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Budapest

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With a population of nearly two million, Budapest is the capital and largest city of Hungary. As such, it is the seat of the country's administrative, business, legislative, educational, and cultural institutions. Budapest is also the hub of Hungarian gay and lesbian life and the center of the country's glbtq political rights movement.

While glbtq people outside of the capital city were relatively invisible in Hungary's conservative society until quite recently, Budapest has long had the reputation as a gay metropolis in Eastern Europe. For many years gay men were able to meet in Budapest's many Turkish baths and at well-known cruising areas along the Danube River.

Since 1990 and the fall of the Communist regime, Budapest's gay and lesbian community has witnessed considerable advances in its social and legal status. Since then, about a dozen bars and clubs have opened, as well as glbtq-friendly cafés, saunas, and bathhouses.

The Budapest Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Festival, held annually since 1996, features exhibitions, discussions, and film screenings, and culminates with the Pride Parade, with thousands of people taking part in the festivities.

Homosexuality is legal in Hungary, and since 2002, the minimum age of consent is 14 for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. The Hungarian Parliament passed a law in 2007 that allows homosexual couples to live together in a "registered partnership," which grants many of the same legal rights to same-sex couples as to married heterosexuals.

Although the glbtq minority has achieved significant legal victories in Hungary in recent years, discrimination nevertheless remains common throughout the country, including in Budapest.

History

Originally a Celtic settlement, the region now known as Budapest was conquered by the Romans in approximately 35 B.C.E. and named Aquincum. It served as both a Roman trading settlement and a garrison town.

The region was later invaded by various tribes, including the Huns, the Avars, and, in the late ninth century, the Magyars, considered to be the ancestors of modern day Hungarians. The Magyars, under King Stephen I, converted to Catholicism, which was established as the national religion and which remains the faith of some seventy percent of Hungarians today.

In 1541, Turkish armies invaded the region and turned the area known as Buda into a provincial capital of the Ottoman Empire. The Turks remained in Buda and neighboring Pest for nearly 150 years.

Thereafter, the region came under the control of the Austrian Habsburg Dynasty. Development of the region was particularly significant during the reign of Empress Maria Theresa (1740-80). Pest in particular grew into a wealthy town with the increase of mercantile activity.

Despite the growth and modernization of the region under Habsburg rule, the nineteenth century ushered in an awakening of Hungarian nationalism and a struggle for independence. A national insurrection against the Habsburgs began in the Hungarian capital in 1848 and was defeated a little more than a year later.

The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 made Hungary a more equal power in the Habsburg Empire and Austria-Hungary was created, a single nation with two parliaments. In 1873, Budapest became a single city with the unification of the separate towns of Buda and Óbuda ("Old Buda") with Pest. During this time, the population of the new metropolis swelled, Hungarian culture thrived, and Budapest became a celebrated destination for wealthy travelers throughout Europe.

However, this golden age of progress ended suddenly with the outbreak of war in 1914. The end of World War I, in 1918, left Austria-Hungary defeated and its empire in collapse. The Treaty of Trianon, the peace accord drafted at the conclusion of the war, and signed on June 4, 1920, reduced Hungary's territories by over two-thirds.

Allied with Germany in World War II, Hungary reoccupied many of its former territories for a time.

However, by the end of the war, Budapest had been partly destroyed by British and American air raids during the Battle of Budapest, from December 24, 1944 to February 13, 1945. It also suffered major damage from advancing Soviet troops. All of Budapest's bridges were destroyed by German troops in a desperate attempt to halt Russian advances across the Danube.

The remaining German forces surrendered to the Soviets on April 4, 1945, following a particularly brutal siege that left the Royal Palace of Budapest in ruins.

After the war, the Soviet military occupied Hungary and soon replaced the freely elected government with the Hungarian Communist Party, which governed the country during the Cold War.

The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, a nationwide revolt against the Stalinist government of Hungary, was met with a massive assault on Budapest by the Soviet Union. After a period of repressive consolidation, the Communist government moved toward a somewhat more liberal style of politics, dubbed "Goulash Communism." When the Hungarian parliament legalized freedom of assembly in 1989, the power of the Communists quickly diminished and the party was dissolved. The last of the Soviet troops withdrew from Hungary in 1991.

Hungary joined the European Union on May 1, 2004.

GLBTQ Rights

Within recent years, the Hungarian glbtq community has seen considerable improvements to its legal and social status.

The Hungarian Penal Code of 1878 made sexual relations between men (defined as "perverse fornication") punishable by law.

In 1961, homosexual activity above the age of 20 was decriminalized, then above the age of 18 in 1978 under Paragraph 199 of the revised Hungarian Penal Code. Nevertheless, Paragraph 199 also imposed a

penalty of up to three years in prison for persons found guilty of "unnatural illicit sexual practices" with partners under that age. In contrast, the age of consent for heterosexual couples was 14.

Several Hungarian gay rights organizations banded together to challenge the constitutionality of the discriminatory age-of-consent law in 1993; additional challenges were also filed in 1996 and 1998. Finally, in September 2002, the Hungarian Constitutional Court repealed Paragraph 199 and the age of consent was equalized at 14 for both heterosexual and homosexual activity.

The 2003 Act on Equal Treatment and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities prohibits discrimination on the basis of both sexual orientation and sexual identity in the fields of education, employment, housing, health, and access to goods and services.

Limited legal recognition of unregistered domestic partnerships has been available to same-sex couples in Hungary since 1996, when "two people living in an emotional and economic community in the same household without being married" were granted certain inheritance, hospital visitation, and immigration rights.

Registered Partnerships

Registered partnership legislation for same-sex couples, granting many of the same financial benefits and civil rights as legally married heterosexuals, was finally approved in 2007 to go into effect beginning January 1, 2009.

In October 2007, the Hungarian Liberal Party, Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, or SZDSZ), presented to the Parliament's Human Rights committee the draft of a bill allowing for same-sex marriage by defining marriage as "between two persons over the age of 18." The Hungarian Parliament rejected the bill without debate. Opponents of the bill cited a Constitutional Court ruling earlier that year that defined the institution of marriage as a "bond between a man and a woman."

Another bill sponsored by both the Alliance of Free Democrats and the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt, or MSZP) was then submitted to Parliament that introduced registered partnerships for same-sex, as well as unmarried opposite-sex, couples. The law would provide many of the same rights to registered partners as legally married couples.

Despite strong opposition from Christian Democratic and other right-wing political parties, on December 17, 2007, the Hungarian Parliament adopted the registered partnership bill. Beginning January 1, 2009, both gay and straight unmarried couples can register their partnerships and enjoy legal rights regarding next of kin status, taxation, health care, inheritance, social security, pensions, and shared possession of the home.

The law, however, does not allow the adoption of children by same-sex partners, access to fertility treatment, or the right to take a partner's surname.

GLBTQ Organizations

Budapest's first gay organization, the Homeros Society, was established in 1988 initially as a social group, but it quickly evolved into a political organization as well.

Early in the AIDS pandemic, Hungarian law required that all positive HIV test results be reported, which discouraged most people from being tested. In 1989, the Homeros Society obtained permission to run an anonymous testing clinic in Budapest, on an experimental basis at first. The clinic now gives more tests than any state facility.

Since 1991, the Homeros Society has been publishing *Mások* ("The Others"), a social, cultural, and human

rights monthly. It is Hungary's leading glbtq periodical.

The Homeros Society has also established a telephone help-line, which has been particularly valuable for glbtq people living outside the capital city.

Established in 1995, the Háttér Support Society for Gays and Lesbians in Hungary has initiated several projects, including a counseling and information help-line, an HIV/AIDS prevention project (sponsored, in part, by the National AIDS Committee), and, since 2000, the free Gay Legal Aid Service.

Also concerned with legal issues is the Habeas Corpus Working Group (Habeas Corpus Munkacsoport), formed in 1996. In addition to filing petitions with the Constitutional Court, the group sponsors public debates and provides a legal aid service.

The Labrisz Lesbian Association, founded in 1999, is devoted to combating both sexism and heterosexism, and to establishing public spaces for lesbians. The association hosts informal discussion groups, a monthly film-club, and an educational book series.

Other Budapest-based glbtq organizations include the Symposium Association (Szimpozion Egyesulet), which sponsors educational, cultural, and leisure activities for glbtq youths, and Flamingo, a social group for glbtq people 30 years and older.

The Budapest Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Festival

The Budapest Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Festival has been held annually since 1996. It was the first such event among the ex-Communist Central and Eastern European countries.

Members of the Háttér Society originally organized the events; beginning in 2001, however, the festival has been coordinated by a coalition of Budapest's glbtq groups, known as the Rainbow Mission Foundation (Szivárvány Misszió Alapítvány).

The Festival includes exhibitions, discussions, and film screenings, and culminates with the Pride Parade, in which thousands take part, as both participants and observers.

At the 2007 Gay Pride parade, the government's Human Resources Secretary of State, Gábor Szetey, came out publically as a gay man, a landmark moment for the Hungarian glbtq rights movement.

Szetey is the first member of a sitting Hungarian government to announce publicly his homosexuality, and only the second Hungarian politician, after Klára Ungár, one of the founders of the liberal Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party, who came out publicly in 2005.

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