

Chapter 17 : Desideria Bernadotte (III) (1823-1860) – “Une femme d'un certain age“.

*“You're as old as you feel,
but not as significant.”*
German proverb

Desirée's 37 years in Sweden 1823-1860 are poorly documented. I list what's known.

Desirée moved into the castle's “Queen Floor“, below Jean's floor but connected with a spiral staircase. She continued her attempts to reunite sister Julie with her husband who was in exile in America. She thought she had Jean's support in this but he gave his diplomats secret instructions to ignore the matter.¹ There are many letters to Julie preserved. Desirée had a lively style and it is noticeable that she initially enjoyed her new role as Queen. She advised her niece Charlotte not to be depressed by adversity because “one must have small demands for happiness to meet her in this world. A measure of philosophy and joy is required, and in addition: Why fall ill? The doctors are so boring and their medications so worthless.“² She monitored her French assets, followed the interest and exchange rates and checked the banks' accounts.

Desirée was this time around able to establish her own court, headed by her niece Marcelle Clary (1792-1866; m. de Tascher de la Pagerie; Chief maid (1823-1829) and then Vilhelmina Gyldenstolpe (1779-1858; chief maid 1829-1844). Chief maid of the Norwegian court state was Countess Karen Wedel-Jarlsberg (1789-1849; b. Anker; 1825-1845). The other members of the court consisted of chamberlains, maids of honour and ladies-in-waiting. Since Desirée never bothered to learn Swedish, good French was a must. Those who spoke only French formed a small clique for themselves. Jean was annoyed with Tascher & vice versa. A description:

Regardless that [Countess Tascher] lived in the castle, she was very often late for dinner. The king, who always lacked patience, but especially so at meals, was irritated beyond measure and let her know how he felt, but in vain; madame Tacher was neither easily frightened nor meek, but answered him in kind; the situation becoming so bad that she eventually returned to France. M:me Tacher was healthy and strong of body, had a beautiful face, a hard, penetrating voice, was fierce, capricious and not in the habit of restraining herself.³

The representation was more fun when she was the main character. There were many audiences, gatherings, soirees, dinners, coffee parties, balls, masks & tableaux. She both travelled on her own & followed Jean on his trips to Norway, but not on the two longest 1828 and 1839, because Jean was not as amused by court life as she was. As Queen, Desirée followed decorum - danced by rank order, walked with around with her suite & endeavoured to pay attention to everyone regardless of rank. For a while she was really popular. By 1827, however, the court life had lost its appeal. “What a fool I was to give up my freedom. I ask you: Was I not happy? I did what I wanted from morning to evening; If I was in a bad mood I let others suffer ... and here!“⁴ Here she had to restrain herself. “When you live surrounded by a court and you have to express your feelings in the form of courteous phrases life

¹ Löwenhielm 1927: del 2, ss. 117-118.

² Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 215.

³ 1:e hovmarskalk J O Nauckhoffs memoarer. I: Ahnfelt 1880: del 2, s. 110.

⁴ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 217.

becomes so difficult, that you would rather be some place else ...⁵ She was not brought up to this and felt as if she was losing her true self (*perdre soi-même*).⁶

There is fragmentary information about her duties beyond being a hostess and to attend. She received foreign envoys and was patron of the Manilla Institute of the Deaf & Mute (1829), a school for neglected children (1832), and an organization for the establishment of schools for young children (1837). She also practised an extensive financial charity: e.g. paid pensions to former employees, outsourced sewing assignments to “*pauvre-honteux*” & and provided grants to needy. She had a large amount of money for that purpose in a cash box in her room. A similar activity was carried out in Norway.⁷ Desirée was anxious not to appear too ignorant and had her courtiers read aloud from the history and literature of Sweden-Norway while taking notes.

In 1828, she wanted to visit Julie, who was ill in Italy. Jean was totally opposed. The family must stand united in the face of political opposition. Desirée relented. “Actually, My Friend [=Jean] is the only one, who I would regret leaving; I sometimes imagine that he would be happier if I did so. But it's too complicated to explain.”

On August 21, 1829, she was crowned in the Grand Church of Sweden. There are several versions of who took the initiative. According to Desirée, it was Jean's idea and she was ambivalent. She saw the coronation as another way of tying her to Sweden and preventing all foreign travel. According to Jean, he gave in to her “childish demands”. Harald Wieselgren refers to her experiences in the summer of 1823 at Rosersberg Castle, unknown what experiences but it would have something to do with her daughter-in-law.⁸ According to the French ambassador, it was a matter of prestige. Emperor Peter I of Brazil had August 2, 1829, married Josephine's sister Amélie and she was crowned Empress.⁹ Another hypothesis is that Josephine, by virtue of her youth, her children and her learning Swedish, had become more popular than herself & must be countered. However, these are all speculations. As early as 1811, there were rumours that Desirée had “for a long time” wanted a throne to equal her sister Julie.¹⁰

According to *Aftonbladet*¹¹, the coronation was caused or supported by a motion from the peasant's Estate November 29, 1828, written by the Estate's secretary Trägård but delivered by somebody else, unknown who and on whose initiative, but against Jean's will. Within the nobility, it came to a debate that she should first convert to the Evangelical-Lutheran doctrine according to a motion from Fredrik Leonard Gyllensvaan (1784-1864; b. Rosenquist af Åkershult). She didn't, but she received anonymous hate letters that she should have.¹² The ceremony was impressive and there is a painting:

Her Majesty downs her Duchess Crown, and Countess Brahe dons her the royal mantle. The Queen kneels, and the Archbishop anoints her. Her Majesty ascends the throne. His Excellency Count Rosenblad, assisted by the Archbishop, takes the crown from the altar and together they put it on the Queen's head. His Excellency

⁵ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 217.

⁶ Karmina 1991: s. 280, 294.

⁷ Girod de l'Ain 1960; Sandin 2011.

⁸ NFB 1880.

⁹ Karmina 1991: s. 302.

¹⁰ Anonym 1811. I: Scaevola red. 1885: s. 135.

¹¹ *Aftonbladet* 1861-10-11, s. 2.

¹² Brander 1923: ss. 142-149.

Count Löwenhielm, also he assisted by the Archbishop, similarly takes the spire from the altar and puts it into Her Majesty's hands and so the orb, which is handed her by His Excellency Baron Lövenskiöld.

The State Herald then proclaims the coronation completed: "Now is crowned Queen Eugenie Bernardine Desirée of Sweden, Göte and Vende, she and no one else."¹³

It is doubtful whether the painting corresponds to reality. It was completed in 1856 after several changes. Desirée was crowned in an embroidered costume with a train, but on the painting she wears a white wedding dress in Atlas silk. She was supposed to also be crowned in Norway but it was postponed due to disturbances - Swedish Governor Baltzar von Platen had on 17 May 1829 let the military disperse a crowd trying to celebrate their "independence day". The Swedish government requested it twice in 1830 and 1833. According to the MP Hans Riddervold, the request was voted down on the grounds that a coronation infringed on the country's sovereignty.¹⁴ The English ambassador much later claimed that the request for Desirée's Norwegian coronation was perceived as a Swedish diplomatic reaction to the Norwegians celebrating their "independence day" and to their refusal to appoint Crown Prince Oscar Norwegian viceroy.¹⁵ The Norwegians had, however, purchased the regalia that were put to use at Queen Lovisa's coronation in 1860.

Desirée was concerned that the French Revolution, which had hitherto been a compromise – the introduction of constitutional rather than absolute monarchy – would become complete with the July Revolution of 1830 "and people [as in 1789] yet again become victims of it as if smitten by cholera". More down to earth: If France became a republic, her assets might be seized. In the Italian unrest the following year, Napoleon-Louise Bonaparte died. Desirée wanted to comfort the widow, but was advised by her son Oscar not to even mention such a thing to Jean.

On July 20 & 21, 1838, the Crusenstolpe riots took place. Crusenstolpe was convicted of Lèse Majesté and the riots were aimed at securing his release. Two people were killed. There are two stories about this incident:

Desirée, awakened in the middle of the night by the commotion, appeared in a dressing gown and nightcap to participate in the king's deliberations. [More likely, she had not had time to go to bed.] Charles John walked back and forth in front of his officers, wearing two overcoats and his triangular hat. "I will kill them all," he cried, "The guns will talk!" ["Sabrez la canaille (to the sword with them)!"] Rivers of blood will flow." - "Don't listen to what he says", Desirée is supposed to have remarked, "he would not harm a worm."¹⁶ It seems a canard. Another version is that Desirée had had some vehicles prepared in order to flee the country if things got out of hand. When Jean learned of the matter, the luggage was unloaded and Jean dusted her down for how such a desertion would be perceived by Tsar Nicholas I who happened to be visiting with his son Alexander. "Un des plus mauvais quart-d'heures de ma vie" (one of the

¹³ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 228.

¹⁴ Aftonbladet, 1846-09-10, s. 2; Riddervold 1847.

¹⁵ Bloomfield 1886: ss. 181-182.

¹⁶ Palmstierna 1939: s. 475; Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 246. [Källa: Enligt ögonvittnet major C.F. Meyer till statsfrun Ulla Lagerbielke.]

worst quarter hours of my life) she explained afterwards.¹⁷ Other stories are also available about this incident.¹⁸

In some depictions of the relationship with Charles John at this time it sounds as if it was good, but that is probably an exaggeration. Desirée made sure to maintain appearance:

The time of day, which was usually set for my [Georg Ulfsparre, State Secretary 1838-40] individual presentations, was at 5 a.m., and then it almost always happened, that H. Maj the Queen arrived at the king's office. It was her usual morning visit to her consort, she was dressed in negligé. As soon as she entered, Charles John, sitting at his toilet table, said without getting up: "Dear Desideria, how are you?" She usually replied: "Very good, and you?" but if she ever was not, she told him in detail; I rose and offered her an armchair. But she did not sit down, because the king, who did not like the visit to be long, said: "Dear Desideria, I am busy, I have work with the Secretary of State, as you can see." She immediately replied: "Yes, I see, I will not stop you, I will go and take a walk." Then she ascended, nodded with a friendly face and went her way.¹⁹

In 1843, Desirée was supposed to accompany her son Oscar & his family to Italy, but it did not happen. Desirée explained this by saying that there was no room for her suite & luggage on the boat. "In fact, I did not want to leave the king alone." - "Some say travel, others say stay, some suggest overland, others by sea. This Nordic boat is so hard to leave, that I never succeed in doing so. There is no country which can make you lose your will such as this, without you realizing how it happened." What she meant by this has remained unclear. Many observers at the time noted her "indolence", quite unlike her previous perky self. Probably her life depressed her. After all, she was held captive by Jean on the grounds that the family must keep a front against all its inner and outer enemies - Republicans, Gustavians, Newspapers, Bonapartists, legitimists - whom Jean during his nightly outbursts threatened to imprison, execute, exile or shoot at the spot.

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In 1844, Jean died. She attended his deathbed, but there is no information on how her grief was expressed. There is a report that she spent the rest of the day in her private chapel. The letters to her sister Julie afterwards were extremely restrained. The inheritance was allocated according to the marriage contract. Desirée retained all Swedish movables and all French immovable and movable property - in contemporary money about SEK 250 million. The following year, her sister Julie died. Desirée still behaved in a straightforward bourgeois manner that was considered inappropriate. There is a scathing description from a condolence visit in May 1844 by the French diplomat Adolphe de Bacour (1801-1865), restoration style puke:

Yesterday I was received at the palace first by King Oscar, then by Queen Josephine and finally by the Dowager Queen. - - - Then I was introduced to the Dowager Queen, who kept me for an hour and a half to tell me a lot of pitiful things, which was a torment to hear. She began by talking about her grief with expressions, which were more ridiculous than fitting. Then she talked about Paris, about her family, about her

¹⁷ Oscar II 1960: del 3, ss. 233-234. [Min tolkning. Tidpunkt och motiv är oklara. 1838 var Oscar endast nio år.]

¹⁸ Stensson 1986: s. 187.

¹⁹ Ulfsparre 1907: ss. 173-174.

friends, about her past, and all this in a vulgar way, which was truly painful. Royalty has not changed her. She has always been and will always remain a most ordinary woman of the bourgeoisie, as amazed at her own elevation as those who meet her. My ears are full of all the baroque stories she told me with a wearying delight. She is an embarrassment.²⁰

The quote probably gives a wrong impression of how Desirée went about her audiences. She was always very keen to be well prepared and began them with a number of questions about the person's career, interests and their mutual acquaintances. Afterwards, she used to ask her court how it went. It was her background that offended, not the audience per se.

As queen dowager, Desirée had few duties but continued to practice charity. She founded a club for rewarding the diligence of young people (1845), a school for young children at Drottningholm (1846) and awarded scholarships to artists. Those who dealt with her in these matters thought her witty, knowledgeable & easy to relate to. The diligence association grew into a fairly large organization with Desirée as 1st Honorary Member, Protectress & Chairman of the Board. In 1845, she planned a spa visit in Denmark with friends, but it did not happen. In 1846, her friends put her house on rue d'Anjou in order, but she did not come and it was rented out. Maybe she had got used to her situation. She toured Sweden & Norway and took an interest in archaeology, literature, music, dressage & gardening.²¹

The French February Revolution of 1848 and the proclamation of France as a republic greatly alarmed Desirée, and during the March unrest in Stockholm that year she urged her son Oscar to put down all Swedish revolutionary inclinations by force before it was too late. “Oscar, pourquoi ne laisses-tu pas tes troupes agir? Je m'y connais moi aux revoltes et aux revolutions! Ce sont des canailles, des scélérats, frappez-les, tuex-les, ils ne meritent que ça! Vite, ou bien nous sommes tous perdus!” (Oscar, why don't you let your troops do their thing? I know myself about revolts and revolutions! They are scoundrels, villains, hit them, kill them, they deserve only that! Quick, or else we're all lost!)²² Since 18 people were killed and several hundred injured when the riots were suppressed, she was truly answered in kind.

On May 30, 1853, she made a last attempt to visit France. Napoleon's nephew Napoleon III had proclaimed himself Emperor on November 24, 1852. The putative trip appears to have been a combination family and state visit. Desirée's refusal to go through with it is hard to explain. Her grandson Oscar II wrote a long story whose essence is that no one thought she would go but no one really cared.²³ Perhaps she was anxious to arrive in Paris as a stranger. Maybe she wanted to be remembered as a beauty, not a beldam. Who knows?

Desirée is often described as socially isolated, but not until old age. She had a Swedish circle of acquaintances and received visits from her French family and circle of friends. In November 1855, she received the French envoy Marshal Canrobert, who described her as follows:

She was quite small in growth, rather chubby and wrinkled; Her hair, stained chestnut brown, was laid with great art, and her toilet was highly cared for. She wore a light purple dress and spread a distinctive fragrance around her. If her black eyes had not

²⁰ de Bacourt, Adolphe Fourier. Une mission en Suède et en Danemarck sous Louis Philippe 1844. Le Correspondent 1893. I: Lindwall 1919: ss. 235-237. [Avtryckt diplomatrapport.]

²¹ Girod de l'Ain 1960; Sandin 2011.

²² Oscar II 1960: del 3, s. 226.

²³ Oscar II 1960: del 3, ss. 236-240.

been so lively, her face would have seemed insignificant. The snub nose and the smile were the salient features of her physiognomy.²⁴ They spoke for quite a long time. Desirée was afterwards told he thought she had “a warm heart and a charming head.” [Canrobert brought with him an invitation from Napoleon III to visit France, but once again it did not happen.]

Her grandson Oscar II remembered her “in everyday life“:

I remember her only as a woman, or at least as what a child imagines to be a woman. - Small, tender, with a nervous trembling gait and [heavily made-up], greying curls, of which I imagined that not all were natural, but with lively, witty, yet beautiful and clear eyes. Such emerges »Grand'Maman« when I seek to dig into my childhood memories.²⁵

Despite her 25 years in Paris, Desirée still spoke “provençal“, a French dialect closer to Latin than to French. This made her hard to understand - possibly even for Jean, who spoke an equally arcane “Béarnais“. During her 37 years in Sweden, she learned only occasional Swedish words but her French seems to have improved.

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From Desirée's last years, there are four eyewitness accounts that present her as a charming original. However, their access was limited: (1) Carl Hochschild (1831-1898) was chamberlain 2.5 years 1855-11-03 to 1858-06-15 and 1888 published his memories from that time (in Swedish 1889). (2) Sofia Jennings (1835-1922: m. 1860 D'Ailly) was lady-in-waiting 1.5 years 1859-01-05 to 1860-10-29 and served every 3 days. Her grandson, director Uno Brander, published her notes and memories in 1923. (3) Desirée's grandson Oscar II (1829-1907) knew his grandmother since the cradle but in his memories from 1899 recorded not a single conversation with her. (4) Her maid and assistant Christina Rogberg (1832-1907) was employed in 1857 until her death.

Desirée's schedule was more suited to Paris than Stockholm: rise at 14, “morning coffee“ at 15, light lunch at 18, then late evening ride, theatre, opera or a ball, supper at 00, a walk in the long gallery at 03, and then to bed. The toilet took a lot of time. Anniversaries were family events. In between she used to invite herself.²⁶

In the summer Desirée lived at Drottningholm and at dower residence Rosersberg Castle. At Rosersberg she ran a chicken farm that also included peacocks, pheasants and other beautiful things. “She often [took] lonely walks in the surroundings and in doing so it was by no means unusual, that she returned home followed by a whole crowd of poor folks, whom she regaled with food and money.“²⁷ The surrounding children often visited the castle to see a glimpse of her. Desirée used to hide behind a curtain and throw money to them too. The winter months could be unbearably boring. It was even dangerous to go out because you could meet wolves in the streets. Desirée, trapped by a thunderstorm, once sighed from the bottom of her heart: “Qu'avais -je à faire dans ce pays de loup?“ (what am I actually doing in this country destined for wolves).²⁸ Anecdotes like this travelled far. Desirée was too witty for her own good.

²⁴ Babst 1904: del 3, s. 27. I: Girod de l'Ain 1960: ss. 261-262.

²⁵ Oscar II 1960: del 3, ss. 213-214.

²⁶ Lewenhaupt 1937: ss. 64-65.

²⁷ Brander 1923: s. 40.

²⁸ Rogberg 1873: s.93.

In order not to be ignored, Desirée was always extraordinarily difficult. She never arrived on time and made great things of her entrances. Most such information is from her opera visits where her arrivals in the middle of the performance became so troublesome that her grandson Charles (XV) tried to keep his presence secret so as not to be subjected to “grandmother's surprises“. Desirée had her Parisian spy habits intact however. Her announced but never conducted Paris trips may have had the same agenda: to be noticed or to highlight her importance. Even her own court was exposed to such. For example, before leaving for Norway, it had once to wait for two hours while she said goodbye to her favourite dog.²⁹

In 1859, her son Oscar died and she extended the period of mourning until her death the following year. The daughter-in-law wanted to give her the consolation of religion, and Desirée complied as far as confessing at Easter, but was otherwise republican recalcitrant. “When the Queen's confessor [Lorentz Studach] once gave an imaginative depiction of the torments awaiting the soul in purgatory, her majesty finally did not stand more details, but cut him short with the indignant reproach: “If you knew, what it irritates my nerves, you would certainly not torment me with these horrors.“³⁰ Actually, as far as religion is concerned, Desirée seems to have only given in once, and that in connection with Jean's death. Studach could triumphantly report to “his addressee“ in Rome: “Her Majesty the Dowager Queen has received the sacraments during Easter [1844] for the second time in her life, having hesitated for 50 years.“³¹ In connection with the construction of the Eugenia chapel, Desirée in 1936 received a letter from Rome's Congregation for the Propagation of the Catholic Faith in which she was asked to “protect Catholicism“. Desirée interpreted this as a call for missionary activity, but Studach made her rethink it – it would suffice to be a good example. In a letter of reply, he urged the Congregation to avoid her: “[It is] best for us here if the Queen does not interfere in our affairs. She's just ruins the cause. She is untrustworthy, seeking only pretexts to ignore us.“³²

The nephews on the continent sent her the latest bestsellers from which she had the lady-in-waiting read aloud. These were novels, dramas and memoirs of revolutionary & imperial times. Britt Dahlström³³ has studied her library which is full of books by & about her French acquaintances: The Duchess d'Abrantès, the Countess de Genlis, Mme Récamier, Mme de Staël, and of “protofeminist“ classics: Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth & George Sand. Also suspense literature by Sir Walter Scott & James Fenimore Cooper; social depictions by Honoré Balzac, Edward Bulwer-Lytton & Victor Hugo; pure entertainment by Alexander Dumas & Eugen Sue; no non-fiction except travelogues but the debate book *Hertha* by Fredrika Bremer - Desirée actually experienced the 1858 law that unmarried women over the age of 25 can apply for adult rights. Sven Åke Heed³⁴ has done a corresponding review of her theatre plays & librettos, several hundred of them. Desirée's ladies-in-waiting probably read them aloud. Desirée was also very interested in gossip, accidents, crimes, and “horrible things“ in general.

Desirée did not age with any elegance. She easily gained weight and was at times a real dumpling. In 1853/54, however, she began losing it - probably from a stomach or intestinal cancer, she had problems with her stool. In the autumn of 1855 she fell, hurt herself

²⁹ Brander 1923: ss. 23-24; af Edholm 1944: del 2, s. 177.

³⁰ Brander 1923: ss. 172-173.

³¹ Becker & Blückert red. 2007: s. 72.

³² Wallin 2010: ss. 13-14. [Brev från Studach till propagandakongregationen, 1836-01-24, sida 13-14.]

³³ Dahlström 2006: ss. 15-36.

³⁴ Heed 2010.

quite badly and had to be carried. In 1857/58, she suffered from repeated abdominal pain. At the time of the death of her son Oscar in 1859 - there is a miniature portrait - she looks quite exhausted. On December 17, 1860, she died of cardiac arrest after a visit to the opera. She was 83 years old. Despite all the incidents, she was fondly remembered - "the epitome of good intentions wrapped in royal purple and a crown" - as one newspaper put it.