

## Massimo Consoli, an Italian Gay Giant is Dead

Doug Ireland (November 11, 2007)



Massimo Consoli, known as the father of the Italian gay movement, died on Sunday, November 4, at the age of 61 after a long battle against cancer.

Called "Papa Max" by his closest gay friends - in Italian, "Papa" means both "Daddy" and "Pope" - Consoli was a prolific writer, theorist, and self-trained historian with 40 books to his credit, mostly on homosexual subjects, as well as an indefatigable archivist of materials on homosexuality. He was also a tireless and talented lifelong organizer who pioneered the first modern Italian gay organizations.

The leading Italian daily, La Repubblica, in its front-page obituary on Consoli, noted that his many friends included the Italian cultural giant Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was a poet, novelist, literary critic, playwright, and filmmaker who celebrated homosexuality in his work; the novelist Alberto Moravia; the gay neo-Symbolist poet Dario Bellazza, whose poems are suffused with homosexuality, and who was considered by many Pasolini's cultural heir; and the openly gay French anthropologist Alain



Daniélou, a noted expert on India.

He originally studied to be an accountant, but after a long crisis over his homosexuality Consoli abandoned his university studies to consecrate his life to those he considered his gay "brothers and sisters." He thought it unjust, he later wrote, "that anyone should have to suffer uselessly just because he loved someone of his own sex."

In 1963 - six years before the Stonewall rebellion in New York City - Consoli, a lifelong anarchist, formed a discussion group, La Rivoluzione Ã Verde (The Revolution is Green), around the themes of sexual discrimination and social injustice. In 1966 he launched another gay group, the Associazione Culturale Roma-1. The name "Roma-1" did not refer to Italy's capital city, but was a secret acronym for Rivolta Omosessuale dei Maschi Anarchici - Prima fase (Homosexual Revolt of Male Anarchists - First phase).

"Now if you're gay, you just look up an organization in the phone book," Consoli told journalist Elisabetta Povoledo last year, noting that when he was growing up he was forced to send furtive letters to gay magazines abroad, looking to make contacts.

"There was a sense of sin to it all then," he added, "and any meeting was potentially dangerous. It was difficult - you have to understand how it was, we lived in terror. Everything was banned; it was all clandestine, people can't believe that today."

Consoli's precocious gay activism quickly led him into confrontations with the Italian state and the Catholic Church, and as early as October 1967 the Italian counter-espionage service, SID (Servizio Informazioni Difesa), began a file on him. His neighbors were interrogated about his visitors and his habits. This investigation caused him to give up his teaching position in a Roman school and to move to the Netherlands in 1969.

As related by Consoli's friend Dr. Hubert Kennedy, a research associate at the Center for Research and Education in Sexuality at San Francisco State University, "Consoli's reason for relocating was threefold: (1) he wished to publish an ideological document that would stimulate the birth of a homosexual movement; (2) he knew this was not possible in Italy (since he was already under police surveillance, he could expect a violent reaction to any such publication); and (3) the Netherlands seemed at that time to be the most open to homosexual political action."

Thus, Kennedy wrote, in the [gbltq.com](http://gbltq.com) online encyclopedia, "The resulting document, published in 1971, became known as Manifesto Gay; its original title was "Manifesto per la Rivoluzione Morale: l'Omosessualità Rivoluzionaria" ("Manifesto for the Moral Revolution: Revolutionary Homosexuality"). It was a programmatic document meant to furnish the basis for an Italian gay liberation movement, such as had already been established in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. The work succeeded in stimulating the formation of gay organizations in Italy."

The most important of those organizations was the Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano (Italian Revolutionary Homosexual United Front), better known by its acronym, FUORI! - meaning "Come out!" in Italian, and which explicitly stated that it was inspired by Consoli's Manifesto. One of the key organizers of FUORI!, which in 1971 emerged almost simultaneously in Rome, Turin, and Milan, was Mario Mieli, a radical student leader of the 1968 generation and another pioneering Italian gay theorist who had already participated in London's Gay Liberation Front.

Mieli went on to write an influential Marxist account of homosexuality and homosexual oppression, "Elementi di critica omissibile" (1977), translated into English in 1980 as "Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique." After Mieli's early death in 1983 at the age of 33, the largest gay organization in Rome changed its name to Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli ( the Mario Mieli Homosexual Cultural Circle), which is today still an important gay institution and cultural center.

Mieli was also Consoli's good friend.

Consoli participated in - and often organized - many of the most significant gay events in Italy. For



example, he took part in the Gay May Day in Rome in 1972. He organized the first annual Italian commemoration of New York City's Stonewall riots on June 28, 1976, at a time when most of the participants had no idea what "Stonewall" meant. Throughout the 1970s he organized hundreds of conferences, exhibitions, book presentations, theatrical spectacles, and political demonstrations. In 1976 he defied a police ban to organize a public demonstration on the first anniversary of the assassination of his friend Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Consoli was in New York in 1981, where he became a good friend of pioneer gay and AIDS activist Vito Russo, when the first cases of what would become known as AIDS were announced. Immediately recognizing the danger of the epidemic, Consoli wrote an article for publication in Italy calling the disease "the plague of the 20th century." He subsequently gave up a lucrative position in New York to return to Italy and launch education campaigns for safer sex.

Consoli was the first person to request a meeting with the Roman police regarding crimes against gays. (The police commissioner later said that it was due to his work that these crimes were drastically reduced.) He also met with the mayor of Rome to request - and obtain - the appointment of a liaison officer to the gay and lesbian community.

In 1989, Consoli founded the magazine Gay News Rome.

In 1992, he organized a demonstration at the Vatican to protest the anti-gay letter written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, to the U. S. bishops entitled "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons," which described homosexuality as a "tendency ordered towards an intrinsic moral evil" and recommended banning gays as teachers and coaches, as well as other discriminatory measures.

As a gay historian, Consoli was particularly devoted to the memory of the pioneering German theorist and fighter for homosexual emancipation Karl Ulrichs (1825-1895). In 1867, Ulrichs became the first self-proclaimed homosexual to speak out publicly in defense of homosexuality when he pleaded at the Congress of German Jurists in Munich for a resolution urging the repeal of anti-homosexual laws.

Ulrichs published a dozen books proclaiming that homosexuality - which, invoking Plato's "Symposium," he baptized "Uranian love" (from the Greek urianos, or "heavenly love") - was normal and natural, and arguing that Uranians should have full social and legal equality with heterosexuals, including the right to marry.

Ulrichs' books - two of which Consoli translated into Italian - had worldwide influence. For example, Oscar Wilde and his friends embraced both Ulrichs' philosophy and his Uranian language when they founded a secret Uranian organization, the Order of Chaeronea, to fight for legalization of homosexuality. And in his eye-opening 2005 revisionist biography, "The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde," which details Wilde's hitherto ignored gay activism, the British historian Neil McKenna demonstrates that "the very title of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' is a Uranian pun.... Among less literary Uranians, 'earnest' - a corruption of the French uraniste - enjoyed a short vogue as a coded signifier of Uranian inclinations - as in 'is he earnest?' to mean 'is he gay?'"

Ulrichs spent the last 15 years of his life in Italy. After rediscovering the tomb of Ulrichs in Aquila (about 50 miles northeast of Rome) in 1988, Consoli began annual pilgrimages there on August 28, Ulrichs' birthday, which grew from a handful of participants to large gatherings that attracted gay activists from all over Europe. Last year, thanks to Consoli's efforts, a statue to Ulrichs was erected at his grave, an event that received international media coverage.

Consoli's other important books include "Homocaust," a massive account of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, which made available for the first time in Italian the violently anti-gay speeches of Nazi leaders. On the wall outside Consoli's study was a framed letter from Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal thanking him for writing the book. Consoli also wrote "Ecce Homo," an account of homosexuality in the Bible; and an autobiography, "Affetti Speciali" (1999), which records the birth and progress of the Italian gay movement.



"I've lived the history of the gay movement - it's inside me," Consoli told the International Herald-Tribune when it profiled him last year. And, he added, "I feel like a historian, but I was forced to be an activist."

The newspaper called the autodidact Consoli an "exact researcher."

Consoli's favorite among his books, "Andata & Ritorno" (2003), is an autobiographical novel in which the protagonist's serious illness prompts a review of earlier periods of his life.

Not long before his death, Consoli completed work on a soon-to-be-published biography of the German gay writer Kurt Hiller (1875-1972), a pioneer homosexual liberationist and close colleague of Magnus Hirschfeld who, in 1929, succeeded Hirschfeld as chairman of the gay organization he'd founded, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, which fought for repeal of the infamous Paragraph 175, Germany's law criminalizing homosexuality.

In 1998, Consoli's huge archive of gay materials and personal papers was acquired by the State Archive of Italy's Ministry of Culture - but only after Consoli had threatened to take the archive out of the country if the state would not agree to conserve it.

At Consoli's death, openly gay Member of Parliament Franco Grillini - co-founder in 1985 of Arcigay, which with some 200,000 members is now Italy's largest national gay organization - said, "Massimo told with energy and passion, in many texts and essays, the reality of gay and lesbian life both in Italy and internationally, and its history. He has been a tireless promoter of the spread of gay culture in Italy. The death of Consoli, with his example of vision and courage, is a serious loss for the Italian LGBT movement and the culture of our country. We promise that we will carry on the many works of Massimo which remained unfinished."

After reposing for public tribute at the Rome offices of Arcigay, Consoli's body will be buried in the non-Catholic cemetery of Rome, at his request next to the body of his dearest friend, the poet Bellazza, who died of AIDS in 1996.

Massimo Consoli maintained an extensive Web site, including many of his hundreds of articles in both the mainstream and gay press, at [cybercore.com/consoli/](http://cybercore.com/consoli/) [2]. It will be kept up by his friends.

(This article was originally published in [Gay City News](#) [3])

Doug Ireland can be reached through his website <http://direland.typepad.com/direland/> [4].

[His social space on i-Italy is: http://www.i-italy.us/profile/DougIreland](http://www.i-italy.us/profile/DougIreland) [5]

**Related Links:** [http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/consoli\\_m.html](http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/consoli_m.html) [6]

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#### Links

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[3] [http://www.gaycitynews.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=19005552&BRD=2729&PAG=461&dept\\_id=568864&rfi=6](http://www.gaycitynews.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=19005552&BRD=2729&PAG=461&dept_id=568864&rfi=6)

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