

Comments for LGBT-RAN DINNER, May 2010

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Thank you so much for inviting me to be here. It is a tremendous honor for me to be recognized by LGBT-RAN, an organization whose mission has so much academic, cultural, and political stake for the LGBT community, for faith communities, and not least for professional scholars. Mark has asked me to say a few words about how I came to my project.

During my PhD coursework at Berkeley, an academic advisor asked me to review his new survey of modern Jewish history before it went to publication. The survey was superb and, as any good survey should, it synthesized all of the most up-to-date scholarship in the field, paying particular attention to women's history and the too-often neglected non-European Jewish communities. But there was no mention of LGBT history or LGBT Jews in his survey of over 500 page; which, of course, annoyed me and I mentioned as much to him-- though as politely as I could.

"But how does gay history relate to *Jewish* history?" he asked me, "What was the story here beyond simply asserting that gay Jews existed?" Was I merely asking him to include a "who's who" list of lesbian and gay Jews in his narrative? "Show me how to place LGBT history into Jewish history; show me how and why gay history matters as a *Jewish* story and I'll do it." In short, was there a way to narrate a gay Jewish history that was meaningful for both historiographies?

I couldn't answer my advisor when he posed them to me, but his questions have been driving my work ever since. The fact is that there was virtually no historical literature on the subject for my advisor to synthesize in his survey. There has been almost no serious scholarly engagement, either among Jewish or gay historians, with the historical experience of homosexual Jews or the question of homosexuality in the modern Jewish experience (I am speaking here of Jewish history prior to Stonewall but in the modern period).

In my dissertation, my interest is to bring these two disparate historical traditions into conversation with each other, to bring gay history into Jewish history, to demonstrate the stakes of lesbian and gay history for Jewish history and vice versa, and to inaugurate a new subfield that my advisor could incorporate in his second edition.

The paper which you've awarded tonight was my first attempt at giving my advisor an answer to these questions.

Jiří Langer, the protagonist of my story, was a prolific writer of poetry, folk literature, history, and psychoanalytic anthropology in German, Hebrew, and Czech during the interwar period. Almost all of his writing touches on gay and queer themes, but he has been ignored by scholars until now. Langer was affiliated with the famous interwar "Prague literary circle" and was a close friend of Franz Kafka and Max Brod. Kafka liked Langer very much, but even by Kafka's standards Langer was a bizarre figure, and Kafka mentions as much in his diaries. Langer was something of a local scandal for living quite visibly as an eastern-European Hasid in a heavily

secular, German-Jewish interwar Prague. As an adolescent he ran away from home to live with Eastern-European Hasidim in today's Hungary; he transformed his dress, his hair and his entire lifestyle to conform with Hasidic tradition and he returned home during the Great War to shock his family and friends with his new lifestyle. His own brother later described him as *the living incarnation* of Kafka's Gregor Samsa in the *Metamorphosis*; Langer returns home from the Hasidic court to find himself transformed into a giant bug, alienated from his family and community after coming out of his Hasidic closet, walking around bougie-Jewish Prague as a kind of Hasidic freak or as Max Brod put it "as a walking relic of the middle ages." In my paper I analyze the very complicated family dynamic around Langer, and I argue that his brother constructed an elaborate coming-out-as-Hasid narrative to hide a much deeper troubling fact-- Jiri Langer had "come out" as an open homosexual as well.

When I first came across Langer's name in the secondary literature on Kafka, I wondered if Kafka's Gregor, long read as a metaphor of the closet for queers, was modeled on Jiri, whose German name "Georg" is an anagram of "Gregor." I wasn't able to find evidence to validate this hunch, but it didn't matter, I had discovered something much more interesting in the life and work of Langer himself.

The first discovery I made was that Langer had left a rich record of what is perhaps the earliest cultural articulation of a homosexual-Jewish consciousness and identity. In his many published writings, Langer adumbrated a history of homosexual Jews from antiquity to modernity; he developed what we might call today a form of queer spirituality based in Jewish mysticism and folklore; he located almost all of the major texts and historical epochs in Jewish history and rabbinic literature that lend themselves to queer readings, anticipating almost all of the post-Stonewall writing on queer issues in Jewish Studies, and he wrote the first explicitly homoerotic and homosexual verses in modern Hebrew poetry. In his literary production, I argue, Langer renegotiated the relationship between homosexuality and Judaism and opened a space for homosexuals in traditional Judaism and Jewish culture.

My second discovery was that in trying to reconcile his dual identities as both an Orthodox Jew and as a gay man, Langer engaged and responded to the reigning sexological discourses on homosexuality and to the birth of homosexual politics taking place around him in interwar Central Europe. In the process, Langer filters the language of sexology and homosexual political emancipation through a religious prism. He understood his sexual subjectivity in Jewish terms and his work provides us with an alternative model of gay identity that complicated the language of sexology, psychology, and pathology and which grounded his sexual subjectivity in history and religion.

These two discoveries I made in Langer's life and work exemplify the potential that LGBT Jewish history has for both gay and Jewish history. My focus on the intersection of gay and religious history reveals how colorful and variegated the possibilities were for the expression of identity; with the support of institutions like LGBT-RAN scholars like me will continue to tell these untold stories in LGBT religious history. I'm incredibly grateful for this award and I hope you all continue to enjoy your dinner tonight.