

OBSERVING AND PERFORMING MALE SAME-SEX DESIRE: APPROPRIATION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN LATVIA DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND LATE STALINISM (1940–1953)

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The article focuses on male same-sex subculture in public space in Riga during the Second World War and late Stalinism. It analyses the performance of same-sex desire through which the public space was appropriated for male same-sex purposes. The article argues that during the period under discussion, same-sex loving men, who socialised in Riga, perceived themselves as recognisable and positive agents in urban life, thus creating the vibrant male same-sex subculture of the public sex culture. The key source of the article is a diary, whose author both observed his contemporaries performing same-sex desire in public space and practiced it himself.

Key words: homosexuality, performativity, Soviet Latvia, Second World War, late Stalinism.

In the increasing range of studies on the role of space in sexual sociality, space is perceived as a symbolic tool to map the socially sexual variation or as a cultural or historical artefact, for example, as a safe shelter for non-conformist sexual sociation.¹ With the help of the means of gender performativity same-sex desiring people continued to subvert the Soviet system, same as

¹ Green, Follert, et al. 2010, 7.

they had done in the 19th – early 20th century with regard to the system in the Russian Empire and in the 1920s–1930s with regard to the Republic of Latvia.² Consequently, male same-sex subculture maintained certain practices of performing desire, which were understood by those who belonged to the subculture, while the rest – those who were not involved – mostly did not notice the obvious. New York’s same-sex loving men subculture was characterised by double life and camp epistemology, as argued by historian George Chauncey.³ Similarly, the homosexual subjectivities of the late Soviet period were characterised by shared laughter, language, and solidarity, as well as the internalisation of self-censorship as constituting “secrecy ethos” that historian Arthur Clech names as “specifically Soviet”.⁴ The same features in fact also characterised Latvian male queer subjectivities before the Soviet occupation and during the Second World War and late Stalinism.⁵

For “cruising and socialising”, same-sex loving men used various popular centrally located urban sites, which originally had not been intended for sex. However, after they were appropriated by the subculture, they functioned like the Pleshka in Moscow.⁶ In male same-sex public sex subculture, “cottaging” and the sexual culture of the park (“the bushes”) were important practices. These practices were observed in the early 20th century (until the 1940s) in New York, London, Toronto, and other cities. During the Second World War, they were especially broadly spread in London.⁷ Studies by anthropologists and

² Healey 2001, 144–173; Lipša 2014, 66–71, 247–275.

³ Chauncey 1994, 179–205, 271–299.

⁴ Clech 2018, 29.

⁵ Lipša 2021, 415–442.

⁶ Healey 1999, 38–60; Essig 1999, 87–89; Schluter 2002, 89–94; Fiks 2013; Healey 2014, 95–117; 100–106; Clech 2017; 91–110; Healey 2018, 99–100; Aripova 2020, 102–105.

⁷ Vickers 2010, 58–73; Maynard 1994, 207–242; Chauncey, 1994; Houlbrook 2005, 133–156; Sibalís 1999, 15–23.

sociologists show how individuals implemented in real life the “rights to the city” formulated by sociologist Henri Lefebvre (and had easily accessible, quick sex without social consequences).⁸ Namely, if the existing commercial and cultural infrastructures do not provide a space for the needs of queers, they redefine the existing public spaces. Thus, they preserve their agency, appropriating the public places as spaces for the acquisition of same-sex encounters, transforming the city into a centre of sexually alternative behaviour. Recent studies on the relevant aspects in Riga in the late socialism show that there, too, queers subverted the existing social order and replaced it with an alternative order, constructing private networks to gather and speak about their sexuality and adapting various private and public visibility strategies.⁹

The experiences of the public sex subcultures in Soviet Latvia have not been studied due to the lack of historical sources. However, the task of a social historian is to identify places and activities, which so far have been abstracted in historiography and public discourses of the time as dark and marginal, and to construct the experiences of the insiders.¹⁰ Thus, diary as a historical source became necessary, as literature on the studies of Soviet subjectivities demonstrates. First, researchers were interested in examining how in the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union implemented its ideological project of creating “New Soviet Person”. Anna Krylova and Jochen Helbeck focused their research on the first generation of Soviet subjects in Russia in that period.¹¹ At that time, many residents tried to transform themselves into “New Soviet Person” by “speaking Bolshevik” and internalising the Soviet ideology and its values by constructing

⁸ Lopes 2020, 13–29; Green, Follert, et al. 2010, 7–27; Flowers, Marriott, et al. 2000, 75.

⁹ Aripova 2020, 101.

¹⁰ Mayne 2000, 252.

¹¹ Krylova 2002, 243–263; Hellbeck 2006; Krylova 2007, 101–121.

themselves in their diaries.¹² Rustam Alexander recently has added a new aspect to the Soviet project of creating a “New Soviet Person”, suggesting that the eradication of homosexuality was also part of this project, “discussed mostly behind closed doors”.¹³

Researchers have conceptualised Stalinist subject and the Soviet person with the “Soviet man” category, thus juxtaposing the “autonomous” liberal self to its constituent other.¹⁴ However, there were innumerable variations between these opposite models of subjectivities. As Dan Healey notes, “many had a ‘revolution on their mind’ and explored the revolution’s meaning for themselves in their journals, but numerous others refused to ‘speak Bolshevik.’”¹⁵ He makes a point that “no collection of diaries written by particular types of citizens could reflect the broad swathe of responses to life in the USSR.”¹⁶ To trace the diversity of these experiences, Russian social and cultural anthropologist Natalya Kozlova has applied the inside-out interpretative approach.¹⁷ She has characterised her methodology as reading human documents. Through writing letters, diaries, and other life-writing documents, individuals sought to localise themselves in the network of social relations and discursive practices offered by the system, thus engaging in the construction of social identities.¹⁸ The realities of this network, reflected in life-writing documents, involved a polyphony of voices worth of study. Rustam Alexander has demonstrated it by examining the autobiography of Pavel Krotov, written in the late 1970s while undergoing treatment for homosexuality in Gorky under

¹² On the diary as a source in Soviet history see: Healey 2020, 196–211.

¹³ Alexander 2021, 5. On Soviet legal discussions about decriminalization of homosexuality, see: Alexander 2019, 1–28.

¹⁴ Sharafutdinova 2019, 174.

¹⁵ Healey 2020, 196.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁷ Kozlova 2005.

¹⁸ Sharafutdinova 2019, 185.

psychiatrist-sexopathologist Yan Goland.¹⁹ Arthur Clech, in turn, studying in-depth interviews, gives a vivid scene of the connection between the outing of male homosexuals in public spaces and the culture of suspicion-fearing informants of police in towns of Soviet Georgia in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁰ Diaries are an essential historical source to explore male same-sex subcultures in the Soviet Union after the Second World War. However, it is only recently that scholars have started to use it in research to understand the subjectivities of homosexuals. Historian Dan Healey has written pioneering studies in the field.²¹ He has examined the diary written in 1955 and 1956 by Soviet singer Vadim Kozin (1903–1994), convicted of homosexuality, who served his sentence in the Gulag. Healey has brilliantly used the approach of recognising complex and multiple voices in his analysis of Kozin's diary. I will apply the method as the interpretive lenses in my reading of Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996), a resident of Jūrmala, a seaside resort town near Riga²² which serves as a primary historical source for my article.

IRBE'S DIARY AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

In Latvia, the process of self-fashioning into the “New Soviet Person” through “speaking Bolshevik” and internalising the Soviet ideology and its values mostly could happen during the post war Stalinism in the late 1940s–1950s: during the Second World War, the Soviet occupation regime established in 1940 was replaced by the Nazi rule (1941–1945). Thus, the imposition of the Soviet rule resumed in Latvia after the war. For this purpose, the Soviet Union sent tens of thousands of functionaries of

¹⁹ Alexander 2021, 391–414.

²⁰ Clech 2021, 367–390.

²¹ Healey 2020, 203–207; Healey 2018, 73–89.

²² Irbe. *Dienasgrāmata* [Diaries of Kaspars Irbe] (henceforth, only the date of the entry will be given.)

different ethnic origins to Latvia,²³ among them, most likely those who had forged themselves as “Soviet people” in the way Helbeck described. Now the locals had the opportunity of following their example. Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe also tried to do so in the first months of the Soviet occupation.

The earliest surviving entry of his diary is dated 24 February 1927. It was followed by twelve entries in 1928 and six entries in 1929. His writings from the late 1935 up to the late 1938 and from the beginning of 1940 have survived in a more significant number (34 entries). Regular records have been preserved starting from 1 June 1940. Thus, Irbe’s diary, written regularly for 56 years, from 1940 to 1996 and filling 72 volumes,²⁴ becomes of particular importance, as it documents his life through the whole era of the Latvian SSR and beyond.²⁵

During the entire Soviet era, Irbe lived alone in his private house in Dubulti district of Jūrmala inherited from his parents and had a legal so-called out-of-office income: in summers he let rooms. He did not establish his own family. Thus, he was free from both the disciplinary power of relatives and family and the watchful eyes of neighbours.

Irbe prioritised his romantic adventures over work and chose his jobs accordingly. He did not work for pay in 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied Latvia. He did not work during the Nazi occupation (1941–1944) either but made a living from what he earned on the black market and by transcribing books in Braille on behalf of the Institute for the Blind. Irbe worked as the bailiff at Jūrmala People’s Court from the summer of 1945 to 1948 and at the People’s Courts in Riga from 1952 to 1956 and from 1961

²³ On Sovietisation see: Bleiere 2018, 593–629.

²⁴ During the Stalinist era, the most significant chronological lacuna in the diary is the absent volume from August to December 1949. There were also months with no entries at all, for example, April 1941, February, March, and May 1951, as well as March and May 1952, April and June 1953. Starting from 1955, he wrote his diary every month.

²⁵ More details on diary see: Lipša 2021.

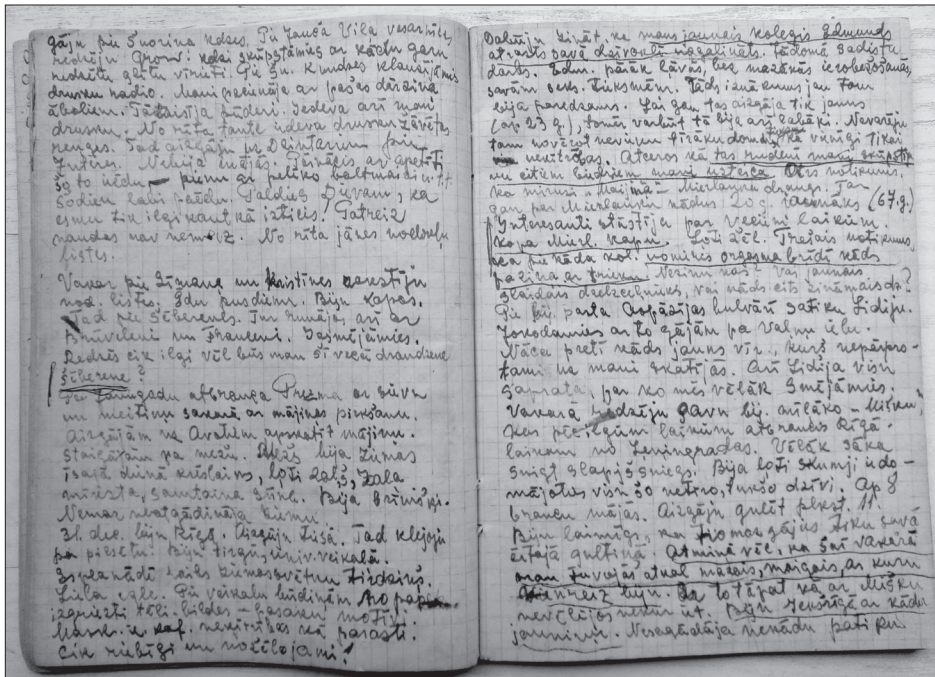


Fig. 1. The 30 June 1951 entry in Irbe's diary

1. att. 1951. gada 30. jūnija ieraksts Irbes dienasgrāmā

to 1968. In the late 1940s and 1950s, he worked only as much as to avoid the attention of authorities, which were combatting the so-called parasitic lifestyle. E.g., in 1957, 1958, and 1959, he worked only in summers— as a forest-guard in Jūrmala forest district so he could dedicate himself to voyeurism.

Irbe's formative years fell in the 1920s–1930s. He did not support the authoritarian regime created by the coup d'état in 1934 and rather favourably treated the Soviet occupation in 1940 because he hoped that the new rule would restore democracy. A few months after the Soviet occupation, in an effort to understand the ideology of the Soviet regime, Irbe read literature on dialectical materialism. He found the worldview it promoted acceptable. However, after the Second World War, his at-

Fig. 2. Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996) in 1934

2. att. Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996)
1934. gadā



titude towards the Soviets changed within a few months. In December 1944, he accepted a house manager position in Majori district of Jūrmala because this status exempted him from mobilisation in the Soviet army. In March 1945, as soon as the mobilisation threat ended, Irbe quit the job. During these months, Soviet soldiers seized and occupied townhouses owned by private individuals and stole their belongings. The Soviet rule turned the houses into offices of Soviet institutions or sold their belongings for personal profit. As a house manager, Irbe witnessed it all. Therefore, he deliberately avoided joining the Communist Party or having an administrative position.

Similarly, in Soviet Georgia, in the late 1980s, homosexual Shota F. abstained from becoming a member of the Communist Party and refused promotions because he believed it would attract attention to his private life.²⁶ In contrast, Irbe made his choice in the late Stalinism and his motivation was political: he wanted to avoid participating in the Sovietisation of the population.

During the Second World War and late Stalinism, Irbe wrote a diary only for private use. However, in the late 1960s, he started to think that his diary would be a valuable study material to a writer or a psychologist. His writing was shaped by the political realities of the Stalinist regime. His ideological self-censorship is more evident than his sexual self-censorship. It is only from an entry made in 1992 that the reader finds out that in the winter of 1948/1949, Irbe was hiding a friend in his house who was persecuted for political reasons.²⁷ He kept in mind the 1941 and 1949 repressions when Soviet authorities deported more than 57 thousand Latvian citizens to remote areas of the USSR. He lived in constant fear of deportation.

The late 1940s through the 1950s was the most intensive period in his same-sex affairs in the culture of public sex. Nevertheless, the idea of being found out or prosecuted for sodomy was never his concern in his written self-reflection (similarly, as Clech writes, Shota F. did not directly fear the application of anti-sodomy articles²⁸). Instead, he considered his ownership of real estate as the main cause of such danger. In the late 1960s, Irbe began noting in his diary that he was keeping silent about many things that he had observed in order to avoid potential repressions from the Committee for State Security (KGB).²⁹ He writes: "I would have liked to present an accurate picture of the

²⁶ Clech 2021, 372, 376.

²⁷ 21.10.1992.

²⁸ Clech 2021, 385.

²⁹ 03.04.1968.

past times; however, I am writing very carefully, cautiously, passing over in silence many things.”³⁰ By this he meant his views on the realities caused by the Soviet policies on migration, ethnic issues, and the Latvian language. However, from the 1960s, Irbe’s self-censorship regarding critical assessment of the regime started to soften. Now he began to describe events of the 1940s–1950s in more detail than he had back then; but only one such event is related to the male same-sex subculture of public sex. In the summer of 1945, a Red Army officer perceived Irbe’s refusal to engage in a sexual encounter with him as ideologically motivated (as a result of negative attitude from the part of the locals towards the new Soviet rule). Right after the incident, Irbe described it in his diary as follows:

“This evening, a brutal officer spoke to me near the Vesta Temple. [...] The brutal officer told me: “Moloden’kaia artistka! [Young actress!]” He wanted to come to my house and used filthy language.”³¹

In the 1940s, Irbe was cautious about what he wrote in his diary about his experience with an influential representative of the occupation power. In the mid-1990s, he finally revealed the Nazi versus Soviet ideological context hidden under the euphemism of “filthy language”:

“On my way to the train station, I sat down on the bench at the end of Rainis Boulevard opposite the [railway] station. [...] Many lonely men were sitting on the benches at the end of Rainis Boulevard. While I was sitting there, I saw a Russian army major of mighty bodybuilding with many medals on his chest. He examined the men who were sitting on the benches. Finally, he stopped opposite me and, without any introduction, asked: “Tu daesh v zhopu ebat’? Ia khochu ebat’!” [Do you give a butt-fuck? I want a butt-fuck!] I was shocked and got up to leave. I crossed the street to go to the station, but the major started to curse: “Fashistam ty

³⁰ 20.10.1969.

³¹ 29.06.1945.

dal, a sovetskomu ofitseru ne daesh!” [You gave the butt-fuck to fascists, but you don’t give the butt-fuck to a Soviet officer!], etc.”³²

The criminalisation of male homosexuality also necessitated self-censorship in written self-reflection. Irbe uses aliases and abbreviations of words and names when writing about his Queer self and events in the male same-sex subculture to make sure that only he alone could understand the respective details.³³ For example, he designates his homosexual acquaintances with “hms” and/or “colleagues”. Thus, his diary does not allow identifying other individuals from male same-sex subculture (with a few exceptions). Nevertheless, his description of his own and his counterparts’ activities in the subculture are surprisingly frank. Irbe’s self-censorship in regard to his observations of male same-sex subculture changed only a little over the whole Soviet period.

It seems that it was the Soviet anti-sodomy statute that contributed to Irbe’s choice to confine himself primarily to one-time casual same-sex encounters offered by the culture of public sex. Thus, he kept his sexual affairs anonymous. He never revealed his identity to his sex partners or invited them to his home. He did not have a regular partner. However, he longed for such a person, especially in the late 1940s and 1950s. In Irbe’s case such a strategy paid off. Although he lived in the male same-sex subculture of public sex for five decades, police never detained Irbe for performing his same-sex desires.

Irbe expressed contempt for men who realised their same-sex desires in public restrooms regarding them as uncultured individuals. However, he became a regular in the toilets himself. At the same time, Irbe’s disdain for men who engaged in the sexual culture of public toilets may have been an expression of

³² 29.01.1995.

³³ 11.08.1976.

his attitude towards the fact that, by criminalising same-sex relationships, the authorities forced same-sex desiring men to confine their relations to encounters in toilets. In this sense, the sexual subculture of toilets probably carried an enforced character. Similarly, some other queer men in different periods were disgusted by the observed culture of public sex in toilets. Russian engineer Pavel Krotov felt that way about Moscow's homosexual subculture in the 1970s, and Georgian physician Shota F. about that of Tbilisi in the late 1980s.³⁴ However, as Arthur Clech shows, Shota F. avoided the sexual culture of toilets not only because of the sense of superiority stemming from his belonging to the intellectual circles and the notion of how he should behave as a representative of those circles. His second concern was that the visibility of cruising and engaging in the sexual culture practiced in public toilets could threaten its agents' safety and put them at risk of being made police informants.³⁵ Irbe had never faced such risk.

Irbe's observations allow us to trace the construction of the queer subculture in Soviet Latvia. His main focus of interest was sexuality. Thus, he documented the events, texts, and observations that he contextualised with sexuality.

CRUISING – FLIRTING – SELF-PRESENTATION

During the Second World War, the public sex culture was influenced by the dislocation of soldiers. Artist Tom of Finland also remembers how there were desiring hands on each corner in the darkened city of Helsinki during the war, pulling him in little sideways where he had public sex.³⁶ The war granted similar opportunities to British soldiers in London.³⁷ In Latvia,

³⁴ Alexander 2021, 408–409; Clech 2021, 377.

³⁵ Clech, 2021, 380–385.

³⁶ Arell, Mustola 2006, 20–23.

³⁷ Vickers 2010, 58–73.

during the Nazi occupation, sex was as easily available as it had been before. A Nazi soldier whom Irbe met in a park said that, “no such things were possible” in Germany while “here [in Latvia] soldiers are allowed to do everything”.³⁸ Namely, in Germany, the socialising of soldiers at the sites frequented by homosexuals would be penalised, whereas, in the general district of occupied Latvia, such behaviour was ignored. In 1942, Irbe, who knew by face the same-sex desiring men who had frequented the cruising sites before the war, remarked that there were “many unfamiliar faces because there’s a great movement in Riga now”.³⁹ He made a similar conclusion after the war in 1948, mentioning that few of the old acquaintances remained in the “current circles” because there were “a lot of ‘newcomers’”.⁴⁰ Thousands of newcomers from different regions of the Soviet Union continuously kept arriving in occupied Latvia. From 1946 to 1950, around 272 thousand newcomers settled in Latvia, mostly from Soviet Russia and Belarus. About 50 thousand of them had chosen Latvia as a place of residence when demobilising from the Red Army.⁴¹

The newcomers behaved in a reserved manner until they understood the specific local norms of the subculture. Irbe has noted only two situations when the newcomers did not observe these rules. In both cases high-ranking Red Army officers were involved.

The first case was the already mentioned event in the summer of 1945 when a Soviet officer addressed Irbe near the temple of Vesta in obscene, dirty language, voicing his sexual desires directly and loudly and thus ignoring the norms accepted in the subculture. In contrast, a representative of the local subculture would have expressed his wishes in the language

³⁸ 04.06.1944.

³⁹ 24.06.1942.

⁴⁰ 22.08.1948; 03.09.1948.

⁴¹ Eglīte, Mežs 2002, 417.

of facial expressions, gestures, and body movements. This case perhaps demonstrated a typical behaviour of high-ranking Soviet officers during the Second World War.

The second case, in turn, suggests that overtime officers, too, had to adapt to the codes of the local subculture. In 1946, some still lacked patience to follow these codes. Irbe was sitting on a bench in a park in the city centre (Vērmanis's Park) on a September evening. An officer sat down next to him "after some walking and looking".⁴² Irbe hesitated to start a conversation; after some time, the officer grew angry, threw away his cigarette and left (yet he did it without verbal articulation), whereas Irbe regretted his hesitation.

Irbe always associated cruising with flirting. He explained it as a "language of eyes", adding that he knew how to use it very well.⁴³ Exchange of glances between same-sex desiring men were an essential indicator of interaction, a manifestation of togetherness and connection. The potential partners recognised each other "by their appearance, glances, etc." and could "signal attention for unmistakable purposes" while passing by.⁴⁴

In Irbe's interpretation, "the language of eyes" involved one man consistently gazing at another one, sending him invitational signals. The addressee would reply without words with the help of a facial expression, winking, and walking away. The former man would follow him.

"He looked at me closely. He sent me invitational signals by his gaze. I returned his gaze. He followed me."⁴⁵

Places mentioned by Irbe were among the famous cruising sites in Riga. In the 1930s–1950s, one of the Latvian-language counterparts for "cruising" was "flirting" ("we went to flirt", "we

⁴² 03.09.1946.

⁴³ 13.09.1948.

⁴⁴ 02.08.1950.

⁴⁵ 13.04.1952.

started flirting”⁴⁶), the essence of which could also be worded differently, e.g., “I went out looking for adventures”, “he stared closely and relentlessly because he wanted to get acquainted”⁴⁷. Such behaviour suggests that those involved in same-sex loving men subculture had knowledge of its codes and tactics. Irbe did not use any specific Latvian counterpart for the English term “camp”, an informal version of “ostentatiously and extravagantly effeminate” man, as well as a man “deliberately exaggerated and theatrical in style”.⁴⁸ In 1964, Susan Sontag suggested that the camp’s essence is its love of artifice and exaggeration; the camp is “something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques”.⁴⁹ She argued that “[t]o perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre”.⁵⁰ Historian Georg Chauncey has brilliantly historicised camp practice in New York’s male same-sex subculture from the 1890s to the 1940s as both a cultural style and a cultural strategy that helped homosexuals understand the social categories of gender and sexuality and served to exclude them, respond to them, and undermine them.⁵¹ Referring to anthropologist Esther Newton’s study of female impersonators in the 1960s, he recalls that camp was a style of interaction and display that used irony, inconsistency, theatricalism, and humour to highlight that social convention is artificial. Camp manifested itself in any verbal game that challenged gender categories.⁵²

The subculture codes and self-identification described by Irbe were characteristic of the camp style. In the 1980s, Irbe explained in more detail that this style included the ability to

⁴⁶ 13.09.1948.

⁴⁷ 09.08.1948.

⁴⁸ Soanes 2001, 168.

⁴⁹ Sontag 1966, 191–202.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵¹ Chauncey 1994, 290.

⁵² For recent treatment of camp see: Halberstam 2020.

negotiate in a “flirtatious, flattering, humorous way”.⁵³ He described it as a “theatrical style of speech-behaviour”, in which “everything is accompanied by [a certain] facial expression, gestures, etc.”⁵⁴ However, one’s facial expression is not exaggerated. The entire “performance” is marked by one’s efforts to imbue the process with “heightened naturalness, seriousness”.

The command of these skills served as a source of knowledge in cruising, the essence of which was based on the participant’s sexual interest but not always on his sexual identity.⁵⁵ The purpose of flirting was sexual intercourse, not relationship-building.

Before commencing flirting (cruising), same-sex loving men socialised within their community. To an outsider, this form of socialising could resemble performative self-presentation. On an evening in October 1950, this socialising evolved in the following way:

“After 7 o’clock, I arrived in Riga. I had an entertaining night. First, I had fun with my date – a young soldier. Then in Vērm. [ane’s] Park with my friends. It was a beautiful warm night. The yellow leaves of maples glistened in the electric light. We had a good time. A tipsy young guy stood in the pavilion. [...] We held each other’s hands and walked along the pavilion. Then I danced to entertain my friends. I joked with Čuru Lize [the Piss Liz] and Briļļu Dore [Dore with specs], who was with a young navy sailor. It is impossible to write about everything, but I will keep it in my memory. I felt very light, fit, funny – witty. Everyone laughed. Later I walked holding hands with Kuzņec. and joked. On Saturday evening near the opera, I met a gypsy colleague (Van), who passed by with two boys. He asked me why I was walking without a number etc. It is so nice to wander around in beautiful evenings and nights, along the boulevards, looking for adventures, meeting mates, observing many things, etc.”⁵⁶

⁵³ 14.03.1981.

⁵⁴ 21.12.1985.

⁵⁵ Lopes 2020, 22.

⁵⁶ 09.10.1950.

Joking was an essential element of the communication among same-sex loving men. Irbe mentions it in nearly all of his descriptions of the pastime activities in the cruising circles. E.g., he writes that “there were spicy conversations as it is common in our circles”⁵⁷.

In the cited episode, the men’s self-presentation created a fun atmosphere – bantering, witty jokes, frolicking, holding hands, dancing, chasing each other, “making a high ballet jump with one’s legs spread”⁵⁸, pretending to be prostitutes. These self-presentation practices are part of the tradition of shared laughter.

Gender performativity was critical in the communication among same-sex loving men. The remark “why are you walking without a number” that was addressed to Irbe was a hint about sex, drawing on an analogy with prostitutes, who in Latvia in the interwar period had to register themselves at a police station to receive a booklet of medical and sanitary control to be allowed to legally practice prostitution. Same-sex loving men were self-ironical and joked about the topic of prostitution using it as a kind of a pretext for discussing the sexuality of others, while in fact speaking about that of their own. In the autumn of 1940, Irbe described an episode in Vērmānē’s Park. A tipsy same-sex desiring man was sitting on a bench next to an ugly homosexual. Irbe sat down pretending to be a prostitute and asked for money. The drunk said: “What a handsome boy, but how spoilt.” The comment on immorality (on him being spoilt) insulted Irbe. He explained in the diary that he pretended to be a rather brutal person when imitating a prostitute because this was his usual style of bantering. “Brutal” in this situation means somebody who speaks directly about the issues of sex. He argued that he did not care what the others thought of such a behaviour and

⁵⁷ 06.09.1948.

⁵⁸ Idem.

that his “real personality should not be manifested to such people”.⁵⁹ Irbe perceived the drunk man’s remark not as a demonstration of irony typical for camping but as an earnest statement. It signalled that the author of the statement did not want to involve in camping or did not even understand the Being-as-Playing-a-Role played by Irbe. He was probably one of same-sex desiring men whose presence in the cruising was determined not by his sexual identity but rather by preference for same-sex erotic and sexual acts with men. He probably belonged to those same-sex desiring men who were ignorant of or consciously avoided camp style. Irbe, on the other hand, perceived cruising as a theatre performance, in which one should not reveal one’s real identity of a serious, intelligent, and culturally educated individual. Somehow it reveals that Irbe separated his sexuality from his actual personality, hinting at the double life he lived.

In this diary entry Irbe emphasises the performative situation, in which he embodied some imagined fictitious personality, because he did not want others to see his authentic subjectivity. In his diary Irbe mentions “girls”, “the street girls” (this is how prostitutes were casually called in pre-war Latvia), “sisters”. A group of young homosexuals self-ironically referred to themselves by these names, and Irbe identified himself with these homosexuals. They called another group “aunts”. Such use of irony, the application of the idiom of kinship, created a delicate balance between violating the customs of the dominant culture and reaffirming it.⁶⁰ They used women’s pronouns and nicknames, just like same-sex loving men in New York, Berlin, and elsewhere.⁶¹ In this role, Irbe had two nicknames – Cleopatra and Mermaid Sea Rose.⁶² In general, this indicates using a

⁵⁹ 01.10.1940.

⁶⁰ Chauncey 1994, 291.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 181, 286–187; Beachy 2014, 58.

⁶² Lipša 2021.

particular language specific to the group; this cultural strategy helped to maintain the sense of collective identity among the men in the group.⁶³

A few times during the first months of the Soviet occupation, Irbe transgressed gender, imitating a woman who wanted to meet men in the dusk of a summer evening at the seashore. Being cross-dressed as a woman, he accidentally met a prostitute he knew. Together, they walked and amused themselves at the unusual situation, flirting with men who did not recognise Irbe as a man.

“We both walked together through the peaceful night. She was very amused by the whole thing. I told a lot of jokes and joked around with men. I danced a few steps for one suitor with my skirt raised high and so on. It was wonderful.”⁶⁴

Before the Second World War, the locations where prostitutes offered sex coincided with the “cruising” (by same-sex loving men) and “flirting” sites.

An essential factor in the establishment of sexual encounters was one’s outer appearance. Irbe was convinced that it was because of his youthful and handsome looks that intelligent and elegant men wanted to spend time with him. However, he thought that the charisma and charm radiated by intelligence, culture, personality, and decent clothing⁶⁵ that was difficult to obtain in the Soviet system after the war, was also necessary. To create a specific image, the men used any means at their disposal. Irbe and several other homosexuals of his generation used flowers as tools to aestheticize their looks. Irbe used to carry a bouquet and wear a sad facial expression, thus intentionally constructing an image of a romantic. He writes that he went to Riga with a beautiful bouquet of dahlias. He looked

⁶³ Chauncey 1994, 289.

⁶⁴ 12.07.1940.

⁶⁵ 30.08.1948.

exquisite – fatigue made him serious and slightly sad; this emotional state made him look especially lovely.⁶⁶

The suffering caused by break-ups and separation from one's object of love had to be manifested in one's outer appearance. Besides, such a state had to look beautiful:

“After the break-up, I went to the boulevard, heavily suffering. [...] Tears were falling from my black lashes, and they looked beautiful in the mirror. However, despite it, I flirted with someone who followed me to the greenery of the opera. After that, I got on a train. I had a very hard time in the train. I went through extreme suffering; there were tears in my eyes.”⁶⁷

Irbe described these experiences in his diary creating in the reader associations with a staged performance.

George Chauncey has demonstrated in a study of New York's history of homosexuals from 1890 to 1940 that same-sex loving men described their situation not with a closet metaphor (which came into circulation only in the 1960s⁶⁸) but with that of camp and the epistemology of double life.⁶⁹ Steven Maynard argues that “[W]hile living a double life necessitated some of the secrecy and hiding we associate with the closet, for many men it did not mean the isolation and invisibility with which we also think of the closet.”⁷⁰ In Riga, during the interwar period, the Second World War, and post-war Stalinism, same-sex loving men did not isolate themselves and were seen in the public space. Thus, the closet concept did not define same-sex loving men community.

⁶⁶ 05.09.1950.

⁶⁷ 20.09.1948.

⁶⁸ Even in 1961, when the concept of the closet emerged, it was not meant to describe the space occupied by homosexuals (or described themselves as occupying them), but to refer to the space to which they had been expelled by heterosexual society. See: Dumančić 2014, 200.

⁶⁹ Maynard 1999, 71.

⁷⁰ Idem.

Same-sex erotic activities described by Irbe took place where the passers-by could not see them. However, during the Stalinism period, same-sex loving men also ventured such an expression of intimacy as walking hand in hand.⁷¹ In 1950, Irbe met his “blonde, handsome, long-term jerk-off” at dusk, and together they walked to the biggest shopping mall of Riga “hand in hand”.⁷² In the evening dusk, they dared to caress each other while sitting on the park bench – hug each other, fondle and press their faces against each other, stroking each other’s bodies as if by accident.⁷³ In the post-war Stalinism period, the park sexual subculture meant sexual encounter without commitment. However, it did not always provide “immediate sex” and “easy access”.⁷⁴

TEMPLES AND MAUSOLEUMS: SEXUAL CULTURE OF COTTAGING

In addition to parks, cottaging was also practiced in men’s public toilets. In relevant English-language literature, public restrooms are called “bogs” and “tea-rooms”, but sexual encounters in these places – “cottaging”. Two terms that referred to this spatialised sexual practice in Latvian were a “temple” and “mausoleum”. It was in the summer of 1941, a month after the Nazi occupation, that Irbe used the term “temple” for the first time. By this term he referred to the already mentioned public toilet (the temple of Vesta) next to the railway station⁷⁵. In 1941, the temple of Venus (in Vērmanes Park) became a cruising site⁷⁶, but in 1950, “mausoleum” was mentioned for the first time – it was a public toilet behind the Opera building in

⁷¹ 30.08.1948, 06.09.1948, 02.08.1950, 06.10.1950, 16.10.1951, 03.02.1952.

⁷² 05.06.1950.

⁷³ 06.09.1948.

⁷⁴ Flowers, Marriott et al. 2000, 75.

⁷⁵ 11.08.1945.

⁷⁶ 29.08.1941.

Krišjāņa Barona Street⁷⁷ (in 1946, Irbe referred to this toilet as a “Temple”⁷⁸).

Irbe sometimes poetised same-sex loving men’s erotic activities, writing, e.g., that he or someone else “sacrificed on the ‘altar of Venus’”.⁷⁹ He described same-sex sexual encounters, using proper nouns such as Cupid, Venus, Vesta⁸⁰ and referred to the bushes of Vērmāne’s Park, where usually oral sex took place, as the Cupid’s grove.⁸¹

Appropriation of mythological concepts for the queer subculture was characteristic also for other countries where homosexuality was illegal. British writer George Ives (1867–1950) in his journal in 122 volumes, which he kept for 64 years, made “a cultural reverence for Hellenic which Ives and other homosexual writers shared and deployed in their arguments for the legitimacy of homosexual relations”.⁸² For British painter Keith Vaughan (1912–1977), “the opportunity to associate oneself and one’s tastes with the homosocial heyday of ancient Greece and its rich intellectual and aesthetic legacy must have had great appeal”.⁸³ In 1864, the German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895), the pioneer of the movement of homosexuals’ rights, named same-sex loving men Uranians (Urning – in German) after Uranus, the Greek god of the heavens, “whose solitary parentage of Aphrodite, the goddess of Eros or sexual love, symbolised same-sex eroticism in Plato’s “Symposium””.⁸⁴ Historian Dan Healey has generalised that nostalgia for classical Athens was “a common sentiment in modern European male homosexual mentalities”.

⁷⁷ 01.08.1950.

⁷⁸ 10.08.1946.

⁷⁹ 18.09.1951.

⁸⁰ Lipša 2021.

⁸¹ 24.08.1946, 27.09.1946, 03.09.1946.

⁸² Cook, Matt 2006, 201.

⁸³ Belsey 2020, 48.

⁸⁴ Beachy 2014, 17–18, 103–104.

Consequently, the Latvian male same-sex subculture subverted the temple concept to refer to a location where “cottaging” took place; however, there was no specific term in Latvian that would serve as a counterpart for “cottaging”. The metaphor about sacrificing on the altar is self-ironical, it is part of the camp style and the tradition of shared laughter.

Irbe had mixed in the circles of same-sex loving men since 1935, but it was only in the autumn of 1940 (the third month of the Soviet occupation) that he discovered cottaging. He had heard stories about such things happening in Arkādijas Park, which was located further from the centre – on the other side of the Daugava River – and decided to check it himself.⁸⁵

Irbe was confident that in the first year of Soviet occupation (1940/1941), Arkādijas Park was the only place in Riga where there were holes in toilet partition walls as a feature of the cottaging subculture.⁸⁶ He was disgusted by what he saw there:

“I saw a disgusting scene yesterday. The toilet was full of perverts – they jerked themselves off, touched each other’s organs [rubbed their penises], etc. There was an unbearable stench in the air. It was so disgusting! I ridiculed them. Someone started cursing me.”⁸⁷

Irbe’s surprise about the discovery of this sexual subculture leads one to an assumption that drifting from one layer of the subculture to another and back again was not popular among same-sex loving men, i.e. there were those who practiced the park sexual culture, and those, who preferred cottaging, as was the case also, for example, in Toronto, Canada in the early 20th century.⁸⁸ Otherwise, in the course of the five years, Irbe would have heard of it.

⁸⁵ 15.09.1940.

⁸⁶ 15.05.1941.

⁸⁷ 03.11.1940.

⁸⁸ Maynard 1994, 209.

The dynamics of the cottaging subculture in a concrete site was also impacted by whether the toilet was functioning or closed. In the summer of 1945, Irbe anticipated that “liveliness will return [to Strēlnieku Park] because the temple has been reopened there”.⁸⁹ In September 1951, he noted that cottaging was not taking place there because the holes in the toilet partition walls that same-sex loving men had made were nailed over with boards.⁹⁰

The main feature of the cottaging sexual subculture was silence – functioning not as a barrier, but as something that gives agency.⁹¹ Avoidance of verbalisation demanded that this part of the men’s lives should remain strictly within the subculture. Anthropologist Maycon Lopes in his study on the meaning of silence in male same-sex encounters in public toilets draws the conclusion that same-sex loving men understood the interests of the entrant based on the criteria of temporality and attention.⁹² Slower than necessary movements in a stinking space signalled the entrant’s readiness to stay there longer. Still, active engagement of the gaze meant that the entrant had been involved in identifying the intentions of the men present. Gestures (for example, touching one’s crotch) were evidence of motivation.

The norms of sexual interaction in the toilet generally comply with the rules of behaviour in men’s restrooms, where visitors rarely share personal information and do not expect intimacy.⁹³ As a result, toilet sex is mostly silent. Communication takes place through looks, signals, and certain gestures.

Cottaging practices were determined by the architecture of the space – the arrangement of the toilet, design (the space

⁸⁹ 05.06.1945.

⁹⁰ 27.09.1951.

⁹¹ Lopes 2020, 20–21.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹³ Green, Follert, et al. 2010, 17.

shapes the sexual practices), e.g., the cubicles, which are intended to ensure privacy in the public space. However, cottagers adapted the space to their own needs. E.g., holes made in the partition walls of the toilets provided an opportunity for sexual interaction that was as anonymous and impersonal as possible.⁹⁴

So far, I have not found documents or photographs that would allow me to understand the spatial arrangement of the Riga “temples” from 1940 to 1953. However, studies provide evidence that the structure had influenced the models and policing of subculture in Toronto, Canada in the first decades of the 20th century. There police officers used the architecture of the toilet building (a little skylight window) to catch same-sex loving men.⁹⁵ In post-war Riga, same-sex loving men used the window made at the roof level to observe sexual encounters in the toilet. In 1950, Irbe wrote that he had observed others having sex in toilet cubicles through the tiny window of the mausoleum (near the Opera house), and the observees did not know that they could be seen.⁹⁶ Often he watched same-sex erotic activities with some acquaintances with whom he later would share a joke and have a laugh about the “dudes at the opera temple of Cupid”⁹⁷, thus creating a playful and joyful atmosphere.

Twenty years later, Irbe regarded public toilets as sites of male same-sex public sexual subculture filled with memories. When these buildings were demolished, Irbe felt sad and nostalgic. In 1974, seeing that “the ancient temple of Venus” in Vies-tura Garden had been torn down, he commented with nostalgia and regret that all the events that he had witnessed in his long life – even the most unthinkable ones – would perish together with this building.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹⁵ Maynard 1994, 225.

⁹⁶ 19.11.1950, 14.09.1950, 29.09.1950, 04.10.1950.

⁹⁷ 05.06.1950.

⁹⁸ 18.03.1974.

Irbe often referred to cottaging as “dirt”, “obscenities”⁹⁹, “depravity”¹⁰⁰ and characterised the respective sites and the activities taking place there as “disgusting”.¹⁰¹ “Dirt” was synonymous with mature manure in the interwar Latvian language.¹⁰² A toilet is a physical space and cultural construction that plays a particular role in socialising sexual exchange. Researchers who have analysed the role of space in sexual sociality state that “as an object in the cultural imaginary associated with defecation, anonymity, the non-verbal negotiation of space, bodily release, dirt and expedience, tearooms – as a particular instance of place – communicate a symbolic context that shapes and incites the kinds of meanings actors will attach to sexual interactions and the subsequent script of sexual exchange within the physical parameters of the toilet”.¹⁰³ Consequently, because of the stench in toilets, Irbe associated sexual exchange in these spaces with obscenity. Furthermore, the toilet as a space outside the boundaries of the polite in social and sexual exchange generates additional symbolic meanings. For example, associating the dirt with public restrooms connects the toilet with an idea of fast, highly erotic, and dirty sexual exchange.¹⁰⁴ Thus, bathrooms give shelter to erotic practices and feelings and shape them.

CONCLUSIONS

The Second World War and post-war Stalinism were characterised by the vibrancy of male same-sex and opposite-sex subcultures of the public sex culture in Latvia. Individuals

⁹⁹ 27.09.1951.

¹⁰⁰ 02.02.1950.

¹⁰¹ 21.07.1949, 02.02.1950.

¹⁰² Briedis 1932, 494, 496.

¹⁰³ Green, Follert, et al. 2010, 11.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 20, 22.

interested in performing and observing desire in the public space successfully appropriated the spaces of specific places for their own needs.

In general, the change of ruling regimes did not influence Irbe and his circle's practices of observing and performing queerness. However, the Second World War with the Soviet occupation and the Nazi occupation brought unprecedented masses of people to Riga. It increased the number of men with various cultural backgrounds involved in same-sex practices. It also intensified communication between male same-sex loving people who favoured different public sex practices. Thus, it was only in the first months of the Soviet occupation in 1940 that Irbe, who had a five-year experience in cruising, discovered the practice of cottaging.

However, it did not change Irbe and his circle's understanding of "their" public spaces as they continued to use the cruising sites that had been in use already before the Second World War. Homosexual practices performed in public space were based on camp style and were characterised by irony, absence of seriousness, playfulness, desire to maintain youthfulness. They were performed in the public spaces of cruising, proving that Irbe and his circles did not live in isolation but perceived themselves as a recognisable and positive presence in urban life.

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VĪRIEŠU VIENDZIMUMA SEKSUĀLO VĒLMJU
PERFORMANCE PUBLISKAJĀ TĒLPĀ RĪGĀ OTRAJĀ
PASAULES KARĀ UN VĒLĪNAJĀ STAĻINISMĀ (1940–1953)

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Zinātniskās intereses: 20. gadsimta sociālā vēsture, seksualitātes un sociālās kontroles vēsture.

Rakstā ir pētīta vīriešu viendzimuma seksuālo kontaktu subkultūra Rīgas publiskajā telpā Otrā pasaules kara laikā un vēlinajā staļinismā, fokusējot izpēti uz viendzimuma seksuālo vēlmju performanci, kuras procesā homoseksuāļi piesavināja pilsētas publisko telpu savām vajadzībām. Raksts pamato tēzi, ka pētāmajā periodā homoseksuāļi, kuri socializējās Rīgā, uztvēra sevi kā pamanāmus un pašapzinīgus dalībniekus pilsētas ikdienas dzīvē, tādējādi veidojot dzīvīgu vīriešu viendzimuma subkultūru. Raksta galvenais avots ir Kaspara Aleksandra Irbes (1906–1996) dienasgrāmata, kuras autors ne tikai ir novērojis subkultūras dalībniekus, bet no 1935. līdz 1996. gadam arī pats pie tās piederējis.

Atslēgas vārdi: vīriešu homoseksualitāte, performativitāte, Padomju Latvija, Otrais pasaules karš, vēlinais staļinisms.

Kopsavilkums

Telpai seksuālajā socializācijā piemīt metaforiska rīka loma. Ar to var kartēt sociāli seksuālo variāciju, vai to var izprast kā kulturālu vai vēsturisku artefaktu, piemēram, kā patvērumu nekonformistiskai seksuālai

socializācijai. Tā telpu ir izmantojuši viendzimuma seksu mīloši vīrieši 19. gadsimtā un 20. gadsimta sākumā Rīgā Krievijas impērijā un 20. gadsimta 20.–30. gados Latvijas Republikā. Izmantojot dzimumu kā performativitātes līdzekli, viņi arī padomju sistēmu piemēroja savām vajadzībām, uzturot konkrētas performatīvās prakses, ar kuru palīdzību subkultūras piederīgajiem publiskajā telpā pauda savas seksuālās vēlmes, vienlaikus paliekot ārpus šai subkultūrai nepiederošo uzmanības loka. Subkultūru Padomju Latvijā raksturoja dubultās dzīves un “kempa” (angļu *camp*) epistemoloģija, tāpat kā 20. gadsimta pirmajā pusē Ņujorkā. Kopīga humora izpratne, valoda un savstarpējā solidaritāte, kā arī internalizēta pašcenzūra veidoja tā saukto “slepenības etosu”, kas raksturoja homoseksuālās subjektivitātes Latvijā jau starpkaru periodā, un tāpēc nav pamata Latvijā šo subkultūru dēvēt par “specifisku padomju etosu”. Tas ir pastāvējis no vismaz 19. gadsimta beigām, un Otrā pasaules kara laikā un pēckara staļinisma gados minētais etoss tikai turpināja attīstīties.

Viendzimuma seksu mīlošie vīrieši Rīgā socializējās, “kreisējot” (angļu *cruising*), potenciālo seksuālo partneru meklēšanā izmantojot dažādas vietas pilsētas centrā, kas sākotnēji nebija paredzētas seksam. Kreisēšanas būtība sakņojās dalībnieka seksuālajā interesē, bet ne vienmēr seksuālajā identitātē. Tās mērķis bija seksuāls kontakts, nevis attiecību veidošana. 20. gadsimta 30.–50. gados homoseksuāļi Rīgā izmantoja subkultūras kodus un taktikas, kuru vidū būtiskākās bija savstarpēja skatienu apmaiņa un teatrālisms kempa stilā, kas dažkārt varēja šķīst pārdrošs, ņemot vērā kriminalizējošo un stigmatizējošo ietvaru, ko homoseksualitātei piemēroja visas Latvijas teritorijā 20. gadsimtā valdošās varas. Piemēram, staļinisma gados homoseksuāļi atļāvās publiski pastaigāties, sadevušies rokās.

Viendzimuma erotiskās darbības notika publiskajā telpā, pārsvarā garāmgājēju skatieniem nepieejamās vietās parkos. Par sabiedriskajās tualetēs notiekošo seksu jeb kotedžingu (angļu *cottaging*), kam atbilstošu precīzu jēdzienu latviešu valodā autorei nav izdevies atrast, signalizēja vārdu “templis” un “mauzolejs” attiecināšana uz tualetēm. Padomju okupācijas pirmajos mēnešos homoseksuāļi to Rīgā praktizēja nomaļajā Arkādijas parkā. Šķiet, vīrieši, kuri iesaistījās publiskā seksā parkos, un tie, kuri deva priekšroku kotedžingam, līdz padomju okupācijai socializējās atšķirīgos subkultūras slāņos.

Kopumā valdošo režīmu maiņa neietekmēja prakses, ko Irbe un viņa subkultūras līdzgaitnieki izmantoja viendzimuma seksualitātes

performancē. Tomēr Otrais pasaules karš, kam sekoja padomju–nacistu–padomju okupācijas, atveda uz Rīgu milzīgas cilvēku masas. Tas palielināja arī to vīriešu skaitu, kuri iesaistījās viendzimuma seksuālajās praksēs, turklāt viņi nāca ar dažādu kulturālo bagāžu. Iedzīvotāju skaita pieaugums arī intensificēja komunikāciju starp viendzimuma seksu mīlošiem cilvēkiem, kuri deva priekšroku dažādām publiskā seksa praksēm. Pirmajā padomju okupācijas gadā tika novērots kotedžings. Tas nostiprinājās nacistu režīma laikā un turpināja pastāvēt pēckara staļinismā. Valdošo režīmu maiņa neietekmēja arī Irbes un viņa aprindu priekšstatus par “viņu” vietām publiskajā telpā – viņi turpināja lietot tās pašas kreisēšanas vietas, ko bija izmantojuši jau pirms kara. Homoseksuālās prakses norisa kempa stilā ar tam piemītošo ironiju, nopietnības noraidījumu, rotaļīgumu, jauneklības garu. Tās demonstrējot Rīgas centra ielās un parkos, homoseksuāļi savu klātbūtni pilsētas dzīvē izdzīvoja nevis kā kaut ko anonīmu, bet atpazīstamu, nevis kā marginālu, bet centrālu, nevis kā deviantu, bet normālu.

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