

In Memoriam

George Lachmann Mosse
(1918-1999)

In the early morning of January 22, 1999, George Mosse died of a cancer that had been diagnosed shortly before his departure. His life belonged very much to the twentieth century. He was born in a Jewish family in Berlin, going into exile immediately after Hitler took power. He left for the United States in 1939 to continue his studies, becoming a leading historian of European culture and Nazi ideology. At the time of his retirement he began to study gay history, soon joining the editorial board of the *Journal of Homosexuality*. For all who knew him, Professor Mosse was a great scholar, a marvelous teacher, and, above all, a sweet and faithful friend.

Professor Mosse was born on September 20, 1918, at the end of the First World War. His father had taken over from *his* father-in-law the Mosse publishing house, which, among many works, published the leading liberal newspaper of Germany, the *Berliner Tageblatt*. It was such a wealthy family that little George received at his 10th anniversary a car with chauffeur. His family belonged to those assimilated Jews who believed in German *Bildung* and *Kultur* and who struggled hard to oppose the rising right-wing forces in Weimar-Germany. They hardly could believe that Hitler's rise to power was possible in a civilized state. His father had not prepared the family for living in exile. Once exiled the family had to live off the earnings of the non-German parts of the Mosse corporation, most importantly a news agency in Switzerland.

As an incorrigible boy, George had been placed in a boarding school in Germany. Once in exile he was sent to another boarding school in England. His parents enjoyed travel among the major capitals and tourist resorts of Europe. In 1939, young George went to the United States to continue his historical studies at Harvard. At entry, he changed his name from Gerhard to George. The U.S. would become

his second home for the rest of his life, but he would visit Europe on a regular basis and for extended periods: particularly London, Paris, Munich, Berlin, Amsterdam, Rome. He always felt himself to be an émigré.

Mosse's first historical studies dealt with the Renaissance and Reformation. He first taught at the University of Iowa. Since 1955 he was a member of the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He later changed the focus of his study to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Early in his career he earned his reputation as a great teacher who could command and inspire large classes of students. His course-book, *The Culture of Western-Europe*, was published in 1961 to great acclaim and is still used as reading material for students.

Professor Mosse's specialization became the rise of the Nazi ideology and the loss of humanist and liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. He remained faithful to liberal ideals, notwithstanding the atrocities of World War II and the postmodernist critiques of Enlightenment philosophy. He wrote many books on this topic, the first and still magisterial, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964). Other titles followed: *Germans and Jews* (1970), *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975), and *Towards the Final Solution* (1978). He favored and strongly promoted an explanation of fascism in terms of culture rather than one that stresses economic and social factors. Image building and mass communication were the instruments of fascists seeking power.

As the leading historian of Nazism and the holocaust, Mosse became an advisor for museums on how to portray the history of the two World Wars. He lectured widely on the topic and participated in debates, such as the German *Historikerstreit*. He was prominent in Italy as the historian of fascism. He received guest professorships in Jerusalem, Munich, the Washington Holocaust Museum, and Capetown South Africa. Many honorary doctorates were bestowed upon him.

In the early eighties, Mosse changed once again his focus of study. As an editor of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, he published special issues on decadence and sexuality and wrote, himself, on these topics. In 1983, the international gay and lesbian studies conference *Among Men, Among Women*, held at the University of Amsterdam, was the occasion for his scholarly coming out. Mosse was one of the first well-known professors to do so while others of his generation, such as Norbert Elias, remained in the closet. The papers he wrote

during this period were brought together in a book called *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (1985). It is very much a gay history book. It focuses on the outsiders in modern nationalism. In 1988, he became the first guest professor of gay and lesbian studies at the University of Amsterdam. He made a lasting impression on the many people he met there, voicing strong opinions in several masterful lectures. When asked if he had changed his sexuality during his lifetime, he flatly said no.

He wrote two more books on ideals of masculinity. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (1991) concerns the masculine imagery of war monuments. The second one, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996), discusses the production of manliness in various political movements. The morning he died, the proofs for *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (1999) arrived. The book he had finished just before his death was his autobiography, *Confronting History: A Memoir* (1999). It gives his perspective on the century he lived through with great intensity, and as well the fascinating story of his life. At the moment he passed away, he had lived for nearly ten years with his lover John Tortorice.

Doing gay history in Europe, George was probably gayer in Europe than in Madison (Wisconsin), New York, or Jerusalem. The star of Jewish studies could not be too much of an "outsider" in those cities. Understandably, his books on European gay and gender history made more of an impression in Europe than in the United States. Mosse became in his later years an icon of gay history and sensibility in Amsterdam and in Berlin, where he opened the large exhibit "*Hundred Years of Gay Movement*" (1997).

George was a liberal of the nicest kind. He was leftist, but not a doctrinaire Marxist. He enjoyed gay studies, but had no taste for postmodernism and queer theory, although some scholars tried to make him into a protagonist of these perspectives. His place was firmly in cultural history, not cultural analysis. As a Jewish gay man he was keenly aware of social inequalities and discrimination but nevertheless enjoyed the pleasures of urbane life. He was able to savor the privileges of the upper class without petty remorse and he liked the traditional customs of Cambridge University where he taught for a while. He visited and interviewed former S.S. officers because he wanted to understand their minds. His fascination with people with radically different opinions made him also go to the South Africa

under the Apartheid regime. When we once came across a fundamentalist Protestant church service in the Dutch Bible Belt, he loved seeing and feeling it.

Dear George was a great teacher and scholar. But he was also a lovely friend. He came to Europe yearly to enjoy the company of many old friends and to make new ones. When he was here, it was as if he had never been away and the discussion of last year simply continued. George was a very organized person and prepared his visits far in advance so there was always the fresh prospect of a new visit. Dining and wining with George always ended in lively discussions about general politics as well as private pleasures. These included the funny and seamy sides of vibrant gay, erotic small talk. George Mosse will continue to be among us through the lenses and memories of his friends and students. But we will miss very much his own robust voice, his resolute views, his impressive physical presence, and the lingering prospect of his amiable visits.

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