

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs: 1825–1895

The second of the five children (two died in infancy) of his father, Johann Hermann Ulrichs, and his mother Anna Elise née Heinrichs, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was born on 28 August 1825 on his father's modest estate of Westerfeld, near Aurich (East Friesland). His father, a district architect in the service of the Kingdom of Hanover, died in 1835, and shortly thereafter Ulrichs moved with his mother and younger sister Ulrike to Burgdorf, where his older sister Louise was already living, as was his mother's father, a Superintendent in the Lutheran Church, by whom Ulrichs was confirmed in 1839. In the years 1839–1842 he attended the Gymnasium in Detmold, where a maternal uncle was a Lutheran pastor. He had earlier intended to become an architect like his father, but after completing his schooling in 1844, he studied law at the Universities of Göttingen, 1844–1846, and Berlin, 1846–1847. In 1848 he entered the civil service of the Kingdom of Hanover, where he held various positions as junior attorney until December 1854, when, under circumstances not entirely clear, he asked to be released from state's service. [Added 2003. His sexual activity had become known to the authorities and he could have been disciplined by being dismissed from service, had he not resigned first.]

Ulrichs led a somewhat unsettled life in the following years, with lengthy stays in Burgdorf, especially after the death of his mother in 1856, until he settled in Frankfurt am Main in 1859. There he was occupied with various subjects, from poetry and German mythology to public law. He became a freelance newspaper correspondent and was employed as a private secretary by J. T. B. von Linde, a representative to the parliament of the German Confederation. There, too, he worked out his ‘third sex’ theory of homosexuality: that the (male) homosexual—or Urning (the term coined by Ulrichs)—has a feminine soul in a masculine body. At the same time he formed a plan for a campaign to gain recognition for his theory in a way that would liberate Urnings from the centuries-old legal, religious, and social condemnation. These ideas were developed in the first five of his writings on “Researches Into the Riddle of Love Between Men” (*Forschungen über das Rätsel der mannmännlichen Liebe*) and were published in the years 1864–1865.

Ulrichs next planned a volume of poetry on the subject of Urning-love, but the plan was interrupted—and never carried out—by the invasion and annexation of Hanover by Prussia in 1866, an action Ulrichs never forgave. (As late as 1892, fourteen years after the death of blind King Georg V, whose right to the throne Ulrichs defended, he still condemned Prussia for this event.) As a result of his public agitation in Hanover, Ulrichs was twice imprisoned. The second time, in April 1867, his house in Burgdorf was searched and the material for *Nemus sacrum*, the proposed volume of poetry, and all of his papers and correspondence were seized. Following his release in July, part of the material was returned, but he never recovered all of it.

On 29 August 1867, only one month after his release from prison, Ulrichs spoke before the Congress of German Jurists in Munich, where he tried to introduce a resolution calling for the repeal of the Prussian anti-homosexual law. Although his “Researches” had been published under the pseudonym “Numa Numantius,” Ulrichs had many times said that he was the author, so that a large part of the audience knew this. Thus we may say that this was the first time that a self-proclaimed homosexual/Urning spoke out publicly for homosexual rights. He had hardly begun speaking, however, when he was shouted down and not allowed to finish.

Ulrichs then settled in Würzburg, where he wrote the next six booklets of his “Researches Into the Riddle of Love Between Men.” *Gladius furens* (1868), in which he gave up his pseudonym, contained the text of the speech he planned for the Congress of German Jurists in Munich, along with the story of that event. *Memnon* (1868) was a new and more systematic elaboration of his theory. The two publications of the following year were prompted by a notorious case of homosexual rape and attempted murder in Berlin. (Friedrich Engels commented on the first of these in a letter to Karl Marx of 22 June 1869.)

Prometheus (1870) was intended to be the first issue of a monthly journal that was, however, not continued. It was followed later that year by a plea to the Legislatures of North Germany and Austria to revise their antihomosexual laws. Ulrichs then moved to Stuttgart, where he lived for ten years. A final plea to the law-makers (*Critische Pfeile*, 1879) had no apparent effect.

Ulrichs then determined to leave Germany and, in 1880, he went to Italy, where he spent the last fifteen years of his life. He lived at first in Naples, but in 1883 he moved to Aquila, where he supported himself by teaching foreign languages and, from 1889, by the publication of a journal written by himself entirely in Latin. He died there on 14 July 1895 of inflammation of the kidney (nephritis) and was buried next to the family tomb of his patron, the Marquis Niccolò Persichetti.

Although he later recalled an indication of his own homosexuality at age 15, Ulrich only became fully aware of it at age 21, when he was a student in Berlin; by 1854 he was convinced of the inborn nature of this trait. Ulrichs was not the first to arrive at the conviction that homosexuality is inborn and natural; this required only an honest and unprejudiced introspection. That this condition is inborn had, indeed, been admitted in some cases by the Berlin medical forensic expert Johann Ludwig Casper in 1850, but Ulrichs did not become acquainted with Casper's writings until 1864. And, although Ulrichs appears to have arrived at his concept of the Urning as "a feminine soul in a masculine body" by introspection and observation, he was not the first to have this idea.

The possibility had already been mentioned, and rejected, by Heinrich Hössli (whose work Ulrichs did not read until 1866) as part of the rabbinical doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Ulrichs's originality consisted in proposing a scientific cause for this phenomenon—and this was precisely what the spirit of the times required.

As the scientific cause of homosexuality Ulrichs posited separate germs of development for the sexual organs and the direction of the sexual drive. His argument was that these did not always develop in concert, as was Nature's rule, but sometimes in opposite directions, thus producing the physical man whose love was directed toward another man, i.e., was a woman's love. That Nature made sexual 'mistakes' was shown by the existence of physical hermaphrodites, several examples of which were in the medical literature at that time. (We may recall here that the chromosomal basis of sex determination was not discovered until the 20th century.)

By furnishing a scientific mechanism that served as the cause of homosexuality, Ulrichs had formulated a theory that was just as scientific as many another widely accepted 'scientific' theory of his day. Thus he expected his theory also to be accepted as the solution to a centuries-old riddle. He was, of course, disappointed, for hardly anyone would

even listen to him. It is clear to us, and quickly became clear to Ulrichs, that the theory was not rejected because of any perceived lack of scientific merit, but simply from religious and social prejudice.

Ulrichs's goal was to free people like himself from the legal, religious, and social condemnation of homosexual acts as unnatural. For this he invented a new terminology that would refer to the nature of the individual and not to the acts performed. Casper, for example, used the term paederast, from the Greek for boy-lover. But this term had become confused with the Latin *paedicatio* (anal intercourse), and indeed in the popular mind the two were synonymous. (It may be noted in passing that the term homosexuality was not used until 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny.) Ulrichs found the source of his terminology in the speech of Pausanias in the *Symposium* of Plato, who "derived the origin of love between men from the god Uranus, that of the love of women from Dione." In a circular letter to his relatives in 1862 Ulrichs used the terms Uranier and Dionäer for men who love men and women, respectively. In his first publication on the subject in 1864, however, these were changed to Urning and Dioning, and these terms were used consistently by him thereafter. Various terms were used by him for lesbians: Urningin, Uranierin, Urnin.

Ulrichs's interests were varied and he showed talent in several fields (he was, for example, a master of the Latin language), but his major efforts were given to his struggle to gain a more enlightened and humane treatment for his fellow Urnings. The driving force behind this long campaign was his strong sense of justice and deep feeling of righteous indignation. He compared his efforts to those in the previous century to eliminate torture and the persecution of witches. He intervened privately with legal briefs and publicly with his propaganda booklets. For the most part, his efforts fell on deaf ears; on the rare occasions that his writings were commented on, they were usually rejected with derision, the final argument always being that he could not be taken seriously, especially since, as a self-proclaimed Urning, he was arguing *pro domo*. Thus he was unable to bring about repeal of any anti-homosexual law, and indeed in his lifetime the harsh Prussian law was extended to all parts of Germany.

Although Ulrichs's theory was as 'scientific' as any other of his time, it lost the force of its original simplicity when further observations required the accommodation of more

and more varieties of Urnings, so that its structure began to resemble the epicycles of the later Ptolemaic theory of the universe. But a more basic objection can be raised to his assumption that the love directed toward a man must be feminine, and indeed such an objection was raised before the end of the century by, for example, the author of a letter to John Addington Symonds that was published anonymously in 1897 in *Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis and J. A. Symonds—and published the previous year in the German translation of that work. (The author of that letter has since been identified as the Harvard University mathematics professor James Mills Peirce.)

Ulrichs did contribute to the growing recognition in the 19th century of the homosexual as a distinct type of person, more frequent in the population than had been thought. His estimate, that one man in 500 in Germany was an Urning, was often rejected out of hand as far too high, but probably brought about a greater awareness of their existence. What Ulrichs did not foresee was that the Urning would then not be accepted as a natural person, but would be taken over by psychiatry as a sick individual. Ironically, it was Richard von Krafft-Ebing, author of the perennial best seller *Psychopathia sexualis*, who, while acknowledging that it was Ulrichs's writings alone that had interested him in the study of homosexuality, went on to lead the movement to treat the condition as a pathology or degeneration. His views may be seen as a sort of secularization of the degeneration theory based on religious grounds that Bénédict Auguste Morel had proposed in 1857.

John Addington Symonds wrote in his *Memoirs* that he “had not read the extraordinary writings of Ulrichs” until sometime after May 1889, but he included a chapter on Ulrichs’s theory in his privately printed *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891). He later visited Ulrichs in Aquila on 27 October 1891, when he discussed the subject with him. He recalled the visit in a letter of 7 February 1893 to Edward Carpenter: “He must be regarded as the real originator of a scientific handling of the phenomenon.... There is a singular charm about the old man, great sweetness, the remains of refined beauty.”

Although Ulrichs did not achieve the goal of homosexual emancipation that he expected, his theory was later revived in modified form by Magnus Hirschfeld and his example of courageously speaking out for the rights of homosexuals continues to be an inspiration for the modern gay movement.