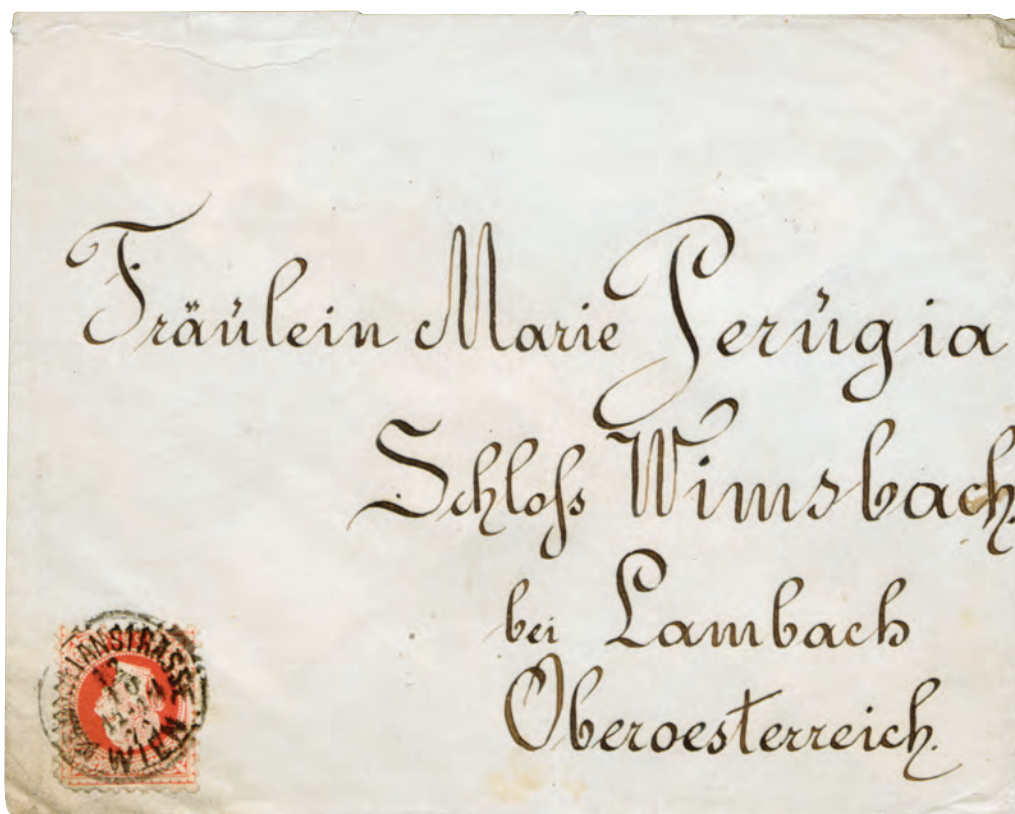


# ‘Hugs from your sincere friend Thildi’: Letters from Mathilde Lieben to Marie de Rothschild

Lisa-Maria Tillian introduces the subject of her research based on new material at the Archive.



*My dear Marie! The weather is getting more miserable every day and I must really summon up all my strength so as not to become totally melancholic; I need not mention how much our correspondence helps me with this. [...]*<sup>1</sup>

Envelope in the hand  
of Mathilde to Marie, at  
the Schloss Wimsbach.  
RAL 000/924/17

With these words, written in 1878, 17-year-old Mathilde Schey (1861–1940) begins one of her many letters to her cousin Marie Perugia, the future Mrs Leopold de Rothschild (1862–1937). It was at the end of September; the summer vacation of the Schey family in their villa near Vienna was reaching its end; the autumnal weather darkened Mathilde’s mood. But almost daily contact through letters with her cousin Marie contributed to raising her spirit. This intense practice of writing, fostered during childhood, was both the expression and the product of the bourgeois culture that the two girls were surrounded by. Part of this culture, and part of the lifestyle of the German educated middle classes, was ongoing private correspondence that went well beyond the mere exchange of information. In the nineteenth century, the composing and receiving of letters was part ‘of the good form of social life’.<sup>2</sup> The regular exchange of letters



between relatives, friends and acquaintances was therefore customary for the members of the German bourgeoisie. Writing letters was part of daily life. The girls kept up various ‘correspondences’, and with the years, the circle of those with whom they had to maintain regular correspondence enlarged.

In June 1879, Mathilde wrote:

[...] My correspondence (not with you) has grown to a size this year that is something frightful; I must write letter after letter. Everyone wants to have news. [...]³

The fact that Mathilde’s numerous letters to Marie – together with others, for example from Marie’s mother Nina – have been preserved to this day and are now kept at The Rothschild Archive, is due in large part to Marie’s descendants. Her son Anthony in particular developed a passion for archives and family history and took care to preserve the family’s archive. Marie’s grandson, Anthony’s son Evelyn, continued his father’s efforts and has been a supporter of the foundation which is today The Rothschild Archive.

Mathilde’s letters, which cover the period from 1872 to 1937 and were mainly characterized by personal and very intimate content, represent valuable sources for historical research. The documents provide fresh perspectives and opportunities for asking new questions, for instance in relation to the family and social network of each of the two ladies, as well as to the cultural and religious practices of the Jewish bourgeoisie. Last but not least, the letters – written from one woman to another – provide insights into female lifestyles and spheres of interest within

*Above*

Letter in the hand of Mathilde to Marie, written from the Schloss Wimsbach. RAL 000/924/17

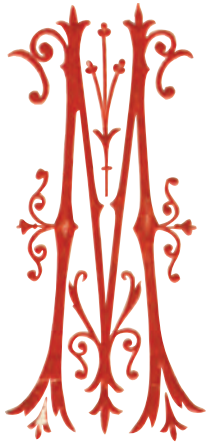
Tilly Schey as a young girl, from a Perugia family photograph album. RAL 000/93/1

*Opposite*

Monogram of Mathilde Schey. RAL 000/924/17

Marie Perugia, Mrs Leopold de Rothschild, by Cyril Flower c.1885. RAL 000/360

that circle. They will be of particular interest in researching role models, expectations, self-perception, and positions within the family and society at large. Mathilde's hitherto unknown letters help broaden and fill gaps in the current state of research. Furthermore, the numerous documents allow the girl and woman Mathilde Schey/ Lieben to be placed at the heart of the presentation of my research into the daily life of Jewish women in Austria. In the first stages of my research I have been primarily and deeply engaged with the letters from the years 1878 and 1879 on which this essay is based.



### Mathilde and Marie: The family environment

Both Mathilde and Marie were descended from what might be seen as typical Jewish bourgeois families, which had merged into one extended family through strategic marriages.

On the one side there was the Landauer family, from which line came the girls' mothers, Hermine and Nina. Hermine (1822–1904), Mathilde's mother, and Nina (1825–1892), Marie's mother, were two of the fifteen children of Josef Landauer (1793–1855), a merchant, and his wife Rosalie, née Bauer (1796–1864). Josef Landauer, like his parents, was among the 'tolerated' Jews of Vienna,<sup>4</sup> which meant that they had a residence in the city in return for an annual payment (*Toleranzgebühr*, tolerance fee). Josef Landauer sought to maintain and strengthen the economic and social position of his family and business, among other things by marrying his children to members of other rich Jewish families. For example, his daughter Nina married the merchant Achille Perugia of Trieste by whom she had six children. Marie was the youngest daughter of the Perugias.

On the other side was the Schey family, from which Mathilde's father Friedrich (1815–1881) descended. In the 1830s, he came from the Hungarian town of Güns to Vienna and worked as an employee for the Landauer company. Schey subsequently married three daughters of the Landauer family, one after another. His first wife Emilie died in 1840 of childbed fever. His second wife Charlotte died in 1842 in giving birth to her first child. In 1846 he was married, for the third time,

to Hermine Landauer; their union produced Mathilde and six other children. How close the relationship to the Landauer family was and how fully integrated Friedrich was with the family can be deduced from a passage in the last will of his father-in-law, Josef: '[...] therefore I recommend also to my children, among whom I include my good son-in-law Fritz, whom for years I have loved as much as my sons, always to be obedient, affectionate to their mother [...].'<sup>5</sup> In 1855, Schey founded his own wholesale company, which was, nevertheless, tightly connected to the Landauer enterprise, and he became a successful entrepreneur and banker. In 1859 his uncle, Philipp Schey, was elevated to the peerage, the title being inherited by Friedrich, since Philipp was childless.<sup>6</sup> From the 1860s onwards, the Schey family lived in an imposing palace on the Ringstrasse, immediately adjoining the Imperial private gardens which today is the publicly accessible Burggarten.<sup>7</sup> For a while, Marie and her mother Nina lived on the fourth floor of the house. Mathilde sent her a few letters there in March 1879, while Marie had measles and the girls were prevented from personal contact:



[...] By the way, how are you, poor girl? Perhaps commiseration won't help you much, but at least you should know that I feel very sorry for you and it makes me furious not to be able to go upstairs, all the more as I am convinced I would not be infected. [...] Send Pipsl [Marie's dog] to me if he needs to go for a walk. [...]<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, the families of both Mathilde and Marie were part of the Jewish upper class of Vienna and Austria. With her marriage in January 1881, 19-year-old Marie Perugia was, however, able to raise her social status still further. She married Leopold de Rothschild (1845–1917), her senior by 17 years, and thus became a member of the English branch of the most famous Jewish family of the nineteenth century. The fact that Edward VII of England, Prince of Wales, was a friend of Leo's and attended the marriage ceremony in London's principal synagogue, made the wedding a spectacle of international interest. In a tender letter to his mother-in-law, Nina Perugia, Leopold referred to the wedding that had taken place shortly before:

Dear best Madam Perugia [...] dear mother-in-law. I hasten to repeat in writing what I have already told you several times. I will try to make your dear Mary as happy as I can. [...] She herself has written to you how [...] our neighbours [...] welcomed us. Despite the snow, hundreds of people were there, celebrating. [...] I cannot write to you in German everything that I ought to say [...] I can only add that I will always do everything to be pleasant to you. [...] Leopold de Rothschild.<sup>9</sup>

From this marriage came three children: Lionel Nathan (1882–1942), Evelyn Achille (1886–1917), and Anthony Gustav (1887–1961). The family lived, of course, in England, dividing their time between different places: their London town house at 148 Piccadilly, Gunnersbury Park near London, and then Ascott in Buckinghamshire as their country seat and Palace House near the Newmarket racecourse. The Rothschilds were an integral part of English high society and Marie and Leo accordingly entertained the best society. In a letter dated July 9, 1881, Marie's mother Nina showed a great interest in a recent invitation:

[...] I am very happy that the dinner went well and that the Prince enjoyed himself; this is always a satisfaction for hosts, and it certainly must be a joy for Leo. Did you have your cook and servants come from Ascott to Newmarket, or how exactly are such dinners arranged? [...]<sup>10</sup>

Like Marie, Mathilde married according to her status. In 1887 she became the wife of Adolf Lieben (1836–1914), 25 years her senior, from the prominent Jewish Lieben family in Vienna. Adolf was the son of the wholesale merchant Ignaz Lieben (1805–1862) and his wife Elise, née Lewinger (1807–1877). Besides having traditional professions in business and finance, the Lieben family played an important role in science. With the donation of a sum of money to the Imperial Academy of Sciences in 1862, the foundation was laid for a prize from which young Austrian natural scientists were to profit, and which still exists today.<sup>11</sup> Some members of the family themselves undertook scientific careers: Richard Lieben (1842–1919) and his brother-in-law Rudolf Auspitz (1837–1906) were important Austrian economic theoreticians.<sup>12</sup> Their nephew Robert Lieben (1878–1913) invented the so-called Lieben Tube (*Lieben'sche Verstärkeröhre*).<sup>13</sup> Nor should Mathilde's husband Adolf be left out in this context. After studying chemistry and earning his *Habilitation* in 1861, he worked as a university professor in Palermo, Turin and Prague. Because of his Jewish heritage, he was denied the chance of a professorship in Vienna; only in 1868 did the complete legal equalisation of Jewish and non-Jewish citizens take place, bringing with it complete freedom to practise a profession.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Adolf Lieben was an important and distinguished chemist in Austria. In 1871, he became a professor at the German University in Prague and, in 1875, became director of the second university laboratory of the University of Vienna.<sup>15</sup>

*Right*  
Leopold de Rothschild.  
RAL T36

Miniature of Marie  
de Rothschild, 1880s.  
RAL T13



Three children resulted from the marriage of Mathilde and Adolf Lieben – Fritz (1890–1966), Heinrich (1894–1945), and Edith, who died as a 2-year-old in 1894. In an autobiographical note from 1906, Adolf referred to his marriage to Mathilde: ‘A very important event for me was my marriage to Baroness Mathilde Schey of Vienna in December 1887. I may have married late, but the experiment turned out very happily, and two adolescent sons enliven our house.’<sup>16</sup> At first, the family lived in an apartment in the 9th District of Vienna. After Adolf’s retirement, they moved to the attic floor of the house Mölterbastei in the 1st District which was built as a back wing of the Palais Ephrussi. The couple constructed a roof garden, an absolute novelty at that time in Vienna.<sup>17</sup> In his memoirs of 1960, Fritz Lieben mentions that his mother Mathilde ‘[...] ran [...] a socially active house, and later it will be seen that it would not be wrong to speak of it as a salon in the years between 1890 and about 1937, a salon upon which she stamped the character of her personality, and acted as the leading force.’<sup>18</sup>

### The letters

One of the earliest letters preserved in the archive from Mathilde to Marie is dated 1872. Though Mathilde wrote as an eleven-year old girl, her language, the content and the structure of the letter make it clear that she had certainly studied letter-writing, and that this was part of her daily routine. No letters from Marie to Mathilde have yet been discovered in any other archives. We encounter Marie only in a few letters at The Rothschild Archive composed by her and mainly addressed to her mother.

Naturally the contents of Mathilde’s letters changed over the course of time. The eleven-year-old girl was preoccupied with different topics from the growing adult woman. In the 1870s, for example, Mathilde reflected upon her role as a girl and young woman, upon expectations and ideas, while also revealing personal wishes. In June 1878, she wrote:

My dear Marie! Today I have spent a long time in the kitchen, harbouring the intention of seriously learning to cook. The two of us will be exceptionally good housewives, won’t we? On a more serious note, I am convinced that I would do quite well in a small inn where I would have to help out, and that I would be happy at it – of course on condition that I had the kind of husband I wanted [...]<sup>19</sup>

Mathilde seemed to be able to identify with a middle-class image of women that did not necessarily correspond to the image – prevalent in bourgeois circles – of a ‘lady of the house’ who had no need to work.<sup>20</sup> She could very well imagine putting her hands to work in her household, and confidently articulated her ideas and wishes. It might be that Mathilde was also covertly criticising arranged marriages, which were common in her immediate circle, and in which, on occasion, personal feelings were not allowed to play a part. Beyond the religious criterion, in wealthy business circles it was also of utmost importance to maintain or elevate one’s own social position through an appropriate marriage.<sup>21</sup> Without necessarily assuming the absence of an emotional connection, there were several examples in Mathilde’s immediate environment of marriages in which social and financial considerations played a significant role. Her half-sister Emma’s first marriage was to the London banker and merchant Anton, Baron de Worms; Mathilde’s brother married Julie of the Brandeis-Weikersheim banking family; and another brother, Paul, married their cousin Evelina Landauer.<sup>22</sup> Mathilde was especially critical of the marriage of Paul and Evelina (though here, sisterly jealousy might have played a role):

[...] I took a walk along the Ring. Among the few acquaintances we encountered were Baron and Baroness Paul Schey, who, in the street, appear truly married, while indoors look rather ridiculous, especially because they have kept their own individual patterns of behaviour. [...] <sup>23</sup>

In another letter dated the same year, she discusses her cousin Julius Morpurgo, and stresses the importance of love in marriage:

[...] I really feel sorry for him; it would be best for him if he could find a good wife, which is admittedly not an easy thing, for love should be the main ingredient on both sides.<sup>24</sup>

In many of Mathilde’s letters, it becomes clear how the culture, ideals and attitudes of the bourgeoisie were adopted and experienced. Various statements on Judaism and religious practices from the years 1878 to 1879 do not leave any doubts that Mathilde wanted nothing to do with traditional Jewish rites, even finding them ridiculous or repulsive. Distressed, she wrote about an Orthodox funeral in October 1878:

[...] The funeral seems to have been quite appalling and I could hardly listen to Josef’s remarks. Lackenbach [*one of the Siebengemeinden, the seven largely autonomous Jewish communities established after 1670 by Paul I, 1st Prince Esterházy of Galántha, in what was then western Hungary and is today Burgenland, Austria*] is in fact a hamlet whose inhabitants consist only of the most repulsive Jews, where everything is done according to the severest Orthodox custom, which I myself find very disgusting. That the dead bodies are buried without pomp as performed by the Catholics is all right, but one should at least not begrudge them a coffin. I’m reluctant to tell you further details, I can only say that I was scandalized by the people there, and actually still am. It must have been awful for our dear father, but thank God he is well. [...] <sup>25</sup>

In June 1879, Mathilde wrote in a similar manner of the circumcision of her nephew Albrecht, son of Stefan and Julie Schey:

[...] You can’t imagine yesterday’s Jewish assembly. Such an awful thing. I couldn’t eat anything although I had rather the best place at the table, between Gusti Pick and Albert Boschan. At the peak of this wonderful society were Jellinek, Sulzer, Dr. Spitz and some kind of a master of ceremonies; among the relatives (thank God not from our side but from Julie’s) Mr von Brandeis, Aurelie with her husband, Sigmund Goldschmidt, Albert Brandeis, Hermann and Dora. Finally, Sulzer sang an endless prayer, during which I had to think of Phillip all the time, hardly able to stifle my laughter. [...] <sup>26</sup>



Monogram of Marie’s mother, Nina Perugia.  
RAL 000/93/1

Mathilde's inferred attitude in these quotations is quite typical and fits the image and value system of the liberal Jewish bourgeoisie. Most of the affluent, acculturated Jews rejected the rules of Orthodoxy, while favouring a secularised version or culture as a substitute for religion.<sup>27</sup> Mathilde did not renounce Judaism during her lifetime, although conversions and renunciations were common in her environment toward the end of the nineteenth century. To what degree she saw herself as being Jewish, what distinctions of 'Jewish' she perceived in her environment, how she judged them and with what kind of Judaism she was able to identify cannot be unambiguously determined. What is certain is that researching the letters and working carefully with these valuable sources presents the opportunity of exciting perceptions and insights into the life of Mathilde Schey/Lieben.

*Lisa-Maria Tillian is currently studying for a PhD at the University of Vienna. She has used the sources at The Rothschild Archive extensively for her research.*

## NOTES

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