

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 35 (2008)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Arenenberg Castle : the Emperor from Switzerland
Autor: Ribl, Rolf
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907199>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 15.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Emperor from Switzerland. A Swiss citizen as Emperor of France? Napoleon III was the last Emperor of France from 1852 to 1870. Prior to that he spent 23 years in Arenenberg Castle in the Canton of Thurgau. He was a Swiss freeman, a captain in the Bernese artillery, and he spoke the dialect of Thurgau. By Rolf Ribli

When the last Emperor of France took his dying breath on 9 January 1873, a document from Switzerland lay on his deathbed – the Thurgau Passport of 1838. Of course, Napoleon III's homeland was always the "Grande Nation". But when Prince Louis Napoleon, as he was then, thanked the Canton of Thurgau in 1832 for the right of citizenship, he referred to that part of Lake Constance as "his home". "Can there be more compelling evidence of a person's devotion to his home?" asks Dominik Gügel, curator of the Napoleon Museum in Arenenberg Castle.

April 20th this year marks the 200th birthday of the last French monarch who controlled France's destiny with an iron fist, a liberal spirit and a sociable heart for more than two decades as president and emperor. What role did Thurgau's Arenenberg Castle play in the life of the prince who was to become Emperor?

Louis Napoleon was the youngest son of Queen Hortense de Beauharnais and Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland and brother of the great Emperor Napoleon I. Hortense was also the daughter of the Empress Joséphine, Napoleon Bonaparte's first wife. Queen Hortense, mother of Napoleon III, was therefore the step-daughter and sister-in-law of Emperor Napoleon, who was in turn the grandfather and uncle of his nephew Louis Napoleon.

Asylum in Arenenberg

The young prince came to know Switzerland at just seven years of age. After Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 when his reign as Emperor came to an end, Hortense and the entire Bonaparte family were



Emperor Napoleon III.

driven out of France. At the end of an audacious escape, the exhausted queen and her youngest son reached Constance in Germany in December 1815. As the eminent guests could not stay there either, they sought and found sanctuary in Arenenberg. "The government of the Swiss Canton of Thurgau allowed me to buy the castle. In doing so, it allowed me time to rest", Hortense later wrote.

The Thurgau authorities boldly asserted themselves against the concerns of the Swiss Diet, granting the queen the right to stay. And so a new era began in 1817 on the hill with the panoramic view of the lake, the island of Reichenau and Constance in the distance. Arenenberg and its castle became the centre of the infamous Napoleon family's social and political life. An aura of monarchy and world history surrounded the republican Canton of Thurgau. From 1823, Queen Hortense and Prince Louis Napoleon lived in Arenenberg on a permanent basis during the summer.

The magnificent residence overlooking Lake Constance, which is known locally as Untersee, was built as a castle in the 16th century. After her arrival in Arenenberg, Hortense refurbished the estate in the style of a French country house with a neo-gothic chapel. She adorned the interior with carpets, furniture, figures and paintings in memory of Emperor Napoleon I, whom she greatly admired. Until her death in 1837, the former queen, who now called herself duchess, received many eminent guests from all over Europe, from the fields of literature, music, art and politics as well as from the ranks of Europe's high nobility, in her summerhouse. According to the historical lexi-

con of Switzerland, "Arenenberg became an enclave of French culture in the petit-bourgeois region of Lake Constance". The "duchess" was a popular figure amongst the people because of her good work for the poor.

"The next Emperor"

All visitors were aware that the next Emperor of France was growing up in Arenenberg, close to his mother's bosom. Napoleon Bonaparte's first marriage to the Empress Joséphine had been childless. Napoleon I had decreed that the future children of Hortense would succeed him on the throne. Following the early death of Napoleon I's only legitimate son from his second marriage to Marie-Louise, the daughter of the Austrian Emperor, Prince Louis Napoleon was first in line to succeed the Emperor. "It fell to Hortense's youngest son to restore power and glory to the fallen dynasty, as Napoleon III in the second French empire", reads a text in the Napoleon Museum.

The same text says: "Having grown up in the glory of the first empire, his uncle, the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, had sat him on his knee and told him of a great future that lay ahead for him." It adds: "His mother Hortense never failed to keep the imperial past alive in him." During his time at Arenenberg, all the rooms in his part of the building faced west, where Paris lay. Incidentally, Emperor Napoleon I never visited Arenenberg.

Adventure and love affairs

Prince Louis Napoleon received his first communion in Einsiedeln monastery with which he formed a life-long attachment. It is said of the 20-year-old prince that: "He enjoyed spending time with local youngsters of his own age and turned the heads of many a pretty girl." He apparently spoke the Thurgau dialect better than his own French mother tongue. He helped to found the Thurgau Rifle Association and was heavily involved in the organisation of the first cantonal shooting event. In 1832, the commune of Salenstein, where Arenenberg is situated, made him a freeman, an honour which he gratefully accepted. When the Thurgau Great Council confirmed his status, the prince became a citizen of the Swiss confederation. "I live in a free country", he said proudly in his acceptance speech.

As he could not undergo military training in his homeland, he attended the military school of Colonel Dufour in Thun. He vol-

unteered to take part in military exercises and slept like everyone else on a bed of straw in freezing conditions (as he indicated in letters). The young officer won the favour of General Henri Dufour, as he was to become, and remained in contact with him until his death. From 1834, the prince performed regular military service and even wrote a "handbook on the use of artillery". He was held in such high esteem in the Canton of Berne that he was made a captain of the artillery.

The Prince as a revolutionary

The July revolution of 1830 in France, the fall of the Bourbons and the seizure of power again by the bourgeois stirred the prince's political passion. He wrote pamphlets such as "political and military reflections on Switzerland". Arenenberg even became a meeting place for young revolutionaries. The prince gave his support to the revolt of the patriotic Carbonari in Italy. After two unsuccessful coup attempts in France, Paris demanded his extradition from Switzerland. But the majority of the Diet refused to comply, referring to the prince's Thurgau citizenship. As the conflict between the neighbouring countries escalated to the dispatch of military contingents, the prince left Switzerland on the advice of friends.

But this did not suppress his revolutionary zeal. He attempted to seize power in 1840 through another coup from England. The attempt failed and the prince was sentenced to imprisonment for life. His time in prison became his "university years", during which he planned his political future. He escaped to England after five years in prison.

Emperor of France

With the bourgeois-democratic February revolution of 1848, Louis Napoleon came close to realising his dreams. He was firstly elected to parliament and then declared president of the second French Republic on 10 December 1848. With the coup of 1851, he extended his presidency and was declared Emperor Napoleon III a year later. France became Europe's strongest power in the two

decades under his rule. The Parisian court was the epitome of elegance under the beautiful Empress Eugénie. The Suez Canal was also completed at this time. The world exhibitions of 1855 and 1867 put Paris in the spotlight. "Napoleon III took France into the modern age", says Christina Egli, a curator at the Napoleon Museum.

self filled his guests' glasses with champagne.

Napoleon III never returned to Arenenberg again. After France's defeat in the battle of Sedan in September 1870 in the German-French war and his surrender, a new era also seemed to dawn for Arenenberg. Yet the death of the monarch on 9 January 1873 in



Idyllic setting: Arenenberg Castle

Even at the height of his power, Napoleon III never forgot Arenenberg. Since the death of Queen Hortense in 1837 and the forced departure of her son, it had become tranquil. But there was great excitement on the Untersee in the summer of 1865 as the Emperor of France and his wife Eugénie would be staying at Arenenberg Castle from 17 to 21 August. More than a quarter of a century earlier, the prince had been forced to flee from the region. The Salenstein male voice choir performed for their former fellow citizen. The Emperor was delighted to revisit "the place where he spent the happy years of his youth". The freeman's return was celebrated with great merrymaking – the Emperor him-

self was to dictate otherwise. Empress Eugénie and her young son Prince Louis Napoleon stayed in Arenenberg. The castle, which had been extended again, now became the focal point for the supporters of a Napoleonic restoration. The prince's tragic death in 1879 in South Africa while serving with the British colonial army thwarted this plan.

The Empress visited Arenenberg less and less often and in 1906 bequeathed the entire estate to the Canton of Thurgau as a mark of gratitude for the hospitality shown to her family in difficult times. The valuable empire clock, which the grateful queen gave to the canton, is on display in the Napoleon Museum.

NAPOLEON MUSEUM

The Napoleon Museum, which was founded in Arenenberg Castle in 1906, provides a good insight into Napoleonic history and society during the period. The museum contains many pieces of original

furniture and items from the time of Queen Hortense. In addition to the valuable collections, the residence also houses a research library. An historical exhibition will be held in the Napoleon Museum and in the City

Museums of Constance (20 April to 19 October 2008) to mark Napoleons III's 200th birthday.

www.napoleonmuseum.tg.ch