



## Rudolf Brazda

Rudolf Brazda was the last known concentration camp survivor deported specifically for homosexuality. For many decades, Brazda's story remained unheard as discrimination against gay men and lesbians in Europe continued. He began to speak out publicly about his experiences only in the final years of his life, telling the world about the persecution gay men and lesbians faced at the hands of the Nazis, specifically the experience of gay men in the camps which was often extremely harsh.

The Nazi regime targeted anyone who did not fit their narrow ideals of what was 'normal'. They targeted gay men for persecution, expanding and reinforcing the pre-existing legislation known as *Paragraph 175* which criminalised homosexual acts between men. They also targeted lesbians, albeit less severely than they persecuted male homosexuals.

Rudolf Brazda, the youngest son of Czech immigrants, was born on 26 June 1913 in Brossen, part of the modern German town of Meuselwitz. His parents had moved to Saxony from Bohemia to find work. However, an accident in the mines took his father's life when Brazda was only seven years old. In Meuselwitz and Altenburg, he found a tolerant atmosphere and befriended other gay and lesbian people in local clubs and meeting houses. Despite the prejudicial legislation in place, there was little discrimination at the time and Brazda could be open about his sexuality. At the age of 20, he met Werner at a swimming pool, a man who would soon become his first boyfriend. The two later moved in together, subletting from a Jehovah's Witness landlady who accepted them as her tenants. Brazda's family also approved of his relationship with Werner, acting as witnesses to a symbolic marriage ceremony in their home.

As early as 1933, the Nazis began raiding gay clubs in larger cities and the pre existing, thriving gay and lesbian culture in Germany was destroyed. It is estimated that tens of thousands of people faced persecution for their sexual orientation. Significant numbers of gay men were arrested, of whom an estimated 50,000 were sentenced to prison terms varying from a few months to several years. Most were not sent to concentration camps but were instead exposed to inhumane treatment in police prisons. Some were subjected to hard labour and torture. Brazda was arrested on the charge of 'debauchery

between men'. Love letters and poems that he had written to his partner were used against him. Werner, who had enlisted in the military, was also arrested and the two soon lost contact with one another. Brazda served a six month sentence before being deported to Czechoslovakia. Although he was a Czech citizen, he was not familiar with the country nor did he know the language, so he moved to the German-speaking Sudetenland where he found work as a roofer. Before long, the Nazis had invaded the region. He was arrested again in 1941 and was forced to serve another fourteen month prison term.

In August 1942, he was deported to Buchenwald concentration camp. There, he was assigned the prisoner number 7952 and was forced to wear a pink triangle. He was subject to forced labour and remained there for 32 months. It is estimated between 5,000 and 10,000 people were sent to camps because of their sexuality. Each individual was forced to wear a badge which would identify them to their oppressors and to others in the camp and gay men were forced to wear a pink triangle. These gay men are commonly referred to as 'die Rosa-Winkel' or 'The Pink Triangles'; in reference to the badges they were forced to wear. Whilst in the camps, gay men were treated particularly badly - many people died from exhaustion due to heavy labour, others were castrated and some subjected to other gruesome medical experiments. There are some known cases of deported lesbians, but these women were often deported mainly if they were Jewish or due to their political involvement.

Brazda too was beaten, once having teeth knocked out. Recalling his experiences years later, Brazda believed that he may have survived thanks to the assistance of kapos, while others around him were not as lucky. His kapo in the roofer kommando prevented Brazda from being sent to the feared Dora sub-camp, in retaliation for having shown a lack of respect to a SS guard. Before a 'death march' to another camp, another kapo spared Brazda the risk of death along the way by hiding him in a shed from the other guards. Brazda stayed hidden there for a few days, next to the pig sty, until the camp was liberated by American forces on 11 April 1945.

After his release from the camp, Brazda moved across the border to Alsace, France where he became a French national in 1960 and led a quiet life as a free man. However, this was not the case for all gay survivors of Nazi persecution. After liberation the Allies did not immediately 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. Many gay men continued to be sentenced under Paragraph 175 until 1969 in West Germany. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) reverted to the pre-Nazi version of Paragraph 175 in 1950 and discarded it completely in 1968, however many men still continued to experience discrimination.

In the 1950s, Rudolf met his life partner, Edouard Mayer, at a costume ball. The two stayed together for nearly half a century. After Mayer had been injured in a work place accident, Brazda took care of him for 30 years until his death in 2003. Brazda broke his long silence

about his experience of persecution in 2008, after hearing of the upcoming unveiling of a memorial to homosexual victims of Nazism, at a ceremony in Berlin. He was persuaded by his friends to tell the world that there was still another of the Pink Triangles able to tell his story.

Brazda devoted the rest of his life to telling his story and encouraging future generations to remain vigilant against hatred and prejudice. In 2010, he attended the unveiling of a memorial plaque in honour of Pierre Seel, who had also experienced persecution by the Nazis for being gay. For speaking out about his experience, Brazda was awarded the gold medals of the cities of Toulouse, Nancy and Puteaux, and was appointed Knight in the National Order of the Legion of Honour in France in 2011. Two biographies have also been written about his life.

On 3 August 2011, Rudolf Brazda died at the age of 98, in Bantzenheim, France. In the last few years of his life, he continued to tell his story as a warning to future generations of what can happen if we don't respect differences. During these final years, he said, 'If I finally speak, it's for people to know what we, homosexuals, had to endure in Hitler's days... it shouldn't happen again.'