

Dona Leopoldina, an Extraordinary Woman

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Dona Leopoldina was born in Vienna in 1797. Daughter of Emperor Francis I of Austria, the archduchess was the wife of Dom Pedro I and the first empress of Brazil.

She received an exquisite education at the Viennese court; she had an inclination for botany and mineralogy, spoke several languages, and understood political affairs.

But it was in Brazil that the young archduchess found her prince: her hand was given in marriage to Dom Pedro, heir to the Portuguese throne. And although it was an arranged marriage, Leopoldina fell in love with her future husband as soon as she received his portrait. The wedding took place in Austria, by proxy, in 1817.

The next step would be to face the long voyage to Brazil. She would have to confront the wild ocean, and also her own uncertainty before the unknown. After a crossing that lasted eighty-five days, Leopoldina finally reached Rio de Janeiro in November 1817. Her first impression was recorded in a letter to Maria Luisa, her elder sister:

"...Neither pen nor brush can describe the first impression that paradisiacal Brazil makes upon any foreigner..."

The first letters written by Dona Leopoldina on Brazilian soil show her fascination with the country and the intense love she bore her husband. Soon after, however, her letters would be marked by tears and resentment. The dream of a perfect marriage was destroyed by the husband she so loved. Dom Pedro did not hide the many extramarital affairs he kept, a cause of profound suffering for Dona Leopoldina.

Yet she must never be remembered merely as a frustrated wife. Leopoldina played a grand and fundamental part in the independence of Brazil.

For a better understanding, we must go back a little in history.

In 1808, Brazil, then a colony of Portugal, became the center of the Portuguese government. This came about when Dom João, the prince regent, decided to transfer his court to Brazil — a strategy to escape Napoleon's troops.

Rio de Janeiro, the capital of the time, went through a rapid transformation with the installation of the court: museums, libraries, colleges, the Bank of Brazil, academies, the Royal Press, and universities were created. In short, an entire structure was assembled so that Brazil could be the administrative center of Portugal.

In 1815 came a further change: Brazil was raised to the status of a kingdom, becoming part of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves. And as time passed, Dom João VI, now king, showed great affinity for his new country and no intention of returning to Portugal.

But the Portuguese longed for the return of their king, and in 1821, after the Porto Revolution, Dom João VI found himself obliged to go back, fearing he would lose the throne. He left, leaving his son, Dom Pedro, as regent in Brazil.

Dom Pedro's remaining in Brazil caused great displeasure in the Portuguese Cortes — the parliament in Lisbon — which demanded the prince's return as well. Dom Pedro came to feel undecided, but his wife, Dona Leopoldina, deeply engaged with the Brazilian political cause, was resolved to defend the country's interests. Using her pregnancy as a pretext, she rejected the idea of embarking for Portugal and managed to persuade her husband to remain in Brazil. The day on which Dom Pedro declared that he would stay became known as the *Dia do Fico* — the Day of "I Shall Remain" — January 9, 1822.

The Cortes, vexed by Dom Pedro's disobedience, sent a new order demanding the prince's immediate return. When the determinations from Lisbon reached Rio de Janeiro, Dom Pedro was in São Paulo, and Dona Leopoldina was governing in his place.

It was then that, on learning of those orders and understanding Portugal's intentions, Dona Leopoldina convened, on September 2, 1822, an extraordinary session of the Council of Ministers. There it was decided that Brazil should separate from Portugal. After the meeting, Leopoldina sent a letter to her husband, informing him of what had occurred and urging him to make Brazil free:

"The fruit is ripe; pick it now, or it will rot... You will have the support of all Brazil, and against the will of the Brazilian people the Portuguese soldiers who are here can do nothing."

Dom Pedro received the letter on September 7, on the banks of the Ipiranga brook, where he proclaimed independence.

Brazil was born an independent nation, and Dona Leopoldina became the country's first empress. The yellow of our flag represents the House of Habsburg, that of Dona Leopoldina, while the green symbolizes the House of Braganza, that of Dom Pedro.

Sadly, the empress saw little of the flowering of the nation she helped to found. In December 1826, Brazil lived through profound grief: the death of the beloved empress. All Rio de Janeiro wept for the woman who so loved the Brazilian people — the kind woman who ran into debt to help the needy, who bore moral humiliation in the belief that she was defending a noble cause, and who dreamed of building a free and prosperous country.

Dona Leopoldina was only twenty-nine when she died, days after suffering a miscarriage. Recent studies have revealed that the cause of her death was a severe infection, refuting the rumors that circulated at the time.

Maria Leopoldina marked the history of Brazil as the architect of independence.

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