

## Lesbian Women during National Socialism

### Lesbian Women in the Women's Concentration Camp of Ravensbrueck

Since the beginning of the 1990s, we as autonomous feminist and lesbian women from Germany and Austria, have been taking part in the anniversaries of the liberation of the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrueck, the youth concentration camp for girls and young women in the Uckermark and the men's camp. For us, Ravensbrueck is a site of remembrance, of warning and of commemoration. But it is also a place for discussions, controversies and an important place in my own political life.

In three consecutive years since 2014, we have organized events on the topic of "Persecution of Lesbian Women during National Socialism", where we give information and provide opportunities for exchange and commemoration at the Ravensbrueck memorial site.



On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its liberation day in 2015, we laid down a memorial ball, with which we wanted to commemorate lesbian women and girls in Ravensbrueck, believing that it was high time to also make them visible and to remember those women. Last year our initiative submitted an official request, after the authorities responsible for the memorial site had removed the ball. Unfortunately, there has not been a positive decision by the advisory committee yet. We have only received the information that there were very controversial discussions. We still hope that at the next meeting of the advisory committee on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, they will agree to let the memorial ball remain at Ravensbrueck.

During National Socialism, lesbian women were discriminated against, stigmatized and also persecuted. Women who were persecuted for racist and other reasons were additionally punished for their (allegedly) lesbian behaviour, for example at the women's concentration camp.

We know very little about the lives of lesbian women during National Socialism. How did their everyday situation change after the Nazis came to power and in which ways and to what extent were they discriminated and persecuted? One question that comes up is the one of evidence.

We believe there are strong indications that deserve to be considered and put into a feminist context.

The following text will include thoughts, facts and quotations from reports and research papers that prompted our reflections and which have reinforced our assessment that lesbian women in the concentration camp should be commemorated as a group. I want to point out different aspects.

## Neglected Research

Again and again, scholars have pointed out that there has been little research on this topic. Here, we would like to express our gratitude to Claudia Schoppmann who has been carrying out research in this field for decades. On the whole, there has been a lack of interest and recognition and research funding has been difficult to obtain.

In addition to that, many documents had already been destroyed by the Nazis and in the meantime, many survivors and witnesses are now deceased.

## Homophobia and Lesbophobia

Homophobia and in particular, lesbophobia – a term in use since 1994 – play an important part since taboos and lesbophobia have had an impact on memories, reports and research.

## Discrimination against Lesbians and against Women in general

cannot be considered independently of each other but are closely interlinked. The discrimination and devaluation of women during National Socialism is the foundation of the discrimination and persecution of lesbians.

Already in 1921, one year after it was founded, the NSDAP ruled to exclude women from both the party's leadership and its "managing committee". After its rise to power in 1933 several new laws were passed expelling women from universities and higher level professions. They were urged to abandon their waged labour in favour of marriage and motherhood. They were deprived of their passive suffrage i.e. their right to be elected. The women's movement was brought into line. Women were pushed out of the public sphere while the private sphere was assigned to them, leaving them subordinated to their husbands as wives and mothers. Women's independent sexuality did not count and was subordinated to the obligation for reproduction.

In *Frauen im Nationalsozialismus (Women during National Socialism)*, Renate Wiggershaus lists the following examples of **NS sexist legislation**:

"Female parliamentarians lost their positions. Many were driven into exile, expatriated and expropriated, for example, Anita Augspurg (USPD) ...; or they were sentenced to prison or



Feminists Anita Augspurg (1857-1943) and Lida Gustava Heymann (1868-1943)

workhouses ...; or they lost their lives in concentration camps, for example, Johanna Tesch (SPD), who perished at Ravensbrueck concentration camp 11 days before her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, or Leni Rosenthal (SPD) who was murdered by the Gestapo after cruel mistreatment; or, out of sheer despair, they took their own lives."

When women are barred or kept from employment and when they are discouraged from living on their own but are expected to get married and give birth to children, measures like these hit lesbian women twice as hard. In the few biographies compiled by Claudia

Schoppmann and Ilse Kokula, lesbian women report that they experienced dismissal from their jobs and termination of their rental contracts, if – by way of denunciation – it became public that they lived in a lesbian relationship.

### **Destruction of Lesbian Subculture and Infrastructure**

In Germany, already as early as 1933, meeting places, magazines and books for lesbian women were blacklisted and destroyed by the Nazis.

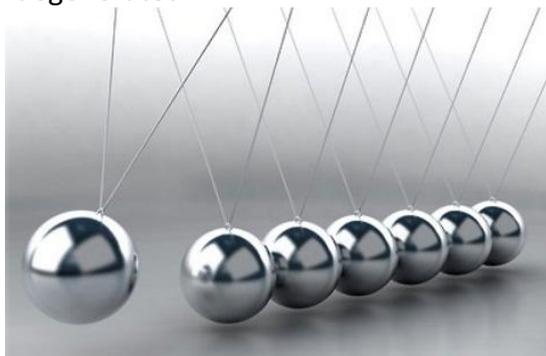
This is impressively described by both the historian Claudia Schoppmann and sociologist Corinna Tomberger.

There are reports about **raids and even arrests at lesbians' meeting places.**

### **Background of the Ideology of Degeneration**

The book *“Medizin und Geschlecht: zur Konstruktion der Kategorie Geschlecht im medizinischen Diskurs des 19. Jahrhunderts“* (“Medicine and Gender: on the Construction of the Category of Gender in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Medical Discourse”) by Kathrin Schmersahl includes a historical analysis of the so-called doctrine of degeneration:

“Also, the doctrine of degeneration contributed to objectivising the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s gender hierarchy, i.e., attributing the social, political and cultural discrimination against women, to some seemingly natural law. There was a principal tendency to pathologise the female sex. Prostitution and the women’s emancipatory movement served as prototypes of female “degeneration” (*Entartung*), with lesbian relationships among prostitutes being regarded as an especially degenerated phenomena. The Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909) claimed that there was a close connection between female homosexuality and prostitution – a stereotype repeated by other psychiatrists (among others, Krafft-Ebing and Moll) and, finally, by the National Socialists. A Prostitute was the female counterpart of “the born criminal”, a theory popularised by Lombroso. Pathologised sexual behaviour was associated with other social deviations such as criminality, in particular. Lombroso advocated lifelong internment, deportation and extension of the death penalty to include the “degenerated”.



Together with criminalisation, this pathologising became the breeding ground for the National Socialist ideology of inferiority, degeneration, criminality and asocial behaviour. The National Socialists also attributed above average “sexual instinctive behaviour” (*Triebverhalten*) to lesbian women and considered them prostitutes and denounced them as degenerated, asocial and criminal.

Kathrin Schmersahl writes further: “Around 1890, Julius Koch (1841-1908) coined the umbrella term of “psychopathic inferiority”, thus linking “asocial behaviour” with psychopathy. According to Koch, psychopathy was either innate or acquired and was associated with “asocial behaviour”, sexual excesses and raised levels of sexual instinctive behaviour. In the following decades “psychopathy” became stylised as the prototype of

“degeneration”. Thus, psychiatrists had created a diagnosis allowing them to exclude all those people deviating from the bourgeois norm. That norm included, among other things, the duty for those considered “superior” to beget new citizens ...”.

In fact, we find lesbian women being equated to prostitutes in the more recent past. For example, *amnesty international* published the following incident in a report about human rights violations on the grounds of sexual orientation: on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2001, 32 women were arrested for prostitution, because they were present at the New Ocean Bar in the Mexican city of Monterrey, a location mainly frequented by lesbians. For hours, the lesbian women were detained and subjected to harassment at the police-station. They were released only after having paid a fine as prostitutes for their “breach” of the *Reglamento de Policia y buen Gobierno*.

*(Breaking the Silence- Human Rights violations on the grounds of Sexual Orientation / Menschenrechtsverletzungen aufgrund sexueller Orientierung, edited by Wolfgang Dinkelberg, Eva Gundermann, Kerstin Hanenkamp, Claudia Koltzenburg. Amnesty international 2001 [Berlin]).*

“... In that respect, the National Socialist sexual and population policies did not represent a fundamental ideological turning point, although they bore specific racist, anti-Semitic and patriarchal ideological characteristics ... Two cornerstones seemed to be decisive for the strengthening of these specific ideological features : the reference to “*Gesundesvolkesempfinden*” (healthy popular/national sentiment) and the definition of the “*Gemeinschaftsfremden* “ (alien to the community). In that way, it was guaranteed that all people and types of behaviour not meeting the requirements of the National Socialist system of norms and values, could be prosecuted.”

*(Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps], Vienna 2004, p. 336).*

### **Paragraph 175 and Lesbian Women in the German NS-State**

In the aftermath of the “Roehm Coup” and the power struggle to topple the SA, the existing Paragraph 175 of the penal code was strengthened in order to criminalise homosexual men even more.

Even after 1945, extending legal prosecution to homosexual women was taken into consideration, but not put into practice. Paragraph 175 was not extended to cover lesbian women, because the National Socialist ideologists and jurists assumed that they had already sufficiently restricted lesbian way of life by passing bills and acts applying to all women.

The written protest by the Nazi jurist Rudolf Klare against the decision of the official board on penal law clearly shows that the reasons not to criminalise lesbians were of a merely strategic nature and did not have anything to do with the acceptance of lesbian life.

Regarding homosexuality as “degeneration based on race” (*rassische Entartung*), Rudolf Klare wrote, “On principle, female homosexuality is to be considered punishable behaviour, as it is prone to undermine the values regarding the blood and to withdraw women from their *völkisch*-ethnic and nationalist obligations”.

According to the Reich Ministry of Justice, homosexual men wasted “potency” whereas homosexual women would not per se “drop out of reproduction”. Additionally, it was thought that there was much less homosexual activity among women than among men – except by prostitutes. Moreover, it was believed that both the intimate relationships among

women and their potential denunciations would be much more difficult to investigate. “Finally, ... one important reason for the criminal liability of homosexual relations lies in the corruption of public life which will occur if this plague is not encountered with determination.” This would hardly be the case in view of the relatively minor role women played in public life.

In 1939, jurist Gertrud Schubart-Fikentscher wrote in an issue of *Die Frau* (The Woman), “The punishment of unnatural fornication (*Unzucht*) among women is to be applied in severe cases”.

Alice Rilke, member of the Reich Women’s Leadership made the following remarks, “Regardless of the lawmakers’ decision, homosexuality among women is of course like that among men, a moral degeneration, that threatens the existence and morale of the *völkisch*-ethnic community, which is obliged to fight all phenomena of degeneration.”

The discussions above, clearly show that in addition to the ban on meeting places for lesbians; women’s general deprivation of rights; their dismissals from their jobs and their forced displacement from higher positions and professional life; their exclusion from passive suffrage and the implementation of heterosexist ideology by the homogenized women’s organisations were also calculated and strategic measures against lesbians.



Gay and lesbian commemoration at Ravensbrueck

### **Registration of Lesbians in Card Files**

From 1944, the Berlin Criminal Investigation Department for Homosexuals was required to register the names and information of lesbian women.

### **Differences in the Persecution of Homosexual Men and Women**

“The nature and severity of persecution of lesbian women cannot be equated to that of the persecution of homosexual men. Paragraph 175 of the penal code, which was introduced in 1871, during the German Empire, and was massively tightened in the NS-state in 1935 applies exclusively to men. This was different in Austria or the so-called Ostmark where, in contrast to Germany, lesbian relationships were punishable by law (Austrian Penal Code (Paragraph 129 I/b)) After the annexation of Austria, the legal practice was not harmonized. However, in general, female homosexuality was considered “socially less dangerous” and therefore not systematically prosecuted. Still, homosexual activities were denounced as “a characteristic feature by no means intrinsic to a German woman”. (Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps]*, Vienna 2004, p. 99, footnote).

In her paper on *Verfolgung und Diskriminierung der weiblichen Homosexualität in Rheinland-Pfalz 1947 bis 1973 [Persecution and Discrimination of Female Homosexuality in Rhineland-Palatinate between 1947 and 1973]*, Kirsten Plötz writes: “Studies show that for the prosecution of lesbian love, it was not imperative that it was a threat according to Paragraph 175 of the penal code. Every now and then women were accused of lesbian love by the police and the judiciary, although it was not in itself punishable.” This could be shown by research on persecution during National Socialism.

Regional studies in Hamburg show that in 1941 a woman was denounced, who was accused of “activities punishable by Paragraph 175: “Since underage children are living in the same household, immediate intervention is required”. There were also investigations conducted on the grounds of “lesbian activities”; women suspects were interviewed by the criminal investigation department and asked intimate details. Women offenders were often punished more severely than others if it became known that they lived in a lesbian relationship.

Research in Hannover unearthed a case of denunciation where women were accused of alleged lesbian sexuality. The investigating department regretted that Paragraph 175 of the penal code did not also apply to women. But on the whole, it is not certain if women were convicted on the grounds of this paragraph or not.

### **The Penal Code’s Paragraph 175 in Austria and Bohemia and Moravia**

“Austrian Penal Code (Paragraph 129 I/b) dating from the year 1852 imposed the criminal prosecution of homosexual men and women, in contrast to the German Reich’s penal code” (Schwarzwurzelkollektiv)

In 2012, in contrast to most assessments, Johann Karl Kirchknopf, an Austrian social historian, arrives at the following résumé in his master thesis: “The result of my research clearly proves that women in Vienna were by no means affected to a lesser extent by the prosecution of homosexuals by the NS-regime. The number of women the courts investigated on the grounds of Paragraph 129, rose by more than half in 1941 compared to the average number of cases during the years 1932 to 1945. Their share, within the group of people under investigation based on Paragraph 129 rose to nearly 15 percent. The number of women sentenced at both of Vienna’s Criminal Courts on the grounds of Paragraph 129, reached its climax in the year 1942, amounting to more than double the average number compared to the years between 1932 and 1943 ... The specific prosecution of homosexuals in the NS-regime did not only have an effect on the number of women prosecuted in Vienna during that time. Also, the regulatory measures which clearly broadened the scope of the offense stated in Paragraph 129 and which removed all juridical limitations regarding the interpretation of this provision, had considerable effects on women. I have shown that the interpretation of Paragraph 129 from 1935 was applied to women in the same sense as Paragraph 175 of the Reich’s penal code. The question that remains to be answered is to which extent the NS-leadership intended these consequences or even took them into consideration at all. The majority among the NS-leadership did not see female homosexuality as an appreciable threat to the “*Volkskörper*” (the people’s body) ... Yet, the fact still remains that the systematic prosecution of homosexuals by the NS-regime also affected women, at least in Vienna, as I have been able to show.

### **National Socialist Categories, “Asocial” Persons**

Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps]*:

“Lesbian Women were exposed to particular forms of prosecution. Bock assumes that many lesbian women fell victim to the so-called ‘prosecution of asocial persons’. Among the 110,000 Germans committed to concentration camps between 1937 and 1943, 70,000 were labelled ‘asocial persons’ and 40,000 political prisoners.”

“Sexualised-heterosexist violence: As already mentioned, lesbian women were not affected by National Socialist prosecution to the same degree as gay men. The fact that the notation ‘asocial/lesbian’ is found in the Ravensbrueck’s admission lists, seems to confirm Schoppmann’s hypothesis (1997) that lesbian women were prosecuted as “asocial” to a greater extent than on the grounds of homosexuality. Especially regarding the allegation of asociality the Nazis liked to use the reasoning of *sittliche Verfehlungen* (moral misconduct/indecent activities). At the Ravensbrueck concentration camp lesbian behaviour was explicitly listed as an aspect of the internal SS penal system:

According to the Ravensbrueck camp rules, women were to be punished if “they approached other prisoners with lesbian [sic!] intentions, if they committed acts of lesbian ‘swinishness’ or if they did not report any such acts when witnessed.” (Schoppmann 1997, p. 254).

"Alleged or real relationships were punished by relocating the accused women to the penal-confinement barrack and/or by beating them on the naked buttocks or by forcing them to undress in public.

Repeatedly, testimonies by survivors tell us about homosexual relations among prisoners inside the camps. Most of these testimonies exhibit prejudice, stigmatisation and depreciating attitudes. This shows that many norms and attitudes acquired in everyday life outside the camps also remained valid within the camps themselves." (Schoppmann 1997, pp. 248f)

Sexualised-heterosexist violence is directed against the (female) body as defined by heterosexual norms. Rape, forced labour, “*Umpolungsversuche* (attempted conversion)”, sanctions against behaviour attributed to the opposite sex and same sex ways of life, are just some examples for sexualised forms of violence against homosexual women and men. In her published memoirs, a Polish survivor mentions the incidence of a Polish countess arriving at the Auschwitz concentration camp in men’s attire who had to prove her “womanhood” to the male SS-guards to avoid being taken to the men’s camp. (Lengyel 1972, p. 19f, quoted in Schoppmann 1997, p. 245)



## Mary Puenjer

Mary Puenjer is commemorated with a "*Stolperstein*" (stumbling stone) at Wandsbeker Marktstrasse 57 in Hamburg. The text on this stone, written by Astrid Louven, reads as follows:

"... in summer 1940, 35-year-old Mary Puenjer lived together with her mother in a house that no longer belonged to them ... On the evening of July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1940, Mary Puenjer was arrested. She spent almost three months at the police prison in Fuhlsbuettel. On October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1940, she was transferred to the Ravensbrueck women's concentration camp. In the admission list, it said "asocial", with the notation "lesbian". The 'daughter of a respectable family' found herself marked by a black triangle which was attached to the jackets of the prisoners at the concentration camp. This symbol marking vagabond, non-conformist behaviour by people usually coming from poor family backgrounds was used to stigmatise so-called "*Gemeinschaftsfremde*" (aliens to the community) ... Between the end of November 1940 and the middle of March 1941, Mary Puenjer was once again transferred into the hands of the Hamburg police authorities and subjected to interrogations also by the police department 23, responsible for sexual offences. On March 15<sup>th</sup> 1941, she was taken back to Ravensbrueck. In November 1941, the medical doctor Dr Friedrich Mennecke took up his notorious activity there. He was a *SS-Obersturmbannfuhrer* and employed in the context of "Action 14 f 13", which started in 1941. According to this programme, Jewish prisoners were to be removed from the concentration camps, i.e., to be killed. In January 1942, he came to Ravensbrueck for a second time. His notification sheets containing "diagnoses", which were equivalent to death sentences, have been preserved, including the notification sheet for Mary Puenjer. He wrote about her, "... married full Jew. Very active lesbian ('*kesse Lesbierin*'). She repeatedly visited 'lesbian meeting places' to exchange caresses and tenderness." This wording indicates that she was arrested in such a club. Mennecke selected the Jewish prisoners for his experiments using existing records. His characterisation of them was based on entries written by the officials of the criminal police and the NS *Schutzhaft* (NS protective custody = detention of political opponents). This would mean that the Hamburg criminal police or Gestapo was the authority that classified Mary Puenjer as lesbian. The question remains, whether she was really a lesbian or only considered one by the Hamburg authorities. The women selected by Mennecke did not have a chance to escape being murdered at the Bernburg psychiatric hospital and nursing home ... In an archive in Warsaw, there are lists that were kept or copied by Ravensburg prisoners that show that Mary Puenjer was murdered in the gas chambers on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1942 following a selection at the extermination centre of Bernburg near Dessau ... She was sent to the concentration camp because she was assigned the "black triangle" not because she was Jewish. The protection that a "privileged" so-called mixed marriage offered against deportation to camps expired as soon as a Jewish person was criminalised.



Yayoi Kusama

## **Prostitutes**

The ambiguity of the SS surprised some women as the following testimony clearly shows: "Similar to the 'Greens' [green triangle for criminals], prostitutes belonged to the scum of the camp. They suffered a lot due to the absence of men which led to the prospering of lesbian love among them. And it is astonishing that although people in the Reich were sent to concentration camps for this reason, that this matter was more or less tolerated here. Allegedly the Nazis locked up prostitutes in the camp in order to 're-educate' them and to bring them back on the track in order to lead a respectable life. Yet, when they felt like it, they threw off their hypocrisy and gave the 'asocial' women their freedom back –but only to the young and pretty ones – on the condition that they provided their services at the brothels for soldiers and at the men's concentration for half a year." (MGR/StBG. – vol. 42/986)

(Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps]*, Vienna 2004, p. 106)

(Note: No single case is known of any woman who was released. When they survived their time at the brothel, they were sent back to the concentration camp, often in very poor health).

## **Lesbians in Brothels**

Christa Paul did some research on forced prostitution during National Socialism:

"On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the 'special barrack' at the Flossenbuerg concentration camp was handed over to the administration. This barrack was divided into two parts, one was the brothel for prisoners, the other for members of the SS ... A homosexual male prisoner reports the following about his friendship with one of the women at the brothel who was a lesbian, "We talked for a long time until I was sent away by her boss ... Else saw to it that we could meet once in a while to talk."

In her book *Zeit der Maskierung (Time for Masquerade)* (1988), Claudia Schoppmann refers to a report by Erich Helbig, who was deported to the Flossenbuerg concentration camp on the grounds of his homosexuality. He describes the life of Else, a lesbian he had met at the brothel for prisoners at the Flossenbuerg concentration camp as follows: The Nazis liked to send lesbian women to work in brothels. They believed that the women would be brought back on track there. (Lembke 1989, pp. 13-30, quoted in: Schoppmann 1998, p. 22f).

Schwarzwurzelkollektiv:

"Following the models of Mauthausen and Gusen, that were more or less the 'prototypes', brothels for prisoners were established in eight further concentration camps.

With a few exceptions, the women who had to carry out forced labour at the brothels for prisoners, came from the Ravensbrueck concentration camp ...

The women had to be Germans and "of the kind where it clear from the outset that, due to their past and attitude, they will not ever be won over to lead a well-ordered life, i.e., that even after the most thorough of examinations, we do not have to reproach ourselves for having spoilt a person worth saving for the German people." (Himmler in a letter to Pohl, quoted in: Christa Paul: *Zwangsprostitution [Forced Prostitution]*, Berlin 1994).

This clearly refers to women considered prostitutes. The SS also liked sending lesbian women to brothels for conversion. Here it needs to be stated that any sexual behaviour deviating from the National Socialist norm could lead to arrest on the grounds of

“prostitution”. These women were categorized as “asocial” by the SS, had to wear the black triangle and were at the very bottom of the prisoners’ hierarchy. This means that beside their vulnerability to arbitrary cruelty committed by the SS, they were also exposed to the contempt of other prisoners, thus having very bad prospects of survival.”

### **Rapes**

Sociologist Ilse Kokula writes about a lesbian woman who was sentenced on the grounds of ‘undermining the military forces’ at the end of the war and deported to the prisoner-of-war camp of Buetzow in Mecklenburg. There she was detained in an extra bloc with six other lesbian women, separated from the rest of the female prisoners. They were placed under male surveillance, which was contrary to the usual practice. The SS-guards set the French and Russian prisoners of war against the women, urging them to rape them. This happened in spite of the rule that normally forbade prisoners-of-war to have any interaction with German women.

(Kuckuc 1975, p. 127f, quoted in Schoppmann 1997, p. 239).

### **The Women’s Concentration Camp of Ravensbrueck**

At the women’s concentration camp, lesbian behaviour was punished. Holding hands was considered lesbian behaviour and survivors such as Isa Vermehren report about beatings and women being transferred into the penal-confinement barrack.

Insa Eschebach, head of the Ravensbrueck memorial site since 2005, points out that the rules of the camp criminalised lesbian contacts and pressured prisoners to report them.

Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps]*, Vienna 2004, pp. 89-92:

“Having a friend in the concentration camp is much more important than in normal life. All one’s love is directed towards her, all one’s attention and self-sacrifice, which normally belongs to one’s sexual partner, one’s family, one’s children. A girlfriend – that is a symbol, the magical embodiment of family life. I can tell a girlfriend “what I really was ...” (Kos 1998, p. 174f.)

As in Marty Kos’s story, the platonic, sisterly, purely friendly nature of such relationships is a typical description of such friendships. The surviving women rarely speak about whether some of these friendships also had sexual and intimate aspects and about what role sexuality, desire and intimacy played for them in the context of the concentration camp. In Kos’s text, a sexually intimate aspect of the relationship with a girlfriend can be read between the lines, because “all one’s love is directed at her, (...) which actually belongs to one’s sexual partner.” Also the symbolisation of friendship as “the magical embodiment of family life” includes the sexual and intimate love between spouses as well as the parental love of children.

In telling their life stories, none of the women interviewed mentions personal, sexually-intimate relationships with other prisoners, neither to female nor to male ones. Thus, we have a similar situation here comparable to the issue of sexualised violence. Subjects and aspects that are connected with sexual intimacy in one way or another, are rarely talked about. They only appear in reports about others. In most cases same-sex sexuality among women is seen and presented negatively. In accordance to Schoppmann (1997, pp.44-254), we can also observe that lesbian relationships only are mentioned in context with women

labelled “asocial”, while sexual relationships among “political” or other prisoners are not discussed.

In addition, before being imprisoned in the concentration camp, some women didn’t know that intimacy and sexuality between women even existed.

“(…) many of the asocial persons were Germans, unbelievably many lesbian.... I would say, ‘Yes, I don’t know anything about such things, that is why I am asking so stupidly, because I do not know anything about it.’” (IKF-RAV-Int-10\_2, p. 73)

Linda Breder, who came from Auschwitz on a transport, was in Ravensbrueck for 2-3 days. There she met some French women who were lesbians. She talked to one of them, who was so young and had beautiful long hair, and asked her why she was in Ravensbrueck. She told her that she was a lesbian. (Visual History Online Shoah Foundation).

### **Condemnation and Punishment of LL (Lesbian Love) at the Women’s Concentration Camp**

Isa Vermehren, who was interned at Ravensbrueck for reasons of so-called “*Sippenhaftung*” (kin liability, joint liability of family members), writes in *Reise durch den letzten Akt*:

*Ravensbrueck, Buchenwald, Dachau: eine Frau berichtet [Journey through the Last Act: Ravensbrueck, Buchenwald, Dachau: A Woman is Telling Her Story]:*

“While all this was going on, I looked at a board on the wall which contained triangles in different colours and explanations of their meanings: ... pink = LL (lesbian love) ...” (p. 17).

“LL” was probably only used inside the camp as an abbreviation for “*lesbische Liebe*” (lesbian love). An official designation could not be verified.

Elsewhere she writes: “In front of the typing room, a number of loud bickering and gesticulating prisoners had gathered, as far as I could see they were mostly block leaders and camp police, and had surrounded two girls in a half-circle, one of whom was ghastly pale and breathing heavily. At the beginning, I could not understand anything, until I heard the word ‘El-El’ (short for lesbian love) repeatedly, and ‘Admit that you slept with her’, ‘Don’t lie, you are her girlfriend’ and similar things ... But the yelling women did not show any mercy. They pushed and shoved her across the camp court and she was put in the punishment block the next day. This block was a barrack surrounded by barbed wire and located in the large camp ... indeed, it was the breeding ground of real lesbian love with all the disgusting phenomena of its distorting effect. The majority of the younger prisoners in the punishment block had fallen prey to this vice and it was not difficult to identify them by their very masculine outward appearance ...” (p. 49-50)

Overall, Isa Vermehren’s descriptions are detached and lesbophobic but they reflect the atmosphere of hostility towards lesbians that prevailed at the concentration camp as well as the denunciation and punishment of (alleged) lesbian prisoners with beatings and transferal to the penal-confinement barrack, where (in her opinion) many lesbian prisoners were forced to stay.

#### “Penal-confinement barrack and punishments

The penal-confinement barrack was separated from the rest of the camp by a barbed wire fence and a wall made of wooden planks. It was the place where prisoners were brought who were to be punished particularly severely. They had to carry out the most strenuous and dirtiest kinds of work. In addition, they had longer working hours, hardly ever a day off and had even smaller food rations than the rest of the prisoners. It had the most brutal overseers who ran a real terror regime. Being transferred to the penal-confinement barrack was a particularly dreaded; it was considered the ‘hell of Ravensbrueck!’” as can be seen in

the testimonies like in:

([www.fjweb.fju.edu.tw/lcyeh/lit/material/1\\_1/Strafblock%20und%20Strafen.pdf](http://www.fjweb.fju.edu.tw/lcyeh/lit/material/1_1/Strafblock%20und%20Strafen.pdf))

### **Persecution**

It is often claimed that the term of 'persecution' should not be used to describe the situation of lesbian women during National Socialism because they were not prosecuted systematically by law.

But what does the term 'persecution' mean?

Duden (official German dictionary) offers the following synonyms: discrimination, humiliation, violence, diminishing, belittlement, pogrom, harassment, suppression, discriminating against.

### **An Issue of Topical Interest: The Persecution of Homosexuals and Asylum**

Also today, there is still a debate about the issue of 'persecution' and its recognition – for example, in asylum laws.

Since March 2017, with the help of the internet organisation *All Out*, a petition has been addressed to the UK Home Office to prevent LGBT asylum seekers from being deported to Afghanistan. The British authorities officially claimed that they could simply refrain from exhibiting their sexual orientation or gender identity in public.

The argument that sexuality can be practiced in the private space continuously ignores that a homosexual life includes more than a secret sexual act. In addition, for many women, the question is whether this private space is available at all. But also, people persecuted for political and religious reasons are not told: Can't you stay quiet and practise your religion at home?

### **Multiple Persecution**

How did it affect the persecuted women that they were victims of multiple reasons of persecution?

Did it matter if National Socialists added a description such as "*kesse Lesbierin*", which has a similar connotation as dyke or bull dyke to the file of a prisoner at a concentration camp and what were the consequences?

Why were such extra remarks added at all?

For example, was being a homosexual a further threat to Jewish lesbians?

"... Jews were not interrogated unless they were accused of additional offences ...", Anja Lundholm writes about her experience at the Innsbruck police prison before she was sent to the Ravensbrueck concentration camp in 1944. (Anja Lundholm: *Im Netz. Bericht. [In the Net. Report]* Reinbek 1991)



In 2015, Ingeborg Boxhammer told the story of the couple Marta Halusa and Margot Liu in the “Third Reich” . The interdependency of the different reasons of persecution by National Socialists – such as Jewish, prostitute, anti-fascists and lesbian – are especially obvious in their case and consequently led to numerous arrests, denunciations, detention and violence by the *Gestapo*. Luckily they were able to survive those times! In 1949, they emigrated to England and started fighting for recognition as victims of persecution in a number of compensation proceedings.

### **Intersectionality**

Isabel Meusen, PhD, University of Memphis, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures) writes: “Regarding the arguments often heard that there isn’t sufficient proof to validate the persecution of women as lesbians, I think it makes sense to abandon the existing (National Socialist) categories and to count ‘lesbian women among those persecuted’. This would lead to the acknowledgment of women’s intersectional discrimination as well as of the multiple-layers of their persecution.

### **Continuity**

The regional government of Rhineland-Palatinate commissioned a research paper aiming to promote the rehabilitation of homosexuals and produce a historical reappraisal of the criminal proceedings against them. Commissioned by the Department of Contemporary History in Munich-Berlin and in cooperation with the Federal Foundation Magnus Hirschfeld, the historians Dr Guenther Grau (Berlin) and Dr Kirsten Ploetz (Hannover) carried out the research. It was presented to the public on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017.

Kirsten Ploetz arrives at the following conclusions:

“It is striking that the legal discrimination against lesbian love has not shown the same persistent dismantling, as is the case with the criminal prosecution of gay men since the 1960s. In regard to female homosexuality, it can be said that even though it may not have been legally prosecuted, it was strongly discriminated against, at least into the late 1970s and in the 1980s in Rhineland-Palatinate. This can be seen in the quoted legal decisions pertaining to custody laws and homicide. It is very probable that discrimination was common even longer in these sectors – and perhaps even in other ones. Therefore, further research into how the justice system has dealt with lesbian love is called for. There are serious differences in the knowledge regarding female and male homosexuality. It took a lot of effort to find any evidence concerning the discrimination against lesbian love in the years between 1946 and 1973 for this short study ...

While the penal law was crucial for men, other aspects played a major role for women namely the marriage and divorce laws, their situation on the labour market, the idea that

marriage was their exclusive goal in life, and the negation of the existence of lesbians. We also need to consider that some measures discriminating women in general, hit lesbian couples doubly hard.

In addition to the rehabilitation and compensation for Rhineland-Palatinate victims of Paragraph 175 of the penal code, there should be a public commemoration of the discrimination against lesbian women from Rhineland-Palatinate. The target group should also include those women who did not follow their lesbian desire but got married because of the pressure of social norms that put them at the mercy of their husbands and who were sometimes only able to leave their husbands when they accepted great losses. Undoubtedly, it can be assumed that under such circumstances some lesbian love was not always acted on. Of course mothers suffered when they lost custody of their children because they lived as lesbians. And, last but not least, the concealment of lesbian life in public and the withholding of literature containing lesbian characters must be mentioned. Research into such instances of discrimination has only just begun.

Paragraph 175 of the penal code did not threaten women with punishment. However, this does not mean that lesbian women were not discriminated against. Rather, as long as it existed, the paragraph could have been extended to include women at any time. Indeed, this was discussed repeatedly and demanded several times, for example in 1951 by the Catholic *Volkswartbund* (the People's Guards). In its brochure *Das Dritte Geschlecht [The Third Sex]* author Richard Gratzweiler, a judge from Bonn, warned against male homosexuality. Towards the end of his article, he stated that "lesbian love should also be punished; and that it is inconsistent not to do so..."

To be blunt: Women should get married and be at their husbands' mercy for the rest of their lives. The pressure exerted by the law and by society as a whole made it unnecessary to punish women as criminals on the grounds of Paragraph 175 of the penal code. The primacy of marriage firmly established both socially and by civil law already limited the possibilities of lesbian ways of life substantially.

#### Concealed Alternative

Additionally, there was no visible public forms of lesbian life that could have been seen as an alternative to marriage. This surely caused many women to give in and get married even if they, consciously or unconsciously desired or loved women."

We consider it important to evaluate the known facts from a feminist perspective.



We commemorate all those lesbian women who were interned and murdered in Ravensbrueck or were transported from the Ravensbrueck concentration camp to the Bernburg psychiatric hospital where they were murdered in the euthanasia programme of the Nazis (like Mary Puenjer and Henny Scheermann). Thanks to the work done by Claudia Schoppmann, we can commemorate the few women whose names and biographical data we know: Mary Puenjer and Henny Schermann, Elli Smula, Inge Scheuer and Marie Glawitsch. But also Maria Ruehrnössel from Austria. She was convicted of homosexual acts and was transferred to the concentration camp Ravensbrueck after her imprisonment. Sylvia Koechl came across her name when she did research work into the so-called "professional criminals".

We think it is high time for an official commemoration of the lesbian victims of National Socialism in Ravensbrueck and also for a memorial stone. Thus, we hope for a positive decision by the advisory committee.

Wiebke Haß

(for the initiative of Autonomous Feminist Women and Lesbians in Germany and Austria)  
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