

THE STUDY OF EARLY GERMAN-JEWISH AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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In 1823, the young German-Jewish artist Jacob Liebmann (1803–1865) painted a peculiar still life. It shows a theatrical curtain that is lifted to disclose a combination of objects placed on a table, including a Torah scroll, a shofar, a prayer book, and a circumcision knife. All of these objects signify Jewish ritual life and tradition. One item in the lower right hand corner, however, stands out. It is an oval portrait of the philosopher and silk merchant Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), rendered after a well-known painting by Johann Christoph Frisch (1738–1815) that was completed sometime after 1778.

The portrait places these objects geographically as well as temporally in Jewish history. Just as the portrait is integrated into a still life of Jewish religious practice, it also points to a revision of this practice for which the figure of Mendelssohn in some ways stands. Following Mendelssohn, Jewish tradition has been reinterpreted within the framework of the Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*. And just as Mendelssohn had urged Berlin Jewry to keep to Jewish customs but study German, Liebmann designs a balancing act as well. His picture reflects the Jewish religious objects in the style of Dutch or German early modern paintings, still lifes that pictured flowers, fish, fowl, or fruit.

How can we understand early Jewish acculturation within a German cultural context? In the past few years, my work has concentrated on the writings of the German-Jewish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I have been particularly interested in Berlin authors who studied German, embraced a new German audience, and

decided to tell this audience who they were, and what their lives were like. Several such accounts were written before 1812, the year when legislation in Prussia established legal names for its Jewish population and granted Jews the rights of



Still life by Jacob Liebmann, 1823

citizenship. How did these authors use their newly acquired German language? How could they speak about themselves? And what did they want to tell? While historians, philosophers, and literary critics have studied the emancipation debates of the late eighteenth century, the emergence of the so-called Jewish salons in Berlin, and the development of Jewish Enlightenment philosophy, my work has largely concentrated on autobiographies as firsthand accounts that speak of a desire to acculturate during this period.

Within the German literary tradition, two autobiographical models were available. In the first one, the pietistic confession, the author related an experience that

provided a turning point for his life: the experience of true Christianity, or the revelation of the New Testament's teachings. This type of life story was structured as a "before" and "after" in regard to this event. A second model extended to biographical texts and was a *Gelehrtenbiographie*, or life account of a famous person.

For the Berlin Jewish writers who set out to write about their lives in the eighteenth century, neither of these models would apply. All of these authors took the Enlightenment seriously, and many were students of Immanuel Kant. All of them wanted to establish themselves as individuals whose life stories should be of interest to a wider, non-Jewish audience. But there was no conversion to true Christianity to report, and many of these figures were not well known beyond the confines of their own community. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, first published in Germany in the late eighteenth century in a few excerpts only, provided a possible alternative. If Rousseau could venture to write about his life because he regarded himself as a "unique" individual, so perhaps could these Berlin Jews. But if their uniqueness made their lives worthy of narration, how should they proceed?

Karl Philipp Moritz's early psychological journal, the *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, published between 1783 and 1793, offered Berlin Jews the first opportunity to write about their lives, and they did so as medical case studies. Thus, the Jewish autobiographical subject established itself first as a pathological one. Authors such as Moses Mendelssohn, Marcus Herz (1747–1803), and Lazarus Bendavid (1762–1832) complained about linguistic difficulties and described physical pain, but soon the descriptions changed and Judaism itself became the malady in need of a cure. While all the contributors to the journal saw an acculturation to their German surroundings as a road to physical and mental health, many made

subversive arguments as well.

Salomon Maimon (1754–1800) would become the co-editor of the *Magazin* for the last two years of its publication. Born in Polish Lithuania, Maimon had moved to Berlin to study German and Kant’s philosophy. In 1792, he published two short articles about his life in the journal, and soon he revised them into his *Lebensgeschichte*, a first-person narrative and the first autobiography in book form written in German by a Jew. Maimon’s autobiography was hailed as an “authentic” account, not in the least because of the work of his editor Moritz, who insisted on incorporating linguistic flaws into the text. Nevertheless, it was praised as a work of acculturation, and as a *Bildungsroman* of sorts—an account of Maimon’s intellectual development and acquisition of “Western”

learning.

Subversively, however, Maimon was able to tell another story as well. He placed an essay on the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides in the very middle of his book, presenting him as a true figure of the Enlightenment to rival Kant. Who, then, should acculturate to whom?

Two other autobiographies of this period employed very different narrative strategies. Lazarus Bendavid, another contributor to the *Magazin*, published his autobiography several years after Maimon, in 1806. Bendavid had won an essay prize from the Berlin Academy, and was thus asked to write his own *Gelehrtenbiographie*. Indeed, he was the first Jewish author to be asked to write one, and interestingly enough, Bendavid follows the model of the pietistic autobiography—except that instead of depicting a religious conversion, Bendavid describes his conversion to philosophy, and in particular to aesthetics. It is not the vision of Jesus and the revelation of true Christianity that provide a turning point in his life—but the vision of the

ugly, naked feet of his nurse maid, which made him aware of the importance of beauty. Bendavid’s text subverts the German literary tradition, just as Maimon’s story subverts the German philosophical one. In contrast to the other case studies in the *Magazin*, moreover, Bendavid does not establish himself as a pathological subject; he defines Judaism itself as a patient, suffering from its own “superstitious” practices and ceremonial rites. For him, Mendelssohn’s portrait would serve as a contrast to the shofar, and with his account, Bendavid established himself as an already successful new Jewish citizen of the future.

Benjamin Veitel Ephraim’s (1742–1811) life story contrasts very strongly with those told by Maimon or Bendavid. He

autobiography in a prison cell.

Ephraim’s account, first published in 1806, gives evidence of the complicated relationship of Prussian politics and Enlightenment philosophy, and of the great patriotism of a Prussian Jew in pre-emancipation times. Ephraim soon wrote a second, expanded edition of his political adventures, and his autobiography was even translated into French. It was one of the most successful of the early autobiographies written by Berlin Jews.

These are just three examples, but they raise already important questions. What does it mean that the authors of these autobiographies established themselves as pathological subjects first, and what are the consequences of this discussion for their social position, their philosophical

views, and Jewish history? What is the importance and the role of aesthetics in their self-perception? To what degree did these autobiographies contribute to a sense of a

separate Jewish “nation,” or any other construction independent of religious beliefs? How do these texts revise our notions not only of German-Jewish writing, but also of the German literary tradition, into which they entered and also transformed?

In studying these texts, and considering their legacy for German-Jewish literature, I hope to contribute not only to the study of German Jews and their acculturation to their German environment, but also to a new understanding of German literature itself, as its tradition was not only enriched but transformed by these autobiographical texts.

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was a member of Berlin’s financial elite, the son of a court Jew who helped finance Frederick the Great’s wars, and he inhabited the most famous mansion in Berlin (the Ephraim Palais, which has been rebuilt and houses the Berlin Museum today). Tutored by both Mendelssohn and his friend, the German poet Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Ephraim tried his hand at literature as well, and wrote what is probably the first German drama ever written by a Jew. But Ephraim was also a patriot of the state to which he could not (yet) belong. Still barred by his Jewishness from holding citizenship, he nevertheless hoped to become a Prussian diplomat in Paris. In post-Revolutionary France, he tried to work on treaties between France and Prussia, gave famous parties, and acquired an infamous reputation. Unable to navigate the dangerous waters of aristocratic politics, he was arrested on his way home to Berlin and began to write his