



# GRAND DUCHESS ELIZABETH ROMANOV SOCIETY

With the Blessing of BISHOP IRENEI OF LONDON  
and WESTERN EUROPE, ROCOR

**DARMSTADT PILGRIMAGE**

17th-20th September, 2024

Organized by

*Grand Duchess Elizabeth Romanov Society UK*

*with participation of the parish of*

**ALL-MERCIFUL SAVIOUR**

*Dedicated to the 160th Anniversary of the Birth of the New Martyr Grand  
Duchess Elizabeth*



*Princess Alice, Ella, Victoria, Prince Ludwig, 1867*

This pilgrimage to the former Grand Duchy of Hesse and by Rhine had two aims: to commemorate with prayer one of the greatest saints of the Orthodox Church in her homeland and to acquire knowledge about her family roots, her parents, her siblings and the places where she was born, raised and educated. Our four-day programme included visits to almost all places open to the public, which are mentioned in St Elizabeth's biographical books, in Darmstadt and its vicinity: Darmstadt Old Castle and St Mary Magdalene Royal church, Rosenhöhe Mausoleums, Kranichstein hunting castle, Wolfsgarten and Heiligenberg. These places hold memories about Ella's early life, her immediate relatives and ancestors, and about close connections between the Grand Duchy of Hesse and by Rhine, Russia and Great Britain.

We visited various historic churches. The first, after our arrival to Frankfurt, was the Imperial Coronation church of St Bartholomew, where the Holy Roman Emperors were crowned from 1356 until 1792, and which was a symbol of German national unity for later generations. The first church on this site was built in the 7th century, the second in 13th and the present one in the 16th. We prayed in the chapel where a relic of Saint Bartholomew the Apostle has been kept for centuries (a part of his skull). A guided tour was led by Marina Stuz in Russian (with translation) and by John Harwood in English. We learned a great deal of German history in the cathedral and just walking around the most ancient central square, surrounded by many historic buildings, recently restored after destruction at the end of WWII. For us it was quite important to start the trip to Hesse-Darmstadt with an introduction to German history, the ancient and the recent.



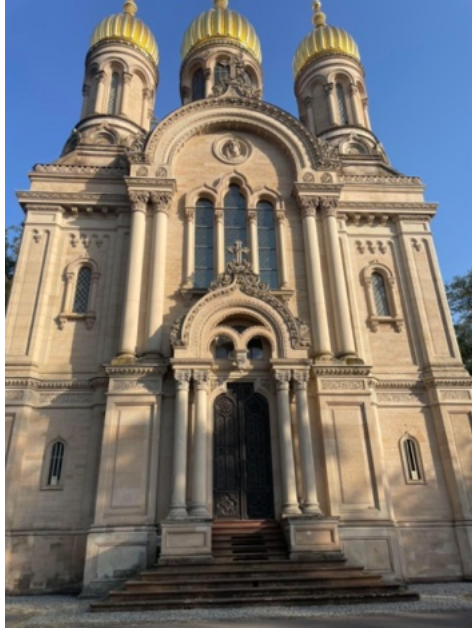
*In front of the Coronation Church and Coronation Balcony with the figures of German Emperors*





**We had to change our programme for the next day, as we found out that on the 18th September there would be a great celebration at the St Elizabeth Orthodox church in Wiesbaden, built 1847-1855 and dedicated to St Elizabeth, the mother of St John the Baptist, who was our Grand Duchess Elizabeth's patron-Saint. She always celebrated her namesday after her conversion to Orthodoxy at her husband's estate Iliinskoe, near Moscow with a church service and a Cross procession followed by a market feast for the local community. This tradition has been re-established nowadays.**

**The celebrations of this day in Wiesbaden were connected with the memory of another Princess from the House of Romanov, Elizabeth Mikhailovna, the niece of the emperor Nicholas I, who married Duke Adolf of Nassau in 1844 but died next year in childbirth, aged 19. The grieving Duke decided to build a magnificent church over her grave. Architecturally this most beautiful building repeated the forms and details of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. The service which we attended was led by the Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany (ROCOR) with the presence of many priests and believers from Darmstadt, Frankfurt and other parishes. The Grand Duchess Elizabeth was also commemorated with prayers to her as a glorified New Martyr of Russia.**



The next morning we had a *moleben* to St Elizabeth at St Mary Magdalene Royal church in Darmstadt built in 1897-1899 in the middle of the *Mathildenhöhe* for the Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna (a younger sister of Grand Duchess Elizabeth).





**We venerated an icon of the Holy Martyr Elizabeth and a small icon of the Mother of God of Kazan, which belonged to St Elizabeth and was given to Archimandrite Seraphim (Kuznetsov), who transferred the bodies of the Holy Martyrs Elizabeth and Barbara from Alapaevsk to Jerusalem (1919 - 1921). He passed this icon to Queen Louise of Sweden, Elizabeth's niece, who bequeathed it to the Royal Chapel in Darmstadt. We were overwhelmed to see and venerate these icons and a handwork of the Tsarina Alexandra, the embroidered Cross.**



The whole iconostasis, we were told, was a gift from Maria Alexandrovna, Duchess of Edinburgh, Ella's sister in law. Our own icons of St Elizabeth were blessed there.



The church stands literally on Russian ground as the earth was brought here from all the regions of the Russian Empire and delivered to the site by a specially built railway line. The land around the church was the property of Tsar Nicholas II. Now two of the roads leading to the church are called *Nikolaiweg and Alexandraweg* (Nicholas and Alexandra Roads).



The chapel was built in the so-called “historical style”, a project of Leon Benoit, a leading architect of St Petersburg, head of the Art Academy, showing also many elements of the art nouveau.

The dominating mosaic image of the Mother of God over the altar is the work of a prominent Russian painter Victor Vasnetsov, who also decorated St Vladimir’s Sobor in Kiev. This icon made a strong impression on us with her deep eyes looking directly at our eyes. We were told that the drop of a tear can be noticed if you look at her face with prayer.



We ascended to the choir, a balcony created for the Imperial family. The whole church was conceived as a private chapel for their visits, that is why “the acoustics on the grounds were excellent and not so on the balcony”, the choirmaster Evgenia explained to us. Some of us also noticed that the image of the Mother of God looked different from the balcony - slightly more “in focus” than if you look from the ground floor, suggesting that the main point of view was elevated from the ground towards the balcony. For us it was a moment of special blessing that we could walk and stand at a place allocated for the Holy Royal Martyrs Nicholas and Alexandra and their children. St Elizabeth also stood there next to her sister.

Royalty from the whole of Europe gathered in St Mary Magdalen’s in 1903 for the wedding of Ella’s niece Alice and prince Andreas of Greece, both Orthodox. Elizabeth Feodorovna was present there for this occasion and during her visit in 1910, together

with Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, this time in her monastic habit as Head of the Martha and Mary Convent of Mercy, which she opened in 1909, after the assassination of her husband in 1905.

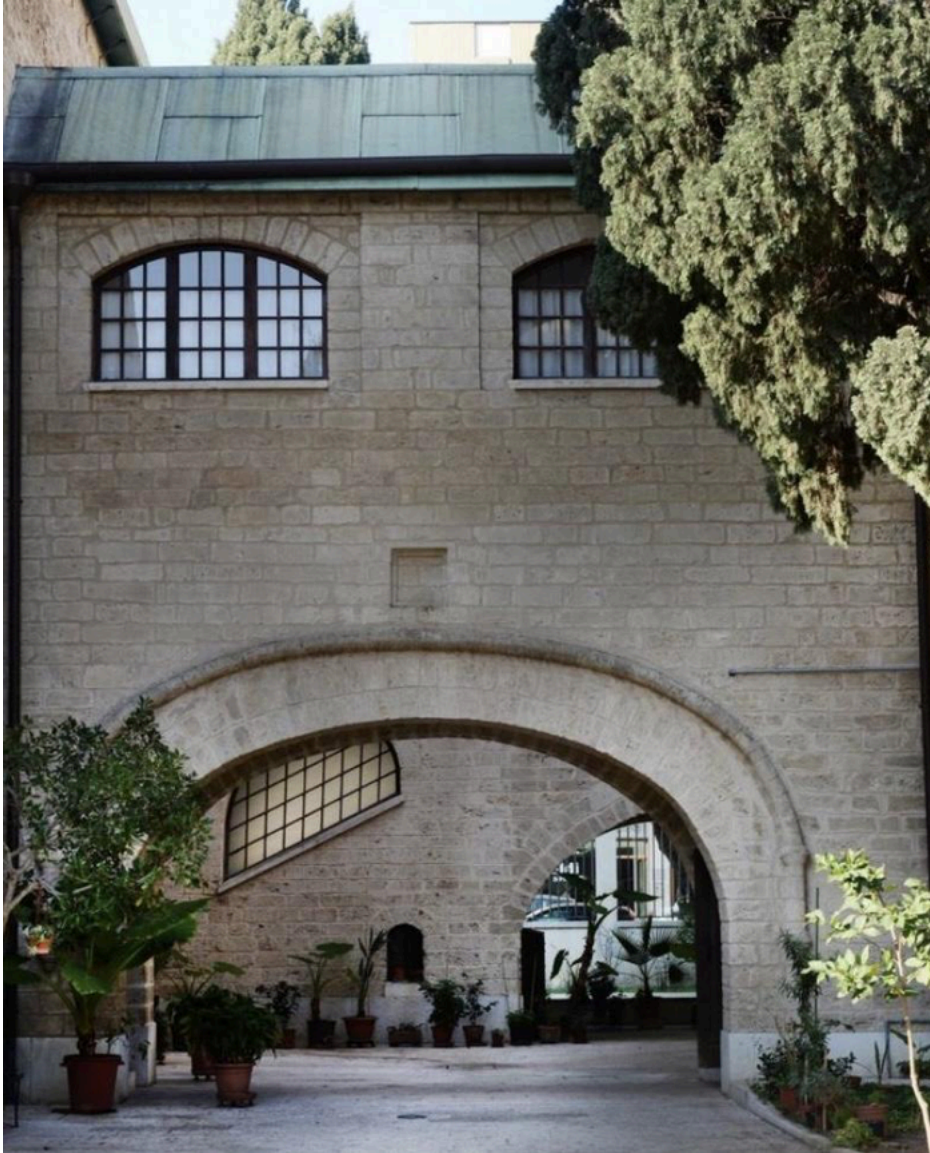


*Grand Duchess Elizabeth and Tsar Nicholas after the service. 1910*

The art nouveau style was popular among the Hessian family at the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Similar tastes were common in Russia among the Romanovs. Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna invited artists from the Russian art nouveau circles to build and to decorate her convent in Moscow in 1908-1909 and later the Pilgrims' house and a church in Bari, when she acted as Head of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, replacing her husband Grand Duke Sergius. Her favorite painter Michael Nesterov was invited for both projects. He belonged to the same group of artists as Vasnetsov.

It was so interesting and important to see that St Mary Magdalen church was one of her inspirations for her building projects in Russia and Italy.





*Russian Pilgrims house in Bari. Modern photo*

The whole quarter, where the church was built, Mathildenhohe, later became an art nouveau quarter inhabited by “*jugendstil*” artists, built with the support and sponsorship of the Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig, Ella’s younger brother.



**We noticed that among many other architectural elements the Rotonda which was built near the church was an important sign of the stylistic unity of the site. This is an ideal observation point which brings together the church, the street with the artist's cottages and the main exhibition hall.**



**Some of us were worried about how Orthodox believers feel being surrounded by this intensive cultural milieu? During the vespers before the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God we could prominently hear a popular music coming from outside but we were assured that it was not a usual situation. A special event coincidentally took place this weekend - the opening of the main exhibition hall on the Mathildenhöhe after its restoration (during 2012-2024). St Mary Magdalene church was prepared to open the doors next day after the liturgy to the visitors during these festivities because the “Russian Chapel” was included in the UNESCO site of architectural and historical importance. An outside exhibition showing the history of the church and Romanov connections was ready to be shown to the public - a missionary and educational work all in one.**





**Our first guided visit to a museum was to the Darmstadt *Residenzschloss* - Residence Castle - constructed in the 16th century as a residence for the Landgraves of Hesse. It was extended during the next centuries and has changed its owners and its purpose but to this day it remains a witness and a keeper of the history of the Hessian ducal family. The museum rooms were full of pictures and objects which illustrated the family life of the last Grand Dukes of Hesse-Darmstadt and connections between the Royal and Imperial houses of Hesse, Russia and Britain.**





Four times during the 18th and 19th century, the House of Romanov and the House of Hesse were interconnected through marriage: Emperor Paul and Princess Wilhelmina of Hesse, Tsar Alexander II and Princess Marie of Hesse, Grand Duke Sergius and Princess Elizabeth of Hesse, and finally, Tsar Nicholas II and Princess Alex of Hesse. The links between the British Royalties and Hessian Grand Dukes were also strong; the most important link was formed through the parents of Grand Duchess Elizabeth and Empress Alexandra - Princess Alice of Great Britain and Ludwig IV, Grand Duke of Hesse and by Rhine (Grand Duke 1877-1892).

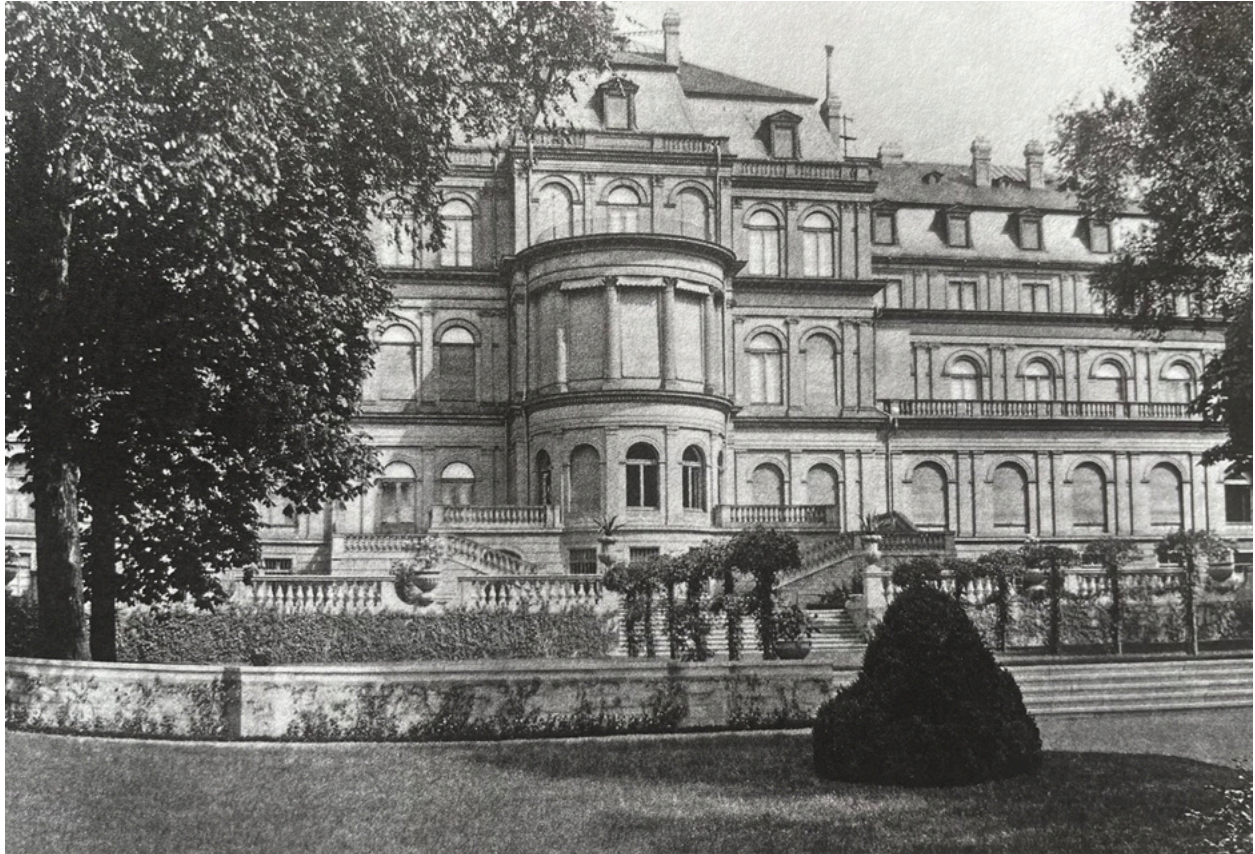


Ella inherited from her mother many features of her personality and character: self-sacrificial and dutiful nature, her dedication to charity work, deep religiosity, compassion to the poor and destitute, her interest in medical nursing work, her attitude



to her husband and her children, her understanding of the history and culture of her new homeland and true patriotism - all these qualities her mother Princess Alice showed in abundance when she moved from Great Britain to the Duchy of Hesse.

Ella was born on 1st November 1864 in a relatively small and humble princely home in central Darmstadt which previously was occupied by Ludwig's parents Karl and Elizabeth. In two years the family moved to the newly built palace which was called *Neues Palais*.



*Neues Palais, destroyed in 1944*

When Hesse Darmstadt was involved in the Austro - Prussian war (1866) Alice committed herself to nursing work organising field hospitals and introducing there the best nursing practice. She asked the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale, the heroine of the Crimean war, to help to educate and train her German nurses. In 1867 she established "Woman's nursing association" which she administered herself. The hospital in her name was established after her early death. It moved to the Mathildenhöhe in the mid 1880s and it exists until now. We saw it as we passed by. The similar memorial hospital - Alice hospital - was opened in England in Eastbourne, where Alice and her children spent their last summer holiday together. She was remembered because of her remarkable charitable activities.



*A memorial plate was put on the wall of the former Prince Karl's Palais on the Wilhelminstrasse where Ella was born.*



*Alice hospital in Darmstadt today*





*A Monument dedicated to the Grand Duchess Alice and all the charitable women of Darmstadt. 1902*

**Alice died tragically at the age of 35, in 1878, from diphtheria while nursing her children in the *Neues Palais* in Darmstadt. Since that date her five surviving children, especially the girls: Victoria (14), Elizabeth (13), Irene (12) and the youngest Alix (6) were “adopted” by Queen Victoria, as she insisted they would be under her special care.**



*Princess Alice's and her daughter May's coffins in the family mausoleum on Rosenhöhe*



**When Alice died (after her youngest daughter Mary) the family abandoned their hunting Schloss Kranichstein (built in 16th century) where they had spent many happy days. They used Kranichstein since 1863 as their summer residence and in some years before the completion of the Neues Palais as their main residence. After 1878 Ludwig re-visited it sometimes with his hunting parties but the family preferred to move to Wolfsgarten for their summer stays.**

**Queen Victoria after her visit found the furniture there not suitable and donated to the young couple a new set delivered from England. Now the main sitting room is under restoration and looking empty, we were told that the museum is still hoping to locate pieces from Victoria's set.**

**We were shown a signature of Queen Victoria engraved on the window glass. Quite impressive testimony of the past. We had a stroll along the lake where Alice used to bathe regularly. Grand Duke Ludwig was a great hunter and collected lots of hunting trophies and weapons. Nowadays Kranichstein has become the Museum of Hunting.**







Another important line, which united by marriages the Duchy of Hesse and by Rhine, the Russian Empire and Great Britain, was the one which followed the marriage in 1874 of Grand Duchess Maria, the daughter of the Empress Maria Alexandrovna (born Princess of Hesse and by Rhine) to Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, the second son of Queen Victoria. Both Maria and her younger brother Serge were frequent visitors to Hesse together with their mother, Empress Maria Alexandrovna, and sometimes with their father, the Emperor Alexander II. Their favorite residence was in the castle Heiligenberg. This explains how Ella and Sergius met each other in early childhood and later became engaged and happily married. The place of their family's meetings was Heiligenberg.



*The wooden sign reads: Louis Mountbatten Strasse*





*John Harwood resting next to Grand Duchess Wilhelmine, the first owner of Heiligenberg (Built in 1820s). She was Ella's great grandmother.*



*Victoria and Louis Mountbatten in Heiligenberg. Their younger son Louis is sitting on the edge of the swimming pool.*



*We had our rest at the same pool in front of the bathing house and the Castle.*

**We visited this beautiful rural place with magnificent parkland on the third day of the pilgrimage. It was opened to the public after recent restoration, and a few years ago a Romanov and Battenberg exhibition was organized in a former bath house. Our guide Vanessa Novak was one of the creators of this exhibition, a member of the Heiligenberg trust, which runs the castle these days. Her presentation of Battenberg family stories was most vivid and clear. The name Battenberg was given to the children of Prince Alexander of Hesse and by Rhine, the brother of the Empress Maria Alexandrovna, who had married her lady in waiting. Their marriage was morganatic so the children could not inherit the titles of Hesse but of Battenberg, from their mother's side. The title of Princes was granted to them all. One of the sons of Alexander and Julie became a first Prince of**



the Bulgarians, another, Ludwig, was sent to Britain to serve in the British Navy, and finally raised to the position of First Sea Lord (died in 1921). He married the older sister of Ella and Alix, Victoria, in 1884. They inherited Heiligenberg but after the First World War they had to sell it (in 1920). Their daughter Alice was the mother of Prince k, consort of Queen Elizabeth II. So the name Battenberg, Mountbatten in later versions, passed to their children. But the name of the dynasty remains Windsor.

Victoria and Ludwig (Louis) met many times with Ella and Sergius, and with Nicky and Alex and their families during summer holidays in Wolfsgarten, which was the main summer residence of the Grand Dukes of Hesse-Darmstadt since the 1880s.



*Grand Duke Ludwig with his two married daughters Ella and Victoria, Grand Duke Sergius and Prince Louis Battenberg in the background.*



*All the Hessian sisters with their husbands and their brother Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig gathered in Darmstadt for the wedding of Victoria's daughter Alice. 1903*

In preparation for this trip we contacted and booked in advance all possible guided tours to the places which otherwise would be closed during weekdays. One of them, Wolfsgarten, was open to the public only once a year and we used this occasion to see this important summer residence of the Hesse family. This was the last day of our pilgrimage and we started it with the *moleben* to Saint Elizabeth in front of a wooden garden chapel which was used for prayers and services by Orthodox guests of the Grand Ducal family.











*Wolfsgarten. Ella and Alix in the coach, Ernst Ludwig behind it, Grand Duke Ludwig and Victoria are watching from the stairs. Irene is holding the horse. 1882*



*The Russian Imperial family's visit to Wolfsgarten in 1910.*



**We saw the outside of this spacious hunting Castle, the largest of all which we have seen. It keeps memories of some brighter days in the life of Grand Duke Ludwig (Grand Duke from 1877), after he had partly recovered from the loss of his wife and two younger children: the engagements of his daughters, who married those who they had chosen and loved, and the success in education and military training of his only son and heir Ernst Ludwig. In his last years he felt surrounded with even more care and love from all his children, especially from Victoria and Elizabeth, who were trying to replace their mother. He died from heart failure in 1892.**

**Wolfsgarten became the favorite residence of the next Grand Duke of Hesse and by Rhine Ernst Ludwig. And this is a completely new story. His sisters with their husbands and children used to visit him almost each year. Alix stayed with him for two years and played the role of a Grand Duchess of Hesse until she went to Russia. Her overwhelming shyness didn't help her in her official duties in Darmstadt as also happened later in Russia. Ernest married in the same year as Alix. He called his first daughter Elizabeth, testifying his fondness of his older sister. His daughter Elizabeth occupied a special place in his life. He built a little house in the park for her entertainment (maybe the idea was taken from Osborne House where his mother spent the summers of her childhood and his sisters were frequent visitors).**



**There are some testimonies that Tsarevich Nicholas, the heir to the Russian throne, confessed his love to Alix in Wolfsgarten sitting next to the lake on the bench which still exists.**



He had firstly a negative answer as Alix didn't want to change her religion. Her father was an ardent Lutheran, he didn't accept Ella's conversion to Orthodoxy in 1891, and he would have supported Alix's doubts. Maybe Alix was thinking about her father's and other relatives' reaction? But Queen Victoria finally supported the decision of her heart. Nicholas waited for a year or two and finally was officially engaged with Alix during the wedding of Ernst Ludwig and Victoria Melita in Coburg in April 1894.

Tragedies followed. Ernest lost his "sunshine" in November 1903. She died at the age of 8 from typhoid. The next blow was his divorce from Victoria Melita. After he re-married in 1905 only then was his life back to normal. For his second marriage the artist's community wanted to present him with something monumental and Ernst Ludwig suggested a project to build a Wedding Tower on the Mathildenhöhe, which was completed only in 1908. It was clearly dedicated to him in appreciation of his support to the "jugendstil" artistic colony.





**It is quite obvious that Matildenhöhe presents an aesthetical and ideological dialogue between St Mary Magdalene church as an expression of a traditional faith in the forms of historicism, and the complex of buildings in the background, an expression of pure humanism and modernism. But this opposition can't be fully understood without taking into account the lives of the last Romanovs and of the last Grand Duke of Hesse, who was responsible for the creation of this strange universe, controversial but still harmonious.**

**Ernst Ludwig had built a New Mausoleum on Rosenhöhe for his parents and close relatives but he buried his little Elizabeth outside in the grounds putting there a lovely monument in the form of an Angel. He himself and his wife Eleanore also were buried outside, in a very simple grave together with others who died in an airplane crash, a few months after his death, in 1937. Incredible coincidence! They all were traveling to the wedding of his son Prince Ludwig and Margaret Campbel Geddes. This marriage was childless, so the line of Alice and Ludwig died out after their death. Earlier, in 1918 Ernst Ludwig had lost his throne as a result of the revolution (but he had not abdicated) and his title was not inherited by his son.**



Knowing about the tragedies which happened to the members of the Hesse family in 20th century we left Wolfsgarten, nevertheless, with a light and joyful feeling because Wolfsgarten was also a place of their happiness and love. We walked in the steps of the Holy Royal Martyrs Nicholas, Alexandra, their children and the Grand Duchess Elizabeth. Their martyrdom and their faith give us another aspect of their earthly lives. It is like



looking at the image of the Mother of God in the church from the elevated point, from the Royal balcony, where the focus is different.

We would not have achieved all our goals without friendly assistance from the parish of Saint Mary Magdalene in Darmstadt (ROCOR), and from the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society (Germany) who supplied us with a car and a driver on daily basis and guided us through the streets of Frankfurt and Darmstadt and opened for us the doors of their most beautiful Royal Chapel.

We would like to express our special gratitude to Father Ioann and Father Konstantin, deacon Alexander and bell-ringer Antony, to choirmaster Evgenia, to Chairman of the IOPS in Germany Denis Sudobin and his wife Alyona, and its member and a guide Marina Stutz. The members of the group asked me to express their gratitude to Paul Oxborrow, a trustee of the GDERS, for his heroic and safe driving through the roads of Deutschland and Darmstadt, to Father Aleksander Groves and Reader John Harwood for prayerful services and historical expertise.

Maria Harwood,  
Chairman of GDERS UK