

# From Frankfurt to Europe

An Exhibition documenting the rise of the House of Rothschild

rise of the family and the many facets of the Rothschild legend. Many exhibits are the family's own and are on view to the public for the first time here. The Frankfurt Jewish Museum organized the exhibition on the occasion of Meyer Amschel Rothschild's 250th anniversary as founder of the dynasty. The exhibition also represents a highlight in Frankfurt's 1200th year celebrations. Since there is a large international interest, texts accompanying the exhibits are both in German and in English.

## Modest beginnings

It was here, in the cramped conditions of the Judengasse, that rapid and giddy rise of the Rothschilds began. Still dazzled by the sumptuousness of the first rooms, the visitor is introduced to their modest beginnings. The office, occupying only a few square metres, with its writing desk, stool and bookcase, is sparsely furnished and has been restructured according to contemporary plans. It was here in this office, typical of an 18th-century firm, that Meyer Amschel Rothschild and his five sons began an unprecedented career. By dealing in antique coins, he became court factor to the Landgrave Wilhelm von Hanau, who later became Prince Elector von Hessen-Kassel. By 1800, he was sufficiently prosperous to become

"A View from the Royal Exchange" (Nothman Rothschild), Drawing by Richard Dighton, 1918.



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Barbara Wolbring

The visitor enters the Rothschild world through a blue curtain to experience a touch of the "goût Rothschild" in the lavishly furnished salon which awaits him. The rooms, together with the pieces from the Rothschild art collections in the display cases, testify to the strength of the claims of the most famous 19th-century banking family to be the equal of Europe's higher nobility, as do pieces from the Rothschild art collection in their display cases. Magnificent drinking vessels, golden

snuff-boxes set with diamonds, enamel work and porcelain vases show that the Rothschild collection was built-up in accordance with the ideals of Renaissance princes. In addition to this, clocks and astronomical measuring instruments bear witness to the family's penchant for exactness and precision. Both rooms in the Rothschild city palace on Frankfurt's Untermainkai are faithfully reconstructed according to the originals and in the style of the previous occupants. These rooms sound a fanfare at the beginning of this first exhibition, which documents in full the



involved in the lucrative business of Government loans. The House of Rothschild had one advantage over its competitors — its European dimension, a decisive characteristic of the family business in its prime. Meyer Amschel's third son, Nathan, had already been in England since 1798.

At first he settled in Manchester, centre of the English textile industry, where he could hope to make it easier for his father to import cloth from England. Nathan's pattern book, kept in the London Rothschild Archive, shows clearly the young salesman's conscientiousness. In this book he not only noted his customers' orders, but also attached a sample of the cloth in question showing its quality and pattern. As a result of Nathan's work, the family career progressed by leaps and bounds. The cloth trade was lucrative, especially during the Continental System since few wares found their way across the Channel. As a result of his marriage to Hannah Cohen, Nathan managed to rise among the Jewish financial élite in London. He moved to London and opened his own bank, the N.M. Rothschild & Sons of today.

### A European family business

The London office, like its Frankfurt parent, gradually evolved from a trading house to a bank. In 1810, Meyer

Amschel Rothschild introduced his sons into the business as partners. In this way, he avoided the business being split up between his sons and, more significantly, through the Partnership Agreement, eventually created the basis for future successes. The company's founder made all his sons partners, who were to make all important business decisions together and were to be equal owners of the company's capital. Daughters and sons-in-law were precluded from entering the business or receiving fees from the company's capital.

The high-standing position that Meyer Amschel Rothschild had reached when he died in 1812 is reflected clearly in his gravestone, still visible today in the Jewish graveyard in Frankfurt. It can also be clearly seen from the entry for him in the Memorbuch (Jewish community prayer book); it is the longest in the whole book. Rothschild is particularly remembered for using his wealth and connections to make a substantial contribution to the achievement of Jewish civil rights in Frankfurt in 1811.

### More than just a bank

The visitor's understanding of the rise of the Rothschilds deepens, as he climbs the historic marble staircase to the next floor. On display here are the activities of the Rothschild brothers in those European metropolises where branches of the bank were set up: Nathan Meyer had already settled in London, Salomon Meyer went to Vienna, Callmann to Naples and Jakob Meyer to Paris, where he exchanged his German Christian name for James. The eldest son, Amschel Meyer, remained at the parent branch in Frankfurt. The oil portraits, attributed to Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, portray the brothers in the style of the European nobility, to which they later belonged. Social success followed economic success.

The exhibition follows the family's progress in more than just an economic sense. The Rothschild legend is portrayed



in caricature and in the anti-semitic propaganda of the National Socialists. The family used its wealth and connections to save co-religionists. Edmond de Rothschild became involved in building up Jewish colonies in Palestine, and used a large part of his assets to this end. Other members of the family became involved in science, art and culture, or in wine growing, in which the name Rothschild became a synonym for a refined lifestyle. The Bordeaux wines from Château Mouton and Château Lafite have been amongst the finest in the world for more than 100 years. Alongside cultural involvement, patronage of the arts is also part of the family tradition. In Frankfurt, several foundations, the Rothschild Park and the Rothschild Library, were reminders of the family even after the Bank had gone from the City. In 1901 it was closed as there were no male heirs. It was only a few years ago that the bank once again sought connections with the city of its origin and opened a branch. ■

*Historical room in the style of Louis XIV with a bay ceiling in the Rothschildpalais on the Untermainkai in Frankfurt.*

[photos: catalogue]

*Silk cloth, printed 1836, in memory of Nathan Moyer, following his sudden death. It shows the famous silhouette of the pillar in the Royal Exchange.*

