

Wiebke Haß,

Speech at the EL*C - the first European Lesbian* Conference 6. – 8. October 2017
(europeanlesbianconference.org) in Vienna on Friday, 6th October

Dear Lesbians, hi everyone,
thank you very much for joining us.

My name is Wiebke Haß and I represent the Initiative of "Autonomous Feminists and Lesbians in Germany and Austria". Susanne Kuntz from Hamburg, Irmes Schwager from Kassel, Lisa Steininger and Maria Newald from Vienna are here as well.

We are very happy for the opportunity to speak to you here at the first European Lesbian Conference - at this important gathering.

First of all I will give you a short summary of my speech:

I will talk about our initiative to put a commemoration orb for lesbian prisoners at the site of the former concentration camp Ravensbrück. Ravensbrück was a special concentration camp for women located 50 miles north of Berlin. It was opened in May 1939 and around 130.000 women had been imprisoned there and about 30.000 to 90.000 women were murdered. I will talk about the history or herstory of the memorial ball. And in the second part I will give information about the situation of lesbian women in National Socialism - as far as there is information. I will explain why we also talk about persecution and why we do think it is necessary to make lesbians visible as a group. After my introduction, that takes about 25 minutes, there will be time for questions and discussion. And we hope that you will find time to walk through our exhibition.

This year in April, I gave a similar speech at the opening of our exhibition about Lesbian Women during National Socialism and the herstory of the memorial ball at the former concentration camp Ravensbrück. The exhibition was part of a 2 days-symposium "Identity policy and commemoration: debating Lesbian-Gay culture of remembrance".

About us:

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 Ravensbrück, the youth concentration camp for girls and young women at Uckermark and the men's concentration camp.

Some of us are members in organizations of survivors of the Holocaust in Germany and Austria.

For us Ravensbrück is a site of remembrance, of warning and of commemoration. But it is also a place for discussion and an important place in political life.

And now the herstory of the memorial ball:

In the 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 of exchange and commemoration at the Ravensbrück memorial site.

On the 70th anniversary of the Ravensbrück liberation day in 2015, we laid down a memorial ball, with which we wanted to commemorate lesbian women and girls in Ravensbrück, believing that it is high time to also make them visible and to remember those women.

Last year the initiative submitted an official request, after the authorities responsible for the memorial site had removed the ball.

In May 2016, at their annual conference, the IRK, the International Ravensbrück Committee, decided to support our application. In the meantime, over 520 people and organizations from a total of 27 countries

have also supported our initiative by e-mail.

As a part of the exhibition you can see a set of paper roles on which all emails have been printed.

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.

The background of the conflict is that there is a debate on the definition "persecution". Other than homosexual men, homosexual women in Germany had not been prosecuted by law. Furthermore only few biographies of lesbian prisoners in the concentration camp Ravensbrück are known.

The next meeting of the advisory committee will take place on 24th of November this year and we still hope that they will agree to let the memorial ball remain at Ravensbrück.

We, on the other hand think that 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 in Ravensbrück.

When we look at the Situation of lesbian women in National Socialism there are strong indications for this assessment that deserve to be considered and put into a feminist context.

The following talk includes thoughts, facts and quotations from reports and research papers that have prompted our reflections and which have confirmed us in our assessment that lesbian women in the concentration camps should be commemorated as a group. I want to point out different aspects:

First of all:

- NS legislation restricted and discriminated women in general: women were expelled from universities and higher professions and they were deprived of their passive suffrage, that is to say their right to be elected.

The women's movement was brought into line.

From 1933 to 37, women were urged to abandon their waged labour jobs in favour of marriage and motherhood.

Lesbian women and couples were especially affected by these laws and regulations.

There are some reports showing that lesbian women lost their jobs or rental contracts, if it became public that they lived in a lesbian relationship.

Discrimination against Lesbians and against women in general cannot be considered independently of each other but are closely interlinked.

In 1935, the existing paragraph 175 was strengthened so as to criminalise homosexual men even more. Extending legal prosecution to homosexual women was taken into consideration, but not put into practice. The National socialist ideologists and jurists assumed that they had already sufficiently restricted the lesbian way of living by passing the bills and acts applying to all women.

Since women had been displaced from public life into the private sphere, the Nazis no longer feared – as they put it - "the corruption of public life" that "could occur if the plague was not fiercely opposed" which they considered an important reason to criminalise homosexual relationships.

According to the Reich Ministry of Justice homosexual men wasted "potency" whereas homosexual women would not "drop out of reproduction".

The written protest by the Nazi jurist Rudolf Klare against the decision by the 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", Rudolf Klare wrote, "On principle, female homosexuality is to be considered punishable behaviour, as it is prone to undermine blood values and to withdraw women from their völkisch – ethnic and nationalist obligations".

In 1939, the jurist Gertrud Schubart-Fikentscher wrote “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, “Independent of how the lawmaker will decide – as a matter of course, homosexuality among women is like the one among men, moral degeneration, threatening the existence and morale of the völkisch – ethnic community which is obliged to fight all phenomena of degeneration.”

- Regional research has shown that there were some investigations against women on the grounds of “lesbian activities”. They were accused of “activities punishable by paragraph 175” by the police and the judiciary even though paragraph 175 of the Penal Code did not apply to women. Furthermore, women offenders were often punished more severely if it became known that they lived in a lesbian relationship.

- From 1944, the Berlin Criminal Investigation Department for Homosexuals was obliged to register personal information on lesbian women in card files.

- Contrary to Germany, lesbian relationships were punishable by law in Austria and the Ostmark, (Article 129 Ib, Penal Code). However, in general, female homosexuality was considered “socially less dangerous”. In 2012, in contrast to most assessments, Johann Karl Kirchknopf, an Austrian social historian, arrives at the following resumé in his master thesis: "at least in Vienna, the systematic prosecution of homosexuals by the NS-regime, also affected women." He notes an increase in investigations and convictions of women during the Nazi period, especially in the years 1941 and 1942 on the grounds of § 129. According to Kirchhof, the specific prosecution of homosexuals in the NS-regime also led to a broader interpretation of this law.

- The so-called doctrine of degeneration, which was the basis of the national socialist ideology of inferiority, degeneracy, crime, and asocial behavior, already had predecessors in the nineteenth century.

In her historical analysis of the so-called doctrine of degeneration Kathrin Schmersahl writes: "prostitution and the women’s emancipatory movement served as prototypes of female 'degeneration', 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 which was repeated by the National Socialists. Lombroso advocated deportation, lifelong internment and extension of the death penalty to the “degenerated”.

In 1890, Julius Koch (1841-1908) coined the umbrella term of “psychopathologic inferiority”, thus linking “asocial behaviour” with psychopathy. 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 ...”.

- As early as 1933, lesbian subculture and infrastructure in Germany was destroyed by the National Socialists. Magazines, books and meeting places for lesbian women were blacklisted. This is impressively described by both the historian Claudia Schoppmann and the sociologist Corinna Tomberger.

- There are reports about raids and even arrests at lesbians’ meeting places.
- 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.

The extreme conditions in the penal confinement barrack were called "Hell of Ravensbrueck" by the prisoners.

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

There are reports from survivors about lesbian women and lesbian relationships in the concentration camp, but almost all of these are very distanced and lesbophobic. They mirror the hostile atmosphere towards lesbians and the social norms in general.

- In our opinion suffering should not be qualified and different victim groups should not be measured by each other.

Lesbian women were persecuted for many reasons: from racist and political and other reasons; they were stigmatized as criminals and so-called "asocials".

How did this affect the women who 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, were Jewish lesbians not threatened because they were also homosexuals?

- In 2015, the life stories of the couple Marta Halusa and Margot Liu in the so-called “Third Reich” were told by Ingeborg Boxhammer. The interdependency of the different reasons of persecution by National Socialists – such as Jewish, prostitute, anti-fascist and lesbian – are especially obvious in their case and consequently lead to numerous arrests, denunciation, detention and torture by the Gestapo. Their life stories are examples for women’s intersectional discrimination and the multi-layered forms of persecution.

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.

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

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

Here is a current example of the Persecution of Homosexuals and Asylum: Since March 2017, with the help of the internet organisation *All out* a petition is being prepared to the UK Home Office to prevent LGBT asylum seekers from being deported to Afghanistan. The authorities here officially claimed that they could refrain from exhibiting their sexual orientation or gender identity in public.

The argument that sexuality can be practiced in the private sphere, 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?

- But what does the term persecution mean?

The Duden (official German dictionary) offers the following synonyms, among others: discrimination, humiliation, violence, diminishing, belittlement, pogrom, harassment, suppression; (metaphorically) discrimination, discriminating.

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 killed in the euthanasia programme of the Nazis.

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 Ruehrnoessel from Austria. She was convicted of homosexual acts and was transferred to the concentration camp Ravensbrueck after her imprisonment.

Sylvia Koechl discovered her name when she researched the so-called "professional criminals".

We think it is high time for an official commemoration of the lesbian victims of National Socialism at the memorial site Ravensbrueck and also for a memorial stone or - a commemorative ball.