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John C. G. Röhl

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PART I

*1859–1888: The Tormented Prussian Prince*

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## CHAPTER I

*The 'soul murder' of an heir to the throne*

The marriage of Wilhelm's parents in London in 1858 was intended to herald a close relationship between Great Britain, with its vast overseas empire, and the rising (and also largely Protestant) kingdom of Prussia on the Continent. The seventeen-year-old Princess Victoria, known in her family as Vicky, was the oldest child of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the Prince Consort; her bridegroom was Prince Friedrich Wilhelm ('Fritz'), the only son of the sixty-year-old Wilhelm, Prince of Prussia, who had recently become Regent for his mentally ill and childless brother, King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. With the birth of a son, on 27 January 1859, the future of the Hohenzollern dynasty and the peace of Europe seemed to be secured for decades ahead. Significantly, the newborn Prussian prince was also given the names of his English grandparents: Friedrich Wilhelm Viktor Albert.<sup>1</sup>

The birth took place on the top floor of the Kronprinzenpalais on Unter den Linden in Berlin. The circumstances surrounding the delivery of the child, for a long time shrouded in speculation, are now clearly established on the basis of documents in the royal family archives. The labour pains began in the afternoon of 26 January. Early that evening the father, who never left his wife's side during her confinement, sent a letter by the ordinary post (!) to alert the leading Berlin gynaecologist Professor Dr Eduard Arnold Martin. At that point no one yet realised that the child was in the breech position – bottom first, with the arms stretched upwards over the head. When this complication, life-threatening for both mother and child, was recognised the following morning, the Crown Prince sent a messenger to fetch Professor Martin – who had not yet received his letter. The gynaecologist thus found himself confronted with a grave

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emergency when he hurried up the palace stairs into the delivery room. On his instructions the suffering mother was given a large dose of chloroform by the Scottish doctor Sir James Clark, whom Queen Victoria had sent to Berlin. As he deemed the contractions to be insufficiently effective, Martin gave orders for ergot (in fact an abortion-inducing substance) to be administered, and then tried to extract the child, who was in danger of asphyxia as the umbilical cord, supplying oxygen, was being crushed by the head in the birth canal. During his attempt to pull down the baby's left arm, which was stretched up above his head, and to rotate the body 'by means of the same [arm]', as Martin wrote in his report, the nerve complex in the neck was torn. Thus the future king of the military Prussian monarchy and the man destined to rule as emperor over the mighty German Reich came into the world not only 'suffering to a high degree from foetal asphyxia' but also with what is technically referred to as a brachial plexus injury or Erb–Duchenne palsy.<sup>2</sup>

Over the next weeks and months it became clear that the little prince had been seriously injured during his birth. A distinct crease developed between the left upper arm and the shoulder area. While the arm was pulled tightly to the shoulder, the arm itself hung limply down with the elbow joint, stiff and inflexible. Compared with his right arm, his left arm was cold and shorter, the difference becoming ever more visible as time went by. His left hand also remained smaller than the right, with unusually pointed fingers that curled inwards in a claw-like fashion. The cause of this worrying malformation remained a mystery at first. It was assumed to be due to a contusion of the muscles that would heal with time, and washing in cold water, rubbing with spirits and passive movements of the crippled arm were recommended. The royal physician also gave orders for the infant's right arm to be tied to his body so as to encourage him to use the left arm – proof enough of how little was then known to medical science about the nervous system. Only gradually did the doctors become convinced that the paralysis had been caused not by muscle injury but by damage to the brain or the nerves, and was therefore incurable.

On the basis of the mistaken diagnosis, treatments that now seem grotesque were tried out. When the infant was six months old Professor Bernhard von Langenbeck of the Charité hospital in Berlin

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1 Wilhelm on his tenth birthday; a glove is used to make the left arm appear longer and the left hand larger; the Crown Prince ordered the plate of this photograph to be destroyed, but one print has survived.

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prescribed ‘animal baths’. Twice a week Wilhelm’s left arm was inserted into the body of a ‘freshly slaughtered hare’ for half an hour, in the hope that the wild animal’s warmth and vigour would be transferred to the arm.<sup>3</sup> At this point one already wonders what psychological effects this cruel and gory procedure, which was kept up for several years, might have had on the future German Kaiser. It certainly brought no physical benefit. As his paralysed arm made it difficult for him to balance, Wilhelm’s attempts to walk were painful, especially since his right arm was still regularly tied to his body. He reacted with frustration and rage. Soon after Wilhelm’s first birthday, in addition to the ‘animal baths’ Langenbeck prescribed malt baths and electromagnetic therapy. His arm was electromagnetised for the first time on 11 April 1860, but it remained cold and numb and dark red in colour. Later electrotherapy was carried out on the neck using constant galvanic current, as Wilhelm could not tolerate the alternating magnetic current on this sensitive spot. For his arm both types of current continued to be used daily ‘for a great length of time’ and ‘with considerable intensity’, as Queen Victoria’s doctors noted in 1865.<sup>4</sup>

When Wilhelm was four years old he developed yet another clinical condition: torticollis. The unharmed neck muscles on the right side were pulling his head downwards to the right, twisting his chin towards the paralysed left side. In April 1863, as his father recorded, a specially constructed ‘machine for Wilhelm’s neck’ was tried out.<sup>5</sup> This ‘head-stretching machine’, which the prince had to wear for an hour a day, as his horrified mother wrote to the queen, consisted of

a belt around the waist to the back of which an iron bar is fixed. This bar leads up the back to something which looks exactly like a horse’s bridle. The head is then fixed in this and positioned as desired by means of a screw which adjusts the iron bar.

The Crown Princess added a drawing of the instrument; it was dreadful, she lamented, ‘to see ones [sic] child treated like one deformed’.<sup>6</sup> This treatment, the psychological effects of which one can again well imagine, also proved useless, and an operation became necessary. On 23 March 1865, when Wilhelm was just six years old, Langenbeck cut through the tendon between the neck muscle and the collarbone on the right side. A few days later a second muscle was severed, because it was pulling his chin to the side and distorting his

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2 The 'head-stretching machine'.

face: his right eye and right cheek had grown disproportionately large, his mouth was crooked and his left eye was half closed.<sup>7</sup>

As Wilhelm could not move his left forearm at all – it remained locked stiffly at the elbow – in 1868 it seemed that another operation

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might be necessary, this time to cut through the biceps tendon. In the end, however, it was decided not to do this, since the stiffness was judged to be due to a deformity in the bone of the elbow joint. Instead of an operation, the ‘arm-stretching machine’ that the prince had been forced to endure since his infancy was applied even more frequently; twice a day, and also during his lessons. It was only for fear that it might induce epileptic attacks that he was not obliged to wear it at night too. With the aid of the arm-stretching machine and a ‘fixing frame’, from 1866 onwards Wilhelm was able to do remedial gymnastics three times a day under the supervision of Captain Gustav von Dresky, the effects of which proved beneficial for the development of his crippled arm.<sup>8</sup>

As if this (naturally, well-meant) torture were not enough for the delicate prince, further physical defects appeared over the years, which the doctors likewise attributed to his difficult birth or to the treatment of his birth injuries. The defective sense of balance that had been noticeable in his infancy led to dislocations of the knee on several occasions in his youth, and sometimes kept Wilhelm in bed for weeks. From the autumn of 1878 onwards he suffered for years from a recurring, life-threatening infection of the right inner ear, with polypoid growths and foul-smelling pus. When an alarmingly severe attack of the ear infection occurred in 1886, accompanied by dizziness and buzzing in the ears, the doctors prescribed a ten-week cure at Bad Reichenhall in southern Bavaria. In October of that year the previously healthy left ear also became inflamed, and the eardrum had to be perforated. Rumours that the growths were cancerous proved unfounded, but in later years fears continued to be expressed to the effect that this otological malady might be the underlying cause of the Kaiser’s peculiar behaviour. In August 1896 a radical operation to remove the eardrum in the right ear proved essential because of the danger that meningitis might develop. Even after the operation the Kaiser suffered all his life from chronic middle ear catarrh, which he removed vigorously every morning with a cotton swab on a wooden splint fashioned by himself, followed by a small strip of gauze inserted into the ear canal with a pair of tweezers.<sup>9</sup>

All these ailments, and the way in which they were handled, are meticulously documented in the sources; the facts are clear. But other explanations for Wilhelm II’s peculiarities put forward by his



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contemporaries or by biographers remain speculative. Whether he suffered a (minimal) degree of brain damage during his birth, which might account for his distorted face, must remain an open question.<sup>10</sup> His sexual orientation, and the possibility that he had suppressed homosexual tendencies (which has also sometimes been suggested), will be examined later in connection with his marriage and friendships. There are indications, not conclusively proved as yet but strong enough to be taken into consideration, of a hereditary illness that afflicted the royal families of Hanover and Great Britain from the Stuarts onward, namely porphyria. Wilhelm's great-great-grandfather, King George III, is thought to have suffered from porphyria, which led to that monarch's occasional bouts of rage and periods of dementia. The fact that the dominant gene causing this transmissible 'royal malady' crossed from the British royal family into the house of Hohenzollern through the marriage of Wilhelm's parents has recently been proved beyond doubt through DNA analyses, which confirmed the presence of the mutation in his eldest sister, Charlotte, and her daughter, Feo.<sup>11</sup> Whether Wilhelm himself was affected remains open to question. What can be said for certain is that leading doctors and statesmen in London became convinced quite early on that 'the taint of George III is in his blood' and that he would always be subject to sudden bouts of rage, which would become more frequent and violent with age.<sup>12</sup> Much more obvious than such suppositions, however, are the consequences that Wilhelm's birth injuries and the various measures taken to treat them, which overshadowed his entire childhood, had on the development of his character.

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## CHAPTER 2

*Ambivalent motherhood*

These consequences cannot be fully understood without taking into account the consternation felt by Wilhelm's young mother at the birth of a son who was, in her eyes, 'deformed' or 'crippled'. Vicky, known in Prussia as 'the Englishwoman', was barely eighteen years old. Proud of her status as Queen Victoria's daughter, intelligent, well read, liberal and astonishingly progressive in her ideas and a passionate anglophile, she made no secret of her feelings of superiority at the antiquated, reactionary Prussian court, and was correspondingly unpopular and isolated there. Defiantly, she counted on the accession of her beloved soldier husband Fritz to the throne in the near future, followed by the introduction of a more modern – parliamentary – constitution and an alliance between Prussia and her powerful mother country. With the expected birth of her son it seemed certain that these bright hopes would bear fruit well into the twentieth century. But the little prince had come into the world 'crippled', and the Crown Princess felt a constant, almost intolerable sense of shame that he was imperfect. 'I feel so sore on the subject that when other people make remarks about it I wish myself under the ground or in my shoes or any where [sic],' she lamented.<sup>1</sup> The flaw had to be removed – and, if the measures prescribed by the doctors failed, the physical handicap would have to be corrected through the child's upbringing. With the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, these unrealisable hopes led to a vicious circle of reciprocal disappointment, which was to degenerate, on Wilhelm's side, into hatred and rejection of his mother's liberal ideals. Many years later, after the catastrophe of the First World War, Sigmund Freud was to pinpoint Vicky's inability to bond with her handicapped son as the root cause of their fateful estrangement. 'It is usual,' he observed in 1932, 'for mothers whom Fate has presented