

Open letter to the lesbian, gay and queer public

Regarding the “lesbian commemorative orb” as visible memento of the persecution and murder of lesbian women during Nazi-fascism.

This letter is being sent to all the lesbian, lesbian and gay, gay and queer initiatives and structures we know, and we wish it to be passed on to further initiatives and structures, and to activists. We have deliberately decided against a discussion of this matter in the bourgeois mainstream media, and in favour of a debate within the structures addressed above.

As most of you know, the initiative “Autonome Feministische FrauenLesben aus Deutschland und Österreich” (Autonomous Feminist WomenLesbians from Germany and Austria) placed a commemorative orb as a visible sign of remembrance of the persecution and murder of lesbian women and girls at Ravensbrück concentration camp in April 2015, the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the women's concentration camp of Ravensbrück and the youth concentration camp for girls Uckermark. In June 2016 a motion for a Lesbian memento within the Ravensbrück Memorial Site (<http://www.ravensbrueck.de/mgr/>) was presented to International Advisory Council and the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation by the initiative, supported by the IRK (Internationales Ravensbrück Komitee; <https://www.ravensbrueck.at/vernetzung-kooperativen/internationales-ravensbrueck-komitee/>) and 517 signatories, i.e. individuals and organisations from 24 countries.

Currently 629 persons and organisations from 27 countries are supporting the motion - among others from: Germany, Austria, Italy, France, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Greece, Israel, Sweden, Great Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia The organisations are lesbian, lesbian-feminist, lesbian-gay initiatives and organisations; survivors' associations from Germany, Austria, Italy; feminist, left, antifascist groups, organisations and projects; as well as activists and scholars.

The inscription suggested in the motion for the commemorative orb reads, “In Gedenken aller lesbischen Frauen und Mädchen im Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück und Uckermark. Lesbische Frauen galten als „entartet“ und wurden als „asozial“, als widerständig und ver-rückt und aus anderen Gründen verfolgt und ermordet. Ihr seid nicht vergessen!”

(English: “Commemorating all lesbian women and girls in the women's concentration camp Ravensbrück and Uckermark. Lesbian women were regarded as “degenerate“ and were prosecuted and murdered as “anti-social“, as resisting and “mentally deranged“ and for other reasons. You are not forgotten.”

The International Advisory Council and the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation (Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte) have postponed the decision several times following controversial debates and are now going to vote once again on the motion on 24 November 2017.

Background of the controversy

Here we will list some examples cited to illuminate the background of the “controversy”. We consider these comments and statements as misogynist and, above all, as lesbophobic. We are again outlining the (written) argumentation here, in order to clarify its background and to enable conscious and informed intervention.

“Representative of Homosexuals”

It has come to our attention that the “Representative of Homosexuals”, Alexander Zinn, nominated for the International Advisory Council by the LSVD Berlin-Brandenburg (the German Lesbian Gay Association), presented a written rejection of the lesbian memento to the International Advisory Council in 2016. This is an excerpt of his text:

“[...] There is still no evidence, nor has there ever been any, of lesbian sexuality having been a reason for persecution in the Third Reich [??!! Comment by the women writing this open letter]. Although those in power in the NS-Regime also rejected female sexuality, they consciously decided to keep sexual acts among women unpenalised when tightening §175 in 1935. [§175 penalised male homosexuality in Germany]

[This is only true of the legal situation in Germany itself as the so-called “Old Reich” of the fascist “Great German Reich”, while in Austria, as the “Ostmark” part of the fascist “Great German Reich”, sexual acts among women were in fact penalised under §129. Note by the women writing this letter.]

Until today there is no single known case of a woman having been legally persecuted because of lesbian sexual contacts. [??!! Comment by the women writing this letter.] [...] But even if a lesbian predisposition/sexuality should be proven to have been the cause of imprisonment in one or several cases, this would still not count as evidence for a systematic persecution of lesbian women as pretended by those bringing in the motion for a lesbian memento. Would the Council follow the motion of the Initiative “Autonomous Feminist WomenLesbians from Germany and Austria”, it would agree to a manipulative rendition of history [Geschichtsklitterung] and contribute to the press and the public accepting the legend of a “persecution” of lesbians as “historical truth”. [??!! Comment by the women writing this open letter.] Therefore, the Council can only reject this motion. The motion is furthermore an insult to the Council. The Initiative Autonomous Feminist WomenLesbians from Germany and Austria has demonstrated by its act that it is not willing to accept the Council's decision. As a reaction to the negative decision taken by the Council on 26 November 2012 the Initiative simply placed a “wild memento” during the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation in April 2015.

[??!! Comment by the women writing this letter.] *It was only by accident that former Council member Joachim Müller noticed this “wild memento” in spring 2016. It was only his intervention with the board of the Foundation that led to Ms Eschebach (PhD) having the memento [...] removed. [...] It is against this background that the positive statement by Ravensbrück Memorial Site is to be understood as regards the application for the memento. The claim by the Memorial Site's board, that 'the mere existence of the memento' does not 'lead back to an understanding of a history of a legal persecution of lesbian women', ignores the claim made by the women bringing in this motion, who explicitly refer to such a history. And it ignores the politically motivated debate about an alleged persecution of lesbian women that has been resurfacing for years. With this at the very least naive, if not manipulative, behaviour the Memorial Site's Board makes itself an accomplice in a completely unacceptable instrumentalisation of history in the service of current political interests. [??!! Comment by the women writing this letter.] [...]*

“Current state of research”

An article on queer.de, published on 19 September 2017

[http://www.queer.de/detail.php?article_id=29722] says, “Homosexual female inmates are to be commemorated at the Concentration Camp Memorial Site Ravensbrück – although the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation does not see any targeted persecution.”

[?!! Comment by the women writing this letter.]

(According to the online magazine queer.de of 19 September 2017) Prof Dr. Günter Morsch, Head of the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation and International Council member, writes in a letter to the LSVD Berlin-Brandenburg that the Commission of the Brandenburg Memorial Foundation notes *“that according to the current state of research, there is no evidence of women having been punished for their homosexuality by imprisonment in camps. There is also no single case (among 139,000 women prisoners) in which lesbian behaviour has been proven to be penalised with imprisonment in a camp under a pretext (e.g. as “anti-social”).*

[?!! Comment by the women writing this letter.]

“Comments”

One of the first comments on the article in queer.de, cited here, is exemplary of the lack of understanding within large parts of the gay community. *“Those who frame commemoration in this way question or minimise the suffering of gay men, because this gives rise to the impression that like the female victims they were ‘merely’ gay incidentally and additionally. Gay men were persecuted, tortured and murdered because of their sexuality. That is a category in itself. Why is it so hard to bear that among homosexuals there is only one single persecuted group, namely gay men?”* [?!! Comment by the women writing this letter.]

We are now calling on you, because we think it is necessary to discuss this in a lesbian and gay public and to take a stance.

The LSVD Berlin-Brandenburg has again nominated Alexander Zinn for the International Council that will meet next on 24 November 2017 and decide on the motion for the “Lesbian Commemorative Orb”. We consider it unacceptable that a person who calls the persecution of lesbians in NS-fascism a “legend” and a “manipulative rendition of history”, who tries to discredit lesbian activists, and who calls the Board of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site “naive” and “manipulative” can be active as representative of homosexuals in the International Council of a Memorial.

This decision is also within the responsibility of the lesbian, lesbian and gay, gay and queer structures, especially in Germany.

A “representation of homosexuals”, a Council and a Commission, that among other matters decide on mementos for the persecution of “homosexuals” under NS-fascism, must also take the lived realities of lesbian women and girls and the structures of persecution against lesbians and lesbian life styles into account. The persecution of lesbian women and girls under NS-fascism did exist, not only individually, but structurally. It is necessary both historically and politically that the visibility and the commemoration of the persecuted lesbian women and girls under NS-fascism is made possible.

The persecution is not exclusively visible in the groups of inmates created by the national socialists. The persecution of lesbians – in common with that of gay men – is characterised by the ostracism directed against homosexual love within society. In Nazi ideology they were regarded as “morally degenerate”. The status by lesbians in society cannot simply be viewed in terms of that of gay men. “Lesbians [have] more in common with [single women] and women living on their own” Wienke Zitzlaff said in a presentation on “Living Spaces, Living Dreams” (Wienke Zitzlaff, 1931 – 2017, active anti-fascist, leftist, feminist and lesbian). The structural persecution of lesbian women and girls under NS-fascism is visible:

- in patriarchal structures of power and sexist laws (such as the barring of women from professions, patriarchal family laws and a sexist, racist and eugenic reproductive policy)
- in the persecution of lesbian lifestyles
- in the banning of lesbian magazines and destruction of lesbian bars or cafés
- in the dismissals from jobs or accommodation on suspicion of a lesbian life style
- in the stigmatisation and persecution of lesbians as “anti-social”, “criminal” or “mentally deranged”
- in the special notes “Lesbierin” (“lesbian”) contained in Nazi files
- in the punishment, torture, singling out of lesbian women in concentration camps.

We thank all women activists and women scholars who have been fostering the visibility and the discussion of the persecution of lesbian women and lesbian life styles with their manifold engagement, providing content, and the groundwork of research. To name but a few: Working group Lesbians (in East Germany in the 80s), Ilse Kokula (Germany), Claudia Schoppman (Germany), Corinna Tomberger (Germany), Ulrike Janz (Germany), Gudrun Hauer (Austria), Angela Mayer (Austria) and currently, the Initiative “Autonomous Feminist Women Lesbians from Germany and Austria”. And we support the press statement by the “Bündnis für lesbisches Gedenken in Ravensbrück” (“Alliance for lesbian commemoration Ravensbrück”) from September 2017.

We think it is important that the “Lesbian Commemorative Orb” is placed as a memento and that a space is being created within the Ravensbrück Memorial Site where the persecution and murder of lesbians and those who were denounced as such becomes visible and where the women concerned can be commemorated, a commemoration that can thus contribute to a critical discussion of structures of persecution during NS-fascism.

Please discuss this and write comments on this within your communities.

Send your statements to the LSVD Berlin-Brandenburg, berlin@lsvd.de

Write to: Head of the International Council / Vorsitzender des Internationalen Beirats Thomas Lutz, info@stiftung-bg.de

and to: Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte / Brandenburg Memorial Foundation ProfDr Günther Morsch, info@gedenkstaette-sachsenhausen.de

and send a copy of your letters or emails to: solidaritaet_gedenkkugel@gmx.at

Lesbian, feminist, antifascist greetings in solidarity,
Lesbians from the FZ - Autonomes Feministisches FrauenLesbenZentrum Wien
and plenary meeting of the Women’s Centre, Vienna, October 12th, 2017

October 2017

Further details:

*There is a film on the laying of the “Lesbian Commemorative Orb” during the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp.

One of the “Lesbian Commemorative Orbs” (there are three specimen which have been created following different discussions and occasions) can be found at the lesbian archive Spinnboden – Lesbenarchiv and Bibliothek Berlin. The second commemorative orb is exhibited at the Schwules Museum Berlin where an event took place with Wiebke Hass, a representative of the initiative, and with Corinna Tomberger on July 30th, 2017. Cf. film <http://video.tagesspiegel.de/5541728775001>. The third “commemorative orb” is deposited in the Archive of the Ravensbrück Memorial Site for it to remain there until a final decision has been made.

*On the occasion of the 72nd anniversary of the liberation of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp the symposium “Identity Politics and Commemoration. Lesbian and Gay Cultures of Commemoration under Discussion” took place on April 20th/ 21st, 2017, organised by the Ravensbrück Memorial Site/Brandenburg Memorial Foundation. In this context the initiative arranged the exhibition “Lesbian Commemorative Orb. History of and Background to the Memento for Lesbian Women Persecuted and Murdered during NS-Fascism”. This exhibition remained at the Ravensbrück Memorial site until the end of June, was shown from October 5th to 8th at the EL*C – European Lesbian* Congress in Vienna and can be seen until December 20th at the FZ – Autonomous Feminist Women’s Lesbian Centre in Vienna.

* To contact the initiative “Autonome Feministische FrauenLesben from Germany and Austria”, send an e-mail to: gedenkkugel@gmx.de