

**Excerpts from Chapter 1 of THE VON BIBRA STORY** by Lois Nyman & Graeme von Bibra  
(November, 1996)

[T]he Bibras were an important family from early times, for only people of rank kept records of their ancestry. From about the time of the Second Crusade in the 12th century they were first documented, Rupertus de Bybera being mentioned in 1119 A.D. and Henry of Bybera in 1220. Since 1245, when Berthold de Bibera and his wife Mechthildis kept a father-to-son account of their lineage, it has continued in unbroken line to the present time. No record exists of the family being ennobled, the first mention of them in the 11th and 12th centuries showing that they were then knights. Since around 1300 the spelling of the name has stabilized to Bibra from such variations as Bybera and Bibera. These first-known members of the family lived in Franconia, a province later incorporated into the Kingdom of Bavaria by Napoleon, and is situated in that southern part of Germany which has Munich as its capital. Bavaria still remains the home province of the present-day Bibras.

Before any written record of German history existed noble families looked on themselves as little kings.<sup>2</sup> All the land was divided into duchies, principalities, bishoprics, counties, etc., and feudal lords passed judgment on wrongdoers within their own domain. A translation from '*The Genealogical Pocket Book of the Houses of Gentry of the German Empire for the year 1849*' says of the Bibras: '*An old aristocratic family, belonging to the former Imperial Knightly Cantons in Franconia, within the bounds of which are situated all their lands, most of which have been from time immemorial and are still in their possession.*'

Long ago only some monks and members of noble families could read and write, and for purposes of identification the houses of the gentry were recognized by the heraldic bearings they carried on their banners or had emblazoned on their castles. In 1295 the Emperor Charles awarded Berthold von Bibra a coat-of-arms, and in 1372 this was improved by the addition of a crown on the helmet, so that it now contained a golden shield of a knight with a walking and natural beaver (Biber is the word for beaver in German). The open crowned helmet on the shield bore, with a black and gold covering, an open golden flight, the two sides of which showed a slanting beaver, turned inward and outward.<sup>3</sup> A modern attachment to the coat-of-arms shows it to be slightly different, being a golden shield wherein a beaver is to be seen walking obliquely upwards. The crowned casket which stands open on the shield bears an open gold pair of wings with black and gold cover, both sides of which are inlaid with a beaver turned upwards. The comet over the shield first had five points on it, denoting a knight, and later seven points, denoting a baron.

At various times between 1698 and 1772 each line of the Bibra family was elevated from Imperial Knights to the status of Imperial Barons (and Baronesses). Between 1815 and 1828, after the Holy German Empire was dissolved and Franconia was incorporated in the Kingdom of Bavaria, the various branches were made Bavarian Barons. At the end of World War I, 'titles' were abolished but were incorporated into the last name, so that a name would read (anglicized), Conrad Baron von Bibra. In Germany today each Bibra would still be considered a baron or baroness.

According to the 1912 '*Almanac de Gotha*', (a book publishing the family details of the higher strata of society in Germany and still noted and checked by those of aristocratic lineage), from earliest times the 'extremely ancient' family of Bibra lived in Bibra Castle, on the River Bibra - and still continue to do so. This fortress castle with its eight towers connected by immense stone walls three metres thick at the base was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was created to protect the military road that ran from Thuringia to Franconia.

At one time it was occupied by six different families of Bibras, each occupying a separate building within the walls, only one of which still exists today. They increased further in number so that by 1467 five lines of the Bibra family existed, all of them being joint owners of the parent castle and lands as well as having their own properties elsewhere. Things were not always peaceful between them, so in 1467 twenty-one cousins met at the ancestral castle and concluded a Peace Treaty. This Treaty forbade them to insult each other, and punished anyone attacking another family member with ostracism for one month if a knife was used, three months if a sword, and a year if a wound was inflicted; in the case of death the guilty person was to be ostracized forever or until the attacker was considered reformed.

In 1486 the German Emperor Friedrich III signed a document empowering the village of Bibra with the right to '*hold markets*' and the Bibra family '*to rule with authority in the region*'. Succeeding emperors carried on the tradition, and these documents are still in possession of the family and are extremely valuable.<sup>4</sup>

In 1492 the building of the present church, St Leo's, was commenced in the village surrounding Bibra Castle, and this now contains many tombstones of the Bibras who have died during the five centuries the family has worshipped there.

In 1354 the knights of Bibra were possessors in fee of Gleicherwiesen. Instead of a castle this contained a large manor, originally with an enclosed courtyard, and was set in extensive meadowlands at the foot of the great Gleichberg. The scenery here, like practically all Bavaria, is extremely attractive. The estate remained in the family for five hundred years and it is from the Gleicherwiesen branch that the Australian line descends.

Scattered through the various villages in Germany were to be found Jews, who in the main traded for a living. By 1680 the Germans, many of whom owed money to them, became violently antagonistic towards them and more often than not drove them out of the villages - thus ensuring that they no longer had to pay their debts. Such a happening was a real threat in the village of Gleicherwiesen. By this time the whole of the economy was upset and the need for capital urgent. Therefore when the Jews asked the lord at Gleicherwiesen if, for a stated sum, he would allow them to live in the village and promise them protection, he agreed. They lived there for a considerable time, conducting their religious ceremonies in peace, and when it was judged safe for them to once more mingle freely with the locals they became solidly entrenched once more, so that in time forty-three per cent of the population there was composed of Jews. In time all hostility towards them ceased, and during the Second World War when the Jews were threatened with extermination many local Germans did all they could to protect them, until it was no longer possible.<sup>5</sup> After World War II and until 1989 the surrounding area of Gleicherwiesen was banned to anyone visiting except military personnel. This was because of its proximity to the West.

Another of the properties acquired was Irmelshausen, situated on the border of what was, after the War, East and West Germany. This estate was I acquired as a fief in the 1370s by Berhold von Bibra from the prince-bishopric of Würzburg, since when it has been one of the main seats of the Bibra family. It has been, like most of the ancient castles, considerably enlarged during the ensuing centuries.

This fortress, situated on a little island and surrounded by a moat as a I; protection against people and wild animals of the time of building, is considered to be one of the most beautiful castles in Franconia. Half of it is still owned and occupied by members of the Bibra family. Baron Hans and his I wife Barbara. It is an ancient building, the walls of which enclose a large courtyard and were built to withstand storm and siege. One tower in these walls dates back to the year 800 A.D. when a relative of

Charlemagne transferred the village to the Counts of Henneberg.

Irmelshausen is known as a veste - that is, a fortress. During the Second World War the village and castle of Irmelshausen, which at present owns about three hundred acres, were separated from the nearby villages of Thuringia by the Soviet Zone border a quarter of a mile away. This barrier took the form of a double barbed-wire fence controlled by mines and overlooked by guards - a truly frightening structure. In April of 1945 an American colonel entered the castle and was so impressed with the contents that he ordered it off limits to troops. This was the first time an enemy has ever entered Irmelshausen.

From very early times the legal requirement of the country meant that most estates were entailed as feudal fiefs, which made it possible for the Bibras to keep their large estates throughout the centuries.

The German nobles possessed much wealth. Heinrich von Bibra owned the Castle of Bramberg, but in 1476 sold it to the prince-bishopric of Würzburg for six thousand florins, which he used to buy three other estates. He was already Lord of Irmelshausen, Hochheim, Aubstadt and Gleicherwiesen and others as well. In the year 1500 the Bibra family collectively owned many properties of differing sizes.

Lorenz von Bibra was born in 1459 and belonged to the line of Anton. One of his brothers, Antonne, was a Doctor of Jurisprudence and was active in changing the laws from feudal to more modern ones. A half brother, Wilhelm, was from Bibra Castle and was sent by Archbishop Herman of Cologne as German Ambassador to Pope Innocent VIII to intercede in a delicate situation. In 1490 Kaiser Friedrich sent him on a similar diplomatic mission to Rome, but on his return journey he became ill and died; his tombstone in full coat of armour can still be seen in Verona. Lorenz von Bibra attended school and university at Heidelberg, Erfurt, and Paris. For centuries the oldest male member of the whole family of Bibra had been accorded the honorable role of Hereditary Vice-Marshall of the Princely High Bishopric of Würzburg,<sup>6</sup> but during the years 1495 to 1519 Lorenz was chosen for an even higher position. He reigned as the prince-bishop of Würzburg and became Duke in Franconia. The role of prince-bishops existed for over a thousand years and held great legal and political power. The position involved more the administration of civil affairs of their principality rather than the undertaking of religious duties, which in the main they relegated to their assistants.

Lorenz was recognized as an outstanding administrator and was a popular ruler. His residence was the vast and ancient Marienberg Castle which overlooks the city of Würzburg, which was one of the oldest and most important cities in Germany and was situated on trade routes from various countries. Here Lorenz lived in splendor, even having coins of his realm struck with his image, some of these coins still being in the possession of present-day Bibras. He was the first prince-bishop of Würzburg granted the right to mint gold coins.

Often the Emperor stayed at the palace, and so able a politician was Lorenz that that important person was pleased to have him present at many important conferences.<sup>7</sup>

Lorenz was a deep and progressive thinker and sought to bring reforms to the Roman Church from within. In 1518 Martin Luther visited Würzburg and the Marienberg Palace, where in a discussion with Lorenz he found that the prince-bishop had been influenced by the Renaissance and by what he had gleaned of the new movement that was sweeping Germany in the wake of Luther's writings and travels. (This was shortly before Luther took his firm stand on what became known as Protestantism.) Lorenz was the possessor of a penetrating intellect and as Luther explained his views of the Scriptures he

listened intently.<sup>8</sup> In a letter at the time Luther wrote: '*He is very much on our side*'. The visit caused much speculation over the Prince-Bishop's sympathies; this, however, ended soon after the meeting, for Lorenz died. All this took place before Luther's final split with the Roman Catholic Church.

Lorenz had good relations with the famous sculptor Tilmann Riemenschneider, who was once mayor of Würzburg. He persuaded him to make the altar for the church which had recently been built at Bibra; this is exquisitely carved from limetree wood and is architecturally renowned. Lorenz also commissioned him to carve a full statue of him in marble, firmly insisting that the artisan's Gothic style become Renaissance, which he had greatly admired when in Italy. On completion it did not please Lorenz - a man of pronounced individuality - and he insisted that Riemenschneider make him look more youthful. This statue is still to be seen in the Würzburg Cathedral and is very valuable indeed.

Lorenz became distressingly ill towards the end of his reign and died in 1519, after ruling for twenty-four years.

He was not the only member of the family to reach such high office. From 1540 to 1544 Conrad von Bibra, from the vanished side-line of Rossried, also ruled as Prince-Bishop of Würzburg. He was born in 1490 and studied at the universities of Cologne, Bologna, Erfurt and Ingolstadt. All his life he was undecided about entering the priesthood, and three times from the age of thirty to forty-two started to become a priest and then resigned. In 1525 when the Peasants' Rebellion broke out in Würzburg Conrad helped defend the beautiful fortress of Marienberg while it was under siege, quite unaware that he would shortly reside in it. In 1539 at the age of forty-nine he again filled a priestly position, and a year later was surprisingly elected Prince Bishop and Duke in Franconia. Still undecided (or stubborn), seven times he delayed taking his church vows as a priest and bishop, even in the face of the Vatican's expressed disapproval of this. He never married, but when he died in 1544 after holding office for only four years he left behind two illegitimate children, Conrad and Katherine Biber. Later, Katherine's husband murdered the next prince-bishop.<sup>9</sup> During Conrad's reign the family coat-of-arms was emblazoned on the 4th floor ceiling of the Marienberg Castle.

Upon the death of each prince-bishop his heart was put in an urn at the monastery at Ebrach, his other internal organs were buried in the round chapel in the Marienberg fortress, and his body was buried in the Cathedral of Würzburg.

In 1525 the Peasants' War broke out. At Bibra the castle was destroyed, and at the conclusion of hostilities was only partly restored.<sup>10</sup> However, at Irmelshausen Georg von Bibra, a most persuasive and diplomatic man, made a settlement with the peasants so there was no need to take up the drawbridge and adopt a state of siege. Georg was a wealthy man who had inherited twenty-eight localities from his father Valentin, and he held many important posts. He married twice, and as none of his eight daughters joined convents, it would seem that he agreed with Martin Luther's doctrines.

Georg's son Hans von und zu Bibra ('von' meaning 'of and 'und zu' 'living at') actually left the Old Faith and publicly practiced Protestantism and ordered that his subjects do the same. This meant that he had no more authority in Catholic affairs and had to get influential positions in other districts. He was Lord of Bibra, Irmelshausen, Miihifeld, Hochheim, Gleicherwiesen and numerous other properties." Hans, the common ancestor of all living Bibras, was a progressive man and had three new wings added to Irmelshausen Castle. In 1558 he married, and so fond of his wife was he that in one of the rooms he had a special sandstone carving made in the Renaissance portal over what is now known as the Wedding Door. This contained the words, '*There is no happiness without you and therefore I am happy*'. Nearby a fireplace shows the eight coats-of-arms of the two people. Hans died in 1581, and his gravestone is

among many others at the late Gothic church belonging to Irmelshausen.

During the Thirty Years' War, (which was superficially between the Roman Catholics and Protestants in Germany (1618-1648) and which before its termination involved most of the countries of Western Europe), the fortress of Irmelshausen was only damaged slightly, whereas the partly restored Bibra Castle was once more attacked violently in 1641 and Hans Casper von Bibra, Snr., was killed. The children were taken by a servant to another castle, Bundorf, near Brennhausen, where they were reared. Bibra Castle itself was so completely sacked that for the next two hundred years it was used as a stable and a cow-shed. The ruin was partially restored between 1840 and 1884, and since then numerous improvements have been made, and now Bibras are once again in residence there.

The days when the Bibras had been among the most important, influential, powerful and wealthy families in the German Empire were slowly passing, especially when a particular branch had turned to Protestantism. This religious conflict was fully to the fore in the matter of the Bibras owning Brennhausen, a property about ten miles from Irmelshausen. The castle, a gaunt, stark, ancient building dating back to about 1200 A.D., passed through several hands before 1681, when it became the property of the Bibras. This ownership, however, was not achieved before considerable difficulty was encountered, for the estates of a Heinrich von Bibra, instead of passing into the hands of his relatives at Irmelshausen, had been appropriated by the prince-bishop of Würzburg, Julius Echter von Mespelbrunn. It took eighty years of legal wrangling before the then prince-bishop of Würzburg, Peter Philipp, though loath to allow it to fall into the hands of a Protestant nobleman, agreed to exchange Brennhausen for a repossessed Bibra property. An agreement between them, documented in *'The History of the Castle Brennhausen'* reads: *'The Bibras release their legal claim, to the Walpach estate, but receive in return the Brennhausen estate with fields, fish-ponds, pastures, woods, sheep-farming, hunting and accessories...'* Baron Hanns Caspar von Bibra, Jr., thus took possession of it and became the patriarch of the Bibra-Brennhausen line. The present owner of the castle today, Conrad von Bibra, an American engineer, is a direct descendant.

The first documentary mention of Brennhausen comes from more than eight hundred years ago, when it was called *'Brunechenhusen'*. A legend exists that in old times it was a Dominican convent, and some of the present-day names of its fields such as *'nun-fields'* and *'pastor's path'* indicate that this could well be so. *'The History of the Castle Brennhausen'* reads: *'Castle ghosts were in Brennhausen... Even if one is not aware of it during the day, at night one can still experience it. At a certain hour the nuns suddenly step out of the wall, walk trance-like along the same path through the room and finally disappear slowly again into the wall'*. At one time a chair with a skeleton sitting on it was unwallled, and it was surmised that this was that of a nun. The castle has medieval fortified towers and its thick walls contain rectangular loopholes.<sup>12</sup>

The building contains three wings, the north one being four levels in height. In 1832 there were seven main buildings and six adjoining ones and twelve families lived there, ten of the inhabitants being Catholics, thirty-six Lutheran, and five Jewish. The building was gutted in Napoleonic times while the owner was absent, and the present owner, Conrad, found plenty to restore and renovate when he inherited Brennhausen. He and his family travel over from America every summer and from 1970 to the present time major work has been carried out. Lately heating has been installed throughout the whole building, which is now appropriately furnished. The property contains about five hundred acres, three hundred of which is forest and two hundred farmland.

Occasionally there was a misalliance in the Bibra family. One such incident occurred in 1734 when Ludwig Ernst von Bibra, the son of Hanns Caspar who first took possession of the disputed

Brennhaus, married a peasant girl named Katharina Seyfert, a commoner from Brennhaus. As his years were drawing to a close Ludwig realized that unless his wife's rank was raised his sons would have difficulty in claiming their inheritance. He laid his case before the Emperor, Karl VI, who, a few months before Ludwig's death six years after his marriage, ennobled Katherina. He also changed her name to Therese von Seyferhold and granted her all the rights and privileges of Equality of Station with her husband. But because Ludwig had not married in accordance with his rank he had aroused great animosity among his relations. Following his wife's ennoblement and his death it was found that he had left Brennhaus to his eldest son, young Friedrich Gotthelf, and also to his still younger son. A cousin, Johann Philipp Carl von und zu Bibra, refusing to acknowledge the right of '*the peasant's son*' to the estate, with a band of horsemen forcibly took possession of the castle. It was ten years before the Imperial Court Councillor ordered Johann to give back Brennhaus to Friedrich and his brother and to pay compensation for having stolen it. Friedrich became the Senior of the House of Bibra and Vice-Marshal of the Duchy of Franconia. His younger brother, Carl, later took over the castle at Bibra when Johann Philip's son died childless.

The third member of the von Bibra family to be chosen as a prince-bishop was Heinrich VIII, from the line Schnabelweyd which died out in 1826. He was born in 1711 at Schnabelweyd and was named Karl Sigmund. He had ten brothers and sisters and they were subjected to strict discipline as they grew up. He became a Benedictine monk at the age of nineteen and was given the name of Heinrich, and in the Order he studied philosophy, theology, and law. Six years later, in 1736, he traveled to Rome, and in the following years gradually became more prominent in the Church. At the age of forty-eight he was elected as Prince-Bishop and Abbot of Fulda, which is in present-day Hesse bordering northern Bavaria.

Immediately after Heinrich's enthronement in 1759 he was forced to escape when the area was overrun by invading armies during the Seven Years' War. When peace was declared in 1763 he undertook the rebuilding of Fulda and the restoration of its shattered economy. It was a demanding undertaking and he found it necessary to start his day at four o'clock each morning. Gradually order was restored, and when stable currency was once again established he was able to undertake the reforms he so desired. He proved to be a most outstanding bishop. His achievements were in many fields. He modernized the state system, restored ruined buildings and built new ones, established orphanages, saw that all boys and girls took advantage of the compulsory education he introduced, established libraries throughout the land, cared for the underprivileged, improved agriculture, built roads, had the land surveyed for minerals, arranged the health system - in short, was a modern statesman.

Under his leadership porcelain was manufactured in Fulda, and this became quite famous; examples can be seen at the National Gallery in Melbourne. The making of this porcelain ceased the year after Heindrich's reign ended, but lately reproductions are being made, these falling somewhat short of the beauty of the originals.

Heinrich also provided freedom of religion and employed Protestants as well as Catholics in his administration, and forbade the mistreatment of Jews. He died in 1788, at the good old age for those days of seventy-seven, having quite transformed Fulda during the twenty-nine years in which he reigned.<sup>13</sup>

Another prominent member of the family was Baron Ernst von Bibra, who was born at Schwebheim Castle in Franconia in 1806. He studied law at Würzburg but soon realized that his real interest lay in the natural sciences, especially chemistry. After further study Baron Ernst put his vast knowledge of various subjects into writing. In 1842 he produced a book dealing with the necessary but

unappealing subject of pus, followed every year or two with other learned tomes on such diverse matters as teeth, phosphorous, sulphur the liver and the gall-bladder. In 1849 he went to Brazil and Chile, after which he wrote two books about South America. He then settled at Nüremburg and published various collections dealing with subjects such as the human brain, bread coffee, bronze and copper alloys in ancient times and the discoveries of iron and silver. In his later years he wrote fiction, and his six books were amazingly successful. In 1895 his classic text '*Plant Intoxicants*', already republished in German, was translated into English and republished. He died in Nüremburg in 1878. <sup>14</sup>

## References

1. *Encyclopaedia Brilannica*, 1961 ed., p.543.
2. *Holding the Stirrup* by E. von Guttenberg, p .9.
3. *Almanac de Gotha*, 1912 edition, p.l.
4. Historian at Bibra Reunion, Germany, 1995.
5. Ibid.
6. *Genealogical Pocket Book*, 1849.
7. Historian from University at Würzburg, Reunion. 1995.
8. *Los Angeles Times*, April 24th., 1983.
9. Information supplied by Conrad von Bibra, Brennhausen and USA.
10. Council Offices, village of Bibra, 1990. (Supplied by John Summerfield, UK.)
11. *Almanac de Gotha*, edition 1857, p.l.
12. Documents supplied by Conrad von Bibra. California, USA.
13. Ibid.
14. English Translation of Biographical Entry of Ernst von Bibra.