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Deaf Victims of the Holocaust

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University Honors Program
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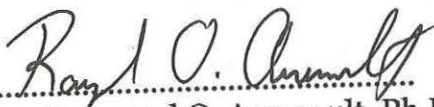
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Deaf Victims of the Holocaust

by

David Volper

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of the requirements of the
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Introduction

The years 1933-1945 were filled with great turmoil and inconsistency throughout Germany. As early as 1933, laws were enacted and passed that set in motion the sequence of events that would lead to World War II and the Holocaust. Adolf Hitler's rise to power in a country torn by inner conflict subsequently gave authority to those who adhered to the principles of eugenics, euthanasia, sterilizations, and other methods of "population control." By the late 1930s, the goal of public support of establishing a "master race" was widely accepted and lauded in Germany.

While Hitler's influence and power was considerable, his master plan of establishing a single, genetically perfect race would not have gotten such support if not for the Nordic wing which was based in the Munich chapter of the eugenics movement. The Nordic wing, in the Munich chapter, viewed eugenics as Hitler did and this created the support he needed from the Nordic wing to further his own purposes as he proceeded with his master plan. When Hitler took power, the Nordic wing became the cornerstone of German views on eugenics and thus set in motion the events that would culminate in the Holocaust and the deaths of 11 million human beings. These events determined the fates of thousands of deaf victims during what is now known as the Holocaust.

Chapter 1: How German Laws Victimized Deaf Citizens of Germany

It is widely accepted that deaf victims along with other physically inferior people were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time when the Holocaust occurred during 1939-1945. This is not the case. The victimization of deaf people in the Holocaust can be traced back to the year 1933. The year 1933 marked the establishment of one of the first laws that effectively isolated and dehumanized deaf citizens of Germany. This law was called "The Sterilization Law of 1933." This law effectively excluded people with a variety of mental and physical disabilities from the German population as equal citizens.

In Horst Biesold's book, Crying Hands, Henry Friedlander states, "This law, issued with the cumbersome name of Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases, served as the cornerstone of the regime's eugenic legislation."¹ As this statement clearly indicates, the German government was clearly working hard to establish a superior race of people, and deaf people among other physically disabled people were immediately considered subjects to be quarantined.

Hitler had a vendetta against any impurity in his proposed master race and would not tolerate the possibility of inferior breeding. This meant deaf people would be among the first to feel the brunt of Hitler's cruelty. The German government, specifically the Nordic wing, began to implement laws with the purpose of isolating and dehumanizing their intended targets. This was the first stage of Hitler's plan to construct a master race. The second stage involved the German government's determination to eliminate future generations of genetically imperfect people. This was better known as racial hygiene. These laws, passed from 1933 to the outbreak of World War II, made it possible for Hitler to persecute deaf people before and during the Holocaust.

The Sterilization Law of 1933 was actually conceived in Prussia but was not approved by the legislature. In Biesold's book, Friedlander writes, "The new German government simply adopted this Prussian law, but, unlike the Prussian model, the new law included provisions for compulsory sterilization."² Hitler twisted every law and every potential piece of legislation into an instrument of his terror and deaf people found themselves to be one of the earliest groups to be victimized. Friedlander comments on the impact that this law had on German citizens: "Taking effect on the first day of 1934, the law eventually led to the sterilization of approximately 375, 000 German nationals."³ Many of these German citizens were deaf.

An even more nauseating aspect of this law was created in 1935. An amendment was passed authorizing abortions in order to prevent births of children in pregnancies that began before sterilization. This amendment focused on those with hereditary disabilities. This would be enforced against disabled pregnant women even if only the father had a hereditary disability such as genetic deafness. Friedlander gives us an example of this law as he states, "For example, in May 1940, the public health office in Feldkirch, Upper Austria, ordered an abortion for a pregnant young woman because of concern that her offspring might suffer from congenital deafness."⁴

Another series of laws passed affecting deaf people in Germany was called "The Nuremberg Racial Laws." One new law was known as "The Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German Nation." This law forbidded marriage between parties if either person had a mental illness or a hereditary disease covered by the sterilization law. The German government went to extreme lengths to prevent the marriage of people with disabilities. If two people wished to marry, they had to obtain a Marriage Fitness Certificate from the public health office. Clearly, these laws and more to come provided

the basis for severe discrimination against those with physical disabilities, and this led to the horrors that deaf victims faced during the Holocaust.

Another law that strongly supported the notion that disabled people needed to be sterilized was "The Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases." This law reflected eugenic theories of creating genetically superior people by eliminating the potential for genetic flaws through sterilization. Biesold writes that a noted proponent of eugenics named Herbert Weinert supported the measures taken to eliminate deafness. As Weinert insisted, when asked the best way to handle deaf people and their offspring, "The surest is sterilization."⁵ It is mistaken and misguided thinking like this that led to the victimization of many thousands of deaf people who otherwise could have led normal and productive lives with offspring to raise, hearing or deaf.

In a special online issue of "World Around You," the ramifications of sterilization and how it has affected deaf people who experienced it are discussed. This brief article reflects on a conversation with a deaf man in which Biesold asked him why none of his deaf friends had children. The response was as stunning as it was sad according to Biesold: "The German government had sterilized him. Under the Nazis in the 1930's, the government had removed his testes."⁶ Research by Biesold reveals that more than 17,000 deaf people were sterilized in Germany during the 1930s. An even more awful revelation emerged from Biesold's research: "When people were sterilized, no medicine was used for pain; the reproductive glands-testes in men and ovaries in women-were removed without anesthetic."⁷

There are many examples of such treatment of the deaf. Pregnant women were forced to undergo abortions if they were found to be carriers of hereditary deafness. Approximately nine percent of all deaf victims of sterilization were pregnant women. In

an article written by Lynne Bohlman, Dr. Simon Carmel states, "One deaf man who ignored three notices to show up for sterilization was arrested, and as punishment, operated on without anesthesia."⁸ In this article, Bohlman expands on sterilization and its effect upon deaf survivors. Bohlman writes, "While as many as 3,000 deaf German Jews were among the six million people who perished during the holocaust, many more deaf people, Jews and non-Jews, were victims of the Nazi sterilization program."⁹

During the 1930s, Hitler influenced many doctors and nurses with his theory of establishing a perfect Aryan race. In an article discussing eugenics, Morris Broderson writes, "'Hitler felt that his nation should only consist of perfect Aryan specimens and it was thought that Binding and Hoche's euthanasia policy would conserve medical resources for wounded soldiers."¹⁰ This viewpoint began to extend to doctors and nurses and the results were horrifying. Broderson also states, "Despite their Hypocratic Oaths, many doctors and nurses agreed to destroy *unworthy* life. The abortion of unborn children thought to be *defective* or *biologically inferior* was common and occurred as late as the ninth month of pregnancy."¹¹

For the deaf, the agony of being sterilized and being subjected to ridicule afterwards has served as a powerful influence not to discuss the atrocity in a public format. The strong opinions of those educating the deaf led to the establishment and enforcement of laws permitting such treatment of the deaf. Biesold notes in his book: "Writing in the same journal, teacher A. Abend had asked in 1925, 'What does racial hygiene have to say to the teacher of the deaf?' While he agreed that persons deafened from 'accident or illnesses are genotypically [hereditarily] sound,' persons with hereditary deafness should not be allowed to marry."¹²

Sterilization has left its imprint on the lives of those who survived the Holocaust. In the Gallaudet Today Magazine, Laura-Jean Gilbert writes, "The Nazi geneticists said that hereditary deafness needed to be removed from the gene pool."¹³ This cold, calculating view of those with hereditary diseases spread throughout Germany and deaf people were seen as prime examples of hereditary inferiority by officials of the German government. Gilbert also writes, "These experiences led to a sense of inferiority on the part of German deaf people, making them terribly ashamed of what occurred and, therefore, reluctant to talk about it after the war."¹⁴

An article in The Deaf American, written by Ernest Gill, expounds upon Biesold's experience with deaf victims of sterilization. Gill writes, "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."¹⁵ Every single deaf survivor of sterilization feels shame and feels as if he or she needs to hide this fact. The idea of sterilizing deaf people in Germany originated not in Germany but in the United States.

As Barbara Kannaspell, has argued, "I was struck to learn that the idea of reducing or preventing the growth of 'undesirable people', including deaf people, by voluntary or forced sterilizations started in the USA in the early 1900's."¹⁶ "American physicians during that time were enthusiastic about the idea of preventing the birth of 'undesirable' people which included deaf people. The Nazis adopted the idea of eugenics for preventing or eliminating 'undesirable' people in the 1930's and 1940's."¹⁷

Nicholas Mirzoeff in an article entitled, "The Silent Mind: Learning from Deafness" also deals with sterilization in America: "In 1927, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of such procedures, reasoning that if the state had the right to ask

people to die in its defense, it could ask 'for these lesser sacrifices in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence'. By 1941, over 36, 000 people had been sterilized as a result."¹⁸ Many of those 36, 000 people were deaf. This situation helped legitimize the Nazi perception that inferior life was to be eliminated. As Mirzoeff reminds us, "The tragic consequences of these misguided actions reached their height in Nazi Germany. At least 1,600 deaf people died in the extermination camps."¹⁹ When Hitler decided to stop sterilizing "undesirable life," he decided to kill them all instead.

These laws effectively set in motion the series of events that enabled the German government to decide the fates of those deemed *unfit* for life. Many teachers of the deaf who did not understand cultural deafness wrote articles endorsing sterilization. Biesold writes, "Such publications by teachers, and their activities in support of race hygiene programs, fed the anxiety of students at deaf institutions. They feared that their instructors would report them under the sterilization law."²⁰ The Marriage Health Law of 1935 effectively forced deaf citizens of Germany to be sterilized before they could not marry. Incredibly, the laws passed in the 1930s are still in the lawbooks today although they are not applied. They have not been removed or made inapplicable to deaf Germans today. During the 1930s, the fear of being forced to face a lifetime without children and to be physically scarred, psychologically scarred, or both was terrible to endure. Many deaf survivors struggled alone because they believed that they were singled out while the truth was that many other deaf survivors had gone through the same agony. In the Jewish Deaf Community Center newsletter, Sharon Soudakoff writes, "The Nazi government had told its victims, 'You don't speak to anyone. If you speak to anyone about your sterilization, you have to go into the concentration camp . . .'"²¹ This explains the unwillingness of many deaf survivors to tell their stories.' An article written by

Vickie Walter in Gallaudet Today, also sheds light on sterilization: "Biesold's research shows how the German policy of sterilization paved the way for 'all the inhumanity that was to follow.'"²² Inhumanity is the right word to describe a situation in which deaf people were sterilized simply because they were seen as "undesirable;" putting an end to deafness was seen as just another way to create a better world. The Nazis were ready and willing to commit a horrible atrocity against their fellow man just to establish a genetically perfect race. As Maria Petal observed, "Physically, they (sterilizations) didn't involve the murder of deaf people, but they involved a cultural genocide."²³

Chapter 2: Forced Sterilizations and Abortions: The "Solution for the Deaf Problem"

Forced sterilizations and abortions became commonplace during the 1930s and deaf people were among the victims. While there are many accounts among deaf survivors of being forcibly sterilized, the story of Franziska Schwarz is a particularly powerful testimony. A victim of the sterilization laws enforced by Hitler, she shared her story with Ina Friedman, the author of a book entitled, The Other Victims: First-Person Stories of Non-Jews Persecuted by the Nazis.

"I never saw anything wrong with being deaf, Schwartz recalled, my younger sister, Theresa, and most of my friends were deaf."¹ Unfortunately, Hitler did. When the sterilization law was passed, deaf people like Schwarz were summoned to go to the hospital to be sterilized. Many deaf people refused because children were part of the hopes and dreams of many of these deaf people in the 1930s. Schwarz says, "For me, the trouble started in 1935. I came home from the convent (a Catholic club for deaf girls) and found Mother crying. 'What's the matter?' I signed. She handed me the letter that read, 'Frau Schwarz and her daughter Franziska are to come to the health office to arrange for their sterilization.'"² This type of summons was not a choice; it was either obey and be sterilized or face the dangers of defying the Nazis. At first, Franziska's family petitioned the administrative courts to try and get the order overturned. This attempt failed, leaving Franziska distraught, "I started to cry", she remembered, "The previous year, I had met a boy I liked, Christian Mikus. Whenever he saw children playing, he'd smile and sign, 'One day, we will have children, too.'"³

The order to be sterilized turned her life upside down and cast a pall over her relationship with Christian. This is what happened to many deaf people who suddenly

found themselves victims of a law that sought to dehumanize their worth and shatter their dreams of having children. Franziska also stated, "If I were sterilized, I didn't think Christian would want to go with me anymore."⁴ Although Franziska resisted at first, declaring, "I won't go, I want to be able to have babies."⁵ She eventually submitted to her father's wishes that she go to the hospital instead of being forced there by the police.

Franziska recalls:

I screamed all the way to the hospital. The nurse locked me in a room with two other deaf teenagers. The three of us cried all night. When the nurse came to give us tranquilizers, I tried to fight her off. She held me down and gave me the injection. In the morning, I woke up in a room full of beds. My stomach hurt. I touched the bandages and started to cry.⁶

Franziska reflects on the aftermath of this experience as she says, "When Christian came to he house, I started to cry. 'The doctors sterilized me. I guess you won't want to be my boyfriend anymore.'" ⁷ The pain and shame of being sterilized was apparent in Franziska's view of what had happened to her.

Christian's response to Franziska was favorable as he made the sign for love and said, "Whatever happens, we'll be together. As soon as you're twenty-one, we'll get married."⁸ Franziska became pregnant and planned to marry Christian. Upon examination by a gynecologist, the doctor found out she was supposed to be sterilized and subsequently forced Franziska to have an unwanted abortion. While in the Women's Hospital, Franziska was held for three days against her will. Franziska explains, "For three days, I lay there, biting my nails and screaming. No one came to check my urine or examine me. Then the doctor came in. He pointed to my stomach. His lips moved, saying, 'Out.' 'What do you mean?' 'Out.' He left."⁹ This meant that they

were going to take her baby from her based on the fact that she was potentially carrying a deaf baby. The horrible conclusion occurred the next day:

All night long I banged on the wall so they would let me out. The nurse shoved me into bed and gave me an injection. I woke up just as the stretcher was being wheeled into the operating room. There was a big tray next to the operating table. My baby is going to be on that tray, I thought, instead of inside me. 'No, no,' I tried to shout. 'Christian, stop them.' When I woke up, I had terrible pains. 'Christian, Christian,' I moaned. My uterus feels as though it's burning.¹⁰

After this ordeal, the Nazis still insisted that she be sterilized. Since Christian and Franziska were unable to marry because she was not yet sterilized, Franziska went to the hospital and was sterilized. Christian and Franziska later married and built a life together but one regret haunted them as Franziska recalls, "We could not have children. This caused us much pain and regret."¹¹

Horst Biesold relates the story of a deaf woman who showed him a written note from a state-employed doctor. The note stated, "You must be sterilized because your disease would be inherited by your offspring. But you do not need to be sad about it. It's not so bad. You can still marry. The operation is a trifle. It would be much worse to have miserable children. You know that yourself."¹² This is reflective of the attitude of those in power who imposed their views and desires upon deaf people, victims who had little or no avenue of escape from such atrocities. As Biesold observed, "Nazi doctors attempted to trivialize the operation even though they knew better."¹³

Nazi doctors were not the only reason why deaf people experienced sterilization. The parents of deaf people often supported sterilization in a misguided attempt to still their own anxiety about having deafgrandchildren. One such case is documented in Biesold's book:

My son Heinz H. has just been sterilized in an operation. As a single mother, I have to welcome wholeheartedly that this was done to my son, if for no other reason than to avoid later mentally inferior offspring.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the individuals who experienced sterilization felt otherwise. Horst Biesold relates several telling accounts of how deaf people felt about sterilization:

I was forcibly sterilized by the Nazis in July 1938. It was an extremely painful torture, the doctor bored around in the sensitive part of my vagina with his finger, I suffered terrible pain. . . . Throughout my marriage with a deaf husband I have had pains as a result of the operation. Even today the pains are often very intense. Almost always I have pain during intercourse with my husband. While other women have orgasms and experience the joy of lovemaking, the pain from the operation scars kills all pleasure for me. It caused me a lot of grief that I couldn't have a child. I like being a housewife and would have really enjoyed being a mother. All the people whom I get to know well ask me why I don't have any children.¹⁵

My husband was about 24 years old when he was sterilized in 1935. After the sterilization he suffered another eight years, had ruptures on both sides, and also had heart problems. So he had to have all this brought back to mind and he is still psychologically disturbed by it.¹⁶ My wife NN died on DD 1979. She was sterilized and suffered her whole life that she couldn't have children. She so badly wanted to be a mother. . . . Now I, her husband, stand here all alone; if I had had children, I wouldn't feel so lonely in my old age.¹⁷

The horrible experience of being sterilized and the after effects combine to prolong needless suffering and psychological damage.

In a special online commentary, Morris Broderon explained why so many deaf people were sterilized: "Many deaf people were turned in by their teachers and that the Nazis perpetuated the myth that all deafness was hereditary and could be wiped out by

sterilization and euthanasia.”¹⁸ This narrow view of the deaf contributed heavily to the decision to sterilize any and all deaf people within the German state. The Nazi party practiced euthanasia when sterilization ceased to be sufficient as a controlling method in the late 1930s.

The pain and suffering, both physical and psychological, was clearly severe. When Biesold questioned and interviewed deaf subjects who had endured sterilization, many of them acknowledged that their suffering was a continued problem. Biesold writes, “Almost half the interviewees responded that they still experience physical pain from the operation, and more than three-quarters, 76 percent, stated that they continued to have psychological pain from their forced sterilizations.”¹⁹ Although many doctors assume that this procedure does not affect one physically or psychologically because it is not an illness or an ailment the testimony of sterilization victims suggests otherwise. Biesold concludes:

The extremely commonly expressed medical opinion that a technically faultlessly performed sterilization has no injurious consequences, that complaints lasting past the convalescence period after the operation are to be referred to the patients general physical constitution, must be decisively opposed, since this ‘received opinion’ does not do justice to the makeup of a human being.²⁰

The deaf can and did suffer long after the initial operation. Sterilization led to a lower quality of life in many aspects, most notably in the ability to have a family, to enjoy lovemaking, and to experience psychological well-being. As Biesold reported, “Many deaf respondents also have said that without children their lives have become poorer in respect to several hopes. Almost all expressed anxiety at having to grow old without the supportive love of children, and an uncertain future in isolation and loneliness.”²¹

Some deaf people actually lost their lives as a result of sterilization. One such account involves a deaf woman named Frau Tatjana S. Biesold tells us her experience as recounted by her daughter and it is chilling:

The Nazis were cruel and dangerous. They destroyed my mother's abdomen with the sterilization operation. She had continuous bleeding after the operation. The incision didn't heal. All my mother could do was lie in bed. Her suffering lasted for five years. She couldn't eat anything and grew very thin. On June 23, 1942, she died. I was very sad because my mother had to die far too young, just 28 years old. I was only eight years old and saw my mother for only a short time and never had a chance to live together with her. The Nazis were cruel, brutal people.²²

This is an example of what sterilization and forced abortions did to the deaf community in Germany during the 1930s. The Nazis did everything they could do to cover up such cruelty but fortunately the testimony of survivors and their families has revealed the reality of the oppression that deaf people faced during these years.

Chapter III: Eugenics, Operation T-4, and Euthanasia: How Jewish Deaf Victims Were Dealt With

Michael Burleigh gives us a cold and calculating account of just what Hitler intended to do to the deaf and other "inferior" citizens was revealed in Hitler's speech given in August, 1929: "If Germany was to get a million children a year and was to remove 700-800,000 of the weakest people then the final result might be an increase in strength."¹ In September, 1939, the decision to carry out the order of euthanasia resulted in the deaths of thousands of mentally ill patients. Burleigh writes, "The murder of adults began on an *ad hoc* basis in September, 1939, when SS units shot thousands of Polish mental patients to provide barrack space for German soldiers."²

Today, euthanasia is a method used primarily to control population growth in cats and dogs in the United States elsewhere. Some animal shelters support euthanasia, and some vigorously oppose it. Euthanasia became a method of control for the Nazis. The Nazis classified deaf people as a minority that needed to be dealt with. The Nazis began to apply euthanasia as a method to eliminate certain people from their society. As Biesold has argued: "Deaf people were a sociocultural minority that Nazi racial hygiene theorists wanted removed from society. Deaf Germans were not 'racially intact' or 'hereditarily fit,' according to German eugenicists."³ Euthanasia became accepted public policy in Germany during World War II. By the beginning of the war, Hitler no longer felt the disabled, including the deaf, could be treated thus the decision to kill them outright was made. As Michelle Baron put it, "By 1940, sterilization was replaced by murder; the Nazis called it 'mercy killing.'"⁴ As the war processed, episodes of euthanasia

became more and more prevalent. Morris Broderson, the author of an article, "Sign Language during World War II," discussed the extent of these killings:

Twenty killing wards were established by Reich Committee as part of the so-called *T-4 euthanasia scheme*. Sometimes drug overdoses were administered, sometimes lethal injections, and sometimes patients were starved to death. Many of the victims were children and their parents were often told that their children had died of influenza or some such other minor illness.⁵

The grim story of just how horrific this decision to systematically kill off those deemed unfit for life cannot be completely told. What can be told, however, is chilling. The fact that human beings did this to other human beings is heartbreakingly sad. According to Broderson, "There was widespread protest at these barbaric acts but after the killing of babies and children, the Nazis moved on to killing institutionalized adults and World War I veterans."⁶ It is important to note that euthanasia did not originate in Nazi Germany. This method of extermination was prevalent in many countries worldwide, but Nazi Germany was the first country to use it upon people in a mass effort to remove undesirables from their society.

Use of the euthanasia among the deaf was carried out all across Germany. Broderson states that, "In 1942, 146 deaf people were murdered in the Israelite Institute for the Deaf in East Berlin."⁷ He is citing just one example of the suffering that the deaf experienced at the hands of cruel and brutal Nazis. In 1939, euthanasia found supporters in Nazi Germany within the Reich Ministry of the Interior and while it is true Hitler gave the order to initiate euthanasia against the undesirables, German doctors did their part to carry out this insidious plan. As Horst Biesold points out, "Nazi programs targeted groups for 'euthanasia' action, commencing in 1939 with action

against children. The murdering of children began with a confidential circular from the Reich Ministry of the Interior on August 18, 1939."⁸

Doctors and other health care professionals greatly assisted the systematic euthanasia of these groups including the deaf by constantly informing the Reich of such persons. According to Biesold, "Physicians and midwives were ordered to report 'monstrous births' immediately and also report children up to the age of three who suffered from idiocy, mongolism (down syndrome), micro- and hydrocephaly, and deformities of the extremities."⁹ Such views of the disabled led to the Operation T-4 program which focused on killing disabled adults. T4 stands for Tiergartenstrasse 4, Berline-Charlottenburg. The director of this program was Victor Brack, head of Hitler's chancellery, Central Office II.¹⁰ Brack claimed that the program was designed for "incurably ill" people, but the reality was much more insidious.

In the T4 action at least seventy thousand persons, who were in no way all incurably ill, were murdered.¹¹ T4 went on for two years and until protests from churches and the general population, and the diversions of the war effort against the Soviet Union convinced Hitler to discontinue this program. Disabled people, including the deaf, were killed in gas chambers disguised as shower rooms.¹² After Hitler suspended T4, this sort of killing still continued but in subtle ways. One technique was to starve the disabled until they passed away. An unknown number of disabled people perished in this way. The total number of deaf people killed through starvation is not known but it is estimated to be fairly significant in proportion to the number of deaf people living in Germany at that time. Deaf students who did not fare well academically were denied remedial programs and subsequently found themselves among the victims of starvation as these programs frequently offered room and board including food.

Biesold comments, "These measures show that in individual schools for the deaf between 1933 and 1945 remedial programs were no longer offered to students who were academically behind; instead, these children were selected out and delivered for mercy killing."¹³

The truth of the killings was not immediately apparent as letters and cover-ups from these euthanasia centers were sent to the families of those who were exterminated. These letters gave a cause of death, usually heart failure, severe influenza, tuberculosis, appendicitis, and other common health problems of that day and age. According to Biesold, "Reference was always made to 'official directions connected with war measures' or to the ongoing danger of infection that made necessary the immediate cremation of the bodies. Cremation avoided any possible demands for autopsies."¹⁴ A deaf woman by the name of C.W., is an example of such measures. Nazi health authorities ordered C.W.'s sterilization in July, 1937, and she was forcibly transported from her job in Bad Rothenfelde to a Psychiatric Hospital in Munster in April, 1940. She was murdered there in June, 1940 but this was covered up. Biesold observes, "Her death certificate gave the time of death as exactly twelve o'clock, and the hereditary health court gave the cause of death as a weak heart. Both of these specifics were frequently used to cover up the actual procedures."¹⁵

Euthanasia and Operation T4 sprang forth from a theory called Eugenics. Eugenics is defined as "the movement devoted to improving the human species through the control of hereditary factors in mating."¹⁶ It defines the school of thought that existed within the German government before Hitler assumed power in 1933. Laura-Jean Gilbert sheds some light upon this train of thought: "The Nazis targeted three major groups-Gypsies or 'Roma,' Jews, and people with disabilities—based on the belief

that all of these groups were biologically inferior."¹⁷ Eugenics would not have snowballed into such horrendous proportions within Germany if not for the cooperation of doctors and nurses throughout the country. As Dr. Robert Proctor has observed, "In wrong political climate, medicine can join with evil to create terrible crimes."¹⁸ While it is now generally known that the German government planned to eliminate all undesirable people from their country with the application of eugenics, the origins of this theory were not from German but from American legalism. As Gilbert notes, "In the 1920's, before the Nazis even came to power, there was a movement within both the United States and German medical communities—supported in general by society—to sterilize mentally retarded and criminally insane people living in mental institutions."¹⁹ This movement grew out of control in Germany while it stayed restricted to those who were mentally retarded and criminally insane in the United States. Once the Nordic wing of the eugenic movement of the German government firmly entrenched itself in power and Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany, the eugenic theories that applied to mentally retarded and criminally insane people were applied to all undesirable people including the deaf.

In Germany, the basis of eugenics became widely accepted throughout the professional community and was supported by professionals such as medical and scientific experts. Gilbert states, "In Germany, this became known as the racial hygiene movement and was promoted through professional journals and by medical/science departments of German universities."²⁰ Unfortunately, a number of Americans also promoted this view of eugenics during the 1920s and German eugenicists sought to model themselves after their American counterparts. "Germany actually looked to the United States as a model in relation to sterilization and to excluding people with

disabilities or congenital illness from immigration", says Gilbert.²¹ Eugenics gained support in the United States partly because of Alexander Graham Bell and partly because there were a lot of misunderstandings about hereditary diseases. Bell did not approve of intermarriage among deaf people because he felt that marriage between two deaf people could produce future generations of deaf people. As Nicholas Mirzoeff, a leading student of the attitude towards the deaf in nineteenth-century America, reflects, "As this culture began to seem increasingly self-sufficient, it seemed appropriate for some deaf activists to suggest creating a deaf nation in the American West where only the deaf would live. This plan alarmed eugenicists and other sections of society concerned to keep what they saw as the 'lifestream' pure."²² According to Mirzoeff, this view had much to do with Bell, who had a deaf wife, and Bell campaigned to eliminate sign language and deafness by appealing to social control.²³

Bell's fears spread to the government in the United States and especially in Germany as he promoted statistics that claimed to support his views. Mirzoeff writes:

He (Bell) claimed to show, by rather dubious statistics, that the deaf were more likely to marry each other if they knew sign language than if they did not; and that such marriages produced offspring at a faster rate than the mainstream population which, if extrapolated on the grand scale, might create a significant deaf minority population in a period of high concern over immigration both in Europe and the United States, such fears found ready audiences in government.²⁴

Deafness and sign language were the objects of wrath as far as eugenicists were concerned. While Bell's primary legacy is the telephone, he also sparked the first debates over the rights of deaf people to marry each other and to use sign language to communicate. This kind of thinking took root in the German government and the proponents of eugenics in the government enacted laws that led directly to the horrors

in Germany during the Holocaust. Thus, in this sense, the United States had a part in sparking the flames that would later ignite into the Holocaust.

In Germany, the model gained support and grew until German leaders became obsessed with the eugenic movement. Gilbert writes, "In 1933, as the Nazis came to power, the racial hygiene movement gained political support. That year, a law was enacted in Germany calling for the sterilization of anyone with a genetically transmitted disease—including congenital deafness. Physicians were required to register any 'defective' person."²⁵ This definition of "defective" persons empowered those in the German government to begin the persecution of those deemed undesirable. Eugenics had a direct effect upon deaf people. "Before 1933, about 600 deaf Jews lived in Berlin. Only about 34 survived the war," writes Gilbert.²⁶ Deaf people found themselves weeded out and branded as undesirable and subsequently sent to hospitals, gas chambers, and any other place where they could be "dealt with" by the German authorities.

As a result of the eugenic movement, the widespread sterilization, mistreatment, and killing of deaf people became official public policy from 1933 to 1945. While it is unclear exactly how many, a great number of deaf people lost their ability to have children, their status as equal citizens in Germany and other nations as Germany invaded and conquered neighboring nations during the late 1930s and early 1940s. This is the true legacy of the eugenic movement, a philosophy born of evil that found itself justifiably discredited when Hitler was defeated by the Allied forces in 1945.

Chapter IV: Deaf Survivors and Their Stories

While many deaf people perished in the Holocaust, many others survived. Understandably, some deaf survivors are reluctant to tell their stories but some have been willing to share their experiences. Their stories and testimonies of courage, hope, and love all tell us what happened in the Holocaust and each person gives us a new understanding of what it means to endure to the end.

Journalist Lynne McConnell gives us the stories of deaf survivors from Budapest. One of these survivors, Konig, states, "We had to walk with our arms raised over our heads all the way. Everything we had on us was stolen. We spent 14 days in semi-prisoner status."¹ She was a victim of a raid in which Jews and other undesirable people were sought out and captured. Konig managed to escape from the grasp of her kidnappers but briefly found herself facing death at the Danube River as she was lined up for execution along with a thousand other victims. Konig states, "I was shot three times, three different places on my body."² Konig was one of a handful of survivors that day as most of the other victims were killed. She suffered great losses during the war as she lost many dear to her. "By the end of the war . . . Konig had lost her grandfather, father, brother, fiancé, and countless friends," writes McConnell.³ Another survivor named Peter Farago gives us his experiences during the Holocaust: "I had no idea where to go . . . I felt so very alone."⁴ Farago had been wandering aimlessly for days without food or rest at the age of ten. He had been separated from his mother and was trying to find his home after the Allies had conquered Germany and the war had ended. "Suddenly, said Farago, I noticed my mother's back, and I said, 'Mom, Mother!' She turned, and my mother just fainted on the spot."⁵ Accounts like Farago's are common amongst survivors.

Klara Erdosi is another deaf survivor who recounts her experiences during the Holocaust: "I said goodbye to my deaf friends. Only after the war did I find out that all of my deaf friends had died."⁶ When she left Hungary, Erdosi found herself in a labor camp near Leipzig, Germany. This camp was not tolerant of those who could not work. Those who were weakened to the point of collapse were shot or cast outside in the extremely cold temperatures and left to die. Erdosi was forced to dig graves and she wept often. As she put it, "At first there were three of us, then just me. I cried the most and I was so very cold."⁷

Henning Irgens is a deaf man who grew up in Norway during World War II. He states, "The German soldiers took over our house and we moved to an apartment in the city. Food and clothing were scarce. We wore shoes made of wood or derived from tree mushrooms."⁸ While Irgens's story is brief, he reflects the difficulties that people faced during these war years. "My shirt was spun from paper, he recalled, It had buttons made from milk. My sister was pregnant, but, not able to get enough to eat, she lost her baby."⁹ This kind of life often was filled with the threat of death at the hands of Nazis, the chances of survival were slim.

Like Irgens, Stanley Teger somehow managed to survive the Holocaust. Deaf since age four due to a blow on the head by a rifle from a Nazi soldier, Teger and his mother survived the Holocaust because they looked gentle. Teger's family had to leave their home when Germany invaded Poland in September of 1939. Journalist Chrisena Coleman writes, "They went many days without food. In fact, Stanley's father was put to death by the Gestapo because he was hungry—it was considered a crime."¹⁰ The Holocaust had a profound effect on the Tegers. Many relatives died and Teger's mother lost many close family members. Coleman writes, "She lost two sisters, each one of who

had two children, and two brothers, one with a child, her nieces and nephews, all her beloved cousins, aunts . . . everybody."¹¹ This litany of death was common among deaf survivors of the Holocaust.

Columnist Ronald Levine gives us brief accounts of a handful of deaf survivors. David Block, one of these survivors, tells us about his experiences at Dachau: "We arrived about 11 at night. It was raining hard and there were rows and rows of lights. One of the SS guards tried to get my attention, but because I was deaf, I couldn't hear him. So he smacked me."¹² Often, deaf victims were physically manhandled. Block managed to survive by being very aware of his surroundings. Another survivor, Rose Rosman, commented, "Sometimes the deaf were the first ones sent to the gas chambers."¹³ There were many more deaf survivors from all over Europe during the Holocaust but all of them found themselves in situations that challenged them to utilize their survival skills.

Columnist Sharon Ann Soudakoff conducted a series of interviews in which many deaf survivors were interviewed. Deaf victims shared their stories of survival and left us with a significant contribution to an area of the Holocaust that had been previously unknown. One such survivor, Hertha Myers, had a hearing sister named Renee who helped her when both of them were in the camps. Hertha credits her sister for helping her survive. Hertha had deaf parents and a deaf grandfather and a deaf uncle. Deafness is more than a physical distinction for Hertha; it is a cultural distinction as well.

According to Soudakoff,

When the war started, Henrietta and Julius Gross (Hertha's parents) paid a couple to hide their two girls, Hertha and Renee to protect them. When the parents were deported and didn't pay the couple, the girls returned and were caught and learned that their parents had been deported to Auschwitz. Hertha and Renee were sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration

camp for a year. After the war was over, they found out that their parents had been killed.¹⁴

Sadly, many people learned exactly the same thing when the war ended. It was harsh and brutal in the concentration camp, but the girls did not give up: "Renee started to lose her will to live and was ready to give up but Hertha gave her support and at the same time she remembered that she promised their parents that she would look after Hertha."¹⁵ The girls stayed in Sweden after the end of the war, and in 1948 they came to the United States because a cousin made arrangements to bring them over. Hertha married and had three deaf children, Ira, Hetty, and Sara. Hertha is now living in Henderson, Nevada and has two grandsons, Justin and Sven.

Doris Fedrid and Esther Landman are two more survivors who gave an account of their plight during the Holocaust. Soudakoff writes, "Doris was born around the year 1920. Her parents went hiding with her while Esther was born fifteen years later in the 1940's. They know if the Nazis heard Esther cry, they would kill all of them."¹⁶ Esther and Doris found themselves placed in different areas. Esther went to a Christian orphanage while Doris and her parents went to a labor camp. When the Russians invaded Poland and forced the Nazis back, Esther's parents returned to the orphanage to take her home. When the war ended, both girls were separated again as Esther went to the United States and had five children with her husband Lawrence. Doris stayed in Europe and married another deaf survivor named Fred Fedrid.

Soudakoff's account of Joseph Schertz's survival is equally moving:

He came from a well-to-do family. His father was a well-known cantor. They lived in a mansion before World War II. The Nazis took their possessions away; they went from riches to rags overnight. Joe's father was separated from the family; put on a train with the statement 'that he would be sent to work.' He never came back. He was killed in the camps.¹⁷

As the war approached its conclusion, an underground tunnel was built to enable those in the ghetto to escape. Schertz recalls, "Mothers had to sacrifice their own babies and young children because they knew that they would have to be very quiet in escaping through the tunnel. They knew that if the Nazis heard any babies crying or any other noises, they would be suspicious and found out about the secret tunnel."¹⁸ Joe, his mother, and his two brothers stayed in Poland after escaping through the tunnel but later relocated to France. Joe's uncle made arrangements to bring them all over to America. Joe's aunt and uncle had survived the war as well. Joe, who had two daughters, Jackie and Brenda passed away in 1995.

Marion Schlessinger Intrator is another deaf survivor who described her struggle during the Holocaust. She became deaf at age two due to scarlet fever. When Marion was in her teens, Marion's family all went to the United States but she did not. Soudakoff writes, "She stayed behind because the American Government wouldn't allow deaf or handicapped people into the United States."¹⁹ She was sent to England to attend a Jewish School for the Deaf. When the war began and the Germans bombed London, she was sent to a Christian school named Brighton School. This area was bombed nearly every day for two years straight during 1940-1942. Soudakoff writes, "Marion didn't know where her parents were for four years. Thanks to the efforts of the Red Cross, her family was able to trace Marion in 1942, and brought her over to New York City."²⁰ Today, she is married to Sam Intrator and is living in Sherman Oaks, California.

Rose Steinberg Feld Rosman, another survivor, became deaf at the age of three due to an illness. She was sent to the Israelite School for the Deaf in East Berlin,

Germany, where she met her future husband, Max Feld at this school. They married in 1939. Soudakoff writes:

Max worked as a dental technician for a dentist. Germany had announced that all Jews were to be found and reported to the soldiers. There was a drawing and Max's name was picked out. Rose was breast-feeding her six-month-old baby girl, Esther, when the soldiers knocked at her door and asked for Max. He was taken into the Camp Beauve LaRolanda in Paris.²¹

Rose would see her husband Max only a few more times between 1941 and 1942. Rose, Esther, and her mother went to America and became United States citizens in 1952.

According to Soudakoff, "Max was deported to Birkenau in 1942 from France and never returned."²² After the war, Rose found out what happened to Max and to her father.

Author Marie Petal writes, "Rose learned that Max and her father were dead, killed in Nazi death camps."²³ Rose remarried in America and Esther married in 1962. Today, Rose is a volunteer for deaf and blind people in the Los Angeles, California area.

The last of the interviewees that Soudakoff interviewed is the husband of Doris Fedrid. Fred Fedrid kept a dairy and notes. Fred was born to deaf parents and most likely was born deaf. He graduated from schools for the Deaf in Vienna as his parents did in 1936. Soudakoff writes, "In October, 1941, the Gestapo arrested Fred and his family at their home and brought them to a pooled school. The Nazis segregated the Deaf from the others."²⁴ This was due to the orders from Hitler that differences be noted between the able-bodied and those who were not able-bodied. This included the deaf. Soudakoff continues, "Not wanting the Nazis to select them in this way, knowing it could only mean hardship or worse, Fred and his parents kept their hands to their sides."²⁵ Three months later, Fred's father died of hunger and his mother died in August from starvation. Fred found himself forced to make uniforms for the Nazis in Lodz. In 1944,

Fred was deported to Auschwitz where he was sent to Daschau. Fred was given a metal pin with the word 'Taubstummen' which meant "deaf." "In this way, the guards would know he was deaf and would not shoot him when he did not immediately respond to their commands," writes Soudakoff.²⁶ Fred immigrated to New York and rejoined his relatives there. He married Doris Rosenstrauch and had three children with her, Charles, Rose, and Eleanor. Fred passed away in 1963 and is survived by his wife and children.

Gene Bergman is another deaf Holocaust survivor. At the age of seven, the Germans invaded Poland. Bergman says, "The Germans built a wall around a tiny section of Warsaw and forced my family and the other Jewish people to move into it. We called it "the ghetto."²⁷ For five years, the Germans stayed in Poland. At the age of twelve, Bergman was sent to a factory. "After the war, I looked for my father and my uncle, but I never saw them again. They were dead. So were all my friends. So were most of the Jews in Poland."²⁸

Deaf survivor Nesse Godin also recounts her experiences during the Holocaust. Godin and her family were put into the Shauliai, Lithuania ghetto. Godin says, "There were two things in the ghetto—hunger and fear."²⁹ The family was split up in the ghetto. After the war ended, Godin was set free. Godin's father died in Auschwitz, but her mother and brothers survived.

All of these stories have much in common as each survivor tells of the loss of family, relatives, and friends. Billions of lives were touched and millions of lives were lost and deaf victims were prominent among those who suffered. The Holocaust involved a catastrophic loss of life from which the world is still recovering today. The

stories of these deaf survivors show us just how deeply one often forgotten part of the world was affected by this loss.

Conclusion

The Holocaust leaves us with shattered lives and many questions. Many of these questions will never be answered. It is true that we know Nazi Germany became infatuated with Hitler and his promises of restoring Germany and taking the country to superpower status. When this became the goal of the German government during the 1930s, Hitler took advantage of this mindset to implement the laws described in Chapter One, laws that served to discriminate against and oppress those whom the laws targeted.

Euthanasia, T-4, and Eugenics all combined to bring about the destruction of millions of lives. Eugenics became a justifiable theory for the German government in dealing with undesirable people such as the deaf. "Indeed, as a minority within a minority, the Jewish deaf were doubly hunted and persecuted by the Nazi regime," says Rabbi Eliezer Lederfiend.¹ Those who were disabled in any way, shape, or form were often the first to perish. Survivors often found their lives shattered and their pasts irrevocably lost.

Chapter One dealt with the laws and the effects of laws in Germany. Chapter Two dealt with sterilization and forced abortions. The mass sterilization of those deemed unfit to propagate life originated in the Eugenics movement. As Friedlander has written, "World War I radicalized the German eugenic movement. Not only did eugenicists begin to advocate 'negative' eugenics, particularly sterilization, but many also adopted a racist viewpoint."² The German government, Hitler, and research in Eugenics led to the persecution of minorities, including the deaf and any and all people deemed unfit for life.

"In the United States, even in Germany, few are aware that during the Nazi era human beings—men, women, and children—with impaired hearing were sterilized against their will, and even fewer know that many of the deaf were also murdered," states Friedlander.³ Recent research has brought to light such atrocities. Horst Biesold's research uncovered extremely detailed information exploring on very issue. Sterilizations and forced abortions were performed and cover-ups masked the depth of the pain and suffering that deaf victims endured when subjected to these measures.

Chapter Three focused upon euthanasia, eugenics, and T-4, all factors in persecuting the deaf. When the German government accepted eugenics as a means by which to eliminate social problems, this enabled Hitler to impose measures such as euthanasia and Operation T-4. In Nazi Germany, euthanasia was performed on human beings. Operation T-4 was a variation of euthanasia in which victims were given lethal injections and drug overdoses and starved to death. This program was implemented as a direct result of Hitler's desire to kill off the undesirables instead of treating them through sterilization. "T-4 established six killing centers—Bradenburg, Grafeneck, Hartheim, Bernburg, Sonnenstein, and Hadamar—equipped with gas chambers and crematoria. There the T-4 operatives killed their victims in assembly-line fashion in the gas chamber and burned their bodies in the crematorium," states Friedlander.⁴ In spite of these killings, many did survive, as the testimonies in Chapter Four demonstrate.

Chapter four dealt with the stories of those who survived. While many, many victims died and are recorded as part of those millions of people who perished during the Holocaust, there are deaf survivors who managed to escape death and tell us what happened. A great majority of deaf victims of the Holocaust were sterilized, many were murdered, and many were separated from their family, friends, and loved ones for

extended periods of time or in some cases, the separation resulted in the deaths of family members. Their stories all included differences in experiences and obstacles encountered while struggling to survive in the Holocaust. All of the survivors suffered a loss of some kind. Elizabeth DeJong, a hearing child of deaf adults, tells us how she was separated from her mother at Auschwitz-Birkenau: "Then suddenly some huge trucks showed up, a selection took place and my mother with all the 'older' women, the women with children and babies were sent to the left, put on those trucks and I never saw my mother again."⁵ This was all too common during the Holocaust where children and parents were separated never to see each other again.

The purpose of deaf survivors telling their stories and for us to know their stories is to establish an understanding of what Nazi Germany did to those deemed undesirable. Some have traveled to Europe to find out more about these survivors who include a group of students from Midland Park High School in New Jersey took a trip to the Czech Republic and Poland. Midland Principal Roger Fitzgerald and Colleen Tambuscio, a teacher at the school explained the significance of the trip:

Our guide, through the use of first person accounts and the recollections of Holocaust survivors, related stories of fear, betrayal, loss, love, and occasionally, hope. Each story and each emotion allowed students to search for some personal meaning, or draw on some personal experience and feel connection.⁶

The Holocaust leaves us with the words of these survivors who have endured horrible persecution at the hands of Nazi Germany. All of the deaf survivors have established themselves in their post-Holocaust lives, some with families, many with close friends who provide support; others, unfortunately, have long since passed away. While we may never know why the Holocaust happened, we can trust in God to create something good

out of something evil. The Bible leaves us with the final word on how to handle evil,

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and not unto thine own understanding" Proverbs

3:5.⁷

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