

Mobility in the European Aristocracy during the Age of Enlightenment

The Example of Princess Helena Potocka

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Abstract. Helena Potocka offers a wonderful case study because she was a perfect representative of the high European aristocracy under French influence. Educated in a Parisian religious house, she had the culture of the young girls of the nobility of Versailles. Her matrimonial alliance with the son of the Prince de Ligne poses the problem of matrimonial strategies. Helena was both a free and rebellious spirit who believed in her ability to build her happiness with the side she chose. This is why she left Charles de Ligne; she thought she had discovered her soul mate with Vincent Potocki, but in reality, it must have been a lifelong quest. The Potocki couple are then torn between the financial resources of distant Ukraine, where the immense properties that finance them are located, and Parisian social life.

Potocki's very particular family situation triggered incessant mobility throughout his life, but this mobility had very varied motivations and was one of the main characteristics of the high European aristocracy, which had the financial means to travel to all parts of Europe. The international circulations of the aristocracy produced, within this social group, a growing cosmopolitanism: in fact, the aristocrats of the various nations of Europe rubbed shoulders and mixed more and more in the various spaces of sociability that were theirs. This worldly cosmopolitanism led to the progressive diffusion within this elite of common modes of consumption, behavior, and thought—in short, an aristocratic European Habitus.

Keywords: aristocracy, elites, circulation-travel, mobility-cosmopolitanism, material culture

Current historiography of the nobility places particular emphasis on the mobility of the very high nobility, as demonstrated by the very recent colloquium held in Le Mans entitled *Noblesses en exil: les migrations nobiliaires entre la France et l'Europe du XV^e au XIX^e siècle*.¹ In a Europe that was a marquetry of states, the overwhelming

1 Bourquin et al., ed., *Noblesses en exil*.

majority of whose populations were rural and static, aristocratic movements were an active factor, perhaps the decisive factor, in the emergence of a first form of continental unification. By dint of movement and exchange, a small social elite transformed Europe: courts, elite residences, and learned institutions became increasingly similar in nature and function. Practices that had initially circulated among the European aristocracy began to spread to the people. In the food sector, for example, we can sometimes track products, recipes, and culinary behaviours that, once adopted by the elite, eventually spread to wider sections of society,² as in the case of exotic foods such as tea, coffee, sugar, and chocolate... Similarly, the spread of French cuisine underwent a preliminary phase within the aristocracy before moving to lower social strata. We may also point out that, in the urban landscape, Vauxhalls or pleasure gardens have an aristocratic origin, nourished by international transfers. In this context, the example of Princess Helena Potocka is exemplary.³ Born in 1763 in Vilnius (Wilno), Lithuania, she was orphaned in the year of her birth and so was raised by her uncle, the bishop of Vilnius, Monseigneur Massalski, who in 1771 decided to entrust her education to a Parisian institution, the Abbaye-aux-Bois on rue de Sèvres, which trained the young girls of the Versailles nobility. Thus began a European journey that took her to Paris for seven years before her first husband, the son of the Prince de Ligne, came to take her away to the famous Château de Beloeil, but also to Brussels, sometimes to Paris in the 1780s, and of course to Vienna at the time of the Brabant revolution. This was followed by a return to her native Warsaw and a meeting with Vincent Potocki, Grand Chamberlain to the King of Poland, who took her to his lands in Galicia, where she spent several years, not forgetting trips to Russia and Holland in 1802. In 1806, she moved back to Paris on the Chaussée d'Antin, and in 1811, the couple acquired the Château de Saint-Ouen, north of the city near Saint-Denis. This new double residence did not prevent a series of toing and froing between France and Ukraine, caused as much by land management as by the adventures of a fickle husband. It was in October 1815 that the princess was laid to rest at Père Lachaise, bringing to an end a life of whirlwinds and passion during which she had travelled to the ends of Europe. An extensive correspondence, comprising thousands of letters and now preserved in Kraków's Wawel Castle,⁴ provides an insight into the material conditions of the journeys and the consequences of this European mobility.

2 We refer here to the works of our colleague Professor Jaroslaw Dumanowski of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun.

3 For more information, see: Figeac, *Helena Potocka*.

4 Wawel Castle Archive, Kraków, AKPol. This is where the original of her school diary is kept.

Estates in the four corners of Europe according to the fortunes of life

Helena's initial estate: the Massalski family

As Helena had no immediate family other than her uncle, who had made the long journey from Lithuania, it was decided that her wedding ceremony with the Prince de Ligne would take place in the institution that had provided her training at Abbaye-aux-Bois. On 25 July 1779, the marriage contract was signed in Versailles in the presence of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, who put their prestigious initials at the bottom of the deed. The princess's dowry was on a par with that of the great families of Central Europe, consisting of the land with its castle at Mogylani, south of Kraków, a palace in the nearby city, and another in the capital, Warsaw. Prince Radziwill owed the Massalskis 1.8 million florins from Helena's mother's outstanding inheritance. He relinquished three considerable pieces of land as interest, and the income from these lands was divided equally between Helena and her brother, who was soon to die without an heir. Finally, the Prince-Bishop undertook to provide and guarantee the princess, from the day of her marriage, a net income of 60,000 pounds per annum paid in Paris and to pay for the young couple's stay there, thus confirming the city's special status in the Line galaxy. The magnates' fortunes resided, above all, in immense landholdings that included dozens, if not hundreds, of villages. This group of high nobility was obviously very small, but thanks to the large estates in the hands of its representatives, it played a very important role in economic and political life.⁵ These large estates were made up of several neighboring villages, each with its *folwarki*—that is, farms based on serf labour. Each *folwark* had its own buildings, farm implements, servants, and steward and was, therefore, technically a separate and entirely distinct farm. Above all the stewards in each *folwark*, there was often a general steward. His functions in the economic organization of the seigneurial reserve were very varied. In some cases, the general steward merely laid down the most general provisions concerning the operation of the various branches of the rural economy. In other cases, however, the general steward was the actual steward of all seigneurial holdings located on the estate. Since the mid-seventeenth century, the economic concentration of seigneurial farms progressed as a consequence of the concentration of noble property that occurred after the wars that ravaged Poland in the mid-seventeenth century. This latifundary organization was much less stable than might have been expected, as it varied according to the rhythm of inheritances and marriages. Helena's possessions were thus scattered at both ends of the country, from the Kraków region in southwestern Little Poland to the northeastern tip of Lithuania, the traditional territory of the Massalski family, a sign of the ubiquity so characteristic of great families.

5 Rutkowski, "Le régime agraire en Pologne," 68–70.

The ubiquitous nobility of the de Ligne family

The ubiquity of the great families of the European nobility is also to be found in the Ligne family, historical circumstances having accentuated this characteristic since, following the Treaty of Utrecht, the Spanish Netherlands had become Austrian. The Ligne was, therefore, a family whose patrimonial heart was in Walloon country, while its political heart was in Vienna. “His biographers call him Prince Charming, the Enchanter of Europe, Prince Rose, Prince Chéri, the Prince of French Europe. No doubt, the last qualifier is the most appropriate in today’s historical context.”⁶ This is how Roland Mortier presented Helena’s father-in-law in an article in which he made him the archetypal European prince of the Enlightenment. He was born in Brussels in May 1735 into one of the country’s leading noble families, which enabled him to become not only Prince de Ligne and of the Holy Roman Empire, Baron of Beloeil, Sovereign of Fagnolles, Lord of Baudour in Belgian Hainaut, but also Grandee of Spain and Knight of the Golden Fleece. He was Governor and Grand Bailiff of Hainaut but had been in Austrian service since the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 returned the Southern Netherlands to the Habsburgs of Austria. At the start of her marriage, Helena had to divide her time between the capital of the Austrian Netherlands, Brussels, and the family’s eponymous castle, according to the city/countryside rhythm that was typical of all great noble families. Even if Helena had taken with her a bitter nostalgia for Paris, the Belgian capital was at the time a bright and lively place. The year was divided between Brussels and Beloeil, and from spring to summer, social life moved to the heart of Hainaut. The old *château* was a rectangular fortified building protected by a moat and a round tower at each corner. This basic structure has survived to the present day, although the facades and interior have been extensively modified over the centuries. Respecting the main symbols of the fortified castle was a way of ensuring feudal continuity. The towers and moats, although devoid of any military significance, remained signs of seigneurial power. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the fortified *château* was transformed into a luxurious country house in the French style.

The Prince also had luxurious residences in the political capital of the Empire, Vienna. The townhouse was located on the Mülkerbastei, and it was, in fact, made up of two adjoining houses. An engraving on the street outside reveals a sober, classical four-storey façade. Charles Joseph had also bought a country estate near Vienna, which he preferred and cared for the most. Helena found herself swept up in the whirlwind of the Viennese capital’s pleasures. She was admitted to the society of the Upper Belvedere Palace, that magnificent Baroque residence on the outskirts of Vienna built by Eugene of Savoy at the turn of the century.

6 Mortier, “Charles-Joseph de Ligne,” 225–38.

The contribution of her second husband, Vincent Potocki

Helena's second marriage in 1793 to Vincent Potocki brought her into contact with the Count's estates in Galicia, in present-day Ukraine. He owned the castles of Niemirów and Kowalówka. Vincent Potocki's vast estates justified his frequent absences, as they required him to make periodic trips to Dubno or Brody in Galicia. He owned vast tracts of land around the town of Brody. In 1704, the town became part of the Potocki family's ownership. In 1734, the Brody fortress was destroyed by Russian troops, then rebuilt by Stanislas Potocki in the Baroque style typical of the region. When Poland was partitioned for the first time in 1772, the town fell under the control of the Habsburg monarchy. The Polish territories in Western Ukraine thus annexed by Austria took the official name of 'Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria.' In 1779, the border town of Brody was declared a free trade zone, following the example of the ports of Trieste and Fiume. Once again, Brody became one of the main centres of trade between Central and Eastern Europe, generating extremely profitable revenues for the Potocki family, who were the masters of the area, as it was here that Austria, Prussia, France, and Italy traded with the Levant. During Napoleon I's continental blockade, the smuggling of colonial goods flourished. In 1812, Vincent Potocki was forced by the Austrian government to demolish the city's fortifications. This special status helped to attract Jewish merchants and craftsmen, who in the nineteenth century made up 80 percent of the population, to whom the Count rented the farms associated with the inns, brandies, and salt. After the loss of Kowalówka in 1807, the Potockis moved into a small residence, as the old castle was too large.

Added to this dispersal of estates was the attraction of Paris, a veritable European capital. To satisfy her taste for Parisian life, Helena's two successive husbands had acquired a hotel on the *Chaussée d'Antin*, which became her main residence during the Empire. Naturally, this meant frequent travels across Europe, which the Princess recounts in her correspondence.

Travel conditions

The problem of distance

When Vincent Potocki separated from his wife under various pretexts, she continued to correspond with her husband, giving us a very detailed account of the travels and making us aware of the problem of distance, which contributed so much to the isolation of the Count's Ukrainian estates. For someone who had experienced the hustle and bustle and sociability of the big capitals, Kowalówka, which she loved dearly, and Brody were the ends of the world. She never travelled alone, as she had

a small escort at her disposal, consisting of Lozzi, her husband's steward, a secretary, four lackeys, two postilions, four maids, a maid of honour, and four Cossacks charged with ensuring the convoy's safety.

It was early winter, and the main problem was, of course, the state of the roads, which were easier to drive on when the ground froze at night, avoiding mud and potholes:

“What cold, what frost, it's unheard of, all the car doors were frozen this morning so that we couldn't open or close them, and to top it all off, my people had the skill to break a window, so it's unbelievable what I'm suffering, I'm waiting until I get to Mittau to have it mended. I left Fromberg this morning at eight o'clock and arrived in Mielki for dinner, where I had the unexpected joy of finding an excellent fireplace and a Polish-speaking innkeeper who has been the delight of Lozzi. [...] You have no idea of the villainy of Lozzi. I don't have a teapot or a kettle because he said we couldn't find any. All so as not to spend, I live on borrowed money all the way. So I'm planning to have Jau buy what I need in Mittau. To the first guide who led us, he gave 20 gros for three miles, and he'd rather we lost our way or stopped every quarter of an hour than pay anything.”⁷

Very lucid about the shortcomings of her environment, she does not really seem to care because the most important thing for her is to arrive, and she lives in her car as if in a 'bubble', oblivious to the outside world:

“I've finished *The Countess of Tackenburg*, and I'm reading *Herman*. I have a real passion for German literature, and I hope that thanks to emigrants, we won't be short of translations. [...] Whether in the inn or in the car, I'm absorbed in the letters I write you or in reading, and I take no part in anything that's going on around me. I'm here in an abominable hole; it looks like a cut-throat [establishment].”

The carriage she used for traveling was a comfortable sedan, a much lighter vehicle than the coach that had been invented in 1600 in the capital of Prussia. The great innovation of the eighteenth century was the improvement in the quality of the springs, which made journeys more bearable. On arrival in Paris, she would often report how tired her vehicle was, but in town, she would swap the heavy sedan for a fast convertible. In winter, the extent of the snow cover would sometimes necessitate leaving the sedan for the sleigh:

7 All the quotations below have been taken from the digitized correspondence: AKPot 3274, 1802–1816.

“I warn you that I’m dying of fear of these sledges. I’m used to traveling on wheels and I’m afraid of new things, and it’s really a new thing to go sledding in the snow.”

The difficulties with circulation, the scarcity of stopover facilities and the vast distances involved are all factors that need to be constantly taken into consideration to better understand daily life and the difficulties of long journeys. For a family of high aristocracy who frequented European capitals, living on Ukrainian soil was problematic.

The problem of stopping off

Indeed, inns were often squalid places, and we come across this cliché from the Polish travelogue about a squalid inn run by Jews:

“Vincent, forgive me for all these sad thoughts, but if you knew what an abominable Jew’s inn I’m in, you’d say there’s plenty to disgust you with the country.”

The stopover at the inn was one of the topoi of this type of literature. Like his fellows, Bigot de Morogues, the Sulkowski’s tutor, complains about the mediocrity of the inns.

“To think of having dinner there would have been madness, so we had everything we needed. I was revolted to find here the same uncleanness as when we arrived from Lissa to Warsaw: lice, geese, pigs, chickens, and Jews.”⁸

Aside from the brutality of the formula, this is not a very original statement. Many French travelers reported that inns in Poland were run by Jews⁹ and that comfort was limited. In his report, the Marquis de Fougères wrote that “these same Jews are the only ones who run inns in Poland... It is even quite common to live in the same lodgings as the chickens, cows, pigs and all the animals of the house”. Similar remarks were made by Hubert Vautrin and Méhée de La Touche.¹⁰ These inns posed a sanitary problem, and we cannot suspect any lack of objectivity on Helena’s part, for a few days later, she congratulated herself on her stay in another establishment, which was the occasion for a remarkable sociological testimony:

“Here I am, halfway to Mittau [...]. I always look forward to this moment with great importance. In the inn where I slept, there was a patriarchal Jewish family reminiscent of the ancient times of the Bible: an old

8 BnF NAF 11351, f° 4.

9 Tollet, *Histoire des Juifs en Pologne*.

10 Vautrin, *L’Observateur en Pologne*, 188; Méhée de La Touche, *Mémoires particulier*, 14.

white-haired father, sick and sitting in an armchair, his wife, as old as he was, wore a white apron, looked clean and my maids told me that she [put] a roast goose and some cakes on a table in front of her husband, which looked very good because it was the Sabbath; around the table were the two sons and their wives and at least ten grandchildren who were given a handful of hazelnuts [...] as I had a pretty good room, we didn't bother them and they ate their meal in front of our people who say it's rare to see Jews so clean."

Travelers in the modern era, therefore, found a wide variety of places to eat, depending on their budget and social status and where they went.

The problem of borders

Returning from the Ukraine in the spring of 1811, she left Wrocław (Breslau) in early April, but here again, crossing into Germany was no easy matter, especially the border crossing, of which her account provides a good insight into customs formalities—in this case, at the Saxon exit between Dresden and Frankfurt.

"A great adventure happened to me, the last favor Douazan wanted to do me on leaving Frankfurt. I told Douazan to go ahead with the post car to retain my lodgings, but above all not to gossip at customs and not to say that I had nothing against the prescriptions, because depending on how they behaved, I would declare or not, I wasn't very worried, my tablecloth, my toile, my percale remained in Dresden, where I was told that there was a treaty between the Emperor and the King of Saxony that entrances paid very little [...], the firm that sold [the items to] me makes large shipments, so the transport won't cost me much either, and I left them my purchases that they must send me. So I arrive at customs, a clerk comes up to me and says: »Madame, we wouldn't have searched the car of someone like you, but your courier has contraband of the most prohibited kind in his suitcase, which obliges us to make the most exact visit of your car and we ask you to come down.« I went to the office and saw Douazan, pale and frightened, and all his belongings lining the room. There were some shawls and English cloths that the customs officers told me I couldn't even get into if I paid, so I made up my mind on the spot. I said, »These effects don't belong to me and I'm not making any claims, but before you search my car, I want to make a declaration in writing.« I was given pen and paper and wrote »I declare that I have some unframed paintings, some old Saxon porcelain as curiosities, some French porcelain cups for my use on such a long journey, various curiosities and jewellery, a bronze lamp which is a night

light, a clock which I always use on my journeys in countries where there are no clocks. 3 or 4 furs, which I need as I'm from a country where they're usually worn, and a lot of books for my use, as I've been traveling for three months. The rest are my clothes, among which is an old, worn black shawl. I declare that I have no new shawls, muslin, or linen, and if there are any, they do not belong to me. If, among my belongings, there are things that pay duties as I am unaware of, I will pay them.« Having left this declaration, I went to my inn and left them my car. They opened everything, but my declaration was so well done that they found nothing prohibited, which made them very sceptical. They sent me back my car, my maid and Gibert, whom I had left after three hours, without taking anything and having nothing to pay. They decided that since I had declared everything myself, the paintings didn't [need to be paid for], the curiosities were only of imaginative value and weren't numerous enough to be taxed, and that the rest were things I needed for a long journey in countries where you can't find anything. So I didn't spend a penny, but Douazan's belongings, confiscated without return because he said he had nothing, were not even allowed to be sent back to Frankfurt; they'll be burnt, they say. He says it's a packet of goods given to him in Brody and that he didn't know what was in it, but what imprudence to take a packet without knowing what it is, well, he's punished for it as well as those who entrusted him with their interests; if my bad star hadn't inspired me to send it forward, I'm sure they wouldn't have opened my car, but it has a suitcase which is enormous and looks like a trunk, that gave rise to suspicions.”

In a delicate situation, she showed all her composure. This incident shows just how draconian customs barriers were in economic terms, with a veritable hunt for textiles that were either prohibited or heavily taxed. The police formalities applied to individuals may seem lax, but customs formalities applied to goods were systematic. In fact, they were often the true sign of the change in sovereignty: on land, even more than pillars or milestones, it was the customs offices that marked border crossings.

Last trip to Ukraine

Crossing Europe in the wrong season

Helena remained without the slightest news of her husband, whose silence between May and mid-July 1814 became increasingly burdensome due to the uncertainty of international relations. To the burden of absence, she had to add increasingly distressing financial difficulties, as the primary objective of the trip was indeed for her

to procure the funds she needed to keep up with the ever-expensive Parisian lifestyle. It turned out that postal difficulties were the only reason for this silence, as the letters that had been held up in the depths of Europe finally reached their addressees in a flurry at the beginning of August. Obtaining the necessary cash had always been a real problem, but the international situation had deteriorated to such an extent that creditors seemed to be laying siege to the Hôtel de la Chaussée d'Antin and the Château de Saint-Ouen. She was even forced to pledge her finest jewels to the Mont-de-Piété to obtain the necessary liquidity and avoid foreclosure.

In the end, Vincent Potocki released the money, and she decided to leave, despite the bad season ahead and health that seemed much more fragile, even if we can draw nothing concrete from the simple allusions in these letters: "The care of my health occupies me very little at the moment, I think only of accomplishing my journey and I don't care if I end up with it." Or again on September 6: "I cannot imagine that my health can withstand so many sorrows that I am obliged to confine and that I cannot entrust to anyone." In fact, everything here is said in terms of self-analysis. She made exactly the same observations when she took part in scenes of joy or gladness, such as related to the return of the restored king, and the phrases slipped to Vincent to tell him that his absence casts a shadow of sadness are not just stylistic formulae.

Unable to stand it any longer, on 30 September, after taking stock of her financial status for Vincent, she rushed off in her carriage:

"I'm leaving today my dear Vincent, I'm bringing with me all my accounts and you will see and judge how I have administered your finances. I leave Badens, Cavaignac, and Lamaze, who are equally devoted to us, at the head of our affairs, and the latter two have given me the most touching proof of this. You can boldly send your funds, either to my address, or to that of Monsieur de Badens, you can be sure that your orders will be carried out to the letter, they know everything. You had announced 140,000 francs, I only received 120,900; however, I have paid and beyond, everything you ordered, I have repaid the 20,000 francs that Swartz and Munster had lent me on my simple bill, but I have not been able to release my jewels which remain committed for the sum of 29,000 francs."

Her intentions were clear:

"I will be in Ukraine as in a place of passage, I will increase your expenses very little, I will see the people you see, I will live as you live and I will necessarily decrease your expenses in Paris... I would rather give up Paris than stay there alone. I'll share your fate, whatever it may be, and I'll be happier than I am; every occupation, every pleasure we can provide each

other will be a pleasure, instead of all the joys and amusements Paris can give, poisoned by the devouring worries, the bitter sorrows your distance causes me.”

All had been said...

European wanderings in pursuit of elusive happiness

Helena chose to pass through Vienna on her way to Brody, where she stayed in the suburbs, as the Austrian capital was so crowded with the cars of European diplomats who had moved there to redraw the borders of Europe following Napoleon's first abdication.

Helena came to Vienna to help settle a conflict in her daughter's marriage. It was a very special marriage, one that she played a crucial role in bringing about. It helped her to unite her two families: the Ligne and the Potocki. Sidonie was born of her marriage to Charles de Ligne, whom she divorced in 1788. Sidonia's husband, François, was the son of her second husband, Vincent Potocki, from her first marriage to Countess Anna Micielska.

She seems to recognize her own daughter's undeniable responsibility:

“Sidonie had written me a letter in Paris in which she seemed repentant of her follies and despairing of having lost François's tenderness; the naturalness with which she expressed herself touched me, she told me that the worries one has brought upon oneself are also more difficult to bear; here, she seemed sad, humiliated, and I believe that if we can mend fences with François, it would be lasting, for she does regret the happiness she has lost, but François seems no longer to want to live with her. My delicacy seems to prevent me from pleading Sidonie's case, who is certainly very guilty, but in the end, she feels it, she cries, says she loves François and has been led astray; if he loves her as he told me, only you can still persuade him to let go and forgive. It seems that he wants you to be the arbiter of his conduct, and it's quite certain that whatever their destiny may be if they separate, even if it's the most brilliant on both sides, as soon as they're no longer together, it's not the same for us, and it's no longer you, it's no longer me.”

The beautiful marriage the parents had achieved seemed to be in jeopardy, yet this Viennese psychodrama, which reflects the difficulty of making a soldier's long absences compatible with his wife's social life, seems to have had no lasting consequences. She left as soon as she had obtained her passport from the Tsar, without seeing the Lignes again, even though they had expressed their intention to meet. Did

she regret it afterward? It is not impossible, as it would have been an opportunity to see the Prince de Ligne one last time, who for decades had embodied the aristocracy of the Enlightenment. Confident in life and curious about everything, he had every intention of attending the Congress of European Diplomacy. His health deteriorated in early December. Was it because he had caught a chest cold at a ball, having gone out without a coat to escort home a man dressed in an elegant masquerade ball costume, and finished his career true to the legends about him? In any case, Vienna's best doctor, Malfatti, called to his bedside, could do nothing. "Doctor, do you think a field marshal's funeral would entertain the sovereigns? Then I'll devote myself." On the morning of 13 December 1814, he sat up in his bed and fell back to eternal sleep.

François and Sidonie, who were in Vienna, accompanied him to the Kahlenberg Hermitage in Wienerwald, where he had wished to be laid to rest. Three twenty-four-gun salutes greeted the departure of the cortege in the thick fog of the freezing hills. A host of princes, admirals, and ambassadors were present. Prince Auguste of Prussia, the Prince of Lorraine, Field Marshal Schwarzenberg, the Duc de Richelieu, the Duc de Saxe Weimar, and Eugène de Beauharnais all saluted him with their swords as the coffin passed. Thus went the embodiment of the Prince of the Enlightenment.¹¹

Grief-stricken, François and Sidonie left for Brody to join Helena. Helena's feelings are not well documented, but while Sidonie was in deep mourning, she also decided to dress in black. Vincent stayed on for a while before resuming his tribulations in the four corners of Ukraine. In January, when she was in Niemirów, in a setting that must have brought back so many bad memories, in the middle of the snow and in appalling weather conditions, Helena suggested that her husband join her in Kiev, where he had an apartment:

"There's no way, my dear Vincent, that we can stay here, apart from the inconceivable destitution, the deep solitude, the long evenings without seeing a living soul, plunges us into a melancholy that torments us for each other more than if we were alone to bear it; if on the third day, I can't resist it, what with the prospect of 5 or 6 weeks of such a life, the sad reflection that having gone to so much trouble to reach you, I'm leaving you, and that such a short space separates us that I can easily cross, yet the lack of communication means we're a thousand miles apart. All this makes me decide to leave. We won't increase our expenses in Kiev, since the house is already rented, we only need one room for Sidonie and me, they won't make an extra dish for us, and you won't have to pay for a separate kitchen like we have here."

11 For a detailed account of the funeral, see: Mansel, *Le prince de Ligne*, 270.

The weight awarded to economic considerations was truly indicative of difficulties, perhaps more complicated to resolve than with a simple dispatch from the St. Petersburg banker. Helena waited for spring to arrive, but with Vincent as elusive as ever, she decided to head back west. Her journey was a near-total fiasco. However, since 1 March, Napoleon had begun his reconquest of power, and by 20 March, he was in Paris. Cautious, she preferred to return to Vienna, where she stopped to await further developments, sending news of the European situation to Vincent in Brody. She preferred to remain in Vienna out of caution, but her French friends sent her reassuring news: "Things are very quiet in Paris, Napoleon has not had anyone shot or even arrested, he is wonderfully gentle and cajoles all parties." The Austrians were determined to put an end to Napoleon once and for all, but they would have to wait for the Russians to do so, as the idea was to overwhelm him by sheer numbers, as they had done during the French campaign. Initially staying at an inn, she soon gave up because of the cost and poor quality of the food, preferring to find an outlying residence.

She found this in Hietzing, which was right next to Schönbrunn Palace. In her opinion, it was closer to Vienna than Saint-Ouen was to Paris, so much so that her maid could easily take a carriage to the big city to run the necessary errands. The 3,000 florins for six months that the operation cost her was not exorbitant, as the residence boasted a small garden, a lovely view of the mountains, beautiful, well-furnished apartments with mahogany furniture and stables for ten horses and four carriages, as well as two underground kitchens. Describing this enticing setting, she eventually convinced Vincent to join her rather than live in the damp miasma of Brody. In particular, she was pleased to praise the quality of the food, confirming that he was a great gourmet:

"Eugenie [her maid – M. F.] meddles in the cooking, she showed Zaiapzkoski how to make spinach, she makes it excellent, she'll teach him to cook all vegetables the French way, he gave us roast goslings which were the best thing in the world, they're no bigger than small chickens, we also have beautiful asparagus, beautiful lettuce, lambs that have just been born, all of which seems very good to me after having been fed cabbage, large meats and eternally thin capons."

She received her former brother-in-law Charles de Clary, who had come as an emissary to convince her to go and visit Christine de Ligne and the dowager princess, who were very offended by her intention not to go and keep them company so as not to 'renew unpleasant memories.' Indeed, this was to misunderstand Princess Helena, unwilling to rekindle old wounds, especially as she had not been there in October when the Prince was still alive. She finally took the road back in August 1815, by which time Napoleon's fate had long since been sealed, but once again,

she left her husband behind as he had to return to Brody to collect his seigneurial income. She took her time, passing through Regensburg and Nuremberg to admire the works of Dürer, once again giving free rein to her great artistic sensibility. On 7 September, she returned to Paris, almost a year after leaving.

A month and a half later, she left Saint-Ouen to return to Paris without complaint, but on 30 October, she was seized by horrible pains in her lower abdomen. Twelve hours later, she expired in the arms of her daughter Sidonie, taking with her a part of her mysteries. Was she a victim of this final journey across Europe, as the bumps in the road would have aggravated her condition? The autopsy report seems to suggest poorly treated peritonitis or perhaps a cancerous invasion of the lower abdomen.¹² In any case, the intrepid princess left the world at just fifty-two years of age.

Undeniably, Princess Helena embodied the French-speaking European nobility who flourished in Parisian high society, where she found herself so at home whenever she felt the need to break out of her solitude, whether moral or physical. The international circulations of the aristocracy produced a growing cosmopolitanism within this social group in the most factual sense of the term: in fact, aristocrats from all over Europe rubbed shoulders and mingled more and more in the various spaces of sociability that were theirs. This cosmopolitanism, which was fundamentally worldly, led to the gradual spread within this elite of common modes of consumption, behavior and thought—in short, a European aristocratic habitus. If we take the case of the Polish nobility, adherence to this model created a dividing line between the high aristocracy and the penniless, dependent nobility, who adhered to the values of Sarmatism. And let us not forget that Helena Potocka's orphan status facilitated her integration by giving her early independence. Surviving accounts of entertainment in aristocratic homes and salons suggest that, across the continent, men and women shared certain leisure activities specific to their social group, such as the art of conversation, literary games, theatrical society, and amateur concerts. This explains why emigrants during the revolution easily integrated into the nobility of other countries. This is clearly seen in how Helena welcomes her Baden friends¹³ to Ukraine, where they were to become her clients and live with her in the *Chaussée d'Antin* hotel in Paris. The Russia of Helena's geographical origins is an excellent example of the international nature of the high nobility, which, although originally characterized by its geographical isolation and national particularities, had a strong presence in Paris, as Antoine Lilti shows,¹⁴ and converted to a European model.

12 Figeac, *Helena Potocka*, 291.

13 An old noble family from the Aude region, ruined by the Revolution. They became close friends of the Princess and her clients whom she installed in the *Chaussée d'Antin* hotel.

14 Lilti, *Le monde des salons*, 143, ff.

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