The Men with the Pink Triangles

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Over the last few years enough evidence has been accumulated to prove that the Third Reich exterminated countless gays throughout Europe. Numerous documents have finally come to light proving that many gays, arrested and indicted, but without a trial, were put into concentration camps and forced to wear a pink triangle (the homosexual equivalent to the Jews’ yellow star) on shirt sleeves and pants; within the camps, gays were often beaten, tortured, or killed. The persecution started around 1935, and in many ways ran parallel to that of the Jews.

I was a witness to the happenings in Germany, though fortunately from a privileged position at the border of the Third Reich. In February, 1933, while a freshman at Frankfurt University, I realized I had to get out if I wanted to stay alive. My father, a liberal, a Jew, and the cofounder of the League of Socialist Physicians, had been arrested when Adolf Hitler took power. Some time later the authorities released him—he had served as a front physician in World War I. They set him free but he did not survive the “Crystal Night” (November 9, 1938), when the Nazis destroyed over two hundred synagogues and burned down the houses of Jews, socialists, and other “treacherous elements.” I immediately registered at the University of Basel (Switzerland), a city ten minutes away from the German border. There I began to collect everything available about the antiminorities’ campaigns undertaken by the Nazis. Several of the trends that later surfaced in Germany I had experienced myself as a member of the Wandervögel (Birds of Passage), one of the many youth movements in Germany similar to the Boy Scouts, whose leaders were elected without adult supervision. . . . The Wandervögel, with the other youth groups, most of them religious, such as the Evangelical and Catholic youth groups, were slowly coerced by the Nazis into surrendering their independence: they were channeled into the Hitler Youth.

One of my earliest playmates, Ferdi, left the Wandervögel when I did, though for different reasons. A bit older than I, blond, stocky, sexually experienced, very much an extrovert, he worked at the pharmacy that supplied my father’s office. He didn’t hold it against me that he had to scrounge for a living—his father, a drunkard, hated him and gave him no help—while I was “The Red Doctor’s Boy” who would go on to the University. Ferdi joined the SA—the Nazi “Brown Shirt” paramilitary organization—which soon got him a better job. When he showed up in his dull-brown uniform, I cursed him. But Ferdi continued to be friendly with me, even though things got tougher. When my father was taken to jail, it was Ferdi who persuaded me to leave Frankfurt right away. He discovered my passport was not valid, and managed to get me to the passport office, at the top floor of police headquarters, before it officially opened. He bribed another gay man working
there, and I got on the train to Basel with a passport valid for five years. Without it, I wouldn’t have been able to survive in Switzerland and migrate to the United States some years later.

In Germany, the famous Paragraph 175 concerning sexual acts between males was changed to 175 A. While the old 175 had not included mutual masturbation but only acts of penetration, now any contact between males of any age that could be construed as sexual would be severely punished. Even having your name listed in a suspect’s address book could lead to incarceration. This new law was made public on June 28, 1935, as a directive for “the ruthless persecution of sexual vagrants.”

If sufficient pretexts to prosecute a political enemy could not be found, he could always be accused of having proposed “unnatural acts,” and the Gestapo regularly provided some youngster, released from jail and well rehearsed, to swear to that. In October, 1936, Heinrich Himmler—Gestapo chief and architect of the Nazi antigay campaign—demanded the “elimination of all degenerates.” He proceeded without legal procedure to move those already arrested—numbering thousands by now—into the camps. By November 1941, Himmler, now in total command of all internal security operations, proposed castration for minor offenses, death for major ones.

The Schutzstaffeln, or SS, was Himmler’s creation, an outgrowth not only of his anti-Semitism but also of his aversion to all “constragencies.” I have coined this expression to characterize any group that doesn’t fit into the framework of society—here anything non-Germanic, anything nonstandard: Jews, gays, Romani (gypsies), the disabled, Jehovah’s Witnesses. Strangely enough, Himmler showed no interest in lesbianism. When lesbian incidents were reported in Camp Ravensbrück, a camp reserved for women who supplied prostitutes to the all-male camps, he reacted with indifference although a number of lesbians were incarcerated as political prisoners or for being so-called “vagrants.”

By 1941, Himmler ruled over twelve separate SS fieldoms, keeping a tight rein on each, playing one against the other, his agents infiltrating every level of society. The SS established its own courts of justice; the regular judiciary had caved in shortly after 1935. By then Himmler had organized the first concentration camps, though the extermination camps—most of them in Eastern Europe—did not start their activities before 1942. Himmler could order the “definitive resettlement” of thousands without a moment’s hesitation, but he collapsed when witnessing an execution. He was totally removed from reality—the only sentiments he mustered while speeding the annihilation of constragencies was pity for the “brave SS elite” troops who had to carry out these orders.

While in Basel from 1933 to 1934, I learned that almost all the members of my liberal student group had either been arrested or fled to a foreign country—most to Czechoslovakia or France—where they were later caught. Then after June, 1935, I received an unsigned note postmarked Frankfurt/Main. It was from Ferdi, my early companion, and it hinted that he would try to get out to Holland. He also mentioned a few other gay men we knew had disappeared—and I noticed even then what could be called a “conspiracy of silence.” Neither the Swiss nor the French papers I read mentioned the arrest or disappearance of any gay men in the Third Reich. Of course in those days we didn’t hear much about concentration camps. Only in the forties, mostly through the efforts of Jewish organizations, did we learn what had been happening there. Furthermore, the gays who managed to escape always declared themselves to be political refugees; if they were Jewish, they didn’t need to furnish any explanations.

We also learned much later that at the height of the extermination campaign, around 1943 to 1944, Himmler added something new for men who wore pink triangles. Those who agreed to castration would be discharged from the camps. A few really believed this; they were castrated, but not freed. Instead the authorities transferred them to the feared Dirlwehanger Penal Division, which consisted of former criminals. Oskar Dirlwehanger, one
of the most hated leaders of World War II, specialized in liquidating partisans, but also had his own men shot from the back if he didn’t trust them. It is no wonder that almost none of the castrated soldiers survived. . . .

Dr. L. D. von Classen-Neudegg, a physician from Sachsenhausen concentration camp, published several accounts in a small magazine during the 1950s.

Forced to drag along twenty corpses, the rest of us encrusted with blood, we entered the Klinker works. . . . We had been there for almost two months but it seemed like endless years to us. At the time of our “transfer” here, we had numbered around three hundred men. Whips were used more frequently each morning when we were forced down into the clay pits under the wailing of the camp sirens. “Only fifty are still alive,” whispered the man next to me. . . .

The witness gives three to four more pages of the deadly work in the clay pits. Among the victims: an elderly reverend who committed suicide, several youngsters, a gay Jew. He had to wear both the pink triangle and the yellow star. . . .

Another survivor witnessed several of the sadistic games the SS organized when ordered to “liquidate vigorously the ‘derailed deviants’” to make room for the newly arrested gays from the occupied territories. One game: The prisoners worked in a quarry surrounded by a high voltage fence. If they stepped within five feet of the fence, they were shot. The SS would throw a prisoner’s cap against the fence and order him to retrieve it. He would be electrocuted if he touched the cap, or he was shot for disobedience if he refused to go after the cap.

Later on, as the situation worsened, as the cities were bombed and food was getting scarce, as more prisoners crowded the camps, the SS invented other methods. They picked an inmate they didn’t like, either one with a pink triangle or one with a yellow star—by now more and more Jews were brought in. Two guards threw him on the floor, a third put a metal bucket over his head. The first two men then started drumming on the bucket. After a while the victim began to lose control, to thrash around, to shout in terror. When the bucket was suddenly removed, they pushed him in the direction of the high voltage fence. Half unconscious, he would stumble against it and be electrocuted; if he didn’t touch it, then they would shoot him for disobeying orders. . . .

I returned to Germany for the first time after the war in 1954 to search for a few missing friends. In Frankfurt/Main, my hometown, I found several gay groups, among which was one nicknamed the “Farinells,” after a famous eighteenth-century operatic castrato. Why these castrated men frequented the gay bars, though they could only be partially interested in sexual contacts, later became clear to me: like members of any minority in an alien territory, they liked to be with their own people.

Aftermath

In 1969, a compromise law was pushed through in West Germany that abolished all of Hitler’s Paragraph 175A and most of 175. But while those who had worn the yellow star, or the red triangle (political) were often granted some form of restitution, the courts ruled that gays imprisoned and/or tortured were not to be considered political, but criminal inmates. West Germany, like the former East Germany before it, has abolished the worst features of the antigay legislation, but it apparently still considers the killings of the men with the pink triangles legally justified.