

good it is—rich, important, lively, greatly detailed in its own way, and occasionally hilarious in a fashion that only a polished writer can manage to bring off. For instance, while evaluating how studies subsequent to Kinsey have tried to measure some of the same variables he explored, Gathorne-Hardy takes us behind the scenes to meet the “Blue Rinse Brigade,” a group of elderly ladies hired by a Chicago research organization to gather sexual histories. The “extensive training” that these women were said to have received turned out to consist of only a single page of guidelines and three days of actual practice—a woefully inadequate level of preparation that has plagued many other post-Kinsey studies as well. Kinsey, who wrote extensively on interviewing techniques, in contrast demanded that his history takers receive training for a *full year* and set extremely rigorous standards to maximize their “people skills.” He would have laughed out loud at the very notion of the Blue Rinse Brigade. For as one of its potential subjects asked with plaintive bewilderment, “Do they think I’m going to tell some old woman who reminds me of my mother that I’m a cocksucker?” (Gathorne-Hardy, 1998, p. 286).

* * *

Numerous researchers have stepped in since Kinsey’s death to continue his work, with some achieving success in a few areas. But no one has matched his cutting edge or has come close to the quality and detail of the *Male* and *Female* volumes (both of which have recently been republished). They endure as the standard reference works on what people did and mostly still do in sex. They also endure as the first, and to this day the most comprehensive, refutation of myths associated with homophobia.

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Henry Gerber (1895-1972): Grandfather of the American Gay Movement

Jim Kepner
Stephen O. Murray

If everyone keeps aloof, nothing will be done. As Goethe said:
"Against human stupidity even the gods fight in vain."

Henry Gerber, October 23, 1945, letter to Manuel Boyfrank

Henry Gerber (1895-1972), the crotchety Bavarian-born forefather of a gay movement in the United States, arrived in the United States in 1913. In



Chicago Historical Society

1917 he was briefly institutionalized in a mental institution for being homosexual. After the United States declared war on Germany, Gerber was given a choice between joining the U.S. Army or being interned for the duration of the war as an enemy alien. He chose to join the army, working as a printer and proofreader in Coblenz (in the Rhineland) as part of the American Army of occupation during the early 1920s. Gerber contacted the then-thriving Bund für Menschenrecht (Society for Human Rights, founded in 1919 by Hans Kahnert) and worked either on *Blätter für Menschenrechten* (*Journal for human rights*, a gay periodical published in

Shortly before his death, Kepner drafted a two-and-a-half-page biographical sketch for a precursor of this book. Murray edited this sketch and added material from Gerber's letters—letters that Kepner had collected and that are now in the ONE/GLA collection at the University of Southern California—and from the material Kepner supplied Katz (1978). Dates following quotations are those of letters to Manuel Boyfrank. Page numbers that are not part of a fuller reference are from Katz (1978). Kepner did not supply citations for the direct quotations in his sketch.

Berlin for which Gerber wrote two bylined articles from the United States that appeared in 1928 and 1929) or, more likely, on an army post newspaper. His 1962 article in *ONE Magazine* recalled subscribing to a German homosexual magazine and traveling several times to Berlin.

After the war, his citizenship status still uncertain because of the psychiatric hospitalization, he worked for the U.S. Postal Service in Chicago. With some help from his supervisor there, he founded a Society for Human Rights (SHR) in Chicago. The SHR's December 1924 charter from the state of Illinois as a nonprofit corporation had the stated objective

to promote and protect the interests of people who by reasons of mental and physical abnormalities are abused and hindered in the legal pursuit of happiness which is guaranteed them by the Declaration of Independence and to combat the public prejudices against them by dissemination of factors according to modern science among intellectuals of mature age. The Society stands only for law and order; it is in harmony with any and all general laws insofar as they protect the rights of others, and does in no manner recommend any acts in violation of present laws nor advocate any matter inimical to the public welfare. (Katz, 1978, pp. 386-387)

Gerber signed the application as secretary. The Reverend John T. Graves, an African-American preacher, who was the only clergyman Gerber seems to have found congenial, signed it as president, and the document lists seven directors, including Gerber and Graves.

Gerber was deeply disappointed by his inability to gain support for SHR from any physicians or advocates of sex education and sexual freedom: "The most difficult task was to get men of good reputation to back up the Society." He tried to get medical authorities to endorse the new organization, but as he said "they usually refused to endanger their reputations." He was dismayed that "the only support I got was from poor people"; the only men willing to join were "illiterate and penniless." Gerber did all the work and bore all the costs. He recalled that he had been "willing to slave and suffer and risk losing my job and savings and even my liberty for the ideal" (Katz, 1978, pp. 388-393). Years after SHR collapsed, Gerber reported that he had come to realize that "most people only join clubs which already have members" (June 22, 1946).

Very few individuals were even willing to receive the Society's publication, *Friendship and Freedom* (of which there were two issues), by mail, regarding it as akin to thieves publicly subscribing to a thieves' journal, making it easy to find criminals (as those engaging in any same-sex sexual contact were then considered). Postal censors eagerly cooperated with local

law enforcement agencies to identify "sex deviants." A picture of *Friendship and Freedom* appeared in a German magazine (it is reproduced in Katz 1978, p. 587), and a brief review of the first issue appeared in the French journal *L'Amitié* in April of 1925 (originally titled *Inversions*).

In his 1962 retrospect, Gerber wrote that upon his return to the United States,

I realized that homosexuals themselves needed nearly as much attention as the laws pertaining to their acts. . . . The first difficulty was in rounding up enough members and contributors so the work could go forward. The average homosexual, I found, was ignorant concerning himself. Others were fearful. Still others were frantic or depraved. Some were blasé.

Many homosexuals told me that their search for forbidden fruit was the real spice of life. With this argument they rejected our aims. We wondered how we could accomplish anything with such resistance from our own people. (Katz, 1978, p. 388)

Gerber never said where he tried to recruit, other than through pen pals. There were speakeasies where homosexual men gathered, but Gerber neither drank nor smoked and did not like to associate with queeny or with older homosexual men. Surreptitious homosexual activity in parks, restrooms, and theaters limited, if not precluded, conversation, at least any discussion about joining a legal reform organization. The few pen pals who admitted they were homosexual were interested in direct sex contacts, in trading erotic photos, or in ethereal romanticism.

Nevertheless, Gerber and his original group had a plan for gradual expansion with two cautious principles, both of which prefigured 1950s' homophile organizations:

- (1) We would engage in a series of lectures pointing out the attitude of society in relation to their own behavior and especially urging against the seduction of adolescents.

- (2) Through a publication named *Friendship and Freedom* we would keep the homophile world in touch with the progress of our efforts. The publication was to refrain from advocating sexual acts and would serve merely as a forum of discussion.

The final part of the plan aimed to convince authorities of the need for change:

(3) Through self-discipline, homophiles would win the confidence and assistance of legal authorities and legislators in understanding the problem: that these authorities should be educated on the futility and folly of long prison terms for those committing homosexual acts, etc. (Katz, 1978, pp. 386-387)

Gerber and Graves had decided to exclude bisexuals from SHR. Unbeknownst to them, SHR's vice president, Al Weininger, called by Gerber an "indigent laundry queen," had a wife and two young children. The members of SHR were jailed when Weininger's wife told a social worker about an organization of "degenerates," and the social worker passed on the information to the police. The police brought along a newspaper reporter when they came calling on Gerber. As Gerber recalled:

One Sunday morning about 2 a.m., I returned from a visit downtown. After I had gone to my room, someone knocked at the door. Thinking it might be the landlady, I opened up. Two men entered the room. They identified themselves as a city detective and a newspaper reporter from [the Hearst newspaper] the *Examiner*. The detective asked me where the boy was. What boy? He told me he had orders from his precinct captain to bring me to the police station. He took my typewriter, my notary public diploma, and all the literature of the Society and also personal diaries as well as my bookkeeping accounts. At no time did he show a warrant for my arrest. At the police station I was locked up in a cell but no charges were made against me. (Katz, 1978, p. 390)

The next morning he was taken to the Chicago Avenue Police Court, where he found John, Al, and George, a young man who had been in Al's room at the time of arrest. The *Examiner* reported the story under the headline, "Strange Sex Cult Exposed." The reporter claimed that Al had "brought his male friends home and had, in full view of his wife and children, practiced 'strange sex acts' with them." He also wrote that a pamphlet of this "cult" was found that "urged men to leave their wives and children," a statement totally antithetical to the SHR policy of including only exclusive homosexuals.

On Monday the detective produced a powder puff in court that he claimed to have found in Gerber's room. This was understood by everyone as evidence of effeminacy, although Gerber heartily denied that it was his or that he ever used powder or owned a powder puff. The judge wondered aloud about whether *Friendship and Freedom* violated federal laws about sending obscene materials through the U.S. mail—the obscenity being discussion of

homosexuality or the persecution of homosexuals, rather than anything particularly prurient.

The case was dismissed and the prosecution reprimanded (by a different judge), but his legal defense cost Gerber his life savings of \$600 and resulted in dismissal from his job for "conduct unbecoming a postal worker." Al pled guilty to disorderly conduct and was fined \$10. Most undistributed copies of *Friendship and Freedom* were confiscated by the police, along with Gerber's private papers and typewriter. Despite a judge's order, they were never returned to him. No action on obscenity was taken although two postal inspectors were present in the court. The case left Gerber very bitter that none of the more affluent Chicago homosexuals helped him in a fight which he regarded as one for the collective good. Gerber was left without a job or savings, and his dream of a Society for Human Rights was ended.

It is not clear what Gerber did to earn a living during the next few years. On a 1927 visit to New York City, a friend from his newspaper days in Coblenz introduced him to a colonel (who had been a brevet major general during World War I) who told Gerber he would be glad to have him in his unit if he reenlisted. Gerber did so; in 1945, he received an honorable discharge and a \$100 a month military pension. Making New York City his home, Gerber made some further efforts to organize homosexuals, although he increasingly believed that "most bitches are only interested in sex contacts," not challenging legal and social stigmas of homosexuality. "I have absolutely no confidence in the dorian crowd, mostly a bunch of selfish, uncultured, ignorant egoists who have nothing for the ideal side of life," Gerber wrote Boyfrank (April 9, 1944). "Since it gets me nothing and prevents me from enjoying my liberty in private, why bother to help others?" was the bitter view of the one-time idealist reformer. "Why waste your time and run risks of jail over a few stupid homos who are bound to get in dutch and spill everything? I have gone through all this and swore to do it no more" (January 4, 1945).

Gerber also ran the pen-pal club *Contacts* from 1930 until 1939. It had about 150 to 200 members when he began. Although most members were heterosexual, it was possible for Gerber and a few other homosexuals to blend in, thereby avoiding attention and interference from the postal authorities. Members were not informed who was running the club. He produced a monthly newsletter, generally a single mimeographed sheet for "Contacters." He also worked on a 1934 freethinking publication, *Chanticleer*, writing many articles in defense of homosexuality, including an early report on the persecution of homosexuals in Germany. He missed the fact that a similar witch-hunt against homosexuals had begun in the Soviet Union months earlier: Russia was still thought to be the only Western country that had been

freed from legal oppression. So convinced was Gerber that religion was the source of antihomosexual bias that he hardly saw atheism and what we might now label gay pride as separable.

In the final (1939) issue of *Contacts*, #10, Gerber provided a lengthy self-description of a vaguely (pop-)Nietzschean misanthrope whose misogyny is dwarfed by his anticlericalism:

NYC Male, 44, proofreader, single. Favored by nature with immunity to female "charms," but do[es] not "hate" women; consider[s] them necessary in the scheme of nature. Amused by screwy antics of Homo Sapiens. Introvert, enjoying a quiet evening with classical music or non-fiction book. Looking at life, I understand why monkeys protested Darwin's thesis.

Of Bavarian descent. Brought up Catholic, now an avowed atheist. (God loves atheists because they do not molest him with silly prayers.) Believe[s] in brotherhood of man, but sees no hope for mankind to free itself from exploitation of the entrenched money changers. Religions is a racket and one who believes in supernatural powers is ready to swallow anything, including Jonas' whale.

Believe[s] in French sex morality: that it's not the state's business to interfere in the sexual enjoyment of adults so long as rights of others are not violated. If I had designed this world, I would have designed a less messy and filthy modus operandi of procreation than "sex" and birth. . . . Nature is plain, although there is no meaning beyond multiplication of existing forms. Like cats, men and women create children, which in the case of cats are drowned every time a litter appears. It is still against the law to drown unwanted children. Nature will always favor procreation and is distinctly on the side of women in trapping man and drafting him for his natural duties. Birth control makes slow headway, but is considered legal, although natural forms of birth control which do not depend on artificial goods sold in drugstores [homosexual contacts] are still considered grave moral misdemeanors. . . . Religious racketeers realize that man's emotions, if freely expressed by sex activity, would leave nothing for religion. But sex repress [repressed] and inhibited leads to religious hysteria, and priests get rich thereby. Thus sex must be suprest [suppressed]. No intelligent man will find certain anatomical parts of man's body more moral than others and would naturally reject the word "obscene." But it is part and parcel of a scheme to deprive man of sex pleasure for the ultimate profit of others. Man must not enjoy himself too much or God will weep and punish him! Absurd theology, accepted by millions of Christians and Jews.

Life itself is not a great gift, but those who have a good income without having to work too hard manage to find life tolerably interesting and enjoy the pleasures of mind and body. . . . A genuine introvert, consider[s] solitude the greatest blessing of man. Can get along without friends and prefer[s] to be alone rather than waste my time with morons who have only learned phrases such as You said it, You are damn[e]d right, Search me. It is impossible for a person conducting his business in a big city to be alone most of the time, and contacts in the line of business prevent a solitary introvert from becoming lopsided. Books, the radio, the newspaper bring the world into his home, without forcing him to endure painful contact with nitwits. Brainless people fear being alone with their empty selves and run from party to party and from the many amusements offered such unthinking people. I am fond of reading non-fiction books and have quite a library of selected volumes. Very fond of classical music. Have about 1000 gramophone records (all classical) and a radio-combination, also play the piano. Fond of outdoors in summer. Like foreign, especially French, films, and the few worthwhile Hollywood pictures, but am disgusted with the hypocrisy and "goody-goody" filmware which shows all men honest and all women "pure." Firmly for realism even if it shakes a few pious spinsters out of their "Alice-in-Wonderland" reverie. Rather particular about correspondents. Not interested in smut or "obscenity," not because it is a "sin" but believe my private affairs personal and sacred, not to be divulged to gossip. Not interested in the gossip-mongering of the average Contacts female nor inclined to waste time on brainless male "old wives" who are too lazy or cowardly to solve their own problems. Consider myself civilized and self-sufficient, but always welcome people of like minds who can discuss life intelligently, and can share the simple pleasures of discussion, music, and travel.

This diatribe drew at least one response, the beginning of correspondence with Manuel Boyfrank. In a January 27, 1940, letter Gerber wrote Boyfrank, "I was surprised to find you a homosexual, too, but let me tell you from experience [that] it does not pay to do anything for them. I once lost a good job trying to bring them together. Most men of that type are too scared to join any association trying to help them; the other half are only interested in physical contacts and have no interest in helping their cause, as I found to my sorrow." Gerber continued, immediately, with specification of his own sexual conduct, circa 1940:

Personally I am only interested in young boys around 20 who are willing to do all the "dirty" work for say a dollar. . . . Fortunately there are many of that type who deliver the goods for a price, and I am more or less consorting to this business. How should I worry how others get theirs? As they say in the South, I get mine; why worry how he gets hisn?

In a letter to Boyfrank (March 23, 1944), however, he said that mutual masturbation in movie theaters was the extent of his "love affairs."

He might have been not quite honest, since in another letter to Boyfrank (July 5, 1945), he wrote, "I prefer prostitutes who have their price and do a good job. . . . Thousands are willing to make a couple dollars and get pleasure on top of it." In addition to their abundant supply, he stated that another advantage in this choice of sexual partners was that "prostitutes would no more call the police than a bootlegger would ask a revenuer for protection of his illegal business."

Generally unsociable, Gerber longed for that "ideal friend," but by his midforties he had settled for quick anonymous sex, primarily masturbating military men in theaters. Intellectual companionship for him was at a geographic distance, maintained cautiously (given his experiences with the U.S. Postal Service) by mail. From 1939 to 1957 he engaged in extensive correspondence with Manuel Boyfrank, Frank McCourt, and several others about how to organize homosexuals, and how to answer the prejudice and misinformation in the press.

Gerber and his friends suffered periodic beatings, theft, and blackmail by the "dirt trade." They were further harassed by postal snoops who opened "suspicious or obscene" mail and reported homosexuals to the police. In February 1942 Gerber's quarters were searched by G-2, the U.S. Army investigative unit. Although they found no damaging evidence, Gerber spent weeks in the guardhouse. Gerber recalled that "they put me before a Section VIII (undesirable) board and tried to get me out of the army on that. When I told the president of the board I only practiced mutual masturbation with men over 21, the psychiatrist told me 'You are not a homosexual.' I nearly fell out of my chair! Imagine me fighting all my life for our cause and then be told I was not a homosexual!"

Although he recurrently discussed the need for a homosexual advocacy group, Gerber felt that it was virtually impossible to find enough reliable people to start one. On Governor's Island in 1948, Fred Frisbie, a nineteen-year-old soldier who had gone home with a friend of Gerber's, enthusiastically joined such a discussion over breakfast, but Gerber argued that most homosexuals would never support any organization designed to improve the

general social position of homosexuals. Frisbie was later a participant in Mattachine and ONE, Inc.

Some of Gerber's long-winded letters in defense of homosexuality (also attacking corrupt politicians, conservative moralists, and religion) appeared in *The Modern Thinker*, *The Freethinker*, *American Mercury*, and District of Columbia newspapers, signed by "Doctor Gerber," since only a doctor was presumed to know anything about such abnormality.

Gerber, Boyfrank, and McCourt were masculine in appearance and demeanor and felt they had little in common with effeminate queens or lesbians. In particular, Gerber regarded women as nest builders, allies of priests, and as natural enemies of homosexuals. "Women are good psychologists and [it] did not take long to find out that homosexuals are their deadly enemies in the capture of the male" (January 4, 1945) was a leitmotif of Gerber's letters to Boyfrank. Although knowing little of the gay bar scene, they knew the park and movie theater cruising scenes well. Each had been rolled a few times. They argued among themselves about what homosexuality was and what to do about the problems homosexuals faced. Gerber initially viewed homosexuality as innate, then as a preference, and, after a Freudian conversion, as potential in all men ("There are no homosexuals. There is only sex pleasure and various forms of acquiring it"—July 5, 1945, letter to Boyfrank; reiterated October 23, 1945). However, he continued to vacillate about the existence of a homosexual kind of person as indicated by his rhetorical question, "What homosexual in his right mind wants to marry or to be 'cured'?" (August 9, 1947).

After a few relatively early partnerships with young queens, Gerber rarely had sex with friends or with anyone much over twenty-five years of age. Although publicly opposing racism, he often expressed his own. He viewed psychoanalysis as liberating and angrily cut off any friends, such as Jan Kingma (who was involved in or founded Philadelphia's Foundation for Social Development in 1948) simply because he espoused mysticism or religion or sought to work with sympathetic clergy. Except for the Reverend Graves, Gerber regarded any seemingly supportive clergy as a hypocrite, ignoring Christianity's implacable and essential opposition to homosexuality.

He worked some, though at a distance with Mattachine—New York and *ONE Magazine* during the 1950s. He wrote an account of the Society for Human Rights that appeared in the September 1962 issue of *ONE Magazine*, and translated part of Magnus Hirschfeld's (1914) *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* for the *ONE Institute Quarterly*. Although Gerber pressed Boyfrank to join ONE, he continued to doubt that these organizations could win support from most gays or substantially change public prejudices. In a June 18, 1957, letter to Boyfrank he commented that "ONE and Mattachine have lots of financial trouble because the average ho-

mosexual is mainly interested in contacts with other homosexuals. When neither of these publications help in this matter but beg for contributions all the time . . . people are discouraged. . . . So the average homosexual, unless he is unselfish, can see nothing in it for him and he returns to the solitary hunt for trade."

During the 1950s he began to explore the gay bar scene and was astonished to discover that more men than he had previously supposed did engage in anal intercourse. Except for brief trips to Mexico and Europe during 1951 and 1952, he spent his final years at the U.S. Soldiers' Home in Washington, DC. He worked on an autobiography "admitting my homosexuality but not going into details," a critique of religion, a book on ethics, and a book on sex laws. The last he titled *Moral Delusions* (January 4, 1945). He also worked on rewriting translations he had done years earlier of two German gay novels he collectively titled *Angels in Sodom* (December 7, 1946). He mailed some manuscripts to Boyfrank. Either they all were lost—perhaps seized by postal inspectors—or they disappeared into Boyfrank's never-finished cut-and-paste manuscript. Boyfrank told Kepner he did not recall receiving them, although they are discussed in their correspondence around that time (e.g., in an October 23, 1945, letter). Gerber also produced a recreational bulletin at the soldiers' home and wrote letters and prepared tax forms for other veterans, most of whom he despised as idiots.

Although his fledgling organization was crushed by a cabal of social control agents, Gerber sowed the seed of gay pride and the idea of fighting for gay rights in scores of correspondents, directly and indirectly influencing Harry Hay, Jim Kepner, Tony Segura, Donna Smith, Fred Frisbie, Manuel Boyfrank, and others who worked to establish the homophile movement of the 1950s. Gerber is also a clear link between the German movement to remove Paragraph 175 of the German penal code and the 1950s' law reform movement that still remained extremely high-risk activism for people who were not just stigmatized but whose relations—even nonsexual associations—were criminalized. He was keenly aware of the centrality of postal inspectors interfering with association at a distance by those seeking to organize around homosexuality and its repression, an obstacle to nonlocal mobilization that ONE finally succeeded in removing in 1958.

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