

Horst Biesold: Helping the Survivors

by Ernest Gill

Just three years ago a casual conversation between a deaf man and a teacher of the deaf in West Germany led to the uncovering of a story which has shed new light on the early days of Hitler's Holocaust. Now, after three years of tireless research, interviews with more than 1,000 people and trips to Scandinavia, Israel and America, that teacher, Horst Biesold of Bremen, has come forth with previously undisclosed information on the Hitler regime's early steps to achieve "racial purity."

He has disclosed a story of forced sterilizations, abortions and "mercy killings" involving 350,000 deaf and other physically and mentally handicapped people in Germany starting as early as the summer of 1933 while Hitler was still amassing his political power. Biesold contends this early test of Nazi racial purity ideology, a test which apparently met extraordinarily little resistance from parents, teachers and even religious leaders, was an important first step in the direction towards genocide.

His research, aided by Ernst Walthemate, a Jewish member of the West German parliament, has resulted in the establishment of a small restitution fund for the approximately 1,500 deaf and other handicapped people who survived the Nazi sterilization and abortion clinics and are still alive today.

Biesold's findings have made headlines in Los Angeles, Washington and New York, where he has lectured to Jewish and deaf community audiences as the guest of several Jewish philanthropical organizations. Though his efforts have received some attention in the West German and Israeli press, they were virtually unknown outside the small deaf community in the United States.

The highlight of his month-long American lecture tour in May, 1983 was a memorial service in English and American Sign Language in New York City sponsored by the Hebrew Association of the Deaf, the New York Society of the Deaf and the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. There, as he had already in meetings in San Diego, Los Angeles and Washington, he encountered deaf people from Germany who had been personally involved in the forced sterilizations. Also present were a number of deaf Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union who have been resettled in Brooklyn under a unique program run by a man who is himself a deaf Jew from Tashkent.

Three years ago this spring, Biesold, then 40 and a teacher at the Bremen School for the Deaf, was chatting with a deaf man at a deaf athletic club gathering when he chanced on the subject.

"I asked him why it was that he was middle-aged, but had never gotten married and had children," Biesold recalled. "He became very uncomfortable and changed the subject. Then later, after other people had left, he turned to me and said, 'Do you really want to know what happened to me?' Then he looked about furtively and silently told me in just two signs in German Sign Language: 'Hitler,' 'Castrate.' I was shocked and at first could hardly believe him." But similar conversations with other middle-aged deaf people convinced Biesold that he had stumbled onto something big. He found nothing in academic records at his local school or at the University of Hamburg's files on deaf education. And when he asked the editor of West Germany's monthly magazine for the deaf to publish an appeal for information, the editor refused.

"The editor, who apparently knew more than I did, said he didn't want to cast a bad light on educators," Biesold said. But when Biesold threatened him with a lawsuit, the editor gave in and published the appeal for information and even backed up the appeal with an editorial saying it was time for the truth to come out.

The response overwhelmed Biesold.

"I got dozens of letters and calls immediately," he said. "Then as word spread, as newspapers began to pick up the story, and after a TV show devoted a half-hour to my work I got hundreds of letters. People sent me original documents, medical records, death certificates, old clippings, everything." People would come to him crying, saying they had always believed they alone had been singled out, never realizing thousands of others had been sterilized and had also been shamed into silence.

The law requiring the sterilization of deaf people in particular, and of various other handicapped people in general, was signed into law on July 14, 1933, barely six months after Hitler became chancellor, and before he had succeeded in obtaining total dictatorial power.

Sterilization of deaf people had been debated for decades both in Europe and America. Even Alexander Graham Bell, whose mother was deaf, who married a deaf woman, and who invented the telephone while trying to perfect a hearing aid, even Bell once publicly stated that the deaf should not be allowed to have

children. Lost in the debate was the medical statistic that fully 90 percent of all congenitally deaf babies are born to hearing parents, not deaf parents, and that deaf people generally have hearing children.

While it may not have been too surprising that the new Nazi regime could introduce forced sterilizations of the deaf, it was surprising how little resistance there was. School teachers may not at first have realized the import of the new medical reports they had to fill out for deaf pupils beginning with the fall term of 1933. But the intent could not have remained hidden from them for long. Biesold has learned that whole classes of adolescents and even children as young as 9 years old were taken by school authorities to clinics to be sterilized.

It may have been that teachers knew deaf students could not remain in school unless they had been sterilized, in which case they put education before the sanctity of their pupils' bodies. Or it may have been that teachers, along with parents, knew that the law was difficult to avoid. Once a deaf person had been reported, by a school, a neighborhood Nazi Party official or even through membership in a deaf club, the person was required to report to a clinic within two weeks for sterilization.

"There are some reports of resistance," Biesold said, though he has been unable yet to confirm any particular instance. But most resistance was in vain, particularly when even leaders in the religious and deaf social communities worked for sterilization.

Biesold has obtained a copy of a 1936 sermon by a Lutheran pastor assigned to minister to a deaf congregation. In it the pastor tells his flock that deafness is a pitiable condition from which future generations should be spared. He calls on them to accede to the law and offer up "a grateful sacrifice" for the good of Germany and mankind.

Equally chilling were the actions of a deaf man who headed the national association of deaf clubs in Germany. He used the association's publications to crusade against Jews and reported entire deaf communities to officials for sterilization.

Through it all there were some signs of resistance, as in a short article in a deaf publication that condemns a member of a deaf sports club for refusing to go along with the club's anti-Semitic policies. The article called on members to ostracize him "since he obviously prefers the alien-blooded Jews over us German-blooded sports club comrades."

Some teachers apparently shielded their students from the law, though that became more difficult after 1937 when universal competency tests were administered to handicapped children. Those who failed the tests were taken out of school and, Biesold surmises, were victims of "mercy killings."

The headmaster of the Hebrew Institute for Deaf Mutes in Berlin managed to flee to London in 1939 along with 12 students. Biesold encountered two of those former students in San Diego.

"Another woman in San Diego apparently saw in me something of her husband, a deaf Jew whom the SS had shot to death," Biesold said. "Suddenly it all came out— all the feelings, all the memories. And she talked to me a long time. I could hardly sleep for two nights after that."

All that remains of that Berlin school located in what is now East Berlin, is a plaque stating that the school's 14, deaf Jewish students were hauled away in 1942. Biesold has learned they were taken to Auschwitz.

Biesold is still searching for information about teachers or school official who, like the Berlin headmaster, may have shielded their students. He says he has heard of only one or two teachers who resisted and were fired or arrested.

What he finds particularly disturbing is that most educators, however unwittingly or acquiescently, went along with the sterilization and mercy killings policies. And, after the war, when the fall term opened in 1945 they were back in the classrooms again. "There was never a word about what had happened," Biesold said. "Deaf people were ashamed or afraid to talk, and the educators continued as though nothing had ever happened."

Parents also were quiet, some because they had successfully hidden their deaf children from authorities, others apparently because they had relented in the belief that their children, though sterilized, had at least remained alive and in school.

Some deaf and other handicapped people in Germany sought restitution immediately after the war. But, though the 1933 sterilization law and the subsequent "mercy killing" edict had been abolished, they were never formally rebuked by the West German government. So, unlike Jews and some other Holocaust victims, deaf and other handicapped people could not claim restitution.

Biesold and Walthemate, one of the only Jewish members of the West Germany parliament, succeeded in late 1980 in securing a one-time payment of 5,000 marks, or about \$2,500 to any deaf German who could prove sterilization by the Hitler regime. But Biesold says distribution of the money has been stymied in a bureaucratic tangle.

Both men are still working to get the West German government formally to refute the Hitler era laws, thus paving the way to full restitution to the survivors.

(Mr. Gill is an associate producer for GBH and often contributes to The Deaf American.)