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## **THE LEGEND OF THE AIGLON” – CULTURAL IMAGE OF NAPOLEON'S SON IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND ITS LATER ECHOES**

The only legitimate son of Napoleon I and Marie Louise of Austria was born in 1811 and styled after birth the King of Rome; in 1814 he left France forever with his mother and died prematurely in 1832 in Vienna, as the titular Duke of Reichstadt (a small principality in northern Bohemia, which he never visited), after living most of his life in the golden cage of the Habsburg court, isolated not only from European politics but also from his paternal family. He was posthumously nicknamed “l’Aiglon” – the Eaglet or son of the Eagle.

With Napoleon’s myth of the tragic hero and genius, the “modern Prometheus” and “martyr of St. Helena”, growing after his exile in 1815, and even more after his death in 1821, his son became a “touristic attraction” for visitors in Vienna, who tried to catch a glimpse of him on the Prater or in the opera, and in vain attempted to obtain an audience, and after 1832 visited his grave in the Capucin crypt in Vienna. Despite chancellor Metternich’s efforts he had not been entirely forgotten by politics: in the year of European revolutions, 1830, his candidature was considered for the thrones of France, Belgium, Poland and Greece; an idea that could never be agreed upon by Austria. Already before his death rumours began to circulate in Europe that he had been poisoned on Metternich’s orders. His posthumous legend was incorporated into the broader Napoleonic myth and legend, but at the same time it had its own dynamics and characteristics, which are the subject of the project.

His birth was hailed by 121 cannon discharges, as well as literary competitions, portraiture by the most prominent contemporary artists that presented the baby King of Rome in official attire, and allegorical scenes revolving around Roman mythology. In the Viennese period official literary production related to the prince ceased, and the not numerous portraits show him as a private person or at best as an officer of the Austrian army. The popular and seditious production around 1830 consisted of engravings, medals and every-day use objects (pipes, snuff boxes, scarves, fans) that bore the portrait of the Duke. After his death in 1832 scenes of apotheosis appeared in large numbers, and the prince was presented usually as united with his father in the Elysium. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century biographies, literary and theatrical works, paintings, engravings and prints abounded, and the culmination came with the 1900 premiere of Edmond Rostand’s piece *L’Aiglon*, starring Sarah Bernhardt in the role of the Duke. The play gained enormous popularity in the interwar period, the main role was played both by male and female actors (in Poland it marked the beginning of the great career of Juliusz Osterwa), and the drama was turned into an opera by Arthur Honegger and Jacques Ibert in 1937. Apart from both official and unofficial literary and artistic production, what interests me in the project are also memoirs of prominent and ordinary persons who met or just saw the Duke, and other documents that show the reception of his person from Europe to America, Australia and the Pacific, such as gossip attested in press and in memoirs, conspiracy theories about the poisoning but also legends about the Duke’s escape from Austria, and stories linking him with the great mysteries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Caspar Hauser and the alleged escape from revolutionary prison and survival of the young Louis XVII.

By studying all this material I intend to reconstruct the legend and the “persona” of the Duke, together with its transformations over time. The legend of the Aiglon, which makes up an integral part of the broader Napoleonic legend in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and at the same time has its own evolution and dynamics, was one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century myths, which combined the romantic fascination in tragic exiles, misunderstood individuals and persons transgressing the human boundaries, as well as in mysterious fates. The tragic and ironic coda of the return of the Duke’s remains to Paris in 1940, executed by the Nazis, after almost a century of French diplomatic efforts, regularly rejected by the Habsburgs, and its effects contrary to Hitler’s intentions, is also of interest to me, as well as the tentative revivals of the popularity of the Duke as an icon in the post-war period in film and literature. All this makes up a fascinating and unique story, which tells us a lot about the changing fates of memories and receptions.