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Persecution of Lesbians and Gays in the Context of the National-Socialist Exercise of Power

When remembering victims, it is important to view the persecution as a whole. Until now, what has been missing, above all, is the correct context that allows us to see the persecution within a wider framework, specifically from the time prior to and including the period of National-Socialism. National-Socialism never really contributed anything new, rather it worked within a pre-existing context, and this was a part of its success. There was nothing that one did not already know or recognize. Everything had tradition and fit within the current prejudices of a wide segment of the population. If we look at the persecution within its true context, it becomes clear that we are dealing with the problems of modern society, and the Nazis understood how to use these problems and prejudices for their own ends and were prepared to follow them to their ultimate consequences.

It is unimportant in our considerations to know if the percentage of homosexuals in the concentration camps stood at under one percent or higher. For me the more important question seems to be what the persecution tells us, not only about the Nazis, but about the society as a whole, which, after all, provided the context for the persecution and extermination.

An opinion widely held before 1933 was that the Nazis were opponents of bourgeois society. They were seen as hooligans, without any education or culture, that supported Hitler, and much of their speech and behavior supported this view. For example, my father, one of the most important newspaper publishers in Germany, believed Hitler had his proper venue in the *Ulk*, the comic supplement of the *Berliner Tageblatt*. His position on this was not atypical.

But what did the term “bourgeois” mean to the National-Socialists? To put it into the terms used by Hitler, it meant: rich, effeminate, devoted to half measures, in short, unmilitary. But this has distorted our picture of the National-Socialist’s actual views. They were by no means against bourgeois respectability, the mirror through which bourgeois society continues to see

itself today. On the contrary, good manners, poise, and generally accepted standards of sexual behavior were important to them. It was a particular focus of their agenda to defend against what they termed the “moral quagmire of the age.” There is extensive evidence for this, from action taken against nudists to their anti-pornography laws.

What does all this have to do with our agenda? When we look at the groups persecuted by the Nazis, a pattern develops that has also helped form the context of contemporary times. A good example is the 1943 draft for a law governing treatment of “social outsiders.” Social outsiders were those persons not fitting into any social group. The concept included people refusing to work, the disaffected, vagabonds, beggars, the mentally ill, and homosexual men. Beyond this one can add Jews and gypsies. Common to all these groups is that they embody the exact antithesis of the bourgeois ideal: the work ethic, ownership of property, an established home, acceptable behavior and control of natural drives. The final ones are particularly important bourgeois characteristics: moderation and reserve.

All of these qualities and virtues characterize the face and body of the male. At first glance one can easily distinguish between the virtuous and the corrupt. Not only for the Nazis, but long before the nude male body served as symbolic of a social ideal. Ideal masculine beauty was seen as the embodiment of masculine virtue. According to Johann Joachim Winkelmann, the body had to correspond to the antique Greek model. That which found general acceptance in bourgeois culture was largely determined by the homosexual Winkelmann, and this was made possible by the fact that he was writing at a time when bourgeois norms were still understood to be evolving. His description of Greek youths in his *History of Ancient Art* (1764) reflected the tenor of the times perfectly, because the two things meant to motivate the bourgeoisie of the 19th century were dynamism and order: dynamism through the play of muscles, order through the build of a harmonious body. In a Greek youth, all is proportioned. No fat, every muscle in its proper place, or---in the favorite phrase of Hitler---all “tall and thin.” Still, this ideal had existed a full hundred years before the Nazis.

The “outsiders” were the exact antithesis of this ideal. All were effeminate, in motion and emotive, unharmonious, badly positioned, slovenly. They were unable to control their passions. For example, when looking at turn-of-the-century caricatures of homosexuals and the other outsiders mentioned above, they are all very similar. All outsiders are effeminate, whether they

are Jews, gypsies, homosexual men, beggars or vagabonds. The appearance of one group resembles that of the others, as we quickly recognize when we begin to look at these representations more carefully. The doctors of the 19th century had already constructed this network of associations. One disease led to another, and particularly to disorder of the nervous system,---and this is the actual and most feared anti-bourgeois disease. This was the distinguishing mark of effeminacy, as real men always exercised self-control. Even so, nervous disorders afflicted male and female outsiders to an equal degree.

The result is that a stereotypical image largely determines people's views of their own society and that of outsiders. And the stereotypes of the outsiders are very similar. This stereotype and its counter-type are fundamental to the type of masculinity that the Nazis loved to propagate. It was not only important to confirm the male through a counter-type---the ideal man can not exist without its counter-type,---but gender roles were important, because the female only embodied a part of society, while the male embodied society as a whole.

For the National-Socialists the women had a clearly defined place in society, but that place was more in the private than the public sphere. The reason for this was centered in motherhood. Although the flapper (translator's rendition of "Frau mit Bubikopf") of the Weimar Republic was seen as a major threat, she was no diseased outsider, no degenerate being. In the earlier Wilhemine period, an allegorical figure, like Germania or the Marianne of France, was a national symbol. In this role the woman almost always looks to the past, and Germania sometimes even bears a medieval castle as headdress. In revolutionary periods the Marianne was temporarily represented in a bare-breasted version, but this changed as soon as the revolution was over, at which point she reappeared respectably covered. The complete disappearance of the Germania figure as a national symbol was characteristic of the National-Socialist period.

This all forms a relevant background, because, as was already indicated, the Nazis invented nothing new. They adopted the familiar and developed it to its logical end. They wanted to eradicate those aspects of German society that had already been long branded as alien and diseased. Here we encounter already identified social elements again. Homosexuality was seen as side effect of neurotic disorder. As the Nazis formulated it, all so-called criminals that defied manhood were to be neutralized.

Mainstream society wanted to contain outsiders, but not to exterminate them. Naturally, there is a big difference between discriminating against a group and wanting to exterminate it. What is the difference? Racism. Everything in National-Socialism was focused on this point. Racism, once again, invented nothing new; it was its strength that it was able to use and intensify already existing prejudices. Racism is always concrete, nothing about it is vague; everything in it has clear, sharp contours. There are no gray areas, and this is an important part of its success. In the center of National-Socialism stand the stereotypes of the insider and the outsider, and these are also clearly concretized through appearance and body. There is the ideal-type and its counter-type.

It is the great strength of racism that the body, male and female, forms its central focus. Everyone knows the body; it can be touched, beaten, whatever. But the body is also a symbol and carries more symbolic power than, for example, the national flag, the national anthem or other symbols. It is no surprise that every book on racism is also a picture book. Here, through history or the body, one can recognize the particular race and learn to distinguish between the master race and subordinate races. Here again the human form becomes a symbol, easily understood and long-trusted.

From a racist point of view, homosexuals played a different role from that of the Jews or the gypsies, who were seen as alien peoples and stigmatized as enemies. This could not be done with homosexuals, because, according to the “experts,” who in their turn cited traditional medicine, there were not only genetically based homosexuals (translator’s rendition of “erblich Veranlagte”), but also those youths who were recruited to homosexuality. In the language of the Nazis, the latter were termed “superficial homosexuals” (translator’s rendition of “Scheinhomosexuelle”). In such cases it was always possible to save the homosexual or “superficial homosexual,” even though the suspicion of relapse was ever present. “Superficial Jews” or “superficial Gypsies” did not exist.

Those acknowledging and living out genetically based homosexuality were, according to Himmler, choosing decadence as their sole ruling principle. Or, once again from Himmler: “If it is true that ten percent of the Germans are homosexual, this plague will destroy our nation.” As was already usual in the 19th century, homosexuality was seen in terms analogous to disease. The disease determined decadent appearance. The alien race and, naturally,

the race traitor were marked by ugliness. It was characteristic that homosexuals in occupied countries, like Poland for example, were hardly persecuted, and not persecuted at all in France. The reasoning was quite clear: homosexuality in an alien people served to weaken it. The minister of education during the Vichy regime was homosexual, and Jean Cocteau gave a lecture at the 1942 opening of the exhibition in Paris of the sculpture of Arno Breker. But even in Germany, it was naturally possible for homosexuals to closet themselves, and they did so, as did many Jews, but for a Jew this was something new and uncustomary. In contrast, homosexuals were practiced in this kind of camouflage. Consequently it was possible for homosexuals, as is stated in the memorial, to be perpetrators as well as victims. After all, the racial family tree of most homosexuals was acceptable.

It is a real tragedy for us that the masculine-state of the National-Socialists exercised such power of attraction, even over homosexual outsiders. It was a male dominated state. Looking at the invitation to the 1933 National-Socialist rally, one sees that its symbols are carried by nude men. It was a masculine state and represented itself as such. There existed, for example, Adolf Brand's *Eigenen*, the first openly homosexual magazine. Unfortunately, one must accept the fact that this openly racist publication was pro-Nazi. Naturally, it was immediately forbidden in 1933, although nothing happened to Brand personally.

But the outsider always wanted to conform---which in this case meant subordination to current ideals of masculinity. For example, looking at contemporary representations in homosexual magazines, one finds an image overwhelmingly expressive of male virtues, the "Aryan" virtues of the "all-American boy," or of the "clean-cut Englishman." The ideal masculine type can be found everywhere and has the same symbolic effect everywhere, whether in Germany, England, or America, and this type continues to be represented in homosexual magazines. The appearance, the ideal masculine form, as symbol of righteousness provided social acceptance, particularly in the age of racism. For example, in order to be admitted to the so-called School of Leaders (translator's rendition of "die Führerschule"), one had to have an Aryan appearance, and this meant exactly what I've already described: an appearance at once dynamic and harmonious.

I have no idea how one can erect a memorial that demonstrates the degradation of a minority as an almost natural consequence of the higher

power (translator's rendition of "Übermacht") of the society. This seems to be kind of a leap to me, but not only homosexuals tried to conform; many others tried as well. In the years before the U.S. civil rights movement, blacks, or Afro-Americans, tried to straighten their hair chemically, and, for example, used skin creams to lighten their skin. We also know that Jewish women have nose jobs done. At all times the minority wants to conform to the standards of the majority, and of course, this also applies to homosexuals, who, at the time of the Third Reich, were not only conformists (translator's rendition of "Mitläufer"). During the thirties the only country in which openly homosexual people could be found in leading positions was the France of the Vichy regime. The National-Socialists were completely indifferent to this fact.

Read the *Brown Book on the Hitler-Terror*, and you will find that the main swear word of the Nazis was "gay." The anti-fascist movement---I myself was a member of this movement---was defamed as being gay by the Nazis. We know that the National-Socialists dominated the entire political debate of the 1930's. Therefore, it was logical that within the anti-fascist movement a counter-accusation of Nazi-homosexuality also dominated. However, one must view this within the context of the time. Maxim Gorki set the tone with his remark: "Exterminate the homosexuals, and fascism will disappear." This is as idiotic as Max Horkheimer's dictum: "He who does not want to discuss capitalism, must be silent about fascism." For Wilhelm Reich in *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (In my opinion, a very bad book), homosexuality is the soil in which fascism thrives. I could cite further evidence. Bert Brecht, now universally famous, did not make himself ridiculous with a poem in which he constructs a sexual relationship between Hitler and Ernst Röhm. What does it signify? As a concerned party, Klaus Mann clearly saw and pointedly formulated it: "The homosexuals are the Jews of the anti-fascists." He wrote that in the article titled "Vice and the Left." However, he did not have the courage to publish the article in his own periodical, but printed it in an obscure Prague paper, because he wanted to avoid offending either the communists or the socialists. This too was characteristic of the period.

These are the aspects of Nazi persecution and murder that I consider to be extremely important and which should not be forgotten in a memorial. All this should be remembered when we think of the victims. The persecution of homosexuals and Jews must be seen within a context. It must never be forgotten. Not only the Nazis and racism were at fault; society was guilty,

although, as already remarked, there is a big difference between discrimination and murder. However, discrimination is the beginning of murder, the first step. By these means, the Nazis were able to move against Jews and homosexuals. First they discriminated, then they murdered. The end justified the means.

A memorial should also present how seductive such a masculine state once was to us. This self-revelation seems to be very important to me. There is no clear evidence that here were homosexuals in the leadership of the National-Socialists, at least after Röhm was terminated. Even so, the attractiveness of Nazis to many homosexuals should not be ignored.

Stereotypical thinking is decisive in this. Everything I have presented here is based upon stereotype. The ideal of male beauty is almost more important than that of female beauty. Fascism naturally exaggerated this, pushing it to the its ultimate consequences. The socially symbolic power of masculine beauty as described by Winkelmann, along with the sharp distinctions between the ugly and the beautiful, are also fundamental to fascism. Since the 18th century, one has been able to distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly at first glance, and if you are ugly, you are immediately recognized as an enemy of the race. These are long established prejudices. I must raise this issue once more, as one should never lose sight of the context of a memorial. I hardly have to mention that it is exactly this context that survived the Nazi period. In my view the Nazis only pursued the consequences of a deeply rooted prejudice, in other words, an ideal of masculinity and its countertype, an ideal symbolic of society.

A memorial should honor mankind and provide historical lessons. Only then can we know what we are, recognize the fundamental obstacles we must overcome, and look to the future with confidence. Even so, the stereotypical masculine image is still with us. Allow me to pose a question: What is to be done? The society I am describing continuously strives for recognition and acceptance; it is the fundamental problem of homosexuals. How can acceptance, acknowledgement and recognition be found? And how can this goal be expressed in a memorial?

The remembrance of the victims is not the only goal here; that is relatively easy to achieve. The inclusion of context in the memorial would be a real achievement.