



Volume 4. Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890 A Magdeburg Merchant Remembers a Royal Visit (1880)

After 1871, royal visits were frequently made to Germany's diverse regions and localities in order to foster the Empire's "inner" unification. These visits were well-suited to familiarizing non-Prussian populations with the new Hohenzollern dynasty, and, as this excerpt suggests, they also encouraged popular allegiance to the new imperial state, even among Prussian populations. Here, a Magdeburg merchant, Otto Pilet, recalls Kaiser Wilhelm I's visit to his city nine years after unification.

After I had gained the capable help and support of Ernst Jacoby in my business in 1870, I accepted a seat as a municipal deputy and joined the assembly on August 10, 1871. Soon my activities in this assembly became quite substantial. As early as October 23, 1873, I was elected to the committee charged with overseeing public debt; on May 27, 1881, to the committee on trade; and, not long after my start as a municipal deputy, to the committee for the projected building of the new city theater. [. . .] Subsequently, as a member of the election commission, and also as its chairman, my position in the assembly became greater and more influential, as it were. Thus the year 1880 came along and with it Magdeburg's grand day of celebration, June 4th, which marked the 200th anniversary of the definitive incorporation of the Duchy of Magdeburg into Brandenburg, the date upon which it had come under the glorious scepter of the Hohenzollerns. The day brought a visit to the city by the old Kaiser [Emperor] Wilhelm, the magnificent Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, the young Prince Wilhelm (our current imperial majesty), and the chivalrous Prince Friedrich Karl, together with a dazzling entourage. The enthusiasm and excitement during the preparations were great, for Magdeburg wished to give a grand reception to its beloved ruling house. With pride and delight I think back to this day: to the beautifully decorated city, the magnificent large banquet hall of the Alte Markt,* and the parade of Magdeburg merchants and tradesmen paying homage. Everything glistened in the most glorious weather fit for an emperor.

The assembly of municipal deputies had voted me onto the reception committee, and I belonged to the executive of this body. In particular, I was responsible, together with one city

* The "Old Market Square" – trans.

councilor and a municipal deputy, for attending to the banquet, and, again as a board member of the joint-stock association that supported the city theater, I was also in charge of organizing the setting for that evening's gala performance.

On the previous day, the Empress of Russia, the sister of our beloved Kaiser, had passed away, so our city's joyful anticipation of seeing our illustrious ruling dynasty was seriously threatened. Late in the evening, however, the happy news arrived that all the dignitaries would attend, and that the entire program should remain unchanged. His Majesty the Emperor, though, would have to return to Berlin after accepting homage in the Alte Markt. [. . .] Everyone breathed a deep sigh of relief and looked forward to the following day with jubilation. [. . .]

As members of the special committee, we had the honor of being the first to welcome the arriving dignitaries, who were accompanied by city leaders, and of being introduced to them. And to this day it fills me with happiness to remember the sociability and kindness that the royal ladies and gentlemen displayed, especially His Imperial and Royal Highness, the Crown Prince. Specifically, I will never forget the scene after the meal in the adjoining work area of the private chambers that had been specially set up on this day for the reception of the illustrious guest and for taking coffee: The Crown Prince showed such affability and openness to conversation; he was always quick with a kind or joking remark. Also unforgettable, though, were the great, kind eyes of our beloved old Kaiser as he, standing immediately before me, greeted us municipal deputies with friendly words upon his arrival at the Alte Markt. Magnificent as well were the words that His Majesty the Crown Prince offered in reply to the speech and toast given by the Lord Mayor to the Kaiser and the ruling dynasty. Only a few days had passed since the engagement of our current Kaiser with Princess Auguste Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein, our illustrious Empress. He [the Crown Prince] spoke about this and said that it was a particular pleasure to first mention this happy event publicly in Magdeburg of all places, the city that had shown so much love for his grandmother, the unforgettable Queen Luise. He then expressed his wish that his future daughter-in-law, our current illustrious Empress, would also encounter as much love from the people one day as had [Queen Luise]. [. . .] And how this wish has come true!

I have preserved a wonderful, dear keepsake from this day. My wife had contributed the champagne glasses for the little breakfast table at the exhibition, and, under my watchful eye, the servant marked and wrapped the glasses Kaiser Wilhelm and the Crown Prince had used; engraved with an inscription and crown, they now represent a precious family treasure in my house.

At 8 p.m. the theater performance began. As my colleague and I – the hosts, as it were – welcomed the grand dignitaries on their approach, the Crown Prince offered yet another example of his captivating, joking affability and good mood, addressing me with the words: “My God, there you are again!” While the Lord Mayor and the head of the municipal deputies led the Crown Prince to the foyer, and while the Mayor and my colleague, Major Schrader, led Prince Friedrich Karl, I had the honor of accompanying Prince Wilhelm, our current imperial majesty. Following the festival production, the dignitaries had tea with the local ladies who had been invited to the performance, after which they returned to Berlin because the Crown Prince needed to catch the night train to St. Petersburg, where he would appear on behalf of his imperial father at the funeral of the Empress of Russia. His Highness did not forget to confirm that his adjutant had indeed brought along the bouquets. He wished to give them to his wife during their brief meeting in Berlin, where she intended to greet him at the Lehrter Bahnhof* when he passed through. Among the bouquets there was also one which my little daughter had given to him – unofficially, to be sure – and which he had taken from her with the kindest and friendliest words, not without mentioning, as he asked for her name, that he had met her father. The kind reader may forgive me for dwelling so extensively on this day and what it has meant to me personally, but it does represent a highlight among the reminiscences of my past.

Source: Otto Pilet, *Ein Rückblick auf mein Leben, insbesondere auf die Entwicklung des Handels in den letzten 50 Jahren* [A Look Back at My Life, in Particular at the Development of Commerce in the Last Fifty Years]. Magdeburg, 1900, pp. 67-70.

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* A train station – trans.