

LIFE UNWORTHY OF LIFE: Experiences of Deaf People in Nazi Germany

BBC-TV See Hear! Special
Transmitted: 6th March 2004
Producer: David Horbury
Director: Rachel Scarrott

You may have viewed the heart-breaking special edition of See Hear, broadcasted last month of March, entitled "Life Unworthy of Life – experiences of Deaf people in Nazi Germany". This upsetting and highly emotive programme was of particular interest to myself after just completing my dissertation titled "A Silent Holocaust" as the part of my Combined Award of Deaf Studies and Special Needs BA degree at Wolverhampton University.

The programme was both informative and heart rendering. 1933 – 1945 was the period of Hitler's rule in Germany. Many people including some deaf individuals (unbeknown to them what was to happen) supported Hitler's regime, which was committed to the annihilation of all those who were not considered part of the perfect Aryan race. Hitler and those who followed him sought to eradicate deafness and used extreme measures such as forced sterilisation (resulting in an estimated 17,000 deaf people being sterilised), medical experimentation and ultimately murder, to achieve these results. Achieving the perfect race was not Hitler's only concern, he also sought to eradicate all those who were considered a burden to the state such as the mentally ill and physically disabled or as Hitler phrased it the "useless eaters" who contributed nothing to the state.

This programme was expertly researched with great compassion and attention to detail. The production team not only interviewed historians such as Jochen Muhs, and academics but also went to a deaf club in Berlin and spoke to the people who lived under Hitler's regime to try to gain some insight into their personal experiences.

The treatment of deaf people was portrayed in a new light, as was the treatment of other minority groups, using not only words but also pictures and film footage to reinforce the images of Hitler's rule throughout Germany. The impact of the Nazi rule over Germany was discussed delicately, highlighting the decrease in the Jewish deaf community and the ending of specialist publications of the deaf community. The closure of deaf clubs and societies had resulted with the amalgamation of one Nazi led association called the REGEDE (the Reich Union of the Deaf in Germany).



Children with disabilities including deafness, were killed in a variety of ways and their bodies disposed of. The Hadamar killing centre (one of six in Germany) was shown where many deaf adults, usually with additional needs were perished. The information and images shown within

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this were portrayed with real sensitivity, respect and compassion to those who lost their lives and those who lived through the experience.

This documentary showed the hypocrisy of the Nazi party with terrible crimes being committed against the deaf community who were discriminated against by law. Forced sterilisation was introduced but deaf people were indoctrinated from a young age into the Nazi beliefs. Hitler Youth camps were open to all including deaf youths who were unwittingly drawn into.

Clive Mason in his part as narrator, and Daryl Jackson as Deaf in-vision interpreter, both gave extremely sensitive views in appropriate sombre manner, on the horrors faced by deaf people, the individuals that are the forgotten faces in history, not remembered in history books or taught in schools. The Jewish community, deaf people and other groups must not be forgotten. We must strive to remember these people to ensure history never repeats itself.

Personally, this programme gave me further insight into the lives of German Deaf people during the period of 1933-1945. Prior to this I was unaware of the inhuman acts Hitler injured upon deaf people. I was disgusted that he intended to wipe out what he called the "useless eaters". My degree in Deaf Studies and Social Policy has given me an understanding of the relevant legislation, the equality and diversity of the individuals and many other aspects relating to deafness, deaf people, their culture and community. Examples of such current legislation are the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Human Rights Act that would not allow this form of condoned brutality and genocide to happen in present day society.

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Images with courtesy of the BBC, London

Further readings

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Deaf Mosaic TV series (1987), #309, *Stanley Teger, who survived the Holocaust to make a home in America*. Washington, DC, USA: Gallaudet University:

Deaf Mosaic TV series (1989), # 403, *"In Der Nacht", an exhibition on the Holocaust developed from the memories and photographs saved by deaf people persecuted primarily because of their deafness*. Washington, DC, USA: Gallaudet University: