

# MENDELSSOHN

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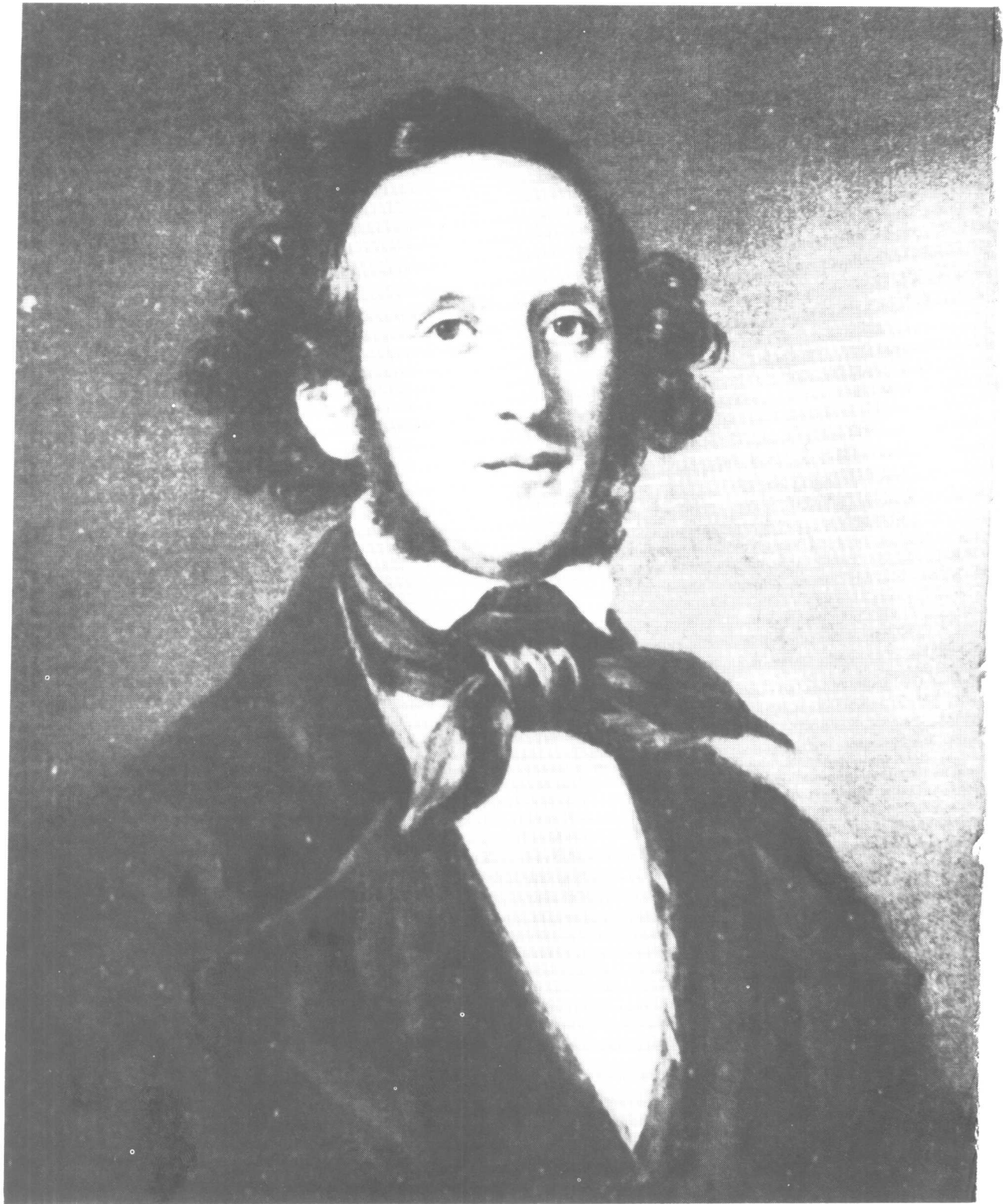
his life and times

MOZELLE MOSHANSKY



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## **Mendelssohn: his life and times**

# MENDELSSOHN

his life and times

*Mozelle Moshansky*



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For my Father,  
and to the memory of my Mother

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# Chapter 1

## Beginnings

'They are an ancient people, a famous people, an enduring people, and a people who in the end have generally attained their objects. I cannot help remembering that the Jews have outlived Assyrian Kings, Egyptian Pharaohs, Roman Caesars and Arabian Caliphs' — DISRAELI

When, on 4 November, 1847, worn out by care and overwork, Felix Mendelssohn died, the world of music was stunned.

At thirty-eight, Germany's prince of music, this 'modest and simple man', one of the century's brightest and most attractive stars, was no more.

In Leipzig, where he died, a city mourned. 'An awful stillness prevails', wrote an English student at the Conservatory, 'we feel as if the King were dead'. Three days later, the Paulinekirche, draped in black, saw the first of many services to be held throughout Germany. The Berlin *Staatszeitung* reported:

Mendelssohn's body was brought to church, preceded by a band of wind instruments playing Beethoven's *Funeral March*; the pallbearers were Moscheles, David, Hauptmann and Gade.\*

The professors of the Conservatory, with Mendelssohn's brother as chief mourner, and several guilds and societies from Leipzig and Dresden, followed the coffin. After the pastor's funeral oration, an organ prelude and chorales from *Sr. Paul* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* were played by the orchestra under Gade's and David's direction. During the service, the coffin remained open, and the painters Bendemann, Hübner and Richard made drawings of the great man with the wealth of laurel upon his brow.

At eight the same evening, a torchlit procession upwards of a thousand people bore the coffin to the railway station for its journey to Berlin. At ten, the train left, halting at Köthen, Dessau and Halle, being met at each stop by men and women come to pay tribute to the foremost German musician of the day. At seven the next morning, the Prussian capital came into view:

There the coffin, adorned by ivy leaves and a large wreath of laurel, was carried on a hearse drawn by six horses draped in black to the cemetery of Holy Trinity Church. Thousands followed the bier, and Beethoven's *Funeral March* was again played. Clergymen and other friends of the deceased pronounced orations at the grave, and a choir of six hundred sang a hymn by Gröber, *Christ the Resurrection*.

\* Schumann and Julius Reitz were also there.

Felix Mendelssohn. After  
the oil painting by  
William von Schadow,  
1835.

'It is impossible to describe the mournful scene', the *Staatszeitung* concluded, 'the men threw earth, and the women and children flowers, on the coffin when it was finally lowered into the grave. Mendelssohn sleeps near that beloved sister whose death so fatally affected him'.

To Karl Klingemann, Felix's brother, Paul, wrote, 'By Fanny's death, our family was shattered (*zerstört*); by Felix's, it is annihilated (*vernichtet*).

As a mark of respect, a concert scheduled at the Leipzig *Gewandhaus* (where Mendelssohn had been music director) was cancelled. But on 14 November, the Viennese premiere of *Elijah* went ahead, the music stands draped in black, the singers dressed in black. With full Viennese pomp, there lay on the conductor's desk a score and laurel wreath. But no one stood there. The performance was instead directed from a lower dais by the chorus master.

Across the channel, England's grief was no less sharp. Pre-occupied with the Irish famine and the violence stemming from it, Queen Victoria still found time with Prince Albert to send to Mendelssohn's widow, Cécile, a more than usually heartfelt message. An even keener appreciation of the Queen's distress is to be found in her diary:

We were horrified, astounded and distressed to read in the papers of the death of Mendelssohn, the greatest musical genius since Mozart, & the most amiable man. He was quite worshipped by those who knew him intimately, & we have so much appreciated and admired his wonderfully beautiful compositions. We liked & esteemed the excellent man & looked up to & revered the wonderful genius, & the great mind, which I fear were too much for the frail delicate body. With it all he was so modest and simple. To feel when one is playing his beautiful music, that he is no more...

Moses Mendelssohn.  
Felix's grandfather,  
philosopher and champion  
of Jewish emancipation.

Of Mendelssohn's superlative gifts, there can be no doubt. At nine, he showed himself a pianist of altogether unusual accomplishment. At ten, he was a precociously talented composer, at sixteen one of genius.

Concurrently, he developed talents that ranged over a multitude of disciplines. Playing violin and organ, sketching with ink or charcoal, painting with watercolours, all this and more he mastered without effort.

A sharp-eyed correspondent, he was at twelve a letter-writer of insight and energy (he once wrote twenty-seven letters, long detailed letters, in a single day). Books he read continuously and came back for more. At twenty-one, two undisputed masterpieces behind him, he was in the forefront of the Bach revival, conducting the first performance in a century of the *St. Matthew Passion*.

As a traveller he was indefatigable, climbing mountains, traversing valleys and fording streams. Soon the most sought after musician of the age, he was eulogised wherever he went. Handsome, charming and urbane, he became a celebrity among celebrities. People everywhere capitulated to his kindness and sincerity. Women adored him. Men admired him.

Felix Mendelssohn was, moreover, rich; after his father's death hugely so. Son of a wealthy banker, he was born to greater comfort and good fortune than any other composer. From the start, all the good things in life were poured out for him. Clothes, music paper, writing materials, all were of the finest. If Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn expected much from their children, their material well-being was assured.

As a result, it is easy to forget that it had not always been so. The Mendelssohn's riches were all newly acquired. Felix's grandfather Moses, 'the son of Mendel' from the small town of Dessau on the banks of the Elbe, came from very different circumstances. Only with difficulty, hunchbacked and undernourished as he was, had he survived a childhood of poverty and deprivation. So determined was he to make a better life, that at fourteen he left home to tramp the eighty or so dusty miles to Berlin, capital of Imperial Prussia, there to seek fame and fortune.

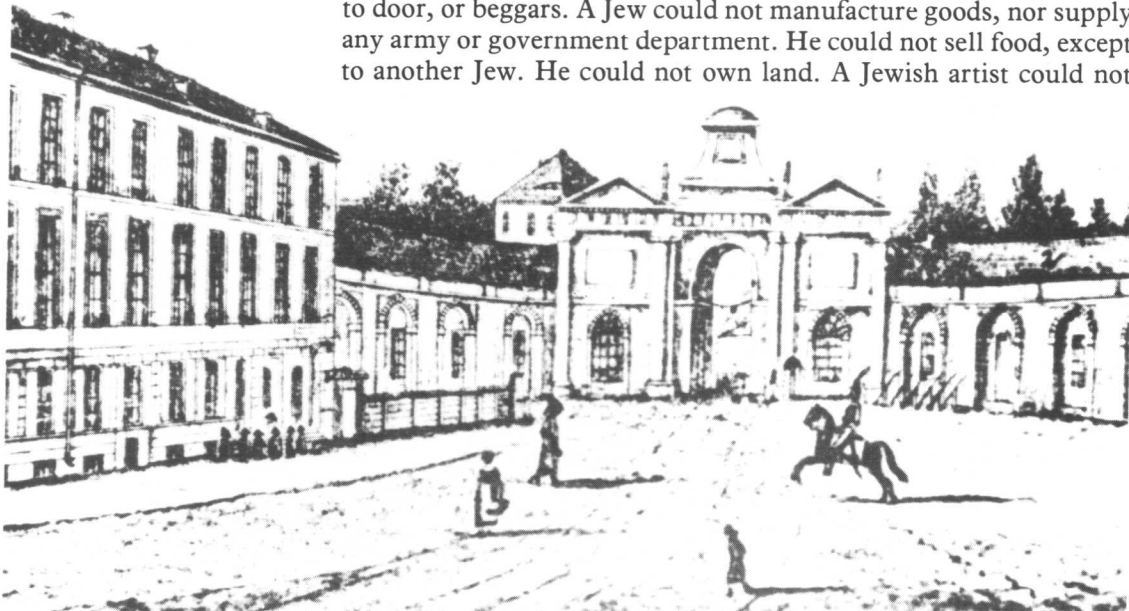
As he approached the city, he would have made for the Rosenthaler Gate. This he would have done because he was a Jew, and the Rosenthaler the only gate by which a Jew might enter the city. It is said that when the guard came to record the day's events, he wrote:

Today there passed through Rosenthaler Gate, six oxen, seven pigs, one Jew.

Apocryphal or not, it hardly matters. At the time, life for Jews all over Europe was hard. In the various German states, they enjoyed few legal rights, living instead under a battery of laws and edicts designed especially to humiliate them.

There were restrictions on where a Jew might live and what kind of work he might do. Disbarred from all but a few professions, most were compelled to become peddlars, hawking their wares from door to door, or beggars. A Jew could not manufacture goods, nor supply any army or government department. He could not sell food, except to another Jew. He could not own land. A Jewish artist could not

Rosenthaler Gate



become a court portrait painter. If he had musical ability, he was forbidden to teach in any school, save those for Jews. If he needed clothes, he could buy them only at stipulated hours, and had no redress for faulty goods.

Taxes of various kinds were heaped upon him. *Leibzoll*, or 'body tax', extorted from Jewish travellers protection money to ensure their 'safety' on the road. Another, *kalendargeld*, levied a charge for using the Hebrew rather than the Gregorian calendar. In Austria, a 'light tax' was imposed for the lighting of candles on the Sabbath and Holy Days. How this was collected remains a mystery.

In Prussia, ruled by the gifted but irascible Frederick the Great, every Jew was compelled to celebrate his marriage (for which a permit was needed) by purchasing from the royal china factory in Berlin a set of rejects. As a result, Moses Mendelssohn became, on his wedding day, reluctant owner of twenty china monkeys.

Jews, above all, were condemned to live in ghettos. Even in so relatively enlightened a province as the Cologne Electorate, ruled by bishops sitting in Bonn, Jews were obliged to live in a tiny, squalid sidestreet (the *Judengasse*) as late as 1770, when Beethoven was born.

In Frankfurt, the young Goethe often visited the Jewish quarter, watching the street life and flirting with the pretty Jewish girls. Colonel John Trumbull, the American artist, gives on the other hand a less rosy picture of the same district. The *Judengasse*, Trumbull records, was:

...a very narrow street or rather lane, impassable for carriages with the houses very lofty, old-fashioned, and filthy, not more than a quarter of a mile long — no cross avenue or alley, and a strong gate at each end, carefully closed and secured at tattoo-beat, after which no one is allowed to go out or enter and whoever is found out of the quarter after this time is secured by the city guard and confined. This quarter is said to contain ten thousand of this miserable people, how such a number can exist in such a narrow space is almost incredible, yet (at one of the entrance gates) I saw them crowded together in filth and wretchedness, calculated to generate disease. And how were they to escape from fire after the only two avenues were closed for the night?

When popular feeling ran high, even their lives were in danger. Well could a Jew speak of an 'Isaak, may his light continue to shine', or a 'Rebecka, may her life go on'. Survival was hardly assured, the future clouded with uncertainty.

Matters elsewhere were even worse. For anyone luckless enough to be born a Polish or Lithuanian Jew, the only hope of safety lay in flight. Pillage, rape and arson were commonplaces of existence, and each year hundreds braved wolf-infested forests to reach the border. Between 1710 and 1760 at least nine trials on trumped-up charges are recorded in Poland, after which Jews found 'guilty' of murdering Christian children for ritual purposes, were flayed, tortured and executed by being impaled on sharpened stakes. Massacres took place with monotonous regularity, usually after the harvest failed or bands of marauding cossacks with time to kill had nothing better to do than terrorise some *shtetl* dwellers.



Frankfurt ghetto or  
*Judengasse*.  
(Mary Evans Library)



In Spain, the Inquisition was still in full swing. Of 868 cases tried between 1721 and 1727, more than eight hundred were for the 'crime' of Judaism. Of those found guilty, seventy-five were burnt at the stake.

In France, the wind blew hot and cold. Enlightened though he may have been in many ways, Voltaire was, by and large, no friend of Jews, having been swindled by one in a transaction in which he himself had not acted with complete honesty. Even so sensitive a soul as Pascal was not averse to echoing Martin Luther, and recommending that the Jews 'be made miserable because they crucified Him'. Fanaticism everywhere was rife. Only across the channel, in England, were Jews left largely unmolested.

Not every Jew was inclined to take things lying down, and the age was peppered with Jews who rose high and, in not a few cases, fell low. There was Joseph Oppenheimer (1692?-1738), who served

both the Elector of Mannheim and Karl Alexander, Duke of Württemberg. For the latter, he devised a plan, drawn from the British model, for a state bank. A member of the Privy Council, he invented taxes, expanded royal monopolies and, less wisely, accepted bribes, splitting the profits, it was said, with the Duke. When Karl Alexander died, Oppenheimer was arrested, charged and convicted. He was subsequently garotted, and his corpse gruesomely displayed to public view in a cage in the town square: Such was the fate of the man known as 'Jud Süß'. Leon Feuchtwanger told his story in the novel *Pever* (1925).

A little later came Veital Ephraim, official banker to Frederick the Great, free-spending King of Prussia. Under Ephraim's guidance, the Prussian Exchequer bought up gold and silver coins from Holland, Hungary, Poland and Russia, melted them down, mixed them with inferior base metals, re-stamped them and sent them back to their various countries of origin, claiming full value. It was forgery — hugely profitable forgery — on a grand scale. Not for nothing did Berliners sing:

*Outside silver, inside tin,  
Outside honesty, inside sham,  
Outside Frederick, inside Ephraim.*

Felix Mendelssohn's maternal grandfather rose to become jeweller to the Prussian court. Restless and dissatisfied, another young Jew walked out of a rabbinical seminary in the country, and made his way to Frankfurt. There, he began a series of financial transactions that brought him to the notice of Landgrave Wilhelm of Hesse-Cassel, and led his heirs to a fortune of some £3 billion. His name was Meyer Rothschild.

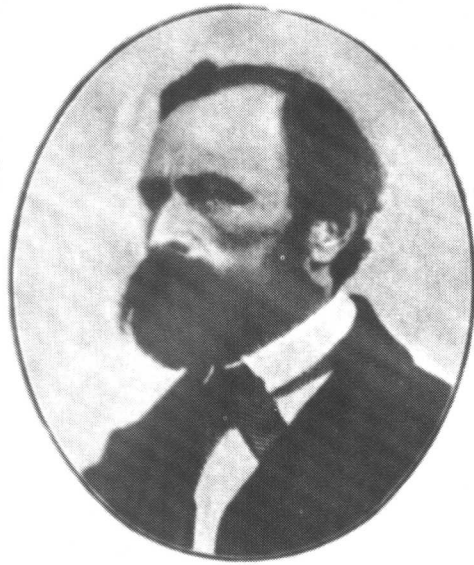
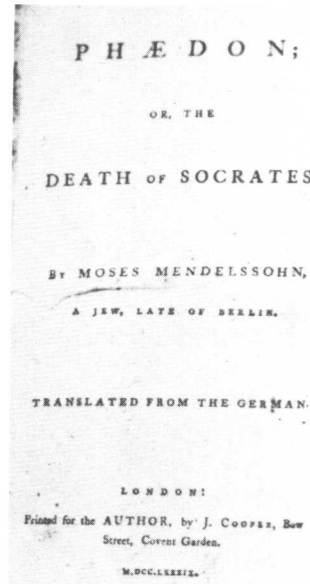
Similarly, against a background of prejudice and occasional violence, did Moses Mendelssohn somehow contrive to prosper. From the start, living in an attic room, he learned new languages, English, French, Greek and Latin. Fired by a thirst for knowledge and possessed of a keen intellect, the young man from Dessau read deeply in philosophy, European literature, mathematics and Euclidean geometry.

From abject poverty, he rose first to become a house tutor (*hauslehrer*), then a bookkeeper and finally senior partner in a silk weaving factory owned by Isaak Bernhard. A man of great distinction, mild and good-natured by temperament, he won at the same time a European reputation as a philosopher and thinker. From Berlin to London his books were read, bringing him the admiration and friendship of many leading figures in the Enlightenment. His *Phädon*, a mock-Platonic treatise on the immortality of the soul first published in 1767, was a popular classic in thirty languages, and excited the attention of the great Immanuel Kant, whose own achievement was for a time eclipsed by that of Mendelssohn.

Firmly resisting attempts to convert him to Christianity, Moses also became famous as a champion of Jewish emancipation and religious tolerance. He translated into German certain of the



Left: Title page of English Edition of Moses Mendelssohn's bestseller *Phadon*, 1789.  
Right: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81).



Psalms and the *Pentateuch*. Believing that Judaism was 'revealed legislation' rather than a religion, and that all monotheistic religions were no more than differing interpretations of one truth, 'the German Socrates' as he came to be known, furnished, in *Jerusalem, or of the Religious Force of Judaism* (1783), stylistically his finest achievement, what Kant described as 'irrefutable' proof that the state had no right to interfere in the religion of its citizens. The most sympathetic portrait of Moses had already been penned by his friend, the dramatist Lessing, of whose *Nathan the Wise*, (1775) Mendelssohn is the eloquent, open-handed hero.

Despite his unattractive physique, Moses married happily — his wife was Fromet Guggenheim, daughter of an impecunious Viennese merchant — and in due course became the father of six children. Of three sons, two, Abraham and Joseph, survived infancy to become bankers. The eldest of three daughters, Dorothea was to scandalize her contemporaries by taking as second husband a man much younger than herself — the poet, Friedrich von Schlegel — with whom she had previously philandered for some time.

It was Henriette, however, who was to play the most prominent part in Felix's life. Known by her nieces and nephews as 'Tante Jette', she was for some years headmistress of a school in Paris and, for a time, governess to the daughters of General Sabastiani. Hensel describes her reign in the latter role as 'a brilliant misery', adding, 'What self-sacrifice did Henriette devote to the ungrateful task of making this meagre French soil fruitful by German diligence!'.\* Henriette returned to Berlin in 1824, and was in close touch with her brother Abraham's family until her death seven years later.

\*Fanny Sebastiani, an attractive but not especially intelligent child, grew up to marry the son of the Duc de Praslin, by whom, in 1847, she was murdered.

Evidently a warm-hearted person, she wrote Felix a letter on his twentieth birthday that opened wistfully, 'My poor Felix; in ten years, no longer a boy!'.

Abraham Mendelssohn, 'formerly the son of my father, now the father of my son' as he was later wryly to describe himself, was born in Berlin in 1776. In 1797, he obtained a junior post in the Paris banking house of Fould and Co. A hard worker he had, by 1803, risen to the position of chief cashier. In Paris, he met Lea Salomon, daughter of the Prussian court jeweller and granddaughter of the banker Daniel Itzig, an educated, musical woman of grace and beauty. Abraham proposed, was accepted, and shortly after his marriage returned to Germany, settling in the Hanseatic free city of Hamburg in partnership with his brother Joseph.

Abraham and Lea suited each other well. Lea could be bright and clever, and a keen student of English, French, Italian and Greek, reading Homer in secret, it is said, lest such a recreation be thought 'unladylike'. Though less gifted than either his father or son, Abraham was nonetheless a man of ability, by nature tough and efficient, and governed by the belief that the gifted man has a duty to strive for perfection and thereby set an example to others. Yet he was capable also of generating love and respect, and between them Abraham and Lea combined attitudes upon which an affectionate and united family could be raised. Abraham, wrote Sebastian Hensel, was 'a harmonious, independent, vigorous character', Lea 'gentle, full of accurate judgement and striking, but never malicious, wit'.

A devoted parent, Abraham's letters to his children indicate his patriarchal solicitude for their wellbeing:

Your (Felix's) letters have given me pleasure, but in the second I found some traces of carelessness, which I will point out to you when I come home. You must try to speak better, then you will also write better. Your letters, my dear little king of the Moors, also called Paul Hermann, were the best of all, without a single mistake and beautifully short. I praise you for your conduct, of which Mother, Rebecka and Fanny give such a charming account.

And, in the same letter, to Fanny:

You, dear Fanny, have written your first letter very nicely; the second, however, was a little hasty. It does you credit you do not like B's bad jokes; I do not approve them either, and it is wicked to try to make people laugh at what is beautiful and good.

The eldest child, Fanny Cäcilie, was born at the family home, Marten's Mill, on 14 November, 1805; she had, her mother divined, 'Bach fugue fingers'. Next came Jakob Felix Ludwig, on 3 February, 1809. Then, on 11 April, 1811, Rebecka.

Only weeks after the birth of Rebecka, the entire family was forced to flee Hamburg and seek refuge in Berlin. This hasty departure stemmed from the Napoleonic wars ravaging Europe for years past. The reasons are complex, but a few strands stand out. When, in 1806, Bonaparte defeated Prussia on the battlefield, he