# George L. Mosse on his Berlin Childhood in the Last Years of the Weimar Republic (Retrospective account, 2000)

## Abstract

The German-American historian George Lachmann Mosse (1918-1999) came from a Jewish publishing family and grew up in the Weimar Republic. In this excerpt from his memoirs, published in 2000, he describes how he experienced the late phase of the Weimar Republic as the child of a very wealthy family in Berlin. Shortly after the Nazis came to power in 1933, Mosse left Germany and studied first in Great Britain and later in the United States, where he settled and became a U.S. citizen in 1941.

## Source

No sense of impending doom marred my childhood, lived in Berlin during the last years of the Weimar Republic. I witnessed those years as a spectator cushioned from the real world through an opulent lifestyle which served to block out the realities of life. What other child had a car and driver of his own when not yet ten years of age and was driven to primary school when other children walked? Moreover, a series of governesses took care of all my needs. I had my own living room as well as bedroom at my disposal both in Berlin and on the country estate just outside the city.

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But it was the opulence and the availability of space which characterized the setting of these early years. Although I was an infrequent visitor there, my grandfather's mansion in Berlin is the house which, more than any other, seems to symbolize the background against which my childhood was lived. My maternal grandfather, Rudolf Mosse, built his "palace," modeled on those of Renaissance Italy, on Berlin's Leipziger Platz in 1882 in order to demonstrate the solidity of his publishing empire founded two decades earlier. As an additional sign of his status, he bought the rural estate of Schenkendorf in 1896, with its palatial country house, some forty minutes by car outside Berlin. The Berlin residence was a large stone building in the classical style; its courtyard enclosed a fountain by Walter Schott which, with its dancing maidens, was to be imitated by one at another estate in East Prussia and another in New York's Central Park, which still stands. But this was not all; the mansion, besides the lavish living quarters, also contained my grandfather's art gallery and extensive library.

The existence of such a gallery and library in a private house reflects the German middle-class ideal of *Bildung:* the acquisition of self-worth through continuous self-development in which education, culture, and the visual arts played an important part. The paintings and sculptures in a collection like that of Rudolf Mosse, with their historical, sacred, or national themes, could be absorbed without difficulty and given a spiritual dimension in which they exemplified truth and beauty and elevated the human spirit.

What must have been the most startling painting in the mansion decorated one large wall of the dining room. The artist, Anton von Werner, was famous for his 1877 painting of Bismarck's proclamation of the new German Reich; he was an expert in crafting paintings with historical themes. I remember his huge fresco in the dining room well; it was a source of endless fascination. *The Festival Dinner*, as it is called, was a portrait painting in brilliant colors completed in 1899. Rudolf Mosse, along with his wife and daughter—my mother—and some of his important political friends, are all clad in Renaissance costume, seated at a large banquet table in an Italian setting, talking and proposing toasts. This was a gathering of leading liberals such as the physician-politician Rudolf Virchow and the liberal parliamentarian Heinrich

Rickert. Others of the middle-class elite had themselves painted in the same manner, and frescoes in their homes, also built at the end of the last century, often showed the family in Renaissance dress.

This vogue, which would not survive long into the new century, documented a new self-confidence on the part of a new middle-class elite, as well as their quest to attain legitimacy by appropriating a nonaristocratic past that had been one of the high points of Western taste and culture. Moreover, this was a past which in its republicanism suited the liberal elite, patrons of culture; thus it was especially appropriate for German Jews as a sign of their integration into European history and tradition. I knew nothing of all of this, just the fun of looking at such a costume party, and I was always struck by the beauty of my mother as a young girl.

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The villa which my grandfather Mosse had built for his daughter and her husband—my parents—in Berlin's west end was quite different, more modern and nondescript. Here is where I spent part of my early childhood. Upstairs every one of us three children had a bedroom and a playroom (or sitting room as my brother and sister grew older). Here too I lived in my own little world. The public rooms and the dining room were downstairs, together with my father's study. I remember the two large and ornate sitting rooms only as public rooms because of the many gatherings which took place there; after them came a large dining room decorated with Medici tapestries. A concert hall had been built behind the sitting rooms: there well-known musicians performed both as soloists or in quartets. The tradition of musical performances given in the home lived on in these circles. We, in turn, were invited to such concerts, and to this day I remember one given by a quartet in the house of the prominent banker Carl Melchior, perhaps because for once I was allowed to accompany my parents.

I was considered much too young to take part in the cultural life of Berlin at the time, and it is ironic when today students ask me what it must have been like to experience the excitement of cultural life in the Weimar Republic. To be sure, like other children, I was taken to the opera (usually those like Friedrich von Flotow's *Martha*—my own first opera—or Gustav Albert Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmermann*—my second), but never to the theater. My childhood was lived almost entirely in Schenkendorf or within my parents' villa on the Maassenstrasse, situated in one of Berlin's most elegant districts. There we were surrounded by the homes of other members of the Jewish elite, most of whom knew each other. A certain reghettoization, though far from complete, had taken place in the pattern of settlement. Even at Schenkendorf we were surrounded by estates which had been purchased by other acquaintances, bankers or industrialists for the most part. Most of this splendor even survived the Second World War. But then these villas were torn down in the 1960s to make room for urban renewal in the shape of ugly prefabricated apartment buildings.

In addition to the Berlin house, the second environment where I spent much time before I went to boarding school and later, on holidays, was the estate at Schenkendorf in the flat countryside surrounding Berlin, with its birch trees and sandy soil. Schenkendorf in its origin had been a feudal *Rittergut*, or knight's estate. The proprietor of such an estate could in Wilhelmian times carry the title of *Rittergutsbesitzer*—important in a world where title guaranteed status. The building itself dated only from the 1890s; it was surrounded by a large park, and beyond that by sizable farmlands. The actual farmyard which adjoined the park, with its stables and a disused sugar beet mill, always provided an attractive playground.

The village of Schenkendorf itself, by the 1890s, had lost the coal mines which had provided its livelihood. The mine workers' housing was left standing, however, and gave the village of a few hundred people its character. The drab houses built by the mine owners were called „Siemens houses" after the famous German company which had owned the mine. To this day the arms of the mine workers' union decorate the village's largest house, which had been their social center. But all of this was merely

background as far as I was concerned. I do not remember mixing with the village children, although I was told recently that at times children were asked to the manor house for cakes and sweets in order to provide playmates for me. On my birthday the village band regularly serenaded me, beneath the manor's large terrace, a homage which, once more, I took for granted.

The village was extremely poor, and it was said that by 1933 one half of its inhabitants voted Nazi and the other half Communist. My parents, for all that, acted and were regarded as something like the lords of the manor. In 1928, for example, they donated the village church bells: one was inscribed with my sister's name and one with my own (I don't know why my brother was apparently omitted), and I vividly remember the ceremony of installment presided over by the Lutheran superintendent (Bishop) of the region. Today this bell is the only concrete link that still ties me to the village; for while my sister's was melted down during the Second World War, I myself continue to ring out over manor and village. The church itself had impressed me earlier only because it contained in the cellar the bodies of the children of the Count von Löben, who had owned the estate during the seventeenth century. The eighteen half-opened coffins which held their bones presented a fascinating, if gruesome, sight. (The interior of the simple church, after its restoration by the German Democratic Republic, turned out to be a seventeenth-century jewel well worth visiting.)

The Schenkendorf manor house itself I never found especially attractive, though it had a large hall at its center around which, on a gallery, some eight bedrooms intended for guests were grouped. My father had each of these rooms equipped with a private bathroom, an unheard-of luxury at the time. The two drawing rooms (red and green) were downstairs, as was the dining room, together with my mother's suite and a so-called winter garden off the great hall, leading to the large terrace with its view over a wide lawn toward a small lake.

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The servants were a necessary and integral part of this opulent lifestyle. The house in Berlin and the one in Schenkendorf were maintained by some five or six servants each, including cook and butler, my mother's personal maid, various chambermaids, and a kitchen maid. The story is told that in Berlin my father once met on the stairway of our house a woman whom he had never seen before, and in answering his astonished question of who she was and what she was doing there, she said that she was the kitchen maid. Our relations with at least some of the servants must have been very close; they were in any case far from hostile, as class-based theory would have had it. Whatever was saved of the contents of our houses was due to the actions of loyal servants, who rescued valuables, including tapestries and some furniture, from under the very eyes of the police who had confiscated our property after our flight into exile. Some of these possessions followed us halfway around the world; they eventually turned up when my father and stepmother lived in California. But as the pleasant was often mixed with the bizarre during the first years of exile, the loyal concierge of the Berlin house had packed among the Medici tapestries and Empire chairs a whole suitcase full of enema bags of the large old-fashioned kind. Perhaps she was afraid of what strange American food might do to our health.

Source: George L. Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir*. With a Foreword by Walter Laqueur. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, pp. 7–16.

Republic (Retrospective account, 2000), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3848> [March 16, 2026].