Anthony Gustav de Rothschild (1840–1915) joined the firm in 1900, after a distinguished career in the British Army. He served with distinction during World War II, rising to the rank of Brigadier. His eldest son, Sir Evelyn de Rothschild, married Yvonne Cahen d’Anvers (1921–2003), the first Jew to be elected a director of the London Stock Exchange. 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 1917 from Leopold. Edmund de Rothschild, a nephew of Anthony, was Senior Partner from 1899 to 1915 and Lionel from 1917 until 1941. The sale of the family’s collection of Jewish art in 1975, to raise money for the Balfour Fund, was a highly controversial event. Sir Evelyn de Rothschild (1921–2003) became a director of the London Stock Exchange in 1976 and was President from 1980 to 1994. In his article about the Jewish Wars Committee, Stather notes 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 European 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 (1808–1949) in Paris to his uncle, Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild (1812–1901). 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. The Rothschilds on the continent were preparing to live in occupied lands again.

Time is on our side: the Rothschild family in World War I

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

In the autumn of 1914, the Jewish Wars Committee was formed under the chairmanship of Sir Evelyn de Rothschild. The committee was established with the aim of raising funds to aid Jewish soldiers. It was composed of members of the Rothschild family and other prominent Jewish figures. The committee was able to raise significant funds, which were used to support Jewish soldiers and their families. The Rothschild family played an important role in the committee, with Sir Evelyn de Rothschild serving as its chairman. The committee’s efforts were instrumental in providing assistance to Jewish soldiers during the war.

The Rothschild family had a long history of involvement in Jewish affairs, and the family’s involvement in the Jewish Wars Committee was a natural extension of this tradition. The family’s wealth and influence allowed them to make a significant contribution to the committee’s work. The Rothschild family also played an important role in other Jewish affairs, including the establishment of the British Jewish War Memorial Council, which was established in 1919 to commemorate the Jewish soldiers who died in the war. The Rothschild family played a key role in the establishment of the council, and Sir Evelyn de Rothschild served as its president.

In conclusion, the Rothschild family played an important role in Jewish affairs during World War I. The family’s involvement in the Jewish Wars Committee and other Jewish affairs demonstrates the family’s commitment to supporting Jewish soldiers and their families during the war. The family’s efforts were instrumental in providing assistance to Jewish soldiers and in the establishment of the British Jewish War Memorial Council.

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Edouard’s cousin, Robert (1880–1946) served as an interpreter. He was twice awarded the Croix de Guerre and was mentioned in Despatches. Together with other French officers he attended the 1914 Christmas dinner of the 8th Division, British Expeditionary Forces, to which he was seconded. Whilst Robert was dispatched on classified missions his wife, Nelly, (1886–1945) nursed at their property at Laversine, which had been converted into a hospital. James (1878–1957) and his brother Maurice (1881–1957) were both attached to the British Army as liaison officers. Henri (1872–1947) turned over his car factory to the production of ambulances. Having witnessed some of the horrors of the injuries suffered by servicemen in the trenches he developed a burns unit which could travel by ambulance right to the battle zone front. He also worked on devising airtight containers for the men’s rations to prevent contamination. James’ son, James (1896–1984) served in the French air force as a combat pilot and both his wife Mathilde (1874–1926) and his mother, the Frankfurt born Laura-Thérèse (1847–1931), nursed during the conflict.

The Austrian cousins who were eligible also signed up at the outbreak of war. Three brothers, Alphonse (1878–1942), Louis (1882–1955) and Eugène (1884–1976) fought for their country in several capacities. Louis was left in charge of the business built by Salomon von Rothschild (1774–1855) in Vienna, whilst Alphonse was sent as an Oberstleutnant to the Italian front, where his brother Eugène was also serving. Eugène found time to keep his family informed of his activities. On 18 May 1915 he sent a picture postcard of himself standing in a trench [see below] to his sister Valentine (1886–1969), writing:

I wish you all the best on your birthday and hope that you receive this one card in your 29th year! Things are going well for me, as you can see, and I have a lot of things to do. Eugène’s levity in his notes to his sister disguises the tensions of the stalemate at the Italian front for most of the war where there were heavy casualties at every attack. Though Austria shared in the humiliation of defeat in 1918, the three brothers were no doubt thankful to return to their families, their business and to their European cousins.

Left
Eugène von Rothschild on active service on the Italian Front.
BLC 002/156/32

Opposite
Robert de Rothschild in uniform, August 1914. Robert served as a French-English interpreter during the War.
BLC 002/321 (18-9425)

Menu for Christmas dinner 1914 which Robert and other French officers attended with the British Expeditionary Forces.
BLC 002/0312
Scenes from the Western Front from a file associated with Robert de Rothschild which includes private documents, such as travel passes, allowing access within the British Army occupied areas, 1914. RSL 000/796.
Research into the experiences of so many members of the Rothschild family during World War I has allowed us to re-examine many of the collections at the Archive and to link together material which reached us from diverse sources. A comprehensive account of the family’s lives and description of the sources is available on the Archive’s website.¹

Natalie Broad joined the staff at The Rothschild Archive in 2009 as Archive Assistant. She assumed the role of Assistant Archivist in May 2011 after completing her Postgraduate Diploma in Archives and Records Management at University College London. She gained her Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Religious Studies from the University of Winchester and has a continuing interest in this area.

NOTES

¹ The title of this article is taken from a letter written by Winston Churchill to Nathaniel, 1st Lord Rothschild in January 1915, RSL/1927/248/57. The text is based on a longer piece in the Rothschild Pensioners’ Newsletter published in London.

² Paris, 1st Aug 1914. My dear Uncle, Forty four years ago! my poor dear mother embarked with us children in times just as tragic as these we are experiencing and which now necessitate the departure of my dear wife and my dear children. I entrust them to you, and may God protect them. Believe me, my dear Uncle, your very affectionate, Edward.² RSL/1915/122/32.

³ Thanks to Caroline Poulain, curator at the Municipal Library of Dijon for information on menus from World War I and to Gisèle Kaiser for assistance with the interpretation. Further examples of menus can be found on the websites www.patrimoine.bm-dijon.fr/pleades/ and www.sciences-et-bibliotheques/fonds-publiques/bibliotheques/archives/cuisine-de-guerre-menus-de-la-bibliotheque

⁴ Baronne James de Rothschild, Souvenirs de la Grande Guerre (1914–1918) (Macon: Protat Frères, 1927)

⁵ www.rothschildarchive.org/exhibitions/rothschilds_and_the_first_world_war/