

The Counts of Pourtalès

This article is translated and edited from Rolf Jordi, *Schloss Oberhofen*, Thun: 2004, pp.25-39. Rolf Jordi is responsible for Research, Education and Mediation at *Schloss Oberhofen* in Oberhofen am Thunersee, Switzerland. The article details the history of the de Pourtalès family through to Count Albert Alexander de Pourtalès (1812-1861).



Jean de Pourtalès and his sons

The Protestant de Pourtalès family originally came from the French Cevennes. Two of the four sons of Jean de Pourtalès (1648-1715), banker, merchant and city consul in La Salle, settled in what is now Switzerland at the beginning of the 18th century, thus escaping the religious persecutions by the French king after the revocation of Edict of Nantes in 1658. Louis de Pourtalès (1692-1751) went to Geneva, while Jérémie (1701-1784), the great-grandfather of Count Albert Alexander de Pourtalès, settled in Neuchâtel, then Prussian, around 1720 and married Marguerite de Luze in 1721. She was the daughter of his employer and later partner Jean Jacques de Luze, co-founder of the cotton industry in Neuchâtel. Shortly after the wedding, Jérémie moved to Geneva and on 9 August 1722, their first son, Jacques Louis, was born. Son Henri followed in 1726. The merchant later founded the companies Lavergne, Pourtalès & Co. in Lyon, and Pourtalès, Simons & Co. in London, before returning to Neuchâtel in 1737 and founding the indienne factory Luze, Chaillet & Pourtalès with Jean Jacques de Luze and Henri Chaillet.¹ On 14 February 1750, the merchant and banker was elevated to the Prussian nobility by Frederick II, the Great, and when he died on 7 February 1784 he left a considerable fortune.



Jérémie de Pourtalès

Jacques Louis de Pourtalès is remembered as the king of merchants. In the 1750s, the company Pourtalès & Co. was founded. The company did not solely rely on buying fabrics from overseas and



Jacques Louis de Pourtalès, James Alexandre, Louis, Jules Henri Charles Frédéric and Rose Augustine

reselling them printed. Jacques Louis took any opportunity to make a good deal. The company's success was rapid, with rising sales; soon the company had branches in all major cities in Western Europe. In 1769 Jacques Louis married Rose Augustine de Luze (1752-1791), who was thirty years his junior. She presented him with sons Louis (1773-1848), James Alexandre (1776-1855) and Jules Henri Charles Frédéric (1779-1861). Towards the end of the 18th century, Pourtalès & Co.'s business was less prosperous. Many partners left the company, and finally poor business practices led to the liquidation of the company. But Jacques Louis de Pourtalès continued doing business with his large fortune and on 30 July 1811 the hospital in Neuchâtel donated by de Pourtalès was inaugurated. In the spring of 1814, he died surrounded by his family in his home town.

Count Frédéric de Pourtalès (1779-1861) and Countess Louise (1793-1881)

Count Jules Henri Charles Frédéric de Pourtalès was born on 23 January 1779 in Neuchâtel. From 1801 he served in the Prussian service: he was a lieutenant in the Gensdarmes regiment in the Battle of Jena. In 1808, after the Peace of Tilsite and his return to Neuchâtel, he was appointed adjutant general to Prince Berthier, Duc de Neuchâtel, and in 1809 he was appointed equerry to the French Empress Joséphine. On 18 November 1811 in Malmaison near Paris, he married Marie Louise Elisabeth de Castellane-Norante, maid-of-honour of the Empress. She was from old French nobility, daughter of the Royal French Lieutenant-Colonel Michel Ange Boniface, Marquis de Castellane-Norante. Empress Joséphine secured a dowry of 100,000 francs for the bride.

A nice anecdote is told among Frédéric's descendants. Pourtalès is said to have been captivated by the Empress's daughter, Hortense. Empress Joséphine expressed her concern to the Emperor, but fortunately, Frédéric proposed to the Empress's lady-in-waiting, Louise de Castellane-Norante. The imperial couple gave their approval, so what choice did her father have but to consent to the marriage. In any case, the two were happily married for fifty years, with or without the help of Empress Joséphine.



Countess Louise
de Pourtalès

In 1809 Frédéric was appointed French Comte de L'Empire. At that time Neuchâtel was a French possession until it was returned to Prussia in 1814. In 1814 Frédéric and his two brothers were elevated to the rank of Prussian count. Count Frédéric de Pourtalès held the office of chief inspector of the Neuenburg militias in 1818, was state councillor in 1831 and from 1842 chief Master of Ceremonies at the Prussian court in Berlin.



Albert, Count Frédéric and Guillaume
de Pourtalès

The Royal Chamberlain and Knight of the Legion of Honour, owner of *Schloss Greng* on Lake Murten and co-owner of *Schloss Oberhofen*, died on 30 January 1861 at the age of 81 in Clarens near Vevey. He left his wife and two sons, Albert Alexander and Guillaume.

After the death of her husband, Countess Louise travelled in the spring of 1861 with Countess Anna, Albert Alexander's wife, and their daughters to Venice to the deathbed of her daughter-in-law Countess Charlotte, wife of her younger son Guillaume. Despite the extremely sad occasion, the trip and the company of Countess Anna and her granddaughters served to lessen her grief, but the death

of her beloved 'Frederic' caused her to withdraw gradually from social life. Nevertheless, 'Grand-Maman', as she was affectionately called by her grandchildren, remained an indispensable part of the family, radiating her French zest for life among relatives, friends and acquaintances, until the end of her fulfilling life. Throughout her life, Countess Louise was considered a loving, educated, kind and elegant Frenchwoman, alert and quick-witted. She had a strong, volatile temperament, and was known to vigorously reject anything that did not please her. Until her death, she commuted between her residences in Berlin, Greng and Geneva. On 26 February 1881, Countess Marie Louise Elisabeth de Pourtalès, née Marquise Castellane-Norante, formerly lady-in-waiting to Her Majesty the Empress of France, Joséphine, died in Geneva.

Count Albert Alexander de Pourtalès (1812-1861) and Countess Anna (1827-1892)

Born in Paris on 10 September 1812, Albert Alexander studied in Geneva and Berlin. In the autumn of 1832, at the age of 21, he embarked on a two-year trip to America with Charles Joseph La Trobe, Washington Irving and Henry L Ellsworth. It took him and his fellow travellers to parts of the Midwest - they travelled to Ohio, the Mississippi and also to Mexico. He began his diplomatic work in the service of Prussia at the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Victoria of England. From 1838 to 1840 he was second secretary of the Prussian legation in Constantinople. After a brief interlude in Naples, he spent another three years on the Bosphorus as first secretary. During this time he undertook various extensive journeys through the Ottoman Empire. He had more knowledge of the conditions in the Ottoman provinces than almost any other Prussian diplomat of his time. In 1844 he was appointed to the Bülow Ministry in Berlin. He remained there as Legation Counsellor until 1848.



Count Albert de Pourtalès

Earlier, at *Rheineck* near Bonn, Count Albert de Pourtalès met Anna von Bethmann-Hollweg (1827-1892), the daughter of Moritz August von Bethmann-Hollweg, a professor at Bonn University who later became the Royal Prussian Minister of Education and Minister of Spiritual Science. At various court festivals, Fräulein von Bethmann-Hollweg had impressed Albert Alexander with her noble demeanour. They married on 6 August 1846 and the following year on September 4th, their first daughter, Countess Elisabeth de Pourtalès (1847-1866) was born.



Countess Anna de Pourtalès

The marriage of the two met with great approval at court, and Count Pourtalès was congratulated on his choice. Countess Anna was a woman of unusually thorough education, highly musical, had a serene nature even in difficult times, and a thoroughly engaging personality. The Pourtalès spirit as well as the Bethmann-Hollweg spirit was reflected in the upbringing of their two daughters.

Count Pourtalès spent the turbulent March days of the revolutionary year 1848 in Berlin and, like many others of his rank, within close quarters of his king. Dressed as a coachman, he spent the night of 19-20th March at the Brandenburg Gate, ready to assist the royal couple to flee to Potsdam. That same spring, Albert Alexander accompanied the Prince of Prussia, later Kaiser Wilhelm II, to England. Returning from Britain, he conducted the armistice negotiations with Denmark and Sweden in Malmö, which the king had entrusted to him.

In November 1848, Albert Alexander returned to Constantinople with his young family. Here, in the palace of the Prussian Embassy, Countess Helene de Pourtalès was born on 7 May 1849. Until 1851

Count Pourtalès served as ambassador to the Bosphorus. That spring he took a leave of absence following differences and apparently even quarrels with the government in Berlin. But above all he wanted to participate in the domestic political development of Prussia.

In the years that followed Count Pourtalès, probably not least due to the influence of his father-in-law Bethmann-Hollweg, as one of the heads of the *Wochenblatt* Party, became an advocate of moderate liberalism and thus fell into favour with Friedrich Wilhelm IV. The King and Foreign Minister von Manteuffel entrusted him with a special mission in London, which among other things dealt with the German western border and Prussia's position in internal German affairs. In the following spring, however, Albert Alexander withdrew completely from politics and diplomacy for about four years. He severed his ties with the *Wochenblatt* Party; again, considerable political differences of opinion were responsible.

The following extracts reveal that Count Pourtalès did not have good relations with Bismarck. This was based on balanced reciprocity, and Bismarck was certainly not the only 'subject' in Prussia to let Albert Alexander show off his French streak.

Bismarck's verdict on Pourtalès in a letter to Friedrich Wilhelm IV's adjutant general, Leopold von Gerlach, dated 13 April 1854:

Portalès is one of the best plated buffoons I've ever come across. Fast talking, bold assertions and good French have never impressed the majority of Germans; being of great wealth, having travelled far, been an ambassador, a count, blasé, personally acquainted with the first Europeans, and influenced by church, salon, science and matters of the flesh, how could he not persuade a German Michel von Bonn scholar (i.e. Moritz August von Bethmann-Hollweg) with the most moderate degree of flattery to consider the world to be sick as long as this son-in-law is not a minister!

From a judgment by Pourtalès on Prime Minister Otto von Manteuffel and Bismarck in 1853:

Bismarck always needs and abuses his party comrades. They are to him what only ministers should be to the king, post horses with which he drives to the next station. Bismarck has identified with one faction like no other (and is the author of its most dangerous excesses and shameless intrigues), and now that it's no longer working, he's trying others. There is simply a Judas in his knightly coat, and I don't walk a single step with him, but that wouldn't prevent me from using him as a tool. Manteuffel simply and comfortably swam with the current, Bismarck used the current to fertilize his vegetable garden... I don't mind if Bismarck gets a few chestnuts out of the fire for me. But I will never work with him and let him abuse me. Towards him I am always saddled with black ingratitude.

The de Pourtalès family subsequently moved first to Switzerland, then to Venice to the *Palazzo Tiepolo*, now known as *Palazzo Papadopolo*. Blessed with a large family fortune, de Pourtalès lived in independence and prosperity until 1858. The King of Prussia is said to have commented on Pourtalès' wealth in 1853: 'He would be a minister for me if he didn't have 30,000 Reichsthaler too much income, that's the source of disobedience.'

After the king's illness and when the Crown Prince of Prussia took over the regency, Albert Alexander was called back to Berlin. In the course of the government reshuffle, Count Pourtalès saw new opportunities open up for himself. In November 1858 he was appointed ambassador to Vienna. However, he never took up this post. In January 1859 he succeeded Hatzfeldt as ambassador in Paris.

The new ambassador was an idealist. He strived to campaign vehemently for his ideals, primarily for the unity of Germany, but he clearly lacked assertiveness. The following extracts from letters and

texts are intended to show the challenging responsibilities of Count Pourtalès during his three years as a diplomat in Paris. In a letter to his father-in-law in November 1859 he reports:

People live in such a hectic state here in Paris that I have not had a moment to write you a word since my return. As soon as I arrived, I was completely absorbed by visits and political discussions during my two-day stay. Then came Compiègne, a court life like no other, in which one never came to one's senses, and which I'm glad to have been part of. This court is absolutely the most splendid I have ever seen, and the people cultivate as much splendour as taste. The toilets (this one for the ladies) are by no means overly elegant. In the morning, when you arrive for breakfast in woollen skirts and red English petticoats, it's almost affectedly simple. The cuisine is excellent, and finally the carriages, in which one drives for hunting and for outings, are the most stylish. However, I was glad when all the glory came to an end, and still more that Anna had not been obliged to share in the fatiguing aspects of this campaign.

In addition to all the social advantages that life in Paris seemed to offer, the political problems could not be pushed into the background. While de Pourtalès had previously complained about Berlin's passive attitude in matters of foreign policy, in the following report Albert Alexander again expresses his concern:

Count Pourtalès - On the foreign policy situation - January 1860:

I am very far from preaching legitimate tendencies, but it cannot be a matter of indifference when one state alone (i.e. Napoleon III) seizes the initiative and steers now in one direction, now in the other, and the others drag after him. The main fault of the other cabinets is a lack of initiative and their own ideas. We have been negating or covering up the issues that have arisen since 1815. Suddenly someone comes along, *qui aime à faire parler de lui* [who likes to be talked about] and he stirs up now this, now that, which causes the others to run wild in horror and not be able to contain themselves out of fear. Why don't we make our own politics? Why are we completely without initiative and without our own thoughts... why not at least do this in Germany? And since one adores nationality, shall ours attain the status to which it is entitled?

You have no idea how sick and tired of Paris I am! I fear that I am not equal to my office, and I wish a more active, enterprising spirit like Bismarck could be sent here. He might try to do something with the local elements, while, impacted by the experiences of last summer, my courage fails me and I can do no more than avoid compromises and dangers. Everything I've been doing here is purely negative, because I've only found languor and lack of initiative in previous proposals, and between us, this negative is characteristic of our current ministry. It is honest, benevolent, and full of good intentions, but it lacks energy, it allows itself to be kicked and pushed, and instead of taking it seriously and treating enemies and friends as such, it still manoeuvres shyly like a debutante.

Explaining his often short-tempered, impatient manner, he remarked in 1861:

My nature, which is not German, often results in my being angry at German cheapness, German patience and German modesty, and allows me to complain about such things.

After Albert Alexander had spent the time from September to the beginning of December with Anna and their daughters on Lake Thun, in his last letter to Bethmann-Hollweg written on 10 December 1861 he clearly shows how much he would have loved to stay at *Oberhofen*:



Chateau Oberhofen c.1856

'Anna and her daughters arrived from *Oberhofen* this morning, and so we are all gathered, looking forward to the winter campaign with some concern, since I particularly like the contemplative life on Lake Thun much better than the Sisyphean business that I have to do here'.

Author Albert von Mutius later described the letter as a testament-like reckoning of the Count with himself and his like-minded people.²

Count Albert Alexander Pourtalès, Knight of Honor of the Order of St. John, Royal Prussian

Chamberlain and real Privy Councillor, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary at the Imperial French Court, Lifetime Member of the Royal Prussian House of Lords, died unexpectedly of a heart attack on the afternoon of 18 December 1861 at the Palais Beauharnais, the seat of the Prussian Embassy in Paris, while his wife and daughters were driving into town for Christmas shopping. His successor was Bismarck.

In 1933, Albert von Mutius assessed Count Pourtalès and his work as a statesman:

Portalès (appears) as the most modern of the Prussian statesmen of that time, Bismarck not excluded. From the awareness of being a man of the present and having the burgeoning powers of the future for himself, he drew on astonishing self-confidence with which he charmed his juniors with great inner modesty, and sometimes amazed and sometimes angered his opponents. It was not for nothing that he had absorbed the relativity of all European civilisation, the deeper problems of the traditional political and cultural conditions in Europe, during three stays of several years in the Orient.

His instinctive rejection of Russian supremacy in Eastern Europe was thoroughly modern, as was his struggle against the policy of the Austrian imperial state, which enslaved the unity movement in Germany and Italy; modern was his struggle for honest maintenance of the constitutional form on the part of the Crown, while vigorously confronting the revolutionary forces of the time; modern, the deep sense for the dynamic of all historical events, which speaks from all its utterances, the awareness that it is never a matter of status, but always something in the making; finally, the thoroughly European character of his Orient policy, which was always aimed at fostering understanding between the great powers, is modern. During his second stay in Constantinople from 1841 to 1844 he wrote the words that sound prophetic today: 'Let us not tear each other apart in Europe over the Syrian and Egyptian inheritance, as France and England used to do over the possession of India and so many other colonies. The moment is not far off when the material conditions will automatically hand over all rights of sovereignty in those countries to European capitalists. But when the time comes that political administration there has to be handed over to them, let us not form rival and hostile English, French, German trading companies like they did back then, with the tendency to destroy each other, but European ones'.

The text reflects Albert Alexander's political views, ideals and aspirations in the most clear and concise way. Mutius has presented Pourtalès' thinking and work in these sentences in such a way that the text can be considered a homage to a progressive thinker.

Countess Anna and her two daughters moved to Berlin after Albert Alexander's death. There, at the request of Crown Princess Victoria of Prussia,³ the widow entered her service as deputy Oberhofmeisterin (Mistress of the Household). In the spring of 1862, the body of Count Pourtalès was transferred from Paris to *Rheineck* and buried there in the Bethmann-Hollweg family crypt. In June 1866, Countess Elisabeth, just 18 years old, died of a severe fever.

After the death of her husband and her older daughter, Countess Anna commuted with Countess Helene mostly between Berlin, *Rheineck* and *Oberhofen*. Increasingly, the two arrived at Lake Thun with 'Grand-Maman'⁴ and stayed in the castle for extended periods.

In the spirit of Count Albert Alexander, Countess Anna was known as a generous benefactor in Oberhofen. According to her husband's wishes, she had the "hospital" built in 1862/63 with an attached school for young children. The poor from Oberhofen and Hilterfingen were treated there free of charge. As early as 1859, Count Pourtalès had sent two girls from Oberhofen to the Fliedner Deaconess Institute in Kaiserswerth for training, and rented rooms in the village where the infirmary and classroom were initially set up. In 1864, Countess Anna was very distressed by the village fire in Oberhofen, in which the castle was spared. Together with Countess Louise, who donated 500 francs, Anna helped the community with an additional 6,000 francs. In addition, the school celebrated Christmas in the castle every year.

She demonstrated her generosity, albeit for different reasons, to the composer Richard Wagner. Count Albert Alexander had invited Wagner to stay at the Palais Beauharnais, the Prussian Embassy, at the end of his less than successful visit to Paris in 1861. As a token of his gratitude and admiration, Wagner dedicated a paraphrase in A flat major for piano over an aria from *Tannhäuser*: 'Arrival at the Black Swans - in memory of his noble landlady, Countess Pourtalès, from Richard Wagner'. Following his stay in Paris, Countess Pourtalès received a total of seven letters from Wagner between March 1862 and May 1863. Finally, in March 1863, the composer asked the Countess for 1,200 thalers, which, according to correspondence, Countess Anna sent to him. Wagner had reached his 'desired goal'.

After the marriage of their daughter Helene to Count Harrach in 1868, the newlyweds accompanied Countess Pourtalès to Norderney in the summer of 1869. There they met the Prussian crown prince Friedrich Wilhelm, later German Emperor Friedrich III, and his wife Victoria. In 1870 Countess Pourtalès was presented with her first grandchild, but Elisabeth Countess Harrach was not to remain the only granddaughter.⁵ The Harrachs often came to visit her at *Oberhofen*, where Anna enjoyed the happy company of her grandchildren, or else she travelled to them.

Countess Anna Pourtalès, née Bethmann-Hollweg, died at *Oberhofen* on 10 July 1892.

¹ <https://blog.marasim.co/the-beautiful-indienne-a-textile-story-of-switzerland/>. Indiennes are printed and painted cotton fabrics that came from India to Europe in the 16th century and were soon imitated by French and Swiss companies. In 1785, with 160,000 printed clothes, Neuchâtel was the most important European centre of Indienne production.

² *Graf Albert Pourtalès: Ein preussisch-deutscher Staatsmann*, herausg. von Albert von Mutius, Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1933.

³ Daughter of Queen Victoria.

⁴ Countess Louise de Pourtalès.

⁵ Helene and Count Ferdinand Frédéric Auguste Harrach had four daughters and four sons.