

Gay Men at Your Service

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Drottningholm, Gripsholm, Stockholm, Kungsholm – these were the names of the Swedish transatlantic passenger liners and cruise ships that made the hearts of those who were longing for far away places beat faster. The names are also to become familiar to those who are interested in learning how gay men working on such ships were organizing their sexual and working lives. This is namely the scope of Gothenburg based sociologist Arne Nilsson who in his study draws us a picture of gay men working in the hotels and restaurants of the transatlantic passenger liners of *Svenska Amerika Linien* (SAL) from the 1940s to 1975.

In his book "*Såna*" på amerikabåtarna. *De svenska Amerikabåtarna som manliga homomiljöer* ("Men like that" on Transatlantic Liners. The Swedish American Liners as Gay Male Milieus) Nilsson discusses the organisation of the sexual lives of gay men on such ships based mostly on 25 interviews with former SAL workers. Yet equally important themes for him are the group relations onboard – both among and between gay and straight workers and passengers – and also the supporting role gay men had in sustaining the profitable functioning of the SAL passenger ships. Since the topic of sexual organisation of the crew members is something Nilsson already has published upon in English (Nilsson 2006), I will focus here on the latter two themes of the gay men's working conditions, a topic

not less fascinating but until now less frequently studied and discussed.

The transatlantic liners travelled between Gothenburg and New York while the cruisers sailed in several spectacular coastal and island regions and made in addition three month trips around the world. Hence working for SAL provided young men with great possibilities to see the world at a time when tourist travelling was available only to the few well-off. Yet the ships were even more interesting for young gay men in the making. Although homosexual deeds were decriminalized in Sweden already in 1944, the climate in the 1950s was still forbiddingly heteronormative. The possibility to work on the passenger ships offered young men an honourable possibility to escape such normative expectations. On the one hand, willingness to be mobile which was required by a constantly moving workplace gave a splendid excuse for not getting married and setting up a family back home. It even offered a possibility to engage in same-sex erotic contacts apart from the possibly already existing marriage. On the other, the ships opened up a micro cosmos of men "like that" with whom one could explore one's homosexual inclinations. There were also the same-sex sexual possibilities provided by foreign harbours.

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At that time the liners were hosting some 800 passengers a trip while the cruisers took half the number of guests on board. The passengers were respectively served by a crew of roughly 300 men and 30 women, while an additional 100 men were working on deck and in the machinery to navigate and maintain the ship. Hence the crew on the ships offered enough population for creating sizeable sub-communities among the different occupational groupings. They, again, clearly differed in their attitudes towards gay colleagues. Whereas ship's hotels and restaurants offered the friendliest environment for gay men –allowing the ratio of gay men to increase up to 30 % of the personnel – the all-male workers on deck and in the machinery who considered themselves both as real (heterosexual) men and real sailors were pronouncedly less welcoming to homosexuality.

Even the reviews one can find today in the web about cruise ships will continue to attest to how crucial the role of the services provided by waiters, bartenders and cabin personnel is to the comfort and well-being of the cruise passengers. These professionals are the key providers of these invisible support service structures which allow the guests to feel comfortable and well taken care of. According to Nilsson, the gay men in particular were the ones predestined to deliver the best service on *SAL* liners.

In luxury cruisers first class waiters were always to be male, hence the profession of a waiter could be considered a rather esteemed manly profession. Nilsson repeatedly reminds the readers that the men working in the service professions on *SAL* ships at that time were considered to embody a particular kind of masculinity and not thought

to be either automatically effeminized or necessarily gay because of their chosen profession. Such changes in the general perception started to take place only since the late 1960s.

Considering how good looking and mannered the men were, one could assume that being well groomed was an unuttered requirement for being hired on the ships in the first place, besides the outspoken ones, such as the best professional training and fluent language skills in at least three languages in order to effortlessly maintain conversation with the guests. Yet Nilsson also details a host of additional capacities attached to the service work performed by gay men. While doing this he is, however, not falling back to any innate gay sensibilities. In contrast he sees their particular competences as something the gay men had acquired in order to avoid discrimination and to enhance their own survival while growing up in repressive times. Most importantly they were trained in reading the expectations of their surroundings and conforming to them in order to avoid open conflict and to pass as straight. This acquired ability to read even unuttered wishes of their counterparts and to fulfil them accordingly could be put in a very profitable use on board of the luxury liners.

Working on a prestigious liner or a cruise ship was considered a necessary training and career move for men working in the hotel and restaurant trade. The gay men interested in furthering their career were keen to perform well, and that is what they also did while working on for example *Kungsholm*, which was characterized by one of the interviewees “a floating retirement home for millionaires”.

In particular the female guests, many of whom were well-off American widows, valued the qualifications and social skills of the gay men working on board had to offer. Among them Nilsson lists the ability to show personalized attentiveness to the guests' needs and wishes, to maintain well-humoured socializing, and to keep the women company on the dance floor. Through applying their aesthetical skills the men were able to style the guests and the party venues both tasteful and theatrical, and in general to create an atmosphere of pleasure. On occasion the versatile personnel even threw a drag show for the entertainment of the more eccentric guests.

Because satisfied passengers were vital for the successful business of *SAL*, the company was keen on recruiting the best possible personnel and also keeping it happy. The men's hard work with the passengers was well paid, and the already good salaries could even be topped by the generous gratuity of the pleased guests. The company also knew to value its competent gay personnel and, for example, a gay couple living in a steady relationship was offered a joint cabin and matching working schedules as a matter of course. However, it can be observed how gay men were seldom seen to take up posts on the managerial level on the ships.

Nilsson's detailed work even presents us with waiters who came to work for a Swedish company from the more repressive post-war countries such as Finland or Germany which allows the reader to contemplate about the issues of "race", ethnicity and nationality in a business catering to international audiences. However, the author does not

extensively analyse these hierarchical features he mentions – the shades of whiteness being a common blind spot for much of the research done in Nordic countries.

However, in his historically informed sociological account Nilsson can make a quite convincing argument for the case that the liners provided in oppressive times a surprisingly gay friendly working climate. On the ships gay men could not only foster their particular professional skills but also live out their non-heteronormative sexual identity 24/7 and even feel good about it. Since his work discusses in detail the period from the 1940s to the 1970s, a time when transatlantic passenger ships became replaced by aeroplanes and a new trade of tourist cruises opened up, it also encourages the reader to make his or her own mental links to the emergence and decline of such present day professions in the ever growing personal service and experience industry as air hostesses and stewards or party promoters. His work also has links to the increasing body of research done about sexual and gender minorities at work in Finland (Lehtonen ed. 2002; Lehtonen & Mustola eds 2004). Yet more research about the current sexual conditions is required to explain the statement by one of the crew members of *Queen Elizabeth II* Nilsson quotes who maintains that even today the ship remains one of the world's top 10 gay clubs.

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