

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

Regina Stephan

A Semitic commonwealth of Jews and Arabs. Erich Mendelsohn's observations, reflections, and advice for the future of Palestine in 1940

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

The author of the text is the architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953) from Allenstein, East Prussia. He emigrated from Germany in March 1933. In the same year, he founded new offices in London and in 1935 in Jerusalem, between which he travelled. The short text (18.5 p.) published by Jerusalem Press Ltd. in Palestine, then a British Mandate, in an unknown edition has no illustrations. It was published in February 1940, when Mendelsohn was living in Palestine with his wife. They had left London in the early summer of 1939 due to the recognizable threat of war. However, the situation in Palestine was also difficult. Mendelsohn's building projects suffered from the Arab uprising between 1936 and 1939. In September 1939, the German Wehrmacht invaded Poland, starting the Second World War. The following month, the British Mandate government imposed a ban on immigration to Palestine. The 53-year-old architect, who had already visited Palestine for the first time in 1923, when there were still far fewer European immigrants living in the country, wrote the text at a politically extremely turbulent time. He starts the text with a review of 6,000 years of history of the Mediterranean and its neighbors. In his view, Ottoman rule led to the decline of Palestine, which is nevertheless “the only solution to the perpetual conundrum” facing European Jews today. However, he notes that Palestine is not an uninhabited country, but on the contrary part of the Arab world. Therefore, the fate of Palestine depends on Jews and Arabs seeing themselves as members of the common Semitic family and developing the country together. It is a demand towards both sides.

Origin and early career

Erich Mendelsohn was born in 1887 in Allenstein, East Prussia, the fifth of six children of a merchant. After a semester of economics, he switched to architecture, which he first studied in Berlin and then from 1910 to 1912 at the TH Munich. At the time, Munich was a center of modern art, to which Mendelsohn felt drawn. Therefore he began his career on two tracks: as a stage and costume designer and as a private architect. His first building was the Bet Tahara in Allenstein. Between August 1914 and November 1918, the First World War interrupted his career. He read writings on architecture and art theory and developed ideas for future architecture in small-format hand sketches. After serving on the eastern and western fronts, he founded his first office in Berlin in November 1918. In the immediate post-war years, he leapt to the forefront of the avant-garde with the Einstein Tower in Potsdam and subsequently acquired further orders. Among these, the hat factory Friedrich Steinberg, Herrmann & Co. in Luckenwalde and the Rudolf

Mosse publishing house stand out, which he was able to realize in Berlin's newspaper district until 1923.

First trip to Palestine in 1923

In 1923, he and his wife Luise travelled to Palestine for the first time at the invitation of the engineer Pinchas Rutenberg. In 1921, the British High Commission had awarded Rutenberg the concession for the power supply to Jaffa and Tel Aviv and thus the construction of power stations. Mendelsohn was to design these very stations. His itinerary can be traced very well in letters to his daughter Esther: Munich, Salzburg, Trieste, Brindisi, Alexandria, Jaffa, Tiberias, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Cairo and Luxor , where they visited the Valley of the Kings on Mendelsohn's 36th birthday.^[1] Mendelsohn was very impressed by his stay in Egypt and Palestine, which at the time were largely unspoiled and virtually free of Western influences, but it did not lead to any contracts. After a month, he returned to Berlin.

Berlin 1923-1933

After the end of hyperinflation in November 1923, the order situation improved, enabling his office to develop into one of the largest in Germany through challenging construction contracts throughout the German Reich. These included the department stores in Nuremberg, Stuttgart and Chemnitz of the Jewish company I. Schocken und Söhne from Zwickau/Saxony, and in Berlin the WOGA-complex with the Universum cinema, the Kreuzberg metalworkers' house and the Columbushaus on Potsdamer Platz. Orders also came from abroad, for example from Leningrad for the Textilfabrik Krasnoje Snamja. From 1928 on, Mendelsohn planned and realized his private house on Rupenhorn in Berlin's Westend district. The family moved into this house at the beginning of 1930. In the few years that they lived there, it became a meeting point for important personalities, particularly from the Jewish-Zionist milieu, including Kurt Blumenfeld, Chaim Weizmann, Salman Schocken and Albert Einstein, who played music at house concerts. On March 31, 1933, Erich and Luise Mendelsohn left the house due to antisemitic hostility and threats and went into exile. Luise's friend Hede Vasen and the housekeeper packed the household effects they had left behind. They were stored at William Whiteley's Depositories in London until 1948.

In exile from 1933

Unburdened by personal household effects, the Mendelsohns were able to react to political events at short notice in the following years and live temporarily in different places. In addition to the United Kingdom, it was especially the British Mandate of Palestine that attracted Mendelsohn after the failure of the project for a European Mediterranean Academy. He had been pursuing this project together with his friend Hendrikus Theodorus Wijedveld since 1931. Outstanding representatives of various art disciplines were to offer interdisciplinary courses for graduates of European universities. A plot of land had already been acquired in Cavalière on the Côte d'Azur for the academy building, but it was not built. The project was finalised in 1934. For Mendelsohn, who had initially been strongly committed to the Academy, other projects had meanwhile taken priority, including the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-sea and the home of Chaim Weizmann, President of the World Zionist Organization, which Mendelsohn planned and then implemented in Rehovot from spring 1934.

The second Palestine trip 1934 and the Jerusalem office

The trip to Palestine, which Mendelsohn undertook in autumn 1934 together with the Weizmanns and his

wife, took him back to the British Mandate for the first time, eleven years after his first stay in Palestine. The country had changed considerably in the meantime due to the high number of immigrants. In particular, Tel Aviv, founded as a garden suburb of Jaffa, had been extensively and rapidly developed. Architects who had trained at European universities were particularly involved in this. Numerous motifs from his German buildings were taken up by them and applied to the buildings in a kind of modern eclecticism. The fact that this was possible irritated and displeased Mendelsohn greatly. Mendelsohn's designs for building projects in Palestine were different from his European projects, as they were conceived for a different climate and a different cultural landscape. This can be seen by comparing the contemporaneous buildings in England and in Palestine: the Weizmann House in Rehovot as well as in Jerusalem: the Schocken Villa and Library, the buildings for the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus and the Anglo-Palestine Bank. During these years, Mendelsohn himself lived and worked in an old Arab windmill in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia, which also housed his office. This testifies to his architectural approach, which sought to integrate new architecture into the existing landscape and the surrounding urban planning conditions - not only in Palestine, but throughout his entire career. He was a master of integration without subordination. His correspondence with his wife Luise contains numerous references to building projects, working and living conditions in Palestine. [2] On the one hand, he shows himself to be a Zionist - for example by flagging the windmill with the Union Jack and the blue and white Zionist flag for King George V on Coronation Day - and on the other hand as an architect who works together with the local building contractors and reports on the construction workers' strike during the Arab uprising. With the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, construction in the British Mandate area was halted. This meant that Mendelsohn could no longer earn any income. As he supported his family members living in exile financially, this led to a difficult economic situation for him in Jerusalem. [3] The intervention of the German Wehrmacht in the North African campaign from February 1941 was followed by the Mendelsohns' decision to emigrate to the USA at the beginning of March 1941. They arrived there on 27 April after a journey of almost two months.

Palestine and the World of Tomorrow

As his legacy, Mendelsohn left behind not only finished buildings, but also the publication he described as a pamphlet. After an introduction to the history of the Mediterranean region, in which Mendelsohn expands on his broad cultural and historical knowledge, he turns to the current situation. This was characterized by the fact that the Jews returned to Palestine after 2000 years of diaspora. However, he does not want this return to be understood as either a conquest or an escape. (p. 14) According to Mendelsohn, reconstruction - after the previously postulated decline under Ottoman rule - can only take place together with the indigenous Arab population. (S. 14) For Mendelsohn, the key question for the future of Palestine is: "Palestine is not an uninhabited country. On the contrary, it forms of the Arabian world. The problem that confronts the Jews in Palestine is how to reach an equal rank among their neighbors; how to become a cell of the future Semitic commonwealth, to which they do in fact belong by their race, tongue and character." (p. 11) He analyses very clearly the core problem of the Jews in Palestine, who are divided between two worlds: "... the Arabian world in the East, to which they immigrated, and towards the European world in the West from which they had emigrated. To the first they do not yet belong; to the second they do not belong any more. Thus they stand between two worlds" (p. 11). He also sees great differences between the Jewish immigrants between Eastern European Jews, to whom he attests extreme

views, and immigrants from Central Europe, whom he recognizes as having a greater sense of reality. He calls on the Jewish people without distinction to become an equal member of the Semitic alliance of states. And he includes the Arab population in this demand: "Palestine of today is symbolizing the union between the most modern civilization and the most antique culture. (...) In arrangement commanded by this union both Arabs and Jews, both members of the Semitic family, should be equally interested. On its solution depends the fate of Palestine to become a part of the New-World, which is going to replace the world that has gone. Genesis is repeating itself." (S. 19)

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Notes

[1] The letters adressed to the seven year old daughter Esther, who was left in Berlin, can be read, transcribed and commented, under: <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe>

[2] <http://ema.smb.museum/de/briefe>, Letter of Erich Mendelsohn to Luise Mendelsohn, 12 May 1937

[3] see the letter to Chaim Yaski from the 8.7.1945.

About the Author

Regina Stephan, Dr. phil. habil., is Professor of the History of Architecture and Urban Planning at Mainz University of Applied Sciences. She specializes in the architecture of the 19th and 20th centuries. One focus of her research is the life and work of Erich Mendelsohn. She has published several books on this subject, including "Erich Mendelsohn, Gebaute Welten", 1999, and together with Ita Heinze-Greenberg: "Erich Mendelsohn, Gedankenwelten", 2000, "Erich and Luise Mendelsohn, Eine Partnerschaft für die Kunst", 2004. She was curator of the ifa's touring exhibition: "Erich Mendelsohn, Dynamik und Funktion" (2000-2013), edited Erich and Luise Mendelsohn's correspondence for the Getty Research Institute and the Kunstbibliothek Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in 2014 (<http://ema.smb.museum/>) and, together with Jörg Haspel, is the initiator of the Erich Mendelsohn Initiative, founded in 2021.

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