

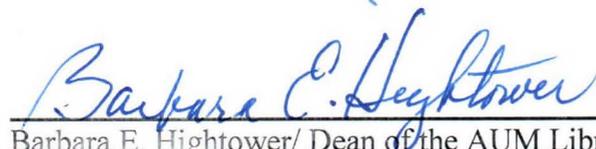
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“Pink’s the Lowest”

Homosexual Holocaust: History and Reality in Martin Sherman’s *Bent*

Thesis

Primary Reader: Dr. Eric Sterling

Secondary Reader: Dr. Joyce Kelley

23 October 2013

Lisa M. Lawrence

“Pink’s the Lowest”

Homosexual Holocaust: History and Reality in Martin Sherman’s Bent

By

Lisa Michelle Lawrence

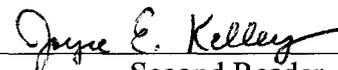
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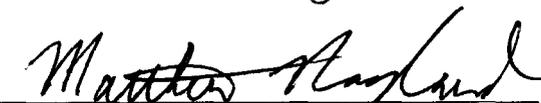
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my mother, Patricia D'Alessio. She is a magnificent woman who singlehandedly molded me into the woman I am today. Her incredible work ethic and drive inspired me to always strive for more and influences my life on a daily basis. Her unconditional love and support through the years allowed me to chase my dreams and be comfortable in my own skin. I love and respect her more than she will ever know.

In Loving Memory of Three Role Models Who Offered Amazing Grace and  
Unconditional Love to Me and So Many Others:

Ernestine Henderson

Francis Cooper

Marie D'Alessio

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## Introduction

If art represents life and life becomes so horrific that it is beyond imagination, how can a writer present that work to an audience? In the case of the Holocaust, in which over six million Jews were murdered, the writer must respect the Holocaust's history and survivors; however, the work must also engage the audience while considering the uncomfortable and emotional nature of the material. Artistic recreations of the Holocaust invite the audience to contemplate details of this historical atrocity and interpret it with their own consciences. The tragedy of the Holocaust deserves the most appropriate and respectful medium of art so that it may never be forgotten and never be repeated. This cannot be achieved through prose's one dimensional page. Even though the Holocaust can be represented by various literary genres, the medium of theatre may best function to bring the events back to life. A successful play respectfully initiates a conversation with the audience, trusts them to engage with the material, and asks for some type of understanding and empathy. As Robert Skloot, Professor Emeritus of Theatre and Drama at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, remarks, "[the playwright must be successful] through the presentation of meaningful and urgent human action without trivializing the experience or demeaning its victims" (540). Holocaust drama generates images, ideas, and emotions needed to begin to adequately understand the horrific circumstances. Whether or not it is the playwright's objective to protect the audience, he or she recreates a time in history that no one wants to visit but that everyone should understand. If done successfully, every member of the audience will walk away feeling differently and seeing

human nature and history differently; the audience members will question their moral code and will have their beliefs changed forever.

With the prevalence of Holocaust theatre about the Jews, many may wonder why more literature does not focus on other victims when political adversaries, gypsies, Jehovah's witnesses, and homosexuals were also targeted by the Nazis. Martin Sherman's unique play *Bent*, which opened in New York City and London in 1979, depicts a Holocaust different than the one with which most people are familiar; Sherman explores the capture and oppression of male homosexuals during this time. This dark play portrays a homosexual man, Max, who is captured by the Nazis and sent to Dachau after trying every means of exodus and survival; a friend, Horst, inadvertently teaches Max to survive by pretending to be Jewish and hiding his homosexuality, but ultimately Max learns that he should not deny his true identity. *Bent* remains the only critically acclaimed Holocaust drama depicting homosexuals because Sherman admirably presents an accurate portrayal of how the Nazis treated homosexuals and because other writers refrain from writing about gays during the Holocaust – at least for the stage.

*Bent*, a Tony Award and Pulitzer-Prize nominee, made Martin Sherman an overnight playwright sensation. Sherman grew up loving the stage and wanted to voice his politics and social reform ideas in this creative medium. He chose to write hard-hitting, historical fiction; he spent his career writing about uncomfortable situations that fostered public awareness and focused on tolerance. Sherman often relates to the characters in his plays in some way; similar to his characters in *Bent*, Sherman is a homosexual, but he is Jewish. He felt the need to write about the Holocaust because of his Jewish heritage, and he made the choice to present the victimization of homosexuals

because of his sexual orientation. His emotional attachment to the historical circumstances and understanding of the homosexual prejudice of this play render him an authentic source of information. However, there are many who criticize Sherman's play and his implication that homosexuals were treated worse than the Jews during the Holocaust. These critics do not believe that *Bent* accurately represents the historical truth of the Holocaust and should not be held in the same regard as other "traditional" Holocaust plays. Robert Skloot is one such critic.

Skloot has studied and published on a variety of modern playwrights and current dramatic themes. Although he publishes on many different cultural and historical atrocities depicted through dramatic media, he feels "drawn to reflect on the Holocaust for the ethical, cultural, and aesthetic problems it encompasses" (Skloot, xii). In his introduction to the collection *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, Robert Skloot asserts that playwrights have five objectives: "1) to pay homage to the victims... 2) to educate audiences to the facts of history; 3) to produce an emotional response to those facts; 4) to raise certain moral questions...; and 5) to draw a lesson from the events re-created" (14). Because he studies dramatic interpretations of the Holocaust in depth, his list of playwrights' objectives warrants further study in regards to *Bent* to gauge if Sherman's play accurately displays historical accuracies or merely portrays a love story amongst the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust. Skloot does not believe that *Bent* merits inclusion in an anthology of Holocaust plays because Sherman "distorts the Holocaust experience and deflects our attention away from the terrible suffering," and Skloot claims the play is "not truthful to the larger cause that would validate his smaller one" (*Darkness* 121).

Martin Sherman engages the audience with a love story and a personal journey, but he juxtaposes it with the atrocious nature of life for gay males in Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. Divided into chapters, this thesis fully examines all five of Skloot's playwright objectives in regards to Sherman's play, and then reflects on the absence of other homosexual Holocaust literature. Another important aspect evaluated in this thesis is Skloot's assertion that *Bent* lacks the horrific depth to depict the homosexual suffering in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. Using Skloot's objectives, Holocaust research, and a close reading of the play, this thesis analyzes the situation to discuss whether the homosexual aspect diminishes or intensifies the horror and suffering of the Holocaust and also explores why other homosexual Holocaust drama has not emerged.

Chapter one investigates whether Sherman pays proper respect to the homosexual victims through his theatrical characterizations and themes. As Skloot explains, "[Playwrights] seek to retell the story and thereby make the murdered live again, if only in the imagination; they want to pay what Terence Des Pres calls in his excellent book, *The Survivor*, the 'debt to the dead'" (*Theatre* 13). Skloot believes that playwrights have an obligation to the victims and survivors because of the depth of the Holocaust's unique atrocities. Do the homosexual victims not deserve the same dignity? Because they were a small portion of those victimized, literature of their stories only exists on a limited basis. The homosexual population of survivors presents a unique facet because after they were liberated from the camps, they were still in danger of being killed due to their sexual orientation. Nazi laws against homosexuality continued well after World War II.

Therefore, many homosexual survivors remained silent about their horrific experiences, and they chose never to write their memoirs.

The brave men who have shared their stories provide a platform for autobiographical comparisons for Sherman's play. Heinz Heger and Pierre Seel represent a very small population of homosexual survivors who bravely documented the atrocities they endured before the concentration camps, in the concentration camps, and after their liberation; these courageous homosexual men shared their experiences and the experiences of others. Because of the similarities between the characters in *Bent* and several actual homosexual victims and events, Sherman respected the historical facts through the development of his characters. *Bent's* main character, Max, and his homosexual loves, Rudy and Horst, epitomize a large population of homosexual men during this time period. While Sherman could not pay homage to every single victim, he studied the deeply horrific circumstances and put Max, Rudy, and Horst in similar situations. The way the men interact with one another throughout the play mirrors actual accounts of survivors and the stories they tell of life inside the concentration camps and during the Holocaust. *Bent* even inspired some of the memoirs that were published later because the production provided an inspiration to those victims whose voices felt stifled until the play. Even though the climate of tolerance began to improve in the 1970s and 1980s, many homosexuals still felt unsafe in sharing their stories. The autobiographical memoirs and fictitious accounts of Holocaust homosexual experiences published during this time led the way for others to emerge. However, much of these victims' stories remain untold, and they will remain untold because the survivors are either elderly or have passed away.

Chapter two explores whether or not *Bent* educates audiences to the truthful historical horrors of homosexuals during the Holocaust. Sherman's play opens on the infamous "Night of Long Knives," which took place on June 28, 1934; while this night is historically important to the persecution of homosexuals during the Holocaust, the Second Reich began targeting homosexuals in 1871. When Hitler came to power, he immediately restricted progressive and conservative sexological work taking place in Germany. In 1933, after Hitler was able to destroy conducted research and prevent future research, his sexual ideology of Nazism, which was anti-Semitic, antifeminist, and homophobic, could easily be implemented. Hitler sent the first homosexuals to the concentration camp, Dachau, in the fall of 1933; by the next summer he even eliminated his SA (Sturmabteilung – the Nazis' mass paramilitary organization) leaders not only because of their sexual preference, but also because they were not benefitting the Nazi cause any longer (Haerberle 274). Hitler considered these men a threat because they wanted more power. Hitler's decision to eliminate these powerful men, who were very vocally critical of him and known homosexuals, incited the "Night of Long Knives," in which gay bars were purged and numerous homosexuals were incarcerated or killed. Further implementing Hitler's ideology, Paragraph 175 and its predecessor 175a, which made homosexual acts against the law, were amended at this time. Eliminating people considered undesirable from the population was extremely important to Hitler, especially because the 1936 Olympics were coming to Germany. Another raid of bars and common homosexual hotspots transpired in 1936, right before Berlin hosted the Olympic Games. This led to the highest population of homosexuals incarcerated in the camps at any given time. Most homosexual suspects were sent to prison first; these men were usually of a

high social class and suspects for other crimes against the Nazis. While in the prisons, the men were closely watched; if they were suspected of homosexual activity or caught having any inappropriate same sex contact with other inmates, they were immediately sent to the concentration camps on train transports.

Although the transports were extremely dangerous to all victims, homosexuals had a higher transport death rate because they were transferred more than any other group of prisoners (Lautmann 156). The Nazis guards knew that many people perished on these trains, so they put the homosexuals on frequent transports in an effort to eliminate as many as possible. Martin Sherman displays the dangers of transports in *Bent* using Max's lover, Rudy, as a target for the SS officers onboard the train. The officer may pick on Rudy because he's acting effeminately or simply because he's wearing glasses (a sign of intelligence), but when Rudy calls out to Max for help, the officer assumes that Rudy and Max are a couple. Upon arriving at the camps, prisoners were separated into varying social groups depending on their race, sexuality, nationality, or religion. They were given emblems, mostly triangles of different sizes and colors with different initials, to wear on their uniforms. Sherman illustrates this in the play when Horst confirms to Max that wearing the pink triangle is the worst "only because the other prisoners hate us so much" (39). Sherman's description of homosexuals' jobs inside the concentration camps mirrors actual accounts by Heger and other survivors and also shows the social hierarchy inside the camps. Horst tells Max at dinner that he doesn't want to talk because he's tired from having to get up at four in the morning to work the stone pit (Sherman 38). According to Rudiger Lautmann, homosexuals received the most dangerous and strenuous work details in the camps. In addition to the strenuous labor, Heger claims

they were also given mindless jobs in an order to drive them crazy. The Nazis hoped these types of jobs would work the men to death or drive them insane. Some prisoners report that they were to carry snow from one pile to another, a task that Sherman also uses in his play. Thus, this thesis argues that *Bent* does present historical truth.

Chapter three of this thesis examines the array of emotions Sherman's characters and situations were intended to produce in comparison with the variety of emotions the play actually evokes from the audience. Many critics' concerns lie with the issue of "humanness" among the characters in the play. Audiences may react honestly when they can see parts of themselves in the characters, but because homosexuals are a minority, some audience members may not be able to relate to them on a deep emotional level. If the audience interprets Max as a stereotypical, flamboyant gay man, they might not be able to feel empathy or sympathy for him due to the stereotypical homosexual traits of the character in the beginning of the play. In the middle of the play, when Max is journeying to the concentration camp, Skloot argues that Sherman, not the Nazis, tries too hard to shock his audience with Max's nature of neglecting his identity as a gay man; therefore, Sherman tries to put the victims in a hierarchal environment that conflicts with the historical reality. Skloot writes that Sherman "distorts the Holocaust experience and deflects our attention away from the terrible suffering of all the Nazis' victims whose humanity was destroyed" (*Darkness* 121). However, as the play develops, Sherman provides relatable qualities to Max and the other characters. Max becomes an emotionally connected partner in a relationship; he also employs family members to aid in his freedom and survival. Sherman uses homosexual characters to illustrate the special

kinds of circumstances and horrors that were reserved for gays that differ from those others endured in heterosexual Holocaust literature.

Chapter four examines what moral questions *Bent* leaves with the audience. Skloot explains that when speaking of the Holocaust, “we speak most particularly of the life and death of the helpless populations who were systematically and relentlessly pursued until the greater portion of them succumbed to a sadistic strategy wholly dedicated to removing them and the memory of them from the world” (*Theatre* 7). The moral obligation of society when dealing with any kind of genocide is to prevent current atrocities or keep the events from occurring again. Just as educating others to the horrors of the Holocaust has not prevented other genocides, educating others about people different from themselves has not prevented intolerance. In this capacity, *Bent* serves to teach multiple moral lessons. First, by teaching the senseless nature of victimizing certain people for the supposed betterment of the world, the play can deter other acts of cruelty from happening. Sherman, however, takes the lesson of tolerance to another level by showcasing male homosexual persecution because much of society and the Nazi leaders at the time of the Holocaust believed homosexuals could change their sexual orientation. The Jews could not and would not change their religious beliefs; they also could not change their heritage. In contrast, the Nazis believed they could “cure” the homosexuals. Unlike their Jewish prison mates, the Nazis believed that some homosexuals could “prove” they had been cured and then would be released. Homosexuality is not something that can be “cured.” Sherman’s play also teaches a moral lesson of acceptance of being born differently than others. Max denies his true sexuality in the play to survive, but he never claims to be heterosexual. Max acceptance

of self provides another moral lesson for audiences. He overcomes adversity among others and within himself to conclude his life honestly and without judgment. The different facets of tolerance that Sherman displays in *Bent* resonate on several various levels beyond just the atrocity of genocide. Today, homosexuals remain a helpless population that seeks understanding and tolerance. The play provides many layers of moral education and growth.

Chapter five explores the possible lessons that Sherman's audience should learn from this dramatization of history. Skloot determines that if a Holocaust production does not teach the audience a lesson, it does not deserve recognition among the other plays of its kind. Whether reading the play or seeing it onstage, *Bent* teaches an entirely different lesson than other Holocaust dramas because there is so little known about this population of victims. By presenting another kind of victim, Sherman educates society on another aspect of the Holocaust. His play shows a unique dimension to the larger known historical event. When people think of the Holocaust, they immediately consider the persecution of the Jewish people; the masses do not realize that the Nazis targeted many different groups people different from themselves. It is not the intention of the playwright to categorize the different groups persecuted, but to divulge information that exists on a topic with which not many people are familiar. For this reason alone, the play provides the education Skloot desires; however, *Bent* provides so much more unique information about the historical atrocity that audiences will gain information never sought.

Chapter five also explores why other playwrights have not recreated the history of the homosexual Holocaust. Without more Holocaust literature involving homosexuals,

this particular part of history will be lost forever. Currently, many survivors are elderly or have already passed away. Since homosexual tolerance continues to progress, literature of gay survivors might be safely accepted. Kai Hammerstein agrees that “historically [gay Holocaust literature] could not have come into existence before a widespread gay liberation movement. We only care about the history of those who matter to us” (22). The gay population who suffered oppression and prejudice during this time were still fearful of the consequences after the war should they come forward to give their accounts. Homosexuality was still illegal in Germany years after the Holocaust. However, the climate of tolerance for homosexuals has changed. Tolerance continues to grow for all people. Because historical education can help keep such atrocities from reoccurring, this thesis ultimately argues that the literature of the gay Holocaust also needs to be included in anthologies and texts containing Jewish stories. Martin Sherman wrote the first, but his play definitely should not be the last.

## Chapter 1

Robert Skloot's first objective for all playwrights writing about the Holocaust is "to pay homage to the victims, if not as individuals then as a group" (*Theatre* 14). The homosexual victims deserve the same solemnity as the others who perished during the Holocaust. Because they were a small portion of the victims, literature of their stories exists only on a limited basis. Tish Dace explains that "Sherman conducted his research at London's Wiener library, specializing in the Holocaust and Nazis... Sherman found [homosexual] information in 'a sentence here, a footnote there'" (45). The male homosexual survivors present a unique facet because after they were liberated from the camps, they were still in danger of being prosecuted due to their sexual orientation. The brave people who have shared their stories provide a platform for autobiographical comparisons with Sherman's play. Although Dace claims that Sherman did not read Heinz Heger's memoir, some of Heger's memories are very similar to incidents in *Bent*. Many critics believe that *Bent* is based on Heger's memoir, but Sherman has denied any correlation between the two texts (46). Pierre Seel also wrote a memoir of the horrors he endured at the hands of the Nazis. Seel's story is important because it confirms what gays endured after the liberation. Heger and Seel bravely documented the atrocities they and others endured immediately before the concentration camps, in the concentration camps, and after the liberation. This chapter will focus on the similarities between the characters in *Bent* and several actual homosexual victims and events to reveal that Sherman respected the historical facts through his development of his characters.

Heinz Heger was the German pen name of an Austrian homosexual survivor, Josef Kohout. He wrote the book *The Men with the Pink Triangle* and was brave enough to tell his story, but he used a pseudonym in order to protect himself from being arrested. Many believe that *Bent* is based off Heger's book because of the multiple similarities, but the play and the book are completely separate entities according to Martin Sherman. The experiences Heger writes about in his book happened to many of the homosexuals during this time, and it is likely that Sherman used some of these experiences to bring his fictional characters to life. Whether Sherman found the information in Heger's book or another historical account of the Holocaust, Sherman uses these circumstances to illuminate the atrocities suffered by male homosexuals due to the Nazis; by doing this, he respects the history and pays homage to the survivors and victims of the Holocaust.

Unlike Max, Heger (or Kohout) was an upstanding Austrian citizen from a Catholic family. He grew up in a nuclear upper middle-class family and had loving parents and siblings. He realized in his teenage years that he was more attracted to boys than girls, and when he went to college, he fully recognized he was homosexual. He kept his sexual orientation secret and was very careful for many years; he only disclosed his homosexuality to his mother. She had already assumed her son was gay and did not consider it a problem. He met a young man in college, and they instantly began a relationship. It was a postcard he penned to this partner that caused the Reich to summon him for questioning; the situation was more complicated because his partner's father was an SS officer. Because of his handwriting on that postcard and the romantic message, Heger was found guilty of being a homosexual and immediately locked away in a Vienna

prison and forced into work detail (Heger 22-24). As bad as that was, he never could have fathomed what would come next.

Not long after Heger's incarceration, he was transported to a camp. He was immediately given a pink triangle; this meant that he would forever be considered a "degenerate." Each of the different populations within the camps were forced to wear a unique triangular insignia on their uniforms to indicate why they were there; the Jews wore yellow; the political prisoners wore red; the criminals wore green; the Jehovah's Witness wore purple; the emigrants wore blue; the gypsies wore brown; and the homosexuals wore pink. However, the pink triangles the homosexuals were branded with were two to three centimeters larger than the other triangles (Lautmann 148). The SS wanted to know who they were at all times from all angles. Heger states that the Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals were the bottom of the population system, but the homosexuals were treated the worst and murdered at the highest rate for the population (32). The social order of prisoners has long been a source of contention where *Bent* is concerned. Horst comments to Max that the pink triangle is the lowest in Dachau. Many historians and critics do not like that homosexuals claim that they were treated even worse than the Jews because more Jews were tortured and killed than any other sub-group of people. The Germans did not want them to share their soil and wanted to exterminate all of them. The homosexuals were labeled degenerates, lowlifes, and filthy sexual perverts. Even the other prisoners hated the homosexuals. They were forced to eat and shower last because the others did not want to share germs or see them undressed. The homosexuals were forced to sleep with all the lights on and their hands above the covers at all times, so they would not be tempted to misbehave (Heger 34). When the medical personnel wanted to

experiment on prisoners, the homosexual inmates were usually chosen first. Guards were relentless in their torture of these men. This is not to say that the other prisoners were treated well, but the homosexuals seem to have been treated worse than many of their fellow prisoners. Because of their sexual orientation, the men were raped with foreign objects by the guards while they beat them. The guards believed the homosexual men enjoyed this because of their deviant sexual behavior. Heger confirms these stories and the mutual hate of homosexual in his memoir, *The Men with the Pink Triangle*.

After Heger arrived at the camp where he was stripped, shaved, and branded with his pink triangle, he was sent for line up or roll call, where he was taunted and beaten for being a homosexual (32-33). The guards felt it necessary to break the prisoners down immediately upon arrival in order to keep control. They beat away their identity and individuality. The guards were so outnumbered that they had to use these tactics to prevent an uprising until the prisoners had been there awhile and suffered from starvation, sickness, and a loss of confidence. Any way that the homosexual prisoners would die without the Nazis outright murdering them provided further extermination of their kind and proved they were unworthy of life. The homosexual prisoners were worked to death many times because their work details were so extreme.

The work detail assigned to the homosexual prisoners was either ludicrous or the most strenuous detail in the camp. For example, Heger and his fellow prisoners were assigned to move snow from the left side of the road to the right, and then when they were finished doing that, they were to move all the snow back to the left side. They had to do this with their bare hands and use their coats to load the snow. This meant they froze from the weather and suffered from frostbitten fingers and hands. The thought was

to break their spirit and drive them insane. This ridiculous work detail is portrayed in Sherman's play. In *Bent*, Max and Horst must first move rocks from one pile to another, but as winter comes, they move snow from one pile to another all day long with their bare hands. A cruel kind of work for the homosexual prisoners in some camps was work in a clay pit; this work detail was nicknamed the "death pit" by the inmates because more men died in the clay pits than in any other job at the camps (Heger 37). The work here was the most strenuous and under the most extreme conditions imaginable. In the summer, it was as hot as an oven, and in the winter the snow made the job harder. They had to push carts filled with clay up rails to the ovens and brick-making machines. Because the men were half starved and utterly exhausted, the work was almost impossible. The guards used mostly homosexuals in the clay pits because their lives were valued the least of any of the prisoners. The Nazis did not care how many homosexuals perished because they were considered the lowest of the low. Heger tells that many of the workers died each day in the clay pit, yet he managed to stay alive during his entire work detail in the clay pit. Although he had to witness many of his barrack mates perish from the strenuous work and beatings from the guards, he was one of the lucky ones. Unfortunately, the work detail to come next had devastating consequences for the homosexual inmates, as well. The guards had them help construct mounds at the shooting ranges for their target practice. However, the guards liked to use the prisoners as targets instead of the mounds. This work detail transformed into moving the dead and wounded bodies out of the way instead of building the mounds that the guards were supposed to use for shooting practice. It was after this work detail that

Heger's life became a bit more bearable; he had figured out a way to stay safe and alive in the camp.

Some of the SS guards and Capos were either homosexual or temporarily acted on homosexual urges out of necessity. When new homosexual prisoners came into camp, the men in charge picked out favorites and make deals for them among each other. If a homosexual prisoner was picked and he was smart enough to agree to the relationship, his life would be protected if possible by his partner. Heger was smart enough to engage with his Capo when he was asked. Although Heger always preferred a caring, committed relationship, he understood that his survival depending on submitting to a more casual sexual relationship. His Capo could choose to select him for safer work details and keep him from being abused by the other guards. Similar to Max and the Captain's relationship in *Bent*, the inmates could sometimes get special favors. Max used sexual favors to get what he wanted in camp in the play. However, it was easier for Max because he wore a yellow triangle instead of a pink one. Many of the inmates and guards admitted they were not homosexual under normal circumstances, but they had to resort to these behaviors in the camps because there were no women easily accessible. Under these intense circumstances, the prisoners began to do anything and everything they could just to stay alive. However, when the homosexual prisoners were transferred to another camp, these partnerships had to be formed all over again, and relationships were difficult to cultivate because trust was hard to earn inside the camps. Heger, like many homosexuals, was transferred often during their time in the camps because fatalities on the transports were very high. Anything the Nazis could do to kill the homosexuals without "murdering" them helped to eradicate the undesirables. It was when Heger was

transported to Flossenburg that he witnessed a scene that would serve as the end of Sherman's play.

Heger found another partner in Flossenburg, so he was given a lighter work detail than the others and extra food rations. However, this did not protect him from all the horrors of the camp. Flossenburg was surrounded by a very tall electric fence topped with barbed wire. If any prisoner went within ten feet of the wire, he was shot for trying to escape. Guards received vacation time for stopping "escapes." The guards could make anything look like an attempted escape and shoot prisoners at will; however, they had a trick they liked to play even more. Because the fence was electric and it looked better if the prisoners killed themselves on the wire (many prisoners did this as a form of suicide when they could not take life in the camps anymore), the guards instituted a "game." The guards would take a prisoner's hat off and throw it at the fence; then, they would order the prisoner to retrieve his hat. If the prisoner refused, he would be beaten to death. If the prisoner went near the fence, he was shot for trying to escape. If the prisoner made it all the way to his hat, he was electrocuted by the fence. The prisoners had no option of survival, and the guards were entertained waiting to see what choice the victim would make. This "game" became the dramatic ending to Sherman's play, *Bent* when Max's boyfriend, Horst, is targeted by the Captain. However, Horst chose to try to retaliate since he knew there was no way for him to win. He attacked the guard instead of retrieving his hat. He lost his life like many actual homosexual prisoners did, but he died fighting it. Heger, like Max, witnessed this done many times while he was in the camp. Heger was much luckier than Horst and survived his time in Flossenburg.

Heger escaped during one of the liberations. He and some of his barrack mates were able to travel at night and hide and rest during the day. He was able to make it to his sister's house where she nursed him back to becoming, at least physically, the man he once was. However, he would never be the same man as before the Holocaust. After staying for four weeks and gaining his health back, he returned home to his mother. Unfortunately, his father had taken his own life after Heger was incarcerated because he could not deal with the shame of having a homosexual son. Heger sought compensation for his time in the concentration camps, but he was denied such compensation because of his sexual orientation. Even after the liberation, it was still illegal to be a homosexual. He could still be prosecuted if the authorities found out the truth about him. Heger was one of the lucky ones who survived the Holocaust, and he was one of the very brave to tell his story. While Sherman refutes having sought inspiration from Heger's story, he could have based his play on Heger's memoirs. The circumstances Sherman uses in *Bent* were not altered or used to disrespect the survivor; they were used to write a play based on the real events that homosexuals dealt with during the Holocaust. He wanted their stories and their voices to live on, and by doing this he pays homage to the victims and survivors.

Martin Sherman wanted a well-rounded representation of the entire homosexual Holocaust, so he relied on multiple sources for information. Pierre Seel was another homosexual persecuted at the hands of the Nazis, and he was one of the very few to tell his story so it would live on after he passed away. His story is very different from Heger's, but an understanding of multiple homosexual survivors' accounts helps the audience comprehend the characters and circumstances in *Bent*. In dissecting Seel's

memories from the Holocaust, audiences can understand that Sherman did pay homage to all victims and survivors in his play because he used various sufferers to communicate a complete representation of this horrible time in history.

Like Heger, Seel was raised in a middle class “normal” family, and they were Catholic. He realized his sexual orientation very early on; however, he did not act upon it until he was in his teens (11). He was also summoned by the Gestapo and had to appear before them. He had signed a statement for the French police when his watch was stolen in a known gay hangout. He could not deny the proof and was thrown into jail. A short time later he was transported to the camp. He was showered, inspected, shaved, and beaten into submission like the others (29). Seel was one of the youngest inmates, and this added to his terror. He became extremely ill inside the camps, even to the point where the daily abuse became normal. He did not speak to others and worked very hard; he remembers he could hardly function because the hunger was excruciating, but he persevered and learned to stay safe. Although he’s haunted by the horrific memories of what he witnessed inside the camps, Seel was not one of the casualties. He was one of the lucky ones; he was in the camp less than two years. Seel was needed to fill the available spaces in the German Army because they were losing the war. The Germans did not care if Seel died in the camps or on the battle field, but he survived both. The bulk of Seel’s memories lie in what came after he was released from the camp and the war was over.

Once Seel made it safely to French soil, he immediately began to repress his memories, but he soon realized that liberation was for others. He would never be able to go back; he had to figure out how to move forward with his life. Upon his arrival home,

he found out that the anti-homosexual laws had followed him. He knew he could not risk being found out, so he threw his energy into helping other people. His father instructed him to remain quiet about his sexual orientation, even though his entire family knew the truth. As his mother lay on her deathbed, they discussed at great length everything Seel had lived through and his true identity. This provided cathartic for Seel; he was able to be open and honest about everything that happened to him over the last four years. He was at last able to move on, but he lived a lie.

In his autobiography, Seel recounts how he realized that he would never be able to live as a homosexual, so he decided to get married and start a family. The marriage was arranged through the church in the bride's community because everyone in his hometown knew his situation and why he had been sent to the camps. After years of marriage, kids, and various jobs, Seel still could not find happiness. His marriage started to deteriorate, and he never recovered from his previous life. Although the camps did not kill him physically, they robbed him of a normal life on the outside. In 1981, Seel was finally able to come out of the closet and admit what had happened to him under the Nazi rule. He then spent the rest of his life fighting for homosexual tolerance and recognition of homosexual suffering during the Holocaust. He traveled and spoke on numerous occasions to educate people about what had happened to him and others at the hands of the Germans. He fought hard for homosexuals to receive the same benefits that other persecuted groups received after the war, but he was never successful. Sherman's characters died in the camps, so they never had to deal with the turmoil of homosexual hatred that continued after the Holocaust. Sherman knew of the continued homophobia, and maybe this is why he chose to have Max and Horst never leave the camp. Heger and

Seel are two homosexual victims who documented their horrors, but others (who remain anonymous) shared bits and pieces of their stories to various writers.

Because Sherman wanted to pay homage to all the homosexual victims, he sought research everywhere. Many writers shared various survivor stories but kept the victims' names anonymous and wrote in generalities. They spoke for multitudes of survivors in various camps. Because the homosexuals were barracked together and usually kept separate from the other populations, what happened to a few of them usually happened to all of them. Many of their stories are similar to Heger's and Seel's, thus making them very similar to Max's and Horst's. They all tell stories of the pink triangles; they all tell stories of the sexual and physical abuse; they all tell stories of the SS officers doing everything in their power to kill them without really killing them. The ones lucky enough to survive tell stories about hiding after liberation; they lived frightened lives because they knew the persecution could happen again if anyone found out their sexual orientation.

Sherman provides a realistic picture of the life of homosexuals during incarceration in the camps. He accurately portrays the victimization suffered by gays and created his characters to respect and emotionally engage with audiences in order to pay homage to the real victims. Sherman's story mirrors actual events in several camps and pays homage to those who lived it. Their stories matter just as much as those of the other victims. Every human life is important; every human life should be respected and celebrated. Martin Sherman respects and celebrates the lives of the homosexual Holocaust victims in his play.

## Chapter 2

Telling the truth in Holocaust plays is important because of the tragic nature of the action. Some consider inaccurate dramatizations to be insults to the dead and the survivors. Skloot's second objective for playwrights is "to educate audiences to the facts of history" (*Theatre* 14). Skloot desires that historical theatre represent the actual events meticulously; he believes that the playwright should do research and present the past to the audience truthfully. Expecting an honest representation of the past to come to life on stage is not unreasonable, but Skloot goes on to assert that the playwright owes the audience the whole truth without any dramatization. However, playwrights can be historically accurate and still invent characters and scenes within the realm of truth. Skloot's concern could be that the audience will never visit that historical moment again, or that the audience will see inaccuracies on stage and consider them fact. Therefore, he wants the audience to be educated while entertained. He believes that Sherman's play is not historically accurate, and he claims *Bent* is nothing more than a love story. In contrast to what Skloot claims, Martin Sherman did thorough research and provides the historic truth of homosexual persecution during the Holocaust in *Bent* (Dace 46). Because writing a play that covered all the horrific years of the Holocaust is impossible, he decided to focus on the first two years of the mass homosexual assault. Although the entire play takes place between 1934 and 1936, homosexual harassment in Germany existed long before and long after these years. In order to get the audience to fully understand the situations that transpired during these two years and in *Bent*, Sherman had

to also include the events leading up to these years and the events that transpired after the Holocaust ended.

Robert Plant's book, *The Pink Triangle*, provides an in-depth discussion of male homosexual persecution by the Germans from beginning to end. The beginning of the infamous Paragraph 175 was adopted from Prussia by the Reich in 1871. This Prussian Penal Code simply stated that sexual acts between males were punishable with imprisonment. Paragraph 175 dealt only with men; it did not mention women or lesbianism. The Prussian Penal Code also stated that sexual acts between males and beasts were punishable. The Prussians and Germans linked homosexuality to bestiality. Both crimes were punishable with four years of jail time. Because Germans had a long-standing hate of homosexuals, they adopted the Prussian Penal Code and condemned many sexual practices in 1871. They also enacted legal commentary against bestiality, sex between Jews and non-Jews, masturbation, intercourse with virgins, and coprophilia (sexual pleasure from feces). The Germans felt that anyone participating in any of these activities was a danger to society and deserved to be punished. Germans simply wanted pure, heterosexual German men to have sex with their own women so they could produce the desired society.

Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a known homosexual, Jew, and doctor who studied sexology, was the first and loudest to petition these laws. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld was a pioneer in sexual studies; he managed a team of colleagues and volunteers who helped with his important research. He was extremely ambitious and became a leader of psychological and medical organizations. He founded an institute for sexual research, and he organized many international congresses dedicated to sexual research and to

policies that would lead to the acceptance of homosexuality. Dr. Hirschfeld had been doing ground-breaking research in the biological reasoning behind homosexuality. He believed that homosexuals were a third gender, neither male nor female. He published many studies in medical journals that discussed the medical, legal, historical, and anthropological aspects of homosexuality. In one year he published over three hundred essays in Germany on homosexuality. He was a true pioneer in sexual studies. During this time, he also constructed a petition to combat Paragraph 175 and was successful in getting many famous people to sign it. Sherman also used Hirschfeld and his petition in *Bent*. When Max asks Horst how he obtained the pink triangle, Horst replies, “I signed a petition...for Magnus Hirschfeld” (Sherman 37). Horst’s name ended up on a list of known homosexuals. Other lists of homosexuals were constructed after Hirschfeld’s 1903 research questionnaires.

In 1897, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld established the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. The first task of the committee was to distribute over six thousand questionnaires asking personal sexual preference questions. These anonymous questionnaires were sent to students and factory workers in Berlin. Many of the questionnaires were returned, and the results claimed that 2.2 percent of males had participated in homosexual experiences (Plant 40). He believed that if he could educate society, the people would vote to appeal Paragraph 175. He worked tirelessly for acceptance and tolerance for people of all sexualities. He formed committees, traveled and spoke all over Europe, and continued with his research and publications. He became an outspoken, educated adversary to Hitler as Hitler climbed to power. In 1920, Hirschfeld was attacked at a speaking engagement in Munich. This was the first of many

attempts on Hirschfeld's life because of his persistence in challenging the Reich's beliefs on sexuality. However, Hirschfeld lived until 1935 when he died of heart failure. In 1933, vandals destroyed all of Dr. Hirschfeld's hard work at the Sexual Institute; they burned and destroyed most of Hirschfeld's research which would save others whose names were on the lists and questionnaires.

In 1933, Hitler was elected Chancellor; he named Ernest Roehm SA chief.

Roehm was a known homosexual, but Hitler trusted him enough to make him his second in command. Roehm's sexual orientation and homosexuality was ignored as long as Roehm supported Hitler's agenda. However, Roehm had his own ambitious agenda and began to flaunt his homosexuality. Many in Hitler's camp were disgusted by Roehm's lifestyle, and Roehm went too far when he spoke out against Hitler to Herman Rauschning:

Adolf is a swine...He will give us away. He only associates with the reactionaries now. His old friends aren't good enough for him...Adolf has learned from me. Everything he knows about military matters, I've taught him...But Adolf is and remains a civilian, an 'artist,' an idler...What he wants is to sit on the hilltop and pretend he's God. And the rest of us, who are itching to do something, have got to sit around doing nothing. (Sterling 370)

After realizing that Roehm was speaking out against him, Hitler ordered the murder of Roehm and everyone loyal to him. Once Roehm was dead, Hitler broadened the scope of his victims to include all homosexuals, and he went after them with a vengeance. Hitler

wanted anyone that did not match the pure Arian mold exterminated. To pose as the moral leader during this purge, Hitler published a directive which read:

I expect all SA leaders to help to preserve and strengthen the SA in its capacity as a pure and cleanly institution. In particular, I should like every mother to be able to allow her son to join the SA, [Nazi] party, and Hitler Youth without fear that he may become morally corrupted in their ranks. I therefore require all SA commanders to take the utmost pains to ensure that offenses under Paragraph 175 are met by immediate expulsion of the culprit from the SA and the Party. I want to see men as SA commanders, not ludicrous monkeys. (Plant 67)

This purge of Roehm, his men, and many male homosexuals in Berlin was called the Night of Long Knives and occurred on June 28, 1934; however the purge actually lasted for five days. Many of the known homosexual clubs and gay establishments in Berlin were attacked by SA guards. Gays were captured and put in jail because of Paragraph 175. This night is when *Bent* begins. Max and Rudy are partying in a club in Berlin on this infamous night; Max meets a SA officer and brings him home. The next morning their apartment is invaded and the officer is killed. The men find out from the club owner, Greta, that the man Max has brought home is the boyfriend of one of Karl Ernest Roehm's men. Greta educates Max and Rudy on the politics involved in the historic night. He explains that homosexuals are no longer safe because their only ally in the Reich, along with all of his men, has been murdered.

The homosexual purge continued to develop. In October and November of 1934, mass arrests of homosexual males began throughout Germany. Men were jailed for

having their names on any of Hirschfeld's lists; they were also jailed for breaking any of the laws in Paragraph 175. The crazed homophobia grew so prevalent among the Reich that SA officers were allowed to arrest men who could potentially have impure thoughts. Secret lists were distributed to all police stations to identify any known male homosexuals. When homosexuals were brought in for questioning, they were pressured to supply names of other homosexuals they knew. Throughout 1934 alone, approximately seventy thousand German men were arrested on suspicion of being homosexual (Plant 212). Lesbians were left alone during the entire purge. It was easier for women to hide their sexual identity, and the Germans did not see it as a threat. In addition, lesbians were harder to detect than homosexual males because society deemed it as normal that women are often tender towards other women. While very few lesbians were arrested for their sexual identity, many women were accused of being traitors or politicals in order to punish known lesbians and send them to the camps. Plant suggests that lesbians were lucky because "they fell outside the universe of Himmler's sexual obsessions" (116).

Heinrich Himmler was appointed head of the Gestapo at the end of 1934 but moved up the chain of the Reich when Roehm was murdered (many believe that Himmler orchestrated the purge). He was a known homophobic and truly believed he could exterminate all of Germany's homosexuals. He gave a secret speech in 1937 to his SS leaders in which he instructed that all homosexuals must be eliminated. Himmler was a sadistic man; he ignited fear in the lives of homosexuals all across Europe. He used his officers to carry out his agenda; the officers were allowed to arrest any man that they even slightly suspected of homosexual behavior. They were given free rein to use abuse

and murder when needed. The incarceration of homosexuals continued for years.

During this time, Himmler saw that Paragraph 175 was instituted to drastic extremes. On June 28, 1935, Paragraph 175 was amended and the text was made official law. The amended Paragraph 175, referred to as 175a read as follows:

175:

- I. A male who indulges in criminally indecent activities with another male or who allows himself to participate in such activities will be punished with jail.
- II. If one of the participants is under the age of twenty-one, and if the crime has not been grave, the court may dispense with the jail sentence.

175(a): A jail sentence of up to ten years or, if mitigating circumstances can be established, a jail sentence of no less than three years will be imposed on

- I. any male who by force or by threat of violence and danger to the life and limb compels another man to indulge in criminally indecent activities, or allows himself to participate in such activities;
- II. any male who forces another male to indulge with him in criminally indecent activities by using the subordinate position of the other man, whether it be at work or elsewhere, or who allows himself to participate in such activities;

III. any male who indulges professionally and for profit in criminally indecent activities with other males, or allows himself to be used for such activities or who offers himself for the same.

175(b): Criminally indecent activities by males with animals are to be punished by jail; in addition, the court may deprive the subject of his civil rights. (Plant 206)

The German male homosexual purge under Himmler lasted until 1940. However, there was a brief break in 1936 because Berlin hosted the Olympics. Hitler reopened the gay bars and took all the anti-Jew propaganda down for all the visitors to Germany. Himmler even told his police not to bother the gays while the games were going on (Plant 133-4). But before the Olympics and once the games were over, using this amended version of Paragraph 175, more homosexuals than ever were brought in for questioning, put in prison, and sometimes transferred to the concentration camps.

This newly amended law gave police the right to arrest men who were engaging in or contemplating any homosexual acts, and they were brought in for questioning and intimidation. But before the police even started arresting the masses of alleged homosexuals, they went after homosexuals who had stood up to the homosexual persecution that began before the Holocaust. First, they targeted the directors of homosexual-rights organizations and men who worked with Hirschfeld. Then they went after political leaders of any kind who opposed the Reich; whether they were homosexual or not, they were arrested for violating Paragraph 175. During this time, courts decided that even a lewd glance from one man to another was sufficient grounds for prosecution. This aided the Reich in prosecuting all those who opposed their ideology. After all the

political vendettas were covered, they started with the general population. Once arrested, the alleged homosexuals were questioned, bribed or intimidated to offer other names, and then incarcerated for further study. Inmates with powerful families, a lot of money, or ties to show business or art were usually released. Those who stayed in jail had to survive the process of being deemed a homosexual. First, they were photographed and fingerprinted; then they were searched, and their homes were searched for anything suspicious or for evidence that they had friends and acquaintances who shared their sexual orientation. Next, they were taken to court to stand before a judge. If the police could not find anything incriminating, the men were free but still under surveillance; if the police found anything that resembled or could be construed as evidence of homosexuality, they were found guilty. Once jailed, the inmates were watched and put to work. As the population grew, the inmates had to be released, moved, or exterminated. Prisoners who could be “cured” were able to be released. The men who could show the guards that they could successfully resist homosexual temptation and were able to have sex with a female were considered cured and set free. Inmates who could not be “cured” were then sent to concentration camps as room was needed in the prisons. Starting in 1938 Himmler declared that any man convicted of being homosexual should be transported to the camps, and he declared in 1940 that any accused must go straight to the camps. Prisoners who were caught in any lewd acts while in jail were immediately exterminated. Engaging in homosexual acts with the prison guards who were heterosexual could get inmates special favors or it could result in death; they never knew what would happen. The prison guards claimed that the circumstances during the Holocaust were not normal circumstances, so the sexual favors the guards demanded

from the homosexual prisoners were acceptable because there were not any women readily available; however, the guards all claimed that in “normal” life they were completely heterosexual and homosexuals were perverted degenerates. The guards’ homophobic hypocrisy reigned the entire duration of the Holocaust. This behavior continued when the prisoners were sent to the concentration camps; however, the enormity of their suffering was much more severe. In *Bent*, Max was able to get medicine for Horst by performing oral sex on the Captain; the Captain only engaged in sexual activity with Max because Max had a yellow star and not a pink triangle. Even though the Captain knew Max was gay, their sexual act was considered normal because neither man was labeled homosexual. In the camps, this was considered normal behavior because women were not present for sex. Years later, brothels were set up to combat homosexual activity between men in the camps.

The persecuted men were sent to the concentration camps on transports. These were usually some type of cattle cars on trains. The SS officers would put approximately one hundred and fifty people in one car for long periods of time, from twelve hours to twelve days. Prisoners were locked in the cars for days with no food, water, or way to relieve themselves. Many of the cars did not have windows for light or ventilation. Upon opening the cars, thirty to forty dead would be the first to fall out. Death by starvation, dehydration, and suffocation were common. The lucky prisoners were able to get off the trains and sleep in local prisons on the way to the camps, and sometimes they were able to walk between train stations struggling with nature’s fury of heat or stunning cold; however, this was normally not the case (Kogon 61). The Nazis also used these transports to transfer prisoners between camps. Because the chance for death was so

great, homosexual prisoners were transferred frequently. Experienced prisoners would warn the new men what was coming. For example, in *Bent*, Horst warns Max to do what he is told or he will die during the transport. Horst also tries to warn Max as to what to expect at the camps. However, Max, like historical victims, could not believe the stories until they experienced them firsthand. If they survived the transports, what met them at the concentration camps was a different kind of hell.

Upon their arrival to the concentration camps, the homosexuals were battered, kicked, and insulted. Then they were showered, shaved of all bodily hair (it is believed that only the Jewish and homosexual prisoners had their pubic hair shaved), and beaten again when transferred to their own barracks. They were constantly humiliated and berated by all the guards and Kapos. One inmate describes:

When my name was called, I stepped forward, gave my name, and mentioned Paragraph 175. With the words ‘You filthy queer, get over there, you butt fucker,’ I received several kicks...then was transferred to an SS sergeant in charge of my block. The first thing I got from him was a violent blow on my face that threw me to the ground...[H]e brought his knees up hard into my groin so that I doubled over with pain...[H]e grinned at me and said: ‘That was your entrance fee, you filthy Viennese swine...’ (Plant 163)

During this entrance process, the inmates were given ill-fitting prison garb and their insignia depending on why they were incarcerated. All the colors were discussed in the previous chapter; however, the homosexuals’ pink triangle was chosen because pink was considered feminine, and the Nazis saw it as a sign of weakness. Many inmates and

historians claim that the homosexual's triangle was a few centimeters larger than the other inmates so they could be spotted from farther away. The pink triangle was the lowest in the hierarchy within the camps, according to most survivors. Sherman dramatizes this belief in his play; in *Bent*, Horst tells Max, "Pink's the lowest" (33). Homosexuals were treated the worst by the SS, the Kapos, and the other prisoners. The additional torture they were forced to endure was shocking. They were beaten like all the other prisoners, but they also received special abuse because the guards were allowed to do whatever they wanted to the pink triangles. Survivors tell stories of the homosexuals being beaten in their private parts, undergoing castration, and having their private parts mutilated. Many homosexuals were also raped with large objects by the guards. Gay prisoners had the highest death rate percentage of any other population in the camps. Rudiger Lautmann found that "the homosexual death rate was over fifty four percent, while the political death rate was forty percent, and the Jewish death rate was just over thirty four percent...three out of four deaths among homosexuals occur soon after their committal (within the first year) (81-82). The homosexual prisoners were put in every situation that could possibly eliminate them completely. Not only were they abused the most in the camps and put on the most transports, homosexuals were given the most dangerous and strenuous work details of any inmates.

As previously discussed in chapter one, some camps, like Dachau, gave homosexual prisoners mindless tasks in order to drive them insane. These jobs ranged from moving rocks from one pile to another to moving snow from one pile to another. They had to do this every day from sun up to sun down. The purpose was to take away any dignity and individuality they might have left. In *Bent*, Max and Horst have to move

heavy rocks from one pile to another; when winter comes, they have to move snow from one pile to another. Max explains to Horst why the meaningless jobs are the best: “No one gets sick here. Look at all those guys moving rocks over there... They look healthier than most. No one dies. The guards don’t beat you, because the work is totally nonessential. All it can do is drive you crazy” (Sherman 47). If a homosexual prisoner were not lucky enough to be assigned a mindless job, he was assigned the most dangerous and strenuous work at the camps. These jobs involved working in clay pits, digging tunnels, and working in quarries. The jobs were physically demanding and very important to the war. Therefore, when the workers did not complete their work in a timely fashion, they were beaten relentlessly. These prisoners were starving, sleep deprived, and scared, but they were expected to do the work of very strong, healthy men. Rudiger Lautmann explains that the prisoners called the tunnel detail at Buchenwald the “liquidation squad.” Prisoners had to dig a one mile tunnel in the Harz Mountain. One thousand to two thousand men worked in the tunnel at any given time. They slept in the tunnel, even in the harsh winter. From the work commandos, Lautmann reports that more homosexuals were sent to this work detail more than political prisoners and Jehovah’s Witnesses (151).

The Nazis did not use the work details alone to exterminate the homosexuals; they also sought help from the camp hospitals. Although experiments were performed on many populations of inmates, special experiments and medical procedures were performed on the homosexual inmates. The most common procedure was castration. Because the homosexuals were considered deviants, they could volunteer for castration in hopes of being released from the camps. The Nazis thought castration could eradicate

homosexuality. Between 1938-1940, approximately 200 acts of castration were conducted. Walter Poller, a former medical clerk, reports on a typical case:

the inmate was homosexual and had served a prison sentence when brought to the camp. He was too intelligent not to recognize the inescapability of his fate, and he was too soft to survive the rigors of the camp. He signed the application for castration and willingly gave any information necessary...[A]fter the castration had been carried out he was released from the penal battalion...[I]n order to apply pressure to other candidates to do the same. (Roll 22).

Also, some doctors experimented with drugs and procedures in a failed attempt to cure homosexuality. For example, “in Buchenwald and Neuengamme, ‘Experimental Section V’ conducted work in counteracting homosexuality by gland implants and synthetic hormones” (Kogon 165). Under Nazi orders, the doctors could try to cure homosexuality like they were trying to cure typhus and yellow fever, using the inmates for research. Again, they believed that homosexuality was an ailment and could be fixed. These beliefs persisted in Germany long after the victims were liberated from the camps.

The camp liberations began on August 23, 1944 in France; they continued until April 28, 1945. After the liberations, the survivors were able to try to rebuild their lives. However, the homosexuals could not; Paragraph 175 was still law. Men who were arrested for being a homosexual were still prosecuted and given a prison sentence. After what they survived in the camps, the homosexuals were still not safe in Germany. Paragraph 175 was not voided in Germany until 1969. Because homosexuality was still considered a crime, many Germans did not believe that the incarceration of homosexuals

in the camps was unjust; therefore, gays did not receive any compensation for their suffering like many other prison populations did (Haerberle 279). This is why so many homosexual survivors remained silent after the war; they did not want to go back to prison. Many of them even got married and lived a phony life in order to protect themselves from the German prejudice and punishment.

Although Sherman could not have included all the events of the homosexual persecution during the Holocaust in his play, he does respect and represent many of the monumental events that took place. To this extent, he does educate the audience to the historical facts, which is what Skloot wants in a Holocaust play. Sherman's play begins on the Night of Long Knives. Max and Rudy were at a gay bar that was raided, but they were lucky to make it safely home. However, they are apprehended and incarcerated later, proving the homosexual purge continued for years. The playwright mentions key officials who were responsible for the homophobia and homosexual purge in Germany. Sherman provides truthful information about the dangers of the transports to the camps. He uses real work details from Dachau in the play. Sherman mentions Hirschfeld's petitions and how they were responsible for some homosexuals' incarcerations. He clearly researched the historical background in order to portray the two year time frame to the best of his ability with regards to the premise of his play.

### Chapter 3

Robert Skloot's third play objective is "to produce an emotional response to [the historical facts]" (*Theatre* 14). Many critics' concerns with *Bent* lie with the issue of "humanness" among the characters in the play. Audiences may react honestly when they can see parts of themselves in the characters; because homosexuals are a minority, some audience members may not be able to relate to them on a deep, emotional level. If the audience interprets Max as a stereotypical gay man who does drugs, engages in carefree sex, lives recklessly, and cares only for himself, they might not be able to feel empathy or sympathy for him due to the stereotypical homosexual traits of the character in the beginning of the play. However, as the play develops, Sherman provides relatable qualities for Max and the other characters. Max becomes an emotionally connected partner in a relationship; he also employs family members to aid in his freedom and survival. Sherman uses the homosexual framework to illustrate a different kind of relationship and horrors that vary from heterosexual characters in Holocaust literature. Therefore, the emotional response from the audience should not be more or less empathetic than with other Holocaust dramatic representations; the response will just be different because this play is like no other.

Before an audience can join an emotional journey with a text, they must begin to trust the writer. Skloot believes that "plays of the Holocaust experience must painstakingly build a sense of trust between playwright and audience...it is hard for some audiences to grant trust because they have expectations and prejudices about the Holocaust material before they encounter it." He further explains that the responsibility

of the audience is to “greet Holocaust drama with openness, generosity, and concern” (*Darkness* 122). As discussed in previous chapters, Sherman researched the historical facts carefully and presents a play based on some of the actual events of the homosexual Holocaust. In doing this, he provides an honest account of history while adding fictitious characters and circumstances. His play’s depiction of the historical events are authentic, but the storyline is his unique creation. Sherman builds the foundation of trust with his audience; however, the audience must do their part as well. Because the subject of homosexuality is still controversial and most people are familiar with the basic historical aspect of the Holocaust, audiences will come to the play with some preconceived notions. However, if they do as Skloot instructs by coming to the play with an open mind, they should empathize with what the characters endure during the play. The audience must be generous for them to trust the playwright, understand this different facet of history, and find the emotional state needed to feel compassion for these characters and the circumstances that endanger them. Sherman provides many opportunities in *Bent* for the audience to empathize and connect emotionally with the characters.

The first opportunity for connecting with the characters comes in Act I after Max and Rudy’s apartment is raided, and the SA officer, Wolf, is killed. Max and Rudy are forced to run, and the desperation of the survival during the Night of Long Knives begins. They run back to the club to find answers; Greta, the club owner, explains that the Nazis are killing the gays, and they are not safe. She instructs them to run, but Max and Rudy cannot fathom what is going on around them. Rudy does not want to leave his home and his plants. Rudy’s anxiety helps the audience relate to Rudy; his devastation about having to leave his life behind was a common theme for many victims of the Holocaust.

Everyone can empathize with people having to leave behind all their belongings and the life they know. Max is the rational one of the couple who realizes what they must do in order to survive. After running from the Nazis and living in tents in the middle of the forest, Max calls a meeting with his uncle for help to get out of Germany safely. During this meeting, the audience learns of Max's relationship with his family. Uncle Freddie is a homosexual, but he keeps his sexual orientation secret. Max is the only son of a prominent family, but he has disgraced them because of his homosexual lifestyle; he has not been discreet about his sexual orientation. Uncle Freddie claims that Max has purposely flaunted his homosexuality to disgrace his family. Max has not communicated with them for over ten years. They are willing to help him, but they will not help Rudy. Uncle Freddie brings only one ticket to the meeting in order to separate the couple. Max refuses to take it because he will not leave Rudy behind. This is the first time the audience sees Max do the right thing, a selfless act to relieve his guilt for his many indiscretions. Max sacrifices his freedom to try to help Rudy. Until this point in the play, Max has seemed like a selfish, hedonistic man who only chases sex and drugs. Max's effort to help Rudy escape shows another side of his personality, and it also shows that Max does care for Rudy on some level. This is the first time in the play the audience might begin to like Max. However, Max cannot protect Rudy for long.

Uncle Freddie never has the chance to get Max two tickets to Amsterdam because Rudy and Max get arrested due to Rudy trusting the wrong people. Both men are put on a transport train to the camps. Rudy is quickly singled out on the train because of his glasses; Rudy's glasses are horn-rimmed (signaling femininity) and were a sign of intelligence during this period. The guard makes Rudy break his own glasses and takes

him away. Rudy calls to Max for help on his way out, but another prisoner, Horst, tells Max not to move because there is nothing he can do to save him. Horst explains to Max, “Listen to me. If you survive the train, you stand a chance...If you try to help him, they will kill you...If you even see – see what they do to him, hear – hear what they do to him – they will kill you. If you want to stay alive, he cannot exist” (Sherman 34). Max sits in disbelief; he cannot believe that what is happening is real. He cannot deal with the horrific reality of the guards beating Rudy; he can hear what is happening. When the guards come back to get Max, he denies knowing Rudy like Peter denying Christ. The guards make Max beat Rudy to prove he does not care for him and prove he is not a homosexual. The guards know they are a couple, but they want to torture both men for their own entertainment. For the first time in the play, the audience witnesses a horrifying reality of the Holocaust; many victims watched as their loved ones were murdered, and there was nothing they could do about it. With the feeling of helplessness overwhelming them, they could only watch while the Nazis beat and humiliated people they loved. Max counts to try to ignore reality and escape what is going on in front of him, but what the guards do to him next leaves an awful memory stamped in his mind for the rest of his life.

Later in the play the audience finds out what has happened on the transport; however, in real time, the guards take Max to another car soon after they kill Rudy, for Max to prove to them that he is not gay. The guards force Max to have sex with a recently dead Jewish teenage girl. Max tells Horst what happened: “Just. Just dead, minutes...bullet...in her...they said...prove that you’re...and I did...prove that you’re...lots of them, watching...laughing...drinking...he’s a bit bent, they said, he

can't...but I did...I hit him, you know. I kissed her. Dead lips. I killed him" (Sherman 40). Max connects Rudy with the dead girl. He finally admits to himself that he helped to kill Rudy by not aiding him; his denial kept him alive. Max's desperation makes him an empathetic character. He seems so persistent but childlike in the way that he explains everything. It is Max's vulnerability that audiences can connect with; when Max is explaining to Horst what has happened with the girl on the train, the broken sentences and word choice evoke a disturbingly intimate emotional connection. The audience begins to hurt for Max because he becomes so shattered. His disgust for himself engages the audience to want to protect him. He finally starts to feel emotions and realize the consequences of his homosexuality. He begins to loathe himself and what he has done. He is also able to keep living because he had an erection while having sexual intercourse with the dead girl. He realizes on the train that he must do whatever the guards instruct in order to stay alive. Again, the guards know Max is homosexual, but they want to humiliate him and torture him for their own pleasure. As the audience reads Max's confession to Horst, they should feel immense hurt for him. He cannot deal with what is happening, but he keeps trying to make sense of it all. Max sees the girl as an angel that saved him, but he cannot seem to save himself from the self-hatred of what he has had to do to survive. It was not possible to make sense of anything the guards did on the transports and in the camps. There were no rules or laws they had to follow when dealing with the inmates who were considered less than scum, especially the homosexual prisoners.

Having sex with the dead girl also earns Max a yellow star, which is what the Jews wore, instead of a pink triangle that marked homosexuals. Horst tells Max on the

transport that “Pink is the lowest” (Sherman 33). Therefore, Max does not want to wear the pink triangle; he works a deal. He decides that his sexual orientation has hurt him enough. He’s lost his home and his companion, so he wants to start fresh. Max masks his true identity in order to survive. He loses touch with his identity in order to cope with all that has happened. Although audiences might not like the way Max behaves at the beginning of the play, those survival skills help him while he is in the camp. Readers cannot understand the situation fully, and therefore, they cannot understand how these victims desperately tried anything to survive. The prisoners believed they would be released soon and just had to stay alive until that time. However, he finds someone who keeps him going, Horst.

Horst gives Max advice that helps him survive, and during their conversations, Max forms a friendship with Horst. Yet Horst is disgusted with Max because Max hides his true identity as a homosexual. Max will not accept Horst’s refusals for friendship, so Max works another deal to have Horst moved to his work detail. Horst has been assigned one of the hardest work details in the gravel pit, so Max has him moved to his mundane, nonessential work detail. Max says that he has done it to help Horst stay well, but he actually does it because he wants Horst’s companionship. Max thinks Horst should be grateful to him for the transfer, but Horst knows that Max has done it for selfish reasons and thus does not appreciate that Max has not discussed the change with him first. Max sees the move as helping Horst survive like Horst helped him to survive the transport. Max believes that he has done a good thing, but Horst sees through it. The audience sees the selfish Max come out in this part of the play, but they must realize that relationships of any kind were very important in the camps. Inmates needed someone to care about in

order to keep the will to live. Everything else had been stripped from them. Once Horst forgives Max after three days of silence, Max and Horst's relationship does progress.

They create a rhythm of communication while they work so the guards will not notice anything unusual. During one of their breaks, they begin a sexual conversation. They begin to talk about their attraction for each other and missing sexual intimacy. This conversation progresses into a verbal interchange of sex between two men.

HORST: Do you feel me?

MAX: I feel you.

HORST: I see you.

MAX: I feel you.

HORST: I have you.

MAX: I want you.

HORST: Do you feel me inside you?

MAX: I want you inside me.

HORST: Feel... (Sherman 56)

This conversation progresses until both men climax, and their relationship is formed. They are able to be sexually intimate without the guards knowing. They both feel free for the first time since their incarceration. This is an important turning point for Max. Eric Sterling explains in his article "Bent Straight," "Sherman portrays this scene as a bonding between the two men as their relationship advances into a loving and caring attachment. The two men become as one, for Max learns to love Horst and himself" (385). For probably the first time in Max's life, he has felt true intimacy during sex instead of it being merely the physical act. This intimacy helps Max learn to connect

emotionally with Horst. If audiences can accept the graphic language used in this scene, they can discover the beautiful nature of Max's progression to his true self. The audience has witnessed the progression of Max throughout the play; they have seen the positive influence Horst provides. Inside the concentration camps and among the devastation, these two men find something for which to live. The relationship between Max and Horst creates a connection that forces Max's defensive emotional walls to begin to crumble, especially when Horst confesses his true feelings to Max: he says, "I love you. When I'm not dreaming about rocks, I'm dreaming about you. For the past six weeks, I've dreamed about you. It helps me get up...Knowing I'll see you. At least out of the corner of my eyes. In passing. It's a reason to live" (Sherman 60). The desperation in Horst's words causes an emotional reaction in the audience because they see how deep Horst's connection is with Max. Until now, Horst had not had a reason to keep going; life in the concentration camp has been atrocious. His feelings for Max give him something to look forward to and something that could counteract all the ugliness he witnesses on a daily basis. Just like it gives Horst hope, the men's relationship gives the audience hope.

Further pain for Max occurs when he begs Horst not to love him. Max feels that he is not worthy of anyone's love. Max says:

Don't love me...I don't want anybody to love me...I can't love  
back...Queers aren't meant to love. I know. I thought I loved someone  
once. He worked in my father's factory. My father paid him to go  
away. He went. Queers aren't meant to love. They don't want us to.  
You know who loved me? That boy. That dancer. I don't remember his

name. But I killed him. See -- queers aren't meant to love. I'll kill you too. Hate me. That's better. Hate me. Don't love me. (Sherman 61)

In this part of the play, we see that Max's low self-esteem derives from being a homosexual and being told he is deviant. He does not feel worthy of love; he assumes that society feels he does not deserve happiness. He does not feel equal to heterosexuals and thus accepts the punishment. The persecution by the Nazis has further proven his opinions of his poor self-worth. But what Max does not realize is that he cares for Horst as well. Throughout their time together, Max keeps telling Horst about rumors he claims to hear; rumors mostly involving better food. Max is trying to give Horst hope, and something to look forward to. Additionally, in this same scene, Max notices that Horst does not feel well and continues to cough. Max is truly concerned for him, so he performs a sexual favor for his SS officer in exchange for cough medicine. Because Max wears the yellow star, the officer accepts the favor; if the favor had come from a homosexual inmate, the Captain probably would not have accepted the offer. By Max taking care of Horst, he shows the audience that he's truly changing into a better human being. Max cares for Horst and is starting to value himself because he can help someone instead of cause them harm. However, the medicine eventually causes Horst harm because the Captain finds out that Max gave the medicine to Horst; this tips the Captain off to their relationship. When the men are questioned about the medicine, Horst cannot refrain from coughing.

The Captain makes Max watch while he orders Horst to throw his cap against the electric fence. Both Max and Horst know what is going to happen because they have watched it happen before to other prisoners. However, Horst decides to go out with a

fight. He will not be bullied anymore for who or what he is. The stage direction reads, “He turns and rushes at the Captain. He screams in fury. The guard shoots Horst. Horst continues to lunge at the Captain. His hand is out. He scratches the Captain’s face. The guard shoots Horst in the back. He falls, dead” (74). All the frustration Horst faces because of the prejudice of his sexual orientation drives him to make one last stand. Because he knows the end is inevitable, he finds the strength to fight back. The Captain and guard provoke Horst to become a masculine antagonist, yet the Nazis considered homosexuals to be feminine and weak. The overwhelming pride the audience should feel for Horst heightens at the realization that he is another human being, just like them. He has feelings, and he deserves a peaceful life just like everyone else. Once the audience can see themselves in Horst, it helps them understand that all the pain and suffering truly left scars, and in death Horst becomes free from all the pain. The death of Horst is emotionally heartbreaking, but it is filled with awe and satisfaction for his final stand against those who persecute him for his sexuality. Being judged and treated a certain way due to being different is something to which all people can relate. The ability to stand up for oneself is something to be acknowledged and respected.

This also happens to Max after Horst’s death. Although the audience has watched the emotional growth of Max throughout the play, what he does at the end of *Bent* usually shocks and moves audiences. After the Captain and guard leave Max to take Horst’s body to the pit, Max carefully cradles Horst and tries to hold him up as the bell rings for the break. During the break, Max talks to Horst and explains everything to him and the audience. He says, “O.K. I won’t drop you...I’ll hold you. They’ll let me hold you...I never held you before...Horst? You know what? I think...I think I love you. Shh!

Don't tell anyone. I think I loved...I can't remember his name. A dancer. I think I loved him too...I love you. What's wrong with that? What's wrong with that?" (Sherman 75). Max finally realizes that he is capable and deserving of love, and he realizes that being emotionally connected with someone is healthy. Yet he also realizes that society does not think it is acceptable, and that is why he keeps asking what's wrong with loving someone. He has always been persecuted for his homosexuality, and he thought he had shut himself down from the hate. He learns that the hate hurt him, and Horst has taught him to find that love, to love himself, and to take pride in his sexual identity. The audience takes this journey with Max and hopefully understands the depth of the pain Max has endured. They understand why he once resorted to drugs and partying and have watched him figure out what is really important as well.

This makes the end of the play so touching for the audience. After Max places Horst in the pit and goes back to moving rocks, he again begins to count reality away. The audience may think that Max has reverted to his old ways of blocking reality and taking care of himself. However, Max cannot do this anymore because now he has tapped into his true emotional identity. He goes back to the pit, takes Horst's jacket with the pink triangle on it, and puts it on. He finally comes to terms with who he really is and is not ashamed. Max wears Horst's jacket as he walks into the electric fence; he ends all the pain and suffering. As he accepts his identity and makes his last act of free will, the audience must respect and be proud of Max. He overcomes so much, and the audience is able to make that journey with him. The emotional connection that is formed during the play lingers after the death of all the characters. Because the audience and playwright trust each other to make the journey together, the audience is able to form an emotional

connection to the play and the characters. The relationship does not deflect from the tragic events; it adds another level to which the audience can connect. Even though they may not support homosexual relationships, everyone engages in some type of relationship; therefore, they can understand the relationship even if they do not understand the type. The devastating circumstances of life in the camp are not camouflaged by the men's relationship, but it is made more tragic with them trying to save one another. Therefore, Skloot's assertion that audiences cannot connect with Sherman's play because of the homosexual storyline and Sherman's intention to mask the tragic persecution of people during the Holocaust with a love story proves incorrect.

## Chapter 4

Robert Skloot's fourth objective for playwrights is "to raise certain moral questions for audiences to discuss and reflect upon" (*Theatre* 14). Skloot explains that when discussing the Holocaust, "we speak most particularly of the life and death of the helpless populations who were systematically and relentlessly pursued until the greater portion of them succumbed to a sadistic strategy wholly dedicated to removing them and the memory of them from the world" (*Theatre* 7). The moral obligation of society when dealing with any kind of genocide is to learn how and why such events occurred in order to prevent other acts of violence from happening. However, just as educating others to the atrocities of the Holocaust has not prevented other genocides, educating others about people different from themselves has not inhibited intolerance. In this capacity, *Bent* serves to teach multiple moral lessons. First, by teaching the senseless and harmful nature of victimizing certain people for the supposed betterment of the world, the play can deter other acts of cruelty from happening. Sherman's play also teaches a moral lesson of accepting those who are different from or alien to the majority. The different facets of prejudice that Sherman presents in *Bent* resonate beyond just the atrocity of genocide; the play provides many layers of moral education and emotional growth.

Most pieces of Holocaust literature aim to portray the victims' suffering at the hands of the Nazis. The texts deal with how the atrocity started, what happened during the Holocaust, and how the survivors deal with the aftermath. The education provided by reading Holocaust literature and seeing Holocaust theatre can help prevent similar acts of violence from occurring through educations, identification, and catharsis. When dealing

with the Holocaust, most Holocaust literature and theatre discuss the persecution of the Jews because they were the largest population persecuted by the Nazis. However, other groups were also victimized because the Nazis felt superior to them in some way and wanted to eradicate any group they considered inferior and a corrupting force. Most people know about the Jewish Holocaust, but many do not know about the homosexual Holocaust, the Jehovah Witness Holocaust, the Gypsy Holocaust, the political prisoner Holocaust, the criminal Holocaust, the clergyman Holocaust and the disabled persons Holocaust. The Holocaust started with the mass murder of the disabled. Any person who was not considered purely Arian or healthy was a possible target for the Nazi regime. Without survivors willing to tell their story, the public would remain ignorant of the different facets and victims of the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a unique situation in which intolerance led to mass murders of several groups of human beings. The Nazis believed the Arian race and its non-compromised members were better and more deserving of sharing the splendors and spoils of Europe than all others, especially Jews and homosexuals. Because most historical and fictional works pay homage to the Jewish Holocaust, Sherman wrote a play to teach another facet of Nazi intolerance. Sherman's goal is not a competition of whose victimization was more severe, but rather to show that others were victimized and should also be included in the historical literary genre.

The moral lesson most Holocaust texts attempt is the awareness of religious persecution and racial prejudice. Many feel sorry for the Jewish victims of persecution because they assume they were attacked for religious reasons and were the primary victims. However, many believe that the Nazi's prejudice towards the Jews was more economic and ideological than religious. Nevertheless, people can relate to others being

persecuted for their social class or religious affiliation because they may see themselves being persecuted for the same reasons. People have oppressed other people for centuries because of race, class, and religion. Audiences should recognize how persecution for race, class, and religion is morally wrong, but they can be biased against others.

However, people do not seem to be able to empathize with a group being oppressed for “abnormal” sexual orientation. Because homosexuals represent such a minority of the population, the majority of society cannot understand why these individuals feel sexual desire toward others of the same gender. Homophobic people oppose homosexuality for different reasons, mostly religious or ethical ones, or because they are predisposed to dislike gays and have never met them, relying on prejudiced ideas they obtained from others. Morality deals with doing what is right, and most have always seen homosexuality as wrong. Therefore, these individuals cannot tolerate people who do not share their same moral code that heterosexuality is right. Sherman attempts to confront these beliefs in his play.

The moral lessons contemplated in *Bent* involve expanding tolerance for people who are different from some parts of what society deems normal. The play specifically examines how bigotry toward homosexuals is equally as intolerable as that against the others who were tormented. *Bent* offers a historical education of the homosexual oppression in Germany. We see the intolerance towards homosexuals early in the play and it gets progressively worse on the train and in Dachau. In the beginning of the play, Greta tells Max and Rudy, “You know, you queers are not very popular anyhow. It was just Rohm keeping you all safe. Now you’re like the Jews. Unloved, baby, unloved” (Sherman 21). Because they are homosexual men, they are unloved by most of Nazi

society. In the eyes of the Nazis, their sexual orientation deems them unworthy of emotional responses that everyone craves. Sherman confirms his point of prejudice using Max's uncle, who is also gay but chooses to be discreet about it, to show how even Max's family has disowned him because of his sexual orientation. Because of his sexual orientation, his family will not tolerate their son's behavior or even talk to him. This further proves that he is unloved; as a result, Max feels that he does not deserve love, nor can he give love because of the way he has been treated. His own family and circle of acquaintances cannot get past their bigotry and treat Max morally. Horst provides a moral compass for Max from which to learn. Horst serves as the teacher of Max and the audience.

In the play, Horst does not try to mask his sexual identity. He provides the moral example and self-love and self-acceptance that Max finally emulates. Horst shows Max that in order to love others, one must first love and accept oneself. From their first meeting, Horst tries to help Max make the right choices to survive. However, Horst does more than that; Horst tries to help Max make moral choices. Horst himself stands up for moral behavior, even something as trivial as his soup helping in the camp. He tells the Kapo to give him some meat in his broth; the Kapo responds, "Fucking queer! Take what you get!" (Sherman 36). Horst is not ashamed of who he is, and he fights for what he believes in. He asserts that homosexuals in Dachau deserve food, just like the other inmates. They are just as worthy as the others. Even though he is hated for his pink triangle, he knows that he has not done anything wrong. Horst becomes frustrated with Max because Max will not accept his true sexual identity. However, Horst understands Max's dilemma because he has dealt with the same bigotry. Horst feels sorry for Max

because of all he has been through, even though Horst has been through much of the same. Horst's empathy for Max allows Max to perceive life differently. Sherman uses Horst to juxtapose Max's initial self-loathing with Horst's acceptance of self; Max's self-loathing diminishes the longer he witnesses Horst's self-confidence. Horst believes in what is right; he stands up to the Kapos and guards because he knows they are acting immorally. Until people are willing to stand up for what is right, the prejudice and persecution will continue.

Sherman examines other acts of intolerance besides that suffered by the gays in his play. He sheds light on prejudice toward anyone different; Sherman uses Rudy on the transports to show another type of discrimination. In *Bent*, the guard on the transport immediately notices Rudy's glasses; the guard says, "Glasses. Give me your glasses. Horn-rimmed. Intelligensia"(32). Eugen Kogon points out in his book that "Intellectuals and white-collar worker, especially if they wore glasses, were inevitably launched on a path of doom" (81). Wearing glasses does not signal intelligence, but it does make people different from those that do not wear glasses. The selection of Rudy indicates the irrational prejudice exhibited by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Homosexuals were sometimes considered intellectually superior in Germany during this time period. This generalization aided in the hatred towards them because the SS were intimidated by those whom they considered intellectually superior because they always feared an uprising in the camps. Sherman shows that because someone wears glasses, he is brutally beaten to death, even though he has done nothing wrong and is no different from the other prisoners on the train. Sherman dramatizes the preposterous nature of intolerance and attacking anyone different from ourselves.

Sherman even shows the prejudice that occurred within populations of minorities. In *Bent*, Sherman shows that homosexuals were treated poorly by the other inmates in the camp. This point of contention plagues this play. Many critics, including Robert Skloot, believe that Sherman aims to show that homosexuals were treated worse than the Jews and treated inferior by the Jews. Max wanting a yellow star instead of a pink triangle causes critics to berate the play because of the categorization of suffering. Because Horst tells Max that the homosexuals are the lowest caste of prisoners, Max decides to pretend to be Jewish. Horst tells Max that pink was the lowest because “the other prisoners hate us so much” (Sherman 39). Even within the camp, persecution happened among the different populations of prisoners. One might think that because they all shared a common bond of terror, they would not mistreat other inmates; however, the homosexuals and Jews were treated far worse than the other populations by the other prisoners and SS. Because of their “deviant” sexual behavior, the homosexuals repulsed the other men. The other prisoners thought the homosexuals were deviants and immoral people and thus deserved what they received. This is ironic because no one deserved the atrocities inflicted by the Nazis, and the other prisoners should have realized this long before others did.

There are moral lessons rooted throughout *Bent*. Even the title of the play provides a moral lesson; Dace explains where Sherman found the idea for the title of *Bent* in her book, *Martin Sherman: Skipping over Quicksand*:

The playwright selected as his title the British slang term “bent,” a derogatory synonym for “gay” possibly derived from the fact that a gay man bent over exposes his bum. Max and Horst bend to pick up and put

down rocks. But the title conveys the play's essence, not only its gayness but also that the men endure SS persecution bent but unbroken. Max bends circumstances to his advantage, and Max and Horst bend Dachau's rules, promoting their spirits' survival. (48)

The way "bent" is used in the title proves the Nazi prejudice towards people who are different. The fact that the derogatory term led to the title of the play indicates that the play is needed to further tolerance and expose the homosexual aspect of the Holocaust. Sherman uses the term "bent" in the play during one of the most horrific scenes when Max is explaining what the guards made him do to the newly murdered girl. The guards use the term "bent" to explain that Max cannot become fully erect to perform with the girl because he is a homosexual. When he succeeds at the task, the guards say, "make him a Jew. He's not bent" (Sherman 41). Using Dace's explanation, the audience can assume that the guards mean that they can make him a Jew because he's not gay. However, the guards know he's gay, so they are just further exploiting him for their own pleasure and rewarding him with a yellow star for entertaining them.

However, if the audience considers Dace's explanation of the title of the play to be positive, the term "bent" gives the play more power. Max bends truths and circumstances in order to survive, and Max and Horst bend camp rules in order to be together, to love each other, and to survive. This means that the moral lesson of acceptance outweighs the homosexual aspect of the play. When Horst accepts Max for exactly who is truly is, Max begins to accept himself. Max learns to care for and love Horst, and then Max learns to love himself as a gay man. Sterling writes that "The love relationship between Max and Horst in Dachau is of great importance in Bent because it

strengthens both men emotionally, making it important for each to protect the other” (385). Before this relationship, Max had never been loved unconditionally. Horst provides Max the empathy and emotional connection that allows Max to no longer be ashamed of himself. The Nazis were not able to break the men; they simply bent them. But, by the Nazis bending Max, Max learns that he is not immoral, and he deserves love and acceptance by all people.

Sherman uses Max to demonstrate deep moral choices in life and death situations. Dace writes, “Many of us never face an ethical challenge of catastrophic proportions. Max faces two - participating in killing Rudy and killing himself” (56). Max must cooperate in the killing of Rudy in order to save himself. But Max tries to save Rudy before the transport. When Uncle Freddie brings Max a ticket to Amsterdam, Max refuses to go without Rudy. He demands two tickets because he is not going to leave Rudy behind. Max tries to protect Rudy for as long as he can but not enthusiastically. Max makes moral decisions regarding Rudy because he cares for him, yet Max does not even realize he cared for Rudy at the time. He realizes this later in the play after Horst teaches him love and understanding and self-acceptance. When Max kills himself because of the shock of Horst’s death and his self-acceptance, the audience is able to see the true Max, the moral Max. He dies with dignity and the audience cheers through their tears because they realize something more important, acceptance for all people.

Sherman provides many moral lessons in *Bent* for audiences to discuss and explore. He shows how intolerance of a certain segment of a population, no matter why they are being scapegoated and victimized, can lead to catastrophic consequences. He shows how dramatizing people unlike ourselves can be educational and not controversial.

Sherman wrote a play about unconditional love and acceptance. He wrote a play about doing what is right now, no matter what the circumstances and consequences. His play teaches audiences not only about the Jewish Holocaust, but also another layer of the Holocaust not many know exists. *Bent* provides so much more than a homosexual love story; the play provides an enlightening lesson on morality and identity.

## Chapter 5

Robert Skloot's final playwright objective is "to draw a lesson from the events re-created" (*Theatre* 14). Skloot concludes that if a Holocaust production does not teach the audience a lesson, it does not deserve recognition among the other plays of its kind.

Skloot asserts that in plays of the Holocaust, "We see a landscape of horror and humiliation re-created by live human beings; if it is created with integrity and presented with skill, that is, without sentimentality and free from political and pornographic exploitation, it can move us to ponder the great issues that the distractions of a more mundane existence usually prevent us from considering" (*Darkness* xvi). Sherman's play provides the landscape of horror, yet he also includes his political ideology. The way in which Sherman does both produces a play that goes beyond teaching history: the play enlightens people about tolerance. *Bent* instills an entirely different lesson than other Holocaust dramas because there is so little known about this population of victims. By presenting another type of victim, Sherman shows a unique dimension to the larger known historical event. Without more Holocaust literature involving homosexuals, this particular part of history will be lost forever.

In the years since the Holocaust, tolerance for gays has increased due to education and protests. Kai Hammerstein agrees that "historically [gay Holocaust literature] could not have come into existence before a widespread gay liberation movement. We only care about the history of those who matter to us" (22). When people think of the Holocaust, they immediately consider the persecution of the Jewish people; the masses do not realize that the Nazis targeted many different groups, groups different from

themselves. Because historical education works toward keeping such atrocities from reoccurring, literature of the gay Holocaust also needs to be included in Holocaust anthologies. It is not Sherman's intention to categorize the suffering of the different groups persecuted, but to divulge information that exists on a topic with which not many people are familiar. For this reason alone, the play provides the education Skloot desires; however, *Bent* provides much unique information about the historical atrocity of homosexual persecution during the Holocaust and sheds light on a facet of history that others were too scared to talk about.

Skloot does credit *Bent* for some promising qualities. He writes, "Into the [first six] scenes the playwright skillfully compresses the story of gay oppression in Germany and establishes the sense of real danger and terror that homosexuals endured at the hands of the Nazis" (*Darkness* 118). Sherman realistically takes years of homosexual persecution and condenses the monumental events to create the opening scenes of the play. The events that transpired at the beginning of the play really happened. Homosexuals went from feeling safe within their cliques to being banished and snitched on by their own; many gays would testify and name other homosexuals to try to save themselves. Also, the gays felt safe within their own clubs and establishments in Germany. After the purge, they were not safe anywhere in Berlin or surrounding countries. Using Max and Rudy in the first two scenes of the play, Sherman portrays the desperation felt by homosexuals during this time. Rudy keeps talking about not wanting to leave his plants, which makes him sound idiotic. But Sherman may use the plants to symbolize Rudy's life. Rudy has spent so much time and energy cultivating his plants, yet he is forced to leave them behind. Just like he has spent so much time building a life

in Berlin with Max, and he's afraid he will lose that forever, as well. Within the few short days starting with the Night of Long Knives, gay life changed, and they were forced into hiding. Most people have no idea that any of this horror took place, and *Bent* rectifies the ignorance of most people believing the Holocaust "belongs" only to the Jews.

Many of the actors who were cast in the first productions of *Bent* (some of them gay) had never heard of the homosexual persecution during the Holocaust. Robert Chetwyn remembers, "Reading *Bent* was a powerful experience. Shamefully – as a gay man – I knew nothing of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals...I found the second act absolutely remarkable in its conception and incredibly brave – combining the growing intellectual/erotic connection between Max and Horst with images as hauntingly bleak as a Beckett play" (Dace 52). *Bent* is a play so unique that it caused seasoned actors, directors, and producers to engage in life-changing discussions dealing with the history of homosexual persecution. Sherman tells the story to provide an educational experience not just for the audience, but also for the theatre troupes. It was very important to Sherman that directors, producers, and actors in the play read Bettelheim's *The Informed Heart*. Bettelheim's book deals with inmate psychology; this book is where Sherman found the inspiration for how Max and Horst would respond to the treatment from the SS, and where he got the revelation to have them form a romantic relationship (Dace 47). It was this book that gave Sherman the inspiration for the love story of which Skloot and so many others disapprove. Bettelheim's book instructs, "To survive, not as a shadow of the SS but as a man, one had to find some life experience that mattered, over which one was still in command" (Dace 47). The inclusion of the love story in *Bent* gives the characters

a reason to live. Until the SS murder Horst, the relationship is the only thing that the Nazis cannot take away from the couple because it is their very own private world. Max and Horst can control whether they want to enter the relationship, cultivate it, and let it grow. The men need it in the bleak world of the camp to give them strength and a bit of normalcy. They find comfort in their daily routine with each other. This love story is not “fluff” and does not deflect from the nightmare that was the Holocaust; the love between Max and Horst makes the homosexual Holocaust in the play authentic.

Other famous audience members took valuable lessons away from the play, too. Nicolas De Jongh comments, “the loathing of sexual minorities’ still exists today. *Bent* gives an idea of where and how that loathing can culminate. It is a play of importance, power and pathos which should concern us all” (Dace 64). The play teaches a lesson in acceptance that the Nazis did not comprehend. However, the play also teaches a lesson of acceptance for audiences of today. Seeing the horrific treatment of homosexuals at the hands of the Nazis could teach prejudice people the consequences of their hatred. Although most people never dream another genocide could materialize like the Holocaust, *Bent* shows how prejudice can spread into epic proportions. In the beginning of the Holocaust, it took only a few influential powerful people to propagate hatred throughout the masses of people. People today can swear that it can never happen again, but the Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, etc. probably thought the exact same thing. No one could believe that a nation could wish to exterminate another population of people, but it has happened since the beginning of time. The play should act as a warning to prevent future acts of hatred from occurring.

Another important lesson *Bent* teaches that combats hatred is love. When James Hammerstein was asked about *Bent*, he stresses, “You could say it’s about standing up for who you are, but it’s not that; it’s about standing up for who you love” (Dace 55). All the horrific circumstances of the Holocaust aside, the story between Max and Horst teaches a lesson of unconditional love. It demonstrates loving under any circumstances; Max learns not only to love someone else, but also to love himself due to Horst’s unconditional love for him. Horst knows that Max is not a good person, but he values Max’s pain because he understands from where it derives. The hatred for homosexuality and society deeming gay men as degenerates cause emotional scars for both men. They are able to rise above the Nazis and rise above the intolerance to find love. Sherman himself argues, “the object of one’s sexual desire is so unimportant, which makes homophobia ridiculous and inexplicable” (Dace 55). Sherman believes that love does not live within the confines of heterosexuality. Everyone needs love, and everyone deserves to be loved. The love portrayed in *Bent* between Max and Horst amidst the most horrible of circumstances teaches the ultimate power love holds.

Furthermore, Michael Leech said that *Bent* “is not to be missed...[it is] a harrowing play that makes you think and reflect,” and he reminds audiences that “*Bent* serves to remind us that the theatre is not just for entertainment” (Dace 65). *Bent* opened in London on July 4, 1979 and on Broadway on December 2, 1979 to mixed reviews, but the play became “the play to see that season” (Dace 79). Broadway critic, Rex Reed, stated, “Rarely have I heard so many heated debates in the lobby and on the street...When’s was the last time you saw that in a New York theatre?” (Dace 78). Some audience members and critics claimed that Sherman invented the homosexual Holocaust

because they had never heard of homosexual persecution during that time in Germany; others claimed that he had magnificently recreated the true, horrific homosexual Holocaust. Since the original openings, the play has been produced in fifty four countries and continues to “shatter those, gay and straight, who see it” (Dace 80). Theatre can surmount many obstacles. Live human beings recreating events for a live audience holds enormous power. There is a conversation between the people on stage and the people in the audience. Depending on the objective, a play can teach, advise, and sometimes deceive. *Bent* not only educates audiences on the homosexual events of the Holocaust which not many are aware took place, but it also teaches tolerance and unconditional love for people different from ourselves. *Bent* does not deceive; the play is not trying to portray a love story. The play shows that love can overpower nightmarish situations and give victims hope.

Sherman converted his play into a screenplay in 1981. After *Bent* was adapted for the screen, the production experienced complications with funding and casting, so it was released on a limited basis throughout the world in the mid-1990s. On November 26, 1998, *Bent* opened in major U.S. cities and general release thereafter (Dace 179). Critics and audiences in the United States liked the movie more than those in other parts of the world. Like the play reviews, the movie reviews were mixed. Some critics found that the movie should have taken a more minimalistic approach like the play instead of such a realistic one. Stephen Holden reported that the film, “still has some power to unsettle...[it has] earned its place in cultural history. And it’s still impossible to watch the scene set on a train transporting prisoners to Dachau...without feeling a sickening shudder of dread” (Dace 181). The images are shocking, but the shock gets the

audience's attention so they can be educated to the horrors of the homosexual Holocaust. Ed Johnson-Ott regards the film version of *Bent* as "unnecessary because 'the nightmares of the Holocaust are well documented'" (Dace 182). This is the only film of its kind; the homosexual persecution had not been well documented until Robert Plant, Eugen Kogon, and Martin Sherman. Sherman forged the way for homosexual survivors who had remained quiet for so long to come forward and tell their stories.

Because *Bent* benefits its audience on numerous levels, the question arises why other such Holocaust dramas do not exist. Homosexuality remained a crime long after the Holocaust ended in many parts of the world. Many do not know about this aspect of the Holocaust because hardly anyone would talk about it due to their fear of further persecution. Also, in 1945 when the camps were liberated, records show the mortality rate of homosexuals was higher than other units investigated (Plant 180). Though homosexuals were a small portion of camp population, they suffered the most deaths per populace of any group. This population that many never knew existed in the Holocaust may have suffered the most. Robert Plant thinks that "*Bent* opened the forbidden closet a crack and put the world on notice that indeed the Nazis had hounded all contragenics, that gays had been classified with criminals, asocials, and Jews as deviant sub-humans, the cosmic lice that Hitler and Himmler had vowed to exterminate" (15). Unfortunately for homosexuals, the vow to exterminate and persecute continued after the Holocaust ended; homosexual were not liberated like the rest of the inmates. They were not given benefits for their suffering; society at that time approved of their persecution and continued to harass them.

Most inmates tried to get back to normal life and find their families and friends. Homosexuals had to find new lives as heterosexuals who married and had families, or they had to run to friendlier countries in order to live as openly gay men. Plant explains:

According to German law, homosexual ex-prisoners were to be treated as criminals. East Germany voided the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 only in 1967; West Germany followed in 1969, adding minor alterations in 1973...Families frequently refused to take back homosexual ex-inmates. And former gay friends were usually displaced or dead. Although they were no longer compelled to wear the stigmatic pink triangle, they felt marked for life. And like so many victims of the Third Reich, most gays never recovered emotionally from the Nazi boomtowns of hell. (181)

Once they were liberated, they had nowhere to go and no one to help them. Their own families turned their backs on them out of fear. The homosexual Holocaust lasted decades after the Jewish Holocaust ended. According to Dr. Klaus Muller, "Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, German courts convicted homosexual men at a rate as high as that of the Nazi regime" (Heger 13). These men were left unaided and uncared for by everyone. Why would they have come forward to tell their stories? The hell that awaited them prevented them from becoming a part of the survivor population. Not only did no one care for them, but the majority of people still found them disgusting. They had very few countries to turn to if they decided to leave Germany. They could not even come to this country as many survivors did. "U.S. Congress passed a new law in 1952 preventing homosexuals from entering the country, defining them as 'afflicted with a psychopathic personality.' If they were found out after having entered, they were to be deported, a

practice upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967” (Haeberle 285). Homosexuals wanted only the same rights as the other victims. This is what Pierre Seel was brave enough to fight for; although he never was successful, he made sure that his voice was heard, and he did not give up when others did. However, Seel did not start the fight until it was safe, in 1981. It was Heger’s book and Sherman’s *Bent* that started many conversations all over the world. Sherman was one of the few to shed light on this additional layer of the Holocaust.

Homosexual stories still need to be told. Sherman was not a survivor, yet he portrayed a realistic vision of what it must have been like for these victims. Hammermeister agrees that “it is a literature that does not necessarily depend on the testimonies of survivors, though it participates in the commemoration of their suffering by responding to the need of the present for stories in order to counteract the remoteness of the numbers of the past” (25). If more writers would approach this subject respectfully and educate people on the historical events, *Bent* and other minority texts would be more accepted.

Homosexual survivors are no less important than the others persecuted at the hands of the Nazis. However, they were not able to come forward and tell of the horrors they faced. While society sympathizes with the other survivors, many heterosexuals cannot relate to the homosexual survivors because they cannot understand why they are gay. If more writers would investigate this aspect of history, people could have educated discussions in which they could learn intolerance and memorialize these forgotten victims of the most atrocious time in history. Until people learn to love one another unconditionally, hatred will still exist with the possibility to spread and infect others.

## Conclusion

Skloot states that “no serious artistic work of any kind can succeed if it lacks technical skill, human insight, and moral passion” (*Darkness* 116). Skloot feels that Sherman’s motivation is to call attention to current gay oppression. He feels that the play seeks more attention for Max’s coming out as a homosexual than the homosexual persecution during the Holocaust. Skloot fails to indicate that this play does both; *Bent* calls attention to gay oppression both then and now, it sheds light on a man coming out, and it portrays the horrible suffering of homosexuals by the Nazis. Skloot assumes that Sherman wants only to disseminate his political agenda, but Sherman truly wanted to teach people about the homosexual Holocaust; Sherman had two themes in *Bent*: outsider status and survival (Dace 60). Skloot writes that Sherman:

Distorts the Holocaust experience and deflects our attention away from the terrible suffering of all the Nazis’ victims whose humanity was destroyed. This is not to say that the Holocaust ‘belongs to the Jews,’ a mistaken argument I totally reject, but that Sherman’s considerable skill, insight, and passion does not do justice - cannot do justice - to the reductive nature of the drama. Ultimately, *Bent* is not successful because it is not truthful to the larger cause that would validate his smaller one. (121)

*Bent* is, however, a successful play, for it both educates audiences about the existence of homosexual persecution during the Holocaust and identifies the need for equality for gays then and now. Martin Sherman invites the audience to enter the atrocious world of Nazi Germany to see what life was like for homosexuals, but he also shows how the power of friendship, love, and morality shielded the characters from breaking, leaving them...bent.

Along with others discussed in this thesis, I had never heard about homosexual persecution during the Holocaust until I chose to take a Holocaust class in college. It was in that class that I first read *Bent*. I was immediately drawn to this piece of history in which I knew nothing. *Bent* must to be taught in all Holocaust classes, and this play must be included in Holocaust anthologies to secure its place among literature of this time period. This play provides a different educational layer to the Holocaust in which most people are familiar. Sherman's play forces audiences into meaningful discussions and self-reflections about this atrocious time in history, tolerance for people unlike themselves, and being comfortable with one's identity.

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