

Happy
in
BERLIN?

SSF
Stephen
Spender Trust

The Institute For Sexual Science

The Institute for Sexual Science was set up in 1919 by the German doctor and queer campaigner Magnus Hirschfeld. The world's first major archive of sexology, it functioned as a research facility, a medical centre, a library, a museum, and an informal social and activist space.

The Institute's scientists produced ground-breaking research into LGBTQ people, and early transgender surgeries took place there. Archival collections gathered materials relating to intersex, transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual histories, some of which were exhibited to the public. Hirschfeld's team also studied other sexual subjects, including venereal disease, impotence and fertility.

Christopher Isherwood stayed at the Institute from 1929-30 with his archaeologist friend, Francis Turville-Petre, who gave lectures on sexual reform there. WH Auden was also among the Institute's British visitors.

The Institute for Sexual Science was infamously raided by the Nazis in 1933. Youth demonstrators burned or otherwise destroyed thousands of books, medical records, and artifacts. Hirschfeld fled to France, where he died in 1935.



The Institute for Sexual Science.
Historical postcard, 1920s. Archiv der Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft e.V.,
Berlin

At this point in his 1976 memoir *Christopher and His Kind*, Christopher Isherwood has just been shown the Institute's collection of sexual objects, portraits and erotic drawings.

Read this excerpt and discuss the questions.

Christopher giggled because he was embarrassed. He was embarrassed because, at last, he was being brought face to face with his tribe. Up to now, he had behaved as though the tribe didn't exist and homosexuality were a private way of life discovered by himself and a few friends. He had always known, of course, that this wasn't true. But now he was forced to admit kinship with these freakish fellow tribesmen and their distasteful customs. And he didn't like it. His first reaction was to blame the Institute. He said to himself: How can they take this stuff so seriously?

Questions

- 1. Choose two key words from the text that describe Christopher, and two that suggest how he feels about the exhibit. Explain your choices.**
- 2. Isherwood's memoir was published soon after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain. Does this context inform your understanding of the passage? Give a reason why/why not.**
- 3. Suggest two ways in which the destruction of the Institute has impacted twentieth and twenty-first century queer history.**
- 4. How seriously should we take the history of sexuality? Justify your answer.**

Extension: Find six key facts about how LGBTQ people were understood in the 1920s and 30s.
