

Survivor: Ingelore Herz Honigstein

Told in ASL by Ingelore and translated to English by Patti Durr

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Photos Courtesy of Ingelore Honigstein

My German name is Ingelore but most Americans have too much trouble remembering my first name so I am generally known as Lore. My maiden last name was Herz, which is German for heart. I was born in 1924 and grew up in Kuppenheim, in Baden-Baden, Germany which is part of the Black Forest. My parents were Berthold and Amalie Herz. I did not communicate much with my family members. My family in Germany was all hearing. My Aunt Cora, my mother's sister, told me that she noticed that I might be deaf when I was one year old. When the doctor confirmed this fact, my mother refused to accept it. I have no siblings because my mother was worried about having another child that might be Deaf. I was sent to a foster parent who was a speech teacher and he tried to get me to use my voice but it was paralyzed. One time he hit me on the back and I yelled. This is how he woke up my voice. We then practiced the sound of EACH letter. It was a very slow process much like learning to walk after one has been paralyzed. I was placed in a school for the hard of hearing when I was six years old but later went to a school for the Deaf.

I was very much a tomboy and always out playing and going on adventures. My family was a purely Jewish family. My children have gone on to marry Catholic women. They are very sweet and I love them dearly. As a child growing up, my family attended synagogue every Friday but I did not understand what was being said. We had been very well off but when the Nazis came to power they took all our silver, fur, and valuables. I can remember we had to make a menorah for Hannukah from a piece of wood.

While I was growing up in Germany under the Nazi regime, I did see Hitler, Himmler, and Goebbels (who was very short), pass by in a motorcade with hundreds of Germans giving the Heil Hitler. I also had to do this for fear of getting in trouble. This was in 1932.

I attended the Heidelberg School for the Deaf. I was the only Jewish child and suffered greatly from my classmates mocking and picking on me. When I complained to the superintendent of this unwarranted treatment, Dr. Singer*, who himself was a Nazi member as most teachers were, did not offer any explanation but said it would be best if I was sent home. Thus, in November 1938 after Kristallnacht I was sent home by train and saw many burned down synagogues and Jewish businesses that had Nazi signs with swastikas on them. My family had already been stripped of our silver, fur coats, jewelry and were forced to wear the Star of David badge and carry our papers, which were stamped with a J for Jude. When I arrived at the train station in my home town, no one was there to meet me. I had to drag my bags a long distance to my home. When I arrived at our very large and beautiful villa, I found the front door barricaded with two pieces of wood forming an X. I ran around to the back and pounded on the back door calling for my mother. My mother greeted me and ushered me in. She explained that my father had been taken to Dachau, a prison camp. I am not sure how my father's freedom was bought but I suspect the townspeople who intended to take over my father's business due to the Aryanization of all German stores needed my father to explain where to buy goods wholesale. He returned home wearing a black and white striped prisoner's uniform and cap. The people of our town greeted him by throwing stones at him. My father had owned the only hardware store in the area and the people wanted it for its materials.



In the meantime my Aunt Cora, who was a teacher, had found a Deaf Jewish School in Wannsee (East Berlin) for me to attend. This was the Israelite School for the Deaf. Dr. Reich had been the superintendent of this school but had left to bring several Deaf Jewish youngsters to London, England. He planned to return for more but was detained in England when the war broke out. I began there in 1939 and started to learn Hebrew, how to keep house, and to be a seamstress. Dr. Kahn was the superintendent of the school in Dr. Reich's absence and there were only a few other teachers still around at this time.

I was around 15 years old and I was sent to work during the day for a rich Jewish family much like a mother's helper. This was a form of vocational training in a way. I cooked and cleaned their home, which was in Brandenburg. I had to return to the Deaf Jewish school everyday before the curfew of 8 pm. This was very dangerous as sometimes the street cars ran late. One evening I was getting back to the school after the curfew. I was very worried especially since a military academy was right near to our school building. As I was walking down our street quickly with my head held low, two young soldiers grabbed me and dragged me into their room. These two Nazis forced me to do sexual acts from A to Z. At this time I knew nothing about sex. I was covered with my own blood. When they were done, they shoved me out the door and I ran to the school. I knocked for them to let me in but when they came to the door, they refused since it was after curfew. I begged them to look at the state I was in - all bloody and hurt. They took mercy on me and turned out the lights so no one would see them sneaking me in. One of the house parents helped me to wash up. I could barely walk, I was in so much pain. This took place in October of 1939.

In December, I went home for the holiday break. From the American consulate we were able to get visas because my Great Uncle lived in Alabama. Everyone had one except for me because I was Deaf. We had to go to the American consulate for the Southern region of Germany, which was in Stuttgart.

When they summoned me to show up, they would not let my mother accompany. I was very frightened to have to talk with the man alone. He made me turn around so he could test my ability to understand him without lipreading. Thankfully G-d was watching over me. Using the man's reflection in a picture of the American flag, I could understand the man a bit. I explained to him I wanted to go to America to attend school and study English. He made me write down my name. When he released me, my parents were frantic with worry. They had been pacing and so nervous. I told them that the consulate had me sign a paper. My father said, "You signed the paper! Hurrah, Hurrah!" I hadn't realized the significance of this act until I saw the joy on my father's face.

Within twenty-four hours we had to pack up all our most needed and precious valuables and carry them in packs on our back or suitcases. So many important, dear, and valuable things we had to leave behind.

We were to take a train to Holland and the Nazis searched us. I had hidden a gold bracelet by sewing it into my shoulder pads. Even though they were using a metal detection type device, they didn't go near my shoulders so our valuables went undetected. They then searched all of our belongings THOROUGHLY. We were allowed to write a note to our Uncle and Aunt in Germany for money and valuables the German's did confiscate to be sent back to them but we knew the Nazis would just pocket all of the goods and not send it back to our relatives.

My Great Uncle worked for a hotel in Rotterdam, Holland as an export/import dealer and brought us into the restaurant there. I remember being so shocked. There were tables FULL of food; especially fresh fruit, which we never saw in Germany while living off food ration tickets. We were so exhausted we went straight to sleep.

We boarded the ship, Volledam #1, and slept in holds below. There were four women per room and on the others section of the hold there were four men per room. There was only a fan in the wall. Traveling through the English Channel was a very fearful experience as we could see these large mines floating nearby us and I had to pray relentlessly that none would come into contact with our boat. I imagined trying to blow them away from us much like the wind would. We were all told to wear life jackets and when the signal was given that it would be alright to take them off, I refused. Being the only Deaf person on board, I wanted a little extra protection. I noticed when I went up for meals that none of the other passengers came up. They were all terribly sea sick and upset from all the stress. The sailors invited me to dine with them and I had a fun time while everyone else was miserable. When we arrived to the American coast, I called my mother to come above. She had been terribly sea sick.

When the Statue of Liberty came into view, EVERYONE on board was crying. Our tears were bitter-sweet. On the one hand we were overjoyed with a sense of FREEDOM, but we were also besieged with worries. How were we to find work and a home to live in?

We arrived on the 22nd of February in 1940 ♦ it was George Washington ♦s birthday.

When our boat docked in NJ, I was separated from my family because I was Deaf. I began crying and my face broke out with red blotches. They thought I had chicken pox and were planning to send me to Ellis Island for quarantine. Fortunately, my face returned to normal when I calmed down and they let me go around 6 pm.

Through a social services organization for Jewish immigrants, I was enrolled in the Lexington School for the Deaf and my family lived on 139th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus. My father worked as a gardener in Mt. Vernon and my mother became a chambermaid.



Now you recall what happened to me with the Nazi soldiers. After that I missed my period for a few months. In America, there was a German doctor named Dr. Vogel who had an office across the street from us. Vogel means bird in German. I asked to speak with him privately. He consented and we discussed my experiences in Germany. He asked me for a urine sample so they could do the rabbit test. He then informed me I was pregnant. I was completely puzzled. I, at that time, had no understanding of how a person becomes pregnant. When I had gotten my period at the age of 10, my mother ♦s response was to slap my face. I thought she had done this because I had soiled my clothes but later found out it was a Jewish custom. No one ever explained to me about what menstruation was for. I never KNEW how someone became pregnant and at the age of 15 I was told I was carrying a baby made from what the soldiers did to me. I never experienced any symptoms of being pregnant like morning sickness and such. I had gained some weight and my breasts had become larger but that was all.

Dr. Vogel explained that I could abort the baby or keep the child. I told him I wanted nothing to do with a child that was made

(photo by Ingelore's son, Frank Stiefel)

from that night and the Nazis. One problem was that for me to get an abortion, I would need my parents ♦ permission. I explained to the doctor that I was fearful of asking my parents because they knew nothing about what happened to me while I was at school. I never told them about that night. I explained that my father had a habit of hitting and beating me. I was afraid of how they would react. The doctor said he would protect me and speak to my parents. Naturally they were shocked and upset. The abortion was done in the doctor ♦s home in a back room and his wife served as the nurse. I had to stay in bed for two weeks. A nurse came over once a day to check on me. At this time I became a man hater.

Later I met my first husband. He was a Deaf Jewish man from Germany, who came to the US via London, England in October 1939. He was a custom tailor, named Herbert Stiefel (which means boot in German). We were married for 25 years until he died from bone marrow cancer. He was actually dating my hearing cousin as they were both from the same hometown of Weinheim, Germany. I asked him what do you do when you go out with my cousin? Mind you there was a big age difference between Herbert and myself ♦ about 10-15 years. He replied that they would go to the theatre and concerts and such. I replied, ♦ that is for her but what about you. You are Deaf. You should be with someone like yourself. You should be with me. ♦ So we started going out together in the afternoons and fell madly in love. We were married for 25 years until he died from bone marrow cancer. I married for a second time, and this husband passed away suddenly in his sleeps. We had only been married for four years. My third husband, Paul Honigstein was 95 years old when he died and we had been married for 28 years. I was a widow for a few years before marrying Paul.

I did revisit Germany but it was painful to find the cemetery of my great grandparents had fallen into a state of disrepair despite efforts of my Aunt Cora to have the mayor of the town assure that it would be well tended to. I also went to my childhood home which had been taken over by the Mayor. I asked if I could look around inside and they admitted me. When I saw that the dining room was filled with my family ♦s original furnishing I was flooded by memories. They had kept many of our heirlooms as if they were their own. It was very upsetting so I quickly said good bye without a word of thanks.

I have shared my story with my children at Passover ♦ explaining to them about how wonderful our seders at home were in Germany before the war. We would have a lavish meal with delicious Matzah ball soup and all the fixings. We had to special order the Matzah from a factory and it was delivered to us in crates. After Kristallnacht, the Matzah never came. We assumed the businesses that made the Matzah were all forced out of commission. We could not celebrate our Passover as we traditionally did. When we arrived in the US, we would gather together in our small apartment making due with whatever we had and thankfully we could buy Matzah again.

I never shared my story publicly until I attended a Deaf Jewish conference and after a panel discussion on the Holocaust at the urging of Ruth Stern, I stood up in the audience and told my story. I was so scared I just stared at the wall as I signed it all out. There was not a dry eye in the room afterwards.

Note: Doris Berman and Joshua Berman were instrumental in introducing Ingelore to NTID/RIT and encouraging her to tell her story more.

*Many non-Jewish children were forcible sterilized while students at the Heidelberg School for the Deaf under Dr. Singer's command. See Crying Hands by Horst Biesold for more details.