

BEHIND THE EXHIBITS:  
THE CAMPAIGN TO MEMORIALIZE GAY VICTIMS OF NAZI PERSECUTION

Presented to the Rainbow History Project by Craig Howell

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Cheryl, Barrett, Friends:

Last month marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginnings of my career as a gay activist in the District of Columbia, primarily through my role in what is now known as the Gay & Lesbian Activists Alliance of Washington (GLAA). In these past three decades, no project has given me greater satisfaction than helping to pave the way for the remembrance of the gay victims of Nazi persecution in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. I am therefore very grateful indeed for your invitation to Barrett and myself to provide our perspectives on how that worthy goal was accomplished.

I must, however, confess disappointment at the absence this evening of any representatives from the Museum's own professional staff. We all need to hear what they could offer from their own personal and institutional memories, and they need to understand much more fully how the decision came about to include gay victims at all. I trust the Project will extend an appropriate invitation for them to speak with us in the near future; or, for that matter, perhaps we should go to them.

I heard Dr. Klaus Mueller, whose contributions to fleshing out the details on the Nazi persecution of homosexuals as the Museum's in-house expert cannot be exaggerated, speak many times while he was stationed here. He would frequently open his remarks with a passing comment that the Museum had been dedicated to including the story of the gay victims from the start. That is simply not true, as I hope you will appreciate before this evening is over. From my own experience, it was at least a four-year battle, from 1979 through 1983, a battle where we started out in a hole and whose outcome was never predetermined.

The struggle for the remembrance of the gay victims is only lightly touched upon (consisting of a couple of pages and some footnotes) in the Museum's official history, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*, by Edward T. Linenthal, published by Viking in 1995. The author does credit what he (incorrectly) identifies as "the Gay and Lesbian Alliance" (to be historically correct, he should have referenced the "Gay Activists Alliance of Washington," or GAA) in forcibly bringing the story of the gay victims to the attention of the Holocaust Memorial Council in early 1980. However, he neglects to explain either GAA's subsequent interplay with the Council or the considerable resistance both inside and outside the Council towards remembering the gay victims at all.

I want to get a narrative of GAA's struggle to secure gay remembrance onto the record so that full credit can be finally given to the many people, gay and nongay alike, who played vital and indispensable roles in our community's ultimate and on-going victory.

I want to start with some background of events taking place before GAA became committed to leading this campaign in 1979.

In the heady days of the post-Stonewall era of the early 1970s, a great deal of attention was being devoted in many quarters to uncovering or rediscovering the history of ordinary gay men and women in this country and around the world, a history largely lost or untold because of the hostility of the homophobic world around us. One of the most dramatic untold stories revolved around the barbaric treatment of homosexual men by the Nazis. Literally nobody at the time understood the full dimensions, ramifications, and subtleties of that story, but we demanded that the world acknowledge the existence of what our community then generally called “the gay victims of the Holocaust.”

I know of no attempt to estimate the number of homosexual men murdered by the Nazis until an obscure publication called the *Detroit Gay Liberator* published a single sentence in 1974. This brief note reported that the Austrian Protestant Church had conducted a study finding that 220,000 gay men had died in Nazi concentration camps. This news apparently triggered an explosion of interest in the subject within our community, if not in the world at large. That figure of 220,000 gay victims (sometimes inflated to 250,000, 500,000 or -- what the heck -- an even million) would be repeated endlessly by the gay community press and by gay activists over the next 15 or 20 years.

I am reluctant to get ahead of my story, but I feel obliged to tell you now that this figure is off by an order of magnitude, that no such estimate was ever rendered by any Austrian church, and that the *Liberator's* story was most probably a deliberate hoax. I wrote many articles, book reviews, and letters in the 1980s trying to debunk this hoary myth, but often despaired of ever stamping it out. But to my great relief, that myth has in fact pretty much disappeared over the last decade.

While our community was busily reinventing our history, President Jimmy Carter took the next important step by establishing what was called the President's Commission on the Holocaust in 1977. The several dozen men and women appointed to this Commission were charged by the President to develop recommendations on what our country should be doing to honor the memory of the millions of people murdered or otherwise terrorized during the Nazi era. The Commission spent the next two years gathering a wealth of information from Holocaust survivors and their families, historians, religious organizations, foreign governments, and others, detailing what had happened during the Holocaust and how we as a people should dedicate ourselves to the motto: Never Again.

It was during this period of public input, I believe (but cannot verify directly myself), that what was then known as the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) first intervened with the Commission, urging them to include the gay victims in whatever recommendations for remembrance they would eventually bring forth.

It came as a bitter shock when the Commission issued its final 40-page report in October 1979 that catalogued many categories of people that the Nazis targeted for persecution if not annihilation, yet said absolutely nothing about the very existence of the gay victims. NGTF protested vigorously, only to see their efforts rebuffed and ignored by the members and staff of the Commission. Discouraged and faced with very limited resources and many competing priorities, the NGTF leadership at this point abandoned any further efforts.

And there things might have rested indefinitely, except that Tom Chorlton of GAA put his foot down and said, in effect: This Will Not Stand.

Tom persuaded GAA President Mel Boozer and other GAA members to go beyond our usual focus on DC-area issues and assume a rare national leadership role in the fight to secure official recognition of the Nazis' gay victims. Mel wrote a letter on GAA's behalf to the Commission on October 23, 1979. Mr. Michael Berenbaum, the Commission's Deputy Director, replied briefly on November 16, protesting that he had "been (1) misquoted and (2) quoted absolutely out of context." He continued: "The President's Commission on the Holocaust is committed to memorializing *all* those who perished in the Holocaust." (Emphasis in original.) The Commission report's refusal to acknowledge even the existence of the gay victims, however, belied Mr. Berenbaum's words.

On January 15, 1980, I wrote a letter to President Carter on GAA's behalf, asking him "to appoint at least one openly gay man or woman to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council...to focus public attention on one of the most serious gaps in public understanding of the Holocaust: the fact that the Nazis carried out an intensive campaign to exterminate homosexuals." We denounced the "three decades of official silence about anti-gay genocide." At the end of the letter we promised President Carter that GAA President Mel Boozer would soon be sending him "an Open Letter explaining in more depth why gay people should be part of the Holocaust Memorial Council."

That Open Letter was dated January 31, and is quoted in Edward Linenthal's book. I assume that Tom Chorlton was the principal drafter of this letter. I have not found a copy in my own files, and I do not recognize some of its language as cited in the following summary, taken from Linenthal's book:

The alliance [sic] asked that the [U.S. Holocaust Memorial] museum include "appropriate exhibits relating to the Nazi campaign against homosexuals," that there be an educational focus on "anti-gay genocide," that "openly gay [men] and lesbians be appointed to the Citizens Committee on Conscience," that there be specific remembrance of gays in Days of Remembrance proclamations, and that fund-raising "include an outreach to gay men and lesbians."

Sometime in early 1980, Tom Chorlton moved on to work on the 1980 Convention Project (a national, partisan effort beyond GAA's scope), and I agreed to take over in my capacity as Government Projects Coordinator. The timing proved to be highly fortuitous, for I quickly discovered that the landscape had shifted enormously in our favor in the few months since the Commission's final report. The old Commission had disappeared into the bureaucratic mist, and a New Guard, far more sympathetic to our concerns, was now in place.

What had happened in the meantime was that the old Commission had been replaced (as it itself had recommended) by the new, permanent U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, whose job it would be (among other things) to raise private money for the construction of the Holocaust Museum here in Washington and to develop guidelines for its exhibits. More than 50 members of the Commission had been freshly named, chaired by noted writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. In addition, a brand new staff had been hired, with George Washington University Law Professor Monroe H. Freedman as Director.

Both Wiesel and Freedman would play central parts in correcting the old Commission's failure to recognize the gay victims. Mr. Freedman already had a pro-gay record, having served as a volunteer attorney for Dr. Frank Kameny's Mattachine Society of Washington in the early 1960s.

Mr. Freedman responded to GAA's January 15 letter on February 1. In that letter he opened up the doors for us with one simple sentence: "I would be extremely grateful if you would supply the Council with any documents, memoirs, and historical research and analysis that you have relating to the Holocaust." Mr. Freedman wrote us again on March 14 in response to Mel Boozer's January 31 Open Letter. "You can rest assured that the memorial will appropriately honor the memory of all those who were the victims of Nazi oppression," he told us, and reiterated that "any documented materials you may be able to supply the Council relating to the homosexual experience during the Holocaust would be most helpful."

We took Mr. Freedman's requests as an indication that with concrete, verified information on what had actually happened to homosexuals under the Nazis, the members of the Council would almost certainly be willing to include the gay victims in the Museum and in the Council's publications and events, such as the annual Day of Remembrance ceremony conducted each April. It would not be quite that simple and automatic, as we were to discover, but our optimism was well-founded for the long run.

As we spread the word in our community about the new attitude we had encountered, we very soon discovered precisely the kind of historic evidence we were looking for, thanks to the good offices of our friend, the late and greatly-missed Clint Hockenberry. In his capacity as the American liaison of what was then called the International Gay Association (IGA), Clint had sent word to his European counterparts asking if anyone knew of any research that had been done about the gay victims of the Holocaust. Sure enough, the COC of Amsterdam, one of the world's oldest continuously active gay and lesbian civil rights organizations, reported back good news. One of their members, Dr. Page Grubb, had recently translated into English a book written on that very topic: *Pink Triangle: The Social History of Antihomosexual Persecution in Nazi Germany*, by Professor Ruediger Lautmann, Professor of History at the University of Bremen in then-West Germany.

Professor Lautmann had delved deeply into the archives of the International Tracing Service, where all surviving concentration camp records are preserved. Unfortunately, many other such records had been lost at the end of the war, while others were behind the Iron Curtain and were thus difficult if not impossible for Westerners to access.

But based on what he could find, Professor Lautmann had compiled a virtual Census of the homosexual men who had been sent to the concentration camps and on their ultimate fates. His research disclosed that the actual number of such men -- the men with the pink triangle -- was vastly lower than the estimates that had been floating around the gay community, on the order of perhaps 15,000 instead of 220,000. In addition, the records indicated that nearly two-thirds of them had died in the camps -- a death rate significantly higher than that recorded for any other category of prisoner. Professor Lautmann devoted most of his book explaining the network of sociological reasons that lurked behind such a high death rate.

Thanks to the intervention of Dr. Grubb, Professor Lautmann wrote GAA on February 28, 1981 and enclosed the typed manuscript of Dr. Grubb's English translation of his work, which we were authorized to release to the Council. In turn, we formally presented this manuscript to Professor Freedman in a small, formal ceremony on May 18. Dr. Kameny, Vice President Andy Hirsch, and I represented GAA on this august occasion, and Clint Hockenberry represented IGA. (I regret that to this day, Professor Lautmann's complete book has never been published in English.)

Beyond that, I started a veritable Crusade to spread the word about Professor Lautmann's revolutionary findings in any publication or venue within reach, chiefly to correct the numerous misconceptions that had been running rampant through our community. The need for such a crusade within our own ranks was highlighted by the 1981 publication of a truly horrendous book, *The Nazi Extermination of Homosexuals*, by Frank Rector. Mr. Rector sensationalized his subject so blatantly at every conceivable opportunity that it could not be considered a reliable source of information on any claim he made. Not content with citing that same *Detroit Gay Liberator* clipping about the 220,000 alleged gay men murdered under the Nazis, he arbitrarily doubled the estimate to half a million deaths. Unfortunately, too many book reviewers in the gay press swallowed this nonsense uncritically, keeping me trying to extinguish the ensuing brushfires and limit the damage as best I could with the aid of Professor Lautmann's research.

I received a letter in September 1981 from another historian, Professor Jim Steakley of the University of Wisconsin, who had published one of the relatively few academically respectable books analyzing the ideological sources for the Nazi policy against homosexuals. He told me that he had seen that same Detroit clipping that Rector and I had seen and had quoted it in the first edition of his book. But later he grew suspicious enough to contact the Austrian church that had supposedly conducted the study leading to the estimate of 220,000 gay deaths during the Nazi era. The church replied that they knew nothing of any such study or estimate. As I indicated earlier, I firmly believe the *Liberator* story was a deliberate hoax, but to this day I have no idea of who might have originated it.

I should mention that during the early 1980s we in GAA and many gay historians were eagerly awaiting publication of a comprehensive study on the gay Holocaust victims by Richard Plant, himself a gay German who survived the Nazi regime by emigrating to this country in 1938. Professor Plant had announced that he was writing such a book in the 1970s, and we were wondering whether he would confirm or contradict Professor Lautmann. For health and other reasons, that book, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*, was not published until 1986, long after the Council had decided to include the gay victims in the Museum and all commemoration publications and ceremonies. And yes, you'll be happy to know that it fully supported Lautmann's results. With the help of a grant from the Gay Education Fund, GAA purchased a copy of this book for every Council member in preparation for the Council's February 1987 Conference on "The Other Victims" at the U.S. State Department.

Mr. Freedman summed up his philosophy, and ours, very succinctly in a letter he wrote to us in December 1981, shortly before he stepped down as the Council's Director. "I think you are wise, as well as morally right, in insisting upon scrupulous historical

accuracy. The truth, sad to say, is horrible enough. We do not need exaggerations, which injure our own integrity and which invite criticisms that serve only to detract from the merits.”

Despite the strong encouragement we were consistently getting from Mr. Freedman and several members of the Council, it still took nearly two years between the time we presented Professor Lautmann’s research in May 1981 and the Council’s final decision in April 1983 to include explicit references to homosexuals in the Museum and the Council’s various publications and activities. This delay only partly resulted from homophobia, which came in many flavors.

For example, Communists and some other leftists charged that homosexuality was a perversion uniquely engendered by Naziism and/or by capitalism. Right-wing homophobes routinely stressed the open homosexuality blatantly displayed by Ernst Roehm and his *lumpenproletariat* SA stormtroopers and tolerated by Hitler. Any “toleration” of homosexuals in the SA or elsewhere was of course abruptly terminated on the notorious Night of the Long Knives in June 1935 when Hitler ordered the murder of Roehm and his top deputies, thereby triggering a large-scale round-up of homosexual men whose identities had been known to the police through lists they had been maintaining long before the Nazis assumed power. Others argued that homosexuals were imprisoned for having violated criminal laws already on the books before the Nazis (the notorious Paragraph 175, expanded by the Nazis into Paragraph 175a) and therefore deserved no more special recognition than any other kind of common crook. Orthodox Jews and Christian fundamentalists denounced homosexuals as grievous sinners who should not be honored under any circumstances, least of all in a museum dedicated to preserving the memory of the *innocent* victims of Nazi terror.

No, beyond these overtly homophobic reasons for keeping gays out of the Holocaust Museum, there was great deal of controversy within and outside the Council about the definition of the Holocaust itself. The attitudes of Michael Berenbaum, who carried over to the Holocaust Council staff after serving as Deputy Director of the President’s Commission, illustrate what we were up against.

In a meeting that Barrett and I had with him and his colleagues on the local Jewish Community Council (which he chaired) in February 1983, Mr. Berenbaum drew sharp distinctions among the categories of Nazi victims. Invoking the poetic language of Dante’s *Inferno*, he placed the Jews at the “Center of Hell,” as he put it, because that was the single group that the Nazis were determined to exterminate at all costs. In the Second Circle of Hell were the Romi, or Gypsies, most but not all of whom were also destined for extermination on racial grounds. The Poles were in the next Circle, as only the intellectual classes were marked for extermination, the rest being doomed to slavery. Mr. Berenbaum placed gay men in the Fourth Circle, followed by the asocials and the Eastern Europeans.

In an interview with the Lisa Keen of the *Blade* a few weeks later, Mr. Berenbaum explained that he and his colleagues on the Jewish Community Council were making “no attempt to minimize what the Nazis did to Gays,” but that he felt there was a “radical difference” between the degree of persecution levied against the Jews and that perpetrated upon other groups singled out by the Nazis.

Mr. Berenbaum was in some ways a moderate, because some Jewish leaders were openly demanding that the Holocaust Museum and other commemorative efforts should

seek to remember *only* the Jewish victims, and that including any other groups would only serve to diminish or trivialize the horrors experienced uniquely within the Jewish community.

All such issues were finally resolved by Council Chairman Elie Wiesel, who used his overarching moral authority to persuade the Council to accept two propositions in April 1983. First, all victims of the Nazis would be remembered. And second, the gay victims would be included among the other groups of victims. Chairman Wiesel summed up his Solomonic approach towards the question of inclusion of non-Jewish victims in a few well-chosen words: “No omission, absolutely not, but no equation.”

Oddly enough, I was not aware of this victory until I read about it deeply buried in a *Washington Post* article. No one on the Council staff had bothered to contact me about it, illustrating just how valuable Monroe Freedman had been while he was the Council’s Director. That victory was profoundly satisfying to me, as it remains to this day. I told Lisa Keen of the *Blade* how vitally important this development was to me personally and to our community in general. Inexplicably, the *Blade* failed to report any news of our success.

In the two decades since that April 1983 decision, the Holocaust Council has never wavered from its pledge to explicitly remember the gay victims at every appropriate opportunity. Beyond that, it has hired professional staff, starting with Klaus Mueller, to find gay survivors and urge them to get their own stories out to the public. These efforts have borne fruit beyond my most optimistic expectations. The Museum has integrated the story of the gay victims throughout its exhibits. Visitors are able to track the stories of several individual gay victims through ID cards they can obtain at the start of their tours and update as they proceed through the exhibit areas. Just last year the Museum sponsored a special exhibit on “The Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals,” which is traveling to several cities over the next few years.

One of the most satisfactory demonstrations of the Council’s thoroughgoing commitment to remembering the gay victims came at its special conference on “The Other Victims” at the State Department in February 1987. One of the featured invited speakers at this symposium was Professor Lautmann himself, whom I finally got to meet in person. He told me he was both surprised and gratified to see his work play such a central role in the commemoration of the gay victims. His paper, “Gay Prisoners in Concentration Camps as Compared with Jehovah’s Witnesses and Political Prisoners,” appears in *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis*, a collection of speeches presented at the symposium edited by Michael Berenbaum, who has long since “seen the light” and has been a solid friend of our community for many years now.

I have abused your patience long enough. Thank you.