

Chapter 2 : Jean Bernadotte (I) (1763-1780) – The Brat.

Jean-Baptiste Jules Bernadotte was born January 26, 1763 in the town of Pau, the old provinces of Béarn & Gascogne in the south-west of France. His parents were Henri Bernadotte (1711-1780) & Jeanne de Saint-Jean (1728-1809). Jean was the middle child of three siblings Jean-Évangéliste “Jean-E“ (1754-1813), Jean himself (1763-1844) & Marie (1769-1795). Two more siblings died before he was born. His father was a procureur, a self taught lawyer. His brother Jean-E also studied law and inherited their father's law practice.

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Jean was never particularly outspoken about his youth, but the environment was curious, why there is some more or less certain information, from Jean himself, his wife, relatives & interviews with Pau residents. The data are spread over a large number of publications. The main sources are:

- F U Wrangel's account (1889 & 1917) of Jean's life up to the age of 30 - a compilation of documents, letters and genealogies.
- Two articles by the local researcher Hilarion Barthely (1899 & 1912): One about which house Jean was born in. One about errata in Hans Klæber's (1910) biography.
- Henrik Schönbeck's digest (1878) of his conversations in 1834 with Jean's relative M. Fourcade (1812-?).

There is a report that Jean's mother supposedly was frightened by friends' antics during a carnival - January 29 is carnival time - and that Jean for this reason was born prematurely in the seventh month.¹ Perhaps. He is reported to have spent his first year with a nurse in the neighbouring village of Gan.² He grew up to be a lively boy and at least his mother preferred the calmer brother Jean E. His schooling is unclear. According to one piece of information, he received home education.³ According to another, he attended the Lycée de Pau.⁴ Anyway, Jean seems to have been a poor student. According to Jean's chief of staff in 1797-99, Jean Sarrazin, he was hard to handle:

[His father] took care early to inspire his son with [love of justice and] such noble sentiments; but was not fortunate enough in his attempts to adorn his mind with that classical knowledge, which opens to youth the vast field of the sciences. The vivacity of the youthful John, and the inconveniences inseparably attached to domestic education, opposed in this latter instance, the good intentions of his virtuous father.

Béarn, a province of France, situated to the north of the Pyrenees, has always furnished excellent soldiers. The inhabitants are well made, robust, active, courageous, sober, lively, but very selfish. Agreeably to the manners of the country, Bernadotte was early inured to fatigue and hardship. Although his parent's circumstances well allowed his being superbly clothed, and brought up delicately, he himself took great delight, in winter as well as in summer, to run about bare-headed and bare-footed, with the children of the lower classes, and his favourite aliment was bread, with some

¹ Runkel 1841: s. 5; Schönbeck 1878: s. 32 [enligt JB:s systerson M. Fourcade 1834].

² Touchard-Lafosse 1838: s. 31-32.

³ Wrangel 1889: ss. 38-39.

⁴ Delfour & Lespy 1890: s. 207. Citerad I: Barthely 1912: s. 12.

fruits. Very soon weary of the monotony of his instructions, and hurried on by the strength of his passions, he gave way to his strong inclination to a military life.⁵

After the confirmation in 1778, Jean practised two years as a copyist with one of his father's colleagues, and in the meantime made additional profits as a postal carrier.⁶ At the law firm he was so ill-suited to work that his supervisor advised him to choose another profession. It has been assumed that the criticism was about his lively nature, but according to a statement conveyed by Peter Wieselgren, it seems to have been about his poor scholastic skills:

The king himself has, for a warm friend of public schools (Earl J. DelaGardie [1768-1842]) told something, which sufficiently explains what took place. The King once declared with great emotion that he with all his heart wished to see public schools all through his kingdom, so that every child, even the poorest, might learn to read and write: »I know myself the trouble caused by lacking these skills. A Commander-in-Chief saw me as a soldier doing my thing, and was impressed; You are Corporal, he exclaimed, if you can write! I still remember the shame of being forced to answer: No, I can't, but will learn. I had to give half my salary to a Regiment clerk, who taught me the art of writing, while my comrades rested.» Some time later, when the Commander came by, he gave him a paper signed with his name. You are now a Corporal, was the answer. This war on June 16, 1785.⁷

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Some information about Jean's youth has been passed on by his wife Desirée. Sofia Jennings (1835-1922: m. 1860 D'Ailly) was for a while her lady-in-waiting. 1923-1925 after her death her grandson, director Uno Brander, published her notes, memories and additional information. Jean appears to be the source of the following, but it has been adapted and dramatized:

It wasn't long before he started to find the cottage too narrow and delighted in using all opportunities to roam the small town and its surroundings, where there was an infinite amount of interesting things to do for a bright and adventurous boy and his comrades. In the stream, you could swim and fish, the forests teemed with woodcocks, pigeons and wild ducks to snare, and the steep ravines on the other side of the old castle offered an ideal terrain for warlike games.

It is in the nature of things that these little excursions did not take place without all sorts of mischief, in which Jean often played a rather prominent role, and the warlike games sometimes became almost too warlike. Thus, once, when the boys, enraptured by the heroic stories of ancient Béarn, were in the process of replaying the war of liberation against Aquitania, the game turned into a serious fight. The freedom-loving Béarns under Jean's command were seized by such rage against their Aquitanien oppressors, that they pelted the enemy with whatever was at hand. The losses on both sides were great, and Jean, who was playing no less than Centullus IV, the first Baron of Béarn, a renown hero of Béarn freedom, was hit by a stone in the forehead with such force, that he had to be carried of the battle field. This first wound of the future warrior became a memory for life, and Karl Johan delighted in older days, when

⁵ Sarrazin 1813: vol. 5, s. 423.

⁶ Heinrich von Brandt. Citerad I: Blomberg 1888: ss. 159-161.

⁷ Wieselgren 1844: s. 7.

reminiscing on his childhood, to point to the scar on the forehead and tell of the heroic times, when he liberated Béarn from the Aquitans.

Jean had inherited the sense of honour of the true Béarnaise, but also the fierce, disposition of the Gascognes, under which influence he could say and undertake much, which he then bitterly repented. So it happened once, that he in justifiable indignation over the fact that a comrade had ratted on him, gave the little gossip such a powerful going over, that the boy had to be taken care of by the local barber-surgeon. Of course, such things could not go unnoticed, and Jean was also charged by his parents - especially his mother - with both reproaches and serious punishments for his conduct. There is therefore no need, as has often happened, to accuse Mrs. Bernadotte of having preferred her older son to the younger or treated him with unnecessary rigour. She was a resolute and powerful woman who, with a certain authority, ruled her home and was used to being obeyed, but she was also appreciated for her solid qualities in other respects. The historical writer Bascle de Lagreze, who was related to the Bernadotte family, has in his work *Ma vie* described her as follows:

“She was a woman, known for her qualities and firm character. She had a distinct love for her eldest son, the heir. Bernadotte accepted this, and the severity that his mother showed him did not subtract from the affection that his noble heart had for her.”⁸

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He was also very interested in horses, and the postal carriers, who liked him for his open and cheerful manner, allowed him to help them with strapping and saddling and so on. For this service, he was later allowed to enter the saddle and blow signals in the postal horn. This is where the future rider acquired the basics. Somewhat older, he would sometimes even be allowed to serve as a deputy for which he was tipped.

Karl Johan used to tell how he on one of these deputy trips had come close to being robbed – an occurrence, which at that time was not unusual in the southern mountain regions of the Pyrenees. The bandits caught sight of him from their camp and hailed him to stop. Instead he spurred his horse and rode - literally- for life, while the bullets whistled about his ears. To his good fortune, the robbers were apparently not prepared for a hunt, and Jean ended up unscathed. He avoided telling his mother however for fear that she would then quickly end these satisfying but not so harmless expeditions. Dowager Queen Desideria, who was greatly amused by this and other episodes from the childhood and youth of her husband, told it to her surroundings, never neglecting to add the undeniably very thoughtful words: ‘Il était décidé, que sa vie serait sauvée pour des actions plus glorieuses.’

At the age of eleven, Jean was sent to school in the old Benedictine College, but his above-mentioned qualities conspired to end the schooling in an overtly dramatic way. One day he witnessed the brutal beating up of one of the younger boys by a teacher. A punishment for some rather minor misdemeanour. Jean tried to remain calm, but the punishment went on, the teacher ignoring pleas from the classmates to stop it. Jean at last tried to intervene, was ordered to leave the classroom but refused. It ended up with him hitting the teacher in the face.

It goes without saying that the poor boy paid dearly for this first brave attempt to appear in the defence of the oppressed and defenceless. In a rich measure, he would learn how ungrateful it is that, as Viktor Rydberg says, »lift a shield to the defence of the small of this world«, for apart from the consequences that naturally awaited him at

⁸ Gustave Bascle de Lagreze (1811-1892). *Ma vie*. I: Brander 1924: s. 28.

home, he also suffered the harshest punishment the school could administer - expulsion. But nothing - he used to say later - could cause him to regret his action.

Jean's main education was now at home with his father and older brother. One of the priests at the church of St. Martin, abbé Roux, who was the family's confessor and always with particular interest included its youngest sapling, guided him in the study of Latin, and with a fencer living in the city he was taught to elegantly and safely wage the sword. For warlike sports he early on showed both liking and aptitude, but his interest in bookish studies, despite a rare good memory and a quick and lively perception, was lacking. Nevertheless he seems to have acquired a fairly respectable amount of knowledge, according to the then modest demands: Literacy in reading, writing, arithmetic, and possibly some understanding of Latin - no more was demanded, and in these subjects he gradually improved.⁹

The information from Desirée et al has been assessed as too uncertain to be included in Jean's official biographies, but has a kind of shadow life. Torvald Höjer summarizes it:

His subsequent upbringing is unclear. According to one tradition, he received homeschooling under the guidance of his father and the nine year older brother, according to another, he some time attended the Benedictine College. Be that as it may; It is certain that the book knowledge he acquired in Pau was not very extensive.

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According to a consensual but late written down tradition he already as a child distinguished himself for a lively and enterprising temperament, which made him difficult to raise. Of a certain interest is some information, which in 1812 was told to a German officer by the then postmaster of Pau. According to this legend, the young Bernadotte is supposed to have worked extra as a postal carrier for tips. During the time he devoted himself to a profession [as copyist], which did not interest him, his liveliness seems to have taken a turn to the worse, which aroused some concern within the family circle and according to tradition at some point brought him into the city's custody after a fight, where the sympathies were on his side.¹⁰

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On March 31, 1780, his father died and on September 3 Jean enlisted as a private soldier in the 60th French line regiment Royal-la-Marine. According to Jean's physician Erik af Edholm, it went as follows:

In the town of Pau on an old street, which curves around the foot of the mountain upon which the famous castle rises, wherein Henry IV was born, is a house with modest appearance, which all travellers visit. On a beautiful morning in July 1780, the gate of this small and neat house opened, and thus a young man of 17 years, but whose appearance and condition seemed to testify of a at least 5 years older age; It was a lively, tall, well-grown youth, with black, thick and curly hair, with bold, piercing eyes, and an eagles nose. He proceeded with haste, as a man, who intends to complete a task.

This youngster was the second son of a lawyer in Pau; Since he had little desire for his father's profession and also was displeased with his mother's affection for his older

⁹ Brander 1924: ss. 24-35.

¹⁰ Höjer 1939: s. 5-6.

brother, he had this morning risen, to perform an act that would determine the fate of his whole life. A few moments later he went into the house of a sacked captain of the Royal Navy, who lived at his birthplace, and asked him to be immediately and secretly enrolled as a volunteer; The captain, who was happy to send his regiment a recruit with such a favourable appearance, did not hesitate and the agreement was soon drawn up and signed. In order to avoid attention, it was signed by the maire [mayor] in a nearby village*, and the next day the new warrior, his family, unknowing took the way to Marseilles, where he boarded a boat to his regiment, then garrisoned [at Bastia] in Corsica.

* In order to have legal force, every military contract had to be endorsed by a bourgeois authority.¹¹

There has been speculation about the reason why Jean enlisted - career, adventure, money, family conflicts - but perhaps the question is wrong. He was unsettled. The alternative to military service was actually to wait as a copyist for any of Pau's four procureurs to die. His father had waited for 18 years. In addition recent research has shown that his financial position as a procureur would have been anything but brilliant. The subterfuge is easier to understand if one realizes that Jean when enlisting had not yet had reached maturity. I summarize Jeans childhood & youth in a table:

1763-01-26	---	Born in Pau, Béarn, France
1774	11 yrs	Enters Pau's Benedictine College
1775 (?)	12 yrs	Mismanages his studies
1776 (?)	13 yrs	Expelled after assaulting a classmate & a teacher
1777 (?)	14 yrs	Home education & work as a postal carrier
1778	15 yrs	Confirmation & work as a copyist at a lawyers office
1779 (?)	16 yrs	Mismanages his work
1780-03-31	17 yrs	His father dies
1780-09-03	17 yrs	He enlists

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There is an alternative history. According to Coupé de Saint-Donat (1820), after signing, he met an acquaintance who had previously enlisted, but now was on leave, and who suggested that they change clothes with each other. The acquaintance thought he looked magnificent in his new uniform and uttered the prophetic words: “Look at that! Now I have created a Marshal of France!”¹² According to Swederus (1877), Jean then made his way to the neighbouring municipality Billeris (Billère) for the certificate, then the 40 miles to Toulouse, possibly on foot & without money, where he hid in the hold of a ship and did not show himself until out at sea. This sounds like something had happened and there is a possible explanation. According to a family tradition, conveyed in 1834 by Karl Johan's relative M. Fourcade, it happened like this:

¹¹ Edholm 1844a: ss. 5-6. [Moderniserad stavning.]

¹² Coupé de Saint-Donat & Roquefort 1820: s. 122

[Jean Bernadotte wanted to become military from childhood.] He received teaching in the city school and was considered by both teachers and comrades very talented, but had little taste for more rigorous studies. He used all his spare time to practice fencing and had achieved so much skill that he in 1780 engaged in a serious duel with his fencing teacher and this with such success that the latter was overcome and wounded. The many unpleasantries, which he then experienced, and his dissatisfaction with Pau life, brought about the decision to enlist in secret. It was towards the end of the summer of the same year. Not far from Pau, he met a friend, who had left the army and now was on his way home, still wearing the uniform he had worn as a volunteer in the Royal Marina regiment. He drew in the darkest colours all the deprivations and labours of field life and insisted on Bernadotte returning with him to Pau. The conversation ended in them changing clothes and that Bernadotte in his new military uniform was accepted as a volunteer in the same regiment that his friend had left. As a volunteer, he accompanied the regiment to Corsica.¹³

Wrangel (1889) is anxious to minimize the dramatics. According to him, it took a month after enlistment before Jean left home.

¹³ Schönbeck 1878: ss. 32-33.