

# Cruising the Seas: Male homosexual life on the Swedish American Line 1950-1975

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Paul Baker and Jo Stanley (2003) have written a pioneering study of gay life on passenger ships. My study on sexual relationships between men who worked on the liners of the Swedish American Line during the period after the World War II is both in accord with and differing from the picture given in their study. In this article I will in particular study the role of those features which either promoted or restricted male homosexual life on board. Not least important among those features was the historically situated organization and conception of sex between men. This allows me to discuss the workings of the hetero-homo divide and other differences in the lives of these men.

As I have demonstrated in my two previous studies of male homosexual life during the decades around the World War II in Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, the passenger ships of the Swedish American Line (SAL) played a prominent role in it.<sup>1</sup> (Nilsson 1998a-b; Lindholm & Nilsson 2002.) According to the interviewed men, the port visits of the SAL ships were noticeable events in the meeting places of the male homosexual world. Moreover, working on these ships was not uncommon among homosexual men: some of the interviewees themselves had worked on the ships, and they say that a substantial part of the crew considered themselves as homosexuals. In the light of these

findings, I carried out a further study of the SAL ships as sites for male homosexual life and as places where homosexual men used to work. The study is based mainly on retrospective interviews with men working on the SAL ships after the World War II.<sup>2</sup>

The SAL liners, with names like Drottningholm, Gripsholm, Stockholm and Kungsholm, sailed between their home port Gothenburg and New York, and also cruised around the world during the period of 1915–1975. The size of the liners varied, but those dominating during the post World War II period had room for about 800 passengers on transatlantic crossings and half as many passengers were accommodated on cruises.

The crew, for its part, consisted of about 400 persons, of whom almost all were Swedish men, many of which from Gothenburg. However, their dominance decreased over time, the number of people coming from other countries than Sweden increased, yet the Swedes always remained as a majority. Most of the men worked in the hotel department of the ships. Among other things they cooked, washed the dishes, cleaned up, did the laundry, but many of them also served food and drinks to demanding passengers in the dining rooms, lounges, bars, outdoor decks and cabins, and decorated lounges for passengers'

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parties. At that time women were rare among the crew on ships. Furthermore, first class restaurants and hotels were associated with male service personnel, and the service on the SAL liners was considered first class, especially on cruises. One interviewed man explained it like this: If there were women serving, it was not first class. (See also Mills 1998.)

In this article I will depict homosexual life among men working on the SAL ships. I intend to examine eroticism and love relationships between men and also social interaction among homosexual men. In particular my aim is to pay attention to features which either promoted or restricted male homosexual life on board. In order to provide a clearer and more comprehensive pattern for the reader, some comparisons will be made between the male homosexual life on board and that in Gothenburg.

In the following I will use the term *såna* (men like that) when I am referring to men who considered themselves homosexual. By doing this I want to emphasize the terminology often used by the men themselves.<sup>3</sup>

### **Patterns of male homoerotic encounters on board**

In my study of male homosexual life in Gothenburg 1930–1960 I discovered that the sexual relations between men mostly consisted of short, silent and anonymous encounters in environments such as public toilets and parks. These public places were a male domain, especially during evenings and nights. On the SAL liners, too, men in the crew lived in spaces dominated by men. Over long periods of time

they spent days and nights, work and leisure times, close to each other. A great deal of the time they were isolated from land. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that there would have been a lot of homoerotic encounters and relationships on board.

As a matter of fact, several men do report of erotic encounters and relationships between men working on the SAL liners. Interviewed men recall gazes (reciprocal or not) and other ways of getting in touch with each other during both leisure time and work. They report homoerotic intimacy in the cabins, but if intimacy was impossible there, also other places, such as nooks and recesses on outdoor decks, were used for the purpose. Unlike on land, toilets were seldom places for erotic encounters, and if they were, they were primarily only places for looking and to be looked at. The same applied to crew's showers, which likewise were ordinarily located outside the cabins, in groups along the corridors.

Homoeroticism was apparent in other social settings too, for example, when *såna* came together as friends, acquaintances and colleagues in smaller or bigger parties. The men interviewed remember erotically charged atmosphere, flirting and sexual encounters in such contexts, especially when men who were not assumed to be *såna* participated. Interviewees also recall such activities taking place in bigger crew parties.

On the ships different kinds of men had homoerotic encounters and relationships. There were meetings and relationships across hierarchical, occupational, spatial and other borders, between newcomers and experienced men.

There were relationships between *såna*, all of whom worked in the economy/hotel section, and “real” sailors (men working on deck and at the engine), and between *såna* and other men, single or married, working in the hotel part of the ship, as well as between crew and passengers. There were also erotic meetings between equals in different respects, for example between those men who were sharing cabins.

### **Holiday atmosphere**

Several circumstances enabled and encouraged homoerotic life on board. Alcohol, readily available on the ships, could encourage men to approach other men erotically. Alcohol could legitimate homoeroticism among men who did not consider themselves *såna*: unexpected behaviour could be explained by saying that they lost their head and did not know what they were doing. (Cf. Hekma 1992; Yannakopoulos 2002; Tikkanen 2003.) What’s more, it could make men defenseless.<sup>4</sup>

As I already concluded in my previous studies, *såna* described sailors as broad minded. Interviewed men in this study talk about the context on ship as permitting and tolerant. An interviewed straight man said that he became a lot more tolerant while living and working on board. A homosexual man said about the ship:

*“There are beautiful people. People are on holiday. They are relaxed. There is good food. People are drinking. It is romantic. There are beautiful views. Sunsets. So it is a very sexual setting. That is how I perceived it.”*

The perception of the ship as a kind of free zone, disconnected from land, loosened traditional norms and conventions. In a study about gay male life on British merchant ships, Paul Baker and Jo Stanley describe, inspired by Rob Shields, these ships as liminal spaces, moments of discontinuity in the social web, which make less conformist ways of living possible. (Baker & Stanley 2003; Shields 1991.) Like the man quoted, they talk about the holiday atmosphere, and compare the ships with such coastal resorts as Blackpool or Brighton where people were engaging in transgressing or unexpected behaviour. Working on the SAL ships meant for part of the crew engagements with activities usually associated with holidays. It was also a means for exploring the world during a period when very few people could afford doing so as a leisure activity. The interviewed men tell about sightseeing trips and excursions of their own during cruises, and they talk about their own parties that resembled the cruise passengers’ parties.

Thus, there is evidence on homoeroticism among men in the crew, and there were circumstances encouraging this. However, homoerotic life seemed to be a lot more sporadic than one would have expected under these conditions. Only a few of the men I have interviewed apparently lead a constant homoerotic life style on board. What was holding them back?

### **Obstacles to homoeroticism between *såna* and “real men”**

In the post-war Gothenburg, during the fifties, homoeroticism among men was to a great extent characterized by

meetings between *såna* and “real men”. The men in the first category considered themselves to be homosexual; the latter did not. *Såna* were often associated with femininity, real men often with working class masculinity. The former were of different ages, had different kinds of occupations and belonged to different social classes. Seldom, however, they had occupations which were considered to be typical for masculine men. Real men, in contrast, were often young working class men. *Såna* were more attracted to real men than to their peers.<sup>5</sup>

Some real men belonged to the local working class, some were visiting sailors in merchant or military marines. In my previous studies about Gothenburg there are a number of reports on homoerotic encounters and relationships between *såna* and sailors. Interviewed men who had been working on freighters reported homoerotic experiences on board. In the city men met in public places or sometimes even in the homes of *såna*, where sailors participated in their parties.

On the SAL ships there was a likewise functional and professional division partly equivalent to the division between *såna* and real men in Gothenburg: the division between “real” sailors and men working in the hotel part. It was virtually impossible for “real” sailors to present themselves as *såna*. As in Gothenburg, many *såna* working on the SAL ships during the 1950’s and 1960’s were not attracted to each other erotically but were often interested in other types of men. (Cf. Baker & Stanley 2003.) However, in general men working on board did not seem to engage themselves much with each other erotically, and nobody

depicts homoeroticism between, for example, “real” sailors.<sup>6</sup> I think one reason is that many *såna* revealed their sexual orientation to other men only distinctly, another reason is given by the fact that the visibility of *såna* deterred the homoerotic engagement of all other men.

The latter argument is supported by studies of homoeroticism in strictly masculine settings.<sup>7</sup> Sociologist Steven Zeeland (1996) discovered in the American Marine Corps a kind of homoeroticism among men, the existence of which, he argues, was dependent on the absence of the homosexual. In another study of American military sailors, Zeeland (1995) discovered such eroticism between men on board, which is difficult to interpret in hetero-homo terms. He argues that the presence of openly gays on board obstructs such eroticism, since it associates sex between men with gay identity. The fact that most men associate gay male identity with femininity contributes to the inhibition, Zeeland says.<sup>8</sup>

Literary historian Robert K Martin (2000) writes about something similar at an American University where he studied during the years around 1960.<sup>9</sup>

*“Secure in our assurance that we were not gay we could freely have showers, sleep, even dance with each others without fearing loosing our masculine privileges...//...Neither was sex something scarce. If you confine several hundreds of men in an isolated college without women the result is highly predictable. There was sex between men, but it was not homosexual.”*

Straight men, who came back to dormitory after dates with their girlfriends were often open for a discrete mastur-

bation or a blowjob, Martin observed. However, these activities were never discussed about. Nobody should know about them, and they did not mean anything, Martin continues.

The connection between the visible presence of many *såna* and the lack of erotic engagement between different kinds of men on the SAL ships gets additional support when comparing the interviewees' stories about life on the SAL ships with accounts of life on freighters. It seems that *såna* on freighters as well as on the SAL liners were working only in the economy department, namely in the kitchen and as stewards. However, the amount of economy personnel on freighters was very small. Consequently it does not come as a surprise that reports on freighters indicate that "real" sailors there were more likely to engage erotically with *såna* than on the SAL liners.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, *såna* on the SAL ships had a stronger power position in relation to other men than either those on freighters or in Gothenburg. It was achieved by the considerable amount and visibility of *såna* on the SAL ships. Furthermore, *såna* often had jobs requiring high qualifications.<sup>11</sup> They were often serving first class passengers and not, as on freighters, only the crew. Some of them were officers, which meant that they had a superior rank and status. Hence many of them earned great sums of money.<sup>12</sup> On land and on freighters erotic encounters between *såna* and real men were promoted because real men were in superior position. As the situation on the SAL ships was different, it helps to explain why there was less erotic engagement between *såna* and real men.<sup>13</sup> Even

though *såna* were conceived as less masculine men, more womanlike men or even as women in men's bodies, their subordinate position in the gender order was counter-balanced on the SAL ships by their superior occupational position.

Since the distinct occupational and spatial borders on the SAL ships helped "real" sailors to make *såna* into Others, one could assume that this perceived difference would again promote sexual engagements in the same way as was common in Gothenburg. There real men engaging in homoerotic contacts didn't need to identify themselves as homosexual, due to the difference constructed between themselves and *såna*.<sup>14</sup> However, the distinction between "real" sailors and other men working on board was not the same as the distinction between real men and *såna* but there was a distinction between jobs considered masculine and jobs that were not, but this division did not have any sexual connotation.<sup>15</sup> And, of course, not all men working in the economy and hotel parts of the ship were *såna*.<sup>16</sup>

However, among the crew functional and occupational divisions - both horizontal and hierarchical - were very distinct. People belonging to different sections of the crew lived in different parts of the ship and often they also had separate mess rooms. When sharing mess rooms they commonly occupied separate tables. Moreover, wearing uniforms and rank symbols, for example badges of rank worn on sleeves, helped keeping people in their own place. Such spatial and symbolic arrangements helped to restrain eroticism between *såna* and other men, especially real sailors. The shared knowledge of who belonged to which

occupational category made it difficult for real men to invite såna into their cabins for erotic encounters. Likewise, someone who was not considered to be såna visiting a man belonging to that category would attract attention and the word would quickly spread out.

In Gothenburg there were further circumstances which were encouraging contacts between såna and real men which were missing on the SAL ships. In Gothenburg, taken as a whole, the number of real men was very large compared with the number of såna. Historian Gert Hekma (1992), who has written about Amsterdam during the same period, says that even if only a few of the real men living in the city chose to visit male homosexual meeting places, the sheer amount of them would still make them a great part of all the visitors there. On the SAL ships the number of real men was smaller in proportion to the number of såna.

Another circumstance that increased the amount of sexual contacts in Gothenburg, especially before World War II, was that young working class men were often poor, and the possibility to earn money would count as a plausible reason to have sex with men that were considered to be homosexual. Such economic explanations were not applicable on the SAL ships, where everybody earned good money. However, this does not exclude other ways of benefiting from homoerotic relationships.

In the Marine Corps, the military marine and on freighters there were either none or only very few women. In contrast on the SAL ships there were some women working in the economy and hotel parts. In addition, there were women among passengers. However, although some interviewed men

report erotic contacts and relationships with women, there were both spatial and regulative obstacles for such relationships, which made it difficult for men to engage with women on board. This was especially true for men in subordinate positions, who did not do service work for passengers. Passengers were not allowed to visit the crew premises and, as mentioned already, people in subordinate position in the crew were not allowed to visit passengers' spaces, except on duty.<sup>17</sup> Even women in the crew lived in their own section. Nevertheless, heteronormativity given, the presence of women might help explain why there were rather few erotic contacts between såna and other men.

### **A fading pattern of polarised homosexuality**

Thus, in order to understand why homoerotic life on the SAL ships was not more common than it was, I think we should seriously consider the fact that at the time there was a prevalent convention of categorizing men into såna and real men in Gothenburg. This was particularly the case in the 1950's and to a lesser extent in the 1960's. However, the categorisation gradually faded, and by the time the SAL ships were closing down in 1975, the understanding and arrangement of erotic behaviour between men had profoundly changed.<sup>18</sup> (Nilsson 1998a, 1998b; Lindholm & Nilsson 2002; Nilsson 2003; Cf. Marshall 1981; Weeks 1985; Hekma 1992; Chauncey 1994; Escoffier 1998.) In Gothenburg during the decades around the World War II real men slowly disappeared from the scene into heterosexual relationships and

family homes. Sâna, for their part, created new homosexual places, such as gay clubs (together with lesbians), but also homes, which in turn furthered the creation of modern homosexual identities. At the same time it seems that erotic encounters and relationships became more common between men who identified themselves as homosexuals.

Corresponding changes can be observed in the reports on the SAL ships. The spatial gender segregation of the crew became less strict. For instance, gender-integrated mess rooms were introduced, which made it easier for men to engage themselves erotically with women in the crew. One man working on an SAL ship in the 1960's said that women were kept under lock and key<sup>19</sup> in their own cabin section. Another man who was working there during the last years said that there was a tremendous coming and going between the A deck, where the real sailors lived, and between the women's section at the stern.

It is also possible to notice changes in the behaviour of sâna. Having erotic encounters with other men like themselves is reported only from the end of the period but not from the beginning. One man working on the SAL ships during the last years says that "there was much fucking going on board" and that it took place among sâna. Furthermore, in accounts towards the 1970's, feminine attributions and self-knowledge among sâna are less common than in earlier reports from the 1950's.<sup>20</sup>

### Sexual encounters in ports

Although a new kind of organizing of sexual relationships between men was taking place, accompanied by changed self-understanding, the structural environment on the ships still remained pretty much the same. There was hard work. Many men had long working days, and it was common to work for many days without interruption. This effectively tuned down eroticism between men. But there were also other reasons for that.

The SAL ships themselves were not urban places, but rather small, and their social setting was detached from the surrounding world. Moreover, the crew members lived close to each other during fairly long periods. Hence the indoor premises were not to be confused with parks or public toilets of an urban context, where men often did not know anything more of each other than what they experienced during short erotic meetings. Jeremy Tambling (2002) writes about sexuality and the city:

*"Promiscuity is so much a feature of the urban because of the city's relationship to the anonymity and plurality of identities and its de-realization of fixed and stable identities, and also because the city is always in change itself, creating life as implicitly promiscuous because it is fragmented."*

Furthermore, not only real men but also many sâna did not dare to engage erotically with men on board, because they were afraid that they would be get caught or recognized and consequently be regarded as sâna by others.

Nevertheless, working on the SAL ships meant good possibilities for maintaining urban erotic habits, although not on board but in ports. Time spent on sea between port calls was usually not long: on transatlantic crossings about a week, on cruises often only a night or two.<sup>21</sup> According to my interviewees, for many *såna* homoeroticism was a substantial part of life in ports.<sup>22</sup>

New York stands out as the most frequently visited port. That was where the transatlantic tours ended and started and where the SAL ships' luxury cruises departed and arrived. It was common that the ships stayed there several nights and that crew took time off in New York. The interviewed *såna* tell about their extensive participation in homoerotic life there. They speak fondly of bar rounds, baths, cinemas, and parks. They recall sex on the spot but also making love in men's homes after seeing each other in, for instance, a bar. They give a picture of happy-go-lucky erotic life in New York, even during the 1950's and 1960's, decades which are pictured as extremely homophobic, filled by terror and fear for homosexuals.<sup>23</sup>

During the post World War II period airlines gradually took over the transatlantic passenger service, and as result the SAL ships increasingly turned into cruise ships. Towards the 1970s cruises were their only activity. Common cruise destinations were the West Indies, North Cape, Europe, and Mediterranean. The ships also cruised around Africa and South America and sailed around the world. Interviewees give accounts of many homoerotic adventures in cruise ports, where they met men in gay bars and on beaches.

Reports from cruise ports outside north-western Europe and North America often include prostitution. During this period the often implicit prostitution in Gothenburg lessened as the number of poor people decreased and the welfare state was established. At the same time the growth of the number of cruises and of tourism in general contributed to the wider spreading of sexual (and other kind of) exploitation from the north-western countries around the globe. (Cf. Puar 2002.)

In the 1950s, Gothenburg was still frequently visited by the SAL ships. Like in New York the ships used to stay several nights, and it was common to spend time off in Gothenburg. Many *såna* working on the SAL ships had their own accommodation there as well. Some had cheap small flats of their own, some shared flats with other *såna* who were working on the boats, while others had rented rooms for themselves. Interviewed men tell about their homoerotic life in Gothenburg, where in the 1950's there were many (although in a decreasing number) public places available for men who wanted to be erotically together with other men. However, *såna* considered the homoerotic possibilities in Gothenburg poor in comparison to what they were used to especially in New York, since in Gothenburg there were no gay male baths and only one gay bar. Although a couple of clubs were established during the middle of the 1960's, some interviewed men said that during their spare time in Gothenburg they rather travelled to bigger northern European cities.

## Love and friendships

After the World War II public places, such as parks and public toilets, were considered less and less as places for eroticism between men in Gothenburg. This had to do with the already mentioned changing of organization and conception of sex between men. Closely related to the former change there was also a growing general association between eroticism and emotional intimacy, love, romance and coupling, also among homosexual men. (Nilsson 2003.) It would be easy to imagine that this change would be apparent on the SAL ships as well. However, this does not seem to have been the case. Only a couple of *såna* reported that they had romances or longterm love relationships with men on board.<sup>24</sup>

The scarcity of love relationships on the ships had partly to do with the fact that many *såna* were young and just wanted to enjoy themselves. This kind of attitude was promoted both by the holiday atmosphere on board and by the frequent encounters with male homosexual life in places like New York and other cruise ports around the world. Another reason for avoiding long-term involvement had to do with the fact that terminating a lasting emotional relationship on board could be difficult. Even if the love relationship ended, the partners could not get away from each other unless one of them left the ship. Occasionally men actually decided to change from one SAL ship to another because of jealousy.

Sometimes it happened that *såna* fell in love with real men. However, as the latter ones frequently put limits to erotic encounters and relationships, they were even more restrictive when it came to emotional relationships. One man recalled his erotic affairs with men who were not considered to be

*såna*. He said that when such affairs began to resemble love relationships, the partners left him. For many *såna* lasting love relationships with men were not something to be expected during those days, especially during the 1950's.

Some men engaged themselves in love relationships with men they had learnt to know in ports. Such relationships were difficult to uphold over longer periods and great distances. However, it happened that men moved over to the United States to live with men they had met in, for example, New York. There were men who had simultaneous erotic or love relationships on the boats while at the same time being involved in long lasting relationships ashore, either with men or women to whom they were engaged or married.

If erotic and, especially, love relationships between men were uncommon on board, other kind of social life among *såna* was not. Interviewees tell about small scale socializing in cabins, bigger cabin parties, parties that spread out into the corridor, and even more large-scale parties in which other men and women of the crew could participate. Interviewees give accounts of storytelling and representing and parodying femininity by, for instance, giving each other female names and cross-dressing. One man remembers a fashion parade in the cabin corridor where especially many *såna* were living. Interviewees depict big parties and drag shows organized for the whole crew largely by *såna*. They describe their own parties as imitations of those held in the passengers' lounges and bars on the ship. But since *såna*

were also staging parties and shows for passengers and styling them for parties, it can be asked which one was actually a copy of which.

Much of such social interaction was encouraged by the holiday atmosphere on board. As Baker and Stanley write about British merchant ships, this atmosphere also gave men opportunities for exploring different identities. Socializing which involved cross-dressing offered possibilities for flirt and erotic contact, not least between *såna* and real men. Men who cross-dressed on such occasions tell that they were found sexually attractive by real men.

*Såna* did not socialize with each other only on leisure time but also during work, since, as mentioned, many of them worked closely with each other. Interviewees recall a homosexual atmosphere on board manifesting itself in easiness: joking, telling stories during pauses, and staging small scenes, occasionally even in front of passengers.

Many *såna* did not perceive themselves as such when they first started to work on the SAL ships. Some did not have any previous sexual experiences with men. It was only on board that they were socialized into the category of *såna*. The easy social interaction and the free-minded atmosphere made it easier for newcomers to adopt an identity as one of *såna* and to display it openly to other people in the crew. The fact that the members of the crew on the SAL liners had only sporadic connection to their families, the land and the communities of origin made it possible for men with homosexual wishes to live double lives, to conceal their homosexual activities from wives, families and old friends. At the same time the free zone character of the SAL

ships made it easier not to live double lives in another respect: it was possible to live as *såna* both in leisure time as well as during work.

Social interaction among *såna* was promoted by occupational fellowship and spatial nearness in and outside work. Thus, some of the same conditions which suppressed homoerotic encounters and relationships on board conversely promoted other kinds of social interaction, for example, friendship circles among *såna*.

Also in ports *såna* engaged with each other as friends, acquaintances and colleagues. They visited bars, restaurants and baths together. Interviewees tell about the world of culture and entertainment, and visits, for example to opera, cinemas, and to shows at Radio City Music Hall. Some of them recall getting tickets easily because they knew people working in these fields in contrast to other men in the crew, who were considered less keen in such activities. Some men report on socializing with men from other cruise ships in cruise ports, and also with cruise passengers. Some remember being invited to cruise passengers' homes in New York or nearby. Sometimes they were asked to start working in their homes as butlers, for instance.

In Gothenburg *såna* from the SAL ships socialized with peers at places like parks, in the unofficial gay bar Top Floor Club and later in gay clubs and also in homes. They came to Gothenburg with a lot of money and were popular guests. Their peers in Gothenburg were often curious about them and admired these cosmopolitan men who were dressed in American clothes.<sup>25</sup> They were posed questions about

things out in the big world. Men engaging in social circles of *såna* in Gothenburg soon got to know the SAL ships as working places for men of their kind, and some of the crew on the ships was recruited through these circles.

### **Såna in charge**

It is true that there were many men who considered themselves homosexual and also other men with homoerotic wishes who did not engage in the circles of *såna* on board. It is also true that *såna*, to a certain degree, lived separated from others, especially “real” sailors, so that the latter did not need to confront them. Nevertheless, many *såna* and their social worlds were obvious for others in the crew.<sup>26</sup> For instance, more experienced “real” sailor colleagues soon informed the newcomers about the presence of *såna* on board. Especially for those working in the hotel section of the ships, *såna* were well visible.

How, then, did other men act towards *såna*? As already mentioned, many men distanced themselves from them. It went without saying that “real” sailors were straight. The ones interviewed emphasise the strong heteronormativity in their own occupational category on board, and report of ongoing talk and boasting about women prostitutes and brothels in ports visited and ports ahead.

Also other men working in the hotel part of the ship distanced themselves from *såna*. They often made a considerable effort in order to try and find out who was what. However, according to interviewees, there were also other ways of reacting. Interviewees who perceived

themselves as straight recall being first shocked when they encountered the culture of *såna* on board, but that they gradually became used to it. Some men enjoyed the social interaction among *såna*, even off working hours, to the extent that some of them even preferred spending their leisure time with *såna* to the company of their peers. At times these friendships went so far that *såna* would discuss troubles of their personal love lives with these other men.<sup>27</sup>

Yet interviewed men also tell about instances when other men harassed or discriminated *såna*. Some men remember meeting a couple of real sailors on the gangway and these had said that they did not appreciate men like them. However, reports of harassing and discrimination are scarce and they are accompanied with reports of *såna* not accepting it. Also, when a man working in a passenger dining room together with some other colleagues, told the trade union that they did not want to work together with *såna*, and that they wanted fewer of them working on the ship, the trade union said there is nothing they could do about it, there were simply so many *såna* on board.<sup>28</sup> This is rather remarkable considering that the 1950’s but also the 1960’s were characterized by severe homophobia in Sweden, as well as in other western countries.<sup>29</sup>

There are good reasons for the strong position of *såna*. Most of all they were attractive labour force for the shipping company. They were considered to be well-behaved, concerned about their personal appearances, and especially good at serving demanding passengers on luxury cruises. A man, who for many years was responsible for recruiting personnel to the hotel part of the SAL ships, said that if

recruiters had to choose between a homosexual man and another man, who were equal in any other respect, they would choose the former.<sup>30</sup> Interviewees state that the shipping company also made an effort to take care of *såna*. For instance, men living together in relationships were placed into one cabin and their work schedules were arranged in order to give them time together. However, some interviewees vaguely recall that a number of *såna* also had to leave the boat. According to interviewees, it was said that they provoked others in the crew and maybe also passengers by demonstrating their sexual identities too offensively.

However, it seems that the carnivalesque social life of *såna* was accepted by the shipping company as long as it did not offend passengers. As Baker and Stanley (2003) write about British ships, one of the reasons for that might be that this way the employer did not need to arrange special leisure activities for the crew. Another reason might be that in their social life *såna* acquired skills that were useful in their work with passengers, for instance setting up stage parties.

On the whole *såna* had a fairly strong position in comparison to other men on board. This was so not only because they were many but also because they knew that they were attractive labour force. As mentioned earlier, their jobs required good qualifications and merits, and they often earned large sums of money. They also shared a strong sense of common identity and community, fostered by living and working close to each other, and engaging in activities that excluded other men.

## Conclusion

In this article I have given an account of homosexual life among men working on the passenger ships of the Swedish American Line during the decades after the World War II. On the basis of retrospective interviews I have depicted not only eroticism and love relationships between men but also their social interaction. In particular I have paid attention to features which either promoted or restricted men's homosexual life on board.

Almost the whole crew on the SAL liners consisted of men. They spent days and nights, work and leisure, together on sea. There was a holiday atmosphere on board, favouring less rigid norms for ways of living. In addition to real men there were many men who were considered to be homosexual, or *såna*, like that, as they often described themselves and their equals. Thus one would expect a flourishing homosexual life on board. In a way, it did exist, but only some forms of it flourished.

One would have expected sexual encounters and relationships between *såna* and real men, just as it was common in the home port Gothenburg especially during the 1950's. Indeed, *såna* were not interested in their peers, but in real men instead. However, the latter were often reluctant to engage sexually with *såna* on board. One reason for that, I argue, is that with such relatively large and visible amount of *såna* on board, sex between men became closely and very uncomfortably associated with homosexuality. Another reason is that the subordinate position of *såna* in the gender order was on the ships counterbalanced by their strong occupational position. In addition to this, the spatial

arrangements on board with different crew categories living in different sections further restrained sexual relationships between them and real men.

By the 1970's, with more modern and less gendered sexual categories, there was more sex between *såna*. Nevertheless, some men were rather used to the safety of short anonymous sexual encounters, and were concerned about being perceived as homosexual by other men on board. Thus, even if they chose not to engage in homoeroticism there, such encounters were easy to arrange in ports, and port calls were frequent.

If it was hard for men, both *såna* and others, to engage erotically with men on board, it was still harder for them to have love relationships with men there. Many men were young and rather wanted to enjoy themselves, something which was encouraged by the holiday atmosphere on the ships and the frequent port calls. The fact that it was hard to get away from each other on the ship if a relationship went sour was another restricting circumstance to consider. Hence love relationships between men were not common on board.

However, the holiday atmosphere, together with the occupational and spatial nearness of *såna* fostered other kinds of social life among them, both on board and in ports, as they engaged with each other as friends and colleagues. This in its turn promoted a strong sense of identity and community among them.

The great number of *såna* and their attractiveness as labour force to the shipping company helps to explain their strong

position compared to other men working on board. This strong position is even more remarkable, considering the period of time in question: the post World War II period, which has been pictured as especially homophobic in the western world. On the SAL ships the vertical aspect of the hetero-homo binary was weak, in other words: heterosexual masculinity was not hegemonic. On the other hand, the hetero-homo divide in itself was very clear-cut.<sup>31</sup>

### Notes

1. Together the two studies cover the period 1930-1980.
2. I conducted long interviews with fourteen homosexual men and with ten other men during 2001 and 2002. Other kind of material such as shorter interviews and records are also used.
3. *Såna* were not always regarded as such by others. Also, their self-identities often changed over time.
4. Sexual abuses between men are reported in the interviews.
5. Similar patterns have been reported in studies of other cities in Western Europe and United States during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the decades around the World War II. See, for example Hekma 1992 discussing Amsterdam, Chauncey 1994 about New York, Parikas 1999 discussing Stockholm. See Marshall 1981 and Weeks 2000 about England. Implicit prostitution was not unusual in these encounters and relationships.
6. This does not necessarily mean that it did not exist at all. The strong heteronormativity in Sweden even today probably makes reporting of such eroticism difficult.
7. For references of studies of same-sex eroticism in men's prisons, see Bech 1997. Bech is criticizing interpretations of such eroticism as resulting from women's absence.

8. For a similar argument on the level of modern society, see Bech 1997. According to Bech the existence of the homosexual promotes absent homosexuality, which comes into sight only indirectly.

9. I have translated the cited text from Norwegian.

10. I want to call attention to the fact that my picture of homoeroticism on freighters is based upon a few men's reports.

11 They had often many years of vocational training and experience of first class restaurants and/or hotels before working on the SAL-ships. For some of them working on these ships was part of an international hotel/restaurant career. Baker and Stanley give in their British study a picture of jobs requiring less professional qualifications.

12. Most of it in the form of tips.

13. In Gothenburg it was common that *såna* were sexually serving men perceived as real men.

14. Cf. Zeeland (1996), who suggests that men in the Marine Corps are so secure in their masculinity that they can take liberties.

15. Men working in departments other than those of real sailors were often called *flunkar* in Swedish. One interviewed man commented this: "To flunk means to fail. In the era of sailing-ships newcomers were sent up in the main mast. Those who failed to climb up had to go below deck and start working in the kitchen and cleaning and such things. 'He flunked.' 'He is a flunk'. It was a disparaging word and very often used by men working on deck and at the engine."

During the late 20th century and today men working as flight attendants are often thought to be gay irrespective of the direction of their sexual interest (Mills 1998, Petersson 2003). Men who served passengers on the SAL-ships were not looked upon in that way. Flunk had no sexual connotation. This difference might indicate the growing importance of the hetero-homo-binary during the 20th century.

16. For other men, who worked in the same kinds of jobs as *såna*, there were no similar borders toward the latter ones as was the case with real sailors. Still, differences were made. For example, *såna* were often looked upon as feminine, even among themselves.

17. But for officers engaging with passengers was part of their duty, not least when dining and dancing with them. Officers also had single cabins.

18. Cf. Halperin 2002 and Kristiansen 2004, who argue for paying attention to continuity.

19. In Swedish "bakom lås och bom".

20. Baker and Stanley (2003) report similar changes on British merchant ships. They argue that the gay movement played an important role for the changes to occur.

21. Baker and Stanley (2003) write in their British study that homosexual relationships were less likely on ships running shorter routes across the Atlantic than on ships running longer distances, for example, to Australia. They also write that a surprisingly great amount of men only had relationships on land.

22. Not only the SAL-ships but also ports were liminal spaces, including holiday associations. Many cruise ports were in fact holiday resorts.

23. For a personal account, see Duberman 1991. Interviewees often said that they heard of police raids in bars. Some of them recall bars closing and reopening at other places, but often they did not know why. One interviewee remembers a colleague from the ship being caught by the police in Bryant Park and forced back to Sweden immediately. A couple of men recall witnessing policemen receiving bribes. One man said that he got seized by policemen when being involved in the Stonewall revolt. Almost nobody remembers immigration authorities questioning about homosexual contacts at arrival in spite of rigorous checks in other respects.

24. Likewise Baker and Stanley note in their British study that short term affairs were more common than long term love relationships.

25. It is possible that *såna* from the SAL-ships helped to promote positive roles among their peers in Gothenburg by being proud role models.

26. There are exceptions from this pattern. For instance, one man working in purser's office said that he had not heard about men like

that on board. And not until he got involved in this study he began thinking that one of his closest colleagues probably was sån.

27. Furthermore, according to interviews there were men among the workers in this part of the ships who were together erotically with both men and women. Nothing similar is reported about real sailors.

28. The trade union organized both real sailors and others working on the ships.

29. Concerning Sweden, see for instance Söderström 1999.

30. Men looked upon as såna did not necessarily consider themselves as such. The same applies to men not perceived as såna. This was, from obvious reasons, particularly true concerning applicants not previously known to the recruiting personnel.

31. In contrast, the picture given by Baker and Stanley of British ships of similar kind is that this division was less clearcut than on land.

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