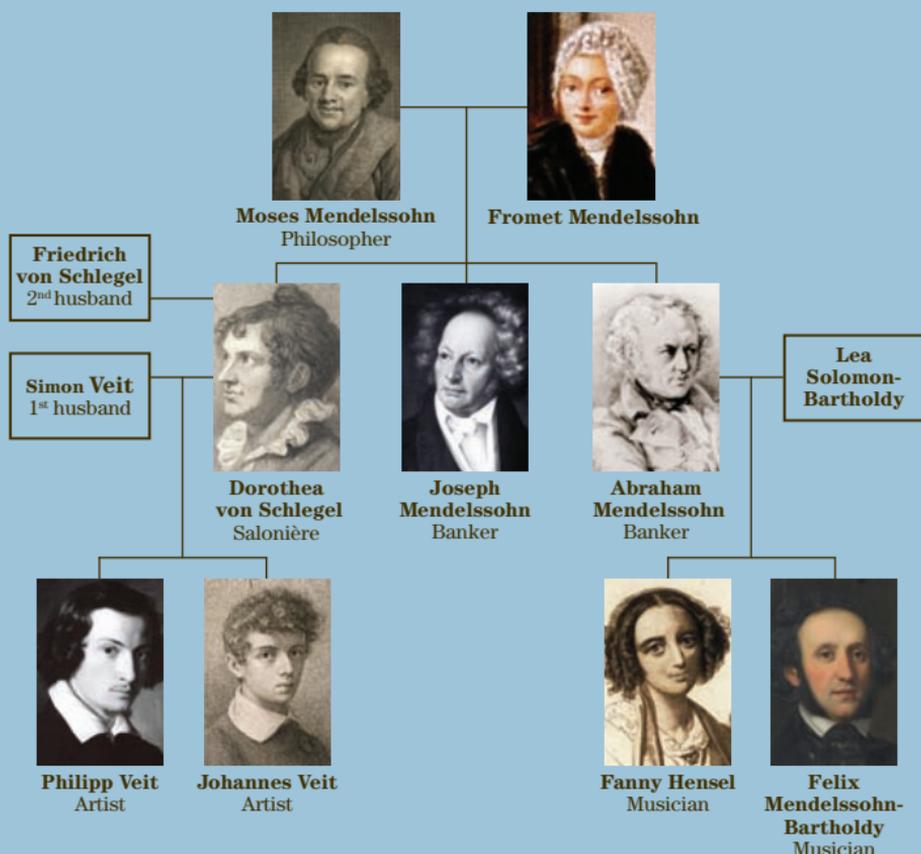


THE MENDELSSOHNs: A German Family of Scholars, Bankers, & Artists



Leo Baeck Institute
New York/Berlin

At the residence of The German Ambassador
Washington DC, May 2013

MESSAGE OF GREETING FROM AMBASSADOR DR. PETER AMMON

It is my pleasure and honor to host the Leo Baeck Institute's exhibition *The Mendelssohns: A German Family of Scholars, Bankers and Artists* at my residence.

Over generations, the Mendelssohns excelled in their respective disciplines and had a tremendous influence on many aspects of German society. At the end of the eighteenth century, they founded what was to become one of the most important private banks in Germany. The headquarters of the former Mendelssohn Bank in Berlin is located just around the corner from today's Foreign Ministry.

The musical stars of the family, the sibling composers Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Fanny Hensel, are both also very present in today's Berlin: Two schools are named after Fanny Hensel, whose likeness can also be found on a permanent stamp series honoring famous women in German history. Many prizes and places bear the name Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, among them, Mendelssohn Bartholdy Park in the new heart of reunified Berlin.

Their grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, is particularly well known in Germany as a philosopher of the Enlightenment and a close friend of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who was inspired by their friendship when he wrote *Nathan the Wise*. The Leo Baeck Institute has named its own award for critical thinking after Moses Mendelssohn, the first of which Foreign Minister Dr. Guido Westerwelle presented to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in December 2011.

I am delighted that this exhibition will help to raise awareness of the many important contributions which this immensely talented and creative family has made to culture and history in Germany and beyond. My appreciation goes to the Leo Baeck Institute, which so wonderfully preserves these unique exhibits.

—Peter Ammon

THE MENDELSSOHN

Few families have had a more profound impact on the shaping of German culture than the Mendelssohns. Moses Mendelssohn, raised in a strictly Orthodox family, arrived in Berlin in 1743 as a young man from Dessau who intended to become a rabbi. He followed his teacher, Rabbi David Fränkel, to Berlin. In the span of only twenty years, Mendelssohn became the most important Jewish intellectual in Europe, a symbol of the *Haskalah*, or Enlightenment, which sought to combine Judaism with modern culture.

Mendelssohn's Talmudic training encouraged a clear, Socratic method of instruction, inspiring him to write some major works in the form of dialogues. He was also inspired to expand his knowledge beyond the Talmud, especially to science and philosophy, and to learning languages other than Hebrew and Yiddish.

His commitment to Judaism remained steadfast throughout his life. Many Christians were astonished that such a brilliant, enlightened intellectual would remain a committed Jew, showing the ignorance and intolerance among some Christians of his day. Mendelssohn's famous response to this astonishment came in a letter to the Swiss theologian Johann Caspar Lavater, which explained Judaism as a religion of reason. In his book *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn further argued that traditional Judaism was fully consistent with religious liberty, tolerance, and civil rights. It became the founding text of modern Jewish philosophy.

On the 250th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth, the Berlin Senate created the Mendelssohn Prize "for the promotion of toleration for those who think differently and between nations, races and religions." In 1999, Chancellor Angela Merkel published an appreciation about Mendelssohn's work and life.

MOSES MENDELSSOHN: PHILOSOPHER, ART CRITIC, LINGUIST



Anton Graff, Portrait of Moses Mendelssohn
Engraving, 1772

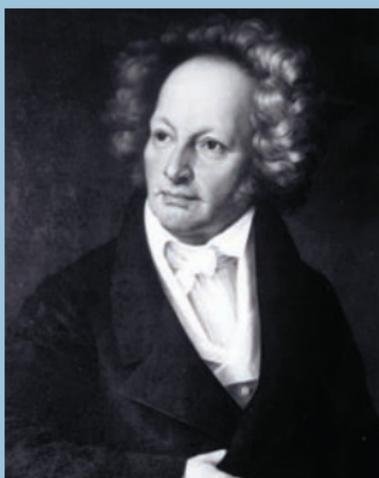
Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the son of a Torah scribe from Dessau studied Bible and Talmud with Rabbi David Fränkel. When Fränkel was called to Berlin, Moses followed. His intellectual curiosity led him to study, read, and learn – Latin, French, mathematics, philosophy, literature. He wrote and published extensively and

by the mid-18th century was considered the leading figure of the German Enlightenment. His mission was to facilitate the integration of Jews into German society. Mendelssohn's translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, in Hebrew script, served as an important step toward bringing Jews closer to their culture. By using "high German," he replaced Judeo-German (Yiddish) as the spoken and written vernacular of German Jews and indirectly paved the way for the Reform Movement.



Moses Mendelssohn's Eyeglasses and Case, Late 18th century

THE BANKERS: JOSEPH & ABRAHAM MENDELSSOHN



Wilhem Ternite, Portrait of Joseph Mendelssohn
Oil on canvas, 1831



Wilhelm Hensel, Portrait of Abraham Mendelssohn
Drawing, ca. 1830

Moses Mendelssohn's third child, **Joseph** (1770-1848) established a bank which became one of the most important banks in Germany. The Mendelssohn Bank acted as bankers to the Russian Czars and its Berlin branch continued operating through 1938 until the Nazis shut it down. Joseph was also dedicated to promoting Enlightenment ideals in the Jewish community by expanding their traditional frame of reference. He was a patron of leading German writers and scientists, including the great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859).

Joseph Mendelssohn's younger brother, **Abraham** (1776-1835), father of Felix and Fanny, became partner in the Hamburg branch of the bank in 1804. He famously remarked, "Once I was the son of a famous father, now I am the father of a famous son." He and his wife Lea were music lovers and members of the Berlin Singakademie. They regularly organized performances in their home, where their children Felix and Fanny came into their own as musicians. These private music soirées attracted large audiences and became an integral part of Berlin's cultural life.

THE MUSICIANS: FELIX MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY & FANNY HENSEL



Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Portrait of Fanny Hensel née Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Oil on canvas, 1842



Eduard Magnus, Portrait of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Oil on canvas, ca. 1840

Fanny Hensel (1805-1847) and **Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy** (1809-1847) were the two children of Mendelssohn's second son, Abraham Mendelssohn (1776-1835). Their mother, Lea (1777-1844)—a granddaughter of the prominent court Jew, Daniel Itzig—was a pianist who encouraged her children's musical training. Abraham had intended Fanny's musical training only as “decoration, never as the basis of her activities and life,” but it became just that. While Felix went to study abroad, Fanny regularly performed at the “Sunday Music Sessions” at her parent's house. In this semi-private framework she was able to have an important impact on Berlin's music scene.

Her brother Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy became the main exponent of German Romanticism. By 1840, Felix, together with Robert Schumann, was the most famous composer in Central Europe. In his short life, he composed five symphonies, the choral works *Elijah* and *St. Paul*. Some compositions ascribed to him, such as the *Song Without Words*, were discovered to have been actually written by Fanny, who could not publish music under her own name because she was a woman. Fanny and Felix were converted to Christianity by their parents.

THE SALONIERE: DOROTHEA VON SCHLEGEL



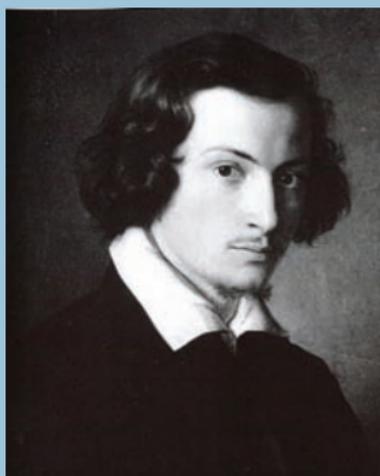
Johannes Veit, Portrait of Dorothea von Schlegel
Engraving, ca. 1820s

Brendel (Dorothea) Veit von Schlegel (1764-1839) was Moses Mendelssohn's eldest surviving child. In 1778, when she was 14 her parents arranged her marriage to Simon Veit, the son of a prominent family of Berlin Jewish bankers. In 1790, their son Johannes was born, followed three years later by Philipp.

One of the most important

salonières in Berlin, in the 1790's Brendel changed her name to Dorothea and her circle of friends became dominated by Christian intellectuals. She conducted the salons in her home, inviting the cultural elite of the day. In 1797, she fell in love with the philosopher and literary critic Friedrich von Schlegel and in 1799 divorced her husband to be with von Schlegel. With her divorce, she forfeited the right to live in Berlin and became estranged from her siblings. In 1799, the couple moved to Jena where, in 1801, von Schlegel published Dorothea's first novel, *Florentin* without naming the author. From Jena they moved to Paris, where Dorothea converted to Protestantism and finally married von Schlegel. The couple converted to Catholicism in 1808, shortly before moving to Vienna, where Friedrich found a position as secretary at the Imperial Court. Dorothea once again became a *salonière*, inviting prominent writers and artists to her home. In 1818, Dorothea went to Rome where her sons Philipp and Johannes and her brother-in-law Jakob Bartholdy, all lived. After Friedrich Schlegel's death in 1829, Dorothea moved to Frankfurt, where she spent the last years of her life in the household of son Philipp, who had become director of Frankfurt's Städels Institute and Museum.

THE PAINTERS: PHILIPP AND JOHANNES VEIT



Philipp Veit, Self Portrait, Oil on canvas, 1816



Philipp Veit, Portrait of Johannes Veit, Drawing, ca. 1808

Philipp Veit (1793-1877) studied with the prominent Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and was strongly influenced by Romanticism, to which his mother had introduced him through her acquaintance with the leading romantic poets of the day. Philipp Veit joined the Nazarene movement in Rome, a group of German and Austrian painters seeking to revive Christian art. From 1830 to 1843, Veit was active in Frankfurt as director of the Städel Institute and Museum and professor of painting.

Johannes Veit (1790-1854) was the oldest son of Dorothea Schlegel and her first husband. Born Jonas Veit, he changed his name to Johannes when he converted to Christianity in 1810. Like his brother Philipp, Johannes was a painter and member of the Nazarene movement that attempted to revive Christian spirituality in their art.

Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, one of the most famous nineteenth century German-Jewish painters, was a close friend of Philipp Veit's. This sketch is notable because it includes an image of Gabriel Riesser, the most vocal and effective nineteenth century proponent of Jewish Emancipation. Veit's portrayal of his friend Riesser contains a certain historical irony. Riesser, a Reform Jew, was the grandson of Rabbi Raphael Cohen who had waged a vicious war against Mendelssohn's Bible translation. So a Catholic grandson of Mendelssohn is portraying a Reform grandson of Mendelssohn's fiercest traditionalist opponent.



Philipp (Feibisch) Veit, Oppenheim Painting a Self Portrait with Portrait of Gabriel Riesser
Pencil on paper, 1840

WAHLVERWANDTSCHAFTEN: MENDELSSOHN & LESSING



Artist Unknown, Portrait of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing
Engraving

Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing were *Wahlverwandte*, or, “relatives by choice.” Playwright and critic Lessing was one of the first Christians Mendelssohn encountered upon arriving in Berlin. According to legend, a mutual friend introduced them over a game of chess when they were both twenty-one

years old. Their backgrounds could not have been more different. Lessing was from a prominent Protestant family and was educated at the best European schools while Mendelssohn was from a poor Jewish hamlet and largely self-taught. Nevertheless, they formed a lifelong friendship on the basis of their commitment to the enlightened principles of tolerance, free inquiry, and rational religion. In the 19th and 20th centuries Mendelssohn and Lessing’s friendship served as an important symbol for a tradition of German cosmopolitanism and German-Jewish friendship.

LEO BAECK INSTITUTE

Since its founding in 1955, the Leo Baeck Institute has become the premier research library and archive devoted exclusively to documenting the history of German-speaking Jewry.

In the aftermath of World War II, with the annihilation of European Jewry almost complete, some of the leading intellectuals who were forced out of Germany and Austria were determined to preserve the shattered remains of their devastated heritage and sought to collect as much material as they could. The founders included Martin Buber, Max Grunewald, Hannah Arendt and Robert Weltsch. Rabbi Leo Baeck, the last leader of the Jewish community in Germany under the Nazis became its first president. The Institute is named in his honor, representing the ideals of modern, cultured, assimilated German-speaking Jewry.

LBI offices were created in each of the great outposts of the exiled community: London, Jerusalem, and New York, with New York as headquarters. In September 2001, LBI New York opened a branch of its archives at the new Jewish Museum in Berlin. This marks the first time that these extraordinary materials are available in Europe, a very significant development in the continuity of this legacy shared by Germans and Jews.

The remarkable holdings of the Institute reflect a heritage of triumphs and tragedies that must never be forgotten.



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