

**Rabbi Walter Rothschild  
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# »Sans Papiers«

**A Biography of Landgerichtsrat  
Walter Fritz Rothschild  
(1890–1950)  
and his Family**

HENTRICH  
& HENTRICH

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# Preface

On the morning of 6th February 1950<sup>1</sup> a man died in Switzerland, a broken man, at the age of 60. He was buried in plot 745 of the Jewish cemetery at Prilly, Lausanne.<sup>2</sup> The death certificate, in French, describes him simply as “Sans Papiers” – “Without Papers”. Stateless. This means someone whom no State wished to accept as a citizen or even really as a resident or as a refugee. Switzerland had accepted him, grudgingly, as one of very few German Jews to be allowed the privilege of breathing the Swiss air so long as they kept away from any occupation or political activity – but only a few days before his death the authorities of the Canton Genève had rejected his request for longer-term asylum status.

This man, a cultured, educated man with a strong sense of social justice, a former Judge in fact – was our Grandfather: Walter Fritz Rothschild. (In his Army Paybook and Wedding Certificate: Walter Louis Fritz Rothschild.) And we actually have *many* papers for him. He was, indeed, a man who cared very much for papers and documents and retained many – and his wife Charlotte (“Lotte”) and his son Edgar retained even more. Though it has taken a long while for many of these papers to re-emerge from storage, both in Switzerland and England, they are worth transcribing, translating and presenting here. Indeed it feels as though they were retained for this very purpose and one sometimes wonders what those who wrote a letter decades ago, perhaps even a century or more ago would feel were they to know that others would read and translate and publish them now.

Born some four years after his death, I never knew him personally, but I bear his name. His life and his fate had a major if indirect impact on my own life and the choices I made in that life: To close a circle, to return to work – as a Walter Rothschild – in Germany. With the help of my sisters Joyce and Sylvia we are piecing together as full a picture of his life as we can.<sup>3</sup>

We are fortunate to have quite a few original documents – primary sources – for his life and work. Secondary sources of direct relevance are few; Apart from published local and regional histories of the known events such as the war or the “Reichspogromnacht”, which have been gratefully used, cited and referenced, especially for the earlier history, these are effectively confined to verbal family memories. There is no Index nor full Bibliography. This is not an academic work; It is a picture of a family trying to cope and stand together and support each other in difficult times. “No man is an island”,<sup>4</sup> and we have deliberately added much extraneous information about those who lived before him, those who – including his widow and son – lived on after him, and material on the political and military context of the times. The situation in Dachau, that of Jews in Baden from 1933, the problems facing Jewish refugees

in Switzerland, the behaviour of the churches ... The assumption is that this will be new and informative for most readers, especially those who read in English. However it would appear from recent surveys that many Germans are also unaware of the details or the extent of the persecutions of the Nazi period, so it feels relevant to include many such documents or references. For the same reason we have given where appropriate or available both an original German text and then a translation for those who require it.<sup>5</sup> The book is thereby made much longer, but at the same time more “complete”.

One important question that would arise in any academic work or any work passed through the hands of a professional historian or editor would be: “What should be kept in and what should be left out? Not all the documents are of equal significance and especially in a period where so many documents can be found and called up online, is it necessary to transcribe and re-publish them?” In addition, there are matters of personal privacy, for family documents of necessity describe difficult relationships, divorces, disappointments in love and career and more – these are human touches but, being human, could be capable of causing personal embarrassment.

To this my own personal response is twofold: Firstly, almost all those referred to are now long-dead and beyond any further embarrassment or distress; and secondly, for some reason Charlotte and then Edgar retained all these documents and considered it important to do so; The implication is that they wanted – somehow – that these documents should be preserved and made available to whomever might be interested, whether just the close family and descendants, or a wider public. None of the people described here lived simple lives, they had their human weaknesses and failings and often made decisions under stress. But nevertheless – from my own very personal viewpoint – they are “Family”. My family, my ancestors. This is why I have included so much “*in extenso*” and even translated where necessary so that they are available to non-German speakers.

Walter’s only son, Edgar Hermann Julius Rothschild, born at the family home in Eichendorffstrasse 5 in Hannover on 11th August 1924, was only nine years old when the events of the National Socialists’ rise to power led to such a drastic and early end to his father’s legal career, so his own memories were vague. The family then moved from Hannover to Baden-Baden, where Charlotte’s parents Hermann and Margarete Fiedler owned a house – in fact this was the house where Walter and Charlotte had first met and fallen in love. Edgar was only 14 when he had to be sent instead to a Boarding School in St. Gallen in German-speaking Switzerland owing to the increasing antisemitism in Germany and 15 when he was sent from there in August 1939 to England to learn a new language and start a new life, first at a boarding school in Seaford, then in London, later moving to Bradford due to the presence there of a former teacher from his school in Baden-Baden. Following training in workshop skills he took a job in an engineering factory at Keighley and then joined the Royal Air Force, where he trained at RAF Jurby on the Isle of Man to become a Meteorol-

ogist, later serving in India, Vienna and Udine. He was only able rarely and briefly to see his father again, being in any case wholly cut off by the war until 1945.

My sister Sylvia, the youngest grandchild, stayed with Charlotte for a year in Lugano as a young girl and built up a very close personal relationship with her grandmother, hearing over several visits many anecdotes which are often hard to place wholly correctly chronologically but which represent what Charlotte recalled decades later of her husband and their life together. She is also an excellent Internet detective and has found numerous references. Of course, the desire to ask questions and the ability to ask the correct questions comes usually too late – as in this case, too. The persons are no longer there to be asked ... For example, Helga Stödter of Hamburg<sup>6</sup> knew the Fiedler family when she was a young girl, but not Walter.

The “official” family papers we have tend to be bound up either with happy times – weddings and other celebrations – or sad times – deaths and the financial and testamentary arrangements that needed to be made. Some concern arrangements to be made for Edgar. Even the few official papers we have in Walter’s own hand – a brief “*Curriculum Vitae*” (“*Lebenslauf*”) and a brief note about the financial status of the house in Hannover – appear to have been prepared only as appendices to documents concerned with the forced emigration or inheritance. We also have however many letters he wrote from Switzerland to his young and then growing son in England. By this time however he found writing difficult and usually had to dictate his words to Lotte or others. Other letters by his wife, his mother-in-law Grete Fiedler in Lugano and his sister Trude Brühl in New York provide reference to and context for his personal and health situation, often describing the same events from their different perspectives – and although we do not have any letters from Edgar we have access to his diaries for the period, thus adding his own perspective. In the circumstances we cite these *in extenso* because even the forms of greetings at beginning and end are indicative of the attempts to maintain family links through correspondence despite the distances and difficulties created also by the war and the post-war complications.

Walter had two older sisters, one of whom, Elizabeth (“Lilli”) remained unmarried and moved from her home in Hannover to her sister in Breslau when Walter moved to Baden-Baden;<sup>7</sup> she was sickly throughout her life and died in the Jewish Hospital at Breslau of stomach cancer in 1940; The second, Gertrude (known as “Trude”, first married to Emil Pollack, divorced in 1922, then in 1929 remarried to Julius Brühl – then aged ca. 54) moved in 1939 from Breslau to America, where she died childless<sup>8</sup> – so there are no other witnesses or sources from this side. We have no diaries or reports from other friends or colleagues. Of necessity, this biographical account is a little unbalanced, yet nevertheless it provides a picture of a man of education and culture and tolerance, whose life and career were ruined by the events of the times in which he lived and also their physical impact on his health.

What follows is an attempt to put the known facts into sequence (though we need to jump forward now and again) and to fill in the gaps with anecdotes and then to place the whole in an historical context from secondary sources. Whilst it is neither necessary nor possible to incorporate an entire family history here, it is still important to provide this context, both historical and family. Apart from the direct correspondence we add in Appendices correspondence which comes from “another perspective” and sometimes provides the background of which Walter and Charlotte were themselves unaware at the time.

Although it is uncommon to put a “Conclusion” at the beginning of a book ... What is here presented is the story of several generations of a settled, stable German family, placed in their historical context and with grounds for optimism, with in addition some further contextual coverage of where and how their descendants lived. This family’s existence was affected by the First World War in which Walter served as a soldier, his brother-in-law Emil Pollack was taken prisoner and the husband of the woman he did not yet knew was severely injured (albeit we know nothing of where Bergfeld served or the nature of the injuries.) It was then threatened and then partially destroyed by the political events of the 1930’s and 1940’s.

All things are relative and there are many horrific accounts from the Twentieth Century, not just regarding Germany, not just regarding Jews, of entire families being wiped out, deported to mass shootings or extermination camps “in the East” or massacred in their home towns and villages, of mass famines, of the torture of anyone who resisted and was betrayed and caught, of entire cities bombed and burned ... It is not the intention in this book to show the family of Walter Rothschild as especial victims but, sadly, more as relatively normal ones, in some respects even fortunate ones inasmuch as many survived, together with properties and documentation They were people who did their best to adapt and some then to flee after being caught up in the political and ideological changes that were beyond their control. Post-war, the fractures led to complications in restoring the remaining fragments – now split over different continents – to any sense of coherence and this too is recorded as part of the context, the after-effects or shockwaves of the cataclysm.

*Walter Rothschild, Berlin,  
Written from April 2011 to December 2025.*

(With much assistance from Sylvia Rothschild and her internet researches, Marta Mackowiak for research in Wroclaw, Julia Solbach for researches in Baden-Baden, and thanks especially to Rabbi Dr. Ulrike Offenbergl and Julia Prabhu for their aid in transcribing and translating many handwritten letters. Many others helped along the way, and several are mentioned in the relevant footnotes. Joyce Rothschild worked hard to improve the quality of the illustrations.)

# Introduction: Aim and Method

There are those who never had Grandparents, and there are those who once had Grandparents. The first could not ever ask, the second group often neglect to ask. Until it is too late. Then one has only secondary sources, the next generation, a different continent, old documents, faded and blurred photos and many gaps. This is the story behind so many family histories that were begun too late, when the main characters could no longer be asked to share their personal memories.

There is nothing significantly “new” in this book for the professional historian, apart from the primary documents cited; there are no dramatic new discoveries about the internal workings of the Nazi Party or insights into German society. Apart from the documents in the family archive themselves, only secondary sources have been used and cited, the work of other (often local) historians. It reflects merely a Family History or Chronicle – OUR Family History – and the people who lived and loved and worked and travelled and suffered and tried to make the best of things in difficult times, coping before the First World War with the need to integrate and establish themselves, between the Wars with establishing families, and after the Second World War coping with paralysis, poverty and statelessness. We see how they tried to stay together and hold their families together through correspondence even when the mail system was disrupted by war, or when travel was obstructed by a multitude of visa requirements and new borders and Occupation Zones. Much secondary explanatory material is provided – in the text, as footnotes or as Appendices – to provide information for those who can be assumed not to know so much about this period of history.

We do not know how and why Edgar retained so many of these letters, even when travelling or in military service; He never mentioned them and most were found – neatly bundled and filed – only after his passing. Others, together with documents about his time as a schoolboy, were retained in Lugano and “salvaged” when the house there had to be cleared. This is not just a simple biography but one embedded in a family Chronicle. The first section provides family history and context, the second describes what we know of Walter’s life (we know nothing of his childhood, little of his student days or military career); a lengthy section then comprises letters from both parents to their son Edgar; there are documents concerning schools for Edgar and correspondence that continues after Walter’s death in 1950. He was not forgotten. In Chapter XXXI we read that many papers seemed to have been “lost” by German banks and offices or Swiss archives and so the value of what Walter and then Edgar

retained is enhanced. For the officials concerned in the late 1940's it must have been a nightmare to have to deal (or to avoid dealing with) a clear-headed lawyer who had managed to retain letters and receipts from the 1930's and who peppered them with polite and reasonable requests for information and action. Requests they frequently ignored. Clearly nobody in 1938 had ever envisaged this possibility! Despite Walter having, it seems, suffered from a blow to the head while in Dachau which led to subsequent neurological issues, these affected his ability to move but in no way his ability to think.

In several Appendices are incorporated information that provides relevant background context to the period and also letters by Edgar as a schoolboy, unaware of what his parents were going through at the time, as well as excerpts from his diaries as a lonely and mixed-up adolescent schoolboy and youth, his desire to find a firm home to belong to, to be accepted by his comrades, to be loved, his disastrous first marriage and the even worse consequences for his self-respect and which even threatened his next relationship until the divorce was settled. Sometimes Edgar's views as an adolescent or as a young man seeking to build up a life of his own conflicted substantially with what his parents were hoping for him. We can often read two sides of a dialogue and see how misunderstandings arose and in the same way we can read correspondence from an Aid organisation which provides background to what Walter and Charlotte were going through post-war. It is interesting to see the same period from different perspectives and this also illustrates how personal feelings were sometimes hurt by what we can now see to have been misunderstandings or failures in communication.

On reading through the wartime letters, one is sometimes struck by the fact that Walter and Charlotte lived to some extent in a bubble. It was an uncomfortable and insecure bubble, for they were in exile in Switzerland without any fixed status or income, having originally intended to travel on to Cuba; They worried about their declining health, they worried about their very limited financial resources, they worried about their status and they worried very much about their children in England – and yet to a large extent the major events of the War are rarely mentioned and there are but few references to deportations from Western Europe or possibly even worse events in Eastern Europe. Why is this? Presumably post in both directions went through a Censor – this is hinted at several times – and we know the Swiss Police kept them under close observation; Walter's solitary obsession in his loneliness and anguish seems at times to be the lack of frequent letters from England and yet at this time – say, from 1941 to 1944 – it was not so easy simply to post a letter from England to Switzerland.

At the same time Walter and Charlotte seemed to be very well informed as to certain deportations of friends and relatives, learning quite soon of events in Breslau, Ottenstein, Hannover, Baden-Baden etc. This is relevant, since the question of "Who knew What, When and How?" remains a thorny issue even now. After the war was over there remained immense problems with trans-

port, transit and entry Visas which hindered travel and of course the situation in Occupied Germany was also complex. At times they refer to events and of course they corresponded with many other people at the same time and had sources of information that they might simply not have wished to share with their children. Edgar was reading material on the mass murder of Jews already in early 1943, attending Jewish services when he could while in the RAF, and seeking contacts to the local Jewish community in Bradford. Clearly this religious identity was important to him.<sup>9</sup>

This is a composite work. It began as a modest attempt to record family history for family members but grew from there. As well as the primary sources which came to light at various times, secondary sources were encountered in a non-systematic manner, almost random as one came across various books, pamphlets, reports that helped shed light on the circumstances of different times and different destinies. It has been decided to include information on some “dead-ends”, if only to help future researchers and even if it is only indirectly relevant – for example, material on other people in the region with similar names. These are dealt with either in notes within the text, in (often extensive) Footnotes or (mainly) in the several Appendices, as well as information on Jewish life in Seesen, or issues of life under the National Socialists also for “non-Aryan” Christians, and the fates which Walter and Lotte avoided by *not* being sent to Gurs, and so forth. This means there will be occasional overlap and repetition, but the chances are that few people reading this, especially in Britain, will ever have heard of the Gurs concentration camp in France or the Grini one in Norway or are aware what life for Jewish refugees in Switzerland was like at the time – and yet this is all important context in its way. On occasion reference is made in the letters to people and incidents who cannot be traced even with the help of the Internet. But they meant something at the time. Occasionally problems with transcribing letters mean that gaps have had to be left. It is known that several letters were lost in transit. This account is not intended as an academic thesis and anyone seeking original footnotes will need to consult the sources quoted. It is, as much as anything, a “*Memorbuch*”, a memorial to a person and his family and a vanished period and a vanished community – a compilation as comprehensive and extensive as possible, for the simple reason that it is highly unlikely that anyone else will ever wish to seek out this information and so this is the only chance to collate and to present as much information of direct or indirect relevance for future generations to read and learn. Especially for those who read only English. And the archive we have, despite the gaps, is truly a rich one.

Little attempt has been made to coordinate different sources – for example, when Charlotte writes to Edgar about her mother, she does not always know what her mother was thinking at the same time, but which is kept in a separate Appendix of her correspondence of the time, or what her son was thinking which is kept in a series of his Diary entries. Each speaks for themselves and from their own perspective. We have preferred to keep it this way.

Because most of the surviving family members and descendants read English rather than German and many of the letters were written in English, this is essentially a book in English into which original German texts are incorporated where they are appropriate, and then translated. Of course, this adds to the length. Those who read German can, if they wish, compare the originals to the translations.

In view of the fact that family members considered it so important to keep all these materials, we have also considered it important to include them – even those of relatively low historical importance or which might be slightly embarrassing. The temptation to cut and cut again has been resisted. (The tendency to hoard old documents has also been inherited by following generations.)

It is just one story amongst so many, though perhaps better backed with rich documentation than many others. Nevertheless, there will always remain the many gaps and mysteries.

*Rabbi Dr. Walter Rothschild*

# Further Thoughts

For reasons of context this book – despite its title – has to cover the generations before Walter Rothschild was born in 1890 and the generations born after his death in 1950 and so we have included some genealogical researches into the past, as well as parallel experiences of other victims of the events of the 1930's and 1940's, and then also material on his son and his grandchildren. The story of course continues to the present day (and will hopefully continue beyond) with several members of the two next generations already born and growing.

This is in consequence not just a Biography but a Family Chronicle. It is being written now because this is almost the last chance to do so. Walter Rothschild left a widow and a son and a sister in America who was childless. The widow, Charlotte, left two daughters from a former marriage, one married and settled with a family in America, one who remained physically small and after a brief and loveless marriage was also left widowed and childless. The son married and had, in turn, a son and two daughters. We are the ones who are left who can put this story together and we are, ourselves, no longer young (two of us are grandparents!).

As a child one never knows the full story of one's parents and even less of one's grandparents. There may be an occasional anecdote, a comment, "This is where so-and-so used to live" or "This furniture came from such-and-such"; one may see a picture, a photo of individuals or a couple smiling but not know really who they were. One visits an elderly lady for tea, one is introduced to various older people who make polite compliments and then one withdraws as the conversation turns serious and for adults only. I personally grew up always aware of shadows in the background, of having been named after someone who was dead, of being the firstborn and the only male child, of being told I had especial responsibilities, of being the only child in my school or class with the foreign name and foreign background, of being a part of my home town in England and yet at the same time not fully a part of it, for we had family in other countries. This is perhaps more normal now but was unusual then, in the 1950's and early 1960's. On our father's side, there was a rather distant aunt in America whom, I believe, I only ever met twice, and another who lived close by and who bore the name "Flehinger" without our knowing the hows and whys of this surname. We all carried this sense of "family" in us in different ways and we have all retained the family name in different ways. Our father came from "somewhere else" yet he had married our mother who was "from here" and we were here and we had a "home" – a home that remained such, almost taken for granted, even after we left and went into our own lives, until it finally had to be sold and emptied after our mother – by now a matriarch with great-grandchildren – had died. How they had got to that home, what they each separately

and then together had gone through beforehand, how they had struggled to maintain that home, what they had sacrificed to raise us – we never really knew. It was just “Life”.

Now all the persons of that generation have passed on and we can look through old documents, try to match them with personal memories, see what agrees and what jars. We can even confront the inevitable embarrassments which every family has. Much is revealed, much remains unknown. As the main writer I take responsibility for the content but on some issues, we needed a joint decision, because some of the materials are very personal and very tragic, they reveal our father as a lonely and confused adolescent, or as a man who felt suddenly confronted in later life with betrayal from his own mother (and half-sister). There were or had been bitter fights within the family (as in every family) of which we knew little or nothing at the time. I have followed the principle that these papers – letters, wills, certificates and more – were all retained for a purpose and this purpose was to ensure that the information they contained did not get lost for ever. It became therefore my own personal mission to ensure that as much as possible was transcribed, translated as necessary and included, even if it makes the final version rather bulky. I have been working on this text for over fifteen years – our father saw an early version. There have now been over one hundred drafts or iterations as new files were discovered or new external sources illustrated parts of the story from another perspective.

After all these years I find myself loving my parents and grandparents even more than before. Let this be a judgement on the work, and a hope for all others who read it.

*Walter Rothschild, 2025*

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