



Seel, Pierre (1923-2005)

by Linda Rapp

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Sent to a Nazi concentration camp because of his homosexuality, Pierre Seel remained silent about his ordeal for decades but finally chose to speak out, demanding recognition of the atrocities committed against gay men by the Third Reich and advocating for equal rights for the glbtq citizens of France.

Pierre Seel came from a comfortable middle-class family. The youngest of five sons, he was born on August 16, 1923 in Haguenau in the north of Alsace and grew up in the southern Alsatian city of Mulhouse, where his parents bought and operated a pastry shop.

Seel recognized his sexual orientation by the time he was about fifteen but, having been raised in a devout Roman Catholic household, was reluctant to accept it. He turned to his confessor, but the priest not only refused him absolution but also, over a period of months, grilled him about his thoughts and activities until, recalled Seel, "I was convinced that I was a monster."

Nevertheless, by the age of seventeen, he identified as a Zazou, the then-current French slang for gay. Although still not out to his family, he began frequenting a local club where gay men, including some of the stalwarts of the city, met for same-sex encounters.

On one of these visits, his watch was stolen, and he reported the theft to the police, who were initially courteous but became intimidating when they learned the scene of the crime. Seel was shaken by the experience, but there were no immediate repercussions--nor any apparent attempt to pursue an investigation--and he hoped that the incident would be forgotten.

Unsatisfied with the club scene, Seel longed for a truly loving relationship and found one with a young man identified in his memoir and elsewhere only as Jo. He delighted in the time that they spent together, when both were able at last to speak freely about their feelings.

In June 1940 German troops took control of Alsace. "Our family wept," wrote Seel, as they watched "a human tide" of French citizens marched through the streets of Mulhouse on their way to prisoner-of-war camps.

In May of the following year, Seel himself had to face the Gestapo. Because of the report of the theft of his watch, he was rounded up with about a dozen other gay men and viciously tortured by German officers seeking to force them to give the names of other homosexuals.

Once Seel had disappeared into Gestapo custody, his frantic family sought word of his fate. When his father and a brother went to headquarters, an officer informed them--using a German slur--of the reason for his detention. "And that was how, in the most humiliating manner, my family learned of my homosexuality," stated Seel.

With the adoption of the criminal code promulgated in 1791 in the wake of the French Revolution,

homosexuality had been decriminalized in France, but the Germans had annexed the conquered territory of Alsace to the neighboring state of Baden-Württemberg and imposed their laws on it; thus, when the Seel family attempted to secure legal help, attorneys advised them that there was no recourse for their son.

Seel was interned at the Schirmeck concentration camp, where he was beaten and brutalized. His prison garb bore a blue bar marking him as a gay man. (The more common sign of the pink triangle was not used at Schirmeck.) The stigmatizing symbol caused Seel to be excluded from such groups as prisoners were able to form. "In a universe of inmates I was a completely negligible element that could be sacrificed at any moment," he wrote.

Seel did not meet such a fate, but others did. Not long after his arrival at the camp, he and the other prisoners were summoned to the roll-call site and forced to watch as an eighteen-year-old man was stripped, had a metal bucket put over his head, and was set upon by vicious German Shepherd dogs who first savaged and then devoured him.

The victim was Jo.

As Seel looked on in horror, he "fervently prayed that [Jo] would black out quickly." The terror of that moment never left him: "I sometimes wake up howling in the middle of the night," he stated. "For fifty years now that scene has kept playing and replaying through my mind. I will never forget the barbaric murder of my love--before my very eyes."

While nothing could compare to that horrific experience, Seel continued to suffer mightily during the war. At Schirmeck, he, along with other gay men, was subjected to painful "medical experiments" and made to work on the construction of a crematorium at the nearby Struthof camp. Deprived of food, he was reduced to "wolf[ing] down a few carrots" when assigned to clean rabbit hutches.

Summoned to the commandant's office in November 1941, Seel feared that he had been turned in for stealing carrots and might be tortured or killed since any infraction of the rules could have catastrophic consequences. He could not have been more surprised when the officer informed him that because of his good behavior he was being released and given money for a train ticket back to Mulhouse.

Weak, emaciated, and fearing his family's reaction, Seel arrived home at dinnertime, and his father conducted him to the table and gave him his gold watch--an ironic gift--to celebrate his homecoming.

While the reception for Seel was warm, his father cautioned that the family would not speak of what had happened to him. The reason for his imprisonment--his homosexuality--was not a topic that the family would discuss.

With Alsace annexed to Germany, Seel was subject to the military service requirements of that country. Called up in March 1942, at the age of eighteen, the former prisoner of the Third Reich was put into the Reichsarbeitsdienst (state labor service) and, after six months of military preparation, was inducted into the German army.

His unit was sent to Zagreb, where he was wounded in hand-to-hand combat. Once released from the hospital, he was assigned to desk jobs, first in Berlin and then at a Lebensborn campus in Pomerania, where he felt repulsed and "terrified by [the] quasi-animal breeding" of handsome blond German soldiers and gorgeous blond women taken from Norway with the goal of producing perfect Aryan children.

Seel was subsequently sent back to Yugoslavia and then again assigned to Berlin in the summer of 1944. Forty days of intensive around-the-clock bombing by the Allies pinned the German forces in underground

structures connected to the subway, where they tried to help civilians who had taken refuge.

Seel was next dispatched to the eastern front on a train on which, he wrote, he and his fellow conscripts "sat mute, realizing that we were headed toward the final slaughter."

Seel would again escape death, but his unit was under constant bombardment from Soviet troops and was short of munitions and basic supplies. Finally, in the early days of 1945, the officer to whom Seel was assigned as an orderly decided to desert and take Seel with him so that both could make their way home to the Rhineland, the officer to Cologne and Seel to Mulhouse.

On the third day of their trek, however, the officer was killed by a volley of machine-gun fire from a passing panzer division. Seel continued on alone, soon casting off his German uniform for civilian clothing that he found in an abandoned farmhouse.

Seel was captured by Soviet soldiers who initially suspected that he was a spy. He managed to convey to them that he was French, however, and they took him with them as they moved west across Poland. Subsequently sent to a repatriation camp in Odessa, Seel languished there for several months before arriving home in August 1945.

With French law re-established, homosexuality was once again decriminalized but was still not well accepted in Alsatian society. Seel therefore hesitated to attempt to make new social contacts, and in any event, he remained haunted by memories of his first love, Jo.

Seel's family maintained their silence about his sexual orientation and his wartime experiences, until, during his mother's final illness, she asked him for the truth. He poured out his memories while she listened with compassion. When she died in June 1949, he lost his one beloved and trusted confidante.

Despairing of being able to live openly as a gay man, Seel decided to marry and, through a matrimonial agency in Paris, met a young woman who was the daughter of a refugee from Franco's Spain. The couple married in August 1950 and initially settled in Mulhouse but soon moved to a small town near Paris. In 1968 they relocated to Toulouse.

Their family had grown to include two sons and a daughter. With money often tight, Seel's wife frequently urged him to apply for a state pension for camp survivors, but he consistently refused since the reason for his original detention would be revealed, and he had never told his wife about his homosexuality.

The burden of his silence was, wrote Seel, "devouring me like a cancer." A doctor prescribed medication to combat his depression, but it was ineffective.

In 1978 his wife filed for divorce, their marriage having long since deteriorated.

Alone and in the grip of a "suicidal despair," Seel joined a psychological rehabilitation group and gradually began to recover.

In May 1981 he attended a talk by Jean-Pierre Joecker, whose company had just published a French translation of Heinz Heger's *Die Männer mit dem rosa Winkel* ("The Men with the Pink Triangle"), a memoir of his experiences in a German concentration camp. Afterward, Seel approached the speaker and identified himself as a survivor from Schirmeck. Joecker, who had been unable to find anyone interned at an Alsatian camp, was eager to interview Seel, who agreed but insisted on anonymity. His story appeared in the gay magazine *Masques*, of which Joecker was the founder and publisher.

Breaking his silence was liberating for Seel, who began to take a more active role in the gay community, joining David and Jonathan, a social group in Toulouse.

Seel was moved to take a public stand against homophobia when, in 1982, Bishop Léon Elchinger of Strasbourg abruptly canceled the reservations of approximately one hundred members of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) who had been planning to stay at a Catholic dormitory during a convention. Elchinger explained his decision by saying that he regarded homosexuality as a sickness.

Outraged, Seel wrote an open letter to the bishop and sent copies to the media. The mainstream press ignored it, but the letter was published in the monthly magazine *Gai Pied*.

This proved to be a turning point to Seel, who became ever more vocal, determined to educate the public about the wartime atrocities and to fight for equality for glbtq people, and his message began to be heard. In 1988 he addressed a packed audience at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the following year he was interviewed on French television. He also told his story in a memoir, *Moi, Pierre Seel, déporté homosexuel* (1994).

Seel was one of five homosexual concentration-camp survivors who appeared in Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's documentary *Paragraph 175* (2000), narrated by Rupert Everett. In a 2005 interview on National Public Radio, Epstein recalled that "the experience of filming [the piece] was a very painful one" for Seel. Reviewer Eric Harrison stated that Seel's anguish made his "one of the most moving interviews" in the film.

Although Seel stated in *Paragraph 175*, "I swore never to shake hands with a German again," Epstein took him to the Berlin Film Festival for the screening of the documentary. "It was full house, and at the end of the film there was a five-minute standing ovation for Pierre," he recalled. "He gave a very moving speech in which he said that he never imagined that he would ever set foot on German soil again, and here he was."

Director Isabelle Darmengeat interspersed excerpts of Seel's memoir with conversations with contemporary French gay men in her film *Amants des hommes* (2004), in which she sought both to document the dire consequences of homophobia in the past and to warn of its continuing menace. In November 2005 the French cable channel Pink TV asked Darmengeat for permission to broadcast *Amants des hommes* as an homage to Seel. She agreed, and the film was shown in prime time in January 2006 and subsequently re-aired seven times.

Pierre Seel died on November 25, 2005. He had spent the last two decades of his life with a loving partner, Éric Féliu.

The couple eventually shared their home with two dogs. "For forty years following the atrocious death of my friend Jo I didn't dare touch a dog, but thanks to [Féliu], I have been able to conquer my fear," stated Seel, who called the presence of the dogs "a daily pleasure" in his later years.

On December 21, 2007 the municipal council of Toulouse voted unanimously to rename a street in honor of Seel. At a well-attended ceremony on February 23, 2008, the rue Pierre Seel was formally dedicated with a tribute to the courage and commitment of Seel and a moving remembrance of the tragic loss of Jo.

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