

The homesick King

The exiled King Constantine of Greece could get his royal estates back, thanks to a European court ruling. He hopes to live in his palace again, but is reconciled to losing his throne. 'If you feel bitter, you cannot survive,' he says



Interview
Helena de Bertodano

The small watercolour on the wall of King Constantine's study is not the most impressive of the paintings in his Hampstead house. But it underlines the intimacy between the King of Greece and the British Royal Family. It was painted by the Prince of Wales nearly 20 years ago during his honeymoon. "The boat was steaming past Crete as he painted it and he sent it to me from there," says Constantine. It bears no signature, just the name of the place, Marmara Bay, and the date, 1981. When he first pointed it out to me, I had thought he was indicating a neighbouring picture, an impressive landscape. "Ha, ha, ha," chuckles Constantine. "I don't think Charles is that good." The Prince of Wales's painting is more amateurish: broad brushstrokes depicting the sea and a blur of passing land. Much as Constantine likes his British royal relatives, he has had to spend rather more time on their soil than he would have chosen. Since 1974, he has lived in exile in London, stripped of his throne, his court, his palace. Last week, however, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that his private property had been illegally seized by the Greek government. Either his estates must be returned or the government will have to pay him compensation, estimated by the King at £1.2 billion, which includes 34,000 acres of woodland, the royal palace at Tatoi and the summer palace of Mon Repos on Corfu, where his cousin the Duke of Edinburgh was born. When I arrive at his house, several mysterious figures in suits greet me and file into the room for the interview. Constantine himself is affable and informal and does not stand on ceremony. His aides had told me I should address him as "Your Majesty" but thought a courtesy might be a little excessive. He is wearing a dark suit and

black tie with gold-rimmed glasses and gold ER cufflinks. In fact, although his home could scarcely be described as a palace (it is a redbrick 1960s house in Hampstead Garden Suburb, just round the corner from Jonathan Ross's new house, with an acre of garden backing on to the Heath) there is certainly a regal theme, with gold as the dominant colour.

The carpets throughout the house are gold, the paint on the walls is pale gold, the curtains are striped gold and rose, the sofa and armchairs are gold with pale blue piping. Even the bathroom has a gold basin with gold taps and gold flecked wallpaper.

We sit in the drawing-room, which has an official, rather than a family, feel to it. The tables are groaning with photographs of European royalty, most of whom are his relatives. His sister is Queen Sofia of Spain and his wife Queen Anne-Marie, is the sister of Queen Margrethe of Denmark. They have five children, ranging in age from 14 to 35. His eldest son Pavlos is married to Marie-Chantal Miller, the daughter of the billionaire Robert Miller. On the side table between us is a photograph of Prince William as a small boy, dressed in a sailor suit. King Constantine is his godfather. "He's an excellent boy, very sensible, he's got a wonderful sense of humour, he's hard-working, full of fun."

Constantine happily reels through the interlinking godparentage. "I'm godfather to William, Charles is godfather to my second son, William is godfather to my grandson and the Queen is godmother to my youngest daughter."

It has been said that he is so close to both the Queen and the Prince of Wales that he played a crucial role in persuading the Queen to accept Camilla Parker Bowles as her son's mistress. Certainly, it was at Constantine's 60th birthday party this summer, held at Highgrove by Prince Charles, that the two women came face to face for the first time in decades, a manoeuvre involving almost military planning. Constantine, naturally, rules out any suggestion that he was an intermediary. "I know them all, but that is none of my business," he says firmly, meaning, I suspect, that it is really none of my business.

He is very courteous while remaining completely in charge. When I ask him where he would like me to sit, he says: "Wherever you would be most comfortable." Adding "Probably there," pointing to a specific corner of a sofa. And when his aides

begin to cough and shuffle, signalling an end to the interview, he says: "I think I'm being told that I've taken up too much of your time." Constantine talks easily and fluently, with a marked Greek accent, and a deep voice underscored with decades of smoking strong Pallas cigarettes. He insists that he would rather have his property returned to him than to receive financial compensation, which would put a burden on Greek taxpayers. The European Court has given Greece six months to come up with an offer. He says that he would love to live in Greece again. "I just desperately want to go back to Greece. Every Greek is homesick. They always long to go home again." In fact he has only returned twice to Greece since he was overthrown in 1967, once in 1981 for the funeral of his mother and once on a family holiday in 1993 that ended with Greek warships shadowing his yacht. It was after this visit that the late Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu stripped the King of his Greek citizenship, passport and properties. The government also insists on referring to him as Constantine Glücksburg, an abbreviation of Denmark's royal house of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, from which King Constantine is descended. But he has clung steadfastly to his title, insisting that he has no surname. "It's not a title any more. It's an identification of who I am. Most royal families have some kind of a surname. We don't." Constantine was 23 when his father died and he

became King. Three years later, the colonels seized power in a military coup. "The 21st of April, 1967, was definitely the worst day of my life. It's a horrible, horrible feeling to be head of state and up until midnight it's a free democratic country. Then overnight everybody's under arrest, locked up and the army's taken over." Yet it is sometimes said that Constantine is the author of his own misfortune. Some say that if he had shown a firmer hand, like say, his brother-in-law King Juan Carlos of Spain who saw off a similar coup in 1981, he might have remained on the throne. I ask him if he feels he did everything he could. "I'm always very intrigued when people say I should have done more, but they should tell me what they think I should have done. I'm certainly not going to analyse what happened in 1967 to you because I don't think we have enough food for dinner here." It is only midday so he is suggesting that it would take at least eight hours. "The main point is that my staff were arrested and beaten up, my house was surrounded, there were no communications in Spain they didn't touch the communications, everybody was free to move around and it was daytime — in Greece, it happened at night. I felt I had to find a way to solve the problem without bloodshed. Some people say 'Why didn't you do a Gandhi?' But if I did a Gandhi, and sat down passively and did nothing, there would have been bloodshed." Arresting the leaders was out of the question, he says. "If I went up to them and said 'You

are under arrest', they would just have laughed." Within hours, he was signing decrees for the junta. Nine months later, he organised a counter-coup that failed, prompting him to flee into exile in Italy. He spent seven years in Rome, and in 1974, after the military regime disintegrated, the monarchy was rejected in a referendum by a 69 per cent majority. "When you are young, it is much easier to adapt to circumstances. You have your

Alexis and Pavlos, and flew to Rome, with nothing except the clothes he stood up in. "I didn't even have any shoes. The pilot, a very good friend of mine, gave me some money to go and buy a pair of shoes in Rome." Since then it is thought that he has survived with the generous financial support of loyal diaspora Greeks, although he will not confirm this. "It is private and personal," he says, adding morosely: "I have a lot of legal bills to deal with." Certainly the trappings of his life are not as sumptuous as they once were. An avid yachtsman, who won a gold medal in the 1960 Olympic Games, he says he no longer sails. "It's quite expensive to have a boat and I can't do that now." But he has never had to sell the family jewels, which reputedly include a fabulous collection of rubies and emeralds from his great-grandmother Queen Olga. If he had not been born to kingship, he says he would like to have become a journalist or an actor. "I always wanted to go into the theatre." "He was a very good Mark Antony," says one of the men invigilating the interview, who, it turns out, is an old school chum. With a theatrical flourish, King Constantine immediately throws himself into the role: "Oh pardon me thou bleeding piece of earth, That I am meek and gentle with these butchers. Thou art the ruins of the noblest man That ever lived in the tide of times. Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!" His second son, Nikolaos, who is also sitting in on the interview,

laughs at his father, perhaps embarrassed at this outburst. But after school, Constantine went into the Armed Forces and "theatre went way out of the window." Now he fills his days dealing with his correspondence — over 40,000 letters a year — and receiving Greek students and businessmen. He says every Greek he has ever met has had nothing but warm words for him. "You can come with me one day if you want to, to what's that place called? Self, Self." One of his aides prompts him: "Selfridges." "Yes Selfridges. I go shopping there, come with me, I'll take you there, all the Greeks go shopping there and every corner I go round, they come up to me and say 'You're the King', and they're terribly sweet and kind." This sounds like a man who feels he has enough public support to return to his country one day as King. But he insists that this is not the case. "All I want is to have my home back and to be able to travel in and out of Greece like every other Greek. I don't have to be in Greece as head of state. I'm quite happy to be there as a private citizen. Forget the past, we are a republic now. Let's get on with the future." I ask him if he feels bitter. "God help us if you feel bitter in life. I've been through a lot. I left my country because I tried to overthrow a dictatorship. I put my family's life at risk my wife lost a baby in the process (she miscarried her third child) and we've lived in exile ever since. If you feel bitter, you cannot survive." What does he feel? He thinks about this for a few seconds. "I feel extremely patient."

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King Constantine in Hampstead Garden Suburb. I go shopping in Selfridges... all the Greeks go shopping there and every corner I go round, they come up to me and say 'You're the King'.

