

Liddy's story. Queer Musings on Sainthood

Traugott Roser

1 Introduction: St. Maurice and the Community of Saints

Every morning, with my first cup of tea, I check the »ecumenical saint of the day«. Today's saint is St. Maurice or Mauritius, one of the few saints born in Africa.¹ Maurice supposedly was an Egyptian military leader heading the Theban Legion of Rome in the 3rd century. He is one of the most widely venerated saints and the patron saint of several professions, locales, and kingdoms. His legion was entirely composed of Christians. When Emperor Maximian ordered them to offer sacrifices to the Roman deities and pay homage to himself, their emperor, Maurice refused and stated that adoration was only due towards God and not human beings. Maximian then ordered them to murder local Christians. Again, Maurice and his soldiers refused. Maximian's third order was fulfilled, however: all members of the legion, Maurice included, were executed and became martyrs for not complying to the power and might. From the 13th century on, Christian iconography pictured Maurice as a Person of Color. While Mathis Gothart Grünewald around 1520 also pictured St. Maurice as a Black African soldier in a huge painting of an encounter with St. Erasmus, 60 years later El Greco depicted the saint as a white bearded, muscular young man, surrounded by other white young men, in his gigantic oil on canvas painting »The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice« (4.45 m x 2.94 m!). Later statues and paintings present the African saint mostly as white Caucasian man, in line with the majority of a Eurocentric Community of Saints. After learning about Pauli Murray's life² and contribution to the Civil Rights movement and contribution to the Episcopal Church in der USA, I wonder why the color – and with it the assumable ethnicity – of St Maurice was hidden. What is the place for minorities in the community of saints?

1 See Schäfer, Joachim: »Mauritius«, in: Ökumenisches Heiligenlexikon: <https://www.heiligenlexikon.de/BiographienM/Mauritius.htm> (last accessed: 10.05.2024).

2 See the article by McCray, Donyelle C.: »Consolations of a Pixie Priest«, in this volume.

Abb. 1: St. Maurice statue at the Dome of Magdeburg, ca. 1245³



Protestants are said to be critical if not sceptical towards the veneration of saints as they fear that veneration comes close to idolatry. Protestants are especially hesitant towards the Roman Catholic protocol and regulations of beatification, canonization and glorification procedures. The declaration of a deceased person as an officially recognized saint requires proof of their virtuous life, giving witness to the faith the person lived by, and at least one, better two miracles following intercessory prayer by the venerated. It is hard to imagine that any openly gay, lesbian, polyamorous, trans or otherwise queer person would be able to pass the

3 Photo by J. Schäfer, see J. Schäfer, Mauritius (note 1).

canonization protocol. However, the Lutheran tradition is no stranger to the idea of saints: Article 21 of the *Confessio Augustana* (1530) says

»of the service of the saints[:] it is taught by us that we should remember the saints, so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they were graced and also how they were helped through faith; moreover, we should take their good works as an example, each in his profession.«

This understanding is an opening for my musings on queer sainthood. What kind of witness, or even martyrdom of a queer person would it be that strengthens our faith? What works would we consider as good example to live a faithful life? Why should a person belonging to one of the LGBTIQ+ communities be considered to also belong to the community of saints?

2 Liddy's story

I want to introduce you to Liddy Bacroff, a martyr in her own kind, murdered during the dark days of Germany's so-called ›Third Reich‹.

If the Nazis had had their way, nobody would be able to remember Liddy Bacroff. Nothing would be left to remind of her existence. Her murderers not only wanted to take her life, but also her name and every proof of her existence erased from human memory on this planet, just like they did with people like her, millions of Jews, Sinti and Roma, Jehova's Witnesses, political opponents and Christians unwilling to take part in the idolatry of Adolf Hitler. The Nazis sent Liddy Bacroff to the Mauthausen concentration camp and killed her. However, although brutal and dehumanizing killing methods were industrialized, they did not succeed to erase all memory and names. There is ongoing work of remembrance. In many cities, towns and villages you will stumble over a golden paving stone with name and biographical data of a person deported or killed by the Nazi regime. One of those paving stones bears Liddy's name. I stumbled across her name while I was searching for my grandfather on the website of the Mauthausen concentration camp. Today there is a memorial site, collecting names and biographical information on every inmate. An archive of martyrs, an archive of saints in their own way.

Born Heinrich Habitz⁴ on 19 August 1908 in Ludwigshafen, she was considered a difficult child. She played with dolls and could not keep her hands off her mother's

4 All biographical information taken from Rosenkranz, Bernhard/Bollmann, Ulf: »Heinrich Habitz (gen. Liddy Bacroff)«, in: Andreas Kranebitter (Hg.): *Gedenkbuch für die Toten des KZ Mauthausen und seiner Außenlager*. Band 1: Kommentare und Biografien, Wien: new academic press 2016, S. 217–219.

lipstick. Several stays in children's homes could not ›correct‹ her behaviour or change anything, Heinrich was Liddy. A career of forced admissions to prisons began. The only shelter for someone like Liddy were brothels, where she would be able to pay for food and clothing by the money customers would give her in exchange for intimate encounters and sexual service. But brothels were no safe spaces, not for Liddy. Some of her clients, under fear of being put to prison for committing a crime against the Nazi law, gave away her name. Because of the amendment of Section 175 of the German Criminal Code by the National Socialists in 1935 »a male who commit[ed] lewd and lascivious acts with another male, or permit[ed] himself to be so abused for lewd and lascivious acts, [had to] be punished by imprisonment«⁵ with hard labor. Liddy was sentenced several times for ›unnatural fornication‹ and imprisoned for several years; in 1936 she was deprived of her civil rights. During the trials at court, Liddy ›confessed‹ to regularly and habitually engage in ›unnatural behaviour‹. On April 4, 1938, Liddy asked to be castrated in order ›to get rid of her pathological vice‹, but this was denied by the judge who argued that she would not stop working as »passive paederast«: A forensic pathologist from the Hamburg health office had coldly stated that she lacked any higher emotional powers and was »a corrupter of morals of the worst kind [...] and must] be eliminated from the Volksgemeinschaft«⁶. Liddy was finally sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. There she was murdered on 6th January, 1943.

In the beginning of her years of suffering, forced self-denial and torture, she still put her experiences into texts and poems, but later she only fought for her survival. The titles of her texts were »Freedom (the tragedy of a homosexual love)« and »Experience of a Transvestite. The adventure of a night at the transvestite's Bar Adlon«⁷.

In memory of Liddy Bacroff and honouring her life, a stumbling stone⁸ is put into the pavement in Hamburg-Center, at Simon-von-Utrecht-Straße 76–79, with her name and dates. Painstaking memorial work attempts to reconstruct each indi-

5 Cited in Burgi, Martin/Wolff, Daniel: Rehabilitation of homosexual men convicted pursuant to Section 175 of the German Criminal Code (Rehabilitierung der nach § 175 StGB verurteilten homosexuellen Männer), 2016 (https://www.antidiskriminierungsstelle.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/publikationen/legal_opinion_paragraph_175.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3; last accessed: 10.05.2024), p. 15.

6 Cited by B. Rosenkranz/U. Bollmann: Heinrich Habitz (note 4), my (T.R.) translation.

7 Arolsen Archives: »#prideuntold: Liddy Bacroff«, 31.08.2021: <https://arolsen-archives.org/news/prideuntold-liddy-bacroff/> (last accessed: 10.05.2024). »Freiheit! (Die Tragödie einer homosexuellen Liebe)« und »Ein Erlebnis als Transvestit. Das Abenteuer einer Nacht in der Transvestitenbar Adlon!«, my (T.R.) translation.

8 See Rosenkranz, Bernhard/Bollmann, Ulf: »Heinrich Habitz gen. ›Liddy Bacroff‹ * 1908. Simon-von-Utrecht-Straße 76–79 (Hamburg-Mitte, St. Pauli)«, in: Stolpersteine Hamburg: https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de/?MAIN_ID=7&BIO_ID=791 (last accessed: 10.05.2024).

vidual life and to wrest it from anonymising shame. This project is a work of love, a witness of justification of life stories.

Dear friends and colleagues, participants in this congress, Liddy is a saint in her own right. Born to a single mother and later adopted by her mother's husband (thus the name Habitz), she spent her first years with her grandparents. Ludwigshafen's population was equally catholic and protestant; it is not known to which denomination she belonged, but it is highly probable that she was baptized. Nothing is known about her religious and spiritual life. Since she was considered to not be worthy of belonging to the community of the ›Volk‹, nobody cared to know more about her.

Except for the photographer at the police department in Hamburg.

Abb. 2: Liddy Bacroff⁹



The official photo taken at the Criminal-Biological Department of Hamburg police presents Liddy as a self-aware and artistic person, smiling at the camera, and presenting herself with beauty and dignity.

As a protestant member of the queer community, I want Liddy to be part of our community of saints. As part of the Christian church, I want Liddy's story to be part of the larger narrative of the justification by faith. Liddy lived her life and stayed

9 Source: Staatsarchiv Hamburg StAHH 242–4 Kriminalbiologische Sammelstelle, S. 339.

true to her ideals. I truly hope that she found some help and strength through faith during the unbearable suffering. I trust that she felt God's grace and her own dignity that none of her prosecutors could take away from her.

Let us join for a moment to meditate on Liddy Bacroff's life and the struggles many queer persons have to go through in many places of this world, where they are criminalized, marginalized and victimized. Words by the British band Coldplay may guide us through this moment. It is a song about saints, a song for saints, a song asking the Holy One to be there when they need a friend.¹⁰

Holy, holy, dove descend
Soft and slowly
When I'm near the end

Holy, holy, dark defend
Shield me, should me
When I need a friend

Slowly, slowly, violence end
Love reign o'er me
When I need a friend

There is diversity in the community of saints. There are Persons of Color, persons from all kinds of ethnic and cultural background. There are lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transpersons, nonbinary persons and queer persons among the community of saints. They should be visible. Their stories need to be told. We can pray for them, as much as they will pray for us. We are one community of saints. We are one through Christ who is holy.

10 Coldplay: »When I Need a Friend«, from the album »Everyday Life« (2019), Words & music: Christopher Anthony John Martin/Guy Rupert Berryman/Jonathan Mark Buckland/William Champion. © Universal Music Publishing Group.