

Homosexuality and the Holocaust -- Pink Triangle Trivia

by James Chamberlain

Remembrance Day is a time to reflect on the horrors of the Holocaust and educate students about the history of war and the importance of peace and acceptance of others. Many of us know the Star of David (two overlapping yellow triangles) was a symbol "used" in Nazi Germany to label Jewish people. Pink triangles were also a symbol used for labelling gay people in the concentration camps, and black triangles identified lesbians.

Paragraph 175

In 1935, Nazi jurists undertook an extensive overhaul of the German criminal code. Laws like Paragraph 175 were re-written to broaden the law's scope of "indecentities between men" from a narrow interpretation of an intercourse-like act, to include virtually any contact between men deemed to have sexual intent, even "simple looking" or "simple touching."

The revised law took effect on September 1, 1935. Between 1936 and September 1, 1939, the outbreak of World War II, nearly 78,000 men were arrested for violating Paragraph 175. As homosexuality in some cases was deemed a mental illness, some men were institutionalized. Others were forced to choose between "voluntary" castration and imprisonment. Hundreds more were interned in concentration camps outside the legal process.

The severity of the persecution of homosexuals increased after the war's outbreak. In July 1940, any convicted homosexual who "seduced more than one partner" was sent to a concentration camp after completing his prison sentence to prevent the homosexual contagion from spreading.

Those "175ers" sent to concentration camps were often subjected to physical and sexual abuse by camp guards and fellow inmates. Most camps employed a prisoner identification system based on coloured patches, often triangles. Those incarcerated under Paragraph 175 wore pink triangles, making them easily identifiable by other inmates. Fearing guilt-by-association, already prejudiced fellow prisoners shunned them, leaving them isolated and powerless within the prisoner hierarchy.

After World War II

Under Allied occupation, some homosexuals were forced to serve out their terms of imprisonment regardless of time served in concentration camps. Homosexuals were specifically denied compensation as victims of National Socialism.

Symbols of Pride

Both of these triangles have been reclaimed as symbols of pride within the gay and lesbian communities. They are reminders of a horrific past as well as symbols of hope and strength for the future.

In Amsterdam, there is a Homo Monument dedicated to the gay and lesbian people who lost their lives in Nazi Germany. It is a large pink triangular block of granite that juts out into one of the canals. People from all over the world come to view it and pay their respects throughout the year. The Homo Monument is located just around the corner from the equally emotional Anne Frank house.

Please tell your students this story. It is an important and often overlooked piece of history.

Students and teachers may want to log onto the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) and type in "Pink Triangles" in the search engine. It will list more in depth articles on this topic.

Source- BC Teachers Federation
<http://bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=6108>