

Gay Life in a Perverse Society

This interview, which took place earlier this year in Bonn, represents the opinions and individual perspective of one gay German, Dieter, a computer scientist who lives in Bonn. He came to Bonn as a student 13 years ago, belongs to the West German ecological group Die Grunen, and supports the feminist movement and autonomy for the workers.

Are there any gay/lesbian groups in Bonn?

Yes, one that was founded in 1974 by seven people, myself included, who were almost all students then. We felt that we could get a group going, that we should do it, and that it would work. One special impetus was a movie by Rosa van Praunheim called Nicht der Homosexuelle ist perverse, sondern die Gesellschaft in der er lebt (loosely translated: Society is perverse, not homosexuality). The movie showed how gay people live together, how they act and behave. It was professionally made but presented in a kitschy manner which was the correct style for the film because gay people act kitschily sometimes. The central message was that gays should come out of the bars, out of the toilets, and be proud of being gay and publish your gayness. Gay people were doing just that. The time seemed right then, and it was the last of a sequence of movements begun in the late 60s to get going.

What were the group's goals?

Helping people who were coming out and trying to repeal the law §175, which had been the same since 1933. Homosexual relations between people under 21 were illegal and punishable by imprisonment.

What specifically was done for people coming out?

We organized a room and held weekly meetings, wrote newspapers, had a telephone line. There were 20-30 people in the group in the beginning.

Were you successful in helping people come out?

In a very limited way, yes. Especially, I suppose, in regard to the number of people. Perhaps 300-400 people have gone through the group since it began.

Were there any attempts to make Bonn aware of homosexuality?

Four times a year we held a booth in the central market-place where we distributed a pamphlet asserting that gay people are as "normal" as straight people and that §175 should be repealed.

What else was done to repeal §175

Besides writing letters to the representatives in parliament as a group, we tried to collect all the other gay groups into one organization that held yearly meetings and sponsored marches and demonstrations when the groups met. Perhaps 300 people would march. Other demonstrations were held on Christopher Street Day or during Stonewall week in Bremen or Berlin or Hamburg.

Is §175 still on the books?

No, it was changed a little bit to lower the age to 18, but of course it is a restriction for homosexuals only. The age for heterosexuals is 16. Another difference is that if a man has a relationship with a girl under 16, the parents or someone else have the responsibility to prosecute. If a man, however, has a relationship with a boy under 18, the state has to persecute.

What anti-homosexual laws are prosecuted?

Well, whenever the government has knowledge of such a situation, they prosecute.

How do they find out?

If a 17-year-old boy tells a teacher, the teacher goes to the police. This happens a lot.

But what about prosecution against adult homosexuals?

Normally, there's not any. The police do have mirrors behind the toilets or they take pictures (in Hamburg, for example). If they know the identity of the person, they put them down on the lists they keep of known homosexuals. In some towns there are lists called Rosalisten (Pink Lists) of the known homosexuals. They never arrest them for having sex in the bathroom. They can't unless one is underage. You can't protest against the list. Some employers keep lists also. When a known homosexual leaves a firm and changes jobs, the new factory receives his recommendation and there are special phrases or sentences that indicate that the person is homosexual.

Can a gay person go to the police and see if his name is on a list?

No. People have tried, but they were told they could have no information about secret documents. No one knows who does see these lists. If someone wants to be a teacher, the school asks for information and usually receives it.

How else do they get names for the list?

Occasionally a large number of police
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