

Elisabeth Wagner

Absence/Presence: The Berlin Mosse Topography

At the beginning we must realize: the Mosse's heritage in Berlin is broken, physically, or missing completely, the places, where they lived and worked, sights of their distinction and concern: the Mosse Palais at Leipziger Platz, the villa of the Lachmann-Mosse family in Maaßenstrasse, which was completely destroyed in the Second World War, the Mosse Publishing House at the corner of Schützen- / Jerusalemer Strasse, the manor house in Schenkendorf, where George spent many days of his childhood, the reform synagogue in Johannisstrasse, where his father was especially engaged in the composition of a new liturgy. "East Berlin, it was the heart of a cosmopolitan Berlin that 160.000 Jews called home", the journalist Nina Bernstein wrote in Newsweek September 30, 1990 when she accompanied George Mosse to view the former possessions in the GDR, now eligible for restitution demands. George visited the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin Weissensee, the tombs of his ancestors, his grandfather Rudolf Mosse, the founder of one of the press empires in Berlin, and his grandmother Emilie, the eminent benefactor and philanthropist, honored in 1909 with the imperial Wilhelm-Orden, exceptional for a Jewish woman at that time.



Fig. 1. George Mosse at the graveside of his ancestors, Berlin-Weißensee.¹

"The road of annihilation runs through the contemporary culture of Berlin"², Daniel Libeskind wrote, the architect of the Berlin Jewish Museum and one of the first speakers in the series of the Mosse Lectures, founded by Klaus Scherpe and George Mosse in 1997 at Humboldt-University. Before following the traces of Jewish life in Berlin, before viewing the remnants and ruins, before discussing renovation and restitution matters, we have to realize - this terrible absence of the former Jewish presence, the void built into the Jewish Museum. No way, as it is said, to make this absence visible – referring to the Hebrew Bible.

¹ Unknown Photographer: George L. Mosse at the Tombs of Ulrike Mosse (née Wolff), Rudolf Mosse and Wolfgang Mosse, F81044. George L. Mosse Collection AR 25137. Copyright: Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

² Daniel Libeskind in his MOSSE-LECTURE at Humboldt University, Berlin on June 6, 1997.

How then can we come to feel it?



Fig. 2. The void at Potsdamer and Leipziger Platz in Wim Wenders Movie “Der Himmel über Berlin”.³

Before and after the fall of the wall at Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz there was this haunting empty space which we see in Wim Wenders movie “Der Himmel über Berlin” (“Wings of Desire”). For a short moment of history, in 1990, there was this notion to preserve this void at the city’s center, symbolically.



Fig. 3. The lonely house, reconstruction of the Mosse-Palais in 1997.⁴

³ Otto Sander and Curt Bois in Wings of Desire (West Germany/France 1986/87) by Wim Wenders. Copyright: Wim Wenders Stiftung – Argos Films.

⁴ Unknown Photographer: Major construction site Potsdamer Platz - Construction of the Mosse-Palais at Leipziger Platz, Berlin, 15.04.1997. Copyright: imago images / Gueffroy.

The first building re-erected in this emptiness, on the site of the prestigious Mosse-Palais, Leipziger Platz 15, was an office center, built by the American architect and step nephew of George Mosse, Hans Strauch with allusions to the former architecture and the inscription "Mosse Palais". As a sign of respect, the new owner, Hans Röder, gave a floor free of rent to the American Jewish Committee. The lonely house at the empty space of Leipziger Platz, the new Mosse Palais, was soon to be surrounded and constricted by hotels and a shopping mall.



Fig. 4. The original Mosse Palais.⁵

Look at the front view of the Mosse Palais (Fig. 4), the original chateau like city residence, decorated with an inscription "Die Erhebung des deutschen Geistes" ("Rise of the German Genius") – built in the early 1880ies, and destroyed in an air raid in February 1945 – demonstrating the wealth of the principal Rudolf Mosse, the economic ennoblement of the Jewish press baron: a show piece of representation, only partly used as a living space after the death of Rudolf Mosse in 1920.

⁵ Unknown Photographer: Mosse-Palais from the Southside, Leipziger Platz 15, between 1895-1920, fm1007258. Archive Dr. Franz Stoedtner. Copyright: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, www.fotomarburg.de.



Fig. 5. Mosse-Palais with honour court, Voßstr. 22, 1935.⁶

The Palais was the home of the famous Mosse Art Collection, now the object of the Mosse Art Research Initiative (MARI). And there was also a library, the famous book collection of Erich Schmidt, the former rector of the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, which Rudolf Mosse had bought from the family of the celebrated professor of literature. It is worth noting that not only works of art, but also rare manuscripts and collections of books in Jewish possession were looted by the Nazis and are still missing in the stacks of public libraries: ‘presently absent’: as shown in the restitution project of the artist Maria Eichhorn.

⁶ Photographer: Atelier Bieber /Nather. Copyright: bpk



Fig. 6. Maria Eichhorn's installation at the *documenta 14*, 2017⁷

Under the name of Rose Valland Institute, Maria Eichhorn presented this tower of non-restituted books and other documents at the Documenta exhibition in Kassel 2017, an ongoing project, which she presented again in the Berlin Mosse-Lectures on May 9, 2019.

⁷ Photographer/ Copyright: Mathias Völzke. Courtesy: Maria Eichhorn.



Fig. 7. Soviet soldiers with August Gaul's sculpture "Lying Lion" in the court of the former Mosse-Palais, 1945⁸

In the front yard of the Mosse Palais a voluminous sculpture, August Gaul's "Lying Lion", gave a stately impression. Before visiting this restituted art object at the Staatliche Museen Berlin, take a look at this documentary photo of May 1945, showing the lion as a kind of hunting trophy of the Red Army.



Fig. 8. Reform Synagoge, Berlin: excavated foundation walls 2016⁹

⁸ Photographer: Friedrich Seidenstücker. Copyright: bpk.

⁹ Photographer: Dirk Jericho. Copyright: Dirk Jericho.

The Mosses were prominent supporters and members of the Jewish Reform Congregation. This photo shows the fallow ground between Oranienburger and Johannisstraße, where in 2016 archaeologists excavated the foundation walls of the synagogue, built in 1852/1853. It was on this site that the synagogue of the Jewish Reform Community was inaugurated in 1854. Distinguishing features of this temple included: the holding of Sunday services, no gender segregation or use of head covering, increased use of the German language and organ accompaniment.

The synagogue was damaged in the “Night of the Pogrom” (called “Reichskristallnacht” by the Nazis) on November 9, 1938 and partly restored.

The nearby New Synagogue, acted as a substitute until 1942, was closed by the Nazis in 1941. Destroyed during the war, its ruins were later removed entirely.



Fig. 9. The Reform Synagogue as it was in the 1920ies from the outside.¹⁰

¹⁰ Photographer: Abraham Pisarek. Copyright: bpk.

Jewish orthodoxy left behind, German Jews like the Mosses, adjusted to “the spirit of the time”, as George told us in his memoir, not religious but concerned with Jewish life within German culture. Rabbi Joseph Lehmann of the Reform Congregation played an important part for the family, notably in the children’s education. George’s father, Hans Lachmann-Mosse, as said before, took an active part in the new composition of the liturgy, which was recorded and then used in many Reform Congregations, even in Jerusalem and in Madison.



Fig. 10. Bust of Rudolf Mosse in the devastated synagogue.¹¹

What remained after the annihilation of Jewish life in the community of Johannisstrasse? This photograph was taken in the ruins of the synagogue. It shows the bust of Rudolf Mosse, the great benefactor of the Congregation, thrown to the floor. What remains? In a moving passage of his memoir, George writes: “The liturgy was perhaps the only real bond with my youth left to me – much to my amazement, I heard parts of it when I attended a synagogue in Madison, Wisconsin, some twenty-five years after I had left Germany.”¹²

¹¹ Unknown Photographer: View of the destroyed interior and the bust of Rudolf-Mosse. Copyright: Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin – Centrum Judaicum.

¹² George L. Mosse, *Confronting History. A Memoir* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 2000), 36.



Fig. 11. The Schenkendorf estate as it was.¹³



Fig. 12. The former Mosse's estate Schenkendorf in 2016.¹⁴

¹³ Unknown Photographer: Mosse Residence Schenkendorf, F27726. George L. Mosse Collection AR 25137, Copyright: Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

¹⁴ Photographer/Copyright: Daniel Bastmeyer.

On German TV there runs a series “Verlorene Orte” (“Lost Places”). The Mosse’s estate in the countryside, is one of those, pretentiously named a “Rittergut” by its owners (a “knight’s castle”) though it was built in the 1890s in classicistic style; nowadays a run down and ruined, remnant of the former property. Schenkendorf, 15 km away from Berlin, was a wonderful playground for the Mosse children, and a splendid convivial place, where the Mosses hosted the cultural, social and political elite of Berlin. After the compulsory sale in 1935 and expropriation in the GDR, Schloß Schenkendorf became a service place for state and military facilities.

With students of our Mosse project at Humboldt University I made an excursion to this place; we climbed across the broken fences of the surrounding park und ventured to get into the building through a broken window. This is what we saw, the despairing remains of former splendor.



Fig. 13. Schenkendorf Mosse estate inside, today.¹⁵

When George at the beginning of the 90s visited Schenkendorf several times with the journalist Nina Bernstein, he pointed out in his typical manner of sovereign coolness and a flash of emotional remembrance, that only one thing left, remains meaningful to him: the church bell, donated to the village by his father, with the engraving of his name.

As George Mosse recalls the extensive philanthropic projects of the Mosses reflected the status and self-confirmation of the economically successful Jewish entrepreneur. Through generations the Mosse women were especially dedicated to charity, education and healthcare for the disadvantaged, beginning with Emilie Mosse, making her own mark with her Mädchenhort (girl’s hort) established in 1895 providing shelter and food for needy girls and mothers of all confessions. In the time of the Weimar Republic, George’s mother Felicia continued these activities and her daughter Hilde, George’s elderly sister, the prospective doctor and

¹⁵ Photographer/Copyright: Elisabeth Wagner.

psychiatrist, in her American exile, continued this commitment with her deserving and most valuable work for the Lafarge clinic in Harlem.



Fig. 14. Mosse-Stift, built 1893 – 1895.¹⁶

The stately and palace like building of the Rudolf and Emilie Mosse Foundation, built from 1893 until 1895 in Berlin Schmargendorf, home of various educational projects; under the Nazis, used as a children's hospital, the name of the Jewish founder was eliminated. In recent times the building was renovated and is still used as a center of rehabilitation and youth work. When you pass the building these days, you will come across the Mosse memorial tablet and discover inside the “Rudolf und Emilie” Café, a meeting place for children, parents and educators.



Fig. 15. The Mosse-Stift in Berlin-Wilmersdorf 2008 with the “Rudolf und Emilie” Café in the right wing.¹⁷

¹⁶ Picture postcard with the building of Rudolf Mosse's educational home, Schmargendorf around 1920, Inv.-Nr. 2010/141/4, Offsetprint, cardboard, 8,9 x 13,9 cm, Copyright: Jüdisches Museum Berlin.

¹⁷ Photographer/Copyright: Axel Mauruszat.

The most recognized Mosse building in Berlin, an icon of architectural history in the emerging metropolis, was the Rudolf Mosse Publishing House, center of the press imperium with its flagship the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the German *New York Times* of the Weimar Republic, as it is said.



Fig. 16. The original Mosse printing house.¹⁸

The Press House was built from 1900 to 1903 with the impressive art deco façade, damaged during the Spartacus revolt of January 1919, when the editorial offices served as the headquarter of the insurgents. The massive building complex was reconstructed and modernized from 1921 to 1923 by the architect Erich Mendelsohn, a friend of the family; largely destroyed in the Second World War; in East Berlin, at the edge of the wall, it was used again as a printing house.

¹⁸ Unknown Photographer: Mosse printing house, fm1081367. Archive Dr. Franz Stoedtner. Copyright Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, www.fotomarburg.de.



Fig. 17. The Printing House after the Reconstruction and Modernization 1921 - 23 by Erich Mendelsohn.¹⁹

The new Mosse Center was opened in 1995, with Humboldt University's German Department residing here. With George's prestige in the back, we convinced the investor and new owner, Hans Röder, to engage in some sort of symbolic capital, funding the Berlin Mosse Lectures, a project to commemorate the history of the Mosse family and the Publishing House, their dedication to liberalism and democracy. Up to the present day up to 200 events have taken place with prominent speakers, scholars, politicians, artist and writers from around the world, generously supported by the Mosse Foundation and its chairman Roger Strauch.

¹⁹ Photographer: Arthur Köster: House of the Berliner Tageblatt after Reconstruction by Erich Mendelsohn. Copyright: VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.



Fig. 18. The Mosse Center in Berlin 2010, corner: Jerusalem Strasse and Schützenstrasse²⁰

On May 14, 1997 George himself gave the first Berlin Mosse Lecture in the atrium of the new Mosse Business Center, the former Publishing House. Its title: “The Liberal legacy and the Public of National Socialism”.

He left his typescript with us, and we reproduced it, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of our project, in the Mosse Almanach of 2017: a document of his personal effort to recall the liberal “spirit of the house”, in his native tongue with little errors and corrections and, – more significant, with what is missing between the lines: symbolized maybe by the German umlauts, absent on his American typewriter. In this lecture again, George insists that, historically, *Bildung* and the ideals of enlightenment were meant to provide a sense of identity and security for the German Jews, who fatally ignored the power of antisemitism and the destructive energies of Hitler’s Volksgemeinschaft.

The “spirit of the house”?

There is this absence, this physical and material loss, this gap, which, as George wrote, separated him from his past, this void in the architectural shape of Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, which cannot be filled, restored or restituted. George’s German writing on the American typewriter somehow made us feel that, before reconstructing and claiming this heritage, we have to face this absence, this loss, which the Mosse family must have experienced in exile. In 1997, at the end of his lecture, we heard his sorrows and warning that the liberal democracy, we have achieved since then, could be endangered again.

²⁰ Photographer, copyright: Torsten Flüh