Remembering the gay victims of the Holocaust
During the Nazi period up to 100,000 gay men & women were persecuted & imprisoned for their sexuality under Paragraph 175 of the German Penal code. The Third Reich had no place for such 'deviants' & set out a systematic strategy to rid itself of this 'poison'. About 15,000 were sent to concentration camps where, forced to wear the 'pink triangle', as many as 60% lost their lives.

Those that did survive were subject to ongoing persecution in post-war society & struggled hard to be recognized as victims of the Holocaust. In 2005 very few of these witnesses are left to speak of their experiences & in a few years there may be no survivors left. Their voices call now to future generations to listen & learn ensuring their plight does not slip quietly in to the realms of history alone.
Before Fascism

The golden twenties were never so prominent as in Berlin. The city alone featured almost a hundred gay clubs and bars, where men danced with men and women met women without incident.

The decadence of the period allowed many to revel in their sexuality. Over 30 homosexual journals were published, including 'Der Eigene', ('The self-owners') and 'Die Intel' ('The Island'). These journals celebrated the male form and featured writings, poetry, essays and photography. Several lesbian journals were also widely circulated, including 'Frauenliebe', meaning 'female love', and 'Die Freundin', meaning 'girlfriend'.

Berlin also boasted the 'Institute for Sexual Science', responsible for much of the early research into homosexuality, and the first global gay rights organisation: the 'World League for Sexual Reform' (WLSR). Responsible for both of these pioneering organisations was the German sexologist, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld.

While gay life was relatively well catered for in large urban areas, homosexuality was still not generally approved of. As a result most gay affairs were conducted with discretion and some caution.
Shortly after the Nazis became the only legal party in the Third Reich, homosexual men and women became the target of police raids and interrogation. Under a section of the existing 1871 German Penal code, known as Paragraph 175 (§ 175), homosexual men could be arrested and tried. Paragraph 175 made sexual acts between men a punishable act.

When the Nazi party came to power the act was adjusted to include further punishment for homosexual men and the code was used as the main instrument to arrest both known homosexuals and later, men suspected of homosexual acts. The photo opposite is a police identity picture showing a German man arrested in October 1937 for violating Paragraph 175.

By June 28th 1935, and in effect from September 1st 1935, the new § 175 had been revised to include indecency and two further additions: 175a and 175b.

By 1944 a suggestion of homosexuality was all that was required for an arrest and many more men found themselves arrested and imprisoned.
Arrests

As police raids on homosexuals began and became widespread, more and more gays were identified and charged. A man suspected of violating § 175 would be questioned, photographed and often softened up with the use of force. Under extreme pressure and violent interrogation those arrested would then be forced to give the names and addresses of other homosexuals known to them.

Often the Gestapo would have raided the house of a homosexual on arrest and found an address book that would have led them to other violators of § 175.

Statements and confessions were signed under intense, often physical pressure and once a signature was obtained the arrestee would be charged. As most 'confessed' to their crime, few were given a fair hearing or the chance to fight their case in a court of law.

At the point of arrest suspects were given no chance to return home or the opportunity to communicate with their family about their whereabouts. Many did not see their families again until after their liberation from concentration camps or after completion of prison terms.

‘Off I went to Dachau without a trial - directly to Dachau'
Gay survivor Heinz F.

speaking about his arrest (taken from the documentary 'Paragraph 175')
Homosexuals charged under § 175 were held in so called schutzhaft or 'protective custody' at a variety of prisons and detention centres including Waldheim prison and Fuhlsbutter prison.

The first special centre to house criminals and homosexuals was erected in 1933 at Dachau, southern Germany, which was largely seen as the prototype for further camps. The Sachsenhausen camp opened in 1936 to eventually house more than 200,000 prisoners, including many homosexuals. When the huge network of concentration camps were in place throughout Germany and occupied Europe, many arrested homosexuals found themselves deported straight from the police custody, without any chance of trial. Violators of §175 were then held mainly at Auschwitz- Birkenau, Treblinka, Flossenburg, Neuengamme and Schirmeck.

'Voluntary' castration
From 1935 men convicted under § 175 could 'volunteer' to undergo castration in order to "free themselves" from their "degenerate sex drive." This was the idea of SS doctor Himmler. Many homosexuals agreed to the operation believing that they would then be set free. After the operation many were then simply re-arrested as they were still thought to be a degenerate risk to the purity of the Reich.
Pink Triangles

To differentiate between the various groups in the camps, the Nazis devised a simple system of easy identification. Besides the individual numbering system of tattooing each prisoner on entry, various cloth symbols and letters were sewn onto uniforms and worn at all times to aid instant recognition.

Initially homosexuals were identified by the letter 'A', which was sewn on to their left breast or trouser leg. The 'A' stood for Arschficker, which is the German word for 'Ass-F**ker'. Later replaced by a triangle system as shown in this chart: yellow for Jews; red for politicals; green for criminals; purple for Jehovah's Witnesses; black for asocials; brown for gypsies; blue for emigrants and pink for homosexuals. Jewish homosexuals were made to wear both the yellow triangle and the pink triangle, which undoubtedly left them 'the lowest of the low'.

Table of camp inmate markings

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<td>Professional prisoners</td>
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Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi_concentration_camp_badges
'The day regularly began at 6am, or 5am in the summer, and in just half an hour we had to be washed, dressed and have our beds made up in military style. If you still had time, you could have breakfast, which meant a hurried slurping down the thin flour soup, hot or lukewarm, and eating your piece of bread. Then we had to form up in eights on the parade ground for morning roll call. Work followed, in winter from 7.30am to 5pm, and in summer from 7am to 8pm, with a half hour break at the workplace. After work, straight back to camp and immediate parade for evening roll-call.'

Heinz Heger (pseudonym), 'The Men with the Pink Triangle'
Gay men were often given the most gruelling work to do in the camps and many died though exhaustion as a result. Forced to carry heavy boulders in quarries, many suffered terrible injuries as a result. Other jobs included moving meaningless quantities of stones for days on end from one side of the camp to the other in an SS attempt to break the 'homosexual spirit'. By 1943 the SS had begun the 'Extermination through work program', specifically designed to literally work homosexuals and criminals to death.

Gays were treated with particular contempt not only the SS but also by many of the other inmates, who regarded them as degenerate perverts. Life in the camps was a solitary existence making it hard to survive mentally for any period of time. In the face of such hatred and degradation, it is no surprise that many committed suicide by running into electric perimeter fences rather than face ongoing persecution.

'In the morning we had to cart the snow outside our block from the left side of the road to the right side. In the afternoon we had to cart the same snow back from the right side to the left... ...We had to shovel up the snow with our hands - our bare hands, as we didn't have any gloves. We worked in teams of two... ...This mental and bodily torment lasted six days, until at last new pink-triangle prisoners were delivered to our block and took over for us. Our hands were cracked all over and half frozen off, and we had become dumb and indifferent slaves of the SS'.

Heinz Heger, 'The Men with the Pink Triangle'
Punishment

Camp punishments for various misdemeanours included tree hanging, featuring a high pole erected with a hook from which a victim, already shackled from behind, was strung up by the hands. The weight of the body soon pulled the arms up resulting in excruciating pain as the shoulders twisted under the strain. These poles were arranged in multiple lines and referred to 'the singing forest'. Gay survivor Heinz Dörmer recalls 'The howling and the screaming was inhuman.'

'Two SS men brought a young man to the center of the square... ... the SS stripped him naked and shoved a tin pale over his head. Next, they set their ferocious German shepherds on him: the guard dogs first bit into his groin and thighs, then devoured him right in front of us. His shrieks of pain were distorted and amplified by the pain in which his head was trapped. My rigid body reeled, my eyes gaped at so much horror, tears poured down my cheeks, I fervently prayed that he would black out quickly.'

Pierre Seel, 'Liberation Was for Others'

Another popular punishment was the horse: a wooden bench over which a victim was secured stomach down, legs and arms tied to the legs, before being struck several times with a blunt instrument or whip. Other forms of punishment included standing still for hours on end either in the heat of the day or the cold of night. All of these punishments were carried out in front of other inmates adding to the humiliation.

'Half a year I was kept bent over... My hands were tied to my ankles. When they brought the food, the bowl was on the floor; they poured it from above and it was spilled all over. I had to lick it up with my tongue. We couldn't go out, so your pants were soiled.'

Survivor Paul Gerhard Vogel
In spite of the harsh conditions in the camps, or even because of it, relationships were formed. Survivors talk of beneficial sexual and emotional bonds that existed between inmates and camp commandants, block leaders and even in some cases, SS guards. Guards and capos - the block leaders often took a male prisoner that they liked and kept them as 'pets'. In the absence of women, who were forbidden entry to men's blocks, it appeared that sexual drives were often stronger than sexual boundaries.

Those 'lucky' enough to be chosen as pets would receive extra food rations in return for sexual favours and often avoided the hard labour forced onto the other prisoners.

While the majority of these relationships were clearly driven by desperate times and survival tactics, others were driven by genuine affection in the face of unbelievable hardship.

'Anyone found with his underclothes on in bed, or his hand under his blanket -- there were checks almost every night -- was taken outside and had several bowls of water poured over him before being left standing outside for a good hour. Only a few people survived this treatment.'

Heinz Heger
Lesbians

While gay men made up the majority of victims, lesbians were by no means saved from persecution. Although § 175 made no reference to lesbianism, the Third Reich had no place for women who could not reproduce and further the Aryan race. Gay men were regarded as largely degenerate and dangerous impurities to the Reich, where as all women were regarded as 'passive' and in need of men. Generally lesbianism was regarded as a non-permanent state resulting from confused friendships rather than a systematic threat.

The Nazis outlawed and closed all lesbian bars, groups and publications. Police were encouraged to raid known lesbian meeting places creating a climate of fear. This forced many women to break off friendships and to meet in secret. Some escaped possible persecution by entering into marriages with gay friends as a form of cover. Survivor Annette Eick, b1909, escaped to the UK on a false papers that she had secured from a woman she had met at a lesbian bar. As a Jewish Lesbian, she would have almost certainly been persecuted had she stayed in Berlin.

There are documented cases of lesbians being held at the German camp Ravensbruck. One woman, Henny Schermann, b 1912, was arrested in 1940 in Frankfurt and was labelled 'licentious Lesbian' on her police mug shot. Also identified as a 'stateless Jew', she was deported to Ravensbruck concentration camp, where two years later she was selected for extermination and gassed at the Bernburg psychiatric hospital.

Right: Henny Schermann
http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/
“Liberation”

Liberation for others
After the many years of ongoing persecution and Nazi terror, the freedom dreams of many concentration camp prisoners finally came true when, in 1944, the liberation began. The largest of the death camps - Auschwitz - was not liberated until January 27th 1945. World War II ended on May 7th, 1945, when Nazi Germany finally surrendered to the Allied forces.

Continued persecution
After the camps were liberated and the plight of the Jewish victims acknowledged worldwide, the persecution of gay men continued throughout post-war Germany. In fact many pink triangle survivors were re-imprisoned under § 175, with time spent in concentration camps deducted from their pensions. Time spent in the camps contributed to their continued sentences that were then completed in prisons.

While other victims of the Holocaust received compensation for loss of family and loss of education, gay men remained deviants in the eyes of post-war society. In fact in Germany many more men were prosecuted under § 175 in the years immediate to the Nazi regime.
Silent shame

The gay survivors who were liberated (i.e. not subject to further prison terms) often found themselves ostracized from society. Some were not welcomed back to their homes in the aftermath of war for the 'shame' they had brought on their family's reputation. Those that did return often kept their experience to themselves fearing that the sensitive nature of the horrors would bring further distress to family members. Some never spoke out about their suffering.

In the post-war years many homosexuals tried to restart their battered lives; some entered into marriage; others struggled to find anonymity in their communities; some even entered into the armed forces. The stigma of the pink triangle was clearly a heavy burden and, without the support and contact of gay friends who were either in hiding or dead themselves, many survivors lived with the silent 'shame' of their experience in secret.

In the early days after my homecoming, the neighbours made a bit of a fuss about this 'queer' concentration camp returnee.'

Gay survivor Heinz Heger (pseudonym)
With § 175 still in place, many survivors tried hard to put their experiences behind them fearing further persecution. However, after the 'liberation' some survivors did bravely struggle for recognition through the courts. Survivors such as Karl Gorath, Heinz Dörmer, and Pierre Seel, fought many years for retribution for their imprisonment. Goraths' attempts at legal reparations were rejected both in 1953 and 1960. Pierre Seel refused to give up and continued fighting throughout the 1980's and 1990's.

In the 1945Nuremberg war crime trials that followed the liberation no mention was ever made of crimes against homosexuals. No SS official was ever tried for specific atrocities against pink triangle prisoners. Many of the known SS Doctors, who had performed operations on homosexuals, were never brought to account for their actions. One of the most notorious SS doctors was Carl Peter Vaernet who performed numerous experiments on pink triangle inmates at the Buchenwald and Neuengamme camps. He was never tried for his crimes and escaped to South America where he died a free man in 1965.

Many of the pink triangle survivors were never recognised as victims of the Holocaust during their lives and never lived to be repatriated. For those who continued to fight, it would be many years before their efforts paid off.
After the 'liberation' some survivors including Karl Gorath, bravely struggled for recognition through the courts in post-war society. However, with Paragraph 175 still in place, many survivors tried to put their experiences behind them fearing further persecution.

Unwilling to go quietly into the night, one survivor began writing down his painful memories onto paper. The result was the powerful 'Männer mit dem rosa Winkel ' ('Man with the Pink Triangle'). First published in 1971, the German book opened the lid on a part of history that had remained hidden for so long. The Austrian survivor chose to remain anonymous fearing possible repercussions, instead relating his experiences to the German writer Heinz Heger. The book was later translated into English and republished in 1980 as 'The Men With the Pink Triangle', when it received wider recognition.

Other survivor books soon followed, including 'The Pink Triangle' by Robert Plant; 'An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin' by Gad Beck; 'Liberation was for Others, Memoires of a Gay Survivor of the Nazi Holocaust' by Pierre Seel (Originally published in French as 'Moi Pierre Seel, déporté Homosexuel'); and 'Damned Strong Love: The True Story of Willi G. and Stephan K' by Lutz Van Dijk
Historians began to research the Nazi persecution of homosexuals extensively, among them German-born Dr. Klaus Mueller, who has produced many articles on the subject. In 1995 he helped & encouraged eight survivors to issue a collective declaration demanding judicial & moral recognition of their persecution. The declaration read:

"Declaration of gay survivors 50 years after their liberation"

"50 years ago, Allied troops did liberate us from Nazi concentration camps & prisons. But the world we had hoped for did not happen to come true. We were forced to hide again & faced ongoing persecution under the same Nazi-law that was on the books since 1935 & stayed on the books until 1969. Raids were frequent. Some of us - just tasting their new freedom - were even sentenced to long-term prison again. Although some of us tried courageously to gain recognition by challenging the courts up to the West German Supreme Court, we were never acknowledged as being persecuted by the Nazi regime. We lacked the moral support & sympathy of the public. No SS-man ever had to face a trial for the murder of a gay man in or outside the camps. But whereas they now enjoy a pension for their 'work' in the camps, our years in the camps are subtracted from our pension.

Today we are too old & tired to struggle for the recognition of the Nazi injustice we suffered. Many of us never dared to testify. Many of us died alone with their hunting memories. We waited long, but in vain for a clear political & financial gesture of the German government & courts. We know that still very little is taught in schools & universities about our fate. Even Holocaust museums & memorials many times don’t mention the Nazi persecution of homosexuals.

Today, 50 years later, we turn to the young generation & to all of you who are not guided by hate & homophobia. Please support us in our struggle to memorize & document the Nazi atrocities against homosexual men & lesbian women. Let us never forget the Nazi atrocities against Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah’s witnesses, Freemasons, the disabled, Polish & Russian prisoners of war & homosexuals. Let us learn from the past & let us support the young generation of lesbian women & gay men, girls & boys to lead unlike us a life in dignity & respect, with their loved ones, their friends & their families."
Recognition did eventually come but late for many of gay victims & survivors, who lived the rest of their lives as criminals in the eyes of the law. While memorials remember the many other victims of the Holocaust, it was 54 years before one included the gay victims. In January 1999 Germany finally held its first official memorial service for the homosexual victims at the former Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

However, it wasn't until December 2000 that an actual apology came. The German government issued an apology for the prosecution of homosexuals in Germany after 1949 & agreed to recognise gays as victims of the Third Reich.

On May 17th 2002, the compensation process was completed as thousands of homosexuals, who suffered under the Reich, were officially pardoned by the German government. About 50,000 gay men were included.

German justice minister Hertha Daeubler-Gmelin told parliament,

"We all know that our decisions today are more than 50 years late, they are necessary nonetheless. We owe it to the victims of wrongful Nazi justice."
Im Gedenken an die homosexuellen Männer, die hier gelitten haben.


In memory of the homosexual men that suffered here.

There were 650 Rosa – Winkel prisoners in the Buchenwald concentration camp between 1937-1945. Many of them lost their lives.