

Exhibit reveals horrors gay men faced at Hitler's hands

by Jane Muder

"The Holocaust" is the term synonymous with the World War II-era extermination of approximately 6 million Jews of European descent. But other minority groups also were sentenced to grim fates—by labor or gas chamber—under the regime of Adolf Hitler, including Poles, Gypsies and homosexuals.

Homosexuals, especially men, fared quite badly under that totalitarian state, but the fate of Germany's homosexual community under a wartime Nazi regime often went unmentioned in scholarly Holocaust discourse of years past.

Now, this lesser-known part of history has been brought to life at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. *Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals 1933-1945*, a traveling photographic exhibit on loan from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is on display at the Fine/Perlow Weiss Gallery in the Kaufmann Building of the JCC through Feb. 6. Its proximity to the entrance of the JCC's lecture rooms and fitness facilities makes it a major conversation piece; individuals entering the building for classes or workout sessions cannot help but notice it.

Until 1994, Germany's Criminal Code contained a clause condemning homosexual acts between men. Enacted in May 1871, Section 175 of the code denounced gay male activity. The Nazi rise to power made the code's tenets far more pernicious, because according to Nazi views of social and racial purity, homosexuals were regarded as deviant and anti-social.

In 1935, Germany's Criminal Code condemned all so-called "lewd" acts among men, a definition that broadened the range of verboten behaviors far beyond male-on-male contact. This was especially ironic because Ernst Rohm, a co-founder of the *Nazi*

Sturmabteilung—or "stormtroopers," which functioned as a paramilitary organization of the German Nazi party and played a key role in Hitler's rise to power—was known to be a homosexual. Hitler had Rohm removed from power and killed in 1934.

At this time, the Gestapo, or Nazi secret police, began to round up homosexual men convicted of violating Section 175, sentencing them to prison or to work camps. To be sentenced to a work camp was often a fate worse than death: Men suffered brutal, inhuman working conditions, and many died from their prostrations. One panel of the *Nazi Persecution* exhibit outlines this concept plainly: "Homosexuals in these camps were almost always assigned to the worst and most dangerous work."

The exhibit offers stark testament to the political climate of Nazi Germany. Displayed on large, laminated billboards, and taking up significant floor space in the JCC's Kaufmann Building, the collection of black-and-white photographs includes pictures of victims, their totalitarian oppressors and the conditions to which the men were subjected during the Holocaust.

Those viewing the exhibit can follow the legacies of these victims as they unfolded; the photos are designed to be viewed chronologically, from the Nazi takeover of Germany to the Holocaust's sobering aftermath. A press kit includes biographies of individual victims printed on stock cards so that viewers can become better acquainted with the individual stories of gay Holocaust victims.

Stephen Zupcic, a member of the Holocaust Commission of Pittsburgh, was fascinated by the exhibit since he saw it several years ago in Washington, DC. He remembered an earlier Holocaust exhibit that had been on display at the University of

Pittsburgh in 1987: *Auschwitz—A Crime Against Mankind*, which referred to other, non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The exhibit was distributed by the Auschwitz State Museum in Poland.

"The Holocaust material was mostly from Europe—there was far less material [in the United States]," says Zupcic, who serves on the committee for this exhibit. "It either hadn't been translated into English or simply wasn't available."

On Nov. 27, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* quoted Holocaust Center Director Edie Naveh as stating that the exhibit was "unprecedented" and that "There's never been anything else like it, certainly not in this country."

Local businessman Nachum Golan agrees. The owner of Nachum Golan Interiors is a committee chair with a singular connection to the exhibit.

"My parents survived the Holocaust... and, as the only gay son my mother and father had... it's a very personal involvement," he says, adding, "The most important thing is that the Jewish community here in Pittsburgh is willing to show a controversial and very exciting exhibition."

Zupcic believes that this exhibit teaches a lesson from which many political oppressors worldwide can learn today.

"There's still an enormous amount of discrimination that occurs in our society," he says, "and by appreciating some of the most horrific kinds of discrimination and prosecution—that which crosses the line into state-sponsored imprisonment and murder—you can get a clearer view of your own situation."

Zupcic cites the current political climate of Iran, one in which homosexuality is so taboo that men risk sex-change surgery rather than face execution for committing "acts of sodomy," as one example of such political persecution.

As a nation, Germany did not confront the horrors of its gay male persecution until 1994, when Paragraph 175 was expunged from the Criminal Code. As a result, there was little post-Holocaust evidence or testimony of the horrors homosexuals faced under Hitler's regime. Zupcic says that well into the 1960s, German homosexuals prosecuted under Paragraph 175 were reluctant to come forward and share their Holocaust experiences.

Pittsburgh's Lambda Foundation, a non-profit organization providing grants and scholarships to area GLBT projects, is the largest monetary supporter of the *Nazi Persecution* exhibit; additional funding was provided by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation and by individual donors.

Despite its dark subject matter, supporters believe the exhibit provides hope for a future free of hate crimes and discrimination. The post-Holocaust thoughts of Karl Lange, one of the men prosecuted under Paragraph 175, are reprinted on one of the press kit's stock cards: "The homosexuals did not disappear simply because the Nazis wanted them to." Though it took him until the 1960s to find paying work in Germany—a nefarious consequence of Paragraph 175 conviction stigma—Lange survived the Holocaust to share his story with the world.

The survivors and the casualties both pieced together the hidden stories of gay Holocaust victims. The presentation of *Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals 1933-1945* to Pittsburgh is a testament to these men's legacies.

Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals 1933-1945 is presented by the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh and the American Jewish Museum of the Jewish Community Center through Feb. 6. For more information, call 412-421-1500. See "Out and About" on page 28 for a schedule of related activities.

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