

## FACT, TRUTH, AND FICTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH NOVELIST FREDERICK REUSS

Frederick Reuss's novel *Mohr* (2006) is a work of imagination that builds upon years of historical research. Max Mohr, the central character, was an actual person: a doctor by training and a successful playwright and novelist whose literary career roughly coincided with the Weimar era. Mohr came from an assimilated German-Jewish family and emigrated to Shanghai in 1934. The plan was for his wife Käthe and daughter Eva to join him there. They were, however, still living at the family's home in Bavaria at the time of Mohr's death in 1937 during the Japanese siege of Shanghai.

Reuss, Mohr's great-great-nephew, knew almost nothing about Mohr's life when he began tracking down Mohr's writings. The posthumous publication in Germany of one of Mohr's novels in 1997 led Reuss to Nicolas Humbert, Mohr's grandson. From Humbert, whom he had not previously known, Reuss gained access to a large collection of letters, photos, and papers—and to an unknown family history. In turning that story into a novel, Reuss made extensive use of Mohr's papers and other contemporary documents. The novel is interspersed with photos, many taken by Mohr himself, that comprise a second narrative complementing Reuss's prose.

Writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, Geoff Nicholson describes *Mohr* as "a story about love, without being a love story, and a novel about politics whose central character is apolitical." Calling that "quite an achievement," Nicholson adds "How true all this is to the 'real' Mohr is for others to say, but I was fully convinced and engaged by Reuss's creation." The relation between the Mohr of history and the Mohr of fiction, between the novelist's reconstruction of the past and the historian's, is the subject of the following interview with Frederick Reuss conducted by David Lazar in September 2006.

Frederick Reuss is the author of three novels in addition to *Mohr*: *A Novel: Horace Afoot* (1997), *Henry of Atlantic City* (1999), and *The Wasties* (2002). He lives in Washington, DC.

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**David Lazar:** How did you come to Mohr as a topic?

**Frederick Reuss:** Deeply personally. The knowledge that had been extant in the family of the Mohrs more or less stopped with my grandfather, who came to the U.S. in 1938. My grandfather was a very charming, loquacious man, educated in the *humanistische* tradition, an assimilated Jew from a bourgeois family. His mother was Hedwig Mohr. She was a

paragon of bourgeois respectability. Her husband, Joseph Reuss, was *Oberlandesgerichtsrat* in Bayern, which was a pretty heady position for a Jew to attain in Bavaria at the turn of the century. My grandfather, who was born in 1904, was baptized a Lutheran right away. Odd considering the Catholic predominance there; but perhaps also a way of remaining out of the majority. I don't have any evidence that the parents converted or were baptized. So, he grew up in this twilight world of German-Jewish identity, which he describes very clearly—and with a certain amount of prevarication—in a memoir he wrote in the early 1940s. It was found in 1998 in an archive of manuscripts at the Widener Library at Harvard University by some sociologists from the University of Oldenburg and published in the *Oldenburgische Beiträge zu Jüdischen Studien*. My grandfather claims in the memoir that he only learned of his Jewish identity after trying to join a fraternity at the university in Würzburg. His father took him aside and said: "Son, I have some news for you—you have a Jewish grandfather and because of that this fraternity might not be the place for you." He suggested that instead he try the *Korps Makaria*, which I guess was a more liberal-minded German fraternity that allowed Jews or part-Jews. So, my grandfather joined the fraternity—I have a picture of him in his fraternity gear—and proceeded to make his way in society.

Max Mohr was only spoken of by my grandfather as a beloved old uncle who went off to Shanghai and died there—famous writer, doctor—that was it. He was a friend of D. H. Lawrence—my grandfather was very proud of that—but there was never any discussion or mention of a family, of anything. I accepted that and went through the process of assembling anything I could bibliographically of Mohr's *Nachlass* by going to the Library of Congress and chasing down quotes here and there. I found letters to Mohr in the collected correspondence of D. H. Lawrence; a few references in the Thomas Mann diaries. But I could only get so far. Then, in 1997, a novel of Mohr's appeared in Germany, *Das Einhorn*. It was published by Mohr's grandson, Nicolas Humbert, and contained a selection of letters to his wife written from Shanghai. It was an overwhelming experience. Not just to meet this "lost" relative, but to have access to a huge trove of material. Nicolas, it turns out, is a film maker, and as a student did a film called *Wolfsgrub*. It's more or less the account of his mother, Eva, her life in *Wolfsgrub*, which is what the house is called, and her memories of her father and so on. So I had not just documentation but also the work of a contemporary attempting to come to terms with the history as well.

**Lazar:** At which point did you begin thinking about Mohr as a subject for a work of fiction? When did you stop thinking about him as an interesting relative whom you wanted to read about?



Max Mohr in China. The photo on the table is of his daughter Eva. Photo courtesy of Frederick Reuss.



Max Mohr at the front during World War I. Photo courtesy of Frederick Reuss.

**Reuss:** I can't say that there was a moment of truth, although it became apparent to me quickly. Nicolas and I had a very intense meeting. He took me to Wolfsgrub and we spent a week—just he and I—alone in this house, Wolfsgrub. It was show-and-tell—he showed and told me everything he knew. We talked about the similarities between Mohr's ambiguous Jewishness and what I can only describe as my grandfather's total denial. I was deeply interested in the story. Hedwig, by the way, died in Theresienstadt along with her husband, Joseph; so that curtain came down in 1943 for the Reuss-Mohr side of the family. My grandfather's memories, when conveniently fuzzy, were also in many cases false, fabrications. The question I had vis-à-vis my grandfather was: You made it here, you're safe, your parents were killed in a concentration camp—what is there to be ashamed of? Why can't you be truthful about it? I never got the truth from him. He asserted until the very end that he was not 100 percent Jewish. He claimed that he was only part Jewish—there was always this insistence on percentages. It was really incomprehensible to me. Nicolas grew up in Germany, he's culturally German. His mother, Eva, never hid from him the fact that Mohr was a Jew and that she herself was half Jewish.

I found it really odd that the side of the family that had found safe haven in America was the least forthcoming. It opened up certain questions of not just memory, reconstruction of the past, but also *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the way the past is reconstituted in ways that may or

may not bear any direct relation to the truth. My grandfather's memoir, published in an academic journal, and which asserts the veracity of the first-person, original source material, his own account of himself—is false! He's lying. But he's lying for very interesting reasons. His representation of himself growing up in Germany—the distortion—I saw as itself a part of the picture.

Approaching Mohr as a fictional project—I mean, I'm a novelist, so it was the first thing that came to mind—seemed only natural. For me, it boiled down to one question: Why did he leave his wife and kid behind? But it's not a question anybody today can possibly answer. I found that I would get closest if I tried to enter into the subjectivity of the character rather than present him as just an actor. That opened up the door. But then there was the issue of photographs. There are many. Mohr must have been one of the first amateur photographers. There are pictures of and by him taken in the trenches in World War I. He had his little Kodak Brownie or Leica along with him. Unbelievable. The guy took snapshots at war. It was amazing.

**Lazar:** Is there much of your grandfather in the Mohr of the novel?

**Reuss:** No. They were completely different natures. My grandfather took after his mother, Hedwig, a conventional, social-climbing bourgeois. Mohr was rebellious, artistic. They—brother and sister—detested each other. Nicolas told me as much, and I can see it in the material, oblique references. I figure that was why my grandfather didn't speak much about Mohr, or even mention, by the by, that he had surviving family. There was no good feeling. Ironically, by some strange genetic trait, I identify with Max more than I ever could with Hedwig. I have a picture of him with his fellow officers sitting at a table in some fortified bunker during the war. Somehow, Hedwig had it turned into a postcard and sent it to Eva; it's postmarked *Sylvoester 1935*. On the back she wrote something to the effect "This is so you can remember your father as he was in the good old days, your heroic soldier father with the Iron Cross" and so on and so forth. This told me everything I needed to know about Hedwig.

**Lazar:** I'm curious about the part of his life that you decided to write about. Certainly the historical figure Mohr is a Weimar figure. He lived through interesting times. That part of his life only occurs in flashbacks in the novel. Your framing of the narrative is very much from his decision to leave Germany to his death. Had you thought about other framings?

**Reuss:** Yes, definitely. Originally I wanted to get it all in. The final form that the novel took came after a process of not just scaling back or scaling down but coming to an understanding of the human side. The temptation was great to write a big, giant, all-encompassing novel. I even

wanted to bring it into the present and have me in there and Nicolas coming to terms with the past in a big Proustian effort, the whole twentieth-century canvas. But the more intimate I became with the material, the more I realized that the only way to really approach it from an artistic standpoint was to strip away and concentrate on the characters and on the situation that a person of that time would have felt themselves to be in. And that turned out to be a much more challenging task.

Imagining oneself into a pre-Holocaust world is impossible. Adorno said there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. There's a certain hyperbole in that, but what there definitely isn't after Auschwitz is firsthand knowledge of what the prewar period *felt* like. The biggest challenge for me was to avoid being portentous. They didn't know what they were facing. Mohr was a writer and somewhat of a public figure and more political, probably, than most. I don't know if you've read the diaries of Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness*; a very detailed, fantastic picture of *Alltag* under the Nazis. To us, reading today, it's almost too fantastic. How could this erudite, thoughtful man who saw the world around him so clearly have also been so stupid? He wants to work on his study of Voltaire and renovate his house and go on drives in his car, is too married to his domestic and academic routine to get his ass out of there! But it's so wrong to look at it that way. It was the same with Käthe. She clearly was aware of what was going on and had clearly made a decision to stay out of the way as much as she could—but also had no idea what was going to happen.

I met Nicolas in July 2001. I had already begun the mental act of transporting myself into the past on a fairly full-time basis. Then 9/11 happened and—I won't say they were similar in any way, but I imagine *Kristallnacht* had similar repercussions. My grandfather, a little late, to be sure, finally took his cue and got out of Germany. The idea that one sees and acts with the same clarity is just not the case. Mohr, I think, could see with a fair amount of clarity, but then there was this complete lack of clarity in the action he took. Emigration is a traumatic and catastrophic event and has permanent repercussions. When you're as close to it as one generation, there is a tendency to sublimate and smooth over, or even revise entirely. I think it takes a few generations for the full, let's say, import to be apparent. Hannah Arendt describes the tendency in an essay she wrote shortly after emigrating herself. "Now I'm a poor *Dackel* [dachshund]. Once, I was a St. Bernard." That was my grandfather.

**Lazar:** This might be an indiscreet question: We can pass over it if you don't like it. Is your framing of the story, centering on why Mohr didn't bring Käthe and Eva with him—is that also the family's narrative? Is that the question that comes up in the tapes of Eva?

**Reuss:** No, actually, it's not. I never had a chance to talk to Eva, but her account is fascinating. In Nicolas's film, she not only describes her childhood as idyllic, she remembers in great detail her father, Max, telling her that he was leaving. And she remembers him lying to her. She didn't understand it as a fib until she was an older woman. But she very vividly recalls him saying to her that he was leaving because "your mother doesn't want me to live here anymore"—which of course was completely false and unfair. As an adult she realized what a terrible thing it was to say, what it represented, but as a child she just accepted it. A kid of eight doesn't question. She was perfectly willing to accept what was happening. They were expecting to go and meet up with him. That was the plan.

The question—why did he leave them behind—is my own formulation. I don't think it would have occurred to them to pose it that way. It wasn't part of the framework. But seen from today, it is *the* question. Mohr was aware of the possibility that he would not return to Germany, and he had no intention to do so. And Käthe accepted it because she shared his political views. But nobody foresaw *Kristallnacht* in 1934. That it would become fatal to be a Jew in Germany, I don't think could have been foreseen in 1934. Even so, why do you leave your wife and kid behind? It's a strange thing to do.

**Lazar:** This work is very different from your previous novels in being set in the past and having a tremendous amount of historical detail. For example, when Käthe goes to Munich to buy luggage, you describe what she sees, she passes by the "*Entartete Kunst*" exhibit. There are descriptions about what Mohr sees when he's out and about in Shanghai. You've clearly done a lot of work, a lot of research into the background. Was this something new for you? How did this attention to historical detail figure into the creative process? Was it a hindrance? Was it inspiring?

**Reuss:** It was inspiring, and I was very conscious of the process and eager. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the only word I can think of. I've long been interested in the phenomenology of Husserl and, more recently, Paul Ricoeur; ideas about memory and history, how the one is intimately tied up with the other. I was interested in making something of the material, and the existence of a photographic record really brought it to a different level. The personal side in *Wolfsgrub* is very well documented, and I was able to immerse myself in the Shanghai of the period by reading the *North China Daily News*. It was the preeminent English language newspaper of the day and a major resource. It was also illustrated, had photographs. In fact, the photograph of the carnage in the book was a newspaper photograph. Mohr had somehow obtained a print, cap-

tioned it on the back and mailed it back to Käthe. It would be nice to know not only just how he got his hands on it—he must have gone to the offices of the newspaper and asked for a copy. But *why*? An odd thing to do—another glimpse of the man. Between August and November 1937, bombs were being dropped all over the city. The Spanish Civil War and Guernica are seen as the beginning of modern air war against civilians, but it happened in Shanghai and China during the Sino-Japanese War on a massive scale, too. The population of Shanghai in the 1930s was about four million. The aerial bombing of the city was seen not just as a catastrophic event, but as a spectacle as well, well covered and much discussed in the dailies. Even as the subject of cartoons—residents of Shanghai as camera-toting tourists watching dogfights from the roofs of apartment buildings. So I had, on the one hand, this extremely private resource, and, on the other, an extremely public one, the newspapers.

**Lazar:** To jump back briefly to the problem you mentioned earlier of getting into a pre-Holocaust mind-set and trying not to be portentous: Did you ever find yourself having to cut the detail that was too good or too foreboding?

**Reuss:** It was tempting to get more into the war experiences. Mohr was a medical officer in a German cavalry regiment, was captured at the front somewhere in France, and spent a year as a POW in England. To have that refracted and reflected in the context of the coming war was a big temptation. But then I asked myself: As Mohr stood at the window of his Shanghai apartment overlooking a scene of devastation, would he necessarily have been thinking about his own wartime past, the Great War? Even if he had, it would have been a cliché, I think. In one letter to Käthe, he writes about how sick and tired he is of war, and Käthe writes back “Ach, du hattest schon zu viel Krieg.” [You have had too much war already.] She is merely commenting on his current predicament; but seen from today, in retrospect, it becomes portentous, a foreshadow. It was important to me to avoid clichés. The epoch is so well known, you can easily fall into cliché by saying too much.

**Lazar:** Let’s talk a little about the source material and the family materials that you drew upon. Just a basic question first: are the quotations from letters and telegrams in the book genuine?

**Reuss:** Yes.

**Lazar:** You didn’t take any liberties?

**Reuss:** Well, I tried as much as I could to let the texts speak for themselves. Käthe’s recounting of the mountain-climbing accident is taken directly from something she wrote. They are her own memories. I tried as much as possible to leave them to speak for themselves. That’s why in the

end I couldn't infer any single, specific motive for Mohr. I decided he both knew and didn't know what he was doing, which is completely consistent with what I know of human nature. I adapted a lot of his conversation with D. H. Lawrence directly from their correspondence. I put words in their mouths that had actually been written. I don't have Mohr's side of the correspondence, so I used the Lawrence text and then just bounced it off Mohr. A big no-no for an historian but not for a novelist. Here I'm giving you the deep architecture of the book. It was important to me to remain true as much as I could to the record, as it were, while taking liberties wherever I wanted. I maintain that, although this is a novel and although I took liberties and invented characters and parts of the story, it's true to the people. I think Mohr would recognize himself and I think Käthe would recognize herself in the book.

**Lazar:** You had access to family correspondence and a variety of records as well as to many photographs. It seems, and correct me if this is a false impression, that you rely more on the photos than the other documents and give them more prominence. The book opens and closes with meditations on photography, and either the narrator or Mohr brings up the issue of what photos can help us remember or what they capture. I'm assuming that this was a deliberate decision to give the visual document priority over the written document.

**Reuss:** Well, no, I wouldn't say priority. It required a completely different level of interpretation. A photograph as an object, as a piece of documentation, carries a completely different significance than a letter, say, or an oral history. One must bear in mind the differences in the material. This difference is what I was drawn to, teasing out some of the issues which I allude to—I wouldn't say superficially, but to provoke questions. There's the work of John Berger, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sonntag: they've all sketched out what the issues are vis-à-vis photography. The late philosopher Paul Ricoeur goes the deepest theoretically and brings up extremely pertinent issues that, in the context of trying to imagine myself back in time, became readily obvious.

In looking at a photograph, one is looking at not just a discrete moment in time but by necessity bringing to it an interpretation. There is only so much that can be *known* from a photograph—the rest is inferential, and I took liberties inferring. I think of the materials that were available to me as parallel modes of interpretation—photograph, memory, inference; text, memory, inference. When you read a letter of Mohr to his wife, you're inferring. Even in the smallest details—"I did this and that today, I miss you"—there's inference going on. This is true with any document. I came to see photographs as texts, which is a cliché of post-modern theory but a compelling way of approaching them.



Käthe and Max Mohr, 1934, just prior to his departure for China. Photo courtesy of Frederick Reuss.

**Lazar:** Was there something that you could put your finger on that the photos either by or of Mohr told you that his writings and his letters couldn't or didn't?

**Reuss:** Absolutely. For example, the one of him and Käthe at the table. That picture speaks a thousand words, just the expressions on their faces. I don't think anything, except maybe a beautiful poem, could convey the feeling in the room as well as that photograph does. Their relationship is as plain to see as the dishes on the table, where they're at. One has to look at a photograph not as a mute aesthetic object but as a conveyor of meaning, content. This presents both obstacles and opportunities. As John Berger has famously said, the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. This is where interpretation begins.

**Lazar:** Is there a distinction or a boundary line between a photograph as a document containing certain information and a photograph that starts you thinking and you begin imagining what they're saying? Is there a clear line there?

**Reuss:** I don't know. Probably not. Are there clear lines anywhere?

**Lazar:** The way historians approach photos can be much more mundane and perhaps circumspect. You might call it the Rodney King problem.



Max Mohr, Wolfsgrub, Bavaria (early 1930s). Photo courtesy of Frederick Reuss.

When we saw the videotape on TV, we saw one thing; when it was shown in the courtroom, the jury saw something very different. There can be more than one way to view and interpret a piece of visual evidence. We can both derive meaning from a photo and project meaning onto it.

**Reuss:** A photograph connotes meaning; it doesn't denote meaning. A historian by methodological necessity can only consider those things that can be readily contextualized. Anything that is subjective or not apparent isn't properly considered as part of the record. The idea that photographs contain meaning in and of themselves is nonsense—they don't. Meaning is read into them. Even a photograph of Hitler at the Nuremberg rally. Yes, it's pregnant with meaning, it means something; but what it means depends on what the viewer knows. I guess that's the difference between a historian's and a novelist's approach.

As a novelist, I can look at a photograph and imagine the circumstances around it, read into it freely. When Mohr jumps over the stool, for example. I completely contrived that scene. An historian would consider what I did a falsification. There is a picture of him jumping over a stool. Clearly, he set a stool out in the yard one day and leapt over it. That's more or less all we know. But I maintain that the more important thing

we can know from the photograph, the quantum of truth that it contains, is that he was the kind of guy who would do such a thing. He was that kind of person. The precise circumstances are almost irrelevant. Was it a dare? Was he trying to impress his wife? Was he drunk? We don't know. Anyway, I don't think he could have done that drunk—it's a pretty hard thing to do. So I invented a scene and took what I know he did do and used it as a way for him to deliver a little bit of his philosophy of life to a young man. You knit things together in some way. And actually, I don't see that a historian has much choice but to do something similar. Knit things together in some way. I just read something from Paul Valéry; it's a nice quote: "History will justify anything. It teaches precisely nothing for it contains everything and furnishes examples of everything." I agree with the spirit of that statement.

**Lazar:** How would you distinguish yourself from an historian or a biographer? What sort of boundaries do you see between fiction and history?

**Reuss:** I guess there's a controversial way of answering that. Very little separates fiction from historical narrative insofar as interpretation is involved—it's all telling and retelling. The narration of events, even contemporary events, is always going to have a subjective aspect. I wouldn't say there's *no* difference between history and fiction. That would be going too far. But take my grandfather's memoir, which a historian would accept as primary-source material. I, as the grandson, see some of the falsehoods it contains; yet if you take one step back, which the sociologists at Oldenburg do, it is a perfectly valid document, it is in itself an artifact of the period, one that they're willing to accept at face value. It was completely irrelevant to them whether he had actually heard Hitler give a diatribe in a Munich *Kneipe* and then leave without paying for his beer—one of the more colorful episodes in the memoir. To them it was more interesting how he, an assimilated Jew, a student, a member of a fraternity, all of these being true, speaks of his experience. Already the nuances involved are many and deep.

I think that two hundred years from now, somebody coming across the story of Max Mohr is going to come across my book too, and they're going to come across it as an artifact of a wider period. Maybe when the Owl of Minerva has flown far enough away, we'll be able to see more clearly just what the relationship between us is. I don't mean in the familial sense, but in how I chose to relate the story, the whole approach to the past. It's all a matter of perspective. I find it amusing when I get into conversations with people who have this incredibly one-dimensional view of what it is that constitutes a fact. A fact is a point of reference, and a point of reference merely reflects a point of view. It's dynamic and fluid, to be played with. Again, I would never call myself a historian, but I also

believe that what I've done is history in a very real sense. A biographer would have assembled evidence to show that Mohr left his wife and family behind in Germany because a, b, and c. But I didn't do that. In some ways, I was truer to life. I drew the line at asserting something I knew I could never know.

**Lazar:** Is this a factor in the choice to use third-person narration?

**Reuss:** That's also a very important point—I switch between the second person and the third person. In the very first paragraph, I address a conundrum that literary critics have spent probably too much time worrying about: the ambiguity of the second person as a narrative voice. The author is simultaneously asserting the subjectivity of the character and of the author. The narrator and the narrated. And *you* can also imply the reader, a way of projecting the reader into the text. It's a little bit of a Borges-like puzzle, but I found it useful in drawing attention to the nuances of interpreting photographs.

**Lazar:** Were you ever tempted to use the first person in this project?

**Reuss:** Never, never, never. I didn't want to take that final step into the subjectivity of Max Mohr. It just seemed wrong aesthetically, and maybe there's even a taste factor involved, I don't know. It removes some of that interpretive distance that I needed in order to make up what I needed to make up.

**Lazar:** Historians have a basic code of ethics. If you quote a document, you have to quote it accurately. No picking and choosing; you can't ignore the bits that don't fit your argument. Historians might look at novelists as amoral—you can make things up if you want; we can't. What sort of ethical obligations did you have with this project? Were there ethical constraints because it is a family project and there are people alive whom you're close to and who might be potentially offended?

**Reuss:** It's an important question. While being constrained by a desire to remain faithful to the material and to the subject, I changed things that a historian would never have been able to justify. Yet in bending all of those rules and in more or less making hay of what I had, I believe I was able to achieve a deep resonance with the subject—a truthful resonance. Like I said, I think if Max Mohr were to pick up this book and read it, he would find it was a fair portrait of him.

**Lazar:** And Käthe?

**Reuss:** And Eva too. More importantly—and I think this holds for historians as well—you have to be true to the material. If you find you need

to change things, it can only be after a level of empathy has been established with the subject, and you get to the empathy only after you've done the work and you understand the material. Only when empathy and understanding have been achieved can you begin picking and choosing. Historians pick and choose all the time. You sort through the material. Truth is a by-product of that empathetic experience, that deep identification with the subject.

**Lazar:** Identification with the subject: historians do it, biographers do it, novelists do it. Historians and biographers usually have very few qualms about saying, "He did this for that reason" or "She was motivated by x, y, and z." Your narrative revolves around a question of motivation—why did Mohr leave, what did he intend to do—and the question isn't fully answered, or at least not explicitly, in the end. What was your goal in not answering this question? Is this part of where you see a difference between history and fiction?

**Reuss:** It gets back to what I was saying earlier. A conventional biography centered on a man of that epoch would have to take into consideration the reasons, motivations. The problem is that people are not always aware of themselves and their motivations. To ascribe a motivation is to interpret. I'm not saying I don't interpret—the whole book is an interpretation. But it leaves open the possibility that he himself, the subject, might not have been fully conscious of his reasons. There's human material there, you don't just have a formula: storm clouds brewing in Europe. It's more nuanced. To resist ascribing motives requires a greater leap of imagination.

**Lazar:** Do you think that there's a qualitative difference between the imagination a novelist brings to a story set in the past and the imagination a historian uses in trying to construct a narrative from his or her empirical data?

**Reuss:** I guess I don't really know the answer to that. I wouldn't want to qualify or distinguish between different aspects of the imagination. But I think the reader knows when a historian is not simply engaged in scholastic minutiae and has a real empathy with the subject. The reader always knows. I like Simon Schama, for example. He transgresses or rather plays, and I think he's making an interesting point. He's a historian interested in narrative. I can only speak as a novelist who has an interest in history. I think his insight is that there are moments of convergence between historical narrative and fiction. I agree. Narrative is storytelling, history is storytelling. You can concentrate on the big general sweeps and strokes and tell it that way—names and dates and ideas and events

and places. Or you can do it at the level of individual experience, as in biography—or a novel.

**Lazar:** Were you reading much history while working on this project?

**Reuss:** Of the period?

**Lazar:** Or also not of the period, for narrative's sake.

**Reuss:** I read pretty eclectically. I found most valuable the newspapers because that enabled me to really submerge. In terms of assembling the *Zeitgeist*, the nuance, the way people spoke, I was lucky that Mohr was a writer. I was able to use his writings as a lens. The books depict the man's inner state in a very rich way and are period pieces as well. In many ways, I functioned as a sort of literary critic, and found all kinds of correspondence between Mohr and Lawrence, and was able to extract a flavor of the time. Also important were the letters. In a way, letters are like reading the newspapers.

**Lazar:** Attention to memory seems important to you. It seems like there are two forms of memory at play in the book: individuals' memories of their own experiences and memory as what's passed down. When Eva asks Käthe about her parents' lives before she was born, there's no clear boundary line between these two forms of memory. You play with that. You've talked about how two hundred years down the line when people talk about Mohr, this is going to be part of the record, this will be part of the memory. Let me start with a crude question: How do memory, history, and fiction, or memory and narrative, fit together?

**Reuss:** Well, I'll point to Paul Ricoeur—who says forgetting is also important. Anyway, one enters a maze of questions. I did very consciously mirror the transmission. When Eva is in bed or sitting on her mother's knee, I am telling the story within the story. As I said, I left those pretty much verbatim—they are absolutely Käthe's words and memories. The idea that stories are what is remembered of something begs the question again of what's true, what's not, what's fact, what's fiction, how much can we rely on our sources. Remembering involves forgetting, to echo the title of Ricoeur's book. This also takes on different forms. Forgetting can be conscious as well as unconscious. For example, trying to enter pre-Holocaust Germany in my imagination involved conscious forgetting—that's one way of putting it—dissociating. Or what Käthe remembers of her early years at Wolfsgrub with Max, when they were happy, is transmitted in the things she chooses to tell. She told stories beyond the mountain-climbing accident. I selected that one for a very specific reason: a

restless quest for adventure that ended in disaster. From my perspective, it mirrors what ultimately became of their life story. Perhaps Käthe was aware of it as she passed the story to Eva; or perhaps not. I chose to retell certain of Käthe's stories for my own reasons; and my retelling then becomes part of the continuing story.

Somebody may ask some day: Why did Frederick Reuss write a novel about his great uncle and portray him in a highly subjective way instead of just telling the real story? I don't know that I have a coherent answer for that, except to say that I wanted to. I'm open to the suggestion that, pulling back, there is a wider historical perspective in which our era may be seen to have been produced out of the earlier one in ways we can't yet formulate. Storytelling is a way of participating in that flow of time. The Owl of Minerva. . . .

**Lazar:** Perhaps to get back to my question of motivation. One of your starting points is your grandfather. Is *Mohr* the novel in any way recompense for the memoir your grandfather did in the early 1940s, an attempt of sorts to set the record straight?

**Reuss:** Bending the facts a little bit? It does mirror it in a funny way. But I wouldn't put it quite like that. If his invention is a mirror of his time, so my invention is a mirror of today. My interest in the past was certainly stimulated by what was denied and kept hidden for so many years. But I went about my fictionalizing in an effort to come to a deeper understanding of the truth, not to obfuscate or bury it. And I also see it as an expression of a desire to connect with what was. There are definitely larger forces at work in this. Rootlessness, alienation, transience, the often-cited pathologies of modern life. My guess is that there are a lot of books like this being written right now, and two hundred years from now people will look back and ask: What were they so obsessed with? And why did they puzzle themselves so?