

4 Bubis behind Bars: Prisons as Queer Spaces

In the late 1940s or early 1950s, East Berlin dog groomer Rita “Tommy” Thomas served ten months for unlawful possession of a gun at the East Berlin women’s prison at Barnimstraße (Barnim Street), just minutes from Alexanderplatz.¹ She recalled the experience in a 2016 oral history interview with the Archive of Other Memories:

I went to Keibelstraße [the East Berlin People’s Police pretrial detention site] for pretrial detention right away. Then they transferred me to Barnimstraße, Barnimstraße 10. There was a block upstairs, on the first or second floor, first floor, that was all juveniles ... They saw me downstairs and called to me from upstairs: Hey, send the Bubi to us up here. Because back then people used to say Bubi [lad] and Mäuschen [little mouse]. And well, I had to, if I wanted to or not. But it was a good time. It was like a kindergarten. There were pretty women there too. And once when we had our free hour, with one of them I got along really well, and we said, we’ll celebrate our engagement here now. And there were ten of us, not more, ten or twelve, we walked around the prison yard arm in arm, and they followed. And so we celebrated our engagement, more for a joke, really. And the guards, they were [transcript unclear, could also mean “that was”] strange too, the inmates would give them nicknames. One of them had a silver tooth in her mouth, and they’d call her Blechzahnubi [tin tooth Bubi], and the other one was called Fräulein Fuchs [Miss Fox]. And, well then I was in a cell, she [another prisoner] always wanted to make out, and I did not like that so much. There were three of us in the cell, and I asked for a single cell. And then when I did get a single cell, I wrote. I only ever wrote. The guard said I was like Chopin, that’s what she said.²

In Tommy’s narration, the prison emerges as a space marked by the articulation of queer subjectivities, the scene of inmate relationships

both playful and transgressive, and a place that allowed for introspection and creativity – a veritable room of one’s own. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, in East and West Berlin sources from the 1950s and 1960s, women’s prisons appear as spaces in which queer relationships were lived, where queer subjectivities became visible and were formed. A closer analysis of Tommy’s prison memories will guide us towards a full articulation of this argument.

Immediately upon her arrival, Tommy is called out as *Bubi* by other prisoners. “*Bubi*” has been employed as a German term for masculine-presenting, same-sex desiring women since at least the turn of the twentieth century, and historians of queer cultures of the 1920s have described gender-differentiated lesbian couples of *Bubis* and *Mädels* [girls] or *Bubis* and *Damen* [ladies].³ By calling Tommy out as a *Bubi*, the other prisoners were hence designating her as queer. Calling her by this name also placed her in the space of the prison: she is sent “up to us here,” to the group that claimed her as one of their own. Tommy does not elaborate who this group was, if it was all *Bubis*, suggesting a gendered organization of prison space, or both *Bubis* and *Mäuschen*, pointing to sexuality as ordering principle. These queer subjectivities did not apply to inmates only but also to two guards the prisoners nicknamed “Tin Tooth Bubi” and “Miss Fox.”

In Tommy’s story, the prison also provided space for various kinds of inmate relationships. The performance of an engagement ceremony between Tommy and another prisoner, celebrated in the presence and with the participation of other inmates in a mix of play and formality, was a demonstration of prisoner agency: the incarcerated used their free time and the comparatively open space of the prison yard to construct their own social order. In her cell, by contrast, Tommy was exposed to unwanted sexual advances. When she was granted her wish to be put in a single cell, it became a space of reflection. The guard’s comparison of Tommy’s creativity to the composer Frédéric Chopin was a compliment, and a sense of pride resonates in her narration of this episode. Given that she came from a working-class family, did not receive formal education beyond high school, and made a living as a dog groomer, her prolific prison writing stands out in her biography. The single cell that she occupied and the time away from everyday life afforded her a chance for reflection that she likely would not otherwise have had, and it may explain why she described her prison stay as “a good time,” a perhaps surprising assessment that I will contextualize below.

Tommy’s narrative introduces carceral spaces as sites where non-normatively lived genders and same-sex relationships could be found. Whether inmates arrived in prisons with queer subjectivities, whether

they adopted them in prison, and whether their experiences in prison had lasting effects on their sexual subjectivities will be the questions running through this chapter. As I will demonstrate through my discussion of oral history testimony and administrative and inmate files, looking at prisons can help us see queer histories that so far have largely remained opaque, particularly in the German context, such as working-class lesbian relationships and trans subjectivities in the 1950s and 1960s. In this way, a queer historical analysis of prisons contributes to a more comprehensive history of the repression and resilience of queers, a history that takes seriously the intersections of gender, sexuality, and class, and their repercussions in queer folks' everyday lives. While my focus in this chapter is on women's prisons, it is important to note that, in postwar Germany, especially in the West, prisons were sites of the mass criminalization, degradation, and disenfranchisement of men sentenced under §175 and §175a, the laws prohibiting sex between men and male prostitution. I will offer a brief excursus on queer men in prison in West Berlin as well.⁴

In what follows, I outline the historiographies on prisons, sex, and butch-fem subjectivities. I then analyse archival documents and oral history testimonies on women's prisons in East and West Berlin. In my examination of these sources, I offer an intertwined analysis of practices (what people were doing), subjectivities (how they understood what they were doing and who they were), and discourses (how others understood what they were doing, who they were, and what the repercussions of that were) in the hope of arriving at an understanding of the prison that spotlights queer agency while remaining mindful of the very real deprivations, hostilities, and violence inflicted on queer inmates.

Prisons, Sex, and Butch-Fem Subjectivities

As a central agent of what Michel Foucault calls "the normalizing power" in modern Western societies, the prison is a prime location for studying how sexual and gender norms were produced and how non-normative sexualities and genders were disciplined.⁵ Foucault famously posited that the modern prison is one institution among others, such as schools, almshouses, or social work, in a "carceral network" that, through "its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation," disciplines individuals and produces deviants.⁶ Historians of sexuality and prison historians have been slow to explore the nexus of the carceral and the sexual, however, as Regina Kunzel has pointed out in *Criminal Intimacy*, her history of sexuality and prisons in the United

States.⁷ She argues that the prison's location at the margins of society makes it a particularly well-suited site for examining the instabilities and anxieties that structure the broader society and that discourses about prison sex might illuminate the construction of gender and sexuality norms. Kunzel's thesis is based on her analysis of sociological studies of US prison populations from the mid-twentieth century. These studies' authors, she shows, most prominent among them Donald Clemmer and Gresham Sykes, interpreted same-sex practices and relationships between prisoners as an "understandable and compensatory response to the deprivations of incarceration" and thus without consequences for the stability of American heterosexuality more broadly.⁸ These were instances of "situational" homosexuality only, they argued, and as soon as inmates left the prison "situation," they returned to the heterosexual order.⁹ At the same time, however, the sociologists' assurances betrayed their realization, Kunzel argues, that prison sex also carried "potential to reveal heterosexual identity as fragile, unstable, and, itself, situational" and thus to "expose the framing beneath the edifice of heterosexuality at a key moment in its construction."¹⁰

The rich sociological scholarship on prison society in the United States does not have a correlate in Germany, where prisons as social spaces have been largely ignored by sociology, history, and sexology.¹¹ Recent publications on everyday life and sexuality in Nazi concentration camps by Insa Eschebach and Anna Hájková have begun to examine same-sex sexuality between camp inmates, as well as between inmates and guards. However, their focus has been on expressions of homophobia in camp memorializations rather than on sexual and affective practices in the camps.¹² Also, the situation of concentration camp inmates was far worse than that of prisoners in the postwar Germanies, as the goal of camp internment was death, not punishment. As I will show, German postwar prisons allowed inmates some room for negotiation of their conditions. With the postwar years characterized by what Dagmar Herzog has termed "fragile heterosexuality" and a "desperate search for normality," negotiations around sex in prisons may be particularly insightful for the making of sexual norms in Germany in this period.¹³ To repurpose Kunzel's words, the postwar years in Germany were also a "key moment" in the construction of "the edifice of heterosexuality," and ideas about non-normative sexualities were crucial building blocks for it.

Beyond prison sex as a central discursive site in the construction of heterosexuality, Kunzel is also attentive to the practices of constructing the gendered and sexual selves of prisoners and the presence of queer working-class subjectivities in mid-century prisons.¹⁴ "Populations

of women's as well as men's prisons were drawn disproportionately from the working class, and the increasing importance of butch-femme dynamics and gender signification began to be apparent in women's prisons beginning in this period as well," she writes.¹⁵ Kunzel cites Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis's oral history study of the postwar butch-fem subculture in Buffalo, New York, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*.¹⁶ Though I have already discussed this seminal work in the chapter on homes in conjunction with Tommy's photographs of lesbian sociability in East Berlin, Kennedy and Davis's argument for the political significance of butch-fem subjectivities warrants a closer look.

Butches defied convention by usurping male privilege in appearance and sexuality, and with their fems, outraged society by creating a romantic and sexual unit within which women were not under male control. At a time when lesbian communities were developing solidarity and consciousness, but had not yet formed political groups, butch-fem roles were the key structure for organizing against heterosexual dominance. They were the central prepolitical form of resistance.¹⁷

Kennedy and Davis here offered an alternative reading of US gay and lesbian history, challenging the narrative that the respectability-centred approach of the homophile movement had been the only gay and lesbian politics before Stonewall. In my analysis of German inmate files and oral history testimony, I pay keen attention to gendered performances and their verbalizations, such as Tommy's designation as Bubi in the East Berlin prison. I contend that in Germany too, the practices of butch and fem self-fashioning were key to queer community building, not just under the conditions of imprisonment but also more generally during the intensely homophobic 1950s and 1960s.

Excursus: Queer Men in Prison in West Berlin

Because only sex between men was prohibited by law, incarceration as punishment for queer sex affected only those identified by the law as men, which included those classified as male-to-female transvestites, as seen in the previous two chapters. Excerpts from the oral history interviews of Orest Kapp and Klaus Born highlight aspects of queer men's experience in prison that warrant exploration in greater depth, especially because prison time was a feature of many queer men's lives.

No statistics exist for the incarceration of queer Berliners under §175 in the postwar years.¹⁸ However, according to historian Jens Dobler, 758 men

were convicted under §175 in Berlin (East and West) between 1945 and 1948 alone. Statistics of the sentences given to men in West Germany under §175 or §175a between 1950 and 1969 show that 75 per cent received a prison term.¹⁹ With the prosecution for §175 intensifying dramatically in West Germany over the 1950s and into the 1960s, it seems likely that thousands of men were imprisoned in West Berlin prisons for having sex with other men until the reform of the law in 1969. In East Berlin, the numbers were likely much lower. Incomplete statistics show that between 1949 and 1959, at least 202 men and male youth were sentenced under §175 and §175a.²⁰ But as seen in [chapter 3](#), the GDR's laws targeting "asocials" were possibly also used against queers. Men's prisons in East Berlin thus warrant an in-depth examination as sites that played a significant role for queer men.

Orest Kapp, whose description of the painstaking process of learning normative masculinity I discussed in [chapter 3](#), was "surprised with a friend" by the West Berlin police in the late 1950s when he was seventeen.²¹ In the interview, he does not specify what they were caught doing, but he was arrested for causing a public nuisance and for §175, suggesting that he and his friend had sex in a public space. While Kapp was ultimately not convicted, he spent three months in custody. He was "ashamed to be in prison, especially as a homosexual," and told acquaintances that he was jailed for "something criminal."²² In custody, he had sex for safety,²³ as he explains to the interviewers:

INTERVIEWER: Did you have problems in custody?

OREST KAPP: Hm, I did not, thank God, because the boss of my cell, where I was, well, the boss, he took me under his wing, to put it this way, yeah. So I was his sex partner. But in return, the others spared me.²⁴

By incarcerating him for consensual sex with a friend, the state thus subjected teenage Orest Kapp to a situation in which he had to choose between acting as sex partner to the cell's "boss" or being exposed to the advances of other inmates.

Twenty-one-year-old Klaus Born's arrest during his first sexual encounter in West Berlin, with a man he met in the vicinity of the Zoo station in 1965, also led him into custody, but his experience there was different from Orest Kapp's. Born was put in a single cell and not allowed to have any contact with other prisoners. In the oral history interview, he describes the deprivations of life in prison.

And then I had my room in the uppermost floor. A so-called solitary cell. There was nothing in there. There was the bed, a table, a small chair, and

the pit toilet. And that was it. And a little bit of water. [breathes in] ... So I was inside. A week. Two weeks. Three weeks. It must have been ... seven, eight weeks. How long exactly it was? I don't know. [breathes in] ... And in the time I was inside. I had no music. I had nothing to read. I had nothing to write. Nothing. I wasn't allowed to do anything either. It was like a, how do you say? Hm, hm, it was a solitary confinement ... The only thing I was allowed to do. I was allowed to. Everyday. For ten minutes. With two men. One in front. One behind. In a certain distance. To go for a round in the yard downstairs. And then I could go back upstairs. But I could not come too close to the two. I might have infected them, after all. To become gay. Right?²⁵

In the transcript, Klaus Born's repeated pausing to breathe is noted, and the frequent full stops register his chopped narration, indicating that these memories are hard for him to express. He enumerates the things he did not have (music, things to write and read) in order to illustrate how he suffered from the lack of occupation and contact that his solitary confinement entailed. The only contact he describes occurs during his court rounds, and during these instances, prison staff prescribed a mandatory physical distance between him and the men walking in front and behind him, whether these were guards or other prisoners. Born sarcastically renders prison staff's pathologizing rationale for this distance, which likely explains his solitary confinement too: they pathologized him as infectious.

Continuing his narration, Klaus Born describes how he appropriated this pathologizing language and turned his court trial from a spectacle meant to shame him into an unashamed praise of sex between men.

And then the trial came. Then I said to him ... Then why do I go to trial? I'm going to make them all sick! Won't they all get sick when I get up there. No, not there. That's a court. It will sentence you, after all. Ah, ok. Hm. Well, anyway ... Now I am in the dock. And I look in the back. That was a large room. Then two school classes come in there ... They were to listen to this so that they would not get sick. Right? So that they know how it is when you lead a gay life. When you practise §175. So when you go through with it. Yeah. Then they listened to all of that. I explained it to them close and hot [*brühhwarm*], what we did and how it was so beautiful too. I said: It was wonderful. And then all of a sudden the lamps go on and we are dis-, disturbed. That probably did not suit them either.²⁶

In this part of his narration, Klaus Born appears strong and self-confident. He is aware of the efforts to pathologize him but does not let

himself be affected by them. Instead, by naively asking if his presence during the trial won't infect the other people present, he demonstrates the absurdity of the idea that his homosexuality might be contagious. During the trial, when he becomes aware of his audience of high school students, he appropriates the courtroom as a stage that was meant to cast him as a shameful criminal. He "explains" to the students "close and hot," so likely in vivid and detailed language, what he and the other man did, and how "wonderful" it felt. In his rendering of his statement in court, the state's intervention comes across as a disturbance: it is not he and his sex partner who disturb public order, but the state that disturbs a "beautiful" encounter between two people. In this narration, decades after his trial, Klaus Born thus rhetorically turned the state's weapons against itself.

The Women's Prisons in Postwar East and West Berlin: Criminological Concepts and Penal Practice

Guided by different strategies for dealing with the Nazi past and competing visions for the future, the East and West German states developed different concepts of penal law and practice. In the first years after 1945, penal law in both states was almost identical to the Reich Penal Code of 1871. The purpose of punishment was retribution for the crimes committed.²⁷ In the West, the postwar years were characterized by continuities from the Nazi period in criminological thought and penal practice, as well as a slow process of liberalization. In the immediate post-Nazi period, biological determinism remained the predominant theory for explaining crime.²⁸ But over the 1950s, under the influence of the occupying powers, liberal understandings of criminality, which stressed environmental influences, gained ground in West Germany.²⁹ As a result, the criminal's rehabilitation, or *Resozialisierung*, became the chief reason for incarceration.

On the ground, however, many West German federal states kept the Nazi rules for prisoners in place, with only slight changes. There were significant continuities from the Nazi era among penal personnel, ranging from high-ranking civil servants in the ministries to prison directors, chaplains, and guards.³⁰ Many of those working directly with convicts did not believe in rehabilitation. As Greg Eghigian has noted, prison reform in West Germany was a top-down affair, "carried out and designed by academic experts, longtime federal administrators, and national politicians, who clearly and knowingly operated contrary to the general sentiment of most prison staff and the general population."³¹ While prisoners were incrementally granted more rights and

a new Federal Penal and Prison Order went into effect in 1962, it still stressed retribution over rehabilitation. Only in 1976 did rehabilitation become the explicitly stated goal of incarceration in the new penal law, alongside protecting the public from future crimes.³²

East Germany pursued a more radical break with the Nazi era by removing former party members from all state offices. All Nazi judges and prison staff were dismissed.³³ The law, and by extension incarceration, was now marshalled for the goal of building socialism. The law thus served to penalize East Germans for behaviour that was regarded antagonistic to the socialist state and society.³⁴ Despite the stated goal of moving away from Nazi ideology, however, penal practice differed starkly from official policy throughout the existence of the GDR. While the East German authorities initially put experts in charge who had led prison reform during the Weimar Republic, they were quickly let go again.³⁵ In 1951, responsibility for the penal system was wrested from the judicial system and given to the Ministry of the Interior and the police, "the most unscrupulous pillars of the new regime," according to Nikolaus Wachsmann.³⁶ It was partly the growing number of political prisoners that motivated this change.³⁷ Living conditions in East German prisons were dismal, particularly in the early 1950s, and prisons were routinely overcrowded by the mid-1950s. There was also a severe shortage of qualified staff.³⁸ In the late 1950s, East German scepticism about rehabilitative penal measures gave way to an optimism about the potential of the social sciences to turn convicts into "socialist personalities," citizens who would abide by the new state-issued rules for everyday behaviour, such as "decency and discipline."³⁹ Beginning in the 1970s, the Cold War détente led East German penology to adopt international developments in correctional theory. But as Eghigian has argued, practice was much slower to change, and the shortage and poor education of prison staff meant that they remained focused on "putting prisoners to work and keeping order," and guards interpreted breaches of prison rules as "evidence of shortcomings in the 'character' of inmates."⁴⁰

These divergent developments can also be traced in Berlin's penal system. In 1945, it came under the control of the occupying Soviet troops, including the women's prison located at Barnimstraße 10 in the city centre, very close to Alexanderplatz.⁴¹ During the Nazi era, both Hilde Radusch and Eva Siewert had been incarcerated here – Radusch as a communist, Siewert for making fun of the Nazis. As a result of the Berlin crisis of 1948, the city was split into East and West politically and began to turn into two separate administrative, economic, and cultural entities, a process that would not be complete until the

construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, however.⁴² The city's penal system was divided in 1949. Now, prison staff who resided in West Berlin could no longer enter East Berlin. Inmates who had originally been living in what was now West Berlin were transferred to prisons in the West.⁴³ In East Berlin, the new judiciary introduced penal reforms in the late 1940s designed to alleviate everyday life behind bars and give prisoners more control over their incarceration, such as the introduction of prisoners' councils and the opportunity to partake in cultural and educational events.⁴⁴ This liberalizing approach ceased immediately when the police took over the East German penal system in 1951. Now, rehabilitative approaches to punishment were driven out in favour of a more authoritarian, militarized regime.⁴⁵ In West Berlin, the former military prison in Moabit, a working-class district just northwest of the city's historical centre, was turned into the women's prison in 1949.⁴⁶ After briefly housing refugees in 1945, it now took in West Berlin's female convicts. The turn-of-the-century building had suffered only minor damage in the war, but it had also not been modernized in decades. For instance, until 1964 there were only buckets in the cells, no toilets.⁴⁷ The complex continued to house the city's female prisoners until 1985, when a new facility opened in Plötzensee, a district in northern Berlin.

Queer Relationships and Subjectivities in the East Berlin Women's Prison

This chapter opened with East Berlin dog groomer Rita "Tommy" Thomas's memories of the ten months she spent in the juvenile wing of the women's prison at Barnimstraße 10. In her oral history narrative, she depicted the prison as a space of play and privacy: "a kindergarten" full of "pretty women," where engagements were celebrated "for a joke" and a young working-class person could be compared to the creative genius of a Chopin. Tommy's time at Barnimstraße prison likely fell into a comparatively comfortable period in 1949–50: the worst material deprivations of the postwar years had been overcome; the prison was no longer overcrowded with women incarcerated for petty crime, prostitution, and other postwar criminality; and the socialist authorities experimented with new, more liberal approaches to penal justice.⁴⁸ Tommy's incarceration occurred during an in-between period when the chaos, uncertainty, and openness of the postwar years had not yet hardened into the full-blown articulation of socialist morality and the sexual conservatism of the early years of the GDR.⁴⁹ With a new "normal" not yet defined, the prison was less effective as an institution of

normalization. These circumstances probably contributed to the “good time” that Tommy enjoyed at Barnimstraße prison.

During the oral history interview, the interviewers asked Tommy about her usage of the terms “Bubi” and “Mäuschen”:

INTERVIEWERS: You just mentioned that, back then, people would always say Bubi and Mäuschen.

TOMMY: Yes, yes, that’s how it was, there were many before us, after all. I met someone once, who was, she told me this, she said: “That’s a hard time, when you enter there, I was Mäuschen once too.” So I say: “What’s that?” And she says: “Well, Mäuschen is the woman and Bubi, well, the guy, the little guy.” And that’s how I know that, yes, Bubi.

INTERVIEWERS: And was it always a combination of Bubi and Mäuschen or were there couples of Mäuschen and Mäuschen or Bubi and Bubi?

TOMMY: Yes, yes, yes.

INTERVIEWERS: Those existed too?

TOMMY: Yes, those existed, too, you didn’t catch on to it so much.

And most often those who were a little strict, back then you could really distinguish them, you would notice – you’d simply notice, pretty much. Well, they had short hair, I always had an Elvis haircut, a little longer here [points to the left and right sides of her head, by her ears], and combed to the back. And I had a suit made for myself. I bought cloth, had a custom-tailored suit made. And on the pictures, I wear a trench coat, on most Sundays I would, during the week I had to work after all, so it wasn’t possible.⁵⁰

Several aspects in this excerpt from Tommy’s narrative are striking. She learned the terminology of “Bubi” and “Mäuschen” from another woman, who warned her of the “hard time” awaiting her. Since Tommy’s elaboration of what a Bubi was moves away from the prison context to her everyday life in Berlin, it is not quite clear what entry the other woman was referring to (“when you first enter there”). Is she referring to prison and a gendered organization of prison subculture into Bubis and Mäuschen? Or to styles of female femininity and masculinity in lesbian subculture more broadly? Since both terms are diminutives, they may refer to young people foremost, a possibility that is also suggested by her specification that Bubi was “the little guy.” Tommy here also gives an example of butch self-fashioning at mid-century: short hair, combed back and with sideburns, as well as a custom-made suit and a trench coat. Her reference to Elvis is anachronistic, though



Figure 4.1. Rita "Tommy" Thomas in 1951. Rita "Tommy" Thomas Photo Collection, Feminist FFBIZ Archives, Berlin.

the hairstyle was popular with young Germans before him too at the time. She likely modeled her masculinity after the working-class men in her environment, as well as after Hollywood depictions that she saw in West Berlin's movie theatres. A photo taken in 1951 shows Tommy with no smile, hair slicked back, wearing a button-down shirt and a light-coloured men's flight jacket, long, wide pants, and black, clunky leather shoes (figure 4.1).⁵¹

Apart from Tommy's narrative, queer subjectivities and relationships at Barnimstraße can also be found in official documentation. In reports from the prison, queer sex and subjectivities were noted in the 1950s and 1960s as an indication of immorality and deviance in conflict with the norm of the "decent," productive, heterosexual socialist persona of the early GDR.⁵² A 1954 quarterly report written by the penal department within the police mentioned "a larger group of comrades with lesbian disposition" that could not be fired "because of the acute lack of staff."⁵³ A year later, another quarterly report noted the firing of five prison guards at Barnimstraße because of their "lesbian relationships with prisoners."⁵⁴ The author of the report judged these incidents to be an "expression of the class enemy's activities in our penal departments."⁵⁵ Claudia von Gélieu has suggested that, in these cases, homosexuality may have been the real grounds for

dismissal, or it may have served as a label to get rid of employees who were not considered politically reliable. Either way, relationships between guards and inmates could not be tolerated because such relationships transgressed the border between criminal and normal, and destabilized prison order.

In the mid-1960s, the Barnimstraße prison saw an influx of women incarcerated as *Arbeitserziehungspflichtige* (people obligated to education through/to work) under §249 of the new penal code. Under this section the GDR formalized its criminalization of citizens who it deemed “work-shy” and prostitutes, two groups that the regime classified as *Asoziale* (asocials).⁵⁶ While the introduction of a formal law against *Asozialität* (asociality) was a genuine novelty of the socialist state, the term itself was not new. It had circulated since the late nineteenth century as a negative term for people transgressing different social norms and had gained prominence in welfare discourses during the Weimar Republic.⁵⁷ The Nazis persecuted people who did not work, as well as individuals who “repeatedly and routinely committed minor transgressions of the law,” among them prostitutes, as “asocials.”⁵⁸ From 1942 they were transferred from prisons to concentration camps to be “exterminated through work.” At the camps, inmates marked as “asocials” were low in the prisoner hierarchy and suffered further exclusion from other groups of prisoners.⁵⁹ Insa Eschebach has shown that survivors of the Ravensbrück women’s concentration camp also linked lesbianism to “asociality,” ascribing lesbian behaviour solely to “asocial” and “criminal” inmates in their memoirs.⁶⁰

In reports on Barnimstraße prison from 1966 to 1968, the police repeatedly linked “lesbian love” and disruptions of the prison’s “educational work.”⁶¹ Written by the prison’s warden or the responsible official within the police (*Vollzugsgeschäftsstelle*, or Corrections Office), the reports address “the fulfilment of the main tasks of the penal department” and “the enforcement of a strict discipline and order.”⁶² The reports’ authors claimed that “not a small part of the AE” (*Arbeitserziehungspflichtige*) had “an inclination for lesbian love.” “This,” they wrote, found “expression in some of them consciously trying to appear ‘masculine’ and to position themselves at the centre of the AEs’ interest through rowdiness and rioting.”⁶³ Here, the report does not specify how these prisoners tried to “appear ‘masculine,’” whether they embodied a female masculinity through hairstyle or alterations to prisoner clothing, adopted male names, or were a part of butch-fem couples. It did stress the damaging effects that “lesbian love” had on the prison’s “educational work” (*Erziehungsarbeit*), however, which affected the work morale not only of the AEs but

also of regular prisoners and those in custody.⁶⁴ The year's annual report claimed that the staff at Barnimstraße had "for the most part managed to normalize the situation brought about by the change from prisoners to *Arbeitspflichtige*" but that "the order and educational work [were] still negatively affected by a number of aspects of lesbian love," and deliberations were necessary concerning "how and by what means this phenomenon can be repressed."⁶⁵ A report from February 1967 about "the enforcement of a strict discipline and order" continued to locate "the by far largest part of the motives and reasons for breaches of order and discipline" in "the widespread lesbian relationships, as well as gossiping and fighting among the AEs."⁶⁶ Instead of using their free time to read the newspaper or quality literature, "they are only interested in making illegal connections and conducting primitive conversations, most often in the dirtiest fashion about love affairs." If AEs did participate in one of the existing offers for prisoners' leisure time, "they only [did] so to make friends or to make better use of their connections. These so-called pure friendships very much and very often lead to lengthy exchanges [*Kassibereien*] of pieces of clothing or letters. What happens especially frequently is that AEs with shopping limits are provided by others with tobacco and groceries, even though they know that it is forbidden and that they too will be disciplined as a result."⁶⁷ In this quote, lesbian relationships among the prisoners appear as acts of resistance against the prison's function of disciplining inmates through "education through/to work." Sexuality (the sexual content of conversations and letters is indicated by the adjectives "primitive" and "dirty") served as an alternative way of spending free time in prison and as a subversion of the institutional mission to educate. The quote also illustrates economic solidarity among prisoners, as those who were permitted to purchase food and tobacco shared with those who were not. However, aside from such expressions of solidarity, the penal administration also recorded instances of prisoners reporting others. The 1967 "annual estimate of petitions [*Eingaben*] of incarcerated persons" includes three complaints from AEs about other AEs "who disturbed the work routine and discipline through lesbian relationships."⁶⁸ These women were assigned to other work units or were isolated temporarily.

Beatrice Kühne, a former inmate of the Barnimstraße prison interviewed by Claudia von Gélieu, remembered lesbian relationships between other prisoners. Her testimony attests to how prisoners subverted prohibitions of such relationships and to the broader political relevance of living an openly lesbian life in the GDR. Kühne herself

was imprisoned in Barnimstraße in 1970 and 1971 because of her plans to flee the GDR.

GÉLIEU: There are supposed to have been many prostitutes and “asocials” incarcerated at Barnimstraße. Is that true?

KÜHNE: I don’t know about that. But sex did play a role. Masturbation was not spoken about but tolerated among the prisoners. And there were lesbian relationships. I was together [in a cell] with a criminal [Gélieu and Kühne distinguish prisoners between “politicals” and “criminals”], and she had a partner [*einen festen Freund*], a woman. That was well known. They had shared a cell and fallen in love but had been separated very quickly. That was a huge drama. They met in secret, exchanged gifts. Among prisoners that was consensus. I think that kind of thing was quite frequent. First-hand I only know it about this woman, a very pretty, rebellious woman. She lived that openly. That’s not to be taken for granted in the GDR. In a way, she was an oppositionist [*Oppositionelle*] too.⁶⁹

According to Kühne, lesbian relationships were not tolerated by prison administrators, but they were accepted by the other prisoners (“that was consensus”). In the case she narrates, the involved women were not isolated in single cells, as had been the practice for lesbian women at the prison during the Nazi period, but they were separated.⁷⁰ Earlier in the interview, Kühne described separating cellmates who had grown “too close” as part of “the prison management’s strategy” and the “haphazard and unpredictable” way in which separations happened as “a crucial aspect of the psychological terror.”⁷¹ The lovers continued meeting and exchanging gifts. Kühne voices respect for her cellmate living “that” openly, which she describes as extraordinary for the GDR. Indeed, Kühne even states that by openly living her same-sex love, her cellmate “was an oppositionist too.” Her comment destabilizes the distinction between political and criminal prisoners, and thus acknowledges the political nature of an openly lived queer life in a homophobic society such as the GDR.

The oral history narratives of Tommy on the early 1950s and Beatrice Kühne on the early 1970s, as well as the prison reports from the 1950s and 1960s, shine a spotlight on queer subjectivities and prison management’s reactions to them during different phases of the early GDR. As the Ministry of the Interior and the police took over responsibility for the penal system and prison policy moved from liberal to repressive, queer practices of affection that had been quite open – Tommy’s engagement ceremony in the prison yard in the very early 1950s – became

much more secret, like the meetings and gift exchanges of the couple that Beatrice Kühne remembers from the early 1970s. Prison authorities' interpretations of queer sexuality in prison shifted from interpreting homosexuality as a danger coming from outside socialist society ("an expression of the class enemy's activities") in the mid-1950s to a threat destabilizing socialism from within through women whose refusal to conform to socialist norms of work and sexuality branded them as "asocials" in the mid-1960s. Queer embodiments of gender through hairstyle or clothing, a crucial feature of Tommy's prison memories, have left few traces in the Barnimstraße administrative records. By contrast, files from the West Berlin women's prison offer rich sources on prisoner relationships and butch and fem subjectivities, allowing for a deeper analysis of prison as a queer space.

Queer Relationships and Subjectivities in West Berlin Prisons

After Berlin's penal system was divided in 1949, the former military prison in Moabit district served as West Berlin's women's prison.⁷² Dr. Gertrud Siemsen, who had been the prison librarian at Barnimstraße prison, served as the director of the women's prison from 1953 until 1972.⁷³ Two files created during her governance speak to the institution as a queer space, documenting relationships between imprisoned women, inmates' gender presentation and sexual practices, as well as prison authorities' reaction to same-sex relationships. The first archival file, titled "Special Incidents: Secret Messages" and dated from 1958, contains messages sent among inmates and intercepted by prison staff. The second one is the prisoner file of Bettina Grundmann, who was incarcerated there in 1966–67 and whose verbal and embodied presentation of female masculinity is reflected in the database entry for their file: the person who created it added the term "*Lesbierin*," an outdated term for lesbian, to their name.⁷⁴

The 1958 file on "secret messages" contains a message from an inmate who signs as "Stolch" (rascal, tramp, thug) and who writes to "Mammi" (Mommy), also referred to as "Lisa."⁷⁵ Though I cannot determine Stolch's gender from the file, the word "Stolch" is grammatically masculine, suggesting a flexible or fluid gender identity. I will therefore use they/them/their pronouns for Stolch. The message was found in a handkerchief. Across three pages, Stolch expresses their emotions for Mammi and other prisoners, reminisces about a former relationship with a woman in an East German prison, and makes suggestions for a rendezvous, as well as plans for their time "outside," after release. In the first sentences of the letter, Stolch describes Mammi/Lisa and

themselves in gendered terms. Mammi/Lisa is “resolute” and makes Strolch feel “safe and sound.” “Nevertheless,” Strolch does not conceive of themselves as a “hen-pecked husband.”⁷⁶ While they describe their love for Mammi/Lisa as “warm and trustful,” their relationship is also sexual: “Lisa, how about we find each other physically Sunday night (tomorrow) at ½ 9 [8:30 p.m.] (each on their own)? Why do you want to hit me for that??? That you are 100% as sensual in the erotic, I do believe, a woman like you!!! But I have studied since my 15th year and I know ‘the school of love.’”⁷⁷

Here, Strolch suggests that the two masturbate simultaneously at a set time, each on their own. Later in the letter, they write out a fantasy of performing cunnilingus on Mammi/Lisa. The two also made plans for acting out these physical fantasies in person by beginning a game of chess in order to distract the guards. “We’ll play once or twice, until they [prison staff] are sure [that they are really playing chess and not doing anything illicit], and then I will take advantage of the opportunity, you can believe that,” they assure her.⁷⁸

What did the West Berlin prison administration make of this apparent evidence of sex between prisoners? Prison director, Dr. Gertrud Siemsen, felt that the letter, as well as two other related letters, were fake messages sent with the aim of being discovered. Whoever sent them, she thought, wanted their alleged author to be punished and possibly wanted to disrupt a relationship between prisoners.⁷⁹ In reaction, she summoned all prisoners involved to her office, those on whom the messages were found as well as their alleged authors and addressees. In her report of the subsequent disciplinary measures, she notes that she had told prisoners

that secret messaging may not be a pleasure for us, though some may think so, but it also does not shock us. The content was always simply telling of its authors and possibly addressees. I had no intention to take care of their dirty business for them and serve as handmaid for their revenge. Neither did I have the intention to deal with the messages in detail to figure out who had written them; if secret messages were found on someone directly, however, they would be punished. What is more, secret messaging was childish since they had enough opportunity to talk to each other in their free time and in the recreation room. Subsequently, I reminded them that any business among prisoners is forbidden.⁸⁰

Siemsen hence knew about relationships between prisoners, and she describes them matter of factly and not derogatorily as “friendships.” Yet her comment that they did “not shock” the prison administration

demonstrates that she was aware of their sexual content. There is also tension between the freedom of communication that she postulated – despite all socializing happening under the watchful eyes of guards and other prisoners – and her reminder that “any business among prisoners” was prohibited. While “Geschäfte” can be translated as “business” in the sense of the exchange of goods, it can also be understood as a reference to sexual relations.

Siemsen’s reaction to the discovery of this letter creates the impression that the West Berlin women’s prison was a rather benign place governed by a generous, understanding director. This picture is confirmed but also complicated by the prisoner file of Bettina Grundmann, who arrived at the women’s prison of West Berlin eight years after this incident, in April 1966, and to whose case I now turn to make visible both queer subjectivity and the prison as a normative institution.

The “Lesbierin” File

The prisoner file of Bettina Grundmann, categorized as “*Lesbierin*” (lesbian) in the archival catalogue, includes their mugshot, documentation of their belongings, a list of visitors, exchanges between them and the prison director, and correspondence with other prisoners and letters to their family. It offers a detailed picture of life in the women’s prison of West Berlin in the 1960s. Attached to the file’s inside cover is Grundmann’s black-and-white mugshot in profile and frontal view, showing them dressed in a light-coloured men’s shirt, hair cut short in a neat crew cut. Their gaze to the camera is self-confident, even sporting a whiff of arrogance.⁸¹ Grundmann appears as a handsome, masculine-presenting young person who was not intimidated by the camera. In their carefully groomed masculinity, they epitomize the mid-century butch. The file promises a window onto an openly lived lesbian working-class life in 1960s West Berlin and thus access to a form of lesbian subjectivity rarely preserved in the LGBTIQ* movement archives. In the course of my analysis, it became clear, however, that rather than simply a long-desired proof of lesbian working-class experience, the Grundmann file raises complex questions about queer subject formation in mid-century West Germany. Grundmann’s shifting embodiment of gender within and outside prison suggests that the category “lesbian” in the 1960s was capacious, encompassing subjectivities that today might be described as trans.⁸² I thus use they pronouns to refer to Grundmann. In the following, I will summarize Grundmann’s court case before reconstructing the prison as lifeworld as it appears in the file.

Bettina Grundmann went to prison because the courts found them guilty of lying about the identity of their son's father and of fraudulently receiving alimony from another man whom they claimed was the father, Walter Fern.⁸³ Born in Berlin to a single mother in 1936, Grundmann had grown up in a foster family from infancy. After high school, they continued to attend vocational school and then worked in a variety of manual labour jobs.⁸⁴ Grundmann met Walter Fern on a suburban train in Berlin in April 1959, and the two went on a few dates together. In January 1960, Grundmann gave birth to a son, Hans. Since Fern disputed his fatherhood, Grundmann's home district office in the West Berlin neighbourhood of Kreuzberg, acting as the legal guardian of the child, as was common practice for children born out of wedlock, filed a suit against him. Grundmann testified in court that they and Fern had had sex once and that Fern was the only man they had slept with during the possible period of their child's conception. They added that they were "a lesbian before having sex with the accused, and I am one again now. Through my relationship with the accused, I tried finding my way back to normal sex."⁸⁵ The court, believing Grundmann's testimony, sentenced Fern to pay monthly child support of 70 Marks. He appealed the sentence, however, and the court ordered an analysis of Fern's blood groups to determine whether he could be ruled out as the father. While three subsequent analyses did not reach definite results, the court followed the third expert's estimate that Fern's fatherhood was "apparently impossible."⁸⁶ He was released of all obligations to the child, and Grundmann was charged with lying under oath.⁸⁷ Judge and jury believed Fern's statement that he and Grundmann had never had sex, and their lesbianism was taken as a sign of their guilt: "Since she always had lesbian tendencies, she cannot have forgotten about an intercourse [*Geschlechtsverkehr*]."⁸⁸ The court hence could only imagine "intercourse" as heterosexual sex. They found Grundmann guilty of attempted fraud by trying to make Fern pay child support. They were sentenced to the minimum sentence for perjury, one year of penitentiary, and stripped of their civil rights for a duration of two years, as well as declared legally incapable of swearing an oath. Their appeal of the decision failed, but the appeals court lowered their sentence from penitentiary to regular prison because of the "significant life difficulties" that they had faced due to "her lesbian tendencies."⁸⁹

On 22 April 1966, Grundmann arrived at the women's prison. Just under one year later, on 14 April 1967, they were released early after serving two-thirds of their sentence.⁹⁰ At the time of incarceration, they were twenty-nine years old. Their son, born in January 1960, was living with their foster parents in the West Berlin working-class district

of Kreuzberg. Grundmann shared an apartment in Wedding, another West Berlin working-class district, with their girlfriend, who is noted as their “next of kin” on Grundmann’s prisoner information sheet, which staff completed upon their arrival in prison.⁹¹ Grundmann cultivated their masculinity while in prison, both by attending to their body and by engaging in romantic relationships with multiple women inside and outside. Once incarcerated, they had to exchange their butch outfit, a black leather jacket, a men’s shirt, a pair of navy-blue pants, and black shoes, for prison garb, which included dresses, work aprons, an underskirt, but no pants.⁹² They were allowed to continue smoking their pipe, and their girlfriend provided them with hairstyling product during visiting hours. Six weeks after entering the prison, Grundmann wrote to the prison director, asking about haircuts for inmates: “Some are really in need of one, including me. I already feel quite scruffy around my head,” they explained.⁹³ The request was granted, though the director noted, likely just to herself: “Actually, I find G’s hair just right – and shorter would be less beautiful!”⁹⁴

In keeping with the policy of isolating gay and lesbian inmates, which was standard practice in prisons in the Nazi era and in West Germany into the 1970s, Grundmann was assigned to a single cell.⁹⁵ The prison director stressed that Grundmann was “a jack of all trades [*Hans Dampf in allen Gassen*], looking for contacts constantly ... Unfortunately, it is impossible to allow her much community.”⁹⁶ Indeed, Grundmann made good use of the opportunities that free time or visits to the doctor offered for connecting with other prisoners, as intercepted messages in their file demonstrate. Two and a half months into their confinement, a prison guard caught Grundmann with a secret message to another inmate, Sabine Rasinne. The message included a photo of Grundmann at a younger age, which they had managed to smuggle into their cell by claiming that it showed their six-year-old son.⁹⁷ Though reprimanded, the two continued exchanging love notes until another inmate reported them. The snitch also told prison authorities that she had seen them kissing in the bathroom during a visit to the prison doctor. Rasinne’s letter to Grundmann illuminates the eroticism and the butch-fem dynamics of their relationship, conjuring up the memory of Rasinne’s arrival in prison “in high heels, the tight light-blue ladies’ suit, and super blonde hair,” an emblem of hyper-femininity.⁹⁸ Rasinne addresses Grundmann as “Dieter,” the name with which Grundmann signed the letters, another aspect of Grundmann’s masculinity. In Rasinne’s letter, she informs them of her progress on the collars she is making for them and adds: “You’ll have to make up later for all the things I’m sewing and embroidering here for you.”⁹⁹ And by mentioning the music that

she is listening to on the radio, she creates a mental space of sensuality: "Now they're playing 'Nur wenn Du bei mir bist' [Only when you're with me]. That part is so beautiful, 'Wunderschön ist das Leben seitdem Du mich geküßt' [Life is so beautiful since you kissed me]. Remember that time in remand prison? Hopefully we can continue that soon without being disturbed. You can't imagine how much I look forward to that."¹⁰⁰

Despite the short duration of their relationship, Rasinne and Grundmann clearly developed a passion that they even managed to live out physically, at least once. Their affair ended after they were discovered. The prison director instructed staff that Grundmann was to be led to all medical appointments separately from now on, no longer with the other prisoners, "so that she cannot connect with others on her way to the doctor or while waiting."¹⁰¹

Grundmann's relationship with their girlfriend outside prison ended during their affair with Rasinne. Afraid that their ex-girlfriend might take more than belonged to her when she moved out of their shared apartment, Grundmann applied for prison furlough. The application was denied, but the director allowed Grundmann to go to their apartment accompanied by a guard and dressed in prison garb. Grundmann rejected this compromise, explaining that they were known in their neighbourhood as "Mr. Grundmann." Apparently, Grundmann passed as a man in their everyday life.

Now single both inside and outside the prison, Grundmann asked "Granny" – the name by which they referred to their foster-mother – to visit their "friendships [*Freundschaften*]," a term they apparently used for their romantic interests.¹⁰² In case "Granny" could not visit them now, she was to "write a letter to them right away and include the last passport photo you have of me. Please, Granny, it's urgent and I promised," Grundmann added.¹⁰³ It is likely that Grundmann's description of prison life as "subordination with almost military drill" explains why "Granny" never received this letter, but it is also possible that the director was actively sabotaging Grundmann's relationships with women outside.¹⁰⁴

Grundmann's flirtations with other prisoners continued throughout the period of their incarceration. In spring 1967, Grundmann, writing again as "Dieter," sent a message to Nadja Werner, whose discharge from prison was imminent. Dieter had big plans for their reunion in freedom. "At any rate I'm looking forward to a life with you," they wrote.¹⁰⁵ After this letter was discovered in Werner's cell, Grundmann lost access to radio, television, and the recreational room up to the day of Werner's discharge, effectively separating the two. A card from Werner after her dismissal was not delivered to Grundmann because

former inmates were prohibited from contacting those still in detention. When Grundmann themselves were released from prison prematurely in April 1967, the reunion with Nadja Werner apparently did not come to pass. Instead, a week after being released, Grundmann wrote to the court asking for permission to write to yet another inmate and explaining that, in prison, they had “befriended a young woman whose engagement no longer exists, and who is also not interested in its maintenance. Because she will move in with me immediately after her discharge to live with me.”¹⁰⁶ The court forwarded the letter to the prison director, who rejected Grundmann’s request, not without noting that they had “several irons in the fire” and scolding them for already having attempted to contact two inmates without permission.¹⁰⁷

Grundmann’s queerness elicited different reactions from prison authorities, ranging from acceptance to paternalism to pathologization. As noted earlier, Grundmann’s girlfriend was designated as next of kin in prison documentation, suggesting that the administrator adopted a matter of fact approach to their relationship. In correspondence to the state attorney, the prison director described Grundmann as “having a lesbian disposition,” using a medicalized but relatively neutral term.¹⁰⁸ Both director and chaplain come across as accepting of Grundmann’s relationship with their girlfriend. When they were still together and Grundmann applied for furlough to facilitate the girlfriend’s inclusion in the rental contract for the apartment they shared, the chaplain supported their request “in the interest of her own rehabilitation.”¹⁰⁹ However, the same chaplain pathologized Grundmann in his statement on a prisoner assessment form when he claimed that “[she] stands outside the community legally too, because of her sexual abnormality.”¹¹⁰ The director’s insistence that she could not allow Grundmann much contact with others, though stated with regret, meant that, against their wishes, Grundmann lived in a single cell and was assigned to perform needlework by themselves rather than work in an out-of-prison setting or with others.¹¹¹

The prison administrators’ stance towards Grundmann’s female masculinity was ambivalent. The assessment forms filled out by guard and work supervisors described Grundmann as “boyish” and repeatedly as “self-confident,” but did not pejoratively comment on their butchness.¹¹² The director’s comment on Grundmann’s hair – “shorter would be less beautiful” – may express an aesthetic ideal of longer rather than shorter hair for women, but it also betrays her appreciation of Grundmann’s looks. Grundmann themselves altered prison garb to make it more masculine by buttoning a collar made by their prison girlfriend on the shirts, and their petition to have a hairdresser come in and cut

inmates' hair was successful, suggesting that prisoners were allowed some freedom to modify their appearance.

The Significance of Photos in Prison

During Grundmann's stay in prison, photos repeatedly became objects of contention. House rules prohibited the possession of photos showing the prisoners themselves.¹¹³ This prohibition bothered Grundmann much, and they expended great energy to subvert it. As discussed earlier, when first admitted to prison, Grundmann brought in some pictures of themselves at a younger age, duping prison staff by claiming that the photos showed their son. Giving their portrait as a token of love to the women they were interested in was clearly an important romantic practice for Grundmann. Being thwarted from doing so was thus a cause of great unhappiness and anger, as a letter to Grundmann's family that was censored because of its "tone" demonstrates:

Received your dear mail with great thanks ... today ... Now there are two drops of bitterness in the letter. First, that Papa is so sick and has to go to the hospital. Second, I did not get the images of Bettina. [Note that Grundmann is referring to herself by using her given first name rather than the first-person possessive pronoun.] That makes me so upset, and again underlines the injustice here ... But I do not see why others may have family photos on which they are depicted too, just "Grundmann" can't. And then they say that I have a big mouth. Even though all I want is to be treated like others. I am trembling from suppressed anger, I can hardly write.¹¹⁴

Grundmann understood that it was partly their non-normative gender presentation that the prison sought to discipline. In March 1967, they asked the prison director for two photos to send to their hospitalized father. Grundmann described the photos as "pictures from the fifties, in which I wear women's clothing."¹¹⁵ The photos were kept with their personal belongings. Siemsen granted them this wish, and Grundmann was allowed to choose the photos themselves, but prison officials simply put the photos into the letter as it was mailed rather than giving the photos to them in the cell.

Ruby Tapia has noted in her scholarship on incarcerated women in the present-day United States that "what the public 'has' of images of women's incarceration is largely fictional and spectacular, most often transmitted by women-in-prison films."¹¹⁶ If self-portraits were

crucially important to prisoners' relationships to themselves and others, as Grundmann's file indicates, the prison's prohibitive picture policy appears as a central aspect of curtailing inmates' subjectivities and instituting normalcy. The fact that I could not gain permission to publish Grundmann's photo, while grounded in justified concern about individual privacy, continues this absence of images.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, sociologists who studied women's prisons in the United States in the mid-twentieth century found same-sex relationships the central feature of prisoner society but were not alarmed by these findings. They understood the gendered organization of both male and female prisons as adaptations to the deprivations of prison life and thus not as a subversion of heterosexuality.¹¹⁷ However, relationships formed in prison sometimes lasted beyond incarceration, as Bettina Grundmann's example shows. Despite the prison director's intense efforts to break off all contact between Grundmann and other inmates, their persistence eventually paid off. Six years after their dismissal, in 1973, they were in a relationship with a woman they had met in prison, Monika Kurzbein, as is apparent from another prisoner file.¹¹⁸ In November 1973, Grundmann had to return to prison for ten days because they could not pay a 100 DM fine for theft.¹¹⁹ In the admission sheet, Kurzbein is recorded as "next of kin." For Grundmann and Kurzbein, then, incarceration had had queer effects, resulting in a long-lasting relationship. Prison had not functioned as a normalizing institution; it had not normalized Grundmann's sexuality or rehabilitated them to a law-abiding life, much less helped them gain financial stability.

In this chapter I have argued that prisons are sites where non-normatively lived genders and same-sex relationships can be found and that taking them seriously as objects of historical analysis can serve to broaden the picture of what it meant to live a queer life, in Germany and beyond. The sources from the West and East Berlin women's prisons in the years between 1945 and 1970 paint an ambivalent picture of queer experiences of prison. They were sites of romantic, erotic, and sexual relationships. They were also locations where butch-fem subcultures were significant, either as a feature of the organization of prison life or as an important category of inmates' subjectivities. Prisons facilitated queer relationships: inmates flirted with each other nonverbally, for instance by blowing kisses, and verbally by chatting during free time and by exchanging notes. Sometimes they flirted with guards or

social workers too. They formed romantic relationships, sent each other love notes and portraits, exchanged gifts, and created shared romantic moments by listening to love songs. Girlfriends on the outside sent mail, visited, and provided the everyday necessities to queer prisoners, such as hairstyling products. Inmates participated in rituals of romantic bonding such as engagement ceremonies; they sent each other scripts for oral sex; and they made dates for mutual though physically separate masturbation sessions. They used rare private moments to kiss and do other pleasurable things with their bodies, and they made plans for a life together after their time in prison, which sometimes worked out and sometimes did not.

Prisons were also spaces of non-normative gender expression. Inmates overcame the restrictions imposed by prison uniforms, altering them to make them more masculine (or feminine, presumably). They petitioned for haircuts and engaged in gendered practices such as smoking pipes. In their relationships, they adopted female or male nicknames and used the appropriate pronouns. Both Tommy's memories of Bubi and Mäuschen in East Berlin and the intercepted messages from the West Berlin prison can be read as indicative of a gendered organization of women's prisons.

Despite these possibilities for and realities of queer life and love, prisons were far from utopias. Inmates categorized as lesbians were isolated by being put in a single cell rather than group cells. Cellmates known to have developed intimate relationships with each other were separated. Exchanging notes with other prisoners was forbidden and punished with loss of free time and entertainment. Released inmates were not allowed to keep in touch with girlfriends they had made inside. Since pre-existing same-sex relationships were accepted by the West Berlin prison administration, authorities were likely concerned about the corrupting influence that the same-sex environment of the prison might have on inmates read as heterosexual. Even though an understanding of homosexuality as biologically determined is prevalent in the prison files, the notion of the homosexual seducer remained powerful in West Germany in the 1960s. "Women in Prison" films, popular since the 1950s, made the stereotype of the predatory "prison lesbian" who seduced innocent heterosexual inmates a figure with much cultural purchase.¹²⁰

This chapter has shown that analysing prisons is a promising research strategy for historians interested in the history of same-sex relationships and gender non-conforming lives, as well as for understanding how ideas of "normal" sexuality and gender were constructed. Systematic studies of prisoner files will help broaden and deepen our knowledge

of prison societies and their entanglements with and effects on society at large. Certainly, though, studying prisons can “productively complicate” contemporary history, irritating our preconceptions about identities or state attitudes towards queer folk, and in this way indeed continue the work of rendering the past queer.¹²¹