Let us set the scene: it is Berlin, in the summer of 1812. Napoleon rules over Europe. Prussia, defeated by Napoleon in 1806, still exists as a separate state, but mainly because of the role allotted to it by the emperor – that of French satellite and buffer-zone against Russia. From 1806 to 1809 Berlin was occupied by French troops, and now the city is an operations base of the Grande Armée on its way to Russia. Once more, Berlin is full of foreign soldiers.¹

Living in Berlin during that time is the Princess of Orange, widow of the Dutch Stadholder William V and better known in the Netherlands as Wilhelmina of Prussia. In 1787, her arrest by Patriot guards at the border of the province of Holland had prompted her brother the Prussian king to send out troops, and so doing, to bring the Patriotic revolution to an end.² The Stadholder was restored to his former


position, but the restoration lasted only eight years: driven away by the French, the Orange family fled to England in 1795. In 1801 William V and Wilhelmina had settled in Nassau in the German Reich, their hereditary land, but in 1806 this also was occupied by French troops. At the end of 1807 Wilhelmina and her daughter Louise of Brunswick, both newly widowed, had arrived in Berlin, where their son and brother, the hereditary prince of Orange and his family had fled. They all lived frugally. Their status and possessions had evaporated with the Old Regime; their savings had melted away, their income was small, they were dependent on help from their royal relatives. The hope that the old days would return had flown. They had lost Nassau and the Netherlands had been annexed into the French Empire. Wilhelmina had left Berlin in 1767, newly married and 16 years old. Now she was living there again – but how much had changed in those 40 years: in her life, in her position, in Berlin and in the whole of Europe!

On the 1st of August, 1812, six days before her 61st birthday, Wilhelmina began writing her memoirs, in French, under the title *Mes souvenirs*. Her daughter Louise had put her up to it, and had also given her some written questions to work from: what was her first memory? What did she remember about her father, who had died young? And so Wilhelmina, who addressed her memoirs to her daughter, did her best to recall her childhood feelings and experiences. However, although Wilhelmina was a confident woman and an experienced writer, it seems as though she had more than a little trouble with this self-imposed task. She wrote, corrected, added, struck out, and started all over again. In the end, there lay several versions of what was essentially the same story. Most stop at her wedding day, and so the *souvenirs* are in essence memoirs of her childhood.

In the autumn of 1812, Napoleon’s power, which had seemed unassailable, began to show cracks. In June Napoleon had invaded Russia and on September 14th he reached Moscow, but soon there were signs and rumours of serious French setbacks. Berlin was quick to pick them

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