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Sokolová, Věra: Queer Encounters with Communist Power. Non-Heterosexual Lives and the State in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989.

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The queer history of the Bohemian Lands is only slowly coming to the attention of Czech historians. Since 2011 there have been major publications on the subject, notably by Jan Seidl on the homosexual emancipatory movement, and Martin Putna on the queer cultural environment.[1] Yet these works have chiefly focused on men and are certainly strongest in their analysis of the decades before communism. Věra Sokolová's study is therefore ground-breaking in many ways. She concentrates on female lives, mining a rich line of new oral history; hers is also a book exploring the actual diversity of 'queer encounters' under the supposedly monolithic state socialism.

Sokolová draws some radical conclusions. In contrast to the research findings of Franz Schindler who interviewed 21 gay men in 2004, she challenges his rather bleak picture of queer lives.[2] She further disputes the degree of state persecution of homosexuals, arguing instead that some officials who had power went out of their way to offer sympathy or even support for the queer predicament. In short, Sokolová presents a nuanced picture of life in communist Czechoslovakia. It was a state where the stereotype of rigid conformity was persistently undermined by citizens who managed to avoid the strictures of societal surveillance while carving out a fulfilling existence. Even for many who shared some type of LGBT identification, their lives "were filled with a surprisingly large amount of self-identified freedom, consciousness, and love" (p. 220).

The book has two main interlinking themes. First, Sokolová assesses how homosexuals – chiefly lesbians – negotiated their identity in everyday life; and second, how they managed their relationship with the pervasive state authorities. A key source for both aspects are 54 oral interviews, most of them with women born between 1929 and 1952, and most carried out by the author herself. On the basis of

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[1] *Seidl,* Jan et al.: Od žaláře k oltáři. Emancipace homosexuality v českých zemích od roku 1867 do současnosti [From the Dungeon to the Altar. The Emancipation of Homosexuality in the Czech Lands from 1867 to the Present]. Brno 2012; *Putna,* Martin et al. (eds): Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury [Homosexuality in the History of Czech Culture]. Praha 2013.

[2] *Schindler,* Franz: Život homosexuálních mužů za socialismu [The Life of Gay Men under Socialism]. In: *Himl,* Pavel/*Seidl,* Jan/*Schindler,* Franz (eds.): "Miluji tvory svého pohlaví": Homosexualita v dějinách a společnosti českých zemí ["I Love the Creatures of my Own Sex": Homosexuality in the History and Society of the Czech Lands. Praha 2013, pp. 271-386.

these, Sokolová argues that many lesbians had a certain agency. They were not just passive or cowed by the system in their life choices, and their behaviour was also notable for its diversity of expression. Many voluntarily married (and then divorced), not just to conform but because of the benefits which the system offered married women. Some self-identified as "transsexual" (interestingly, none of Sokolová's interviewees used the word "lesbian" to describe themselves). Some were monogamous and experienced long-lasting female relationships. Others were quite ready to participate in organized sex parties, or even to enjoy risky anonymous sex in public toilets despite the criminal offence of "gross indecency" (§244) that entrapped many men.

In terms of understanding their own sexuality and meeting other lesbians, a number of crucial reference points guided these women in a strictly heteronormative world. The interviewees typically mentioned crushes on female teachers, or books about marital sex that highlighted for them their own sexual difference. Most notable were models that hailed from the West such as Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* (translated into Czech in 1931 and republished in 1948 and 1969). "All [interviewees] mentioned this particular book as a great source of inspiration, affection and queer identity formation" (p. 138). Another role model who struck Czech consciousness was their former citizen, Martina Navratilová; although she was abroad, it was a shock when the tennis star came out in 1981. It reaffirmed for lesbians that they were not alone.

Even so, one might ask how, in the absence of any commercial sub-culture, it was possible for lesbians to meet each other. Certainly a handful of clubs were allowed to exist in Prague, but most queer people did not frequent them. In contrast to Franz Schindler's research, Sokolová does not explore the possible locations for lesbian encounters except to note the everyday chance meetings. She does show, however, that from 1964 (when legalized) the placing of personal advertisements in popular journals became quite common. In time-honoured fashion these produced some results. Some lesbian codes for the ads were generic such as that about 'language teaching': "I will teach a female friend a tongue". Others point again to western influences such as *The Well of Loneliness*: "In the well there is wisdom, but a lonely person cannot discover it" (pp. 158-159). Such behaviour had echoes of the ways lesbians manoeuvred and dissembled in interwar Czechoslovakia, even though the state framework then for queer agency was arguably more flexible than after 1948.

Indeed, under communism the major obstacle for lesbians or gay men who wished openly to express their sexuality was what Sokolová terms "the watchful heteronormative eye of society" (p. 67). This partly drew on latent homophobia in Czech society as recorded by homosexual activists before the war, but that was now greatly advanced by the communist regime's assumption and promotion of 'mandatory heterosexuality'. It ensured public stigmatization of any sexual difference. Even so, Sokolová's research seems to confirm that there was no systematic state persecution or even surveillance of queer citizens. The authorities were simply not interested as long as a certain outward conformity was maintained, and never issued any uniform directives about how homosexuals should be treated. Was this because homosexuality ('unnatural fornication' – *smilstvo*) was decriminalized in 1961? In fact, few

interviewees felt this to be a watershed: public stigmatization remained, homosexuality was still classified as an illness, and §244, which criminalized 'gross indecency', ensured that the police had a wide remit for random harassment. For lesbians, as Sokolová shows, this usually occurred if the individual had committed some political transgression. For example, 'Heda' who worked at the Czech Academy of Sciences was harassed by the StB not because of her sexuality but because she had openly supported the Hungarians in 1956. For many lesbians who held public or official positions it was a case of deflecting attention or conforming under the heteronormative gaze of those around them. While hiding in plain sight, some women certainly sublimated their sexual preferences and identity in favour of maintaining a successful career.

A final aspect of Sokolová's revisionist argument is about the role of sexologists in these queer lives. In her view, the medical experts, who drew on a long Czech tradition stretching back to the 1920s, were not just a heteronormative arm of the communist state but often liberal and empathetic to the queer predicament (including transsexuals). Here Sokolová criticizes sociologists like Kateřina Lišková for suggesting, through a selective reading of sexological texts, that the experts saw homosexuality as a "perversion" to be punished. For although sexologists' prevailing construction of sexuality was binary, many seem to have sought to comfort and counsel homosexuals (especially men). This included recommending a heterosexual marriage as a solution for loneliness as well as providing an outwardly "legal partnership". But by the 1980s it also meant sexologists creating sympathetic and safe spaces where queer men could meet (such as the Sexological Institute in Prague). Whether or not these really acted as "substitute gay clubs" as Sokolová suggests, she is convincing when explaining the "powerful and emancipatory dimension of sexology in socialist Czechoslovakia" (pp. 104-105).

This then is a provocative and constantly surprising book. Via the source base of the oral interviews the author illuminates the elusive diversity of queer behaviour. Through a fresh study of sexological writings she proposes a new evaluation of state power, showing how individuals in positions of influence could often subvert the monolithic narrative of the communist party. Our eye is particularly drawn away from the usual focus on the dissident movement or on a heteronormative narrative for these decades. For by refocusing on the lives of "women who were into women" (*být na ženský*), Sokolová radically skews the perspective. While there is certainly room for expanding her source base, the book sets a new benchmark for queering Czechoslovak history in the communist era. Not least, it arouses many comparative questions about how far homosexual lives and identities were really affected or altered by the different regimes imposed on the Bohemian Lands during the twentieth century.

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