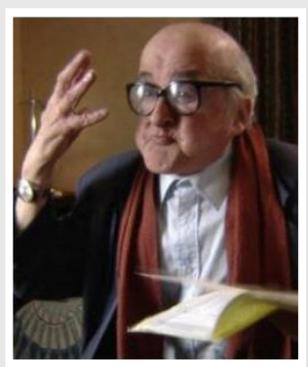


Pierre Seel



HOLOCAUST
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Pierre Seel grew up in France, and was imprisoned by the Nazis for being gay at the age of 17. This life story explains how Pierre spoke out about his persecution.



'I had to bear witness even if I did it anonymously. Was I the only one? I wanted to find out, track down other witnesses, for someone who shouts alone is easily suspect. And that suspicion hurts.'

Pierre Seel was born on 16 August 1923 in Mulhouse, Alsace, France. He was the youngest of five sons and his parents ran a patisserie in the town. Alsace is a region in France very close to the German border. The region had been fought over by the two countries more than once and had been considered the property of both. It is a strong Catholic area and the Seel family were regular church followers.

From an early age Pierre Seel knew that he was gay but he also knew he needed to keep it secret from his religious family. Homosexuality was not illegal in France at that time, but was considered 'a sin' by many people, especially those with strong religious leanings. At the age of seventeen he hung out in the town square to meet men and on one of those occasions he had his watch stolen. He decided to report the theft even though he knew it meant that he risked his family finding out where he had been. The policeman who took his statement decided to threaten Pierre, verbally attacking him for being gay. It was a humiliating experience but worse still the policeman added Pierre's name to a police list of 'known homosexuals'.

The Nazi Party of Germany and its leader Adolf Hitler had been threatening the countries of Europe for years during the 1930s and had invaded Poland in 1939. France, along with Britain, had declared war on Germany in response, but there was little fighting in Western Europe to begin with. In 1940 Germany attacked France.

Pierre's brothers had left with the French declaration of war, but he was too young. Instead he continued with his studies and fell in love with a young man called Jo. Pierre also became involved with some minor resistance work, such as agreeing to carry messages. On 2 May 1941 on his return home from studies, Pierre's mother told him that the Gestapo (Nazi Secret Police) had called in and ordered that he report to them the next morning.

He was detained by the Gestapo and then he was interrogated. It was obvious that the French police had handed the list of 'known homosexuals' over to the Germans, as he recognised many other people who were being questioned that day. In German law homosexuality was illegal and they had begun to arrest those they believed to be homosexuals. Pierre was imprisoned, brutally tortured and forcibly sodomised by the Nazis. Pierre's family were informed of his arrest and told why but even with the help of a lawyer he was imprisoned – although there was no trial.

Along with other gay men Pierre was taken to a camp and like other prisoners of the Nazis his head was shaved and his clothes removed and replaced with prison wear. The men were given forced labour and lived under a brutal regime of beatings, starvation and humiliation. The camp was called Schirmeck and was a 'security camp' and the prisoners represented a number of those that the Nazis disliked or marked out for attack – eg priests, political opponents, deserters from the German army. Over four years 15,000 people from Alsace passed through that camp.

Pierre later recalled,

'I was spared most of the horrors of Schirmeck. I quickly became a disjointed puppet under the shouts of the SS men, who made me obey all kinds of orders and perform tasks that were exhausting, dangerous, or simply idiotic.'

His worst experience there was one that he witnessed - one that scared him more than the physical beatings. In the camp one day he saw his lover Jo, who at 18, was the same age as Pierre. Jo had been found guilty of some crime by the Nazis, it could have been anything, maybe nothing at all, but his punishment was to be stripped naked and have dogs set on him until he died whilst the prisoners were forced to watch.

In November 1941 the Nazis released Pierre, his good behaviour in the camp had 're-educated' him and he was allowed to go home. He was welcomed home but his homosexuality was not discussed and neither was his experience in the camp.

In March 1942 Pierre was conscripted into the German army, he was expected to fight for the very people who had tortured him and murdered Jo. He had no choice and served in the army – though because of his history he was given roles that didn't require using weapons or fighting. Nonetheless, he was nearly killed on a number of occasions as he served on the Eastern Front.

Once the war was over and Pierre Seel returned home, his experiences at the hands of the Nazis continued to be kept quiet. France kept the German laws banning homosexuality and Pierre like many others could not tell anyone what he had experienced for fear of arrest again. His religious family did not wish to discuss things and so when he decided instead that he would marry a young woman, his brothers and family kept quiet about his past.

Pierre moved away from Alsace and had a family of his own but his experiences and knowledge of who he really was stayed with him. He didn't tell his wife and his distance from her affected their marriage. He spent many years depressed and alone, unable to speak and still suffering from nightmares of what he had experienced and witnessed. It was not until 1981 when Pierre was separated and living alone that he attended a book reading about the treatment of German gay men by the Nazis that he decided to stand up, speak out.

He started anonymously but condemnation and modern homophobia made him decide to speak out openly. Also he believed it was time that he and other gay men received restitution for their time in the camps just as other prisoners of the Nazis had. Pierre spoke out at conferences, on television and at anniversaries. His ex- wife, his children and his remaining family in Alsace all accepted him speaking out.

For Pierre it was not just that he was speaking out about his experiences under the Nazis but that he was speaking out against the prejudices that still existed in France (and elsewhere in the world). His claim for compensation was held up in red tape; the right for gay groups to lay wreaths at memorial sites was often pushed back to last or not allowed at all.

Today homosexuality or being gay is legal in all European countries, but prejudice still exists and attacks still occur. Pierre's story reminds us what happens when people keep quiet and when they don't speak out. In Toulouse where Pierre lived the last years of his life the town named a street after him in memory of his experiences and his bravery to talk to others about them.

Find out more...

Podcast with Professor Gregory Woods on Pierre's story: hmd.org.uk/professor-gregory-woods

Nazi treatment of gay people: hmd.org.uk/gay-people

Rudolf Brazda's life story: hmd.org.uk/rudolf-brazda