



Marching for what is ours

We are interested in situations similar to the ones we have to cope with in life ourselves; these are the stories of other people, yet they seem familiar.

Do LGBT+ Poles make up a genuine community whose presence can be felt in everyday life in Poland? Mateusz Gędźba asks people who represent local businesses, the media, as well as the cultural and theatre scene.

Over the last few years lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals and their allies have taken to the streets to march more and more often, not only in the cities of Poland but also in smaller towns. They aren't afraid of the colours of their rainbow flags, which they carry ever more boldly. Blue birds, ladies, gentlemen, divas and pixies. Stubbornly they trudge through the streets waving their rainbow flags in time to loud, usually disco music. The various attempts to force them back into the national closet are increasing in strength and becoming more spectacular. But what are we dealing with here? Is it a random series of walks undertaken by eccentric pedestrians, a motley crew of boisterous people, is it perhaps a social movement or ... a community? Just a few years ago a well-known Polish sociologist, Jacek Kochanowski, analysed the public activity of non-heterosexual people in Poland and made the claim that they cannot be considered a social movement. He pointed out that there are only a few formal organisations,

that they have access to grants, that they do not mobilise spontaneously or in a non-conventional way and, in addition, they that have to self-censor their activity. However, LGBT+ life in Poland is not standing still. I decided to ask some keen observers their opinion on this: people from the world of the arts and media as well as the owners of small and medium-sized businesses whose services LGBT+ people are happy to use. I asked the author of the novel *Nadfiolet* ('Ultraviolet') who also founded the publishing house Seqoya, the owner of a popular and longstanding website, the manager of the popular bar *Lindo* in Krakow's Old Town, a star of drag queen revues, a representative of the portal *Outfilm* which provides access to LGBT+ serials and films, the owner of an internet sex shop and also a psychotherapist who specialises in helping lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals. Here is a summary of what they had to say.

A community or a motley crew?

Opinions are divided as to whether there is an LGBT+ community in Poland in 2020. Some people claim that it continues to be a motley crew of people, not necessarily as organised and aware of its identity as LGBT+ people from Germany, France and the UK. According to the people I talked to Operation Hyacinth was not Stonewall. They say that the effects of the mass collection of data on homosexual men that was carried out between 1985 and 1987 by the citizens' militia, together with the repressions that accompanied it, cannot be compared to the riots that broke out in the New York bar in 1969.

However, not everyone is so sceptical when looking for a key moment for LGBT+ people that marks their presence as a social group in Poland. Some of the people I spoke to pointed out that among LGBT+ people different attitudes

are noticeable. In today's Poland you can find people who don't want to get involved or reveal themselves. They consciously isolate themselves and hope they can slip through unnoticed and will be able to simply live their own lives. Their dream is simply some peace and quiet and an existence away from all the fuss of LGBT+. Apart from them there is a sizeable number of people who occasionally get involved in one or more initiatives, as well as a group of committed activists. At present there are more and more cases of diverse celebrities and influencers who are well known online revealing their sexual orientation publicly, so it is easier to find representatives of "one's own people". The people I spoke to mentioned pride marches, which are becoming more numerous and visible throughout Poland. They talked about initiatives such as online media and LGBT+ community centres, which although still small in number are functioning well. One way or another, the question as to whether a small group of enthusiasts who organise a pride march in a small town once a year is a community, remains relevant. Or maybe it isn't?

A means of achieving success or a recipe for disaster?

What is success? The business owners I asked agreed that success shouldn't be reduced to figures, tables and charts. You're successful if you survive in business for a long period of time, despite changing circumstances and competition. There's no lack of people who point out that success can have a deeper meaning. A sign of this turns out to be the feeling of satisfaction we get from what we're doing, as well as when we bring about real social changes through our work.

There is a prevalent belief that, considering their social potential, businesses geared towards lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals are not yet as popular as they could be. A representative of the "traditional" business that the LGBT+ bar can be considered to represent said that homophobia which is highly visible in the public sphere can, paradoxically, benefit this type of place. It increases the need for a space where you can feel safe and at ease. People simply expect to be accepted in places where they spend their time. Whether this is modest hand-holding or maybe a kiss, in most establishments LGBT+ couples who show each other affection still fear at best "only" being mocked.

Depending on the industry, the belief dominates that simply "sticking on a rainbow" isn't enough. This must be accompanied by a careful identification of the need which a given service or product is intended to satisfy, and it's necessary to target people who are interested in it or waiting for it.

Different from everyone else?

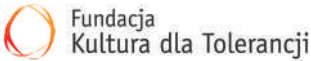
So are there any needs that are specific to LGBT+ people? Yes and no. Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals are people just like everyone else. A number of their everyday problems are no different from the worries of heterosexual people. Like everyone they can lose their job or go through the pain of losing their parents. Their cultural needs are also similar. When they watch films and serials each of them wants to feel a connection with the characters. We are interested in situations similar to the ones we have to cope with in life ourselves; these are the stories of other people, yet they seem familiar. Regardless of our sexual orientation or identity, when using the services of a psychotherapist we want to be listened to by a person who won't ridicule us and won't attack us. When we go to a bar we want to find ourselves in a place where we feel at ease. In this sense LGBT+ people are no different from the rest of society.

Most of the people I spoke to said that a feeling of "foreignness" or of "being different from everyone else" was characteristic of LGBT+ consumers. They spoke about their experiences of coming out, which can have an influence, for example, on their choice of viewing material. They also pointed out that providing certain types of service requires specialist knowledge. In the case of the psychotherapist, for example, clients from the LGBT+ community expect professional knowledge of the free expression of gender, sexual and relational diversity.

How it all started

One of the most interesting moments of each interview was the story about the initial stages of the business. The founder of the portal *Queer.pl* talked about how in the early days of the internet he typed the word *gej* ('gay') into a search engine. It turned out that the word was almost completely absent from Polish online resources. This discovery motivated him to create a website.

The idea of setting up a portal for LGBT+ films and serials came about in a similar way. A trip to Berlin and a visit to a shop with LGBT+ films prompted him to found the website Outfilm, thanks to which films and serialised dramas — about her love for her, his for him and the pain of coming out or single-sex break-ups — can reach the homes of everyone in the country. But the most unusual story definitely turned out to be that of the founding of the online sex shop Kinky Winky. Its founder studied film. At the end of the course he wrote his master's dissertation on the subject of pornography. Having completed his studies, standing on the threshold of adult life, he had to think of something to do with his life. He wanted to do something that was at least partly related to his interests. So he borrowed 5000 zł from his mother, secured funding from an academic business incubator and set up his sex shop. For the founder of the publishing house Seqoja, the motivation to do something was her observation that despite her achievements in the form of books that had already been published, it was difficult for her to get the next one published. The normal practice of publishing houses is that they don't give reasons for their decision to reject a book, including challenging stories on difficult issues such as forming an identity, the meaning of carnality, women in society and micro-communities, and religiousness vs. politics in the Church. You can usually read their reasons between the lines. What makes the



Say hello to the moon, the stars and the angels for us

On 6th May 2020 we were very sorry to hear that Henryk Pasiut, a visionary and patron of the arts, had left the stage. Heniu, Heniek, Heniutek... many people knew him, and in Krakow there are many stories about him. During his life he was involved in a lot of projects. In the colourful and wild 1990s he began a business which today we would call an events agency. Of course that was a time when nobody had ever even dreamt of anything like that. Then, for twelve years he directed the Association of Non-Institutional Theatres. He was a great friend to artists. Their helpful, sincere and impartial confidant. His most precious child was The Only Drag Queen Revue in Poland, which, since he founded it four years ago, has developed thanks to Heniu into something extraordinary. The revue has raised drag from the level of an oddity that people ridiculed to the rank of an art form that's applauded in theatres. At revue performances Heniu always began by saying "Welcome moon, welcome stars and bar-lovers, welcome my friends, but if you're my enemy then I shake you off, like dust off my jacket, with a light flick of my hand". He was always smiley during intervals, he would make jokes and dispense advice. "During the interval you can go to the bar for a drink, but remember, if you see the bar coming to you, it means you should stop drinking." After every show he chatted with the guests, often until the early hours. "You must think New York, not some awful backwater" — he would say, and not without reason. He travelled a lot, he saw a lot. He was known in Paris, he was known across the pond. We hope he will be remembered for a long time. We want to ensure that he won't be forgotten and share his story with the world. We invite everyone who wishes to tell us their memories of Heniek, or send us materials linked to his work, to contact us at znakirownosci@org.pl

Mateusz Gęźba



Choristers in fine voice

The Krakow choir that sings with pride despite setbacks: by ourselves and yet together.

Krakofonia have once again clocked up many achievements that they can boast about. These include the jubilee concert "Queerovision" and collaboration with choirs from abroad. In February they put on a special concert called "The Two Choir Evening" together with Grosse Pointe South Choir — an ensemble that came all the way from Michigan in the US.

Through thick and thin

This year was expected to be very busy, but also fabulous. In order to encourage support through singing and sprinkle some glitter of hope in these difficult times, "away concerts" had been planned, which the choir hoped would be attended by a large number of people, including those in "LGBT-free zones". Furthermore, the ideas that unite members of Krakofonia were to take on an international dimension — this was thanks to concerts including one with choirs from Ireland (Gloria) and England (Diversity Choir), which was to take place on 13th June. They were also looking forward to a joint concert with The Fourth Choir from the UK in July. Unfortunately, the pandemic and lockdown put paid to these plans. The whole world stopped, and this also affected Krakofonia. Concert plans have had to be changed. The choir was sad to put its activities on hold, and the performances which promised to be fantastic were cancelled.

Connected

Despite the pandemic they were still busy behind the scenes. During lockdown the members supported each other financially and when the restrictions were first introduced they focussed on broadening and honing their theoretical knowledge. They met for online lessons on the principles of music and music-reading. These turned out to be useful because members of the choir aren't required to have a knowledge of music. This training helped everyone use their time in social isolation productively. Hoping that maybe the world would quickly return to normal, the choristers didn't just sit at home doing nothing, instead they shared a song with the public that they performed as a virtual choir. Despite the distance they managed to record the song "Born This Way" together. They reminded others that singing together is worthwhile, even if you can't meet face-to-face. It was difficult to put together, but the final visual effect was very satisfying. The success of the film of the recording has inspired the Krakow choir to surprise fans with something else: to mark Pride Month they're recording another song in the same style.

Virtual yet real

During the pandemic the members of the choir decided to hold rehearsals online. Although they aren't as effective as rehearsals face-to-face, the social factor is very important for the singers. It's an escape from the problems of everyday life. Through practising together they're able to support each other. The choristers have set up an internal self-help fund, which supports people who have been most affected by the financial consequences of

publishing house founded by Ewa Schilling unique, apart from the subject matter of its books, is also its partnership approach to its authors.

Sink or swim

As an undisputed diva of the Polish stage sings: Bo trzeba mieć nadzieję, że biznes się opłaci, że będzie z niego zysk, a firma nic nie straci ('Because you need to hope that business will be worthwhile, that you'll have a profit, and the firm won't lose anything'). On the one hand, the business owners I'm writing about are affected by the same problems as everyone else. Constantly increasing costs and taxes. Ever stranger regulations and restrictions associated with the pandemic. On the other hand, worries specific to a particular industry have to be added to that. Some people are worried about the actions of the government which are hostile to sex education. The owner of the LGBT+ bar talked about his sad experience with a payment terminal company. The company refused to provide its services, stating "the risk of fraud resulting from offering sex services" as its reason. Fortunately, reality doesn't only paint itself in dark colours. Last year we saw an avalanche of initiatives aimed at the LGBT+ community. One large corporation has associated itself with LGBT+ issues very closely by promoting its own brand of ice cream. This firm continues this work visibly and is still tackling LGBT issues. The person who coordinates

this work has received awards and is invited to various events, not only marketing ones. This probably means that this advertising experiment on Polish soil has proven successful. The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't made life easier for writers. The promotion of a book which had been planned for the Warsaw pride march never happened because the march didn't take place. However, as life has shown the pandemic does not have just one face. For the owner of the internet sex shop, the situation exceeded all expectations. In March 2020 sales dropped practically to zero, only to shoot up in April, and the month ended with the best sales figures in the eight-year history of the shop. An interesting phenomenon has emerged, that of "benevolent group purchases". In the same way that in March people bought groceries to help friends and neighbours in their time of need, in April it turned out that the same mechanism had shifted to the erotic industry. For example, virtual sex devices became more popular. These allow a person to steer an erotic gadget via the internet that stimulates the other person. For artists such as drag queen Papina McQueen the social isolation prompted by COVID turned out to be a surprise. To start with her short online performances were not very popular. This changed after people shut themselves away in their homes and started looking for virtual entertainment. The growth in the popularity of her performances exceeded this revue queen's wildest expectations. The payments from

online viewers that followed have allowed her to continue to grow as an artist and make new plans. However, these performances have brought a high degree of discipline into Papina McQueen's life. It turned out that people quickly became accustomed to seeing her performances on certain days and at certain times. Furthermore, the internet has torn her performances away from their physical location and made them accessible to people from villages and small towns, who for various reasons have never been to a drag queen performance in a theatre. The virtual audience has started to create a bigger and bigger community spontaneously. People have started to get to know each other and organise their own small and cosy meetings and outings together. Through this the process of transforming a motley crew into a conscious community has really gained momentum.

A transitional stage

The spontaneous online integration of LGBT+ people from outside large towns and cities is one of the factors that suggest that the regress in Poland, brought about by the systemic homophobia of the current ruling elite, is temporary. Here it would be worth rounding off by quoting a hit Polish song: Jeszcze będzie przepięknie, jeszcze będzie normalnie ('One day everything will be wonderful, one day everything will be normal').

Mateusz Gęźba



author: Jacek Grafi

We're here for you too!

Whoever and wherever you are, you'll always find help at DOM EQ.

At the Krakow Equality Centre, thanks to the diversity of the organisations that work together here, you can get various types of help. Depending on your needs, you can take part in both group and individual self-help meetings.

- At DOM EQ there are support groups for young people, trans people and those close to them, people who come under the asexual umbrella, as well as a group for the parents of LGBT+ people and rainbow families.
- Recently we've also set up a group for LGBT+ foreigners, one for bisexual people and a long-awaited group that brings LBtQ+ women together.
- If you don't necessarily see yourself in any of these groups, then you can always come to Free Zone, when our doors are open to everyone. You can have a tea or coffee and chat to other people or, simply spend some time in a friendly and open environment.

But if you'd prefer some individual support, then you should know that DOM EQ attracts a lot of people who are willing to help others at difficult moments. This is how our counselling group came about, which currently numbers around fifteen people who specialise in various aspects of psychology and psychotherapy. So if you feel that you or someone close to you needs help, don't be afraid to write to us and tell us about the problem, sending your email to wsparcie@znakirownosci.org.pl. Our counselling team can also help you online. However, if there's been a situation in your life where you feel you've been discriminated against, or you've been the victim of homo-, trans- or biphobia, then you can count on the support of our legal team, who will try to solve your problems and get you back on track. Chin up! There's no situation without a solution, and if you think there is, you'll find that DOM EQ and lots of friendly people will always support you. Because that's how the family you can choose, which we're creating together at the Krakow Equality Centre DOM EQ, works.

Łukasz Siemienieć



author: Marcin Kramer i Adam Harych

lockdown. This acts as a "psychological buffer" — it gives members of the choir the feeling that despite being isolated at home they still belong to a community.

Together

The concerts with foreign choirs that had been planned were cancelled, but Krakofonia maintains international contacts and is close to Polish choirs. There will certainly be opportunities in the future to organise other joint events. After all, there's no shortage of choirs that want to come to Poland to support each other through music and singing and bring people together, regardless of where they come from or their identity. Krakofonia will "return to normality" gradually. Firstly, the choristers will start meeting face-to-face, physically, again — of course with full regard for safety regulations and social distancing. The rehearsals will take place in smaller groups, divided into sections. It has been decided that events from September will not be affected. Annual trips to take part in workshops have become a tradition, which everyone in Krakofonia really looks forward to. So the singers hope that they will manage to organise this. Lockdown has taken its toll on all of us and so time spent together socialising and at rehearsals will undoubtedly have a soothing effect on the whole group.

Premieres

Soon you can expect new repertoire from Krakofonia, prepared specially for the next big concert, at which you'll only hear Polish music. However, at smaller events and "away concerts" you'll get to hear repertoire from "Queerovision", which everyone loved. The programme will be intertwined with new songs here and there, but their exact titles will be kept secret. What everyone in the choir is excited about is our association with the choir Rosa Cavaliere from Berlin. The fruit of this collaboration will be a fabulous concert to mark their thirtieth anniversary in February 2021. This date seems a long way off, but preparations are slowly getting underway. Considering the constantly evolving situation, you can certainly expect nice surprises from Krakow's rainbow choir.

Let's support each other

In response to the wishes of fans and supporters of the choir, Krakofonia has set up a Patronite account. Here you can make regular financial contributions to the choir. This will help the choristers develop their singing and raise funds for future concerts, home and away. In the future, when the pandemic situation improves, our patrons will be able to expect such benefits as being able to sing with us at rehearsals, go away with us and take part in music workshops.

Krycha Dembiczak