

Travels in Europe: 'Stray Leaves From My Journey, 1867'

Melanie Aspey explains how one of the highlights among new accessions provided the excuse to revisit some of the earliest material deposited in the Archive.

The abiding interest in photography of generations of the Rothschild family – as commissioners, collectors and practitioners – will be well known to readers of previous issues of this *Review*.¹ Baron Lionel de Rothschild (1808–1879) appreciated the potential of photographs as evidence in litigation, as he tried to prevent the planting of unsightly telegraph poles by the United Kingdom Electric Telegraph Company. His wife Charlotte (1819–1884) was most probably responsible for assembling an album of works by photographic pioneers such as Oscar Reijlander, Roger Fenton and Julia Margaret Cameron. She was certainly the recipient of a print of Cameron's *The Kiss of Peace*, which the photographer inscribed to her and which is one of several examples of her work in the album.² The couple's grandson, Lionel (1882–1942), left proof of his talents as a photographer in his collection of autochromes taken in the years before World War I.

Did this fascination with photography skip a generation? We now know for certain that it did not, with the arrival in the Archive of a back-breakingly impressive volume with the rather nonchalant title, 'Stray Leaves From My Journey, 1867'.³ The volume was compiled by Leopold de Rothschild (1845–1917) – son and father of the Lionels above – and contains photographs and prints of European cities, often captioned in Leopold's own hand. The images clearly mark a progression east – from Hamburg to Stockholm, then Moscow to Sebastopol with a handful of places in between.

Lithograph of Moscow:
Couvent de St Simeon
from 'Stray Leaves From
My Journey', compiled by
Leopold de Rothschild,
1867.
RAL 000/2019



Of value for its own sake as an item of interest and beauty the volume brings to life, and is enlivened by, documents that were already in the Archive: the letters written on the journey in 1867.⁴ Enthusiastic as they were for photography, many Rothschilds were also ‘inveterate scribblers.’⁵ The researcher can rejoice that they have also been inveterate collectors: business letters, private letters, photographs and prints open up a multidimensional view of the past.

Leopold’s journey in the late summer of 1867 was made in the company of his cousin and brother-in-law, Ferdinand de Rothschild (1839–1898). Ferdinand’s wife, Evelina, had died in December giving birth to their first child. The younger of the two men, Leopold was fresh from Cambridge University where his application to his studies had been somewhat less than enthusiastic. His mother often reminded him of his future responsibilities at the bank, and, a highly intellectual woman herself, expressed frustrations over her son’s negligent approach to the educational opportunities available to him at Cambridge. She frequently urged, ‘pray read and study and make the best use of your time’, and hoped, ‘that you will study conscientiously.’⁶ In May 1867, his Cambridge days behind him, she wrote, ‘It seems sad, and such a waste of youth and golden opportunities, and many rare and precious gifts and talents to fritter time away. I trust you will come back to study languages and art.’⁷ The ‘Grand Tour’ was perhaps devised for the benefit of both parties: to correct a perceived drift in Leopold’s life as he prepared himself for duty in the family firm, as well as to divert Ferdinand from his grief.

The letters of Leopold and Ferdinand, which provide colourful impressions of the places they visit and the people they meet, reveal that the two of them are also representing the business and undertaking specific commissions for family members. From Stockholm, Leopold wrote on 2 September:

Your message to the Bank of Sweden dear Papa seems to have created great excitement amongst the Directors, the chief of whom, Mr Schwan, proposed a fete in our honour and I believe would have organised a grand entry for us but fortunately for us Mr Guilletmot prevented these grand doings.⁸

On the following day, Ferdinand presented his own impressions to his father-in-law.

Mr. Guilletmot [*sic*] has overwhelmed us with civilities, he does all in his power to make himself useful, and as he is a clever man and has plenty to say for himself, he proves to be a useful auxiliary. Mr. G does much business with the Paris and Frankfurt houses and he is most anxious to enter into business connections with you. He told me that there was a great deal of money to be made here. Sweden is (comparatively) rich and certainly a very prosperous country. He said he would do all in his power to please you; every day he renews his offers to me and I think, if I may venture to express an opinion, that as the Paris house does business with him, you might do the same. He makes them remittances and gives letters of credit on them.⁹

The travellers were conducted on a tour of the Royal Palace and State Rooms by Count Corti, already known to the family, whom Leopold described in his letter of 2 September as ‘not much changed in looks or in character although he has now a beard and a good many white hairs, still we fancy that he no longer deserves the name of white negro.’ Leopold reported that while the paintings by Swedish artists were all ‘dawbs’, the king painted fairly ‘for a monarch’ and displayed his pictures to anyone who wished to see them.

The two men found time to visit some of Stockholm’s antique dealers and jewellers, one of whom hoped to convince the two Rothschilds that they should snap up his collection of ‘bric-a-brac rubbish’ (Leopold’s words) built up over twenty years in the hope of tempting the king to buy the whole lot. Leopold remarked that not even the Bond Street dealer, Joseph, would be so foolish as to make the man an offer. Joseph, it is clear from the letters, is but one of the



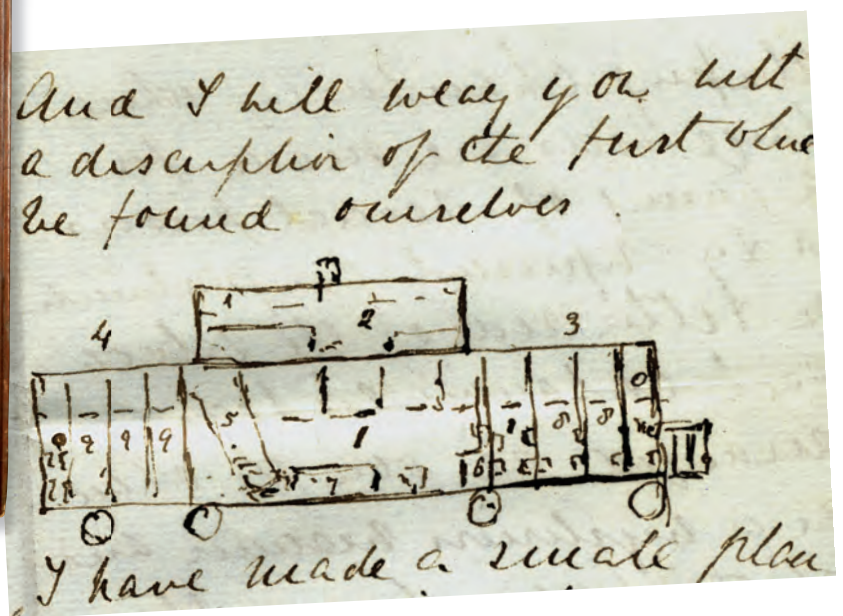
dealers whom the travellers encountered as they made their progress across Europe. By the time they reached St Petersburg, the competition for bargains had intensified. Ferdinand wrote to his father-in-law, "The only friends I met were a trio of curiosity dealers, Durlacher, Spritzer and Wetheimer. I hear that Davis and Joseph are living two streets off. Considering the presence of these Bond St. robbers I shall not even attempt to look out for curiosities, and shall be glad to save both time and money. They have all come to buy Princess Galitzine's Collection. Durlacher is to take me to see it."¹⁰

Ferdinand picked up some useful insights at the Galitzine museum, hearing from the director that the dealer Davis paid £600 for a vase and offered it to the Rothschilds for £1600.



'Stray Leaves From My Journey', a volume containing photographs and prints compiled by Leopold de Rothschild, 1867. RAL 000/2019

Sketch of a Russian train from Leopold's letters to his parents. RAL 000/22





Hand-coloured lithographs forming a panorama of Moscow from 'Stray Leaves From My Journey', 1867.
RAL 000/2019

Arriving in Moscow Leopold and Ferdinand were welcomed by the British consul, a 'pompous gentleman', who provided them with an interpreter and a suggested itinerary. The sheer scale of the city overwhelmed them, Ferdinand admitting that his literary skills were not up to the task of describing the place: 'it would require the pen of my dear Aunt [Charlotte] to do justice to the wonderful panorama of this town'.¹¹

Leopold made sure that their impressions of Moscow were captured by more than just their pens. He acquired a dazzling series of ten richly coloured views of the city to add to a collection of photographs and prints acquired at each of the places they stayed, which now form a stunning centrepiece of his 1867 album.

The process of travelling is described in detail too. Much of it was tedious, some of it – as on the Russian railways – was unexpectedly luxurious, as Leopold reported at length to his parents from Moscow.

The journey here was most interesting as we had plenty of opportunity for watching the luxury of the Russians travelling arrangements.

The train is composed of several long carriages but all are differently arranged.

1. the ordinary first class
2. the sleeping carriage
3. the ordinary second class
4. the sleeping carriage

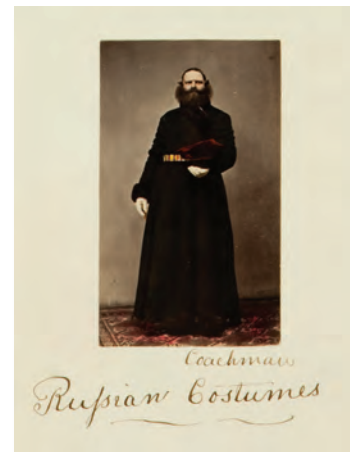
and I will weary you with a description of the first where we found ourselves.

I have made a small plan but I fear it is rather complicated, however, it may serve to give an idea of the dimensions. The middle compartment (1) represents a section of the saloon, in which (7) is a large divan and an elaborate side board with a piece of glass over wax candlesticks, the staircase (5) leads up to a sleeping chamber (2) where large beds are made for a family of several persons; 8 and 9 represent compartments on either side of the saloon, each containing six beds arranged one over the other in a mysterious manner and at the proper hour the corridors 3 and 4 afford a small promenade for the nervous traveller and at the last extreme of each wing is a *oo* [*sic*] in perfect condition and arranged as well as in the most private houses. A silent servant with noiseless motion administers to all ones wants, and has in his stores every imaginable object, cards, cigarettes, cushions, iced water, soap, towels, a complete wash-stand etc. all of which disappears in a second after it has been used – and when one considers that the price of all these comforts amounts to 2 roubles one is fairly astounded.¹²

Travelling in Russia around the time of the New Year, Leopold and Ferdinand had to make plans for the holidays and arranged to spend the time with the Karaite Jews. The letters provide further details of encounters with their co-religionists as their arrival in successive towns caused minor sensations. Leopold gleefully told his parents that he had managed to deflect one suppliant in Ferdinand's direction, answering him truthfully that his name was Leopold, and 'Rothschild' was his travelling companion.

Not unsurprisingly the letters also confirm that opportunities to speak up on behalf of the repressed or unrepresented communities of Jews were never lost. Even as a young man, Leopold was aware of the privileges of access to political power that the family's business activities could bring. '...it is more than probable that we shall see his Imperial Majesty and as such our opportunity ought not to be lost we should like to know if there is anything particular that you would wish the Czar to remark. Ferdy thinks that he might say something about the poor Jews, as the Chief Rabbi came to us at St Petersburg and said that although there were many Israelites in Russia especially in the army and the navy that as yet there was no place of worship!'¹³

It is often the archivist's privilege to be the first to open the pages of a book, or to unwrap tightly bound packages of paper, which have sealed in the experiences of generations past and to experience the thrill of discovery. Bringing together letter and photograph, receipt and object, collection and collection is a satisfying enough process in itself; associating researcher with research material is more rewarding still. The collections in the Archive described above offer endless questions to historians in many disciplines. Was the tour recorded in the journals of those that the Rothschilds met? Did the dealers keep accounts of their purchases and sales? Are there articles in the press noting the events they attended? How rare are the photographs?¹⁴ We eagerly await the answers.



NOTES

- 1 See Anthony Hamber, 'New Boundaries: Baron Lionel, photography and the United Kingdom Electric Telegraph Company', *Review of the Year 2003–2004* (London: The Rothschild Archive, 2004), pp.44–51 for an example of commissioned photography; Colin Ford, 'Hannah, Charlotte... and Julia', *Review of the Year 2001–2002* (London: The Rothschild Archive, 2002), pp.32–36 for more on the Rothschilds as collectors of photographs; Victor Gray, 'The colours of another world' *Review of the Year 2005–2006* (London: The Rothschild Archive, 2006), pp.14–19 for a description of Lionel de Rothschild's autochromes.
- 2 RAL 000/924/24.
- 3 RAL 000/2019. The album, like the one attributed to Charlotte de Rothschild, was also formerly at Ascott House.
- 4 RAL 00/22 (Leopold) and RAL 00/26 (Ferdinand).
- 5 Charlotte de Rothschild, London, to Leopold de Rothschild, Switzerland, 25 August 1874. RAL 000/84.
- 6 Charlotte de Rothschild, London, to Leopold de Rothschild, Cambridge, 16 and 20 March 1866. RAL 00/84.
- 7 Charlotte de Rothschild, London, to Leopold de Rothschild, 22 May 1867. RAL 00/84.
- 8 Leopold de Rothschild, Stockholm, to Lionel and Charlotte de Rothschild, 2 September 1867. RAL 00/22.
- 9 Ferdinand de Rothschild, Stockholm, to Lionel and Charlotte de Rothschild, 3 September 1867. RAL 00/26. The Paris Rothschilds had begun a regular correspondence with the firm of Guillemot and Weylandt around this time, but the London bank did not follow suit.
- 10 Ferdinand de Rothschild, St Petersburg, to Lionel and Charlotte de Rothschild, 10 September 1867. RAL 00/26.
- 11 Ferdinand de Rothschild, Moscow, to Lionel and Charlotte de Rothschild, 18 September 1867. RAL 00/26.
- 12 Leopold de Rothschild, Moscow, to Lionel and Charlotte de Rothschild, 18 September 1867. RAL 000/22.
- 13 Leopold de Rothschild, St Petersburg, to Lionel and Charlotte de Rothschild, 15 September 1867. RAL 000/22.
- 14 I am grateful to Anders Perlinge for his observations on the Stockholm photographs.

Above
Photographs collected
by Leopold in Russia.
RAL 000/2019