



## Hössli, Heinrich (1784-1864)

by Hubert Kennedy

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Nineteenth-century Swiss milliner and anthologist Heinrich Hössli was a passionate apologist for homosexuality, but his work exerted almost no influence.

Hössli was born in Glarus, Switzerland, on August 6, 1784, the first of 14 children. He received no formal education, but learned the trade of hat-making in Berne. He returned to Glarus, where he became known as the town's leading milliner and interior decorator.

At age 26 Hössli married the 25-year-old Elisabeth Grebel in Zurich. The couple did not live together: his wife remained in Zurich and he returned to Glarus. But he visited her often and they had two sons, both of whom later emigrated to the United States.

One son disappeared; the other son, who had corresponded with his father about his own homosexuality, died in a shipwreck while returning to Switzerland. (There are indications in his writings that Hössli himself was also homosexual.)

A successful businessman, Hössli was able to live a comfortable, if restless life, moving his residence many times. He died in Winterthur, Switzerland, on December 24, 1864.

A turning point came in Hössli's life in 1817 when he learned of the execution of Franz Desgouttes for murdering the man he loved, and it was then that he conceived what he afterwards referred to as his "idea," namely, that the understanding of male love of the archaic Greeks had been replaced through the centuries by such strong denial, repression, and condemnation, that even those men who by nature felt such a passion were unable to accept it as genuine and, as a consequence, saw themselves as evil and acted as such.

This revelation, that Greek love was an eternal part of human nature, and the dreadful consequences of the suppression of this knowledge, gave Hössli his lifelong mission. He studied the matter as best he could, but believed his schooling had not prepared him to present it adequately.

Two years later, in 1819, he visited the popular German-Swiss writer Heinrich Zschokke (1771-1848) in the hope of persuading him to write a defense of his idea. In fact, Zschokke did publish some of Hössli's views in 1821, but Hössli was disappointed with the result. He then spent the next years studying the subject and struggling to express himself, publishing the first volume of *Eros* in 1836. A second volume followed in 1838, but a planned third volume remained unpublished and has apparently been lost.

Volume one of *Eros* established two themes that Hössli continued to elaborate: (1) that society treats those subject to Greek love in the way that previous centuries treated witches and heretics (Hössli assumed--perhaps rhetorically--that society had rejected belief in witches), and (2) "the unreliability of exterior characters in the sexual love of the body and the soul" (here anticipating--and rejecting--the later theory of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, that homosexuals will show characteristics of the opposite sex).



Heinrich Hössli as a young man.  
Archiv für Sexualwissenschaft, Berlin.

Hössli's often convoluted rhetoric is full of righteous indignation that sometimes, however, hits the nail firmly on the head. For example, he writes in volume 1 of *Eros*: "In the time of madness someone who does not go along with the madness is said to have no conscience, and this precisely always all the more when he is conscientious." He saw this madness precisely in the treatment of homosexuals.

In volume 2 of *Eros* Hössli reformulates and elaborates his theme in two parts: an anthology of male love and a defense of Greek love against what modern critics have made of it.

The anthology mainly includes examples from Greek, Roman, and Persian writings. He does not include Plato in his anthology, but he avers that "the dialogues of Plato witness higher and deeper than all these voices of earlier times for my idea." The next such anthology was not to be published until 62 years later by Elisar von Kupffer (1872-1942).

In the second part of volume 2, Hössli refutes nine false statements about the male love of the Greeks, including the accusation that it is child abuse. He has carefully studied the Greek model and is clear that for them love was asymmetric--there were not two lovers, but a lover and a beloved--and he elaborates the resulting situation very clearly.

Hössli's writing can still inspire us with its strong feeling for justice. As Warren Johansson observed, "*Eros* ranks as the first sustained protest against the intolerance that homosexual love had suffered for centuries in Christian Europe."

Unfortunately, Hössli's books had few readers and apparently exerted little influence. They were not reprinted in their entirety until 1996.

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## **About the Author**

**Hubert Kennedy** has published in several fields and several languages. Among his books is a biography of the German pioneer of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He has also translated the gay novels of John Henry Mackay.