



Gay memorial: Amsterdam's last stand as gay capital?

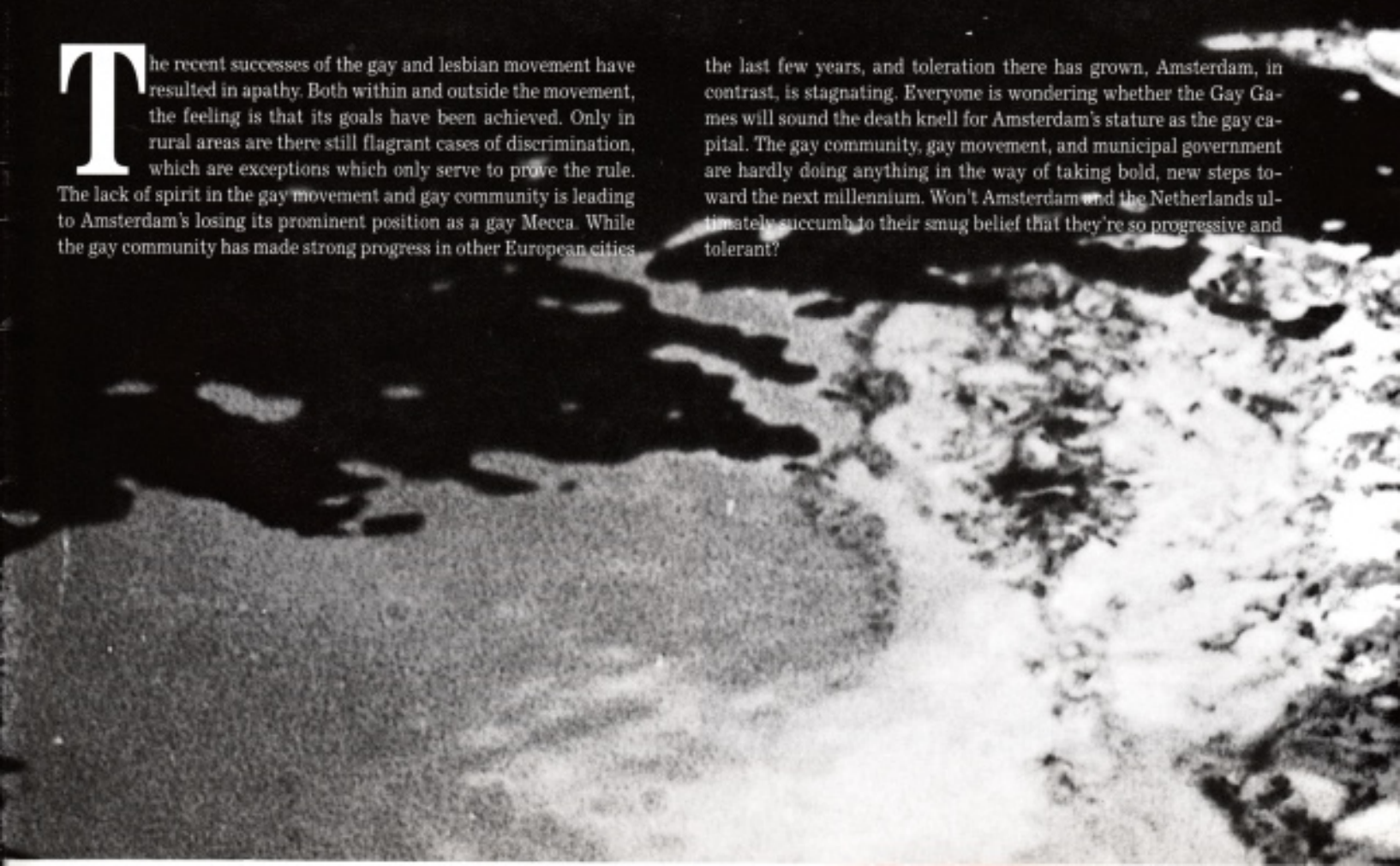
Gay capital's swan song

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Won't Amsterdam and the Netherlands ultimately succumb to their smug belief that they're so progressive and tolerant? Tolerance in this case essentially means indifference, writes Gert Hekma, in this essay, in which he predicts the end of Amsterdam's reign as gay capital of the world.

The recent successes of the gay and lesbian movement have resulted in apathy. Both within and outside the movement, the feeling is that its goals have been achieved. Only in rural areas are there still flagrant cases of discrimination, which are exceptions which only serve to prove the rule. The lack of spirit in the gay movement and gay community is leading to Amsterdam's losing its prominent position as a gay Mecca. While the gay community has made strong progress in other European cities

the last few years, and toleration there has grown, Amsterdam, in contrast, is stagnating. Everyone is wondering whether the Gay Games will sound the death knell for Amsterdam's stature as the gay capital. The gay community, gay movement, and municipal government are hardly doing anything in the way of taking bold, new steps toward the next millennium. Won't Amsterdam and the Netherlands ultimately succumb to their smug belief that they're so progressive and tolerant?



The basic question is what significance Dutch tolerance still has. Although the legal context for gay emancipation has been created, no social structure has arisen providing a world where sexual variations have space to breathe in the heterosexual ghetto that the Netherlands has remained. In secondary and vocational schools, teachers barely devote any attention to information on sexuality. Homosexuality often gets little or no attention. It is no wonder, then, that a recent study showed that most schools have remained straight domains where half of the boys still carry around prejudices against homosexuality. Gay integration is still of secondary importance for the government, corporate world and sports associations. This is the negative result of the fact that the most well-known gays on the tube are jokers that nobody takes seriously.

For centuries, Amsterdam has had the reputation of being a tolerant city. After all, didn't religious dissidents such as Jews, Armenians, Catholics, Huguenots, and others find a safe haven there? This image does not hold true for men and women with homosexual preferences. As recently as the eighteenth century, in the Age of Enlightenment, gay sex - especially among men - was severely prosecuted, and two hundred men in the Netherlands, a dozen of whom in Amster-

dam, received the death penalty for what was then called 'sodomy'. It was not until around 1900 that the first small breakthrough in gay tolerance was achieved and the first undisguised gay novel appeared. Politicians nevertheless continued to advocate stricter punishment of homosexual 'perversion'. In 1911, the Christian government introduced stricter public decency laws. Article 248 made homosexual relations between adults and minors (younger than 21) punishable. For heterosexual contacts, the age of consent was 16.

The criminalisation of homosexuality resulted in the establishment in 1912 in The Hague of the first Dutch gay movement. In 1932, Amster-

*Sex remains a
dirty business,
even in the city that
lives off of it*

damers took the initiative in the bar De Empire to start the first gay magazine, *Wij [We]*. They wanted to establish a more comfortable, Amsterdam club. Only one issue of the magazine came out, and before the association could get off the ground, the police raided De Empire, arresting everybody in the bar. Not until 1940 did others make a second attempt and publish the magazine *Levensrecht* [Right to Live]. Only four issues were published of this monthly, as the German invasion put an end to this initiative.

Before the war, the Amsterdam police kept a very close watch on the handful of bars with homosexual clientele. The managers were warned to escort gay customers out the door. This control remained in effect during and after the war. Two things did change after the war, however. The police permitted the Shakespeare Club or COC, to hold meetings, provided these would be decent. Secondly, the police discovered that it was better to let queens seek each other out in bars behind closed doors rather than have them comb the streets in search of partners.

In the 1950's, Amsterdam became the gay capital. The policy of tolerating gay life by allowing bars, dancing spots, and COC resulted in enormous growth for the subculture. If the number of gay could be counted on one hand before the war, suddenly in the 50s, there were two dance halls and a dozen cafés. The first exclusively lesbian bar however did not arrive on the scene until 1970. Not only gays and dykes themselves, as well as the police, were thinking about homosexuality more respectfully, so were prominent ministers, priests and psychiatrists. While gays directly after the war could count on eternal damnation, and some proposed castration as the solution to homosexual desires, gays and lesbians were elevated to fellow human beings.

The more tolerant attitude and growing subculture very much furthered gay migration and tourism to Amsterdam from both other parts of the Netherlands and neighbouring countries. In the mid-1960s, city hall became alarmed about the plane loads of English gay tourists coming to Amsterdam for a weekend. Such concerns, however, were swept away by the sexual revolution, and the gay community further grew undisturbed.

In 1969, they first took to the streets to organise a demonstration at the Dutch Parliament against Article 248. In 1971, the Amsterdam chapter was not allowed to lay flowers for homosexual victims of World War II at the May 4th memorial service on Dam Square. Activists broke through the police and navy cordon and laid their wreath down. In 1977, Lesbian Nation organised the first American-style gay and lesbian parade on the last Saturday in June. This demonstration has since become an annual tradition known as *Roze Zaterdag* (Pink Saturday), and since 1980, has been held in a different Dutch city each year.

In the meantime, the gay movement was counting its first successes,



Gay Pride: homophobia confined to the countryside?

