

The return of the Austrian Rothschild Archive

Victor Gray describes the rediscovery of a collection of papers which for 50 years were thought lost as casualties of war

At a small ceremony in an anonymous building in the Moscow suburbs on 29 November 2001, the Head of the Russian Federal Archive Service signed a document acknowledging the transfer to the ownership of The Rothschild Archive of a collection of papers which for fifty years had lain secretly preserved, unsuspected by anyone in the West.

The signing of this agreement marked the conclusion of a ten-year story which began as the first news filtered out to western historians of the existence in Moscow of a 'Special State Archive' housing hundreds of collections of Western records which had been thought destroyed during the 2nd World War; and which had gone on to take a sinuous course through a bumpy succession of changes of government policy on the issue of repatriation, one of the centrepieces of confrontation between the Russian Parliament and President Yeltsin.¹

The return of this collection was an important step forward in international cultural relations for the Russian Government, for this was the first time it had reached an agreement with any non-governmental body for the return of archives captured by the Soviet Army in the course of the 2nd World War. It was important for the Rothschild family since these documents were the last vestiges of the papers of a branch of the family which had been at the centre of Austrian business and society for well over a century and which had been brutally separated from that position on 12 March 1938, when the Nazis marched into Vienna.

In the wake of the Anschluss, the firm of S M von Rothschild was placed under compulsory administration on 30 March 1939 on the orders of Walter Rafelsberger, economic adviser to the Gauleiter of Vienna, who was charged with the systematic confiscation of all Jewish assets in Austria. It was put under the temporary control of the firm of Merck Finck and Co. and sold to them in October 1939. It is clear however that attention had been given to the archives strikingly soon after the German army entered Austria on 12 March 1938. On 2 April Sonderkommando (Special Unit) II.112 of the Sicherheitsdiensthauptamt (the Security Service High Command) completed a preliminary inventory of the papers which they had already found and secured on Rothschild premises, many of which form part of the Archive now received – along with the inventory itself, now crumpled but still bearing witness to the thoroughness of the operation.

What happened next is not yet clear but it seems highly probable that these, along with many other confiscated archives, were consolidated in a Gestapo store in Emserstrasse in Berlin. With the intensification of Allied bombing in 1943, papers stored in this building were evacuated from Berlin, first to Furstenstein and then, from April 1944, to the Castle of Wölfelsdorf (now Walbrzych in Poland). In early 1945, a Red Army counter-intelligence SMERSH Unit with the Second Ukrainian



Front uncovered the Wölfelsdorf treasures and shipped them to Moscow. In all some 50 rail freight cars were used to transfer the archives held at Wölfelsdorf.²

In March 1946, the Soviet Government established the Central State Special Archive (TsGOA) to house papers captured during the War. They were intended for the use solely of such bodies as the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs and the Secret Police, the NKVD. Access beyond these bodies was prohibited until 1992 when it was renamed the Centre for the Preservation of Historico-Documentary Collections (TsKhIKD). In March 1999 the Centre was abolished and incorporated into the neighbouring Russian State Military Archive.

With *glasnost*, the West became gradually aware, for the first time, of the survival of these 'twice-plundered' archives. During the 1990s, agreements were reached with the Governments of France, Liechtenstein and Great Britain for the repatriation of papers previously stored in the Special Archive. The French agreement had, through negotiation, provided for the return, along with 20 tonnes of French governmental papers, of a collection of papers snatched by the Nazis in 1941 from offices and houses of members of the French Rothschild family. These reached the Rothschild Archive in 1994. Other inter-governmental agreements are still under negotiation. The restitution of the Austrian Rothschild archive differs in that it is the first agreement arrived at between the Russian Government and a non-governmental organisation or individual for the return of archives. It was made under an amendment by President Putin in 2000 to the law on the restitution of cultural treasures initially plundered by the Nazis from occupied countries, Holocaust victims and other enemies of the Nazi regime.

In recognition of the care given in preserving and cataloguing the papers by several generations of Russian archivists, a collection of letters of Tsar Alexander II and Princess Yuryevskaya were gifted to the Russian Federal Archives by the Rothschild family.

Schedule of Rothschild archives, compiled by Sonderkommando II.112 in April 1938 at the time of their seizure

The archive, now returned from the Russian State Military Archive, consists of 419 files in 29 boxes, made up, by the estimate of the archivists, of some 40,000 papers. Though much smaller than the French family archive released in 1994, it is historically far more significant from the point of view of Rothschild history.

That significance is twofold. In the first place the collection includes the small but important group of ‘key documents’ in Rothschild family history gathered together by Salomon von Rothschild in the 1840s and described in detail by Melanie Aspey elsewhere in this Review.

The second major significance lies in the opening up of a whole geographical swathe of Rothschild operations which has been largely unchronicled and, apart from files which, no doubt, lurk in government archives (where they have survived), are recorded nowhere else. The Frankfurt and Vienna offices together set up business and banking involvements in an arc stretching from Sweden, through Middle Europe, to Italy.

In this collection, although it represents only a random fragment of what must once have constituted the Bank’s archive, are to be found, among others, records (admittedly varying in quantity and quality) of the South Austrian Railway, the Buschetéhrad Railway in Hungary and the Vladistavovka Railway in Russia, the Carl Ludwig Railway in Galicia, the Italian Electricity Trust Company, the Kronstadt Paper Factory in Budapest and the Danube Steamship Company. There are references to mining and to oil trading in Baku.

In the field of government involvement there are references to and reflections of loans to Austria, Hungary, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Sweden, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Japan.

Personal loans to several European aristocrats and monarchs are mentioned, including the Esterhazys and King Alexander of Serbia who, it becomes clear, in 1893 placed substantial quantities of royal jewels with the Vienna House as security. The prize items in this area, however, were a series of letters from Prince Metternich, the Imperial Chancellor, and a close associate of Salomon, which were presented by the Russian Government, as a gift, to the Austrian Nation in 1960. Photocopies are retained in the collection.

Away from the business area, the collection includes miscellaneous records - mainly financial accounts - of the family estates in Austria: principally, Schillersdorf and Beneschau. Personal papers include several hundred family photographs from the early decades of the century, together with personal letters, and ephemera concerning social occasions, personal purchases, etc. A 1903, privately printed, catalogue of the paintings and furniture of Nathaniel von Rothschild is an important addition to our knowledge of the family collection.

The family’s philanthropic activities are reflected in a group of papers relating to the construction of the Bettina Pavilion, a hospital for women founded after the death of Bettina, the wife of Albert, in 1892. Other activities recorded are the donation by Salomon in 1844 of 40,000 gulden towards the building of a polytechnic institution in Brno and the founding of psychiatric institutions by Nathaniel in 1898.

The Austrian papers will be incorporated into The Rothschild Archive’s own catalogue system for eventual access via the Archive website. In the meantime, enquiries about the collection can be addressed to Melanie Aspey at The Archive.



Title plate of a lockable metal case constructed to house details of Metternich's personal financial dealings with the Rothschilds

NOTES

1. The most comprehensive account of the seizure of documents and of the issues involved in their restitution is to be found in Patricia Kennedy Grimsted: ‘Twice plunders or ‘Twice saved?’ Russia’s ‘Trophy’ Archives and the Loot of the Reichssicherheits-hauptamt”, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 4(2) September 2001.
2. Grimsted, *op.cit.*, pp204–206.