

The Dignity of Difference

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The Pink Triangle and Beyond

Nazi Persecution of Gay Men and Lesbians

Lesbian and gay life in Germany began to thrive at the beginning of the twentieth century. Berlin in particular was one of the most liberal cities in Europe with a number of lesbian and gay organisations, cafés, bars, publications and cultural events.

By the 1920s, Paragraph 175 of the Penal Code (which criminalised homosexual acts) was being applied in an increasingly limited fashion. Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science led the world in its scientific approach to sexual diversity and acted as an important public centre for Berlin lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered life. In 1929 the process towards complete decriminalisation had been initiated within the German legislature.

Nazi conceptions of race, gender and eugenics dictated the regime's hostile policy on homosexuality. Within days of Hitler becoming Chancellor repression against gay men and lesbians commenced. On 6 May 1933, the Nazis violently looted and closed The Institute for Sexual Science, burning its extensive collection on the streets. Other organisations were shut down. The existing law was toughened and the courts/police were encouraged to take draconian steps. Unknown numbers of gay men and lesbians fled abroad, entered into marriages in order to appear to conform to Nazi ideological norms, and experienced severe psychological trauma. The thriving gay culture in Berlin was lost.

The police established lists of homosexually active persons. Records from 1937-1940 include the names of over 90,000 suspects. Significant numbers of gay men were arrested,

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of whom an estimated 50,000 received severe jail sentences in brutal conditions. Most homosexuals were not sent to concentration camps but were instead exposed to inhuman treatment in police prisons. There they could be subjected to hard labour and torture, or be executed or experimented upon. The Nazis dehumanised the inmates in their camps and some of their prisons by giving them a symbol, which coded them according to the reason for their detention, and assigned them a number to replace their name. Some 10-15,000 people were deported for being gay to concentration camps. Many, but not all, were assigned pink triangles. Most died in the camps often from exhaustion. Many were castrated and some subjected to other gruesome medical experiments. Collective murder actions were undertaken against gay detainees, exterminating hundreds at a time. Recent research in Sachsenhausen reveals a special area of the camp reserved for gay inmates, who were given particularly tortuous activities. Some people belonged to more than one targeted group. Thus, for example, there were Jewish gays who wore a yellow triangle and a pink triangle together. There must have been many other unidentified lesbian and gay men in camps – there because they were persecuted for other reasons.

During the redrafting of Paragraph 175 in Germany, there was much debate about whether to include lesbianism, which had not been recognised in the earlier version. It was decided not to and so lesbians were not targeted in the same way as gay men. In Austria, after anchluss, a similar debate led to the inclusion of lesbianism in the penal code. Lesbians suffered the same destruction of community networks as gay men. They were allowed to play no role in public life and therefore were often at a double economic disadvantage.

After the war, the Allies chose not to remove the Nazi-amended Paragraph 175. Neither they, nor the new German states, nor Austria would recognise homosexual prisoners as victims of the Nazis – a status essential to qualify for reparations. Indeed, many gay men continued to serve their prison sentences.

People who had been persecuted for being gay had a hard choice: either to bury their experience and pretend it never happened – with all the personal consequences of such an action – or to try to campaign for recognition in an environment where the same neighbours, the same law, same police and same judges prevailed. Unsurprisingly very few victims came forward. Those who did – even those who had fought the Nazis and survived death camps – were thwarted at every turn. Few known victims are still alive but research is now beginning to reveal the hidden history of Nazi homophobia and post-War discrimination.

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© Schwules Museum

Albrecht Becker

Albrecht Becker was an actor and production designer. He lived with his partner, the Director of the State Archive, in Würzburg, a town in the southern state of Bavaria. Also living in Würzburg was a Jewish wine merchant and Swiss citizen, Dr Leopold Obermayer. When Obermayer complained to the local police that his mail was being opened, the Gestapo investigated him further, and a number of photographs of young men were found in his safe. One of these photographs was of Albrecht Becker.

As both an observant Jew and gay, Obermayer could not hope for mercy, but this was still before the full Nazi onslaught against Jews and he did try to defend himself. His own notes from his trial have survived. He was first sent to a concentration camp at Dachau where he was tortured. Later he was transferred to the notorious Mauthausen camp where inmates were literally worked to death and where he subsequently perished. Albrecht Becker was also arrested and put on trial, after which he was sent to Nürnberg Prison. Towards the end of the war, when more soldiers were needed, some gay men were released in order to help the war effort; Albrecht was among these. Having no option but to go into the German army, he was sent to the Russian front. Soldiers who were sent there rarely survived for long and suffered extreme privations. However, Becker did manage to survive and was able to return to working in the film industry after the war where he became well known internationally. He died in 2002.

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Why Holocaust Memorial Day Matters

Ann Marriott of LGBT Youth Scotland explains why commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day is important.

“Then the loud speakers broadcast some noisy classical music while the SS stripped him naked and shoved a tin pail over his head. Next they sicced their ferocious German Shepherds on him; the guard dogs first bit into his groin and thighs, then devoured him right in front of us”
Pierre Seel – Survivor

“We who wore the pink triangle were prioritized for medical experiments, and those generally ended in death. For my part, therefore, I took every care I could not to offend against the regulations.” Heinz Heger – Survivor

The Dignity of Difference allows people of today to look at the impact the Holocaust had on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Even today there is a legacy of silence, a fear of understanding the reality faced even by the gay survivors who continued to be persecuted after the Nazi defeat.

Gay men were re-imprisoned by victorious Allies, since they were still regarded as criminals. They were denied compensation, and still are.

It is estimated that some 100,000 gay men and lesbian women were murdered, tortured or experimented against.

So little of the LGBT experience is known, and all of the LGBT young people who access LGBT Youth Scotland were astounded that such an integral part of their heritage is lacking from the school curriculum. There was also recognition that the lack of information does not fit with the UNCRC which states:

Article 12.

You have the right to have a say about decisions that affect you and have your opinion heard.

Article 13.

You have the right to get and share information.

Holocaust Memorial Day offers today’s young people and wider society, an opportunity to reflect on LGBT peoples experience of the Holocaust, and also recognises the need to challenge homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

If we are to truly celebrate the Dignity of Difference then we need to know about all people’s experiences.

www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

The Dignity of Difference

Same. But Different

This year's theme is 'The Dignity of Difference' and, from that, we have devised a campaign centred around the strap-line 'Same. But Different'.

As a nation of 60 million people, essentially we are all the same, but different. Similarity is what unites us; difference is what enriches us.

We must work together to ensure that communities are encouraged to learn the lessons of the Holocaust to help create a society that respects both our differences and our common humanity.

You may find that you can use this campaign to highlight how different communities within a town add to that area's vibrancy or how a diverse student population will lead to a positive school experience.

'Same. But Different' will be used in a national effort to strengthen society's respect for difference. This message emphasises the benefits that a diverse and multicultural society can bring. It will be communicated across the UK to communities as part of Holocaust Memorial Day.

For further information visit www.hmd.org.uk or call Louise Hector on 0845 838 1883 to discuss how to incorporate "Same. But Different" in your local commemorative event.

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Much Achieved – More To Do

Without doubt, we've seen huge steps forward in recent years towards achieving equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain.

We secured an equal age of consent in 2001. In 2003, the House of Lords voted overwhelmingly to scrap Section 28, following a long struggle in parliament.

It's now illegal to discriminate against someone at work because of their sexual orientation.

Thousands of gay couples have tied the knot since the end of 2005, at long last able to gain legal recognition of their relationships thanks to civil partnerships. Same-sex couples can now apply to adopt jointly in England and Wales - Scotland is currently considering similar changes to its laws.

In November 2005, the government agreed to outlaw discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services. These new protections will cover a huge range of areas from hospitals to schools to hotels.

The new laws are expected to take effect in April 2007. Stonewall hopes that the government will resist calls from some religious groups to carve sweeping exemptions into the regulations, if they are to tackle the sorts of discrimination that take place on a daily basis.

We've achieved a lot, but there's still a long way to go before we see a society free from homophobia.

Too many children in our schools still face the daily trauma of homophobic bullying, as we know from our Education for All campaign.

Gay men and women still receive second-rate treatment from public services like the NHS.

All too often, in spite of legal protection, the workplace is still permeated with prejudice against gay people. Homophobic hate crimes, even in tolerant cities like London, are on the rise.

Changing the law is important, but it is not enough by itself. Winning hearts and minds to ensure that our children can grow up in a Britain where to be gay is not to suffer intolerance at school, at work, at home is equally important too and perhaps an even greater challenge.

Jonathan Finney
Stonewall

www.stonewall.org.uk

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Gay survivor of the Holocaust, Janni Kowalski, visits Manchester in 2006 © Manchester Evening News.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust is here to help in any way that we can. We have a variety of resources available including local activity guidelines packs, education materials including case studies and assembly plans, a short DVD and PowerPoint presentations. There are also further resource sheets available on a variety of subjects relating to the 2007 theme "The Dignity of Difference".

You can contact us on:

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Suggested Reading

This sheet acts only as an introduction to LGBT experiences in the Holocaust and today in Britain. If you would like to know more about these issues there are several books and websites that can help.

The Hidden Holocaust?: Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-1945 – Gunter Grau
I, Pierre Seel, Deported Homosexual – Pierre Seel
Bent – Martin Sherman
An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin – Gad Beck
Liebe Macht Frei: The Biography of Janni Kowalski – Jeremy Harder
The Men with the Pink Triangle: The True Life-And-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps – Heinz Heger & David Fernback
Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present – Neil Murray
Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880 – Lesley A Hall
The Way We Are Now – Foreword by Ben Summerskill

Useful Websites

www.proudheritage.org
www.pink-triangle.org
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/index.php?ModuleId=10005261&Type=normal+article>
www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk
www.stonewall.org.uk
www.lgf.org.uk
www.lgbtyouth.org.uk