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Empress Elisabeth

„It would be easy, if she were as good as she was beautiful“





Empress Elisabeth on the front page of the Wiener Salonblatt, 17th September 1898

Preamble

Sometimes majestic and powerful, then pedantic and bureaucratic, enigmatic and eccentric, self-serving, and at other times psychologically unstable, or completely indifferent: Whoever deems to study closely the family of Emperor Franz Joseph I. connects inevitably these different mentalities to certain personalities of the imperial house. This is especially true in the case of Empress Elisabeth, whose initial shyness changed to a narcissistic self-presentation as a fairy like creature. She pays however, a very high price for this: Besides a time-consuming beauty cult, she develops a slimming mania, which makes her endure high athletic performances on horseback or on power walks, as well as the most rigorous and absurd diets. At the same time, an inner restlessness manifests itself in her wanderlust and homesickness, which results in countless and expensive journeys. Thereby, she flees from not only the Viennese Court and its professional duties and constraints, but also, increasingly, from her family. Empress Elisabeth said in a conversation with her Greek teacher, “Beauty

is the cause and the purpose of all things.”¹ The saying, that beauty has the advantage of not having to be useful, comes true, nevertheless only in the negative inversion. She wastes precious and necessary time, which she could be spending on her representation duty as Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary, her family, and most important of all, her children, with her beauty cult, debilitating body cult, and the dangerous equestrian sport. In addition to this, there are the long trips and stays abroad, which are often disguised as cures. Emperor Franz Joseph’s valet, Eugen Ketterl, states unequivocally: “For a ruler, who must take her duty seriously, she was completely unsuited.”²

Her absences from the Viennese Court, which increase with age, feed, at the same time, the gossip about the increasingly unpredictable ruler. Neither does this escape her lady-in-waiting and most intimate friend, Countess Marie Festetics, who writes, on the 12th of December 1871 in her journal, before starting imperial duty: “One hears so many things, ach! If only she were as good as she was beautiful, it would be easy. That house impresses me, there must be a great amount of gossip there.”³ The gossip doesn’t even end, when the consequences of growing older, and the physical changes thereof, take their toll on Elisabeth: “I found her ugly, old, and

thin as a rake...”⁴ – the unflattering judgement of the Austrian Consul in Corfu, Baron Alexander von Warsberg, when he meets the 48-year-old monarch in 1885. Empress Elisabeth, without further ado, decides to withdraw from the public gaze, and without consideration for the emperor, to organize her own daily routine as she sees fit. As a result, she not only snubs the emperor, who doesn’t dare to entrust her with representative tasks, but her self-serving behaviour triggers astonishment at other courts, as is illustrated by a letter from the Prussian Crown Princess Victoria, the eldest daughter of her namesake, the English Queen, to her mother, which quite blatantly states: “The beautiful Empress is a very strange individual, as far as her daily schedule is concerned. She spends most of the morning sleeping on the sofa. She dines at 4 o’clock, rides the whole evening alone, never for less than three hours, and is furious, if anything else is planned. She doesn’t wish to see anyone, or let herself be seen anywhere.”⁵ This uncompromising retreat from the public eye threatens to render her forgotten, even when she is still alive ...

There lies a certain irony in the fact that Empress Elisabeth, made gloomy by a death wish, only after her murder – which was committed by an Italian anarchist – was brought back to mind to a public that she had

strictly avoided in the last decades of her life. It took more than half a century, till her person, which thanks to the “Sissi” films with Romy Schneider, could establish itself as a new figure of light in the hearts of those born afterwards – „her future souls”. The success of the Sissi trilogy was not only due to the enchanting charisma of the actress, but also to the immediate post-war period, in which everything military had had its day, as the literary Marlene Streeruwitz hits the nail on the head: „*The Empress as saviour of the monarchy and the emperor. [...] A beautiful woman smiles at the ruler of a nation which is less than friendly, and already, this nation remains bound to the k.u.k. monarchy. In this way, wars are avoided in the “Sissi” films. The virgin and dragon myth of the ‘50s.*”⁶ Apart from this new Sissi-cult, historical experts have newly adopted this personality, by which Brigitte Hamann’s comprehensive standard work about this monarch⁷ may claim validity up until the present time. Due to additional evaluation of some new source material, such as journals and letters, the digital access to historic newspaper archives, as well as exhibitions and museums relating to Sisi, the historic portrait of the Empress and her environment becomes richer in nuances, and, in this way, also makes minor readjustments.

Many contemporary witnesses have their say, therefore, in the present snapshot, who, – like her last lady-in-waiting, the Hungarian Irma Sztáray when she began working for her in 1894, succumb to the fascination “Sisi”: “[...] *I was introduced. There was something fascinating about her. When her sad, shining eyes rested on me for the first time, I stood stunned, as if under the spell of some unearthly being [...] I felt close to a great and good soul, who encouraged me, yes, raised me up.*”⁸ However, even well-meaning contemporaries, like, for example, Albin Freiherr von Teuffenbach, were in two minds about the judgement of this exceptional personality: “*Perhaps she wasn’t able to step outside of her chaste nature, on the one, most critical level, namely that of the monarchical representation. One must give the people what is of the people – that glamorous exterior of the empress, the omnipresence of the monarch, without which most people are unable to capture a personality in any way, or to appreciate it.*”⁹

The „glamorous exterior of the empress“ also shows her today in varied and one-sided roles – as women’s libber and feminist, pioneer of the beauty and fashion generation, as political visionary, as poet, or, moreover, egotistical eccentric. This has guaranteed Sisi a second existence for decades, in the hard-

fought market of books and exhibitions. After recently publishing a handy Crown Prince Rudolf book for Kral publishing house in Berndorf, I was invited by the publishing director and personal friend, Robert Ivancich, to continue this Habsburger series, which I am delighted to do. My wife, Elisabeth, took care of the first editing of the text in the manner accustomed. She received the support of Philipp Marek in this endeavour. Mag. Anne Saskia Schmutterer (publishing coordination), undertook, from the publishing side, the supervision of this comparatively small project with a sense of proportion and commitment.

Mag. Tina Gerstenmayer (D&K Werbeagentur GmbH) applied herself to the graphic design, not an easy task, considering the small format. I was able to realize my wish for continuous illustration of the book throughout, due to the dedicated support of various collectors and institutions: Viktor Kabelka’s (Wien-Gießhübl) and Mag. Thomas Ilming’s (Gollarn), Habsburger-fundus were made available to me, further, those of the Karmel St. Joseph of Mayerling, for which I wish to offer my special thanks to the honourable Mother Superior Maria Magdalena and her Prioress, Maria Regina. I complemented this pictorial material with my own collection, Punkenhof, in order to

complete this brief portrait of the difficult empress. Are we today more immune to the bitter life balance sheet, in which the unhappy Empress wrote down her life confession in 1886 in the form of a poem, and in which she recognizes herself as not only betrayed by the world, but also as deceiver? “*In my loneliness / I write the little songs; / The heart, full of sorrow and sadness, / depresses my spirit. [...] / How young and rich I once was / In joie de vivre and hope / I thought of no strength greater than mine, / The world was still open to me. / I have loved, I have lived, / I have travelled the world; / But never achieved that for which I strove. / I have, and was deceived!*”¹⁰

Hannes Etlstorfer
September 2020





„The Empress became a Martyr“¹¹

SISI'S BIOGRAPHY ACCORDING TO CHOSEN LIFE STATIONS AND QUOTES



Sisi's mother, Duchess Ludovika with her children Ludwig Wilhelm and Helene

Sisi's father, Duke Max in Bavaria (Zither-Maxl), Lithography by H.v.Mayr, ca. 1850



Schloss Possenhofen, drawing by Empress Elisabeth

Emperor Franz Joseph's mother, Archduchess Sophie



1837: Elisabeth is born on the 24th of December¹², the second daughter of Duke Max(imilian) Joseph of Bavaria (1808–1888) and Duchess Ludovika Wilhelmine (1808–1892) in Palais Max in the Ludwigstraße in Munich. At her baptism on the 26th of December, the Sunday's child receives the names Elisabeth Amalia Eugenia, later, however, named "Sisi", by family members. She is one of ten children of this Bavarian duke and duchess: Ludwig (1831–1920), Wilhelm Karl (1832–1833), Helene (1834–1890), Elisabeth (1837–1898), Carl Theodor (1839–1909), Marie (1841–1925), Mathilde (1843–1925), Maximilian (born/died 8th December 1845), Sophie (1847–1897), and Max Emanuel (1849–1893). Of her nine siblings, therefore, only three brothers and four sisters attained adulthood. In "Possi", as the children of the couple lovingly named Schloss Possenhofen, at Starnbergersee,¹³ which was purchased in 1834, Sisi

spent a carefree childhood. Without Sisi, this "family of eccentrics", would probably be long forgotten.¹⁴

1853: In advance of the emperor's birthday, Duchess Ludovika arrives with her two daughters, Helene (Néné) and Sisi on the 16th of August in Ischl. At this point, of course, the girls have no knowledge of the coupling intentions of their mother, and her sister, Archduchess Sophie: Franz Joseph was to meet his intended bride to be, Helene, and to get to know her more closely. The plan almost succeeds, since the young emperor is delighted, however with the „wrong candidate – Néné's younger sister, Sisi. Despite all his mother's objections, on the 18th August – his 23rd birthday – Emperor Franz Joseph proposes to his fifteen-year-old cousin. The mother and mother-in-law submit to his will, despite some concerns. Sisi, being extremely shy, feels, on the other hand, completely overpowered. Her reaction is one of immense embarrassment, and she is soon overwhelmed by the sudden public attention. However, she also knows: You don't say no to an emperor. As a result, the engagement of the future imperial couple is solemnly celebrated on the 19th of August in Ischl. All at once, all her youthful light-heartedness disappears. After growing up as a child of nature in

Elisabeth as a young duchess of Bavaria, original photo by Alois Löcherer, heavily altered, ca. 1852



Sisi in 1853, the year of her engagement

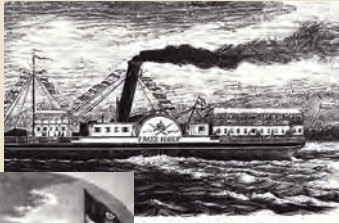
Sisi's sister, Duchess Helene in Bavaria



Empress Elisabeth in the first collection of portraits in the Viennese Atelier of the court photographer Ludwig Angerer, autumn 1860



Franz Joseph along with Sisi and her father playing the zither on Starnbergersee, lithography by Heinrich Gerhardt, 1854



Paddle steamer Franz Joseph with Sisi on board, Österreichische Illustrierte, May 1854

The welcome celebration of the imperial bride in Vienna Nußdorf



The festive entrance of the imperial bride in Vienna on the 23rd of April 1854

Possenhofen, her future mother-in-law wants to form and discipline Sisi at top speed, in order to change her into an excellent aristocrat. The conflicts are pre-programmed, as are the revolts and the failure.

1854: Elisabeth sets out with her mother on the 20th of April from Munich on the triumphally celebrated bridal trip to Vienna. From Straubing to Vienna, the journey is undertaken down the Danube on paddle steamers. The glamorous wedding takes place then, on the evening of the 24th of April in the Viennese Augustinerkirche, which is ablaze with 15.000 candles. Motto: *“The emperor gets a wife, the people a mother, the empire an empress!”*¹⁵ The church ceremony is presided over by the Viennese Archbishop Joseph Othmar von Rauscher,¹⁶ assisted by over 70 bishops and prelates. In his sermon, he speaks about a woman who does not love her husband, if she only marries him because he is rich. This tactless allusion is only later understood by Sisi, when she learns that the bishop is the spiritual advisor of her mother-in-law, Sophie.¹⁷ At the round of congratulations in the Hofburg, Sisi panics because of all the strangers around her, and flees into the neighbouring room, where she once again dissolves into floods of tears.¹⁸ The festivities continue until

the 29th of April.¹⁹ The imperial couple spend their honeymoon from May until July mainly in Laxenburg, but also in Bohemia and Moravia, thereafter travelling together for the first time to the annual summer retreat of the emperor in Ischl.²⁰ The idyll is deceptive: A mere 14 days after the wedding, in poetry composed by herself, she mourns the loss of her previous freedom and light-heartedness: *“I have awoken in a dungeon. My hands are in chains. My yearning is stronger than ever. Freedom! You have abandoned me!”*²¹ Archduchess Sophie already notices the first signs of pregnancy in Sisi in summer. She hastens to tell her son of the behavioural measures to be taken in the circumstances, moreover, to tone down his passionate tokens of love.²² In her letter of the 29th of June 1854, she also warns him that Sisi shouldn't spend too much time with her parrots: *“Since in the early months, it is so easy to overdo looking at the animals, the children themselves tend to resemble the animals. It's better if she looks at herself in the mirror, or at you. This looking, I approve of.”*²³

Sisi with ivy in her hair, steel etching by Franz Stöber according to Franz Schrotzberg, around 1855



The young imperial couple under the Habsburg crown



Memorial medal of the marriage of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth, 1854



Numerous illustrious guests crowded into the baroque church benches of the Wiener Augustinerkirche, on the occasion of the imperial wedding



Baptism of Sophie, the first daughter of Empress Elisabeth in March 1855



Daughter Sophie dies, however, on the 29th of May 1857



The imperial couple as happy young parents, group of figures made of porcelain, before 1860



“Austria’s pride and joy” – The young imperial couple with daughter Gisela

1855: For the young emperor, it is increasingly difficult to note how Sisi’s joy to parenthood is accompanied by so many pregnancy complaints. He also tells his mother, Sophie, about this: “Sisi could not come, since she was very miserable yesterday. She had to leave the church, and vomited several times, moreover, she had a headache, and spent the best part of the day lying in bed.”²⁴ On the 5th of March, then, their first child, daughter Sophie, is born in the Wiener Hofburg, and is named after Franz Joseph’s mother Sophie.

1856: “Her majesty the empress joyfully gave birth to an archduchess yesterday, the 12th of July at 6:35 am. The solemn baptism will take place today, the 13th, at 2 pm in Laxenburg.”²⁵ – from the Wiener Zeitung about the birth of Sisi’s second daughter, Gisela, in Laxenburg. Her name is in memoriam of Gisela von Bayern (died in 1060), the wife of the first Christian King of Hungary, Stephan I.²⁶ In the whole monarchy, there are huge celebrations – also in the imperial summer residence in Ischl, where at a celebratory event in the evening in Hotel Elisabeth, the home poet and composer of the Upper Austrian anthem, Franz Stelzhammer, is present: „Herr Stelzhammer, famous for his poems in Upper Austrian dialect, delighted those present by reading

pieces particularly fitting for the occasion. [...] At 10 o’clock, a solemn high mass and Te Deum were celebrated in the festively decorated parish church, with many members of the high aristocracy in attendance.” Once again, one had waited in vain for a male successor to the throne ...

1857: During a stay in Hungary, both of her daughters, whom she had taken with her on the difficult journey, despite the warnings of her mother-in-law, become ill with an intestinal infection. Sophie, a mere two years of age, dies on the 29th of May in her mother’s arms. This event plunges the imperial couple into a severe crisis. Mother-in-law Sophie, as a result, disputes the fact that Sisi is competent as a mother. Franz Joseph tries to calm the waters between his wife and his mother: “I beg of you, however, to judge Sisi with indulgence, even if she is an overly jealous mother, she is such a devoted wife and mother!”²⁷ Nevertheless, Sisi gives up the fight for her children.²⁸



It is important to the emperor that Elisabeth shows herself in public. The picture of course shows a fictional family idyll.



Archduchess Sophie doubts Elisabeth’s competence as a mother



The so-called highest imperial family. It is a photo that shows Sisi with her children, photo Ludwig Angerer 1859



The proud presentation of Crown Prince Rudolf, who was born on the 21st of August 1858 in Laxenburg. *Das Interessante Blatt*, 2nd February 1889



Elisabeth is accused of living more for her dogs than for her family. Above: The photo shows her with a black poodle, photo by Ludwig Angerer 1864
Below: Elisabeth with the dog Shadow, around 1864

1858: Rudolf, the long-awaited crown prince, is born on the 21st of August in Laxenburg, as third child of the imperial couple. Just one day after his birth, Emperor Franz Joseph appoints him colonel and colonel in chief of the 19th line infantry regiment. The baptism takes place on the 23rd of August, in the banqueting hall in Schloss Laxenburg, which has been converted to a chapel.²⁹ His name is in memory of the progenitor of the dynasty, Rudolf I. (1218–1291). Sisi, on the other hand, seems strangely resigned, dreams about her carefree life in her Bavarian home, while writing poems, and playing with her parrots, which she brought from Bavaria, and with her huge dogs.³⁰ She lives only for her dogs, as a horrified chambermaid reports to Bavaria, “she always has one on her knee, beside her, or in her arms, she even cracks fleas at the table and on the dinner plates.”³¹

1859: On the 29th of May, Franz Joseph leaves Vienna, despite the express disapproval on the part of Elisabeth, to take part in the Italian manoeuvre. This culminates in the fatal decisive battle at Solferino, in which imperial Austria loses against the kingdom of Sardinia and its ally, France, under Napoléon III. This results not only in the loss of Lombardy for Austria, but also paves

the way for the unification of Italy. In spite of this, Franz Joseph has no intention of confiding in his wife on political matters. His main confidante remains his mother, Sophie. Only rumours of secret love affairs of Franz Joseph’s shake Elisabeth’s confidence in him. She reacts increasingly with defiance, provocation, and egoistic pleasure seeking, so turning the Viennese court even more vehemently against her. This obviously brings her even more critics. Even her own doctor, Dr. Seeburger, already pours out in 1859 “in complaints about the empress, who complies with neither that purpose nor that of a woman; while she is actually unoccupied, her contacts to the children are only fleeting, and while she mourns and weeps for the missing emperor, she goes riding for hours, to the detriment of her health; there is a huge chasm between her and her mother-in-law Sophie.”³² At the same time, the emperor implores her to show herself in public, for his sake: “I beg you, for the sake of the love you gave me, pull yourself together, show yourself in town, and visit institutions. You have no idea how much benefit this would be to me. It would give a boost to the people of Vienna, and keep up the good spirit that I so desperately need.”³³



Crown Prince Rudolf poses here together with his sister Gisela, photo by Ludwig Angerer, around 1864



Franz Joseph with Elisabeth in the court box of the Burgtheater, lithography by Friedrich Krepp and Friedrich Bruckl, 1855



The young imperial couple riding out together

“Little Liesl amused her father with her jokes“

FROM THE CIRCUS RING ONTO THE THRONE

“The children of this house grew up under simple and natural conditions, in admiration of natural beauty, with respect and love for spiritual works and poetic genius [...] Little Liesl amused her father with her jokes, but she was completely spoiled by her mother. From her earliest

youth, Elisabeth showed a special preference for nature and country living.“¹¹¹ As transfigured as in this passage from the „Interessantes Blatt“ of September 1898 can Sisi’s childhood be read, in many obituaries of this beautiful but shy, vain but fairylike icon of Austrian history. The empress herself contributes to this transfiguration of her childhood in Bavaria, when she writes in her secret diary, as fifty-year-old Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary: “I’m a Sunday child, a child of the sun!; / The golden rays she wound to a throne for me, / In its shine it wove my crown, / It is in its light, that I live. [...]“¹¹² As she writes this, she is however, suffering severely from melancholy and loneliness, which is partly due to circumstances beyond her control, and partly to some fault of her own. This makes the days of her childhood seem even more care-free, in comparison to her present situation.



The parents of Empress Elisabeth – Duke Max Joseph in Bavaria (1808–1888) and Duchess Ludovika Wilhelmine (1808–1892).



Schloss Possenhofen is mainly known as being Sisi’s favourite summer residence. She was, however, born at Palais Max in Munich.

SHE HAS THE NATURE OF „ZITHER MAXL“

In comparison to the strictly guarded childhood of her future husband Franz Joseph, there is, in any case, an extremely casual way of living in Palais Max in Munich’s Ludwigstraße, Elisabeth’s place of birth, and also in the summer residence at the much-loved Schlässchen Possenhofen at Starnberger lake. This is made possible by the fact, that her father, Duke Max Joseph, does not belong to the royal branch of the house of Wittelsbach, and therefore has no official function at the Bavarian royal court. One “knows him very well, [...] the author of lovely novels, the singer of folk songs. He belongs to the people

with heart and soul”,¹¹³ such were the enthusiastic tones of the “Illustrierte Zeitung”, in April 1854, as it was the aim, in advance of the wedding of his daughter Sisi to Emperor Franz Joseph, to present her family in the most favourable light. That the ruling royal family of Wittelsbach delegates neither official functions nor representational tasks to him, is fitting to his nature of „Zither Maxl“, as he is named:¹¹⁴ Due to the comparative dynastic insignificance, his family is largely spared certain questions of etiquette or protocol which later torture Sisi at the Viennese court. Apart from his career as an officer, Sisi’s father prefers to dedicate his time and enthusiasm to music, nature, socializing, and sport and foreign travel. He also enjoys



Duke Max visits the old Egyptian artefacts during his Orient trip. For eight months he travelled through the Holy Land and the Orient, after his return he published a travel report “Malerische Ansichten aus dem Orient”, which was illustrated by his travel companion Heinrich von Mayr.

spending time writing travel reports and novels, playing the zither, and composing folk music pieces, which he signs H.M., instead of the boring life of a courtier in a golden cage.¹¹⁵

DOES FATHER HAVE MORE ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN THAN LEGITIMATE ONES?

He demonstrates no social snobbery, moves in both bourgeois and in rural circles, loves „Schnadahüpfel“ and playing the zither as much as writing

poetry according to his role model, the German author Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), and travelling. So, Duke Max undertakes a journey to the orient in 1838, a year after Sisi's birth, which takes him to Jerusalem, by way of Greece and Egypt.¹¹⁶ Word rapidly gets around, that he even took his zither to the top of the Cheops pyramid, in order to play his favourite Bavarian songs there, to the astonishment of the Egyptian escorts ...¹¹⁷ That he was forced into marriage, is in an unhappy marriage with his wife Ludovika, who, for her



„INSTRUCTED IN ALL EQUESTRIAN ARTS“

part, is not very happy with her husband, that conjugal fidelity is alien to him, and he has more illegitimate children than legitimate ones,¹¹⁸ is understandably kept silent, as during the empress's lifetime, her parents „gracious to the highest level“ must be honoured... Moreover, contemporaries noticed that „the duchess [...] almost always takes care of the children and the house on her own.“¹¹⁹

Sisi's admiration for her father is obviously not harmed by this, since their preferences are very similar. Like her affable and eccentric father, she shares a love of poetry, enjoys travelling, and shows, most of all, that insatiable enthusiasm for animals, and here, mainly for horse riding, which her father also has: In his palace in the Ludwigstraße, he has an „extremely comfortably equipped riding circus in the third courtyard“ be set



Sisi's unfortunate sisters Marie (left) and Mathilde, 1861.



Presumably the oldest surviving photo of Sisi shows her at the age of 15.



During her life, the freedom loving Elisabeth seemed to prefer sitting in a saddle to on the throne. This etching was taken from a painting by Carl Theodor von Piloty and Franz Adam and shows her in the year of her engagement to Franz Joseph (1853) in front of Schloss Possenhofen.

up, in which Sisi with her equestrian feats soon becomes the main attraction¹²⁰ about which, for example, Erich Graf Kielmannsegg reports, who, by the way, attributes the many absences at court to this passion of hers. *“It should be known, that the Duke of Bavaria, the father of the empress, had a circus in Possenhofen, and instructed his daughters in all equestrian arts, which is the reason for the horse and horse riding passion, which led to so many eccentricities and to so many absences from her husband’s side.”*¹²¹ Preferably in side saddle to on the throne - that could be the motto from Sisi’s childhood, which demonstrates in every nuance a rural tie.

A HAPPY CHILDHOOD?

With Duchess Ludovika, Sisi’s mother, it is similar: Although she – as Archduchess Sophie, the mother of Emperor Franz Joseph, – is the sister of King Ludwig I. of Bavaria, she appears more as a rustic woman, without social ambitions: She prefers a quiet and introverted life and against aristocratic conventions, insists on bringing up her children herself.¹²² Until today, the question about Sisi’s school education is discussed controversially: According to Brigitte Hamman, the children will

not bow to any kind of systematic schooling to the detriment of their teachers, moreover, they unashamedly insist on using their Bavarian dialect.¹²³ Rudolf Reisner, though, refers to an excellent education of the ducal children, especially in the subject of History, in which Elisabeth too has been very well educated.¹²⁴ Overall, Sisi is an impetuous, happy country girl rather than a well-behaved aristocratic offspring. The question remains whether all this is sufficient for a happy childhood. Was Sisi able to find this out for herself? Nicolas de Chamfort (1741–1794) once wrote: *“It is difficult to find happiness in ourselves and it is quite impossible to find it elsewhere.”*¹²⁵ Similarly, Sisi finds it difficult as young empress to find such happiness, which has been prematurely predicted at her birth on the 24th of December 1837: As she already has one tooth at her birth, this is, according to Bavarian custom, considered a “lucky tooth” and taken as the sign of an extraordinary human being ...¹²⁶



Ischl Kaiservilla in winter. Archduchess Sophie hurries along the conversion of the Kaiservilla in winter 1853/54 so that the married emperor will not need to reside in the following summer in the Ischl townhouse.

„Ischl has a festive appearance —
Everyone rejoices and is happy “

ENGAGEMENT WITH HURDLES AND SURPRISES

Of the children of the Bavarian ducal couple, only the eldest daughter Helene acts disciplined, serious and diligent to such a degree as to be considered a candidate for the matrimonial market of the high aristocracy. The „Journal des Dames“, at the time, names Emperor Franz Joseph the best match of Christendom.¹²⁷

Sisi's mother Ludovika knows this. However, her sister Sophie at first pursues ambitious plans and puts out feelers with various ruling houses for a suitable bride for her son and emperor. For instance, she tries to marry Franz Joseph off to the young Saxon Princess Sidonie, but Franz Joseph refuses. Franz Joseph unsuccessfully proposes to the Prussian

Princess Anna von Preußen (1829–1901)¹²⁸ who is already engaged to Landgraf Alexis von Hessen-Philippsthal-Barchfeld (1829–1905). She is the daughter of Prince Carl von Preußen as well as the niece of his mother Sophie and her sister, Queen Elise von Preußen.¹²⁹ In order to soften up Elise or to change her niece Anna's mind, Sophie sends letters: *“You know him well enough, that it is not so easy to live up to his standards, that the next best will not be adequate, that he must love the person who is to be his companion, that she must please him and be personable. Your dear little one seems to meet all these requirements, judge for yourself, how I long for her for my son, who so much needs happiness, since he so early had to forgo insouciance and illusions of youth.”*¹³⁰ All efforts by Archduchess Sophie to attain this Prussian bride are in vain: Anna remains faithful to her fiancé and marries him on the 27th of June 1854 in Charlottenburg.¹³¹ For the time being, Duchess Ludovika does not have any more luck with her daughters.

After all the futile attempts, the sisters, or rather the mothers Sophie and Ludovika again take the initiative in August 1853 to bring their children together, by arranging a meeting in Ischl. It is planned that the imperial cousin should warm to his cousin



Young Emperor Franz Joseph only has eyes for Elisabeth who has been completely overpowered by Franz Joseph's proposal.

Helene, although they hardly know each other at this time. According to an entry in his journal on the 2nd of September 1843, the thirteen-year-old Franz Joseph had first met the five-year-old Sisi in Munich. Of course, it is not Sisi's fault that he felt terrible during this visit with his relatives: *“We left Munich at 7 o'clock, arriving in Possenhofen at a quarter to ten. There we found Herzog Max and all his children but one – Louis, who was in Switzerland. We had breakfast with Aunt Louise, Helene, Elise and the very nice but almost spoiled Kakl. At 10 o'clock we went to the dull chapel to attend mass, where I felt unwell. They had to carry me out of the chapel to an open window, where I recovered, then I lay on the bed.”*¹³²

„HER ANXIOUS HEARTACHE“

Ten years later nothing should go wrong at the rendezvous, which was dressed up as a meeting of relatives: It is planned close to the young emperor's 23rd birthday on the 18th of August, and should hopefully finally lead to a fortunate turn of events for Franz Joseph and Helene: Franz Joseph, who has only just survived an assassination attempt and who is heading for a climax of unpopularity after the bloody suppression of the revolution in 1848, finally needs positive headlines. The designated bride Helene at 18 years old is, according to custom, considered overripe for marriage. As the emperor also has three younger, unmarried brothers, Ludovika takes Helene's younger sister Elisabeth along to Ischl for good measure, in order to take the emotional pressure out of this endeavour. She also wants to distract Sisi, after she has fallen in love with Count Richard Schwarzenberg¹³³, who is not of her station, and of whose untimely death she writes in her diary: *“The die is cast, / Oh, Richard is no longer! / The bells of mourning are ringing – / Oh, have mercy, God! / She is standing at the small window / The blonde maid. / It stirs even the ghosts / Her anxious heartache.”*¹³⁴

„AUNT SOPHIE IS SO GOOD AND KIND TO HER“

These emotional issues are added to by seemingly mundane problems, which have grave consequences: When Ludovika, Helene and Elisabeth arrive in Ischl on the 16th of August, the accompanying ladies-in-waiting are missing, as is the luggage containing the festive wardrobe of Ludovika's daughters. A storm has hindered the entourage's passage to Ischl. For Helene all that remains to be done is to appear in front of the imperial family in her dusty black travel frock – although superbly coiffured. Sisi meanwhile, cuts a much better figure in the same such black dress with her hair in braids. Sisi immediately leaves the best impression with the emperor. One day later, on the 17th of August, Emperor Franz Joseph is having breakfast with his mother Archduchess Sophie, during which he only raves about Sisi, as noted in her diary: *“The emperor raved: Oh no, how sweet Sisi is, she is as fresh as a bursting almond, what a gorgeous ring of hair frames her face! She has the loveliest, gentlest eyes and lips like strawberries.”*¹³⁵ The marriage plan by Sisi's mother Ludovika takes an unexpected and unwanted detour, after all, she knows best, the weaknesses of her 15-year-old



daughter, who in one fell swoop has gotten the better of her sister Helene who had been the designated bride of the emperor: *“It is such unbelievable luck, yet such an important and grave position, that I am very moved in every aspect. She is so young, so inexperienced, but I hope one is lenient with regard to her great youth! ... Aunt Sophie is so very good and kind to her, and what consolation to me to be able to hand her to such a kind sister as second mother.”*¹³⁶

Empress Elisabeth as dashing coachwoman in the grounds of Laxenburg. Due to her passion for riding, she spends, however, the greater part of the year in Hungary or other foreign countries, where she appreciates the anonymity.



The solemn wedding in the Viennese Augustinerkirche on the 24th of April 1854. With this glamorous wedding, Emperor Franz Joseph wishes to improve his image.

„REVEREND, PLEASE BLESS US, THIS IS MY BRIDE“

Before the engagement can be celebrated, the written agreement is obtained from the bride and handed by Sisis mother Ludovika to her sister Sophie. On the 19th of August, the emperor comes to Sisi at her hotel, and then at 11 o'clock he asks the priest of the Ischler parish church for a blessing: "Reverend, please bless us, this is my bride."¹³⁷ Hesitantly, the first newspaper reports appear about this engagement: "Today, the happy news poured out of the engagement of his majesty, our

gracious emperor, to the here present serene princess Elise, daughter of the royal Duke Max of Bavaria. In happy excitement about this exhilarating event, everyone went to the church, where his majesty the emperor, along with his serene bride [...] had gone. Ischl has a festive look – All are jubilant and happy."¹³⁸ The engagement is officially confirmed in the Wiener Zeitung on the 8th of September. At that time, Franz Joseph and Sisi have already parted company. On the 31st of August, they tenderly bid farewell in Salzburg: Elisabeth goes home to Bavaria with her family, Emperor Franz Joseph returns with his entourage to Schönbrunn. On the 24th of Sep-

tember, Archduchess Sophie enters into a contract in Ischl to purchase the now „Imperial Villa“ Villa Eltz from Dr. Eduard Mastalier, the doctor of the Ischler spa baths, which he bought in 1850, and in which Chancellor Clemens Fürst Metternich used to spend his summers. Sophie buys this villa for 31.440 guilder¹³⁹ and has the building extended to an E-shape, in symbolic reference to Elisabeth. It is Sophie's gift to the young imperial couple as imperial summer residence, representative family home, summer working place for the monarch and meeting place for diplomacy.¹⁴⁰



There was great interest even at that time in Sisi's wedding gown. Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung No. 22, 1854.

Emperor Franz Joseph and Elisabeth – Porcelain statuette



This bottle demonstrates the enthusiasm for the emperor's fiancé Elisabeth.

Medal to commemorate the wedding of the imperial couple by Ulmer Medailleur und Münzgraveur Conrad Lange.



The valuable cope in the treasury at Maria Taferl is adorned by ornament fragments from Sisi's bridal gown.