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Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter, and the Holocaust¹

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Abstract:

In analyzing an enforced relationship between two women, a German guard and a Jewish Czech prisoner in a Hamburg concentration camp, this article uses queer Holocaust history to explore sexual barter, sexual violence, agency of the victims, and rules of the prisoner society. It also makes a plea for departure from normativity in our thinking of the Holocaust, and for inclusion of marginalized voices.

At 22 years, Věra Fuchsová found herself in a satellite camp on the outskirts of Hamburg. The trained dressmaker and Jewish Prague native was deported in late 1941 to Theresienstadt ghetto and two years later to Auschwitz Theresienstadt Family Camp. She belonged among the group of 500 largely Czech Jewish women who in July 1944 were selected for forced labor and sent to Neuengamme, and one week before the liberation sent to Bergen-Belsen. Here, she remembered fifty years later, they experienced a curious event: "And there was a thing that happened to us: already in Hamburg we had a SS woman, a guard in the camp, a young girl, we called her Bubi, and she treated us kind of ok. A young, pretty girl, but, as it turned out later, she was gay. And she fell in love with one our fellow prisoner. I don't know in how far the girl came close to her, but she had her mother there and she would have done anything for her, and on account of Bubi she had it good. After the liberation of Belsen we suddenly found out that Bubi is among us, wearing the

¹ I should like to thank Alexandra Garbarini, Elissa Mailänder and the anonymous reviewer for their very useful comments. Thanks are also due to the colleagues and audiences who offered their feedback when I presented this as work in progress, and to Alyn Beßmann and Christina Igla for their generous help.

striped prisoner clothing. What to do now? She treated us fine, but she was a SS woman, so what to do with her? The camp Eldest sent a girl to the English leading officer to tell him.”²

The women in Fuchsová's tale were Anneliese Kohlmann, the lesbian camp guard, and the prisoner Helene Sommer who became her lover in order to save herself, and her mother. This story of this enforced relationship offers a springboard to investigate sexual barter and queer desire in the Holocaust.³ Both topics belong among the most stigmatized in the history of sexuality in the Holocaust. It appears as if the existence of sexual barter and queer practices would somehow lessen the integrity and the suffering of Holocaust victims. This stigmatization has far-reaching effects: Firstly, survivors were and still are not authorized to speak about these kind of experiences. Secondly, we miss a crucial part of understanding the prisoner's society as a social space, ignoring practices and emotions that shaped life in the camps as well as survival strategies.

Sexual barter, that is exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection, was a frequent means with which Holocaust victims sought to secure their survival,⁴ as well as an important means of agency. Sexual barter during the Holocaust could be and indeed often was aggressive and violent, and thus form of sexual violence. However, it is important not to equal violent sexual barter with rape: The bartering partners had a measure of choice. In contrast, rape represents sexual assault in which the victim has no leeway to decide whether they want to engage. Historiography of the Holocaust has largely neglected sexual barter, and if it is addressed within feminist context, then often with discomfort, reduced to sexual violence.⁵ Scholars often

² Interview Věra Fuchsová, Archive of the Jewish Museum Prague (AJMP), The Oral History Collection, #386. Unless full names are used where I was able to ensure consent of the interviewee's heirs, the AJMP insists on full anonymization.

³ Helene Sommer's name is a pseudonym.

⁴ A. Hájková, 'Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto,' in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38, 3 (spring 2013), pp. 503-533.

⁵ S. M. Hedgepeth and R. G. Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, eds. (Hanover, NH, 2010) includes several contributions to that end; M. Röger, *Kriegsbeziehungen: Intimität, Gewalt und Prostitution im besetzten Polen, 1939 bis 1945* (Frankfurt/Main, 2015); E. Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the*

focus on the limited choices the selling partners had, the undignified context, and exploitative and abusive relationships. They argued that the agency of Holocaust victims was circumvented, and thus not (really) valid. This argumentation is problematic for a number of reasons: it sets the Holocaust apart from wider history of sex work; it neglects agency of Holocaust victims; it omits that sizeable part of sexual barter took place between Holocaust victims; and it muddies our understanding of the victim society in the Holocaust. By examining the relationship between Kohlmann and Sommer, and Sommer's previous one with Willy Brachmann, a male prisoner functionary, I seek not only to enrich our perception of sexual barter, but also to expand our understanding of significance of the agency of Holocaust victims.

Our knowledge of Holocaust-related sexuality has been largely heterosexual. Whereas there has been considerable scholarship on the persecution of gay men by the Nazis, and to a more limited extent, on that of lesbian women, queer Holocaust history is a total lacuna.⁶ It is as if all Jewish Holocaust victims were imagined as heterosexual, and the queer ones as gentile. Queer Holocaust history, I argue, directs our focus on the victim society, their values, gender norms, hierarchies, and exclusion of those construed as deviant. Sexuality was often used to cast those victims who were suspected of having hurt a societal code as sexually abnormal. This stigma has largely remained valid. Stigmatized sexuality allows us to perceive what conduct has been stigmatized, and to ask why it was so. Transgressive sexuality, that is one that injured certain values and is treated as unspeakable or shameful, is a particularly salient tool. Queering Holocaust history lends one of a kind vantage point that breaks down the normativity of

Holocaust (Princeton, 2016), 107; M. Kaplan, 'Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?' *Jewish Social Studies*, 24,2 (2019), pp. 37-56, p. 44f.

For more differentiation, see C. Jaiser, 'Sexualität und Gewalt in Zeugnissen Überlebender,' in G. Bock (ed.), *Genozid und Geschlecht. Jüdische Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem* (Frankfurt/New York, 2005), pp. 123-148, 127f; R. Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion 1941-1945* (Hamburg, 2010), chapter III; Z. Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford, 2017), 109; and even more radically A. Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), ch. 2.

⁶ A- Hájková, 'Den Holocaust queer erzählen,' *Sexualitäten Jahrbuch* (2018), pp. 86-110; Hájková, 'Queere Geschichte und der Holocaust,' *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 68/32-33 (2018), pp. 42-47.

Holocaust discourse, a particularly normative and hence exclusionary master narrative of the genocide and its victims.

Scholars and activists have pointed out the homophobia of the prisoner society.⁷ Inmates and survivors expressed extremely negative views of same sex activity in the prisoner society, be it consensual or violent, and questioned the humanity of the queer prisoners. The “homosexuals” were largely an imagined category and tool of othering, which is why the queer prisoners described always belong to a different group than the narrator: If the narrator was a political prisoner, then as “asocial,” etc. The homophobia also influenced the narrative of female guards, who are often described as sexually perverse -- for instance as lesbians.⁸ This homophobia is present in early and later Holocaust scholarship.⁹ The prejudice had a strong effect on the record transmission: there are next to no testimonies of survivors who talk about engaging in same sex conduct. In fact, all testimonies of victims marked as socially deviant: those said to be prostitutes, informers, or queer victims are missing. This gap is particularly striking, as the Holocaust is one of the best documented genocides, especially in terms of oral history collections.

With a nonexistent archive, with what sources can we use to write a queer Holocaust history?¹⁰ This research necessitates an archeological approach, tracing names, relatives willing to be interviewed, reparation files, and triangulation of self-testimonies, demanding extensive

⁷ U. Janz, Zeugnisse überlebender Frauen: Die Wahrnehmung von Lesben/Lesbischem Verhalten in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern,“ *FRAZ München*, 2/1994, 3/1994, 1/1995; C. Gelbin, „Double Visions: Queer Femininity and Holocaust Film from *Ostatni Etap* to *Aimée & Jaguar*,“ *Women in German Yearbook*, 23 (2007), pp. 179-204; I. Eschebach, „Geschichte und Gedenken: Homophobie, Devianz und weibliche Homosexualität im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück,“ in Eschebach (ed.), *Homophobie und Devianz: Weibliche und männliche Homosexualität im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, 2012), pp. 65-79.

⁸ I. Eschebach, „NS-Prozesse in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und der DDR: Einige Überlegungen zu den Strafverfahrensakten ehemaliger SS-Aufseherinnen des Frauenkonzentrationslagers Ravensbrück,“ *Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland* (3, 1997), pp. 65-74; A. Kretzer, *NS-Täterschaft und Geschlecht: Der erste britische Ravensbrück-Prozess 1946/47 in Hamburg* (Berlin, 2009). Sarah Helm fell victim to this narrative: *If This Is A Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (London, 2015): 31

⁹ H. Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, trans. Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill, 2006), p. 405; A. Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A sociological Analysis*, (Berkeley, 1979), p. 98; D. Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933-1949* (London, 2016), p. 662.

¹⁰ See also E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 7f; M. Vicinus, „The History of Lesbian History,“ *Feminist Studies*, 38, 3 (fall 2012), pp. 566-596, 575.

research stamina. The methodological challenge at hand is to identify and interpret the hints and silences in the historical record; moreover, in reading these hints, we need to differentiate between homophobic othering and evidence of queer practices. This case study is based on a fortunate combination of existing records, in particular recollections of Neuengamme survivors, many of whom recalled the relationship between Kohlmann and Sommer; Kohlmann's British trial, as well as another trial addressing two satellite camps where Kohlmann worked. Kohlmann's voice is also represented in her prison file. Helene Sommer herself also bore testimony, and albeit she discussed none of the issues at heart of this article, her silence, and matters she chose to speak about and the way she did so are telling. The Hamburg state archive provided records pertinent to Willy Brachmann.

A short conceptual remark: How are we to call people who engaged in same sex, but either did not define as gay or lesbian, or we do not know anything about their sexual orientation? Defining them as homosexual would be reductive, and the term "situational homosexuality" is also problematic.¹¹ In introducing the queer paradigm, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pushed for abolition of identity categories; instead, we inhabit and perform various sexual identities.¹² Sexuality, rather than a given identity, are acts and practices.¹³ For non-heterosexual acts, I term all people who engaged, in some degree of choice, in same sex conduct queer, independently of whether they did so for romantic or rational reasons. This definition, instead of an attempt at reconstructing identity, is meant as an umbrella category. It is not a historical term, however its broadness is crucial in capturing the motivations and identities for queerness. Only when a person called himself or herself gay or lesbian I adopt that term.

This article has five parts that largely follow the story. The chronological approach is required in order to capture the complex canvas of characters and context, and thus make the

¹¹ R. Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the uneven history of modern American sexuality*, (Chicago 2002), p. 7.

¹² Sedgwick, pp. 44-48.

¹³ L. Doan, *Disturbing Practices* (Chicago, 2013), introduction.

sense of sexual barter, queerness, and victim decision-taking. The narrative takes us from the Family Camp in Auschwitz in 1943-1944 to three satellite camps of Neuengamme in 1944 to 1945, to Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, arrest and trial in 1945 and 1946, and postwar lives. The final part offers conclusions on choice, agency, coercion, and a queer Holocaust history.

Family Camp

On 21 December 1943, 2,500 Jews from Theresienstadt ghetto arrived to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The entire transport, men, women, and children, was directed to the BIIb, a section of Birkenau named the Family Camp, because unlike in all of Auschwitz, the entire population of the transport stayed here together without a selection, hence the name Family Camp.¹⁴ Men and women stayed in the same camp section, albeit in different barracks. They were not sent to forced labor, their hair was not shorn, and they were not tattooed, however they received the same minute food rations as other prisoners.

With the December transport arrived also a young Prague woman Helene Sommer, with her mother Elsa, stepfather Franz, and 13-year old half-brother Hans. Helene was born in 1922 in Frankfurt/Main to a Czech mother and German father. The couple divorced and Elsa moved back to Prague and remarried to a Prague merchant Franz Sommer. Elsa came from a well-known very wealthy family; her father built a large departmental store at Wenzeslas Square in the centre of Prague. Officially, Helene kept her birth name, but was widely known as Helene Sommer, or in its Czech form, Helena, or Lenka, Sommerová.¹⁵ Her family was assimilated, spoke German and Czech, and celebrated Christmas.¹⁶ Throughout her life, people remarked on Helene's striking

¹⁴ M. Kárný, 'Terezínský rodinný tábor v 'Konečném řešení', in T. Brod, M. Kárný, and M. Kárná (eds.), *Terezínský rodinný tábor v Osvětimi-Birkenau* (Prague, 1994), pp. 35-49, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵ Since all names of Sommer's relatives are pseudonyms, I do not offer Czech versions.

¹⁶ Interview Hans Sommer, 24 July 1996, VHA, #17535. On Sommer in Theresienstadt, see E. Strusková, "'Helene Pachner' - The Story Behind the Photograph," <https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2018/05/08/Helene-Pachner/> (last accessed on 29 April, 2019; name in the hyperlink is changed but the link works).

good looks – she had grey eyes, curly brown hair, slender yet curvaceous, and at 170cm, tall for a woman of her generation.¹⁷ In 1940, her stepfather ordered her life-sized oil portrait in oil.¹⁸ In December 1941, Helene's family was among the first Czech Jews to be deported to Theresienstadt. According to fellow survivors, Helene was sexually active with several partners.¹⁹ For many young Czech Jews in the ghetto, sexuality offered means of comfort and pleasure.²⁰ Helene recalled that she had several boyfriends in Theresienstadt, one of them became her fiancé. He was sent to Auschwitz in September 1943.

¹⁷ Helena Sommerová's application for ID, 1939, National Archive Prague, police registrations.

¹⁸ David Friedmann, „Fräulein 'Helene Sommer',“ Yad Vashem, art collection.

¹⁹ Author's interviews of Liselotte Ivry, 24 June 2019; and Rebeka Lindt recalling Miroslav Zeimer, 29 April 2019.

²⁰ A. Hájková, 'Die fabelhaften Jungs aus Theresienstadt: Junge tschechische Männer als dominante soziale Elite im Theresienstädter Ghetto,' *Im Ghetto: Neue Forschungen zu Alltag und Umfeld* (Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus, 25), eds. Christoph Dieckmann and Babette Quinkert (2009), pp. 116-135



Helene Sommer on a cover of the
"Kino" magazine, 1946

In the Family Camp, Helene became the block elder in the barrack where she lived with her mother. We know this from testimonies of several other survivors. Helene herself did not mention

any of the moments of her relative power.²¹ Franci Solar, who attended with Helene to the same high school, recalled her as “a very pretty girl, with the brain of a bird. [...] and she was running the whole block like some kind of a small duchy, like a court, with ladies in waiting, and flattery, and all this.”²² Helene’s brother worked as a runner for one of the capos in the Clothing section, serving as a messenger for women prisoners the prisoner functionary selected as his lovers. Hans Sommer would invite the woman to come for sex, and pay them in bread.²³

Rudolf Blum, a 33-year old from České Budějovice, claimed that Helene was considered the “most beautiful girl of the camp.”²⁴ Helene’s beauty might have attracted the attention of the camp guards and singled her out for sexual assault.²⁵ She recalled that together with ten other young women, the SS forced them to disrobe and shower while they watched.²⁶ We can only speculate if this incident of sexualized violence was in fact a retelling of rape. Several other prisoners of the Family Camp recalled that the guards would come, pick attractive female prisoners, take them away and force them to have sex.²⁷ The prohibitions of racial defilement did not always hold outside of Germany, and in the camps.²⁸ “If they resisted,” recalled Herta Kožicková, a young Prague woman, “they said, ‘A Jewess does not make a Jew.’ They simply overpowered them.”²⁹ Herta, who lived in Helene’s block, echoed in her portrayal of Solar’s

²¹ Interview Herta Kožicková, October 15, 1996, VHA, #20868; interview of Eva Weisl, 16 October 1996, VHA, 21076.

²² Oral history of Frances Epstein, p. 81, American Jewish Committee, Oral History Collection, #504, New York Public Library. Thanks to Barry Trachtenberg for his help. See also Frances Epstein, “Roundtrip,” with thanks to Helen Epstein for letting me quote from her mother’s memoir that is forthcoming as “Franci’s War.”

²³ Oral history Hans Sommer, 8 February 1995, Jewish Holocaust Centre (JHC), Melbourne, Australia; author’s interview of Liselotte Ivry, 24 June 2019; Michael Honey VHA. On other boys’ participation of sexual barter of their relatives in the Family Camp, see N. Stargardt, *Witnesses Of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (London, 2005), p. 217.

²⁴ Interview of Rudolf Blum, 30 September 1996, VHA, #20307.

²⁵ On construction of attractivity and sexual violence, see M. Flaschka, “‘Only Pretty Women Were Raped:’ The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in the Concentration Camps,” in Hedgepath and Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Hanover, 2010), pp. 77-93.

²⁶ Interview of Helene Pachner, 20 August 1996, VHA, #18722.

²⁷ Michael Honey, to H-Holocaust, ‘Functionaries,’ 12 July 2000; statement of Willy Brachmann, 15 February 1960, Fritz Bauer Institute.

²⁸ See Regina Mühlhäuser’s contribution in this volume.

²⁹ Interview Herta Kožicková, October 15, 1996, VHA, #20868. See also R. Elias, *Triumph of Hope: From Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Israel* (New York, 1998), p. 120.

characterization: "Lenka was a beautiful girl. We used to say: beautiful and dumb, like Lenka. But she wasn't so stupid, she saved her life, she became the lover of the camp elder."³⁰



Willy Brachmann, ca 1940, Archive of the State Museum Oświęcim

This Camp Elder was Willy Brachmann. Born in 1903 in Hamburg to a working class family, struggling with unemployment he engaged in life of petty crime, stealing and receiving small stolen goods such as coal, coffee, or bicycles.³¹ In 1938, he was deported from a prison to a concentration camp as a "habitual criminal," never to be released.³² In 1933, the Nazis had novelized the criminal code so that repeat offenders were not released after their sentence, but rather automatically transferred to a concentration camp. The "habitual criminals" wore green triangle, the SS liked to use them as prisoner functionaries. In the influential accounts of political and Jewish prisoners, the "green triangles" were routinely depicted as the most despised groups, contributing to their widespread marginalization of their perspective after the war. Brachmann, whose wife had divorced him, passed through Emsland camps, Sachsenhausen, and in summer 1940, he was sent to Auschwitz. In 1943, he was put into the punitive block for stealing food for his friends.³³ In September 1943, he became one of the capos in the Family Camp. He had a good

³⁰ Her interview, The Oral History Collection, 206; author's interview of Liselotte Ivry, May 2019.

³¹ Judgment, 213-11, L 0248/35, State Archive Hamburg (StaHH).

³² N. Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, 2004); J. Hörath, *Asoziale und Berufsverbrecher in den Konzentrationslagern 1933 bis 1938* (Göttingen, 2017).

³³ Dina Gottliebová-Babbitt, 26 September 1998, VHA, #46122.

reputation, and supposedly even protected a small Communist group in BIIb.³⁴ He became the lover of the young attractive Brno artist Dina Gottliebová, who drew for Mengele the Romani prisoners. Fifty years later, Gottliebová spoke fondly about Brachmann: "he loved me, and I also came to love him." Reportedly, Brachmann was able to protect Gottlieb from being sexually assaulted by the SS.³⁵

In March 1944, people from the September transport were murdered in the gas chamber.³⁶ A group of several dozen prisoners, including twins on whom Mengele was experimenting, physicians, patients ill with infectious diseases, and a few other protected prisoners were sent for two days into quarantine, among them also Dina Gottlieb. In this time Brachmann – who has also just been named Camp Elder -- took Sommer to him.³⁷ We find echoes in Helene's testimony who recalled that she was desolate when her fiancé was sent to his death, and that the camp elder, "who for some reason liked me," helped her: "He gave me pure alcohol and coffee and he got me so drunk that I didn't realize what was happening next door."³⁸ Coffee and alcohol had enormous value among the Auschwitz prisoners. Brachmann lost weight in the course of his incarceration and by 1944 was very thin, thinner than in the picture above.³⁹ Brachmann's gifts to Sommer were by Auschwitz terms extravagant; he was willing to spend expensive items to comfort a traumatized young woman, and thus induce her into having sex.

An anecdote related by Herta Kožičková indicates that Sommer had a confident, assertive attitude to sexual barter. „[s]he was very pretty, and she managed to make her way to freedom by making love, to the end. She was my block elder, she lay on her bunk bed naked, she had her

³⁴ Miroslav Kárný, "Komunistická organizace v terezínském koncentračním táboře 1941-1945" (manuscript, 1983), NA, Kárných, ka 16, citing Pavel Lenek.

³⁵ Interview of Michael Honey, 29 June 1994 and 24 May 1995, AJMP, The Oral History Collection, #334.

³⁶ D. Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939 – 1945* (Reinbek, 1989), pp. 734-736.

³⁷ Interview of Michael Honey.

³⁸ Helene Pachner, VHA.

³⁹ Frank Grunwald, who was Brachmann's runner, recalled that Brachmann was much thinner than the already skinny man in the mugshot, author's interview of Frank Grunwald, 1 May 2018.

own bunk bed, and she would say, 'Look, Herta, what my little store [vagina] brought me!' She got a piece of soap for that intercourse. But overall, she had it good. She had rags, she had hygiene, well, she was not bad, I cannot say that, that she beat us or such, even though she could have done it."⁴⁰ Kožičková delivered the story in an amused tone – one of few chuckling moments in otherwise grim biography of separation and dying family members. The reason for her levity was not only Sommer's sexual barter, but the satisfaction with which she owned it and did not feign shame, a reaction that Kožičková probably considered more appropriate.

Both Gottlieb and Sommer had been sexually active with several partners.⁴¹ It seems that it was usually women who were comfortable with their sexuality engaged in sexual barter.⁴² Helene had an additional reason to engage in sexual barter: her family, in particular her mother. The traditional roles between parent and child often changed in the Holocaust, and it was the children, who provided for their parents. In fact, the three known cases of sexual barter between women prisoners in the Family Camp and prisoner functionaries/guards were those where the prisoners had their mothers present, who indeed all survived.⁴³

In May 1944, three more transports arrived from Theresienstadt, including German, Austrian, and Dutch prisoners. Among them was a queer couple of two sixteen-year old girls, Margot Heumann from Bielefeld and the Viennese Ditha Neumann. Margot and Ditha met in a youth home for German speaking girls in Theresienstadt, became close, and started being intimate. For Margot, Ditha was "the love of her life," even though the girls never talked about

⁴⁰ Interview Herta Kožičková, VHA. Kožičková's statement further relevant as she was sent to the same camps in Hamburg and Bergen Belsen as Helene Sommer.

⁴¹ Dina Gottliebová Babbitt, VHA; interview a woman born 1923, no date, AJMP, The Oral History Collection, #443; Moshe Leshem to Alena Hájková (1990) on their mutual friend Dina Gottliebová in B. Čelovský, (ed.), *Alenka: K osmdesátinám Dr. Aleny Hájkové* (Šenov, 2004), p. 33; author's interview Liselotte Ivry; author's interview of Rebeka Lindt recalling Miroslav Zeimer, 29 April 2019.

⁴² For a similar case, see also L. Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain: Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (New York, 1978), p. 294.

⁴³ In addition to Brachmann's relationship with Gottlieb and Sommer, young ethnic German Waffen SS guard Viktor Pestek fell in love with a Brno woman Renée Neumann. Pestek later attempted to escape with a Jewish prisoner, Vítězslav Lederer. E. Kulka, *Útěk z tábora smrti* (Prague, 1966).

the nature of their relationship.⁴⁴ Six weeks later, in early July 1944, the SS moved to close the Family Camp. In series of selections, all those who were deemed fit to work were sent to concentration camps, altogether ca 3,500 people. The majority, 6,500, were murdered in gas chambers between 10 and 12 July, 1944. Helene and her mother were selected to go on a transport with another 500 women between age 14 and 50 that was sent to Hamburg, accompanied by another 500 Hungarian Jewish women. Margot left behind her family to follow her girlfriend. In the women's camp, where the women spent a few days waiting, the girls were amazed by the "wealth" of some of the attractive Czech women, who had gourmet food, which they appeared to have bartered for sex.⁴⁵ Since the women could not take any of their belongings with them, they ate and shared what they could on the spot. After that, they passed through showers, received new clothing, their hair was shorn, they were tattooed, and sent by cattle cars to Hamburg.⁴⁶

Neuengamme

In Hamburg, the group of 500 women from the Family Camp, including Helene and Elsa Sommer and Margot and Ditha were sent to three satellite camps of Neuengamme, successively: Dessauer Ufer (July-September 1944), Neugraben (September 1944-February 1945), and Tiefstack (February -April 1945).⁴⁷ All three camps were set up in 1944 as part of the Third Reich's program "annihilation through labor" that used slave labor to boost the German industry, weakened by the attrition of manpower.⁴⁸ The first, Dessauer Ufer, a former storehouse in the harbor, was the largest of these camps with 1500 prisoners.

⁴⁴ Author's interview with Margot Heuman, 5-9 April 2018.

⁴⁵ Author's interview with Margot Heuman.

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Margot Heuman.

⁴⁷ H. Ellger, *Zwangsarbeit und weibliche Überlebensstrategien: Die Geschichte der Frauenaußenlager des Konzentrationslagers Neuengamme 1944/45* (Berlin, 2007).

⁴⁸ Buggeln.

Two months later, the Theresienstadt women were moved to Neugraben in Harburg, forced to work in construction of housing for bombed out Hamburg inhabitants. They also dug ground to lay pipes for electricity and water, and produced bricks and concrete slabs for the estate construction.⁴⁹ The accommodation was in two huts, the construction of which was not quite finished when the women arrived. Another hut served as a washroom, and yet another as a latrine. The prisoners received some clothing – a summer dress, underpants, wooden shoes, an overall for work, and somewhat later also flannel underwear. Only at the end of November they were issued woolen stockings and a vest. The women worked in the winter without a coat. There was never sufficient clothing per prisoner, and some guards stole the better clothing.⁵⁰ The food was also insufficient, there was only bad coffee for breakfast, no lunch, and soup from old vegetables with 200 grams of bread, slice of sausage, and a little margarine for dinner. Prisoners were constantly hungry; once, several women found cookies and were taken aback how long it took to chew them: they were dog treats.⁵¹

Due to the bad quality of food, many prisoners suffered from enteritis. There was a sickbay and one prisoner, the Brno graduate 37-year old Dr Gisela Gold, served as physician. However, she had a very limited amount of medication at hand, for instance for operations had to use a knife rather than a scalpel. Some twenty-five prisoners helped to run the camp and prepare food, most of them those admitted to the sick bay, so that the infections continued spreading.⁵² In spite of these conditions, the mortality among the women was relatively low;⁵³ it seems that most of them, perhaps over 90%, were alive on 6 April 1945, when they were sent to Bergen-

⁴⁹ H. Ellger, 'Hamburg Neugraben,' in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, vol 1, B *Early Camps, Youth Camps, and Concentration Camps and Subcamps under the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA)* (Bloomington, 2009), pp. 1122-1124.

⁵⁰ Sworn statement Eva Donat, 20 February 1946, WO 309-407, National Archives, Kew.

⁵¹ Karl Heinz Schultz to the author, 30 May 2019.

⁵² Sworn statement Gertrud Karpeles, 21 February 1946, NA Kew, WO 309-407.

⁵³ Unfortunately, there is no surviving list of the 500 prisoners from the Family Camp.

Belsen.⁵⁴ The violence guards inflicted on women appears to have been less brutal than that in male camps, where the mortality was far higher.⁵⁵ Moreover, the women prisoners were kept together as one group (and not separated over camps), which enabled them a social cohesion, they were also younger than the population in the men's camps, and they were more probable to receive help. The largest fatality of the three Hamburg camps was connected to an air raid in Tiefstack in March 1945.

There were about ten guards, almost all of who accompanied the prisoners from Neugraben to Tiefstack. Each group of fifty women prisoners was accompanied by a guard, whose main job was to ensure that the prisoners did not communicate with civilians.⁵⁶ The commandant after the first month was Hauptscharführer Friedrich-Wilhelm Kliem. He was born in 1896 and due to his age left the Wehrmacht in spring 1944 and was transferred into the SS. After clerical work at Dessauer Ufer, he was promoted to commandant in Neugraben. The other guards were not members of the SS; the women were characterized as "Auxiliary SS."⁵⁷ All other guards were conscripted to their job in fall 1944 or winter 1945. Almost all of them had working class background, and worked until being called in by the Labor Office for instance as customs officers.⁵⁸ Some of them underwent a short training course in Neuengamme – Maria Borowski's course lasted eight days, whereas Gustav Rosoll's received no training at all. The guards recalled that training largely encompassed ideological worldview.⁵⁹ If that indeed was the case, would be different from what we know from the guard education in Ravensbrück, where most learning took place by practice and shadowing older guards.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Compare also Buggeln and Ellger

⁵⁵ Buggeln, 116-117, 192-250.

⁵⁶ Sworn statement Otto Kähler, 1 June 1946, NA Kew, WO 309-407.

⁵⁷ S. Erpel, (ed.), *Im Gefolge der SS: Aufseherinnen des Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück* (Berlin, 2007).

⁵⁸ The large number of working class guards corresponds with J. Schwartz, „*Weibliche Angelegenheiten*": *Handlungsräume von KZ-Aufseherinnen in Ravensbrück und Neubrandenburg* (Hamburg, 2018), p. 68.

⁵⁹ Sworn statement Eva-Maria Borowski, 24 March 1946, NA Kew, WO 235-108.

⁶⁰ E. Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942-1944* (East Lansing, 2015), pp. 74-82; Schwartz, pp. 92-96.



Anneliese Kohlmann, April 1945,
Anneliese Kohlmann, who joined the staff in Neuengamme in the middle of November 1944,
photographed by George Rogers (Getty Images)

was largely representative of these trends. She was born in 1921 to a single poor mother and adopted at four years of age by a childless bourgeois couple, Georg and Margaretha Kohlmann. Georg Kohlmann was a teacher at a Gymnasium, the Wahnsschaffschule, a Hamburg institution. He was also a freemason and co-author of a Nazi textbook "The Eternal Nation."⁶¹ Anneliese

⁶¹ E. Sabotny, (ed.), *Ewiges Volk: Ein Lesebuch für höhere Schulen* (Leipzig, 1940); Margarete [sic] Kohlmann to Public Safety Officer, 1 June 1946, NA Kew, WO 235-108.

visited a high school for upper middle class girls, but her schooling ended in 1938 and she was trained as a cook during her “obligatory year” at the German Red Cross. At twenty, she started working for the rail company, later as a streetcar conductor. Even though her family background was educated bourgeoisie, her career path was more working class, and thus in line with her guard colleagues. She joined the NSDAP, and when she was 21 years old, she left home and moved in with a woman, possibly a partner.⁶²

Kohlmann identified as a lesbian, and spoke of previous relationships with women. She was well informed that “lesbianism is not an offence under German law” – indeed, only male homosexuality was not object of the paragraph 175 of the German criminal code -- but that it was punished in the concentration camps.⁶³ She was possibly not the only queer guard in Neugraben, a survivor described Maria Borowski as a “lesbian,” too.⁶⁴ Even though this statement may have been a form of othering of a guard as sexually deviant, Borowski was the only former colleague who testified at Kohlmann’s trial, and did so very positively.⁶⁵ Kohlmann’s lawyer mentioned that she had a fiancé of two years. However, since one of the accusations against her was “abnormal” sexual desire as being a lesbian, he had a good reason to stress her heterosexuality. There is no further evidence of the fiancé, neither in the trial, nor in her letters from prison. Possibly the male partner was construed in order to counter the accusation of sexual perversion that served as a tool to mark the women perpetrators as monsters.⁶⁶

⁶² Buggeln, p. 243; StaHH, Hausmeldekartei, 332-8 A51/1.

⁶³ Sworn testimony of Anneliese Kohlmann, 9 June 1945, NA Kew, WO 235-120. On female same sex desire and § 175 see C. Schoppmann, *Nationalsozialistische Sexualpolitik und weibliche Homosexualität* (Pfaffenweiler, 1997); Laurie Marhoefer, “Lesbianism, Transvestitism, and the Nazi State: A Microhistory of a Gestapo Investigation, 1939-1943,” *The American Historical Review* 121, 4 (2016), pp. 1167-1195; on punishment of female same sex conduct in the camps, see C. Schoppmann, “‘Liebe wurde mit Prügelstrafe geahndet:’ Zur Situation lesbischer Frauen in den Konzentrationslagern,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland* (Verfolgung von Homosexuellen im Nationalsozialismus, 5, 1999), pp. 14-21.

⁶⁴ Sworn statement Eva Donat, NA Kew, WO 235-120.

⁶⁵ Sworn statement Eva-Maria Borowski, 24 March 1946, WO 235-108, NA Kew.

⁶⁶ A. Przyrembel, ‘Transfixed by an Image: Ilse Koch, the “Kommandeuse of Buchenwald,”’ *German History*, 19, 3, (July 2001), pp 369–399; U. Weckel and E. Wolfrum, (eds.), *“Bestien” und “Befehlsempfänger”: Frauen und Männer in NS-Prozessen nach 1945* (Göttingen, 2003).

Kohlmann was conscripted by the Labour Office on 4 November 1944. Historians have pointed out how difficult it was to get out from conscription, which only amplified towards the end of the war.⁶⁷ What would be the consequences for not following the conscription is the core question of scholars researching the camp guards. Some guards managed to leave their jobs after a few months by doing their jobs badly and regularly asking to be released; in women's camp in Auschwitz, the only way out was if they became pregnant.⁶⁸ Kohlmann's mother claimed that Anneliese returned on leave "quiet and depressed." She told her mother about "the horrible conditions in the camp," and that she wanted to withdraw from the job.⁶⁹

Together with hunger and cold, it was guard-inflicted violence that made the camps so terrible. The guards used beating as communication, as means of bringing structure and order, but also as a way to compete with one another.⁷⁰ They would beat prisoners were unruly during distribution of food,⁷¹ push them down the staircase when they felt they did not walk quickly enough,⁷² or when they caught them communicating with civilians, especially receiving food,⁷³ or talking with POWs from a nearby camp.⁷⁴ The guard Albert Runkel once shot at a mother and her daughter.⁷⁵ The commandant Kliem enjoyed inflicting violence, and several times beat prisoners to lasting injuries. Kohlmann described him as a "pervert, because I often saw him beating girls and he obviously enjoyed it to such an extent that occasionally one saw foam coming out of his mouth."⁷⁶ Lilly Reiser, a 20 year old from Ostrava, corresponded with a Belgian POW and received

⁶⁷ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*; Schwartz.

⁶⁸ Sarah Cushman, „Women Perpetrators in Auschwitz-Birkenau,“ Pears Lecture Wiener Library, 19 November 2019.

⁶⁹ Sworn statement Margarete Kohlmann, NA Kew, WO 235/120.

⁷⁰ Mailänder, *Female SS Guards*.

⁷¹ Deposition of Anneliese Kohlmann (9 June 1945) and Eva Maria Borowski (24 March 1946), NA Kew, WO 235-108.

⁷² Interview of Margot Heuman, USHMM, RG 50.233.0054.

⁷³ Interview of Herta K., AJMP.

⁷⁴ M. Herrmann, 'Hamburger Intermezzo,' *Harburger Jahrbuch* 18 (1993), pp. 175-192.

⁷⁵ Gertrude Neumann, 26 February 1946, WO 309-407.

⁷⁶ Deposition of Anneliese Kohlmann, 9 June 1945, WO 235/120.

food from him, which the guards intercepted. She received a huge beating on her behind.⁷⁷

However, many women never experienced any beating, like Margot and Ditha.⁷⁸

Survivors described Kohlmann as comparatively decent.⁷⁹ She claimed that she always worked in the outside and described herself as lenient, even allowing prisoners to engage in relationships with prisoners of other camps and the male guards.⁸⁰ But Kohlmann too beat prisoners. She described her inflicting physical violence when the prisoners were “disobedient,”⁸¹ and some survivors remembered that in particular, she abused older women. She also once beat the 34-year old Mariana Braunová from Boskovice for making a rude remark about her in Czech, which then another prisoner translated.⁸² Kohlmann self-described permissiveness brought her, she claimed, criticism from the commandant Kliem who supposedly even reported her to Neuengamme.⁸³

In this world of hunger, dirt, cold, and violence, Kohlmann fell in love with Helene Sommer.⁸⁴ At least, that is what survivors who were there with them recount. With short hair, Helene, usually presenting as very feminine, appeared more butch, recalled Margot Heuman. She still appeared as remarkably beautiful. Beauty is a social practice, public performance, means to securing attention, and identity maintenance.⁸⁵ How does one maintain “good looks” in a concentration camp, and what does it mean to be attractive here? Sommer’s beauty was a social performance that she employed to engage in rational relationships and to maintain them. Her attractiveness was also a part of her selfhood: people around her stressed foremost her beauty

⁷⁷ Interview, The Oral History Collection, AJMP, 206; interview of Lilly R., 1992, Yale Fortunoff Archive.

⁷⁸ Author’s interview of Margot Heuman.

⁷⁹ Interview Věra Fuchsová; author’s interview of Margot Heuman.

⁸⁰ Deposition Kohlmann, 16 May 1946, WO 235/10, p. 13.

⁸¹ Sworn testimony, Eva Lang, 21 February 1946, NA Kew, WO 309-407.

⁸² Deposition Marianne Braun, 2 June 1945, NA Kew, WO 235/10, p. 20.

⁸³ Deposition Kohlmann, 16 May 1946, WO 235/10, p. 13; clemency plea Kohlmann, 15 September 1947, StaHH, 242-1 II.

⁸⁴ Interview of Susi Weiss, 1999, Archive of Neuengamme Memorial.

⁸⁵ N. Degele, *Sich schön machen: Zur Soziologie von Geschlecht und Schönheitshandeln* (Wiesbaden, 2004).

throughout her life.⁸⁶ Kohlmann's looks further show how beauty needs to be performed as such: Her photo (fig 2) shows her as handsome, in fact she was even described so by Věra Fuchsová. But Kohlmann's good looks were never specifically remarked on, because she did not stage them.

It is not possible to know for certain whether the relationship between Kohlmann and Sommer became physical. Margot Heuman recalled the two women being close, affectionate, and exchanging caresses.⁸⁷ Several women recalled that Kohlmann came to spend the night with Helene at her barrack.⁸⁸ Franci Solar, the camp elder at the time, described in her memoir: "A young SS woman called Bubi who was not only harmless but occasionally quite kind became very friendly with Sylva [Helene]. So friendly that she came often at night to visit leaving at dawn."⁸⁹ Anita Lobel, a 31-year old Hamburg émigré to Czechoslovakia, used the same expression as Herta Kožicková did for Helene in Auschwitz, namely that the two women "made love."⁹⁰ Kohlmann had the opportunity to spend the nights with Sommer. Most relationships in the Holocaust became physical: sexuality became a mode of close communication, a promise, a counter-value, and a mean to remind oneself to be alive.⁹¹

The tenderness between both women is mixed with homophobia in the statement of Ella Deutsch, a young married woman from Ostrava, who recalled the two women in the context of a food parcel the guards had intercepted:

"I have to note that in Tiefstack we were guarded by SS women, these were all young women who were worse than men. There was about ten of them who guarded us during work and

⁸⁶ Which continued to old age: Rebeka Lindt; Hans Sommer „my sister is a very pretty woman."

⁸⁷ Author's interview of Margot Heuman.

⁸⁸ Fini Patay, 23 July 1996, VHA, #17712; Helene Turbowitz to Karl-Heinz Schultz, private archive of Heinz Schultz, with thanks for sharing.

⁸⁹ Frances Epstein, „Roundtrip." Helene Sommer's name was changed in the memoir, alongside a few others. Her identity is ensured at hand of the repeated anecdote as block elder in Auschwitz.

⁹⁰ Interview of Anita Lobel, 13 September 1993, Archive of Neuengamme Memorial, #1548.

The only exception is Dita Kraus, 15 years old at that time, who claimed in her recent memoir that her bed was next to Helene's and all the two women did was talk. D. Krausová, *Odložený život: Skutečný příběh osvětlimské knihovnice* (Prague, 2018): 152-153. Kraus has a record of homophobic statements: Krausová, „Fredyho sexuální preference? Irrelevantní," *Lidové Noviny*, 18 September 2018, 11.

⁹¹ Hájková, „Sexual barter"; see also Katya Gusarov's contribution.

everything we did. Opposite of me sat a guard with her lover, that was the same girls who as soon as we arrived to Auschwitz started something with an SS man. Now they turned and had affairs with women, and we had to look at it and it made us want to throw up. One day they sat in front of me and made out terribly and with great laughter ate food from my parcel that the commandant had confiscated.”⁹²

Deutsch’s statement comes across as confused, which applies for many homophobic accounts. She did not name Helene Sommer (whose identity is clearly established through the recourse to previous sexual barter in Auschwitz). But given the negativity of the quote it would be narrative challenge: Othering applies to people to be excluded, to be made nameless, and therefore witnesses making negative judgments on fellow prisoners per se usually concealed their names. The homophobia of the prisoner society in Neugraben did not only apply to the hierarchical relationship between a guard and a prisoner. Margot and Ditha were criticized by other prisoners for unseemly conduct, and it was only thanks to Ditha’s older aunt who argued that they were “just girls” that they were let be.⁹³

What was love for Kohlmann, was sexual barter for Helene. Sommer was in a dependent position, and Kohlmann could potentially determine her and her mother’s life and death, or at least their wellbeing, protection from physical violence, cold, and hunger. We will not be able to discover who initiated the relationship, and whether or to what extent Kohlmann coerced Sommer. But certainly, we must recognize how hierarchical it was, and that Sommer was profoundly dependent on the guard. She was motivated not only by her own survival, but importantly by that of her mother. At 48 years of age, Elsa Sommer was one of the oldest women in the camp and thus most vulnerable, which Helene, after eight months in Auschwitz, was well aware of. Thanks to Kohlmann, the Sommer women had good shoes, clothing, food, and

⁹² Memoirs of Ella and Otto Deutsch (ca 1990), Beit Terezin Archive, 114.

⁹³ Author’s interview of Margot Heuman.

cigarettes, things inaccessible to the other prisoners and which made their imprisonment vastly easier.⁹⁴ These were probably items that Kohlmann picked up at her parents'. Over time, Kohlmann got to know Sommer better; for instance, she was one of the very few people who knew Helene's actual surname.⁹⁵ Small details like these indicate the social dimension of the relationship between the two women, as well as its rational dimension. They point to Sommer's agency, restricted though it was. Kohlmann believed relationship to be genuine: in Bergen-Belsen at the liberation toward "her" former prisoners, and in her deposition in June 1945, she stated her postwar plans to move to Prague on the invitation of Helene as well as other Czech prisoners.⁹⁶

We should not dismiss Kohlmann's taking Sommer's promise at face value as naïve. A similar case shows that female Holocaust survivors who had engaged in queer rational relationships with female guards could stay with them even after the end of the war, when the power hierarchies turned. Elly Joelsohn, a German Jewish medical student in St Georgenthal, a satellite camp of Groß-Rosen, protected Maria Grohmann, a guard who became her lover, throughout liberation. Joelsohn even brought the Grohmann home to Berlin, where the relationship continued for one more year.⁹⁷ Indeed, once we start thinking about hierarchical sexual barter, we need also to address the relationships between Jews in hiding and the people who hid them, some of which turned into lasting marriages after the war.⁹⁸

The rational relationship between Kohlmann and Sommer was only one small part of the sexual economy of the camps which was largely heterosexual. Margot and Ditha, the queer teenager couple, both engaged in sexual barter. In Dessauer Ufer, Ditha engaged in a relationship with Aldo Barbieri, an Italian prisoner from the POW camp located on the upper floor. The Italian

⁹⁴ Interview of Margot Heuman, 2 December 1994, VHA, #323.

⁹⁵ Margarete Kohlmann to Public Safety Officer, 1 June 1946, NA Kew, WO 235/120.

⁹⁶ Deposition Kohlmann, June 9, 1945, NA Kew, WO 235/120, p. 26.

⁹⁷ Landesarchiv Berlin, B Rep 058, 10395. With thanks to Edith Raim.

⁹⁸ See the debate in S. Beer, *Die Banalität des Guten: Hilfeleistungen für jüdische Verfolgte 1941–1945* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 310–314.

POWs received better food and parcels. Ditha and Aldo met in the basement of the granary, while Margot kept watch. Afterwards, Ditha shared the food that Aldo brought her with her lover.⁹⁹ "I don't think she was in love with him, she did it for food," said Margot. But as an old woman Ditha celebrated her relationship with Aldo as a romantic story, and travelled to Italy to be reunited with Aldo.¹⁰⁰ How are we to make sense of the discrepancy in the two narratives? Was Margot jealous of her rival, and therefore dismissed Ditha's relationship as sexual barter? Or did Ditha frame her encounters with Aldo as a love story because sexual barter is not considered acceptable, whereas romantic love is? The following case seems to indicate the latter. Another young Czech woman, Ruth Weisz, recalled how her friend Lilly organized sulfa drugs to help Ruth who had an infected wound by sleeping with a foreman who liked her. "Of course, she only did this in the camps," Weisz appended the story, indicating that sex work outside of the camps is a disgrace.¹⁰¹

Finally, Margot's experience of sexual barter is instrumental in our thinking about women's agency: she worked as aid for a foreman of her labor unit. He let her steal some of his food (which she then shared with Ditha), and she in exchange let him stick his fingers into her vagina. The foreman and Margot never talked about what was happening. Rather than describing the story as sexual violence or exploitation, Margot insisted: "he was a fairly decent nice guy."¹⁰² In narrating herself in charge, and the man as "decent," Margot focused on, perhaps even overstressed, her own agency. While it is important to listen to the woman's interpretation, we need to recognize that women victims of sexual violence overstressing their control is a frequent coping mechanism with abuse.

Whereas heterosexual sexual barter was seen as transgressive, queer desire made the

⁹⁹ Author's interview of Margot Heuman.

¹⁰⁰ *In Memory of Edith H.* (Toronto, self published, 2011). Last name abbreviated on wish of Margot Heuman.

¹⁰¹ R. Weisz, „Und es war keine Lüge,“ in Wolfgang Benz, (ed.), *Theresienstadt: Aufzeichnungen von Federica Spitzer und Ruth Weisz* (Berlin, 1997), p. 134.

¹⁰² Author's interview of Margot Heuman.

prisoners profoundly uncomfortable. Kohlmann's queerness was widely noticed among the prisoners.¹⁰³ For Margot, she was the first woman she knew who was called lesbian; she realized that there was a whole concept for romantic love between women, albeit one seen as something wrong. In Neugraben she learned it as something negative.¹⁰⁴ Many survivors described Kohlmann as disturbing on account of her being a lesbian. Some depicted her as a virago.¹⁰⁵ The nickname Bubi was tied to her queerness: it depicted her short haircut, a *Bubikopf*; moreover, in the 1920s and 30s lesbian subculture, the term denoted a butch woman.¹⁰⁶ The prisoners were fascinated and disgusted alike by the affair: the camps were violent, but also out of the way and dull. Survivors would bring up their queer guard in passing, as a monstrous curiosity that the camps brought about: in her video oral history, Liselotte Ivry made a telling, half-disgusted and half amused face expression.¹⁰⁷

Fini Patay's recollection from the 1990s -- then a 14-year old Viennese teenager -- is informative for our understanding of the homophobia:

"She [Helene Sommer] had an affair, that Bubi had an affair with her, she didn't want to go with her, you know, but she used her, she was lesbian, so she used her and hmm [pause, makes a gesture with her tongue] Anyway I told you what they do, we had a few there, three or four lesbian SS women so they had a rubber penis, and they put it on their thighs, ja, they put hot, warm milk in the testicles, and that's how they had sex with her, you know. And if she would have said no, they would kill her. But she [Helene Sommer] was really, she was gorgeous. That woman was gorgeous. She had a nervous breakdown when war was over and she married somebody.

¹⁰³ Liselotte Ivry, VHA; Margot Heuman, VHA; Margit Herrmann.

¹⁰⁴ Author's interview of Margot Heuman.

¹⁰⁵ Deposition of Margit Rosenthal, 15 December 1945, NA Kew, WO 235 / 120, p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ K. Sieg, 'Sexual Desire and Social Transformation in *Aimée & Jaguar*,' *Signs*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Gender and Cultural Memory, Special Issue Editors Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (Autumn 2002), pp. 303-331, p. 316.

¹⁰⁷ Liselotte Ivry VHA.

Anyway that was it. Ach Gott, so many things.”¹⁰⁸

The disturbing passage, rather than casting light on sexual practices between Kohlmann and Sommer, brings together various threads of the survivors’ uses of sexuality to other female perpetrators: deviant sexual practices, specifically use of a dildo; the suggestion that these practices brought about Sommer’s breakdown, which she then overcame through heterosexual marriage. Patay’s quote operates with long standing notions of lesbian as a predator in general and Italian Nazi sexploitation films of the 1970s in particular.¹⁰⁹

This already odd story grew even stranger with the arrival of Willy Brachmann at the end of March 1945.¹¹⁰ It was clear that the war will be soon over: The prisoners were digging ditches to stop the Allied army and were increasingly more exhausted and thin. On 20 March, 1945, Tiefstack became object of an air raid, and several prisoners were killed. Willy Brachmann was moved from Birkenau to Gleiwitz, a satellite camp of Auschwitz, later sent on a evacuation transport to Gross-Rosen, and then on to Bergen-Belsen. He escaped en route and made his way to Hamburg. However, rather than staying put – an highly advisable move for an escaped prisoner, who, as middle-aged man in the last throes of war, could be controlled as possible deserter at any moment – Brachmann located Helene Sommer in Tiefstack and visited her daily, bringing food. Kohlmann made these meetings possible and who served as go-between carrying letters.¹¹¹ The fact that Brachmann was able to find Sommer – who could have been in any camp in Nazi occupied Europe, or no longer alive – indicates that she stayed in touch with him. What remains unclear, though, is why Kohlmann enabled her male rival contact with her lover.

¹⁰⁸ Fini Patay, VHA. Patay mentioned Sommer by name earlier.

¹⁰⁹ L. Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994); E. Mailänder, „Meshes of Power: The Concentration Camp as Pulp or Art House in Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter*“ in Daniel Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges, and Kristin Lugt, (eds.), *Nazisploitation! : The Nazi image in low-brow cinema and culture* (London, 2012), pp. 175-195.

¹¹⁰ Author’s interview of Liselotte Ivry; interview Anita Lobel.

¹¹¹ Statement of Willi [sic] Brachmann, 16 May 1946, p. 18, NA Kew, WO 235/10.

Bergen-Belsen

In early April, most of Neuengamme camps were evacuated away from the Allies. Probably on 6 April, the remaining prisoners of Tiefstack were sent by train to Bergen-Belsen, Anneliese Kohlmann accompanied the transport of eighty women in freight cars. On the way she helped four women escape, one of them the Hamburg native, dancer Erna Fuchs.¹¹² In Bergen-Belsen, Kohlmann handed over the prisoners and was not allowed in the camp. Under pretense of needing medical care she managed to enter the camp and asked the commandant, Josef Kramer, to be to speak with her "cousin," that is Helene Sommer. Kramer refused and ordered Kohlmann to be handed over to Neuengamme main camp, where Kohlmann believed she would be punished, possibly because of her conflicts with commandant Kliem, abetting prisoners escape, or disobedience in Belsen.¹¹³

Kohlmann escaped to Hamburg and reconnected with Willy Brachmann.¹¹⁴ The two of them left Hamburg by bike in the morning and arrived in Belsen, 100 km to the south, ten hours later. Possibly, Kohlmann believed that she could survive until the liberation with Sommer, who would then protect her.¹¹⁵ Here they waited for two days, slept in a forest, and on 13 April, when the German guards left and were replaced by Hungarian soldiers, Brachmann helped Kohlmann to get in.¹¹⁶ Kohlmann changed into prisoner striped clothing but kept her boots, and walked around, asking for Helene Sommer.¹¹⁷ She found her together with other women from Tiefstack on 14 April and stayed with them, even after liberation, watching the guards being forced to clear

¹¹² Deposition Kohlmann, 16 May 1946, WO 235/10, p. 13; Erna Fuchs Wiedergutmachungsakte, StaHH, 213-13/9334; statement of Willi [sic] Brachmann, 16 May 1946, NA Kew, WO 235/10, p. 18.

¹¹³ Kohlmann to her mother, StaHH, 242-1 II.

¹¹⁴ Deposition Kohlmann, June 9 1945, NA Kew, p. 26.

¹¹⁵ Z. Berger, *Tell Me Another Morning* (London, 1962), p. 175. Berger's book is a novel and uses "Dasha" for Helene and "Carl" for Kohlmann. Berger confirmed that both figures were based on real people.

¹¹⁶ Deposition Kohlmann, 16 May 1946, WO 235/10, p. 13; statement of Willi [sic] Brachmann, *ibid*, p. 18; Ulrike Jensen, "Die Angeklagte Anneliese Kohlmann," http://media.offenes-archiv.de/ss3_2_bio_1847.pdf, S. 104, [accessed on 3 July 2019]; Alexandra-Eileen Wenck, *Zwischen Menschenhandel und "Endlösung": Das Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen* (Paderborn, 2000), p. 381.

¹¹⁷ Statement of Franziska Horwath, 27 December 1945, NA Kew, WO 235/10, p. 22; Fini Patay.

away the corpses. On 17 April 1945, Kohlmann was arrested.¹¹⁸ She recalled her arrest differently to Věra Fuchsová's opening quote: she claimed to have been recognized by a "Polish prisoner" (possibly the physician Gold who was born in Poland), who then strong-armed "her friends" and made her turn herself in with the British commandant. This account further confirms that in two months after her arrest, Kohlmann still believed that Helene Sommer's affection for her was genuine, and that she was not abandoned but rather her former lover was intimidated into handing her over.

At this point, the strange story turned tragic. Kohlmann was forced with other guards in clearing away the corpses.¹¹⁹ At this occasion, George Rogers took his iconic photos for Life Magazine. Kohlmann is in them easily noticeable with short hair and wearing trousers. She was held in custody and put on trial only over one year later, at the second Belsen trial in 1946. In the days following the liberation, an unknown number of the Hamburg prisoners died from starvation and typhus they contracted in Belsen. Others took weeks and months to recover. Yet others were so seriously ill that they were sent to Sweden to get better, among them Margot, who was thus separated from Ditha. Several of the former Tiefstack prisoners were well enough and had the language skills to work as interpreters for the British. One of them was Helene Sommer, who stayed in Celle for another three months.¹²⁰ In a somewhat catty remark, Franci Solar recalled that Helene "was too busy flirting with the tommies."¹²¹ It is not possible to review this episode from other people's standpoints. We do know that Sommer spoke with great affection about the

¹¹⁸ Jensen, "Die Angeklagte Anneliese Kohlmann," 103.

¹¹⁹ The often cited statement that Kohlmann served as a guard in Belsen is erroneous: Schoppmann, *Lesbische Frauen*, p. 88; D. Barnouw, *Germany 1945: Views of War and Violence* (Bloomington, 1996), p. 82. On guards in post liberation Belsen, see J. Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London, 1998), p. 44; M. Celinscak, *Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp* (Toronto, 2015), pp. 71-73.

¹²⁰ Helene Pachner VHA; Strusková, "Helene Pachner."

¹²¹ Helene Pachner VHA; Frances Epstein, "Roundtrip."

British physician, Major Hobson, for whom she interpreted. Photographs from the time show her smiling with Hobson over drinks.¹²²

Kohlmann's sentencing was fatally shaped by the fact that she was arrested in Belsen, and hence her tribunal was part of the Belsen trial. Had she stayed behind in Hamburg, she may have never been arrested. Even if she were, she would have been tried within the Tiefstack trial as part of the Neuengamme-related trials at the Curiohaus in Hamburg, and would have been acquitted, like many of her colleagues, or at least received shorter sentence. The Belsen trial was characteristic as a British tribunal of coming to terms with the Holocaust, and for women perpetrators, formulating the figure of the *beautiful beast.¹²³ By May 1946, almost all former survivors were no longer present to testify, and none of the Czech prisoners she knew. Helene did not testify about her former lover, who was first interrogated in June 1945. In contrast, Brachmann travelled to Celle and spoke in Kohlmann's favor. She was accused of ill treatment of allied nationals, with aggravating accusations of perverse sexual conduct,¹²⁴ and sentenced to two years. She spent altogether three years in prison, one year in custody in an internment camp and two years in Fuhlsbüttel prison. As a self-identified lesbian, she had to stay alone in a cell.¹²⁵

Postwar

Kohlmann's later life is as gloomy as it is difficult to trace. She was released in May 1948. Her parents supported her, and she was denazified as category V, "exonerated."¹²⁶ Her parents passed away in the following years. She struggled to find a job and had health problems, due to her life long anemia. It seems that Kohlmann engaged in sex work; she was twice registered in

¹²² Helene Pachner VHA.

¹²³ J. Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945: Der Lüneburger Prozess gegen Wachpersonal der Konzentrationslager Auschwitz und Bergen-Belsen* (Göttingen, 2011); Eschebach, „NS-Prozesse“; Przyrembel.

¹²⁴ Statement of Margit Rosenthal p. 20; Marianne Braun, 32; plea defense of Kohlmann's lawyer, Dr Dahlgrün, p. 39, all NA Kew, WO 235/10.

¹²⁵ Note Grude, 22 October 1947, StaHH, 242-1 II.

¹²⁶ Kohlmann's questionnaire, 31 January, 1950, StaHH 221-11, 71652.

Herbertstraße, a short Hamburg street that is entirely a brothel.¹²⁷ In the late 1950s, she worked as a truck driver. In 1965 she moved, apparently with a partner, who herself had been persecuted as “half-Jewish,” to West Berlin. She lived in a cheap apartment in Charlottenburg and worked as a cook in a Red Cross hospital. She died at her work in September 1977, 56 years old.¹²⁸

Her fellow Hamburger, Willy Brachmann, remarried his wife, and after one more imprisonment for theft stayed out of prison. In May 1945, he offered shelter to Kurt Cierer, his former prisoner from the Family Camp, who had ended up in Hamburg following a death march.¹²⁹ Fifty years later, Cierer recalled with a chuckling that all Brachmann could offer him in terms of refreshment was tea with artificial sweetener. Brachmann returned to his job as painter, his only daughter emigrated to Australia. In 1960, he testified against his former tormentors for the investigations leading up to the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial.¹³⁰ In 1967, with failing health and no longer able to work, Brachmann applied for reparation as victim of Nazism, but was rejected: as a former “habitual criminal” he did not qualify, as he was not persecuted for racial nor political reasons. But he did not give up, and sued the state social insurance board.¹³¹ Brachmann lost, but more important was insistence on his right to receive compensation as a victim of Nazism, a unique stance among those survivors marked as “unworthy victims,” that is people considered that they actually deserved their incarceration. His Australian grandson visited him in the 1970s and remembered him as a jovial, old-fashioned man who was not ashamed for being sent to Auschwitz for five years.¹³² He died in 1982, 79 years old.

And Helene Sommer? She returned to Prague with her mother, where she was reunified with her 15 year-old brother, who survived six months in Auschwitz alone. She tried to work as an

¹²⁷ Ulrich Räcker-Wellnitz (Municipal archive Wilhelmshaven) to Christina Igla, StaHH 332-8 A51/1.

¹²⁸ Entry for October 1977 rental book for Goethestr. 48, with thanks to Nicholas Fluschnik; Kohlmann’s death certificate, City of Berlin.

¹²⁹ Interview Yakov Tsur (former Cierer), archive of Sachsenhausen Memorial. With thanks to Astrid Ley.

¹³⁰ Sworn Testimony of Willy Brachmann, 15 February 1960, Archive of the Fritz Bauer Institut, with thanks to Werner Renz.

¹³¹ Brachmann to Office of Reparations, 2 May 1969, StaHH, 351-11, 27799.

¹³² Author’s interview of Ray Seeger.

actress, but without lasting success.¹³³ In 1947, she married a fellow survivor, the fur maker Petr Pachner, whose first wife perished in the camps. In 1948, they emigrated to Australia. The Pachners led a comfortable lifestyle. Helene was a homemaker, took care of her two children, and was a hobby sculptor.¹³⁴ Unlike Dina Gottliebová-Babbitt, who spoke with great frankness about her wartime relationships,¹³⁵ Helene never spoke about how she survived. In her only testimony, an video oral interview, Pachner stressed she was always positive that she would survive. She did not mention Kohlmann at all; in fact, nearly everyone in her testimony remained nameless. Even her mother, who was a central motivation for Helene's sexual barter, barely appeared. Only if familiar with the story, we find echoes of it: "We had SS women too, who looked after us at some stage, most of them lesbians. Some of them, you know [makes a long break], trying to make friends with us. There was one I remember who liked me and she gave me her shoes. So at one stage I had proper shoes I didn't have to wear clogs but it wasn't for very long."¹³⁶ The relationship with Kohlmann comes up as a nameless mention of a favor that which did not last long and was thus not valid.

Conclusion

Sexual barter and other forms transgressive sexuality offer key new insights on the Holocaust victims society, on agency, gender, stigma, and exclusion. In engaging in sexual barter, Helene Sommer expressed agency. Her agency in maintaining the rational relationships is reflected in her constant performing her beauty, a form of social capital that she utilized to improve her social standing. Sommer departed from the usual pattern of the rational relationships that emerged in the camps in that she made her partners believe the relationship

¹³³ Her name is not in the credits of the film she shot. *Parohy*, dir. Alfred Radok, 1946.

¹³⁴ Author's interview of Rebeka Lindt; Strusková, "Helene Pachner."

¹³⁵ S. Hillman and J. Kuehn, 'Narrating survival: Dina Gottliebova in conversation with Hilary Helstein,' *Holocaust Studies*, published online 15 November 2019.

¹³⁶ Helene Pachner, VHA. After this passage, the interviewer asked a completely unrelated question.

will last after the war. Both Brachmann and Kohlmann followed her to the next camp, at considerable personal danger. In going this extra step, Sommer demonstrated a considerable amount of agency. For Kohlmann it had a disastrous impact: the person who made her believe it was worth risking her life abandoned her in the moment when the hierarchy turned. Sommer had reasons to stay silent: had she testified in Kohlmann's favor, her fellow prisoners may have categorized her as "genuinely" queer. Given her new start in Prague and later in Australia, it was clear she wanted to begin again with a clean slate.

These were no choiceless choices. Lawrence Langer's concept choices has come to be an unfortunate automaton, shaping the field Holocaust studies so that the victims appear as always passive, leading to a sentimentalized narrative.¹³⁷ We need to appreciate decisions such as fleeing or staying, with whom to share food or join on transport — or whether to engage in sexual barter, be it in selling or purchasing position.¹³⁸ Only because the leeway was limited, or because these people did not survive in the end, it does not mean it is meaningless.

While choices made under duress are still valid, they far cry from informed choices. However, focusing solely on the lack of informed consent would be ahistorical if we are interested in the norms and values of the camp society. When Brachmann provided for Sommer, it was a source of envy for other prisoners, which she made sure by exhibiting her income and satisfaction alike. Similarly, the objection that the prisoner functionaries and Kohlmann should have helped these people altruistically misses to explain the mentality of the camps. The camps produced new morals, including sexual barter, new social hierarchies, or personal hygiene. At the same time, old morals continued, and so some prisoners sold sex, while others did not, and judged them.

The queer perspective on the Holocaust offers a unique chance to deconstruct the monolith the genocide has grown to appear, including our difficulties with morals in the victim

¹³⁷ L. L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York, 1995), p. 46.

¹³⁸ For a similar point on agency, see Eliyana Adler, 'Hrubieszów at the Crossroads: Polish Jews Navigate the German and Soviet Occupations,' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 28,1 (2014), pp. 1-30.

society. In questioning the normative, queer history take leads beyond the established binary of romantic love and sexual violence, correct and deviant conduct. It also allows us historicize gender in the camps, that is to observe how differently to our world gender works in the camps, both mixed and single sex.

Besides and in spite of the present homophobia, the camps, in their redefined, and crowded conditions with diminished privacy offered a chance at queer desire. Margot, the queer teenager, experienced Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Hamburg as happy places of love, in spite of hunger and cold. If we want to abandon the heterosexual matrix in practice,¹³⁹ queer desire in the camps offers an unparalleled path for implementation. This questioning and possibility of replacement of gender binary and heteronormative family in the Holocaust came across as so subversive/threatening, and is at the root of the survivor homophobia.

Incorporating transgressive sexuality in the Holocaust leads to a more open history, one that explains instead of judging, and helps understand the reasons for stigmatization. Recognizing, and deconstructing stigma has a larger aspect of social justice. Most of people who engaged in transgressive sexuality were marked as deviant were not allowed to bear testimony. Holocaust historians ought to follow the call of subaltern studies: the genocide victims created and enforced categories of suitable and unworthy victims, and gave and took them voice, accordingly.¹⁴⁰ Writing a history of sexuality of the Holocaust thus has an ethical component for the historian: returning people into history, and making place for difficult and ambivalent histories.

¹³⁹ J. Butler, „Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?“ *differences* 13, 1 (2002), pp. 14-44.

¹⁴⁰ For application of subaltern studies in the Holocaust, see D. Glowacka, „‘Traduttore traditore’: Claude Lanzmann’s Polish Translations,“ Forthcoming in Erin McGlothlin, Brad Prager, and Markus Zisselsberger (eds.), *The Construction of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah and its Outtakes* (Detroit, 2020).