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by David R. Quigley



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## Survivors of Nazi camps begin to tell their stories

by Aron van Hertum

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C. continues its groundbreaking efforts to document and present the Nazi persecution of Gays this month.

The museum, which opened in April, will show a film on Dec. 12 that provides the eyewitness accounts of three Gay men who survived the Nazi concentration camps. The men came out as Gay to recount the gruesome experiences they had kept secret for more than four decades.

Persuading the survivors to tell their stories proved to be a slow and arduous process, because anti-Gay persecution in Germany continued unabated after the war, forcing them to keep their sexual orientation — and their painful memories — deep in the closet.

"They thought, like everyone else when they were liberated, that it was over," said German historian Klaus Müller, who coordinates the museum's efforts to document the Nazi persecution of Gays. Instead, "They were experiencing, after 1945, that they were not acknowledged as survivors of

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# Survivors tell their stories

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the Nazi regime but as criminals who were put in camps as well."

As part of a campaign to eliminate certain segments of people from German society and create an "Aryan" race of blond, blue-eyed heterosexuals, the Nazis, in 1933, significantly expanded Germany's sodomy law, Paragraph 175, to ban all sexual activity between men, including kissing, touching—even thoughts of sex—with other men.

After the war, Gay men who survived the concentration camps were denied reparations from the government. Some were even sent back to prison to complete their jail terms. Germany's Supreme Court upheld Paragraph 175 in 1957.

"Persecution was ongoing from 1943 to 1969," when Germany finally repealed the law, Müller said. "In the 1950 and 1960s, there was systematic persecution and police raids."

"It was a very realistic position not to come out, not to tell your story, and to burn all evidence that you had been in the camps wearing the pink triangle," he said. "It was very strange for them to hide their stories for 40 years, and then suddenly, people say, 'We want to know.'"

One of the men, Friedrich-Paul von Groszheim, 88, appears with his identity concealed in the film to discuss his experiences, including his castration in 1938. Today, several years after the film's completion, he has become more open. His story is presented on one of the museum's identity cards, which museum visitors use to follow one Holocaust victim as they traverse the exhibition.

The three men recall their lives before the Nazi takeover in 1933, when the Gay community was vibrant throughout Germany. They share memories of how they were arrested and sent to the concentration camps, and how they managed to survive their brutal treatment there.

According to Holocaust researchers, Gays were treated as outcasts both by the Nazis and by other camp inmates. They had the highest death rate of any group of camp inmates. Some suffered gruesome experiments that attempted to "cure" them of their homosexuality.

In the film, one survivor returns to what remains of the Gestapo secret police headquarters in Berlin where he was imprisoned after his arrest. Another visits a castle, converted into a concentration camp by the Nazis, where he was held.

The film's title, *We Had A Big 'A' Around Our Leg*, refers to a marking one of the men was forced to wear in the concentration camp.

"In the very beginning, the marking system in the concentration camp had not been developed yet," Müller explained. "One of the victims had to wear a yellow band with a letter 'A' on it around his leg." The letter stood for "Arschflicker"—"Ass-fucker."

The film was produced by Ilke Jeunrond and Joseph Weishaupt, a German journalist who had already made a radio documentary on Gays in the Holocaust.

Producing the film proved to be a three-year struggle. Most German television stations turned down the project. The filmmakers finally convinced a regional station to adopt the project and allow them use of studio facilities.

"It was very difficult," Müller said. "It became [Weishaupt's] last, big project."



Friedrich-Paul von Groszheim is a Gay Holocaust survivor featured in the film.

The film was shown on the regional station in November 1991. Weishaupt was hospitalized soon thereafter, and died of complications from AIDS two months later.

Müller said the film may also become available through the Holocaust Museum's bookstore and may be shown again next year, along with several other documentaries.

Very little is known about the persecution of Gays during the Nazi Holocaust, although the past few years have seen a breakthrough in research.

"The documentation is there, but it has to be researched," Müller said. One major research goal is establishing how many Gays died in the Holocaust.

"10,000 to 50,000 is still an estimation," he said. "It could be that the number is quite different."

More Gay survivors have come out to tell their stories. Also, researchers have finally gained access to material hidden for decades in Russian archives.

"I'm very optimistic," Müller said. His goal is to put together a special exhibition at the museum focusing on Gays in the Holocaust. Such an exhibition, he believes, will be a "landmark."

He called on the Gay community to express support for the exhibition and raise money to fund the project.

"If the Gay community doesn't support it, it doesn't happen," Müller stressed. Donations may be made to the U.S. Holocaust Museum, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Pl., SW, Washington, DC 20024-2150, Attn.: Brenda Fraser. To identify the donation as a gift from the Gay community, write the code 8014 on checks.

Fraser said she expects the museum to start a special program "within the next three months" that will enable donations to be earmarked for Gay Holocaust research. For further information call Fraser at (202) 488-2662. ▼

The film *We Had A Big 'A' Around Our Leg*, screens on Sunday, Dec. 12, at 7 p.m., at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, at the corner of 15th St. & Independence Ave. Call (202) 488-0458 to reserve seating.