

The Rothschild school in the Austrian woods: Albert and Bettina's Kinderasyl

The Rothschild Kinderasyl or 'Children Asylum' was a special kind of boarding school situated in Lower Austria between 1878 and 1945. This institution represents a unique example of the Rothschild family's involvement with local communities. Julia Demmer describes her qualitative study with former pupils remembering this unique Rothschild foundation.

A commitment to social responsibility was of high importance for the Rothschild family. The Rothschild Archive research project *Jewish Philanthropy and Social Development in Europe 1800–1940* and the work of Heuberger/Spiegel in their studies on Jewish Zedakah¹ demonstrate this strong strand running through the business and personal interests of the Rothschilds. Welfare institutions have been founded in many places where the Rothschilds lived and worked.

One of these places is Austria. Famous institutions had been established in Vienna, such as a home at Rosenhügel, a hospital in the ninth district and an institution for the deaf and blind at the Hohe Warte.² A less well-known enterprise was the 'Kinderasyl' or Children Asylum in Göstling/Ybbs, Lower Austria. While the building still exists, almost no written records, except short paragraphs in older local books, are extant. Up to now there has been no research to explore this particular institution and its relationship with families of the area. The lack of written or archival sources made the use of qualitative biographical research and contemporary witness evidence inevitable.

In 1820/21, Baron Salomon Mayer von Rothschild (1774–1855) first arrived in Vienna as one of the five sons of the famous Mayer Amschel Rothschild of Frankfurt. Complex negotiations with the House of Rothschild for a large loan to raise finances for the Austrian State demanded the full-time presence of a Rothschild in Vienna, and thus Salomon Mayer moved to the city and established a bank there – S M von Rothschild. Subsequent Rothschild operations in Vienna included investment in the country's railway network, and mercantile trade in the shipment of commodities such as cotton, sugar and tobacco. Through these banking activities, Salomon established himself as a major financier and industrialist, receiving a grant of nobility (along with his brothers) in 1822 from Emperor Francis I of Austria. Salomon was the first Jew in Austria to gain full citizenship and become a significant property owner. At his death in 1855 he was one of the major landowners in Europe.

Baron Albert von Rothschild (1844–1911) was the grandson of Salomon. In 1875 Albert bought a large property in the south of Lower Austria near to the Styrian border between Göstling, Lackenhof, and Gaming, which he shared with his wife Bettina (1858–1892) whom he had married in 1876. The region is mountainous and densely wooded and the Rothschild family established a big forestry enterprise as well as hunting estates and country residences in the Tyrolean style. The property was divided into five administrative areas, Waidhofen, Gaming, Göstling, Hollenstein and Langau. When Albert died in 1911 his sons Alphonse and Louis inherited the property: Alphonse and his wife Clarice inherited Langau and Gaming and Louis received Göstling, Hollenstein and Waidhofen.

In the Göstling region the Rothschild estate provided work for over 600 employees, mainly forestry workers who lived in often very poor conditions in remote areas of the domain. To support the workers the Rothschild family established various social institutions in the region, including the Kinderasyl, established in 1878 by Albert's wife Bettina, and a home for the elderly



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Albert and Bettina
von Rothschild.

The fathers of the children
living in the Kinderasyl
were mainly woodworkers
and lumberjacks at the
Rothschild estate.
(Leopoldine Egger, *Vom*
Urwald zum Siedlungsraum)

opposite
The Rothschild hunting
lodge in Steinbach (near
Göstling) c.1905.
(Georg Perschl,
Private Collection)



in Gaming. The conditions of employment by the Rothschilds were of high standard for the period. Depending on the status of employment, hunters, forest rangers, woodworkers and lumberjacks received different benefits from their Rothschild employers, but every worker was provided at least a shelter or small dwelling which was maintained regularly. They were also provided with a certain amount of firewood and electric bulbs for free. Employees were able to purchase everyday goods at cost price. Even local people who did not work directly for the Rothschild family had the advantages of the social employer, as in wintertime free meals were served to all children of some villages and warm clothes were given out. Above all, the benefit of a secure job with the Rothschilds was most valuable in a scarcely populated area in hard times.

The Rothschilds had a reputation as tough but fair masters. Stealing was not uncommon among employees in this tough environment. Baron Alphonse was well aware of this, and was tolerant of pilferage by poorer employees but could not stand employees of higher grade getting rich at the expense of poorer ones, expressed in his sentiment – ‘I don’t care about mice, but about rats!’

In the Lower Austrian region, the name of Rothschild is associated with prosperous and successful business and public social philanthropy. The Kinderasyl is a good example of the typical female philanthropy in the Rothschild family tradition. Bettina, and later her daughter-in-law Clarice, maintained personal interest in the Kinderasyl. When the family stayed in the region (mainly during the hunting season), the Baronesses took the opportunity to visit the Kinderasyl. During the year, the Director of the Kinderasyl Ms. Saxeneder (and from 1918/19 Mrs. Henöckl) looked after the institution, together with an administrator in Waidhofen. Visits by Baroness Clarice were memorable, as one of the children recalls:

I kissed her hand, Clarice’s hand, one day. This was, when she visited the Asylum one day. This happened occasionally, about every one or two years. Anyway, at that day the Baroness came and we were of course washed and dressed neatly. And then she was sitting outside, beneath the linden tree and we had to stand there in a row and had to kiss her hand. I can remember this very well, we were very excited. And then we got presents and a snack. This was outside, beneath the linden tree, there were benches and we got hot chocolate and a cake, I remember this very well. But I can remember just one time, that she came, but I think she must have come more often.³





The Kinderasyl exerted a strong influence on the life of the workers' and their families. Children of the asylum were able to attend school regularly, an activity which could not be taken for granted at that time in that region. Many families had great difficulties in overcoming the distance to school in this mountainous area and the cost of providing school equipment and clothes was prohibitive. Children had the opportunity to live in the Kinderasyl from where they could easily attend the local village school in Göstling/Ybbs. The children received proper nutrition, and individual care for a very low monthly fee together with regular schooling. They received school equipment and seasonable clothes for every day use as well as a Sunday dress. Many received their first pair of shoes through the Kinderasyl.

To put a child in the Kinderasyl parents had to pay five Schilling for one month. This was approximately equivalent to the daily wage of a woodworker and therefore relatively inexpensive. Other families who did not work for the Rothschilds had to pay one Schilling to a family in the village for one overnight stay of the child. A woman of the region explained that she had a high number of missing schooldays because her father could not afford to pay for overnight stays very often.

The Kinderasyl was a unique institution. It was not a usual kind of boarding school because the children came from rather poor families. Boarding schools in Austria at this time were usually connected to the church, expensive, or reserved for exceptionally gifted pupils. The Kinderasyl was different and did not meet any of those criteria. The institution was not connected to any particular religious belief, charged relatively modest fees and was open to all children of the Rothschilds' employees regardless of talent or status of the parents. It was neither a children's home nor orphanage in the typical way, because the pupils mostly came from stable families. The Kinderasyl might be seen as a kind of social boarding school. Despite the benefits the Kinderasyl provided, it was a very hard challenge for children to leave home and family at such a very young age for long periods of time. The children were aged six when they started and normally returned home just four times a year. This was a tough burden at a young age and influenced their whole life.

Pupils of the Kinderasyl with their director Ms Saxeneder and female helpers c.1905. (Andrew Demmer, Private Collection)



Pupils of the Kinderasyl with their director Mrs Juliane Henöckl (in the front with dog) and female helpers (back row) c.1937/38. (Gisela Buder, Private Collection)

To gain an insight into the life and impact of the Kinderasyl the writer carried out interviews with twelve people who visited the Kinderasyl between 1925 and 1945 and two other people with strong connections with the institution. The surviving witnesses were traced through personal contact and with the help of local people and local authorities. Interviews with former pupils had been recorded by the son of one of them for a radio broadcast with the Austrian radio station Ö1 in 1998,⁴ and these further informed this research. Interviews for this study followed oral history conventions, and were conducted and recorded in a private setting. After transcription and analysis the interviewees had the opportunity to review the texts before they were published. Data derived from oral-biographical interviews needs careful consideration. Oral material can never be seen as evidence of truth. Biographical material offers individual perspectives into the memory of a person at a specific time. Consequently oral interviews give insight into individual memories, feelings, and patterns of dealing with experiences. The interviews studied here offer a unique image of a special institution and life-circumstances of the children of Rothschild employees during 1925 and 1945 in the region of Lower Austria.

Part of the research was the examination of the everyday life and education experiences of the children together with the role of the educators, and the life-long significance of their childhood experiences. The evaluation showed that the children benefited from highly individual learning during a special time in their lives. A key finding was the importance of the personality of the educators for individual child development set against often harsh personal circumstances. The role and importance of peers during hard times were reflected in the interviews and the study compared learning and discipline with other times, and concluded that in the Kinderasyl comparatively modern educational methods were put into practice. For example the day was structured with well planned learning and leisure time, and children had one hour every day in the evening to let off steam by being allowed to run around screaming in the house!

Another aim of the investigation was to preserve individual memories and reinforce the message 'Don't forget the past!' This study supports oral memories of 'ordinary' people with their specific experiences, and is also an important tribute to the history of the Rothschild



The Kinderasyl in 2000.
(Leopoldine Egger, *Vom
Urwald zum Siedlungsraum*)

banking family and their notable contribution in social institutions all over the world. The social commitment of the Rothschild banking family seen in the Kinderasyl was of huge importance to the life of a large number of children in the Lower Austrian Region at that time. A significant passage of one interview, concerning a personal thank-you to the Rothschilds, highlights this lasting memory. The reminiscence below shows on the one hand the personal gratitude in the memory of an interviewee towards a member of the Rothschild family, but also the fact that a child of a rather poor family in Lower Austria made their way to Switzerland to work there. Regular school attendance and the relative stability of the Kinderasyl could be one of the reasons of this individual's success, made possible through the social commitment of the Rothschild family.

The grave in Prilly this is a suburb of Lausanne near to the lake of Geneva. There is a big, old, Jewish cemetery. I was often there when I used to live there. It is a quite simple grave, yes and I also pulled up weeds when I went there. And instead of flowers there are stones lying on the grave. I never took flowers. I always looked for a stone. I was there several times, even after my retirement I came to Prilly. And I was not just because of the Kinderasyl there. I also came because of what she did in wintertime in Lackenhof. Clarice always organised a cooky in wintertime, to make soup for us children. Without that soup, I do not know if I would have made my way home every day. Therefore I thought many times thank you Clarice for the soup, thank you.⁵

In 1938, with the takeover of power by the Nazi regime the Rothschilds were dispossessed of all their properties. The Kinderasyl was taken over by the National Socialists but continued to operate as a kind of boarding school until 1945. After the Second World War, Louis Rothschild disclaimed his former properties and consigned them to the Austrian Republic. Alphonse died in exile, but his wife Clarice took back their properties in Lackenhof and Langau and continued to run the forest enterprise after the war. Her daughter Bettina Rothschild-Looram still lives in the region today. The former Kinderasyl building still stands in the village of Göstling/Ybbs, a lasting reminder of this unique and individual social enterprise.

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NOTES

- 1 Georg Heuberger; Spiegel, Paul, *Zedakah. Jüdische Sozialarbeit im Wandel der Zeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: E. Henssler KG., 1993).
- 2 Kurt Pfeiller. *Die Österreichische Linie der Familie Rothschild* (Lunz am See: self published, 1955, pp.25–8) and Ruth Koblizek, Gernot Schnabert, *Rothschild Stiftung. Neurologie Rosenhügel* (Vienna: Verein Memo, self published, 2002, p.25).
- 3 Gisela Buder (Interviewee), interview fragment translated into English by Julia Demmer.
- 4 Ernst Gerhard Weber, *Hörbilder Eisenstrasse: Die Mäuse machen mir nichts aber die Ratten* (CD broadcast from the Austrian radio station Ö1, 1998).
- 5 Maria Schuhleitner (Interviewee), Interview fragment translated into English by Julia Demmer.