

Gay Holocaust survivors remember

It is important to finally have the human faces testifying—breathing life into our history before it is lost forever

by Bob Roehr

They were the first to wear the pink triangle, these old men, physically frail, as you would expect of men in their eighties and nineties. They are survivors of Nazi death camps, persecuted because they were gay.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum presented the first of its adult education programs on gay men and lesbians and the Holocaust on Dec. 12. Its core was a documentary program which first aired on German regional television in 1991, *We were marked with a big 'A'*, featuring interviews with three gay survivors. The title came from the 'A' for *arschficker* (ass-fucker) which was the identifying mark used in the camps before the colored triangle system was developed.

Friedrich-Paul von Groszheim, one of those in the documentary, was asked to participate in person but he declined, saying that at 88 he didn't want to travel in December without his lover, who couldn't get time off from work.

The documentary itself is no technical wonder, its shoestring budget is apparent in clunky production values. But it is amazing that it was done at all. It is important that we finally have at least bits of human faces testifying—breathing life into gay stories of the Holocaust before they too die and these stories are lost.

There is a strength of character in their voices that shines through the aging flesh, transcending the barriers of language. They

are survivors of both the death camps and of a post-war persecution only slightly less lethal. Their stories are of duplicity and arrest. They were witness to humiliation, beating and death. They survived in work camps in coastal swamps and north of the Arctic Circle in Norway building roads, shoveling snow in paper shoes which disintegrated within hours. Some survived castration.

They are a window to what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil" that men can do. A chilling glimpse of how tenuous our grasp is on "civilization." But most of all, they are examples of the triumph of the human spirit. One stands in awe of their sheer humanity.

The tone for this remarkable documentary was set by the speakers who preceded. "Most museums are celebratory, most museums are monuments to humanity's achievements," said Congressman Barney Frank. "This [museum] is a reminder of inhumanity at its worst. Put up because there was a national consensus that it was important to have a continuing reminder of what depths men and women can fall to, in an effort to prevent any kind of recurrence."

"To the bigots, we all look the same," said Frank. He stressed the importance of making common cause between all groups with a history of oppression. And he pledged to work to remove the vestiges of anti-gay discrimination that remain codified into law.

"In 1945, when the world focused with sympathy on the victims and survivors, the gay and lesbian victims returned to the closet as a means of self-protection," said museum deputy director Elaine Heumann Gurian. "They were denied even the beneficial healing associated with the telling of their story."

"So it is no wonder that when we, the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, set out to find tangible proof about homosexuals and the Holocaust, it was simply not available—both because it was destroyed and/or because it was hidden and known only to a few."

Gurian went on to tell how they came into contact with Dr. Klaus Muller, their consultant/curator on gays and the Holocaust, and how the museum has come to include gays into the context of its exhibition, research and education programs.

"Part of our purpose is that there should be a relationship between historical events and contemporary issues in life," said Raye Farr, director of the film and video department and archive at the museum. She and others noted that the auditorium was full, the first time that a museum adult education program had been oversubscribed in advance. The next series of education programs on gays and the Holocaust is scheduled for mid-May.

Muller came last. He spoke of the Nazi persecution of gay men. He said much of it continued in post-war Germany through

1969 because it was still illegal to be gay. But mainly he spoke of his experience working with the survivors, befriending them and slowly, over time, seeing them open up and tell more of the stories that were painful to live through and had largely been suppressed for decades. There was a great warmth and fondness in his voice as he spoke of the men.

He closed by dedicating the program to a survivor, Karl Gorath, who turned 81 that day. In 1939, when Gorath was 26, his jealous lover denounced him and turned him in to the Gestapo.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is located at 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW, Washington, DC 20024-2150, a few blocks south of the Smithsonian Institution museums on the Mall. Access is limited to control crowds. Advance tickets are strongly recommended. They can be ordered through TicketMaster (800) 551-7328 for a small service fee.

Use of the documentary *We were marked with a big 'A'* is currently restricted. The museum is working to resolve those legal matters and hopes that shortly it will be available for wider use.

Research and program activity on gay men and lesbians and the Holocaust are supported by private contributions. To identify your gift as coming from the gay and lesbian community, write the code 8014 on your check and send it to the attention of Brenda Fraser.



PHOTO BY LINDA KUEVER

ADVANCED SECURITY SYSTEMS

Power — Armed

Commercial/Residential
Security Alarm Systems
Vacation Protection Services
Personal Security Equipment

(503) 282-5912

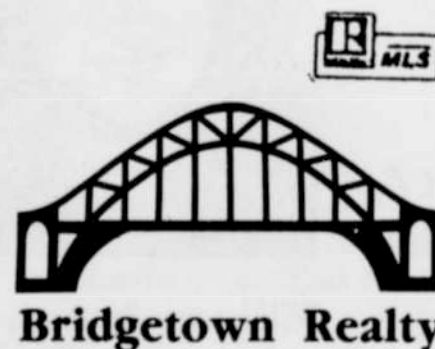
| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7 | 8 | 9 |
| * | 0 | # |

We believe in giving back . . .

*Campaign for a Hate-Free Oregon • The Urban League
National Organization for Women
Bradley Angle House • Our House
American Civil Liberties Union
Human Rights Campaign Fund • Right to Privacy PAC
and many others . . .*

At Bridgetown Realty, good business goes beyond traditional professionalism and consistently excellent service. Portions of both the time and earnings of our entire staff are allocated to organizations that reflect our philosophy as a company.

Choosing an agent from Bridgetown Realty supports a company that promotes tolerance and celebrates diversity.



Red Lion Lloyd Center
1000 N.E. Multnomah
Portland, Oregon 97232
(503) 287-9370

21570 Willamette Drive
West Linn, Oregon 97068
(503) 655-8015

Does Car Buying Stress You Out?

Come out and shop where you won't be hassled or pressured. Dwayne knows how stressful car buying can be. You will be treated with honesty and respect before and after the sale. Call for an appointment today!



Dwayne Kaptur

There's no pain when you deal with Dwayne!

REY REECE'S FRIDAY

OLDSMOBILE-ISUZU-VOLKSWAGEN
122nd & East Burnside, Portland 256-3700
NEW & USED CARS AND TRUCKS