



in der Nacht.

**An unusual
exhibit depicts
the Nazi persecution
of deaf people**

by Vickie Walter

It's the photographs and art work that first catch the attention of viewers, draw them into a time now passed but still vividly remembered:

Max Feld, a wide-eyed child with his brothers and sisters; a confident young man with hands poised on hips; a nameless face amidst others in a German work camp. And, in the last photograph before his death, a somber man with dark, brooding eyes.

Rose Steinberg Feld, a smiling

schoolgirl with her best friend; a young woman in love, perched playfully on Max's shoulder; a sad-eyed woman, with her solemn young daughter, who has lost her husband in a German death camp.

One can see the courage and longing in the eyes of young Anne Frank, as portrayed by deaf artist Morris Broderson. And the stark, skeletal images of death and destruction haunt the works of deaf artist David



(FAR LEFT) Young deaf Jews gather around a campfire in Berlin in 1933. (ABOVE) Rose Feld and her daughter, Esther, after the war. (LEFT) The last photograph of Max Feld before his death.

Bloch, who survived the concentration camp at Dachau and whose memories survived with him.

But the narrative of *In Der Nacht: Visions of Deaf Survivors of Nazi Oppression*, which will be on exhibit at Gallaudet this April, is just as powerful as the pictures. The joys and struggles of a young deaf couple in the years preceding and during the Holocaust come to life. And beyond this personal story is a broader one, a

documentation of the early eugenics movement in the United States and Europe, leading to the sterilization of at least 17,000 deaf Germans and the murder of about 150,000 disabled people—"useless eaters," they were called—1,600 of them deaf.

In Der Nacht (In the Night), the photo-narrative exhibit produced by Marla Petal and Michelle Baron in 1985 for a preview at the XV World Games for the Deaf in Los Angeles,

will be on exhibit in Chapel Hall at Gallaudet University for about a month, beginning April 18. Arrangements are also being made for the exhibit to appear afterwards for a week in the rotunda of the U.S. Senate.

The exhibit was created by the company "All The People," which is now producing a documentary film about the Jewish deaf community. Some of the filming of "All The People Saw All The Voices" will be done at Gallaudet in April, and a short pilot of the film will be shown.

Petal, who also wrote much of the narrative for the exhibit, is an assistant professor for clinical social work at the University of Southern California. She worked for three years as a community organizer for Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf in Los Angeles, and it was the temple that originally approached her about doing the exhibit. Baron, who writes children's literature and music, has worked as a production coordinator



and associate producer with "Beyond Sound," a television film company for deaf people, and as an actress with several deaf theaters. In 1980, she was at Gallaudet for a residency with the Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf.

In Der Nacht received a special merit award from the California Governor's Commission on Employment of the Handicapped in 1986. The exhibit premiered at the Martyr's Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust in Los Angeles and has been on display at other locations throughout the country and the world.

The purpose of the exhibit, according to its producers, is "to share with as wide an audience as possible an experience which will challenge each individual to think about the value of human life, to consider its fragility and to reflect upon the preciousness of each individual being, by standards which defy uniformity or perfection."

Central to the exhibit is the story of Rose and Max Feld, who attended the Israelite School for the Deaf in Berlin during the 1930s. Max kept a photo album, and although he did not survive the war, his album did. The photos are accompanied by Rose's story. "It is the story of Max, our school, our friends, our family, our baby," says Rose in the narrative text. "It is the story of how we tried to escape the darkness that consumed the world. It is a small part of the Holocaust."

The story follows Rose and Max from their school days at the Israelite School to their joys of falling in love and the pain of separation as Rose was forced to flee to Paris in 1935. For two years, Max and Rose wrote to each other, and when Max's parents passed through Paris on their way to Colombia in 1937, Max decided to stay. He and Rose were married in 1939 as bombs fell around them. By the time their daughter, Esther, was born in December 1940, France was occupied by German troops.

Max was arrested by the Gestapo (the secret state police) in May 1941 and sent to a labor camp in Beaune La Rolande. Rose's father was arrested soon afterward. His fur factory was seized by the Gestapo and



Artist Morris Broderson painted a series of works inspired by the life of Anne Frank.

Rose and her mother became "slave laborers," sewing collars on the winter coats of the SS, the elite military and police unit of the Nazi party.

"The needles we used were long and thin and had to go through layers and layers of wool and fur," Rose says in her narrative. "They broke easily. We were each permitted to use only five needles per day." Women who broke five needles were sent outside, where a wagon waited to take them away. "Each day there were fewer and fewer of us," says Rose.

In 1942, Max escaped from the camp and came to visit Rose and their daughter. He hid with non-Jewish friends for several days, the same friends who preserved the photo album during the war. But his presence endangered the people around him, so he voluntarily returned to the camp.

As conditions worsened, Rose and her family fled to the French countryside, where they went into hiding. When the war ended, they returned to Paris to find their home gutted. Max and her father did not return.

"Max had been deported to Birkenau in the fall of 1942," says Rose. "He was murdered along with most

of the world I knew. Those of us who survived began our lives again."

Rose Feld Rosman now lives in California and is an active member of Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf.

Woven throughout Max's album and Rose's story is a historical narrative, with archival documents and photographs, based on the work of Horst Biesold, a former high school teacher of deaf students in Germany. Biesold, who now lives in Bremen, West Germany, will be a special guest speaker at the Gallaudet opening of the exhibit.

Biesold's research grew out of his friendship with deaf people in Germany. He began to notice that many of his deaf friends did not have children, and one day, at a gathering, he asked a friend, "Why don't you have a family?" Embarrassed and ashamed, the friend took him into another room and privately confessed that that Nazis had sterilized him. Many of his other friends told the same story.

Biesold quit his teaching job and began to do research on deaf victims of the Nazis. What he found was a startling story that began years before World War II and the mass destruction of millions of Jews in concentra-



(ABOVE) The Reichs Federation of the Deaf included deaf Nazi leaders who denounced Jewish infiltration of the deaf community. **(RIGHT)** The Israelite School for the Deaf in Berlin. A plaque on the wall of the building reads: "From this house 146 deaf Jewish citizens were dragged by fascist bandits and murdered in 1942. Memorial to the dead. Reminder to the living."



tion camps. "Disabled people were really the first victims of the Nazis," Petal explains. "Mass sterilization of deaf people began in 1933 as soon as the Nazis came into power."

A staggering 320,000 to 375,000 people, 17,000 of them deaf, were sterilized in Germany before World War II began, Biesold's research shows. No anesthetic was used. Of

the deaf people, 33 percent were under age 18 and 20 percent were under age 16. In 9 percent of the cases, women who were sterilized also underwent forced abortion, most beyond their fifth month of pregnancy.

Surgical sterilization of "degenerates" was recommended in Germany as early as 1889, and by 1923 the Executive Committee of the League of German Teachers of Deaf Mutes called for "treatment" as a duty of the association. But, ironically, eugenic (meaning "well breeding") sterilization was pioneered in the United States.

Indiana passed the first compulsory sterilization law in 1907 for "confirmed criminals, idiots, rapists and imbeciles." Then in 1922, the "Model Eugenic Sterilization Law" was written by Harry Laughlin, the official "expert eugenics agent" of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. He identified "socially inadequate classes" which included deaf, blind, feeble-minded, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, deformed and dependent individuals. Between 1907



A brochure from the Israelite School for the Deaf shows a student and teacher during an articulation lesson.

and 1930, approximately 11,000 people in the United States were compulsorily sterilized.

Even earlier, some American educators of deaf people were calling for genetic counseling before marriage to prepare deaf people not to have children. Alexander Graham Bell, a strong proponent of oral education for deaf people, wrote of the dangers of intermarriage among deaf people and warned that a “deaf variety of the human race” was being created. In a paper for the National Academy of Sciences in 1883, he recommended the banning of sign language and legislation restricting marriage among the “socially unfit.”

When Hitler and the Nazi government came to power in Germany in 1933, the government passed a series of laws restricting civil rights, including the “Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring.” This law was based on Laughlin’s work.

German schools for deaf students—their directors and teachers—complied with the law. Biesold’s research has shown that about 37 percent of the deaf people

sterilized in Germany were turned in by teachers or schools for the deaf, and another 47 percent by the public health office.

A deaf Nazi organization, the Reichs Federation of Deaf, was established, and called for deaf people to sacrifice themselves for the Fatherland by being sterilized.

Churches, particularly Protestant ones, also aided the sterilization process. A flyer prepared by the Reich Association of the German Protestant Ministers of the Deaf told deaf people, “The government wants to help you. They want to prevent you from passing on your disease.” The flyer, recently discovered by Biesold, ordered people not to discuss sterilization. “Remember: You mustn’t speak to anybody about it! Not even your relatives! And the doctor, the judge must all keep silent about it!”

The strong injunctions against speaking about sterilization partially explain why no one would talk about it when Biesold began his research in the 1980s. As Biesold brought the information to public light, “the deaf community began to see it as a crime rather than a shame,” says Petal. Biesold and a member of the West German parliament, the Hon. Ernst Waltemathe, were able to secure some token compensation for the victims.

Biesold’s research shows how the German policy of sterilization paved the way for “all the inhumanity that was to follow,” said Petal. Prior to the mass exterminations in concentration camps, a “euthanasia” program offered “mercy killing” to end the lives of those “unworthy of living.” Between January 1940 and August 1941 at least 70,000 Germans were murdered by lethal injections. Others were left to starve to death. As protests against the euthanasia program grew, the operation was moved to concentration camps. Inmates with disabilities were selected for immediate death.

The research also shows how these sterilizations affected deaf people. “Physically, they didn’t involve the murder of deaf people, but they involved a cultural genocide,” Petal explains.

Today in Germany, she notes, the deaf community is behind in many areas. Schools are primarily oral, and

a strong sense of community does not exist among deaf people. Because of the sterilizations, there are few deaf children of deaf parents to pass on the heritage of the deaf community, and there are few hearing children of deaf parents to act as a bridge between deaf and hearing people.

Along with Biesold’s documentation of this mass compulsory sterilization, the exhibit features the works of deaf artists David Bloch and Morris Broderson.

Bloch, who will be at Gallaudet for the opening, was an apprentice porcelain designer at the State Academy of Applied Arts before he was sent to Dachau in 1938. With the help of an uncle, he escaped from the concentration camp and spent the next nine years in Shanghai before resettling in New York. He resumed his career as a lithographer, and designed the china for the Johnson White House depicting each of the state flowers.

When he retired, Bloch began doing woodcuts and oils filled with images of concentration camps and the Holocaust. His lithograph, “Crying Hands,” is on the cover of a forthcoming book by Biesold about his research.

Broderson, whose work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art and is now on display in the Hirshhorn Museum of Modern Art in Washington, D.C., grew up in a very different environment. He was born to a Quaker family in 1929 and grew up in California, far removed from any connection with the Holocaust.

But during a depressed period of his life as a young adult, he read the *Diary of Anne Frank*, which he credits with inspiring him to live. Since 1969 he has produced 18 works on Anne Frank, two created especially for the worldwide tour of *In Der Nacht*.

Broderson’s appearance in the exhibit “reinforces the fact that this is not simply a story about Jews,” says Petal. “All the borders are crossed a number of times in terms of the common experience.”

In Der Nacht will be on the Gallaudet campus for about a month before it moves to the Senate rotunda. Petal and her associates will also be on hand to lead discussions and present programs for teachers at Gallaudet. □