‘There are three types of men’: Lionel de Rothschild and The Jewish War Services Committee, 1915–1919

As many countries mark the centenary of the outbreak of World War I, Archivist Justin Cavernelis-Frost considers the role of New Court as a recruiting office for Jewish soldiers, and remembers the ultimate sacrifice the English Rothschild family paid in the conflict.

The Rothschild family, who had helped to create ‘modern’ Europe through their businesses and marriages linking the continent’s influential families, were deeply affected by the crisis of World War I. Like royalty, they were forced to abjure family solidarity and to give their loyalty to the countries of their adoption: England, France, Austria and Germany. By 1919, 70 million military personnel had been mobilised in one of the largest wars in history. Over a million men from across the British Empire lost their lives on active service between 1914 and 1918, and many thousands more suffered physical injuries and mental scars that affected the rest of their lives. The war was the catalyst for major political and social changes, and by the war’s end, the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires had ceased to exist, and the map of Europe had been re-drawn.

Opposite, from left
Studio photograph of Lionel de Rothschild (1882–1942) in Bucks Hussars uniform.
BAM 000/651/342
Portrait photograph of Evelyn Achille de Rothschild (1886–1917) in uniform.
BAM 000/651/139
Above
Record of the proceedings of the first meeting of the Jewish War Services Committee, 5 December 1915.
BAM 000/58
1914 was in poor health. The decision was given added force by no less than the King himself, who is said to have personally requested that Lionel remain at New Court to direct the affairs of the London House. It proved a wise course of action, for in March 1915, Natty died. In May 1915, Leopold provided the preface for the pamphlet 'Jews and the War' which had been issued by 'The Central Committee for National Patriotic Organisations.' He called upon Jewish men 'to realise their duty as Jews…[and join] in unfaltering defence of the weak, and in vindication of those principles of justice, humanity and international good-faith which they, as Jews, have so much reason to cherish, and from which they have still so much to hope.'

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As the war continued, the committee's remit widened to consider questions of the religious and physical welfare of serving Jewish soldiers. The Visitation Committee of the United Synagogue was responsible for the spiritual needs of Jews in public institutions. When Jews were officially recognised as a distinct religious body in the British army from 1889, the United Synagogue decided to extend its activities to serving members of the British forces, applying to the War Office to appoint a Jewish Forces Chaplain. Rabbi Francis L. Cohen was the first appointed in 1892, succeeded in 1904 by Reverend Michael Adler (1869–1944). In January 1915, Adler was sent to France to assess the need for a Jewish chaplain at the Front. His subsequent report to the War Office showed a desperate urgency, and he returned to France. In March 1916, the Jewish War Services Committee invited two members of the Visitation Committee to join them, and began to lend its support to the holding of Sabbath services for Jewish soldiers, and petitions by Jewish soldiers to the War Office to request that they 'be put to military work that enables them to observe their religious rites'. Through the efforts of the committee, chaplains, beginning with Reverend Adler, were able to provide Jewish troops with some small measure of comfort, the first time that Jewish chaplains had formed part of the British Army on active service. Reverend Adler became known as 'The Chaplain in the Trenches' for his war work. In his appointments diary, he recalls the occasion on 11 August 1916 when he 'met a party of fifty newly-arrived Jewish soldiers belonging to the 1/1st Bucks Battalion - near a village called Bouzincourt, outside Albert. As the place was being bombarded, all troops were ordered into the open, and we found a vacant space in a cornfield where a square was formed and a brief service held.'

By early 1916, the committee was considering a wide range of matters. In February, it assisted the West Central Jewish Working Men's Club to open a hostel for Jewish soldiers passing through London. The hostel had 30 beds, and one night's lodging and breakfast was free, a longer stay being charged at cost price. In the summer, the chairman announced that under the scheme of enlisting friendly aliens, tribunals would be set up for the purpose of hearing appeals against military service. In October the committee considered a letter from the Chief Rabbi asking for arrangements to be made for clergymen to visit enemy prisoners of war. As the war entered its fourth year in 1917, the expansion of the field of conflict and the great need of the troops for spiritual sustenance led to the full unification of the Visitation Committee of the United Synagogue and the Jewish War Services Committee. Throughout 1918, the committee concerned itself with matters of the welfare of Jewish soldiers such as the supply of kosher food and the issue of Passover leave. The last meeting of the committee, on 6 May 1919 was after the Armistice when the final accounts record a deficit of £43.5, and the committee agreed to ask previous donors to renew their support to cover outstanding expenses. The final acts of the committee were to write various letters of thanks and to print 50,000 copies of Reverend Adler's pamphlet on the War.
Lionel's brother Anthony served his country with distinction in the Buckinghamshire Yeomanry, was wounded at Gallipoli, and mentioned in Despatches. He ended the war as a Major with the General Staff. In 1917, the family (already mourning the death of Leopold in May) suffered a shattering blow, when, Evelyn, Lionel and Anthony's brother, was badly wounded on 13 November in the cavalry charge at El Mughar in the Palestine campaign and died four days later in the Citadel Hospital, Cairo. A superb horseman, Evelyn was mobilised with his regiment on the outbreak of war, and in August 1914 had been promoted to Captain, leaving for Egypt in April 1915. Sent to Gallipoli, he was temporarily in command of the Regiment, but after three months was wounded and subsequently invalided out to the base. He was present at both Battles of Gaza, and was promoted to the rank of major in March 1917. In Evelyn's obituary, the officer commanding the Bucks Yeomanry described the battle: 'The Regiment was taking part in a mounted charge on the Turkish infantry, who were very strongly posted on some high ground, El Mughar [i]. I attacked with the Regiment in column of...

squadrons, and Evelyn was with the 3rd Squadron and was a take command of the two lead- ing Squadrons on reaching the objective. We had some two miles of open country to cross, which was fairly swept by machine-gun and rifle fire. It was about half-way across this plain that Evelyn was struck down by a bullet. After all his death was a glorious one, killed when changing at the head of his men of Bucks'. Tragically, Neil Primrose, the son of Hannah Rothschild (1815–1893) who had married the Earl of Rosebery, and cousin of Lionel and his brothers was also killed in Palestine within days. These tragic losses must have given Lionel's war work an added urgency and poignancy.

The Jewish War Services Committee fulfilled the need to deal with the issues of Jewish wartime recruitment. As the early patriotic fervour of the war diminished, the committee played a valuable role in providing succour to serving Jewish troops. These measures must have offered some comfort to counter the horrors of the battlefield. The number of men killed in the war who enlisted at New Court was 75 to which can be added a further 67 who enlisted at the neighbouring St. Swithin's Lane recruiting office, totalling 142. After the war, Field Marshal Earl Haig praised 'the loyalty with which British Jews of every class came forward to fight for the country of their adoption and for the great human ideals which they shared with their Christian comrades in arms'. When it became clear that the war was ending, the crucial task of rehabilitating Jewish soldiers into civilian life began, and the Rothschilds were at the forefront in remembering the fallen and helping the living through the creation of a 'Living' memorial. Under the leadership of Robert Waley Cohen, and supported by Lionel and Anthony, a Jewish Memorial Council was established to support Jewish education and religious training. Lionel was awarded an OBE in the Military Division in 1917. In 1919, he inherited his Uncle Alfred's Buckinghamshire estate, Halton, and began to develop his estate at Edgbury, Hampshire. On 1 December 1919, Anthony de Rothschild unveiled the War Memorial in the churchyard of All Saints Church at Wing, Buckinghamshire honouring his brother and his Wing comrades. In 1911, Anthony named his new son Evelyn, in memory of his fallen brother. Lionel died on 28 January 1942, three days after his sixtieth birthday.

The great upheavals of the war changed the map of Europe. During the war, interconti- nental migration dwindled, but once the war was over, hundreds of thousands of Jews began leaving Europe. In the 1920s and 1930s, Rothschilds at New Court, led by Anthony and his wife Yvonne, again provided significant resources and support, assisting Jewish refugees from Europe. In December 1938, Anthony was appointed chairman of the Emigration (Planning) Committee, a subcommittee of the Council for German Jewry, which helped many Jews leave continental Europe to safety. The Central British Fund for Jewish Relief and Rehabilitation was co-ordinated from New Court. Anthony led N M Rothschild & Sons as Senior Partner from 1944 until shortly before his death in 1961.

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NOTES

1 This article concerns activities of the English family. See the article by Nazari Brinal on pp. for details of the family in the rest of Europe.
4 Although a resurgence of imperialism was an underlying cause, the immediate trigger was war was the assassination in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. This triggered a diplomatic crisis and within weeks, the major powers were at war. See Keegan, The First World War.
To 15 million copies of 200 different posters were distributed by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee over the course of the war. The psychological impact of the early poster campaign was much criticized.

42 Edmund de Rothschild (1841–1898) was Educated at Cambridge, Leopold served at New Court, and was popular in horse-racing circles. He married Maria Peruga in 1871, and supported many Jewish charities.

43 Anthony Gustave de Rothschild (1866–1925) attended Cambridge and entered the business at New Court in 1897, serving Brazil and Chile in 1915. 


47 In August 1914, the Chancellor, Lloyd George, invited Natty to the Treasury to discuss what measures should be adopted to keep the economy steady. Despite previous rivalry between the two, Natty was clear that the Rothschild business would play its part in the dealing with coming crises. See Niall Ferguson, The World’s Banker (London, 1998).

48 Edmund Sebag-Montefiore (1867–1958) was a member of the Montefiore family of diplomats and bankers. Sir Moses Montefiore (1784–1885) was a business partner of Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1777–1835), and Moses’ brother Abraham (1788–1864) married Nathan’s sister Henrietta (1801–1865).


50 Lord Rothschild joined the family firm in 1871, and supported many Jewish charities.


52 Letter from Robert Wales Cohen to Lionel de Rothschild dated 1 May 1919 discussing proposals to erect a war memorial and create a fund to support the traditions of Judaism and British citizenship, KCA.001/195/1. Lionel served as President of the Jewish War Memorial Council from 1919 until 1941.

53 Robert Wales Cohen (1877–1953) was a British industrialist and prominent leader of Anglo-Jewry, and a descendant of Levi Rabin Cohen, whose daughter Hannah married Nathan Mayer Rothschild in 1866.

54 Letter from Lionel George de Rothschild informing him of the honour. KCA.001/31.

55 The event at Haifa played an over-riding part in the conflict. See Andrew Adam, Baruch and Benjamin: The Book of Haifa, (Baron Birt), 1943. Lionel led the forces to the Ministry of Defence in 1919.