

Post-War Experiences of Henning Irgens

By Henning F. Irgens

World War II ended in April of 1945, after German Forces surrendered unconditionally to the Allies in Europe. By the first week of May, the German officers who had occupied our home had to vacate our house in the hills and were taken to a prison camp for deportation to Germany. They had used our home as a means of protecting themselves against the Allied Forces, who would not bomb the homes of Norwegians. We found our house in great disarray, probably because the officers had conducted drunken orgies upon learning the news of Hitler's death. Whether they celebrated the end of the war or the prospect of returning to their homeland is not known. German "WACS", uniformed women, had also lived in our house. We used to call them "the gray mice" for the color of the outfits that they wore.

Fumigation for lice and other insects, due to lack of cleaning during the last days of the war, was necessary. It took a few weeks before my family could move back into our house. Summer was very strange for us, for there was a new feeling of freedom after five years of oppressive German occupation. Patriotism ran high when our King, who had fled Norway upon the German "Blitz Krieg" occupation in April of 1940, came back to his castle in Oslo.

During that summer, the Norwegian underground "civilian" army continued hunting for people who had fraternized and collaborated with the German Forces during the war. Norwegian Nazi members were rounded up, and their property and materials that were acquired

by unlawful methods were confiscated. They faced either the criminal courts, or trials of treason against Norway, after which they were imprisoned.

Some Norwegian women who had consorted with the German soldiers were hunted out, had their hair shaved, and were paraded on the street through a throng of angry people who hurled insults, rotten vegetables, and spit. Weeping and red faced, with their clothes torn, they were cursed. After that, they were no longer seen, for with shaven heads they did not dare go out in the open, except perhaps at night. Some of them found refuge with relatives up on isolated farms, until they grew longer hair. Some of them had babies from consorting with the Germans, and some of them were allowed to join the soldiers they had lived with and move back to Germany with them. Some came back years later, with new names and children, to live under more tolerant conditions, concealing their identities. Life was not easy for them.

Some Norwegians had profited during the war by contract work or business supply distribution designed for the German Forces. With the wealth they gained, they had purchased the expensive homes and farms. However, after the war, they were forced by the new Norwegian Government to relinquish all of the property that had been bought with the income from working for the Germans. Some of the worst of the group fled to South America under false names, so they could not be hunted out. Some of the more clever individuals had hidden their fortunes in Swiss Banks, and were able to start new businesses elsewhere in Europe and in South American nations, like many other Germans with war crimes on their records. A Deaf friend of mine had a father who had grown immensely wealthy and he fled to Argentina, where he was never seen again.

That was a summer of strange events. We found out that some people who we had been missing during the war turned up either alive or dead. Some had survived German concentration camps, where they were found alive under stacked up piles of dead prisoners. They had blinked their eyes to catch the attention of the Allied Forces soldiers, and were saved in the nick of time. Others missing were found in mass graves in the woods with their hands tied behind their backs, executed. I knew two of them, for they had been boyfriends of my two older sisters before the war. They had worked secretly in the Norwegian underground army, and had been in hiding because some of their ranks had been unlucky enough to be caught and tortured by the Germans.

For that reason, many members of the secret army used code names for identification so that their fellow workers would recognize them. I remember recognizing a young man, who was a fiancé of a girlfriend of one of my sisters, at a street car stop in the capital city of Norway. I called out to him using his real name, Finn. He wouldn't acknowledge me and I was puzzled, seeing how he so persistently avoided me. He kept shifting his eyes, looking around to see if any Nazis or German secret police were present.

I felt hurt by his behavior, for I used to be on good relations with him and his family. I told my state school for the Deaf teacher about that experience, and bless her for her wisdom, she explained about the underground forces, which required the use of false names. I was made to understand that Finn had been lucky to get away without being killed. This experience made me aware of the need for greater sensitivity during the war. I saw him again after the war, wearing a military uniform and smiling. These young men were heroes of the war because they survived under a veil of secrecy and they often did not

have enough warm clothes or food (farmers would be executed for collaborating with people working against the Germans). It was a time when everyone had to take every precaution not to give out names or other pertinent information.

By the end of summer, there was still a shortage of food and clothes, so care had to be employed in preserving food for the winter. Food rationing by stamps was still in use for a couple of years after the war. At that time I traveled to a western city in Norway for vocational training. I was sixteen years old, and I had completed 8th grade at the state school for the Deaf in 1944. At the vocational school, I met old school mates and other young Deaf men from various schools in Norway. There I was consigned to taking up the tailoring trade, which I disliked very much, but had to accept, as there was no other choice.

Meanwhile, because no Deaf girls lived in the city, we took to dating hearing girls, which offered us some diversity. The school did have a dormitory, but there was not enough room for some of us, so we lived in rental rooms with families in the city. Dating a hearing girl who attended a local high school whetted my interest in the subjects she was studying.

That was the beginning of my interest in pursuing academic training, for I found myself helping the girl with understanding her English textbook instructions along with other subjects she was studying. The girl's mother wondered why I did not attend high school, which I explained was not accessible to Deaf students. I was encouraged to attend high school, so I approached the headmaster of the vocational school with my request. Fortunately he was one of those rare teachers of the Deaf who said "Why not?" I was given private instruction in

English on a trial basis with a woman teacher, who reported to him that I would make a good student despite my hearing loss.

Consequently, I left the vocational school to go back home and apply for admission into the local public high school. I was denied entry, as the superintendent had known me since my childhood, and he felt that I would be disruptive to learning in the classroom because of his perception that I would not be able to follow spoken instruction. However, a mother-in-law of my sister, who was a schoolteacher, and a friend of the Superintendent at another city, persuaded my parents to consider her school. I was admitted on a trial basis, where I did reasonably well even though I could not understand any of the lecturers who presented in the high school gymnasium.

Due to the fact that my 8th grade level education from the state school for the Deaf was weak, I had to have private tutoring two hours a week to strengthen my ability to tackle foreign languages, advanced math, and writing. Those sessions helped me to clear most of the hurdles that were presented in regular public high school, and I completed the program in five years instead of the usual six years. During those years, I had to take daily train rides back and forth from home to the city school. Sometimes I would miss the train, so I would bicycle many miles in order to report to class. A couple of times during the winter, I would be forced to take a short cut, skiing a lot of terrain, which took me about two and a half hours when I missed the train for school.

At the end of high school I had to take both written and oral exams to obtain a high school certificate to qualify for university study. All of the exams were universal for all Norwegian high schools, in written format, but there would be random oral exams in some of the subjects. I

was able to clear all the written exams but was very nervous about the oral exams, where two independent lecturers from other cities appointed by the Norwegian Department of Education who would be conducting questions.

In my case, I had to take three oral exams, one in English, one in German, and one in Natural Science. Fortunately, I had spent three weeks one summer at a student camp in England where I had practiced with English speaking college students, many of whom came from Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, with English as a second language. This helped me speechread them and converse somewhat meaningfully with them. In addition, my English teacher had Deaf siblings and knew how to sign. This helped me considerably with reading about English history and becoming familiar with English literary writers, which I had to demonstrate knowledge of when responding to verbal questions from the examiners. As a result of these two factors, I obtained the top grade on the English oral exam.

In German, I did well, having read a lot of German literature, but the oral exam consisted more of conversational skill in responding to issues where I had to couch properly spoken phrases to demonstrate my knowledge of German grammar. I passed Natural Science with ease, thanks to my collection and knowledge of the 900 different plant species put into a herbarium, complete with written Latin names and descriptions of each plant. The questions generally would require identification of some plants and the proper Latin names for them.

As to my speech ability, I did have weekly speech tutoring in all of the languages I had to learn. Lipreading, or speechreading for that matter, was quite tough but a bit of imagination and helpful memory for speech articulation helped me a bit.

Following completion of all my exams I was awarded a certificate by my high school as directed by the Norwegian Department of Education. This qualified me for university study. I was at first offered a stipend to take up studies for the legal profession, which I felt was beyond my ability (especially since interpreting services did not exist back in 1940's). I felt that I had to decline, but asked if I could enroll at the Teachers' College. That was denied because the oral medium employed at the time dictated that all teachers working with Deaf children must be hearing. This left me in a great quandary as to what I could do, so I worked in a factory making windows and doors for one year. During that time I learned about Gallaudet College in a Swedish newsmagazine for the Deaf, so I wrote to Gallaudet for information. I applied, with the goal of becoming a university librarian. Having saved up some money from my factory work, and with financing from my parents, I was able to travel by cruise ship from Oslo to New York.

I carried two suitcases and one carry-on bag, plus one thousand dollars in my pocket when I entered the famed Ellis Island and was waved through on a student visa. Taking a taxi from that place to Penn Station was an experience, as I had to resort to writing and sign gestures. Passing through the streets of New York was a bit of a shock, especially with the sight of police officers carrying holstered revolvers directing traffic. Did New York still have gangsters? I had seen many American movies at home. Searching for a train from Penn Station to Washington, DC took time due to communication through writing. It seemed that the people at the station were somewhat familiar with Deaf passengers, as they were able to give me intelligible messages. Traveling in the Pullman (as opposed to European) compartment was revealing. I took to studying passengers on the train,

observing their behavior. I wore a double-breasted suit with a hat, which made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. I remember seeing a young red-haired girl sitting in a bench two rows ahead, who chewed gum and appeared somewhat bratty, acting bold and unconcerned during the train ride. Many years later, I recognized her as the well-known movie actress, Shirley MacLaine!

The Union Station in Washington, D.C. was equally impressive because of its largeness, and the massive stone work all around that represented the capital of America.

I hailed a taxi to take me to Gallaudet College. It was a very hot day and I was decked out in a suit and hat, carrying two heavy suitcases and a shoulder bag. Seeing students milling about on the greens talking in sign language so fast and natural caused me to stare at them. I asked them where I could find the office and they pointed out the main entrance. Soon, I was directed to the house of the College President to a third floor apartment unit, where five other foreign Deaf students lived. There I met my future roommate, a young Englishman from Loughborough. We became fast friends and had much fun observing both the American language and sign language that varied from different states represented at the college.

It was a culture shock for me to meet several American Deaf students who were excellent signers, expressing themselves quite naturally, easily conveying ideas and general concepts. Among some of them, I noticed they did not have full command of their native American language, nevertheless they were quite articulate with idea associations. Picking up sign language came naturally to me, so I did not have to take classes in that area as some did.

Attending classes was interesting, although they were not conducted at the European level, as I had expected. The class I enjoyed the most was English, for the teacher

was excellent, with much skill in signing, as well as in mouthing in proper English. That helped me to learn colloquialisms quickly, which enabled me to express myself more fluently with my fellow students.

On weekends I worked at the Washington Post newspaper, inserting colored flyers before distribution. That allowed me to earn some extra money for my personal needs. Once I went to the Washington Post to collect my weekly check and I found people waiting in line. There I saw an interesting young woman, who stared at me for a long time, and made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. Later I found out she was a newspaper photographer and reporter named Jacqueline Bouvier, who would soon marry the man who would become President Kennedy.

I met several Deaf students in the dining room where we happily conversed, most of which revolved around questions about my own country, background, and culture. As time went on during the first year, I became close to a Deaf lady, Betty Louise Lydick from Pennsylvania, who was in her last year of college. She was very bright and well read, and became my tutor in initiating me into the overall and complex American culture, which I soon came to appreciate. She got a teaching position in New Jersey, where I visited her once a month as my funds permitted. Two years later, we married. I still had to complete four years of college, as Gallaudet did not allow acceleration to courses to complete a degree in less time.

My summer work consisted of using handyman skills, such as painting, carpentry and roofing details. During my college years I was fortunate enough to get scholarship support from a Rotary Club in New Jersey to finance my complete education.

Majoring in Education of the Deaf became my choice over Library Science. The requirements for the Education field in the United States were not as restrictive as in European universities, so I took advantage of the opportunity. Betty had agreed to my request that she study the Norwegian language so that we both could go to Norway to teach in state schools for the Deaf. This we did. Upon completion of my training at Gallaudet College, Betty and I took jobs teaching at the North Dakota School for the Deaf. One year later, we traveled by boat with our firstborn son Jarl, to Oslo, where we spent the whole summer with my parents and the rest of my family. Inquiry with the Norwegian Department of Education indicated strongly that Deaf teachers would not be accepted to teach in academic courses due to observance of the speech requirement. Four years later, we again applied for teaching positions in Norway. There were forces among hearing teachers at my old state school for the Deaf who opposed the idea of Deaf teachers even though my former teacher was secretly supportive of me. We returned to the United States, as we could no longer set our hopes on Norway, the beautiful country of my childhood.

Thus, we decided once for all to forget our dream of working in Norway, and instead devoted our lives to working in the U.S. Over the years we taught at a state school for the Deaf. The pay was not good enough to allow us to consider graduate school, so when an opportunity presented itself, I applied for a Federal Fellowship in Deaf Education. I used the most reasonable argument as to why I, as a Deaf person, should apply for it as it was seemingly geared to hearing people. Among 500 or so applicants, I was one of two Deaf persons selected for National Leadership Training in the Area of the Deaf at California

State University at Northridge, where I also obtained a Master's Degree in School Administration and Rehabilitation in 1964.

There were ten of us studying under a very stimulating learning program, utilizing full time interpreting services for the two Deaf participants. We were so grateful for the interpreter services, as it afforded us the opportunity to associate and collaborate with the eight hearing professionals in our classes. It provided us with many insights that broke down the subtle barriers of the "it's us or them" mentality. That experience made us more sensitive to hearing people, opening up friendships that lasted for many years.

After completion of our studies, we applied for jobs. We sent many applications, complete with resumes, nationwide. The fact that I was Deaf seemed to turn off many potential employers. Eventually, upon encouragement of a Deaf Chief of the Department of Communicative Disorders in the U.S. Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, I applied for a position as a consultant with a vocational technical program with rehabilitative services in Michigan. During those years I was not able to find any suitable professional jobs in other states. So I worked in Michigan in the same capacity for twenty years, until I retired in 1984. The climate back then was not favorable towards Deaf professionals. Our school had not received the kind of financial support necessary to expand, due to the political forces in that state, so I was glad to leave in hopes of finding a new career.

In the meantime my wife, who had received training in computer work at my school, had obtained a very good position with the Federal Government U.S. Defense Department. She worked as a computer systems analyst with an option to retire in five years. Therefore, I

decided not to apply for jobs outside of our state, and I looked for jobs in our neighborhood. I soon found that I was too old and too Deaf to "qualify" for a full time teaching job where the educational philosophy was basically oral, and the practice was to use only hearing teachers. However, having been certified to teach in nearly every subject from middle school to high school, I was able to work part-time as a substitute in the regular schools. This worked out as I could give verbal directions to students for classroom assignments, and help them individually from desk to desk with whatever problems they had. It was quite an interesting experience. I saw individual differences among several minority groups, some being disadvantaged by poor basic education or limited home environments. Income from this job soon created tax problems for me, so I was advised by a tax consultant to leave that job unless my employer was willing to let me work full-time.

A few years later my wife, who had commuted to work twenty-nine miles one way each day, had a auto accident as a result of black ice on the road, and she died instantly. Only a week before, we had purchased a motor home and planned to spend our retirement traveling in it. Her sudden departure left me very confused. I could not grieve much, for the shock was too great. It took me a month to deal with my grief, after which I decided to rig up the motor home and tow a "dinghy" jeep for a long trip out west. I spent some time at my daughter, Heidi's, in California, staying with her for two months, until I decided to drive back home. There I sold the motor home, for it proved to be too big for me, and I purchased a smaller one, which I kept for about ten years to use for sporadic travels across the U.S.

Loneliness drove me to visit places, including Gallaudet University, where I met a new friend, Sharon, through the introduction of Marjorie (Mabs) Stakely Holcomb. She later became my wife. Mabs was our "best woman" at our wedding ceremony that took place on a yacht that cruised around the San Francisco Bay area.

Both Sharon and I have been working on the development of material for her book on Deaf women. We opted to move away from the fast life in the east for a more quiet location out west. That turned out to be Farmington, New Mexico, where Sharon's mother and brother live. Four years ago, we designed an adobe style home that was custom built atop a mesa, with a view of three states in the Four Corners area. I hired four carpenters and worked with them in the construction of our home, which was completed in six months. The house was built with three garages, one of which would have our motor home parked inside. We lived in that motor home while working on interior carpentry and floor work, which took time until we moved into the living quarters.

Currently we are both active in community affairs in the state of New Mexico. Sharon taught in a public school working with two Deaf children of Native American descent. Soon one child transferred to the state school for the Deaf, and the other to a program under the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Since then, Sharon has taught ASL at a local college in Farmington, which she still does on a part-time basis.

I was appointed by the state's Governor and approved by legislation to serve as a member of the New Mexico Board of Regents with New Mexico School for the Deaf. Coincidentally, a Deaf student I had studied with at graduate school in California many years ago had been a

principal of NMSD for nearly a lifetime (unfortunately, he had retired and passed away by the time I came on the scene to serve as a regent for the school).

As for future goals, Sharon and I hope to do some more traveling. We also intend to pursue additional studies for our own enlightenment. Life is a tremendous growing experience, and we intend to keep on growing.

Henning C.F. Irgens was born in Oslo, Norway, and graduated from the Norwegian School for the Deaf. He earned a degree in Education, History and English from Gallaudet in 1957. Irgens, who is now retired, served the Michigan Department of Education as a Deaf Consultant. He also served as Project Director of Deaf Services at State Technical Institute in Michigan for more than 20 years. Currently, he serves as a member of the Board of Regents of the New Mexico School for the Deaf. He currently lives in New Mexico, with his wife, Sharon Kay Wood, and their four dogs and two cats, most of which were imported from Norway. Both Irgens and Wood write for various publications, and present at international and national conferences of the Deaf.