



Consoli, Massimo (1945-2007)

by Hubert Kennedy

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Writer, archivist, and theorist, Massimo Consoli was the founder of the Italian gay movement. For many years he was Italy's leading glbtq activist.

Massimo Consoli was born on December 12, 1945 in Rome to a middle-class family. He was the last of five children. His parents named him Luciano and Romolo (after the founder of Rome), but as a teenager he chose the name Massimo for himself.

Consoli early felt his sexual difference from the majority and developed a strong sense of the injustices that minorities of all kinds experience. He studied accounting, but after a long crisis over his homosexuality, he broke off his studies to dedicate himself to aiding those he considered his brothers and sisters. He did not consider it just, he said, "that anyone should have to suffer uselessly just because he loved someone of his own sex."

His own loves are chronicled in his prolific writings. An early attachment, for example, resulted in the novel *16-22*, which was published in installments in gay journals in Denmark and Sweden in 1970 and 1971, and issued in Italy in 1993. (The title refers to the ages of the two male lovers of the novel.) His most important love affair was the subject of a long series of poems that appeared in the book *Viva l'Omosessualità* (Long live homosexuality; 1976).

Consoli's organizational ability showed itself early. In 1963 he formed a circle, *La Rivoluzione è Verde* (The revolution is green), to discuss social injustice and sexual discrimination. He formed another group in 1966, the *Associazione Culturale Roma-1*, where "Roma-1" does not refer to the city, but is a secret acronym for *Rivolta Omosessuale dei Maschi Anarchici--Prima fase* (Homosexual revolt of male anarchists--first phase).

In 1966 Consoli subscribed to several gay journals, including *Arcadie* (France), *Der Kreis* (Switzerland, published in German, French, and English), and *One* and *Mattachine Review* (U. S. A.), although his knowledge of English was limited at that time. These journals became part of an extensive collection of material in several languages that eventually became the largest gay archive in Italy. In 2001, the *Archivio Massimo Consoli* became part of the *Archivio di Stato* (Italian State Archive).

Consoli's Dantesque sense of righteous indignation showed itself over the years in his many confrontations with individuals and institutions, especially the Italian state and the Roman Catholic Church. As early as October 1967 the Italian counter-espionage service, *SID* (*Servizio Informazioni Difesa*), began a file on him. His neighbors were interrogated as to his visitors and his habits. This investigation caused him to give up his teaching position in a Roman school and move to the Netherlands in 1969.

Consoli's reason for relocating was threefold: (1) he wished to publish an ideological document that would stimulate the birth of a homosexual movement; (2) he knew this was not possible in Italy (since he was already under police surveillance, he could expect a violent reaction to any such publication); and (3) the Netherlands seemed at that time to be the most open to homosexual political action.



A photograph of Massimo Consoli at Rome's Pride Parade in 2002 by Giovanni Dall'Orto. This image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 License.

The resulting document, published in 1971, became known as *Manifesto Gay*; its original title was *Manifesto per la Rivoluzione Morale: l'Omosessualità Rivoluzionaria* (Manifesto for the moral revolution: Revolutionary homosexuality). It was a programmatic document meant to furnish the basis for an Italian homophile movement, such as had already been established in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. The work succeeded in stimulating the formation of gay organizations in Italy.

Among the first was the Turin-based collective Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano (Italian revolutionary homosexual united front), which explicitly stated that it was inspired by Consoli's *Manifesto*. Better known by its acronym FUORI! (Come out!), the group included Mario Mieli (1952-1983), whose university thesis of 1976 (published in revised form in 1977) is a major critical work on homosexuality. Following Mieli's early death, the largest gay organization in Rome changed its name in 1983 to Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli (Homosexual Cultural Circle "Mario Mieli").

Consoli participated in--and often organized--many of the most significant gay events in Italy. For example, he took part in the Gay May Day in Rome in 1972. He organized the first annual Italian commemoration of New York City's Stonewall riots on June 28, 1976, at a time when most of the participants had no idea what "Stonewall" meant.

Throughout the 1970s he organized hundreds of conferences, exhibitions, book presentations, theatrical spectacles, and political demonstrations. In 1976 he defied a police ban to organize a public demonstration on the first anniversary of the murder of Pier Paolo Pasolini.

One of the most notable examples of Consoli's educational activities occurred in 1981. He spent several years in New York and was there when the first cases of AIDS were announced in the press. He immediately recognized its danger, wrote an article for publication in Italy in which he referred to the disease as "the plague of the 20th century," and gave up a lucrative position in New York to return to Italy and continue there his educational efforts on behalf of safe sex. Unfortunately, his dearest friend, the writer Dario Bellezza, died of complications from AIDS in 1996.

In the 1990s Consoli was on the front lines almost daily. He was the first person to request a meeting with the Roman police regarding crimes against gays. (The Police Commissioner later said that it was due to his work that these crimes were drastically reduced.) He also met with the mayor of Rome to request--and obtain--the appointment of a liaison officer to the gay and lesbian community.

On July 29, 1992, he organized with Kevin Calegari a demonstration at the Vatican to protest the anti-gay letter of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) to the U. S. bishops entitled "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons." This document described homosexuality as an "objective disorder" and a "tendency ordered towards an intrinsic moral evil." It advocated legal discrimination against homosexuals in areas of adoption rights, the hiring of teachers and coaches, and in the military.

Consoli's editorial and literary activity is notable for its range and visibility. He was interviewed frequently on radio and television, almost always in his role as founder of the Italian gay movement.

He authored some thirty books and thousands of articles for newspapers and journals. His plays were reproduced successfully and he was also known as a poet, but most of his writings dealt with historical topics.

Perhaps his most important books are *Homocaust* (1984, reprint 1991), which describes the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and *Ecce Homo* (1998; translated into Greek, 2001), which treats homosexuality in the Bible. His own personal favorite of his works was *Andata & Ritorno* (2003), an autobiographical novel in which the protagonist's serious illness prompts a review of earlier periods of his

life. The more conventional autobiography, *Affetti Speciali* (1999), traces not only his own life, but also the birth and progress of the Italian gay movement.

Consoli always enjoyed tracing the history of other gay pioneers, especially the German homosexual theorist/emancipationist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895), who spent the last fifteen years of his life in Italy. After rediscovering the tomb of Ulrichs in L'Aquila (about 50 miles northeast of Rome) in 1988, he began annual pilgrimages there on August 28, Ulrichs's birthday. At first he made these journeys alone, then he was accompanied by more and more friends, so that by 1995 newspapers began to report on these commemorations. They became international events.

Consoli's anarchist and anticlerical positions were solidly reasoned; but despite his rejection of all organized religion, he was nevertheless profoundly spiritual, discerning the divine in nature.

While there was, of course, an evolution in his thinking, his anarchist/libertarian principles remained steady. He experienced the persecution of state and church, but, despite serious health problems in his last years, he continued to write, and to use the Internet to inform a wide circle.

Consoli also knew the joy of being able to adopt a young man, who later married and in 2004 presented him with a grandson named Massimo.

After a long battle with cancer, Consoli died on November 4, 2007. His body was interred near that of his friend Dario Bellezza.

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Massimi Consoli Homepage: www.cybercore.com/consoli/index.htm.

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.