

History of the Crusades. Episode 309. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XIV. Michael and the Emperor.

Hello again. Last week we saw Grand Master Heinrich von Plauen battle intrigue and suspicion inside the Teutonic Order, as he fought against the influence of the Lizard League and its plan to oust Grand Master Heinrich and replace him with Georg of Wirsberg, a man who had accidentally promised to hand Prussia over on a platter to King Wenceslas of Bohemia. The upshot of all of these shenanigans was that the Lizard League plot was uncovered and condemned, and in the middle of it all, Grand Master Heinrich managed to scrape together enough money to pay the second installment due under the Peace of Thorn. We also saw Sigismund of Hungary become the new Holy Roman Emperor.

We left last week's episode with Grand Master Heinrich wringing his hands, wondering how on earth he was going to come up with enough funds to cover the hefty final installment of the ransom money. The only solution which presented itself was to somehow convince the new Emperor Sigismund to assist the Order to come up with the needed funds, so Grand Master Heinrich directed the Marshall of the Order, Michael Kuchmeister, to travel to the Kingdom of Germany to negotiate with Sigismund to secure some sort of assistance to cover the final installment.

Now, do you recall the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk? It goes a little something like this. Jack's mum has completely run out of money, and in desperation she hands her son Jack one of the family's few remaining assets, their cow. She tells Jack to take the cow to market and sell it for a hefty sum of money, but Jack ends up getting swindled into trading the cow for a magic bean. Jack's mum ends up throwing the bean away in disgust. It grows into a giant beanstalk, which Jack then climbs. The beanstalk leads to a giant's castle. Jack manages to steal a bunch of treasure from the giant, then defeats and kills the giant, before climbing back down the beanstalk with all the treasure, saving the day and enabling his family to live happily ever after on the proceeds. Woohoo!

Well, the Jack and the Beanstalk story is about to play out in real life, with Jack's mom being Grand Master Heinrich and Jack being Michael Kuchmeister. Well, to be honest, only the first part of the story is going to be playing out. The magic bean part, the beanstalk, the giant, and the treasure won't get a look in, unfortunately.

Okay, so a desperate Grand Master Heinrich sends Michael Kuchmeister to market. Oops, sorry, no, he sends Michael Kuchmeister to the new Emperor Sigismund. Then Grand Master Heinrich sits back and waits for Michael Kuchmeister to return to Prussia with, not a magic bean, but enough funds to pay the final installment due under the terms of the Peace of Thorn.

When Michael Kuchmeister arrives in the Kingdom of Germany, he finds Sigismund absolutely brimming with ideas about the new directions in which he could take the Holy Roman Empire. Despite the fact that the formalities involved in crowning Sigismund as the new King of Germany and formally installing him as the Emperor are still underway, Sigismund is thinking big in the plans he is formulating. His plans were rather ambitious, to put it mildly. He was going to start off by ending the long running Papal schism. Then he was going to unite Italy, Germany, Hungary and Bohemia under his rule. Sigismund's enthusiasm must have been infectious. Sigismund explained to Michael Kuchmeister that

the only thing holding Sigismund back from solving all the problems currently confronting the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire was a lack of money.

Michael Kuchmeister found himself nodding along in agreement. Then, Michael Kuchmeister found himself not only nodding along but promising to send money from Prussia to the Holy Roman Emperor. Rather a lot of money. Sigismund had initially requested that Prussia hand over 600,000 florins, which was an incredibly large sum, more than double the amount that Prussia had agreed to pay under the Peace of Thorn. However, both men had talked things over and agreed that this sum was a bit much, so in the end Michael Kuchmeister agreed to pay Sigismund 400,000 florins. 400,000 florins was way worse than a magic bean. 400,000 florins was actually more than the final amount owed on the indemnity payable under the Peace of Thorn.

And what was the Teutonic Order going to get in return for handing this obscenely large amount of money over to Sigismund? Well, it was going to get a treaty pledging the support of the Holy Roman Emperor in any moves that Prussia may make against the Kingdom of Poland, not because Sigismund wished to help Prussia out, but because Sigismund would like Prussia's assistance in defeating Poland and bringing it under his rule, along with the other conquests he intended to make.

Is this the worst deal ever struck in the history of diplomacy? I'm not sure, but it would have to be a contender. As William Urban states in his book "The Last Years of the Teutonic Knights", and I quote "Considering Kuchmeister's background in the economic management of the Prussian state, this was extraordinary behaviour. All in all, he spent more money than was needed to settle the indemnity to Poland." End quote.

So the Marshall of the Teutonic Order made his way back to Prussia with the happy news that he had secured a treaty with the Holy Roman Empire against the Kingdom of Poland, and the not so happy news that Sigismund was not going to be supplying the funds to cover the final installment due to Poland. Oh, and the really, really not so happy news that Prussia now owes Sigismund a greater sum than the amount of money that it currently owes to Poland.

To say that Grand Master Heinrich was unhappy with the outcome of Michael Kuchmeister's diplomatic mission is an understatement. He refused to sign the treaties which Michael Kuchmeister brought back and told the Marshall that he would not be handing enormous sums of money, that Prussia didn't have, over to Sigismund, no matter what Michael Kuchmeister had negotiated on the Order's behalf. Then Grand Master Heinrich was forced to reach into the nearly empty coffers of the Teutonic Order for the sum of 25,000 florins to cover the expenses Michael Kuchmeister had incurred during his diplomatic face-plant-fest, which included a number of bribes and expensive gifts to Sigismund and his supporters.

No matter how earnestly Michael Kuchmeister tried to convince the Grand Master that his mission had not been an expensive failure, and that if the Order was going to pay out an eye-watering amount of money, it would be better off going to their ally Sigismund instead of their enemy King Jogaila, Grand Master Heinrich could not see any silver lining in the cloud. When the Grand Master threw this magic bean out the window, no magic beanstalk grew, and no treasure was found. Instead, the reality was that the Teutonic Order was no closer to being able to source the funds to cover the final installment, and it had also put the new Holy Roman Emperor offside by reneging on a treaty negotiated by its Marshall.

Oh, and it had to fork out a significant wad of cash to cover the expenses for this hot mess of a failure of a diplomatic mission.

I guess it probably came as no surprise to anyone that, when the date for the payment of the installment came around, Grand Master Heinrich told Jogaila that he needed a little more time to come up with the money, although this message was made a little ambiguous by the fact that the Grand Master then promptly went and spent what little money he had on hiring extra mercenaries and on improving the defensive capabilities of some of his castles. When more time had passed and it appeared likely that the Order would be forced to renege on its obligation to make the payment, Emperor Sigismund graciously stepped in and offered to oversee talks between Poland, Lithuania and Prussia to try to resolve the issue and set the Peace of Thorn back on the right track. Not only did the issue of the overdue payment need to be discussed, the problem of the borders of Samogitia hadn't yet been resolved, and all of the Bishops of Prussia, men who had been quick to submit to Polish rule shortly after the battle of Tannenberg, were still in exile and their status needed to be clarified.

So Sigismund called on all the parties to travel to the Hungarian border for a meeting to resolve the remaining issues arising from the Peace of Thorn. This meeting ended up continuing for a couple of months, and appeared to mostly involve parties, hunting sessions, and tournaments where the warrior-leaders King Jogaila, Grand Duke Vytautas, and Emperor Sigismund could show off their riding skills and bond over some feasting and drinking sessions. Grand Master Heinrich didn't personally attend the event but sent some appropriately qualified delegates. Deciding not to send Michael Kuchmeister, he instead chose the Archbishop of Riga, Johannes Wallenrode and his bloodstained cousin from the Danzig debacle in last week's episode, Heinrich Reuss of Plauen.

While the delegates and attendees were feasting, hunting, drinking, and competing against each other in lavish tournaments, Grand Master Heinrich remained in Marienburg, deep in prayer. In a marked contrast to the partying happening on the Hungarian border, the Grand Master at one stage led a barefoot procession, which walked from church to church in Marienburg, seeking divine intervention for a favorable outcome to the discussions. The cash-strapped Grand Master even managed to scrape together enough money to pay 12 monks to pray continuously around the clock at a church in Marienburg to bring the desired result to pass.

In the end, an outcome was negotiated, but it appears that the Grand Master's prayers and acts of penitence may have been in vain, because the outcome seemed to suit everyone except the Teutonic Order. Even Emperor Sigismund, who incidentally gave everyone a scare when he took a nasty fall from his horse during a tournament and was knocked unconscious, only to stage a remarkable recovery to everyone's relief, seemed to walk away a winner.

Basically, in August of the year 1412, the Emperor ruled that the first Peace of Thorn was a legally binding treaty, and that a commission was to be established to travel to Samogitia to settle the border issues once and for all. All the exiled Prussian Bishops were to be allowed to return to Prussia. Then importantly, and worryingly for the Grand Master, both King Jogaila and Grand Duke Vytautas agreed to aid Emperor Sigismund with his current collection of ambitious projects, which included uniting the Latin Christian and Orthodox Churches, ending the Papal schism, and promoting a new crusade against the Turks. All three men, King Jogaila, Grand Duke Vytautas, and Emperor Sigismund, then agreed to

mutual defense arrangements, all agreeing not to aid the enemies of their other two drinking buddies.

As for the outstanding indemnity payment and the ransoming of the remaining German prisoners, Emperor Sigismund declared that he would pocket the sum of money that had already been raised by the Teutonic Order in an attempt to cover the indemnity. This sum didn't cover the full amount agreed as the final installment under the Peace of Thorn, so Sigismund declared that he would cough up the remaining amount and hand the entire final installment over to King Jogaila.

Worryingly for the Grand Master, Sigismund then hinted that in return for clearing the outstanding debt, the Teutonic Order may want to think about handing the region of Neumark over to the Emperor. Neumark was a significant piece of territory on the border of the Kingdom of Poland between Pomerelia and Pomesania. Claimed by both the Kingdom of Poland and the Teutonic Order, it was currently under the control of Prussia and was serving as a vital land link and trading route between Prussia and the Kingdom of Germany. The thought of losing Neumark to anyone, even Emperor Sigismund, made Grand Master Heinrich's blood run cold. As an indication of just how cold the thought of losing Neumark was turning the Grand Master's blood, Heinrich of Plauen clapped his hands together and ordered the cities of Prussia to collect any assets they had lying around, and to melt down any silverware which wasn't being used. To everyone's surprise, probably even the Grand Master's, the resulting goods and chattels were enough to cover the full cost of the final indemnity payment, so without having to owe Emperor Sigismund any favors, the Teutonic Order was able to settle its outstanding debt directly with King Jogaila of Poland.

So, with the final installment having been paid and the ransomed prisoners about to head back to Prussia, does this mean that Grand Master Heinrich, King Jogaila, and Grand Duke Vytautas will now all join together, hold hands, and go skipping off into the sunset, heralding a new age of peace in the Baltic region? No. In fact, the wheels are about to fall off the wagon which is the First Peace of Thorn, and Grand Master Heinrich is actually going to end up declaring war on Poland.

Join me next week as Grand Master Heinrich von Plauen stumbles from disaster to disaster in a misguided bid to reverse the outcome of the Battle of Tannenberg. Until next week, bye for now.

This podcast is powered by Patreon. If you can spare \$1 per month and would like to support this podcast, go to patreon.com and search for "History of the Crusades", or go to our website, crusadespod.com, and click on the Patreon link. Your \$1 contribution will mean you get access to an extra episode every fortnight on topics related to the Crusades, and it means that you are powering the History of the Crusades podcast. Thank you to all who have signed up so far.

End