



Magnus Hirschfeld

(1868–1935)

Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld was a trail-blazing genius who advanced the understanding of human sexuality and the advocacy of LGBTI human rights at a time when it was deeply unpopular to do so; the Einstein of sex who braved Nazi genocide. That took courage – and determination.

Hirschfeld was born into a conservative Jewish Prussian family. Against the conventions of his era, even as a boy he viewed sexuality as something entirely natural and wholesome.

During a medical lecture on "sexual degeneracy", a gay man – incarcerated in an asylum for 30 years – was paraded naked like a laboratory animal. Hirschfeld was traumatised. Soon after setting up himself as a doctor, he was waylaid by a soldier deeply disturbed by his homosexuality. Hirschfeld resisted the soldier's pleading for a consultation there and then, telling him to come to his surgery the next day. Overnight, the soldier killed himself. Guilt and remorse motivated him to study homosexuality, writing a pamphlet calling for legalised homosexuality, outlawed under Paragraph 175 of the German penal code. One of Hirschfeld's biggest problems was hostility from gays and lesbians. They mostly accepted their second-class status. They refused to co-operate with his surveys and law reform campaigns.

Realising his lone efforts were not enough, in 1897 Hirschfeld founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee (SHC). Its strategy was in particular to debunk homophobic prejudice and present a case for decriminalisation. The SHC were put under surveillance and subjected to harassment. A similar movement did not emerge in Britain until the 1960s. Due to Hirschfeld's campaigns, in 1898 the German parliament debated repeal of Paragraph 175. Although defeated, the debate put homosexual equality onto the mainstream political agenda.

Hirschfeld took the police commissioner of Berlin on a tour of gay clubs. The commissioner found LGBTI people witty, stylish, polite and well behaved – and enjoyed their company. Hirschfeld also wrote the screenplay for *Different from the Others*, the first film to portray homosexuality sympathetically, which was released in 1919.

Hirschfeld erroneously advanced the idea that LGBT people were an "intermediate sex"; male homosexuals possessed a "woman's soul trapped in a man's body". This misjudgement aside, Hirschfeld was right on most things. He advocated the rights of transgender people – again, decades ahead of his time and established the Institute for Sexual Science which predated Kinsey's Institute by three decades.

His work bought him into conflict with the Nazis; they attacked him, his lover and assistant, Karl Giese and their "perversions". In 1933, Stormtroopers destroyed ISS's archives, the vast library burned in a bonfire of "enemy books". Newsreel footage features in almost every documentary about Nazism. But it is rarely acknowledged that it was Hirschfeld's institute that were the victims. The Gestapo seized the institute's list of client names and addresses to compile its notorious "pink lists", identifying homosexuals and leading to their deportation to concentration camps.

The Nazis publicly denounced Hirschfeld as one of the leading "Jewish criminals", effectively a death sentence. He went to the south of France, and died suddenly of a stroke in 1935. Giese killed himself in 1938, while on the run from the Nazis. Sad, lonely deaths, unbecoming their enormous humanitarian contributions.

Source - this is an edited version of an article by Peter Tatchell for International Business Times in 2015

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