

## LEISURE & ARTS

### German Museum Re-Creates Rothschilds' Rise and Splendor

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Frankfurt

Everything about the Rothschilds was huge — their wealth, their number, their interests, their influence on the rise of modern Europe. The family and its businesses financed the Prussian government, the British stake in the Suez Canal and the Austrian railway, among much else. Now, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of family patriarch Meyer Amschel Rothschild, Frankfurt's Jewish Museum — housed in a former Rothschild townhouse — has gathered a suitably sprawling collection of more than 700 objects to dramatize a fascinating financial epic and the extended family's related tales of philanthropy, art collecting, wine making and other endeavors. "The Rothschilds — A European Family" (until Feb. 27) aims to burnish the image of a Jewish family the Nazis vilified and tried to erase from the city's memory.

The first illustrations and maps take us back to Frankfurt's *Judengasse*, the Jewish ghetto where Meyer Amschel was born. He began his career there in 1764 as a coin dealer; despite his meteoric success he chose to live outside the walled community. His chaotic home office is re-created here, complete with gold coins of the period and the tiny weighing scales of his trade by which he won appointment as an agent to the minor court of Hanau. An oil painting of Austrian hussars parading outside the gates of Frankfurt illustrates the era of Napoleonic wars, when, by supplying the Imperial Army such humble items as uniforms and oats for its horses, Meyer accumulated the capital that his five sons used to build Europe's most powerful banking network of the 19th century.

Although the viewer has to read about much of the Rothschilds' progress on panels of German and English text, the museum has been visually imaginative in places. In the section tracing the Rothschilds' ascent as a pan-European bank — the show's centerpiece — letters traveling overhead on a rotating belt whimsically evoke the innova-

tive communications network that linked the five brothers who spread across Europe, establishing branches of the Rothschild bank in London, Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna and Naples (the first two remain in operation). The daily correspondence included reports from their agents in ports from New York to Odessa; all of it was disseminated via boat, courier or carrier pigeon. No other bank (nor any government, for that matter) could match the Rothschilds' swift information system — or the disinformation they occasionally spread.

Beside a portrait of James Rothschild (1792-1868), who headed the Paris bank, we read that the firm's capital grew from £136,000 in 1815 to £4.3 million by 1828. This spectacular increase is attributed to a specialty the brothers established in placing government bonds internationally. A letter to a subscriber of the large Prussian issue of 1817, signed by Nathan Rothschild (1777-1836) of London, relates to this, the first major bond deal the family struck.

Then with the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Rothschilds, as bankers to Europe's crowned heads, switched from financing wars to backing giant peacetime industrialization projects. This is what made them Europe's wealthiest family. Solomon Rothschild's (1774-1855) role as the financier of Austria's Northern Railway, for instance, is represented by a sooty marble statue of him that once was a fixture at Vienna's North Station.

The ambition of Meyer Amschel's grandsons to transform themselves into aristocracy is also vividly illustrated here. Lionel de Rothschild, of the family's English branch, is shown entering Parliament in a reproduction of an 1858 painting. Although he was the first Jew to be elected to Commons (in 1847), he did not take his seat for 11 years, until the oath professing Christian faith was amended. Lionel's stance reflected the Rothschilds' continuing pride in their Jewish identity — consolidated, as was the family businesses, through a tangled web of marriages. Representing these matches are press reports of sumptuous Rothschild weddings: "The marriage was the major European social event of

the season," trumpeted one London paper when James's son Alphonse married his cousin Leonora in 1857. Honeymoons were spent visiting relatives.

In Frankfurt, they would have enjoyed the splendor now visible in two restored French baroque rooms. For this show, they are filled with Mayer Carl's collections of handworked gold decorative objects, as well as rococo snuff boxes and paintings by Hals and Greuze gathered from around Europe, appurtenances of an opulent lifestyle unashamedly modeled on the court of Versailles.

The family's formidable ostentatious self-importance made for easy caricature. A room of Victorian-era cartoons shows how legitimate criticism of their economic dominance was undermined by crude anti-Semitism. The brothers were even depicted as animals — one French lithograph (c. 1900) portrays Nathan as a dog digging for gold on the Waterloo battlefield, reviving a false tale that he profited from the battle by spreading lies about Napoleon's victory in the London stock market.

By the time the Nazis came to power, the Rothschilds no longer had a presence in Germany (the Frankfurt bank died a natural death in 1901), yet their legendary name subjected them to vilification by Goebbels's propaganda machine. Still photos from a 1940 Nazi film, part of a chilling section documenting the family's persecution, depict the family as a band of repugnant mercenary financiers. In Austria and France they suffered far worse. A photograph of the Rothschild palace in Vienna shows a portrait of Hitler hanging over gilded sofas after the family's assets had been "Aryanized" and Louis de Rothschild had been taken into Gestapo custody. The English branch of the family, meanwhile, paid for the evacuation of 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and Austria to England.

The exhibit tells an incredible story. But like a garrulous relative it wants to talk distractingly about everyone in the family: Louise's charities, Walter's zoological collection, Henri's Pigalle Theater in Paris. The tale of fortune is reward enough.