WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY
INTERVIEWS

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An Interview with Hans Wiggo Kristiansen

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Hans's Home in Gjøvik, Norway

Hans Wiggo Kristiansen: My name is Hans Wiggo Kristiansen and I am 43 years old. I was born in the south of Norway and studied in Oslo for twelve years. I am a social anthropologist; I did my fieldwork in 1993 in Santiago de Chile, where I wrote a thesis on male homosexual identity, mostly in the poor neighborhoods of Chile. After that I worked at the research institute *NOVA* Research Institute (Norwegian Social Research), where I worked on a large-scale research project on the living conditions of gays and lesbians in Norway, which was published in 1999. The report made much noise because the results -at least when it came to young people- were alarming. We found out that one in four young persons with a gay or lesbian identity had tried to commit suicide. These suicide numbers were really alarming. We had 3000 gay and lesbian men and women answer the questionnaire. We got much attention from the media, so the report had an important impact on the debate on LGBT issues in general because the gay and lesbian movement used the numbers strategically to raise money for their work.

After that I started to work on a PhD project about older gay men in Norway. I did life story interviews with 23 men mostly in their 70s and 80s. This became a social historical project where I focused on how their lives were in the 1950s and 1960s and on all the meeting places where they met: tea houses, toilets, parks, etc. I got my Ph.D. in 2004 and later on got a new grant from the *Norwegian Research Council* to do a more broad social historical survey on the period -before the Stonewall riots- between the 1920s and the 1970s in Norway. In this project I used an interesting methodology because I focused on the countryside and on the inland region. I did interviews with older gay men and some lesbian women, but mostly with older heterosexuals that grew up in small communities and many of them had things to tell about people they knew, about male-male or female-female couples that they knew in their childhood. They had a lot of indirect information about the conditions of homosexuality in the rural communities in Norway. This research was published in a book in 2008.

CM: An interesting place to begin is the historical perspective of homosexuality from the 1920s to the 1970s. Many people have talked to me about homosexuality in Norway from the 1960s onwards, about the formation of the gay and lesbian movement and about the ground breaking legislation that has occurred during this period. Not too many people have focused on the living conditions of homosexuals in Norway in the early part of the twentieth century.

HWK: One of the main points that I make in the book is that what is called the “gay liberation” is *a* narrative of history, a kind of history that has been told or that has been created from the 1970s onwards, mostly by people within the gay and lesbian movement, and that has often been very black-and-white. The period before the 1970s has been painted as a very sinister and dark era for homosexuals. That history has focused on the countryside as the worst of places for gays and lesbians in the past. What surprised me when I started to do these interviews was that many people told me that there had been same sex couples living in small villages in Norway and that everyone had known about them and accepted them. My impression based on these interviews is that the level of acceptance of same sex sexuality was greater than it has been presented by the gay liberation narrative, which tries to contrast the past to the present. They suggest that there was liberation from the dark ages of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. I think that is very exaggerated and has lost a lot of the nuances of history.

CM: Did the stories told to you by the heterosexuals in the countryside about gays and lesbians coincide with the stories told to you by homosexuals?

HWK: Yes, in many ways. When I did the life story interviews with older gay men who identify as homosexual in the present, some of them were even nostalgic of the past. They said that the 1950s were their golden years because during that time there were a lot of meeting places such as teahouses, parks, public toilets, etc. According to some of them, later on, especially in the 1970s, that kind of infrastructure started to decay.

CM: Could you speak more in detail about these circumstances and about those meeting places? How may the gay and lesbian movement have contributed to dissolving those platforms?

HWK: I don't really think that they blame the gay and lesbian movement for dissolving those platforms, but they said that the networks that existed, the male networks in the 1940s and the 1950s, were often very closed and it was very difficult to get access to them. People met in private, mostly in private homes, and at dinner parties. They said that there was a very large degree of solidarity within these environments, so when people were introduced to these networks, many friends and people helped each other out, which made it a really nice environment to be a part of. Even though there was a law prohibiting same sex between men until 1973, many of them said they didn't really know about it -I never met anyone who actually was punished or had known a man who had been put into prison for same sex relations. It seems that that law was more or less a sleeping law.

CM: Why do you begin your research in the 1920s?

HWK: Because I mainly used oral sources for the interviews and that is how far you can get back in history using oral sources. People who are now in their 90s grew up in the 1920s.

CM: You seem to have focused on oral histories: what are the parallel narratives brought forth by your interviewees, for example the medical narrative, the psychological narrative and the legal narrative of that period?

HWK: I think an important narrative in Norway has been the religious narrative. The cultural narrative has been very much influenced by religion. I think it is fair to say that homosexuality or same sex sexuality was not thematized within the Church until the 1950s. People didn't talk much about same sex sexuality as a sin; it was just something that didn't exist in a way. A known theologian argued that the situation before the mid 1950s was more or less a situation of silence, the Church didn't talk about homosexuality overtly. Only from the mid 1950s onwards they started to actively oppose homosexuality; they defended the law against same sex sexuality between men and said that if we were to abolish that law it would represent a great danger to humanity. That changed towards the 1970s and 1980s when the Church became at least more accepting of the individual; they used to say that they didn't like the homosexual act but that they accepted the individual. Since the 1990s there have been more acceptances, at least in some parts of Norway, priests started to be able to live in relationships, partnerships or marriages with persons of their same sex, so we started to have same sex practicing priests.

This shows you that the acceptance gradually grew but what I am most interested in is the silence that used to exist before the 1950s, and how that silence was *enabling* to homosexuals. When people didn't talk or make scandals about same sex sexuality it gave homosexuals the possibility to live discreet lives together, especially in the country side, where couples could often live together pretending to be “just friends.” One example is two women who lived together from the 1920s onwards. One them owned a farm and cattle and the other lived there as a servant. They lived together their whole lives using this employer-employee relation as a cover. People in this community told me that everyone actually *knew* and they understood that their relationship was *special*. When they died, they were buried under the same stone just like a married couple. I think that this kind of tacit acceptance of same sex couples has been a phenomenon that has not been given much attention, at least in the history that has been written by gay activists since the 1970s.

CM: Is that silence related to fear?

HWK: Some of the older gay men I interviewed said they were risking their jobs and their careers, and others told me that they could have lost their apartments if the landlord learned that they were living as a same sex couple. Besides that, they viewed discretion as a kind of competency, as something good that was needed to avoid being scandalized and to avoid being put in danger. What I have tried to do with my work is to describe their discretion and to try to understand how they saw themselves. After the 1970s these discrete older men were very much scandalized and outed: they were called things like *closet queens* and seen as cowardly because they didn’t dare come out. I have tried to do a little bit more justice to their choices. I think it is important to understand their choice of discretion within a historical context. We have to understand how society was then and to give these same sex couples credit for being able to live

homosexual lives at all.

One of my favorite examples is a middle-upper class male couple in Oslo that used to live with the mother and aunt of one of them. They all shared a flat but the two men lived in the housekeeper's room, in bunk beds, for more than 20 years. They never talked about their homosexuality or ever discussed their relationship as a homosexual relationship. The one man I talked to, Olf, said that he thought it was a good thing that they never addressed it. I think he felt that his mother had known all along but they never made it explicit. It was a silent complicity that made it possible for them to live together without having to talk about it. These kinds of arrangements were common in the 1950s.

CM: I suppose they could have no physical interaction in public such as holding hands or hugging.

HWK: That is true. He said explicitly that the only time they hugged each other in public was during New Year's Eve. During a party they could hug because everyone else also did so. In public they acted just as friends. At the same time their heterosexual friends treated them as a couple in a way. They always invited them as Olf-and-Carl. Even though they never discussed homosexuality with their friends they felt their friends accepted them as such.

CM: When I was growing up in Colombia I had a few friends that were two generations older than me (I am 30 now) who often told me that homosexuality was something that only concerned the bed and that I should never discuss my sexual orientation with anyone in public. I was always very critical of them because I felt that this attitude was against the way I wanted to live my life.

HWK: It is hard to think of what would have happened for example, if Olf and Carl had come out to the mother, aunt and to their friends. They thought that it would have had very damaging consequences fto their lives. The separation of their private life and their public image was a strategy to survive: they wouldn't have been killed but they would have had difficulties finding work and maybe even with some of their friends. Olf stressed that him and Carl had really loved each other, that they had a very good life together and that it was not only the sexual part that had importance for them, but also their friendship and their loving relationship.

The *discrete* founders of the gay and lesbian movement in the 1950s were Rolf Loevaas and some of his friends, as well as Øivind Eckhoff. They really started the gay and lesbian movement even though Eckhoff, for example, was very discrete about his sexual life. He always used pseudonyms in public and when he wrote in newspapers. These men used a discrete resistance towards the government but they did many important things, they lobbied with the politicians to decriminalize homosexuality, they facilitated meeting places for women and men and he wrote a book, *We Who Feel Differently,* that came out in 1954. Later on in the 1970s and 1980s all their work was discarded and made invisible by the new people associated with the new gay and lesbian movement. It was said that they were cowards because they had not dared to come out

in the 1950s. Many of the founding people within the old movement felt very betrayed by the new faces of the movement because they didn't get recognition for the work they had done.

CM: Did they continue to be discrete even after the 1970s?

HWK: Yes, even in their old age. One of them, Arne Heli was very open in his later years from the mid 1990s until he died in 2006. He was a very outspoken representative of the first generation of activists. He was very critical of Kim Friele and the others that came in the late 1960s and 1970s. There were very harsh discussions between these people.

CM: Did he have a chance to speak to any of them about these decisions of remaining to be discrete even after they had been outed publicly?

HWK: I don't think they were outed really; I never really got to talk to the founding figures because they died before I had the time to interview them.

CM: How do you understand their decision to remain discreet?

HWK: It has to do with habit and with the way they were. I think it is really hard to change when you are in your 60s and 70s. These men were marked by the norms of the society they were part of.

CM: I would like to go back to speaking about issues of community and meeting places. Could you speak about these places in which homosexual activities were taking place back then?

HWK: When I started to do my fieldwork I went to present-day gay pubs and bars in the early afternoon. I met groups of older gay men who met from 3 to 6 p.m. before the youngsters would arrive. These men told me jokes and stories about the teahouses and the public toilets in Oslo in the 1950s and 1960s. I started to ask them more about that in the interviews and tried to make a map of the male homosexual infrastructure in Oslo in the 1950s. That was very interesting; there were many underground teahouses and public toilets that were very dark so that people could get into contact with each other. They often told me that in the East end of Oslo they also had sexual encounters with working class straight men.

CM: So the teahouses were places for sexual encounters?

HWK: Yes, they were mostly places for silent sexual encounters not for having conversations. It is also interesting because many of the men who were unable to find friendships created community and networks in these teahouses and toilets. In that sense it is understood why the founders of the gay and lesbian organization were mostly men.

CM: This is a type of network that was constructed by word of mouth?

HWK: Yes of course. Also some newspaper articles were published in the 1950s that scandalized what went on at these meeting places. That made these places attractive to more people so there were many rumors about what places to visit. Some of the men told me that they made rounds, they went from one place to another starting at 9 p.m. and they would visit ten or fifteen public toilets in one night. The most popular places were the ones situated close to a park or to a green area because they could sit down and meet and later have sexual contact in the toilets.

CM: Do you know any stories about these kinds of meeting places before the 1950s, namely from the 1920s to the 1950s?

HWK: Yes. The eldest homosexual man I talked to told me stories about the 1940s and I also heard some descriptions about the 1930s. At least three or four men that I interviewed told me they had had sexual relations with German soldiers, or at least cruised German soldiers, in the toilets during the German occupation. I think that these meeting places date back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of the historians who have written about that period often mention court cases connected to people being arrested in toilets...

CM: Based on these accounts when does the first officially gay place open?

HWK: What do you mean by official?

CM: A gay bar that is labeled as such.

HWK: That would have been in the 1960s. It was probably the space of the *DNF48* (Det Norske Forbundet av 1948), the gay and lesbian organization. They threw parties there and they also started their own club sometime in the 1970s.

CM: At around the time of the “politicization” of sexual orientation...

HWK: Yes, after Stonewall. Also during the 1950s *DNF48* had a very discrete name. It doesn't really tell you very much, it just references a year.

CM: What does it refer to?

HWK: Back in 1948 Axel Axgil in Denmark founded an organization, which was really the first organization in the region. The Norwegian association started as a branch of the Danish organization, so even though it started in 1950 they used the Danish name so they called it the *Norwegian Association of 1948*.

CM: It was a symbolic name.

HWK: Yes, the name camouflaged it. In Norway however the name was associated with homosexuality because it was often mentioned in the press. They also used some other names, *The*

Association for City and Countryside, on legal paperwork like when they wanted to rent a house or something like that. They used discrete names to protect their members. They had parties once a month and they were very careful so that people from the outside wouldn't know about them. That is probably something Kim Friele can tell you more about because when she first tried to join the association she was rejected at the door because they didn't know that she was a lesbian woman. They thought she was a schoolmistress or something like that. That is a very famous anecdote about the association.

CM: At the time it was only for homosexual men?

HWK: No it was also open to women but you had to be a member or you had to be recommended by a member to get in. If you just showed up at the door they would probably not let you in. That was what happened to Kim Friele so she writes very bitterly about it in one of her books.

CM: I wonder about how the switch between wanting to be discreet and wanting to be open and political may have taken place. I imagine that once there was a sense of a cohesive community, which may have gotten built up at these meetings, their self-perception as a "group" and a kind of entitlement may have occurred that made the idea of discreetness less important.

HWK: That might have been so, but of course that also depended on what happened in society at large at the given time. Because of the international developments and the things that went on in the United States and other countries, the climate around homosexuality was getting warmer and friendlier. If the development had gone in the opposite way, maybe if it had become more repressive and more religious, I think that they would have had to continue to meet in discrete ways.

The fact that people had the chance to meet in secret or to build up networks for themselves was very important for community building. I think it would have been very difficult to take the next step, to start building a community more broadly if you hadn't had this kind of build up period when people could develop their identities. That is one of the things that are often not taken into account: these discrete meetings were also important as a step towards the liberation that occurred in the 1970s. They played an important role in bringing people together and making it possible for people to *be* homosexual openly at least behind these closed doors.

CM: Your work highlights a neglected history of the movement. Why do you think there was opposition to this early history by the gay and lesbian post-Stonewall movement?

HWK: I think it might have something to do with a kind of liberationist ideology. It is difficult to build new historical narratives without contrasting the "liberated present" to the "unliberated and dark past." I think it might have also to do with generational conflicts; the new generation wanted to build something new, they wanted to do something that was different from what had been done previously, they wanted a fresh start and in order to do that they discarded the work of the

earlier generation.

CM: Important changes started to occur like the decriminalization of homosexuality, the Anti-Discrimination Law and the Partnership Law, to name a few. How do you think these legislative advancements affected people's lives and the way that they perceived the earlier historical accounts that you narrate?

HWK: In the 1970s *DNF48* grew very rapidly. Many young people became members of the organization. By the mid 1970s they had more than one thousand members instead of fifty or sixty in the 1950s. Being affiliated or working for a gay association became less dangerous.

At the same time some of the men I interviewed told me they didn't really known that the criminalization law existed. My point is that I don't think one should over exaggerate the existence or impact of a law of that kind. You can see this often in countries where homosexuality is prohibited yet you find a very lively gay scene where many people are living openly as homosexuals. There isn't really a one to one relationship between decriminalization and liberation.

CM: You seem to want to differentiate or not to over exaggerate the impact of legislation and political action on issues of cultural advancement?

HWK: Yes. It is important to see these changes from a larger perspective locally, but also internationally, because these changes took place in many countries at the same time in Europe and North America. That the view of the gay and lesbian movement has often been a bit nearsighted because of their efforts, work and fight to achieve changes.

CM: How do relate to the Partnership Law or the Marriage Act, which seemed to have been achieved out of hardcore lobbying and political insistence and determination? These two examples have certainly affected the way that people live their lives.

HWK: I think really it is important also to take into account that this tradition of partnership goes back to the 1920s. People lived together discreetly without any sanctions from the law. This is in a way a foundation for what was to come later. It is important to remember this history and not exclusively the lobbying and the work of the gay and lesbian movement.

CM: But it is precisely the law that aids relationships to be realized in a fuller way: you can visit your partner at the hospital if he is dying for example, something that people in the past wouldn't have been able to do.

HWK: Yes. It is very important to formalize relationships. I have heard many sad stories about couples who had been living together very discretely for years and when one of them died the other one was left with nothing because the family of the diseased inherited everything and they might not have even know that the other a life companion. I actually urged some of these people I talked to formalize their relationships.

CM: I have encountered much discreteness since I arrived to Norway. I have been chatting with men on *gaysir.no* and other online platforms and have found that many guys will not show their faces and often say they are discreet.

HWK: I think it is interesting that you bring up the Internet and these new meeting places that have taken over the place of the old teahouses and toilets. I think the discreetness has to do with the phase of life these men are in because many young people who are exploring their sexuality don't want to identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual. They want to use these venues to explore their sexuality and to find out more about themselves without having to be very explicit about *who* they are.

CM: It seems to me that you tend to be opposed to a narrative of “repression,” so to speak.

HWK: Well, I don't know if I would say that as such. What I have tried to do is to make a more nuisance historical narrative. I want to propose a view that is not simply a progression from “darkness to light.” There have been “light spots” in the past and there are “dark spots” in the present.

It is also important not to minimize or to trivialize the repression that people have experienced in their lives because there are, of course, people who have experienced hardship, violence and even death because of their sexual orientation. It is important to take that seriously but at the same time recognize the bravery and the accomplishments of these people in the 1950s. Being able to live with a partner, even if it was discretely and highly hidden from the larger society, was an achievement.

I think that is also important to focus on the perception of the rural areas because in much of the research that has been done on the history and present situation of homosexuals, the country-side has also been contrasted to the cities, stating that homosexual life is only possible in big cities. I have tried to problematize this claim by focusing on stories of same sex couples living in the countryside.

I spent five years in a very small rural community in the inner part of Norway with my partner who worked as a parish priest. No one reacted badly to us, we were very well treated, and we were met with friendliness and much acceptance. That was contrary to what I had expected. I expected to be harassed and for people to have traditional views. That personal experience has had an impact on how I view the past. There might be some corners of the past that have to be released to ask ourselves has it really been so hard and so difficult for homosexual people?