



the BARONESS

THE SEARCH FOR NICA,
THE REBELLIOUS ROTHSCHILD
HANNAH ROTHSCHILD

The Baroness




Nica, photographed in Mexico, 1947, age thirty-four ([Photographic Credit coll.1](#))

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*The Search for Nica,
the Rebellious Rothschild*

HANNAH ROTHSCHILD

 Alfred A. Knopf New York 2013

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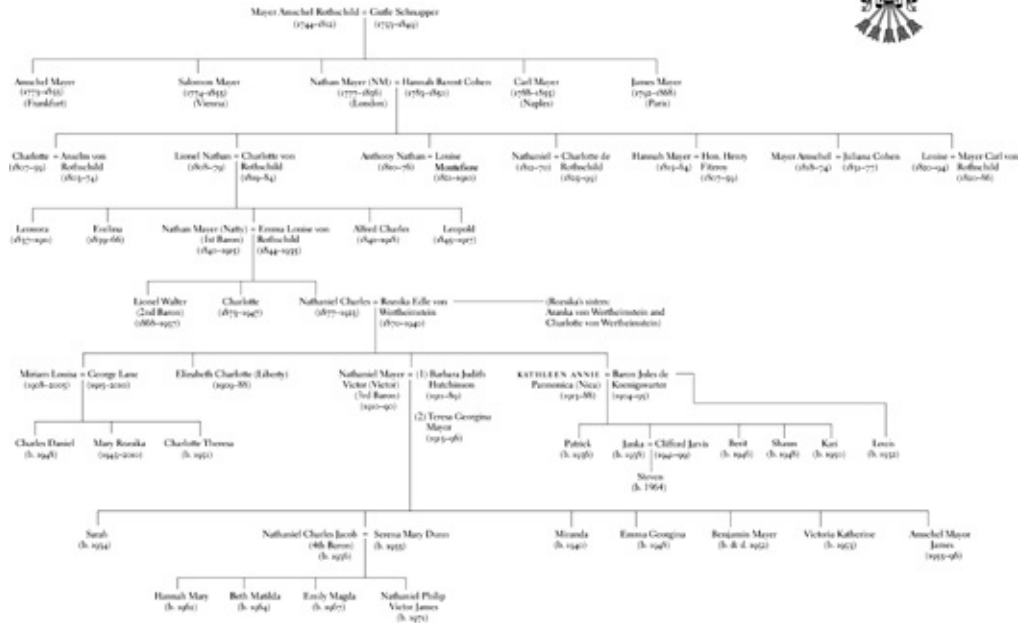
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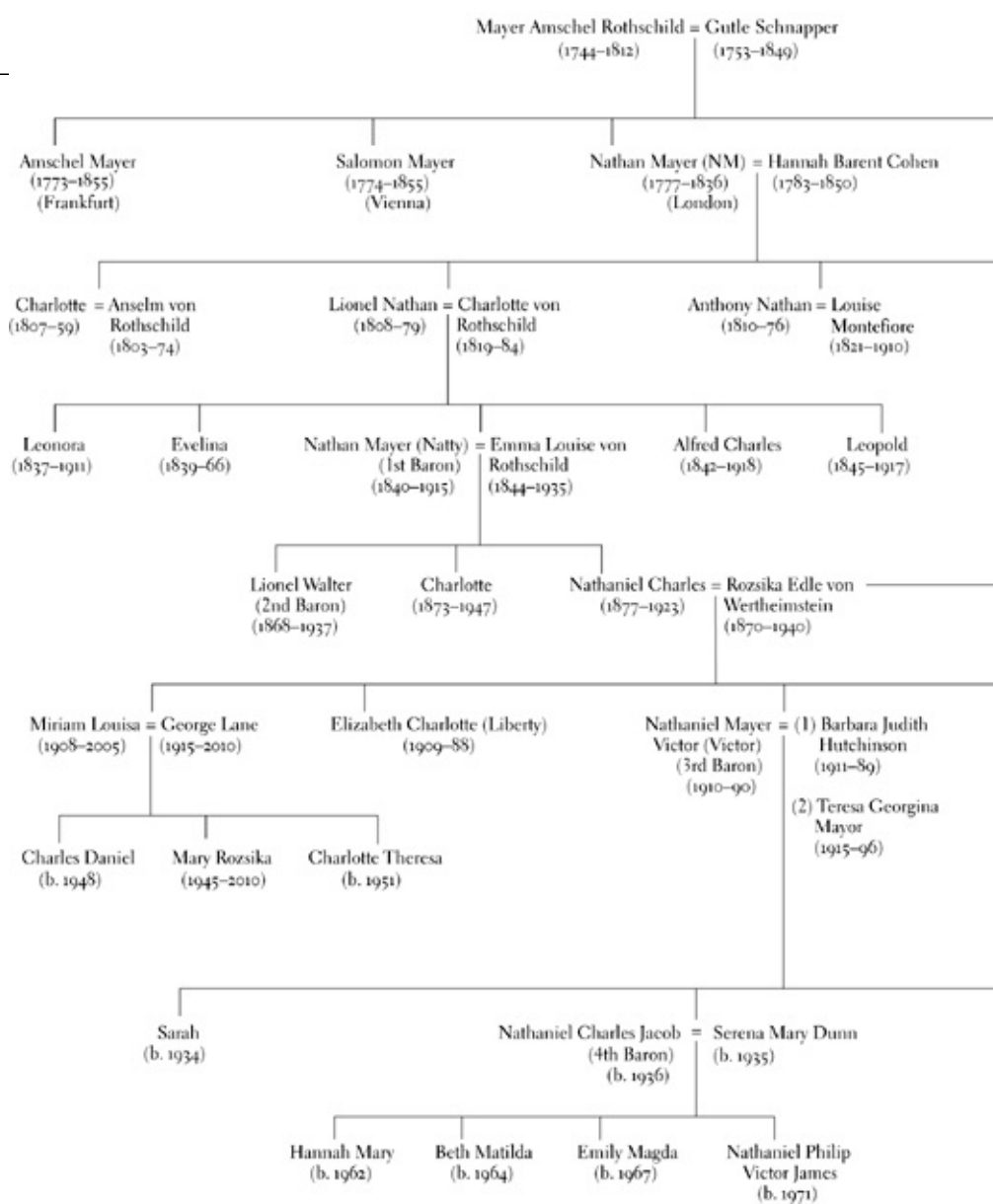
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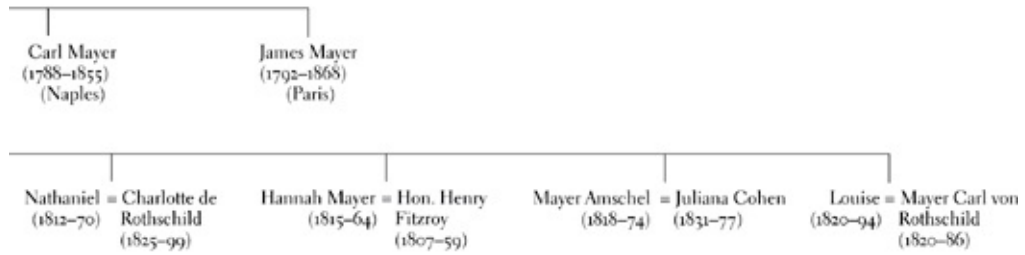
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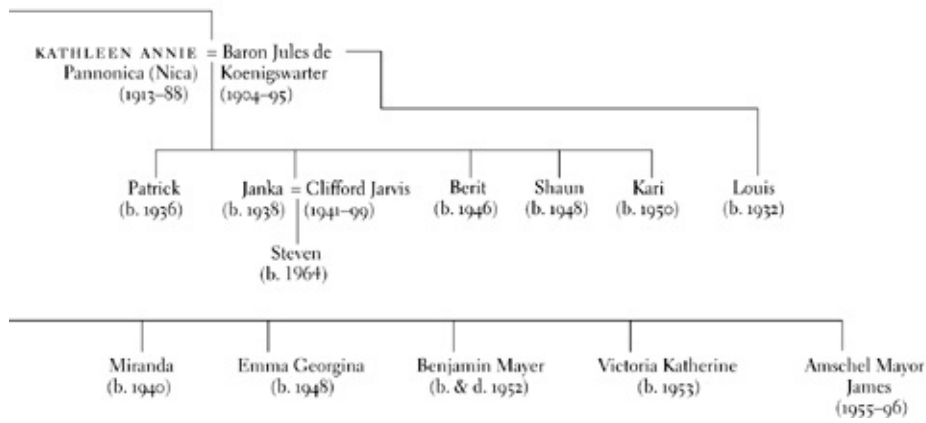
SELECTIVE FAMILY TREE







— (Rozsika's sisters:
Aranka von Wertheimstein and
Charlotte von Wertheimstein)



My grandfather Victor was the first person to mention her. He was trying to teach me a simple twelve-bar blues chord but my eleven-year-old hands were leaden and too small.

“You’re like my sister,” he said. “You love jazz but can’t be arsed to learn to play it.”

“Which sister? Miriam or Liberty?” I asked, trying to ignore the barb.

“No, the other one.”

What other one?

Later that day I found her in the Rothschild family tree: Pannonica.

“Who is Pannonica?” I asked my father, Jacob, her nephew.

“She is always called Nica but beyond that I don’t really know,” he said. “No one ever talks about her.” Our family is so large and scattered that he did not seem surprised to have mislaid a near relation.

I was not put off. I pestered another great-aunt, Nica’s sister Miriam, the renowned scientist, who divulged, “She lives in New York,” but would not offer any further information. Another relation told me, “She’s a great patron, the Peggy Guggenheim of the Medici of jazz.”

Then there were the whispers:

She’s known as “the Jazz Baroness.” She lives with a black man, a pianist. She flew Lancaster bombers in the war. That junkie saxophonist Charlie Parker died in her apartment. She had five children and lived with 306 cats. The family cut her off (no they didn’t, someone counteracted). Twenty songs were written for her (no, it was twenty-four). She raced Miles Davis down Fifth Avenue. Did you hear about the drugs? She went to prison so he wouldn’t have to. Who’s her Thelonious Monk. It was a true love story, one of the greatest.

“So what is Nica like?” I asked Miriam again.

“Vulgar. She is vulgar,” Miriam said crossly.

“What does that mean?” I persisted.

Miriam would not elaborate but she did give me her sister’s number. When I went to New York for the first time in 1984 I rang Nica within hours of arriving.

“Would you like to meet up?” I asked nervously.

“Wild,” she answered in a decidedly un-great-aunt, un-seventy-one-year-old way. “Come to the club downtown after midnight.”

This area had yet to be gentrified and was known for its crack dens and muggings.

“How will I find it?” I asked.

Nica laughed. “Look out for the car,” and hung up.

The car was impossible to miss. The large, pale-blue Bentley was badly parked and inside two drunks lolled around on the leather seats.

“It’s good they’re in there—it means no one will steal the car,” she explained later.

Set back from the street was a small door leading down to a basement. I knocked loudly. Minutes later a hatch opened in the upper door and a dark face appeared behind a grille.

“What?” he said.

“I’m looking for Pannonica,” I said.

“Who?”

“Pannonica!” I repeated in slightly desperate English tones. “They call her Nica.”

“You mean the Baroness! Why didn’t you say so?” The door swung open to reveal a tiny basement room, shabby, smoky and cramped, where several people sat listening to a pianist.

“She’s at *her* table.”

Nica, the only white person, was easy to spot, sitting nearest the stage.

She hardly resembled the woman I had studied in our family photograph albums. That Nica was a ravishing debutante, her raven hair tamed and dressed, her eyebrows plucked in fashionable arches and her mouth painted to form a perfect bee-stung pout. In another portrait, a less soignée Nica, her hair loose and face free of make-up, seemed more like a Hollywood version of a Second World War double agent. The Nica before me looked nothing like her younger self; her astonishing beauty had since waned and now those once-delicate features bordered on the masculine. Her voice will always stay with me, a voice that has been pummelled like a shoreline by waves of whisky, cigarettes and late nights, a voice that was part rumble, part growl, and was frequently punctuated by wheezy bursts of laughter.



Nica in 1942 (Photographic Credit 1.1)

Smoking a cigarette in a long black filter, her fur coat draped over the back of a spindle chair, Nica gestured to an empty seat and, picking up a teapot from the table, poured something into two chipped china cups. We toasted each other silently. I’d been expecting tea. Whisky bit into my throat; I choked and my eyes watered. Nica threw back her head and laughed.

“Thanks,” I croaked.

She put her finger to her lips and, nodding at the stage, said, “Sssh, just listen to the music. Hannah, just listen.”

At the time, I was twenty-two and failing to live up to the expectations, real or imagined, of my distinguished family. I felt inadequate, incapable of making it in my own right, yet unable to make the most of the privilege and opportunity available to me. Like Nica, I was

barred from working in the family bank; the founding father N. M. Rothschild had decreed that Rothschild women were only allowed to act as bookkeepers or archivists. Caught in a holding pattern between university and employment, I was keen to work at the BBC but managed only to collect letters of rejection. Although my father, who had followed in the family tradition of banking, found me jobs through various contacts, I was hopeless at running a bookshop, property development or cataloguing artworks. Depressed and disheartened, I was not trying to find a role model, but I was looking for options. At the heart of my search was a question. Is it possible to escape from one's past or are we forever trapped in layers of inherited attitudes and ancient expectation?

I gazed across the table at this newly discovered great-aunt and felt a sudden, inexplicable surge of hope. A stranger walking into the club would merely have seen an old lady sucking on a cigarette, listening to a pianist. They might have wondered what this fur-coated, pearl-wearing dame was doing, swaying to the music, nodding appreciatively at a particular solo. I saw a woman who seemed at home and who knew where she belonged. She gave me this piece of advice: "Remember, there is only one life."

Shortly after our first meeting I went back to England, where I finally got a job at the BBC and began making documentaries. Again and again my thoughts turned to Nica. In those days before the Internet and cheap transatlantic airfares, travelling to America and maintaining friendships across continents were difficult. We met at her sister Miriam's house at Ashton Wold in England as well as once more on my next trip to New York. I sent Nica postcards and she sent me records, including one called *Thelonica*: an album by Tommy Flanagan and a musical tribute to her friendship with the jazz pianist Thelonious Monk. One of the album tracks was "Pannonica." On the back she'd written: "To dear Hannah, Lots of love Pannonica." I wondered about Thelonious and Pannonica. How had two such strangely named people with disparate pasts ever come to meet? What could they have had in common?

She asked me to play the record for my grandfather Victor, who only commented that he quite liked it. "He didn't really get Monk either," Nica said. I enjoyed my role as a music go-between from brother to sister. Another time she asked me to give my grandfather one of the pianist Barry Harris's records. He gave it another duff review. Next time I saw her, I told her. "I give up," Nica said dismissively. "He only likes trad." Then she roared with laughter.

Nica was fun. She lived in the moment, she was not reflective or didactic, and she did not seek to burden you with her knowledge or her experiences. It was a relief compared to being with her brother Victor or her sister Miriam, where encounters became an intellectual assault course, a mental decathlon in which you were required to show how much you knew and how well you could display your rationale, thinking, knowledge and bravura. When I got into Oxford University my grandfather called me to ask, "Which scholarship did you get?" I admitted that I had been lucky to scrape a place. He hung up, disappointed. In her nineteenth year Miriam asked how many books I was writing. None yet, I said, but I was making another film. "I've done too many of those to count," she said. "I am writing ten books including one on Japanese haiku." Then she hung up.

I did not know anything much about jazz but Nica never made me feel "uncool" or "unhip" or care that I had no idea what dig, cat, fly, zoot, tubs, Jack and goof meant. But she was absolutely adamant about one thing: Thelonious Monk was a genius, up there with Beethoven. She called him "the Einstein of music." If there were seven wonders in the world

she said, he was the eighth.

When I was planning a trip to New York in December 1988 to do some filming for a documentary about the art world, I set aside three nights to hang out with Nica and had saved up questions to ask her. But then, on November 30, 1988, she died suddenly, following a heart bypass operation. I had missed my opportunity.

Those unposed questions continued to haunt me. There would be unexpected reminders: a glimpse of the New York skyline in a feature film; a refrain from a Monk song; seeing her daughter Kari; the scent of whisky. While I spent my professional life making filmed portraits of other people, both dead and alive, another plan was percolating. I made films about collectors, artists and outsiders, subjects and themes that were relevant to Nica and her story. Perhaps her untimely death did not mean the end of our relationship. Perhaps those questions could be posed posthumously to her surviving friends and relations.

Slowly I started to piece together an outline of her life. She was born in 1913, before the First World War, at a time when our family was at the height of its power. She had a cosseted, pampered childhood, living in art-filled mansions. Later she married a handsome baron, by whom she had five children, and they had owned a fabulous chateau in France; she wore designer frocks and jewels, flew aeroplanes, drove sports cars and rode horses. Part of glamorous high society, she lived in a cosmopolitan world peopled by tycoons, royalty, the intelligentsia, politicians and playboys. She could meet anyone, go anywhere, and she often did. To those who have little or nothing, such an existence must seem like paradise. Yet one day in 1951, without warning, she gave it all up and went to live in New York, where she swapped her upper-class friends for a group of brilliant, itinerant black musicians.



Nica and Thelonious Monk, 1968 (Photographic Credit 1.2)

She vanished from British life, only keeping in touch with her children and close family members. The next glimpse most people got of Nica was when her antics were splashed across the newspapers. “Bop King Dies in Baroness’s Boudoir” made headlines on both sides.

of the Atlantic, as did reports that she was going to prison for possession of narcotics. She reappeared, played by an actress, in Clint Eastwood's biopic *Bird* and then as herself in the documentary *Straight, No Chaser*. The original footage was shot in 1968 by two brothers, Christian and Michael Blackwood, who, using a handheld camera, followed Monk from his bed to the concert hall, through airports and backstreets, capturing on celluloid the flotsam and jetsam of his daily life. The footage included scenes with his friend, the Baroness Nica Koenigswarter, née Rothschild.

In this footage I got my first glimpse of Thelonious Monk. Hovering in the background was my great-aunt.

"Do you know who she is?" the High Priest of Jazz asks the camera crew as he dances around the tiny basement. Weighing over 220 pounds, standing six feet four, the pianist looks both out of scale and graceful as he whirls about in a sharp suit, beads of perspiration glinting on his dark skin. Monk hums as he moves from the sink to the table, his heavy gold rings clunking against a glass of whisky. Suddenly, full of purpose, he turns to the camera.

"I said, do you know who she is?" he barks at the film crew.

No one replies, so Monk points across the room. The camera follows his gaze to settle on a white woman, Nica, who is surrounded by four black men in this kitchen-cum-dressing room, the waiting area between street and performance. The camera takes in the scene; there is not an ounce of glamour in the place with its bare light bulb and stack of unwashed dishes. No, does the woman look like your usual rock chick or groupie: she is the wrong side of forty; her hair hangs lankly to her shoulders; the stripy T-shirt and jacket do not do much for her comely figure. She certainly does not resemble either an heiress or a femme fatale.

"She a Rothschild, you know," Monk persists. "Her family laid the bread on the King and beat Napoleon." Then turning back to Nica, he says, "I tell everyone who you are, I'm proud of you."

"Don't forget they threw in the Suez Canal for good measure," she replies, clearly a little drunk. Nica looks at Monk with a mixture of love and admiration before returning to the task of getting a cigarette into her mouth.

"But that was over a year or more ago," interjects a younger musician. "Here, have the Suez Canal," Nica says, clamping the cigarette with her front teeth and holding out an imaginary canal in her hand. "That's a bitch," the younger guy comments.

"I tell everyone who you are," Monk says. For a man whose first language is supposed to be silence he's remarkably voluble. "You know who she is?" Monk asks again, walking towards the camera just in case anyone isn't concentrating. "She's a billionaire, a Rothschild."

I have watched this footage many times, searching for clues about Nica and trying to imagine the reaction of her old friends and extended family. I asked my father Jacob, who did everyone think?

"We didn't talk about her much," he said.

But when you heard that she had been sent to prison or when the famous saxophonist was found dead in her apartment? I pressed.

My father hesitated. "I suppose we were all rather bemused and slightly shocked."

I turned amateur detective. What had taken Nica from the grandest drawing room to the shabbiest cellar? Leaving had real consequences. Divorce, at that time, was a fast track to social ostracism, and the custody of children was rarely given to absconding women. With r

qualifications or career, Nica was dependent on her family for support. Was there a terrible secret, some dark reason why she had to be suddenly rushed out of the country and into the foreign environment?

Maybe she was mad. She had made some fairly dotty public statements. Asked by a journalist why her marriage ended, Nica replied, "My husband liked drum music." She told the filmmaker Bruce Ricker that the catalyst for her moving to New York was hearing a record. "I must have played it twenty times in a row and then more. I missed my plane and never went home."

"She bought Art Blakey a Cadillac and you know what that means," someone told me.

What exactly are you saying?

"Well, you don't just buy someone a car, do you?" he said knowingly.

There were other rumours about other men. What if I found out that my aunt was nothing more than a dilettante, a permissive woman attracted by a certain lifestyle? Suppose that was all there was?

Yet the Nica I knew, who seemed grounded and determined, was not some crazy harpist. She did lose custody of her young children but she never abandoned them: indeed, her eldest daughter Janka came with her to New York when she was sixteen. Nica never wanted to leave the people she loved, but she wanted to escape from a life she described as a "jewel-encrusted cage."

"Do you realise what you're doing? A lot of people aren't going to like this," advised Nica's old friend, the trombonist Curtis Fuller, when he heard I was investigating Nica's life. "You're going to catch some serious shit."

Naively, I had not realised that many people, particularly those in the family, wanted Nica to remain a mere footnote in other people's stories.

I should not have been surprised: obsessive secrecy is a family trait and secrets have, on many occasions, served us well. Secrets kept us alive in the Frankfurt Ghetto in the eighteenth century, through various pogroms and, with a few exceptions, during the Holocaust. Secrets were the source of our fortune on Wellington's battlefields, in the oil wells of Baku and, latterly, they saw us through the mire of volatile financial markets.

Many Rothschild women, including those I knew well, stonewalled my questions or refused to take my calls. I received two unpleasant, threatening letters. This, I found out, had happened before, to Nica's sister Miriam, when she wrote a biography of her uncle, *Dear Lord Rothschild*. It contained stories of family suicides. Although one had already been reported in the national press, Miriam's "crime" was to break ranks and speak about it publicly. She was castigated by a female relation: "However salacious you think it necessary to capture the attention of the public, I never could imagine that you could soil your own nest in this way by making a story out of it."

Nica's children were initially enthusiastic about my research but changed their minds, arguing that their mother would have hated any form of biography. I cared about what they thought and, mindful of their feelings, I dropped the project for a few years. Later they published a biographical essay together with a collection of her private photographs and interviews, titled *The Musicians and Their Three Wishes*, which offered a unique insight into her life. Every musician Nica met was asked to tell her three things they really wanted. The answers are brief but revelatory. Monk says, "To have a wonderful friend like you." Miles

Davis says, "To be white." Louis Armstrong, "That I live for a hundred years." Nica had tried to publish this book during her lifetime as a tribute to her friends, but every publisher turned it down. Then her children added their mother's photographs to the manuscript, and the images brought the text alive. Few of the pictures are composed, the lighting is haphazard and their condition is variable, but none of that matters: together they offer an extraordinarily evocative glimpse into a lost world.

I met the great saxophonist Sonny Rollins, Nica's friend, and told him about my abandoned project. "You have to carry on," he insisted. "Her story is our story. It has to be told." I started work again and continued my research. Wherever my job or holidays took me, I was armed with a video camera and notebook just in case there was someone who remembered something. I've conducted scores of interviews, collected piles of news clippings, album sleeves, documentaries, photographs, letters, emails, tapes and assorted memoirs. It was an adventure that started at one of the Rothschild family homes in Ashton Wold, Peterborough with Miriam, and criss-crossed the globe from Harlem to Holland, from Mexico to Manhattan and from Spain to San Francisco.

I made a radio programme and then a documentary feature film about her, both called *The Jazz Baroness*. The latter was shown on the BBC and HBO, and it still tours festivals worldwide. Storytelling on film is one form of biography; the written portrait offers other possibilities. I was keen to explore them all, to mine every seam. Why? Mainly because her life is such an extraordinary story, a musical odyssey spanning both a century and the globe with all the ingredients of a melodrama: the heiress and the suffering artist; the butterfly and the blues; love, madness, war and death.

But there are other, personal reasons. Though we were born half a century apart, in different circumstances, with dissimilar characters, investigating Nica's life has helped me understand my own. She has taught me to look for the similarities rather than the differences, to value choice over convention and, above all, to be more courageous. Why has this project taken me nearly twenty-five years to complete? There is part of me that wonders if I could make it last a little longer. Again and again I asked, who are you, Nica? Heroine or lush? Freedom fighter or dilettante? Rebel or victim?

2 • Queen of the Fleas

Why are you doing this, Hannah? Is it just about self-publicity?” Miriam demanded.

“There are many easier ways to get publicity,” I answered defensively.

“Can’t you think of anything else to do? Why does it have to be about the family?”

“You wrote a whole biography of your uncle Walter,” I countered.

“But that was different.”

“Why?”

“Because it was about science. Science matters.”

“Music matters to many.”

But Miriam was not entertaining that thought.

“Shall I stop coming?” I asked.

“Oh, I suppose you’d better not,” she said.

Invariably if I did not go and see her for a while, my telephone would ring. “When are you coming? I’ll be dead soon.” Then she would hang up.

To the outside world, my great-aunt Miriam was a distinguished entomologist but to her relations she was a formidable, exacting and inspirational matriarch who extended her benevolent if capricious hand to those in need. Until her death in 2005, she spent most of her ninety-six years at the Rothschild family house, Ashton Wold. The place was always a safe haven for family and friends, including, at times, Nica, her children and me. Miriam was an expert on family history, an endless source of information about and analysis of our forebears. She was the quintessence of her generation and utterly indispensable to my project. What’s more, she knew it.

Many times over the next few years, I went to see Miriam, driving up the A1, through north London and out into the heartland of middle England. It is a beautiful part of the country if one likes flat landscape and vast agricultural tracts. Personally, I found it a relief to turn off a busy road, leave behind the gentle orange glow of the town of Oundle and enter Miriam’s natural wonderland.

Nica and Miriam’s father Charles, an amateur entomologist, fell in love with the estate when he realised it would make an ideal conservation ground for butterflies and dragonflies. He tried to buy the land, but the local estate agent told him the owners would never agree to sell—they did not need to. By coincidence, it turned out that Charles’s father Nathaniel Rothschild already owned it. In 1900, work started on building a large three-storey house and laying the foundations for formal gardens, greenhouses, ponds and a park.



Miriam Rothschild in her wildlife garden at Ashton Wold (Photographic Credit 2.1)

Although Nica's brother Victor, as the son and heir, inherited the bulk of the family possessions and all the estates, in 1937 he gave Ashton to his sister Miriam. In an attempt to save money on heating, Miriam sliced off the whole top floor, lowering the once imposing three-storey façade. Then, declining to prune any plant, she let nature take its course. So every wall and many windows were covered with climbers and creepers, while a riot of ivy, roses, honeysuckles, wisteria and other species were allowed to grow unchecked. In the height of summer Ashton Wold looked more like a buzzing, rustling mound of greenery than a house. Surrounded by a 190-acre park teeming with deer that Miriam flatly refused to cull, the land is ringed with the wild-flower meadows that she became so famous for promoting.

Visiting Miriam was always an adventure. My spirits would quicken with excitement as I drove through her local village with its pub, the Chequered Skipper, named, of course, after a butterfly. A gatehouse heralded the start of the long dilapidated drive that wound through arable fields and meadows. After a mile, one would pass the long, high, brick-walled kitchen garden that once contained several acres of plant beds and greenhouses that in the 1920s were capable of producing flowers all year round for the house, and vegetables for the entire estate. In Miriam's time, the structures collapsed, leaving only their foundations and shards of window glass. A few were kept up to house a pet owl, as a butterfly house and to grow exotic crops.

In the garden, the vestiges of formal ponds, clipped yew hedges, summerhouses and benches were still visible but only just. Forty years of laissez-faire gardening had allowed weeds to choke waterways, paths to close up and trees to fight for space. Nature thrived in those conditions. In early summer the undergrowth teemed with grass snakes. Wild buddleia and flower meadows encouraged a huge variety of insects and butterflies.

"Welcome to Liberty Hall!" Miriam would shout out to arriving guests. "Do whatever you like here."

At any one time you might sit down with visiting professors, relations, the odd duchess, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, the academic John Sparrow plus an assortment of the (mainly male) acquaintances that Miriam met on her various travels. Tea was set out permanently on a long table in the drawing room so that anyone, including the house's enormous population of mice, could help themselves at random. I once pointed out that there were a couple of four-legged "visitors" scuttling around near the Victoria sponge. "Well, just be glad they are mice as it means there aren't rats near by. Mice and rats don't cohabit, you know," said Miriam in her matter-of-fact way.



The greenhouses at Ashton Wold, Peterborough, in 2004 (Photographic Credit 2.2)

Lunch was always served with a minor Rothschild wine and the table was laid for at least ten lest any unexpected visitors appeared. Like Nica, Miriam loved the company of animals. Nica loved cats, while Miriam preferred dogs and even had, for a time, a pet fox. Both Miriam and Victor kept owls. When Miriam's died, it was stuffed and put back on the bookshelf where it had liked to perch. The long entrance hall at Ashton Wold was lined with box files containing Miriam's scientific experiments, and the walls of the downstairs lounge were covered in the rosettes won by her champion cows. The room where I slept was so overrun by mice that the floor was often covered in their excrement. There was no point in complaining, as Miriam would never have understood the fuss.

Towards the end of her life Miriam moved her bedroom to a large room on the ground floor, mainly taken up with a workbench, microscopes, papers and family photographs. "To keep the fleas there in plastic bags by my bed," she was fond of saying. "It was a habit that started when the children were small to stop them from disturbing the insects."

The whole family was mad about insects. I found out that Nica was actually named after one. One day an American friend sent me a bootleg version of the song "Pannonica" that Monk had written for Nica. Recorded at the Five Spot Café, it is accompanied throughout by the chatter of the crowd and the clinking of glasses. Nica was in the audience, and had made the recording, as she so often did. Monk, who rarely spoke, cleared his throat to get attention. "Hello, everybody," he said in his gentle way. "I'd like to play a little tune

composed not so long ago dedicated to this beautiful lady here. I think her father gave her that name after a butterfly he tried to catch. Don't think he ever caught the butterfly but here's the tune I composed for her, 'Pannonica.' ”

I asked Miriam about the butterfly Nica was named after.

“Butterfly!” Miriam roared dismissively and then zoomed out of the room in her high-speed electric wheelchair. My heart sank—what had I done to upset her?

Yet Monk's dedication did seem to provide various clues about Nica and her own mythology. She presented herself as an exotic, elusive creature. It was an intriguing analogy: trying to capture Nica was not unlike glimpsing a butterfly as it flits, dances, bobs and soars over a garden, buffeted by uncertain breezes, drawn by delicate aromas, with the sun momentarily catching its luminescent colours. Suddenly the butterfly will disappear into the neck of a plant or close its wings and, thus camouflaged, become a leaf or a petal.

I decided to find out whether the butterfly *pannonica* was to be found in the entomological collections of either her father Charles or her uncle Walter. Both men had amassed enormous holdings during their lifetimes and after their deaths most of them were given to the nation: more than six million were left to London's Natural History Museum, forming the bulk of its entire collection of bugs and butterflies. I did not set my hopes high: surely there was little chance of finding one butterfly among so many others. I wrote with low expectations and was astonished to receive an invitation to visit the museum's vaults to view the species *pannonica*. Our ancestors were not only great collectors but obsessive documentarians; everything was so carefully catalogued and cross-referenced that little got lost.



Walter Rothschild riding on a giant tortoise (Photographic Credit 2.3)

One dreary November morning in 2007, I went to the Natural History Museum to see the

entomologist Gaden Robinson. We met under the enormous dinosaur skeleton in the main hall and walked down tiled passages, past weird and wonderful creatures, to the storeroom. Robinson led me through huge metal stacks. There I saw the now stuffed giant tortoise that Charles and his daughters used to ride on in the great park at Tring. That poor animal had died of unrequited sexual desire (not for Nica or her, Miriam assured me). The vaults are enormous: long rows of cabinets, filled with beautifully made mahogany specimen trays. “We’re in roughly the right area,” Robinson said, striding down the middle. How did he know what to look for? “Butterflies on the right, moths on the left. Here’s the subgenus *Eublemma*.”

To my astonishment he turned left, not right, and strode down an aisle.

“But this is the moth section,” I said.

“*Pannonica* is a moth.”

“A moth. Are you sure?”

“Quite sure. Here we are.” And he started to pull open the glass-backed drawers.

“But she told everyone she was a butterfly,” I said to Robinson. “There is even a sonnet written for her called ‘My Little Butterfly,’ and endless references to the derivation of her name.”

Robinson turned to me and said quite crossly, “Butterflies are just moths with go-fast stripes. People think they are terribly, terribly different but butterflies are just three out of many dozens of families of moths that have adopted a high-flying lifestyle; because they are flying in the daylight they tend to exhibit brighter colours than moths. With all due respect to people who find butterflies incredibly sexy, they are just suit-cut moths.”

“Why are butterflies less interesting?” I asked.

“I am not saying they are less interesting, but I am putting them in their proper place. People tend to consider butterflies to be nice but see moths as nasty, which is just public perception. It is erroneous; butterflies are moths with better public relations.”

Once located, *pannonica* turned out to be a humble little insect, the size of a small fingernail and hardly a head turner. We carried the tray of *pannonicas* back to Robinson’s office. Each specimen had been carefully mounted on a pin and individually labelled by hand in beautiful Victorian lettering. Using a magnifying glass, we could make out the words. First came “NC Rothschild” (Nica’s father Charles), then the date, August 1913, and finally the place where it was found: Nagyvárad, Bihar, the place where Nica’s mother was born. It was in this village that Charles met Rozsika and it was here that the family would return every summer to see their relations until the war intervened.

There were about ten little *pannonicas* caught between 1910 and 1914. I looked at the finest one, aware of the poignancy of the date; it was the last time Charles would go moth hunting as by then his health had begun to deteriorate. Holding this specimen up to the light, I saw that, far from being a dowdy little moth, it was rather beautiful, its lemon-yellow wings with tips the colour of a fine Château Lafite wine. I laughed, realising that being named after a creature of the night was entirely appropriate: Nica came alive after dark.

“Did Nica know she was actually named after a moth?” I asked Miriam a few weeks later.

“Of course,” she said as if I were a total simpleton. “*Pannonica* means ‘of Hungary’ and it is also a name given to a mollusc and a vetch. If only you bothered to look in the *Lepidoptera* catalogues, you’d have seen it: *Eublemma pannonica*. It was identified first by Freyer

1840.”

“Why did Nica say that she was named after a butterfly?”

Miriam rolled her eyes, harrumphed and left the room. I should have run after her to ask what that harrumph meant, but I did not really need to. Miriam—the eldest sister, the one who stayed behind, who took care of business, who carried on her father’s work, who looked after her extended family—was clearly exasperated by aspects of her youngest sister’s behaviour.

As the daughter and sister of entomologists, Nica would have known exactly what kind of creature she was named after. I wondered why she preferred mythology to the truth. Did it suit her to stay in the shadows, not to tell the whole story, not to give the complete picture?

Though proud of her heritage and dependent on her inheritance, she remained aloof, preferring to live on another continent, pursuing different interests and deciding to jettison her maiden name even after her divorce. What, I wondered, had made Nica so different from Miriam and Victor who remained steeped in Rothschild life? As my research continued, I realised that Nica felt ambivalent about both her name and her family of origin. She knew that, to the Rothschilds, her birth had been a disappointment. They had wanted a boy.

3 • *The Rose of Hungary*

In 1913, the year of Nica's birth, the Rothschild family were facing two crises. One was entirely of their own making; the other was beyond their control. They had, over the previous century, built a massive global empire but the world in which it operated was crumbling. The inexorable decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, along with the expansionist policies of her neighbours Germany, France and Great Britain, meant the balance of power in Europe was in flux.

In war and in peace the Rothschilds were bankers to governments and monarchs, underwriting the dreams and fears of European states. As the financiers of armies and industry, it was said that no one went to war or considered peace without first consulting the Rothschilds. During the Franco-Polish crisis of 1836, a Rothschild matriarch claimed, "There will be no war because my sons won't provide the money for it." It was not an idle boast: her offspring owned and controlled a multinational banking corporation that exercised unrivalled power over the international markets. Their empire spread from the oilfields of Baku to the railway network stretching from France to Belgium, and from Spain across Austria into Italy. From commodities to arbitrage, and from mines to commerce, the Rothschilds' reach extended from South Africa to Burma and from Montana to the Caucasus and beyond.

Prosperous financial empires depend on stable political situations. While the family could influence the leaders of countries and their policies, even the Rothschilds lacked the power to hold a continent steady; the family watched in dismay as Europe drifted towards war.

Internally they faced an even greater problem: the lack of male heirs. The family business was founded and administered on the principle that only Rothschild men could inherit and run the business. It was a principle enshrined in his will by the founding father, Mayer Amschel, in 1812 and it is still upheld today.

My daughters and sons-in-law and their heirs have no share in the trading business existing under the firm of Mayer Amschel Rothschild and sons ... and [it] belongs to my sons exclusively. None of my daughters, sons-in-law and their heirs is therefore entitled to demand sight of business transactions. I would never be able to forgive any of my children if contrary to these my paternal wishes it should be allowed to happen that my sons were upset in the peaceful possession and prosecution of their business interests.

Furthermore, if any of the partners were to die, their widows and their children had no automatic right of inheritance; ownership of shares reverted to the surviving fathers, brothers or sons. Daughters were expected to marry within the Jewish faith and possibly even within the family. James de Rothschild, a French cousin, writing to his brother in 1824 about his new wife who was also his niece Betty, said, "One's wife ... is an essential part of the furniture."

Originally there had been five capable sons to run the five European branches but, over the final decades of the nineteenth century, fate and luck had denuded them; this dearth of men had led directly to the closure of the Frankfurt branch in 1901. The two heirs, Mayer Carl and Wilhelm Carl, had ten daughters between them but no male issue. The Naples branch

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