AXEL AXGIL

b. April 3, 1915

d. October 29, 2011

"We realized the historic significance of what we were doing."

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Axel Axgil was a Danish gay activist and cofounder of Europe's first gay rights organization. After Denmark became the first nation to legalize same-sex domestic partnerships, he and his partner Eigil Eskildsen were the first couple to register.

Born Axel Lundahl-Madsen, he came out in the 1940s after meeting Eigil. The two men would later adopt the surname "Axgil"—a combination of Eigil and Axel—to acknowledge their commitment to one another.

Inspired in 1948 by the United Nations' adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included sexual orientation, Axgil cofounded Forbundet af 48 (F-48), Europe's first gay rights organization. By 1951, F-48 had more than a thousand members and branches in Sweden and Norway.

The couple founded Vennen (The Friend), a gay magazine. In addition to producing the publication, Axgil ran a small publishing company that sold nude male photographs. In 1955, Axgil was arrested for distributing the photos.

The investigation into Vennen led to a scandal and arrests of gay men. After his release from prison, Axgil founded the International Homosexual World Organization (IHWO). In 1970, IHWO successfully appealed to the German Federal Chancellor, who discontinued the seizure of nude male photographs.

In 1989, after years of lobbying by the Axgils, Denmark became the first nation to recognize same-sex domestic partnerships. The law gave same-sex couples most of the rights and obligations of marriage, excluding the right to adopt. On October 1, 1989, the Axgils and 10 couples held a commitment ceremony that attracted worldwide media attention.

Axgil continued his activism and ran a gay-friendly bed and breakfast until Eigil's death in 1995. In 2012, as a result of the groundwork laid by Axgil, Denmark legalized same-sex marriage.