ON 18 JUNE 1812, JUDITH COHEN, newly married to Moses Montefiore, wrote in her diary: “This evening also we passed with my sister Hannah [Rothschild], and found Esther and Samuel there, who had the kindness to conduct us home in their coach, it being rainy weather”. Hannah, Judith and Esther were all daughters of Levi Barent Cohen, about whom much has been written. But who was ‘Samuel’? The answer to this question throws considerable light both on the linkages existing between Nathan Mayer Rothschild, Hannah’s husband, and the Jewish business community in England and on how those linkages enabled him to establish business connections with Brazil.

Until the middle of the eighteenth century the Jewish community in Great Britain was largely composed of people of Sephardic origin, originating in the lands around the Mediterranean. From the early 1740s onwards several thousand Ashkenazim, natives of central and eastern Europe, came to Great Britain. Among these migrants, many of them poor and ill-educated, was Moshe ben Zanvil Pulvermacher, born in the town of Krotoschin, south-east of Pozn, then in Prussian Poland. In England, where he arrived early in the 1760s, aged about 18, he became known as Moses Samuel. He steadily built up his fortune as a merchant, settling in the East End of London. Pious and respectable, he became a leading member of the Great Synagogue, being chosen a Parnas (Warden) in 1795. He married Esther Phillips, and the couple had some ten children.

The eldest son was Samuel Moses Samuel, the ‘Samuel’ who was married to Esther Cohen. Samuel and his four brothers all seem to have become merchants, at first in partnership with their father. In 1805 the London Post Office Directory records the firm of ‘Moses Samuel and Sons’ at 1 Hammet Street, in the Minories, Tower Hill. The family’s standing was attested by the marriage in 1802 of Hannah Samuel to Solomon Cohen, the eldest son of Levi Barent Cohen, and that of Samuel Moses Samuel to Esther Cohen in 1803. When Moses Samuel retired from business and settled in Bath, his sons continued the firm as “Samuel Brothers, African Merchants” at 1 Hammet Street. However, S. M. Samuel also ran his own business. In February 1812 he supplied his brother-in-law, Nathan Mayer Rothschild, with 26½ dozen of 1804 vintage Port, 10 dozen of mature Madeira, one pipe (barrel) of Madeira, one child’s crib, “Bible & Prophecies with Annotations & Commentaries” bound in thirteen volumes, and one “Compleat Sett of Festival Prayers”. The bill for these heterogeneous items came to £245 – 5s – 4d.

The port and madeira that S. M. Samuel sold to Nathan Rothschild indicate that both he and the firm of Samuel Bros. were trading with Portugal and its colonies. It was precisely this connection and a willingness to exploit new business opportunities that explain the creation of the new firm of Samuel & Phillips. Late in 1807 the French armies invaded Portugal, until then neutral in the Napoleonic wars. Instead of attempting to resist the invasion, the Portuguese royal family, the court and the government boarded a fleet in Lisbon harbour and sailed across the Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro, which became the capital of the Portuguese Empire. Brazil
An invoice for cases of gold coins (‘Ports’) shipped to England by Samuel & Phillips on the packet Diana, 1815

ceased to be a colony and its ports were thrown open to trade with friendly states, above all with Great Britain. Among the English merchants who established themselves in Rio de Janeiro in 1808 were Denis (David) Moses Samuel, a younger brother of S. M. Samuel, and Alfred (Abraham) Phillips, the nephew of Esther Phillips Samuel.

The firm created by two young men (Denis Samuel being aged 24 in 1808) prospered. By 1812 its business was so considerable as to require the presence in Rio of a third brother, James Samuel. On 21 September, James wrote from Portsmouth to Nathan Mayer Rothschild. Acknowledging receipt of a letter addressed to Samuel & Phillips he remarked: “I shall feel happy in the pleasure of seeing you previous to my Departure which expect daily with best wishes to MRS R., yourself & Family.” In fact, business between Rothschild and Samuel & Phillips was already under way. At the start of October, the Rio firm purchased 133 “Ports,” gold coins, to the value of £303, dispatched to London in a tin canister “for Acc’t & Risk of M RN M Rothschild”. At the end of December, Samuel & Phillips dispatched 19 bars of gold, worth £1525. It was at this time that Rothschild began to supply cash to the British armies on the continent. Brazil, with its gold mines, was a good source for the specie he needed. To pay for the shipments made by Samuel & Phillips, Rothschild sent the firm bills of exchange drawn on British and Portuguese merchants at Rio de Janeiro. Each transaction was separate and self-liquidating.

By the middle of 1815 Samuel & Phillips had become Rothschild’s corresponding agent in Brazil, maintaining a standing account for transactions between the firm and Rothschild, an account balanced at the end of the calendar year. From the surviving correspondence it is clear that Denis Samuel was the dominant figure in the firm. He was without much culture or education, his writing style and spelling being erratic at best, but he was energetic, shrewd and without much scruple. He cultivated close contacts with government officials at Rio, particularly those of the Treasury, keeping open house for them and quietly providing them with a share of the profits. In February 1816 Denis Samuel commented to Nathan Mayer about “Our Govt. Business which in a great measure is in our hands”. Two months later, he sent to Rothschild a bill of exchange drawn by the Portuguese Treasury at 70½d per Milreis, 3½d above the prevailing rate of exchange, making a “gain, fully 5%”. 
In its dealings with Rothschild, Samuel & Phillips was deferential and compliant. The firm was always "gratified" and "honoured" to receive Nathan Mayer’s letters and to accomplish his orders. "The handsome manner you spontaneously offer your colossal guarantee of our firm is indelibly marked in our mind." The firm suffered Rothschild’s rebukes meekly, always yielding to his desires. At the same time, it was constantly trying to obtain from Rothschild inside information and increased favours. The business relationship was one in which Samuel & Phillips shipped specie and gold dust and collected bills drawn on Rio which Rothschild had discounted, remitting the profits in the form of good bills to England. The business was mutually profitable and grew in size and intensity in the decade after 1815.

In the middle of 1818 Alfred Phillips returned home to England where he married his cousin Rebecca, one of Moses Samuel’s daughters. He took with him the firm of Samuel & Phillips, which conducted business from 8 South Street, Finsbury. At Rio a new firm, Samuel Phillips & Co. was created, with James Samuel being admitted a partner. (This change has understandably been the cause for much confusion, not just to historians but to contemporaries as well, particularly since the "Samuel" in "Samuel Phillips & Co." was and is frequently assumed to be a first name.) A further change occurred in June 1820 when Joshua Samuel, yet another of the brothers, arrived in Rio to work in Samuel Phillips & Co. A personal letter he sent to Nathan Mayer Rothschild makes plain the close relationship existing between the two men. "With best respects to Mrs. Rothschild, yourself, and family in which I beg to include the respectable family of the Montefiores [Judith and Moses] & the circle round your hospitable table." In another personal letter of 29 January 1821, announcing that ill health made necessary his brother James’ return to England, Joshua Samuel referred to "the lovely ladies," words written discreetly in Judendeutsch [German in Hebrew characters], who "are to be found only in name" at Rio. Joshua understood Nathan Mayer Rothschild’s temperament, as a remark in a letter of 19 October 1822 shows: "Our Mr. Josh Samuel tells us Mr. Rothschild was in one of his best & merry humour[s] when he dictated his memorandum on the Preem of the Bahia Bills."

Rothschild’s brother-in-law, Samuel Moses Samuel, was never, it would appear, a partner in either Samuel & Phillips of London or Samuel Phillips & Co. of Rio, but the two firms maintained close links with him both as an individual and as a senior partner in the firm of Samuel Brothers. In 1820, when the Rio firm drew a bill of exchange in favour of the Portuguese Government for £14,500 on Samuel & Phillips in London, it specified S. M. Samuel as payer "in case of absence".

Events in Brazil during the 1820s favoured the firm of Samuel Phillips & Co., causing it to flourish as never before. When the king of Portugal was forced to return to Lisbon in 1821, after an absence of fourteen years, he left behind his elder son Pedro as Regent of Brazil. Growing fears that Portugal would attempt to make Brazil once again a colony led to a declaration of independence late in 1822 with the Prince Regent becoming Emperor Pedro I. Samuel Phillips & Co. maintained close personal relations both with the Imperial family and with the new nation’s cabinet ministers. Early in 1824 Woodbine Parish, the first British envoy to Argentina, arrived at Rio de Janeiro on his way to Buenos Aires, and the firm reported to Nathan Mayer Rothschild: "Mr. Parish handed us also your kind introductions & we tendered him our Services & table with invitation to meet the minister of state with some of our particular friends."

The finances of the new Empire were shaky at best, and Samuel Phillips & Co. showed themselves eager to gain profit from this embarrassment. As early as October 1820 the firm had suggested to Rothschild the arrangement of a government loan at 9 to 12% interest. "We should not hesitate our taking a large share [sic]. Your sentiments would much oblige us upon this Subject." They renewed their urgings on the subject in March and August 1821. But Nathan Mayer refused to bite, as the firm acknowledged in March 1822. "We have made due note of your declining any share of a Loan should we make such contract! You certainly must be the most able Judge upon this head. All we have to
assure you is if such is effected by us the basis will be solid & as far as human foresight can go the payment secured by the Revenues our residence of 15 years has made us equal to select.”

The first Brazilian government loan was not in fact launched on the London market until the start of 1824. Samuel Phillips & Co. knew exactly what then transpired, as the firm’s letter of 18 November shows. “The Loan having been made for One Million at 75 p. C ent & having been at a Discount of 3 p C t is much liked here, the Contractors taking the option within 4 months to take [a] million more [at] 83 & four months after that period the remaining Million [at] 87, but as it’s most likely they will not fullfil the first part of this agreement it becomes annulled & in that event perhaps you may be induced to arranged with Brant & Gameiro [the Brazilian envoys in London] to retrieve their Credit and that of their Government by contracting for the remainder.” In January 1825, Nathan Mayer did step into the breach and had no difficulty in selling the second placement of two million pounds. Rothschild became in effect the Brazilian government’s agent, paying the semi-annual dividends on the loans and acting as banker for the Brazilian envoy in London.

Since the Brazilian government had raised the 1825 loan in part to pay off its debts in Brazil, it needed to draw on the capital held by Rothschild. As Samuel Phillips & Co. reported in March 1825, “It is very probable the Gov’t Drawings on your goodself may pass our Hands.” In fact, from March to August 1825 the firm provided the government with over £200,000, being reimbursed mainly by bills of exchange drawn by the Brazilian Treasury on Rothschild. The size of these transactions testifies to the resources and the standing of Samuel Phillips & Co.

The year 1825 saw a change in the firm’s management in Brazil. Denis Moses Samuel who had been ill returned to England on the April packet boat. In London, he assumed the direction of Samuel & Phillips. To assist Joshua Samuel and his brother James (returned to Rio with restored health early in 1824) there came out to Brazil John Samuel, a son of Phineas M oses Samuel, another of the brothers. John Samuel was then very young and he only began service as a confidential copy clerk in July 1826.
By the time of his return to London, Denis Moses Samuel was a wealthy man. He took up residence in Hanover Terrace, designed by John Nash on the western side of Regent's Park. Even more successful was Samuel Moses Samuel who at the start of the 1820s had moved his office to Freeman's Court, Cornhill, by the Royal Exchange and very close to New Court. S. M. Samuel purchased about this time 29 Park Crescent, designed by John Nash, which still stands, facing onto the Marylebone Road and Regent’s Park. In Boyle’s Court Directory for 1829, both brothers were entitled “Esq.” Contributing to this new social status were the tightened bonds between Nathan Mayer Rothschild and S. M. Samuel. In November 1826, Samuel Phillips & Co. wrote from Rio: “We have to thank you for your communication of the intended marriage of our Brother S. M. Samuel’s daughter Henrietta to Mr. Worms & hope every good may attend them as well as yourself & Esteemed family.” Solomon Benedict Worms, the son of Nathan Mayer’s sister, Jeannette, had been brought over to England and educated there by his uncle. The wedding took place in July 1827. Seven years later, in December 1834, Denis Moses Samuel, then aged fifty, married his niece, Amelia, the youngest of S. M. Samuel’s three daughters.

The letters that Samuel Phillips & Co. sent to Nathan Mayer Rothschild in the later 1820s suggest a subtle change in the relationship. The information given is quite sparse and summary and the tone adopted far more equal. The firm in Rio was now paying, it is fair to infer, as much or more attention to its financial and commercial dealings with Samuel & Phillips. In 1826 the Rio firm’s attempt to take three quarters of the profit from a bill of exchange for £10,000 drawn on Rothschild by the English envoy to Brazil so displeased Nathan Mayer that he noted on their letter: “Cannot allow this, I must have the whole amount.” He refused to accept the envoy’s bill until Samuel & Phillips had endorsed it over to him. The changed circumstances perhaps explain why, at the end of 1829, Rothschild selected as his second corresponding agent in Rio de Janeiro Leuzinger & Co., a branch of an established firm of the same name in Paris. Leuzinger & Co. were not only as deferential in their letters as Nathan Mayer could desire but supplied him, each month, with copious information on the financial, commercial and political situation in Brazil.

The element of tension existing in the relationship between Samuel Phillips & Co. in Rio and Rothschild helps explain the train of events that led at the end of 1831 to Samuel & Phillips replacing Nathan Mayer Rothschild as the Brazilian government’s financial agent in London. During the late 1820s the financial situation of the Empire of Brazil grew more and more shaky. It experienced great difficulty in finding the funds necessary to meet the dividends payable on 1 April and 1 October on its sterling loans. On more than one occasion Rothschild made up the necessary amount out of his own resources and he grew accustomed to dunning the treasury boards in the ports outside of Rio de Janeiro for their allotted contributions to the dividend payments. He seems to have lectured the Imperial government on its duties and reproved it for failure to meet them. In May 1829 Samuel Phillips & Co. reported “the intimation we made to the minister of finance, of what you were pleased to state to our Mr. Denis Samuel on the departure of Packet on 7 March ‘that but for his information on the state of this country you would not have paid dividends 1st April last’ & we hope nothing had occurred at the departure of the Packet on 27th same to alter your determination”.

In April 1831, a political crisis forced Pedro I to abdicate. He sailed for Europe, leaving as emperor his son, then aged five. Pedro I’s political opponents took control of the government. Samuel Phillips & Co. profited from this change. Not only did the departing emperor give the firm his power of attorney to manage his financial and personal affairs in Brazil, but the firm, having done many favours for the politicians now in office, possessed open access to them. The most able and strong willed of the politicians was Diogo Pereira de Vasconcelos, named Minister of Finance in July 1831. Vasconcelos was determined to ensure that the finances of Brazil would henceforth be properly managed and that sufficient funds would always be on
deposit in London well before the due date for the payment of dividends. He so informed Rothschild and sent him both detailed information and specific instructions on the subject.

Vasconcelos wrote in Portuguese and the use of this language may explain why Nathan Mayer Rothschild paid little attention to the Minister’s letters. He clearly believed that political disorder and financial crisis would result from the new state of affairs and so he continued to press the local treasury boards to make large remittances direct to him. His letters to the Brazilian Minister of Finance provided little information on the amount of funds Rothschild held in London but contained many exhortations about the necessity of Brazil fulfilling its international commitments. Vasconcelos’ letters make patent his impatience and rising anger at both the tone and the content of Rothschild’s correspondence. Nathan Mayer paid no heed to these danger signals. As 1831 drew to a close, Vasconcelos took action. On 24 December Samuel Phillips & Co. informed Rothschild:

“We ought to communicate to you that in a Conference we had with the Minister of Finance Sr. Vasconcelos he represented he felt exceedingly hurt that you did not treat the Brazilian Minister well, even so far as to refuse taking his Bill for trifling amounts. That has made him, added to the following reasons, suspend the government’s transactions with you & finding his fixed rezolução [resolve] thereupon if we did not accept same to adopt some other measure, we thought it proper to accept of same, also alleging [sic] the irregularity of your sending accounts & A/C, so much so that the Government are ignorant of the actual state of their Funds in the hands of the Contractors; withal it appears they intend to continue paying the Dividends as usual & that positive Orders went to all the Provinces, to make remittance & also make efforts to do the same from hence.”

What Samuel Phillips & Co. did not specify in their letter to Nathan Mayer was that henceforth the Minister of Finance would use Samuel & Phillips to handle the government’s funds in London and to sell the diamonds, dye woods, cotton and other commodities it sent to Europe. The letter of 24 December implies that the Rio firm exerted no influence on Vasconcelos but simply accepted his decision, given that he would otherwise choose some other firm of merchants to handle the government’s business in London. A Portuguese merchant, writing at Rio on 12 January 1832, offered a very different interpretation of the situation, that of the cuckoo in the nest:

“How is it that the firm of Samuel Phillips, represented here by a drunkard who does not know how to talk in any language, has not only served the ex-Emperor, regaining for him all the pieces of property he desires, but as his attorney is demanding large sums from the State? A nd, with the abolition of the Treasury Agency in London, and removing the sale of the diamonds
and Brazil wood from the hands of the envoys in London, the firm has been asked to sell these products and also to act as Treasury Agent from now on. All this is the result of keeping every day open house, serving no more than half a dozen dishes, and of finding cash with which to make loans to public figures desirous of making a show but without the income to do so.”

It is patent that Nathan Mayer Rothschild did not believe and could not credit how he had been treated. He wrote in wrath to Samuel Phillips & Co. who replied on 26 April with a smooth putdown: “We have to regret it did not afford you satisfaction our communication respecting our conference with the Minister of Finance, we have only in conclusion to state it was at his instance we made it you, & we have nothing to comment thereon. We have no doubt from the exertions made here the Dividends were paid by you as usual on 1 April instant.” Even more galling to Rothschild’s pride must have been the letter sent by Samuel & Phillips of London on 31 August 1832: “We beg to inform you that on Friday the 7th Sept next we shall hold at your disposal the Sum of Thirty three thousand seven hundred & fifty Pounds for which amount £33750 we request you will hand us your receipt in Tripé stating its application to be on account of the Imperial Brazilian Loans for Dividends due on the 1st of October ensuing.”

Rothschild acted as though he had not been supplanted. He continued to harass the local treasury boards to make direct remittances to him of their quota of funds to pay the loan dividends. He bombarded successive Ministers of Finance with protests, projects and complaints against Samuel & Phillips’ conduct. The Ministers’ replies, always courteous and considerate, were unyielding. None of them would consider reversing Vasconcelos’ decision. By the middle of 1833 Rothschild had come to appreciate that Samuel & Phillips’ status as Brazilian government agent in London was unassailable. He resolved to end Samuel Phillips & Co.’s role as his corresponding agent in Rio. Using a failure on its part to conform to his instructions in drawing a bill of exchange on him, he ordered it to hand over the substantial funds it held on his behalf to Leuzinger & Co. and to Finnie Brothers. “We cannot but be sensible to these changes,” Samuel Phillips & Co replied, “& trust any incident of business will not deprive us the honor of your friendship which you were pleased to uphold with us as for times long past.” The letter is in the handwriting of Joshua Samuel, who some twenty years before had formed part of “the circle round your hospitable table”.

Nathan Mayer Rothschild never, to his dying day, acknowledged that he might have been responsible for losing the financial agency. In April 1836, he told a special envoy of the Brazilian government that it “had been unjust towards him, perhaps because of the circumstances of the moment, but that he would not hesitate now to lend with the same good will and liberality he showed in former times, provided the government espoused sound principles, that is, if it scrupulously fulfills the contracts it makes, the only way to possess credit”.

Three months later, Nathan Mayer died at Frankfurt and with him ended any element of personal animosity, if such existed, against Samuel & Phillips. The mourners at Rothschild’s funeral included, as The Times reported, members of the various branches of the Samuel family. In Rio de Janeiro Samuel Phillips & Co. continued to prosper. The firm’s great achievement was the successful launching of a Brazilian government loan for £400,000 on the London market in 1839. The British envoy in Rio characterised Samuel Phillips & Co at the end of 1839 as “a great Commercial, or rather Financial Jewish House in London and here, long connected with this Government in most of its operations.” A month earlier, he had commented: “the Influence of the House of Samuel and Company is very great in this Country, and they make unscrupulous use of the thorough knowledge they possess of the venality of the Brazilian Representatives and Public Servants.”

In reality, Samuel Phillips & Co. had reached its apogee. At the end of 1839 James Samuel returned permanently to England, leaving the firm under the management of his nephew John Samuel. Political developments in Brazil brought the replacement of Samuel & Phillips by the
firm of Goldsmid, King and Thompson as government agents in London. This change does not seem to have greatly affected the firm's fortunes. John Samuel possessed excellent connections with the political and social elite of Brazil. From 1841 to 1843 Samuel Phillips & Co. served anew as corresponding agents in Rio for N M Rothschild & Sons. Finally, in 1851, after a quarter century's residence in Brazil, John Samuel decided to return to England. With no member of the family to succeed him, he put the firm into liquidation.

In London Samuel & Phillips continued to carry on business until the death of Denis Moses Samuel in August 1860. After his return, John Samuel, whose niece Juliana Cohen married Mayer de Rothschild, was a frequent visitor to Mentmore, Mayer's residence in Buckinghamshire, and he sometimes dined with Lionel de Rothschild at the City of London Club, Old Broad Street. John Samuel may have played a role in N M Rothschild & Sons' securing appointment in 1855 as Brazilian government agents in London. He certainly used his family connections to persuade N M Rothschild & Sons to act as the issuing house for the shares of Brazilian railway companies of which he was a director. The longest lived of the Samuel brothers was, paradoxically, Samuel Moses Samuel, the oldest. He did not die until 1873, aged 99, leaving a fortune of £500,000. Neither his son, George, nor Denis Moses Samuel's two sons, Frank and Arthur, showed the least interest in the world of commerce and finance. John Samuel who never married lived until 1887. By then the two firms of Samuel Phillips & Co of Rio de Janeiro and Samuel & Phillips of London were no more than memories. In contrast, N M Rothschild & Sons continued to flourish like a green bay tree.

NOTES


3. Cartas de João Loureiro escritas do Rio de Janeiro ao Conselheiro Manuel José da Costa e Sá," Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro tomo 76, parte III (1913), 392. By 1831 the financial agent in London was no longer the Brazilian envoy, as Loureiro assumed, but N M Rothschild.

4. Draft letter of the Marquis of Barbacena to Diogo Antônio Feijó, Rio, June 1836, transcribed in Antonio Augusto de Aguiar, Vida do marquês de Barbacena (Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1896), p. 950. Known as "General Brant" prior to receiving his title of nobility, Barbacena had been one of the two Brazilian agents in London who negotiated the loan of 1824 and 1825.