

THE PITY

OF IT ALL

*A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch,
1743-1933*

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Introduction

IN the fall of 1743, a fourteen-year-old boy entered Berlin at the Rosenthaler Tor, the only gate in the city wall through which Jews (and cattle) were allowed to pass. The boy had arrived from his hometown of Dessau, some one hundred miles away in the small independent principality of Dessau-Anhalt. For five or six days he had walked through the hilly countryside to reach the Prussian capital.

We do not know whether he was wearing shoes; it is more likely that he was barefoot. The boy, later famous throughout Europe as the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, was frail and sickly, small for his age. Early years of poverty had left him with thin arms and legs, an awkward stutter, and a badly humped back. The hump may have been the result of a genetic disorder (the most severe type, according to modern medical textbooks, is thought to affect mostly Jews of Central European origin and is often accompanied by a stutter), or it may have been caused by rickets, a common childhood disease at the time. The boy's overall appearance "would have moved the cruelest heart to pity," claimed one

contemporary, and yet his face was remarkably attractive.¹ Under the finely arched forehead, his eyes were deep and sparkling, his nose, cheeks, lips, and chin delicate and well-formed.

The boy was all but penniless and traveled alone, carrying his few possessions in a satchel on his hunched back. In 1743, the movements of Jews—many of whom were wandering peddlers—were tightly regulated and controlled. Only a limited number of rich Jews (and, occasionally, a scholar) were allowed to settle in Berlin, but peddlers were barred. Jews requesting admission to Berlin, even for only a few days, were sternly interrogated as to their background and purpose. If temporarily admitted, they were *verzollt*, that is, subject to a “commodity tax,” as though they were merchandise, at the same rate as imported Polish oxen. The gatekeeper’s task, according to one report, was “to stop and register all incoming Jews, keep an eye on them during their stay, and expel the foreign ones” as soon as possible.²

Prussia, under the enlightened despot Frederick II (later known as “the Great”), was, relatively speaking, more tolerant than most other German states; the official disposition was to regard most Jews (and all serfs) as less than human. The gatekeeper’s surviving log for 1743, the year Mendelssohn trudged through the Rosenthal Gate, includes this notation: “Today there passed six oxen, seven swine, and a Jew.”³ Several versions of what transpired during Mendelssohn’s interrogation have been passed down. According to one, the gatekeeper teased the young hunchback, suspecting him of being another peddler. “Jew, what are you selling? I may want to buy something from you.” Mendelssohn is said to have responded, “You’ll never want to buy anything from me.” “Out with it! Tell me what you deal in,” the gatekeeper insisted. “In r . . . r . . . reason!” the boy stuttered. According to another account, Mendelssohn was asked what he wanted in Berlin. His answer: “To learn.”

BOTH versions are apocryphal, yet they sum up, as such stories often do, the main facts of the case. At fourteen, Mendelssohn was a promising young Talmudic scholar. His former teacher was now a rabbi in Berlin and had given his consent for Mendelssohn to attend his religious seminary. The boy’s passage from Dessau to Berlin was as through a time

machine, a journey across centuries, from the hermetic insularity of the medieval ghetto into which he was born to the relative enlightenment of eighteenth-century Berlin. Here, Frederick II, upon his coronation as king of Prussia only three years earlier, had proclaimed the reign of reason and invited Voltaire to stay with him as chamberlain. In Frederick’s eyes all religions were equally false and equally useful politically. “All religions must be tolerated,” Frederick declared (the first European ruler to do so formally). “Every man may seek spiritual salvation in his own manner.” With regard to the role of authority, he decreed that “the exchequer must only see to it that none would injure the others.”⁴ There was, of course, no freedom of speech in Prussia, not even on the subject of religion, but disrespect toward religious practice was punished only mildly. In France, more than twenty years later, the nineteen-year-old Chevalier de la Barre would still be tortured by inquisitors and executed for failing to doff his hat at a passing religious procession.

At the time of his arrival, Mendelssohn knew only Hebrew and *Judendeutsch*, a raw medieval German dialect mixed with Hebrew. German suffixes attached to Hebrew verbs produced the infinitives; the limited, rudimentary vocabulary of *Judendeutsch* permitted only the simplest exchanges. On the rare occasions when it was written, *Judendeutsch* was spelled in Hebrew letters read from right to left. Non-Jews derided it as a mongrel and barbaric dialect, a form of *mauscheln*, whining, the “accents of an unpleasant tongue” (Goethe). Mendelssohn’s education had been exclusively religious. He was still unable to speak German or read a German book. Less than two decades later, almost entirely self-taught, he had become a renowned German philosopher, philologist, stylist, literary critic, and man of letters, one of the first to bridge the social and cultural barrier between Jews and other Germans.

His life suggests a saga not only intellectual but human and dramatic. No fabulist would have cast this stuttering ghetto hunchback as the central character in a unique drama of language and *Kultur*. Mendelssohn’s great ambition was to end the age-old social and intellectual isolation of Judaism, some of which had become self-imposed. In some ways he fully succeeded. His impact on his time was considerable. A recent guidebook to the city of Berlin goes so far as to claim

that, apart from the modest attempts of a few forgotten writers and the founding of the Prussian Academy of Sciences by Leibniz in 1695, "the history of literature in Berlin begins on an autumn day in 1743 when a fourteen-year-old Talmudic student named Mendelssohn entered the city through the gate reserved for Jews and cattle."⁵

As a religious thinker he preached a doctrine of "reason" that, as first expounded by the great Maimonides in the twelfth century, had long been suppressed by German rabbis as heretical. In Mendelssohn's view, God was not a hypothesis, a logical postulation, as later Jewish theologians would claim; rather, reason itself was a gift from God. Mendelssohn became the father, albeit inadvertently, of modern Reform Judaism—he himself remained traditionally devout and observant throughout his life. He was as passionate about language (becoming fluent also in French, English, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin) as about German literature, and for a man of his time and place, passionate about social justice as well: he wished he could turn "Jewish boys into craftsmen and . . . serfs into free peasants."⁶

One of the first practicing Jews to be fully assimilated into high German culture, Mendelssohn became the first German Jew to achieve European prominence as a philosopher and a man of letters, admired by Kant and Herder and by *beaux esprits* everywhere, a close friend and collaborator of the leading German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (one of the foremost liberals of his age) and other prominent figures of the German Enlightenment. His contemporaries hailed him extravagantly. The poet Christian Martin Wieland saluted Mendelssohn "in the sacred name of friendship." For his achievements as a philosopher and religious reformer, he was acclaimed as the "German Socrates" and the "Jewish Luther." For his advocacy of an enlightened secular state, the French philosophe Mirabeau placed him on the same pedestal as the authors of the United States Constitution.

Throughout the nineteenth century, German Jews celebrated, idealized, and drew hope from Mendelssohn's famous interreligious friendships. Their pride in these friendships was indicative of, and perhaps eased, their own difficulties in winning a similar degree of acceptance. Mendelssohn became their patron saint, a model for all who sought to preserve their ethnic or religious identity but share in the general cul-

ture. He was the first of a long line of assimilated German Jews who worshiped German culture and civilization and whose enterprise, two centuries later, would come to such a horrendous and abrupt end. Some were more gifted than others, some not gifted at all; most were unswerving in their attachment to the country of their birth.

Their story, from the days of Mendelssohn until the rise of Nazism—a story of such promise but also so vexed, so tangled, and ultimately so terrible—is the subject of this book. To tell that story, it uses Sartre's definition: Jews are those considered by others as Jews, irrespective of their religious or ethnic allegiance. It is a history, not a work of sociology; the historian, unlike the sociologist, can live with the unique. It traces the fates and ideas of a number of interesting, mostly secular, and often very appealing people; though perhaps not representative, they were emblematic. Many were fully assimilated or acculturated, but neither term reflects the complexity of a predicament that eventually became a kind of identity. The history of assimilation has long been a subversive subject for which Zionists have offered only self-interested interpretations and assimilationists have avoided because they did not want to draw attention to themselves. No one foresaw the end. The duality of German and Jew—two souls within a single body—would preoccupy and torment German Jews throughout the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Nowhere in Western Europe was this duality as deeply felt and finally as tragic.

THERE are no reliable early population statistics. In the eighteenth century, there can hardly have been more than sixty thousand Jews in the German states, less than half of 1 percent of the total German population. This exceedingly small, widely dispersed community was soon considerably augmented by the Jews of Silesia, Poznan, and other largely Slavic territories in the East conquered by Prussia in three successive wars. When, in 1870, more than thirty independent German states consolidated to establish a united Reich, Jews were still an insignificant minority of slightly more than 1 percent. Sixty years later, on the eve of the Nazi takeover, when the total German population had risen to sixty-five million, the relative number of Jews had dropped to 0.8 percent. One wonders how so small a presence could have triggered,

even indirectly, such vast enmity. Other ethnic groups were far more numerous represented in the German-speaking territories. Yet in economic and cultural terms there has rarely been an ethnic or religious minority so visible—and, for better or worse, so magnified and often overrated in the public mind. In a relatively brief period, this small community produced a staggering array of entrepreneurs, artists, writers, wits, scholars, and radical political activists. The high visibility of Jewish success elicited intense feelings of envy, resentment, and a sick, almost pornographic, curiosity. In the distorted mirrors of popular imagination, Jews loomed ominously larger than their number, a presumed threat to national integrity, identity, culture, “health,” and the general well-being.

The brief legal emancipation of Jews during the Napoleonic wars released unparalleled economic, professional, and cultural energies. It was as though a high dam had suddenly been breached. In Jewish history, something similar had happened once before, in Moslem Spain, albeit on a smaller scale. Shortly before the onset of the Inquisition, a Spanish Jew boasted that the kings and lords of Castile had the advantage over their many adversaries in that their Jewish subjects “were amongst the most learned, the most distinguished in lineage, in wealth, in virtues, and in science.”⁷ During the Weimar Republic—the high point of their integration and assimilation into German life—German Jews might have claimed the same.

There has rarely been a confluence of two cultural, ethnic, or religious traditions that proved so richly creative at its peak. Frederic Grunfeld writes that had the end not been so awful we would now hail the decades before the Nazi rise to power as “a golden age second only to the Italian Renaissance.”⁸ In literature alone, German Jews accounted for such luminaries as Heine, Börne, Kafka, Werfel, Zweig, Wolfskehl, Broch, and Kraus; in the sciences, Willstätter, Haber, Ehrlich, Einstein, and Freud; in music, Mahler, Weill, Schoenberg, and Mendelssohn’s grandson Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Given the Jews’ late entry into European civilization, the wealth and variety of their contribution to the arts and sciences was startling.

In politics, they were the midwives or founders of most of Germany’s parties. As political activists, they were prominent mainly on the

liberal and radical left. As voters, they mirrored the most enlightened sections of the rising German bourgeoisie, tending to support the liberal center and the moderate left. Herder anticipated their liberalizing influence early on. Long before Jews were emancipated and given the vote he predicted they would have fewer or none of the prejudices that other Germans cast off only with great difficulty. As social and political critics, a few were sometimes impertinent, unmindful that stepchildren must always be on their best behavior. In general, they were, of course, as conformist as most other Germans and, occasionally, even more so. Yet their constantly precarious situation induced many to cultivate a skepticism and a sense of irony that became, almost, their hallmark. Many retained an outsider’s sharpened sensibility and wakefulness. The ironist Heine’s memorable lines come to mind:

*I think of Germany at night
The thought keeps me awake till light.*

and

*I had, long since,
a lovely fatherland.
The oaks would gleam
And touch the skies;
the violets would nod.
It was a dream.*

These qualities of skepticism, irony, and wakefulness produced some great polemicists, satirists, literary critics, and pioneers and connoisseurs of avant-garde art. Thomas Mann, who in many ways was ambivalent about Jews (though he was married to one), hailed them as Germany’s finest judges of literature and the arts. Among all things “German” in the arts, he claimed, only those that also passed the acid test of approval by Jewish critics were truly valuable.

As involuntary outsiders, they occupied extraordinary vantage points from which to observe and, if need be, castigate the majority. They remained at the very heart of the German culture and their own,

scathing in their criticism of German authoritarianism but also of the foibles and failings and dogmatism of their own ethnic and religious community. The major revolutions in European and American Jewish life during the nineteenth century, from religious reform to political Zionism, originated in Germany or Austria among Jews passionately devoted to German culture. As their own tribal idols crumbled, they did not simply borrow those of the Christian majority but invented new ones—communism, psychoanalysis, and other systems based on the utopian conviction that the world could be rationally reordered and vastly improved on a “scientific” basis. The best among them tended to be indifferent to all religion and to view both their Jewish and their German heritage with detached irony. Heine does just that in his parody of Schiller’s celebrated “Ode to Joy,” a hymn to . . . cholent, the traditional Jewish Sabbath meal:

*Holy cholent, dish celestial,
Daughter of Elysium:
If he'd only tasted cholent,
Schiller would have changed his hymn.*

*God devised and God delivered
Unto Moses from on high,
And commanded us to savor
Cholent for eternity.*

Heine, after his reluctant conversion, remained loyal to his Jewish heritage only, as he put it, out of a deep antipathy to Christianity. (The Jewish heritage, he insisted, was love of freedom and of good cooking.)

For all their irony and skepticism, the Jews of Germany never ceased in their effort to merge German and Jewish identity. The heartstrings of their affection were tied early; their overriding desire was to be complete Germans. Many succeeded. If their success appears in retrospect an illusion, it was often a highly creative one and with a grandeur of its own. Accepted or rejected, German Jews continued to potter with their identity, inventing, suppressing, rediscovering, or professing it. The vast majority never hid the fact that they were Jews. There were long inter-

vals when this forthright approach was no impediment, especially in smaller communities. A great many intermarried. Tens of thousands converted and disappeared within the majority. Those who converted often seemed no less remarkable or creative than those who, spurred by the force of a divided allegiance, found themselves in the vanguard of modern art and inquiry.

Their true home, we now know, was not “Germany” but German culture and language. Their true religion was the bourgeois, Goethean ideal of *Bildung* (high culture). With few exceptions, the main thrust of their intellectual and political efforts—and of their reckless magnanimity—was a desperate but vain attempt to civilize German patriotism: to base citizenship not on blood but on law, to separate church and state, and to establish what would today be called an open, multicultural society. Ironically, the only time German Jewish intellectuals abandoned this effort and joined in the jingoism of most other Europeans was during the First World War—“the seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century,” as George Kennan calls it—without which the Nazis might never have risen to power.

The prominence of German Jews and the contributions they made became fully apparent only after they were gone. In 1933, in a last-minute attempt to counter the Nazi threat, the traumatized leaders of the Centralverein (Central Union of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith), the most representative organization of assimilated German Jews, commissioned the compilation of a list of Jewish “achievers” and “achievements” in all fields. The project, pathetic only in retrospect, included Jewish luminaries in literature and the arts, in Jewish as well as Christian theology, in politics, warfare, industry, and the natural sciences. The result, entitled *Jews in the Realm of German Culture*, was a vast, meticulously detailed encyclopedia of Jewish contributions to German life and culture during the past two centuries. The task was executed with overwhelming thoroughness by a committee of experts headed by Siegmund Kaznelson, well known during the Weimar period as an editor and publisher. The oversized book ran to 1,060 pages and comprised thousands of entries and names. Richard Willstätter, a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, wrote the introduction. To avoid possible misunderstandings, the book even included an appendix on

"non-Jews widely regarded as Jews," from Lou Andreas-Salomé and Johann Strauss to Charlie Chaplin, Igor Stravinsky, and Albert Schweitzer. The Gestapo outlawed the book and ordered the entire edition destroyed. The manuscript survived, however, and was reprinted after the war. An enormous body of literature on the subject has since grown up, mostly in Germany. It continues to bemoan the incalculable loss Germans inflicted, as it were, on themselves after 1933.

BEFORE Hitler rose to power, other Europeans often feared, admired, envied, and ridiculed the Germans; only Jews seemed actually to have loved them. The links—and the tensions—between Jews and Germans were sometimes described as stemming from an alleged family resemblance. Heine was one of the first to emphasize the similarities. He hailed Jews and Germans as Europe's two "ethical peoples"; together they would yet give birth to a new messianic age. Heine went so far as to claim that the ancient Hebrews had been "the Germans of the Orient"! Goethe expressed a wish that Germans be dispersed throughout the world as the Jews had been and strive like them for the improvement of mankind. The poet Stefan George hailed Jews and Germans for living "in God's image, blond or black, sprung from the same bosom: estranged brothers."⁹ Ludwig Bamberger, the Jewish patriotic hero of the 1848 uprisings, boasted that Jews were "Germanized" not only within the confines of German lands but far beyond: in Eastern Europe, Jews more than any other people were rooted in the German language, he claimed, and "language means *Geist* [spirit]."¹⁰ Walter Benjamin said in 1917: "The German and the Jew are like two related extremes that confront each other."¹¹ Kafka maintained that Jews and Germans "have a lot in common. They are ambitious, able, diligent, and thoroughly hated by others. Both are pariahs."¹²

More recently, Gordon A. Craig, the prominent American historian of Germany, has alleged a "striking resemblance" between nineteenth-century Germans and Jews, evidenced by their industry, thrift, and common proclivity for abstract speculation. A shared respect for the written word, he writes, "has made Jews the People of the Book and Germans *das Volk der Dichter und Denker* (the people of poets and thinkers)."¹³ Less positively, Jews and Germans stand accused of a sim-

ilar combination of arrogance and self-loathing, tactlessness and hypersensitivity. Even when such generalizations contain a grain of truth, they do not explain the one-sided love or the one-sided hatred or what happened in the end.

At various times there has also been speculation—much of it rather tedious—as to whether there ever was a real "dialogue" between the two peoples or even, as some put it, a "symbiosis." But dialogue is possible only between individuals; peoples normally only scream or shoot at one another. The term *symbiosis*—borrowed from, of all things, biology—is even more dubious. In a symbiosis, one life-form is unable to *exist* without the other! Not surprisingly, symbiosis between humans was first preached by the Romantics as part of their organic notions of friendship, "race," biohistory, and civilization. Before the Holocaust, it was mostly Jews who spoke, hopefully, of symbiosis. Martin Buber rhapsodized about a German-Jewish symbiosis as late as 1939: it had been abruptly interrupted by the Nazis, he claimed, but it might be resumed again in the future. After the Holocaust, only penitent Germans evoked it, guilt-stricken and rueful over "their" loss. Altogether, the idea of symbiosis was always suspect. Why does nobody ever speak of an American-Jewish, French-Jewish, or Dutch-Jewish symbiosis?

SOME claim to have discerned an inexorable pattern in German history preordained from Luther's days to culminate in the Nazi Holocaust. According to this theory, German Jews were doomed from the outset, their fate as immutable as a law of nature. Such absolute certainties have eluded me. I have found only a series of ups and downs and a succession of unforeseeable contingencies, none of which seem to have been inevitable. Alongside the Germany of anti-Semitism there was a Germany of enlightened liberalism, humane concern, civilized rule of law, good government, social security, and thriving social democracy. Even Hitler's rise to power in January 1933 was not the result of electoral success (the Nazis' share of the vote had seriously declined in the fall of 1932). Rather, Hitler's triumph was the product of backstage machinations by conservative politicians and industrialists who overcame the hesitations of a senile president by convincing him (and themselves) that they were "hiring" Hitler to restore order and curb the

trade unions. Installing Hitler as chancellor was not the only alternative at the time.

Hindsight is not necessarily the best guide to understanding what really happened. The past is often as distorted by hindsight as it is clarified by it. Jean-François Lyotard, a wise Frenchman, has said that the Holocaust was an earthquake that destroyed not only the topography but the seismographs as well, leaving us to wander dumbfounded in the ruins.¹⁴ Circular, self-fulfilling arguments are of little help in recovering the topography. Such arguments tend to deflect backward from the Holocaust to the Middle Ages or to the eighteenth century, when Jews were beginning to trade their "nationhood" for the pottage of an illusory emancipation. From here they plunge ahead to a seemingly preordained end. Accusations of "self-hatred," so frequently flung at assimilated German Jews, usually with scarce justification, are also of little use. In most cases, it was eminently possible to assimilate without hating oneself or despising one's roots. The history of Jewish assimilation, not only in Germany, has long been a subversive subject, which the assimilated have suppressed so as not to draw attention to themselves, and the Zionists, for equally self-interested reasons, have distorted. Fritz Stern, perhaps the foremost expert on this subject, has argued that the history of the assimilated Jews of Germany was much more than the history of a tragedy; it was also, for a long time, the story of an extraordinary success: "We must understand the triumphs in order to understand the tragedy."¹⁵ We must see the German Jews in the context of their time and, at the very least, appreciate their authenticity, the way they saw themselves and others, often with reason. For long periods, they had cause to believe in their ultimate integration, as did most Jews elsewhere in Western Europe, in the United States, and even in czarist Russia. It was touch and go almost to the end.

As we contemplate the story of the German Jews we are seized with a sense of the transience and precariousness of human achievement. We are moved by the losers, by their struggle and pain. A line by Cato the Elder that Hannah Arendt, a quintessential assimilated German Jew, often cited approvingly, comes to mind: "The victorious cause pleases the gods but the defeated one pleases Cato."

I

Ancient Renown

BERLIN, as the young Mendelssohn first saw it in 1743, was little more than a garrison town. The capital of Prussia, a kingdom named after an extinct pagan tribe, Berlin was the seat of the Hohenzollern dynasty. Prussia was inhabited by nearly as many Slavs as Germans—as late as 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, it registered as a "Slav kingdom."¹ Berlin was a walled city, neat and orderly, surrounded by lakes and forests. The streets were laid out in straight military lines, paved even in the suburbs. Madame de Staël in *On Germany* complained that as a city Berlin was altogether too new, as new as the excessive military power of Prussia. There was "too little past" in Berlin, she complained, nothing Gothic! "One sees no evidence of former times."

The recently built royal palace was a severe block of dark stone, relatively modest, built along the river Spree. By enabling barges to reach the Baltic and North Sea ports, the river facilitated the growth of commerce and industry. Berlin's population totaled about 100,000, including 25,000 Prussian soldiers and some 2,000 Jews. Tolerated in the city