

George L. Mosse on Sexual Awakening and Sexual Repression in the Weimar Republic (Retrospective Account, 2000)

Abstract

German-American historian George Lachmann Mosse (1918–1999) was born into a Jewish family of publishers and grew up in the Weimar Republic. In this excerpt from his memoirs (published in 2000), he describes common bourgeois attitudes towards sexual education during his youth. Although the Weimar Republic was generally considered sexually liberal and permissive, child rearing and sexual education did not differ much – at least in Mosse’s educated bourgeois circles – from Imperial Germany. Shortly after the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Mosse emigrated; he first went to college in Great Britain and later moved to the United States, where he became a citizen in 1941.

Source

Typical of the important role Joseph Lehmann played in my family, and especially in the lives of us children, was his function as instructor in sexual matters. Neither my father nor my mother could ever bring themselves to speak about such a topic. To be sure, my father made an effort in 1930 when my sister had joined a coeducational social-work movement which maintained childhood nurseries in a Berlin working-class neighborhood. He began by trying to find out indirectly whether she already had a boyfriend (the answer was “no,” to his great relief), and ended by warning her that all boys were only after her money.

As for myself, my parents waited too long to tackle the distasteful task of sexual enlightenment. I had already been to a coeducational boarding school for several years when, instead of confronting me directly, they sent me to Lehmann. This was not to my advantage: as a very impetuous youngster I took the initiative, even before he got started, and with the proper embellishments told the rabbi, as he sat behind his desk, stroking his long beard, all I had witnessed in the bedrooms and bathrooms at school, and in which sexual practices I had actually joined. This could not have been so shocking, dealing mostly with masturbation, which, however, was considered serious enough. I do not remember any details of the rabbi’s response; his stern admonishment must have made very little impression. Lehmann was convinced from then on that I was the black sheep of the family, shameless if not worse, and I had no more encounters with him. Indeed, I was banished from the Reform movement’s religious school because of my bad behavior. Although I can no longer recall the incident, it may have been one of the so-called mouse-rabbles with which I made my name in school. In the middle of the lesson, I would throw my notebook to the wall with the cry “mouse” and then all my classmates would do the same. Chaos resulted. After I stopped attending religious school, my association with the Reform Congregation was confined to annual visits to the synagogue.

I am sure that my sister’s and my own experiences with attempts at “sexual enlightenment” were far from unique. Such matters were best left unsaid. Respectability still held sway among the bourgeoisie during the Weimar Republic, and the so-called loose morals which respectable men and women could enjoy shown on the Berlin stage every evening or could see represented in the arts were kept totally separate from the private sphere. Here there was no connection between life and art. Young people were sheltered and kept from temptation, so that they would not go wrong in later life. This precaution did not apply to those who, supposedly mature in age and mind, would not be tempted to draw false

conclusions from what they saw on the stage and to make life imitate art.

Source: George L. Mosse, *Confronting History: A Memoir*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, pp. 37–38.

Recommended Citation: George L. Mosse on Sexual Awakening and Sexual Repression in the Weimar Republic (Retrospective Account, 2000), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-3895>> [March 16, 2026].