

Interview with the former head of MTV Christiane zu Salm

## “One does not cry in a Porsche”

Successful, rich and healthy: life for Christiane zu Salm should have been going splendidly – but instead she fell into a crisis. Here she tells how she found her way out – and why we should all write an obituary.

**I have to admit, when I heard your name, my first thought was, “Christiane zu Salm, wasn't she the Rock Princess?” You were called that at the time because you were married to Prince Ludwig zu Salm-Salm. How often do people still react to you in this way?**

Christiane zu Salm: Thankfully, decades have passed since then. However, that's how long it took. You can't get rid of an image like that so quickly. When I started this job as managing director of MTV Central Europe, I was completely inexperienced and immediately got all the labels that you can imagine. Feminine, blond, princess. Inexperienced in television, inexperienced in management, inexperienced with music. I suffered from this for quite a time, until at some point I came to understand that I could also use these labels and projections as protective shields or armor.

**Actually, these labels are absurd. After all, you could also put it this way: in 1998 you were the first woman to run a television station in Germany. You**

**must have been really good.**

zu Salm: That's so easy to say. It was a gamble that only a major American corporation wanted to make at the time – Viacom CBS Networks International, the parent company of MTV Networks. They didn't know whether I was good or not. They just gave me the chance.

**I'd like to come back to the image of armor. In public, we tend to share beautiful pictures of ourselves, for example on Instagram. There were also glamorous pictures of you back then, for example from the Echo Awards, where you appeared in a backless leather suit.**

zu Salm: I can still feel the insecurity that I felt at the time. The photographers wanted me that way – and I let everything be done to me. I didn't have the courage to say, "I'm not a model, I'm not a musician, I'm not a star. I am a manager." I wanted recognition, to be liked. Everything that is hiding in some form in all of us. I still stand by these pictures, but today I feel that this is not me.

**How old were you then?**

zu Salm: 31. The record company bosses, who back then were still the gatekeepers for a music career, didn't take me seriously. One of them once ordered a coffee from me. There's nothing wrong with that. But he just thought I would be my own assistant. I brought him the coffee and said, "Ms. zu Salm is coming right away." Then I let him wait ten minutes.

**How did the record company boss react to this embarrassing situation?**

zu Salm: He was rather uncomfortable. I have been underestimated. But I quickly understood that this also offers a lot of potential.

“No one can ignore visible and measurable success. Not even the people who underestimate you.”

**Many women know the feeling of being underestimated at work. How can one use that for oneself?**

zu Salm: By not fighting against it. By not using all your strength and energy for being taken seriously. In my experience, it's much better to focus on doing your job and creating facts. No one can ignore visible and measurable success. Not even the people who underestimate you.

**Your career then went on. After your stint at MTV Central Europe, you helped set up the quiz game channel 9Live as an entrepreneur and sold it to ProSiebenSat.1 in 2005. From there you went into the Burda board of directors. And then suddenly there was this drastic cutting back: No more galas, no more new posts – instead, you went underground. Then at some point you returned as a hospice care attendant. What was the trigger for this very radical change?**

zu Salm: It was a personal crisis that had occupied me inwardly for many years. I didn't get up one morning and say, "Hospice care, that's what I've always wanted to do."

### **What happened?**

I'd sold my shares in 9Live. I wasn't even 40 years old. I was well provided for. I had earned the money myself. I had a family. I was healthy. And despite these incredible privileges, I had fallen into a big, deep hole, and I was ashamed of it. One does not cry in a Porsche. Well, I don't drive a Porsche, but this image describes my feelings very well. I received offers from headhunters and had opportunities to join boards. But nothing that came to me from the outside moved me on the inside at that time.

### **How long did this crisis last?**

zu Salm: I'm talking about years, not months. Then at some point I really started to look inside myself : what was going to emerge? The training in hospice care was a path that led me further on.

### **What was going to emerge and be dealt with? Was it your younger brother's accident? You were six when he died in an accident right before your eyes.**

zu Salm: For half of my life I hadn't noticed how much this trauma had shaped me. I couldn't look too closely at it. But at some point the moment

came – and I think in every life there is a different point in time when you are ready to let a painful experience such as this emerge within you. That's why I think it is totally inappropriate that society assigns us a year of mourning – at the most - and that's it. Nor should we judge ourselves if we haven't been able to deal with our traumas within ten, twenty or thirty years. Life will tell you when that time has come. Then, examining it closely is perhaps the most powerful and meaningful way to live a fulfilling life.

**What meaning did you find for yourself in this loss?**

zu Salm: Selflove. For a long time I looked for recognition from the outside world and in the process completely exhausted myself. The path to oneself has a lot to do with overcoming fear and really showing up for whom you are.

**You wrote a book and spoke with people who knew they were going to die.**

**What advice did you take from that?**

zu Salm: When you listen to people who are dying, it's a great gift for us who are living, because from them we can learn to get the "should've" and "could've" out of our lives. If only I'd come out as gay sooner, if only I'd decided to move sooner, to change jobs. In my experience, these "if onlys" have to do with our fear of being ourselves. Instead, we often lead lives based on other people's expectations.

**Many people are familiar with the feeling of emptiness as you describe it.**

### **What can one take as a first step to get out of that place?**

zu Salm: I recommend making a chart and then considering, “What is important to me? What values do I want to live by?” Put these in the left column. Then enter on the right what you do in your everyday life. How much time do you actually spend on these values? If you want to go a step further, I’d recommend that you write your own obituary. Do so within 15 minutes. That was a key experience for me during my apprenticeship as a hospice care attendant. It showed me the gap.

### **What did you write in your obituary?**

zu Salm: I spent five of the fifteen minutes going through my résumé. This is, of course, the completely wrong approach. Suddenly it gushed out of me. She would have liked to have expressed herself creatively, she would have liked to have been an artist, she would have liked to have written another book. And then I was quite shocked, especially given that I’ve always seen myself as a renowned hater of the “should’ve, could’ve” attitude. At MTV, I’d always told my staff to “just do it.” Writing an obituary like this is a real admonition to yourself.

**You’ve been married twice. You’ve lived in many different places between Berlin and New York. If I had to spontaneously develop a title for your biography, I would choose “The Seeker” or “The Traveler.” Where do you see yourself today?**

zu Salm: I've made peace with my seeking and I've come to the point where I can affirm it. I can even say I find it exciting. The Austrian-American psychologist Paul Watzlawick once said: be warned before arriving at your envisioned destination. There is always a feeling of security in arriving. That's actually what I've been looking for all my life, because I never felt secure in my childhood. Today I have understood that I will never find safety outside myself. I have come to a deep faith that as long as I live, my paths will always lead me another step closer to myself. I now love my search.

An interview by Antonia Götsch and Astrid Maier · December 26th, 2020

Published in Harvard Business Manager

*How can methods and ideas relating to leadership, strategy and management actually be implemented in everyday life? In what ways do we and other executives fail? In the honest leadership podcast Team A, every two weeks editors-in-chief Antonia Götsch (Harvard Business Manager) and Astrid Maier (Xing News) speak to managers and guests from the fields of science and sport. Team A appears biweekly at Harvard Business Manager as well as on Spotify and Apple.*

Christiane zu Salm was the Managing Director of the music broadcaster MTV Networks in Germany, Austria and Switzerland until 2001 and afterwards founded the TV Channel 9Live, which was funded by IAC Interactive Corp.

With its sale to ProSiebenSat.1, she withdrew from the Television Entertainment Business in 2005. Today, she works as an Emotional Health Counselor. In her virtual practice, she teaches spiritually minded entrepreneurs how to grieve losses of any kind (death, divorce, business) so they can reconnect to themselves. She is also an art collector, author and host of the podcast Before It's Too Late.