



Mahlsdorf, Charlotte von (1928-2002)

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The fascinating life of preservationist and museum founder Charlotte von Mahlsdorf has been the subject of an acclaimed autobiography, a film in which she played herself, and a Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning play.

A controversial figure who may have willingly supplied information to the East German secret police during the period of the German Democratic Republic, Mahlsdorf was nevertheless honored by the German government after reunification for her preservationist and museum work. She was admired by many for her bravery in the face of persecution and for her openness as a transgender public figure during perilous times.

Mahlsdorf was born Lothar Berfelde on March 18, 1928 in Berlin. Biologically a male, even as a child she identified as a girl, displayed a fascination with girls' clothing and "old stuff," and preferred to play with "junk" rather than toys. These early interests presaged Lothar Berfelde's later emergence as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, famous transvestite and collector of everyday historical objects.

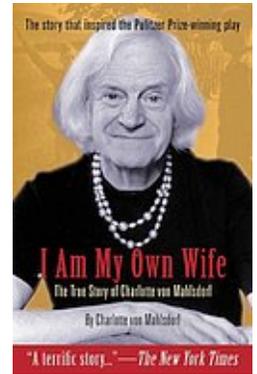
Preferring the term "transvestite" to "transsexual" since she felt no aversion to her male genitals, Mahlsdorf declared that "In my soul, I feel like a woman" and described her childish self as "a girl in a boy's body."

Mahlsdorf's father, Max Berfelde, was a violent man who rose in the ranks of the Nazi party to become party leader in the Mahlsdorf area of Berlin. Bitterly disappointed with his son's sissified manners and interest in girlish activities, he frequently subjected the child to harsh and inhumane treatment. In 1942 he forced Lothar to join the Hitler Youth even though the adolescent despised the Nazis and resented their treatment of Jewish friends and neighbors.

Mahlsdorf's mother, Gretchen Gaupp Berfelde, was Lothar's "good fairy," a gentle and nurturing woman who comforted her child and accepted Lothar's feminine interests. Lothar also found acceptance from a lesbian aunt, who cross-dressed in male clothing and who introduced Lothar to Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's book, *The Transvestites* (1910), a work that Mahlsdorf particularly valued because it reassured her that she "was not alone in the world."

After years of being beaten and humiliated by her husband, in 1944 Gretchen Berfelde announced that she was divorcing him. During this domestic crisis, Mahlsdorf's father threatened to kill his entire family. In response, Mahlsdorf struck her father dead with a rolling pin while he slept. She later defended her action as "a kind of preventive 'self-defense' to save other lives. . . . I felt neither hatred nor a need for revenge, but was forced to circumvent his designs on the lives of my mother, sister, and brother."

After the slaying, Mahlsdorf spent several weeks in a psychiatric institution and then was sentenced to four years detention as an "anti-social juvenile delinquent." With the collapse of the Third Reich in April 1945, however, she was released. In the chaos attendant on the fall of Berlin, she barely escaped summary execution for seeking refuge in an air raid shelter reserved for women and children.



The cover of the Cleis Press edition of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's autobiography, *I Am My Own Wife*.
Courtesy Cleis Press.

Soon afterwards, Mahlsdorf assumed the name "Lottchen" and, then, "Charlotte von Mahlsdorf." As Mahlsdorf, she became a well-known figure in East Berlin, both as a transvestite and as a passionate collector of historical everyday items.

Mahlsdorf's fascination with old furniture and other collectibles had begun as a child. She asked neighbors for old items that they were discarding and, as an adolescent, she worked for a second-hand goods dealer who cleared out apartments, often of fleeing or deported Jews, and frequently kept some items for herself.

After the war, Mahlsdorf built an impressive collection by rescuing objects from houses that had been bombed and also by buying items from people who fled East Berlin for West Germany.

Mahlsdorf, whose strongest desire was "to keep beautiful objects safe," specialized in everyday items--chandeliers, furniture, gramophones, clocks, automated music players, glassware, etc.--from the Gründerzeit, the period of the founding of the German Empire, the years between 1870 and 1900. Even before she understood the differences in period styles, she was instinctively attracted to this era's furniture, which in her childhood had gone out of fashion. "Columns, lathe-turned legs, and ball-shaped wooden decorations here and there gave me a thrill," she later recalled.

In the difficult years after World War II, East German authorities seemed bent on destroying whole sections of Berlin, replacing distinctive old buildings with concrete high-rise towers and prefab housing. Such disregard for the past horrified Mahlsdorf, who dedicated herself to preserving condemned buildings.

"I am not concerned with dead stones or lifeless furniture," she declared, explaining her interest in preservation. "They are embodiments that mirror the history of the men who built them, who lived in them. Senseless destruction does away with a former way of life, the foundation of our spiritual and aesthetic culture, and irretrievably impoverishes our daily lives."

Mahlsdorf's preservation efforts were heroic, especially given the meager resources at her disposal. But hard work, coupled with East Germany's bureaucratic incompetence, enabled her to save several important buildings, most notably the Friedrichsfelde Palace and the Mahlsdorf villa that would become home to her museum, and thousands of historical objects.

Mahlsdorf's collection, perhaps the largest of its kind in the world, eventually evolved into the Gründerzeit Museum, which opened in 1960. In 1958, she had become engaged in the preservation of a derelict Mahlsdorf manor that was threatened with demolition. She managed to save the estate and was awarded the manor house to use as her museum and her home.

Over the years, however, she was frequently threatened with eviction and was often harassed by various officials of the Communist state. At one point, to protest the threats of the government to take over the museum, she even gave away a large part of her collection to museum visitors.

In the cellar of her museum, Mahlsdorf recreated a notorious bar from the Scheunenviertel district of Old Berlin, the Mulackritze. The haunt of gay men, lesbians, transvestites, and prostitutes of all kinds, including those who specialized in S/M, the Mulackritze was finally closed by the East German authorities in 1963. In the 1970s, the recreated Mulackritze in Mahlsdorf's museum became the site of meetings of the Homosexual Interest Group of Berlin and of gay and lesbian dances.

Also in the 1970s, Mahlsdorf apparently became an informer to the Stasi, the East German secret police. Her motivations for doing this are not altogether clear, but they undoubtedly included her desire to protect

her museum. There is no question that she despised East Germany's Communist regime almost as much as she despised the Nazis, once referring to it as "ein rotes KZ" (a red concentration camp).

In the 1960s Mahlsdorf became involved with the motion picture industry, often serving as a consultant on films set during the Gründerzeit period. Several movies were filmed in the museum itself.

Mahlsdorf also frequently appeared in small parts in films. Her most famous role was as a barmaid in Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1990), the first and last gay film to be made in the German Democratic Republic. She later appeared in Rosa von Praunheim's film based on her autobiography, *I Am My Own Wife* (1992).

On May Day 1991, a group of neo-Nazi skinheads attacked a celebration at Mahlsdorf's museum. Several people, including Mahlsdorf herself, were injured. At the time, she revealed that she was considering leaving Germany.

Before she left, however, the government of the newly unified Germany in 1992 bestowed on her one of its most prestigious honors, the *Bundesverdienstkreuz* (or Service Cross of the Bundesrepublik), for her preservation of cultural values.

Also in 1992, she published her autobiography, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* (I Am My Own Wife). The book not only tells the story of her own life lived under extreme conditions, but also that of a whole generation of East German homosexuals, who faced persecution first from the Nazis and then from the Communists.

The title of the book comes from a conversation Mahlsdorf had with her mother when she turned forty. "As much as I like to have you with me," her mother said, "you are now really at an age to be married." In response, Mahlsdorf answered, "I am my own wife," a statement that reflected her independence and self-sufficiency, as well as her identification with the feminine.

While Mahlsdorf regretted that she never found the great love of her life, she enjoyed passionate, longtime relationships with three men, with whom she shared tenderness, affection, and trust, as well as sex.

In 1997, Mahlsdorf left Germany for Polarbrunn, Sweden, where she opened a new Gründerzeit museum. The city of Berlin took over her museum in Mahlsdorf.

On April 30, 2002, during a visit to Berlin, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf died of heart failure.

After Mahlsdorf's death, doubts emerged about the truthfulness of her autobiography, particularly her apparent collaboration with the East German authorities but also even about whether she had actually killed her father as she claimed. Those doubts are the heart of Doug Wright's extraordinary play, *I Am My Own Wife*, which opened on Broadway in 2003 and went on to win the Tony Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Lambda Literary Award. Directed by Moisés Kaufman, the play featured a spectacular performance by Benjamin Mays as Mahlsdorf and 35 other characters.

In Wright's play, Mahlsdorf emerges as less idealized than she had been seen before the revelations about her relationship with the Stasi, but also more complex, more intriguing, and more human.

Above all a survivor, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf may have created her own narrative as a means of coping with the tumultuous times in which she lived.

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Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.glbtc.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.