

MEMBERS MEETING 1st MAY 2007
“PORTRAIT OF A LADY” by Mrs Loebel

Mrs Loebel began her talk by telling members that she and they had something in common - an interest in history and family history. She never knew one set of her grandparents on her father's side but was interested to learn from her mother about her maternal grandmother's family. Initially the most she knew was that her grandfather had an unusual name --BOULLEMIER. He was born in England but his parents were French and very exotic. How did they come to England? She determined to find out.

Mrs Loebel showed members an oval portrait of a lady, the subject of her talk. She said she was lucky in that she had a primary source of information about her – her memoirs.

The lady's name was LEONIE JULIE MICHEL and she was born in 1848. Historically 1848 was an important date in Europe as it was the “Year of Revolutions”, particularly the French Revolution. Revolutions are the favourite sport of the French (Mrs Loebel feels she can say this because she is part French).

Having got rid of the French monarchy the Bourbons came back after Napoleon reputedly “forgot nothing and learnt nothing”. In 1848 the French decided they were sick of monarchy. Waiting in the wings was Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte who had been in exile for 20 years in Clapham, an unromantic part of England.

After the revolution in 1848 he was invited to be President of the Republic for 4 years. He took a leaf out of Napoleon's book and proclaimed himself Napoleon 111 (Napoleon 11 son of Napoleon 1 had died young). The Prince took the title and restored the glory days. Great grandmother Leonie's childhood was spent in the reign of Napoleon 111 when all sorts of things happened.

Paris needed rebuilding after the revolution and Napoleon 111 decided he must get married to get an heir to pass on his heritage. Great swathes of Paris were demolished and grand buildings erected in their place. Napoleon paid court to the ruling heads of Europe in his search for a bride but they all regarded him as an upstart and would have no truck with him. He decided to come down an echelon to the aristocracy to look for a young woman with impeccable ancestry who was charming, religious and well brought up. One such woman was EUGENIE de

MONTIJO and when the emperor saw her he said yes! At this time Bonaparte was small, middle aged with a paunch, receding hair and a goatee beard. He was no oil painting but he had great charm. Eugenie was to become Empress of France, mother of the next Emperor and they had a happy marriage.

At this point Mrs Loebel showed her second picture, a portrait by Winterhalter of a lady in a crinoline dress surrounded by her ladies in waiting. These were the women that little Leonie looked up to, the stars of the day. She would have seen them in their carriages in Paris.

Leonie's father was a doctor from Lorraine. His father and grandfather were doctors too. He came to Paris to train and had a very good practice that was doing well. The family were well to do and happy, but sadly 3 years after Leonie's brother George was born her mother became ill with breast cancer and died age 30. Leonie and George were brought up by their grandmother and by a nanny. When Leonie was 7 she went to board at a Dominican Convent and her memoirs record that she was happy there. She had a very good education but not as we know one now. Education for women then was to make them an accomplished ornament for their father or if they married to their husband's household. She played the piano, was taught watercolour flower painting, learnt English, dancing, the art of conversation, flower arranging and studied French history and literature. When she was 17 she returned home to her father's house "finished and polished" and became his hostess. The housekeeper showed her how to run the house and she became typically "upper middle class". People like Florence Nightingale found this way of life stultifying and had a nervous breakdown because of it but Leonie enjoyed being the daughter of a good family.

At this time one of Emperor Napoleon's soldiers, Colonel Trotter and his wife, who had a daughter the same age as Leonie, visited Paris. Mrs Trotter became ill and they didn't know what was wrong with her. Doctor Michel was consulted, found out what was wrong and cured her. Colonel Trotter and his daughter were delighted to pay his fee of 400 guineas which in the 1860's was a substantial sum. As Leonie had no mother Lady Trotter offered to "bring her out" in society. She was taken to the opera, ballet, went riding and attended soirees. She played the piano for Saint-Saens and met Alexandre Dumas.

The Emperor became ill with a cyst behind his ear. Colonel Trotter recommended that he consult Dr. Michel. The doctor successfully removed the cyst and the Emperor recovered. This meant that the

doctor could have a brass plate saying he was George Michel, Imperial Physician. He began to move in higher circles. He received a personal invitation from the Emperor for Leonie who was 18 and George to attend a ball for young people including the young prince who was then 14.

For Leonie and her brother George, who was a cadet in the Imperial Guard, it was a wonderful occasion. Leonie's ball gown was made for her at a couture house. It had yards and yards of blue silk decorated with real forget-me-nots. Here Mrs Loebl showed her third picture. This featured the opulent ball. At the ball Leonie was invited to join the Trotter's at the imperial dais and to lead the first waltz. Many of the mothers there were certain to look upon her as a nice wife for their son. This was the apogee of Leonie's social life. Sadly when Leonie was only 20 her father died suddenly.

She and her brother George thought they would inherit but as they were both under age there was not much money left and what money there was had to go to pay for George's career in the Royal Guard. Leonie went to live with her uncle. There was to be no great marriage as all of a sudden there was no dowry. What could she do? There was only one thing that women in these circumstances could do, like the Brontes, she decided to become a governess.

During the first 12-18 months of mourning she was not able to go out. Her cousin Blanche, who was like a sister to her, helped her polish her accomplishments. Her uncle was a ceramic artist at Sevres. He had a young colleague ANTONIN BOULLEMIER. He was an up and coming skilled man who was making a name for himself in ceramics. He was a friend of the family and often visited the house. He had a beautiful voice and he and Leonie used to sing duets. Antonin asked Leonie's uncle if he could propose to her. Her uncle said that as she would soon be 21 she could make up her own mind. Leonie had fallen in love with Antonin (who was 9 years older) and in July 1871 they were married.

Whilst they were on honeymoon the Franco Prussian war broke out and Paris was besieged by the Prussian army. There was no food or fuel and Leonie and Antonin lived through a terrible time. The Prussian army marched through Paris and Kaiser Wilhelm was at Versailles. Things went from bad to worse. The government tried to make peace but the populace said no, they wanted revolution. It was dangerous for Leonie and Antonin. The Empress escaped, the prince went to Queen Victoria and the Emperor was a prisoner. Any supporter of Bonaparte was in danger. Leonie, Antonin and George were told by friends to get out of

Paris as their names were on a death list. They managed to get on the first train to Lille where they had friends. George went to Verdun. It was at this time that Leonie discovered that she was pregnant with her first child.

Antonin did not know what to do or where to go. He received a letter from a friend Leon Solon who had a proposition to put to him. As there was no call for art in Paris he had left France and gone to a place in England called Stoke where they manufactured fine porcelain. They needed men who had trained at Sevres, so in 1872 Antonin came to Stoke. He went to work at Minton which was run by Colin Minton Campbell who was delighted to employ him. He worked for two years in Stoke but found it very dull and dirty. He visited Paris but spent the rest of his life here. He fell out with Campbell and became a freelance art director working for Crown Derby, Royal Worcester and received commissions from Queen Victoria.

Leonie was busy as well. She had 10 children, 5 boys and 5 girls. Looking at their birth certificates Mrs Loebel has noted that she spent most of her life recovering from a birth or just expecting another. One of the boys was a sportsman. He was a cricket spin bowler. Her great uncle was a professional footballer who swam, played water polo and entered into the life of the potteries. Antonin sang in choral works and had his own orchestra. He lived the good life but died in 1900.

Leonie was left with 4 young children and no pension. Antonin's American agent advised her not to sell anything and keep the house. All her sons fought in WW1. One was killed and another son (his father's pride and joy who was chief artist at Minton) was gassed and shell shocked and never fulfilled his promise. Three daughters went to France and became teachers or a governess. As an old lady Leonie went to live in a rest home in the Ardennes where she died in 1929 age 82.

She was remembered in Stoke as "Madame Boulemier" and was well loved by her grand daughters and great grand daughters who were also taught by the Dominican Nuns. They recalled that if you spoke to her she was "a real lady"

And that is why Mrs Loebel calls her talk "Portrait of a Lady". Asked if Leonie's memoirs had been produced as a book Mrs Loebel said they were in the form of a hand written pamphlet. The original memoirs are now with Mintons but they have given her a photocopy.

A vote of thanks was given by Andy Parsons.