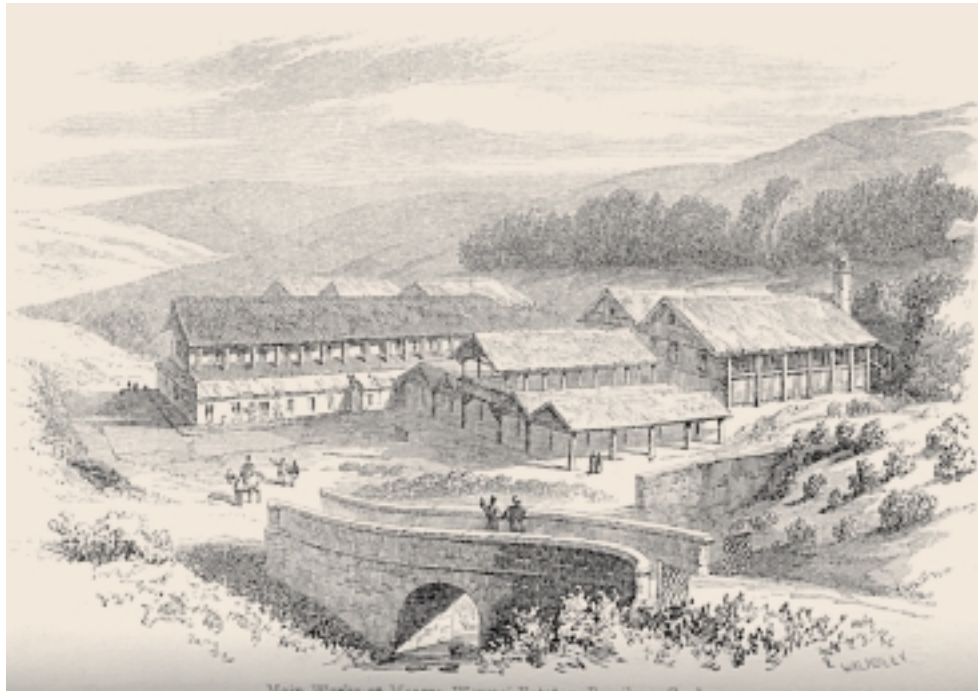


Cousins in Ceylon

Victor Gray and Ismeth Raheem explain a curious and lasting Rothschild connection with Sri Lanka

The Main Works
at the
Rothschild
Plantation,
Pussellawa
(W. Sabonadière:
The Coffee
Planters of
Ceylon, 1870)



The letters of Charlotte de Rothschild are among the gems of The Rothschild Archive. As the wife of Baron Lionel, head of N.M. Rothschild & Sons and a leading figure on the London financial and social scene, she was well placed to cast a knowing eye over the circle of prominent friends and acquaintances in which she moved. She used the opportunity with a style and wit verging often on the mischievous and occasionally on the acerbic.

On 24 October 1865, she wrote to her son Leopold at Cambridge:

“Dear Papa and your brothers were much startled yesterday by the arrival of Messrs. Gabriel and Maurice Worms. The elder brother has been quarter of a century in Ceylon, and is scarcely civilized in his appearance. Both brothers are very proud of having slaved from 4 o’clock in the morning and incessantly, during a quarter of a century to make money – but the elder of the tea-slaves is sixty-six years of age, and he really might have commenced somewhat earlier to enjoy life.”¹

With these two ‘scarcely civilized’ characters (she omits to acknowledge them in this letter as her cousins), Charlotte was brought into touch with a world far removed from her own and with a story which explains one of the more puzzling uses of the name Rothschild in the 21st century.

In 1841 the 36-year old nephew of Nathan Mayer Rothschild, Maurice (born Moritz) Worms, set sail from London for the Far East. He was the youngest of three sons of Nathan’s eldest sister, Schöngé or Jeannette,

who had married in Frankfurt in 1795 Benedict Moses Worms (like Jeannette's father a merchant from the Judengasse). In his twenties, Maurice had come to London and become a successful member of the Stock Exchange. He must have been in regular contact with his uncle Nathan and his family.

What made Maurice take off for the East is unclear but a letter to his Rothschild cousins in London dated 31 May 1841 finds him in Colombo where he has already been for a month after a stay in Bombay. He was deeply impressed:

"Since my arrival I have made more journeys into the interior where I found it very beautiful and romantic, although rough and uncultivated. Nothing but impenetrable forest. You can only make your way on a horse and I needed 14 days to go 125 miles. You cannot imagine how fertile the country is, and how it is always surrounded with the most beautiful fruits, plants and leafy flowers, especially in the interior of the jungle."²

By July Maurice had moved on again, to Madras on his way to Calcutta and China, and in November and January he sent letters to the Rothschilds from Manila. But it was to Ceylon that he returned, seeing there a new and potentially profitable life for himself. He bought a substantial piece of land at Pussellawa, a district 24 miles south of Kandy on the road to the hill-station and sanatorium of Nuwara Eliya. He now invited his brother Gabriel to join him. Gabriel had been a merchant in Paris but after the July Revolution of 1830 had joined Maurice on the London Stock Exchange. Together, they now set up as G. and M.B. Worms.

The Ceylon to which they came had only been wholly under British rule since 1815. In 1833 a unified administration had been introduced and English declared the official language. At the same time land tenure had been changed to allow for private ownership and experiments began with the growing of coffee in the highlands around Kandy, given a new spur, first by the equalisation in 1835 of duty on West and East Indian coffee imported to Great Britain, and then by the dwindling of the West Indian supply. The brothers arrived amidst a boom. During 1841, when Maurice visited Ceylon, the sale of crown lands to would-be planters topped 78,000 acres, more than twenty times the level of 1837.³

Letters of introduction from the Rothschilds in London to high-ranking Government officials and influential personalities among the mercantile sector no doubt eased Maurice's path in settling down in Ceylon. They included introductions to the recently appointed Governor of the Colony, Sir Colin Campbell, and another newly arrived merchant, Henry Ritchie (a friend of Charles Hay Cameron, another investor in coffee plantations, and husband of of Julia Margaret Cameron, the famed Victorian photographer).

The thousand acres which he and Gabriel bought represented a promising investment and, although no evidence has yet been found, the fact that he chose to call this new estate Rothschild suggests that his London cousins had some part in the funding. The Rothschild plantation was big; the average coffee estate in Ceylon was under 200 acres. Indeed, with its neighbour, the Delta plantation, managed by the Sabonadière brothers, it was the largest on the island.

In these early years of the coffee boom it seemed that simply clearing the forest, digging a hole and planting a coffee bush was enough to guarantee success. Climate, soil and the market were all set fair. Between 1849 and 1869 coffee exports quadrupled to 835,000 cwt per year and the price virtually doubled.⁴

On the back of this ready market, the Worms brothers turned their already large estates into perhaps the most modern and productive unit on the island. The coffee beans were prepared and dried at the main works in Pussellawa before being dispatched by cart (and later by railway) to Colombo for shipping. The brothers divided their resources, Maurice managing the Rothschild estate and Gabriel basing himself at the company's offices, 19 Baillie Street in Colombo, handling sales and shipping and managing their depôt in Grandpass.⁵



Maurice (above)
and Gabriel (below)
Worms

It is not, however, their highly successful coffee business for which the Worms brothers have entered the history of Sri Lanka and left their mark on its landscape.

In December 1839, just a year or more before Maurice's arrival in Ceylon, experiments were being made in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Peradeniya, just outside Kandy. A small batch of tea-seeds, sent from Assam in India, was sown. A few months later, 205 tea seedlings were also planted to assess how well they would do in Cingalese soil. In May of the same year, a number of young plants were sent off to the hill-resort of Nuwara Eliya to test their ability to weather the climate there.⁶ The government of the island had commissioned a report to look at the economic potential of this crop, urged on no doubt by the fact that earlier in that same year the very first commercial crop of tea from Assam had been sold on the London markets, breaking the centuries-old Chinese monopoly.

Almost twenty years after Maurice's death, a statement was made by his nephew, George,⁷ in a letter to *The Times*: "My late uncle Mr Maurice B. Worms brought the first tea-plants from China to *Ceylon* in September 1841, and formed a nursery of them on his estate at Pusellawa (vide Sir J. Emerson Tennent's *Ceylon*, Vol. 2 Chapter 7). Samples of the tea grown there were often sent by Mr M.B. Worms to friends in England and found to be excellent. Owing, however, to the objection of the importation of Chinese labour and to the then ignorance of the Cingalese as to the art of preparing tea, its cultivation remained for many years in abeyance."⁸

Sixty years after Baron de Worms' letter, Sir Thomas Villiers, in his *Mercantile Lore*, claimed that Maurice "brought [tea] cuttings [to Ceylon] from China and formed a small garden at Condegalle, Pussellawa, in September 1841. A Chinaman was imported as Teamaker, but the cost of tea made worked out at about £5 per lb".⁹

It is certainly true that Maurice's few surviving letters from 1841 confirm his intention to visit China on his Far Eastern tour and therefore that he may have returned to his new Ceylon estates with tea seedlings, even perhaps with a Chinese tea worker. It is also clear that news of the Worms' experiments got back to India for in 1845 a rather two-edged editorial appeared in *The Madras Crescent*:

"Our Ceylon friends are rejoicing in the cultivation of the tea plant, which has been imported by the house of Messrs. Worms into that island, and is said to be in a thriving condition, many young plants having been raised from the seeds of those originally introduced; and they anticipate that, ere long, tea may become another important branch of their colonial trade."

In a tone heavily protective of the Assam tea trade, the writer went on (ever so politely) to warn the brothers not to count their chickens: "Ceylon lies too far within the tropics to offer a climate like Assam, which lies without them; the plants may thrive to appearance, but that is not a demonstration of their quality.... The Ceylon planters should put the leaf to the proof before speculating on a large scale."¹⁰

It is clear that the brothers were involved very early on with experiments in tea-growing and indeed that they succeeded in moving beyond the simple experiment of trying to persuade tea bushes to flourish in Ceylon soil and actually reached the point of turning the shoots into drinkable tea, as witness the testimony of their nephew in England in the letter to *The Times* quoted above. Certainly they have come to be regarded as pioneers, if not, by some, the founding-fathers of the Ceylon tea-trade. But how far they moved on to attempt to make a commercial success of the venture we cannot, for the moment, say. The fact that, for the rest of their working life, it was coffee which was the mainstay of their estates, may speak for itself.

The Worms' working life in Ceylon lasted for two decades and was a story of considerable success. By the 1860s their original land-purchase had expanded into some twelve properties across the productive district, totalling over 7,000 acres.

The brothers also attempted to play a part in the civic life of the island but found themselves, in a curious parallel with their Rothschild cousins at home in England, faced with barriers against their Jewish background. In 1847 Gabriel Worms stood as a member of the Legislative Council, but, despite being elected, was denied his seat on exactly the same grounds as his cousin Lionel de Rothschild who, in the same year, stood for and won

one of the seats for the City of London. In both cases it was the inflexibility of the law, backed up by strongly restrictive conventions, which insisted that Jews should swear the standard oath of allegiance ‘on the true faith of a Christian’. While Lionel was able, with the help of his friends and connections, to join battle successfully over the issue, Gabriel seems to have quietly accepted the rebuttal and retired from the fray. Lionel and his political friends eventually (after eleven years) won the battle; Gabriel, now in his 57th year, chose not to stand again.

Indeed, by that time, the brothers, now well entered into their fifties, may already have started considering their withdrawal from the business and a return to England. They made the move in 1862, putting the disposal of their assets into the hands of their bankers, the Oriental Bank Corporation. The sale of parts of their estates realised £157,000 and the core assets were acquired by a new firm, the Ceylon Company, launched in April 1862 on the London Stock Exchange. Though successful as a coffee producer this company was held back by loss-making estates in Mauritius and was finally brought down by the collapse of the Oriental Bank in 1892. Its assets were bought up by a new company, The Eastern Produce and Estates Co., the corporate descendant of which manufactures tea on the Rothschild Estate to this day.

The shift from coffee to tea production in Ceylon was a direct result of *hemileia vastatrix*, the coffee-rust disease, which increasingly ravaged the island’s coffee crop from the late 1860s onward. The early experiments of the Worms’ brothers and others had lacked commercial scale and the techniques for turning leaf into saleable tea, but during the 1860s, James Taylor, on an estate at Loolecondera (some 15 miles from Pussellawa), was working on both of these problems so successfully that, between 1870 and 1880 the acreages under tea in Ceylon increased from about 250 to 9,300 and by 1880 over 162,000lb of tea were being exported and coffee production had dwindled.¹²

All this lay (just) in the future when the Worms brothers eventually arrived back in England in 1865 and called upon their Rothschild relatives. It was then that Charlotte recorded her rather sharply edged impressions of the brothers. She soon warmed, if not to Maurice, at least to the chatty Gabriel:

“When we are tired of hearing about Ceylon, and his joyful excitement at being safe and sound in London after having spent a quarter of a century under a devouring sun, has subsided, he too may subside into an old humdrum gentleman, but at present, he is original and droll. His fifteen hundred coolies have neither bed-clothes to cover them, nor beds to sleep in, nor washing-apparatus, nor wearing apparel. They tie a rag round their loins, and own an earthenware vessel in which they boil their rice which is deducted from their earnings, and they do not amount to a sovereign a month...At Colombo five hundred native women clean and sort and pack the coffee berries. The cultivation of the estate and preparation of the coffee cost fifty-thousand pounds per annum, the profit being about ten thousand, but very often the heat is excessive and the crop fails so that there is a great loss. The planters used to rise at 1/2 past 3 in the morning, and go to bed at 9 - dress in white linen, live in terror of snakes and elephants - the former being disagreeable and sometimes poisonous, the latter laying waste with their enormous strides whole tracts of coffee fields. Mr. Gabriel Worms says that pine-apples are eaten by pigs and porcupines, and cost a farthing a piece - and that Ceylonese pearls are becoming rare and dear, having been much preyed upon by an enormous insect, which opens the maternal oyster, and eats the beautiful gem. The Anglo Indians have brought home for their four nieces four sapphire rings.”¹³



The Barbecue, or Drying Floor at the Rothschild Plantation (Sabonadière)

How much of this was embroidery by Gabriel and how much by Charlotte it is impossible to say. Certainly, one feels, this was not the last time Gabriel would dine out on his Ceylon years.

Maurice seems to have retired quite soon to a suburban villa, The Lodge in Egham, from where he issued a series of letters to *The Times* in the spring of 1866 describing a cure for the rinderpest, based on experiments he had made with his own cattle in Ceylon and effectively (or so he claimed) used on an outbreak on Lord Leigh's estate in Hertfordshire. Just a year later, on 23 April 1867, he died.

Gabriel, on the other hand, stayed in London, taking lodgings first in Dorset Square near Regents Park and then at 111 Bond Street. He continued to call on his Rothschild cousins, amusing them with gossip and eventually earning Charlotte's approval as "our good-hearted eccentric cousin". According to his obituary, he gave up much of his income in retirement to charity. On his death in 1881 at the age of eighty, beneficiaries included the United, Central, West London and Great Synagogues, the Marylebone Charity School for Girls and the Friend in Need Charity in Colombo, as well as his landlady and her family. The residue of his £70,000 estate passed to his brother, Solomon Benedict, Baron de Worms.¹⁴

The Times spoke of him as "one of the founders of the modern prosperity of Ceylon" and subsequent histories have confirmed the view. To the 21st-century tourists who arrive regularly in Pussellawa, however, the name on display remains not Worms but Rothschild, a long-lasting cousinly compliment which gives rise to much puzzled speculation as to the family's involvement. With luck, this article may have cleared the confusion.

Victor Gray was Director of The Rothschild Archive from 1999 (until October 2004) and was previously Head of Corporate Records and Archives at N.M. Rothschild & Sons Limited. He is a former Chairman of the National Council on Archives.

Ismeth Raheem is an architect (Royal Danish Academy, Copenhagen, 1969) artist, and art historian of the Colonial Period in Sri Lanka. He has exhibited paintings in Sri Lanka and Europe. His publications include articles for exhibition catalogues for the British Council (1986 and 2000) and the Maritime Museum, Amsterdam. His most recent published work is Images of British Ceylon, History of Nineteenth Century photography of Sri Lanka (Singapore 2000)



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NOTES

1. Letter from Charlotte de Rothschild to her son Leopold, 24 October 1865. The Rothschild Archive 000/84
2. M.B. Worms to N.M. Rothschild & Sons, London, 31 May 1841. The Rothschild Archive, XI/109/41/7/5
3. J.E. Tennent: *Ceylon: An account of the island physical, historical and topographical*, London, 1859, Vol.II, p.230
4. *ibid*, pp.212-213
5. D.M. Forrest: *A hundred years of Ceylon tea*, London, 1967, p.138
6. *ibid*, p.50
7. George de Worms, elder son of Solomon Benedict Worms, born 1827, succeeded to the title of Baron de Worms on the death of his father in 1882.
8. *The Times*, 23 August 1886, p.4. In fact, Tennent's account, referred to by George, says little, but confirms that he had seen tea bushes (at some unrecorded date) blooming at Pussellawa and that there had been a difficulty in finding skilled labour to dry and prepare the leaves.
9. Sir Thomas Villiers: *Mercantile Lore*, the Ceylon Observer Press, 1940, pp.126-127
10. Reprinted in *The Times*, 1 August 1845, p.3
11. Others claimed to have been the first. The Rev. E.F. Gepp claimed to have cleared half an acre of jungle behind the home of his employer, the Chief Justice of Ceylon, Sir Anthony Oliphant, in order to plant about thirty tea plants from the consignment sent to Nuwara Eliya from Assam. Other contenders are W J Jenkins, a retired Assam planter, at Condegalla and a Mr Llewellyn at Pen-y-Lan in Dolosbage (Tennent, *op.cit.*, pp.54-56).
12. Tennent, *op.cit.*, p.288
13. Charlotte de Rothschild to her son Leopold, 26 October 1865. The Rothschild Archive 000/84
14. *The Times*, 21 October 1881