

Estonia



Lilian Kotter

There is no historical evidence concerning the presence of lesbians or lesbian groups in Estonia before World War. II. Neither female nor male homosexuality was punishable; the article outlawing male sodomy was introduced to Estonia directly from the penal code of the Russian Federation immediately after the Soviet occupation in 1940.¹ While lesbians were not specifically named in the law, this did not mean that they were free to express their sexuality. Few people of any sort were able to live their private lives freely. Sexual liberation, even for heterosexuals, was regarded as something which promoted individuality and was considered threatening to a totalitarian society.

At the end of the 1980s, thanks to the opening up of Soviet society, the silence around questions of sexuality—including homosexuality—was broken, and women identifying themselves as lesbians had new opportunities to organize. Although lesbian and gay life was still largely invisible, discussions about homosexuality have helped shift popular attitudes towards tolerance. The economic difficulties of

making the step from totalitarianism to a market economy and civil society have been more "vital" problems than homosexuality. However, many Estonians understand the concerns of lesbians and gay men because they can see the parallels to the repression that all Estonians experienced during the years of Soviet occupation.

SOCIAL CLIMATE

Compared to neighboring Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia is relatively tolerant of sexual minorities. The first study of attitudes toward homosexuality in Estonia, carried out in 1990,² found diverse opinions among Estonian students. Approximately one half of the people questioned in the survey expressed the view that homosexuality was either a disease or an abnormal form of sexuality. However, the majority objected to the isolation of lesbians and gay men from society. One third of the respondents said that they considered homosexuals to be normal people who have been unjustly deprived of human rights. Approximately one fourth of respondents expressed outright condemnation of homosexuality. Attitudes toward lesbians were generally less hostile than attitudes toward gay men. It should be taken into account that the attitudes expressed were merely theoretical, since only a few of the respondents reported having had any direct contact with people they knew to be lesbian or gay.

Most material on homosexuality published in the last five or six years in Estonia has been relatively positive. There have been a few homophobic attacks but they are usually followed by protests. In May 1990, a conference entitled "Sexual Minorities and Society in 20th Century Europe," the first of its kind in Eastern Europe, was held in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. The conference and its subject received positive and encouraging press coverage.

LESBIAN ORGANIZING

During the conference, Estonian lesbians met for the first time with a group of lesbians from another country (Finland). The Estonian Lesbian Union was established at this meeting; it was the first such organization to be formed in the Baltics. Through an interview in an independent newspaper and an interview with the chairwoman of the Estonian Lesbian Union on Estonian television at peak viewing time the group's formation was given prominent coverage.

The ELU has never had its own office space, which has greatly limited its activities. Nevertheless, for nearly five years the ELU has arranged lesbian and mixed (lesbian and gay) parties as well as some fundraising events. Recently, the ELU has arranged sports activities for lesbians. Advertisements about certain events as well as information about the ELU's telephone hotline have been published in newspapers, which has kept the ELU visible in the local media. Mem-

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bers of the ELU have often been interviewed by the local press, and the information leaflet for lesbians started by the ELU is developing into an information bulletin.

In December 1992, a regular lesbian hotline was started, operating twice a week on Thursdays and Saturdays for three hours at a time. The organization also maintains a modest library consisting of books, periodicals, conference papers, educational materials, and information about lesbian and gay groups in other countries.

Since March 1993, the ELU has been an officially recog-

nized Estonian non-governmental organization. As of March 1995 the ELU has a mailing list of nearly 200 lesbians and bisexual women, who are of diverse ages, occupations, and educational backgrounds. Transgendered people in Estonia also contact the ELU and take part in events. Although there is no mixed organization for lesbians and gay men, this has not prevented actual collaboration.

While the ELU represents a significant step forward in forming a lesbian community, many lesbians remain isolated. Lesbians in Tallinn have few public places in which to socialize. In April 1993, a mainly female bar opened in the center of the city, but it unfortunately closed after only six months. Lesbians living in small towns have even fewer options for coming into contact with other lesbians.

PARENTING

Since the end of the last century the number of single women in Estonia has been remarkably high, and no great social pressures exist for women to get married. It is possible for a single woman to adopt a child if she has a regular income and is able to provide for a child's needs; it is also possible for single women to undergo donor insemination.

In a 1993 divorce case in Tallinn, a man sought custody of his two children on the grounds that his ex-wife was a lesbian and lived with her female partner. The lawyer objected, indicating that the law does not mention lesbians and therefore provided no justification for refusing the wife custody of her children. The mother retained custody of the children and is raising them with her companion.

DISCRIMINATION

There has been no government harassment of activists in the 1990s and no problems with registering lesbian groups or publications. Some years ago there were attacks on a lesbian household in the countryside, but such cases are infre-

quent.

There are only a few reported cases of employment discrimination, but this reflects the fact that few lesbians are open about their sexual orientation rather than indicating a positive situation for lesbians in the workplace. The majority of lesbians do not reveal their sexuality at work; they may suffer only minimal discrimination as single women, but as outspoken lesbians they would likely encounter negative consequences.

As this example illustrates, Estonian lesbians are able to live their lives in a climate of relative tolerance but only within certain limits. There is little stigma attached to being a single women, and many lesbians can thus live their lives without constant pressure to get married. However, Estonian lesbians still have a long way to go in building a strong, visible community.

NOTES

- 1 Russian Penal Code, Art. 121: "Sexual relations between men [man lying with man] shall be punishable by incarceration for a period of up to five years." Quoted in Masha Gessen, *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation*. San Francisco: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 1994, p. 9.
- 2 Ivika Nogel, "How Homosexuality Is Regarded among Students in Current Estonia," *Sexual Minorities and Society: the Changing Attitudes Toward Homosexuality in 20th Century Europe*. Papers presented at the International Conference in Tallinn May 28-30, 1990. Udo Parikas and Teet Veispak, eds. *Papers on the History of Sexuality*, No. 1 Tallinn: Institute of History, pp. 115-121.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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