

29 Mar 2023

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Heretics Forever

I got my first article on that topic from Kim Lee - a drag queen who came to Poland from Vietnam to study quantum physics in the 1980s. It was one of our last meetings in her dressing room, before her unexpected death in 2020. She said: "You should have a look at it," and handed me a text dedicated to *Pipels* by Joanna Ostrowska. It was then that I first encountered this author. The text was about young boys who, in order to survive a concentration camp, entered into sexual barter with functionary prisoners. Selected by the functionaries from new transports to the camp, boys (usually at age 16-21) worked as they servants. Polishing shoes, preparing food and having sexual intercourse, in return received more food and form of a protection. It was for that reason that they were rejected from the memory of the Holocaust victims, denying them any commemoration.

Survivors' testimonies on the subject were barely audible from under a layer of shame, social stigma. Despite the fall of the Nazi regime, the decriminalization of homosexuality (which didn't happen in Germany until the 1990s), people with non-heteronormative experiences were accompanied by a constant sense of danger.

I soon read about this again in Joanna's book "They. Homosexuals during World War II." I remember how exasperated I was unpacking it in my studio in Amsterdam. What struck me the most was that the stories and documents she cites were so devoid of literary embellishments; so linguistically pragmatic and factual, and yet made tears come to my eyes. I decided to cherish these moments for myself, gradually allowing my memory to turn what I read into images.

I also wondered if a place for such testimonies would be more possible today. I know there certainly will be, even though the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum still has not commemorated the prisoners with the pink triangle.

The most touching illustration of this policy is the bouquet of flowers that the authorities of the Auschwitz concentration camp museum decided to dispose of in the trash container. The roses were accompanied by a note:

Für meine Kameraden Zbigniew und Tadeusz.

Karl (2)

Karl Gorath put them at the execution wall, where he assumed that his beloved Tadeusz was look-ing straight into the hole of a gun barrel. Because what else? He inquired in the camp's archives whether the boy who had slipped into his bed that night, passionately kissing him, might have survived. He received no information, so as if on a grave, he placed flowers on the camp's gravel. Moments later, a museum employee removed them.

Tadeusz survived the war.

This museum decision stands in line with the Polish government's 2019 election propaganda, which was heavily focused against queer people. There were times when the media described it as a "witch hunt," which made quite a bit of sense. The word *ciota*, which is a pejorative term for a homo-sexual male, was still used as a substitute for "witch" almost until the 19th century.

After returning to Poland, I quickly learned that showing up on the street with a friend who seems to be a little closer than a buddy can become a reason to classify us as witches. On December 18th in 2021, turning around after hearing "Ciota!" screamed behind my back



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ended in a broken nose for me. (7) At that time, we visited the Animation Film Studio, which was demolished shortly thereafter. Perhaps on the principle of cleansing culture of its Soviet heritage; so now we can finally be free of regime politics?

From then on, the safest places were enclaves - clubs, cafes, restaurants with a rainbow flag at the door. Like groups of heretics marking the spots for their secret gatherings. Passing secret knowledge to one another, protecting each other and knowing that the only solution, is to function alongside the official system. And it was this potential self-sufficiency that made them most dangerous. Each successive regime - whether political, like the Nazi or Soviet, or religious, such as the one responsible for the Holy Inquisition - portrayed non-normative people as enemies and threats.

Heretics, renouncing their deeds, were supposed to wear robes with embroidered "faggots", as a sign of what they had done. Faggot in this case is referring to its etymological root, meaning "bundle of sticks", which were visible on their clothing.

And what did they do that broke God's supposed law so badly?

Those accused of heresy defended themselves against the Holy Inquisition with declarations that, after all, they had wives and children! Heresy therefore can be associated to claims of homosexuality, subsequently also pointing towards modern connotations of the term faggot.

Centuries later, their testimonies would be eerily mirrored by men charged under Paragraph 175 in the Third Reich. It criminalized actions such as protracted glancing between men, and overly affectionate shoulder rubbing in male public toilets.

That kind of hidden intimacy, I saw on one of the pages of Joanna's book. A photo of a sleeping boy with thick eyebrows and thick hair. Taken with great tenderness. It was Józef Niemczyk, a young forced laborer, sleeping comfortably in a bed. The owner of this bed, Erich Nägele took the picture.(1)

Their intimate relationship began in a shelter for Poles. The German visited Józef very often, and finally convinced him to move into his place. He offered him German lessons.

"Now let's make love. You are my lady, we will masturbate." - Nägele was to say (what Niemczyk testified during the interrogation according to Paragraph 175).

It were those thick eyebrows and hair that made Joanna pick out that one portrait out of the many factory worker photos for her next publication, assuming that the image might be depicting Józef. The closed eyes of the sleeping boy in the investigation file didn't make things any easier.

Joanna lives on a boat. At that point in time, she was sailing in the Atlantic. When she arrived at the shipyard Chaguaramas in Trinidad-Tobago, where she had stable WiFi at a port pub, we managed to have a zoom call. Joanna told me stories that didn't make it into the final book, but also gave me courage in the face of building visual representations of them. I was afraid to let my imagination fly away to create visual representations of the camp's "drag" stories.

Culture has accustomed us to the image of a death factory when thinking about concentration camps; where life is portrayed in its most existentialist meanings. However, there were still elements of everyday life in the camps, as well as non-normative activities. Performing certain types of identities under such extreme conditions, was a means to overcome obstacles, a tool of resistance, as well as an opportunity to gain the resilience necessary for survival.

As soon as the concentration camp's prisoners had access to a sewing machine, they set about tapering their garments.(6) They wanted it to accentuate their shapes - hugging the waist, accentuating the buttocks. In such reworked, form-fitting uniforms, they could finally be femme-fatales surrounded by a cluster of admirers during their off-day-walks through the main alley of the camp. They proudly walked around with pouch attached with a string to their bodies, to it, so called Bojtel (from German: Beutel).(5) Strings and Bojtel were luxury goods there. You could hide all your possessions in a pouch, having it constantly with you. Hidden in the bunk, it would be stolen immediately by another prisoner.

A string, on the other hand, was a multifunctional tool — you could use it to make a bra, or a belt. It was especially useful when the striped pyjamas ran out.

That's when functionaries would point at the piles of confiscated clothes whenever new camp in-mates arrived. They told them to take whatever fell into their hands.

"This would be your daily Birkenau uniform from today on"



Galerie Max Mayer

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So one of the prisoners wore a 19-century ball gown. Of georgette, with pearls sewn into the fabric all over, sequins adorning the plunging neckline and decorative frayed sleeves and hem of the skirt. Masterpiece. The prisoner was a Czech actress, Zdenka Fantlová.(4)

In the year of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Polish director, Wanda Jakubowska together with her lover, a German communist, Gerda Schneider wrote a script for a movie based on an experience in the camp. Wanda managed to survive thanks to the help of other prisoners from the socialist resistance movement. She also soon joined a group of liaison officers providing information about the murdered people, helping other female prisoners and documenting the living conditions in the camps.

Titled *The Last Stage*, the movie was full of beautiful shots of brave women embracing each other.

David and Helmut were friends; while still in the camp, they promised each other that if either of them died, the other would do everything to notify his family. Dawid remembered Helmut as some-one close to him. (...) His real name is unknown; as are the personal details of many other prisoners accused of homosexuality.

Dawid survived.

...After years of searching, he finally found Helmut's family. He wanted to fulfill his promise to his friend and inform his mother what had happened to her son:

"He thought that - according to the natural course of things - he was coming to this woman with the news she had been waiting for (...). Things turned out differently, however (...). At first the woman tried to remain calm, demonstrated indifference (...). It didn't last long, after a while she exploded (...) with great, uncontrollable joy, turning into hysterical laughter (...). When the woman returned to relative equilibrium, she revealed her reasons for rejoicing over the death of her son. Helmut (...) was a disgusting faggot, a pervert, and perverts they are unworthy to walk on our wonderful German soil." (3)

[Joanna quotes Helmut's story from: Michał Głowiński, "Carska filiżanka", Warsaw 2016.]

Special thanks to Joanna Ostrowska, a historian and the autor of a book "Oni. Homoseksualiści w czasie II wojny światowej" (soon in German under a title "Jene. Homosexuelle während des Zweiten Weltkriegs" – Metropol Verlag, Berlin), which I quoted and translated in this text and with whom I had an enormous pleasure to consult this exhibition.

I would like to thank Ivan Cheng and Nicholas Grafia who helped me with an edit.

