

The historian and his debts

The fourth Rothschild Archive Lecture, delivered by Fritz Stern,
University Professor Emeritus, Columbia University, New York, 28 May 2003



opposite
“A great presence
in Europe”:
the Rothschild
family arms, granted
by the Emperor
of Austria

ONE OF THE GREAT 19TH-CENTURY HISTORIANS, Theodor Mommsen, wrote: “The history of the House of Rothschild is of greater importance for world history than the domestic history of the State of Saxony; and is it a matter of indifference that it is the history of a German Jew?” You see the mark of a great historian: summing up in one sentence the key aspects – world history and German Jewry. By the early 19th century, the House of Rothschild was a great presence in Europe, a presence that had at its core financial power and intelligence, transcending every border, with a unique place in the world of art and social style as well. The dynasty had its origins in the ghetto of Frankfurt but flourished most especially in Paris and London, a tribute to the more congenial, more promising climate in England and in France. The Rothschild dynasty signalled the beginning of a new era in world history.

The thought of talking in an archive made me reflect on the place of archives in the historian’s life: how much we historians owe to archives, even those who never enter one. The thought of that first debt – the historian’s debt to archives – led me by easy association to consider all our other collective debts, the ones we historians tend to take for granted, the ones that don’t have to be repaid, because our benefactors are beyond reach. We should remember them and try to make sure that future historians may benefit from the same benign conditions. I don’t believe that is necessarily certain. As a child I escaped National Socialism and all my life I thought the world would get better and by and large it tended to. But that hope has grown dimmer in recent years. Historians are probably conscious more of the demands put on them than of the opportunities afforded them. I don’t mean to minimise these demands, or the sacrifices and the risks that any creative work entails. I appreciate Clio’s exacting standards as set by the great historians who have come before us.

It is not surprising that we are more conscious of our labours and hardships than of the conditions that allow us to work in the first place. We remember the countless days and years spent in anguished composition. We remember Williams James’ proud boast, “I have to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts.” I won’t speculate on our motives as historians or on our complicated psyches, but I want to recall all that is potentially put at our disposal, partly for prudential reasons that I have already mentioned; we may take for granted what we are given but it might at some later time be restricted or placed in jeopardy. Perhaps we should lament our deficiencies less and recognise our benefits more, and we should not slight what we owe to our culture, to institutions and to individuals.

I use the term ‘debt’ somewhat mischievously, especially, I suppose, in the surroundings of a great bank. Ours are debts that do not need to be repaid, they can not be repaid, they are, as the Preface to the Authorised Version of the Bible has it, ‘a debt of special remembrance and thankfulness’. The debts I talk about are ideal debts (an unusual category) except in the sense that our work should justify the confidence bestowed on us.

We may not realise the full extent of these debts, despite or perhaps because some time in the last century it became obligatory for most historians to add ‘acknowledgments’ to their

completed work, containing thanks to colleagues and institutions as well as to long-suffering spouses, to neglected children and to ever faithful dogs and cats. Having done that, most of us don't tarry over these debts, as gratitude is often pushed aside by anxiety over the work's reception. This, however, is a good occasion to reckon with our multiple gifts and dependencies.

It has been observed that in recent years some of our best historians seem to have become concerned more with potential profits than with virtual debts, eager for assurance in the form of the extravagant advances that ubiquitous agents ever so selflessly negotiate for them. Yet it is possible that Clio casts a sceptical eye on Mammonite devotion. I am not arguing against ambition and reward – anything to whip us to work. In 1782, Gibbon wrote to his stepmother, “My private life is a gentle and not displeasing continuation of my old labours and I am again involved, as I shall be for some years, in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Some fame, some profit, some assurance of daily amusement encourages me to persist.”

(It is the daily amusement that I envy.) I probably have an old-fashioned preference for Macaulay's celebrated ambition that his book should “for a few days supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies”. He also hoped that his work would be put next to Thucydides, whom he thought the greatest of all. Quite a trick to try to attain Thucydides' level and please the ladies. Literary and pecuniary ambitions were one and the same for him; as a 28-year old he sketched ‘imaginary models’ for historians, adding, “a historian such as we have been attempting to describe, would indeed be an intellectual prodigy”. But even intellectual prodigies, to say nothing of ordinary workaday chaps, have needs and bear debts.

The greatest gift – but again not necessarily a gift in perpetuity – is the culture's recognition that there is an essential value in remembering the past. The centrality of secular history is of recent origin, part of the heritage we associate with the Enlightenment, that disposition of spirit that Emma Rothschild has so wonderfully captured as “a condition of the human mind, undepressed and unneglected” – the very words evoke nostalgia. By and large, in what we used to call the western world, we historians pursue the study of the past in a rigorous and scholarly fashion, aware that our moral engagement or presuppositions are likely to fortify or weaken the integrity of our craft. We are largely free of the most noxious forms of censorship and governmental intimidation (most cultures do not respect the right to that freedom). History by ideological dictate, by Marxism-Leninism or Germanic racism, once was rampant and has been overcome. But insidious pressures remain. Only in liberal societies do the words of the great F.W. Maitland apply: “an orthodox history seems to me a contradiction in terms”.

The pressure to rewrite the past, often a commendable and necessary task, may also encourage doctrinaire conformity or hegemonial striving. As the fine liberal American historian C. Vann Woodward warned when he called for a sense of irony in history: “the demagoguery, the cant and the charlatany of historians in the service of a fashionable cause can at times rival that of politicians”. In all societies passions and interests threaten to distort history, but in liberal societies such lapses are capable of correction and some approximation of the truth is demanded. We insist on evidence. If we fail, the fault is ours, not that of a commissar. Government intimidation and restrictive modes nonetheless pervade many societies. We are endangered by what John Stuart Mill called the ‘tyranny of the majority’. There are such things, even in free societies, as closed minds. I would remind you simply of historiography since 1945 in Japan,



which has not been able to deal with its past or, conversely, of the courage of young Israeli historians, writing of their country's origins and founding, some even nostalgic for Mandate days, but debunking all sorts of myths. That is a rare achievement. The past is always in danger of being bent to present-day commands of fashion. George Orwell knew that better than most when he invented the party's motto: "He who controls the present controls the past, and who controls the past controls the future".

The past is largely gone and it must be reconstructed, reimagined. Hence authentic texts and access to them are the elemental subsistence of historians. Without access to archival records, we flounder in uncertainty and myth and legend hold sway. Our efforts to approximate a truth about the past are difficult enough, but to be denied access to records or to face excessive secrecy and restriction on archives, especially for political reasons, is a crippling injury. I fear, that at least in the United States, the present tendency is to greater restrictiveness.

I mention these obvious points because the respect accorded history and the character of historical work are always in flux. In our present globalising circumstances, western historiography faces the need to understand the past of other cultures, whose views on the place of history and about preservation of records may be and probably are quite different from our own. So our reach needs to be greater than ever, while our grasp of traditional historical fields has become so narrow, so specialised, that our work often slights context and complexity. And history is also no longer restricted to print. History at the speed of television or film is usually history purged of complexity, yet history is drama – Shakespeare's, not Spielberg's. I am not arguing that written history should have a monopoly over the past, but it too needs to attract the attention of young ladies and also of ageing politicians, who increasingly try to justify questionable policies by making false or ignorant historical analogies.

Our first and greatest debt then is to the liberal spirit embodied in law and custom that allows for a more or less unfettered enquiry into the past. Only a liberal society will allow us to be free of prescribed orthodoxy or falsehood, will allow us to be free to make and correct our own idiosyncratic mistakes. I say all this out of concern that liberality in the age of fear and exploited fear is itself endangered. But our first tangible debt is to those associations and individuals who collected and preserved their records and made them available to persons with a legitimate interest in them. Archives are the fundament of our scholarship and even those who have never inhaled the musty air of old papers, who have never had the thrill of coming upon an astonishing original document, draw on the work of others who have laboured in archives and have benefited from the meticulous care of archivists.

The archive is the place where the historian lives simultaneously in the present and in the past. A hundred and eighty years ago, the Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke began to fashion the modern style of historical writing on his discovery of the State Archives of the Republic of Venice. Ranke has been much misunderstood and I should add that not all of his fifty-four volumes, written without the help of a computer, are based on extensive archival work, but all are marked by superb style.

Archives have an alluring charm that is hard to capture. They are the locale of authenticity, a tangible, physical representation of the past. A fine contemporary historian has written that "her one love affair that has continued without complication was with the archives". Another has said: "I first heard the voices of the dead in a poorly heated archive at the mouth of the Loire. These were voices that had remained mute until I rediscovered them and could give them life again through my own writing. This has inspired my work ever since." Many of us remember the often quite primitive rooms, themselves residues of some past, where we found and worked on the records of the past. We remember the exhaustion and exhilaration of going through stacks of ancient papers, often covered in forbidding handwriting. We remember all manner of discomfort.



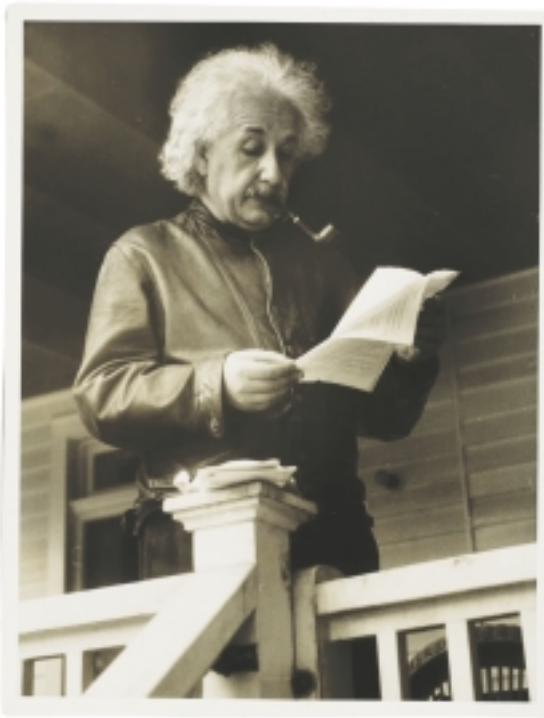
In the old days, before copying machines and sophisticated small cameras, one could only take notes and I remember relying on a four-colour pencil, using the different colours to signify an actual quotation, a paraphrase, a sudden insight to be thought about later, another source or book that needed to be consulted. Thrill and discomfort hedge an archive. The lucky discovery or more often a first intimation of some possible meaning: all that is forever memorable, even though the yield is often lamentably low.

Archives are treasure troves, but they can also be treacherous traps for historians. Treasure troves because they do contain genuine records of at least part of the past. Traps because they are such fun and allow for legitimate avoidance of real work, that is to say of writing. Archives supply diverse facts, presumably genuine ones, but facts as facts are dumb. They give hints that must be explored. Our task is to endow facts with meaning, with context, with life. And the archive is a trap because of the temptation to stay in them and to build only on facts. Put differently, archival finds are like presumptive findings of gold or oil which need to be extracted and refined. There is always the professional risk of empty veins or dry holes. But archives remain an Ur-text for the recovery of the past, almost always necessary and never sufficient. It is to weave the findings there into a comprehensible narrative, to understand the myriad connections among disparate events that is our job. For that we need help of a different kind. Great interpretive works can be written without archival research but they themselves rely obviously on the earlier literature which was grounded in archival work.

Some archives are valuable depositories, conserving and conservative. Others, and they of course are the most valuable ones, continue to be acquisitive, magnificently alert to what can be and should be added to them. I know this is superbly true of The Rothschild Archive; it is magnificently alive. It is true of the other archive I know well, which is the Albert Einstein Archives, now located, according to Einstein's last will, in Jerusalem.

I first came upon the Einstein archive in 1969 when it was housed, unsorted, in very old green filing cabinets in the attic (I seem to have a particular preference for attics) of the

“The archive is the place where the historian lives simultaneously in the present and the past.”
The Reading Room of
The Rothschild Archive



Albert Einstein:
photograph from the
collection of the
Albert Einstein
Archives at the
Hebrew University
of Jerusalem

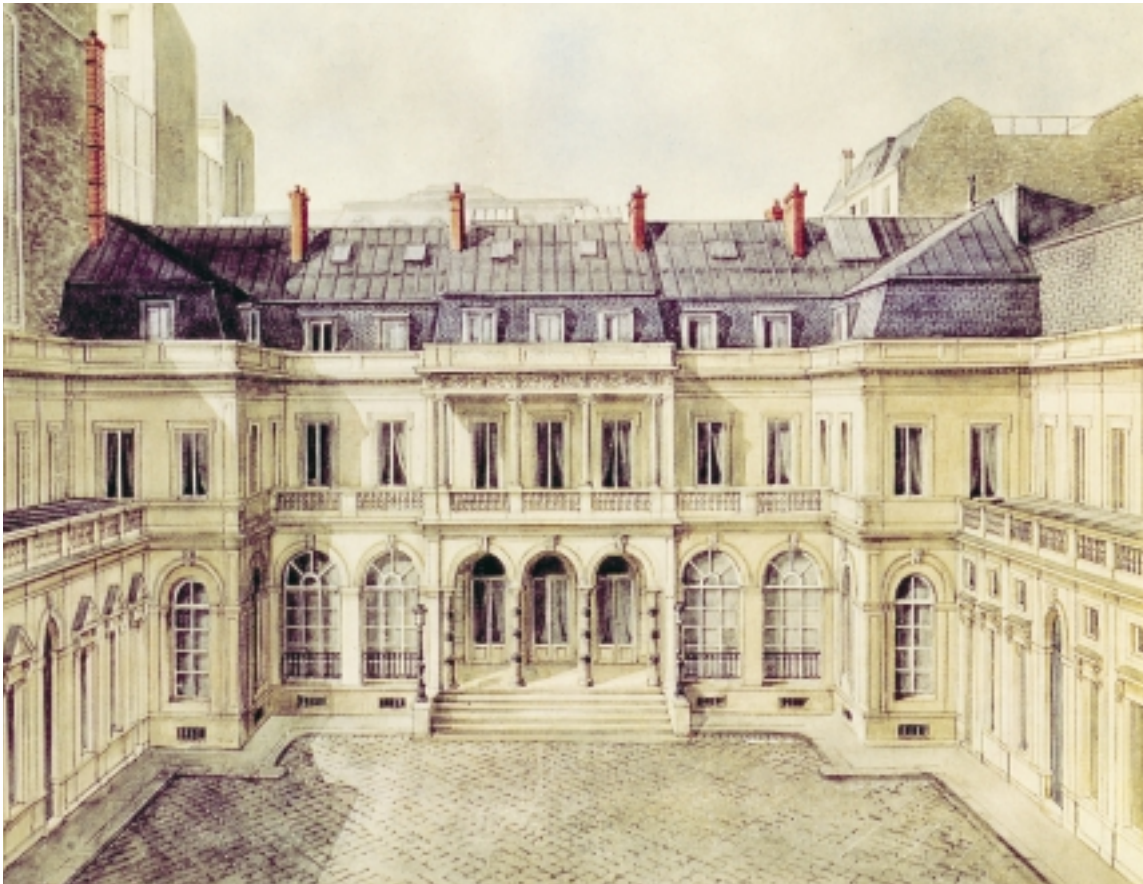
Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Then, in the mid-1970s, I read in that archive Einstein's unpublished and at the time largely unknown correspondence – correspondence that included his observations on political matters, as well as on Zionism, Palestine and other important matters. I had started hesitantly on a lecture on Einstein's Germany, with a conventional view of Einstein as a benign and kindly, saintly person, and I remember the surprise, having found two letters written to friends which had an extraordinarily wounding element to them, coming across a third instance and thinking this benign person did know how to wound people with intuitive precision. He didn't do it often, but, having suddenly come across this, I had to question and rethink my assumptions about the man. It did not change my admiration in any way; it complicated the story.

It is odd to think that Einstein exemplifies in his personality the same cosmopolitan, international character that defines the House of Rothschild. He was less rooted, though, and he could joke about his multiple loyalties. In 1919, when fame first engulfed him, he wrote to *The Times* of London, "Here is yet another application of the principle of relativity for the delectation of the reader: today, I am described in Germany as a German *savant* and in England as a Swiss Jew. Should it ever be my fate to be represented as a *bête noir* I should on the contrary become a Swiss Jew for the Germans and a German *savant* for the English".

The Einstein archives are the principal basis for the *Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, one of the great publishing ventures of our time, with which I have been associated for some twenty years. Here are collected and edited papers of a solitary genius to whom this world fame came – at a time, I would insist, when the old bearers of fame had been weakened, almost destroyed, corrupted, bankrupted by the Great War. This scientist, who is now considered to be second only to Newton, began to have a worldwide reputation, on a scale unknown for a scientist before then. And he occasionally put that reputation, that fame, to the service of political and social purposes, in defence of the underdog, on behalf of what one might call the twentieth-century version of Enlightenment hopes for peace and justice.

Both the Einstein papers – and they include, I think, 40,000 manuscripts and papers – and the Rothschild archives show the interwovenness of life in many countries, life both sustained and affronted in those countries. The Kaiser's police shadowed Einstein, National Socialism made him a non-person and the FBI thought him a Communist and kept him under surveillance. That was his life.

Let me go back further. My own archival experience began in Paris in the archives of de Rothschild Frères in the rue Laffitte, where David Landes and I found business correspondence that became the basis for a book that I ended up writing about what I suppose could be called a Rothschild agent with considerable airs, Gerson Bleichröder, and Bismarck, Prussia's pre-eminent statesman of the 19th century. The business letters that we found in the attic in the rue Laffitte were just that: business letters. They occasionally had political notes attached to them as well, and those were the things that particularly interested me. As one who does not consider himself an economic historian, I was wondering, in my first few



days among the Rothschild papers, what I was doing there but, on the second or third day, among the thousands of bills of exchange, I found one from de Rothschild Frères to Bleichröder signed Cosima von Bülow (née Liszt) later to be Richard Wagner's mistress, even wife. Then I felt at home, since she was one of my cherished dislikes of the 19th century, probably one of the most loathsome women of that century, with a vigorous anti-Semitism. I thought it interesting that even she had trekked to the rue Laffitte.

Baron James was Bleichröder's lodestar, and for me he was an emblematic figure of this new world, perhaps *the* emblematic figure on the continent and seen as such not only by the political financial world, but by the poets and novelists, by Heine, Stendhal, Balzac. Baron James was a model for the rising world of bourgeois wealth and power. I came to think of him as being like the figure of Louis XIV as depicted in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the ever-present, distant model.

If The Rothschild Archive in London had existed when I was working on Rothschild, Bleichröder and Bismarck, my book would have been hugely improved and vastly delayed. At some point you need to be able to stop, which is very hard to do. I found, as all historians do, that one archive leads to another. One day, I went from the rue Laffitte to the Quai d'Orsay, simply on a hunch - based partly on what I had found in the Rothschild papers and then in the Bleichröder Archive - that Bleichröder seemed to have been particularly close to one French Ambassador, the Comte de St Vallier (1878-1882). The Quai d'Orsay had published, at the end of the 1920s, the *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1871-1900*, including the reports of the French Ambassadors in Berlin. In their archive I asked, among

The offices of de Rothschild Frères in the rue Laffitte, Paris, which housed the archives until the 1970s

those gorgeously bound leather folios, for the ones having to do with St Vallier. I had no reason to think or expect that I would find anything, but I discovered that although the French had published very faithfully everything that St Vallier had written about foreign policy, all the reports he had written after his many intimate conversations with Bismarck about domestic policy had been omitted from the published texts. So it was that I came across one of those great undiscovered sources. It was a hunch that paid off, a great surprise and a tremendous revelation, because Bismarck actually unbuttoned himself to the French Ambassador, thinking, quite properly as the case shows, that he could count on the man's discretion.

I also needed access to Otto von Bismarck's private archives. I gathered respectable introductions to the grandson, Prince Otto von Bismarck, but to no avail. It is a long story which I will compress. It was only in 1961 that I gained access. A disloyal secretary somewhat indiscreetly explained to me that Bismarck had no intention of granting access, that he hated historians and feared them as potential denigrators. He did not care to know about his grandfather's financial records, he did not want me to look at them. The notion that the Iron Chancellor should have had an abiding interest in money for political and personal reasons and had a Jewish banker who served that interest, if at all true, was certainly not for public consumption. I finally gained access with what I can only call 'borrowed chutzpah', borrowed because it was David Landes who made the suggestion: "If you finally do get to see him" he advised me, "you only have a few minutes. You should start off by saying that you are writing a book on Bleichröder and Bismarck, that you have studied in the Quai d'Orsay and in the Banque Rothschild in Paris. Mention the other archives that you have been to, and add that you would regret having to say in a book which will appear in English and German simultaneously that the only archive that was closed to you was the Bismarck archive." Faced with that weapon, the Prince replied, "Who said it was closed to you? We must talk about modalities." We did. I was living in Paris at the time and he had delayed so long that it would have been hard for me to go to the princely estate near Hamburg. On the spur of the moment, I suggested using the diplomatic pouch of the American Embassy in Bonn to convey the papers to the American Embassy in Paris. Prince Bismarck was impressed by this possibility and he agreed. I had to rush to the American Embassy in Bonn and explain to a colleague: please would they accept the papers and send them by diplomatic pouch, etc.

That was one occasion. There was another time when I had to see the Prince five years later because in the meantime I had found out that there was another archive, separately kept, of nothing but Bleichröder material. Again I needed all sorts of means to get in. He said, when I met him, "You know you are always welcome, you don't need these introductions, but of course, I am very sorry there's nothing here, you won't find anything." But I knew exactly where to look, what barn, what attic and so on. So I asked him, "If I do find something, may I take it with me overnight to the hotel?" He agreed and the next morning reluctantly agreed for me to microfilm some of the letters. Well, some of the letters were of key importance. I cite this as an example of how far one has to sometimes fight to gain access.

From the Rothschild archives in Paris I went to many other archives including those of the Alliance Israélite in Paris, because Bleichröder for his own reasons, and in the service of the Rothschilds, mounted a campaign to force the newly created state of Romania in 1878 to grant civic rights to Jews, an early private initiative on behalf of human rights in a different foreign state. And I had to use subterfuges to gain access to the great archives of Imperial Germany which, at the time, in the 1960s and 1970s, were located in the then German Democratic Republic, where archival wealth co-existed with socialist drabness.

All in all I worked in nearly twenty archives, on two continents, and while the memorable task was the composition of the book, not the collection of the documents, the latter was a precondition for the former.

Well over 10,000 books have been written about Bismarck but I suspect mine may have been the only one that is based both on the Chancellor's archives and those of the Alliance Israélite. I don't mean to claim that they have equal importance, but the records of the Alliance Israélite sharpened my sense of Bismarck's views on the Jewish question, as it was called, and also made clear that even at that point, it was accepted by both sides, by the supplicants as well as by officialdom, that world Jewry was important and had a kind of power.

Archives are public and private, as are the universities that are home to so many of us. And here too there are many debts to record. Universities in the English-speaking world, and increasingly elsewhere, are of mixed parentage, relying on both state funds and private benefactors. Nineteenth-century American charity and higher education were seen as private domains, and if it hadn't been for some few captains of industry and banking, some of them labelled 'robber barons', our country would have been culturally impoverished. One of the first was J.P. Morgan, as an adolescent fascinated by European culture, which he steeped himself in. As an adult he determined to buy some of it for America. But the private initiative was especially important even before that, as Tocqueville recognised, in providing the cultural institutions that in Europe were supported by crown and state. So we have been the beneficiaries of what has been a particularly strong American habit already recognised by Tocqueville, of the private philanthropist promoting the public good, of fabulously wealthy men and their families, driven by various motives, religious and civic, determined that their money should, in the future, redound to the public benefit.

Today it is the great foundations which are the patrons of our age and many of us in universities are indebted in one way or another to Ford and Rockefeller, Guggenheim and Mellon, Carnegie and Nuffield, in particular for the fellowship, 'fellowship' in the United States signalling a kind of paid leave, at once a great opportunity for scholarly work and a recognition of it. The list of benefactors is relatively short, the list of recipients very, very long.

One of the most recent foundations and one of the richest is the MacArthur Foundation. John MacArthur said in creating the new foundation, "I figured out how to make the money, and you fellows, the Trustees, will have to figure out how to spend it." And what US philanthropy has achieved in education, medicine and welfare generally is extraordinary. But there is in all this the cunning of history that Ford and Rockefeller and Mellon and some of the others would not particularly appreciate: that we often promote the very opposite of what these founders might have supported. Laws, of course, also allow for the creation of tax-exempt foundations with nefarious interests, but that is a price one has to pay.

In the post-1945 world, even private universities have become dependent on public funds. Just as private universities in the past sometimes had to learn to bite the hand that fed them, going against the inclination of the donor, so in the United States today the universities have learned and must learn to bite the public hand – or more specifically the hand of government – which is increasingly sceptical of the value of liberal institutions, and increasingly does not feed them.

In the last century, but especially since 1945, various places for study, instruction and writing have been established. Institutes for advanced study and for interdisciplinary research exist, thanks usually to the generosity of foundations and sometimes government agencies. There too we find rewards and challenges, and there too chance often will have a major hand. The unexpected leads to new paths. I once suggested that a prize be awarded for the project abandoned in favour of doing something else while on leave at one of these institutions. Perhaps the mother of all these institutes is the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, founded by the Bamberger fortune of Philadelphia, where once I worked. These institutions are sometimes derided as affording the leisure of the theory class, but they are of inestimable importance in the scholarly life.



"Bleichröder's
lodestar", Baron
James de Rothschild



The Institute for
Advanced Studies
at the Hebrew
University,
Jerusalem.

Then there is the Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem. The generosity of many Rothschilds in regard to Palestine and Israel is well known. As I wrote of Schama's *Two Rothschilds and the Land of Israel*: "The building of Palestine, as Schama shows, involved heroic work and horrendous fights which sometimes escalated from calumny to violence". The Knesset is monumental proof of Rothschild generosity, and on a smaller scale, but with equal vision, so is the Institute for Advanced Studies, entirely created by the Rothschild Foundation. Isaiah Berlin asked me in the mid-1980s to head a committee to examine the efficacy of what some people called a 'talk-shop'. We urged its continuance.

Archival digging, as I said, is but the beginning, though a historian's work is not and should not be neatly compartmentalised. Our next important debt is to research libraries. Ranke could still own most of the books he needed for his work, but we cannot. Our debt to them is incalculable as it is to librarians and archivists themselves, who know so

much more and guide us in what we do. They are part of what one might call the historian's infrastructure. Of course much of our operating procedure has been altered by new technologies, by the Web and the computer, by 'Googling', by instant electronic access to the Bodleian and all the other archives available on the Web, like this Archive and the Einstein one. Perhaps the future will see our successors sitting at home, post-modern monks and nuns, in family cells with their single laptops. I fear for such a world and not only out of ignorant Luddite sentiments. We owe so much to a collegial atmosphere for our work, even if it sometimes has more than a touch of malice to it. Each of us requires a particular mixture of companionship and solitude. Both are indispensable. For many of us, universities and libraries afford us communal stimulation, hearing the chance remark or finding the chance reference that sets us off in new directions. It is impossible to be self-generating all the time. Historians need instruction and inspiration and there is no recipe to tell you where to find it.

Daunting instruction comes from the masters of the past, most of whom, however stringent their conception of the historical discipline, believed also that history was a branch of literature. I have found inspiration in two distinct realms, in works of fiction and in a few important sociological texts. To understand the story of Bleichröder, or the story of German and German-Jewish scientists, works of the imagination and works of fiction are essential. Stendhal, Balzac, Trollope, Ibsen, Shaw, Fontane, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, were essential, and so were Max Weber and R.H. Tawney. They all recognised, in one way or another, the psychic cost of Europe's transformation from an aristocratic to a mixed aristocratic-bourgeois society.

Of course, the two giants remain Thucydides and Shakespeare. They understood all the complexities of our existence, the greatness and the frailty of states, our own demons and our collective conflicts. There is nothing of fundamental importance that they didn't know.

I have listed some of the historian's debts, the elements in our working lives for which we should be grateful. I mentioned them *seriatim* but of course they constitute a seamless whole. They create the tangible conditions that are the necessary and ideal requisites of our work. I have probably omitted some, perhaps slightly over-exaggerated others, but

there is one indispensable condition and it is the least tangible one, and I repeat myself by saying, it is a liberal culture that allows for multiplicity of views and innovation, of controversy and commitment, that allows for the dispersion of all views. In such a culture there are contending fashions and conflicting moral priorities but no prescribed dogma, no censorship. Encouragement of humane scholarship comes in a variety of forms.

I know that important works of history have been written in repressive times, in exile or in hiding. I have immense respect for such work and hence we must have a deep regret that the authors had to wait for their audiences, or that they first found them in a foreign country. The threat of repression is common to all scholarship of course, but the depiction of the past being so closely related to the politics of the present, the writing of history becomes especially vulnerable to censorship. There is no country or nation that has not transgressed its own values or violated codes that we would like to believe are inviolable. There are temptations to excuse these failings and crimes and there are temptations to exaggerate them, to unmask them. Hence my insistence on the open critical society as a basis for our work.

In incurring all these debts, perhaps we historians are an expensive enterprise, but I hope that we are worth it, if in return we can approximate what actually happened in the past, if we offer varied perspectives about history's complexities for our fellow citizens, if we offer counter-arguments to the claims of legitimacy that powerful groups advance, repudiations of the fraudulent arguments and false analogies that politicians like to scatter about.

Let me end by reverting to one substantive element in the two archives I know best. Both the House of Rothschild and Einstein describe triumphs of achievement. In the first instance that triumph connoted economic mastery, power and cultural presence; in the second, power and imagination of the intellect and the prestige of science. In both instances the triumphs induced resentment and calumny. The Rothschild dynasty and Einstein did much for their fellow Jews, their tribesmen as Einstein preferred to put it, and they suffered from what I have called the anguish of assimilation. The history of triumph and ultimate tragedy is woven into their lives and the archives partially recorded them. What I gleaned from these sources led me to write, "The rise of German Jewry is one of the most spectacular leaps of a minority in the social history of Europe but their new prominence was painfully precarious and recalled Disraeli's desperate boast to young Montefiore, 'You and I belong to a race that can do everything but fail'."

Historians, as I have said, do not repay their creditors in currency, but express our thanks in acknowledgments, and I hope we do not forget just how fortunate we are. For myself I can't think of a better place to express my thanks and, by presumption, the thanks of many colleagues than to this audience in this very place, The Rothschild Archive, and to pay tribute to the generous vision of the Rothschild Bank in creating it.

The House of Rothschild, as I have said, has been a unique and embattled institution in the history of Europe's global expansion. The Archive bears witness to this expansion. It is the very opposite of anything parochial. Future historians privileged to work here can learn by Rothschild example about the breadth and totality of history, the myriad connections within a culture and among cultures. The Archive illuminates how life was lived, how men and women worked, what they thought, what they fought and what they gained and it touches on every issue of our own day from anti-Semitism to xenophobia. Nothing exists in some hermetically sealed sub-division of our imagination or academic discipline. Everything is related to everything else and light shines mysteriously from distant places. The Rothschild Archive might become as transformative for future historians as the Venetian archives were for Ranke and his successors. In that spirit, all thanks and all best wishes.