*In 2000 the book "*De waanzin van Charlotte – prinses van België, keizerin van Mexico*" (The Madness of Charlotte – Princess of Belgium, Empress of Mexico) was published, edited by Jos Pauwels. The book has stood the test of time perfectly and is still one of the most important and most accessible works on the subject.*
The author (b. 1956), himself a former resident of Meise, holds a doctorate in agogic sciences and is a theatre scholar and psychotherapist. For many years he taught in the Social Work programme at AP University of Applied Sciences in Antwerp and now works mainly as a writer. He was kind enough to revisit his account of Charlotte's life for our magazine, for which we thank him warmly.

The Madness of Charlotte

Jos Pauwels

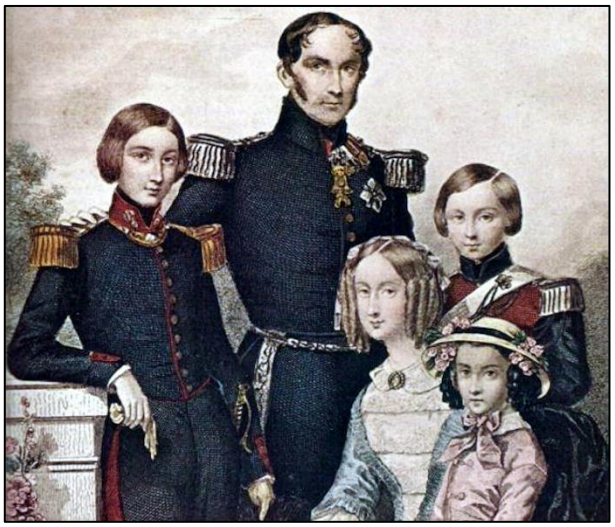
« *Sir, have you been told that one has had a husband, sir, an emperor, or a king? A great marriage, sir, and then... madness. Madness comes from the events...!* »
Charlotte, Empress of Mexico

Introduction

This story is real and true, as true as any personal story. It is based on a selection of letters, diaries and testimonies. The diaries and testimonies were written in the hope that the reader would recognise what a hero, important monarch, mighty emperor or good person the witness was. The letters tell a subjective, personal reality. Often they do not tell the truth but seek to reassure the recipient, or serve to throw dust in the eyes of whoever (anxiously) wants to know what is going on. Every author writes from the convictions that are his own and that belong to his time, rank and person. He shows respect, sympathy, aversion or pity for his characters.
What is based on these sources can hardly be anything other than 'true'. The distinction between history and 'petite histoire' is small. Is there still any difference so many years after the facts? Who would you be if you could choose a role in this story?

Charlotte's childhood

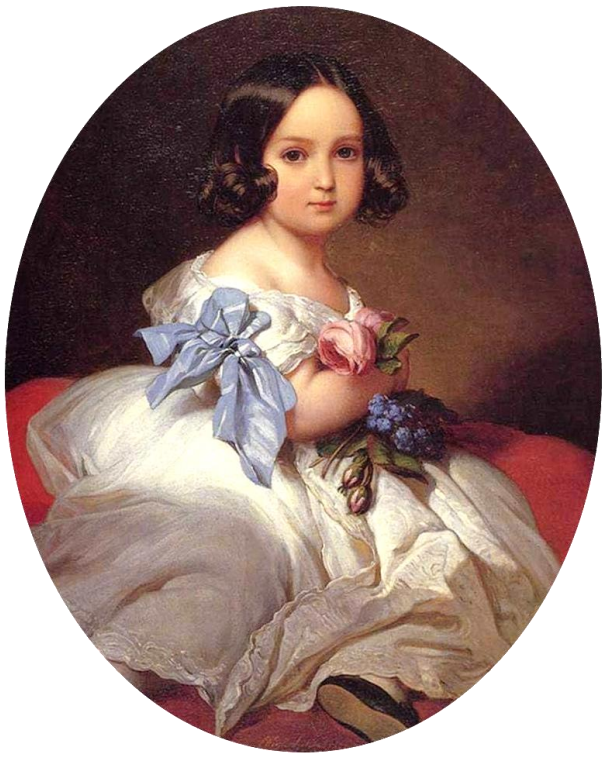
1840: Louise-Marie of Orléans, our first queen, is pregnant with her fourth child. The pregnancy is again extremely difficult. On 7 June 1840 Charlotte is born. Her father Leopold is disappointed that it is a girl.
His eldest son Louis-Philippe, named after Louise's father, the King of the French, lived barely a year. Leopold had hoped for another son to secure the succession to the throne. But Charlotte turns out to be a pretty, healthy, lively and affectionate child. She charms her father. Together with her brothers Leopold ("*Leo*") and Philippe ("*Lipchen*") she is strictly brought up.
It is mainly Louise who takes on this responsibility. The children study up to ten hours a day. The programme includes memory exercises, Latin, mathematics, French, calligraphy, geography, literature, rhetoric, history and German. Dutch is on the programme too. Hendrik Conscience, engaged for this purpose, will never have to give his lessons.
Charlotte receives the same education as her two brothers. She devotes herself to her studies with particular conscientiousness. She soon expresses herself effortlessly in several languages and diligently sends notes to her father in German, French and English. She is clearly the most studious of the three. She proves to be exceptionally hungry for knowledge.



The family of Leopold I
– painting by Charles Baugniet, c. 1850.

Leopold is a Protestant, but the children are brought up Catholic, as stipulated in the marriage contract. The Redemptorist Dechamps is responsible for the children's spiritual and religious education.

While the royal children grow up, the king travels more and more often. Louise is often alone. The king is fond of female beauty. In the *Rue Royale*, on the edge of the park, lives Arcadie Meyer. In the *Rue de la Madeleine*, Brussels' fashionable shopping street, she flaunts her beauty and her royal bastard.
It is not the first nor the last time that Leopold is unfaithful, but it is the most shameless. When he meets her he is 55, she is a minor. He has her marry his equerry to avoid legal problems. After the wedding, equerry Meyer leaves for Coburg. Arcadie's bed is free for the king.



Charlotte as a child
– painting by Franz Xaver Winterhalter, 1842.

Political unrest is growing in Europe. The idea of revolution is spreading. In Flanders the 1840s are marked by a severe economic crisis.
From 1846 to 1848 the standard of living sinks to an absolute low and, after a failed potato harvest, our regions suffer great famines. In May 1847 bakeries are attacked and looted in Brussels, Tournai, Ghent and Lille. When there is work, the family income around 1850 consists on average of 1 to 1.5 francs in wages for the father, a factory worker, supplemented by 0.70 francs from his working wife and 0.50 francs per working child. For that wage people work 12 to 14 hours a day. The entire wage is spent on food, clothing and housing. A loaf of bread costs 0.35 francs.
Until 1866 there is a system under which workers are obliged to do their shopping in their employer's (expensive) shop. On average 20% of the population has no work and depends on poor relief. Thousands of hungry workers leave Flanders for the Walloon coal mines.

Faced with social misery, Leopold I behaves like a monarch of the *ancien régime*. He has no intention of taking social measures. The government concerns itself solely with economic prosperity and with peace and order. Economic prosperity means political stability. Charity and help for the poor are left to the Church and the well-to-do. In this way, according to Leopold, social uprisings are nipped in the bud.
It was, among other things, the social misery caused by systems of economic exploitation that sowed the seeds of the first workers' movements. Banished from Germany in 1843, Karl Marx fled from Paris to Brussels in 1845. The *Communist Manifesto* was written on the Grand-Place in Brussels, in the shadow of the palace. In 1849 our king had him expelled from the country with his wife and children.

In the palace at Laeken, Louise worries about her parents and family in France. The crowned heads have not forgotten the great French Revolution of 1789. Their position is precarious and they feel anything but safe. Moreover, there is the threat of a French invasion of Belgium. The family prepares to flee to London if necessary.
All these worries, Leopold's absence and open infidelity, fear for the safety of her family and concern for her own children weigh on Louise's fragile health. She coughs more and more and suffers from persistent diarrhoea.
In fact she has never been healthy again since Charlotte's birth.
In February 1848 the Paris revolution breaks out. It causes panic among all the conservative regimes in Europe. Louis-Philippe, Louise's father, and her mother Marie-Amélie are deposed and flee to London.
In other countries too, revolutionaries take up the fight. In March fighting breaks out in Vienna and Berlin.

In Belgium the revolution hardly gets going. A few uprisings are easily suppressed by the army and the police. With a few progressive bills, including a sharp reduction of the property qualification for voting, so that from now on twice as many citizens may vote, the government takes the wind out of the revolutionaries' sails.

The death of the queen mother

In her letters Louise shows deep affection for Leopold, her *Leopich*. But Leopold pays little attention to his wife. He travels a great deal, mostly in the company of, among others, Arcadie Meyer. Cartoons and articles about his love life appear in the press. Loneliness weighs heavily on Louise.
The children too suffer from his absence and from the estrangement between their father and mother. Charlotte repeatedly pleads for her father's presence. From his estate at Ciergnon he refuses to come and lets them know that they are not welcome in the Ardennes. In the spring of 1850 Louise visits her parents in England.
When she returns, Charlotte is seriously ill. She has whooping cough. Charlotte is given homeopathy; Louise watches over her bed day and night. Charlotte recovers, but meanwhile Louise herself is growing ever more ill. Louis-Philippe dies at Esher (Surrey) on 26 August 1850. The press is unusually harsh towards him and portrays him as an 'ambiguous' monarch with 'inferior qualities'.

Victor Hugo, who was a close friend of Louis-Philippe, is one of the few to defend him. In *Les Misérables* he describes him as '*one of the best princes who ever sat on a throne*'. All his life Victor Hugo was preoccupied with esotericism and with Gnostic, Kabbalistic and Hermetic thought. This is clearly reflected in his works. In *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* we recognise the knowledge of the proportions and laws of Gothic architecture, characteristic of the Templars.

This criticism of her father hurts Louise deeply. She appears less and less in public; it is said that she is seriously ill.
In August 1850 the people boo Madame Meyer, and later her windows are smashed as a spontaneous expression of sympathy for the queen. The people take Louise's side.
Leopold is heavily criticised for his affair with Arcadie. He is well aware of Louise's illness, though. On 27 September he writes to his niece Queen Victoria: *'Even in her youth she often lost consciousness for no reason at all. And after 1830 she was never really healthy or in good shape again. (...) I believe there is a kind of morbid predisposition in the Orléans family*.' [1]

In September he has Louise taken to Ostend. It is an incomprehensible decision. Presumably he wants Louise away from Laeken to quell the unrest over Arcadie. The house in the Langestraat [2] is poorly equipped and rather small. The family stays at the *Hôtel Fontaine* in the same street. Marie-Amélie, who has come over from England, sleeps in a tiny little room close to her daughter. The king travels back and forth between Laeken and Ostend.

Louise declines visibly. On 11 October 1850 she gives up the struggle and dies in the arms of her mother Marie-Amélie. Before dying, she entrusts the care of Charlotte to her childhood friend Countess d'Hulst.
Belgium mourns: flags fly at half-mast on the ships, the belfries carry mourning flags, locomotives thunder through the country with black flags. In the royal crypt at Laeken the children weep for their mother.

[3]Charlotte is ten. She loses a loving, caring mother. She is faced with a withdrawn, gloomy, absent father. Charlotte Brontë described him as follows: *'The king is a man of fifty, slightly stooped, with greying temples. His face can be compared with no other. Around his eyes, his eyebrows and his mouth the lines seem chiselled. There sat someone who suffered in silence, a nervous, melancholy man.*'

The duty of a royal child

Leopold wants his children to grow up with a 'royal' sense of duty. Charlotte does everything with a stubborn sense of duty. Her father, Madame de Bovée and Father Dechamps remind her daily of 'her high responsibility'; they constantly point out her religious and moral duty.

[1] From a copy of a letter from King Leopold I to Queen Victoria, 7 November 1845 – RAW, RPA.
[2] The old royal palace in Ostend is at Langestraat 69. It served as summer residence of our royal house from 1834 to 1922. In 1867 the house was bought by Leopold II. In 1930 it passed by royal decree to the Royal Trust. It now houses Ostend's historical museum 'De Plate'. In the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, built between 1901 and 1905, there is a monumental tomb for Louise-Marie.
[3] Charlotte Brontë, in Villette, London, 1857.

Countess d'Hulst asks her to meditate daily.

Charlotte is considerably influenced by mystical-magical-Christian ideas. Madame d'Hulst is a childhood friend of Louise. She was born Denise de Grimoard de Beauvoir du Roure and is married to Joseph Le Sage d'Hauteroche, but is always called Madame d'Hulst. As Louise's bosom friend she was present at Charlotte's birth.
In aristocratic circles of the time it is 'bon ton' to take an interest in mystical or occult-esoteric movements such as theosophy, the Rosicrucians and spiritualism.
Through her father, Madame d'Hulst had already come into contact at the French court with the mystical beliefs of a number of 'secret' orders. And Madame de Bovée too was fascinated by the possibilities of magic.
Probably Charlotte too, under the influence of her governesses, tries in a number of spiritualist experiments to make contact with her late mother.

The same theme comes up again and again: the account God demands from the princes to whom He has entrusted part of His power and on whom He imposes the task of watching over the salvation of the peoples He entrusts to them. Charlotte withdraws into herself; she becomes taciturn. She reads theological works, Greek historians such as Herodotus, Plutarch,...
In 1855 she writes to Madame d'Hulst [4]: *'The Holy Spirit has laid His gifts in my heart with His hands and set me on my path. I hope I shall never leave this path. I shall not deserve pity if I do (...) I cannot overcome my laziness. I sin so easily. If I do not watch myself constantly, I lose myself. (...) I try to change myself and sometimes I feel a certain weariness when I try to do better. (...) Sometimes I feel a fever, a madness, that takes hold of me. (...) I believe it is the devil who torments me.'*

What is the devil doing in the head of a 15-year-old girl? Charlotte creates such high ideals for herself and systematically reproaches herself for not attaining them. There is a storm in her head; does no one notice?
With her father Charlotte now 'talks' only through notes. Arcadie has just given birth to a second royal bastard.
For a few weeks each year Charlotte stays with her grandmother Marie-Amélie at Claremont. She notices how Charlotte's mood can change. How she sometimes dwells on the weight of her important role, only to slip suddenly into a melancholy mood. She notices how withdrawn Charlotte is and tries to talk to her. Charlotte talks, but says nothing, despite the affinity she feels for her grandmother.
Charlotte increasingly takes over her mother's role. She visits institutions, chairs relief organisations, attends banquets and celebrations. The relationship with her elder brother Leopold (*Leo*) is not without problems. She dislikes his cynicism and teasing behaviour.
After Louise's death he too had withdrawn, becoming moody and gloomy, but ambitious. Yet there is clear mutual concern and sympathy. She gets on more easily with her younger brother Philippe. He is calm and gentle.

In 1853 Leopold travels to Vienna with his eldest son and introduces him to his future wife: Archduchess Marie-Henriette of Austria, daughter of Joseph, Palatine of Hungary, and great-granddaughter of the great Maria Theresa. Before the marriage she must renounce her rights to the Austrian throne.
Henriette is Leo's opposite. She is lively, sporty and an excellent horsewoman. She paints and plays the piano and harp. Henriette and Leo feel no attraction or interest in each other at all. Father Leopold will not be moved. The wedding takes place on 22 August 1853 in Brussels City Hall and St Gudula's Cathedral.
Henriette feels drawn to Charlotte, who is only four years younger than she is. At first Charlotte is delighted by Henriette's female presence in the palace. Later she will complain about some of her habits and her 'less than elevated' manners.

The honeymoon of Leo and Henriette lasts nine months and takes them through Germany, Austria, Greece, Italy and the Middle East.
Leo carefully prepares for his kingship. He looks for trade contacts and opportunities to colonise a territory. Naturally his father Leopold supports him fully in this. Under the reign of Leopold I at least fifty attempts are made to acquire a colony.
Even after his honeymoon Leo keeps travelling. In 1860 he brings back from Athens a piece of marble on which he has the words '*Il faut une colonie à la* Belgique' (Belgium needs a colony) engraved, and

[4] Letter from Charlotte to Mme d'Hulst, Laeken, 29 December 1855, RPA, Leopold I Collection, 660.

in his speeches in the Senate he stresses the need to conquer a colony.

Charlotte is by now almost 16, and probably one of the most attractive princesses of her time. Dark brown eyes with long lashes, raven-black hair on alabaster skin, a small mouth and a beautiful figure that she holds very upright. She is keenly aware of her dignity and faces the world with defiance. Leopold seeks a royal match for her too. At the end of May 1856 Ferdinand Maximilian (*Max*), brother of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph and admiral of the imperial fleet, passes through Brussels after a visit to the French Emperor Napoleon III.

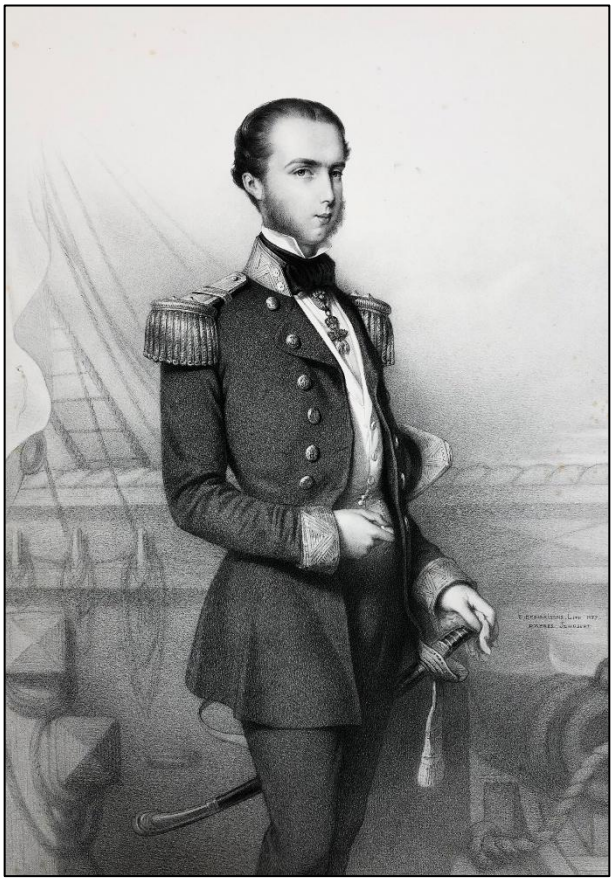
Napoleon III, or Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, is the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte. In December 1848, after the turbulent June Days uprising in which the workers were defeated by the army and all socialist clubs and papers were banned, he is elected by a large majority as the first French president. In 1851 he suspends the constitution and proclaims himself emperor.
In 1856 he wins the Crimean War against Russia. In the Crimean War, Turkey resisted Russia's territorial claims. Because of the support France, Great Britain, Austria and Sardinia gave to Turkey, the war took on the character of a European conflict. Florence Nightingale became world-famous for her role in nursing the wounded. After the fall of Sevastopol in 1855, peace negotiations begin. Russia must recognise Turkey's sovereignty. In Paris there is money and pleasure, Offenbach and the *French cancan*. Max goes to Paris to meet the French victor and congratulate him on his newborn son.
During his 12-day stay a friendship with Napoleon develops. Leopold watches the rapprochement between Austria and France with dismay.
What Max comes to do in Belgium is less clear. Most probably he is sent to meet Charlotte.



Princess Charlotte
– engraving by Émile Desmaisons, 1857.

A prince charming

As a Catholic princess and daughter of Leopold, Charlotte is an excellent marriage candidate. Thanks to his family ties with the English royal house and his distrust of France, Leopold I fits perfectly into Austrian policy.



Archduke Maximilian
– coll. Royal Palace archives.

Max is eight years older than Charlotte and popular in progressive Viennese circles for his flirtation with liberal ideas. Despite his preference for King Pedro of Portugal, Leopold gives Charlotte, by letter, the choice between Max and Pedro. George of Saxony also shows interest in marrying Charlotte.
Charlotte hesitates for a moment, but under the influence of Countess d'Hulst she finally chooses Max. Max is older and more mature than Pedro. He has travelled to Trieste, Egypt and the Middle East. The Catholic faith, the relationship with the Vatican, lobbying by a number of 'secret' orders and the role of the Viennese court as a cultural trendsetter probably play an important part in her choice.
George and Pedro make their disappointment clear, but Charlotte's decision is final. She creates a prince charming around the figure of Max and attributes every possible quality to him. Max and Charlotte share a common ancestry: Maria Carolina, mother of Marie-Amélie and great-grandmother of Charlotte, was an archduchess of Austria-Lorraine. The pope grants the necessary dispensation.

In December 1856 Max comes to Brussels to discuss the dowry. The negotiations are difficult. Leopold is cautious; he wants to protect his property and that of his children. Max and the Habsburgs accuse him of stinginess; they want to get as much as possible out of the agreement. Max is poor and has started major building works. He talks constantly about women, money and fortune. Leo accuses Max of disgusting greed and notes in his diary [5] about the negotiations: *'They thought they had discovered a diamond mine, it is only a gold mine*.'
Max gets the annual allowance he asked for, but Leopold makes sure that a separation of property is drawn up. All of Charlotte's possessions remain her personal property and she can decide herself on their management and income. Charlotte's trousseau and wedding dress are ordered 'to grow into', as Charlotte is only 16.

The dresses are made mainly with lace. The court provides work for 13,000 of the 130,000 women and girls who work as lacemakers at that time.
In the lace schools unimaginable social abuses prevail. Children aged five to twelve sit bent over their bobbins for up to fourteen hours. They become systematically weaker because of the poor lighting and their working posture. During their 'apprenticeship' they earn nothing. They are given no education of any kind. In 1860, 50% of men and 56% of women cannot read or write. After their apprenticeship they earn 20 centimes a day, just enough for one loaf of rye bread. Charlotte's wedding dress costs 12,000 francs. [6]

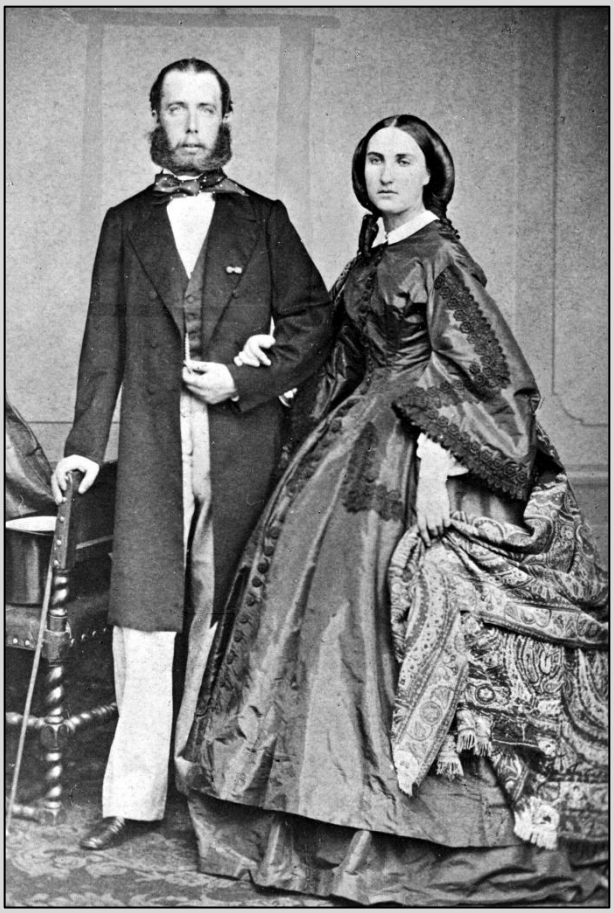
At Leopold's insistence and on the occasion of the engagement, Franz Joseph appoints Max governor-general of Lombardy-Venetia.
In the Austrian-ruled territories of Italy there is unrest and discontent at that moment. The duchies of Parma, Modena and Tuscany too are kept in check by Austrian garrisons.
England and Prussia propose carrying out liberal reforms in these territories. But the regions do not want reforms; they want to break away from Austria.
Max is therefore given a particularly delicate task. He is fully aware of this.
While Leopold and Leo find Max's character increasingly hard to deal with, Charlotte thinks above all of her mother in the days before the wedding.

[5] Journal du duc de Brabant, 3 January 1857, V. Capron.

[6] Kerckvoorde, in Charlotte, pp. 48-49.

She needs support. In the letters of Madame d'Hulst and Father Dechamps she is reminded of her duty and responsibility, and of the account she, as a crowned head, will have to render to God.
Her grandmother Marie-Amélie comes to Brussels a few days early and prepares Charlotte for the wedding night. On the eve of the wedding the royal family prays at Louise's grave.

The wedding takes place in Brussels on 27 July 1857. The burgomaster hurries through the civil ceremony. There is no music during the nuptial mass. On the Grand-Place there is a great popular festival. After the wedding night Leo asks Charlotte about her experiences. 'Max *was very reasonable, it went well, but I was surprised all the same, I was astonished that it went like that (...), I accept it.*'
Three days after the wedding the new couple leave for Italy via Germany.



Maximilian and Charlotte shortly after their wedding
– coll. Royal Palace archives.

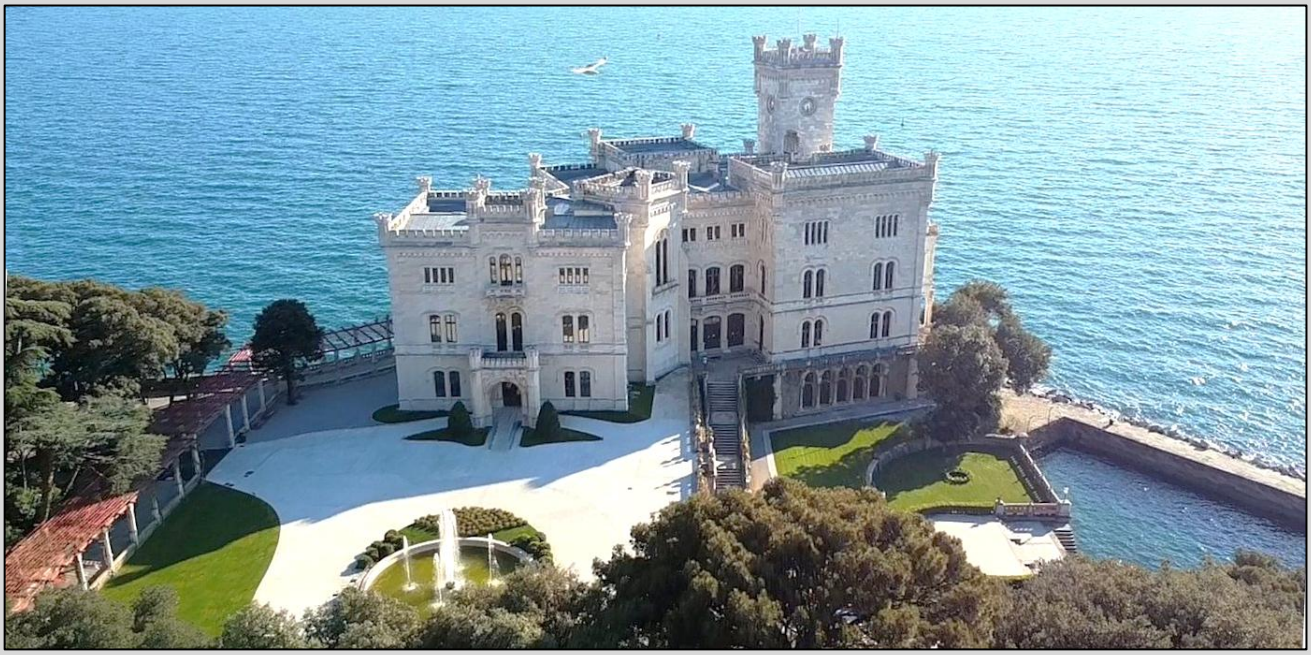
Charlotte finds it very hard to say goodbye to her family. In Vienna they are welcomed by Archduchess Sophie, her mother-in-law.
At the summer residence of the Austrian monarchs, *Schönbrunn Palace*, she meets her in-laws. Next to Franz Joseph, her brother-in-law, sits Empress Elisabeth, known as *Sisi*. She is regarded as the most beautiful woman of her time. She is still mourning her first child, whom she has just lost.

Trieste and Milan

The next day they reach Trieste. Miramare Castle is not yet finished; they sleep in the Moorish villa in the park. Charlotte is delighted; in her letters she speaks of the sunny weather and the azure sea. On 6 September they travel to Milan. Their official residence is the ducal palace behind the Duomo, but they prefer to settle 15 km away in the palace of Monza.

Charlotte speaks Italian to win over her subjects. From now on she wants to be called *Carlotta*. Max lives in grand style and organises luxurious dinners and parties.
The Italian nobility continues to resist the Austrians, but the citizens seem to appreciate Max's liberal measures *(reform of the land register, redistribution of the tax burden, waterworks in Milan and Venice)*. Carlotta enjoys her new life to the full. Soon Max is away for long periods. In Carlotta's letters the word '*solitude*' (loneliness) appears more and more often. Max stays in Vienna from April to September 1858; she stays alone in Monza.

When Max returns, the Italian struggle for freedom has broken out. Max and Carlotta can no longer appear in public without being booed. In January Carlotta leaves for Miramare for safety reasons. In Vienna Max is criticised for his liberalism, his lax attitude and his extravagance. On 21 April 1859 Franz Joseph relieves him of his post.
Franz Joseph sends an ultimatum to the King of Piedmont, Victor Emmanuel. Cavour, Prime Minister of Sardinia and architect of Italian unity, had meanwhile secured French support.
War breaks out; Napoleon III sends his troops into battle alongside Sardinia.



Miramare Castle.

The Austrian defeats of 1859 near the Italian towns of Magenta and Solferino cost the lives of 61,000 French and 32,000 Austrians. It is partly because of his confrontation with the violence at Solferino that the Swiss ambulance worker Henri Dunant later founds the International Red Cross. Austria loses Lombardy and later Venetia.
Giuseppe Garibaldi, the radical republican-nationalist folk hero, launches his Expedition of the Thousand redshirts to the South (Naples and Sicily). Besides the unity of Italy, Garibaldi also fights for social reforms and an international religious brotherhood. Only for the sake of Italian unity did he pledge loyalty to King Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia. Gradually Italy becomes one. Rome follows in 1870.

Max feels his dismissal in 1859 keenly. It looks as if he has fallen into imperial disgrace. Franz Joseph has difficulty with Max's popularity, which rests on a lavish lifestyle, free spending and his criticism of Vienna's authority. Max is in the way. So close at hand he seems a danger to imperial authority. Internationally Max is mainly praised for his liberal reform policy.

Infidelity and loneliness

Carlotta leads a lonely and secluded life in the villa at Miramare; Max travels. He sails with Carlotta to Madeira, leaves her there, supposedly because she is seasick, and goes on to Brazil. There he wants to ask for the hand of one of the daughters of the Brazilian Emperor Pedro II for his brother Ludwig Viktor. Meanwhile he has several affairs. In his travel books he writes that there is no longer room in Europe for a free and independent heart such as his. It becomes increasingly clear that he is avoiding his wife. Carlotta tries hard to have her brother Philippe marry a Brazilian princess. It would bring Belgium fine colonial territories. But Philippe takes no initiative. Carlotta tries to break her loneliness with countless letters.

Visiting in 1860, Leo notices that the reality of Charlotte's life contrasts sharply with the loving and optimistic stories in her letters.
Max goes to Vienna more and more often. He spends New Year's Eve 1860 in the company of his old friends. Carlotta sits alone at Miramare. In 1861 enough is enough. Max infects her with a venereal disease [7] that he caught in Brazil or from a Viennese prostitute. From then on they no longer sleep together.
The intimate relationship between Max and Charlotte was never good. Charlotte kept to the words *'I was astonished that it went like that and I accept it!'* Her mother Louise described it more clearly in a letter to her own mother: *'I put up with him, I let him have his way, but I feel more repugnance than pleasure.*
If he would love me as my brothers do, I would be perfectly content. There are things that chill and irritate, as on the first day: I simply cannot get used

[7] Idem, pp. 83-84.

to what one would call, what I would call, the animal aspect of my new position. It distances me, it disgusts me, it arouses my repugnance.' [8]
Because of Max's impatience, the act itself never becomes an act of love. His infidelity reminds her of her father's infidelity towards her mother and her mother's suffering. Charlotte has had a strictly religious upbringing and is above all proud. She has too much self-respect to accept the humiliations. From now on Max can count on her only for affairs of state.

In France Empress Eugénie is also confronted with the humiliating infidelity of her husband Napoleon III. In a 'diplomatic move', the Prime Minister of Sardinia, Cavour, sent his cousin Nini de Castiglione to France to seduce Napoleon. Nini becomes Napoleon's mistress and successfully pleads for Italian unification. Napoleon does not stop at one mistress. [9]
Aggrieved, Eugénie seeks distraction in politics. When she meets her old childhood friend Hidalgo, the Mexican envoy of the conservative party, in Paris, she is enthusiastic about his plans. Invited by Eugénie to Saint-Cloud, the imperial family's spring residence, Hidalgo is also able to discuss his view of the Mexican question with Napoleon. As a convinced conservative, Hidalgo campaigns for the restoration of the monarchy in Mexico. French support is indispensable for this.

The situation in Mexico

In 1519 the Spaniard Cortés sails from Cuba, discovered by Columbus, to a sandy coast. He calls the place *'Villa Rica de Vera Cruz'*. In Tenochtitlan, later Mexico City, Montezuma, an Aztec prince, reigns. The Mexican deity Quetzalcoatl is white, tall and bearded. Because of his appearance the indigenous population regards Cortés as divine. Thanks to this confusion and a good many cunning tricks, Cortés manages to conquer Mexico with a handful of men. Three centuries of cruel and bloody Spanish oppression, exploitation and Inquisition follow.
After Napoleon deposed the Bourbons in 1808 and put his brother at the head of Spain, the Spanish colonies too became very restless. Agustín de Iturbide proclaimed Mexican independence on 12 February 1812. In Mexico, after 300 years of colonial rule, uprising followed uprising and coup followed coup. Between 1821 and 1861 Mexico saw 60 uprisings.

Conservative, monarchist and clerical movements stand opposed to a liberal, anticlerical group. At that time the Church is a power that cannot be ignored. In colonial times it acquired, like the army and the aristocracy, important privileges. For instance, there is a compulsory church tax of 10% and burying the dead without the Church's permission is illegal. Only the clergy can join couples in marriage. For these acts they often charge exorbitant fees that weigh heavily on the population.
Moreover, a system of debt bondage still exists. Plantation owners pay their farm labourers (mostly Indians) a wage that is not enough to feed and clothe themselves and their families. To survive, the worker is forced to borrow from his boss. At first the boss lends the necessary money. As soon as the labourer is in debt, he can no longer leave his work. Indians who run away are caught and sent back to their creditor.

In 1845 the northern part of Mexico (Texas) declares itself independent. The United States annexes the territory. The war that follows ends with the loss of about half of the original Mexican territory. Texas, New Mexico, California, Arizona, Nevada and Utah become American. America pays a paltry 15 million dollars to the Mexican government as 'compensation'. The saying 'Poor *Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States'* is born.
This military defeat leads to chaos in the countryside. The peasants rise up against the clergy and the landowners and refuse to accept the authority of the conservatives any longer. In 1854 General Juan Álvarez leads a revolt against Santa Anna, the conservative dictator. A new liberal regime takes over.
Benito Juárez becomes the new Minister of Justice. Juárez is a Zapotec Indian who grew up in the deepest poverty but, thanks to a wealthy merchant, was able to study law.

In 1859 Mexico has two governments. Juárez governs from Vera Cruz and in the south-east President Miramón rules. Miramón is chronically short of money. He takes out a loan of 15 million pesos at usurious interest from the Swiss bank

[8] Kerckvoorde, in Louise van Orléans, p. 7; Louise to Marie-Amélie, 25 August 1832, RPA, FL1642.

[9] Count Horace de Viel-Castel reports on this in his Mémoires sur le règne de Napoléon III. 1851-'64.

Jecker. The bank sells these bonds, which can yield fifteen times their stake, mainly in France.
In 1860 Juárez manages to drive out Miramón and rule alone. He abolishes the ecclesiastical and military *fueros* (privileges). Church and army resist. But Juárez wins the day in 1861, settles in the capital Mexico City and plans a further limitation of the Church's power and a reorganisation of the state apparatus. All monasteries and church property, with a total value of 80 million piastres, are confiscated. Juárez also refuses to recognise the Jecker loan.

At the urging of the Archbishop of Mexico City and of Morny, Napoleon's half-brother, to whom Jecker promises 30% profit on the bonds, France decides to intervene. In 1863 the French expeditionary army enters the capital. By 1864 the French occupy almost the entire country. Juárez continues the fight from a few towns in the north of Mexico.
The Mexican conservatives want a monarch to rule the country.

An emperor for Mexico?

Eugénie is extremely enthusiastic about the idea of a Mexican empire. At first Napoleon listens to Hidalgo only to please Eugénie. Later he sees the Mexican question as an opportunity to put a number of things right. Because of his role in Italian unification he still has much to make up for with the pope and the Austrian emperor.
By proposing a Catholic prince as emperor of Mexico, he raises a dam against the influence of the United States and of Protestantism in Latin America, which the pope will certainly applaud. By proposing Maximilian, he pays tribute to the Austrian emperor, who has just lost two Italian provinces because of him. The choice of Max may also have had family reasons. Among the notes left by Metternich at his death in 1859 there was said to be a secret letter from Emperor Francis II stating that Maximilian had Napoleon's blood in his veins. Archduchess Sophie is said to have admitted this in confession too. Sophie had a very affectionate relationship with the Duke of Reichstadt, also called Napoleon Francis or Napoleon II, son of Napoleon and Marie-Louise of Austria. This Duke of Reichstadt may have been Max's real father.
On Napoleon's advice, a junta of (conservative) notables offers the imperial crown to Archduke Maximilian of Austria.
Charlotte and Max are enthusiastic when their names are mentioned.
Franz Joseph reacts coolly. It would suit him well if Max disappeared from Europe, but the honour of the empire is also at stake, and he believes neither in the Mexican cause nor in his brother's abilities.

Charlotte discusses the offer with her father. In 1821 the Mexican crown had been offered to Leopold. The political circumstances and relations between England and the United States were unfavourable at the time. Despite the risks, Leopold also sees the opportunities: Belgium would have its colony. Leo is immediately enthusiastic and Charlotte sees the chance to take up her divine duty. England is reluctant. London dangles the Greek throne before Max, but he has set his heart on Mexico. It becomes ever clearer how risky the whole plan is: there is no liberalism in Mexico, no monarchist movement, and the monarchs will remain entirely dependent on a foreign (French) army. Anarchy reigns in the country and corruption is rife.
According to the Belgian chargé d'affaires t'Kint de Roodenbeke, the Mexican government of Juárez is extorting money from the propertied class. He recommends armed intervention and stresses the country's riches to lend weight to his request.
Max made his decision long ago and is only waiting for the negotiations. He, the eternal second, finally sees the chance to stand alongside his brother in a country with an exotic character. Yet he keeps postponing the final decision.
In France opposition to and distrust of the Mexican adventure grow. In the corridors the archduke is called '*l'archidupe*' (the arch-dupe).
Napoleon wants to speed up the decision and invites Max and Charlotte.
They are received with great honours. Eugénie believes firmly in the Mexican cause. Napoleon knows he is pulling the wool over Max's eyes when he shows him reports from the French general Bazaine declaring the whole territory pacified. From Mexico the conservative party sends the results of a so-called plebiscite. In the rigged figures 75% of the inhabitants vote for the monarchy.

The military and financial negotiations are very tough [10]. 20,000 French soldiers and 8,000 soldiers of the Foreign Legion remain in Mexico until they can be replaced. The Mexican state pays 1,000 francs [11] a year for each of Napoleon's soldiers. In addition the new empire pays 270 million French francs (about 1 billion euros in today's value) for the French expedition and occupation, and takes over the 60 million francs (225 million euros in today's value) of the Jecker loan. The Mexican state will borrow more than 200 million francs (750 million euros in today's value) to meet its obligations.

Did Max not take the decision too lightly? He is evidently not very worried, has hardly looked into the real situation in Mexico, and places large orders to ensure his imperial splendour in Mexico.
North America will not recognise the empire. It adheres to the *Monroe Doctrine*, a position established in 1823 in which America regards any European interference in the affairs of the New World as a danger to peace in the United States. England stays aloof.

And Franz Joseph checkmates his brother with a document obliging Max to renounce all his rights to the Austrian throne and to the family patrimony before accepting the Mexican throne. Max is furious, Charlotte is beside herself. They have no way out. Max has already committed himself to the French emperor and to loans for the Mexican state. Franz Joseph has chosen his moment strategically.
Max at first refuses to sign, but in fact he can no longer go back. On 9 April 1864 Max signs the pact and submits unconditionally, very much against his will, to Vienna's conditions. On Sunday 10 April the Mexican crown is officially offered to Max at Miramare. Emotionally, Max takes the oath on the Bible; Charlotte calmly repeats her oath: *'I swear before God and on the Holy Gospel that I shall devote all my strength to ensuring the welfare and prosperity of the country, defending its independence and preserving the integrity of its territory.'*
Max withdraws, ill. Charlotte presides over the festivities and takes on all the tasks. She hispanicises her name Charlotte to *Carlota*.

On 14 April Max and Carlota leave for their new homeland on the Austrian flagship the *Novara*.
On 18 April they reach Rome. The French expeditionary army still stationed in the city gives them a warm welcome. On 19 April they attend mass and receive communion from the hands of Pope Pius IX. The talks with the pope are cordial, but the thorny situation of the Church in Mexico is not discussed. Carlota visits the Vatican, the Trevi Fountain, the Villa Borghese and the Colosseum.

Neither Max nor Carlota seems to grasp the scope of their Mexican task. On the long voyage Max works on a memorandum on etiquette and protocol in his new empire. The social, economic and financial problems remain undiscussed and unconsidered. Carlota practises her Spanish and organises her household.
The Mexican regency council prepares a manifesto describing the situation of the country and setting out the council's main objectives. Max barely studies the document and seems more interested in the very generous allowance the council grants them. Against the advice of Leopold, who preached sobriety and himself brought only three people from England when he took the throne, a household of 85 people travels with them.

On 29 May 1864 Max and Carlota disembark at Vera Cruz.

[10] Castelot, in Maximilien et Charlotte, la tragédie de l'ambition, pp. 212-213.
[11] Around the turn of the century the French and Belgian francs had about the same value. The Mexican peso was worth about 5.5 francs, the Austrian guilder about 2.5 francs.



The arrival at Vera Cruz – after the painting by Cesare Dell'Acqua, 1864.

Governing the impossible

On arrival, reality shatters the sweet dreams. Max and Carlota ride through deserted streets, the population is anything but enthusiastic and an epidemic of yellow fever is raging. The road to the palace is long and difficult. There are hardly any roads; they sleep in derelict buildings or in the carriages. After fourteen days of travel they arrive in Mexico City on 12 June. The French organise a festive entry. The imperial palace is grand but neglected. It is full of vermin. The first night they do not sleep a wink; Max sleeps on the billiard table.

They move as soon as possible to Chapultepec [12] on the high plateau, where the Aztec kings resided for four centuries. The two buildings are immediately thoroughly renovated and furnished. Max hands out appointments and money freely. The empire cultivates its splendour with exquisite dinners with excellent French and German wines. Like her great example Eugénie, Carlota organises the *'Empress's Mondays'*, weekly evenings of music and dancing. The letters to Europe mainly highlight these regal aspects. There is also the constant fear of armed gangs that regularly venture very close to the imperial palaces.
In a letter to Eugénie, Carlota lets her guard down a little more. *'We are fighting against the desert, against the distances, the roads, the chaos. (...) the Mexicans cannot govern, they think things happen by themselves.'* [13]

In an attempt to put his liberal ideas into practice, Max wants to involve as many Mexicans as possible in the government. Although he is the emperor of the conservatives, Max tries to include liberals in the government alongside the conservatives. This arouses distrust in all parties.
Max tries to look as Mexican as possible. He wears a sombrero, speaks Spanish and proclaims that *'every drop of his blood is Mexican'*. Most of the country, however, remains opposed to the intruder. Meanwhile the Church demands the return of its property nationalised by Juárez. Max does not want to agree [14]. He looks for a solution that will satisfy both clericals and liberals. He proposes introducing religious freedom and recognising Catholicism as the state religion.
The clergy refuse. Their complaints reach Rome and the pope sends a nuncio to convey his demands. Mgr Meglia demands the revision of all reforms, the Catholic religion as the foundation of the country, a ban on all other religions and all education under the strict control of the Church.

[12] Chapultepec is now the Museo Nacional de Historia. The museum still holds many souvenirs from Carlota's time. The castle stands in a large park in Mexico City.
[13] Charlotte to Eugénie, Mexico, 4 June 1864, in Reinach Foussemagne, quoted on p. 184.
[14] His advisers, the Belgian chargé d'affaires Eloin and his private secretary Scherzenlechner, are both anticlerical and anti-French. Eloin is a Freemason.



Emperador Maximiliano I
– painting by Albert Gräfle, 1865.



Carlota Amalia de Bélgica
– painting by Albert Gräfle, 1865.

Carlota too is unable to change the nuncio's mind. Max refuses; he confirms the nationalisations and only has those sales reviewed where obvious fraud was committed.
Max is accused of being a freethinker. The clergy and the Church turn away from him.

In Belgium too the conflict is followed with eagle eyes.
Carlota receives numerous letters from her former governess and ladies-in-waiting reminding her of her religious obligations.
Carlota stands fully behind Max.
To her grandmother she writes: *'This is not about the property of the Church, but about the possessions of the bishops. They were rolling in luxury while humble priests were dying of hunger'* [15]

'The statesman was Charlotte'
(Fernando del Paso)

Max knows the weak points of his empire: an empty treasury, no army of his own, disorder and chaos, '*bandidos*' making the country unsafe, the impossibility of reconciling conservatives and liberals, the unreasonable demands of the clergy, the power of the big landowners who exploit the Indians, the lack of a good road network,... He is willing to tackle them, but how? He is no diplomat, no organiser, not very flexible, very conscious of his honour but not very decisive. Just as in Italy, he drops out; he flees from responsibility. After barely two months of rule he goes travelling. From 10 August to 25 October 1864 Max tours the interior with a large retinue. He devotes himself mainly to his great passion, collecting insects. Carlota acts as regent.

[15] Charlotte to Marie-Amélie, Mexico, 29 March 1865, and quotation Kerckvoorde, op. cit., p. 142; letter in the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels.

Everyone is full of praise for her style of government. She governs more decisively, more diplomatically and much more efficiently than Max, and she enjoys the responsibility. She notices that the path between decision and implementation is difficult. To govern more efficiently, she drafts a constitution on the Belgian model. Max will never do anything with it.
Carlota studies. She has officers teach her military science and inspects the fortifications with the French commander-in-chief Bazaine. At one point she rightly says: *'I could even lead an army'*.
Carlota also has a social conscience. Two million whites oppress seven million Indians. The Indians live like slaves; they work fourteen hours a day in a system of debt bondage. Sons remain responsible for their father's debts. She works on a number of social measures: she limits working hours, abolishes corporal punishment, caps loans and frees sons from their parents' debts. But the landowners ignore the new provisions.

In stark contrast to her social commitment as regent stand Carlota's haughty attitude, her attachment to etiquette and her coldness in human relations. She is also heavily criticised because, as a woman, she resolutely takes the reins. Only on 15 November 1864 does Max take back the government.

The volunteer army at war

In Belgium Leopold recruits a volunteer army for his daughter. On 24 March 1864 an appeal appears in *l'Étoile Belge*. The volunteer army will consist of 2,000 men. The term of service is six years. Those who want to return afterwards receive a bonus; those who stay receive a plot of eight hectares, for Mexico is to be colonised. The troops are assembled in the *Maagdedale* barracks in Oudenaarde. Recruitment and organisation are very sloppy. The information given to the volunteers is limited to a tourist brochure extolling the beauty of the country.
In Oudenaarde there are regular fights between townspeople and the *'Mexicans'*, as the volunteers are called. The liberals oppose the Mexican adventure. The Catholics, at first in favour, turn against the adventure after the conflict with Rome.

Recruitment is difficult. On 14 October 1864 only 600 volunteers board the train in Oudenaarde. Lieutenant-Colonel Van der Smissen becomes their commander. They leave Saint-Nazaire on the steamship Louisiana. 950 men are crammed together on the ship. The voyage takes twenty-nine days, the food is dreadful and there are only two toilets on board. A five-day storm, the tensions and the lack of space make the men ill.

At Vera Cruz they are well received, but then a new journey full of misery begins. Largely on foot and along impossible roads they march to the capital. They arrive on 11 December and, with their last strength, parade before the imperial couple and the general staff.
Militarily little happens. The French commander-in-chief, General Bazaine, sends success stories home but in reality avoids battle. Despite earlier reports, at most a tenth of the territory turns out to be pacified.

The United States does not get openly involved as long as it has its hands full with its own civil war. The American Civil War broke out when Lincoln, after his election in 1860, abolished slavery. The Southern states broke away from the North and united in a confederacy. The Northern states win the war of secession on 9 April 1865. On 14 April Lincoln is assassinated by the actor John Wilkes Booth. The new president, Johnson, rejects every attempt at rapprochement by Max and increases pressure on the French emperor. With the support of the United States, Juárez takes up the fight against the Mexican emperor and empress.

At Baron Van der Smissen's insistence, the Belgian volunteers are allowed to carry out a first mission. General Bazaine sends the Belgians to Zitácuaro [16] to punish the local population for collaborating with the '*bandidos*'.
The Belgians carry out their task with particular 'conscientiousness'. Zitácuaro is deserted, so under Van der Smissen's command they mercilessly raze several villages in the area to the ground.

Women and wine, but no heir to the throne

In the spring of 1865 Max leaves again for two months. Mexican finances are in a disastrous state.

[16] A town in the state of Michoacán (west of Mexico City).

With Loysel and Bonnefond, Carlota studies the situation and the options. François Loysel knows how to get himself noticed. The empress, deprived of all affection, admires the cool Breton.

Two months later, on his return, Carlota travels to meet her husband as far as Puebla. On 7 June 1865 the city has organised festivities for the empress's birthday. When they are shown to a bedroom with a large double bed, Max has a camp bed set up for himself in another room. Max and Carlota no longer sleep together. On the way back to Mexico City they travel in separate carriages.

The emperor does not lack love. His valet [17] later testifies that many elegant women of the court were led through a secret little gate to the emperor's bedroom. Near Cuernavaca [18] he has a country house built as a love nest. Carlota is not allowed to enter *'El Olvido'* or *'Oblivion'*. The house is reserved for his Indian mistresses: Guadalupe Martínez, Concepción, Lola Hermosillo and Emilia Blanco.
Max drinks. When he receives guests he drinks wine, at least twenty glasses (three bottles) a day. Carlota sees her husband only at meals. The rest of the time he shuts himself up in his study.

While Loysel succeeds in winning Max's trust and removing other advisers, such as the Belgian chargé d'affaires Eloin, Carlota too is relieved of all her governing functions.
She may attend the council of ministers only at Max's express invitation, and even then she must leave the council immediately at a sign from him.

Max stays away from every official reception; she alone does the honours. In her letters home she continues to cover up reality and pretends to be perfectly happy. Still, reactions and questions come from her grandmother and brother. They notice in the reports that Max is missing from official events and reproach Carlota for appearing alone. Carlota defends herself, writing that she is only helping the emperor and that everything is going well.

In private too they keep avoiding each other. When Max resides at Chapultepec, she goes to the palace in Mexico City, and vice versa.

The reasons for the estrangement are twofold. The vision from which Carlota governs reflects the aspiration to create a harmonious society, albeit with the monarchs as central figures with a royal task imposed on them by God. Despite his liberal views, Max certainly does not want to go that far.

Then there is the ongoing sexual problem. Her upbringing had already given Carlota an aversion to sexual practice. On top of that there is Max's humiliating infidelity, which revives Carlota's painful feelings about her father's debauched behaviour and the effect it had on her mother's zest for life.
The more resistance his wife shows, the more impatient Max becomes. He is used to being waited on hand and foot. His brusque attitude causes her to react with even more revulsion to the sexual act.
Emperors and kings must produce heirs. The most important role of a female monarch is to secure the succession, Max thinks.
Carlota goes on pilgrimage to the Virgin of Guadalupe and begs for a successor. In vain. To bear a child, there must be relations.

Carlota isolates herself more and more. She knows of her husband's infidelity. She feels humiliated, both by his infidelity and by the way she has to submit to the sexual act.
That humiliation becomes even greater when Max makes plans to adopt Agustín, the two-year-old grandson of the last Mexican emperor, Iturbide.
In those days childlessness was always the woman's problem. Starting an adoption is tantamount to sending a message to the world: my wife is barren!
In later discussions a nephew of Max will claim that Charlotte was too narrow for intercourse and that relations never took place. [19]

A 'spiritual' quest

On 16 July 1865 the Belgian volunteers suffer a first defeat at Tacámbaro [20]. Several officers are killed. Minister Chazal, a great promoter of the Mexican cause in Belgium, also loses his son.
It takes almost a month for the mail from Mexico to reach the home country. Until then families remain in uncertainty about the fate of their soldiers.

[17] Blasio publishes his private diary in 1905: José Luis Blasio, *Maximiliano íntimo*.
[18] A town in the state of Morelos (south of Mexico City).
[19] In his Journal privé, Baron Goffinet puts this statement about Charlotte into the mouth of Karl Ludwig, appointed by the Austrian imperial family as 'guardian' when Charlotte left Miramare.
[20] A town in the state of Michoacán (west of Mexico City). In Oudenaarde and in Beverlo a Tacámbaro monument was erected in memory of the battle.

In Belgium unease grows. Van der Smissen takes revenge with a resounding victory at La Loma. This draws Carlota's attention to him.

The 25-year-old empress suffers from the same melancholy and gloomy moods as her late mother, her father and later her brother.
Her ladies-in-waiting often see her walking through the corridors, biting the initials on her embroidered handkerchiefs to shreds.

At that time opium and morphine are easily obtainable and widely used in aristocratic circles. In medicine these substances are prescribed as painkillers.
Some aristocrats therefore quickly develop a persistent 'headache'. The need for the 'pleasantness' these substances bring is great. Officers too make use of the 'relaxing' effect of opium and morphine.
Most probably Carlota already 'used' regularly at Laeken to force that pleasant feeling and to counter the pressure and the depressing emotions of which she feels the victim.
The accompanying spiritual 'visionary' possibilities fascinate her too.

Through the Indians the *'new Mexicans'* become acquainted with new mind-expanding substances. The step towards these new experiences is a small one.
The use of the old herbs is natural and widespread in Mexico. Almost everyone indulges in them. Several substances are used not only for their relaxing properties but are at the same time strong aphrodisiacs. Even today the sap of the *'red gumbo-limbo tree'* or '*chacah*' is used by the Maya Indians as an ingredient of the local Viagra.

Max certainly came to know these substances as aphrodisiacs in his sexual adventures with local Indian beauties. And we dare to claim, with Michel de Grèce [21], that he even 'used' a few times together with Carlota, in the hope of lifting the sexual blockage between them and still being able to father a crown prince.

Carlota experiments out of her urge to relieve the pressure and because of the spiritual possibilities.

In the books of the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda [22] we read the account of his apprenticeship with *Don Juan*, a Mexican Yaqui Indian. He describes his initiation into methods of mastering 'non-ordinary' reality by means of a number of 'sacred' plants such as *peyote* (lophophora williamsii), *jimsonweed* (datura inoxia) and the mushroom *humito* (psilocybe mexicana). They are used to fathom the mysteries of fear, insight and power.
Carlota is fascinated by spiritual knowledge. Her hunger for knowledge has already been described. In her youth and at Miramare she devoured books on mysticism, theology and theosophy. Soon she seeks out mind-expanding states to satisfy her hunger for knowledge and insight.

In Mexico the *Day of the Dead* (All Saints) lasts a whole week. Death is depicted in all its aspects: coffins, skeletons,...
On this occasion the Indians use *'toloache'*, a hallucinogenic drink they made from datura. Toloache stimulates visions and dreams of the supernatural. Carlota joins in the celebrations.
In his lessons Don Juan makes clear to Castaneda that mind-expanding substances must be used very carefully, at the right moment and in the right dose. In her hunger for more intense experiences Carlota goes further and further. She goes too far.

Journey to Yucatán

While the revolutionaries advance ever further, the United States increases its pressure on France. Before the Civil War Mexico had good relations with the Southern states. After the victory of the Northern states and Lincoln's death, his successor President Johnson refuses to open the letters of the Mexican monarchs.

Driven into a corner by the course of the war, Max issues '*the black decree*'. Every armed man is regarded as a bandit and prosecuted as such. Anyone who resists with arms is put to death within 24 hours.

Meanwhile Max is again thinking of a tourist trip to the Yucatán peninsula. In November 1865 he wants to cross the Gulf of Mexico from Vera Cruz to Mérida, this time in Carlota's company.

[21] Michel de Grèce, p. 343.

[22] Castaneda wrote a number of cult books on this in the 1970s.

In Europe the newspapers report that the emperor and empress intend to embark secretly for Europe at Vera Cruz. His honour wounded, Max withdraws and lets Carlota leave alone.

Yucatán is barely developed. Most of the peninsula is jungle; the population is Indian. The war does not rage there as in the rest of Mexico. The empress receives a heart-warming welcome. Wherever she goes she undergoes exhausting festivities.

Carlota, who has read everything about the Mexican empire, knows that traces of the ancient Maya civilisation are to be found there. She is probably the first European woman to visit, at Uxmal, the city of the demigod Quetzalcoatl.
She visits every pyramid and takes careful notes. She has herself informed about the customs, the rituals, the blood sacrifices,... She carries a decree from Max banning all export of antiquities. With this ban they were by far the first monarchs to show respect for the natural and historical riches of a region.
The journey is very tiring for Carlota. She complains of inexplicable mood swings and on her return is on the verge of a nervous breakdown.
At the beginning of January 1866 she sees Max again. Together they spend a few quiet days in an old palace of Cortés in Cuernavaca. Carlota feels ill, has migraines, fainting spells,... *'I have been poisoned'*, she says. Max is surprised.

The final blow

Max fails to bring order to the precarious financial situation. He cannot repay his loans. The Frenchman Langlais is sent to Mexico by Napoleon to oversee the finances. Langlais collapses under the strain and dies on 23 February 1866. Napoleon too is at his wits' end. The Americans increase the pressure, there is a growing threat of war from Prussia, and at home he has to deal with growing opposition.
On 15 January 1866 Napoleon signs a letter announcing the withdrawal of the French soldiers, with the exception of the Foreign Legion. The letter reaches Max a month later.

Meanwhile, on 10 December 1865, the King of the Belgians, Leopold I, dies in Brussels. Only on 6 January do Max and Carlota receive the telegram announcing his death. Carlota wants to know everything about her father's death: his last words, whether he still thought of her,...
Leopold died in self-chosen solitude. He did not even want to see his children. Only in the last days before his death does Marie-Henriette force her way into his room. She manages to persuade him to receive his sons and grandchildren. He refuses to convert to the Catholic faith.
He dies a Protestant and a convinced Freemason, which is hard to swallow for a certain Catholic class.[23]



Charlotte in mourning dress – photo c. 1866.

The ecclesiastical authorities of Laeken refuse to build the Protestant chapel on the consecrated part of the cemetery. In Mexico City Carlota quarrels with Mgr Labastida, who at first refuses to hold a memorial service for Leopold in the cathedral.

[23] After the first clear condemnation of Freemasonry by Pope Clement XII in the encyclical *In Eminenti Apostolatus Specula* of 1738, the paths of the Church and the Freemasons diverged ever further. Ever sharper condemnations followed in 1751, 1821, 1865 and 1884.

A few days later Carlota's brother Leo ascends the throne. He becomes the second King of the Belgians, Leopold II.
The Belgian mission that comes to Mexico to officially announce the death of King Leopold I and the accession of Leopold II receives a chaotic welcome. Max feigns illness, but Carlota is happy to see compatriots.
On the way back to Belgium the mission is given only a very small escort. They are ambushed. Baron d'Huart, orderly officer of Leopold II, is shot in the head and dies on the spot. The incident fuels unrest in Belgium.
Leopold II writes to his brother Philippe: *'You would have to go to the black cannibals of Central Africa to find similar scenes.'* [24]

Barely a few months later, on 24 March 1866, Carlota also loses her grandmother Marie-Amélie.
Carlota collapses and suffers from severe depression. The doctors prescribe a rest cure. She leaves for Cuernavaca. When she can no longer bear it there and travels back to the palace, Max goes the other way. She longs for support and hopes her brother Philippe will visit her. In the spring of 1866 she writes to him: *'I am turning more and more in on myself. The more I think about it, the sadder I become.'* He does not come.
At nightfall, at the foot of the palace, she steps into a canoe and has herself rowed along the canals to Lake Chalco. It is whispered that the Belgian colonel Van der Smissen more than once formed her night escort and was also regularly received at Chapultepec.
The ambitious Van der Smissen is by then more than tired of the indecisive and hesitant conduct of the war and tries to become commander-in-chief of a 'Mexican' army.
While his troops march north, he tries to make his move at home.
The emperor, who has little time for the Belgian commander, can be approached by Van der Smissen only through Carlota. His visits, certainly at first, are therefore not free of a certain opportunism.

Max sends out his messengers. A mission by Loysel to Paris achieves nothing. The Belgian chargé d'affaires Eloin is received coolly both by Napoleon III and by the new monarch Leopold II. And Bombelles, Max's childhood friend and chamberlain, also returns empty-handed from Vienna. Hidalgo, the Mexican representative in Paris who talked Empress Eugénie into the Mexican cause, seems to act only out of self-interest and fails to inform the French monarchs of the true state of affairs. Max recalls him. Hidalgo comes to Mexico scared to death and flees back to France at the first opportunity.
Max has lost virtually all authority. At the end of June Napoleon announces the end of the French intervention. Max thinks of abdicating.

[24] Leopold to Philippe, Brussels, 10 April 1866, RPA Mexico 270/237-208-54.



Commemorative card of Maximilian's supporters, c. 1867-1868;
top: Emperor Maximilian *(1832-1867),*
centre: Empress Charlotte *(1840-1927),*
centre left: General Tomás Mejía *(1820-1867), former governor of Querétaro,*
centre right: General Miguel Miramón *(1832-1867), former president of Mexico,*
bottom: General Ramón Méndez *(1829-1867).*
Mejía, Miramón and Maximilian were executed together by firing squad at Querétaro on 19.06.1867 – coll. WHI ref. DB-a13688.

Carlota has followed everything from the background. She writes a long, fiery epistle: *'I know of no abdication that does not reveal a fault or a cowardice (...) Emperors do not surrender. As long as there is an emperor, there is an empire, even if it is only six feet wide. An empire is nothing without an emperor. Having no money is no excuse. (...) It is not about an unbridled lust for power, but about loyalty, attachment, love of the fatherland, honour. One does not desert one's post in the face of the enemy; how could one abandon a crown? (...) To set out as champions of civilisation, as liberators and renewers, and to withdraw on the pretext that there is nothing to civilise, nothing to liberate, nothing to renew! (...) it would be the greatest absurdity conceivable under the sun...'* [25]
She proposes to go and convince Napoleon herself. Until Max gives in and exclaims: *'I will not abdicate, I will stay, I will go on!'*

It is as if they are entering an imaginary world. While the empire collapses, they have new coins struck, found a new national theatre, bring the archaeological collections together in a museum, look for objects for Mexico's stand at the World Exhibition, think about creating a national army of their own and talk about the progress they are making.

On 6 July Max is celebrated with a Te Deum. While they are getting ready, news arrives that Prussia has invaded Austria. Max withdraws. Carlota attends the ceremony and the reception alone. At the end of the day all the ladies take an emotional farewell of her. They realise they may never see each other again.

Max and Carlota withdraw for two days to Chapultepec. On 9 July the empress leaves for Europe. In her retinue is, among others, Bombelles, Max's childhood friend, who is charged with watching over Carlota. The road to the port is dangerous. They brave the storm and the population, who know that the last days of the empire are dawning.



On 13 July they embark on the *Impératrice Eugénie*. Carlota does not go on board until the captain flies the Mexican flag next to the French one.
The crossing takes four weeks. Carlota stays mostly in her cabin, seems very nervous and suffers from nausea. She works on her plea for Napoleon and takes a few sculpture lessons from the French sculptor Garbeille, who happens to be on board.

Crusade in Europe: Paris

On 8 August 1866 Carlota and her retinue arrive at Saint-Nazaire. There is no official welcome. For lack of a Mexican flag, the mayor has the Peruvian flag hoisted.
In Paris the reception is just as chaotic. Nobody from the family has come over from Belgium. Paris is celebrating Prussia's victory over the Austrians at Sadowa. Carlota is not immediately welcome at the *Tuileries* and takes up residence at the *Grand Hôtel*. Napoleon is ill; Eugénie pays her a visit but avoids any meaningful conversation. Carlota manages to arrange an audience for the next day.

At Saint-Cloud, residence of the French monarchs, she is received with full honours. Conscientiously and passionately she pleads the Mexican cause, reminds the emperor of his promises and calls on him not to abandon the country. Napoleon cannot refuse and passes the hot potato to his ministers. The council of ministers refuses. Only four days later does Napoleon find the courage to go to the Grand Hôtel and tell Carlota that France can do nothing more for Mexico. She is disappointed, but she is enough of a stateswoman to understand the difficult position of Napoleon and Eugénie.
Strange passages creep into her letters to Max, in which she promises him mountains of money, jewels and an Order of the Golden Fleece.
Carlota does not know how to give up. She wants to take further steps as quickly

[25] The letter can be read in full in Reinach, p. 280.

as possible and leave France. After a visit to her former governess Madame de Bovée in Versailles, she bypasses Brussels and Vienna and travels to Miramare to think things over in peace. Napoleon puts a special train at her disposal. On the way she enjoys the tributes, the escort of Garibaldi's soldiers at Lake Garda, the salute of the Austrian fleet under Tegetthoff's command at Trieste and the reception in Padua by the Italian King Victor Emmanuel. At last she reaches Miramare and recognises the familiar staff: Doctor Jilek, steward Radonetz and others.

Meanwhile a direct cable connection has been established between Europe and America. The mail is much faster. Max reports that he has changed course and now works only with the French and the conservatives. Bazaine continues unabated with the withdrawal of the troops while fighting is already going on at Vera Cruz. Carlota loses heart. She sends Max a three-word cable: '*Todo es inútil*' (Everything is useless). Max asks her to travel to Rome and wring a concordat from the pope.

Sleeping in the Vatican

25 September 1866. It is already night when Carlota arrives in Rome. In the past days she has been received with honour everywhere. Trieste is in the grip of a cholera epidemic. Carlota feared the ship would be quarantined, so they travel by train.
At Bozen (Bolzano) she has a crisis. She does not want to go on to Rome: Napoleon's spies want to kill her; she fears for her life.
When a few hours later she realises she is hallucinating, they continue the journey to Rome. A guard of honour takes her to her lodgings, the *Albergo di Roma*.

In the morning she visits the city; in the afternoon she is received by the second man in the Vatican, Cardinal Secretary of State Antonelli. He sticks to the earlier guidelines: church property must be returned; Catholicism is the only permitted religion. The pope cannot intervene in her dispute with Napoleon. The Vatican is afraid of offending Napoleon. At that moment his troops provide the only protection the Papal States have against the territorial appetite of King Victor Emmanuel in the struggle for Italian unity. Carlota returns to the Albergo disappointed.
During the long private audience she has with the pope the next day, Pius IX repeats these positions. Probably it is not only about politics and Carlota also wants to make her confession. The following day the pope pays her a return visit; the conversation is very short.

On the morning of 30 September she gets up feverish and orders to be taken to the pope. At the Trevi Fountain she drinks water, then forces her way in to see the pope. The pope is at breakfast; she asks him to have her retinue arrested, as everyone wants to poison her. He tries to calm her and lets her share his breakfast. She drinks water from a fountain in the gardens. She does not want to leave, because her murderers are waiting for her outside. In the library they finally manage to distract her. But in the evening she refuses to go back to the Albergo. After long hesitation there is no choice but to set up a bed for her in the library. She thus becomes the first woman to sleep (openly) in the Vatican.
Carlota is afraid; the next day she writes her will. If she dies, she does not want to lie in state or be autopsied. A simple grave next to Saint Peter is enough. After being told that her retinue has been arrested, Carlota goes back to the Albergo. She tolerates only Mathilde Döblinger, her chambermaid, near her. Mathilde must prepare all the food before her eyes. She buys live chickens, kills, plucks and roasts them in the room. They fetch drinking water from the fountain with a carafe.

Meanwhile Cardinal Antonelli, in a coded telegram, asks the papal nuncio in Brussels to inform the Belgian king of his sister's condition and to have her taken away from Rome.
At his brother's request, Philippe leaves for Rome. He is shocked when he sees the terrible state of Charlotte's apartments. When they eat together she shows him what he may and may not eat: *'Philippe, I beg you, eat as little as possible, for I think the doses are rather strong (...) it is not only me, nobody has died a natural death: papa, mama, Lord Palmerston, Victoria's husband Prince Albert, and so many others. They have all been poisoned by the Antichrist Napoleon.'*
Philippe is alarmed by the seriousness of her condition and freezes her accounts. He manages to persuade her to return to Miramare. On the train she accuses him: '*What have I done to you that you want to poison me? If it is about my money, I will give it to you at once, but my life belongs to me.'* And at Miramare she accuses Max: *'It is my*

husband who wants to poison me; he had me poisoned on my journey to Yucatán.' [26]

His sister's madness weighs heavily on Philippe. He leaves Charlotte at Miramare and goes home. Miramare is hermetically sealed off from the outside world. Besides the house doctor Jilek, Professor Riedel, a well-known psychiatrist from Vienna, is called in. On 9 October 1866 Charlotte's long seclusion at Miramare begins.

A glorious downfall in Mexico

Max realises clearly that Carlota is in a bad way. He knows that Professor Riedel is director of a lunatic asylum. He realises he can no longer count on Carlota. He thinks again of abdicating and fleeing.
The most valuable objects are loaded onto a ship and the captain is asked to be ready for a possible escape.

The emperor's by now well-known indecisiveness works against him.
The conservatives and the dubious Father Fischer manage to distance him from the advisers who urge him to flee. Max places his fate in the hands of the (conservative) council of government. They decide while he goes butterfly hunting. They decide that he stays.
Max becomes the plaything of Fischer and the conservatives; they isolate him, afraid he might change his mind again.

Meanwhile Juárez gains more and more ground: Cuernavaca is taken, La Borda is looted.
The government, which needs money, levies an extra war tax and steps up repression. Van der Smissen still tries to convince Max, but Max, who never liked the man, does not listen.
The Belgian volunteers embark on 20 January, the Austrians on 21 January; the last French leave Mexico on 5 February 1867.
'Free at last', sighs Max.



President Benito Juárez (1806-1872).



General Mariano Escobedo (1826-1902).

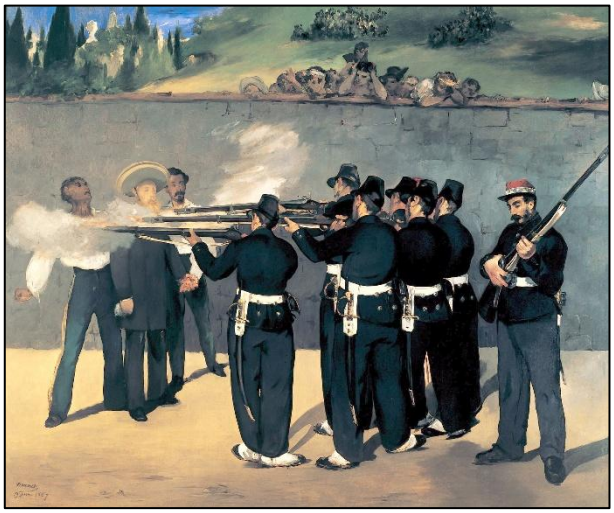
[26] Quotations from Michel de Grèce, p. 297.

After a few defeats, Max decides to withdraw with his last 16,000 soldiers, most of them Indians conscripted by force, to Querétaro. [27] He will take supreme command himself.

Max continues to deny reality.
At the beginning of March he writes to his friend the entomologist Doctor Bilimek: *'It is no longer bees flying around us, but bullets. Between the gunfire I have seen magnificent butterflies. In Querétaro I discovered a new species of bedbug: the "Simex domesticus Queretari", which has double mandibles. If I had bottles I would bring you a few, despite the worries of war.'* [28]
And while the wounded are dying, he dictates to Blasio instructions for a new court ceremonial.

While the skirmishes continue, Max looks for a way to surrender honourably, in a manner worthy of a Habsburg. Perhaps his besieger, General Escobedo, can be persuaded to come to an agreement.
López, Max's adviser and commander of the empress's regiment, is sent to conduct the secret negotiations. If he is taken prisoner, he hopes to be handed over to Europe; otherwise, to die on the battlefield.
After 71 days the siege of Querétaro ends. As the city is taken, Max surrenders.

From 23 May, awaiting his appearance before the court martial, Max is held in the Capuchin convent. At times he is despondent and thinks of an execution; at other moments he maps out his future life in Europe or dreams of the Polish throne. Meanwhile pressure is put on the United States from Europe to intervene and prevent a death sentence. Garibaldi writes personally to Juárez to congratulate him on his victory and asks him to spare the emperor's life.
On 12 June 1867 the court martial sits in the Iturbide Theatre. True to form, Max is able to excuse himself from the session because of his diarrhoea. Generals Mejía and Miramón are sentenced to death together with Max.
After a delay of a few days, the three face the firing squad on 19 June.
Max gives each soldier a gold coin and, pointing to his heart, asks them to aim well. His face is spared for the embalming, which is carried out that same day.



The Execution of Maximilian
– painting by Édouard Manet. [29]



The firing squad of the Nuevo León regiment that executed Maximilian
– coll. WHI ref. DB-a13649.

The eight revolutionaries assigned to the embalming take revenge for the years of oppression.
One of them puts his hands into the abdominal cavity of the dead emperor and cries: *'How delightful it is for me to wash my hands in imperial blood.'* [30]

[27] Both the city and the state bear this name (location: north-west of Mexico City).
[28] Kerckvoorde, in Charlotte, p. 229.
[29] The painting was banned in France for years because the soldiers wore French uniforms and the sergeant on the right closely resembled Napoleon III.
[30] Hyde, in Mexican Empire, p. 298.



The embalmed body of Maximilian – coll. WHI ref. DB-a13981.

For the embalming, for lack of naphthalene, zinc oxide is used. After a month the body begins to turn black.
When Admiral Tegetthoff, envoy of the Austrian imperial family, claims the body at the end of August, Juárez orders a new embalming. Three other doctors carry out the grim task in the Egyptian manner.
Tegetthoff takes the embalmed body to Vienna aboard the *Novara*, Maximilian's former flagship. On 16 January 1868 the ship arrives in Trieste, from where the body is taken to Vienna by train.
Four days before the ship arrives, Charlotte is informed of her husband's death.

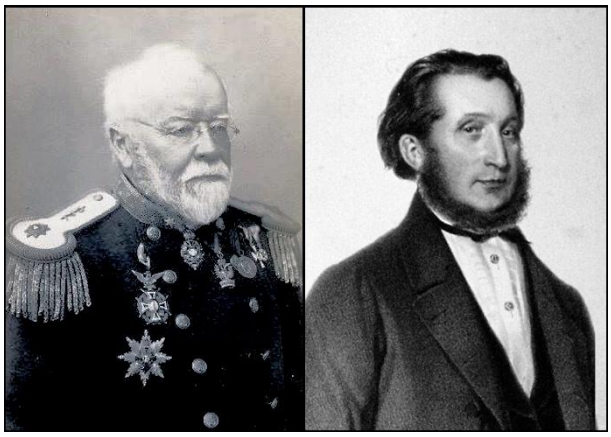
Madhouse Miramare

Meanwhile Charlotte is kept at Miramare against her will, cut off from the world.
The diagnosis of both doctors is unanimous: *'Her Majesty is clearly suffering from madness, with delusions of persecution caused by a mental illness more serious and severe than was at first suspected. All measures have been taken to treat the illustrious patient with all the care her condition requires and with the necessary precautions. Her Majesty is kept in isolation in the Gartenhaus. The prospects are bleak but not hopeless, despite the increase in agitation and the progression of the symptoms.'*[31]
Max is told that his wife is suffering from 'meningitis'.

The fear of being poisoned gradually disappears. Charlotte no longer refuses food.
Still she is kept in strict isolation. Current events pass her by; she gets no newspapers.
Her letters show that she has regained her lucidity.

Only five people have direct contact with her: Max's bosom friend Bombelles, Doctors Jilek and Riedel and her two chambermaids. The other 'staff' (have to) move out or have no direct contact with Charlotte. The Belgian chargé d'affaires Eloin, who travels to Miramare, is not allowed to see her. When she wants to speak to Viscount Conway, who is settling her father's estate, she waits in vain.

Although the isolation was arranged in joint consultation between the Belgian royal house and the Austrian emperor, the family at Laeken begins to worry at the end of June 1867 for lack of clear information. Leopold wants to have her brought to Brussels. Queen Marie-Henriette, as Franz Joseph's cousin, will take on this task.



Dr August von Jilek (1819-1898)

Dr Josef von Riedel (1803-1870)

[31] Letter to Philippe, RPA Count of Flanders Collection, no. 117, Miramare, 11 October 1866.

On 5 July Marie-Henriette leaves for Vienna with Baron Goffinet and a few ladies-in-waiting. The psychiatrist Dr Bulckens will join the party at Miramare. Franz Joseph seems to have no objection and suggests having Charlotte examined by a psychiatrist of their choice.
Franz Joseph's entourage objects fiercely and insists on a guardian. The Austrian emperor proposes his brother Karl Ludwig. It is above all Bombelles who refuses to let Charlotte go.

Marie-Henriette has difficulty getting into the castle. Charlotte throws herself into her arms but does not want to go with her to Belgium. The 'carers' have her completely in their power and invoke '*the will of* Max' at every turn. Her husband's death has been kept from her.

Dr Bulckens's examination shows that the madness cannot have a natural cause alone. The empress has been poisoned.
The newspapers [32] publish testimonies of cases that showed the same symptoms and had been poisoned with toloache.

Bulckens and Riedel agree that it would be better for the empress to travel to Brussels. To convince Charlotte, the same strategy as her 'carers' is used: a letter with an order from Max.
Karl Ludwig comes to say goodbye, but she refuses to receive him.
The Bombelles problem is solved by Goffinet: he threatens the count with physical violence, and the frightened man takes to his heels.
On 31 July Charlotte is back at Laeken. She still does not know that her husband is dead. Why that isolation?

'*Un drame* domestique' or *'a tragic combination of circumstances'*

What exactly happened at Miramare lies safely hidden in the web of time and false trails.

We will not withhold from you the most outrageous but very plausible hypothesis.

Countess de Reinach limits her description of the events to the discreet *'there was "un drame domestique"'*.

In our view, Miramare is the result of an inhuman accumulation of dramatic circumstances.

Trauma 1: **The estrangement between Max and Charlotte is well known and extensively documented. Already at Miramare the separation between the two spouses was a fact. In Mexico there were a few cautious rapprochements with a view to an heir to the throne, but Charlotte's sexual aversion, Max's impatience and his persistent infidelity were each time a breaking point.**

Trauma 2: **In July 1867 at Miramare the psychiatrist Bulckens, summoned by Queen Marie-Henriette, makes a remarkable diagnosis: Charlotte has been poisoned. At the same time an article appears in Le Figaro by D.G. d'Auvergne, who questions several witnesses just back from Mexico. He too comes to the same thesis: Charlotte has been poisoned by an indigenous poison. A few authors** [33] refer to this toloache theory. Michel de Grèce believes the poison was nothing other than a wrongly dosed aphrodisiac, given to her by Max in his wish for an heir.

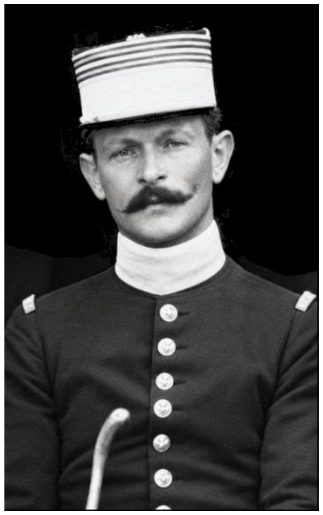
We think the truth is simpler.
The enormous pressure Charlotte was under, the use of opium and morphine — at the time commonly known among the nobility as 'relaxing' substances — and her 'spiritual' hunger drove her to experiment with all kinds of Indian mind-expanding plants. These herbs do not only expand the mind. Their effect as aphrodisiacs is widely praised.
The psychedelic effect freed Charlotte from her strict religious straitjacket. In the open space of boundlessness a fascinating movement of affective and sexual attraction arises.
The boat trips on Lake Chalco were trips to another world. The passionate Van der Smissen, head of her guard of honour, was more than once the rower on duty. The warm woman, open to pleasure, whom Van der Smissen met was an alter ego of Maximilian's cool, distant, frigid empress.

[32] Michel de Grèce refers, among others, to an article by D.G. d'Auvergne in Le Figaro.

[33] Castelot, p. 474, and de Grèce, pp. 341-344.



Colonel Alfred Van der Smissen (1823-1895)



General Maxime Weygand (1867-1965)

Several authors [34] discuss the relationship between Charlotte and Van der Smissen.
Charlotte noticed the colonel after the 'Belgian' victory at La Loma. When Van der Smissen came to Chapultepec to offer his condolences to Charlotte after the death of her father Leopold I, the friendship blossomed. Van der Smissen probably initially hoped to find in Charlotte above all an advocate for his ambition to become commander-in-chief of the 'united' Mexican armed forces.

Charlotte's loneliness, the lack of affection and the romance of a boat trip by night, the use of 'mind-expanding' substances and perhaps even a budding love would have led them both to actions they would not have taken in normal circumstances, given the difference in rank and the strict religious morality.
That the Belgian chargé d'affaires Eloin challenged Van der Smissen to a duel and that Madame d'Hulst refused to receive Charlotte at the beginning of September 1866 can also be seen in the context of that 'forbidden' relationship.

Trauma 3: **Father Leopold, mother Louise and brother Leo all showed a profound melancholy later in life. During Louise's illness Leopold I spoke of the 'morbid predisposition' in the Orléans family.**
All this suggests that in Charlotte's case we can speak of a genetic predisposition to a depressive disorder.

Between the delusions and the depressive periods, very normal and lucid periods are reported in Charlotte.
This points towards a bipolar disorder. A bipolar or manic-depressive disorder almost always begins between puberty and the age of 35. In Charlotte and Leo we noticed a striking withdrawn gloom soon after their mother's death. As a rule, the earlier the disorder manifests itself, the more difficult the course of the illness throughout life. In a bipolar disorder, periods of depression and mania alternate.
The depressive phase can take various forms. In Charlotte's case it was presumably a depression with psychotic features, with delusions, hallucinations and disturbed perceptions.
Mania can be euphoric or dysphoric in character. The euphoric form brings optimism, power and boundless energy. A dysphoric mania shows itself in agitation, irritability, frustration and attacks of paranoia. Psychiatrically [35] we speak of mania when at least three of the following symptoms occur: a greatly inflated self-confidence up to delusions of grandeur; being unable to stop talking; thoughts tumbling over each other; being distracted by anything and everything; needing much less sleep than normal; over-agitation in the sexual or social sphere or in study or work; throwing oneself into activities (for example financial or sexual) without considering the consequences.
In Charlotte we find more than three of these symptoms. Her grandiosity, her anger and her fear of poisoning (paranoia) are typical phenomena during manic episodes. She speaks of Max as *'the master of the earth and sovereign of the universe'* and becomes totally absorbed in religious devotion. [36]
We should also note that people suffering from bipolar disorder are often artistically gifted or speak several languages easily (polyglot). These characteristics also apply to Charlotte.
Drug use can trigger attacks of a latent bipolar disorder. The use of hallucinogens can give rise to the delusions.
Charlotte's reaction to the substances is further reinforced by the severe tensions to which she is exposed: Max's distance and debauchery, the impossibility of governing, the empire becoming ungovernable, the impending withdrawal of the

[34] Haslip, Castelot, de Grèce and Kerckvoorde point to the 'friendship' that existed between Charlotte and Van der Smissen.

[35] We use here the diagnostic criteria described in the DSM-IV, the psychiatrist's handbook.
[36] See, among others, Reinach, pp. 343-345.

French, the death of her father, the death of her grandmother.

People with bipolar disorder tend to use substances that either dampen the nervous system (alcohol, opium or morphine,...) or stimulate it (caffeine, cocaine,...). Half to two-thirds of patients actually 'use'. Bipolar disorder already overloads the brain. Relaxing substances are taken to calm down, stimulating substances because the patient wants to recapture the 'state of pleasure' or the highs of the manic episode. Moreover, this clinical picture, in the form of possible sexual overstimulation and throwing oneself into activities without thinking about the consequences, may explain her unexpected infidelity, so out of keeping with her character.

Trauma 4: **Even at the time there was much speculation about a possible pregnancy of Charlotte, and there are certainly indications in that direction. The incomprehensible isolation at Miramare, for example. At Miramare only a few people had access to Charlotte. Every visit was refused. Did that isolation serve to hide the pregnancy?**

During the crossing from Mexico to Europe Charlotte was constantly nauseous. In Paris, despite the sweltering weather, she wore a cloak. With the clothing of the time it was not difficult to hide a pregnancy.

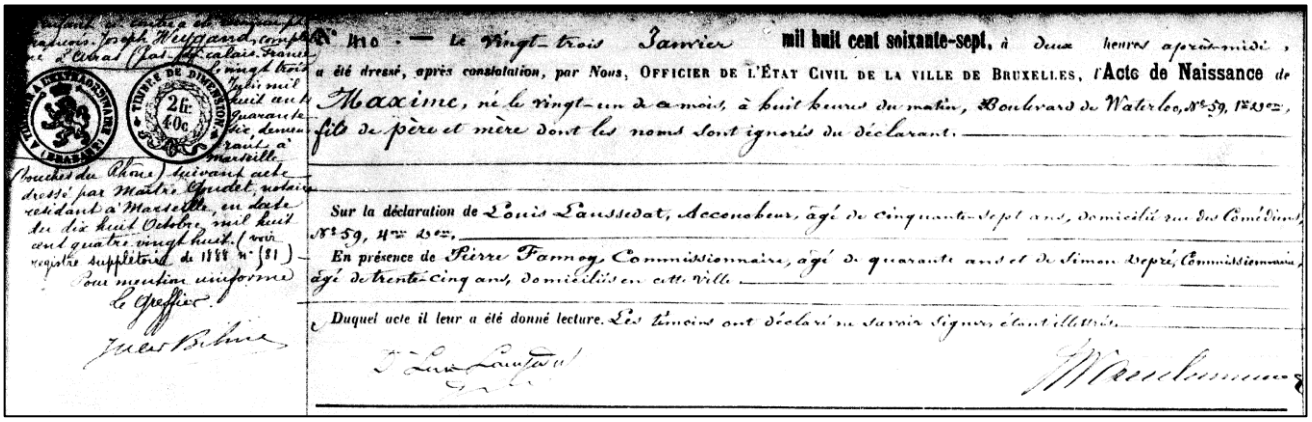
If Charlotte was pregnant and gave birth at Miramare, the child was conceived in the spring of 1866, after her journey to Yucatán and the deaths of her father and grandmother. In April and May 1866 she is 'alone' at Chapultepec.
It is from that time that the stories of her boat trips with Van der Smissen date. [37]

The moment Charlotte discovers she is pregnant and realises that the unborn child cannot be Max's, her world collapses. Charlotte has sinned against everything that was drummed into her for years. She is the unworthy empress who evaded her divine responsibility and has fallen into mortal sin.
'Todo es inútil' are the words she speaks at the moment she can no longer ignore her pregnancy. She is no longer an empress, for she is unworthy in God's eyes! The mortal sin she has committed and the scandal that awaits her must weigh heavily on her.
How is she to deal with the truth? How great must the need of this strictly religious woman be to confess her sins? To whom else but the pope can she turn?

Trauma 5: **The hormonal reaction resulting from the pregnancy stimulates a chemical reaction in the brain. This had a temporary influence on Charlotte's behaviour and state of mind.**
The first signs of an impending manic attack appear on the train to Rome, at Bolzano. Charlotte has a paranoid crisis and does not want to go any further. When she realises she is hallucinating, she asks Grand Marshal del Valle simply to say 'Bozen' — the old name for Bolzano — if she starts behaving oddly.
On 30 September 1866, a few days after her talks with the pope, the mania breaks through completely. Charlotte has herself taken to the Vatican and seeks protection from the holy man himself. The delusions have her completely in their grip. It is in this state that, on 9 October 1866, she is shut away at Miramare.

Trauma 6: **It is not only the pregnancy. The unborn child, certainly if it is a son, is also a real threat to Franz Joseph. Max is officially the father, so the child is a possible pretender to the Austrian crown. For the Belgian royal house too the child is a threat. The crown prince and only son of Leopold II is sickly and Philippe is still unmarried.** [38]

[37] Haslip relates how she first hears of the 'friendship' between Van der Smissen and Charlotte in Mexico.
[38] It is remarkable, moreover, that Philippe, who had refused to marry for years although Leopold and Charlotte urged him strongly, suddenly became engaged in February 1867 and married at the end of April. We suspect that the pressure from the Belgian king increased sharply after Charlotte's 'little accident'.



Birth certificate of "Maxime", Brussels 23.01.1867 no. 410, with date of birth 21.01.1867 – in the left-hand box the adoption under the surname Weygand was registered in 1888.

In all likelihood Pope Pius IX knows of Charlotte's pregnancy; to whom else would she confess her mortal sin? Through a coded telegram to his bishops he informs both royal houses of Charlotte's 'condition'.

The child must disappear. For the Austrians there was never a child. Bombelles and Doctor Jilek, in Austrian service, lay the false trails. Jilek states in his diaries that Charlotte never gave birth and never missed her periods.
Others involved disappear: a chambermaid, Amalia Ströger, is found hanged on 2 June 1867. Several authors attribute her suicide to 'heartbreak' over the executed emperor, or to remorse [39] because she is said to have poisoned Charlotte. We suspect that she committed suicide when she realised the dangerous and hopeless situation she was in as a sharer of 'the secret'. The chambermaid Mathilde Döblinger dies a few weeks later in violent cramps. She was probably poisoned.

We have every reason to suspect that Charlotte's isolation was set up by both royal houses to hide her pregnancy. The plan is sophisticated and must make everyone believe that the empress's madness justifies her confinement. To keep Charlotte calm she is given morphine, which also maintains the 'madness' and keeps the confinement justified.
When Charlotte gives birth around the turn of the year, the child stays with her for only a few days. It is baptised at Miramare. [40] Then she must give it up.

On 10 January 1887 we read in the *Moniteur Belge* as a 'Letter from Vienna': *'We learn that the doctors treating Empress Charlotte have established her complete recovery.'* Is this the message that conceals Charlotte's delivery?

Presumably the Belgian royal house has to take responsibility for the child.
On 23 January 1867 Maxime is registered at 59 Boulevard de Waterloo in Brussels by Doctor Louis Laussédat as having been born two days earlier. Despite the legally required mention of the mother's name, the registrar records the child as: *'son of a father and mother whose names are unknown to the declarant'*. Yet Doctor Laussédat must have known the mother. Many see the first name Maxime as proof of his origins.

On coming of age he receives the name Weygand. [41] He enjoys high protection and an annual allowance from the Belgian royal court, and has a brilliant career in the French army. We find him as chief of staff to Marshal Foch at Compiègne at the signing of the armistice at the end of the First World War on 11 November 1918, and as commander-in-chief of the French army during the Second World War.
To Castelot, who talked with him about the 'Weygand mystery' at the château of Argenteuil,

[39] de Grèce, p. 343.

[40] Weygand is not baptised after the registration at the registry office. At that time it is unthinkable that a child would not be baptised, certainly not after adoption by a family that raises him in a deeply Christian way. He must therefore have been baptised before the registration in Brussels.

[41] Several books and articles have been written about the Weygand mystery.

Leopold III, in an unguarded moment, named General Van der Smissen as *'Weygand's father'*. [42]
And on Charlotte's death in 1927 Weygand received several letters with the message *'it is your mother who has just died'*. [43]

Is Weygand the child of Charlotte and Van der Smissen? Everything points to it.

Leopold III got to know Weygand better during the Second World War.
In the run-up to, during and after the Second World War the two men maintained regular direct and probably also secret contacts. It is remarkable how both developed a very similar, 'idiosyncratic' view of the course of the war. After the war both were also discredited because of their attitude.
We suspect that Leopold also revealed to Weygand the identity of his real father. Charlotte knew who her son was. Weygand knew, while claiming the opposite, who his mother was.
Yet they never met. Duty, responsibility for their country and honour were stronger than the love between mother and son.

Van der Smissen continues to visit Charlotte at Tervuren, Laeken and Meise. They never went further than a few tender touches.

In 1895, following insinuations, a conflict arose.
On 16 June 1895 Van der Smissen shoots himself in the head.
He probably never knew that Maxime Weygand was his son. Yet the physical resemblance between father and son is striking.

To prove this truth beyond doubt, more is needed than logic and testimonies. A DNA test could separate myth from reality.

A captive bird in a golden cage

It is with these traumas in her head that Charlotte arrives at Laeken in July 1867.
Marie-Henriette undertakes to care for her. In their letters the royal couple mention the shameful and inhuman treatment Charlotte underwent at Miramare. Leopold writes: '*My sister arrived here in a terrible state, skin and bone. The isolation and the treatment at Miramare did her much harm. She lived there in constant fear and felt abandoned by everyone.'* [44]

Viscount Conway tells more about her condition on arrival at Laeken: *'Three-quarters of the time the empress's mind is sound. She then talks and acts like you and me, but at other moments reason deserts her. She is never violent and seems happy to be back with us and to have left Miramare. She is dominated by certain traumas, including her forced confinement in her old residence...'* [45]

The empress spends the rest of the summer at the castle of Tervuren, surrounded by a full household. Meanwhile negotiations with Vienna about her fortune are under way. The 1864 will in which Max left everything to her has expertly disappeared.
The negotiations are tough. Father Leopold had taken his precautions through the marriage contract, and Goffinet gets the most out of it. Miramare goes to the Austrian family. Leopold II's daughter Stéphanie, who married Archduke Rudolf, son of Franz Joseph, will later take up residence there. Her father's share of the inheritance remains undivided with Leo's share. That is Leo's dictate, and in this situation Charlotte has no choice but to accept it.

In winter Tervuren is not comfortable enough. Charlotte refuses to spend the cold season on Madeira. Her memories of her trip with Max are not that good.
On 9 October she may move back to Laeken. That is where she likes best to be.
She visibly stabilises. Charlotte makes trips to the Ardennes, dines with Leo in Brussels and invites people: Van der Smissen, Goffinet,...
She still does not know that Max is dead. She is only given newspapers that say nothing about Mexico. When Tegetthoff approaches the European coast with Max's body, silence can no longer be kept. Father Dechamps, now Monsignor, is given the task of informing her.
On 12 January 1868, almost seven months after his death, she hears the painful story.

[42] Castelot, p. 606. Through other historians, such as Duchesne, Leopold III tried to formally deny this origin of Weygand.
[43] Weygand, p. 16.
[44] Letter from Leopold to Mme d'Hulst of 3 August 1867, quoted in Reinach, p. 358.
[45] Conway to d'Hulst, 3 August 1867, quoted in Reinach, p. 356.

For months she has refused all sacraments. Those who live in mortal sin have no right to the sacraments. Charlotte confesses [46] and asks for communion. She wants to know everything about Mexico and Max's death. She tries to read all the newspapers. She has a memorial card made and asks Leopold II to decorate a few loyal Mexicans. Charlotte does not seem to suffer too much from his death. Anxiously she asks whether during the period of mourning she may still wear her jewels indoors and go into town.

Meanwhile concern grows for little Leopold, son of Leopold II and Marie-Henriette.
Since May 1868 the crown prince has been ill. It turns out to be a heart condition. In addition, the boy fell into the pond while playing with a sailing boat, which led to pneumonia. Later dropsy is added. He hardly eats and has lost consciousness several times. Every remedy is tried: leeches, punctures,... Every day he rides around the park in a little cart pulled by his pony *'Kiss-me-Quick'*.
On 13 June 1868 the prince turns 9. There is a dinner, a concert, rowing races on the pond,... The child grows ever more ill.
Marie-Henriette struggles with all the worries about Charlotte and her child. She leaves for a month's cure at Spa. The situation seems hopeless and on 13 August 1868 Leopold has her return early. In all churches and synagogues prayers are said for the little prince. For months hope and despair alternate. On 22 January 1869 *Leopold, Ferdinand, Elie, Victor, Albert, Marie, Crown Prince of Belgium, Duke of Brabant, Count of Hainaut, Duke of Saxony* dies at Laeken. A few days later he is laid to rest in the crypt at Laeken.
Charlotte does not want to see the funeral procession. She forbids her chambermaid Julie Doyen to watch, saying: 'One does not look at such sad things!' [47]
The fateful pond is immediately filled in. The boy's room becomes a chapel.
Something has broken in the king and queen. Leopold throws himself into his work. From now on he will be occupied with grand building projects and his colonial dreams. The queen is replaced by mistresses. With the death of the crown prince their relationship also seems definitively over.

Charlotte too seems to be having a hard time again. Does it have to do with the child's death?
Is she thinking of the loss of a child of her own?
On 27 February she writes in a letter to Philippe: *'I have not eaten for 24 hours, (..) it is like in Rome. Will you be the pope and give me shelter for this night?'* [48]
The crisis continues. Between February and June 1869 Charlotte writes hundreds of mad letters [49] that are never sent. Her identity changes: first she becomes a man, later she speaks of herself only in the third person.

While in Brussels a typhus epidemic plunges almost every family into mourning and the madness seems to return in Charlotte, she is taken back to Tervuren against her will on 1 May 1869.
She will stay there for almost ten years. After several articles about her condition appear in the press, the staff receive strict orders of secrecy.
The king and especially the queen regularly visit the castle. They also keep other family members, such as Victoria in England, informed of the situation.
Charlotte seeks solitude and sometimes has strange wishes. She shuts herself up in her room; food and everything she needs is placed outside her door. At another moment she demands manservants instead of chambermaids to do her hair and dress her. Her request causes a scandal. She wants men to put her to bed! The psychiatrists advise granting her wishes. Otherwise the empress would not sleep, would wander barefoot through the corridors and catch pneumonia, or would get so angry that she would have a brain haemorrhage. Over the years her attitude slowly softens.

Ten years later, on 3 March 1879, the castle of Tervuren is ablaze. Charlotte can only with difficulty be persuaded to leave the castle. It is Marie-Henriette who sets off post-haste for Tervuren alone with a servant to fetch Charlotte. The queen takes the reins and trots with the empress in the small open carriage through the early morning to Laeken.
Tervuren is lost; only the blackened walls remain standing. Leopold will later have the Museum for Central Africa built in the park.

[46] We have every reason to suspect that the pope learned Charlotte's truth outside the seal of confession. This leaves him free to inform the royal families without breaking the seal of confession.
[47] Quoted in Reinach, p. 373.

[48] Charlotte to Philippe, 27 February 1869; Royal Palace Archives, Count of Flanders Collection, letter 128.
[49] Laurence van Ypersele devotes a book to that period. Elsewhere in this book we discuss these mad letters at length. You will also find a number of remarkable quotations from the letters in this book.

While the royal family stays in Brussels, Charlotte lives at Laeken for five weeks. The memories of her childhood give her peace and stability.
Meanwhile the king buys for his sister the castle and estate of Count Amédée de Beauffort at Bouchout (Meise).
On 5 April 1879 Charlotte comes to live in Meise. A few years later Leopold also acquires the castle of Baron d'Hooghvorst, also in Meise.
By joining the two estates the empress obtains a royal residence and a golden prison. Charlotte is not allowed out and no one can enter the estate. The ordinary staff are forbidden to speak to the empress.
Now and then she receives visitors. Until 1892 Van der Smissen also comes regularly. Only the boys of Meise sometimes dare to climb secretly over the wall.
Colonel Goffinet manages the castle.

Mrs Vlayen, who served at the castle for a time, gives the following description of Charlotte's secluded life. '*The empress is mostly calm. She dresses with great care, plays the piano, does needlework. Now and then she has fits of rage; she then breaks and tears everything that comes into her hands. As evening falls a strange ritual takes place. The empress walks to the moat, puts one foot in the rowing boat and stands staring ahead, in the mist of her thoughts. Sometimes in the drawing room she would ask for a doll made of rags and wrapped in a Mexican shawl. For a long time she would rock the doll, humming, until she suddenly threw it away and said: we had a child too, but they took it from us.'* [50]



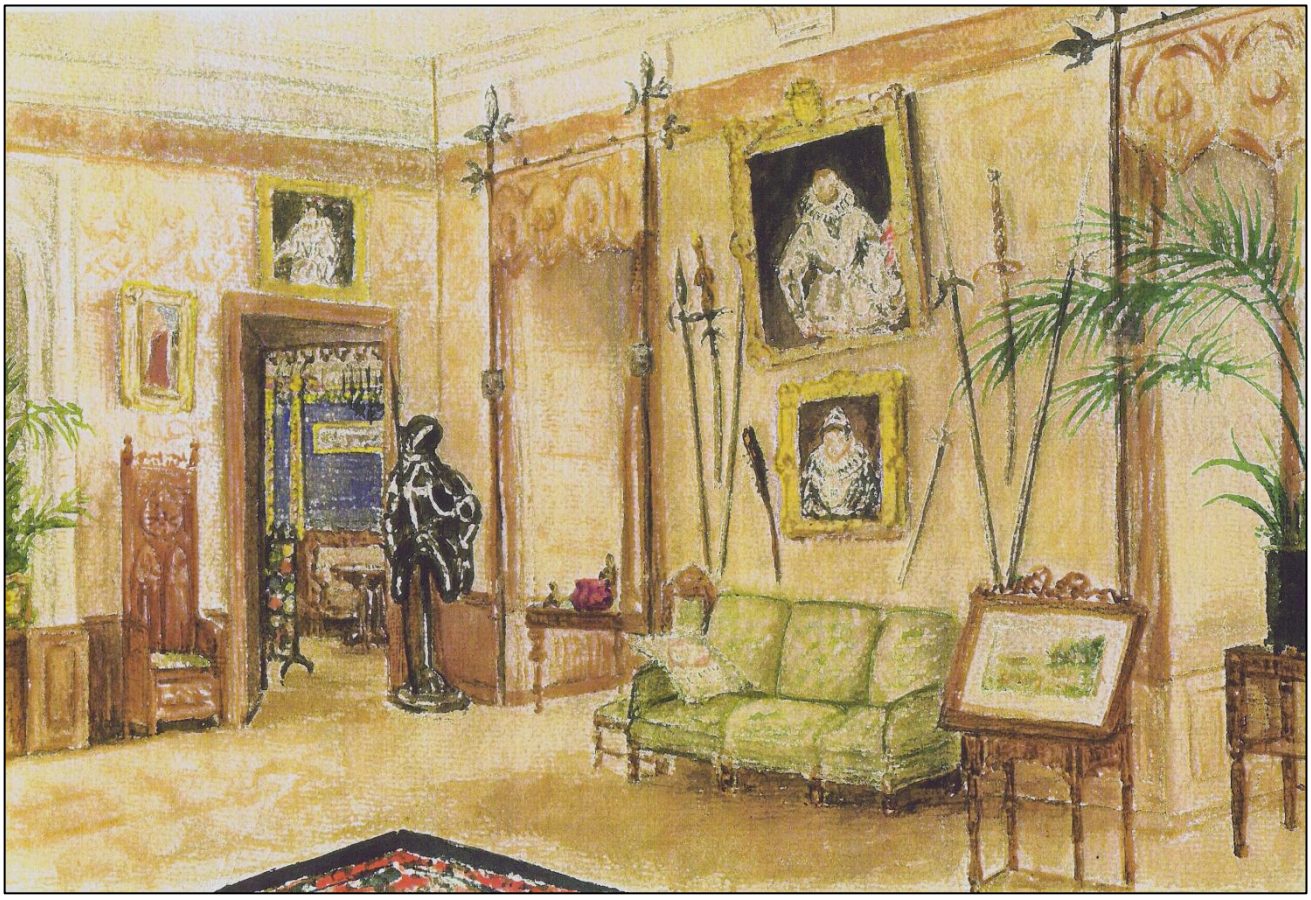
Charlotte with a lady-in-waiting on a ride in the carriage through the Bouchout estate – coll. Royal Palace archives.

For forty-eight years she lives, often lucid, sometimes delusional, on an estate of more than 80 hectares.

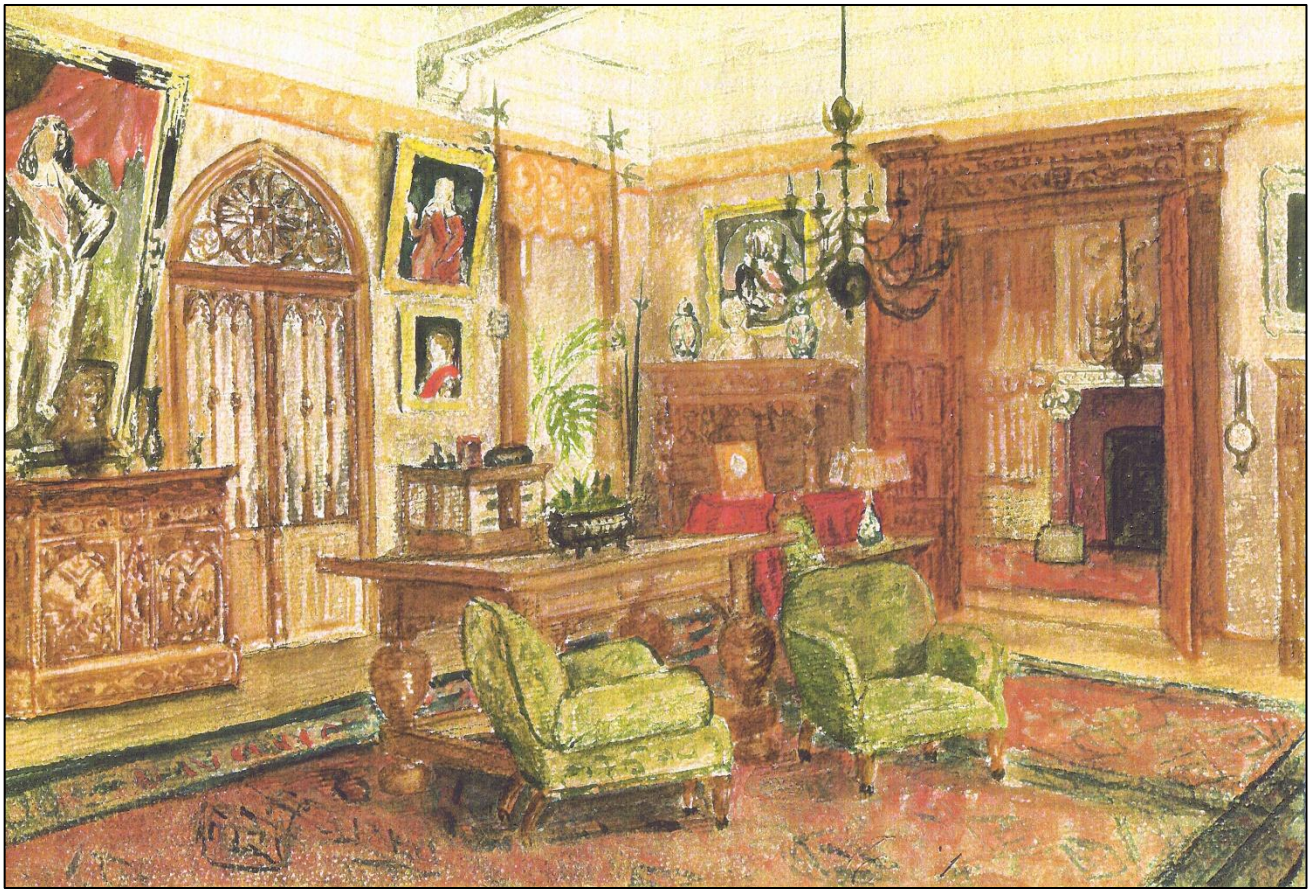
Her mind is at Laeken, in Mexico, in some unnameable reality.
Sometimes she is a woman, sometimes a man, sometimes barely present, and sometimes she is clearly the empress and demands the utmost of her staff.
She is unpredictable, moody and rarely satisfied, and does not shrink from giving the staff a beating.

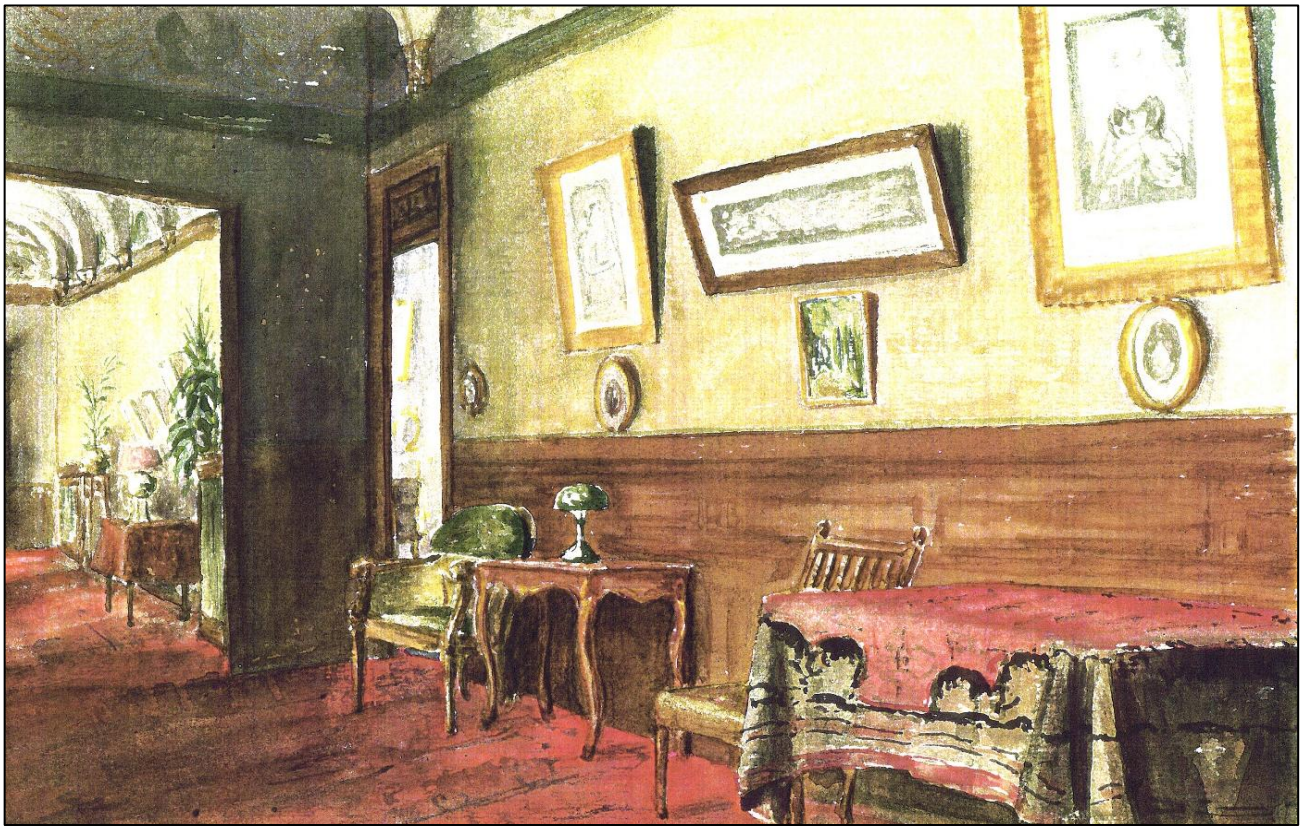
The people around her change; they fight in the war, commit suicide or die in accidents.

[50] Quotation from Fouvez, p. 202.

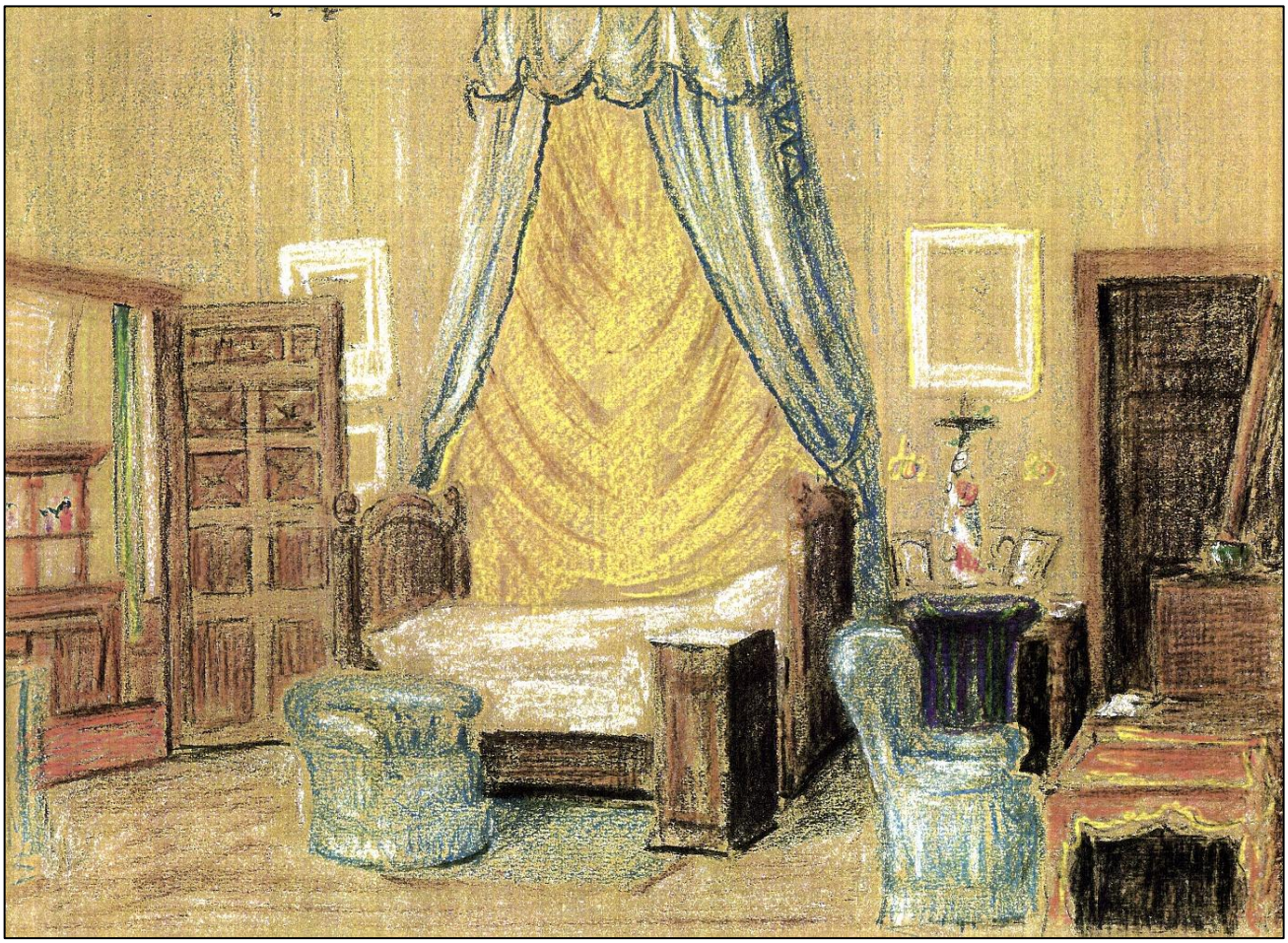


Above and below: *Bouchout Castle, ground floor, armoury – C. De Brandner, 1920 – coll. Royal Palace archives.*





Bouchout Castle, 1st floor, gallery – C. De Brandner, 1918 – coll. Royal Palace archives.



Bouchout Castle, 1st floor, Charlotte's bedroom
– C. De Brandner, 1925 – coll. Royal Palace archives.



Left:
Bouchout Castle, ground floor, blue drawing room – C. De Brandner – coll. Royal Palace archives.

Below:
Bouchout Castle, 1st floor, great drawing room – C. De Brandner – coll. Royal Palace archives.



The First World War passes by. On the gate hangs a sign: *'this castle is inhabited by Her Majesty the Empress of Mexico, sister-in-law of our illustrious ally Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria.'*


VERBOT

Park, Gärten, Hofräume p.p. des Königlichen Schlosses

BOUCHOUT

dürfen von Offizieren und Mannschaften ohne direkten höheren Befehl UNTER KEINEN UMSTÄNDEN betreten werden.

Brüssel, 3. Dez. 1914.

Der Kaiserliche Kreischef,
von LEIPZIG,
Oberst.

Coll. Royal Palace archives.

Kings too come and go.
The fall of the Mexican empire is only the prelude to the end of the other great empires.
Napoleon declares war on Prussia; the defeat at Sedan in 1870 is at the same time the end of his reign.
With the First World War the four other imperial dynasties also fall: the Ottomans in Turkey, the Romanovs in Russia, the Hohenzollerns in Germany and the Habsburgs in Austria. Franz Joseph does not live to see the fall: he dies in 1916.
The Belgian monarchs do not outlive Charlotte either: King Albert and Queen Elisabeth take over after the deaths of Marie-Henriette in 1902 and Leopold II in 1909. The heirs find an inextricable financial tangle.

On 17 January 1927 Charlotte dies, aged 87.
The estate falls into decay. Years later, in 1938, the royal family sells the estate to the Belgian State, which establishes the National Botanic Garden there.
The castle of Meise goes up in flames during the Second World War; only the orangery is spared. Bouchout Castle is left to its fate. Only in 1972 is some restoration work carried out.
Charlotte is not forgotten. Historians and novelists describe her dramatic life, which captures the imagination.

Conclusion: with a principality in her head

Charlotte is the ideal princess.

Already as a child, because of her mother's death and the lack of affection, Charlotte lives very much in her head. She creates her own universe in an intellectual way. Through the upbringing by her father, her governesses and her 'spiritual' adviser, she is drilled with a world in which she bears a terribly heavy responsibility. She is chosen and crowned by God to lead the people through the darkness. She is responsible for the welfare of all her subjects. She is responsible for the proper functioning and organisation of her empire.

And in all this she must not forget that she is there only to support her husband, the monarch.
Submissively she must appear at the moments determined by God and monarch. Haughtily she must radiate her status and position. Charlotte excels in all these qualities.
She can govern, can receive guests, speaks French, English, German, Italian and Spanish. Charlotte has insight into affairs of state, can negotiate,... Charlotte is extremely honest and consistent with herself.

What Charlotte finds hard is being human.
In a mental movement she creates for each royal role a different monarch with a different name.

During the governorship in Lombardy and Venetia she becomes Carlotta. Her first mission fails miserably. But never mind: after a short (enforced) rest, a new mission comes her way.

She becomes Empress of Mexico, she becomes Carlota: now a new role with even greater responsibilities. But the mission fails and she herself, through her 'ungodly behaviour', is one of the main culprits.

Her mind does not stand still. In the delusions of 1869 she creates a new principality for herself: she becomes Emperor of the French, becomes Napoleon himself, becomes 'one', 'he'. She adopts various identities; she becomes the third person.

Charlotte finds a prince charming.

Maximilian of Austria looked like a prince charming.
From a mighty dynasty, raised to rule at the foremost court in Europe, with refined culture and etiquette.
Max is wise, has ideas, seems to listen, is not physically unattractive, not too young, not too old.

Max looks like an emperor, but Max is no emperor. He is fickle and indecisive, cannot carry out his ideas, flees from responsibility, lets Charlotte appear alone at every reception, systematically listens to the wrong people, is susceptible to flattery, lacks diplomacy, has a weakness for women and drink,...
Yet Charlotte will always defend him. Marriage is for ever and always; the woman follows the man, the empress the emperor.
And when the emperor is shot to pieces, the dream remains. And the dream drifts ever further from reality.

Whoever is born to rule needs an empire.
What comes their way?
The duchies of Lombardy and Venetia are awaiting independence when Max is given them as a present. Politically he is burdened with an impossible task. He is given an empire that cannot be governed, as a man who cannot govern.
Mexico is, if possible, an even more poisoned gift.
A torn empire, struggling with its colonial past and countless civil wars.
Max accepts; the eternal second sees a chance to become first.
With this action France wants to raise a dam against the United States.
The country is barely developed, the roads impassable; behind every tree armed danger lurks. Politically, conservative and liberal, monarchist and republican, Church and cultural identity are diametrically opposed. The striving for independence is an indestructible force. Mexico is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible, to govern from the position of an intruder emperor.

Charlotte had imagined God's task to be more achievable.

A crown prince and heir.

Anyone who wants to be something of a queen must be able to bear sons.

Queens and princesses may not choose for themselves whether they are ready to extend the family. They must give birth, preferably soon, preferably often, preferably to sons, although today daughters can also ascend the throne.

In the past childlessness always led to (lasting) estrangement between monarchs. Leopold II's daughter Stéphanie is infected with gonorrhoea by her husband Rudolf of Habsburg. This venereal disease is incurable at the time. She will never be able to have children again. The comment of her sister Louise sounds cynical: *'What she has is serious for the future; in her position she is destined to produce heirs for the crown.'* Even more unjust is that the infertility is blamed on Stéphanie.
Max reproached Charlotte for her childlessness. Without a successor the empire is incomplete.

Charlotte had everything it takes to become a great sovereign. She lost everything she had. Every pillar gave way beneath her feet, and with every pillar everything she had ever believed in, until she had nothing left to stand on, nothing left to believe in. And with those pillars her view of the world collapsed, and her self-image. Until she spoke of herself as another person.

Kings and queens are born in a cage forged with bars of demands and responsibilities. Whoever, by chance or by choice, opts for another life runs the risk of being forced into a prison.

In 1898 Louise, the disobedient but certainly not mad daughter of Leopold II, is abducted and locked up in a psychiatric institution.
Once again it is Franz Joseph and Leopold II who pull the strings.

For a very brief moment Charlotte was free. For a very brief moment she flew towards the sun.
But like Icarus she burned her wings. Her punishment was crushing.
Materially, as a king's child, she could afford anything she wanted.
But tell me, is it less painful to die in a golden cage?



Tomb plaque in the royal crypt at Laeken.

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