

“I Wasn’t Even Eighteen:”

Pierre Seel’s Holocaust as a “175er”

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Over the course of the Nazi Party’s dominion over much of Europe, contemporary reports hold that no fewer than fifteen million human beings were systematically annihilated in ghettos, concentration camps, death camps, or the environs of a myriad of other places. The vast majority of these individuals were ruthlessly hunted down for their “inferior” ethnicity or political status. Neither Jew, Roma, Slav, nor Communist, seventeen year old Pierre Seel of Mulhouse, France was nevertheless arrested and barbarically tortured in a campaign to eliminate the 175ers: Europe’s homosexuals. Confining his story for more than four decades, Pierre chose to break his silence in response to an unmoved world—a world where youth again faced cycles of animosity and oppression.

Pierre Seel was born on August 16, 1923 at Haguenau in France’s Alsace Region. His affluent Catholic family resided in Mulhouse where they owned a successful pastry shop downtown. In 1936, Mulhouse was home to more than 96,000, including a sizeable Jewish community. It was here in his late teens that Pierre encountered Mulhouse’s small gay subculture, which was concentrated in a public garden known as le Square Steinbach.

Following World War I, neighboring Germany had transformed into an “eden” for homosexuals. Contrary to this new era culture, since 1871, German penal code had contained Paragraph 175—a ban on homosexuality. Despite the openness of the gay community under the

Weimar Republic, authorities in some localities chose to maintain lists of suspected homosexuals. The Nazi Party's rise to power in 1933, however, prompted rigorous enforcement of Paragraph 175. In 1934, the Gestapo established an office to combat homosexuality and abortion. State policy subsequently aimed to entirely eradicate these practices for the purpose of raising the birthrate of the Germanic master race.

Germany's formerly vibrant gay culture was forced underground as bars closed, and mass arrests permeated the community with fear. In the decades since the Holocaust, Genocide Watch has established a sequence of eight stages that characterize genocidal occurrences. By 1937, the Nazi party had successfully classified homosexuals by the bars they visited, organized an agency to eradicate the gay community, and dehumanized them as a "plague" or "tumor". Falsely blaming the 1933 Reichstag fire on an alleged homosexual Communist, the Nazi regime polarized the gay community from the general population. Thus, before the outset of World War II, Nazi authorities had already implemented the four precipitating stages of genocide.

An aura of apprehension pervaded Alsace as France prepared for war with Germany, and Pierre's brothers were drafted into the army. The Alsatian Jewry, forewarned of the situation by refugees, went into hiding in Southern France. In May 1940, the fears of war were realized as the German army rolled through French defensive lines. After declaring Alsace *judenrein* in July 1940, the Gestapo began sorting through French police records to pursue members of the next undesirable group: the gay community. Upon reporting the theft of his wristwatch in 1939 from le Square Steinbach, Pierre inadvertently exposed his sexuality. His very presence in a location frequented by gay men resulted in his name being added to a catalogue of suspected homosexuals. Alsatian police had unknowingly drafted death lists for Nazi invaders.

On May third, 1941, the Gestapo summoned seventeen-year-old Pierre and twelve others to

the Mulhouse police station. German interrogators questioned the group, demanding to know the names, addresses, and meeting places of Mulhouse's homosexuals. Frustrated by the group's solidarity, SS officers began a sadistic spree of beating lasting ten days of beating. The detainees were subsequently deported 70 miles north to the Schirmeck-Vorbruck Internment Camp.

A blue bar on Pierre's stiff camp uniform indicated he was a Catholic prisoner. In most other camps, homosexual prisoners wore the infamous pink triangles that ostracized and singled them out for abuse. As opposed to the nearby Natzweiler Concentration Camp, Schirmeck was a "protective custody" camp designated to "reeducate" Alsatians who were seen as uncooperative. Among the inmates were priests who refused to hold mass in German, and young girls who committed innocent acts of resistance. Although not a concentration camp, appalling brutality was not unknown to the detainees of Schirmeck.

Every morning, Pierre and the other prisoners reported for roll call. On one such morning, a young prisoner was dragged to the camp's center. Pierre soon recognized him as Jo, his lover from Mulhouse. He had prayed that Jo would somehow evade the authorities, yet now he stood just feet away, slated for execution. Chocking back tears, he watched as his love was stripped and masked with a tin pail. His sentencing was announced, and vicious German shepherds were ordered to attack. Before Pierre's own eyes, the boy he loved was murdered in a most sickening way; the pail over his head amplifying his pained screams.

Three months after turning eighteen in November 1941, Pierre was freed without explanation. After being drafted into the Wehrmacht, he fought in Eastern Europe against the advancing Soviet Army until the war's conclusion. Pierre kept silent about his experience until 1982, when he came forward in response to the Bishop of Strasbourg's denunciation of homosexuals as "sick." "As a victim of Nazism," Pierre wrote, "I publicly declare with all my strength that such

statements have promoted and justified the extermination of millions of ‘sick’ people.” He went on to publish his memoirs in 1994 and that same year was finally recognized as a victim of the Holocaust. Until his death in 2005, a small candle permanently burned in his kitchen as a memory of his love, Jo.

Pierre Seel’s tribulations, in my eyes, retain an immense significance in the context of Holocaust experiences for two reasons. In the first, over the course of my research I found it difficult to comprehend that these horrendous atrocities were inflicted upon someone my age. Looking around my school, I attempt to picture arrests and deportations of friends, perhaps even executions, and find it difficult to confront. Yet it can happen—it has happened. It is clear to me that when one group is seen as somehow less than human, age is no longer a factor. Youths and adults alike faced ultimate annihilation during the Holocaust; the means by which this was reached were of little importance.

Finally, the primal aspect of Pierre’s story is that unlike other nationalities, the majority of 175ers were not recognized as victims of the Holocaust. While Germany’s anti-Semitic laws were voided after World War II, Paragraph 175 was enforced for two more decades. For this, I am appalled. In the final stage of Genocide Watch’s “Eight Stages of Genocide,” the mass killing is denied. If not for the testimony of rare survivors like Pierre Seel, the holocaust of thousands of homosexuals during the Nazi regime could very well have been indefinitely denied. This, according to Genocide Watch, “extends the crime of genocide to future generations of the victims. It is a continuation of the intent to destroy the group.” Through Pierre Seel’s story, youth as myself may learn the importance of ending cycles of animosity. It is perhaps the only redeeming inheritance of one of history’s darkest pages.

