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George L. Mosse '41 was born into one of Berlin's richest families, a son of privilege. Forced to flee Hitler's rise, this shy yet mischievous 15-year-old would in due course shape a new life for himself. As a scholar in the United States and Jerusalem, he evolved into a dynamic lecturer, rarely referring to notes, smoking a pipe and pacing as he addressed auditoriums packed with hundreds of students eager to hear him speak.
An Exile at Home in the World

He was an exiled German Jew, and for much of his career, a closeted gay academic. In his life at Haverford and then as a renowned student and teacher of history, George Mosse wrestled with issues of isolation, assimilation and prejudice. Witness to a pivotal moment in modern European history and fueled by an insatiable curiosity, his command of cultural history and the passion to teach brought a new voice to the study of mass movements, nationalism, sexuality and gender, anti-Semitism and the study of the rise of fascism in Europe.

When he died at the age of 80 in Madison, Wis. in 1999, Mosse had become one of the most influential historians of his generation. His time at Haverford (he was class of ’41) was the beginning of his American journey. About it he writes in his memoir, Confronting History: “It was here that I was truly initiated into scholarship as a lifelong preoccupation.”

Though his intellect and generosity are indisputable (he left his estate to the University of Wisconsin in Madison to endow an exchange program with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), his greatest legacy may well be the body of students, many now internationally acclaimed teachers and thinkers in their own right, so inspired by the professor that 10 years after his death their devotion to Mosse still thrives. Their own work is informed by their experience of a man whose knowledge of cultural history was surpassed only by his curiosity about life itself.

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Mosse was the precocious youngest son of a German Jewish newspaper magnate, Hans Lachmann, and his wife Felicia Mosse. His grandfather, Rudolf Mosse,
"He was a riveting presence, a charming person and a charismatic teacher. He was able to transcend the personal and make history a force for improving the world." - John Tortorice

founded and was publisher of the venerable *Berliner Tageblatt*, Germany’s chief liberal newspaper of its era (1872-1933). As Hitler was gaining power, the teenaged Mosse was largely sheltered from the grim reality unfolding across his country.

“He had been to some Nazi rallies as a youth as an onlooker,” says Professor Paul Breines of Boston College, a former student and close friend of Mosse who today teaches courses in modern European intellectual history and gender and identity. “He saw that with the truly powerful politics of the 20th century the question is, how do you move people in their hearts to come into a cause? What he reported seemed to be a widespread response to the rallies, and that was the passion. At the core of this, in the fascist movement, he understood the role of male bonding in forming national political movements and the homoerotic dimension to modern nationalism.”

Sequestered at Salem, a boarding school in the south of Germany, Mosse was learning military discipline, but still pulling pranks. After the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor in early 1933, his family fled and left him behind at Salem to finish his semester in the belief that Nazism was a short-lived phenomenon. His parents used their influence to help him escape in March, 1933. He passed through a line of SA soldiers at the border, and took a ferry across Lake Constance, out of Germany and most likely away from a terrible fate.

Unmoored, Mosse continued his education in England at the Bootham Quaker School and Cambridge University. In 1939

Left to right: Mosse (center) meets president of Israel Zalman Shazar (left) in 1970 (Gershom Scholem is on the right); Mosse with his students at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, 1982; Mosse in Assisi, Italy in 1989.
An Exile at Home in the World

he found his way to Haverford when a former nanny, a Quaker, suggested that Pennsylvania’s Quaker schools would open their doors to exiles. His mentor when he entered Haverford as a junior was English professor Leslie Hotson. “He taught me how to do research, though I could never follow in his footsteps; I had too little patience for that kind of scholarship and was always keen to see the bigger picture,” he writes. Mosse soon encountered Haverford history professor William Lunt. “It was under his direction that I wrote an honors thesis, which was my very first venture into serious scholarship—for good measure I changed my major to history.”

After graduation from Haverford, Mosse pursued his interest in English Protestant history at Harvard, where he earned his Ph.D. in 1946. From 1944 to 1955 Mosse lectured at the State University of Iowa—where teaching Western civilization in the cavernous halls with no microphones meant projecting and thus, his trademark resonating lecture voice developed. He left for the University of Wisconsin in 1955 to help strengthen the European history program and was a faculty member until his retirement in 1988. He also taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem from 1969 to 1985 and was awarded an honorary doctorate from its president just moments before he died.

“He was a riveting presence, a charming person and a charismatic teacher,” says John Tortorici, who lived with Mosse for the last 10 years of his life and is the director of the George L. Mosse Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “He was able to transcend the personal and make history a force for improving the world.”

“He was an extraordinarily powerful and persuasive speaker and attracted students in ways I have never seen since,” recalls Anson Rabinbach, professor of history and director of the program in European Cultural Studies at Princeton University. Rabinbach has published extensively on Nazi Germany, Austria, and European thought in the 19th and 20th centuries and was one of Mosse’s 10 teaching assistants at University of Wisconsin-Madison in the early 1970s.

Mosse enjoyed provoking and challenging his students, says Rabinbach, and recalls that his first assignment from Mosse was to translate a 16th-century official document in antiquated German in one week with footnotes. Rabinbach remembers him as “ruthless” and notoriously impatient with students who showed pretense. “He’d start to drum his hands on one knee; that was his bs-meter.”

I took his course I wanted to be him,” says Breines. “He became my ego ideal.” By the second semester of his freshman year Breines had bought his own tweed jacket, a pipe and a little tin of Three Nuns Tobacco in an effort to imitate many personal traits of his new idol.

“His voice got inside me and I never looked back,” says Breines, author of Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral

His early studies focused on English constitutional history, Puritanism and the Reformation and his more than 25 books examined themes of National Socialism, fascism, Nazi Germany, Jewish history, the history of gender and masculinity, and more.

But he knew how to talk to all sides. “He had friends all over the political spectrum,” says Rabinbach. “He was a tremendously engaged person. You’d have graduate seminars in his house in his study and you had to trek out to his house so you would have to have a car. And he would sit behind his desk with his dog Schnootzie for three hours and talk. Then you would have a glass of wine and everyone went home.”

There was no heady political atmosphere when Paul Breines arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a freshman in 1959, and he freely owns up to being politically unaware. “My dream was to be a basketball player,” says Breines, one of a small group of Jewish undergrads at the time. But at the urging of fellow students, he enrolled in Mosse’s course “European History, French Revolution to the Present.” “It was either the first 10 minutes or the first week but very soon after

Mosse and John Tortorici in Leipzig, Germany in 1997 in front of the Volkisher Denkmal, a monument to the victory of the German people over Napoleon.

Dilemma of American Jewry (1990). “I’m 66 years old now, and his presence as a teacher changed my life. It was simply astonishing to me that there was a vocation that involved thinking about the world, how it got to be the way it is and what are our social and moral obligations. George was passionately engaged in figuring out how it got to be the way it was.”

“He had this big, booming voice and when talking about European history he
was erudite and comprehensive," says Rabinbach. "When I arrived in Wisconsin in 1976 with all my belongings still in the car, there was George on the student union terrace debating with students who were planning to occupy a building. The place was popping and George was in the middle of it."

Considered a giant in the field of intellectual and cultural history, Mosse was an inexhaustible writer and worked seven days a week. His early studies focused on English constitutional history, Puritanism and the Reformation and his more than 25 books examined themes of National Socialism, fascism, Nazi Germany, Jewish history, the history of gender and masculinity, and more. He founded and was co-editor of The Journal of Contemporary History with Walter Laqueur. His awards, including many honorary degrees, the American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction, the Leo Baeck Medal, the Goethe Medal, and the Prezzolini Prize, are proof both of his scholarship and his peers' respect.

Though his public persona was confident and charming—Mosse was legendary for his dedication to his students—his personal life was often enigmatic. He could discuss literature in one breath and then cut short the conversation to tune into his favorite episode of "Bewitched." Fearing his students' rejection at learning he was gay, or worse reprisal from his colleagues at a time when exposure would mean the end of his career, Mosse was most at ease lecturing and writing. When he became more open about his sexuality, the encouragement and acceptance of friends often took him by surprise. Indeed, his struggles with personal identity both as a Jew and a gay man sharpened Mosse's precision at untangling—and making sense of—history from the perspective of an outsider.

"George Mosse tends to conceive of culture and cultural process in terms of a dialectical relationship between centre and periphery," writes Steven Aschheim in his article "George Mosse at 80: A Critical Laudatio," which he wrote for the Journal of Contemporary History. Aschheim is a professor of cultural and intellectual history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and was a student and close friend of Mosse. "The insider acquires identity and defines himself in terms of the outsider he creates. There can be no ideal types without antitypes; the victor cannot be understood apart from his victim. The concern with the outsider and the 'abnormal'—with processes of exclusion and victimization—critically illuminates the 'inside' and the 'normal.'"

When Haverford alumnus Paul Reitter '90 first learned of Mosse's work through Rabinbach, it opened a door. "I had never heard of him before, so I read his book, German Jews Beyond Judaism, about two years out of college," says Reitter, who is now an associate professor at Ohio State University specializing in German-Jewish literature and culture. "Initially, Mosse helped me with a personal question. I hadn't yet decided to go to graduate school; however, I had wondered about why my grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, remained so devoted to German high culture. Such devotion was one of Mosse's major themes. He took German Jewry's passion for German culture seriously. Rather than dismissing it as a form of self-betrayal or an abjectly one-sided love affair, he revealed it to be a complex phenomenon that evolved over many decades and was, by the end of the 19th century, both a distinctive cultural tradition and mode of social integration."

Reitter often considers how Mosse's work influenced his new book The Anti-Journalist. The book looks at turn-of-the-century Vienna and the new style of media criticism developed by Karl Kraus, a Jewish journalist who was notoriously harsh in assessments of his fellow Jewish journalists. "Among the many things I find appealing about Mosse's scholarship," says Reitter, "is its poise. He wrote emphatically at times, but he didn't moralize."

One of Mosse's greatest accomplishments, says Rabinbach, is that he was one of the first to write about the cultural roots of Nazism. "George changed overnight the field of studying National Socialism," says Rabinbach, "and the ways that these movements were exciting. He was also the first to write about memory and monuments, and the history of masculinity. George was always five years ahead of the curve and always looking beyond the horizon of his contemporaries."

The fabric of Mosse's life was, in the end, defined not by the circumstances of his exile or identity, but by the compassion he felt for humanity. Recently Steven Aschheim talked about his last visit with his close friend and mentor. He had traveled from Jerusalem to be with Mosse one weekend before he died. "He had this amazing strength...never complained about his illness. He kept talking and finally I was getting concerned and said, 'George, you're tired, I should go,'" Aschheim said in a phone call from Jerusalem. "And he said to me, 'Steve, I'll always have time for you.'"

Kate Campbell is a freelance writer in Philadelphia. She has written for The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Boston Globe and People Magazine.