



# BERLIN'S THIRD SEX

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PREVIEW

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## BERLIN'S THIRD SEX

If one wished to produce a vast portrait of a world-class city like Berlin, penetrating the depths rather than merely dwelling on the surface, one could scarcely ignore the impact of homosexuality, which has fundamentally influenced both the shading of this picture in detail and the character of the whole.

While it is hardly likely that there are more homosexuals born in Berlin than in small towns or the hinterlands, it stands to reason that, whether consciously or unconsciously, those who deviate in undesirable ways from the majority gravitate to places where they might live less conspicuously, and less beleaguered, in the amplitude and mutability of the many. It is precisely this that makes a metropolis so attractive and distinctive, that individuals are not subject to their neighbours' surveillance as they are in smaller localities, where the circles are closed, so too minds and senses. In such places it is easy to monitor when, where and with whom the neighbours eat, drink, stroll and sleep – and monitor

they do, avidly – while in Berlin those in the front of an apartment building often have no idea who is living in the rear block of the same building<sup>4</sup>, let alone what those inhabitants get up to. And yet there are buildings here that contain a hundred households, a thousand people.

That which is hidden from the uninitiated in the metropolis can be all the more easily discovered by the initiate, because it is far less constrained.

Any well-informed person will soon notice that the streets and pleasure spots of Berlin boast not just men and women in the accepted sense, but frequently also those who differ not just in their behaviour, but often their appearance as well, such that alongside the masculine and feminine one can almost speak of a third sex.

This expression was in common currency as far back as ancient Rome, and while I do not find it particularly suitable, it is at least better than the word homosexual (same-sex) which is so often used today, because this term gives credence to the widely-held assumption that wherever a number of homosexuals gather, sexual acts are in preparation if not in progress, an assumption that in no way accords with the facts.

So when this study mentions homosexuals, one should not think of any type of sexual act. Where they do occur they elude observation not just because of their illegal status, but most especially because of the natural sense of shame and morality which is as pronounced in the homosexual as in the normally sexed; these acts are by no means the main focus, and are often absent altogether. What matters here is the essence of the

uranian – and in this text we echo Ulrichs<sup>5</sup> in using this name for those with homosexual sentiments – and that his behaviour toward the male and female sexes derives from the attractions and antipathies within his nature.

But even for those who recognise many typical qualities of the uranian, a great deal still remains concealed, whether because they, and this is by no means rare, bear no readily identifiable signs, or because they play out the comedy – or more likely tragedy – of their life with great skill, able to adapt themselves and all their habits to those of normal people, prudently keeping their inclinations veiled. Most of them are keen that ‘no-one should notice anything’. I know homosexuals in Berlin, even a few who are not at all abstemious, who have managed to fool those around them for years, decades, their whole lives even; it is also common for them to transform a male character into a female when reporting romantic adventures to their companions, just as some translators of the writers of antiquity do.

The physical configuration of Berlin is a great boon in this transformation. Anyone living in the east who conducts his business and family relations there can meet up with friends in the south for years without those in his circle being any the wiser. There are many Berliners in the west who have never seen Wedding, many in Kreuzberg who have never stepped foot in the Scheunenviertel<sup>6</sup>. For a long time I have treated an old Berlin lady, the widow of a musician. She had one child, a son, who had set off on the wrong path, playing truant from an early age, disappearing for days on end and roaming about. His parents would always go looking for

him but when he turned 21 they lost their patience, and let him go. For 26 years the mother had neither seen nor heard from her boy; she was over 70, her husband long dead. And then one day he simply reappeared, a prematurely aged 47-year-old man with a shaggy beard, a vagrant with an 'organism poisoned by alcohol'; he wanted to know if she perhaps 'still had some of Father's old clothes'. The most unusual thing – in those 26 years neither mother nor son had left Berlin. Such a case would never occur in a small town.

It beggars imagination how many can elude the authorities entirely in the Prussian capital, which is seen as a model of order, a status it may rightfully claim when set against other major cities. I have been astonished to witness foreigners remaining unhindered in Berlin long after they were officially expelled, more astonished still to see how those sought by the police can stay here for months and years without registering with the authorities, and not even in outlying districts, but usually near the great transport junctions where their presence would be least suspected.

Have you ever been to Room 361 of the police headquarters on Alexanderplatz<sup>7</sup>? It is one of the most remarkable places in a city scarcely wanting for striking locations. Perched high above the roofs of the metropolis, it is to be found in the middle of a row of rooms in which ten million pieces of paper are arranged in alphabetical order. Each sheet represents a human life. Those among the living are found in the blue cartons, the dead repose in white. Each sheet bears the name, place of birth and date of birth of each person who has

inhabited an apartment or room in Berlin since the year 1836. Every registration and deregistration, every change of address is scrupulously recorded. There are sheets that contain thirty or more apartments, others with only one; there are those whose lifespans begin in a cellar in the east and stretch all the way to the Tiergarten district<sup>8</sup>, and others who start off on the first floor of the front block of the building and end their days on the fourth floor of a rear block<sup>9</sup>. Anyone seeking to find a missing person in Berlin is directed to Room 361. From eight o'clock in the morning to seven o'clock at night, they climb the steep stone steps in their hundreds, many thousands over the course of a year. Each piece of information costs 25 pfennigs. These are not just people seeking to recover money, those who value others purely by the debt they represent. No, many of those mounting the stairs have returned from distant lands and are now trying to determine where (or if) their close relations and childhood friends now live. For the first few years they continued to write to each other, then their correspondence abated, and now the stranger has once more returned to the old homeland. Hearts racing, they write their mother's name and last known abode on the information slip – but she is long dead; they ask after brothers, sisters and friends, all of them, every one of them dead, and with heavy heart the lonely supplicant descends the stairs once more.

How many enquire there, fruitlessly, parents seeking prodigal sons, sisters enquiring after brothers, and girls looking for the fathers of the children whose futures lie in their wombs. 'Not registered', 'forwarding

address unknown', 'emigrated', 'dead' report the officials, always dispassionate, when they return after half an hour and summon the waiting applicant, who then silently, gravely, despondently, all too rarely joyfully, goes back down the stairs to be consumed once more by the tide of buildings and people in this formidable city, Berlin.

The ease with which one can sink unseen into a city of two and a half million inhabitants greatly facilitates the dual personality so often found in the sexual arena. The professional self and the sexual self, day self and night self are often two utterly distinct personalities in one body, the one proud and honourable, most noble and conscientious, the other its antithesis. This applies to homosexuals as well as the normally sexed. I knew a uranian lawyer who, on leaving his office near Potsdamer Platz of an evening, or taking leave of a gathering of his associates, would seek out a tavern at the southern end of Friedrichstadt<sup>10</sup>, a dive bar where he would gamble, drink and carouse the night away with 'Revolver Heini', 'Butcher Herrmann', 'Yankee Franz', 'Mad Dog'<sup>11</sup> and other Berlin apaches<sup>12</sup>. The raw nature of these criminals seemed to exert an irresistible attraction. Another, a former officer from one of the foremost families in the country, went further still. Two or three evenings a week he would swap his dress coat for an old jacket, his top hat for a flat cap, his high collar for a colourful kerchief, donning a sweater, boatman's trousers and army boots and whiling away a few hours in the bars of the Scheunenviertel, whose inhabitants imagined him to be one of their own. At four o'clock in the morning he would make his way to the 'Hammelstall', a pub near

Friedrichstrasse station popular with the unemployed<sup>13</sup>, eat a 10-pfennig breakfast with the poorest vagabonds, and after a few hours' sleep awaken once more to his existence as an irreproachable gentleman.

I also remember a homosexual lady who lived a very similar double life, a cook who sought out dance halls frequented by servants, in whose midst she felt particularly at ease.

This splitting or – if you will – doubling of the personality is particularly noteworthy in those situations where it is additionally associated with a division into two sexes.

END OF PREVIEW

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