Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. W. Jake Newsome

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Dr. Jake Newsome, where I ask him: How did queer people experience Nazi Germany? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have such a good episode for you today. Like, chills-on-my-triceps-level good episode. Let's dive in. Welcome to the show, Dr. Jake Newsome, who is a scholar of German and American LGBTQ+ history. His new book, Pink Triangle Legacies: Coming Out In The Shadow Of The Holocaust, chronicles the lives and legacies of the Nazis' LGBTQ+ victims. Hi, Jake, how are you?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:00:44] Hey, Jonathan. It's always a great day to talk about queer history.

JVN [00:00:47] Amen to that. We are in this moment where LGBTQIA+ plus and reproductive rights are under attack in the US. We're literally under attack legislatively, like, we are having families literally investigated for felonies, for having your child go to therapy, for letting their kid wear gender affirming stuff, going to a doctor, for, like, puberty blockers, like, felonies. Felonies, you guys. Full felonies. And reproductive rights have obviously just been fully upended. And to that, I would just say one more little thing, I feel like I'm seeing a lot of comments of folks being, like, "Thanks for showing up for reproductive rights. We'll make sure to show up for queer rights." This is not solely a women's issue. Reproductive rights and queer rights are inextricably linked. Your book is about LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights under Nazi rule. Can you introduce us to you and your work and what this book is all about?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:01:43] Jonathan, I grew up in a very small, rural, agricultural community in southwest Georgia. I was very, very closeted. And the only thing that I knew about gay people is what I learned about on Sundays in church. How I made sense of all of the feelings that I had was that, you know, homosexuality was a sin, which also meant that it was a choice. Right. And it wasn't until I went to college. In my second year, I was working on a project in the library. I needed to get up and, like, stretch my legs. I was walking through some of the shelves when the title of one of the books just stopped me in my tracks. And my heart is still pounding if I think about it. The title was Growing Up Gay in the South. And I stopped and, like, looked around to make sure that no one was there. And I pulled the book off the shelf. And when I opened it up, it was this collection of oral histories of queer people who were growing up in, you know, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi. And the only choice that they had made was to live openly. Right. To live their true lives.

And for the first time in my life, like, I saw myself. And I realized that I wasn't alone. And so I read that entire book that night. I was too afraid to check it out because I was afraid that, like, someone would find out that Jake Newsome had checked out this gay book. And so I went

back night after night and read as many books in and from that section that I could. In a way, my coming out story, I came out to books, right. Queer history, held my hand and coaxed me out of the closet. And, you know, I was able to see that not only were there people like me growing up in the South, but, like, all over the whole world and that we've been here for thousands of years. I wanted to be a historian, not just to learn more of those stories for myself, but to help identify and preserve and then tell those stories for other people. So I hope that, you know, when folks get my book, they open it up and they will see themselves in the pages. They'll find validation. They'll see that queer people are really diverse, sometimes problematic. But we are beautiful and powerful.

JVN [00:03:52] Ah! That literally made me cry. That was incredible. So couldn't help but notice the chilling similarities of 1930s Germany and now, what's it been like to study Nazi history at this moment in the U.S.?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:04:09] Jarring, I think, is the word that comes to mind. I've heard so many of the people that I, that I live around saying, "Who could have seen this coming? Who could have imagined this moment?" And I just wanted to say, "Historians." Especially historians of the Holocaust, I think we have studied spent all that time studying how democracy slowly was eroded in Germany through the 1920s and into the 1930s. And I will say that some of my fellow Holocaust historians, you know, are quick to say, "No, that's just hyperbole, we can't say that this is just like Germany in the 1920s." I respectfully disagree. Nothing is going to be exactly like it was in the past. But it makes me think of a quote by Mark Twain, and it goes something like this: that history doesn't always repeat itself, but it often echoes. And I think right now, like, the echoes are deafening, like, we are watching a sustained attack on our institutions of democracy.

Even though the right wing would never use the word themselves, they are employing intersectional tactics to go after queer people, after reproductive rights. In their mind, it's all connected. So it's not a coincidence that we are witnessing, for example, an attack on the Capitol, right wing, you know, white supremacy, an attack on reproductive rights, *and* the very worst year on history for anti-LGBTQ legislation. Like, it is all connected. Especially once we realize that the Nazi regime wasn't just anti-Semitic, right? That it was racist, that it wanted to control people's bodies, whether they were Jewish or not. We shouldn't get into comparing suffering, that's not productive. But I also want to point out that things don't have to be as bad as the Holocaust to be bad and scary. If we continue to look at today's issues and say, "Well, it's not as bad as Nazi Germany," then we're actually letting ourselves off the hook. One of the lessons that I've learned from studying Holocaust history is that there were countless opportunities for ordinary people to defy and stop the Nazis up to a certain point. And by that point, it was too late. The Nazis had accrued too much power.

JVN [00:06:13] So let's go on a [SINGING] journey to the past. It's 1920s. It's early 20th century. We are in Germany, honey. And word on the street was and the tens and twenties, like, wasn't it kind of fun to be gay? Like, weren't people fucking? And it was, like, kind of, like,

a hot progressive, like, there's, like, the Roaring Twenties, honey. Like, we were just like, you know, getting fucked and topping and bottoming and versing and transing gender and lesbians and, like, and we were just having fun. So, before Nazi rule how did people understand gender and sexuality. Is what I just said right?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:06:50] Yes. So, Germany lost World War I. So suddenly the, the emperor has abdicated the throne. And there is this new form of government.

JVN [00:07:01] And what year is that again?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:07:03] That is in 1918. And for the very first time, a democracy is set up in Germany, and it's called the Weimar Republic. And this is really important to even understanding gender and sexuality, because now in a, in a democracy, German citizens felt that they had certain civil liberties and freedoms that they didn't have when they were living under an emperor. And part of those civil liberties were the ability to, you know, live one's life the way you wanted to, even if that went against kind of traditional gender norms. Mostly in private, I will say that. In Germany's largest cities like Berlin, the capital city, really Berlin by the 1920s became like a gay capital of the world where folks from New York and Paris and London were all flocking to Berlin because the queer folks there in Berlin had established a a space for themselves that I'm not going to call it, like, full acceptance, but certainly an unprecedented level of tolerance that no one else in the world had had had enjoyed at that point in time. And so even in Berlin, there were 100 bars that catered either exclusively to or made it known that it was a safe space for queer people. There were organizations, political organizations, there were cafes, leisure activities, sports clubs, and a really vibrant gay press. Whether you were into politics or arts and culture or or sports, you could find a gay magazine or newsstand that was for you.

JVN [00:08:35] And this just did not exist anywhere else, because, like, London, it's still very criminalized at this point. America, it's still very, like, the masquerade. Is there any other places where there's, like, smaller versions of this?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:08:47] There are small kind of pockets in other urban centers throughout the Western nations. But Berlin is on a scale that is unprecedented. And I will say that Berlin does not represent all of Germany. I mean, across the rest of Germany, in the rural areas, in the smaller towns, they're seeing this queer culture emerging in the capital. And they're like, "Oh, let's try to keep it in the capital. We don't want it spreading out here into, into the country." And so they're actually cracking down on queer places throughout the rest of Germany.

JVN [00:09:16] What about, like, Munich and Cologne and, like, were those as big then?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:09:20] Definitely there were queer scenes in those cities. But but on a smaller scale, especially Hamburg at the time was known as kind of, like, a gay mecca, almost, second only to Berlin.

JVN [00:09:31] So, bigger cities, pretty popping off, pretty much fun, little ones, not so much. What laws and policies in the 20s protected the queer community or left them vulnerable?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:09:44] So I would say they had very few that actually protected them. And in fact, when Germany was united back in 1871, for the first time, they had a series of laws in their criminal code called Crimes Against Morality. And so these were laws that banned sexual assault, pornography, abortion, and a lot of others. That even during the Weimar period, most of these stayed on the books. But in Berlin, the law enforcement have decided to essentially relax their enforcement of the law because they're saying, "As long as these things are happening in private and as long as it's consensual, we're going to stop enforcing it as harshly. There was an infamous law called Paragraph 175.

JVN [00:10:24] Yes! What's the deal with this fucking thing?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:10:27] So it is, it is Germany's national anti-sodomy law.

JVN [00:10:31] Could straight people not have sex in the ass either?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:10:34] Well, so technically, it was written in a way that was not discriminatory. Right. That it could apply to straight people, too. But if you look at the enforcement numbers, it was very rarely enforced.

JVN [00:10:45] But, like, why are they so scared of anal? Because it feels so good. Like, they are so crazy. It's so rude.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:10:52] It actually began, based on religion, that this is a sin. By the time of the 1920s, and especially by the time that the Nazis come to power, it is all based on reproduction and eugenic ideology that essentially anal sex does not lead to reproduction, and so something that is against that, that is essentially robbing the fatherland of "good" Aryan children is a, is a crime against the state.

JVN [00:11:19] So that's part of, like, some of the importance of, like, taking old faulty laws off the books, like, for legislators to do that work and, like, get these fucking laws, because there's—we're always hearing about laws that are like, you know, 900 year old, not literally, but to these old ass laws. So how did the Nazis conceive of gender and sexuality? I guess that from what I just heard you say, it's, like, anything that doesn't lead to children is an offense to the fatherland, those patriarchal fucks.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:11:44] The most important thing to understand is the Nazis didn't believe that people were born queer, born gay. They believed that homosexuality was a lifestyle choice. It was kind of a vice that anyone could choose and anyone can be tempted into. In fact, that's one reason they thought it was so dangerous, is because that any of these kind of good, straight men could be tempted into having sex with other men. They wanted to be able to contain what they saw as a "plague" of homosexuality.

JVN [00:12:13] So they're, like reacting to their own internalized homophobia.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:12:17] Essentially.

JVN [00:12:18] Because they probably wanted to suck some ding-a-lings, too. And they're like, "Well, if I can't suck dick and I'm having to do all this straight stuff, then all you fuckers better do it, too." Which is probably what these motherfuckers in America are doing too! [BLEEP SOUND EFFECT], [BLEEP SOUND EFFECT] [FRUSTRATED NOISES]]…Furious!

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:12:41] They're just, like, "Yeah, we've got to shut this down." We've got to shut it down.

JVN [00:12:45] [SCREAMS] I hate 'em! Anyways! Oh, man. My professionalism only lasted for three minutes. I'm sorry. I was, like, freaking out. You guys, I don't think I've ever taken my book and just started. I had, like, a fugue state of rage.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:12:57] So I will say that, as you just pointed out, like this is not an idea that is unique to the Nazis, especially. I mean, at this time, it is widely understood that homosexuality is a lifestyle. Right. The idea that people could be born somewhere on the queer spectrum was just very new. In Berlin, this guy named Magnus Hirschfeld was the first to argue that being queer was inborn, and therefore you shouldn't be persecuted because of it.

JVN [00:13:23] And what year is that?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:13:24] That is like late, late 1800s into the early 1900s.

JVN [00:13:28] That's even a long ass fucking time ago that we've been having this specific of, of arguments around born or chosen or whatever and the idea that it's new because, like, even that is, that's over 120 something years of the same conversation. So at this time, by the 1920s and thirties, because when did the Nazis start to, like, because then you kind of come up in the twenties and then he got in trouble, but then he, like, really came back?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:13:57] So, you know, he—, the Nazi Party is this really small fringe party in the 1920s. People make fun of them. They're thinking, "Oh, they're so far to the right, no one's going to ever pay attention to them. Don't take them seriously." But then they slowly gain followers. And they gain followers. And you're right, Hitler does, in the early 1920s, try to

overthrow one of the state governments and take it by force. He's thrown in jail, essentially learns his lesson that in order for him to take power, for the Nazis to take power, they're going to do it through the ballot box, which is ultimately what happens. They become the largest party in parliament in the early 1930s, I believe, in 1932. And then he's appointed chancellor of Germany in January of 1933. And really by that point, you know, their, their main kind of platform was anti-semitism against Jews. But they had made their stance on, you know, queer people and queer culture very clear from early on that they you know, they they said things like, "If left unchecked, homosexuality will lead to the downfall of the fatherland."

Because, you know, as I already mentioned, they believed that it was robbing the next generation of the master race of, of "good Aryan children." But also they believed that it was a gender inversion, essentially, that it turned, you know, otherwise "good, masculine" men. It turned them weak and effeminate. It was not great because men had all of the leadership roles. And so they, they didn't want their men to become weak. And at the same time, they also believed that it turned women masculine. Right. They they said, like, "Oh, yeah, all, all lesbians are masculine and therefore, they're not going to be nurturing and mothering to our good Aryan babies." And so they really, they really felt that, again, this kind of queer lifestyle was not only a moral affront, but was a, a very direct threat to the the social order of the government and the racial reproduction of, of the "master race."

JVN [00:15:57] And they also thought above all else that it was a choice, that it was not something that you were born with. And did they have any, like, literature around, like, why they thought it was a choice? Did they just think that we were, like, whores who wanted to suck dick or something? Like, why did they think that we chose it?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:16:12] Because of a—, essentially a weakness of constitution.

JVN [00:16:16] So they still think you're born with something.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:16:20] That's where, like, if you start listening to actually what they're saying and they're writing, there is kind of a kernel of, like, biological determinism there because, you know, some people might be born with a "weaker constitution" and can't really, you know, confront their, their desires to have sex with another man or another woman.

JVN [00:16:39] But their solution to that was just, like, "Well, we're going to fucking kill you," Because it's not about the individual, it was about, like, service of the master race or whatever. So it wasn't about, like, your individual choices.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:16:49] So here's the thing, like, these details can be kind of, down in the weeds. But it's important because it also defines how the Nazis treated different groups of people. So, for example, because they believed that queer people didn't exist as kind of a separate group of people, and that fact that if the Nazi policies just were aimed at essentially conversion therapy of, like, really violent conversion therapy to get people to stop doing

queer things and then to reintegrate them back into society as good Germans. That was not the case for other groups of people like Jews, the Roma and Sinti, people with disabilities, because the, the Nazis believe that those people posed a really deep, biological threat that could not be changed. Okay, I'm using Nazi ideology here. Right. But you could not "teach" a Jew to quit being a Jew, like, it was in their blood, and that is why they had to be physically murdered. So the policies for queer people, at least officially, were not genocide and were not, like, the wholesale murder of all queer people. Because, again, the Nazis thought, "Well, we'll just throw them in a concentration camp, like, really hardcore conversion therapy, and then they'll be cured and we, we'll bring them back into society."

JVN [00:17:59] What if you couldn't stop doing it with other—, then would they kill you?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:18:03] Then always death was reserved as a last resort. We have to remember, there's always a difference between policy and reality, because on the one hand, they're saying, like, sure, "We can, we can cure you, we'll reintegrate you." But their policies also led to the deaths of tens of thousands of queer people, you know, because they so-called "wouldn't be cured or couldn't be cured."

JVN [00:18:22] So basically choice could be changed through beating, not going straight to death, but now I understand why people on Twitter are, like, "Don't fucking compare this." Because, like, that's a really huge difference that, like, some people were allowed to be tortured, but you had, like, a bigger, like, you know, way better chance of surviving if you were like a non-Jew queer person then, like, yeah, okay, yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me. So basically they just thought there was, like, the inversion but were they, like, not as threatened by lesbians as gay men or something?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:18:48] Yeah. And it essentially comes down to misogyny and sexism. Because in Germany, like most of the countries in the world at the time, only men had access to positions of authority, like, in the economy and in politics and the army. And so therefore, like, queer men or men who did not fit into those "norms," because they had access to that authority, they were seen as the main threat. And so the Nazis, I mean, there are documents after documents of, of Nazis sitting around talking about, "Do lesbians even exist? And if so, should we focus on, you know, including them in Paragraph 175?" Because actually, one of the things I didn't mention is that Paragraph 175 only applied to men. And Nazis believed, essentially, that they didn't want to waste law enforcement resources on going after lesbians when they felt that men just posed more of a, of a direct threat. They believed that essentially women—that, that a woman's desire was so tied to a man that, "Okay, even if women, you know, messed around with each other, that as long as, you know, as soon as a good man came around, they would just like go back to, go back to the man." And then at the end of the day, and this is really chilling, and this comes back to the, the thought about reproduction, there is a quote from a guy who ended up becoming the minister of justice who said that, "At the end of the day, all women are prepared for sex." So essentially, they are talking about the idea that

women, even if they are lesbians, can be impregnated by force if necessary to help create the next generation of the so-called "master race."

JVN [00:20:27] Wow. So what about trans and gender non-conforming people?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:20:33] So really, the Nazis did not view transgender or gender non-conforming identities as "legitimate." A trans woman would be considered a queer man. And in fact, they they lumped together all, like, gay men, bi men, and trans women as just under, under the label "homosexual." Their thoughts and their policies were defined by essentially what they termed, you know, what they considered "the biological sex assigned at birth." And they, there was kind of no really gray zone.

JVN [00:21:03] What about intersex people?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:21:06] I personally don't know what the Nazis' policies were on intersex people. I think that probably according to their, you know, eugenic ideology, they would have either been euthanized probably very early on or sent to an asylum, but would not have been allowed to be part of the general public.

JVN [00:21:25] So but trans, would trans and gender because they were, like, lumped in the gay group or the homosexual group, did that just mean that they were given, like, hardcore conversion therapy?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:21:34] Yeah. We know a lot of the Paragraph 175 convictions that we're finding in the archives. It's hard to to ascertain, like, how many of those were gay men or bisexual men or were, you know, trans women who just according to Nazi viewpoint, was just, "just a gay man cross-dressing." There's still a lot of work to be done, you know, in the historical research to kind of flesh that out. There's some really great scholars working on it right now, but it's hard to sometimes look for the identities that we recognize today because the Nazis kind of just collapsed them all into, into homosexual.

JVN [00:22:19] So Hitler comes to power in 1933. World War II starts in '40? [CROSSTALK] '39. But doesn't the U.S. not get in until '41 or something?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:22:31] Yep. Mm hmm.

JVN [00:22:33] So but worldwide, it's, like, '39 to '45.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:22:37] Yes. Mm hmm.

JVN [00:22:38] Yes. So he comes in in '33. So then how do queer people's lives change under Nazi rule? Like, what happens in Berlin and, like, in Hamburg as the Nazis take over?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:22:48] It is quite sudden the demise of this very public queer life and queer culture. I mean, as I said, the Nazis make it very clear that in—, even though they don't plan to, like, murder every single queer person, they very clearly assert that in the new Third Reich, in the new "master race," there will be absolutely no room for queer life, for queer people.

JVN [00:23:13] And is that, like, a 1933 thing?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:23:15] I mean, actually, even to the late 1920s, I mean, they were saying it on their campaign stops, they're trying to win votes and tell people that, "We're going to clean up, you know, the mess that this democracy has left, you know, in Germany. They blamed democracy for the increase in homosexuality. They're, like, "In a democracy, people are just weak and they're allowed to just chase after any pleasure that they want to. And so people are just giving in to their temptations and becoming more gay." So as soon as, as the Nazis come to power, within a matter of weeks, they implement a crackdown in Berlin. Right. Because, because Berlin is, is the capital of Nazi Germany. But it's also kind of this gay capital. Right. So it has a very symbolic meaning in queer culture. And so they implement a series of raids trying to crack down on all of these bars and publications and organizations and drive it back underground. And this, this really happens just surprisingly quickly. It kind of happens in waves throughout Germany. For example, the first really big large-scale raids in Munich don't happen until 1934. And there are some gay bars that are still open in Hamburg all the way to 1936. But I do think that some of those are left open on purpose for the, like, the secret, secret police to, you know, put it under surveillance. And so that way they can get as many lists or names of gay men on their list as possible.

JVN [00:24:43] So what does that look like? The raids on the bars. So it's just, everyone's thrown in jail. They go to the conversion camps, like, their families, like, "Where'd our family…" Or, like, what, what does that look like?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:24:56] So absolutely. I mean, they, in those large scale raids like that, I mean, the police would show up and arrest like everyone that was there. They would be charged with Paragraph 175 and then, you know, put on trial. At least at first, there was this semblance of, like, "law and order" and, "We're going to do this the right way." Being sent to a concentration camp was not mentioned in the law, so it was still very much kind of, like, "Let's be by the books." I would say the large scale raids are probably a little bit more rare. Where the Nazis arrested most people would be, like, arresting one or two and then forcing them to confess like the names of other gay people that they knew. And then, then they would wait until they have a really long list and then they would just go after, you know, in Hamburg, there's an example of: it started with a forced confession of one person and ended up leading to the arrest of 230 other men. And essentially most of those men would have been convicted and served prison time. If this was not their first arrest, they would then be considered a repeat offender, and then that's when they would be sent to a concentration camp.

JVN [00:26:06] [JVN SIGHS] I've heard about how, like, after World War Two, a lot of officials from the Third Reich ended up, like, assimilating into the US, and in the forties, fifties and sixties, all the way up until Stonewall, like, a lot of these same police raid tactics were used in the United States to persecute and imprison queer people.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:26:26] Yeah.

JVN [00:26:27] So like, we see cultures across time, across decades, like, show up to enforce evangelical Christian-centric policies, like, on queer people in their populations. Just observing that. And then how do queer people react to these Nazi laws and policies? And how does the German public react to this onslaught of, like, 1933, '34, '35, '36? Like, "We're taking out the queers." I don't know why I did a Southern accent when I said that, but I did.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:26:54] One of the things that has been inspiring to me as I've been doing this research is to see all of the different ways that queer people reacted to these policies. I mean, queer people are incredibly resilient. We always have been. We always will be. Right. So, of course, you know, a lot of them did get caught up in these raids, in these policies. But, you know, while they were victimized by the Nazis, I hesitate to try to, you know, condense them down to being just victims because they were individuals with really beautiful, complex lives. Some of them went into hiding. They just said, "Okay, I'm not going to be publicly gay, then," like, "I will just keep it to myself." A lot of, like, queer men and queer women went into marriages of convenience to try to, like, hide their queerness from the state. Some of them took up arms and resisted, like, actively fought back against the Nazis. There's an incredible story of a lesbian resistance fighter in the Amsterdam named Frieda Belinfante, who, with her gay best friend, whose name was Willem Arondeus, helped forge fake ID papers for Jews. And then when things escalated, they actually helped lead a bombing against the registration office so that the Nazis couldn't find where the Jews lived. And they were very both openly gay. Right. And, like, Willem Arondeus who was unfortunately was caught by the Nazis–

JVN [00:28:22] Noooo!

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:28:23] Yeah. He, he was caught. He didn't give up anybody else from the resistance group. There was a show trial and he was sentenced to an execution. But right before he was executed, he told his lawyer, "Please do one last thing for me. Please tell the world that gay people aren't cowards." And, like, that, just, like, that, I'll just, you know, arrow through the heart, right? I mean, that he saw it as his honor, that he could not only be a resistance fighter against Nazism, but fight these stereotypes, that, "Oh, all gay people are cowards and weak." And, you know, he very purposefully tried to fight those stereotypes. So there is a range of how queer people reacted to these policies. And I think one thing that we can't ignore is that some queer people in Germany were incredibly anti-Semitic and racist and found Nazi ideology appealing. And there were, there were queer people who joined the Nazi Party and who, you know, thought that their, their being so-called, you know, "part of the

master race" would, would shield them. When it turns out that actually wasn't the case. I mean, the Nazi Party then began purging queer people from its ranks, using violence, using murder. We need to keep that in mind that just like today, queer people have all kind of different political statements and beliefs. Like, the same thing back then.

JVN [00:29:48] Yeah, for sure. Gross! I was thinking though, what was that nice man's name?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:29:54] Willem Arondeus.

JVN [00:29:55] How major. That really made me cry. So, okay, so what about, like, *not* queer people? Like, how did the German public react? Were they, like, "Good. Great." Because I feel like those speeches that Hitler made that I saw on video. Like, it seems like people were, like, very enthused about his policies.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:30:10] Yeah, this is one of the things that has really just made my skin crawl from, from the research is, is knowing how widely popular the Nazis' anti-gay policies were among the German public. And in fact, queer people were among the first communities that were attacked by the Nazis because the Nazis were politically savvy, and they knew that it could help shore up votes against people who otherwise might have thought, "Eh, I'm not really into the Nazis' anti-semitism where they use too much violence," but rallying against queer people was something that the majority of the population in Germany supported. So we know, for example, that average Germans understood that if they spied on and turned in their queer neighbors to the Nazis, that even just denouncing them would activate the power and the violence of the Nazi state against that person. One third of all of the Paragraph 175 cases that resulted in a conviction came from civilian denunciation.

JVN [00:31:15] Which is very a la Texas abortion law.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:31:18] Exactly.

JVN [00:31:20] Wow. So 1936, SS leader Heinrich Himmler established an office for Combating Homosexuality And Abortion. Ah! In 1937, he said the, quote, "sexual sphere isn't the," quote, "private affair of the individual, but signifies the life and death of the nation" Wow. If that doesn't sound, like, a little bit Republican, I don't know what does. So how are LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights connected here?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:31:50] I think that it's telling, right, that, that they thought of homosexuality and abortion as the same threat and, like, set up a single office to fight it shows that in their mind, the threat was to the Aryan birthrate. Their policies were geared towards creating reproduction amongst those citizens that were deemed part of the "master race" and robbing the reproductive rights of those who were considered, you know, so-called "subhuman," essentially. So I know that on your show you've talked a lot about eugenics and, you know, controlling who gets to have sex. And there's this scholar, Dagmar Herzog, who's

written this really incredible book about how the Nazis—sometimes we think of the Nazis as being, like, "Oh, really sexually repressive and conservative." But really what they did was use eugenic ideology to redefine who could have sex.

So again, they are, they are prompting and encouraging Aryan men and women to actually have a lot of sex, a lot of reproductive sex, like, have as many children as possible. They're giving away, like, mother medals, like, for having the most, you know, babies as possible. But at the same time, the other, the other side of the coin is that they're defining who can't reproduce. So that includes, you know, entire racial groups or who they define as racial groups, like Jews and the Roma and Sinti, but also Germans with disabilities, whether it's physical or mental disabilities, they were afraid that they didn't want, you know, those genetic conditions to be passed down. And so they're writing laws that, that individuals can be forcibly sterilized and eventually even murdered. You know, there was a secret, and then not so secret, program called T4, where they were murdering people with disabilities, you know, across Germany.

JVN [00:33:39] So and then was there, like, restrictions on contraceptives and, like, restrictions on abortion? Because they didn't want, like, any termination of pregnancies or, like, prevention of pregnancies because that was, like, a—, that was an injustice to the fatherland.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:33:53] One hundred percent, I mean, there were increasingly strict restrictions on contraceptives. So by 1941, there's a ban on all contraceptives in, in German territory. They're continuing to restrict abortions. It was called Paragraph 218, which was the law against abortions. The Nazis sharpened it. By 1943, there was even a move to assign the death penalty for someone who got an abortion or a doctor who helped someone get an abortion.

JVN [00:34:22] Wow. Which, again, just and obviously we're talking about Germany, not the United States, but, like, if people were getting abortions in the forties in Germany than they were obviously, like, finding ways to get abortions in the US and the 14th, which means that, like, this shit is fucking rooted in goddamn American history. Back to your gorgeous book. So your book traces the history through the symbol of the pink triangle. So interesting. So are the pink lists the lists of the people who they would capture and then, like, give up?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:34:49] Yeah. So there was, you know, these, these things called "Rosa Liste," which is pink, pink lists. And these were the names and addresses, occupations of mostly men who were either confirmed or even just suspected of being queer. And one of the things I want to point out is the Nazis didn't have to start from scratch here either. The local law enforcement, you know, jurisdictions all over Germany had been collecting these pink lists for years. And so when Himmler started this, you know, Office For Combating Homosexuality And Abortion in 1936, essentially their officers just had to go to other local police officers and say, "Hand me your pink list. We're going to, you know, centralize them in Berlin so that we can have this, you know, essentially a huge database, almost, of, of queer

people." And so these were, as you can imagine, a really terrifying tool that the Nazis used to be able to hunt down queer, queer people.

JVN [00:35:48] So then what's the origin story of the pink triangle, like, it goes from the pink list to the pink triangle?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:35:54] The origin of the pink triangle stems from the concentration camp system. And Jonathan, sorry to put you on the spot, but how many concentration camps would you think that the Nazis had?

JVN [00:36:06] I feel like I remember something in history class. There was, like, the worst one, Auschwitz. And then there one is there's, like, a B, that's, like, Berghen something. And then there's like… seven. Was there seven?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:36:17] So that is, you know, when I first started like that, those are the numbers that I was thinking, like, "eight, ten, thirty." So the new research shows that the Nazis had a network of 44,000 sites of camps and ghettos and prisons, sites of incarceration, not only in Germany, but throughout their occupied territory. So to me, that just completely changes, like, the scope of the Holocaust.

JVN [00:36:44] Because they might have done just, like, a little, like, corner store, like, maybe you didn't even make it to the concentration camp. Like, they would just, like, go kill you in the corner or, like, throw out, like, it wasn't these like, like, there was, like, all sorts of places where you could meet your demise.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:36:56] All sorts of I mean, so of course, we think of Auschwitz because it's like the biggest, most famous. But most people encountered this type of violence and imprisonment at a much smaller, more local site. People could not walk around their town or travel without bumping into one of these things. So, like, this idea that, "Oh, no one knew what was happening," it's just a lie. So in, in this camp system, the Nazis had set up a way of badging the prisoners. Each prisoner had to wear a badge on their uniform that signified why they were being imprisoned. So, for example, political opponents wore a red triangle. Jehovah's Witnesses wore a purple triangle. Jews, of course, had the yellow, yellow star, the yellow triangle. You know, all these different categories had a color. And these men who were in prison for being gay, at the beginning, wore different types of badges. So a lot of them wore a black triangle, which was the, the badge for "social deviants," which is kind of, like, a miscellaneous catch-all category. Sometimes they wore green, which was for common criminals. We know that some in Dachau wore just a big "175" attached on their uniform for the law. And then we also have at least a couple of survivors who mentioned that they were forced to wear a big letter "A," which stood for, in German, "assfucker." Right, so all of these different ways of labeling these queer men existed in the early thirties, and it was really by the mid-1930s things kind of became standardized when the pink triangle became the really standard badge for gay concentration camp prisoners.

JVN [00:38:40] Oh, my God. And was it pink just because of the pink lists?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:38:44] This is one of those things that has been a question that has really plagued me during my research. Like, I wanted to know "Why? Why pink?" And the Nazis were meticulous note keepers. But I've not been able to find anything that showed, like, why they chose the specific colors for the different groups. Using kind of today's understanding of gendered colors, we might think that, "Well, it's a girl color and they wanted to, you know, humiliate the gay prisoners by, by kind of marking them as effeminate." But really early at that period, pink was considered a boys' color. It was, it was, like, a lighter shade of red, which was a really masculine color. And so art historians that I've talked to have guessed that it probably came from the fact that in Germany at that time, there was a slang word for male prostitutes who had sex with other men called Rosarota, which translates to, like, Pinkies or Rosies, that probably the Nazis were well aware of that slang term. And so this probably influenced why they chose pink or *rosa* in German as the color for gay concentration camp inmates.

JVN [00:40:00] So if you're a queer person in Germany during the Third Reich, if you were Jewish, it was, like, "No," if you were Roma, there was, "No." Like, if there was something that they decided was genetic, then there was no hope. But if you were, like, "Aryan" but queer, they're, like, "Maybe we can fix you." But if you end up in a concentration camp, that means that you're, like, automatically a second offender?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:40:20] Yeah. I mean, normally, you know, if it was your first offense, you probably wouldn't get sent to a camp unless there were other things that the Nazis viewed as, as "degenerate." So, you know, if you were a political opponent and gay, you probably were going to get sent to a camp. If you were Jewish and gay. You know, certainly all these different kind of intersecting identities might let you end up in a camp more quickly. So I will say that even though the Nazis had inherited this national law, right, Paragraph 175. The way that it was worded when they came to power, they, they didn't like it. They, they found the original wording constituted a roadblock. And essentially this is because the German court system had established a precedent that they would only prosecute someone, or convict them, under Paragraph 175 if so-called "intercourse-like acts" had taken place. You can only be convicted if it was penetrative sex. The Nazis were, like, "That is way too constrictive. We want more flexibility in how to enforce this law." So in 1935, they amend it, where essentially the new wording is just "indecency between men is punishable." Right. How in the world do you define "indecent"? The whole point is that it is very vague and they can apply it, however and whenever they want to. And so really, after that 1935 Amendment, the number of convictions and arrests skyrockets. I mean, I think it increases by 750%. So really, we see the biggest waves of queer men being sent to concentration camps after that 1935 amendment.

JVN [00:41:56] And was there, like, a specific concentration camp that you may end up at? Or was it just, like, the corner store ones, like, you might get killed right in your town, you might get shipped somewhere? Like, what was that like?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:42:05] So really, they could be sent to any of the camps. And we know Dachau concentration camp was the very first one. And we know that gay men were some of the very first prisoners there. So there wasn't, like, a singular camp just for gay people. But we do know that inside the camps, gay prisoners were often kept isolated in their own, like, their own barracks. The guards felt like they didn't want these gay prisoners to go "seduce" all of the other prisoners. And so they tried to keep them isolated. They normally weren't sent to the killing centers like Auschwitz. Right. They were sent to the concentration camps, which were meant for, kind of, the corrective therapy, so to speak.

JVN [00:42:46] Now, how often would they, like, re-release a queer person from a concentration camp, or did they just, like, work them to death, or did they do, like, programs and programs too, like, or was it electroshock therapy? Like, what was it?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:42:57] Here's the thing where you really have to kind of keep that difference between policy and reality in mind because, right, they were there with this idea that they were going to be converted. And so a lot of times gay or queer men were given the harder work details. They were given less food. Because supposedly, like, a "hard lifestyle" would re-orient you to be masculine and straight. But there were also, especially by the 1940s, a system where Himmler himself set up brothels in the camps where they would take queer men prisoners and forced them to have sex with female prisoners as a way to, as they said, "learn the joys of the other sex." So this idea that you were going to be forced to have sex , you know, straight sex, and then if you "performed well," you could be released. And they judged that being performed well, like, guards would literally watch through holes in the wall and see, like, were you having sex up to their standards to be released?

Gay men were also submitted to really horrible medical experiments where doctors would, like, try to implant testosterone into their body and try to, like, make them more more "manly" and "straight." And at the end of the day, a lot of men were told that they would only be released if they submitted to so-called "voluntary castration." So you can already start to see the Nazis are thinking, like, "We put these queer people here to change their behavior. And it's a really horrible, harsh situation. Why aren't they changing? So maybe there is something, like, deep or inborn about it. And so therefore we'll just try to take away their sex drive altogether, like, we'll castrate them. And so that way they just won't be deviant." And then they were released. Now, here's the thing. All of that to say, on the one hand, there were supposedly all these options for people to be released. But we also know that the death rate for gay prisoners was about 65%, which was the highest out of all the prisoner groups, except for those who were slated for genocide. So on the one hand, they're saying, "We're going to convert them." On the other hand, two thirds of them died in the camps.

JVN [00:45:09] So would the non-genocide people be, like, gays, political opponents.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:45:13] Like Jehovah's Witnesses.

JVN [00:45:16] But how come they could undo a Jehovah's–? Oh, because they said that Jewish people were a different race.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:45:19] A different race. Like it was no longer just about religion for the Nazis.

JVN [00:45:22] I hate the Nazis, I really do. Like, I really do. I just. I just, I really do. Just, it's just, absolutely the worst. So in the concentration camp, lesbians had to do that, too. Like, they had to have sex with men and they were isolated and stuff and pink triangle for lesbians and trans and gender nonconforming people as it, lot, got more solidified?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:45:41] They didn't, you know, recognize the gender non-conforming identities whatsoever. Trans women were often thrown in and wore a pink triangle. Lesbians didn't have their own separate category in the camps because a lot of times lesbians who were sent to the camps, the fact that they were lesbian wasn't the only thing that got them thrown into the camp. So maybe they, you know, weren't married or they were a political opponent.

JVN [00:46:07] Being unmarried was a reason to get sent to a concentration camp?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:46:10] I mean, at least put you on the Nazis' radar. And then they might start poking and prodding and being, like, "Oh, wow, she's not married. But she also, maybe she's a communist or maybe she's a spy or maybe she's a lesbian." Right. So just the fact that you are not conforming to, like, "German motherhood" and being a "good wife" automatically put you on the radar. So there were lesbians sent to the camps, especially there was one called Ravensbrück, which was the concentration camp for women. And so, you know, all women, whether they were straight or not, were sent to, to this particular camp. And most lesbians were marked with the black triangle, again, which was this this badge for the so-called "social deviants."

JVN [00:46:51] So what was life like for a queer Germans after the end of World War Two?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:46:57] This is where the story gets really, really messed up. The Allies have just won this war. They've defeated fascism and racism. And it's all about democracy and freedom. But the Allies, right, including the Americans, when they liberate the camps, they establish a policy that all the prisoners who had been rounded up and imprisoned based on racial, religious, or political reasons were to be immediately released. But those who were so-called "common criminals" were to be kept in prison because they didn't want that to endanger Germany. So since the pink triangle prisoners had broken a national law that

technically predated the Nazis, the Americans considered gay men to be common criminals. And so any of these pink triangle prisoners who still had a time left to serve on their sentence were taken from a concentration camp to a local prison to serve the rest of that time. Right. Mind blowing, which I guess, honestly, it shouldn't be. Right. All the allied forces, including America, had anti-gay laws.

JVN [00:48:00] Do you know why it is mind blowing? That part, no, but it is for me. The reason it blows my mind is because we are sold this propaganda of American exceptionalism from such an early age that, "We freed all these people." Our greatest generation, as Tom Brokaw fuckin' has been telling me since I was six fucking years old, the greatest generation and the greatest generation looked at thousands and thousands of queer people and said, "Rot, bitch. Rot." "Watch everyone else be released. Watch everyone else get their life back. Kind of. Yeah, but you stay here." That's insane. So, so then the Paragraph 175 after World War Two doesn't go away.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:48:42] The allies say, "Okay, we're going to get rid of all these Nazi laws," when they come to Paragraph 175, they're, like, "You know what, we're not going to touch that. We're just gonna let the Germans decide whether or not they want to keep it." Well, the Germans decide to keep it. So that when both, you know, communist East Germany and democratic West Germany are founded in 1949, both of those countries have the specifically Nazi version of Paragraph 175 written into their criminal code.

JVN [00:49:10] So '49 from '45. So for four years, all those people just stay in or they get released if their sentence is over? But, wow.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:49:19] They might be in prison for another few months, another couple of years. It all depends on, like, how much time they still had left given to them by Nazis.

JVN [00:49:29] So how were queer victims of fascism victimized again after the war?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:49:34] Actually in East Germany, again, the communist country, they they decide, like, "We can't keep a Nazi version of this law on the books." So they go back to the original 1870s version, which is a lot more lenient. And therefore, the number of people that East Germany arrests under the law is pretty low. West Germany, on the other hand, again, this free democratic country, they keep it. They defend it and they use it. West Germany arrests about 100,000 queer men with the Nazi version of the law in the first 20 years of its existence. So, yes, there are no more concentration camps, but you can still serve you no time under the law. You can still pay a steep fine. It is still legal in West Germany if you are accused of Paragraph 175 violation that they can take away your license, your, your degrees, you can be kicked out of any type of union or political party that you're a part of. And it goes without saying that you can be fired or evicted for being gay.

That doesn't say anything about the, like, the social stigmatization from your friends and family. So there is one story I want to tell of a guy named Carl Gareth, who survived six years in concentration camps under Nazi rule. Right. Including Auschwitz. After the war was over, he's arrested again under Paragraph 175, and he is, like, floored when he gets into the courtroom and sees that the judge that is overseeing his case is literally the same judge that had sent him to prison under the Nazi regime. Right. And the judge, instead of saying, like, "Oh, I'm going to give you a lenient sentence," like, throws the max at him. And Carl has to serve five more years in prison in democratic West Germany.

JVN [00:51:19] [JVN SIGHS] So how did the new federal public defend their actions? They were, like, "Well, yeah, queer people are a threat or whatever, like, they were right about that."

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:51:27] They, you know, consistently said that gay people were not victims of the Nazi regime. They were criminals that had essentially gotten what was coming to them. And after, especially after the, the death and bloodshed of World War II, the democratic government, which was led by a pretty conservative Christian political party, it was actually called the Christian Democratic Union, asserted that West Germany needed to essentially up its birth rate because so many men had been lost during the war. And so they really upheld this idea of the ideal German was a father and a mother who got married and had a big family and that, you know, showed "good traditional Christian Democratic values." Hauntingly similar arguments that the Nazis had made about why homosexuality was a threat.

JVN [00:52:27] So basically those, like, traditional family values ideas just immediately come straight back into play. And it's really central to their vision of, like, how they needed to rebuild Germany after World War Two, through that family structure of like, mom, dad, kids. But now you can be, like, any race or religion. You just had to be het cis—or cis het.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:52:47] Pretty much, yeah.

JVN [00:52:49] So what alternative spaces and networks did queer people build like this? Does Berlin get, like, a teeny tiny little underground back? Does Hamburg or, like, no.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:52:57] Not really. I mean, there is kind of the the seeds of a queer space that that start to form after the war. But they know, right, that, the West Germany is really strictly enforcing Paragraph 175. And so it really can't, it can't blossom as much as they hoped. There is the very kind of baby seeds of a, of a gay press, this start in the late 1940s and early 1950s. But in 1953 West Germany passes this law, what they called The Law Against The Distribution Of Written Material That Endangers Youth. So this is a law that they use, amongst other things, to ban homosexual publications because it's supposedly a danger to the youth. And suddenly, now, all of these, you know, emerging queer publications are illegal again. And so all of the spaces where queer people are able to talk about themselves in positive ways and even talk about themselves as victims of the Nazi regime are gone. It's off the shelf.

JVN [00:54:00] [JVN PROCESSING] Wow. So in your book, you connect a politics of memory with a politics of power. How does this play out with treatment of queer Germans post-WWII? It's kind of like what we just were talking about.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:54:10] We all construct our memories of the past. And whether we do it intentionally or not, we pick and choose how we remember past events. And the politics of the present always shape the memories of the past. So queer Holocaust survivors or queer survivors of the Nazi concentration camps tried to be recognized as victims of the Nazi regime. But lawmakers and police and journalists and historians in West Germany all used their, their power to remember queer people as criminals and not victims. Right. They wrote them out of history books, which allowed the persecution to continue.

JVN [00:54:53] And so then in the seventies, which is, like, you know, Stonewall in the US in '69, queer rights movements are kind of starting to bubble. And then in the 1970s, a politically active gay movement emerges in West Germany. So, like, what conditions led to its rise?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:55:07] Right, so as you just mentioned, across the world, there are these social movements for people who have been marginalized. By the end of the 1960s, this Christian Democratic Union in West Germany was out of power and the Social Democrats were in. And so we start to see kind of a social and political shift. In 1969, the West German government actually revises Paragraph 175. They don't get rid of it, but they at least get rid of the Nazi version, and they essentially make it legal to be gay as long as you're over the age of 21. Right, so this clears the way for a gay movement to, to emerge. And I think that by this point in 1971, coming out was a political tactic. It wasn't just a personal decision to publicly claim a gay identity. If enough people came out, it would help liberate the entire community from kind of social stigmatization. So it started all of these debates amongst West German queer activists about, "How does one be out? Like, how should one be openly queer?" And there was a group in Germany who was really driving this decision who I just, it's one of those groups that you just really love to read about in history, called the Tunten, which translates in English to, like, "fairies" or "queens." And so they were very purposefully gender non-conforming gay men who were visibly queer. Right? Sometimes they might wear, like, jeans and high heels and makeup, very purposefully challenging the kind of traditional gender norms of what it means to be, like, "a man and a woman," right.

And so these Tunten challenged this myth that Germany had learned from its past and was somehow, like, a really tolerant society. And they said that the gay movement needed to adopt a gay logo so that even straight-passing gays could see how society would treat openly gay people. So, of course, this opened up all kind of debates about, like, "What would a gay logo be?" Or, "How you want to market oneself as gay to the rest of the community?" And there were all these different suggestions for a gay logo. But in 1972, there was a book published under a pseudonym named Heinz Heger. But the title of the book was called The Men With The Pink Triangle. And it was the very first book published by a gay concentration

camp survivor who told their story. And so suddenly, like, the gay movement had their answer for what their symbol was going to be. And in March of 1972, there was this leftist, kind of communist group in Frankfurt called RotZSchwul, who used the pink triangle as a gay symbol for the very first time. And Peter Hedenstrum, who was a activist and member of a group called The HAW, which was, like, the the gay activist group of West Berlin, said that the pink triangle was a perfect symbol for them because it not only provided visibility, but it also represented a chapter of German history that hadn't been dealt with yet. So these activists are wearing the pink triangles, like, on, on posters and on fliers and at demonstrations all over Germany.

JVN [00:58:22] So once they, in 1971, like basically, you know, revised Paragraph 175. And then there's these demonstrations. This visibility *does* translate into political rights. Right?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:58:35] I mean, not not always or at least not right away. But I think that raising awareness and putting this issue into the public consciousness was the first step in starting the movement to turn those political rights into reality. And there's a historian, Craig Griffiths, in the UK who's written a really great book called The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation. That kind of teases out some of these successes and losses of the early gay liberation movement.

JVN [00:59:02] Cause, like, doesn't racism and sexism have to do a lot with, like, some of the failures of the early gay liberation movement?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [00:59:09] At least in West Germany, gay men and lesbians had worked very closely together, at least in the beginning of the movement. And the West German gay movement had really considered itself to be kind of intersectional in a lot of ways in that it was, like, anti-war and pro-environment. But soon it became clear that the movement was mostly focused on issues that were of direct relevance to cis gay men. And lesbians really ended up having to break off and form organizations that met their specific needs as both queer and as women. At the same time, the West German movement did not really see racism as a German problem because most Germans considered Germany to be a, like, a "white country." But really, this, this erases the fact that Black Germans and other Germans of color existed and they had existed for generations. So this racism led to essentially segregated queer spaces where Black queer Germans had to form their own organizations to meet their needs. And scholar Tiffany Florvil has also written a lot about this, especially queer women in Germany.

JVN [01:00:16] So but then it being triangle starts to make its way to the U.S. because I feel like in the early nineties when I was growing up, like I knew that the pin triangle had something to do with gay stuff and, like, HIV/AIDS stuff. So, like, what meanings emerged for the triangle as it makes its way to the United States?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:00:32] Doing historical research, it's often hard to pinpoint, like, an exact moment of when an idea emerges or when something, you know, moves or changes. But I was really obsessed with trying to find *the* moment that the triangle jumped the Atlantic and arrived in North America. And I was really able to find that it all comes down to a guy named James or Jim Szekely, who was a Ph.D. student at Cornell. In the early 1970s, he visited West Germany many times, and he ended up joining some of those Haave, or the gay rights group meetings. And he speaks English and German. So he's able to learn about the pink triangle, about the history of it. And he brings this information with him back to North America, where he ends up writing for a really cool queer liberation newspaper in Toronto called The Body Politic. And he writes a series of articles on gay German history.

And the January and February issue of 1974 is all about gay men in Nazi Germany and like the cover story very prominently, features a pink triangle. And so this is the first time that information about the pink triangle makes its way to an English speaking audience in North America. In August of 1974, the Gay Activist Alliance in New York City at the recommendation of David Thorstad and John Larson designed a pink triangle button for a protest that they're going to do in New York City. And this becomes the first documented instance of the pink triangles use as a gay rights symbol in the United States. So from there, the pink triangle is used by American gay activists in tons of different ways all across the country.

JVN [01:02:22] And it also becomes part of, like, AIDS activism too, I feel like.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:02:26] Yeah. So by the 1980s, when the AIDS crisis is well under way, I think a lot of folks think of the really now iconic Silence Equals Death poster that the group ACT UP used. This group of six activist artists in New York City get together and they design a poster to motivate the queer community into action. And what they designed is this now really famous poster of the pink triangle, with the peak facing up and the SILENCE = DEATH motto.

JVN [01:02:58] Yes, that's I think that's, so that's, like, when it really goes, like, mainstream. But it had been being used for a hot minute. So is the use of the pink triangle all contested it in these times, or where people ever, like, "Mmm…"?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:03:11] So there were some times where people resisted it and said, "Look, okay, we can't compare, you know, facing some social discrimination with being sent to a concentration camp. That's just not the right thing to do." There were some people who argued that the gay community shouldn't use it because they didn't want the gay community's identity to always be tied to victimization. But clearly, despite some of this resistance, the pink triangle became incredibly powerful and meaningful to people from all kinds of different backgrounds.

JVN [01:03:48] Yes. So as we start to wrap up, which by the way, honey, such an amazing episode. We know how important it is to talk about archives and how we source our material,

how we get into our research. So how did you conduct your research for Pink Triangle Legacies?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:04:03] So in Germany, the big kind of state and national archives had very little information on the topic of queer people in the Nazi period or on gay folks in the movement afterwards. And in fact, there's a story about in the 1990s, there's an archive in Hamburg that got caught destroying case files of the Nazis' gay victims to make room for what they called "more archive-worthy material." So there is a very active process of erasure and silencing that still is happening even after German unification. So for my research, I had to rely on a handful of community-based, really grassroots archives, right? These were the results of queer people who were finding and collecting and preserving their own history, sometimes in, like, random cardboard boxes or even Ziploc bags. One exception is the Schulz Museum in Berlin, which is kind of unique in that it is well established and has great funding.

I want to provide two examples to kind of show you what it was like to do research on this topic in Germany. And the first is as I was in the United States, I was trying to plan my research trip in Germany. I found this archive online that I knew was going to have information that I needed. I emailed with the archivist, set up a, an appointment for me to to come and research there in the archives. This was, like, way back in the day before Google Maps on your phones. Like, I had to print out MapQuest, I guess, like, directions. And I showed up to the address and I was in an apartment complex and I was, like, "Oh, no, did I like, write down the directions wrong?" But I find the doorbell, I ring it. And it turns out that this archives was actually this guy's apartment. He had been collecting so much over his life that it ended up being one of the most well-organized, impressive archives that I've ever seen. But it just goes to show that literally, without these individuals who have dedicated their life to collecting and preserving this material, it wouldn't it wouldn't be in the big archives.

Another one is the called The Center for Gay History in Cologne. And again, I would have to meet this guy, the archivist, who would get off of work at five o'clock and meet me in the archives. Like, we would both just sit there eating our, like, sandwiches or whatever, you know? And he would just sit with me until I rummaged through and found the information that I needed. And then he would go home, you know, and live his life. This was all based on volunteer community dedication to preserving this history. So really, this book and really no queer history would be possible without these, these keepers of the archive.

JVN [01:06:41] God, we love them.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:06:43] Absolutely.

JVN [01:06:44] What were some of, like, the stand-out documents or, like, conversations from that work?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:06:48] I mentioned the Tunten, the fairies in, in West Germany, who really were the ones to push for the adoption of the Pink Triangle. In the archives there is a 25-page document where they are laying out kind of the history of the pink triangle, why the gay movement needs any symbol. And then they talk about why we need the pink triangle specifically. So like just being able to find a moment where, you know, as a historian you're trying to find "Why did someone choose this particular document?" And then you find a 25-page document that actually lays out why we chose this symbol is just incredible. But I would say over the process of researching and writing Pink Triangle Legacies, the thing that I'm most thankful for is being able to interview and then learn from all of these incredible queer giants who have, fought for rights and essentially created the world that I get to enjoy with my husband and my son today. You know, having that moment to get to thank them for that is something that I will just always cherish.

JVN [01:07:57] I'm really struck by that idea, especially in this moment we're having, you know, some sort of push back to the overturning Roe v. Wade. But I think a lot of activists have been saying, you know, they're, like, "They're coming for queer rights next." And a lot of queer people have been, like, "What do you mean next?" Like, with what's happening with trans people in legislatures across the country. It's going to soon be federal if the Republicans take the House and Senate and, you know, they're already trying to, like, legislate trans bans federally. As a historian who studies this, how are you making sense of this moment?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:08:25] It's really alarming to me. The Don't Say Gay bills, right, are trying to say that queer topics are inappropriate and essentially queerness should go back into the closet. That you have no right to be visibly, openly queer. And I think that's where the pink triangle has a lesson for us, is that actually we do need to fight for that right to be openly queer. Did you know, Jonathan, that Gilbert Baker designed the rainbow flag, right. Great. But he designed it as a direct antidote to the pink triangle. He and Harvey Milk wanted something that was more joyful, had more soul for the gay community. And I'll just say that, I have a rainbow flag outside my house. But despite the cliches, there's not always a rainbow after the storm. And I think that for us, at this exact moment in time, we need something that will radically motivate us to action. Honestly, I wish that the queer community would reclaim the pink triangle again. Right. And revive it as a really intersectional symbol of radical activism again.

JVN [01:09:28] Rainbows can be for us when we're, like, a group, parties, festivals for us. But outward-facing, because it's a both and we don't have to choose. They're like, they're perfect for different times, places. When we're dealing with the Kevin McCarthys or the Trumps of the world. Bitch, it's pink triangle, bitch. I'm about to pink triangle, okay? But when we're just, like, you know, trying to mind our own business, like, you and your husband are, like, going on a walk with your son, then you can, you know, that you can have or you can have both. Like, I'm a very like "both and" type of person, you know?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:09:58] "Both and" is right. And I just think that sometimes, you know, we need that reminder from history that, like, we, we have these rights but we need to fight like hell to protect them because the pink triangle shows us what happens if we don't.

JVN [01:10:11] So we got to interview Dr. Elizabeth Alexander earlier this year about monuments and what monuments mean. Are there any, like, monuments for queer victims or survivors of Nazi rule?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:10:22] There weren't for a long, long time, which really shouldn't be a surprise. Right. Gay people tried to take part in the annual commemoration ceremonies after the Holocaust, but they were constantly told, like, "Nope, you can't take part." The first physical memorial to the Nazis' gay victims was proposed in 1985 at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial site. But it was denied. It was denied for, for a decade. It wasn't allowed to be installed at the memorial site until 1995. There actually at this point is a national memorial in Berlin to the Nazis' gay victims. It was dedicated in 2008. Today, there are about 20 monuments in six different countries across the world, which demonstrates that this chapter of German history has now taken on global dimensions where folks across the world believe that this is something that should be memorialized. While the construction of memorials and these sites across the world is certainly something to be celebrated, it also raises some issues and questions about the nature of the memories that are preserved by these memorials.

So for, for one thing, a lot of the research and the public education and the narratives that are told by these memorials focus on Paragraph 175 and concentration camp pink triangle prisoners, while contributing to the continued marginalization of other people, you know, like lesbians and trans and gender non-conforming people. Now, that's not to say that scholarship and research on these other members of the community doesn't exist. I mean, for example, Claudia Schoppmann who was one of the first and really remains the leading expert on lesbians during the Holocaust. And she is an incredibly prolific author who has documented, you know, countless lives of lesbians. Some died or survived the Holocaust. There are, you know, a new wave of researchers who are documenting other queer experiences, including Laurie Marhoefer, Jennifer Evans, and Anna Hájková, just to name a few who are really shining a light on these members of the LGBTQ community beyond and beyond queer men.

Of course, as we talked about earlier, all of these politics of memory have consequences. So, for example, lesbian activists and grassroots scholars have been trying for decades to commemorate and memorialize the lesbians who died at Ravensbrück, which was the Nazi concentration camp for women. There have been ceremonies, commemorative ceremonies at Ravensbrück, or at least attempted since the eighties. But since 2016, a group known as the Initiative of Autonomous Feminist Women and Lesbians in Germany and Austria have petitioned to place a, a permanent memorial to the lesbian victims at Ravensbrück. And they have faced extreme backlash from folks who were saying that because there wasn't a single

law like Paragraph 175 or because there wasn't a single kind of triangle category for lesbian inmates in the camps, that lesbians weren't really persecuted.

And I think that one of the things that at least was shocking to me at the beginning was that a lot of the resistance is coming from gay men. Right, who are saying that, "Oh, well, you can't compare what the what gay men and lesbians went through because gay men, you know, were targeted with a specific law and they had a pink triangle. They had their own category." But I think that one of the things that we need to learn is that we need to have a truly inclusive memory. This year, in 2022, was the very first time that the memorial to the lesbians at Ravensbrück was able to be permanently dedicated there at the Ravensbrück Memorial site. 2022. I think to me shows that this history has taken on a global dimension, right, in that people are realizing that it's not just that Germans can commemorate, but that all of us should remember.

JVN [01:14:51] And a note on intersectionality, there were also queer Jewish people who had to stay in prison. Like, if you were a common criminal who was convicted of sodomy or Article 175 and you were Jewish, you didn't automatically get let out afterwards because you were Jewish. So, like, there's intersectional ways. Is that right?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:15:12] Yeah, I would say so. I mean, and then in cases like that, it might depend on the individual allied officer who was, you know, reviewing the file and they could say, like, "Look, you're Jewish and you probably got, you know, persecuted for, for your religious or racial identity. So I might let you go." Or if that person happened to be a particularly homophobic person, they could say, "Oh, we also see that you got arrested under 175, so we're going to keep you here."

JVN [01:15:38] Intersectionality is so important to think about. So in 1979, a German lesbian activist named Viola Fielderwild?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:15:48] Mhm. Viola Fli– Fliederwild.

JVN [01:15:51] Fliederwild! I love her. Made a flyer that said "Normalcy? No thanks." I love her. So what's the importance of saying no thanks to normalcy?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:15:59] History shows us that we should never have to fit into anyone's definition of normal. Right. Because who, who gets to define that? Right. Talk about the politics of power. Right. When you define normal, you're always signaling, you know, that entire groups of people are not normal. So we don't even have to look at Holocaust history to see the result of of, you know, what happens with there. I mean, American history has plenty of examples for us to, to learn from. And so I think that we should all be leery of trying to fit into what's normal, or as, you know, Florida's Don't Say Gay Bill, it calls it "age appropriate." We, we should be really leery of those types of definitions.

JVN [01:16:42] And my final question is, how do you feel that we can live in ways that honor queer history?

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:16:47] I think on the one hand, I hope that we are inspired to turn our queer ancestors' dreams into reality. We, we can't become complacent and just reap the benefits of what previous generations have fought for. We have to continue to help open up doors for others who continue to be the targets of oppression. And I think the best way to honor queer history is with action. We have to create space and resources for all, all of the different wonderful ways of being queer.

JVN [01:17:20] Honey, I love you so much. Thank you so much for your time, your work, your scholarship. This is just been, like, such a massive joy. Dr. Jake Newsome, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious and your book Pink Triangle Legacies. Get into it, y'all.

W. JAKE NEWSOME [01:17:33] Thank you, Jonathan.

JVN [01:17:34] Thank you. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Dr. Jake Newsome. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.