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George Mosse

Even George L. Mosse didn't like the Humanities Building

Mosse was known to be one of the leading historians of the 20th century



by GERALD PORTER · Oct 14, 2015

When he died in 1999, George L. Mosse's friends and colleagues wanted to name the Humanities Building after him — even if he wasn't known to like the building very much.

But the chairman of the University of Wisconsin history department at the time knew Mosse appreciated a good joke, Mosse's friend and

UW history professor emeritus Stanley Payne said. And so the UW System Board of Regents approved dedicating the building after him, honoring the legacy he left behind as a professor with personality and a big voice.

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Mosse, a “legendary professor” and historian, will be honored again through an online course that will focus on the rise of mass movements and fascism in the 20th century, John Tortorice, director of the George L. Mosse program at UW, said. The courses will simulate what it was like to be in one of Mosse’s classrooms.

Tortorice said the “What History Tells” lectures, offered through the Division of Continuing Studies, are a series of lectures on mass movements and how ideology works, ideological foundations of fascism, modern anti-Semitism and racism.

Mosse was born in 1918 to an affluent, upper-middle class Jewish family in Berlin, Germany. Tortorice said Mosse’s parents owned a good portion of the media in Berlin — something Adolf Hitler despised — leading to his denouncing of the Mosse family 14 times before becoming Chancellor. In 1933, the Mosse family was exiled and forced to leave Germany.

“He really wanted to forget Germany and, in a sense, de-Germanize himself and to immerse himself in British history,” Payne said. “This [Britain] was his new home. So he worked the field of early modern English cultural and intellectual history for the first 10 years of his active career.”

After leaving Germany, he attended a Quaker school in England before enrolling in Cambridge University, Payne said.

But while visiting his sister in 1939, Mosse got news of the war breaking out in Europe, which Payne said conflicted with his educational aspirations since German nationals like Mosse weren’t allowed in the UK. So Mosse moved to the U.S., finished his bachelor’s degree at Haverford College near Philadelphia and completed his graduate degree at Harvard University.

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Payne said Mosse began his teaching career at University of Iowa in 1944. Continuing to distance himself from his German ties, he worked in the field of early modern English history.

Mosse developed his reputation as an outstanding teacher at Iowa where he was one of the most popular professors in the history department, Payne said.

It was when he came to UW in 1955, Payne said, that Mosse began wanting to look more toward his roots. Mosse wanted to go back into German history to investigate German culture and what made the rise of Nazism possible.

“I think what the course does well is highlight the passing of a generation,” course instructor Skye Doney said. “This sort of idealistic, European generation whose idealism comes into conflict with this extreme violence of the First World War. So it’s a society that’s reeling in the midst of financial, ongoing conflict, and domestic violence. There’s something to that today.”

Tortorice said Mosse viewed history as a method that was most real in its teaching. But he also had great belief in the power of history to transform people’s lives to help them shape their future.

Mosse viewed teaching history as a way of bringing awareness and sparking students to engage in the world, Tortorice said.

Payne said Mosse didn’t mind when his student disagreed with him. In fact, usually Mosse’s students weren’t all of the same political opinion.

“Above all, he wanted to get them in the habit of asking questions — questioning established practices and prejudices and learning to think for themselves,” Payne said.

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