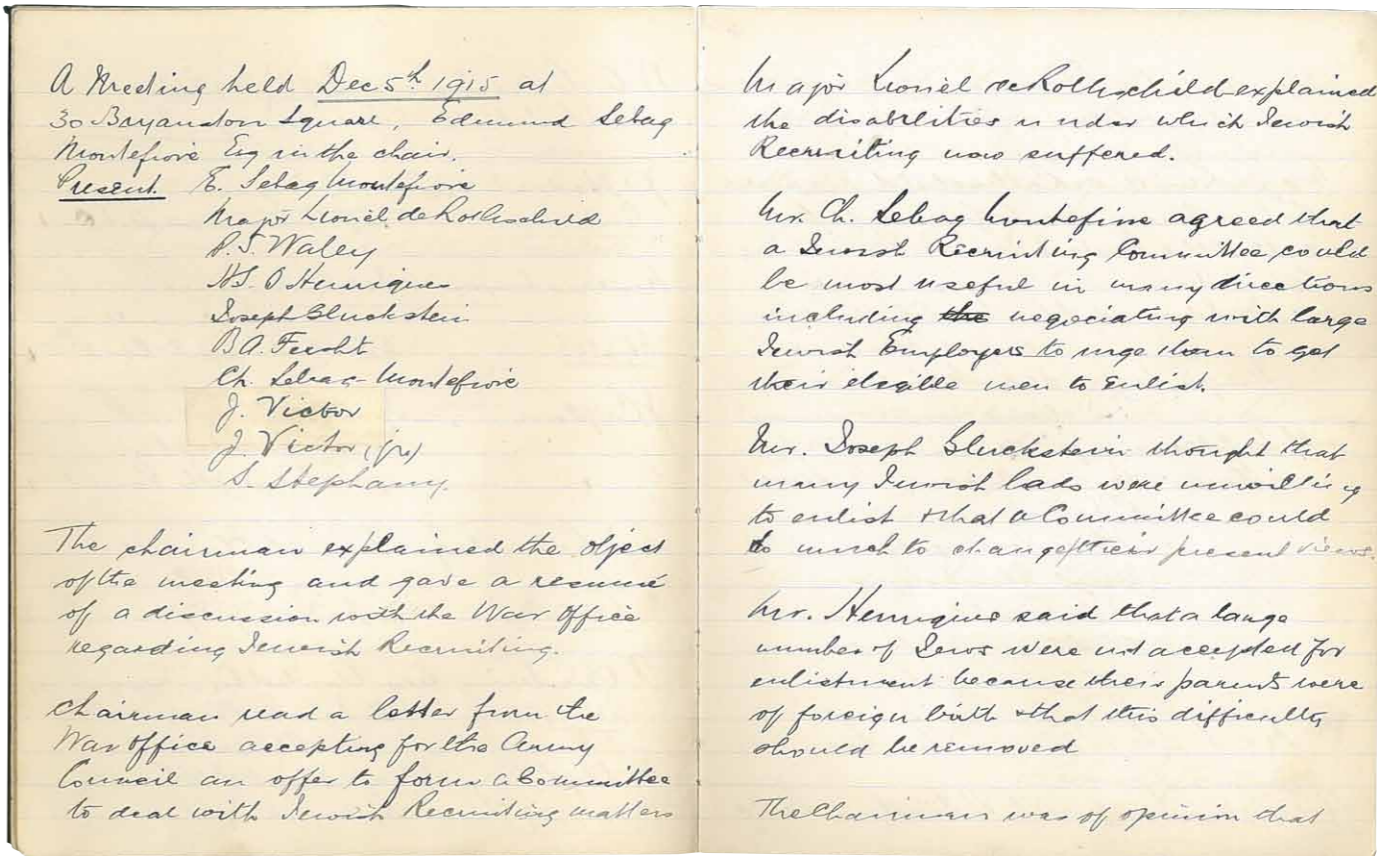


# ‘There are three types of men’: Lionel de Rothschild and The Jewish War Services Committee, 1915–1919

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.<sup>1</sup> By 1919, 70 million military personnel had been mobilised in one of the largest wars in history.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>



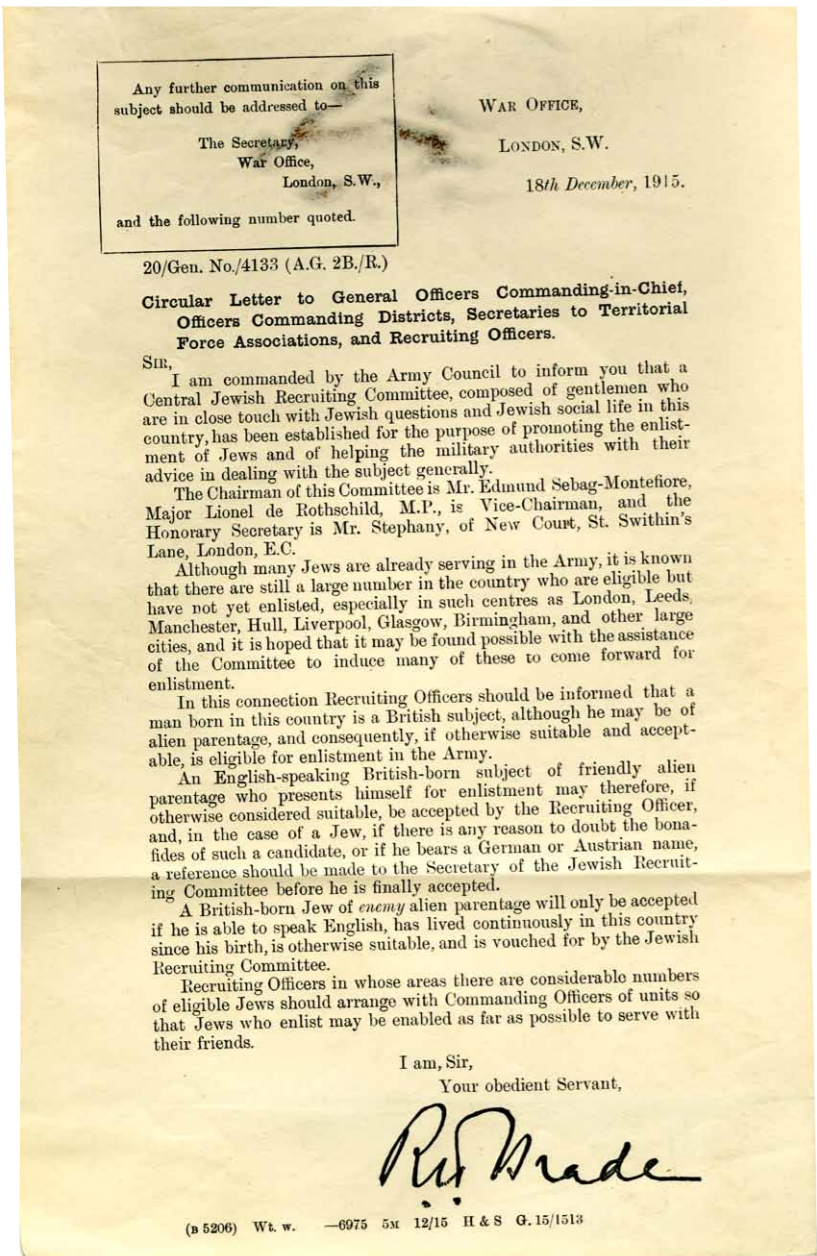
Opposite, from left  
Studio photograph of  
Lionel de Rothschild  
(1882–1942) in Bucks  
Hussars uniform.  
RAL 000/360/232

Portrait photograph  
of Evelyn Achille de  
Rothschild (1886–1917)  
in uniform.  
RAL 000/360/139

Above  
Record of the  
proceedings of the first  
meeting of the Jewish  
War Services Committee,  
5 December 1915.  
RAL 000/358

‘There are three types of men: those who bear the call and obey; those who delay; and – the others. To which do you belong?’ proclaimed a 1915 British recruiting poster.<sup>5</sup> Lionel Nathan de Rothschild (1882–1942) was certainly one of the first ‘types of men’; clearly hearing the call and, believing in the rightness of the cause and the necessity to go to war to protect the freedoms and future of Europe, he contributed to the war effort in very practical ways. Lionel was the eldest of the three sons of Leopold de Rothschild (1845–1917).<sup>6</sup> He was very close to his brothers Evelyn Achille (1886–1917) and Anthony Gustav (1887–1961).<sup>7</sup> Educated at Harrow and Trinity College Cambridge, Lionel took his place as a partner at New Court on 1 April 1915. In his later years, Lionel described himself rather self-deprecatingly as ‘a gardener by profession, a banker by hobby’, but this underestimates his achievements. As a young man he was adventurous, with a natural scientific curiosity, and he was a pioneer of early motoring and photography.<sup>8</sup> The young Lionel spent his summers at the family’s country estate at Ascott in Buckinghamshire, the area where many Rothschilds had settled, and where Lionel would later serve as MP for The Vale of Aylesbury from 1910 to 1923. When Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, Lionel was already a Major in the Royal Buckinghamshire Regiment.<sup>9</sup> His brothers Evelyn and Anthony immediately joined the British Army, also serving in the 1/1st Royal Buckinghamshire Yeomanry (Royal Bucks Hussars).<sup>10</sup>

Lionel, much to his frustration and regret, was not to see active service. Continuation of the business at home was as vital to the war effort as military service.<sup>11</sup> As the most senior of his generation of English male Rothschilds, he reluctantly gave in to pressure to remain with the family firm at New Court, assisting his two uncles, Nathaniel (‘Natty’) 1st Lord Rothschild (1840–1915) and Alfred de Rothschild (1842–1918), and his father Leopold, who by



Circular issued by the War Office, 18 December 1915, announcing the establishment of a Central Jewish Recruiting Committee. RAL 000/358

1914 was in poor health.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> It proved a wise course of action, for in March 1915, Natty died. Leopold died in May 1917 and Alfred in January 1918. Lionel rose to the challenge of leadership, but keenly felt the imposition of his responsibilities. His son Edmund later recalled the impact this enforced situation had made upon his father, ‘the memory that he had remained in England during the war, while most of his friends and both his brothers had gone to the Front, was to haunt my poor father for the rest of his life.’<sup>14</sup>

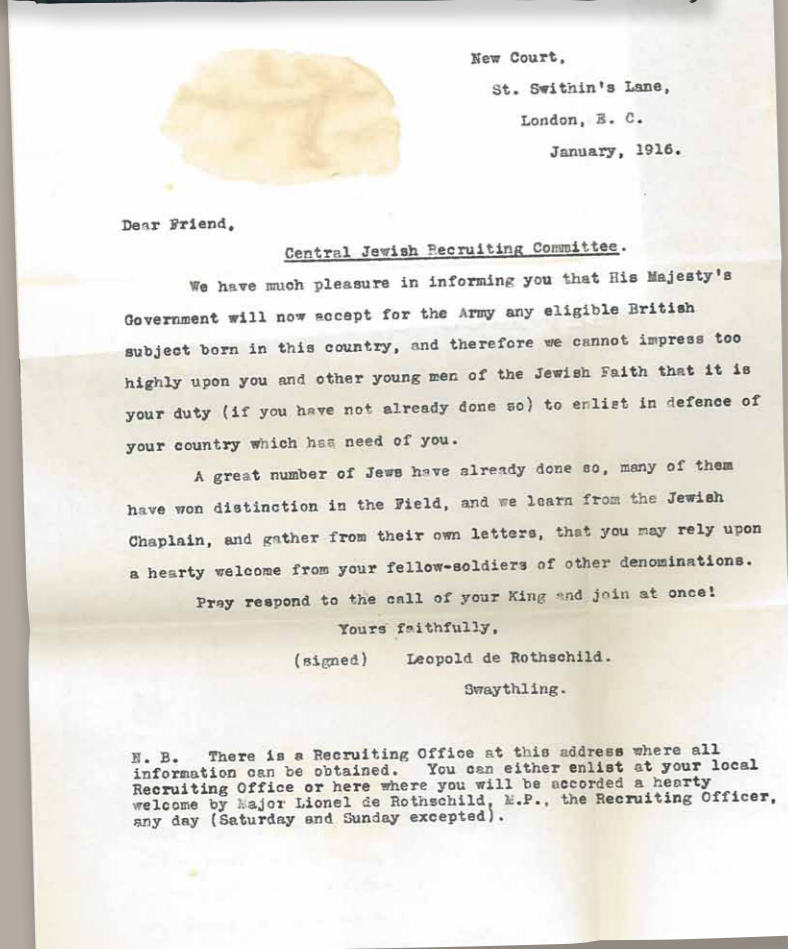
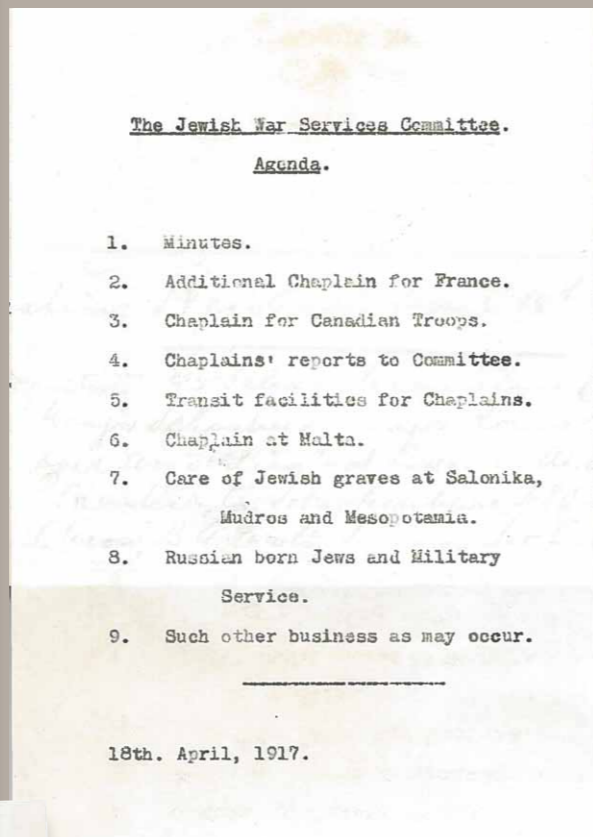
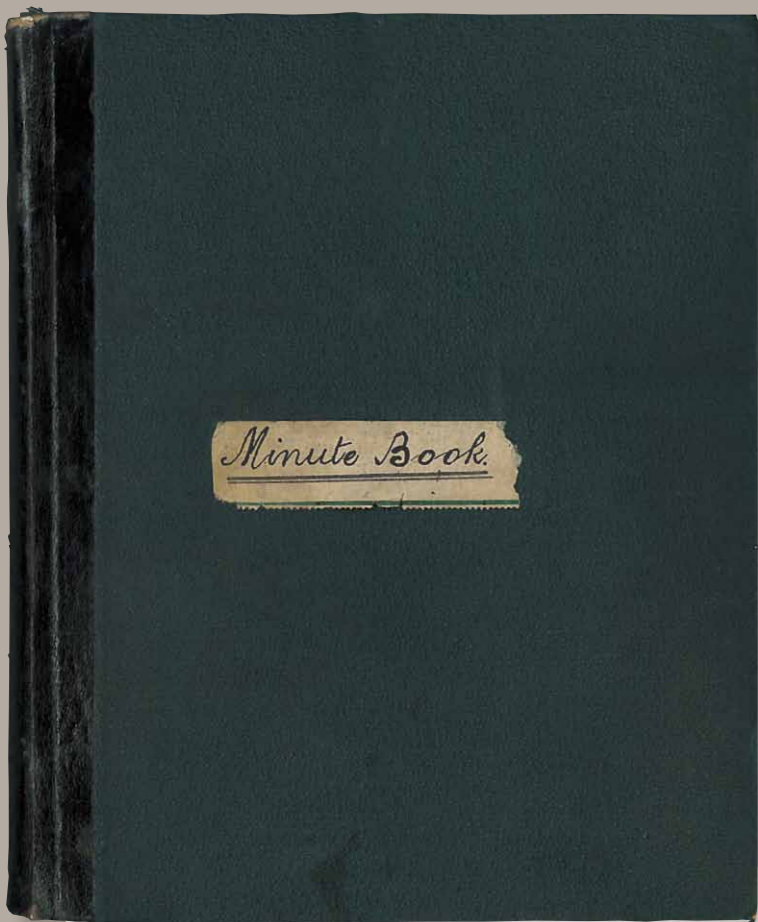
Given the family’s close associations with Buckinghamshire, they were inevitably involved with the local Volunteer and Territorial units, and as leading lay members of Anglo-Jewry, it seemed natural that Rothschild energies to support the war should be directed towards issues of the recruitment of Jews, and men from Buckinghamshire. In 1914, Jewish recruitment was

a serious concern. A high proportion of British Jews were either foreign-born or had foreign-born parents, and anti-German feelings in Britain often did not distinguish between Germans and persons with ‘foreign’ names. At the start of the war, there were reports of Jews being turned down at recruiting centres. In November 1915 *The Jewish Chronicle* reported cases of recruiting officers saying ‘Lord Kitchener does not want any more Jews in the Army’ and ‘We are not enlisting Jews’.<sup>15</sup> There were accusations that Jews were not joining, and, on the Jewish side, complaints that they were being rejected at the recruiting offices. There was also confusion about the legal position of foreigners, and local recruiting officers were not consistent in their actions. Before conscription came into force with the passing of The Military Service Act in January 1916, many Jews had volunteered for service. Prior to the war there were an estimated thousand Jews in the British forces; by 1916, the number of Jews on active service has been estimated at about 10,000.<sup>16</sup>

Lionel’s father Leopold had many personal contacts with the armed forces.<sup>17</sup> Before any official recognition of the issues of Jewish recruitment, the New Court Rothschilds had supported the enlistment of volunteers. 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.<sup>18</sup> 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’.<sup>19</sup> Under Lionel’s direction, a City recruiting office was established at New Court, probably in October 1915. Reporting on its opening, *The Jewish World* explained that ‘Jews wishing to enlist there will be sent to suitable regiments...Major Lionel de Rothschild has succeeded in recruiting over forty Jewish youngsters for either the Royal Bucks Yeomanry, the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry (T.F.) and the Bucks R.A.M.C., in addition to many others’.<sup>20</sup>

On 18 December 1915, the situation concerning Jewish recruitment was clarified by the War Office. It recognised that although many Jews had signed up, there were large numbers of eligible men who had not yet enlisted. Circular 20/Gen. no./4133 (A.G. 2B/R), issued to ‘General Officers Commanding-in-Chief, Officers Commanding Districts, Secretaries to Territorial Force Associations, and Recruiting Officers’ announced the formation of a central Jewish recruiting committee ‘composed of gentlemen who are in close touch with Jewish questions and Jewish social life in this country.’<sup>21</sup> The committee was established with ‘the purpose of promoting the enlistment of Jews and of helping the military authorities with their advice in dealing with the subject generally.’ Edmund Sebag-Montefiore was appointed chairman of the Jewish War Services Committee with Lionel de Rothschild as vice-chairman.<sup>22</sup>

The site of operations of the committee was New Court, and the Committee became known colloquially as ‘Rothschild’s Recruiting Office’.<sup>23</sup> The honorary secretary was Samuel Stephany, a senior clerk at the Bank.<sup>24</sup> Records of the committee survive in the papers held by the Archive, and a minute book, vouchers and receipts record its work.<sup>25</sup> The committee lost no time in beginning its task, meeting on 15 December 1915 at the Bryanston Square home of Edmund Sebag-Montefiore, where Lionel explained ‘the disabilities under which Jewish Recruiting was suffered’. The committee met regularly, initially every three or four days, and later monthly. Early actions of the committee were to meet with the editors of Jewish papers to discuss the placing of recruiting advertisements, writing to synagogue leaders and persons of influence and organising the display of recruitment posters and literature in metropolitan areas. The committee issued its own recruiting circular, signed by Leopold in January 1916. By February 1916, the chairman reported that ‘authorities at the War Office were very pleased with the committee’s work’.



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.<sup>26</sup> 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).<sup>27</sup> 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.'<sup>28</sup> No doubt many of these men had been recruited at New Court.

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 £435, 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*.<sup>29</sup>

Working documents from the Jewish War Services Committee, formed in 1915. Above, agenda for a meeting held at New Court, 18 April 1917 and far left, a recruitment circular, signed by Leopold de Rothschild, January 1916. View of the second New Court building (1860–1962). It was from here that Lionel co-ordinated his war work. RAL 000/207

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.<sup>30</sup> 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]r. I attacked with the Regiment in column of

*Opposite*  
Anthony de Rothschild  
and Evelyn Achille de  
Rothschild (centre) in  
uniform.

RAL 000/360/108

Letter from Downing  
Street to Lionel de  
Rothschild notifying  
him of the award of  
an OBE, 1917.  
RAL 000/928



squadrons, and Evelyn was with the 2nd Squadron and was to take command of the two leading 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 charging at the head of his men of Bucks'. Tragically, Neil Primrose, the son of Hannah Rothschild (1851–1890) who had married the Earl of Rosebery, and cousin of Lionel and his brothers was also killed in Palestine within days.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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'.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> Lionel was awarded an OBE in the Military Division in 1917.<sup>36</sup> In 1919, he inherited his Uncle Alfred's Buckinghamshire estate, Halton, and began to develop his estate at Exbury, Hampshire.<sup>37</sup> On 5 December 1920, 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 1931, Anthony named his new son Evelyn, in memory of his fallen brother.<sup>38</sup> 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, intercontinental 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 1942 until shortly before his death in 1961.

*Justin Cavernelis-Frost is Archivist at The Rothschild Archive. He is a member of the Board of Trustees, the Archives and Records Association UK and Ireland.*

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This article concerns activities of the English family. See the article by Natalie Broad on p.45 for details of the family in the rest of Europe.
- <sup>2</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War*, (London: Hutchinson, 1998), p.8.
- <sup>3</sup> The War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914–1920*, (London: 1922).
- <sup>4</sup> Although a resurgence of imperialism was an underlying cause, the immediate trigger for 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*.

- 5 Over 54 million copies of 200 different posters were distributed by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee over the course of the war. The psychological element of the early poster campaign was much criticised.
- 6 Leopold de Rothschild (1845–1917). Educated at Cambridge, Leopold served at New Court, and was popular in horse-racing circles. He married Marie Perugia in 1881, and supported many Jewish charities.
- 7 Anthony Gustav de Rothschild (1887–1961) joined the family firm in 1913, after earning a double first at Cambridge. He married Yvonne Cahen d’Anvers (1899–1977) in 1926. Anthony was Senior Partner from 1942 until 1961. Evelyn Achille de Rothschild (1886–1917) attended Cambridge and entered the business at New Court in 1907, visiting Brazil and Chile in 1913.
- 8 For information about these interests, see Martin Harper, *Mr Lionel: an Edwardian episode* (London: Cassell, 1970) and The Rothschild Archive, *The Colours of Another Age: the Rothschild autochromes, 1908–1912*, (London: 2007).
- 9 Lionel was promoted Captain in 1910, Major in 1914, and retired from the regiment in 1921. Kelly’s Directories Ltd, *Kelly’s Handbook to the titled, landed & official classes*, (London: 1925), p.386.
- 10 For a history of the Royal Buckinghamshire Yeomanry see Brigadier E.A. James, *British Regiments 1914–18*, (London: Samson Books Limited, 1978).
- 11 In August 1914, the Chancellor, Lloyd George, invited Natty to the Treasury to discuss what measures should be adopted to keep the currency steady. Despite previous rivalry between the two, Natty was clear that the Rothschild business would play its part in the dealing with coming crisis. See Niall Ferguson, *The World’s Banker*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson: 1998), p.965.
- 12 Nathaniel Mayer, 1st Lord Rothschild (1840–1915). The elder statesman of the City and the first Jewish peer, Natty took over the senior partnership in 1879. Alfred de Rothschild (1842–1918) was the first Jew to be elected a director of the Bank of England in 1868, and he arranged numerous meetings to promote Anglo-German relations.
- 13 Leopold had moved in royal circles as a young man, mixing with the Prince of Wales’ set whilst at Cambridge in the 1860s, and the Prince had famously attended Leo’s wedding to Marie Perugia in 1881.
- 14 Edmund de Rothschild (1916–2009) In the World War II, he served with distinction with the Royal Bucks Yeomanry. A partner in the business from 1947, he became senior partner in 1960 and chairman of the bank in 1970, stepping down in 1975, to

- spend time at his beloved estate at Exbury. *A Gilt-edged Life*, (London, 1998), p.102.
- 15 The Jewish newspapers noted specifically the difficulties that Jews had in joining London regiments, but the same was true of other units. *Jewish World*, 14 October 1914, pp.7–8.
- 16 Many Jews attested as Christians when enlisting, resulting in various figures being reported for Jewish recruitment. *British Jewry Book of Honour*, (London, 1922).
- 17 Leopold had got to know Sir Douglas Haig when the two men were taking a cure at spa on the continent, and it is said that Haig first learned the news of his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in France in 1915 from Leopold. Edmund de Rothschild, *A Gilt-edged Life*, (London, 1998), p.16.
- 18 The Central Committee for National Patriotic Organisations was established in November 1914 with the objective of keeping British public opinion informed and to lay before neutral countries a clear statement of the British case.
- 19 The Central Committee for National Patriotic Organisations, *Jews and the War*, (London, 1915).
- 20 *Jewish World*, 4 August 1915, p.11.
- 21 *Circular 20/GEN. no./4133 (A.G. 2B/R.)* issued by the War Office on 18 December 1915, on the command of The Army Council. The circular informed Recruiting Officers that a man born in the UK was a British subject, even if of alien parentage, and was thus eligible for enlistment in the Army. It also explained the circumstances in which British-born Jews could be accepted for service.
- 22 Edmund Sebag–Montefiore (1868–1929). Member of the Montefiore family of diplomats and bankers. Sir Moses Montefiore (1784–1885) was a business partner of Nathan Mayer Rothschild (1777–1836), and Moses’ brother Abraham (1788–1824) married Nathan’s sister Henriette (1791–1866).
- 23 Anne Patricia Lloyd, (2009), *Jews under fire: the Jewish Community and Military Service in World War I Britain*, University of Southampton, Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Science, PhD Thesis, p.84.
- 24 Samuel Stephany was a loyal and trusted member of the New Court senior staff, spending his entire career with the firm.
- 25 Records of The Jewish War Services Committee, 1915–1919, RAL 000/358. Regretfully, correspondence and other papers of the committee do not survive in the Bank’s records.
- 26 The Rothschild family had been associated with The United Synagogue since 1835. Leopold held the Presidency of the United Synagogue between 1915 and

- 1917 and Lionel from 1917 until 1942.
- 27 Reverend Michael Adler (1869–1944) was the Minister for the Central Synagogue in London. He held a commission as Territorial Chaplain from August 1914 until January 1915. In France, he was known as the ‘wandering Jew’, since he ministered to Jews in scattered units. He was awarded the DSO for his war work.
- 28 *Papers of Revd Michael Adler, 1915–1918, MS 125*, Hartley Library, University of Southampton.
- 29 This pamphlet was later published as *‘Experiences of a Jewish Chaplain on the Western Front (1915–1918)*, British Jewry Book of Honour (London, 1922).
- 30 Evelyn was buried in the Holy Land at Rishon-le-Zion, with General Allenby accompanying the cortège.
- 31 Neil James Archibald Primrose (1882–1917). British Liberal politician and soldier. The second son of former Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, he served as MP for Wisbech, 1910 to 1917 and served as Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1915 and joint-Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury from 1916 to 1917.
- 32 *Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914–1919 (CD Rom)*, (Naval and Military Press, 1998).
- 33 *The Jewish Memorial Council: A history 1919–1999*, Alexander Rosenzweig (The Jewish Memorial Council, London: 1998), 1.
- 34 Letter from Robert Waley Cohen to Lionel de Rothschild dated 5 May 1919 discussing proposals to erect a war memorial and create a fund to support the traditions of Judaism and British citizenship, RAL 000/1994/5. Lionel served as President of the Jewish War Memorial Council from 1919 until 1942.
- 35 Robert Waley Cohen (1877–1952) was a British industrialist and prominent leader of Anglo-Jewry, and a descendant of Levi Barent Cohen, whose daughter Hannah married Nathan Mayer Rothschild in 1806.
- 36 Letter from Lloyd George to Lionel de Rothschild informing him of the honour. RAL 000/928.
- 37 The estate at Halton played its own part in the conflict. See Andrew Adam, *Beechwoods and Bayonets: The Book of Halton*, (Baron Birch, 1992). Lionel sold the estate to the Ministry of Defence in 1919.
- 38 Sir Evelyn Robert Adrian de Rothschild, Chairman of N M Rothschild & Sons Limited, 1976–2003.

# Time is on our side: the Rothschild family in World War I<sup>1</sup>

Natalie Broad highlights the role played by members of the Rothschild family in Europe during the conflict that divided the continent.

Letter from Edouard de Rothschild to his English uncle Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild entrusting his wife and children to Natty’s care, 1 August 1914.  
RAL 000/1323/33

In his article about the Jewish War Services Committee earlier in this *Review*, Justin Cavernelis-Frost outlined the role that various members of the Rothschild family in Britain played during World War I. It can easily be imagined that the outbreak and effects of the war were devastating for the family. The Europe which they had helped to build in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars a century before was irrevocably changed. Most of the older generation did not live to see the conclusion of the conflict, but feared its immediate and long-term impacts, both for their extended family and for the next generation who were to lead the business into the new world of the twentieth century.

The sense of dread and fear that must have pressed down on everyone in Europe is palpable in a letter sent from Edouard de Rothschild (1868–1949) in Paris to his uncle, Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild (1840–1915). The letter, written two days before the declaration of war between Germany and France, serves as a stark reminder of the short passage of time between the Franco-Prussian war and August 1914.<sup>2</sup> The Rothschilds on the continent were preparing to live in occupied lands again.

