

Random conversation

By Lynne Wanyeki

- * I think I'm lesbian . . .
- * *Horrors! That's disgusting!*
- * No, it's not! And anyway, why did you automatically think of me in bed with another woman?
- * *Because that's what it comes down to darling. That's how society will label you.*
- * So you're saying that if I'm not sleeping with a woman I'm not lesbian?
- * *Precisely.*
- * But that's ridiculous! I mean, that's like saying if you're not sleeping with a man, you're not heterosexual!
- * *Uhh . . .*
- * So what are you then—aseexual?
- * *Darling, let's be reasonable . . . Does this have anything to do with your relationships with men?*
- * Fuck! Why is it that lesbians are always seen as "male-hating perverts"? It would almost be easier to be a gay man—at least then I'd just be a "pervert" . . .
- * *Now, don't get upset on me, it was just a question . . . but seriously, don't you think it's easier to be a dyke? Don't gay men suffer a lot more than lesbians?*
- * Sweetheart, sometimes I'd almost prefer to be bashed-up, and have my sexual activity declared illegal. At least it's show me that people know I exist . . . that lesbians exist. It's certainly preferable to being declared nuts and stuffed into a looney-bin . . .
- * *I think you're being a little extreme . . .*
- * No, I'm not! Lesbians are condescended to, and gay men are feared. And I'm bloody sick and tired of it!
- * *Well, why is it your problem? Do you really want to be "feared"? Or do you simply enjoy crusades? Really, this melodrama is completely unnecessary.*
- * What's unnecessary? My saying how I feel? Listen, because this is relatively new to me, I can still hide behind people's assumptions—and hear their opinions. Sometimes I feel like a spy. But mostly I feel like a fraud. . .
- * *So you really are homosexually-oriented?*
- * I quote: "Homosexually-oriented? Why don't you just say 'In the Light'? That's what it breaks down to."

GAY - Homosexual. In the 17th century, the word gay went beyond its original meaning of happy to include men who were playboys. By the next century, it was applied to women with promiscuous reputations. By the early 20th century, it had been adopted by homosexuals to refer to themselves. Since 1970, the word has gained acceptance as a standard, nonslang, nonpejorative synonym for homosexuality

The unsung victims of tyranny

by Adrian Park

On 24th. February 1987 a ceremony took place at the site of Natzweiler concentration camp, near Voix, France, to commemorate members of the French resistance and other concentrations camp victims. Many wreaths were laid at a newly erected memorial. When a group of gay men attempted (as they had been invited) to lay a wreath in the form of a pink triangle, they were verbally, and then physically attacked. One resistance veteran declared that the ovens should be reopened for these "degenerates". Threats of further violence persuaded the organizers to exclude these forgotten victims of Hitler's genocide from the ceremony.

Lest anyone should ever harbor doubts as to the magnitude or even the reality of the Holocaust, Martin Gilbert's book, "The Holocaust" should be required reading. It is often forgotten, however, that six million Jews were accompanied by over a million Gypsies, somewhat more Soviet prisoners of war, half a million conscientious objectors, communists, socialists, anti-Nazi clergy and laity, Jehovah's Witnesses and between 50,000 and 100,000 gay men. The first three categories were earmarked for destruction in the extermination camps of occupied Poland. The rest were to be worked to death in over one hundred concentration labor camps scattered throughout Germany and occupied Europe.

Like the treatment of the Jews, that meted out to homosexual men, was not a crime committed by Germans alone. Homophobia, like anti-Semitism is not, and never has been the prerogative of one nation; the subject peoples of parts of Europe joined in, often with enthusiasm. The opinion cited earlier, was, after all, voiced by a Frenchman with impeccable anti-Nazi credentials.

Unique among the victims of National Socialism, homosexual men suffered not under "legal" innovations like the Nürnberg Laws, but as a consequence of the simple reform of Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code of 1871. The 1935 reform of this law raised the punishment for sexual acts between males to 10 years imprisonment, while the definition of "sexual acts" was broadened considerably. A decree of 1936 permitted enforced castration, but this never became routine. In 1942 the criminal law was relaxed slightly to allow able-bodied gay prisoners to "volunteer" for service on the Eastern Front, though at the same time military regulations were tightened to make homosexual acts between or by serving personnel a capital offense, usually subject to summary execution.

The very fact of anti-gay legislation and Nazi persecution of gays, often comes as a surprise to even well-educated people today. This is largely due to the myth, largely fostered by Allied wartime propaganda, that the Nazis somehow encouraged homosexuality, or were "that way inclined" themselves. Ernst Röhm and several colleagues in the S. A. were homosexuals, and much Nazi propaganda material has an undoubtedly homoerotic flavour, but Hitler's own views, and those of most leading Nazis (Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich of the S. S., in particular) bordered on the paranoid. In the new Reich it was the duty of men to be "fully masculine" and to sire as many Aryan children as possible, especially as Germany's birthrate had plummeted since 1919. When Hitler ordered the murder of Ernst Röhm and his former allies in the S. A., Röhm's homosexuality was exploited to the full as justification.

If the Nazi treatment of gays was horrific (Heinz Heger's and Richard Plant's books are highly recommended), the fate of the survivors after 1945 can only be termed callous and cruel. When the Federal Republic accepted its responsibilities to camp survivors in 1950, gay men were excluded from compensation schemes, partly because they had been sentenced under the pre-Nazi criminal law, and partly because that law remained in force until 1968. In fairness, those laws were no harsher than those in force in Britain, Canada or the USA at the time. Compensation was finally granted in 1979. Only in the Netherlands and the German Democratic Republic were "the men with the pink triangle" (so-called because of the badge gay men had to wear in the camps) officially recognized as victims of Nazi tyranny.

Even today, no-one knows exactly how many homosexuals perished between 1933 and 1945. The numbers cited above are estimates only. Around 50,000 to 60,000 men were convicted under Paragraph 175 during the Nazi years in the Reich (Germany and Austria); half as many suffered the same fate in the Reich protectorates (Bohemia, Moravia and Government-General Poland). No figures are available for the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway or France. An unknown number were classed as "antisocials" (black triangle prisoners), suffered summary execution in the armed forces, or were classed as "political prisoners", Jews, Gypsies or illegal immigrants. To further complicate calculations, charges of homosexuality, completely trumped up, were often used to remove many enemies of the regime, particularly during the purges of the armed forces and the churches and their youth groups before the outbreak of war. Other gay men were classed as mentally ill and suffered compulsory euthanasia or became the subjects of medical experimentation, along with tens of thousands of the mentally and physically handicapped.

For lesbians, even less data is available. In the Reich, women were expected to restrict their ambitions to "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" (children, kitchen and church). Though lesbians were not subjected to the criminal law, homosexual activity by women was regarded as a sign of "antisocial tendencies" or mental illness, and these women were treated accordingly. They are the truly silent victims of this period of unparalleled barbarism.

On the same day as the near riot at Voix, another group of gay men joined with city officials, politicians, churchmen and representatives of the Jewish community, in Amsterdam to unveil a pink granite triangle. It is the first, and so far only, memorial to what happened and to the resolution that it shall not happen again. As with anti-Semitism, such madness can only take root in a society where there is a fertile soil of irrational fear, prejudice and myth. As Europe discovered, homophobia, like anti-Semitism, is widespread and madmen can fan its spark into a Holocaust. Those society held in contempt, too easily became "life unfit for life". It must never happen again.

Sources

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- Heger, H., 1980. *The Men with the Pink Triangle*. Alyson Publications: Boston.
- Plant, R., 1986. *The Pink Triangle: the Nazi War against Homosexuals*. Henry Holt: New York.



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