Deaf People in Hitler's Europe

An international conference brings attention to the roles deaf people played during the Nazi Regime

by Laura-Jean Gilbert

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"It's a great misunderstanding to think that the Holocaust was only about murdering Jews. It was also about humiliation—about losing one's self-respect."

That statement, made by one of the panelists at the international conference "Deaf People in Hitler's Europe," was reflected in many of the presentations and sessions held during the June 21-24 event, which focused on deaf people in the Europe of 1933-1945 controlled by Nazi Germany.

Deaf people were among those who were killed by the Nazis during the time--some because they were Jews, others because as congenitally deaf people they were considered "defective" and "biologically inferior." Others carried the shame of being sterilized, while some were Nazi sympathizers who did not understand the impact of what was happening to other deaf people around them. Some escaped before the sterilizations and killings began. Others survived the ghettos and concentration camps of Germany, Poland, and Hungary.

The conference, cosponsored by Gallaudet's History and Government Department and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), was a major step forward in identifying the roles deaf people played during those years, recording their experiences, and opening up new areas for research. Over the three days, conference participants learned about the historical period that led to the rise of National Socialism (Nazism), the philosophy of racial hygiene supported by the Nazis, and the roles deaf people played both as Nazis and as victims. They learned of the reluctance of members of the deaf community to speak out about these years, and about the post-war period, including the German court's decision that sterilization of deaf people and individuals with disabilities by the Nazis was not persecution. Panels and workshops on topics ranging from the experiences of deaf survivors and witnesses to the psychological, educational, and artistic implications of deaf people's experiences set the stage for further research.

The seed for the conference was planted in 1993 when Dr. Donna Ryan of Gallaudet's History and Government Department and Dr. Jane Hurst of the Religion Department taught a course on the Holocaust just prior to the opening of the USHMM. As part of that course, a deaf survivor, Lilly Shirey, talked to the students about her experiences during World War II. This led Ryan, together with fellow history professor and oral historian John Schuchman, to embark on a project of trying to preserve on videotape an oral history of deaf people who also were survivors. As co-chairs of the conference, Ryan and Dr. Schuchman worked together with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to make the event a reality.

The conference took place at both the Gallaudet University Kellogg Conference Center on campus and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It brought together more than 200 participants--ranging in age from 15-88 and including students, teachers, artists, community leaders, professor and researchers from the United States, Germany, Israel, England, the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, and several other countries. Spoken and sign language interpretation was available to participants in English and American Sign Language, German and German Sign Language, and Hungarian and Hungarian Sign Language. The "In Der Nacht" exhibit, developed by Marla Petal and Michelle Baron, and an exhibit of the works of deaf artist and Dachau survivor David Bloch were on display at Gallaudet, and participants also had the opportunity to visit many of the exhibitions in the museum.

The Philosophy of Racial Hygiene

Providing a historical context for the exploration of the Holocaust and the deaf community, history professor Henry Friedlander of Brooklyn College, City University of New York, explained that the Nazis targeted three major groups—Gypsies or "Roma," Jews, and people with disabilities—based on the belief that all of these groups were biologically inferior. The scientific and medical communities did not oppose this movement, he pointed out. Despite their Hippocratic Oath, many doctors agreed that they should be permitted to destroy "unworthy life."

They began by killing babies and children who were sent to special wards (where their parents thought they were being sent to be cured). Hitler then approved the killing of institutionalized adults. The gassing of medical patients by doctors at six killing centers developed the technology of gas chambers and crematoria that was later exported to the concentration camps. The bodies of those killed were looted both for gold and for human organs to be used in research.

The remarks of Dr. Robert Proctor, professor of the history of science at Pennsylvania State University, echoed Dr. Friedlander's comments. Discussing eugenics and deafness in Hitler's Europe, Proctor noted, "In the wrong political climate, medicine can join with evil to create terrible crimes."

In the 1920s, before the Nazis even came to power, there was a movement within both the United States and German medical communities—supported in general by society—to sterilize mentally retarded and criminally insane people living in mental institutions. In Germany, this became known as the racial hygiene movement and was promoted through professional journals and by medical/science departments of German universities. Germany actually looked to the United States as a model in relation to sterilization and to excluding people with disabilities or congenital illness from immigration.

Participants at the conference may have thought, at this point, about Alexander Graham Bell's initiative to stop deaf people from intermarrying. And if they did not, they were reminded of Bell's beliefs later in the conference by Dr. John V. Van Cleve, professor of history and director of the Gallaudet University Press, during his comments at a panel on the closing day in which he and other scholars analyzed findings of the conference and considered possible directions for future research.

In 1933, as the Nazis came to power, the racial hygiene movement gained political support. That year a law was enacted in Germany calling for the sterilization of anyone with a genetically transmitted disease—including congenital deafness. Physicians were required to register any "defective" person.

As the war years began, Germany moved from sterilization to euthanasia, primarily for economic reasons. By 1941, said Proctor, euthanasia was a part of almost every hospital's routine—defective babies, incurably ill old people, mental patients were put to death. Starvation of "useless eaters" became both policy and practice. Parents were made to feel embarrassed if they had a defective child. The practice was extended to include the abortion of babies who might be born with a congenital disability or illness, and such abortions might be carried out as late as the ninth month of pregnancy.

The medicalization of anti-Semitism followed. "Solving the Jewish problem" was seen as a medical problem, Proctor explained, because Judaism was considered a disease. Physical deviance was seen as intolerable—pathological or even treason.

Proctor stressed, however, that all of these actions were part of a larger medical movement wherein the Nazis did extensive research into the causes of cancer, supported ecology, investigated the dangers of asbestos, heavy metals, and tobacco as causes of lung cancer, supported midwifery, and urged people to consider vegetarianism. The medical and scientific communities were the major professional groups supporting National Socialism.

Living Under National Socialism

Many deaf people in Germany after World War II are ashamed of this time both because of the sterilizations and because many had joined the Nazi party, said Jochen Muhs, vice president of the Deaf Federation of Berlin. For these reasons very little has been written about deaf people and this period of history.

In putting together an exhibit in Germany to show what happened to deaf people during this period, Muhs interviewed many members of the deaf community. Many of the deaf people said they were taken in by Nazi propaganda, which only talked about the positive aspects of National Socialism. They couldn't hear the rumors; they didn't know what was happening to the Jews. "One day the Jews just weren't here any more," they told Muhs. "They were sent to the east to work." German deaf athletes who went to the World Games for the Deaf in Stockholm in 1939 learned what was happening in Germany from the other athletes there.

Berlin was home to many deaf community groups before World War II. Sterilization was being talked about in Germany before 1933, and some deaf organizations had joined together to work against this idea and formed a national organization, "Regede." But when Hitler came to power in 1933, the 25 deaf organizations in Berlin were subsumed into Regede, which became a Nazi organization. A deaf Nazi, Fritz Albreghs, was named president of the new organization. At the beginning, this organization had 4,700 members; membership grew to 12,000 as additional groups were "coordinated." All members of the organization were, thereby, members of the Nazi party. People who were not Nazis were removed from office in the deaf organizations. Deaf newspapers and other papers were censored, and finally only one deaf newspaper was left.

As the National Socialist party developed, it had its deaf supporters. These deaf Nazis cheered Hitler's rise to power. A June 1933 issue of the deaf newspaper, Die Stimme, talks about the founding of the first deaf storm trooper (S.A.) group, and there was also a deaf motorized S.A. unit. But a year later this deaf group was dissolved because it did not fit into the Nazi image.

During the Nazi years, employment improved for deaf people because hearing people were serving in the army. But other programs for deaf people—such as recreational programs—ended. Then, in 1934, the forced sterilization of people who were genetically deaf began.

By 1937, Muhs alleged, 95 percent of deaf children belonged to the Hitler Youth for the Deaf. The young members wore the letter "G" on their shoulder (for "gehoerlosen" deaf). After 1933, deaf Jewish children were removed from the deaf schools and were reported to the authorities. Newspapers for teachers of the deaf stressed that teachers must follow Nazi policies. Gradually, many deaf schools were closed and converted to military hospitals.

By the mid-1930s, Muhs noted, many deaf Jews sensed that they were about to be persecuted. They were removed from leadership positions in deaf organizations and athletic associations, and other deaf people lost contact with them. A deaf newspaper of those years carried an article stating that contact between Jews and non-Jews was forbidden.

One individual whom Muhs interviewed shared his memories of Kristallnacht—the "night of broken glass" when synagogues were burned and Jewish businesses looted. He saw shops being vandalized and asked his teacher what was happening. His teacher did not or would not speak out about what was happening and responded only, "Read the newspaper."

Before 1933, about 600 deaf Jews lived in Berlin. Only about 34 survived the war. Muhs interviewed some of them and asked about their time in the concentration camps. Had they told people they were deaf? They answered that they did not tell people they were deaf because that would have only created more problems.

Forced Sterilization

In 1979, after attending an athletic event, Horst Biesold asked a deaf friend of his father's, "Why don't you have a family?" The deaf man took him into another room. When they were alone, he broke down and cried. "Hitler cut," he signed.

That was the first time Biesold, now a teacher of the deaf and adjunct lecturer at the University of Bremen, learned about the forced sterilizations of deaf people that took place under National Socialism. "During my 12 years of working with deaf people, I'd never heard one word about sterilization," Biesold recalled. "I was suddenly aware of the complicity of my fellow teachers in this silence."

Biesold set out to talk with more than 1,200 people in the deaf community about this period of their lives. "I learned of the anguish and helplessness of some of the victims, and also of the courage of some who resisted. I learned of the psychological scars that deaf people carry." He also learned about the extermination of people with disabilities and about the murder of Jewish deaf people. Initially, he was skeptical; he could not believe that if such things had actually happened, deaf people or their advocates would not have talked about it when the war ended.

"I asked the pastor of a deaf congregation about this," he said. He was amazed when she told him that at least 100 members of her deaf congregation (of 600 people) had been forcibly sterilized. "She encouraged me to explore this chapter of Nazi atrocity."

Biesold's research resulted in the book Klagende Hande, which will be published next year in English by Gallaudet University Press under the title, Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany. The book, which includes biographies of both the victims and the perpetrators, traces the path from genetic deafness to forced sterilization. The Nazi geneticists said that hereditary deafness needed to be removed from the gene pool. Those whose deafness was not hereditary were exempt from the law. The goal was to eliminate inferior life.

A 1925 survey estimated there were 45,000 deaf people in Germany. In 1935 a statistician said that 21.7 percent of children born deaf had deaf progenitors, while another researcher felt that one-third of deaf children were deaf because of heredity. After 1934 deaf people were increasingly threatened by what they read in deaf publications about sterilization of individuals with congenital disabilities. These experiences led to a sense of inferiority on the part of German deaf people, making them terribly ashamed of what occurred and, therefore, reluctant to talk about it after the war. Further, people who knew about the sterilizations (for example, pastors of deaf congregations and government officials) continued to suppress the information and/or talk about it only as a medical issue.

Up until 1979, none of these deaf people had received any kind of financial remuneration or compensation for what had happened to them. After Biesold's study, he said, "We brought these documents to the table of a cabinet meeting of the Federal Republic. The finance minister decided spontaneously to establish a fund of 20 million German marks for reparation." In addition to his book, Biesold has made a film, Nazi Injustice to Deaf People, that was shown on German television. Now, said Biesold, "for the first time, a closed persecuted group is being asked about their experience and about the administrative aspects of what happened to them."

Opening Doors

This opening of the doors of silence also occurred at the Deaf People in Hitler's Europe conference. In addition to the keynote speakers, participants heard from a variety of presenters. Panelists Simon Carmel, Jochen

Muhs, Henry Florsheim, David Jackson, and Eugene Bergman discussed their research and/or experiences as survivors and witnesses to the events of 1933-45. Members of the Deaf Jewish Community of Budapest, Hungary, discussed their experiences in the ghetto, labor brigades, and concentration camps. Concurrent workshops focused on a range of topics, from Holocaust education for deaf students, issues in deaf history, and psychological implications for deaf people to preservation of deaf people's experiences, videotaped history interviews, artistic expressions of deaf experiences, and memorials to deaf victims of Hitler.

Participants were touched by the experiences of deaf individuals who lived through these years—those who left Nazi Germany with their families before the sterilizations and killing began, or who were sent away while families remained behind; those who experienced these years as members of the German deaf community, or who survived the ghettos or the concentration camps. The psychological damage and guilt—for surviving when others didn't, or for being a Nazi sympathizer and ignoring the plight of other deaf people—remains even 50 years after the war has ended.

The important thing, all the participants agreed, was that much more needs to be done in this study of Nazi persecution of deaf people and especially of deaf people's response to their situation. Further, it is especially important to videotape and record for posterity the experiences of those deaf survivors who are still living and who are willing to share their memories of these years.

"We accomplished what we set out to do," Schuchman and Ryan said at the conference's conclusion. They pointed out that one of their goals had been to bring this whole topic of deaf people and the Holocaust to the attention of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in order to encourage interest and further research on the topic and how it fits into the whole picture of Holocaust studies. "I think this is the beginning of an ongoing relationship with the museum," said Ryan. "They are interested in pursuing the topic."

"We were able to demonstrate the complexity of the topic," added Schuchman. "It isn't just a simple victimization story."

The two co-chairs of the conference are working on producing the video proceedings of the conference and are also starting to work on an anthology that will include papers from the conference, additional papers, and their own commentary and writing. They also plan to continue work on the oral history project of videotaping survivors' memories of these years.

Another result of the conference, they pointed out, was that it brought together people from around the world, each working on his or her own slice of this period of history. They mentioned, for example, the connection that has been made with the Fortunoff Video Archives of Holocaust Testimonies at Yale.

"Some people think we have a Gallaudet Holocaust Project," Schuchman commented, noting that this is not true. Rather, Gallaudet has two faculty members who have been doing independent study in this area and now are hoping to find some funding to expand their project. They are also, under the auspices of Gallaudet's Center for Global Education, planning a study tour to Eastern Europe (including Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) during the summer of 1999.

Peter Black, senior historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, emphasized the need for further study. Only in the last decade, he said, have scholars begun to study Nazi treatment of people who were physically or mentally disabled. And only in May 1988 did the German legislature repeal the Nazi laws regarding deaf and disabled people. He reinforced Horst Biesold's call for further research about deaf people's feelings, involvement with, and reaction to, the Nazi regime.

"Was resistance attempted?" asked Black. "We need to learn more about the disappearance of deaf Jews and deaf Gypsies. We need to know more about what difference in treatment occurred between genetically deaf and late deafened people—by people who were oral vs. people who signed. We need to know more about deaf people in other countries. And we need to know more about how deaf people coped and survived."

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