

## MY EXPERIENCES OF FILMING "LIFE UNWORTHY OF LIFE" for BBC's See Hear!

The experiences of Deaf people in Nazi Germany are a story riddled with betrayals, twists and unanswered questions. Why were there Deaf storm troopers when the Nazis sought to eradicate deafness? Did deaf people know what was happening to the Jews and that one day it might happen to them? How were Deaf children identified for sterilisation and why was there no resistance from the Deaf community? What do Deaf survivors feel now about their treatment back then? I soon became gripped. The more I researched the more I realised this was a story that had to be told...

The story of Deaf people living under the Third Reich has been told in excellent books by Ryan & Schuchman and Biesold, but to bring the story alive for television I'd have to interview survivors within the German Deaf community itself. My first port of call was *See Hear's* reporter John Hay who introduced me to his German equivalent, Deaf historian Jochen Muhs. Jochen and I started to communicate using the handy, if hilariously inaccurate, online *Google* English to German translation machine, (I later discovered my emails all began "*to my dearest darling...*"!) Jochen helped me tap into the Berlin Deaf community and in December 2003 I met with a group of elderly survivors in the Berlin deaf club. Many of them were in their late seventies and some in the eighties. This documentary would possibly be their last chance to tell their story.



Using an interpreter who could translate from German Sign Language into spoken English (the mind boggles!), the group began to talk to me and I gradually uncovered their story. Many were very young when the Nazi's came to power and were swept along with the grandness of the regime. Most had joined the Hitler Youth and been indoctrinated in summer Deaf camps. Two of them sat quietly. They had sadness in their eyes. As teenagers they had been sterilised by the Nazis. I had just one hour to listen and persuade them to break their silence, and talk on camera about a traumatic experience that they had not talked about for the last sixty years. I began to wonder whether they would turn up for the filming we had agreed to do in January.

I got back to England and started scriptwriting and searching for archive pictures with which to tell the story visually. The Imperial War Museum has six million feet of wartime footage in its

archives. On one reel we found a surviving Nazi propaganda film – *Erbkrank – The Hereditarily Ill*. I found the images in this film sickening; mentally and physically disabled children and adults, including deaf people, were dehumanised, degraded and referred to as a '*drain on the state*'. This was an important piece of historic evidence that *had* to include in the *See Hear* special. At an average cost of £10 a second the archive film for this documentary would eat away one third of our already small budget. We would only have the money for one day filming in London, four days in Berlin. The schedule was tight, very tight, and we'd been warned, the weather forecast gave rain, snow blizzards and minus 10 degree temperatures.

Finally the filming day arrived and Graeme, the cameraman, and myself flew for two days of interviewing with the German contributors. We set up the lights in the East Berlin Deaf club and waited for our seven interviewees to arrive. 8.30 came and went, 9.30 ticked past. By 10am I was starting to get a bit twitchy. Eventually three contributors Kurt, Karl and Harald arrived at 10.30. Phew! They all brought photographs as themselves as little boys, and authentic letters requesting attendance at health courts. Their interviews were full of true stories, real emotion. Even Jochen was discovering new facts about German deaf history. With anger they talked about how the teachers informed the health authorities which children were hereditary deaf and earmarked them for sterilisation. With contempt they told me how Albrechts, the Deaf Nazi leader campaigned within his own community for widespread sterilisation.

However, there was a problem. The two friends who had been sterilised and I had met on the recce were not coming. They felt too sad and ashamed to talk about their experiences. This was a major blow – how could you make a film about the experiences of Deaf people and mass sterilisation, without a personal testament? I asked Harald to try once more and fax his old classmate Erna Giese and kept my fingers crossed. The next evening, after a long day filming at Berlin Deaf School, Harald took me to one side and told me to come with him. We took a taxi out into the Berlin suburbs and rang the doorbell of an old apartment block. He'd brought me to meet Erna. Now all I had to do was persuade her to record an interview!



We talked for a long time. She was very frail and needed convincing that her story was important enough not to be forgotten. Eventually she agreed. We had only 30 minutes to set up some lights and film the interview. Graeme worked at lightening speed, taking care not to knock into the cut crystal ornaments that were Erna's pride and joy. After a few questions Erna just

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started talking freely about her childhood. She'd been only thirteen when she was forcibly sterilised. The Gestapo had come to her house and threatened to take her to hospital. Her mother had no choice but to take Erna to the doctor herself, and leave her with strangers to be sterilised. Erna had cried then and sixty years later she was still very sad about what had happened to her. When the crew left that night, she followed us to the door and stayed for a long time to wave us goodbye. It was the first time I had seen her smile. She had finally had her say.

Clive Mason arrived in Berlin the same day and prepared himself for signing in sub-zero temperatures the following day. Luckily we got the snow and sunshine and missed the rain. All filming day it was gloves on, gloves off, across the tourist sights of Berlin – the Brandenburg Gate, the Reichstag, Unter den Linden, the Victory Column, Berlina Dome, Gendarmarkt – and the police only moved us on once!

Then we jumped on a plane to Frankfurt to prepare mentally for our visit to Hadamar, one of Nazi Germany's six remaining killing centres, now preserved as a memorial site to all the victims who were murdered there. Professor Georg Lilienthal from Hadamar consulted the medical records and found eight files on deaf patients who had disappeared at Hadamar. In the medical records deaf people were frequently referred to as 'feeble-minded' because of difficulties communicating with their hearing doctors. All of them had been murdered by the authorities at Hadamar, but reported in their files that they had died from everyday diseases such as influenza or measles.



Clive had practiced and perfected his script, but nothing had prepared him for walking down into the basement at Hadamar and standing where 10,000 victims had stood before him in the 6ft by 12ft gas chamber. The fake pipework and dissection table were still there and the tiled floor was permanently stained. There's also something quite chilling about the visual act of signing. When I stood there and watched Clive present the industrial process of gassing, dissection and cremation, I visually relived it with him.

It was a very sombre journey back to the airport that night. It brought home the importance of why this story had to be told and why this must never be allowed to happen again. Many of the negative views that Nazis held about deafness still permeate modern society – the equation of deafness with low intelligence, the value of educating deaf children, but only if they can produce and understand speech, the idea that the provision of special resources is a drain on the state, the belief that deafness is a disease that should be eradicated. It is a part of Deaf history that should never be forgotten.

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*Images with courtesy of the BBC, London*