From Aristocracy to Advocacy

A Charitable Association of Noble Women in Early 1800s Vienna

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When Emperor Franz II/I (1768–1835)[1] returned triumphantly from the peace negotiations in France that ended the Napoleonic Wars in 1814, commentators praised not only him but also the individuals and groups who had supported the war effort. Emerich Thomas Hohler (1781–1846), who worked for many years as an educator in the house of Joseph Prince Schwarzenberg (1769–1833), exclaimed,

> "Above all, the emperor looks down with honour on the unique Society of Aristocratic Women to Promote the Good and the Useful [Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen] and on all the associations that have been formed on its model and that have worked so praiseworthily with united forces to achieve great results in this war".[2]

The early years of the first women's association in the Habsburg Monarchy fell into a period of social upheaval. The Society was founded in 1810, after Napoleon's second occupation of Vienna, which lasted for seven months. Poverty was widespread in the Imperial City, with a population of between 280,000 and 300,000 within its present-day boundaries. In 1807, 18% of the total population lived in poverty and there were large numbers of poor and neglected children.[3] This number increased with the social decline of the wealthier citizens after the state was forced to declare bankruptcy following the Treaty of Schönbrunn in 1809.

For the majority of the Viennese society this meant an enormous loss of wealth; at the same time, it triggered massive inflation in many areas of life. The cost of bread and

1 Franz reigned as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire as Franz II from 1792–1806. After Napoleon had proclaimed the French Empire, Franz founded the hereditary Empire of Austria in 1804 and was the first Emperor of Austria as Franz I (1804–1835). – I would like to thank Barbara Haider-Wilson and Ulrike Harmat for their careful reading of my manuscript.

2 Hohler, Emerich Thomas: Die Rückkehr Sr. Majestät des Kaisers Franz, oder: Oesterreichs schönster Tag: Für alle Freunde des österreichischen Kaiserstaates, Wien 1814, p. 25.

3 Peter Csendes/Ferdinand Opll (eds.), Wien. Geschichte einer Stadt, vol. 3: Von 1790 bis zur Gegenwart, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2006, p. 40.

meat rose even more sharply than in previous years, when army supplies had driven up prices.[4] The provision of additional aid was illusory, as there was already a severe shortage of funds to adequately support the existing institutions for the care of the poor. Police reports warned of the population's resignation to poverty and hunger, the neglect of morality due to the French occupation and the spread of prostitution.[5] Prostitution and the fear of the impact of poverty, such as the prevalence of begging, were central themes in the everyday practice of municipal administration in the early nineteenth century, as Dietlind Hüchtker also notes for Berlin.[6]

1. First steps into the public eye

On 29 November 1810, when the Society was officially approved, the patriotic newspaper *Vaterländische Blätter* reported on its front page:

> "It is at such times that true fatherland love shows itself in its most beautiful splendour, when private individuals voluntarily offer their hands and try to do what the state is incapable of doing".[7]

The newspaper was distributed to all members of the Society, as it was trivialised that "this paper is probably still unknown to most women".[8] The personal papers of aristocratic women show time and again that individuals in these circles were very well informed and widely read, not only in terms of newspapers but also in terms of other publications, whether officially sanctioned or censored. Downplaying the level of knowledge of the Society's members might have been a strategy to assuage the Emperor's concerns about the influence that might be exerted. Although the Society walked a fine line, it was by no means a pioneer in promoting the unorthodox. The very fact that women organised themselves and came forward in this way was unconventional and followed the logic of wartime. This article examines the formation of the *Society of Aristocratic Women* from two interrelated perspectives. Firstly, it considers the ways in which gender norms played a role in the formation and activities of the Society. Secondly, it analyses the extent to which media reports, legal papers and official correspondence reveal processes of negotiation for agency and influence.

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4 Ibid.

5 Schembor, Friedrich Wilhelm: Meinungsbeeinflussung durch Zensur und Druckförderung in der Napoleonischen Zeit. Eine Dokumentation auf Grund der Akten der Obersten Polizei- und Zensurhofstelle, Wien 2010, p. 145.

6 Hüchtker, Dietlind: „Elende Mütter" und „liederliche Weibspersonen". Geschlechterverhältnisse und Armenpolitik in Berlin (1770–1850), Münster 1999, p. 10.

7 [Anonymous]: Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen, in: Vaterländische Blätter 29 November 1810, p. 1. WS is the author of the translations in this article.

8 ÖStA [Österreichisches Staatsarchiv = Austrian State Archives], AVA, Inneres [Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Inneres = Archive of the Central Authorities of Domestic Administration], PHSt [Polizeihofstelle = Court Police Authority] 45.1810, Joseph Sonnleithner to Emperor Franz II./I. on 3 November 1810.

Emperor Franz II/I charged the Court Police Authority (*Polizeihofstelle*) with the task of investigating the individuals involved in the founding of the Society and assessing the usefulness of such an association. The reports of the Court Police Authority therefore provide an insight into the process of its formation. In order to understand the anxieties that accompanied the creation of this first women's association in Vienna, the events in France around 1800 are relevant. In October 1793, all women's associations were banned, followed by the assassination of republican women such as Marie-Jeanne Roland (Madame Roland, 1754–1793) and Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793). The journal *Der Teutsche Merkur*, which was read in Vienna, reported on both women in a derogatory article in the spring of 1794. The latter was described as a "Mannfrau" (literally translated as "man-woman"): "Remember that woman, that man-woman […] the shameless Olympia de Gouges, who first set up women's clubs, spoke politics and practised sacrilege".[9]

Many of this generation were aware of what had happened in France when they joined the *Society of Aristocratic Women*. The question of the extent to which women should appear and speak in public, which could include their own salon, was shaped by considerations of avoiding ridicule. Maria Ulrike Countess Lažansky, née Countess Falkenhayn (1765–1852), pointed out in 1810 with regard to women's public appearance "that the vanity of letting one's own spirit shine often leads to rash steps and almost always makes us look ridiculous. A woman should cultivate her mind for her own well-being and that of the people who live with her, but she must not be presumptuous".[10] Given the ongoing criticism of aristocratic culture, the bourgeois institution of the association may have been a welcome opportunity for aristocratic women to promote respectability.

In one of the first statements on the subject, Vice-Police Commissioner Franz Baron Hager von Allensteig (1750–1816, president from March 1813) asserted that the project "deserves every conceivable encouragement on the part of the state; for private individuals are working into the hands of the government".[11] This desire for an extended arm of government was both encouraged and somewhat disturbed by the fact that it was a women's organisation. There are many contradictions in the perception of women's activism at the time. On the one hand, it was perceived as unpredictable, a force of nature, a stereotype reinforced by the social background of women who were recognised as influential in their own right and through their male family members. On the other hand, women were thought to be easily swayed, so male influence had the potential to steer the activities of the Society in the desired direction. Emperor Franz sought to mitigate this ambivalence by insisting on men's involvement in the day-to-day business of the Society. The Court Police Authority directly reserved the right to censor all manuscripts the Society published. This process was made easier by the fact that the association used the government printing press for all its publications. Emperor Franz had ordered the police

9 [Anonymous]: Die Revoluzionsdamen im neuen Paris und alten Rom, in: Der teutsche Merkur, Erstes Quartal 1794, pp. 69–88, 75.

10 After Emperor Franz' eldest daughter, Archduchess Marie Louise of Parma, married Napoleon Bonaparte in 1810, she continued to correspond regularly with her lady-in-waiting and tutor, Maria Ulrike Countess Lažansky. ÖStA, HHStA [Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv], Archive Montenuovo 12, Ulrike Maria Countess Lažansky to Archduchess Marie Louise on 7 September 1810.

11 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810 [91]. In case the document was numbered at the bottom right of the page, the number is indicated in square brackets in the footnote.

to monitor its meetings and activities, to which Hager replied that this task had to be carried out with both attention and caution, as people of higher rank might consider secret observation by the police to be an offence if they became aware of it. Hager, who was known for his lenient approach to his office and who was in charge of monitoring the activities of the Society, especially when it came to the attendance of foreigners at its meetings, reinterpreted this order, arguing that the police should be a supportive force for the women's charitable activities: "To derive the greatest benefit from such an association for the common welfare, it is above all important that the members should themselves be inspired with the greatness and sublimity of their purpose, or be under the influence and guidance of such insightful men who know how to choose what is useful and desirable for the state according to time and circumstances".[12]

The decision to allow this association was in line with Emperor Franz' reluctant efforts "to reform Austrian society to build wartime patriotism",[13] as Pieter Judson described it. This construction of wartime patriotism is also reflected in the above-mentioned newspaper, *Vaterländische Blätter*, which was founded in 1807 to promote the patriotic cause. Karen Hagemann has shown that the wars had a major impact on society as a whole, and she notes in relation to gender: "This symbiosis between nation-building and war had far-reaching consequences, not just for the construction of gender images and gender relations, but also for the entire gender order, which became 'nationalised' and 'militarised'".[14] Hagemann argues that it was through the institution of the association that women became socially "public", with patriotism serving as a reason to enter the so-called "public sphere". With the founding of the *Society of Aristocratic Women*, noble women transferred their long-standing practice of exercising influence to the changing and evolving field of public welfare. Yet, the form of association is deeply intertwined with civil society.

Heinz Reif maintains that the relationship between associations and the state changed over time: initially, associations were tolerated by the state as a distinct private sphere that facilitated reorientation.[15] Over time, however, as the case study in this article clearly shows, the state began to see these associations as a potential avenue for organised self-help in the economic and social spheres. Reif emphasises how the concern of the emperor and the ruling authorities that associations would increasingly become an instrument for the organisation of interests that challenged the bureaucratic-absolutist state and demanded and secured participation in state decision-making became a reality over the course of the century. For Reif, the association form, with all its emphasis on equality among members, was a new form of exclusivity and a way of organising a new upper class.[16] This was particularly evident in the field of charity: between 1810 and 1848, twenty-two charity organisations were founded in Vienna with enormous sums of

12 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810, Report by Franz Baron Hager, Deputy President of the Police and Censorship Court.

13 Judson, Pieter: The Habsburg Empire. A New History, Cambridge/London 2016, p. 92.

14 Hagemann, Karen: Female Patriots: Women, War and the Nation in the Period of the Prussian-German Anti-Napoleonic Wars, in: Gender & History 16/2 (2004), pp. 397–424.

15 Reif, Heinz: Westfälischer Adel 1770–1860. Vom Herrschaftsstand zur regionalen Elite, Göttingen 1979, p. 399.

16 Ibid.

money at their disposal.[17] The first printed history of the founding of the association, published in 1810, emphasised the equality of women as citizens who dedicated their time to the patriotic cause:

> "Although this society was originally an aristocratic one, it was intended from the outset that it should not be confined to the nobility but extend to all classes. These ladies were already united by the will to disregard their rank when it came to achieving a charitable purpose, to consider themselves only as citizens of the State, and to encourage women of all classes to unite with them by invitation".[18]

Charitable work was integral to aristocratic culture, interweaving religious piety and aristocratic behaviour.[19] Aristocratic women around the Viennese court were well-connected and used their links with other courts to exchange information and exert influence.[20] Noble families all over Europe competed for the attention of the rulers in order to maintain their privileges. As Ewald Frie points out, this competition was nothing new around 1800, but the rules were changing.[21] Aristocratic socialisation created favourable conditions for gaining a foothold in the expanded state bureaucracy, be it in the administration or the military.

In addition, the organisation of associations is an adaptation that took place as an appropriation and shaping of bourgeois ideals and norms. The changes in media use that occurred around 1800 were accompanied by an increase in the circulation of newspapers and regular reports on the activities of aristocrats and people at the Viennese court. This led to the emergence of a new player in the field of publicity. The target audience was not only the evolving bourgeoisie but also the aristocrats themselves, who sought to strengthen their family's position within the aristocratic power structure. The aristocratic status of the nobility was created through interaction and the cultivation of certain codes and behaviours, including the role model function, which can be seen as a counterpart to the pejorative ideas about the aristocratic way of life.

2. Charitable politics

The significance of the founding of the *Society of Aristocratic Women* in Vienna in 1810 becomes clear when one considers that there were no opportunities for women to participate formally in state processes at the time. Glenda Sluga describes how women made politics and influenced decisions through informal channels during this period, particularly in the field of diplomacy, and how salon culture contributed to women's influence.

17 Csendes/Opll (eds.), Wien, p. 40.

18 [Anonymous]: Entstehungsgeschichte und Verfassung der Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen, zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen, Wien 1811, p. 3.

19 Reif: Adel, pp. 445–446.

20 See Katrin Keller's published work, for example Keller, Katrin: Hofdamen. Amtsträgerinnen im Wiener Hofstaat des 17. Jahrhunderts, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2005.

21 Frie, Ewald: Adel um 1800. Oben bleiben?, in: zeitenblicke 4/3 (2005). *https://www.zeitenblicke.de/2005/3/Frie/index_html* 18.01.2024.

Diplomatic relations were not only facilitated by women as hosts but also established and used by women themselves, as shown by the examples of Germaine de Staël (1766–1817) or Dorothea Princess Lieven (1785–1857). Aristocratic women were intermediaries, often with a large circle of acquaintances, who brought people together.[22] As conduits of information, they were viewed with suspicion by the imperial government.

To be sure, the revolutionary events in France and the events of the war disrupted gender norms. They promoted dichotomising notions of masculinity and femininity, public and private, which shaped a bourgeois ideal of women that was grounded in fundamental differences in character and based on physical differences rather than human equality. The courtly ideal of a woman included the ability to engage in lively conversation as well as the display of prestige through consumption and appearance. The bourgeois ideal of women as passive, gentle companions, however, shaped judgements about the behaviour of aristocratic women, which came under scrutiny.[23] The alleged hedonism of the aristocracy was denounced, as were ostentation and extravagance. Throughout the nineteenth century, aristocratic women, like the female members of monarchical families, were "ideally celebrated as the embodiment of bourgeois feminine virtues and, in any case, measured against such standards".[24]

However, there was a great ambivalence between such idealised notions of femininity and the reality of many women's lives. An example of this ambivalence is the General Civil Code (ABGB), which came into force on 1 January 1812 and restricted women's agency, especially married women, even though women and men were, in principle, equal in private law. In the realm of law, older legal restrictions on women were still in force, and new ones were based on notions of women's physical inferiority and special characteristics.[25]

From today's perspective, the philanthropy of wealthy women can be read as political activity, but it was a socially expected commitment that had to be decidedly apolitical; Gabriella Hauch describes it as "political charity".[26] In this article, political action is understood as the exercise of influence in the realm of charitable giving, coupled with the associated media attention that this action drew to the issue and the people involved. According to Anthony Giddens, agency is understood as the ability to recognise opportunities for action and execute them.[27] Another level is the extent to which the action

22 Sluga, Glenda: Women, diplomacy and international politics, before and after the Congress of Vienna, in: Glenda Sluga/Carolyn James (eds.), Women, diplomacy and international politics since 1500, London/New York 2016, pp. 120–136; Sluga, Glenda: Madame de Staël and the Transformation of European Politics, 1812–17, in: International History Review 37 (2015), pp. 142–165.

23 Paletschek, Sylvia: Adelige und bürgerliche Frauen (1770–1870), in: Elisabeth Fehrenbach (ed.), Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland 1770–1848, München 1994, pp. 159–185.

24 Wienfort, Monika: Monarchie im 19. Jahrhundert, Berlin/München/Boston 2018, p. 141.

25 Hannelore Burger uses the example of citizenship cases to show how women petitioned and negotiated to get their demands met. Burger, Hannelore: Zur Geschichte der Staatsbürgerschaft der Frauen in Österreich. Ausgewählte Fallstudien aus der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: L'Homme 10/1 (1999), pp. 38–44. For a discussion of family law in the Habsburg Monarchy, see Osterkamp, Jana: Familie, Macht, Differenz. Familienrecht(e) in der Habsburgermonarchie als Herausforderung des Empire, in: L'Homme 31/1 (2020), pp. 17–35.

26 Hauch, Gabriella: Politische Wohltätigkeit – wohltätige Politik. Frauenvereine in der Habsburgermonarchie bis 1866, in: Zeitgeschichte 19, 7/8 (1992), pp. 200–214.

27 Giddens, Anthony: The Constitution of Society, Berkeley 1984, p. 9.

conforms to applicable law or moral concepts and has the capacity to "make a difference", that is, to exercise power.[28] The ability to make a difference was linked to economic success in terms of charitable donations. In the spring of 1810, a member of the police court scoffed at Joseph Sonnleithner's estimate of 50–60,000 guilders in donations within the first year:

> "Sonnleithner, who seems to rely more on his imagination than on his practical sense, believes that they will raise 50–60,000 guilders in the first year. This sum will be used in its entirety without the need for a general endowment of the institute".[29]

In fact, the first year's donations totalled more than 144,000 guilders, followed by almost 90,000 guilders in the second year. Five years after the Society was founded, annual donations amounted to 99,817 guilders. During the Vormärz period, the amount stabilised at around 50,000 guilders per year.[30] There was no fixed membership fee; women were supposed to decide how much they wanted to donate each year when they joined and give the amount to one of the committee members.[31] Additional donations were always welcome, often they were given anonymously, like a donation of 10,000 guilders in 1818 for the support of foundlings.[32]

3. Founding myths and anxieties

From the outset, efforts were made to document the history of the Society, to present its activities in a favourable light and to emphasise the patriotic spirit of its work. In 1910, on the occasion of the centenary, a sumptuous volume in beige cloth with gold embossing was published, containing a brief history of the Society and a list of its presidents and committee members. The first page of the volume is adorned with a portrait of the association's first president, Karoline Princess Lobkowitz, born Princess Schwarzenberg (1775–1816). In contrast to the later, often high-necked Biedermeier fashion, Lobkowitz is depicted in an Empire gown, her long hair pulled back with a plaited ribbon.[33] In the introductory note, the princess is described as the person who initiated the founding of the association.

28 Ibid.

29 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810, report dated 16 May 1810.

30 WB [Wienbibliothek = Vienna Library], Druckschriften, Sign. B-23885, Ausweis der Einnahme der Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen und der Verwendung, Wien 1811–1856.

31 In 1819, an announcement in the *Wiener Zeitung* reported an impostor who had tried to collect membership fees on behalf of the Society. Wiener Zeitung 25.02.1819, p. 369.

32 WB, Ausweis 1818.

33 Die Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen in Wien im ersten Jahrhundert ihres Bestandes 1811–1910, Wien 1911, p. 2.

Fig. 1: Illustration of Karoline Princess Lobkowitz. Wienbibliothek, Sign. B-55987.

The founding myth portrayed an association established by women, comprising solely women, similar to numerous associations founded around 1900. This was reaffirmed on the occasion of the 125th anniversary in 1936, when a commemorative card was printed with the same image of the princess and the caption: "1811–1936, 125 years in the service of the poor. The founder of the *Society of Aristocratic Women to Promote the Good and the Useful*: Marie Karoline Fürstin Lobkowitz".[34] However, police records from 1810 and earlier commemorations list several people who were involved in the Society's founding. A key figure in this process was Joseph Sonnleithner (1766–1835), the longtime secretary of the court theatres. Obituaries describe Sonnleithner as a humorous man full of energy. In early 1810, with the support of Karoline Princess Lobkowitz, he approached the emperor with the idea of an association of noble women. The Court Police conducted a subsequent investigation into Sonnleithner's character, which concluded

34 ÖStA, HHStA, SB Sammlungen Bilder Personen 145, Title: Marie Karoline Princess Lobkowitz (1775–1816), née Princess Schwarzenberg.

that he was a "very patriotic man" who could be trusted. The report noted that he received a substantial salary from the theatre and was protected by his wife's assets, indicating that he did not seek financial gain from the activity. He was also well educated and had an extensive network of acquaintances. "However, he assures us that he has already interested several princesses and all they need is Your Majesty's most gracious approval to recruit members in their circles and to collect the contributions".[35] Sonnleithner was written into the first statutes as the right-hand of the first president of the Society: "The perpetual secretary [sic] of the society, who first drafted the plan and reserved this honour for himself, also works directly with the head of the Society".[36]

Karoline Princess Lobkowitz's charitable activities were likely influenced by her brother, Joseph II. Prince Schwarzenberg (1769–1833) who headed the Court Commission for the Regulation of Charitable Institutions between 1804 and 1815 and became president of the Vienna Military Invalids Fund in 1814. Schwarzenberg was very active in collecting donations and had first-hand knowledge of the plight of poor relief and the challenges faced by educational and medical institutions. Members of the Lobkowitz and Schwarzenberg families belonged to a network of patrons of arts who continuously supported music and theatre. For example, Joseph Haydn's *The Creation* premiered in the Schwarzenberg house in 1798, and Beethoven's *Eroica* premiered in a Lobkowitz palace in 1804.[37]

Both families were also involved in the Court Theatre Company, which, together with other art-loving aristocrats, rented several theatres in Vienna for a number of years until some of them were returned to state ownership in 1810.[38] The founding of the *Musikverein* (Society of Friends of Music) in 1812, in which Sonnleithner played a leading role, is embedded in this activity and linked to the founding of the *Society of Aristocratic Women* two years earlier. A 1908 published history of the singer's association with the *Musikfreunde* (Friends of Music Dilettante Society) in Vienna describes the interrelationships in the founding process in detail:

> "Not only should 'both men and women' be able to be elected as proxies – in the future body of representatives – but a member of the Ladies' Society should also open and sift the votes and announce those elected. In general, according to this proposal, the Society should actually be entirely at the service of the Ladies' Society and in particular organise its concerts for its 'benefit', which is why agreement should always be reached on concert matters with a committee member appointed for this purpose by the Ladies' Society. Membership fees should also be handed over to this committee

35 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810, report dated 24 February 1810.

36 §15, Verfassung der Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen, zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen, Wien 1810.

37 Hanson, Alice M.: Die zensurierte Muse. Musikleben im Wiener Biedermeier. Aus dem Amerikanischen übertragen und nach den Originalquellen zitiert von Lynne L. Heller, Wien/Köln/Graz 1987, pp. 132–136.

38 Österreichische Mediathek, Online exhibition Beethoven on site, available at *https://www.mediathek.at/beethoven/beethovens-orte-innere-stadt/beethovens-orte-theater-und-auffuehrungsorte* / 22.01.2024. On the practice of leasing the court theatres, see Vocelka, Karl: 1699–1815: Glanz und Untergang der höfischen Welt. Repräsentation, Reform und Reaktion im habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat, Wien 2001, pp. 407–408.

> lady, who should be in charge of the entire cash management of the Dilettante Society".[39]

This potential inclusion of women in organisational tasks and decision-making processes raised concerns. This is also reflected in the consideration of whether a male supervisor should be appointed for every female member involved in the *Society of Aristocratic Women*. The newspaper *Vaterländische Blätter* summarised the discussion as follows:

> "Each of them is free to choose a man of proven knowledge and patriotic sentiment as an adviser, but His Majesty has expressly declared that it is by no means necessary to appoint a proper adviser for each of them, as some women may trust in their own insight".[40]

It was believed that men possessed a more rational and clearer understanding of what was beneficial for the state. But it was not just about giving advice; it was also about preventing transgressions. The binary nature of gender relations, firmly established in the popular imagination by 1800, attributed very different physical and mental abilities to men, placing them in the realm of society and culture, while women were seen as closer to nature, as discussed above. The fears associated with this are reflected in a note from Emperor Franz to Commissioner Hager, asking him to ensure that the association remained within the limits set out in the plan and "does not degenerate into an institution detrimental to the administration of the state".[41]

4. Members and networks

The Society's statutes provided for the election of the president and the committee of twelve every three years, and women were often re-elected. Nine of the twelve women on the first elected committee had access to or held a position at the court of the politically engaged Empress Maria Ludovika Beatrix of Austria-Este (1787–1816).

39 Böhmersheim, August Böhm Edler von: Geschichte des Singvereines der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien. Festschrift zum fünfzigjährigen Singvereins-Jubiläum, Wien 1908, p. 125.

40 Vaterländische Blätter 29.11.1810, Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen in Wien, pp. 407–411, 409.

41 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810 [109].

Karoline Princess Lobkowitz, née Princess Schwarzenberg, 1775–1816 (1811–1815, President of the Society) **Chamber access** (Kammer-Zutritt) Marie Anna Countess Dietrichstein, 1750–1833 (Deputy Head, 1811–1815, President of the Society, 1815–1823)
First committee: Josefa Princess Auersperg, née Princess Lobkowitz, 1756–1823 (1811–1831 on the committee) **Palace lady** (Palastdame) Karoline Princess Liechtenstein, née Countess Manderscheidt-Blankenhayn, 1768–1831 (1811–1831 on the committee) **Chamber access** (Kammer-Zutritt) Anna Countess Thurn, née Countess Sinzendorf, 1758–1842 (1811–1816 on the committee) **Chamberlain's widow** (Kammerherren-Witwe) Franziska Baroness Arnstein, née Itzig, 1758–1818 (1811–1815 on the committee) Marie Anna Countess Dietrichstein, 1750–1833 (1811–1815 on the committee, then president) Isabella Countess Chotek, née Countess Rottenhan, 1774–1817 (1811–1816 on the committee) Marie Christine Princess Lichnowsky, née Countess Thun, 1765–1841 (1811–1826 on the committee) **Small chamber access** (Kleiner Kammer-Zutritt) Louise (Rosalie) Countess Rzewuska, née Princess Lubomirska, 1788–1865 (1811–1813 on the committee) **Chamberlain's widow** (Kammerherren-Witwe) Karoline Princess Trauttmansdorff, née Countess Colloredo, 1752–1832 (1811–1836 on the committee) **Palace lady** (Palastdame) Louise Countess Lanckoronska, née Countess Rzewuska, 1774–1839 (1811–1836 on the committee) **Wife of a privy councillor** (Geheime Rats-Frau) Marie Princess Esterházy, née Princess Liechtenstein, 1768–1845 (1811–1823 on the Committee) **Palace lady** (Palastdame) Sophie Countess Schönborn, née Countess von der Leyen, 1769–1834 (1811–1823, headmistress from 1824) **Wife of a privy councillor** (Geheime Rats-Frau)

The person who stands out for several reasons is Franziska (Fanny) Baroness Arnstein, born Itzig (1758–1818), a Jewish salonierre whose salon was widely known and commended for its "relaxed and cosmopolitan atmosphere".[42] She was married to Nathan Adam Arnstein (1748–1838), who had been promoted to the rank of baron in 1797. The police court commented on her involvement:

> "'Adeliche Damen-Gesellschaft zur Beförderung des Guten und des Nützlichen' is the name of this association, which has already been joined by a hundred ladies from all levels of the nobility. In addition to most of the princesses who reside here, one sees in this circle the Baroness v. Arnstein, Mrs von Eskeles and several other ladies of the nobility of the latest creation. […]"[43]

Mrs von Eskeles was Cäcilie Eskeles (1760–1836), the sister of Fanny Arnstein, who was married to the banker Bernhard Eskeles (1753–1839). Both Jewish bankers were leading figures in the Viennese financial world in the early nineteenth century. Interestingly, the police court did not comment directly on the women's religious background but only on

42 Melton, James Van Horn: The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe, Cambridge 2001, pp. 218–219.

43 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810, report dated 16 May 1810.

their status as newly ennobled. The Arnstein family played a pivotal role in the construction of a hospital in the nearby town of Baden, a favourite holiday destination of Emperor Franz. Fanny Baroness Arnstein presented the sum of 6,160 guilders, which she had received from the Jewish community, as a contribution to this hospital. The hospital commenced operations in 1813 with a capacity of twelve beds and initially offered treatment to impoverished foreigners regardless of their nationality or religious affiliation. In 1824, Fanny Arnstein's daughter, Henriette (1780–1859), took charge of the hospital. She made a significant contribution to its expansion by donating nine beds and a considerable sum of 21,700 guilders.

By the end of the Society's first full year in 1811, the number of members had grown steadily, so much so that in March 1812, Marie Anna (Marianna) Countess Dietrichstein (1750–1833), as vice president of the Society, wrote to Commissioner Hager that the number of active members was still increasing from day to day and that an updated membership list would follow when the initial expansion was complete. "Will a few hundred women be able to get along for long"?[44] the police court doubted, especially as the emperor had initially planned to limit membership to a maximum of fifty women. This question of whether the women would get along is indicative of the perception that women would find it difficult to organise themselves. Specifically, this reflects the gendered nature of politics and the assumption that women may be incapable of moving beyond superficial and trivial infighting to focus on deeper issues. Unlike other women's associations in German-speaking countries, this organisation was not dissolved after the Congress of Vienna but continued to operate in Austria until March 1938.

Hagemann provides a detailed analysis of the activities of patriotic women's associations in Prussia, where Princess Marianne of Prussia (1785–1846), the sister-in-law of Frederick William III, together with twelve Hohenzollern princesses, published the famous "Appeal of the Royal Princesses to the Women of the Prussian State" in March 1813 to involve women in patriotic charity work. She went on to found the *Patriotic Women's Association*.[45] Another patriotic women's association was founded in Berlin on 13 July and Princess Wilhelmina of Orania (1751–1820), who was part of Princess Marianne's initiative, was the driving force behind another initiative in The Hague.[46] Some evidence suggests that the *Society of Aristocratic Women* in Vienna inspired the formation of associations in the German states; for example, "as is well known, the Viennese *Society of Aristocratic Women* was imitated not only throughout the Austrian Empire but also throughout Germany".[47]

All these initiatives were abandoned shortly after 1815, when it was argued that, in peacetime, it was no longer necessary to continue the charitable work that had been so closely associated with patriotic endeavours in wartime. In Vienna, Emperor Franz was

44 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 45.1810, report dated 16 May 1810.

45 Hagemann, Karen: „Mannlicher Muth und teutsche Ehre": Entwürfe von Nation, Krieg und Geschlecht in der Zeit der Antinapoleonischen Kriege Preußens, Paderborn 2002, pp. 380–381.

46 I am grateful to my colleague Frans Joost Welten who brought this to my attention.

47 Hohler: Rückkehr, p. 25. The role model function is also emphasised in other reports, such as on the occasion of an audience of the committee members with the Empress in 1817. Wiener Zeitung 14.04.1817, p. 337.

inclined to allow the Society to continue and even to authorise the founding of new societies, but he wanted to drastically restrict the scope of the Society's activities. In an attempt to severely restrict communication between the Society's branches, which would have had a serious impact on its charitable work, he issued a decree in 1816, which was revoked after the intervention of several members of the Society's board:

> "Each of these associations must stand alone. There can therefore be no connection between the various associations, no correspondence, no interdependence and, moreover, no branches".[48]

In early 1817, Marianna Countess Dietrichstein, the Society's second president, reported with relief on the Society's successful intervention:

> "This happy success, and the knowledge that we have done much to help our unfortunate fellow men, must now spur us all the more to continue our efforts with the same zeal, for His Majesty, by the Cabinet letter of 1 January 1817, has removed the restrictions imposed by the resolution of 20 September 1816, after the Society had presented itself to the emperor. His Majesty has removed the restrictions imposed on the Society [...] and has condescended to acknowledge with satisfaction the active assistance given by the Society to several of the existing poor relief and welfare institutions".[49]

The cancellation of all new restrictions was published in January 1817 as a decree entitled "Explanation of some points of the Decree of 1816 concerning the Aristocratic Women's Associations".[50]

5. Charitable work

Charitable work in the field of welfare tasks was a deeply political endeavour. This was especially true during the Napoleonic Wars. Charity can be defined as a "fundamental social relationship" that creates a link between those who have resources and those who do not.[51] The conditions for receiving charitable gifts, the individuals and institutions involved in philanthropic activities and the practice of giving itself have changed significantly throughout history. Tatjana Tönsmeyer contends that forms of charity can be conceptualised as "sovereign practices".[52] This section discusses some highlights of the Society's efforts, focusing on war relief, improving public health and education, and the distribution of needlework products through an anonymous sales system.

48 Politische Gesetze und Verordnungen 1792–1848, dated 26 September 1816, item 131: Principles for the formation of women's associations, Vienna 1816.

49 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PhSt 1810, Letter from Maria Anna Countess Dietrichstein to Catharina Luegmayer, head of the Rohrau branch, 8 August 1817.

50 Politische Gesetze und Verordnungen 1792–1848, dated 3 January 1817, item 15: Explanation of some points of the highest resolution of 1816 concerning the aristocratic women's associations.

51 Ewald, François: Der Vorsorgestaat, Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 71.

52 Tönsmeyer, Tatjana: Adelige Moderne. Großgrundbesitz und ländliche Gesellschaft in England und Böhmen 1848–1918, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2012, pp. 258–262.

Girls' education

Supporting the education of girls was a central aim of the Society's work in the early 19th century. At the beginning, the focus was on establishing industrial schools. These schools, often run by private individuals, taught simple handicrafts such as knitting and crocheting and were aimed at girls. The girls were seen as potential future mothers who would encourage their children to lead moral lives. In 1814, the Society also began to open industrial schools for girls from poor backgrounds in the Viennese suburbs of Rossau and Spittelberg. In the city centre, a woman called Frau Mitterberger[53] provided education in needlework, and the association also paid the school tuition for girls at other private girls' schools. A year later, the Society reported that sixty-two girls had received industrial education, not only in Vienna "but also in Bruck an der Leitha and Wolkersdorf".[54]

After several years of activity, the Society and its numerous branches had become an established part of social life in Vienna and other cities. The Lower Austrian provincial governor, Augustin Reichmann von Hochkirchen (1755–1828), made a proposal in 1814/15 that shows how the resulting network was seen as a resource for state intervention. Reichmann proposed the establishment of industrial schools as crime prevention measure "in such numbers that the entire female youth, especially the girls from the poorer classes, will receive instruction free of charge". In Reichmann's view, such schools should be separate from primary schools and, remarkably, should be supervised not by the Catholic school authorities but by the *Society of Aristocratic Women*:

> "Schools should be generally allowed to exist separately from primary schools; all should be publicly monitored and put under the observation of the Ladies-Association without exception".[55]

Reichmann's assessment may have been influenced by the case of France, where female teachers could volunteer to be *dames inspectrices* and issue annual reports on the girls' schools in their *arrondissement*.[56] The idea of putting women in a position to monitor female industrial schools reflects the status that the Society had gained over the years, however, the industrial school project was never realised.

The Society's commitment to the education of girls is also evident in its financing of the publication of a pedagogical work by Antonie Wutka (1763–1824),[57] an educational entrepreneur and author. The twelve-volume encyclopaedia, of which the first volume was

53 This was most likely Anna Mitterberger (1786–1850), the owner of a sewing school, who had founded her school in 1809 and continued to run her business until the mid-1840s.

54 Dietrichstein, Maria Anna Gräfinn [sic] von: Ausweis der Einnahmen der Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen und der Verwendung im Jahre 1815, Wien 1816.

55 ÖStA, AVA, StHK [Studienhofkommission = Court Commission for Education], 17a in genere: Industrieschulen [23–68], Comment by Augustin Reichmann von Hochkirchen.

56 De Bellaigue, Christina: Educating women. Schooling and identity in England and France, 1800–1867, Oxford 2007, p. 31.

57 Blumesberger, Susanne: Handbuch der österreichischen Kinder- und Jugendbuchautorinnen, vol. 2: M–Z, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2014, pp. 1299–1300.

already published in 1802, offers little reflection on the prevailing gender norms but emphasises nonetheless the intellectual equality of women and men. For Wutka who struggled with economic difficulties, particularly during war time, this financial support for the printing was not only a lifeline but also an acknowledgement of her work.[58]

Needlework sales

Several cases highlight the economic hardships faced by households at this time, particularly those of the lower middle classes and day labourers during and after the financial crises of the Napoleonic wars.[59] According to the Society's observations, many women were under pressure to maintain or contribute to their families' income, including women from more affluent backgrounds. Women who wished to remain anonymous had to sell their products at less than fair value:

> "The consideration that in all major cities a significant number of women are obliged to earn their income by needlework, among whom there are many who are not able to promote the sale of their work with the necessary activity, protected by the circumstances in which they find themselves by birth and by the rank of their parents and relatives […], has led to the establishment of public institutions in several cities […]".[60]

Under the leadership of Marie Princess Esterházy, the Society organised sales points in the city of Vienna. Women were not obliged to deliver their products to one of the four sales points but could send someone else and label the work with a name and a price. This suggests that this sales system may have been also used by women from formerly affluent backgrounds.[61] Marianna Countess Dietrichstein, the second president of the Society, experienced first-hand what it meant to struggle to live up to the social standards of an aristocrat. Dietrichstein remained unmarried, and, as the only daughter of Joseph Karl Count Dietrichstein, who could not continue the line without male heirs, she had to sell the family's properties in Lower Austria to support herself after her father's death.[62] She also resigned as president of the Society. She lived at the *Savoysches' Damenstift* (Savoyard Women's Foundation), a convent founded by Anna Felicitas of Savoyen, born Princess Liechtenstein (1694–1772), who had stipulated in her will that the palace should be used as a convent for noble ladies. Women who met the criteria of financial need were allowed to live in the palace in the centre of Vienna. They had to perform devotional exercises and wear black, but they were allowed to go out, travel and even marry.

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58 The foreword to the new complete edition contains a dedication to the Society. Wutka, Antonie: Encyklopädie für weibliche Jugend, Wien 1815–16.

59 Kann, Robert A.: A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526–1918, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1974, p. 242.

60 [Anonymous]: Kunst- und Industrie-Anstalt für feinere weibliche Handarbeiten, in: Vaterländische Blätter 08.07.1812.

61 For an analysis of poverty among aristocratic women in the German Kaiserreich, see Singer, Johanna M.: Arme adlige Frauen im Deutschen Kaiserreich, Tübingen 2016.

62 Starzer, Albert: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Niederösterreichischen Statthalterei, Wien 1897, p. 363.

The establishment of the Society's distribution service was called the *Kunst- und Industrieanstalt für feinere weibliche Handarbeiten* and involved taking orders from customers. The Society used a sales system whereby for every guilder sold, one kreuzer was donated to the Society's cause of offering places in industrial schools. The Society referred to similar projects in England, namely in Bath and Manchester, as well as in Leipzig, Berlin and Würzburg, and to a *Gesellschaft zur Beförderung des inländischen Kunstfleißes* (Society to Promote the Domestic Art-Industriousness) in Denmark. The model of the Art and Industrial Institute inspired several business entrepreneurs to offer a similar system of distributing goods for a percentage of the selling price. This growing practice led the Society to close its shop in 1826. The concept of such entrepreneurial institutes was well received not only in Vienna but also in Prague and Brno, where similar institutes were opened in 1813.[63]

By 1814, more than two hundred women in Vienna were using the Society's services. In the same year, the head of the diocese Linz, Sigismund von Hohenwart (1745–1825), issued an impassioned warning against educating girls in the finer arts of sewing, as this knowledge would lead to "their dangerous freedom and independence".[64] Many women in the arts and cultural sectors were involved in the drive to provide industrial training for girls and in providing possibilities for the sale of needlework products. For the first year, the private apartments of four women in Vienna were used as means for distribution until a store (*Magazin*) was set up in the *Bürgerspital* in June 1813.[65]

One of the four women was the actress Julie Resch (?–1827), suggesting that some of the participants came from theatre circles. Sonnleithner initially invited Johanna Franul of Weißenthurn (1773–1847) to participate in this project, an actress and writer from Koblenz who spent her professional life in Vienna. Her plays were regularly performed at the *Hofburgtheater* (Court Theatre). In May 1812, she wrote a three-page letter to Sonnleithner, the first page of which is translated here. In her letter, she made it clear that while other women could support the *Society of Aristocratic Women*, she was fully occupied with her professional life. She asked Sonnleithner to read her letter to Princess Lobkowitz and to reassure her that she was not lacking in good will, but that her time constraints prevented her from participating in the endeavour.

"Dear Sonnleithner

When I promised you that I would take on an assignment at your Industrial Institute, I did not know the circumstances that would make it impossible for me to do so. How could I set aside three hours a day, three times a week, for everyone to come and talk to me, when my business often forces me to deny myself in front of my best friends? You must not think of me as an ordinary woman who only runs her household – and can use the rest of her time to contribute to your good cause – in the morning, I study or write – or have rehearsals – in the afternoon, I play, where I cannot miss my sister, who does

63 [Anonymous]: Ueber die fortgesetzte, wohlthätige Wirksamkeit der Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen, in: Wiener Zeitung 04.10.1813, p. 1.

64 ÖStA, AVA StHK, 17a in genere: Industrial schools, Sigismund von Hohenwart, pp. 72–74.

65 [Anonymous]: Kunst- und Industrie-Anstalt für feinere weibliche Handarbeiten, in: Vaterländische Blätter 08.07.1812, pp. 325–326.

> my toilet, since I have neither a make-up artist nor a maid. You told me today about a register – you have to keep accounts and records of work, I don't have time for that, and I don't think my sister is capable of it – when you first suggested it to me, it was only about one hour a week for the girls to deliver their work – this greater expanse forbids me to take part in this enterprise".[66]

Such a tone was not unusual for a businesswoman, as Weißenthurn described herself. The letter shows that Joseph Sonnleithner approached women in theatre circles for help and may have acted as an intermediary between Princess Lobkowitz or other members of the association's committee and middle-class women who supported the charitable cause.

Foundlings

The Vienna Foundling Hospital, located on the main street in the Alservorstadt district, was a particular focus of the association's activities in the early years. Verena Pawlowsky describes how, in 1809/1810, the Lower Austrian government and the Vienna City Council discussed the high mortality rate among foundlings and how the *Society of Aristocratic Women* and the Viennese Court participated in this discussion.[67] The Society's commitment to the care of foundlings must be seen in a wider European context. Linda Colley highlights how women's bodies and the safety of children became the focus of attention: "Encouraging women to procreate, breastfeeding mothers instead of suckling, rescuing foundlings and orphans – all these causes became increasingly attractive to British legislators, scholars and charities in the second half of the 18th century for both practical and humanitarian reasons".[68]

In March 1811, Princess Lobkowitz, Princess Lichnowsky and Countess Chotek "visited the Foundling Hospital, accompanied by the Society's secretary, and His Excellency the Governor, Count von Saurau, gave those ladies the most complete knowledge of the smallest details".[69] The Society intended to use the branches that had successively been established in Lower Austria since its foundation to organise foster homes for children in order to reduce the high mortality rate: "As the mortality tables show that more children are kept alive by those who are taken into care in the countryside, the Society endeavoured to find people there who would take the children into care on acceptable terms".[70] One of the Society's aims was to find suitable foster mothers in Lower Austria and to place children in their care. In 1811, out of a total income of 144,207.54 guilders, the Society spent 118,885.18 guilders, of which about a quarter (30,249.50 guilders) was for this purpose. In the following years, expenditure was between 12 and 18 % of income, with

66 Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Sammlung HAN, Autogr. 8/107–4, 19.05.1812.

67 Pawlowsky, Verena: Mutter ledig – Vater Staat. Das Gebär- und Findelhaus in Wien 1784–1910, Innsbruck/Wien 2001, p. 229.

68 Colley, Linda: Britons. Forging the nation 1707–1837, New Haven 2005, p. 255.

69 [Anonymous]: Wohltätige Sorgfalt der Gesellschaft adeliger Frauen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen für die Erziehung der Findelkinder, in: Vaterländische Blätter 13.03.1811, p. 128.

70 Ibid.

peaks in 1819 (20.8 %) and 1821 (25.26 %). From 1824 to 1828, expenditure was only between 1 and 3%, and from 1828 onwards, foundlings no longer appeared as an item of expenditure in the reports without any explanation.[71]

Furthermore, the promotion of public health was facilitated by the allocation of financial resources for the provision of swimming lessons. The initial objective of the Society was to establish the first swimming school in Vienna, the Military Swimming School, which was located on one of the arms of the Danube in the Prater. However, this enterprise was later transferred to Johann Ernst Count Hoyos (1779–1849), who took control of it as a joint-stock company, with the Society acquiring a small share.

The Society also provided cataract treatment to restore sight for people in need in Lower Austria. These efforts were organised by the Lower Austrian branches.[72] Members of the Society organised and paid for essential supplies such as bandages and hospital equipment. In 1812, the residents in need at the battlefields of Aspern and Wagram received significant support.[73] In 1813, the Society issued a call for wound dressing material with precise instructions for the material itself and its delivery to the vice president of the Society, Marianna Countess Dietrichstein. The appeal emphasised:

> "So then, noble women of our capital, noble women of the entire dear fatherland, use this opportunity to do good and to help heal wounds that have been courageously endured for you and your children, for your hearth, for emperor and fatherland, for honour, justice and lasting peace".[74]

6. An angry letter

The Society's fundraising and activities were hugely successful, and newspaper reports portrayed the women as a patriotic force bringing help to those in need, with constant favourable comments from Emperor Franz. The potential suspicion and resistance the women must have encountered were not reflected in official commentary. Officials accustomed to maintaining control and authority must have felt their positions undermined by this unprecedented exercise of female agency. A letter of criticism concerning a communication from the president of the Society Karoline Princess Lobkowitz to the president of the Ministry of the Court War Council illustrates this aspect:

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71 WB, Ausweise 1811–1856.

72 On the efforts in Lower Austria, see Schütz, Waltraud: Hilfe für Abgebrannte, ländliche Feste und medizinische Versorgung. Wohltätiges Engagement von Frauen, in: Oliver Kühschelm/Elisabeth Loining/Stefan Eminger/Willibald Rosner (eds.), Niederösterreich im 19. Jahrhundert, vol. 2, St. Pölten 2021, pp. 381–410.

73 Two concerts organised by the society and performed by amateur musicians raised 26,100 guilders for Aspern and 20,100 guilders for Wagram, which in each case corresponded to the annual salary of a field marshal who had served for ten years. Chimani, Leopold: Lehrreiche Erzählungen und Geschichten aus dem Vaterlande und dessen Bewohner. Ein unterhaltendes Lesebuch für die Jugend des österreichischen Kaiserstaates, Wien 1814, pp. 197–198 and 201.

74 Österreichischer Beobachter 13.09.1813, p. 1292.

> "People have often complained that the Society of Aristocratic Women arrogates to itself a certain sphere of activity that is not compatible with the dignity of public administration.
>
> For example, it has often been criticised that this Society pursues a kind of investigation into public institutions, and it has been found most strange that the government did object to the publication of such findings of these investigations, which usually cast a detrimental light on the state of these institutions and public institutes, in public newspapers to the public, which in any case sees everything as poorly and improperly managed. The correspondence that this society of ladies conducts, on a very extensive scale, with court and state authorities is also the subject of some biting satire, which is unavoidable as these ladies' notes, together with the other official files, are left in the hands of so many officials.
>
> As I have just received a similar note, which in fact, contains a special order to my Hofkriegsratspräsidenten [then Count Bellegarde], which the latter has probably concealed out of his well-known politeness towards ladies, I thought I would obediently send Your Excellency a message."[75]

Karoline Princess Lobkowitz contacted Heinrich Count Bellegarde (1756–1845), President of the Court War Council, on a matter concerning midwives from the border regions of the Habsburg Monarchy who had to attend training in Vienna. Military midwives were the only women who had the status of military officers. They were skilled civilians employed directly by the army. Like military artisans, they were under military jurisdiction, attached to military units and enjoyed certain benefits.[76] The Chaplain to the Poor, Anton Edler of Bergenstamm (1761–1831), had approached the Society to support the women from the border region who were attending the midwifery course at the Josephine Academy on the orders of the Court War Council. They were unable to feed, clothe and house themselves on the eight guilders they were given, and they hoped that the Society would support them in their plight.

However, Princess Lobkowitz asked Count Bellegarde to take matters into his own hands, as this kind of support was not in the interests of the Society. The letter from the official of the Court War Council provides information about the Society's actions. The women wrote letters to the officials, demanding action and pointing out their inaction. The Court War Council considered this intervention to be interference in military affairs.[77]

This demand for improvement in the area of charity was also echoed in the newspapers. The Society was seen as a force to be reckoned with, as the criticism in this letter and other examples in this article show. The letter ends with an anecdote about a fundraising

75 ÖStA, AVA, Inneres, PHSt 394/1812, Letter from an anonymous employee of the Court War Council to Franz Freiherr von Hager (?), 18 April 1812.

76 I am grateful to my colleague Ilya Berkovich, who provided me with this information.

77 The Court War Council may have been particularly cautious when it came to the Council's affairs, as James van Horn Melton describes in a case of 1780. Melton, James Van Horn: Absolutism and the eighteenth-century origins of compulsory schooling in Prussia and Austria, Cambridge 1988, p. 230.

campaign in a location called "Rothes Haus" (Red House). In this anecdote, Ignaz Sonnleithner (1770–1831) was told that his brother Joseph had been sent to this house in Alstergasse to collect donations. Allegedly he had spent all his money on *Weiber*, so his brother replied that it was only fair that Joseph should go begging on behalf of the Society. This remark at the end of the letter was an insult to the Sonnleithner family but also a disparagement of the members of the Society. The anonymous letter-writer emphasised that similar anecdotes circulated.

Hostility continued to accompany the work of the Society. Accused of "arbitrariness and partiality" in the distribution of donations, the committee decided in 1842 to restructure the Society's work. The aim was to focus on what members called the Society's original mission: the traditional care of the poor. The Society also changed its name, replacing "women" with "ladies".[78] This renaming may have been a move to further distinguish itself from the growing number of bourgeois initiatives.

7. Aftermath

The Society remained active even after the end of the monarchy in 1918 and in the Republic of Austria until March 1938. In the twentieth century, the number of members remained constant at around 120.[79] Although aristocratic privileges and titles were eliminated with the Abolition of Nobility Act in April 1919,[80] the Society continued to exist under the same name, and the designation of persons by their aristocratic titles was by no means over. Elisabeth Kinsky-Wilczek (1865–1941), who was president of the Society from 1924 to 1935, describes its activities in a letter to the Federal Chancellery regarding the annual grants from the state lottery to the Society for charitable purposes:

> "Since the foundation of the association in 1811, it has been active in the field of charity without interruption and is thus the oldest of the charitable associations still existing in Vienna. The association's activities extend in particular to providing poor women who have recently given birth with money and children's underwear, as well as for poor sick people; in keeping with the times, particular importance is also attached to supporting impoverished middle-class people".

In her letter, Kinsky-Wilczek discusses the devaluation of money as a result of the First World War and the resulting limited resources, which would not allow the Society to meet

78 WB, Druckschriftensammlung, Signatur C-24154, Zusammenstellung der Sitzungs-Beschlüsse der Gesellschaft adeliger Damen zur Beförderung des Guten und Nützlichen, Wien 1841.

79 ÖStA, AdR [Archive of the Republic] BKA BKA-I BPDion Wien VB Signatur II-1, questionnaire on the association, signed by Elisabeth Kinsky-Wilczek.

80 8. Sitzung am 3. April 1919, in: Stenographische Protokolle über die Sitzungen der Konstituierenden Nationalversammlung der Republik Österreich, vol. 1, Wien 1919, pp. 179–192.

its many requests.[81] The description of the activities is reminiscent of the Society's first statutes, as is Kinsky-Wilczek's reference to the fact that *Bürgersfrauen* (the wives of bourgeois men) would serve as assistants to the noblewomen, as had already been established in 1810. The longevity of the Society illustrates the stability of the nobility as a political and social factor. The Society's longevity was a negotiation between women's agency and the continued entrenchment of certain norms centred around socioeconomic status and class.

8. Conclusion

Particularly in its early years, the *Society of Aristocratic Women to Promote the Good and the Useful* made a significant contribution to the field of philanthropy. The women involved took on a public profile in support of the patriotic cause. They petitioned the various court authorities, sought public attention in the hope of gaining recognition and acted as vocal players in civil society, although they were strictly forbidden from engaging in formal politics. The Society provided a platform specifically for aristocratic women to fulfil their social duties before a new media audience. The Society served as a hub for charitable activities and social events, facilitating not only the provision of charity but also the cultivation and creation of social networks, as well as the exchange of cultural patronage. Its members played a key role in organising and hosting cultural events such as balls, concerts and other social gatherings, which laid the foundations for the *Society of Friends of Music*, for example.

Aristocratic women often had organisational and leadership skills from other areas of their lives and had access to knowledge. With the support of Joseph Sonnleithner, who for many years championed the Society's cause as its secretary, and in some cases, their male relatives, who assisted the Society in declaring the financial income and expenditure, the twelve board members and the president, who were appointed by election by all members present at a meeting, worked with other charitable institutions in Vienna to provide aid. Overall, the *Society of Aristocratic Women* reflected the ambitions and values of its time. It promoted solidarity and cohesion within the aristocratic community by supporting charitable causes, which could often apply to women of high social status who were experiencing economic hardship following the deaths of male relatives. Although the Society had great success in raising funds and became a player in the field of social welfare, opposition was likely evident from the outset. This opposition manifested itself less in public discourse than in day-to-day operations, as the angry letter from the civil servant shows. In the decades that followed, individuals and associations continued to face the common strategy of denigrating women's efforts to undermine them. Throughout the 19th century, members of the Society continued to apply their experiences, also in the context of new women's associations.

81 See footnote 79. A document from the war years makes it clear that the association had stable funds at its disposal until the end of the monarchy. In 1916, the association's assets totalled around 30,000 crowns. ÖStA, AdR BKA BKA-I BPDion Wien VB Signatur II-1, Josefine Princess Trauttmansdorff to the police commissioner's office for the 1st district.