

Moses Mendelssohn: Soul of Germany; Or, Why Anti-Semites Hate Germany

by David Shavin

The costumed goon squads of today's Antifa and Anti-Germans (Anti-Deutschen) throughout Germany, are tools of a larger project whose aim is to annihilate the heritage of Germany's Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86). The lifelong Orthodox Jew Mendelssohn was the indispensable partner of Gotthold Lessing and related circles, in launching the German Classic movement identified with the leading roles of Goethe, Schiller, and the brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt. When this movement is seen in its relation to the Bach-based musical revolutions of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and others, and to the scientific tradition of Gauss and Riemann—it is clear that every cultural advance during the last two centuries, has been inseparably linked to the German Classic, and therefore also to Moses Mendelssohn.

Now the German Classic was the project of those Europeans who had prepared and supported the American Revolution; thus, integral to his part in inspiring that movement, was Mendelssohn's unique leadership in emancipating the Jews. Not only emancipation from the legal chains which denied European Jews every human right—as indispensable as such legal emancipation certainly was—but, even beyond that, the Jews answered Mendelssohn's call by rushing out from their ghettoization and enforced backwardness, to embrace and master all of world culture which had been denied them so long—a Renaissance. Well before the end of the 19th Century, it had even spilled over to the Yiddish-speaking Jews of the Russian Empire. Although Tsardom never granted Jews effective legal rights, nevertheless, the effects of the so-called Yiddish Renaissance under such leaders as "Sholem Aleichem" are still palpable today, worldwide.

In this sense, the immortality of Moses Mendelssohn's gift to the world, is still re-echoing in the contributions of all these emancipated Jews during the past two centuries, and on into the future. And not just the great names among them, but many thousands whose names are known only to a few, and others whose names may now be completely unknown.

—Antony Papert

Moses Mendelssohn, born in 1729, in a Jewish ghetto in Dessau, Germany, defied the supposed destiny of Germany's then most-repressed population, and, in so doing, succeeded in giving Germany its soul! Prior to the joint mission of Men-

delsssohn and Gotthold Lessing to enrich the German language and culture, the fruits of Germany's best minds—such as Nicholas of Cusa, Johannes Kepler, and Gottfried Leibniz—were isolated from most Germans; and the region was a collection of petty fiefdoms. In 1754, the pair of 25-year-olds joined forces in Berlin to turn the latest organized assault upon Leibniz topsy-turvy.¹ They refused to bow down to the Berlin Academy's officious essay contest, designed to trivialize Leibniz's fruitful characterization, that the Creator created this world as the "best of all possible worlds," into the banal and lethargic, "It's all good." With irreverence for small-mindedness, and a joyful passion for (what Lincoln would later refer to as) "the better angels of [the] nature" of the German population, the pair launched one cultural offensive after another for the next three decades. At a time when the German language was not used for any serious ideas, they launched a periodical devoted to enriching the language with ideas powerful enough to uplift a population, enough to build a nation.²

The Venetian Party's Hatred of Leibniz

The key to the fury against the Mendelssohn/Lessing project, manifested by the "Venetian Party" ensconced in the City of London, is Leibniz. By 1713, Leibniz had successfully organized the courts of Prussia, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire for his nation-building projects, centered around the role of National Academies of Science in driving qualitative improvements in the general welfare of the population. In 1714, with the Hanoverian succession to the English throne, which Leibniz himself had organized, the Venetian Party raised hell to keep Leibniz from moving to London as a government minister. When Leibniz died in 1716, his voluminous writings were seized and held under lock and key by the English monarchs, including George III (the enemy of the American Revolution). Lessing and Mendelssohn shaped their identities in the fight to free Leibniz's legacy.

1. Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Lessing, "Pope A Metaphysician!" (1754); translated by Paul Gallagher, *Fidelio*, Winter 1999. www.schillerinstitute.org

2. Helga Zepp-LaRouche, "Political Revolution Requires the Aesthetic Education of Man," Speech on Nov. 18, 2006. www.schillerinstitute.org



Library of Congress



lithograph by adolf kunike

In the 1750s, the two young geniuses, Moses Mendelssohn (left) and Gotthold Lessing (right), united in Berlin to rescue Leibniz's (center) legacy from Venetian Party depredations, thereby igniting a Classical renaissance in Germany.

In 1746, Lessing and his older cousin Christlob Mylius were students of Abraham Kästner in Leipzig. There, Leibniz and Michael Hansch had attempted to publish Kepler's works in the 1710s; and J.S. Bach had spent the previous three decades developing musical science, and organizing the population with the singing of, in particular, his *Passions*. In the early 1740s, Kästner's teacher Christian Hauser revived electrical experiments—reports of which reached Benjamin Franklin in 1746, initiating his famous investigations. Mylius, the same year, published his doctoral dissertation written under Kästner's guidance, on a Leibnizian investigation of the dynamic atmosphere. In 1748, Kästner published his translation of the anti-Newtonian work on gravity and the ether, by Franklin's colleague Cadwallader Colden. That year, Mylius and Lessing moved to Berlin, where Lessing's early play *The Jew* shocked Berlin by putting on stage an intelligent, moral, and graceful Jew. It was attacked for its lack of realism. The real-life version of the staged character would soon become Lessing's lifetime collaborator.

In 1752, Franklin's proposals concerning electricity seized the imagination of Europe; and Mylius, in Berlin, reproduced Franklin's experiments.³ When Kästner sent Mylius to America to meet Franklin in 1754, he gave him Kepler's *Harmonice Mundi*, with a brief poem: Kepler had written of the deeper coherence of the musical and astronomical forms, and Kästner wished that Mylius's "tender ear perceive" and his "deeper thoughts explore" these harmonies. Surely Kästner had great hopes for what his prize student could do in America with Franklin. However, Mylius never arrived in

there; he died at his London stopover at the age of 33—with no history of health problems. The deep bond between Lessing and Mendelssohn was forged in the wake of Mylius's death.

The Seven Years War

In the Seven Years War (1756-63), Prussia was pitted against Austria, Russia, and France. After losing every battle for the first 18 months of the war, Frederick II of Prussia ("Frederick the Great") displayed a bold genius with his "double-flanking" victory at Leuthen. Christians and Jews celebrated in Berlin, separately of course, and Mendelssohn performed his own "double flank." He first composed the sermon for the Jewish celebration, on how one owed it to God not to wait around for miracles such as Leuthen, but to do the hard work of preparing for such. Then, he translated his sermon from Hebrew into German to distribute among the Christian population! What Frederick had proven in battle, about the seemingly miraculous human mind, was accessible to all his subjects—and in fact, was uniquely appropriate for unifying the population on this higher level. Mendelssohn's sermon was published in several colonial cities—including Philadelphia, by Benjamin Franklin's German publisher. In 1758, Franklin would not likely have known Mendelssohn as the anonymous author, but he surely would have recognized and enjoyed the organizing method.

In 1763, at the end of the war, Prussia was exhausted. Its heroic leader, Frederick the Great, had called upon many, many German men to sacrifice their lives in bloody battles, but in the treaty ending the war, Britain reaped the greatest advantage. Lessing's plays featured the German patriot who had sacrificed much, but now questioned whether he'd been fooled. However, it was Mendelssohn's 1767 *Phaedon*, or on

3. David Shavin, "Leibniz to Franklin on 'Happiness,'" *Fidelio*, Spring 2003 www.schillerinstitute.org



The Mendelssohn-Lessing “cultural optimism” offensive drew Benjamin Franklin (left) to Germany, where he sought out Leibniz’s works. Leibniz’s notion of “happiness” thus found itself reborn in the 1776 Declaration: that mankind’s inalienable rights include “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Franklin also met Abraham Kästner (right), who gave a keynote speech on electricity for the official celebration of Franklin’s visit to Göttingen University.

*the Immortality of the Soul*⁴ that went right to the core of the problem, and was an electrifying success. How could anyone sacrifice for a higher cause without a living relationship with one’s immortal soul? And more, what leader would ask for such sacrifices so recklessly, daring to make war without the deep and rigorous examinations necessary?

Mendelssohn’s treatment of Plato’s *Phaedo* along Leibnizian lines was accompanied, between 1765 and 1767, by 1) the first publication, by Mendelssohn’s colleague Friedrich Nicolai, of a complete Shakespeare, translated (by Wieland) into German; 2) Lessing’s Classic analysis of the sublime, in his *Laocoön*; and 3) the first-ever publication of Leibniz’s long-suppressed devastating refutation of John Locke, in *New Essays on Human Understanding*. This “cultural optimism” offensive drew Benjamin Franklin, fresh from his February 1766 victory in London over the imperial Stamp Act, to Germany, where he sought out the publishers of Leibniz’s study of Locke, Gerlach Münchhausen and Erich Raspe. Leibniz’s “American” idea of “felicity” or “happiness” can be summarized: Man’s capacity to think and invent is *necessary* for the sustenance of life—lest society repeatedly bump up against fixed, Malthusian limitations, with repeated genocidal cullings of the human herd. Conversely, an unhappily arranged world would leave man either as a robot, driven merely by instinct to survive; or as one totally free to do as he pleases, but also totally unnecessary and irrelevant. It is a happily composed world where man’s liberty is necessary for life. For Franklin, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was one unified concept. Locke’s oft-cited “life, liberty, and property” was explicitly rejected.

4. Moses Mendelssohn, *Phaedon, or On the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. by Patricia Noble (New York: Peter Lang, 2007). My “Introduction” expands upon this, and other, themes. www.peterlang.com

It was also on this trip that Franklin finally met with Kästner, who had just finished writing the preface to Leibniz’s *New Essays* which Franklin had studied in Hannover. Kästner gave a keynote speech on electricity for the official celebration of Franklin’s visit to Göttingen University.

Mendelssohn’s Language Project

During the American Revolution, when Mendelssohn saw the possibility of civil rights for his backward Jewish brethren, he spent years on a translation project of the *Torah*, the Hebrew Bible, into High German. Those who attack Mendelssohn for watering down Judaism and promoting “assimilation” by giving up standards, either have never read Mendelssohn’s German Bible or prefer to see the Jews permanently ghettoized—or both. In fact, Mendelssohn was explicit that both the Hebrew spoken in the Jewish ghetto, *and* the language spoken by the German population, were insufficient to convey the ideas necessary to survive. (Or, as my rabbi instructed me many years ago, when given two insufficient choices, always pick the third!)

Mendelssohn’s project involved educating Jewish peasants to speak better Hebrew than even the rabbis, and better German than the Prussian King spoke! His German-language *Torah* was rendered in High German, but with Hebrew letters—totally useless for anyone who wished to dumb down subjects, but perfectly appropriate for the revolutionary Jewish reforms that he presented to the Prussian and Austrian governments in 1781-82. Jews were granted civil rights and allowed to run their own schools, as long as their schools prepared the youth for citizenship, and this importantly included learning the German language.⁵

His collaborator in Prussia was Christian Dohm, a councillor in the department of foreign affairs during the American Revolution. That Dohm controlled the secret archives meant, among other things, that Mendelssohn knew he was being offered high-level collaboration. Mendelssohn closely watched the debates in the newly freed American colonies as the newest, best hope for European culture—and that included Germany’s assimilation of American republicanism. In his joint publication with Dohm in the first Spring after the 1781 Yorktown victory, Mendelssohn sang: “Thanks be rendered to a kind Providence for having allowed me to reach, at the end of my days, this happy season in which a beginning has been made to consider human rights from a truly universal aspect.”

The author of the Austro-Hungarian reforms was Johann Gunther, Emperor Joseph II’s right-hand man, who was also collaborating with Wolfgang Mozart to produce a shocking ending to his opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*: in

5. David Shavin. “Philosophical Vignettes from the Political Life of Moses Mendelssohn,” *Fidelio*, Summer 1999. www.schillerinstitute.org

which the Turkish Pasha is made the most “Christian” figure.⁶ Mozart’s change in the libretto was modelled upon Lessing’s treatments in *The Jew* and *Nathan the Wise*. Mendelssohn’s student, Fanny Itzig Arnstein, had given Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon* to Mozart—and *Nathan the Wise*, the dramatic version of Mendelssohn, was the controversy of Vienna. (At this time, Raspe, the publisher of Leibniz’s *New Essays*, published his English translation of *Nathan* for London.) In June 1782, Gunther was arrested, and charged with being a “Prussian spy.” But the opera was wildly successful, a colonial war against the Turks was averted, and Gunther was released. Clearly, for the oligarchs, “Prussian spy” meant “an agent of Mendelssohn and Lessing.” Mendelssohn, Mozart, Ben Franklin, and LaFayette did well in 1782 Berlin, Vienna, and Paris.

The story of how the “Venetian Party” avoided American revolutions in Europe in the 1780s remains for another day.

The Mendelssohn Garden

Mendelssohn’s grandchildren, Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn, inherited the musical culture of the Bach family. Their maternal grandmother Bella Itzig studied with Johann Philipp Kirnberger, J.S. Bach’s foremost student, who also trained Moses! Her sister Sara Itzig Levy was trained by W.F. Bach, and her exceptional grasp of J.S. Bach caused her, from the 1780s to the 1820s, to be the crucial conveyor of J.S. Bach’s works. Their sister Fanny Itzig Arnstein was Mozart’s collaborator. There are different stories as to which relative gave 15-year-old Felix, Bach’s long-unheard *St. Matthews’s Passion* manuscript, but it clearly was “inherited.”⁷

At age 19, Felix Mendelssohn decided to organize Berlin in the way Bach had organized Leipzig, and prepared the Berlin Singakademie to revive Bach’s *Passion*. The 1829 performances were a uniquely appropriate commemoration of the centennial of the birth of *St. Matthew’s Passion*—and also the births of Mendelssohn and Lessing! On Saturday nights in 1828, Felix and sister Fanny would rehearse a chorus of 16 young friends in the Mendelssohn’s garden-house at 3 Leipziger Strasse. Listening nearby, in a special cottage, was a student of Moses Mendelssohn, Alexander von Humboldt, and his young assistant, Lejeune Dirichlet.⁸ Moses’ son, Abraham, had constructed a magnetically neutral building for his old friend Alexander, so that they could make microscopic measurements of a suspended bar magnet. They were pursuing a project of Kästner’s student Carl Gauss, mapping the invisible and complex geo-magnetic characteristics of the Earth. As they worked, they could hear Mendelssohn’s choir

mapping the invisible and complex voicings and intonations of Bach’s setting of Christ’s Passion—a scientific task, if the singers were to attempt to measure what their Maker had in store for them, what their mission was in life. The performances were a thrilling success; the geo-magnetic survey made history; and Dirichlet’s marriage to Felix’s younger sister Rebecca became an unending love affair.

The simultaneous projects in the Mendelssohn garden encapsulate the unique mission that, 75 years before, Kästner had assigned Mylius for his trip to America and Ben Franklin: His “tender ear perceives” and his “deeper thoughts explore” the Keplerian harmonies of soul and mind that drive our culture. The actual marriage of the human soul and human mind has been Germany’s potential for several centuries now. It is the silver spike of London’s Dracula faction, that drove Friedrich Nietzsche crazy; and it is why, in 1989, Margaret Thatcher and George H.W. Bush gagged over the singing of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” as the Berlin Wall came down.

When a representative of the most dispossessed of a culture is able to give voice to the greatest values of that society, the condensed power provides the maximum leverage for revolutionary change. In living memory, we have the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King and its unique resonance. Today, the prolonged decadence of the “68ers” and their “end of history” ideology have done their best to dispossess their children of any future at all. The “no-future” generation that now must grow up early to win their own future, is uniquely situated to complete the American Revolution of Leibniz, of Benjamin Franklin, and, yes, of Moses Mendelssohn. This was always the issue of German nationhood, and has always provoked the rage of the oligarchs.

Mendelssohn’s entire life was living proof that the (American) exception could, and should, become the rule. Recall that, prior to Mendelssohn, the previous great namesake of the Biblical Moses had been Moses Maimonides, the 12th-Century Jewish scholar. Hence, it came to be said of our Mendelssohn: “From Moses to Moses, there has been none quite like Moses!”

New Translation of Mendelssohn’s ‘Phaedon’

A new English-language translation of Moses Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon: or On the Immortality of the Soul*, by Patricia Noble, including an historical essay on Mendelssohn by David Shavin, has recently been published by Peter Lang. It can be ordered for \$29.95, plus shipping and handling, at www.peterlang.com.

6. David Shavin, “Mozart and the American Revolutionary Upsurge,” *Fidelio*, Winter 1992. www.schillerinstitute.org

7. Steven P. Meyer, “Moses Mendelssohn and the Bach Tradition,” *Fidelio*, Summer, 1999. www.schillerinstitute.org

8. David Shavin, “Dirichlet and the Multiply-connected History of Humans: The Mendelssohn Youth Movement.” www.wlym.com/pedagogicals/dirichlet-shavin.html