

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

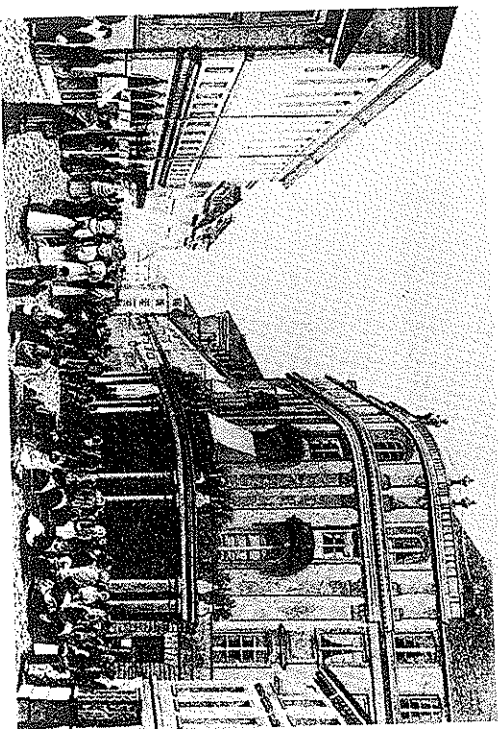
Prussia, under the enlightened despot Frederick II (later known as “the Great”), was, relatively speaking, more tolerant than most other German states; the official disposition was to regard most Jews (and all serfs) as less than human. The gatekeeper’s surviving log for 1743, the year Mendelssohn trudged 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 . . . reason!” the boy sputtered. 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



Veitel Ephraim's town house in Berlin. Ephraim helped Frederick II finance his wars by minting coins with reduced silver or gold content. Like most other court Jews, he was exempted from most of the king's repressive regulations.

Courtesy: Leo Baeck Institute, Jerusalem

most vulnerable. When these employees were discharged or died, their widows and offspring were to be stripped of all rights and deported. Although the reglement pertained mostly to poorer Jews and the growing lower middle class, which, in Frederick's eyes, was of little "use," it was so harsh in its formulations, so full of oblique references to repressive Jewish morals and other shortcomings, that the rich Jews of Berlin submitted a "most humble and submissive" but ultimately unsuccessful request that the new decree not be made public, even as it was put into effect.

The reglement would remain in force until 1812 and, with minor modifications, in some areas of Posen (Poznan) and Silesia until 1840. When the Royal Porcelain Manufacture, in unsuccessful competition with that of Meissen, fell on hard times, the king decreed that his Jews had to buy five hundred thalers' worth of his porcelain on marrying, three hundred thalers' worth on the birth of a first child, five hundred on the birth of a second, and three hundred on the purchase of a house—this obligation being over and above other duties payable on such occasions. They could not choose the plates or cups they liked or

needed but had to take the factory's pick. The factory, of course, used the opportunity to rid itself of unsold merchandise. Moreover, such forced purchases could be resold only outside Prussia. The forced sales continued until Frederick's death and were rescinded by his successor only after payment of forty thousand thaler to compensate him for the lost income.*

Despite Frederick's attempts to rid Prussia of "useless" Jews, the Jewish population under his rule continued to grow as Prussia annexed more and more Jews in the conquered territories. Tens of thousands came under Prussian rule during the two Silesian campaigns (1740-42, 1744-45) and the Seven Years War (1756-63) and later as a result of the final partition of Poland. In Berlin alone the number of Jews grew by 60 percent during this period. In Prussia as a whole, the Jewish population more than tripled. The limited freedoms certain Jews enjoyed in the core of Prussia—Brandenburg, Pomerania, and East Prussia—were not extended to the annexed Jews of Silesia, West Prussia, and Posen. Following the annexation of Breslau in 1742, for example, only twelve privileged Jewish families were allowed to remain in the city. The rest (some ninety families) were forced to roam the countryside in search of a place to live.

Mirabeau said that other states had an army but in Prussia the army had a state. Frederick's calling was war although he also cultivated the muses, French literature, and the company of learned Frenchmen and of dogs. An atheist king "by the grace of God," he was cynical and morose; Rousseau regarded him as a man without principles. Although he was worshiped after his death in absurdly exaggerated ways—in one allegorical engraving Plato, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar welcome him into heaven—under his forty-six-year rule Prussia remained outside the mainstream of Western culture and politics. Elsewhere, political parties were born, the idea of a social contract was making headway, rudimentary parliaments came into being, and prime

*More than half a century later and with the rising antiques market in mind, Heine wrote hopefully that, for the porcelain Jews were forced to buy, their descendants (if they kept it) would recoup a hundredfold: "In the end Israel will be compensated for its sacrifices by the recognition of the world."

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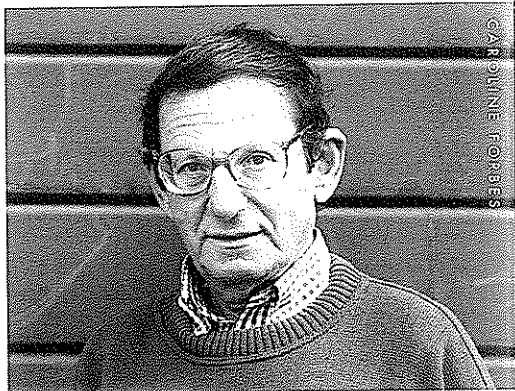
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AMOS ELON

is the author of eight widely praised books, including *Founder: A Portrait of the First Rothschild* and *The New York Times* bestseller *Israelis: Founders and Sons*. A frequent contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New York Review of Books*, he lives in Jerusalem and Tuscany.

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