

The CIA officer, "the Diaghilev of America's Counter-Soviet cultural propaganda campaign"

## **Michael Josselson**

**(2.3.1908 Tartu – 7.1.1978 Geneva)**



### **Short biography**

**based on the Biographical Sketch from the Harry Ransom Center  
The University of Texas at Austin.**

Michael Josselson was born March 2, 1908, in Tartu, Estonia. His father was a first guild timber merchant Mordche (Mordechai) Josselson from Šiauliai, Lithuania.

During the Russian Revolution Mordche Josselson moved his family to Berlin.

Following his primary education in Estonia, Michael attended secondary school in Berlin from 1920 to 1927. He attended one year each at the University of Berlin and the University of Freiburg from 1927 through 1928, then left school to work as a buyer in the Berlin office of Gimbel-May department stores.

Josselson was fluent in German, Russian, French, and English.

By 1935, he sought to leave Nazi Germany and gained a promotion to manager of Gimbel Brothers' Paris office. He was so successful in that position that in 1937 he immigrated to the United States with his new French wife, Colette, to work in New York City as the managing director for all of Gimbels' European offices.

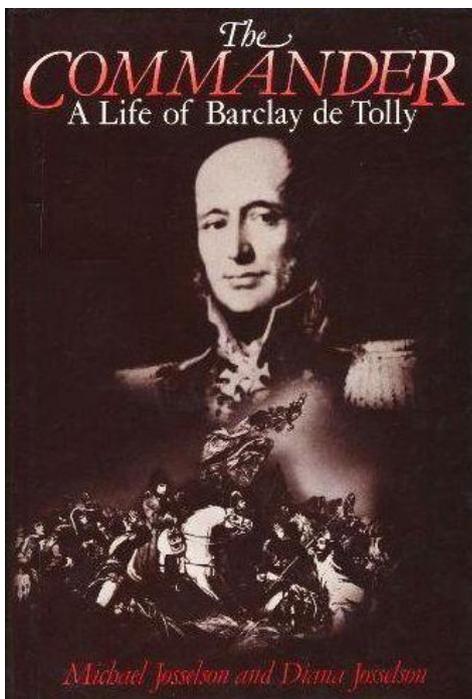
In 1941 he and his wife separated and she remained in New York while he moved to Pittsburgh. They later divorced in 1949. Josselson became a US citizen in 1942 and was drafted into the US Army in 1943.

In the Army, Josselson received military intelligence training and was assigned to a communications unit in Europe as an interpreter. He was discharged as a 1st Lieutenant in 1946, although he remained in the reserves as a military intelligence officer until 1950.

From 1946 to 1949, Josselson worked as a cultural affairs officer for the US War Department's Office of the Military Government in Berlin. From 1949-1950 he worked on the public affairs staff of the US State Department's Office of the High Commissioner for Germany. In these positions he was responsible for the "de-Nazification" of top German intellectuals and leaders as well as the editing and dissemination of anti-Communist propaganda. It is during this period that Josselson purportedly became connected with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Josselson left the State Department in 1950 to help steer the newly created Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a liberal, anti-Communist organization founded by American and European intellectuals to expose Communist cultural oppression and to oppose all forms of totalitarian rule.

A series of news stories in 1966 exposing the CCF and CIA connection brought about Josselson's resignation as the Executive Director and the dissolution of the CCF in 1967.



In the early 1970s, Josselson began extensive research for a biography of the Napoleonic-era Russian General Barclay de Tolly.

Plagued by health problems, he relied heavily upon research and typing assistance, much of it provided by his second wife, Diana Dodge Josselson.

Michael Josselson died in Geneva on January 7, 1978, following heart surgery. He had moved to Switzerland in 1961 to seek treatment for his circulatory problems and had already undergone several surgeries. At the time of his death, his manuscript for *The Commander: A Life of Barclay de Tolly* was finished except for the bibliography and index. Soon thereafter Diana Josselson completed the book, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1980.

From the book **“The Cultural Cold War. The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters”** by **Frances Stonor Saunders**. The New Press, 2000

“For one intelligence officer, the filling out of endless forms was no way to deal with the complex legacy of the Nazi regime. Michael Josselson adopted a different approach. ‘I didn't know Josselson then, but I had heard of him,’ recalled the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, who at that time was working for MI6 in London. ‘His reputation had spread across Europe's intelligence grapevine. He was the big fixer, the man who could get anything done. *Anything*. If you wanted to get across the Russian border, which was virtually impossible, Josselson would fix it. If you needed a symphonic orchestra, Josselson would fix it.’

Speaking four languages fluently without a hint of an accent, Michael Josselson was a valuable asset in the ranks of American occupation officers. Furthermore, he knew Berlin inside out. Born in Tartu, Estonia, in 1908, the son of a Jewish timber merchant, he had arrived in Berlin for the first time in the early 1920s, swept along in the Baltic diaspora which followed the 1917 revolution. With most of his close family murdered by the Bolsheviks, return to Tartu was impossible, and he became a member of that generation of men and women whom Arthur Koestler referred to as the 'scum of the earth' — the *déracinés*, people whose lives had been broken by the twentieth century, their identity with their homelands ruptured. Josselson had attended the University of Berlin, but left before taking a degree to join the Gimbels-Saks department stores as a buyer, becoming their representative in Paris. In 1936 he emigrated to the States, and shortly thereafter became an American citizen.



*Still from Lene Berg's documentary "The man in the background"*

Inducted into the Army in 1943, his European background made him an obvious candidate for either intelligence work or psychological warfare. He was duly assigned to the Intelligence Section of the Psychological Warfare Division (PWD) in Germany, where he joined a special seven-man interrogation team (nicknamed 'Kampfgruppe Rosenberg', after its leader Captain Albert G. Rosenberg). The team's mission was to interrogate hundreds of German prisoners every week, for the purpose of 'rapidly separating strong Nazis from non-Nazis, lies from truthful responses, voluble from tongue-tied personalities'. Discharged in 1946, Josselson stayed on in Berlin with the American Military Government as Cultural Affairs Officer, then with the State Department and the US High Commission as a Public Affairs Officer. In this capacity, he was assigned to the 'screening of personnel' in the German press, radio and entertainment media, all of which were suspended 'pending the removal of Nazis'.

Assigned to the same division was Nicolas Nabokov<sup>1</sup>, a White Russian émigré who had lived in Berlin before emigrating to the United States in 1933. Tall, handsome, expansive, Nabokov was a man who cultivated friendships (and wives) with great ease and charm.

---

<sup>1</sup> A cousin of the famous writer Vladimir Nabokov [MR]

During the 1920s, his flat in Berlin had become a centre of émigré cultural life, an intellectual goulash of writers, scholars, artists, politicians and journalists. Amongst this cosmopolitan group of exiles was Michael Josselson.

In the mid-1930s, Nabokov went to America, where he wrote what he modestly described as 'the first American ballet', *Union Pacific*, with Archibald MacLeish. He shared a small studio with Henri Cartier-Bresson in New York for a while, when neither had any money. Nabokov later wrote that 'to Cartier-Bresson the Communist movement was the bearer of history, of mankind's future ... I shared many of [his] views, but, despite the gnawing longing for my Russian fatherland, I could not accept nor espouse the philo-Communist attitude of so many Western European and American intellectuals. I felt that they were curiously blind to the realities of Russian Communism and were only reacting to the fascist tides that were sweeping Europe in the wake of the Depression. To a certain degree I felt that the philo-Communism of the mid-thirties was a passing fad, cleverly nurtured by a mythology about the Russian Bolshevik Revolution shaped by the Soviet Agitprop Apparatus.'



In 1945, alongside W. H. Auden and J. K. Galbraith, Nabokov joined the Morale Division of the US Strategic Bombing Survey Unit in Germany, where he met psychological warfare personnel, and subsequently got a job in the Information Control Division, alongside his old acquaintance, Michael Josselson. As a composer, Nabokov was assigned to the music section, where he was expected to 'establish good psychological and cultural weapons with which to destroy Nazism and promote a genuine desire for a democratic Germany'. His task was 'to eject the Nazis from German musical life and license those German musicians (giving them the right to exercise their profession) whom we believed to be "clean" Germans,' and to 'control the programmes of German concerts and see to it that they would not turn into nationalist manifestations.' Introducing Nabokov at a party, one American general said, 'He's hep on music and tells the Krauts how to go about it.'

Josselson and Nabokov became a congenial, if unlikely, pair. Nabokov was emotionally extravagant, physically demonstrative and always late; Josselson was reserved, high-minded, scrupulous. But they did share the same language of exile, and of attachment to the new world, America, which both believed to be the only place where the future of the old world could be secured. The drama and intrigue of post-war Berlin appealed to something in both men, giving them scope to exercise their talents as operators and innovators. Together, Nabokov later wrote, they both 'did a good deal of successful Nazi-hunting and put on ice a few famous conductors, pianists, singers and a number of orchestral musicians (most of whom had well deserved it and some of whom should be there today)'. Often going against the grain of official thinking, they took a pragmatic view of denazification. They refused to accept that the actions of artists under Germany's Nazi past could be treated as a phenomenon *sui generis*, with judgment meted out according to the rendering of a *Fragebogen*. 'Josselson genuinely believed that the role of intellectuals in a very difficult situation shouldn't be decided in an instant,' a colleague later explained. 'He understood that Nazism in Germany had all been a mixed grotesquerie. Americans had no idea, in general. They just waded in and pointed the finger.'

In 1947, the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler was the subject of particular opprobrium. Although he had openly defied the branding of Paul Hindemith as a 'degenerate', he later arrived at a mutually beneficial accommodation with the Nazi regime. Furtwängler, who was appointed Prussian State Councillor, as well as holding other high posts bestowed by the Nazis, continued to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and the Berlin State Opera throughout the Third Reich. By December 1946, a year and a half after his case had first been brought to the attention of the Allied Control Commission, the conductor was due to appear before the Tribunal for Artists assembled in Berlin. The case was heard over two days. The outcome was vague, and the tribunal sat on his file for months. Then, out of the blue, Furtwängler learned that the Allied Kommandatura had cleared him, and that he was free to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic on 25 May 1947 at the American-requisitioned Titania Palast. Amongst the papers left by Michael Josselson is a note which refers to his part in what insiders referred to as the 'jumping' of Furtwängler. 'I played a major role in sparing the great German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler the humiliation of having to go through the denazification procedure despite the fact that he had never been a member of the Nazi Party,' Josselson wrote. This manoeuvre was achieved with Nabokov's help, though years later both were vague about the details of the case. 'I wonder whether you remember when was the approximate date that Furtwängler came to East Berlin and gave a press conference there threatening to go to Moscow if *we* would not clear him at once,' Nabokov asked Josselson in 1977. 'I seem to remember that you had something to do with bringing him out of the Soviet sector (hadn't you?) to my billet. I remember General McClure's [chief of Information Control Division] gentle fury at Furtwängler's behaviour then ...' "



*Still from Lene Berg's documentary "The man in the background"*

## Where is Estonia?

**First hand-written drafts of an article by Michael Josselson.  
The Harry Ransom Center. The University of Texas at Austin.**

*“The question may seem absurd to some. To these I apologize. Yet the question is justified by my own experience. The mere mention that I was born in Estonia produces a few seconds of embarrassed silence inevitably followed by an “Oh, yes?” Or there is also a variant which always strikes me as infinitely worse and even humiliating, and that is a quasi-knowledgeable “You mean you are from Riga?”, accompanied by a dilated glance of recognition. This answer makes no sense at all. Worse, it cannot be shrugged off and demands instant lecturing. Perhaps the easiest way to keep Riga and Estonia apart is to start by making clear that Riga is the home of sprats, those smoked small herrings, while Estonia’s capital Tallinn is the home of a different kind of a small fish, a sourer kind of anchovies, called k i l j k i.”*

*“... Poor, innocently maligned Estonia, the land of a people who at the close of the prehistoric period were the strongest of all Balto-Finnic people. No, Riga has nothing to do with Estonia, even though the seat of a Teutonic Bishop, bent on bringing the Estonians the [bloss..] of [...] Christianity, it was the starting point of seven centuries of subjugation and of misery. Teutonic orders, Danes, Poles, Swedes, Russians, Germans lorded over you, until in 1919 you regained your independence and had a remarkable twenty one year flowering, of which your euphonistic language, at root related with Finnish and Hungarian, remains perhaps the most magnificent achievement. It was a tragedy that in 1940 you had to end up as a victim of yet another proselytizing faith, this time from the East, which turned you into one of several Soviet Socialist Republics. The mournful black which dominates your flag symbolizes your history. The mournful black stands out between the blue of the Baltic Sea on top and the white of surrender at the bottom. ...”*