

## JEWISH WOMEN OF THE BERLIN SALONS

The Berlin salons which developed in the late eighteenth century owed both their existence and the form of their development to Jewish women. These early salons were the result of a unique interrelation between the German enlightenment and Haskalah on the one hand and, on the other, young, educated Jewish women from well-to-do families, who were searching for a new role in life outside the patriarchal structures of their families.

These salons have variously been criticized as a symptom of failing Jewish tradition or welcomed as a phenomenon of emancipation and acculturation. Whatever one's attitude, their importance as highlights of the salon culture and for the process of women's emancipation in Germany cannot be denied.

While in Paris by the mid-eighteenth century, salons had become a traditional social institution and even bourgeois ladies had advanced to be *salonnières*, Berlin society, in comparison, was very old-fashioned. The social classes remained strictly separated (with a very exclusive, but largely poor aristocracy at the top); Jews were discriminated against by Prussian law and socially stigmatized. It took a long time for an educated middle class to develop, especially as there was no university in Berlin until 1810.

Middle-class women were not supposed to engage in cultural activities, but only in their religious and household duties. The rich but small Jewish upper class in Berlin had a protected status in exchange for their financial and economic services to the crown. Their lifestyle after the end of the Seven Years' War (1763) became aristocratic. Daughters from these families, born around 1760, became the first Jewish salon women.

The eminent personality of Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) changed the life of some Jews in Berlin by encouraging them to take part in secular German education and literature. The ultimate aim was to demonstrate their fitness for civil rights. The famous friendship between Mendelssohn, Friedrich Nicolai, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing propagated and popularized religious tolerance and acceptance. It was not a level playing field, since Christians set up the rules and seldom treated Judaism as worthy of respect. Jews gave up more of their religious traditions than did Christians, but enlightened Christians also moved away from religious authority.

Beginning in the 1780s, we find Christians and Jews side by side at the tea-tables of gifted and enthusiastic (upper) middle class Jewish women who, born in the 1760s, had grown up in the Mendelssohn era. Many had enjoyed an excellent education, others developed a passion for reading and learning on their own, assisted by their husbands and friends. The social, political and intellectual basis was provided by enlightenment philosophy, augmented by poetical and philosophical emancipation of individual feeling. These social, not yet political ideals may be generalized as liberty, equality and fraternity.

Just as philosophy, poetry and music united educated individuals from different religions, the salons of Jewish women formed a neutral, somewhat extraterritorial meeting ground for all those who wanted to bridge the gaps of rank in traditional Christian feudal society.

**Henriette Herz**, who with her husband took part in the early reading societies, can be regarded as the first salonnière in Berlin. The friends they entertained at home soon split into the elder champions of the enlightenment, who discussed scientific and philosophical questions, and a group of young men, among them poets and authors, who preferred to drink tea and read and discuss poetry and prose with Marcus Herz's beautiful wife. The scholar and writer Karl Philipp Moritz, a habitué of the Herz salon, installed the cult of young Goethe in this circle.

Later on, the emphasis on German classical literature and neo-humanism brought forward the ideals of the so-called harmonious personality, the right and duty to strive for individual perfection of mind, soul and body.

Free conversations, in which people could profit from each other's thoughts, tastes, ideas and samples of favorite literature, music and art, could best be put into practice in salon society. Though later Henriette Herz's fame was overshadowed by that of her younger rival Rahel Levin, it was Herz who created the style of the typical educated bourgeois salon in Berlin: a simple tea-table with a charming hostess, enthusiasm for reading and discussing literature, sparkling conversation and an atmosphere of friendship.

The social, cultural and religious innovations at the salon tea-tables reached a climax by 1800. An important social characteristic of the early Jewish Berlin salon circles was their tendency to exogamous marriages, their contribution to social mobility by providing marriage connections of beautiful, rich and/or clever young

ladies with young men outside their own social circle, often with men of the aristocracy.

The fact that several women not only fell in love but married out of their traditional circle (sometimes even breaking up earlier marriages) was an important factor in changing traditions.

For Jewish salon women, aristocratic marriage, though raising their social status, necessitated conversion, since civil law marriage did not exist. Though many of the young women were daughters of intellectually distinguished fathers, they felt restricted by the subordinate role traditionally assigned to women in the patriarchal structures of orthodox Jewish life.

Nevertheless, most of the converted salon women of that time did not forget family and old friends. They presented a model for Jewish integration into the changing German society, although a model that most Jews rejected.

The salon circles welcomed the American fight for freedom and the early moderate stages of the French Revolution which proclaimed the rights of man. They realized the necessity of reforms even in Prussia's "enlightened despotism," and it is likely that the salons contributed to the process of Jewish emancipation and legal equality. Several of those who later became champions of social and political modernization in Prussia (among them many reformers of the years 1807–1812) were or had been habitués of the Berlin salons.

### **Rahel Levin Varnhagen (1771-1833)**

Rahel Levin Varnhagen was born in Berlin to a Jewish family. Her father, a wealthy jeweler, was a strong-willed man who ruled his family despotically. She was the first Jewish woman to establish herself as an important intellectual and political figure in a German culture dominated by Christianity. She used her excluded status as an opportunity: "One is not free if one must represent something in the bourgeois society, a spouse, the wife of a civil servant etc," she wrote to Pauline Wiesel, also an outcast, but for different reasons.

Varnhagen is remembered in Jewish history as one of a handful of Jewish women who ran intellectual salons in Central Europe, especially Berlin, beginning in the relatively liberal period before the defeat of Napoleon. She became very intimate with Dorothea and Henriette, the daughters of the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Together with them she knew Henriette Herz, with whom she later became most intimately associated, moving in the same intellectual sphere.

Like many of the salonnières, she converted to Christianity in preparation for her marriage to Karl August Varnhagen von Ense. Although she did not reflect much upon her Jewishness in her writings, there is one comment in a letter of 1795 to her friend David Veit:

I have a strange fancy: it is as if some supramundane being, just as I was thrust into this world, plunged these words with a dagger into my heart: "Yes, have sensibility, see the world as few see it, be great and noble, nor can I take from you the faculty of eternally thinking. But I add one thing more: be a Jewess!" And now my life is a slow bleeding to death. By keeping still I can delay it. Every movement is an attempt to staunch it—new death; and immobility is possible for me only in death itself. ... I can, if you will, derive every evil, every misfortune, every vexation from that. ... I shall never accept that I am a schlemiel and a Jewess.

Varnhagen's remarks reveal her sense at the heavy burden of being born a Jew in Enlightenment Europe.

A later remark suggested that she valued her Jewish birth: "What for a long period of my life has been the source of my greatest shame, my most bitter grief and misfortune—to be born a Jewess—I would not at any price now wish to miss." was conveyed by her husband after her death.

What is perhaps most astonishing about her is that she created a new practice of writing. She was not the only woman who concentrated on epistolary writing; but from the outset she was aware of the particular implications of letter-writing and worked to establish a network of people who would self-consciously engage in this as a common enterprise. In contrast to the notions of authorship that appeared in Europe around 1800, which anchored writing in the exceptional

individual, here a heterogeneous group of people was producing something together.

Already in her early twenties she collected and kept all the letters she received. In 1800, before she left for Paris, where she stayed for several months, she asked a Jewish woman friend not only to tend to this collection, should she die, but also to try to retrieve from their various addressees all the letters that she had herself written. This is an indication of how extremely seriously she took this particular form of writing and collecting.

She was in contact with more than three hundred people and her archive contains some six thousand letters. Everybody is to be found there: actresses and philosophers, acculturated Jewish women and young intellectuals. A special moment, a conversation, a book or anything else might serve as the source of her productivity. And so she developed an entire world of insights into philosophy and music, literature and politics. Since what was relevant to her was not the result of thinking but rather the movement of thoughts, her friendships and convivial gatherings were of greatest importance to her. Both were seen as political and philosophical enterprises.

According to the Jewish Encyclopedia (1906), "Rahel always showed the greatest interest in her former coreligionists, endeavoring by word and deed to better their position, especially during the anti-Semitic outburst in Germany in 1819. On the day of her funeral, Varnhagen sent a considerable sum of money to the Jewish poor of Berlin." Amos Elon wrote about Rahel Varnhagen in his 2002 book *The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, 1743-1933*:

She hated her Jewish background and was convinced it had poisoned her life. For much of her adult life she was what would later be called self-hating. Her overriding desire was to free herself from the shackles of her birth; since, as she thought, she had been "pushed out of the world" by her origins, she was determined to escape them. She never really succeeded. In 1810, she changed her family name to Robert... And in 1814, after her mother died, she converted. But her origins continued to haunt her even on her deathbed. ... She considered her origins "a curse, a slow bleeding to death." ... The idea that as a Jew she was always required to be exceptional - and go on proving it all the time - was

repugnant to her. "How wretched it is always to have legitimize myself! That is why it is so disgusting to be a Jew."

### **DOROTHEA MENDELSSOHN VON SCHLEGEL (1764 – 1839)**

The life of Dorothea Schlegel was dramatic, sometimes painful, and full of ironies. This intelligent and spirited woman entered the world as the eldest daughter of the pride of the European *Haskalah*, Moses Mendelssohn.

(Mendelssohn was born in Dessau, Germany, in 1729. By the age of six, despite many health problems, which included scoliosis, he had learned the entire Bible by heart. By the age of fourteen, besides Yiddish, his first language, he spoke German, Latin, Greek, French, and English. Mostly self-taught, Moses Mendelssohn never went to university, nor did he ever hold an academic position. He supported himself by working in a silk factory. In 1762, he met and fell in love with Fromet Guggenheim, a young girl from Hamburg, who was blond and beautiful. However, when Guggenheim saw Mendelssohn for the first time—she knew him by reputation only—and saw his stunted misshapen figure, she began to weep.

"Is it because of my hump?" Mendelssohn asked her.

"Yes," Guggenheim admitted tearfully.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. "According to a Talmudic saying, a proclamation of the name of the person I will marry was made in heaven when I was born. Not only was my future wife named, but it was also said that she would be hunchbacked. 'Oh, no,' I said to myself, 'she will be deformed, bitter and unhappy. Dear Lord,' I said again, 'give me the hump instead and make her fair and beautiful.'" Fromet Guggenheim was so moved by his story that she dried her tears and they married.)

Like three others of the six Mendelssohn children, in time Dorothea left Judaism behind. But her departure from Judaism and from her family was the most profound. She divorced the Jewish husband her parents had chosen for her. Later she converted to become a Lutheran, and married Friedrich Schlegel, a literary

scholar. Four years after their marriage, both Dorothea and Friedrich became Catholics.

Dorothea Schlegel began her life as Brendel Mendelssohn on October 24, 1764. When she was born her father, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) was thirty-five, employed as a bookkeeper for a silk factory. For a decade Mendelssohn had been publishing books and essays in German, and had already begun to be recognized with major academic prizes. Fromet (1737–1812) and Moses ultimately became the parents of five more children.

It was once thought that Brendel benefited from an “exceptional private education” as Moses Mendelssohn’s daughter. But in truth we do not really know how often Brendel and her younger sisters attended the classes which Mendelssohn taught at home for a circle of young Jews. We do know that she was taught to speak and write German and that she was an avid reader of contemporary novels and history.

Although her mother Fromet was rather well educated for the time, as she came into her teen years Brendel’s absorption in modern literature and her disdain for traditional ritual led to conflict between mother and daughter. As a young girl, Brendel was lucky in friendship, her closest friends being her sister Henriette, [Henriette Herz](#), and Rahel Levin, who married Karl August Varnhagen von Ense. When they were in their teens, the girls in this circle shared a passion for avant garde German literature. When they were growing up in the 1770s few would have imagined how far they would eventually travel away from the Jewish world into which they were born.

When she was fourteen, her parents arranged Brendel’s engagement to Simon Veit, who was then twenty-four. They were married four years later. Both sets of parents were pleased with the match. Veit was born into an immensely influential Berlin family, who were proud to secure an affiliation with the Mendelssohns. Although they were definitely not wealthy and Brendel’s dowry was modest, her family had immense intellectual prestige.

Mendelssohn died three years after Brendel was wed, convinced that his daughter’s marriage was happy. As the years passed, the couple’s friends were

divided, some thinking that the marriage was contented, and others worried about Brendel's happiness. Death and dislocation deprived the young couple of a wider extended family. Three years into their marriage each lost a father. And two years later Fromet and the younger siblings left Berlin to live in Mecklenburg-Strelitz.

With considerable difficulty, Brendel and Simon brought into the world four sons, two of whom, Jonas and Philipp survived. For the fifteen years of their life together, during the 1780s and 1790s, Brendel was active in Berlin's dynamic salon subculture. She organized a small reading club, she attended Henriette and Markus Herz's double salon and helped found a secret society called the *Tugendbund*. She wore her hair loose without either a wig or a bonnet. In 1794 Brendel began calling herself Dorothea.

In the summer of 1797, when she was thirty-three, Dorothea first met the writer Friedrich Schlegel. He was then an attractive and accomplished young man of twenty-five. Although his family intended him to become a banker, he disdained commerce and was fast making his name as a literary critic and theorist.

Friedrich and Dorothea Veit fell in love and apparently became lovers. Dorothea pondered long and hard about whether she should divorce Simon Veit. Ultimately she decided she would, telling her friends that her marriage had felt like "slavery." The divorce was granted in 1799. Simon was given custody of the older boy, Jonas. But Dorothea was allowed to raise Philipp, who was then six, until he was thirteen, so long as she did not remarry or convert. As for finances, Dorothea would receive four hundred thaler a year, which would restrict her to a far more modest lifestyle than she had ever known.

She was to lose much more after the divorce. She lost her right to live in Berlin, she lost intimacy with her siblings, and her relationship with her mother ended altogether. Perhaps less predictably, Dorothea even lost many of her Christian friends. Friedrich Schlegel's 1799 novel *Lucinde* was seen as dangerously sexual even among their circle of liberal friends.

In 1799 the couple, still unmarried, moved to Jena with Philipp. There Friedrich taught at the University of Jena, and they lived in the home of August Wilhelm Schlegel and his wife Caroline Michaelis Schlegel. This was a lively setting, where



young romantic intellectuals gathered. But after a time Dorothea and Caroline quarreled, and indeed the adventurous lifestyle of the entire circle went awry. Marriages collapsed and children died and the men involved quarreled over love, literature and university politics. It was while she was in Jena that Dorothea published her only novel, *Florentin*, under Friedrich's name.

Three years later, in 1802, Dorothea and Philipp and Friedrich moved to Paris, hoping to find intellectual fulfillment and a secure income. Since the secure income continued to prove elusive, she began editing volumes of medieval French texts, all published under his name.

It was in 1803 in Paris that her already brittle relationships with her family deteriorated further. Her siblings Abraham (1776–1835) and Henriette Mendelssohn were then living in Paris. Dorothea assured them that she was planning to leave Friedrich, and on those grounds requested that she receive her share of the family inheritance even before her mother died. Abraham and Henriette did not believe her, and refused. Their hostility to Friedrich Schlegel may have been more salient in this refusal than their disapproval of Dorothea's rejection of Jewish life. Indeed, several years later both Abraham and Henriette would themselves convert. A year later, on April 6, 1804, Dorothea became a Protestant and she and Friedrich married.

Soon after their marriage the couple, together with Philipp, moved again, this time to Cologne. These were Dorothea's loneliest years. Friedrich still found no stable employment, he was no longer passionately in love with her, and he traveled a good deal. Philipp returned to Berlin in 1806 to live with his father. Friedrich was becoming more Catholic in his orientation, and hoped that a Catholic baptism might open up career possibilities. We know little about Dorothea's spirituality at this juncture. They became Catholics together in Cologne on April 16, 1808, almost four years to the day after she had become a Protestant. In time Dorothea would become a quite fanatical Catholic.

**Many Jews in post-Napoleonic Europe felt that Judaism had outlived its usefulness and were thus driven to convert not so much for ideological reasons as for practical ones—those of civil equality. In Dorothea's case, despite**

**attending her father's lectures as a young girl, she did not receive much religious instruction from him, and once married to Simon Veit she conflated her loveless marriage with her ancestral religion. Under the influence of both Henriette Herz and Rachel Levin, both of whom had already converted, and the literary salons' stimulating evenings, Dorothea, no doubt, craved a life of freedom, independence, and romance. Once she married Friedrich Schlegel, a Lutheran, it is not surprising that she converted. The lure later of Catholicism was probably due to the pageantry and ceremonial aspects of the church service, which suited their Romantic sensibilities.**

Two years later we find our couple in Vienna, and thus began the happiest two decades in Dorothea's life. For a time Friedrich found employment in the Austrian state service. She was re-united with her childhood friend Fanny von Arnstein, who hosted an opulent salon in Vienna. Very much unlike Dorothea or most of her childhood friends from Berlin, the stupendously wealthy Fanny found a way to remain Jewish and to mix in prominent noble circles.

During Dorothea's Vienna years, in 1810, much to their father Simon's distress, both of the Veit sons converted. They settled in Rome and made names for themselves as painters in the Catholic Nazarene style. Indeed Dorothea spent two happy years living in their artistic commune in Rome in the late 1810s. She returned to Vienna in 1820, where the couple lived until Friedrich died in 1829. She spent her last decade in Frankfurt, living in the home of her son Philipp and his family. She died at seventy-four on August 3, 1839.

Toward the close of her life Dorothea tried to make peace with her family, with some success. Before Simon Veit died in 1819, she asked for his forgiveness for wrongs she had done to him during and after their divorce. Ironically, he was more tolerant of the baptisms of his wife and children than Dorothea was of her intimates who remained Jewish or were Protestant. Her evolution into a fervent Catholic also alienated her from the younger writers of the day, including Heinrich Heine, who were seeking the same freedom from establishment constraints that she herself sought in earlier days. After Friedrich died, leaving behind debts rather than assets, her brothers made their peace with Dorothea and supported her

generously. Her nephew Felix Mendelssohn, Abraham's talented son, admired her greatly and they were very intimate.

Dorothea Schlegel was an industrious author, editor, translator, and reviewer. But because she never signed her writings with her own name, she gained little recognition during her lifetime. Moreover, her life story attracted more attention than her work. Today, we should rejoice that her publications have come back into print and have received greater critical appreciation.

Her life teaches us that however much Moses Mendelssohn can be admired as an intellect and as a founder of various Jewish paths into modernity, his legacy did not pass easily to his own children. Whether or not their rejection of Judaism brought them personal happiness is a mystery we must continue to ponder.