

Breaking the seal

Vic Gray, Director of the Rothschild Archive, outlines a project to unlock the significance of the most tantalising of all Rothschild archives

The publication of editions of letters to and from important historical figures is a well established way of providing historians, in an accessible form, with the essential raw materials with which to write and rewrite history. Ready access to the words of individuals themselves achieves a closeness to the key events and changes of history often unparalleled by other approaches. The publication of such series ensures once and for all that the individuals focused upon find their acknowledged place in the history of their period.

The letters between the five sons of Mayer Amschel Rothschild, cover (with some gaps) a huge historical timespan from 1811 to 1868 and touch upon many major events in European history. The final phases of the Napoleonic Wars, the arrangement and financing of post-War Europe, the Revolutionary years of 1830 and 1848 and the American Civil War are among the many significant moments in which the Rothschilds were closely involved and to which their letters bring new and important disclosures.

The series of letters addressed to Nathan Mayer Rothschild and his sons by his four brothers in Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna and Naples, has been seen by those few historians who have had access to them as central to an understanding of Rothschilds' business in the 19th century and to the relationship of the brothers to the leading European financial and political figures of the period. Among regular information on the European markets and family matters, new revelations, from highly informed and interested parties, are given on many of the major events of the period, the emergence of new national identities and the personalities of crowned heads and statesmen, aristocrats and bankers from virtually the whole of the European stage.

Letters were exchanged among the brothers on an almost daily basis to ensure that the precise arrangements for mutual co-operation laid down in the partnership agreements between them were

sustained and that the advantages of up-to-date market information were exploited to the full. The network of couriers maintained by the Rothschilds ensured swifter delivery of information than was available to almost anyone else in Europe. The use of Judendeutsch (essentially, German words written in Hebrew script though with many idiosyncrasies) and the additional security of private code names, ensured that the letters could be forthright and unrestrained. For this reason, they are often far more revealing, both of the character of the writers and of those about whom they are writing, than comparable series of correspondence of the time.

The earliest letters between the brothers date from 1811 and the letters in Judendeutsch continue to 1853. When the series recommences in 1861, James is the only surviving brother, but he continues to write in Judendeutsch to his nephews in London until his death in 1868.

The Judendeutsch letters are scattered among some 142 boxes of correspondence in the Rothschild Archive in London, amounting to some 20,000 letters in all.

In 1989 work began on the transcription of the letters, the burden of work to date having for the most part been undertaken by Mordechai Zucker, who, across a decade, has developed an unrivalled mastery of the script, language and idiosyncrasies of the writers. So far, some 2,500 letters have been fully translated, transcribed and typeset.

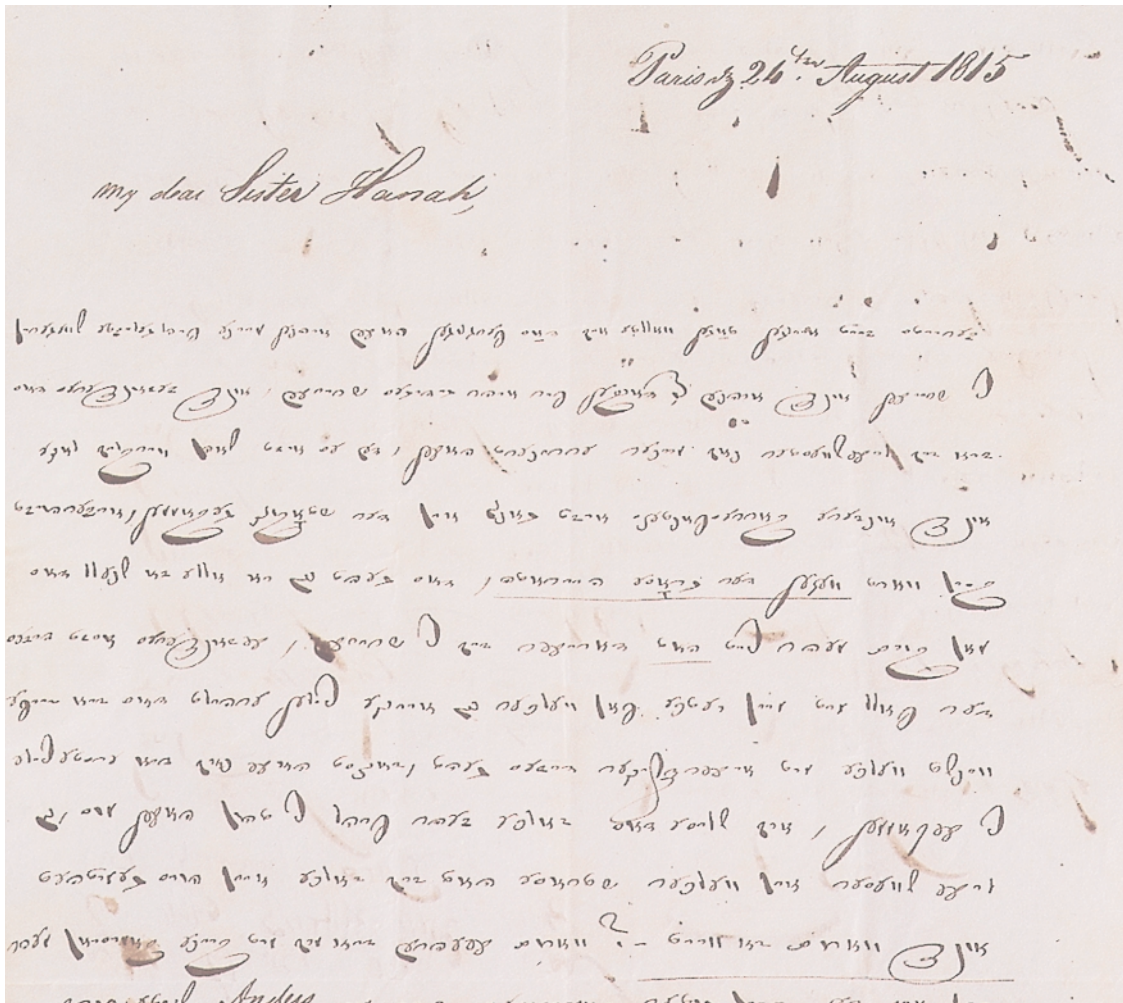
One of the earliest decisions of the new Rothschild Archive Trustees was that work on this project should be accelerated with a view to possible eventual publication of what is clearly recognised – especially in the light of Niall Ferguson's markedly successful use of a selection of the translated letters in *The World's Banker* – as a source of major economic and political significance.



The few early letters between the brothers increase enormously in volume with the commission of Nathan Mayer Rothschild to assemble the funding for Wellington's army early in 1814. They continue through the campaigns of 1814 to Napoleon's exile to Elba, his escape and defeat at Waterloo and the post-War arrangements reached at the congresses of Aix-la-Chapelle and Vienna. There is a break in the letters from 1818 to 1825 for reasons which are not clear. Accidental destruction seems the most probable explanation at the moment.

The letters from 1814 and 1818, of which there are some 2,000, therefore provide a natural block for an initial phase of the project and attention has switched exclusively to this period.

Already a quarter of the letters have been transcribed. These provide a solid base from which to move forward. Work on the completion of the letters for the period will take approximately two years, and a decision on publication will be made by the Trustees in the light of the material revealed during this pilot phase.



One of 20,000 Judendeutsch letters, this one sent by James Rothschild in Paris to his sister-in-law, Hannah, the wife of Nathan, in London, August 1815. The letter expresses astonishment at Nathan's