



foreign rights

author **Helge Hesse**

title **Here I stand, I can do no other.**

Original title Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders

© Eichborn AG, Frankfurt am Main 2006

document type translation

Copyright for the translation © Eichborn AG, Frankfurt am Main

translated by Steph Morris

contact

email rights@eichborn.de

phone +49 69 25 60 03 767

fax +49 69 25 60 03 30

mail Eichborn AG,
Rechte und Lizenzen
Kaiserstrasse 66
60329 Frankfurt
Germany

www www.eichborn.de/rights

If they have no bread, let them eat cake.

Marie Antoinette (1755 – 1793)

Much of what is said about her reflects the reality; she was no angel and did not exactly have a nice personality. Ultimately however it was barefaced lies which led to her tragic end, and in her deepest distress, at her darkest hour, even Marie Antoinette's enemies were impressed by her dignity and composure.

The youngest daughter of Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria did not possess a kindly heart and the upbringing she received was unlikely to have helped her develop one. According to the principle, 'Let others wage war, you, happy Austria, shall marry!' the young Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna, whom everyone simply called Antoinette, was born to live the life of power and luxury enjoyed by all members of the Habsburg house. An appropriate consort emerged as France sought to strengthen its recent alliance with Austria. The powerful French minister Choiseul, one-time favourite of Madame de Pompadour, suggested a union between the young Dauphin, later Louis XVI, and one of the Austrian princesses.

When Antoinette was chosen, still only fourteen, the Austrian court realized with dismay that the education of the future Queen of France, soon to be mistress of Versailles, had been sorely neglected. Versailles was the paragon of procedure and etiquette for courts throughout Europe, and they attempted to rectify the most blatant deficiencies with an intensive course, but gaps still remained. Antoinette, naturally pretty and capricious, was also moody, superficial and incapable of concentration; music was the only thing which occasionally held her attention, and on one occasion she played with the young Mozart.

In May 1770 the spoilt adolescent arrived in France and was hitched to the good-natured yet sluggish and chubby fifteen-year-old Dauphin. The coquettish princess was swiftly enmeshed in the intricate net of intrigue at the French court. As prolonged reflection and diplomatic finesse were not among her defining characteristics, she was unable either to gain affection or earn respect. Everything she did seemed simply to revolve around her own insular world, appeared trivial and excessive; Marie Antoinette indulged in gambling and showed no interest at all in her subjects.

Initially, when in 1774 Louis XVI finally acceded to the throne and Marie Antoinette became Queen, the French populace was well disposed towards the young

couple. Marie Antoinette's efforts to influence the filling of political positions however – attempting for instance to rehabilitate Choiseul, who had been dismissed, and return him to a position of power - simply made her more unpopular at the court, and because she also exploited her position unscrupulously, she made even more enemies. An encounter with her could be extremely humiliating; no-one could address her before she had first spoken to them. The King's aunt soon christened her with the derogatory epithet 'L'Autrichienne'. The mood amongst the people began to turn too as they waited impatiently for an heir to the throne, but it was seven years before the couple succeeded in consummating the marriage; a tight foreskin made sexual intercourse torture for the young king. In the mean time Marie Antoinette used the opportunity to engage in amorous liaisons with courtiers and favourites. Her wardrobe was extravagant, and indulgences such as masked balls unaccompanied by the king, gambling and time spent in her little pleasure palace, the Petit Trianon, cost her dearly. Her enemies were able to make political capital of every tiny detail.

After eight years Marie Antoinette finally brought a child into the world. But it was a girl. It was only in 1781 that she gave birth to the Dauphin Louis-Joseph-Alexander. The situation eased, but instead of seizing the opportunity to strengthen her public image, Marie Antoinette now withdrew into privacy, dedicated herself to raising her children and proved a loving mother to them, continuing to pursue her previous diversions, till the necklace affair finally shattered her reputation, as well as that of the entire monarchy. A rumour was spread that the Queen had been prepared to render services of an amorous nature to a cardinal in order to acquire a valuable necklace. The extent of Marie Antoinette's involvement in this intrigue was never ascertained.

In the mean time the country and the state had been in decline finally sinking to rock bottom. Louis, an honest man, and not by nature bad, nevertheless lacked the determination and skill to push through the necessary reforms. Well-meant actions such as the restoration of parliament resulted in the opposite of what he had hoped for. The establishment which controlled parliament - aristocracy and church – stubbornly opposed the curtailment of their influence. Able ministers such as the finance ministers Turgot, and later Mecker, let Louis down at the crucial moment.

Desperate for a solution, on 5th May 1789 Louis finally convoked the *Etats Généraux*, the assembly of the three *états* of aristocracy, church and citizenry; it had not met since 1614. The move represented Louis's long-anticipated capitulation as

absolute ruler, yet neither he nor his advisers identified the dangers now threatening him. A new power was ready and waiting to grasp the reins. The last of the three *états*, the bourgeoisie, had achieved a weight within the economy and society such that they now wished to become part of the political decision-making process. As soon as the assembly of the *Etats Généraux* rose, it was immediately clear that the aristocracy and church would never agree to abandon their privileges, let alone share political power. In a further *impasse* – procedural issues prohibited any progress and the king was unable to come to any decision – on 17th June the third *état* declared themselves the ‘National Assembly’. The liberal peers joined them, along with the majority of the religious parliamentarians two days later. On 20th June, at a tennis court near Versailles, they pledged never to separate until they had created a constitution for France. Louis was prepared to make concessions, but he rejected equality for all and the abolition of the aristocracy. When on 14th July the news circulated that Necker had been dismissed and royal troops were marching into Paris, where the food situation was acute, the powder keg exploded. Intending to take control of food stores, an angry crowd stormed arsenals and munitions depots. Then they turned on the Bastille, the hated prison of the French monarchy. After several hours’ fighting, the small garrison surrendered. The soldiers were massacred and the head of their commander, skewered on a lance, was paraded around Paris. The French revolution had begun.

In the mean time Marie Antoinette tried to persuade her husband to flee to Metz, where troops still loyal to the King were stationed. He refused. As, over the coming weeks, the King still refused to concede feudal rights to the public, it was suspected that Louis’s wife was behind his resoluteness. ‘L’Autrichienne’ became the principal target of hatred.

Embodying the epitome of her perceived *hauteur*, the following anecdote spread like wildfire throughout France: riding around in her coach, Marie Antoinette was said to have asked why the people looked so unhappy. “Your majesty, they have no bread,” she was allegedly told. It was indeed the case that the failed harvest of 1789 had made bread prices shoot through the roof; starvation loomed. But Marie Antoinette was said to have replied simply: “If they have no bread, let them eat cake.” (S’ils n’ont pas de pain, qu’ils mangent de la brioche.)

She probably never uttered these words. It is more likely that someone took them from the *Confessions* of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, France’s most

acclaimed writer at the time of the revolution. In this book, written between 1766 and 1770, an unnamed princess is heard to say the sentence, talking generally about the hungry. Some believe that it was first said nearly a century earlier by Maria Theresia of Spain (1638 – 1683), wife of Louis XIV. At the time Rousseau wrote the incident down, Marie Antoinette was still a child and living in Austria. Nevertheless in France in 1789 everyone *believed* that such a cynical suggestion could only have come from Marie Antoinette. Pamphlets and plays denigrated her throughout the land. It was even said that she indulged in incest with her son.

In June 1791 the family attempted to flee. They were recognized in Varennes, arrested and brought back to Paris. Marie Antoinette is said to have gone grey over night. In the royal apartments at the Tuileries, papers were found in which plans for a counter-revolution could be identified. On 10th August 1792 the Tuileries were stormed; on the same day the royal family was taken into custody in the Temple, the former residence of the Knights Templar, and Louis was deposed as king. He was now simply ‘citizen Louis Capet’.

Since July the revolutionaries had found themselves engaged in the so-called First Coalition War against Austria, with whom other European states also sided, including Piedmont, Prussia, Britain and Spain. The ruling houses of these countries would not accept the substitution of monarchy with another form of government in general, or the abolition of the French monarchy in particular. Initially things did not look good for the badly organized revolutionaries. Then, with the Battle of Valmy on 20th September 1792, came a turning point in the war. For the first time the revolution troops had withstood a massive enemy attack. That evening Goethe, who witnessed the artillery battle from the Duke of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach’s camp, famously said to the officers present: “Here and now begins a new epoch in world history, and you, gentlemen, can say that you were there.”

However Louis remained a threat to the revolutionaries. He still had many supporters. A counter-revolution was feared. The mob rampaged through the streets of Paris demanding Louis’ head. Above all it was the leader of the radical Jacobins, Robespierre, who wished to see the deposed king eliminated once and for all. With a small majority of 361 to 360 votes, the ‘National Constituent Assembly’ finally condemned Louis to death. On 21st January 1793 he was beheaded at the Place de la Révolution (today the Place de la Concorde). His severed head was held up for the crowd to see.

One of 2,500 other prisoners incarcerated in the Conciergerie Prison, now known simply as ‘widow Capet’, Marie Antoinette’s deference, courage and dignity were impressive. The window in her cell was bricked up and she was kept under constant observation. She could not make the slightest move without the warders’ eyes following her. Her younger son, heir to the throne since the death of his older brother in June 1789, had already been taken from her. He died in 1795, just ten years old, in Paris’s Temple Prison. Finally they took her daughter from her too, the only member of the family to survive the revolution.

On 14th October 1793 the prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville opened the proceedings, accusing Marie Antoinette too of counter-revolutionary activities. In the dark, wood-panelled courtroom she was subjected to a fifteen-hour trial including multiple testimonies against her. The radical journalist Jacques-René Hébert also appeared in the witness box, resurrecting the accusation of an incestuous relationship with her youngest son. Today we know that Marie Antoinette had revealed plans for a French military attack to the Austrians, but at the time that could not be proved.

The former Queen’s calm and self-assured defence led to unexpected expressions of sympathy from the public. However the death sentence was a foregone conclusion. Marie Antoinette wrote to her sister-in-law Elisabeth, who had accompanied her for a long time in prison, herself incarcerated in a cell, “I have just been condemned, not to an ignominious death fit only for criminals, but to find your brother again [...]. I beg everyone I know [...] for forgiveness for all the suffering I have inadvertently caused them [...]. Adieu my good sweet sister! [...] I embrace you and your poor, dear children with my whole heart!” Apparently Elisabeth never received the letter. The following year she too lost her life at the guillotine.

Two days after the judgement, on 16th October 1793 at ten in the morning, Marie Antoinette stepped onto a simple cart pulled by a black horse. Her hands had been tied behind her back and she wore a white dress. Her hair, now entirely grey, had been cropped. Her head was crowned with a simple bonnet such as every woman at the time put on when they woke up. Her gaze seemed indifferent. Had her heart and soul accepted fate?

All of Paris was on its feet as the cart rolled towards the scaffold. For a whole hour the eerie procession moved over the rough cobbles towards the Place de la Révolution, where her husband had also met his death at the guillotine. The mood amongst the crowd fluctuated, the lust for sensation mixed with the desire for revenge.

Were there royalists amongst the gaping masses? The young state was on its guard. Thousands of Gendarmes lined the streets. By the time the cart approached the scaffold, the people were so tightly packed it could get no further. The horse reared up in shock. The executioner and his son stood in front of Marie Antoinette to protect her. She seemed wholly unmoved by events around her. She never once cast her eyes to the ground and climbed the steps of the wooden platform then stood in front of the guillotine. The preparations took four torturous minutes before the blade finally whistled down. Held up by its hair, the severed head was presented to the masses, who cried, “Long live the revolution!”

In his radical newspaper *Père Duchesne*, Hébert commented, “at last that evil head has been separated from its sluttish body! But I must say: the bitch was bold and fresh right to the end!” Half a year later he too had to face the guillotine. Allegedly he begged for exactly what he had denied Marie Antoinette: mercy.

Helge Hesse, *Here I stand, I can do no other*

© Eichborn AG, Frankfurt 2006

Translation by Steph Morris

For further information on international rights for this title please contact rights@eichborn.de.

This excerpt is presented for informational purposes only- any use or copying for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited.