

Minority interests

The research project on Jewish Philanthropy and Social Development in Europe, hosted by The Rothschild Archive, has provided an opportunity to study in detail the charitable engagements of various members of the Rothschild family, and to gain a better appreciation of the breadth and nature of their philanthropy. Thousands of documents held in private and public archives in England, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Israel have been uncovered so far. Claire-Amandine Soulié describes some of the activities of a small family group – the women.

Hardly any member of the Rothschild family was without a cause to defend or an organisation to establish or support on a local, national or international scale, and with varying degrees of personal involvement. Of the major achievements for which the Rothschild family were responsible Adolphe's Eye Hospital in Paris and the Frankfurt Library constitute just two well-known, representative examples. In those two cases, as in many others, a lesser known factor is the level of involvement of Rothschild women, and their contribution to the foundation, management, and running of these and other charitable institutions and societies. Recent scholarly interest in the role of female philanthropists in various local, national, or religious contexts has highlighted the significance and specificity of women's involvement in philanthropic activities and shed light on the role they were able to play in their respective communities, at a very time when their social or political existence was downplayed if it was considered at all.¹ Rothschild women are no exception to this general pattern and serve as an interesting example of female philanthropy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its impact on social development.

From the very creation of the Rothschilds' financial partnership, women had been excluded from the running of the business, and expressly prevented, by tradition and following Mayer Amschel's last will and testament (1812) from taking part in its commercial activities: 'I will and ordain that my daughters and sons-in-law and their heirs have no share in the trading business existing under the firm of Mayer Amschel Rothschild and Sons ... [it] belongs to my sons exclusively'.² Besides it has been noted that Rothschild women, bar Nathan's wife Hannah (1783–1850), or Charles' widow Rozsika (1870–1940), did not show the faintest signs of interest in financial affairs.³ Traditionally considered an activity for which males were more able and suited, banking was left for the sons to worry about, and women were neither involved in it, nor, in most cases, did they feel they should be. It would be wrong to assume, however, that Rothschild women, as a consequence of their exclusion from business affairs, were uneducated. Educated they certainly were, albeit in different fields. While their brothers learned languages, physics and mathematics, girls were taught extensively in the arts, including singing, drawing and painting, and particular attention was given to religious education. Moreover they learned to be dedicated hostesses and housekeepers, functions which contributed to keeping them within the boundaries of traditional gender roles of the time and discouraged their professional development or ambition to pursue a conventional career. This is not to say that they did not have a role to play in making the business successful. As accomplished hostesses, they organised parties and events to entertain members of high society, thus contributing to the formation of a more or less homogeneous banking elite, and bringing together politicians and businessmen within a tight network of highly influential personalities. However, their role was always meant to be peripheral to the activities of the bank itself, and female members of the family remained largely in the shadows.

In this context, philanthropy represented an opportunity for their education and upbringing to come to fruition as well as an area where they could fulfil any frustrated professional ambition. As a consequence of this, and of other parameters such as their religious duty, Rothschild women became conscientious founders and members of many charitable institutions and organisations and generous donors to countless others. A typical example was Hannah Louise von Rothschild (1850–1892). By the time she died, aged only 42, she had succeeded in establishing a library and a hospital, not to mention all the many smaller and more modest endeavours she supported and sponsored in different ways over the years. The fifth of Mayer Carl and Louise’s seven daughters, Hannah Louise was born in Frankfurt in 1850, and remained the only spinster amongst her sisters when Bertha married Louis Marie Berthier, Prince de Wagram, in 1882. Her mother Louise had been deeply involved in charitable enterprises herself, including the establishment of a dispensary for wounded soldiers in 1870, which she visited daily in the company of her young daughters. Louise was a spiritual woman with strong religious convictions, which she was eager to impart to her daughters. Born into the English branch of the family she made a point of reading a religious or moral text to her daughters, in English, every week. One such text read: ‘God has not given us wealth for us to have every comfort, every luxury, every superfluous bauble, ... – When God gave us wealth, he also entrusted us, as a result, with a great responsibility. He entrusted us with other people’s happiness, he made us responsible for our poor brothers; ...’⁴ Louise lived very much by this principle. In 1875, she founded a children’s hospital in memory of her daughter Clementine, who had died in 1865 aged 20. While the hospital was to treat free of charge children of all faiths and denominations between the ages of five and fifteen, it was only, however, intended to accept girls.⁵ This was often the case with organisations set up by female philanthropists in this period: women were more inclined to cater for the needs, or respond to the plight, of other females than their male counterparts were. For example in 1843 Betty (1805–1886), Louise’s cousin, had

Hannah Louise von Rothschild (1850–1892), standing third left amongst a group of sisters and cousins. Hannah Louise was one of Frankfurt’s greatest benefactors.





The home for elderly Jewish women in Frankfurt was established in a former Rothschild family home and featured portraits of the family as well some of their collection of Old Masters.

established a *Société pour l'établissement des jeunes filles israelites*, to provide a professional and moral education for young girls. Ten years later, Adelheid (1853–1935), Hannah Louise's cousin, had co-founded, together with her mother Hannah Mathilde (1832–1924) and sister Minna (1857–1903), a foundation to look after Jewish ladies in their old age. The *Freiberrlich Wilhelm und Mathilde von Rothschild'sches Altersheim für Israelitische Frauen und Jungfrauen besserer Stände*, established in Frankfurt, received regular donations from the Rothschild family, especially from Adelheid herself, who donated 500,000 marks in 1928. In the twentieth century several female members of the Rothschild family would become interested and preoccupied by the plight of single mothers and established charitable organisations to offer them help of various types. Mathilde de Rothschild (née Weisweiler, 1874–1926), Henri's wife, created an association to take care of single mothers and their children after one of the maids of the Abbaye des Vaux de Cernay, their estate near Paris, committed suicide when she realised she was pregnant and could not afford to look after a young child. The foundation Les Berceaux continued to operate after Mathilde's death in 1926 and served various purposes, including being turned into a children's home after the 1943 bombings on Boulogne Billancourt.

Hannah Louise's philanthropic activity was strongly influenced by the desire to pay tribute to past members of her family, and to link their name to the history of Frankfurt, the city where the family originated. One can discern a palpable aspiration for continuity: continuity of her mother's charitable engagements; the marking of her parents' name into the memories of the people of Frankfurt; and the association of the name 'Rothschild' with the history of the city from which they came. At her father Mayer Carl's death in 1886, Hannah Louise was left with the responsibility for a large collection of books which Mayer Carl had accumulated over the years, and she wanted to preserve this aspect of her father's legacy. She had seen her father's art collection, among which was a large collection of vases, dispersed after her father's death, and did not want the books to suffer the same fate.⁶ Hannah Louise quickly made plans to make these collections available to the people of Frankfurt. She appointed a well-qualified young librarian named Christian Berghoeffer to be director of the library, and the classification and cataloguing work started. On 28 January 1888 the *Freiberrlich Carl von Rothschild'sche öffentliches Bibliothek* was opened to the public. Though based on little more than Mayer Carl's collection of books, the library grew significantly over the years. It remained in private hands until the 1920s, when the inflation brought about by the crisis in financial markets meant that the endowment capital was no longer sufficient to keep it running, and the City of Frankfurt took it over. The collections were then transferred to the University of Frankfurt's library after the second world war, where it still remains.⁷ Hannah Louise's efforts to honour her parents' memory did

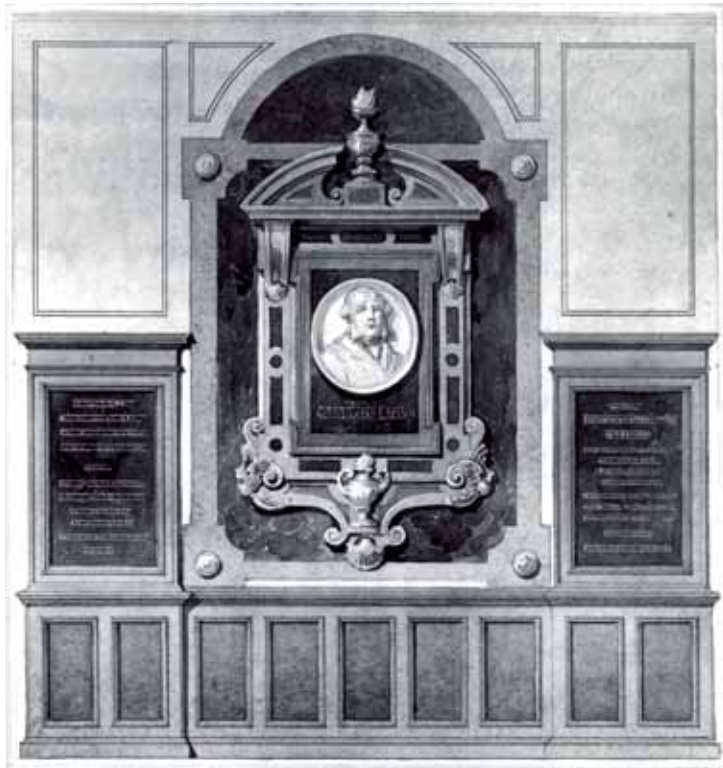


The Frankfurt newspaper, the *Kleine Presse*, carried a front page illustrated report on the Rothschild library, 1892.

not stop there. Two years after opening the library to the public, in memory of her father and on the fourth anniversary of his death, she set up a hospital in Frankfurt, complete with a dentistry ward, which is still in operation today under its original name, the ‘Carolinum’, and now specialises only in dentistry. In the hall of the hospital’s entrance, Hannah had the following tribute inscribed:

Carolinum
 Opened on the 16th of October 1890
 in memory of Baron Karl von Rothschild
 5th of August 1820 – 16th of October 1886
 Love and benevolence were his life, unflinching
 nobility of feelings and good were his goal.⁸

Continuity was also what Julie (1830–1907) had in mind when she scrupulously followed the instructions set out in her late husband’s will, and perpetuated Adolphe’s charitable work after his death. In 1874 Adolphe had created in Geneva the *Hôpital Ophthalmologique Adolphe de Rothschild*, which, by the time of his death in 1900, treated over 2,000 patients per year and attracted an ever growing number of patients from all over Europe. Adolphe had generously provided for the Geneva hospital in his will, and also stipulated that his wish for the creation of a similar institution in Paris should be carried out after his death by his wife Julie. In order to achieve this he left Julie 1.8 million francs for the building of the hospital itself and a capital of 8 million francs, as well as the daunting mission of having a whole hospital built in the heart of



Sketches for a plaque in memory of Mayer Carl von Rothschild to be placed in the entrance hall of the library.

the French capital. Despite being 71 at the time of Adolphe's death, Julie's involvement in the conception, building, and running of the hospital was relentless, and remained so until she died in 1907. First of all, she had a leading role in finding a place in Paris to build the hospital, organising countless meetings with architects, evaluating them, revoking their mandates when necessary, but always insisting that Adolphe's will should be respected to the very letter. The almost daily exchange of lengthy letters between her advisor Frédéric Schneider, from the bank of de Rothschild frères in Paris, and Julie, in 1901, is a testament to the time and dedication which Julie spent discussing the plans for the hospital, comparable in every way to the effort and skills which a full-time career would have required. What she managed to achieve in five years, however, was remarkable as the hospital opened its doors in 1905 and remained in Julie's private estate after she refused, in line with Adolphe's wishes, to register it as a charitable organisation.⁹

Julie's achievement crowned years of involvement of female members of the Rothschild family in an astonishing range of charitable organisations and initiatives. They were Jewish, female, and born into a family where fortune and education usually fell to the men. These factors perhaps were not for them a handicap, but rather the very motivation behind their philanthropic involvement. On an individual level, their engagement in charitable works gave them a purpose in life and served as a substitute for the successful careers of their brothers and husbands. However philanthropy also represented an opportunity for them to make a mark within their family, by being the keepers of charitable traditions and perpetuators of their ancestors' initiatives; within their larger community, by representing a more human, softer side, of an otherwise ruthless business; and within society at large, by founding institutions which looked after 'minorities', which, in a way Rothschild women themselves had always been.

Claire-Amandine Soulié is project co-ordinator for the research project Jewish Philanthropy and Social Development in Europe 1800–1940: the case of the Rothschilds. She has just completed her PhD on French and British attitudes to the rising 'fourth estate' in a colonial context.



Ex libris of the
Rothschild library.

NOTES

- 1 See Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Dr June Hannam and Dr Moira Martin, project on Women and Philanthropy in Bristol, 1870–1920.
- 2 The Rothschild Archive London
RAL 000/87, Mayer Amschel Rothschild's last will and testament, 17 September 1812.
- 3 Miriam Rothschild, 'The silent members of the first EEC', in Georg Heuberger (ed.), *The Rothschilds: Essays on the History of a European Family* (Frankfurt: Thorbecke, 1995), pp.155–65.
- 4 Klaus Weber, 'Die Soziale Verantwortung des Geldes', *Damals – Die sensationelle Aufstieg einer europäischen Bankiersdynastie* (August 2006) pp.42–6.
- 5 Barbara Reschke, *Das Clementine Mädchen Spital, seine Stifterin und seine Namenspatronin*, (Frankfurt am Main: Societätsverlag, 2000), p.29.
- 6 Hans-Otto Schembs, 'Hannah-Louise von Rothschild' in *Die Rothschild'sche Bibliothek in Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1988), p.23.
- 7 <http://www.ub.uni-frankfurt.de>
- 8 See Carolinum Website, URL
<http://www.klinik.uni-frankfurt.de>, with book in PDF format on the history of the hospital:
http://www.klinik.uni-Frankfurt.de/zzmk/stiftungcarolinum/Scan/Stiftung_Carolinum.pdf
- 9 Klaus Weber, 'Far-sighted charity: Adolphe and Julie de Rothschild and their eye clinics in Paris and Geneva', *The Rothschild Archive Review of the Year* (2004–2005), pp.42–9.