

Recapturing a Proud German-Jewish Heritage

On September 9, dedication ceremonies opened the long-awaited permanent exhibition of the Jewish Museum Berlin, “Two Millennia of German Jewish History.” During a trip the following month, I was able to take a two-hour tour of the museum. Although my visit was compressed, the museum’s intended purpose is unmistakable, and a historic step forward for both Germany and the world’s Jewish population.

Rather than forcing the visitor to view German Jewish history through the gray prism of the Holocaust, the museum portrays 2,000 years of Jewish life in Germany by reviewing the religious customs and practice of Germany’s Jews, and the contributions that these Jews, as Germans, made to the development of the German nation, as well as their contributions to the sciences, arts, culture, and universal knowledge.

This idea was uniquely presented by Johannes Rau, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, who sent a text message of dedication to the opening ceremonies. Rau’s message was extraordinary, and it echoed a public statement issued by Democratic Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche on Sept. 3, 1999, entitled “Music, Judaism, and Hitler.”* Not only did Rau embrace German Jewry’s past as part of Germany’s living heritage, he reaffirmed that by understanding the history and contributions of Germany’s Jews, “we will become more aware of how heavy the loss is that we also inflicted upon ourselves with the Holocaust.”

The German President went further, and defined, in ecumenical terms, the importance of Jewish life for all of Europe: “It is therefore not only since the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth

century that Jews have been making a major contribution towards the development of German and European culture. They were involved in it from the very beginning. Europe’s roots do not lie exclusively in Christianity. Jewish culture also forms part of Europe’s roots—as does, by the way, Islamic culture.”

A Sense of Optimism

The museum has a section on the Holocaust, but President Rau addressed this history with a courage and truthfulness that few German leaders have been able to muster. The President shattered the evil shackles of “collective guilt,” something forced upon the German population during the postwar period which still haunts and hinders them to the present day, by stating that the Holocaust was, in fact, “a complete breakdown in civilization . . . neither inherent in the German character nor an inevitable development in German history. The blame for what was done to German

and European Jews lies with those who planned, ordered, and committed the genocide.”

President Rau ended his message by stating that the museum should help provide a sense of optimism for both German and Jew: “This museum will increase awareness of the great contribution which many Jewish Germans and German Jews have made to our culture. The Jewish Museum Berlin shows us that Jewish and German history are more than the Holocaust and the Third Reich. . . . The fact that we are keeping the memory alive, thus contributing to a bright future is, in my view, today’s gift.”

Lack of Clarity

Unfortunately, Rau’s eloquent and courageous message, whose text should be read in full, is more successful in what it conveys, than the exhibition itself—which tends to be heavily existential, lacks clarity in presenting the importance of historical contributions, and omits whole areas where Jews provided the crucial leadership that both furthered German Classical culture and actually built Germany into a modern nation.

The museum faced a difficult task in assembling its displays, for various reasons. Most of the artifacts were amassed from private families, and, of course, so much was physically destroyed by the Nazis and during Allied bombings. In addition, many well-preserved artifacts are already housed at the museum and archives of the New Synagogue in Berlin, as well as the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt. These two institutions hold many wonderful religious artifacts, whose craftsmanship and beauty are a wonder, and they also hold impor-



Title-page illustration portrays Moses Mendelssohn as the “Berlin Socrates.”

* Featured as the editorial in the Fall 1999 issue of *Fidelio* (Vol. VIII, No. 3).

tant historical objects and paintings depicting the major contributions and leading roles that Germany's Jews played in various fields, including classical music, something that is sorely lacking in the new museum. There are also small but significant holdings and archives in smaller state and city museums throughout Germany.

One can compensate for what is missing by visiting the museum's extensive bookstore, which has many wonderful volumes, some in English, covering virtually all areas of German Jewish life and history. The museum will also house an archive and library that will be open to visitors and scholars. The archive plans to have microfilm documents from the Leo Baeck Institute, which has amassed the largest collection of material on German Jewish history in the world. The museum has also wisely chosen to provide the textual description of its displays in English, as well as German (English is the second language for many European nations).

The Mendelssohn Tradition

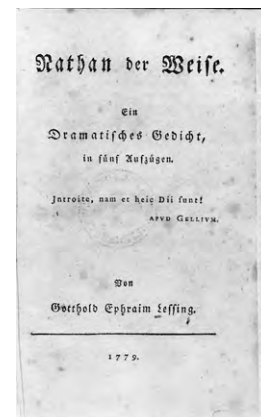
The museum *does* succeed in its unique display honoring the life of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), however. For anyone who is familiar with, or who has studied the life of the great philosopher and Orthodox Jew, the artifacts will tend to excite you, and make this period of history come alive, so that you can walk along in Mendelssohn's "foot-steps."

Mendelssohn is known for his life-long collaboration with the playwright and author Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, which collective activity laid the basis for what has become known as the great German Classical period. As young friends, they fought to defend the ideas and works of Leibniz, who had come under posthumous attack by the Romantic philosophers of the Berlin Academy. The two maintained that only an ecumenical dialogue amongst the three great monotheistic religions could overcome the problems that faced civilization.

To this end, Lessing wrote the drama *Nathan the Wise*, which was published in 1779, and whose main character, Nathan, was modelled on Mendelssohn



Left: Mendelssohn and Lessing in Wolfenbüttel (drawing by Friedrich Werner, 1875). **Below:** Lessing's 'Nathan the Wise,' 1779.



science, and the relationship between Church and State.

[SEE drama review, page 75, this issue]. This background is explained in the text that accompanies an original copy of the play. There is also a wonderful, full-size copy of a drawing of Mendelssohn and Lessing taking a walk on the promenade in front of Lessing's house in Wolfenbüttel, sketched in 1875 by Friedrich Werner.

Mendelssohn, a Plato scholar, wrote *Phaedon, or On the Immortality of the Soul*, which was published in 1767, and catapulted him to world recognition. He was thereafter known throughout Europe as the "Berlin Socrates," as the museum text details; the museum displays original copies of this work in numerous translations, to make the point.

Mendelssohn transformed Judaism through his religious writings, which proved that Mosaic law was coherent with Plato's notion of natural law. He translated numerous Biblical works from Hebrew into German (using Hebrew characters), so that Jews could learn German, and have access to the tools necessary to become leading citizens. The museum display includes Mendelssohn's translation of the Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses), and a copy of *Jerusalem*, his most famous work, on Judaism, religious con-

So you may know Mendelssohn's mind more intimately, you can listen through headphones to readings in German and English from three selected writings, entitled "My Life," "The Jew," and "The Philosopher." There are no fewer than four different busts of the thinker, several oil portraits, and a set of his eyeglasses. In addition, the display includes material on Mendelssohn's collaborators, spanning another two generations.

More than any single person, it was Moses Mendelssohn whose entire being transformed both Germany and German Jewry, forging a path to the German Classical period and Jewish political emancipation, so that Germany might become a modern nation.

As I came to the end of the exhibit, there was a group of German children having a wonderful time (as were their parents) taking a German pfennig (penny) and striking it into a commemorative coin bearing an image of the great philosopher. I believe that it was a facsimile of the silver medal issued in Mendelssohn's honor in 1776.

—Steven P. Meyer

Steven P. Meyer's "Moses Mendelssohn and the Bach Tradition" appeared in the Summer 1999 issue of *Fidelio* (Vol. VIII, No. 2).