2 *Joseph II and his Legacy*

Few men have taken up the reins of government amid such expectations as Joseph II. The German epic poet Klopstock had dedicated his *Hermannsschlacht* to him in 1769 and hailed him as the Charlemagne of learning. The philosopher Herder had called on him to give a German fatherland to those who yearned for it. Even Frederick of Prussia, no friend of the Habsburgs, spoke of the beginning of a new order.

The object of these attentions was born in 1741 and educated by a variety of private tutors, from his worthy director of studies Count Bartenstein, who prepared the boy six thousand pages of notes on medieval Austrian history, to spokesmen of moderate Enlightenment like Riegger and Blanc. From them Joseph would have acquired certain Enlightenment ideas but nothing incompatible with notions of a conscientious absolutism and an unostentatious faith. The vehemence of his attacks on the Monarchy's governing institutions, particularly the nobility, in early memoranda of 1761 and 1765 was therefore as much the response of a quick intelligence and vigorous temperament to Austria's problems as a matter of book learning. 'We inherit from our parents at birth only animal life', he wrote after being proclaimed joint ruler with his mother on his father's death in 1765.[1] But his new position gave him little chance to put his views into practice. Maria Theresa declared only her son and not herself joint ruler, retaining her own sovereign powers in full. Even in the military affairs ostensibly entrusted to Joseph she continued a secret correspondence with officials behind his back and on the important issue of administrative reform he failed to move her. Joseph's own description of his mother's attitude to him as a petulant kind of loving accurately reflects their often fraught relationship in these years.

Thwarted reforming energies found expression in fields still open, whether simplifying court ceremonial, using his father's fortune to reduce state debts or the dramatic journeys to all parts of his domains which bespoke his thirst to play a public role. Between 1765 and his death Joseph II spent a third of his time on the move. While these expeditions were not always the simple, spartan affairs legend has made them – thirteen vehicles accompanied Joseph on his journey to the Banat in 1768 – the Emperor on horseback quizzing all and

sundry, the humble accommodation en route and the bag in which wayside peasants could slip petitions were all real enough. Contemporaries were right to conclude that this unusual monarch was in broad sympathy with key themes of the Enlightenment. He believed that all human beings regardless of status should be treated as rational beings with a right to happiness, that liberalisation in matters of conscience and the press was a means to this end and that feudal and clerical elements would resist such reforms. He was also, however, a convinced absolutist who did not doubt that the welfare of the parts depended on the welfare of the whole, and that only the monarch and his close advisers were in a position to judge what that might be. The man who succeeded Maria Theresa in November 1780 was a strange mixture of benefactor and martinet.

Yet at the start of his brief reign Joseph wrote to his brother Leopold that he intended to go slowly at first. The initial need was to enthuse the administration with his own commitment to the service of the state. One early measure introduced the Prussian system of annual reports on officials' performance by their superiors; another granted them automatic pension rights. Material gain was not, however, to be the primary incentive. In a famous circular of 1783 Joseph wrote that Austria needed men able to renounce all life's pleasures for the sake of the public weal. The demanding ruler who had once given the Governor of Bohemia two days' notice of a major visit issued lists of hundreds of points which *Kreis* commissioners were to cover in their inspections, from the presence of superstitions and roving jugglers to the treatment of disabled children and 'unfortunate girls'. Meanwhile, the structure of government was streamlined. In the non-Hungarian lands the number of provincial governments was reduced to six, each with its Appellate Court, the Diets lost their standing committees and municipal autonomy was much curtailed. Yet at the central level Joseph chose to hector the many noble officials rather than replace them, perhaps because of the lack of alternatives, but giving the impression, as one of them, Count Zinzendorf, wrote in his diary, that he alone loved the country and knew the truth, while all his civil servants were rogues or fools.

Brusque and tactless as he was, in almost every sphere Joseph initially continued along roads his mother had travelled. Peasant reform is the most prominent example. Two Patents of autumn 1781 forbade nobles to fine or physically punish their peasants and abolished noble control over peasant marriage, movement and choice of occupation. This 'abolition of serfdom', a term used in the November Patent