

The Baron & The Zebras

The Story of Sir Walter Lionel Rothschild

■ Dov Levy

Born into fabulous wealth, he rejected the world of finance to pursue his love of nature. He was generally shy and introverted, yet he was very outspoken when it came to the subjects he was passionate about. In his most publicized feat, he drove a carriage drawn by zebras through the streets of London—and into the courtyard of Buckingham Palace! Read the remarkable story of one of England's most eccentric noblemen, the Jewish baron who inherited the Rothschild fortune... and spent it cultivating the world's largest natural museum.

All traffic on the central boulevards of London ground to a sudden halt. Passersby stopped what they were doing to turn and gawk. Conversations along the streets were replaced by hushed exclamation as everyone looked on, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at the unbelievable sight.

The focal point of everyone's shocked attention was a quiet young man riding in a typical London carriage. There seemed nothing out of the ordinary about him. What arrested everyone's activities were the unusual beasts pulling his carriage. Instead of the expected horses, harnessed to the coach were six zebras.

"Did you see that?! Who would ride in such a trap?" said one bystander.

"What a perfectly horrid sight!" said another in a hushed whisper.

"He rides in a carriage pulled by wild beasts!" exclaimed a third.

It was the scandal of the day in Victorian England and the press would no doubt have a field day with the unusual sight. But if anyone thought they had seen everything, the unassuming young nobleman still had one more shock in store for them.

The bizarre zebra-led carriage pulled up to the gates of Buckingham Palace and was waived right on inside!

Founding of a Dynasty

Lionel Walter Rothschild, the man who created such a spectacle on the streets of London, was a sixth generation descendant of the Rothschild dynasty's patriarch, Mayer Anshel Rothschild (1744-1812) of Frankfurt-am-Main, then part of the Holy Roman Empire.

Mayer Anshel Rothschild was born in the "*Judengasse*," the Jewish ghetto of Frankfurt. He was one of 11 children born to Anshel Rothschild, scion of a family that had lived in Frankfurt since 1530. (It was common among German Jews at that time to take the father's name as a middle name, called a patronymic.) According to legend the family name is taken from the home of a grandfather, Izaak Elchanan Rothschild, who lived in 1577 in a home that sported a red shield hanging outside in front. The family business was inside, and when people asked for directions they were told to look for the "*rote schild*," red shield.

Anshel worked as a goldsmith and a moneychanger. He is said to have invested tremendous effort in his son Mayer, providing him with the best tutors and mentors in his Torah studies. Anshel had high hopes that his son Mayer would one day turn into a renowned rabbi, but he passed away when Mayer was just 14 years old.



Drawing of Mayer Anshel Rothschild.



Baron Walter Rothschild on a carriage pulled by a team of zebras.

After his father's death, the family sent young Mayer Anshel Rothschild to apprentice under Yakov Wolf Oppenheimer at the banking firm of Shimon Wolf Oppenheimer in Hanover. Yakov Wolf Oppenheimer taught him everything he needed to know about doing business abroad and trading in foreign currencies. When he returned home at the age of 19, Mayer Anshel Rothschild entered the business world and within a short time he earned a fortune.

The Rothschild Bank Is Born

Mayer Anshel Rothschild saw immediate success in his business ventures and became the father of a dynasty of bankers and financiers, the wealthiest family in the history of the world. Mayer Anshel himself earned a fortune as the principal banker of the local prince and began issuing his own

international loans. He is considered by many to be the "father of modern finance."

In 1798, Rothschild planted the seeds of his international business by sending his son Nathan Mayer Rothschild to England to oversee his business affairs there. In 1811, Mayer Anshel's son Jacob moved to Paris, France. Later, his son Salomon set up a branch of the family bank in Vienna, Austria, and Calman opened a fifth branch in Naples, Italy. The five worked together, allowing them to secure vast loans for governments and other major ventures.

Modern historians point to several innovations Mayer Anshel Rothschild employed in his banking business that ultimately led to its becoming a world empire. From the beginning, he believed in diversification, investing in whatever sort of business came his way rather than limiting himself to a specific niche. This guaranteed



A Rothschild estate in Buckinghamshire, England.



The original Rothschild residence at 148 Piccadilly.



A Rothschild home in London.



A Rothschild palace in France.