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After the Nazis

New study examines the fate of gay men who survived the concentration camp

BY BEN WEINTHAL



First Discover names and Fates Researcher/author Andreas Pretzel, Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit.

“For homosexuals, the Third Reich is still not over,” remarked the German-Jewish theologian Hans-Joachim Schoeps in 1963 about life in liberated West Germany.

The Martin Sherman play *Bent* and the Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein documentary film *Paragraph 175* captured critical aspects of the persecution and suffering of gay men in Nazi Germany. What, however, were the experiences of gay men in post-Hitler Germany?

“For the persecuted, the persecution did not end,” commented Andreas Pretzel, a cultural historian affiliated with the Magnus Hirschfeld Society in Berlin. Pretzel and his colleagues worked two years on a historical analysis (*Aufarbeitung*) of the fates of gay men during the post-World War II years in Germany.

Same-sex historical research, according to Pretzel, has been underway for only ten years in Germany and is still in its infancy. Pretzel’s recently released study is entitled *National Socialist Victims With Reservations: Homosexual Men in Berlin* after 1945. The work aims to secure a place in the culture of memory for the forgotten gay victims of both the Nazi dictatorship and the Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949.

Pretzel, who is gay, said his aim was to describe “how the post-war society functioned for gay men in four spheres: the continuing persecution; the attempt of the gay community to remove

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their criminal convictions as homosexuals during the Nazi period; the efforts of gay men to achieve rehabilitation and their social honor; and the fight for economic compensation.”

Klaus Wowereit, the out gay Mayor of Berlin, who recently returned from the June Equality Forum conference in Philadelphia, introduced the book on June 25 to a packed press conference in the lecture hall of the Landesarchives in Berlin. Wowereit jokingly noted in his opening remarks that it is a “great compliment” that many believe “I have written the book.” He added, however, “What I do not find as a compliment is that many journalists say I am doing a lot in the field of homosexuality because I attended a gay street festival, the Equality Forum, and the *National Socialist Victims With Reservations* press conference. Everything is not so self-evident in a tolerant city like Berlin.”

The publication of *National Socialist Victims With Reservations* coincided with Berlin’s June gay pride event, The Christopher Street Day Parade. The Parade drew a crowd of more than 500,000 and the motto of this year’s parade was “Acceptance instead of Tolerance“ (*Akzeptanz statt Toleranz*).

But, in the immediate postwar years, acceptance took on a very different connotation in the lives of gay men. The German judiciary of that era far too often accepted as legal on its face the persecution of gay men during the Nazi years. Unlike other victims of the Nazi death machine, no particular efforts were made to right the wrongs visited on homosexuals who survived concentration camps.

“The Hitler period has now destroyed me,” declared Dr. Kurt Gudell in 1952 in a state of exasperation during his life-long attempt to be reinstated as an attorney.

Gudell—along with an estimated 17,000 other gay men in Berlin—was persecuted by the Nazis. He was subjected to criminal penalties because of same-sex “behavior.” Interned in a concentration camp, he was not recognized as a victim of Hitler Germany; rather, the West German government considered Gudell a criminal who violated the infamous anti-gay Paragraph 175 of the Nazi penal code.

Kurt Gudell’s case study is one of many in Pretzel’s book documenting the Kafkaesque efforts of gay men to reintegrate themselves into the new German society. As a result of his criminal conviction during the Nazi period, Gudell was stripped of his license to practice law and that prohibition continued under the West German government. He experienced a second wave of discrimination, which left him no recourse to pursue his career. His suffering was compounded by the great poverty he experienced during the post-war years. The gay victims of German fascism were not entitled, as were other persecuted groups such as Jews and Hitler’s political opponents, to monetary compensation.

Gudell engaged in a legal and letter-writing campaign to reclaim his title of doctor, including a personal appeal to Berlin’s first post-war Mayor, Ernst Reuter.

“I have not put up with concentration camp Lichtenburg (in which you at the almost same time were imprisoned like me), unusual Gestapo persecution, loss of citizenship, confiscation of assets, etc., the loss of home, family and friends through the Third Reich, in order today to finally live from begging,” Gudell wrote. “My friends, especially my Jewish circle, support me, but now no longer understand (correctly) that I cannot receive employment.”

Gudell continued, even in the face of legal and administrative sanctions, to sign his letters with his formal doctor title. The University of Greifswald in the former German Democratic Republic recognized Gudell as an opponent of fascism and restored his title in 1962. But he was already 62 and passed away two years later in 1964.

In the years after the war, the West German government retained Paragraph 175, which barred all forms of same-sex contact, including kissing, touching, and “vollust” or feelings of horniness. The Nazis had significantly broadened the powers of Paragraph 175 in 1935 to persecute gay men within the context of a racial and population policy which feared that gay men would sink the population numbers as well as corrupt the Aryan race. Pretzel offered a startling statistic about the scope of 175—“One out of every hundred men in Berlin was interrogated by the Nazis because of homosexuality.”

East Germany, on the other hand, recognized the version of Paragraph 175 redrafted under Hitler as a typical Nazi law and “denazified” the statute in 1951, reverting to the original Paragraph 175 of the Weimar Republic constitution that lasted from 1918 until 1933. The Weimar version, although not as radically repressive as the Nazi law, still outlawed anal and oral sex between men.

The Nazi era version of 175 remained in full force in West Germany until its denazification in 1969.

The German equivalent of the recent U.S. Supreme Court *Lawrence* ruling overturning sodomy laws took place in 1994 when the Reichstag expunged criminal penalties against gay men. During the press conference June 25, Mayor Wowereit highlighted that “since 1994 hetro and homosexual treatment has only been put on equal footing and only since then can one assert that there no longer exists criminal persecution of homosexuals in Germany.”

Pretzel’s ongoing research documents 14 cases in which men sought to remove their criminal convictions as homosexuals and secure reparations for Nazi persecution (*Wiedergutmachung*). Many victims were either unaware that there was the possibility of judicial relief or because of homophobia concealed the fact of being gay and did not pursue a “victim of fascism” legal claim. Neither of those factors, however, seem particularly significant given the outcome of the 14 claims Pretzel investigated.

The case of Otto Giering, who was castrated and imprisoned for 12 years, including three in a concentration camp, was the only success story among the 14 applicants. Giering was imprisoned at the age of 17 in 1933 because of same-sex behavior and did not win his freedom until 1945, when he was 29. Employed as a tailor, one of the allegations against him was that he had dressed in women’s clothing. In the vain hope of winning release, he agreed to a “voluntary castration.” After the removal of his testicles, the Nazis carted him off to the Mauthausen concentration camp.

After his release in 1945, Giering returned to Berlin and married into a so-called “protection marriage.”

“Otto feared nothing more than loneliness,” his stepson reported and Giering surrounded himself with people in order to dilute the trauma of the Nazi period. He mustered the courage to pursue a claim under an special administrative body to deal with general claims of victimization during the war (*Allgemeine Kriegsfolgenlasten*). In a macabre decision, the court compared Giering’s castration with the loss of one’s eyes and used that formulation to compensate him. The economic award was meager and Giering, the only gay man Pretzel identified as having received reparations from the West German government, continued to suffer from severe health problems until his death in 1976.

Giering was the only gay man Pretzel found that won financial reparations from the West German government.

According to Pretzel, the average age of a victim incarcerated in a concentration camp was 40; such a prisoner would be 99 today. As a result, it is safe to conclude that the vast preponderance of persecuted gay men have died without any economic compensation for their suffering.

Pre-war Berlin enjoyed a lively gay community perhaps made most famous through the novels of Christopher Isherwood. Although the Stonewall rebellion in New York City is widely considered the historical departure point for the modern gay movement, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a German Jewish physician, was organizing in 1895 for the rights of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities in Berlin. The Nazis destroyed his institute and the growing gay movement.

Pretzel devoted a chapter of his study to the efforts of the post-war gay community to self-organize and continue the legacy of Hirschfeld. The Association for the Reform of Laws on Sexuality (*Gesellschaft für Reform des Strafrechts*) existed from 1948 until 1960 and advocated the abolition of Paragraph 175. Dr. Werner Hesse, a victim of gay persecution during the Hitler era and a member of the Association, was a gifted criminal defense lawyer who gained attention and respect for his representation of gay men in the post-war years.

The issues of who constitutes a victim of Nazism and whether it is possible to construct a hierarchy of suffering make for a charged historical discussion. The influential weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* devoted an entire issue to the “victimization” of Germans during the waves of allied bombings. The term “Homocaust” originated in the 1970s German gay movement, but many question whether it is appropriate in describing the ruthless persecution of 200,000 gay men in Germany. Pretzel noted that the phrase “Homocaust” was rejected in academic circles and that the persecution was not comparable. Gay men—in contrast to Jews and communists—were not the “chosen victims,” he said, before adding that Hitler’s policy of annihilation was directed at pedophiles and male prostitutes and their customers.

The academic discourse will continue but Pretzel and his colleagues have clearly advanced the understanding of a still ignored class of victims.

“We first need to discover their names and fates in order to do away with the forgetting and silencing,” Pretzel wrote in the book’s introduction. “Their biographies need a place of remembrance.”

The study of gay life in post-war Germany is a work in progress. The history of the gay community in the former East German, according to Pretzel, has yet to be tackled.

Research on the fate of persecuted gay men after 1945 completed by Pretzel and the Magnus Hirschfeld Society was supported through funds from the American contribution to the International Nazi Persecutee Relief Fund, the Pink Triangle Coalition, and the Swiss gay organization Pink Cross.

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