

Mendelssohn on the Edge: Memory, Agency, and National Belonging in Weimar Germany

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ABSTRACT

In times of great political unrest and disorientation, societies generally invent and reinvent myths. As unrest and disorientation were among the most striking characteristics of the Weimar era, it is not surprising that the bicentenary celebrations of Moses Mendelssohn's birth, held in 1929, constituted the peak of the Enlightenment philosopher's popularity as a German-Jewish patron saint. This article argues that the commemoration of Mendelssohn on the eve of catastrophe, four years before the Weimar Republic's collapse, serves as a particularly precise indicator of ambivalent German-Jewish agency at the time, due to its political, social, and cultural implications. Whereas the bicentenary celebrations—featuring the Republic's most prominent representatives, state-of-the-art exhibitions, cultural events in prestigious locations, and extensive media coverage—attest to the considerable leeway German Jewry had in shaping social reality, the continuing absence of Mendelssohn in the canon of German poets and thinkers illustrates the limits of German-Jewish agency in the cultural imaginary of the German nation.

On 8 September 1929, Leo Baeck delivered a speech at the Berlin celebration to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of Moses Mendelssohn's birth. In it, he elaborated on the philosopher's mission as a cultural attaché for Germany. Baeck described Mendelssohn as central to the emergence of modern Judaism: it was because of him that German Jewry had become 'the guardian of the best heritage' of the Enlightenment and its values, such as 'Bildung'—the lifelong process of human education and development.¹ Through Mendelssohn, he argued, Germany wielded influence on the thinking of Jews the world over, and the importance of German Jewry in Europe and America could thus not be overestimated. By commemorating Mendelssohn, he continued, a defeated Germany, which was struggling to restore its international reputation, could build on that 'prestige' and 'standing', making full use of 'Germany's spiritual and cultural paths'.²

¹ Leo Baeck, *Mendelssohn Gedenkfeier der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin am 8. September 1929*, Berlin 1929, p. 19. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² *Ibid.*

Baeck was addressing none other than the liberal elite of the Weimar Republic. The Jewish community of Berlin, in collaboration with two liberal Jewish institutions, the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Academy for the Science of Judaism) and the Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums (Society for the Promotion of the Science of Judaism) had organized the bicentenary celebration at the Sing-Akademie, which was built by the neoclassical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel at the beginning of the nineteenth century and was one of the most prestigious venues in Germany's capital. The Jewish community had inquired whether Chancellor Hermann Müller would be available to give a speech, but, much to his regret, he was unable to participate due to severe illness.³ In the end, Minister of the Interior Carl Severing filled in. He and Berlin's mayor Gustav Böß gave a short welcome address. Other prominent representatives of the Reich, the state of Prussia, the city of Berlin, the Friedrich Wilhelms University, and numerous other academic and cultural institutions were also in attendance, including Albert Einstein on behalf of the Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Prussian Academy of Sciences).⁴ An exquisite musical programme was arranged to entertain the audience. The Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, led by conductor Heinz Unger, performed the overture of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's *Althalia* and closed the event with Richard Strauss's symphonic poem *Tod und Verklärung*.

The celebration in the Sing-Akademie was one of several festivities organized in cities across Germany in September 1929 to commemorate Mendelssohn as a Jewish proponent of German culture. Lavish Mendelssohn exhibitions opened in Berlin, Dessau, and Frankfurt am Main. In the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Berlin State Library), historian Ismar Elbogen and his team of editors presented the first volume of the highly praised jubilee edition of Mendelssohn's collected writings.⁵ A variety of books, special editions, journal articles, and newspaper articles were also published in the Jewish and non-Jewish press. More than a hundred lectures, concerts, radio broadcasts, ceremonies, and performances of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise* (*Nathan the Wise*) in several theatres completed the list of cultural events that shaped and disseminated the memory of Mendelssohn in Germany during the bicentennial year of his birth.

There were few German Jews who considered these festivities from a critical standpoint, but one who did was the writer Bertha Badt-Strauss, who had been sent to Dessau to cover the celebrations for the *Vossische Zeitung*, a leading liberal German newspaper. Though herself actively involved in the Mendelssohn commemorations—she published several articles and a book on Mendelssohn⁶ in

³For the correspondence about this invitation between the Jewish community of Berlin and the Reichs Chancellery, see State Library of Berlin, Mendelssohn-Archiv, MA Depos., MG Nachl. 7/10 (4).

⁴For an account of the event, see Hilde Kassel, 'Berlin', *C.V.-Zeitung*, vol. 8, no. 37, 13 September 1929, p. 497.

⁵Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. by Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttman, and Eugen Mittwoch, Berlin 1929–. Since 1945, Alexander Altmann, Michael Brocke, Eva J. Engel, and Daniel Krochmalnik have edited thirty further volumes.

⁶For example, Bertha Badt-Strauss, 'Moses Mendelssohns Tochter Dorothea', *Der Morgen*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1929, pp. 244–248; idem (ed.), *Moses Mendelssohn. Der Mensch und das Werk*, Berlin 1929.

1929—Badt-Strauss warned onlookers not to be deceived by the sumptuousness of the celebrations and the public demonstration of liberal forces. Contextualizing the celebrations and the rise of extreme nationalist movements, she reported that during her stay in Dessau she had ‘overheard very ugly remarks which were not flavoured with tolerance or human kindness’, and that on 2 September some of the town’s inhabitants had celebrated ‘Sedantag’ (‘Sedan Day’) with lanterns and firecrackers.⁷ A semi-official holiday, ‘Sedantag’ commemorated the 1870 victory of Germany over the French army at the Battle of Sedan, but the celebration had been abolished for being anachronistic after the First World War. Revisionist circles, however, continued to commemorate it.

In the aftermath of the war, Badt-Strauss, like many other Jews, had experienced a growing sense of crisis.⁸ Disappointed by the defeat of Germany and appalled by the virulent antisemitism which had shifted from a subtle code into a political programme and aggressive social movement, they had withdrawn into the German-Jewish cultural system.⁹ But the Weimar Republic offered both non-Jews and Jews unprecedented opportunities to become involved in politics and civil society. Most Jews channelled their energies into forming a democratic state and society, and some, such as Walter Rathenau and the lawyer Marie Munk, managed to pursue exceptional careers in politics, business, and culture. Soon, militant nationalists vilified the new state as a ‘Judenrepublik’ (‘Jewish republic’).¹⁰ Antisemitic jurisdiction, the desecration of cemeteries, and anti-Jewish incidents constituted an inherent part of the Jewish experience during the Weimar years.¹¹ Jews ‘faced anti-Semitism even in times of security’.¹²

Despite that, it would be far too simplistic to judge Baeck’s appraisal of Mendelssohn’s relevance for German society and foreign policy as naïve, and Badt-Strauss’s critical assessment of the impact of the bicentenary as prophetic. Historians should neither fall for ex-post facto analyses nor pretend to be smarter

⁷ Bertha Badt-Strauss, ‘Die Feier in Dessau’, *Das Unterhaltungsblatt*, no. 211, in *Vossische Zeitung*, no. 426, 10 September 1929, n.p.

⁸ See, for example, Martin Liepach, ‘Das Krisenbewusstsein des deutschen Bürgertums in den Goldenen Zwanzigern’, in Andreas Gotzmann, Rainer Liedtke, and Till van Rahden (eds), *Juden, Bürger, Deutsche. Zur Geschichte von Vielfalt und Differenz, 1800–1933*, Tübingen 2001, pp. 395–417; Marlen Oehler Brunnschweiler, ‘Krisenwahrnehmungen in der jüdischen Presse. Eine quantitative Betrachtung deutsch-jüdischer Zeitungen in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik’, in Eleonore Lappin and Michael Nagel (eds), *Deutsch-jüdische Presse und jüdische Geschichte. Dokumente, Darstellungen, Wechselbeziehungen*, vol. 2, Bremen 2008, pp. 139–161.

⁹ Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, New Haven 1996.

¹⁰ Arnon Hampe, ‘Judenrepublik’, in Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Begriffe, Theorien, Ideologien. Handbuch des Antisemitismus*, vol. 3, Berlin 2010, pp. 157–159.

¹¹ For example, anon., ‘Totenschändungen’, *C.V.-Zeitung*, vol. 7, no 11, 16 March 1928, pp. 143–144; Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens, *Unsere Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Friedhofsschändungen in Deutschland, mit einer Liste der Friedhofsschändungen*, Berlin 1929. For a quantitative and qualitative analysis of anti-semitic violence during the Weimar years, see Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt. Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik*, Bonn 1999.

¹² Anthony Kauders, ‘Weimar Jewry’, in Anthony McElligott (ed.), *The Oxford Short History of Germany: The Weimar Republic*, Oxford 2009, pp. 234–259 (p. 240).

than the objects of their research. Instead, both accounts actually reflect the same belief: Baeck, Badt-Strauss, and the many others who commemorated Mendelssohn in 1929, even those who had a different memory agenda, such as the Battle of Sedan, acknowledged the importance of collective memory and commemoration for Weimar society. They were aware that both collective memory and commemoration not only reflected their values, but also and even more importantly had the power to shape social reality, especially in a fragile democratic state.¹³

The topic of how the two-hundredth anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth was commemorated in Weimar Germany thus constitutes a worthwhile means of exploring the ambivalence of German-Jewish agency—between the successful social advancement of German Jewry and the limits of social inclusivity in Germany—with collective memory as a pivotal force. In investigating the various efforts of German Jews to commemorate Mendelssohn's bicentenary, it becomes clear that they established a community of memory through staging the jubilee and constructing Mendelssohn as a German-Jewish 'lieu de mémoire' or 'site of memory'.¹⁴ This in turn sheds light on how a minority under pressure struggled to secure its position in an increasingly hostile environment through acts of commemoration, and how that environment responded to those efforts.

The topic is of special interest for several reasons. Firstly, Mendelssohn is a towering historical figure who has accompanied German Jewry as a (metaphorical) site of memory since the end of the eighteenth century. German Jews invented the tradition of celebrating Mendelssohn, and stylized him into a figure whose biography mirrored the transformation of their social and cultural situation, and expressed their hopes and fears. Secondly, the issue of Mendelssohn as an iconic figure continued to be crucial even when Jews were recognized as German citizens with equal rights, even more so after the First World War, when antisemitism became more virulent and many non-Jews increasingly questioned Jewish emancipation. Thirdly, during the interwar period there were deep ideological rifts that ran through German society. Nationalists, conservatives, liberals, social democrats, and communists fought each other not only through parliamentary debates, rival institutions providing social services, and street battles, but also by competing for German collective memory in order to gain power over politics and society. Examining the Mendelssohn bicentenary of 1929 in Germany can help us measure the degree of agency Jews actually exercised over collective memory and commemoration, and consequently over their non-Jewish environment. At the same time, this exploration provides us with a complex understanding of Weimar Germany's contested collective memory.

¹³ Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History*, Chapel Hill 2006, pp. 154–155.

¹⁴ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', in *Representations*, 26 (1989), pp. 7–24.

I. AGENCY AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Before examining the commemoration of Mendelssohn in more detail, this section will delineate what ‘agency’ means in such a context. Although there is insufficient space to reflect on every aspect of the philosophical and sociological debates on the meaning of agency, it can be stated that, in general, agency refers to the ways in which individuals or groups of individuals use their capacities and power to act in a purposeful and meaningful way. Discussions on agency always include structure. In his theory of structuration, Anthony Giddens stresses the dichotomy between (micro) human agency and (macro) social structure, which are dialectically interlinked. He termed this mutual co-dependence ‘duality of structure’.¹⁵ More recent research follows a less dialectical approach, ‘regard[ing] social life less in terms of individual agency “reproducing” structure in any mechanical sense and more in terms of ongoing dynamic interrelations between actors’.¹⁶

This fluid and multifaceted balance between agency and structure makes it even more difficult to measure agency, since any given degree of agency varies in relation to several factors, such as how actively groups (or individuals) participate in performing an activity, and what impact that activity has on the environment. Also significant in this respect is whether they act deliberately, and whether they act for reasons of their own. Some are able to exercise a greater degree of agency than others, and some are able to exercise a greater degree of agency at certain times as opposed to other times.

Research on collective memory should not be an end in itself, and memory studies is more than a mere reception history. Thus, in order to examine memory as a phenomenon with agency, it makes sense to elaborate on agency through a consideration of the issue of power. Giddens, like Pierre Bourdieu before him and many others after him, reflected on the relation of agency and power. According to Giddens, action—any action—intervenes in world events and thus produce outcomes, but not necessarily the outcomes that were intended.¹⁷ Consequently, agency is understood here not simply as the leeway to act, but includes the notion of power. It refers to the agents’ ability to attain the envisioned or planned transformative process as a result of their action. Capability depends on social status as well as on ethnicity, gender, and other factors. Collective memory exercises agency when it has the capability to intervene in and alter social structures in the ways intended. The agency German Jewry exercised through collective memory and the commemoration of Mendelssohn included several of these aspects: a significant level of human intentionality, the manner in which memory and related cultural practices ‘acted on’ their environment, the messages they transmitted, and the resulting impact on individuals and on society.

¹⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkeley 1984, p. 9.

¹⁶ Anthony King, *The Structure of Social Theory*, London 2004, p. 230.

¹⁷ Giddens, p. 173.

II. CELEBRATING MENDELSSOHN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The tradition of commemorating Mendelssohn on significant anniversaries was not new. It was inaugurated a hundred years earlier in 1829, on the centenary of the philosopher's birth, when the secular commemoration of a historical figure was still something novel within Jewish and non-Jewish memorial culture alike.¹⁸ Immediately after his death, Mendelssohn became the 'Schutzheilige' or patron saint of German Jews.¹⁹ For maskilim—proponents of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment—Mendelssohn's life and work marked a transition from centuries of isolation to an opening up in relation to non-Jewish society. The German-Jewish desire for integration and acceptance, combined with Mendelssohn's status as an Enlightenment philosopher and leading figure of the Haskalah, and his allegedly exemplary life as a German and a Jew made him an important reference point in Jewish collective memory. Viewed through the lens of Pierre Nora's work, Mendelssohn came to be a Jewish 'lieu de mémoire'. According to Nora, a 'lieu de mémoire' could be 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.²⁰ Though not a physical space, a 'lieu de mémoire' is 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself'.²¹

The first Mendelssohn bicentenary celebration was initiated in 1829 by Reform Jews. They were among the avant-garde of European intellectuals, who sparked a 'centenary fever'—a 'wave of commemorations' of writers, painters, composers, and philosophers that swept across the continent in the nineteenth century and became the cornerstone of establishing middle-class national identities throughout Europe.²² George Mosse has emphasized the prominent role of 'nationalism as bourgeois religion', along with its celebrations and ceremonials, for achieving national integration.²³ Few German Jews at the time identified as Reform Jews, and the Mendelssohn commemoration began as a small-scale undertaking. In September 1829, a couple of hundred Jews gathered with some non-Jews for modest events in assembly halls, schools, and other secular locations in Dessau, Berlin, Hamburg,

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of early commemorations of Mendelssohn and their role in Jewish collective memory, see Martina Steer, *Moses Mendelssohn und seine Nachwelt. Eine Kulturgeschichte der jüdischen Erinnerung*, Göttingen 2019.

¹⁹ Alexander Altmann, 'Moses Mendelssohn as the Archetypal German Jew', in Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg (eds), *The Jewish Response to German Culture: From the Enlightenment to the Second World War*, Hanover 1985, pp. 17–31 (p. 18).

²⁰ Pierre Nora, 'From *Lieux de Mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*', in *Realms of Memory*, ed. by Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, tr. Arthur Goldhammer, vol. 1, New York 1996, pp. i–xxiv (p. xvii).

²¹ Nora, 'Between Memory and History', p. 7.

²² Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Fanning out from Shakespeare', in Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney (eds), *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever*, New York 2014, pp. 1–23 (p. 9).

²³ George Mosse, *Die Nationalisierung der Massen. Politische Symbolik und Massenbewegungen von den Befreiungskriegen bis zum Dritten Reich*, Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 91.

Prague, and several other German towns.²⁴ A lecture—subsequently published as a ‘Festschrift’ (commemorative publication)—was followed by a banquet, during which guests sang together and gave toasts.²⁵

Due to the absence of a German nation state, the commemorations primarily celebrated the poets, thinkers, musicians, and painters of an imaginary ‘Kulturnation’ or ‘cultural nation’. Thus, the Reform portrayal of Mendelssohn as an immaculate, humble ‘Bildungsbürger’ (member of the educated middle class) and the parallel disassociation from allegedly backward Polish Jewry was significant. In their efforts to integrate Mendelssohn into the German canon of ‘Dichter and Denker’ (‘poets and thinkers’), thereby connecting Jewish and German history, they not only pursued their integration into the emerging German nation and their emancipation, but also aimed to foster the embourgeoisement of German Jewry and to establish a German-Jewish unity founded on a modern Jewish collective memory.²⁶ Conversely, Orthodox Jews remembered Mendelssohn as the foremost proponent of modernization and assimilation, and did not participate in the anniversary celebrations.²⁷

Subsequent anniversaries in 1879 and 1886, marking Mendelssohn’s one hundred and fiftieth birthday and the centenary of his death respectively, mirrored the transformation of German Jewry. By 1879, the majority of German Jews identified with Reform Judaism and were members of the middle class, some even of the upper class. However, the rise of antisemitism deeply changed the perception of Mendelssohn and his commemoration. Honouring Mendelssohn as a German national writer but unwavering Jew, who had defended fellow Jews against discrimination, for example during the controversy about early burials in Mecklenburg-Schwerin in 1772, became paramount for their self-assertion in an increasingly hostile German (and European) setting. After extended celebrations, which took place in almost every German town with a Jewish community, Jewish and non-Jewish guests alike (including even representatives from the reigning House of Anhalt in Dessau) attended a service in one of the numerous, brand new, Moorish-style synagogues, symbols of Jewish middle-class pride.²⁸ This staging not only reflected the success of Reform Judaism, which had by that point achieved

²⁴ For example, Peter Beer, *Rede, gehalten am 8. September 1829, an die zu Ende des Schuljahres aus der Prager israelitischen Hauptschule austretenden Schüler, mit Beziehung auf die Feier des hundertjährigen Geburtstages Moses Mendelssohns*, Prague 1829.

²⁵ See Leopold Zunz, ‘Moses Mendelssohns hundertjähriger Geburtstag’, in *Haude- und Spenerschen Zeitung*, 19 September 1829, republished in Curatorium der Zunzstiftung (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, Berlin 1876, pp. 112–115.

²⁶ Christhard Hoffmann, ‘Constructing Jewish Modernity: Mendelssohn Jubilee Celebrations within German Jewry, 1829–1929’, in Rainer Liedtke and David Rechter (eds), *Towards Normality? Acculturation and Modern German Jewry*, Tübingen 2003, pp. 27–52 (p. 41).

²⁷ On the attitude of Orthodox Jewry towards Mendelssohn, see, for example, Shnayer Z. Leiman, ‘From the Pages of Tradition. R. Moses Schick: The Hatam Sofer’s Attitude towards Mendelssohn’s *Biuur*’, in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 24, no. 3 (1989), pp. 83–86.

²⁸ See, for example, *Die Feier des einhundertundfünfzigsten Geburtstages Moses Mendelssohn’s in seiner Geburtsstadt Dessau am 31. August 1879*, Dessau 1879.

inner-Jewish hegemony over Orthodox Judaism, but also demonstrated that German Jews wanted to be accepted and valued as Jews.²⁹

Antisemites were offended by this public demonstration of the successful upward social mobility and integration of Jews. This was apparent from public statements made in 1879, such as the infamous speech ‘Unsere Forderungen an das moderne Judentum’ (‘Our Demands to Modern Jewry’) by Prussian court chaplain Adolf Stoecker. In it, he belittled Mendelssohn as having been a kind person without ‘any radical influence on the development of humanity’.³⁰ According to him, the commemoration of Mendelssohn demonstrated that German Jews were disloyal to the German nation.

III. THE MENDELSSOHN BICENTENARY OF 1929

The commemoration of Mendelssohn reached its peak in 1929. This was by no means because the ideological antagonism between Liberal, Orthodox, Conservative, and Zionist Jews had dissolved in the face of real or imagined crises. On the contrary, the fragmentation of German Jewry continued during the interwar years, and each of the camps followed a distinct strategy to tackle antisemitism, demographic decline, assimilation, and religious indifference. In keeping with the spirit of the times, more and more Jews, like non-Jews, questioned the ideal of the Enlightenment. They deployed illiberal ideologies to redefine what it meant to be Jewish. Nationalistic, ethnic, and cultural definitions superseded the concept of Judaism as a mere denomination. Measuring Mendelssohn against these, many Jews, such as historian Selma Stern-Täubler, concluded that his thinking lacked relevance for the inevitable reorientation of Judaism, because it was too firmly rooted in the Enlightenment period.³¹

Fritz Bamberger, one of the editors of the jubilee edition of Mendelssohn’s writings, and thus hardly to be suspected of undervaluing his intellectual legacy, explained the discrepancy between the relativizing of the significance of his thinking for contemporaries within Jewish circles on the one hand, and the extreme effort of commemorating an allegedly negligible figure from the past on the other.³² He argued that ‘Mendelssohn’s effect on Judaism [...] was of a practical, personal nature’.³³ Other Liberals and Zionists argued in a similar fashion.³⁴ Baeck even went further. He

²⁹ Deutsch-Israelitischer Gemeindebund (ed.), *Lessing-Mendelssohn-Gedenkbuch. Zur hundertfünfzigjährigen Geburtsfeier von Gotthold Ephraim Lessing und Moses Mendelssohn, sowie zur Säcularfeier von Lessing’s ‘Nathan’*, Leipzig 1879.

³⁰ Adolf Stoecker, *Das moderne Judentum in Deutschland. Erste Rede*, Berlin 1880, p. 6.

³¹ Selma Stern-Täubler, ‘Zeitbild vom Judentum’, *C.V.-Zeitung*, vol. 7, no. 35, 30 August 1929, p. 456.

³² On the deconstruction of Mendelssohn, see Michael Brenner, ‘The Construction and Deconstruction of a Jewish Hero: Moses Mendelssohn’s Afterlife in Early-Twentieth-Century Germany’, in Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner (eds), *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World*, Detroit 2008, pp. 274–289; Hoffmann, ‘Constructing Jewish Modernity’, pp. 48–50.

³³ Fritz Bamberger, ‘Mendelssohns Begriff vom Judentum’, *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, vol. 10, 1929, pp. 4–19 (p. 19).

³⁴ See, for example, Arthur Eloesser, ‘Moses Mendelssohns 200. Geburtstag. Die Gestalt’, *Das Unterhaltungsblatt*, no. 208, in *Vossische Zeitung*, no. 420, 6 September 1929; Emanuel bin Gorion,

claimed that Mendelssohn's life was important as a metaphor, as a memory that should serve as a signpost for life as an observant Jew living and participating in a non-Jewish environment.³⁵

Zionists who tended to take a critical stance towards Mendelssohn, especially towards his dissident children, were also ambivalent. They acknowledged that Mendelssohn had convinced Jews 'that one could embrace the spirit of the modern age and its way of life without giving up the spirit and life of Judaism', and proved to Christians 'that one could be and remain a Jew, and still be a man of culture in the highest sense'.³⁶ Accordingly, the Zionist press reported extensively and benevolently on the celebrations in Berlin and Dessau. Orthodox Judaism, in contrast and unsurprisingly, objected and lamented that where Mendelssohn had 'rejuvenated and Germanized, [...] not much of Judaism remained'.³⁷

In 1929, inner-Jewish rifts shaped the perception of Mendelssohn, rendering him a controversial 'lieu de mémoire' within German Jewry. The analysis of his person was more sophisticated, fact-based, and multifaceted. In short, it was more enlightened than ever before. Paradoxically, some agents commemorating Mendelssohn used the Enlightenment principle of rationality to pronounce the ideals of the Enlightenment as represented by Mendelssohn and the Haskalah dead. Nevertheless, as the Zionist Rabbi Jehuda Bergmann concluded in his article for the *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin* (Community Newspaper of the Jewish Community in Berlin), Jews 'think with indelible gratitude of Mendelssohn's work and his contribution, [...] honour his thoughts, and bless his memory'.³⁸

Despite the verdict on Mendelssohn's insignificance or even evil influence, Jews from all camps, Zionists in particular, joined in organizing his public commemoration. Although the Zionist anti-liberal *Jüdische Volkspartei* (Jewish People's Party) held the majority in the representative assembly of the Jewish community of Berlin, the community nonetheless organized the aforementioned bicentenary celebration in the Sing-Akademie, and initiated the equally prominent opening of the Mendelssohn exhibition in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek. Oscar Wassermann, president of Keren Hayesod, the principal fundraising organization for Palestine, participated in the festivities in Dessau, as did Moritz Sobernheim. Several editors of the jubilee edition of Mendelssohn's writings, such as Simon Rawidowicz and Haim Borodianski, were involved in the Zionist movement. Badt-Strauss, who published extensively on Mendelssohn and the celebrations, identified as Orthodox, Zionist,

'Moses Mendelssohn. Geboren am 6. September 1729', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, vol. 73, 5 September 1929; Jehuda Bergmann, 'Moses Mendelssohn und die Berliner Jüdische Gemeinde', *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin*, vol. 19, no. 9, 1929, pp. 434–438 (p. 436).

³⁵ Baeck, *Mendelssohn Gedenkfeier*, p. 14.

³⁶ Israel Auerbach, 'Moses Mendelssohn zur 200. Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages am 6. September 1929', *Jüdische Rundschau*, vol. 34, no. 70, 6 September 1929, p. 459.

³⁷ Joseph Wohlgenuth, 'Moses Mendelssohn und das thora-treue Judentum', in *Jeschurun*, 16, no. 7–8 (1929), pp. 321–340 (p. 339).

³⁸ Bergmann, 'Moses Mendelssohn und die Berliner Jüdische Gemeinde', p. 438.

and feminist. Their joint efforts turned the jubilee into a project which was inclusive, integrating Jews regardless of their ideological or religious leanings.

Jews whose religious or ideological affiliations did not suggest great sympathy for the Enlightenment philosopher and his ideas paid tribute to him on his bicentenary, and their nuanced attitudes towards him reflected the ambivalent location of German Jewry between antisemitic hostility and socio-economic achievement. They were not simply Zionists or Orthodox, but also pursued careers in other Jewish organizations and in German society. There was no part of Jewish society without a connection to the non-Jewish world. Wassermann, for example, was a board member of the Verein zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Association for the Foundation and Maintenance of an Academy for the Science of Judaism) and served as a spokesman on the board of Deutsche Bank. Sobernheim was a high-ranking diplomat and president of the Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums. Badt-Strauss was one of the most prolific contributors to the German feuilleton. Their unwavering Jewish identity combined with their professional and cultural ambition in German society to embody the paradigmatic German Jew, one who adhered to Judaism and was at the same time a loyal citizen, a quality which most Jews attributed to Mendelssohn, the 'first German Jew'.³⁹ Consequently, this became the lowest common denominator of the memory of Mendelssohn upon which they could agree, albeit some perhaps with clenched teeth.

Given the equivocal signals from Weimar society, it seemed strategically smart to stress Mendelssohn's dual existence as a German and a Jew. At a time when that concept was increasingly coming under siege and antisemites were questioning whether Jews belonged to the German nation, German Jews, discordant as they were, stood together and instrumentalized their most prominent (though controversial) 'lieu de mémoire' in the dispute over Germany's collective memory, and consequently over their position in the nation.⁴⁰

The jubilee celebrations were integrative as never before in another respect as well. In 1929, German Jewry commanded enough financial resources and still had enough cultural capital—to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu—to organize magnificent events and grand exhibitions in prominent places, and to gather not only the Jewish but also the non-Jewish elite of the Weimar Republic to commemorate Mendelssohn. Although the aforementioned event in Berlin offers impressive evidence of Jewish self-confidence, it is also worth taking a closer look at the central bicentenary celebration in Dessau, which was held over three days. It was only there, in Mendelssohn's birthplace, that Jewish and non-Jewish institutions—the

³⁹ Benno Jacob, 'Der erste deutsche Jude', *C.V.-Zeitung*, vol. 8, no 35, 30 August 1929, p. 461.

⁴⁰ For more information on how non-Jews systematically excluded Jews from German collective memory, e.g. the memory of the First World War, see Tim Grady, *The German-Jewish Soldiers of the First World War in History and Memory*, Liverpool 2011.

Jewish community of Dessau, the state of Anhalt, and the city of Dessau—worked together to organize festivities.⁴¹

The correspondent of the *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig* (Community Newsletter of the Jewish Religious Community in Leipzig) described the atmosphere in Dessau more positively than Badt-Strauss had for the *Vossische Zeitung*:

The public buildings are resplendent with flags. In the evening, the town hall glows in a flood of light from the spotlights: the silvery jets of fountains scattered throughout the city sparkle into the darkness. For three whole days, the city has dedicated itself to honouring its great son: it does honour to itself with a celebration above which the spirit of the ‘Weltweise’ Mendelssohn [sic] visibly hovers.⁴²

The marathon of events began with a performance of *Nathan der Weise* in Dessau’s Friedrich-Theater on 6 September, notably a Friday evening, accompanied by an Arnold Zweig prologue and Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s *Sommernachtstraum*. Saturday morning continued with a service in the local synagogue, with both Jewish and non-Jewish guests of honour, including members of the Mendelssohn family from Berlin, elected political representatives such as Heinrich Deist, the prime minister of Anhalt, and Richard Paulick, the state president, along with delegates from the Protestant and Catholic churches, business leaders, and university professors. Representatives of Jewish organizations such as the Jewish community of Berlin, the Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith), the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute for Jewish Studies), the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, and the Keren Hayesod also participated. In the afternoon, the opening of the Mendelssohn exhibition at the Anhalt Art Gallery was followed by a tea party with numerous addresses by Jewish dignitaries, and an evening concert in the Friedrich-Theater with music by Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

On Sunday morning, the celebrations continued. After a welcome address from Kurt Müller, former Anhalt minister of state, and music by Bach and Beethoven, Ismar Elbogen spoke about Mendelssohn’s most important writings and their significance for modern Judaism, the German language, and Enlightenment philosophy. The dignitaries then laid wreaths at the Mendelssohn monument and went on an excursion to the beautiful Wörlitz Park, where Anhalt minister (this time Ernst Weber) and another tea awaited them. The facts that the flagship journal for the study of Judaism, the *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* (Journal for the History of Jews in Germany) published all of the speeches given at the Dessau celebration, and the Office of the Lord Mayor of Dessau, Fritz Hesse, compiled a

⁴¹ The event cost 3,573.55 Reichsmark. The Jewish community had to pay 256 Reichsmark to the state of Anhalt. State Archive Sachsen-Anhalt, Dessau, LAsA, De, Stami DE3, Nr. 2489.

⁴² G. C., ‘Mendelssohn-Tage in Dessau’, *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig*, vol. 5, no. 37, 1929, p. 3. For another account of the event, see Max Freudenthal, ‘Mendelssohnfeier in Dessau’, *Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung*, vol. 5, no. 18, 1929, pp. 292–293. The term ‘Weltweise’ means ‘philosopher’, but its literal meaning is ‘one who is world-wise’.

photo album of the three-day event demonstrate how significant and unique the collaboration was for Jews and non-Jews alike.⁴³ According to Badt-Strauss, Mendelssohn himself would have been very satisfied with the celebrations.⁴⁴

It was in Dessau that Lord Mayor Hesse announced the establishment of the Moses Mendelssohn Stiftung zur Förderung der Geisteswissenschaften (Moses Mendelssohn Foundation for the Promotion of the Humanities) to fund independent research and to award grants to gifted but destitute students, regardless of their faith.⁴⁵ Franz von Mendelssohn, the patriarch of the Mendelssohn family, who was a banker, member of the general council of the Reichsbank (Germany's national bank), and president of the Deutscher Industrie- und Handelskammertag (Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce) endowed the foundation with 250,000 Reichsmark. Patronage was common among wealthy German families and, aside from a desire for recognition, was also motivated by a desire to exert societal influence that went beyond political participation.⁴⁶ At a time when there was little funding for independent research and the sciences were under political pressure, the Mendelssohn Stiftung was intended, as Hesse explained, to serve as a form of antipode, helping to guarantee freedom of research.⁴⁷ Although the Mendelssohn family had been Protestant for three or four generations by this point, Franz von Mendelssohn entrusted the Jewish communities of Berlin and Dessau with the administration of the foundation in order to prevent malpractice by right-wing forces. Furthermore, due to von Mendelssohn's network and social standing, they were able to secure an illustrious group of intellectuals to serve on the foundation's board of trustees, among them Albert Einstein, architect Walter Gropius, and Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack, who also acted as liberal watchdogs.

The first project funded by the Mendelssohn Stiftung was the 'Jubiläumsausgabe' or jubilee edition of Mendelssohn's collected writings, one of the most ambitious projects in the field of researching Judaism.⁴⁸ The first volume was presented by the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums on 16 September, a couple of days after the Dessau celebration, when the Mendelssohn exhibition opened at the Berlin Staatsbibliothek. German universities did not recognise the study of Judaism as an academic discipline or Mendelssohn as an important German philosopher of the Enlightenment. Thus the symbolism of presenting Mendelssohn's collected writings in a space as prominent as the state library cannot be overestimated. For German

⁴³ *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, 1, no. 3 (1929); City Archive Dessau, Hesse 74.

⁴⁴ Bertha Badt-Strauss, 'Mendelssohn-Feier in Dessau', in *Jüdische Rundschau*, vol. 34, no. 72, 13 September 1929, p. 478.

⁴⁵ Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, I. HA Rep 92 Schmidt-Ott Nr. C36, G; State Library of Berlin, Mendelssohn Archiv, MA Depos., MG Nachl. 7/10 (1–2).

⁴⁶ Philipp Sarasin, 'Stiften und Schenken in Basel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Überlegungen zur Erforschung des bürgerlichen Mäzenatentums', in Jürgen Kocka and Manuel Frey (eds), *Bürgerkultur und Mäzenatentum im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1998, pp. 192–211 (pp. 201–202).

⁴⁷ 'Dem Andenken Moses Mendelssohns. Reden bei der Mendelssohn-Feier der Stadt Dessau am 8. Sept. 1929', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, 1, no. 3 (1929), pp. 177–191 (p. 177).

⁴⁸ Michah Gottlieb, 'Publishing the Moses Mendelssohn Jubiläumsausgabe in Weimar and Nazi Germany', in *LBI Year Book*, 53 (2008), pp. 57–75.

Jews, Mendelssohn was one of Germany's most eminent thinkers and hence deserved an academic edition of his complete works like Goethe's or Kant's.⁴⁹ By presenting the Jubiläumsausgabe in the intellectual heart of Berlin, if not the German Reich, and holding celebrations in other prominent places, with the political, social, economic, and cultural elite of the Weimar Republic in attendance, they claimed a place for Mendelssohn in the German nation's intellectual hall of fame.

On the surface, it may seem paradoxical that Elbogen and his collaborators began this endeavour at a time when Enlightenment ideas were losing influence and even Jews doubted the relevance of Mendelssohn's writings for Judaism. Unlike earlier editions, this one included the Hebrew writings of Mendelssohn, which had been deliberately ignored in previous editions in order to hide Mendelssohn's Jewishness and to emphasize his merits as a German writer.⁵⁰ By 1929, German Jews were no longer downplaying Mendelssohn's Jewishness, and the editors of the jubilee edition made it clear that Mendelssohn embodied 'the noblest forces of the German Enlightenment', paving the way for the ideal of humanism and leading Jews into the 'world of modern culture', a new epoch of Jewish history.⁵¹ As Simon Rawidowicz, one of its editors, pointed out in the Zionist journal *Ha-Tequfah*, the project aimed to revive Enlightenment values and to restore reason to German society.⁵² While Jews from all ideological and religious camps questioned Mendelssohn's importance for the development of Judaism in difficult times, his status as a figure of the Enlightenment enabled them to continue trusting him as a German-Jewish cultural hero whose memory could have a positive, 'enlightened' influence on their non-Jewish environment.

In summary, the festivities of 1929, which were attended by both the Jewish and non-Jewish liberal elite of the Weimar Republic, can be characterized as first-rate social events. Considered alongside the countless articles and publications on Mendelssohn which were published in 1929, they demonstrate that German Jews had enough agency, and enough cultural capital and financial resources to organize an extremely elaborate commemoration for the bicentenary of Mendelssohn's birth. They worked in cooperation with the state's most prestigious cultural institutions, staged the events in a generous fashion, and those they invited—even the highest ranking government officials—generally accepted. In the context of the strong sense of crisis shared by the majority of German Jews at this time, it is clear how much the Mendelssohn jubilee meant to them: they were fully aware of the importance of the politics of memory and its potential to influence society. Although they themselves perceived Mendelssohn as a controversial figure, in their eyes he was the best

⁴⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethes Werke*, vols. 1–143, Weimar 1887–; Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vols. 1–22, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, vol. 23, and Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, vol. 24–, Berlin 1900–.

⁵⁰ David Sorkin, 'The Mendelssohn Myth and Its Method', in *New German Critique*, no. 77 (1999), pp. 7–28.

⁵¹ *Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 1, p. ix.

⁵² Simon Rawidowicz, 'Moses Mendelssohn', in *Ha-Tequfah*, 12, no. 25 (1929), pp. 498–520 (p. 500).

representative of what they sought to defend: their existence as loyal Germans and devoted Jews.

One could argue that the celebrations in Berlin, Dessau, and other German cities were only attended by several hundred individuals, an exclusive circle of invited guests. All of them, moreover, belonged to the Weimar Republic's liberal political, economic, or cultural elite, and thus comprised only a tiny portion of German society. Nevertheless, the Mendelssohn anniversary received extensive coverage in both the national and international Jewish and non-Jewish press. Anyone who was interested could read about it. People could also visit the Mendelssohn exhibitions in Berlin, Dessau, and Frankfurt am Main, which conveyed a positive image of Judaism and its close ties to German culture. These displayed Jewish artefacts and ritual objects such as menorahs and Torah scrolls from Mendelssohn's time, and presented him as a prominent figure in Frederician intellectual circles.⁵³ Anyone who wished to could join the community of those who were commemorating Mendelssohn. Radio programmes had a similar effect. The philosopher David Baumgardt spoke on Funk-Stunde Berlin (Public Radio Berlin) about the *Phädon* and its significance for German philosophy, while Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (Central German Broadcasting) broadcast the Mendelssohn festivities in Dessau.⁵⁴ It is somehow comforting to imagine people gathered around one of the by then four million radio sets in Germany, listening to Baumgardt's sensible voice.⁵⁵

Notwithstanding those efforts, the agency of Jewish memory had reached its limits. What at first sight appears to have been an unparalleled joint venture between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans to honour Mendelssohn as a German intellectual giant turned out to be an almost exclusively Jewish endeavour. Jews organised the celebrations. As head librarians, they curated the exhibitions. With very few exceptions, they gave the keynote lectures and wrote the books and articles on Mendelssohn. As directors, they staged *Nathan der Weise* at theatres. Aside from several opening remarks stressing the importance of tolerance and organizational support, even sympathetic non-Jews demonstrated little imagination regarding what Mendelssohn might have meant to them. In general, the German public willingly provided the stage and audience for the Mendelssohn bicentenary events, but very little beyond that. They participated in the commemoration not first and foremost because of Mendelssohn and their concerns about the situation of Jews in Germany, but because of a general fear of illiberal forces.

German Jews succeeded in integrating non-Jews into the community of people who commemorated Mendelssohn, and to some extent they also managed to get non-Jews to actively participate in the commemoration. What they did not accomplish was the successful introduction of Mendelssohn into the pantheon of German 'Dichter und Denker'. Non-Jews had demonstrated enthusiasm for Mendelssohn

⁵³ See, for example, Ludwig Grote and Paul Wahl (eds), *Führer durch die Moses Mendelssohn Gedächtnis-Ausstellung*, Dessau 1929.

⁵⁴ 'Radio Funk am Abend', *Der Abend*, vol. 4, no. 41, 1929, p. 8; Frauener to Staatsministerium Dessau, 24 June 1929, State Archive Sachsen-Anhalt, Dessau, LASA, DE, Stami DE 3, Nr. 2459.

⁵⁵ Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft mbH (ed.), *Rundfunk-Jahrbuch 1932*, Berlin 1933, p. 139.

shortly after his death, at a time when the image of this important Enlightenment philosopher was still recent. Later intellectual movements, starting with Romanticism, dismissed him as a ‘Populärphilosoph’—a popularizer of philosophical thought—who was of minor importance. At the end of the nineteenth century, antisemites considered him the starting point of a process they feared:⁵⁶ with Mendelssohn, they claimed, Jews had become like non-Jews—and were thus indistinguishable from them.⁵⁷ Even the impressive cult of Mendelssohn could not mask that lack of appreciation for Mendelssohn as an important philosopher of the Enlightenment.

IV. THE LIMITS OF AGENCY

In 1929, there were no antisemitic pamphlets that openly denounced Mendelssohn. Nevertheless, Mendelssohn was insignificant as a positive role model within German collective memory. A list of historical figures considered important enough to be commemorated with academic jubilee celebrations during the Weimar years included Beethoven, Kant, Dürer, Luther, Klopstock, Dante, and Lessing, but neither Mendelssohn nor, for example, Spinoza. The two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Spinoza’s birth and the bicentenary of his death fell in 1927 and 1932 respectively.⁵⁸

Especially, the celebrations for the bicentenary of the birth of Lessing, Mendelssohn’s close friend and collaborator, which were held in January 1929, demonstrate this vacuity and the limits of Jewish agency to secure a place for Mendelssohn in the German pantheon. Lessing had played an important role in the memory of Mendelssohn from the outset. As Mendelssohn’s friend, mentor, and interlocutor he witnessed Mendelssohn’s integration into German culture and played a key part in his commemoration.⁵⁹ Moreover, Jews participated in the commemoration of Lessing, and in January 1929, numerous Jewish organizations—Liberal, Conservative, Orthodox, and Zionist—joined in honouring the dramatist.⁶⁰ Some, such as the Deutsch-Israelitische Gemeinde (German-Israelite Community) and the three B’nai B’rith lodges in Hamburg which invited Ernst Cassirer as speaker, even organized anniversary celebrations.⁶¹ For them, the

⁵⁶ Uffa Jensen, *Gebildete Doppelgänger. Bürgerliche Juden und Protestanten im 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2005, pp. 38–39.

⁵⁷ For example, Wilhelm Marr, *Vom jüdischen Kriegsschauplatz*, Bern 1879, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Markus Drüding, *Akademische Jubelfeiern. Eine geschichtskulturelle Analyse der Universitätsjubiläen in Göttingen, Leipzig, Münster und Rostock (1919–1969)*, Münster 2014, p. 96. On the commemoration of Spinoza in the Weimar Republic, see David Wertheim, *Salvation through Spinoza: A Study of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, Leiden 2011.

⁵⁹ For example, Deutsch-Israelitischer Gemeindebund (ed.), *Lessing–Mendelssohn–Gedenkbuch. Zur hundertfünfzigjährigen Geburtsfeier von Gotthold Ephraim Lessing und Moses Mendelssohn, sowie zur Säcularfeier von Lessing’s ‘Nathan’*, Leipzig 1879.

⁶⁰ For example, Robert Weltsch, ‘Zum 200. Geburtstag G. E. Lessings’, *Jüdische Rundschau*, vol. 34, no. 11, 22 January 1929, p. 35; special edition of the *C.V.-Zeitung*, vol. 8, no. 3, 18 January 1929.

⁶¹ Ernst Cassirer, ‘Die Idee der Religion bei Lessing und Mendelssohn’, in *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (ed.), *Festgabe zum zehnjährigen Bestehen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. 1919–1929*, Berlin 1929, pp. 22–41.

friendship between Lessing and Mendelssohn symbolized a successful German-Jewish symbiosis. Naturally, this friendship was indispensable within Jewish collective memory.

The majority of the greater German public, however, had no place for Mendelssohn in their memory of Lessing. As a 'national effort', Lessing's anniversary aimed to heal the national trauma of the First World War in the wake of Germany's humiliating war experience.⁶² An extreme example of this ignorance was the *Buch des Goethe-Lessing-Jahres 1929* (Book of the Goethe-Lessing Year, 1929), edited by Paul von Hindenburg, the president of the Reich, which drew a connection between Lessing's anniversary and that of the premiere of Goethe's *Faust* in Braunschweig one hundred years earlier.⁶³ Most of the contributors, such as Julius Petersen, Carl Niessen, and Karl Hoppe, belonged to the nationalist camp, and became protagonists of National Socialist cultural politics after 1933. They celebrated Lessing as the martial 'pioneer of the highest German art' and portrayed him as the Faustian 'troubled German man'.⁶⁴ The publication made no comment on the relationship between Lessing and Mendelssohn, or on *Nathan* or the play's related message of tolerance and humanity.

That said, most non-Jewish intellectuals who commemorated Lessing did indeed express their concerns about irreconcilable ideological differences and social disruptions by emphasizing Lessing's humanism and tolerance. In his famous speech at the Lessing celebration held by the Preußische Akademie der Künste (Prussian Academy of Arts), Thomas Mann addressed the dangers of fascism more explicitly than anyone else. However, like others who commemorated Lessing, he failed to mention that Lessing had been concerned with what would have been later referred to as the 'Judenfrage' ('Jewish question'), or the situation of Jews in a predominantly non-Jewish society; nor did he make reference to *Nathan*.⁶⁵

This is not to suggest, of course, that those who did not elaborate on the friendship between Lessing and Mendelssohn in speeches and writings on the former were antisemites. Mann had himself married into a Jewish family. But clearly, antisemitism was not their highest priority when defending a liberal, tolerant, and democratic society. That more and more Jews did not intend to trade in their Jewishness in order to be accepted as Germans, especially after the war, but wished to be recognized as Jews and Germans, had likely escaped their notice. Hence, Mendelssohn was absent in their memory of Lessing because they had no use for him, not even when fighting intolerance.

Following Mendelssohn's death, German Jews commemorated Mendelssohn as a means of influencing the thoughts and actions of Jews and non-Jews in various ways. In 1929, they instrumentalized the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth to

⁶² Wilfried Barner, *Pioniere, Schulen, Pluralismus. Studien zur Geschichte und Theorie der Literaturwissenschaft*, Tübingen 1997, pp. 118–119.

⁶³ Paul von Hindenburg (ed.), *Das Buch des Goethe-Lessing-Jahres 1929*, Braunschweig 1929.

⁶⁴ Paul Trautmann, 'Zum Geleit', in von Hindenburg, pp. xi–xii.

⁶⁵ Thomas Mann, 'Rede über Lessing', in Herzmann Kurzke und Stephan Stachorski (eds), *Thomas Mann. Ein Appell an die Vernunft 1926–1933, Essays*, vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 105–121.

reassure themselves and others that they as Jews were indeed part of the German nation. There can be no doubt that the spectacular celebrations for Mendelssohn demonstrated their successful social and economic achievements within and for German society. In that respect they certainly exerted agency through the commemoration of their most prominent 'lieu de mémoire'. However, the ongoing absence of Mendelssohn from the accepted canon of important German poets and thinkers demonstrated the limits of that very same agency. German Jews failed to secure a place for Mendelssohn, Jewish history, and consequently for themselves in the cultural imaginary of the German nation.