

JOANNA OSTROWSKA

Them

*The World War Two History
of Non-Heteronormative People*

Them: The World War Two History of Non-Heteronormative People
(Original title: *Oni. Homoseksualiści w czasie II wojny światowej*)
by Joanna Ostrowska

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“The few Germans who sexually assaulted and harassed other prisoners in Nazi penitentiaries” was what Polish documents said about men imprisoned in 1933-1945 under Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code condemning homosexual relations.

“They” were considered outsiders, sexual predators and very rare. Due to these three reasons, their history was pushed aside, their experience not commemorated and their plight not considered victimhood. The survivors were not spoken about. Such people were not supposed to live in Poland.

The Second-World-War history of non-heteronormative people still remains a taboo. But it is our fault that “they” do not exist. Obscured by pre-war phantasms which were fueled by Nazi propaganda and obscene camp rumors, they were deemed nameless seducers, criminals, “an anti-social element.” The time has come to revolt against these notions. We can no longer be silent about “them.”

About the author:

Joanna Ostrowska is an academic lecturer with a PhD in the Humanities as well as a film critic and dramaturge. Her research focuses on the history of sexual violence during the Second World War and the forgotten victims of Nazism. Her critically acclaimed book *Przemilczane. Seksualna praca przymusowa w czasie II wojny światowej* [*The Unmentioned. Forced Sexual Labor During World War II*] (2018) was awarded the prestigious Der Mauthausen-Memorial Forschungspreis.

All we know about “them”, “the men with the pink triangles,” is that: none were Polish, there were few, we have little knowledge about them, they were sentenced under Paragraph 175 and wore pink triangles. In her meticulous investigation, Joanna Ostrowska consistently proves that none of these beliefs is true. An impressive, unprecedented and shocking book.

Jacek Dehnel, writer

Ostrowska is simultaneously brutal and empathetic, detail-oriented and synthetic. She fishes her protagonists out of a vast sea of surnames, dates and camp locations in order to rescue their memory and restore justice. She calls for a revision of historical facts and for remembering those who were treated as an unnecessary, minor fraction lingering somewhere after the decimal point in the statistics of heroism.

Paulina Małochleb, literary scientist and critic

Reviews of Joanna Ostrowska's book *Them. The World War Two History of Non-Heteronormative People*:

Joanna Ostrowska's pioneering book opens the door for making the experiences of non-heteronormative prisoners part of Polish WWII memory. Let it be so.

Justyna Szklarczyk, Polityka

Ostrowska phenomenally manages her vast material. Every detail has a role to play in her work. She leaves nothing to chance. Like a doctor talking to her patient during an unpleasant procedure, she informs her reader what she is about to do next and what kind of sensation it will give. She safeguards the reader so that they do not have to personally face the abyss of primary sources. She took the unimaginable physical, psychological and intellectual effort upon herself. I have no idea how she managed to bear it. . . .

Ostrowska undermines the accumulation of pseudo-arguments and excuses, revealing the homophobic prejudice that stands behind them. She confronts it with facts extracted from preserved sources: names, surnames, sentences, camp numbers, fragments of life stories, sometimes faces.

Renata Lis, Dwutygodnik

[<https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9515-jak-trzeba-opowiedac-historie.html>]

Because almost all pink triangles kept silent after the war, restoring their memory today is so difficult and often no longer possible. Dr. Joanna Ostrowska's painstaking, superhuman work should therefore be all the more appreciated as she tells a history that is dismissed and scorned in Poland. . . .

Them cannot be read without the contemporary Polish context, without references to our very current reality where the ruling party, its subordinate institutions, the media and the Catholic church have started an unprecedented witch hunt against LGBT+ people, one we had not previously seen in post-1989 Poland. . . . The homophobic venom spewing from nearly everywhere is consistent with Nazi ideas which culminated first in the persecution and then the murder of homosexual people.

Mike Urbaniak, Gazeta Wyborcza Poznań

[<https://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,105531,26985470,mike-and-the-city-poznanskie-rozowe-trojkaty-do-auschwitz.html>]

Ostrowska shows that forgetting is a practice – a kind of work aimed at denying access to a certain presence. The lack of space for victims of the Nazi regime persecuted for their non-heteronormativity is precisely its product.

J. Szpilka, Kultura Liberalna

[<https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2021/05/25/j-szpilka-recenzja-joanna-ostrowska-oni-homoseksualisci-druga-wojna/>]

Over a decade ago, I participated in a public meeting on the history of a key site of memory in Poland. There were about thirty people in the room. A man was speaking – let us call him “the guard of the institution.” The talk was followed by a question-and-answer. Alongside the classic set of questions about the significance of commemoration, the museum’s maintenance costs and the respect for witnesses whose numbers are dwindling with time, someone inquired about a group of prisoners: men with a pink triangle on their uniform. And although I do not recall what exactly “the guard” was asked, I will always remember his reply. I was hearing that the group of victims had not been commemorated because their number was “relatively small.” According to “the guard,” most of these prisoners had been Germans. Besides, the subject had seemed problematic due to allegations of sexual violence against other prisoners. Under such circumstances – “the guard” claimed – it was difficult to discuss “them” as victims.

The number, the nationality, the violence – these three assumptions have accompanied me since I began my research. “The few Germans who sexually assaulted and harassed other prisoners in Nazi penitentiaries” was what Polish documents said about men imprisoned by the Third Reich under Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code which condemned homosexual relations.

“They” were considered outsiders; sexual predators, pedophiles even, and very rare. Due to these three supposed reasons, their history was pushed aside, their experience not commemorated and their plight not considered victimhood. The survivors were not spoken about [in Poland]. And even when they did publish testimonies outside Poland, no one was making sure their voices would reach us. Even when they did visit sites of memory after the war, their stories were not heard.

The three assumptions framed the discourse on all non-heteronormative people persecuted during the Second World War. In Poland, there were no “such” things and no “such” people.

There was no one to commemorate in that respect. There was no point commemorating.

The Second-World-War history of non-heteronormative people still remains a taboo. Now, seventy-five years after the war ended, virtually no publication about them exists in Poland. One can hardly find even short fragments in general studies on the subject. It is as if pre-war Polish society had been uniformly heteronormative.

One argument put forth by Polish researchers to explain their creative impotence is the lack of written sources. This could not be further from the truth. The stories of which this book is comprised are but a fraction, a sample of hundreds of accounts which simply interested no one. This is also the case with witness testimonies published in other languages or interviews which are readily available in archives of the world. Therefore, rather than the lack of biographies, the issue concerns ignorance or a conscious ideological decision: the experiences of non-heteronormative people are not part of the Polish heritage.

It was only in the last five years that several testimonies were translated into Polish. The life story of Heinz Heger – the first witness who published his camp memoir – is easy to dismiss as he was an Austrian, and was not held in camps located in today’s Poland.¹ It is more difficult to disregard Teofil Kosiński – a Pole who had been given a five-year prison sentence under Paragraph 175. He survived.² Kosiński died in Warsaw in 2003. His memoir, edited in the early 1990s, was published in Germany, followed by the United States and a dozen other countries. It “reached” Poland three years ago. Teofil gave several interviews before he died, including at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. In Poland, practically no one talked with him.

Men deemed homosexual and sentenced under Paragraph 175 were born in Komorowice, Malbork, Elbląg, Kornatów, Nowa Ruda, Świebo-

¹ H. Heger, *Mężczyźni z różowym trójkątem*, trans. A. Rosenau, Warszawa: Ośrodek KARTA, 2016. [Cf. H. Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle: The True Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps*, trans. D. Fernbach, New York: Alison Books, 1994.]

² L. van Dijk, *Cholernie mocna miłość. Prawdziwa historia Stefana K. i Williego G.*, trans. A. Chmielecka, F. Fierek, Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2017. [Cf. L. van Dijk, *Damned Strong Love: The True Story of Willi G. and Stefan K.: A Novel*, trans. E. D. Crawford, New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1995.]

dzice, Stary Lesieniec, Brzeźno Wielkie, Źdiar, Berlin, Przyrów, Milicz. They grew up in Międzylesie, Gliwice, Lautery, Kęsowo, Poznań, Szczecin, Gdańsk, Łódź, Munich, Mogilany, Włocławek or in the Bydgoszcz area. They worked as concreters, bricklayers, typesetters, house painters, machine operators and nurses. Contrary to common belief, they did not all belong to the aristocracy or the intelligentsia. Although some were journalists, writers or lecturers, most were employed in plants and factories, ran small businesses or worked as craftsmen. One can hardly continue pretending that there had been few, and that they had never lived side by side with our loved ones.

They were arrested and jailed in Rawicz, Międzychód, Wronki, Strzelce Opolskie, Koronowo, Cieszyn, Katowice, Kraków, Toruń, or Tarnów. They were deported to camps in the Emsland area, to KL Sachsenhausen, KL Buchenwald, KL Mauthausen, KL Gross-Rosen, to the concentration camp complex Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz, or to Majdanek. They were killed in penitentiaries within the borders of the Third Reich, and if they survived, they returned home. Their graves can be found in Polish cemeteries. Their story by no means consists of scattered clues. Even if particular biographies are incomplete, often ending abruptly or lacking a conclusion, they all constitute a robust polyphony. Year after year, new names surface, and most stories behind them are a research challenge. And while the stories are mostly reconstructed based on the perpetrators' documentation, "they" are indeed many.

Andrzej Białas was born in 1908 and worked as a concreter. He lived in Łódź at Beselerstraße 62 (known in today's Poland as ulica Wapienna). Accused of "indecent acts" with his co-workers, he was transported to KL Buchenwald, and later KL Gross-Rosen, where he died in mid-October 1942. His wife's name was Irena.

Doctor Heinrich Seeger, twenty years Andrzej's senior, orientalist and Evangelical theologian, was born in Stuttgart. He defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Tübingen³ and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Wrocław. In August 1939, he was arrested by Gestapo. Accused of mutual masturbation with other men, he was sentenced to six months in prison. He died in late April 1945.

³ U. Rauch, „Unzucht getrieben mit verdorbenen Subjekten der Großstadt,” Schwäbisches Tagblatt, 18.09.2020.

Fredy Hirsch died a year earlier, in March 1944.⁴ There are several versions of events, including suicide. He was transported to the Theresienstadt ghetto first, followed by the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. As someone who had worked for the Maccabi Jewish sports club in Brno before the war, he would organize cultural events and a school for children in the so-called family camp in Auschwitz. Otto Dov Kulka, who was Freddy's student at that time, recalls: „The experiences that I remember from there unquestionably form the moral basis for my approach to culture, to life, almost to everything, as it took shape within me during those few months, at the age of ten or eleven, between September 1943 and the camp's liquidation in July 1944.”⁵

Twenty years after the war, one Jerzy Zdanowicz is taken to the Leszno hospital in Warsaw:

When he felt unwell, he was walked to a clinic . . . where he lost consciousness. An ambulance was called and took the patient to a hospital. In order to prepare him for examination, a nurse took off his jacket, trousers and underwear, and... let out a cry of surprise. A woman was now lying on the emergency room bed. A small, delicate woman... A rubber tube was cleverly attached to her hips using ribbons so that she could urinate like a man.⁶

In 1944, Jerzy survived the Wola massacre.⁷ Waclaw Gluth-Nowowiejski remarks that “the girl from Elekcyjna Street had always presented as a boy, then a man.” Jerzy died one week after he had been admitted to the hospital.

Last but not least, there was Sylvin Rubinstein, who died in Hamburg in 2011. Pre-1939, he danced as one half of the duet Dolores & Imperio with his twin sister.⁸ Until his death, he performed in drag in Hamburg

⁴ See e.g.: A. Hájková, „Jung, schwul – und von den Nazis ermordet. Die tragische Liebesgeschichte von Fredy Hirsch und Jan Mautner ist ein rares Zeugnis queerer Schicksale in der NS-Zeit,” *Tagesspiegel*, 31.08.2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/queerspiegel/die-geschichte-von-jan-mautner-und-fredy-hirsch-jung-schwul-und-von-den-nazis-ermordet/22972858.html> [dostęp: 7.02.2021].

⁵ Otto Dov Kulka, *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death*, trans. Ralph Mandel, London – New York: Penguin Books 2014, p. 18.

⁶ Translation based on: W. Gluth-Nowowiejski, „Tajemnica Panny X,” in: *Nie umieraj do jutra*, Wydawnictwo Marginesy, Warszawa 2018, s. 165–179.

⁷ Translator's note: during a period of one week in August 1944, Nazi soldiers systematically killed an estimated 90,000 Polish civilians in the Wola district of Warsaw in an effort to stop the Warsaw Uprising.

⁸ K. Kruse, *Dolores & Imperio: die drei Leben des Sylvin Rubinstein*, Kiepenheuer und Witsch Verlag, Köln 2000.

nightclubs. During the war, he hid in Miejsce Piastowe in the Podkarpacie region with a Polish family. He was involved in military actions by the local troops of Armia Krajowa.⁹ Clad in evening gowns and fully made-up, he shot at Nazis in the streets of Krosno, my hometown. He can be seen briefly in one shot of a documentary film made during the war. He is walking between the stalls at a market in Rymanów, dressed in a flowery skirt, pink blouse and a wig topped with a beret. As a character, Sylvin is not known to the local community today and only remembered by Mrs. Stefania Muzyczka, who was a toddler when Rubinstein stayed in her family home.

In 2020, the historian, journalist and Holocaust survivor Marian Turski wrote:

Myself, I can hardly remember them from my (relatively short) time at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is with shame that I admit my memories are – I would say – unfriendly, derisive even. This, of course, is my fault, our fault – the fault of those who thought this way at the time. We – who saw ourselves as sapient, rational, enlightened – mindlessly allowed our thought systems to be corrupted by common stereotypes, which were solidified by the National Socialists.¹⁰

It is our fault “they” do not exist, obscured by pre-war phantasms which were fueled by Nazi propaganda and obscene camp rumors.

Deemed nameless seducers, criminals, “an anti-social element,” they remain the dark background which serves to highlight the heroism of Polish patriots risking both danger at the hands of Nazi perpetrators and an infestation with “the homosexual plague.”

The time has come to revolt against these notions. We can no longer be silent about “them.”

⁹ Translator’s note: Armia Krajowa was the main Polish resistance force during the Nazi occupation. It emerged out of Polish regular armed forces once they had been delegalized.

¹⁰ This fragment comes from Marian Turski’s foreword to a book entitled *Erinnern in Auschwitz*. The Polish version first appeared in the monthly magazine *Polityka*. Cf. M. Turski, Introduction, [in:] *Erinnern in Auschwitz: auch an sexuelle Minderheiten*, eds. J. Ostrowska, J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, L. van Dijk, Querverlag, Berlin 2020, pp. 9–11.

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