

Remembering the Holocaust: Pink Triangle Day And Celebrating Free Speech

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Xtra!

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In Nazi Germany between 1933 and '45 more than 100,000 men were arrested on charges relating to homosexuality. Many of those were taken to concentration camps where they were forced to wear the pink triangle as identification. Decades later Hamilton's Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Advisory Board is trying to ensure that the symbol and its significance aren't forgotten.

"There was complicity and passiveness from the people of Germany that allowed these things to happen," says Lyla Miklos, a member of the advisory board and one of the organizers of Hamilton's upcoming Pink Triangle Day celebrations. "We can't forget that Hitler was elected to office. It is a testament to how fragile our democratic rights are."

On Thu, Feb 14 Hamilton's GLBT Advisory Board, the City of Hamilton and Jewish and queer student groups from McMaster University will copresent a series of events to commemorate Pink Triangle Day. The annual gay holiday was declared in 1979 by the now-defunct Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition in recognition of Canada's first major legal victory for queers — the acquittal of The Body Politic, Xtra's predecessor, on indecency charges on Feb 14, 1979.

"We are holding the events as a victory for free speech but also to remember those we've lost. We must learn from the past," says Miklos. "When the economy starts to go bad, when there is a disaster like 9/11, we start to freely give away our democratic rights. We have to protect the rights we've gained. We don't want to live in fear, we don't want hate to control our destiny, we never want to forget, never again."

During the afternoon Joanne Cohen, activist, author and the child of a Holocaust survivor, will be giving a presentation on the importance of civic friendship, community and free speech for human rights advocacy and Holocaust remembrance. There will also be a screening of Paragraph 175, a documentary chronicling the lives of men and women arrested under the sodomy provision of the German penal code, followed by a candle-lighting ceremony to remember the many groups of people persecuted by the Nazis.

"We are going to have members of the Polish community, trade unionists, people with disabilities, etc," says Miklos. "A lot of people don't realize how many groups were targeted by the Nazis and systematically eliminated."

"We always have to protect the rights we've already gained and never assume that they will always be there," adds Miklos. "Hitler's regime was a dramatic response, proving how important it is to keep writing letters, always engaging our government. One realization that can be taken from the history of the Nazi regime is that we are constantly being scrutinized. Every time there is a victory in our community, there is always someone questioning, working against us. Our rights are under attack."

Miklos says she first learned about the significance of the pink triangle while she was a student at Hamilton's Mohawk College. But, just as many people are unaware of Pink Triangle Day, many are unaware of where the pink triangle's gay connection originated.

"There are still kids today who are ignorant to the fact that gays and lesbians were targeted during the Holocaust," she says. "We are looking to truly educate our community, give them some food for thought.

"We are also creating some very good lasting connections. In Hamilton the three most targeted groups for hate crimes are the GLBT community, the Jewish community and the black community. The Jewish community has been an important ally for us. When we had some beatings outside of gay establishments the Jewish community wrote letters of support and we even had a rabbi who couldn't drive on the Sabbath walk all the way to city hall. We are working toward continuing to build those bridges, connecting with our communities."

Pink Triangle Day events in Hamilton begin at 2pm on Thu, Feb 14 with Lovers in a Dangerous Time, a presentation and discussion with Jewish author and activist Joanne Cohen at the McMaster University Student Centre (1280 Main St W, room 311/313). That evening the documentary Paragraph 175 screens at 7pm at Beth Jacob Synagogue (375 Aberdeen Ave). Both events are free.