

## Case Study: Albrecht Becker



Albrecht Becker. 1938  
© Schwules Museum  
(Gay Museum), Berlin

Hitler and other leading Nazis had a plan for German society which valued same-ness, not diversity. Their goal was to make Germany an exclusively 'Aryan'<sup>1</sup> nation and they had an 'ideal' picture of a German citizen – strong and healthy, fair skinned, blond haired and blue eyed. Propaganda films were made to show this ideal of young German men and women. Hitler was obsessive about same-ness and, for him, not all human beings were equal; some were even *untermenschen* – subhuman. He feared and hated anyone who was different, including people who might look like this German ideal but think or act differently. For example, a person's political or religious views might deviate from the Nazi's concept of 'normality'. Sexual orientation – whether someone was gay or straight - was also important to Hitler.

In the 1920's, especially in Berlin, there had been a more open and tolerant view towards homosexuality. There was even a Scientific-Humanitarian Committee<sup>2</sup> set up to defend the rights of gay and lesbian Germans. However, from the beginning the Nazi party made its opposition clear. The reason they gave for this was that all sexual relations had one major purpose – the birth of more Aryan German children to build up the nation or **Volk**.

In 1933, the Nazis began taking people into what they called 'protective custody' (*Schutzhaft*), but which really meant they were arrested. Anyone who represented a threat to Nazism, through their political, religious or other views was included in the *Schutzhaft*. People who were known to be gay or who had been involved in defending gay rights were also rounded up. In 1935, it was made an offence<sup>3</sup> to 'promote friendships' between men which might have a homosexual element.

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<sup>1</sup> Aryan: Hitler took the word from Indian history. He used it to mean a 'superior' race of northern European people, whose blood was 'pure' – that is, not mingled with any other races.

His view that that such 'Aryans' must be superior in every way took a blow at the 1936 Munich Olympics when Germans did not dominate the games. The outstanding performance of African American athlete Jesse Owens annoyed Hitler but did not result in a more rational approach.

<sup>2</sup> Wissenschaftlich-Humanitäres Komitee

<sup>3</sup> Under the infamous Paragraph 175, formally § 175 StGB

Albrecht Becker was an actor and production designer. He lived with his partner, the Director of the State Archive, in Würzburg, a town in the southern state of Bavaria. Also living in Würzburg was a Jewish wine merchant and Swiss citizen, Dr Leopold Obermayer. When Obermayer complained to the local police that his mail was being opened, the Gestapo investigated him further, and a number of photographs of young men were found in his safe. One of these photographs was of Albrecht Becker.

As both an observant Jew and gay, Obermayer could not hope for mercy, but this was still before the full Nazi onslaught against Jews and he did try to defend himself. His own notes from his trial have survived. He was first sent to a concentration camp at **Dachau** where he was tortured. Later he was transferred to the notorious **Mauthausen** camp where inmates were literally worked to death and where he subsequently perished. Albrecht Becker was also arrested and put on trial, after which he was sent to Nürnberg Prison. Towards the end of the war, when more soldiers were needed, some gay men were released in order to help the war effort; Albrecht was among these. Having no option but to go into the German army, he was sent to the Russian front. Soldiers who were sent here rarely survived for long and suffered extreme privations. However, Becker did manage to survive and was able to return to working in the film industry after the war where he became well known internationally. He died in 2002.

It is not entirely clear how many men suffered as a result of Nazi persecution because sometimes gay men were arrested on different 'charges'. However, estimated numbers are in the tens of thousands. Women were treated more leniently. Those confined in concentration camps were made to wear a cloth badge sewn onto their clothes in the shape of a pink triangle. Such a badge made them identifiable to the guards and singled them out for extra torment. In at least one camp, it is recorded that the SS used the pink triangles on the men's chests as targets to shoot at 'for practice'.

Of course, some Nazis were also gay. Sometimes this was known and tolerated because they were in positions of power. The best known example of this is Ernst Rohm, chief of Hitler's 'Brown Shirts' or Storm Troopers<sup>4</sup>. When he became too powerful, however, Hitler had him and his supporters murdered. The charge of homosexuality was also used to get rid of other 'problem' Nazis.

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<sup>4</sup> The SA or Sturmabteilung