

Genocide & Deafness

by Stephen Baldwin

Genocide is a combination of a Greek word that means "tribe" and "killing." During the Nuremburg trials after World War II, "genocide" was taken seriously by the newly formed United Nations. Although the word "holocaust" is popularly used to refer to nearly six million European Jews who were systematically killed by the Nazi regime, the word "genocide" will be used in this article to refer to the extermination or mistreatment of deaf people.

Genocide can come in different forms. The extermination of a minority in a persecuting society is done by killing. Another part of the physical aspect of a genocide is voluntary or mandatory sterilization or castration. The non-physical form can entail a cultural or spiritual deprivation. The American Indians' loss of their culture is an example of a non-physical form of genocide.

Historically speaking, ancient Greeks and Romans practiced infanticide on babies that were born deformed. It was an ancient custom to let the babies die on the mountains since "spartan" bodies were needed for a military oriented society. Knowing well that deaf babies have an invisible handicap, it is assumed that they escaped death in the ancient ages. During the early Christian period, life was different for the deaf.

It should be pointed out that deaf or disabled or handicapped babies were considered by such church fathers as St. Augustine as "crippled" children who were carrying the sins of their parents, and thus could not be saved for salvation. This was a spiritual kind of genocide until St. Francis de Salle baptized the first deaf person in Spain around 1550 A.D.

The first recorded attempt to sterilize the deaf took place in America in the late 19th century. In 1883 Alexander Graham Bell presented his controversial paper called, "Deaf Variety of the Human Race." Bell was concerned that marriages between deaf people would only produce more deaf people, thus a need to ban such intermarriages. Bell, an influential man with political and financial connections, nearly succeeded in having a law passed to ban "deaf" marriages. The telephone inventor was thwarted in his efforts by leading deaf and hearing educators, the National Association of the Deaf, and ironically, his own Volta Bureau, which did not support his "Deaf Race" theory. Undaunted by this lack of support, Bell went a step further by proposing a possible sterilization program that never materialized. Bell's deaf wife, Mabel Hubbard Bell, may have put her over-zealous husband in his place.

But Bell did succeed in perpetuating a partial cultural genocide. Laws were passed across the country that would ban the deaf from teaching the deaf. Bell said that one-third of the teachers in schools for the deaf were deaf themselves. His crusade against the employment of deaf teachers brought the figures down to an all-time low of 13% in 1920.

Oralism is another form of cultural genocide. Ever since Samuel Heinicke started the first oral school in Germany in 1755, the deaf were told not to sign since it was "ugly" and contrary to the wishes of the oral/aural hearing majority. Like Heinicke, Bell and other oral educators have tried in vain to suppress the deaf community. There are still a few die-hard oralists, hearing or deaf, who oppose the existence of the deaf community. The age-old oral and Total Communication controversy may have been revived by Marlee Matlin's oral presentation at the Os-cars recently.

The deaf German genocide of the Nazi period is a sad record to behold. The recent winter issue of the Gallaudet Today has an excellent cover story entitled, "The Holocaust: Deaf Victims, Deaf Survivors." According to this magazine, "1,600 deaf Germans were murdered because they were useless eaters." Furthermore, "17,000 deaf Germans were sterilized either by volunteering or by force." It should be understood that the Aryan Supremacy of Hitler and the Nazi government aimed to "purify" the Fatherland.

Hartmut Teuber, a deaf German native now residing in Massachusetts, was four years old when World War II ended. He recalls from the stories of many surviving fellow Germans before he emigrated to America that they were forced through the sterilization programs, forced to have abortions, and denied marriage licenses. But some deaf did go along with the Nazi ideals by reorganizing their clubs into the Nazi image (Reichs Federation of the Deaf). Teuber also reports that teachers of the deaf in Germany told all the students that they must agree to the national aim of a "pure" Aryan nation by sterilizing themselves. At that time Teuber attended a Catholic school where resistance by the nuns against the Nazis was not unusual. Those nuns often "sabotaged" the efforts to exterminate the deaf population. As strange as it sounds, the nuns also advised the deaf Germans to live together, not marry, for the sake of survival or to avoid sterilization programs. Teuber also mentions that the deaf kept low profiles and kept away from the scene of trouble; thus the sterilization

program was not completely successful. Teuber estimates that 10% of the deaf were sterilized before the war ended. According to Teuber, the deaf Jews received most of the suffering. Those who survived the genocide either escaped before 1936 or during the end of the war. Among those are David Bloch and Eugene Bergman, two famous deaf German-Americans in the arts and literature. In closing, Teuber says it is ironic that 300 deaf members of a German organization joined the army and got killed in their first day of the Battle of Berlin in the closing days of the war.

It was reported in the Silent News that a parliamentary session at Bonn recently concluded a 15-month hearing of one of the last major Nazi crimes. Two doctors were sentenced to four years in prison for killing more than 15,000 physically and mentally impaired people. Among those killed were a number of deaf Jews. Many deaf Germans were victims of Nazi "euthenasia" measures, and the Bonn government is compensating the victims.

Whether genocide of the deaf has ceased or not cannot be determined. It has been documented that genocides took place in Cambodia and are taking place in Ethiopia, Iran, Lebanon and Nigeria. It is often said that persecution occurs when the government cannot suppress a certain segment of its population. Sometimes those persecuting governments have no sensible reasons at all to initiate a genocide. Dr. Eugene Bergman, assistant professor of English at Gallaudet University and one of the relatively few survivors, says that he "still doesn't understand" (the Holocaust). Bergman, Bloch, and Teuber are living reminders that we should not take life for granted.