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## SURVIVAL OF DEAF JEWISH PEOPLE DURING THE HOLOCAUST ERA

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### Abstract

This project uses academic and personal research to explore the experiences of Deaf Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. The author is a member of the Deaf community and a Deaf Interpreter, as well as the daughter of a Deaf Jewish Holocaust survivor. She examines the construction of Deafness in the eugenics era and chronicles the stories of Deaf Jewish survivors. A recurring theme in these narratives is Deaf survivors' strategic use of silence to facilitate survival.

*Survival is a privilege which entails obligations. I am forever asking myself what I can do for those who have not survived. The answer I have found for myself (and which need not necessarily be the answer for every survivor) is: I want to be their [follower], I want to keep their memory alive, to make sure the dead live on in that memory.*

*—Simon Wiesenthal, Jewish Austrian Holocaust Survivor*

In my early childhood years, I learned about survival—particularly the survival of Deaf Jewish people during the Holocaust—through my Deaf Jewish mother's storytelling. This foundation of knowledge led to my research and understanding of how Deaf Jewish people survived during the Jewish Holocaust, including their experiences inside and outside of concentration camps through eugenics, forced labor, and well-calculated uses of silence. Based on my research and observations, those elements are discussed below.

### The Jewish Holocaust

In my early childhood years, I always asked my Deaf Jewish parents questions about the Jewish Holocaust. I was very curious and wanted to understand why it

happened during that period. They shared with me their stories of the Jewish Holocaust as well as my Deaf Jewish mother's experiences escaping from Austria during her early years. My paternal grandmother's family, including a Deaf great-granduncle, were destroyed by the Nazis during that period. *Holocaust* means "sacrifice by fire" and is from a word of Greek origin. The Jewish Holocaust was the result of a policy of the Nazis to wipe out all Jewish people.

It started in January 1933 and ended in 1945. During the Jewish Holocaust, Adolf Hitler was a politician who rose to power as a Nazi leader in Germany. His power spread to other countries, including Austria, Poland, and Hungary. Under Hitler, the Nazis targeted the Jews, persons with disabilities, people from other ideological and political groups such as Communists and Socialists, people with racial differences, and supporters of Jews who hid them from the Nazi leaders (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM]). From my research and personal communication with a few late Jewish Holocaust survivors, I learned many facts about the Nazis' grand plan to kill all Jewish people, including persons with disabilities, in both Germany and other countries where the Nazis rose to power. The Nazis' treatment of Jewish people was an extreme example of eugenics.

### Eugenics

*Eugenics* is a term of Greek origin meaning "good birth or stock." The term was coined by English naturalist Francis Galton in 1883 (USMM). Galton supported the idea of people with good genetic traits producing healthy children to improve the human race (Claude Moore Health Sciences Library). Based on Galton's thinking, the German leaders used "racial hygiene," a term coined by German economist Alfred Ploetz in 1895 (USMM). Although Galton advocated for eugenic policies, Hitler took Galton's ideas further by viewing Jewishness as a "hereditary ill" that needed to be exterminated. There were many eugenicists, including Alexander Graham Bell, who wanted to prevent any Deaf individuals, whom he believed were hereditarily ill, from marrying other Deaf individuals as well as from communicating through their native language, American Sign Language (ASL). Bell encouraged all Deaf individuals to communicate as oralists; in other words, they were coerced into using speech and lipreading skills instead of ASL. He deprived Deaf individuals of their language (Breuggemann 114).

### Eugenics During the Nazi Era

In very early stages of the Nazi era, physicians targeted all Deaf individuals and other persons with disabilities. The goal was to get them to stop "breeding," through either forced abortions (termination of pregnancies) or sterilization; Nazi leaders created a policy called the Sterilization Law in the early 1930s to support this (Biesold 20). This law targeted all those who were "deemed to have had a hereditary

disease” (Kersten). During the Nazi era, the physicians did not follow the Oath of Hippocrates, which states, “I swear by Apollo Physician . . . that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath. . . . I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrongdoing” (Evans 95). Nazi doctors chose not to follow the Oath of Hippocrates, instead choosing to observe the Sterilization Law established and enforced by the Nazis. Ironically, eugenics during the Nazi era was about doctors obeying the Sterilization Law and ignoring the Oath of Hippocrates to eliminate future children with disabilities, who were considered biologically ill and/or inferior.

Eugenics during the Nazi era had a massively negative impact on Deaf Jewish and non-Jewish communities in Europe, especially Germany. Many Deaf people were forcibly sterilized because the Nazis believed that deafness was a genetic disease and wanted it to be permanently erased from humanity. Between 1933 and 1945, roughly 15,000 Deaf people were sterilized by force. Of these 15,000, about 5,000 were children between the ages of nine and sixteen (Biesold 150).

Horst Biesold, author of *Crying Hands*, documented many heart-wrenching stories told by Deaf people as a result of the Sterilization Law. For example, in the chapter “Sterilization Legacy,” a Deaf woman who experienced the surgery when she was fifteen years old described her experience: “The police came for me at home and took me to the hospital without giving me any reason. After three days without food, I was sterilized. The incisions kept breaking open and I had to spend a year in the hospital. This was an unbearable torture for me because I was still very young” (150). The effects of sterilization on Deaf victims were overwhelmingly destructive to their overall well-being. Depression, suicidal thoughts, and thoughts about how life would have been different for them if they had not been sterilized were repeatedly reported (152). According to Biesold, sterilization took place in approximately thirty cities in Germany, including seventeen cities that had schools for the Deaf. The highest number of sterilizations reported by Deaf people occurred in Berlin (41). Most sterilizations took place between 1935 and 1937 (41). The social impacts of this Nazi brutality on Deaf people, both Jews and non-Jews, were profound; these people were permanently traumatized by what happened to them.

These horrific sterilizations were sloppily done, and little or no sedation was used during this surgical treatment. Many Deaf people and children, both Jewish and non-Jewish, suffered from this unnecessary procedure. They experienced a lot of physical, emotional, and mental pain. Nazis believed that they had the right to damage the Deaf person’s reproductive system to prevent future pregnancies of humans who were “hereditarily ill or inferior.”

By 1940, the Nazis had stopped the sterilization program and replaced it with “mercy killing.” They killed about 16,000 Deaf people. They also murdered babies whom they suspected of deafness and forced Deaf women to have abortions. The

Nazis instructed parents of Deaf children to send those children to doctors to be cured. Instead of being cured, however, these Deaf children were murdered and cremated, and their parents were notified by the Nazis that the children had died of natural causes, which was not true (Perry). My research shows that eugenics for Deaf Jews and non-Jews in Europe was mostly in the forms of sterilization and mercy killing.

### Forced Labor and Silence

According to my mother's stories while I was a little girl, she knew one Deaf Jewish survivor through her friend who luckily survived the Jewish Holocaust by cooking for the Nazi leaders' group because he had not been able to hear what the Nazi leaders' group's meeting was about. I was humbled during my early childhood years to hear more stories of Deaf Jewish survivors through my mother's friends who were survivors.

There were other Deaf Jewish survivors who opted not to share their horrible stories with anyone other than their families. They continued their silence long after the Holocaust. Several decades following the Holocaust, I asked them about their Holocaust experiences, and some of them willingly shared their horrifying stories with me personally.

One of my mother's Deaf best friends, Rose Feld-Rosman, shared her stories with her daughter, Esther, and my mother, Luba. She and her hearing family, including her mother and her sister, hid in the cellar of their home in Villepin, France, for four years, until the end of the Holocaust. She lost the privilege of using her native French Sign Language to communicate during her four years in hiding with her mother and sister while her baby daughter was taken care of by a non-Jewish family outside the basement. She lost her Deaf husband, who was shot by a Nazi soldier who yelled at him to stop as he ran from a concentration camp; this was witnessed by other Deaf Jewish survivors (Luba Gutman Rifkin and Esther Weisel, personal interview, 2019). She was another Deaf Jewish survivor who kept her silence and pretended to Nazi soldiers to be a hearing person for the entire Nazi era. With the help of her fellow prisoners, she avoided the death march. She had no communication with any of her fellow prisoners other than a few words such as visual gestures and signs.

Another Deaf Jewish survivor, who was a Hungarian named Peter Farago, was saved by a fellow, hearing, prisoner named Pavel. Pavel was a Polish boy who was a child of Deaf parents. Pavel guided Peter during that period. I was very moved by Farago's narrative about how he survived during that period with the great help of Pavel. Peter stated, "He took my hand, he said, 'Don't sign.' I was very scared; I was wondering why I shouldn't sign. He said again, 'Don't sign... Be quiet.' He was holding my hand as my brother and he said, 'Just relax'" (Ryan and Schuchman 2006).

That was how he survived until the end of the Jewish Holocaust. I admire his silence, but he was still deprived of his language during the Nazi era.

Another Deaf Jewish survivor, Morris Field, spoke to me about the dangers of using sign language in the camps. I personally interviewed him at my home while I was in high school. I am privileged that he told me his story, which he never shared with anyone else. Morris was fortunate to have stayed alive through five horrible concentration camps by pretending to be a hearing person and not using sign language. He saw a group of Deaf prisoners in the corner communicating with each other by using sign language, and he argued with himself about whether he should join them or continue pretending to be a hearing person. He decided not to join them and continued to act hearing. He realized the next day that his fellow Deaf prisoners had disappeared and never returned. He got the impression that they had all been killed (Vo). He once said to me, “I don’t want to share my horrible stories to anyone, even my family.” His children asked him to tell them the stories anyway, but “I told them; not even a whole sentence, they cried and said stop!” (Morris Field, personal interview, 1978).

The last two Deaf Jewish survivors to be discussed in this paper are Anna Vos-Van Dam and Lea Halpern-Huysmans. They were childhood friends in Antwerp, Belgium, who happened to be friends of Hava, my Deaf aunt living in Israel. They shared their different kinds of experiences during the Jewish Holocaust (Hava Savir, WhatsApp communication, 2019). When a Nazi soldier came by, asking for any Jews in the house, Lea snuck away with her mother from the roof of their home after being in hiding for a year. Lea’s neighbor protected them, saying, “No Jewish people in this house.” Lea and her mother found a place to stay for another two years, until the end of the Holocaust.

Unlike Lea’s experience in hiding, Anna went through a very difficult time during the Nazi era. Nazi soldiers caught her and her family when she and her family were disoriented and tired of running. One German prisoner saved Anna’s life by forcing her to remove the badge labeling her as Deaf (*Taubstumm*). She was afraid to remove the badge, concerned that a Nazi soldier would shoot her for removing it, but she finally agreed to remove the badge quickly and behaved like a hearing prisoner, although she suffered beatings and other cruelty until the end of the war (Zaurov and Gunther 243–49).

I researched a director named Israel Sela, who worked with Hungary’s American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee on a special project to assist Deaf Jewish Holocaust survivors. He was a child of Deaf parents who lived in Israel and helped Deaf survivors of the Holocaust to find new houses and jobs and to get counseling. Sela was a very good friend of my mother; he grew up with his parents once my mother landed in Israel before moving to the states in 1950. He stated, “The [Deaf] survived the war as broken pieces” (Herman). In other words, Deaf Jewish

people experienced a lot of pain and suffering during the Holocaust, but they eventually ended up in Israel and received a lot of support from Sela's parents and the Israeli Deaf community to recover from the devastating war in Europe.

I want to honor my dear Deaf mother, who avoided concentration camps with her Deaf sister after their hearing mother came and took them away from Vienna School for the Deaf in Vienna, Austria. The school was only for Catholic children; the only two Jewish Deaf children were my mother and aunt. She chatted with Nazi soldiers who camped in the gym of that school. No one knew about my mother and aunt being Jewish children while they were at school.

When my grandmother came and fetched my mother and aunt, they did not understand what was happening. They had stayed at the school during breaks, such as holidays and summers. When I asked my mother why she could not stay with my grandparents during breaks, she said, "I wanted to socialize with Deaf children who communicate in the same language as me, unlike not communicating with my parents." My mom and aunt did not have a chance to say good-bye to their Deaf friends; they escaped without suitcases or possessions. They did not know why their mother had fetched them away from that school, where they loved to learn and socialize with their friends. The Nazi era deprived them of their beliefs and education. They did not carry any passports with them, only money to bribe guards to get them through the border lines to Italy, where they stayed for a month to wait for the ship to Israel to meet my grandfather (Gutman Rifkin, Luba, personal communication, n.d.). I am grateful for my grandparents saving my mother's and aunt's lives!

## Conclusion

My research shows that the Nazi regime deprived persons with disabilities, such as Deaf Jewish survivors, of their culture, language, values, beliefs, religion, and heritage. My father's maternal grandmother's entire family was lost to the Nazi era. My paternal grandmother and her cousin emigrated to the United States when she was sixteen years old, but she left her big family in Russia. Many more besides lost their lives to the Jewish Holocaust.

Historically, people often use the quote "Remember the Alamo" to show respect for tragic events. I strongly feel that the Jewish Holocaust deserves equal respect. I personally say, "Remember the Jewish Holocaust" to show respect for the pain and suffering of people with disabilities, including Deaf Jewish survivors. Deaf Jewish people survived by being silent, having no communication with anyone inside or outside the concentration camps. The pain that eugenics inflicted on Deaf people during the Nazi era continues to have an effect on Deaf survivors as well as on their families and friends in close-knit Deaf communities. Reflections on these horrors are necessary for Deaf communities everywhere because today's technology and medical

advances sadly make it possible for Deaf people to become extinct within the next few generations. Having difficult conversations is necessary for protecting Deaf people from modern eugenics. Diversity is important in today's world, and the Deaf form one of the many groups that contribute to diversity.



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