only the noble Count Ulrich Cillei rode his horse, because he had to carry the Holy Crown and hold it over the noble king's head so that all could see that it was the Holy Crown which had been worn by the Holy King, Saint Stephen, and the other kings of Hungary.

[. . .]

¹² The "laws" enumerated and described here were unwritten rules, legal traditions which, with the exception of the first one, were observed without interruption from 1001 to 1526. The only Hungarian king who was not crowned with the Holy Crown of Saint Stephen was Elizabeth's opponent Wladislaus, King of Poland, who was crowned by the Archbishop of Gran on 17 July 1440, only two months after the Archbishop had crowned Elizabeth's son.

Source of original German text: *Die Denkwürdigkeiten der Helene Kottannerin (1439-1440)*, edited by Karl Mollay. Wiener Neudrucke. Neuausgaben und Erstdrucke deutscher literarischer Texte, edited by Herbert Zeman, vol. 2. Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst: Vienna, 1971, pp. 14-18, 24-28.

Source of English translation: *The Memoirs of Helene Kottanner (1439-1440)*. Translated from the German with introduction, interpretative essay and notes by Maya Bijvoet Williamson. D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, UK, 1998, pp. 28-33, 40-44. Reproduced with permission.