



Hiller, Kurt (1885-1972)

by Hubert Kennedy

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In a long and active literary life, Kurt Hiller made contributions to several pacifist and intellectual movements, including the fight for the liberation of homosexuals from the oppression of the German penal code.

Hiller was born in Berlin on August 17, 1885. His family was Jewish; his father was a necktie manufacturer. Hiller was a student at the Universities of Berlin and Freiburg im Breisgau; he obtained the Dr.jur. (doctor of laws) degree in 1907 from the University of Heidelberg with a dissertation that was published the following year as *Das Recht über sich selbst* (The right over oneself). The University of Heidelberg, however, recognized only that portion of the dissertation entitled *Die kriminalistische Bedeutung des Selbstmordes* (The criminal significance of suicide). In the complete dissertation, Hiller defended not only the right to suicide, but also the right to abortion and to engage in same-sex sexual relations. .

Hiller never practiced law, but lived as an independent--and prolific--writer. He eventually amassed over 1,000 publications.

In 1908 he joined the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, the first homosexual emancipation organization, which had been formed in 1897. It was headed by Magnus Hirschfeld; Hiller was a long-time collaborator of Hirschfeld, becoming the second chairman of the Committee after Hirschfeld resigned in 1929. He held that position until the Committee itself was dissolved in 1933, following the assumption of power by the Nazis.

As a writer and publicist Hiller was involved in several "movements." From 1910 he worked with the German Freedom Society, where he represented radical pacifist positions. In 1912 he edited the first anthology of expressionistic poetry (*Der Kondor*)--and coined the term "expressionism" in this connection. In 1914 he coined the term "literary activism" to mean "literature in the service of political intervention." Hiller wrote for various journals; one of the most important in the years 1918 to 1933 was the Berlin liberal political weekly *Die Weltbühne* (The world stage), for which he wrote more than 160 articles.

In 1922 he published *§ 175: Die Schmach des Jahrhunderts!* (Paragraph 175: The disgrace of the century!). Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code criminalized homosexual activity. Hiller's book was the most important of his publications directed toward liberalizing the penal code and was regarded by the Scientific Humanitarian Committee as their most powerful battle paper. It was widely distributed by them, including to members of the Reichstag, the German parliament, during the debates on the sexual penal code in the 1920s.

By 1922 a highly progressive code had been drafted by the Minister of Justice Gustav Radbruch, who had been Hiller's law teacher at the University of Heidelberg, but he was unable to bring it before the Reichstag. In 1925 another, unsigned draft was presented that Hiller described as "the super-idiotic high (or, if you will, low) point of bigotry." To respond to it, a Coalition for Reform of the Sexual Crimes Code was formed; and in 1926, on Hirschfeld's recommendation, Hiller supervised their draft of a comprehensive "counter proposal," which was published in 1927. Hiller believed it had some influence on the Reichstag

deliberations in 1928 and 1929.

Just when it looked as if efforts to reform the law might succeed in 1933, the Nazis assumed power. As a Jew, socialist, pacifist, and homosexual, Hiller was high on the Nazi list and was soon arrested. He was brutally mistreated and spent time in more than one concentration camp. Released in April 1934, he escaped a second arrest in September by fleeing to Prague, where he collaborated on *Die neue Weltbühne* (The new world stage), a continuation of the Berlin weekly *Die Weltbühne*, which had been shut down by the Nazis.

Shortly before the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938 Hiller fled to London. After a period of internment, he resumed his literary work and was active in the German exile press. From 1939 to 1946 he was president of the Group of Independent Authors.

Hiller returned to Germany in 1955 and settled in Hamburg, where in 1962 he tried--in vain--to reestablish the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. He collaborated on a number of new periodicals and also continued his efforts on behalf of the homosexual cause.

For example, in the years from 1946 to 1966 he was represented in *Der Kreis* (The circle)--the long-running Swiss gay journal, which had been the only gay journal to publish during the Nazi period--by twelve poems, fifteen articles, and several commentaries and letters. In one of them he joined the ongoing debate on what to call "us" by suggesting the terms "Androtrop" and "Gynäkotropin" for male and female homosexuals, respectively. Hiller coined these German terms from the Greek words "tropos" (turning [to]) and the combining forms "andro-" (male) and "gynaiko-" (female)--with the addition of the German feminine ending "in." Neither term was adopted, though the first briefly gained some favor; nobody liked the second.

In 1965 *Der Kreis* had a five-page celebration of Hiller's 80th birthday; Karl "Rolf" Meier, the editor, called him a "fearless fighter for right and truth." Also in 1965 Hiller published the book *Archangelos*, a collection of poems written in the years from 1934 to 1947 and dedicated to his friend Walter Detlef Schultz (1910-1964). According to the reviewer in *Der Kreis*, "every line is a hymn to his beloved younger friend."

Hiller met Schultz in a concentration camp in 1934, where Schultz had been interned because of his involvement with the German Communist Party in their fight against the rise of the Nazis. They both fled to Prague that year and to London in 1938. Schultz returned to Germany in 1945. There he found a position with the North German Radio in Hannover and was its director from 1961 until his death in 1964; he was buried in Hamburg, his city of birth.

Although Hiller was deeply in love with him, Schultz has been described as "sexually ambiguous." He was married twice, but, according to Hiller, he did not find the fulfillment he desired in either marriage.

In his last years Hiller wrote a two-volume biography, *Leben gegen die Zeit* (Life against the times). The first volume, *Logos* (1969), concentrates on intellectual and political issues, and includes descriptions of his experience in concentration camps. The second, *Eros* (1973), is homoerotic and, as he directed, was published only after his death. He died in Hamburg on October 1, 1972. After his body was cremated, the urn with his ashes was placed in the grave of his friend Walter Detlef Schultz.

Hiller left a large literary estate, including some 20,000 letters. For thirty years his executor, Horst H. W. Müller, allowed no one to inspect it. But after Müller's death it was acquired by the Hiller-Gesellschaft, which was founded by a group of researchers in 1998 on the occasion of a Hiller Exhibition in the library of the University of Hamburg. Its purpose is to keep alive the memory of Kurt Hiller, to research his life and work, and to make them known to the public. Much information about Hiller may be found at their web site: www.hiller-gesellschaft.de.

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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.