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Baron Edmond de Rothschild & Palestine

Until his death in 1934, Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845-1934) provided support for Jewish colonists, overseeing dozens of new colonies, earning the name 'The Benefactor'.

Edmond de Rothschild (1845-1934) was the youngest son of James and Betty de Rothschild. He bore the Hebrew name Benjamin. He was born in Paris on 19 August 1845. Edmond joined the Paris Banking House in 1868 becoming a director of the Est railway company and other family concerns (making journeys to Bukhara to examine the potential of the oilfields of the area), and devoting himself to art, culture and philanthropic interests. In 1877, he married Adelheid (1853-1935), the daughter of Wilhelm Carl Rothschild (1828-1901).

Edmond's work in Palestine

A strong supporter of Zionism, his most outstanding achievements were involved in responding to the threats facing the Jewish people in Europe in the late 19th century by supporting massive land purchases and underwriting Jewish settlements in Palestine and Israel. Edmond's large donations lent significant support to the movement during its early years, which helped lead to the establishment of the State of Israel. In the 1880s, in his goal for the establishment of a Jewish homeland, Edmond's philanthropy funded Jewish settlements and encouraged the development of agriculture and industry. 'The Benefactor', as he was known provided support for Jewish colonists, overseeing dozens of new colonies. Rishon le Zion (the First in Zion) was followed by others bearing the names of his parents. Edmond stimulated the economic development of the settlements by investing in new crops, such as wine, grapefruit and avocado, and industrial enterprises such as silk production; he played a key role in Israel's wine industry. Under the supervision of his administrators in Ottoman Palestine, farm colonies and vineyards were established, and two major wineries were opened in Rishon le Zion and Zikhron Ya'akov. Edmond paid his first visit to the colonies in 1887, to inspect the progress that had been made in the first five years.

In 1899, responsibility for the Rothschild settlements was transferred to form the Palestine branch of the Jewish Colonisation Association, which had been founded in 1891 by the Bavarian philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch to help Jews from Russia and Romania to settle in Argentina. Baron de Hirsch died in 1896 and thereafter the JCA began to also assist the Jewish settlement in Palestine. At the end of 1899, Edmond transferred title to his colonies in Palestine plus fifteen million francs to the JCA.

In 1924, the JCA branch dealing with colonies in Palestine was reorganised by Baron Edmond as the Palestine Jewish Colonisation Association (PICA), under the direction of his son, James de Rothschild (1878-1957). PICA acquired more than 125,000 acres (50,586 ha) of land and established a range of business ventures. As well as offices in Palestine, PICA had offices in Paris. After the 1929 Palestine riots PICA helped to rehabilitate agricultural colonies that had been damaged.

When Edmond died in Paris in 1934, he left a legacy which included the reclamation of nearly 500,000 dunams of land and almost 30 settlements. In 1954, his remains and those of his wife Adelheid were brought to rest at Ramat Hanadiv in Zikhron Ya'akov. After Edmond's death, his son James de Rothschild (1878-1957) presided over the affairs of PICA. In his will of 1957, James instructed that PICA should transfer most of its land in Israel to the Jewish National Fund. On December 31, 1958 PICA agreed to vest its right to land holdings in Syria and Lebanon in the State of Israel. Edmond and James' determination to continue to support Israeli institutions was carried out after their deaths by James' widow, Dorothy (1895-1988), who founded Yad Hanadiv. Jacob, 4th Lord Rothschild has followed the family's charitable interests in Israel and is the chairman of Yad Hanadiv, the family foundation which gave the Knesset and the Supreme Court buildings to Israel.



*Edmond de Rothschild with settlers in Palestine
c.1930*

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