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Erich Mendelsohn: Architecture and Exile

The escape suitcase is the utensil of strained life situations: It is an enclosed shelter, almost an architectural devise for the migrant's personal belongings. The better arranged its interior space, the more room it offers for objects to be transported from the old into the new, from the own into the foreign: the winter coat, rainwear, toiletries, pyjamas, nostalgic items ... old family photo albums, mementos, favorite books from the beloved library. Seated on the valise, reading offers a very own and temporary clandestine refuge... rest on an uncertain journey. The suitcase is the migrant's hold. A piece of home on the move. Filled with items from his or her past, it is the vehicle of identity. It contains the very something that is saved beyond bare life.

What Luise and Erich Mendelsohn packed into the suitcases, with which they left Germany on the night train to Amsterdam on March 31, 1933, has not been handed down. Yet, we know

that Erich Mendelsohn carried with him the extra-soft 6B pencil, which he pulled out of his jacket pocket when a colleague at Amsterdam Centraal station asked him what he was doing there: "I have just moved my office from Berlin to Amsterdam," was his reply.¹ Luise Mendelsohn had already deposited her precious cello – in wise foresight – in a bank safe in Zurich. 10 days earlier, on March 21, 1933 the Mendelsohns had celebrated Erich's 46th birthday with the usual "Bachanal", the name they gave to the chamber concerts in honor of his anniversary, which fell on the date of Johann Sebastian Bach's birthday and on the beginning of spring. Friends would arrive early afternoon and in changing line-up the Brandenburg Concertos, the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, the Cello Suites were played (Fig. 1). Interrupted only by a light dinner and drinks, music was played until the early morning hours. At the last birthday party the cheerful,



Fig. 1 House concert on the terrace of Erich and Luise Mendelsohn's own house Am Rupenhorn, early 1930s; Luise Mendelsohn on cello

uplifting mood of the previous years did not want to set in.² Outside, in Potsdam, another celebration was taking place at the same time: Reich President von Hindenburg and Reich Chancellor Hitler met in the Garrison Church. Their symbolic handshake of reconciliation strengthened Hitler’s myth as the people’s chancellor. Less than two weeks later, on April 1, the so-called “defensive boycott” against Jewish citizens took place. Luise and Erich Mendelsohn left Germany the evening before. Forever (Fig. 2).

He who builds wishes to stay – a phrase that is often quoted today at the inauguration of new Jewish building projects. Mendelsohn’s own house stood at the end of his successful career in Germany, as its crowning achievement. Yet, he harbored profound distrust towards Germany as a safe place to live: “We as Jews,” he wrote, “are used to looking at the appearance of our fatherland through binoculars.”³ He kept this attitude towards his later homelands as well. A certain distance guarantees a sharper focus, he maintained. Under precarious conditions a firm home might prove to be a burden and block the free view. The ability to constantly take up new positions, to change location, to swift perspective, to be able to react immediately to new situations – that gave him security.

Shortly after moving in, Mendelsohn packed the house between two book covers. With illustrations by Arthur Köster, Berlin’s best architectural photographer, and accompanying texts in German, English and French, he thus opened his house to an international audience. In an increasingly constricted, anti-semitic environment, the publication became a documentation for the culture of a Jewish elite that would soon cease to exist in Germany and German occupied Europe. In book form, the house overcame its material ties to place and time. Detached from the processes of change it turned into a permanent, always available aesthetic and social testimony. And what’s more: Mendelsohn thus brought his show-piece of ideal dwelling into a size that fitted into the emi-

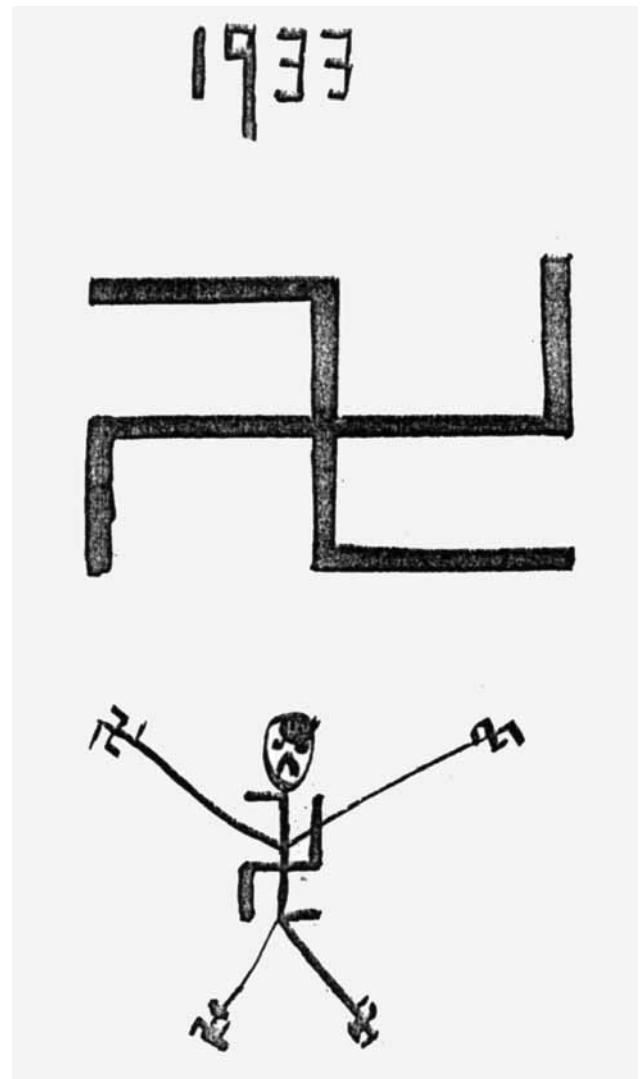


Fig. 2 Luise Mendelsohn, illustration to the poem “Adolf comes with great strides” for daughter Esther, 1933



Figs. 3 and 4 Cover and book page of Erich Mendelsohn’s Neues Haus – Neue Welt [New House – New World], 1932

grant's suitcase: the home – portable, the static condition of the house turned into a dynamic device (Figs. 3, 4).

House and Book relate to Architecture and Exile. THE Book of the Jews – the Torah, the written Hebrew Bible – is a product of exile. It came into being during the Babylonian Captivity in the 6th century B.C. The Book of Books replaced the House of Houses, i.e. Solomon's Temple, which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Heinrich Heine described the Torah as the "portative fatherland" of the Jews: "A book is their fatherland, their possession, their ruler, their fortune and their misfortune. They live in the brands of this book, here they exercise their citizenship, here they cannot be chased away, [...]"⁴ Many Jewish authors from Baruch Spinoza to Heinrich Heine to Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, who experienced outsidership and/or expulsion, commented on the important function of the book – be it the Bible, secular literature or their own writing – in the borderline experience of exile.

Architecture and exile are central notions that make up Erich Mendelsohn's biography. They seem fundamentally antagonistic: architecture stands for a static immobile state, exile for a restless mobile condition. As an architect, Mendelsohn was qua definitionem engaged with the production of human habitat, with humanizing space by creating homes in the sense of *Heimat*. In contrast, Mendelsohn's life was marked by exclusion and departure, by multiple migrations, by the frequent loss of his own home. His paths were repeatedly detracted by political currents, to which he reacted like a

seismograph. Looking back, he wrote: "Ubi bene, ibi patria is not an opportunistic saying. For that, migrations from country to country are too arduous and energy-sapping. But it is the only solution for a man who loves freedom when confronted with the pestilence of tyranny"⁵ Towards the end of his life, Mendelsohn may have seen in his curriculum vitae the cliché of the eternally wandering Jew: Germany – England – Palestine – America; four countries on three different continents and three different nationalities in the course of 66 years.

Although the term exile seems clear in its meaning as enforced displacement, yet it turns out to be rather ambivalent and – depending on the view point – subjected to different, sometimes controversial application. From the perspective of today's German historiography and cultural studies the emigrés' places of habitat outside Germany after their forced exodus are categorically determined as exile. Behind this approach stands the intention to bring German-born Jews – at least nominally – back "home" and thus to finally end their exile. These efforts are to be understood within the framework of *Wiedergutmachung* [reparations] and show various gradations between personal remorse and political correctness. Any other approach to the matter seems – from a contemporary German perspective – impassable, as it might imply on-going expulsion and thus subliminal continued support for Nazi ideology. Well-intentioned, this approach occasionally overlooks the self-understanding and will of the expellees. Mendelsohn, for example, vehemently opposed appropriation from the German side; he decidedly rejected the reintegration into the German architectural discourse after the Second World War. However, shortly before his death he accepted a proposal by his old friend, the art historian Oskar Beyer for a retrospective in Berlin, which was eventually opened 16 years later in 1968 at the Akademie der Künste by Julius Posener in the presence of Mendelsohn's widow.⁶ Few years later Louise Mendelsohn sold her late husband's estate, which she had initially wanted to give to Israel, to the Berlin Art Library. By that time – in the mid-1970s – this act was interpreted as Mendelsohn's coming home.

From a Zionist perspective, the use of the term exile is altogether different. It is categorically not applied to the Land of Israel. Regardless of circumstances or motivation, whether out of conviction or of necessity, the Jewish immigrant to the Promised Land is not considered a refugee, but a returnee. He comes home after 2000 years of diaspora. By contrast, every place of Jewish residence outside the land of Israel in another country, including Germany, is called *Galut* – the Hebrew word for exile, respectively diaspora. Here, too, little consideration is given to the divergent attitudes and sensitivities of individual refugees. Writers in particular were often unable to find their new home in Hebrew and felt their existence in the land of Israel very much as an exile. When Mendelsohn left Jerusalem for New York in 1941 due to a complex mix of reasons, he was considered a deserter in Israel for decades. Moreover, he had presumed to leave behind a highly critical pamphlet on the situation in Palestine, denouncing Zionist policies in the country as chauvinistic.⁷

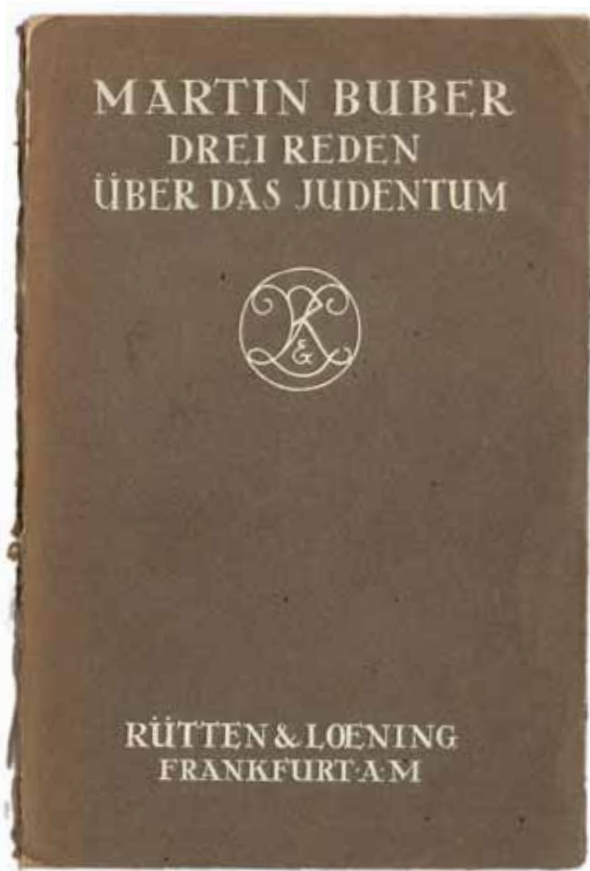


Fig. 5 Cover of Martin Buber's *Drei Reden über das Judentum* [Three Speeches on Judaism], 1911

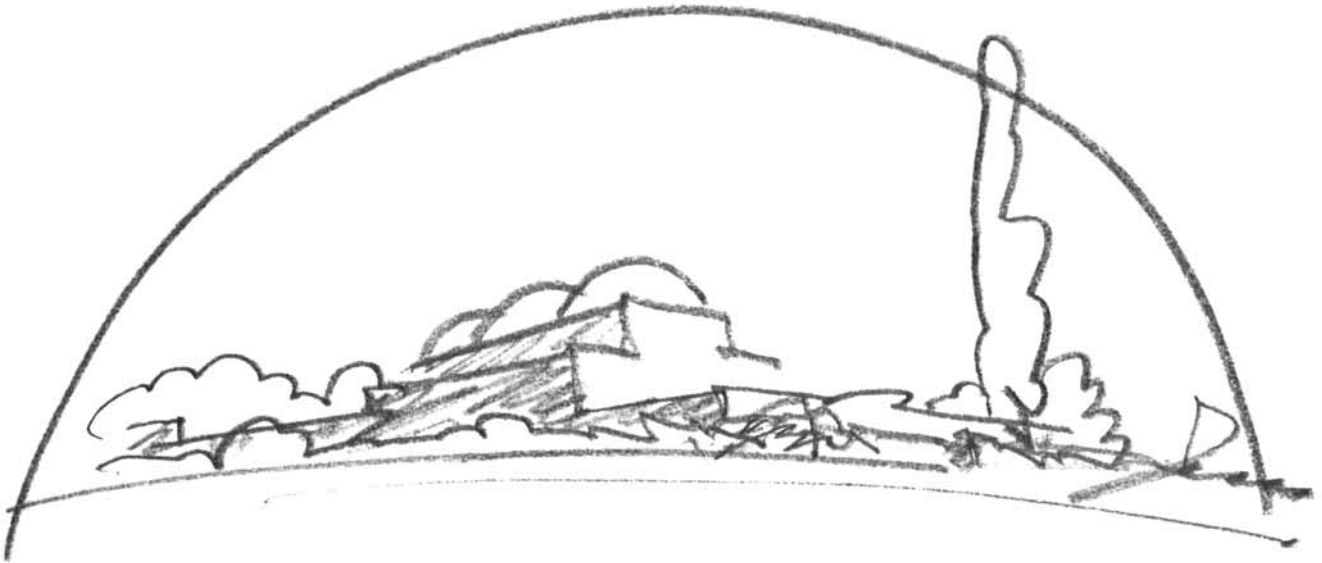


Fig. 6 Visionary synagogue sketch by Erich Mendelsohn, 1934

However, Mendelsohn's reception in Israel has fundamentally changed in the last three decades towards a more balanced critical approach.

The perspective of German Jewish immigrants to America was described by Hannah Arendt in her famous essay "We refugees".⁸ She observed their common rejection of the term exile for their status and instead the pretence of voluntary immigration. She analysed it as a survival strategy of uprooted people in order to demonstrate solidarity and the will to integrate in the new country. The attempt to build a permanent home in a new place must reject the term exile, because it resonates with the hope of returning. For all we know, the Mendelsohns largely fit the picture drawn by Arendt.

It is probably right to say, that without Hitler's assumption of power the majority of German Jews would never have left their country of birth, which they commonly considered – at least up until 1933 – as their homeland. Yet, only a small percentage of the Jews who emigrated or fled, felt the desire to return to Germany after the fall of the Third Reich. Both applies to Mendelsohn. All his wanderings from one country to another were without a return ticket. The reasons for his multiple emigrations and the respective choice of destinations are complex. They range from concrete threats to economic hardships, from a critical stance against political chauvinism to profound alienation, from the welcomed chance for a fresh start to the utopian promises of new worlds.

Unlike Bertolt Brecht, for example, Mendelsohn did not consider the countries of his residence as waiting rooms. After leaving Germany, his country of birth was no longer a point of reference for Mendelsohn. Both in England, but especially in Palestine and the USA, he approached the process of becoming familiar and native through gathering in-depth insight of the geographical, climatic, cultural and social conditions on site – mainly through intensive travel. In Palestine he sent his newly employed assistant Julius Posener – a new immi-

grant like himself – on tour through the country before starting work in his office.⁹

Shortly after arriving in the US Eric and Louise Mendelsohn crossed the American continent by private car. They used a simple foldable tent for their overnight stays to connect – as Mendelsohn emphasized – to the country's nature by direct contact to its soil.¹⁰ His approach was phenomenological: comprehension was through perception of the place. The impressions and insights Mendelsohn thus gained through intensive observation and physical experience had a direct impact on his architecture. They were in line with what one may call a critical regionalism *avant la lettre*.

Mendelsohn's history is after all strongly related to his Jewishness. He was not an avid synagogue-goer though, but a synagogue-builder – in both the factual and metaphorical sense. By deliberately declaring the dynamic – the elastic principle, as he called it – to be the key concept of his building and life constructions, Mendelsohn united both concepts – dwelling and wandering, home and exile. His architecture, which he understood – especially in his early visionary designs – to be essentially of Jewish origin, can be seen as a synthesis of space and time, or as the temporalization of space. Here, as well as in the approach of transforming dualistic systems into a synthesis, thinkers such as Martin Buber or Bruno Zevi recognized fundamental features of Judaism. In this respect, Mendelsohn's buildings represent a materialization of Jewish experience and Hebrew thought.

Bruno Zevi, who published extensively on Mendelsohn since 1954 and edited his *Opera Completa* in 1971, has repeatedly referred to Mendelsohn's deep rooting in the Jewish diasporic relationship with time.¹¹ For the Roman architectural historian Mendelsohn was the revolutionary of modernism par excellence, whose only dogma was change and motion. In his functional-dynamic architecture, Zevi saw the materialization of Hebrew thought, the core of which

he considered to be the temporalization of space. Zevi summarized his multiple references towards the subject in a published lecture of 1974 under the title: “Ebraismo e concezione spazio-temporale dell’arte” [Hebraism and the concept of space-time in art].¹²

A second thinker, who referred to the space-time concept in Judaism – yet from a different perspective – was Martin Buber, who was an early important influence on Mendelsohn. The young architect read and commented on Buber’s *Drei Reden über das Judentum* [Three Speeches on Judaism], while at the Eastern front of WWI (Fig. 5).¹³ In Buber’s interpretation of Judaism, which declared the creative act rather than the passive faith imperative, Mendelsohn found his self-understanding as a Jew and as an artist. Buber, whose major works focused on the philosophy of dialogue, saw the architect’s task in humanizing space. He regarded the experience of the cosmos’ endlessness, which reflects God’s infinity, as essentially unbearable to mankind, as “cruel and awesome”.¹⁴ In order to cope with the world in which man has been placed, he must create his own limited space. By doing so, man overwrites the terrifying endlessness of God’s space with his own creations, “in order to give it a spirit of friendliness”.¹⁵ In contrast to the other arts, Buber conceived architecture as an invasion of space itself, which can only be experienced by passing through it, i.e. by the user’s and the spectator’s own movement. The bows, in which Mendelsohn often placed his sketched buildings may be understood as a “humanization of space” in the Buberian sense. It is an indication of an almost religious integration into the divine cosmos, which Mendelsohn met with respectful humility: “Cover your head so that the blessing of God may rest upon you,” says the Talmud (Fig. 6).¹⁶

Throughout his life, Mendelsohn remained a wanderer between the worlds. Ultimately, he preferred this state to a fixed existence. If one were to place him somewhere at home, the ship on the high seas – an image closely associated with emigration – provides an anchor. The sea, to which he wrote numerous hymns, was his element, his realm. The eternally flowing principle of the waves symbolizes the dynamics of his architecture as well as the restlessness of his life. In his last will and testament, he decreed that his ashes be given to the sea, a wish that was granted by his wife Louise. Mendelsohn’s first letter to her in August 1910 was a unique hymn to the sea: “Only in movement lies endless stimulus.”¹⁷

Credits

Figs. 1, 3, 4, 5: Collection Ita Heinze-Greenberg

Fig. 2: Eric and Louise Mendelsohn Papers, Getty Research Institute

Fig. 6: Erich Mendelsohn Archiv, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

Notes

- ¹ Louise Mendelsohn, *My Life in a Changing World*, San Francisco n.d., p. 254; unpublished memoirs, Erich Mendelsohn Archiv, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 227 and p. 249.
- ³ Erich Mendelsohn, letter to his wife Luise, Berlin 30 January 1933; <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe> (consulted last on 15 July 2022).
- ⁴ Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, München 1995, Band IV, p. 4.
- ⁵ Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Charles Du Vinage, 31 December 1948, Erich Mendelsohn Archiv, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz.
- ⁶ Erich Mendelsohn, ex. cat. of the Verein Deutsches Bauzentrum e.V. and the Akademie der Künste Berlin 1968.
- ⁷ Erich Mendelsohn, *Palestine and the World of Tomorrow*, Jerusalem 1940.
- ⁸ Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees“ [1943], in: Marc Robinson, *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, Boston/London 1994, pp. 110–119.
- ⁹ Julius Posener, *Fast so alt wie das Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1990, p. 228.
- ¹⁰ Erich Mendelsohn, “The Tent“, typescript w.d., Erich Mendelsohn Archiv, Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz.
- ¹¹ See: Ita Heinze-Greenberg, “Heroic Narratives: Bruno Zevi and Eric Mendelsohn“, in: Matteo Cassani Simonetti, Elena Dell’api-ana (eds.), *Bruno Zevi. History, Criticism and Architecture after World War II*, Milan 2021, pp.129–151.
- ¹² Bruno Zevi, “Ebraismo e concezione spazio-temporale dell’arte” [1974], in: idem, *Ebraismo e architettura*, Florence 2018, pp. 23–48.
- ¹³ Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Maas, his later wife, Charlottenburg 2 April 1915, <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe> (consulted last on 15 July 2022).
- ¹⁴ Quoted from: Judi Loach, Raquel Rapaport, “Buber on (looking at) architecture“, in: *The Journal of Architecture*, 5 (summer 2000), pp. 189–214, here p. 190.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Marty Friedländer, “Jewish Signs and Symbols: Kippah“, <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2015-10-15/ty-article/jewish-signs-and-symbols-kippah/> (consulted last on 15 July 2022).
- ¹⁷ Erich Mendelsohn, letter to Luise Maas, his later wife, Allenstein 16 August 1910; <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe> (consulted last on 15 July 2022).