

The Pity of it All – A Portrait of Jews in Germany 1743-1933
by Amos Elon.
Penguin, Allen Lane 2003.

This stunning work of history tells the story of an extraordinary period of almost two centuries, from the arrival in Berlin of Moses Mendelssohn, later to be dubbed 'The German Socrates' to the flight of Hannah Arendt, later the coiner of the memorable phrase 'the banality of evil' in connection with the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann.

In meticulous detail, Elon traces the journey of the Jews of Germany from the degradation of the ghetto to the heights of cultural, political and moral achievement. Juxtaposed with the creativity and quality of the Jews are the unremitting mistrust, contempt and maltreatment meted out by their enemies, actions and emotions that in the twentieth century would drown 2000 years of Jewish settlement in Germany in blood.

The Pity of it All is replete with memorable men and women; philosophers like Mendelssohn and poets like Heine, women of the literary salon like Rahel Varnhagen and Henriette Herz, theologians like Leopold Zunz and revolutionary politicians like Gabriel Riesser and Johann Jacoby. It is an exciting tale of endeavour and an abiding and profound desire to show love of country against a backdrop of suspicion and jealousy.

At the end of the book one is left with the feeling that what the Germans came to hate about their Jewish fellow citizens was their liberalism, their compassion and their conscience, which held up a mirror in which they saw their true selves and disliked what they saw. The response was to smash not just the mirror but those who held it high, and in so doing irrevocably to damage what was greatest, truest and best in their nation and themselves.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh