

## DEAF HOLOKAUST

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This is the first keynote address about the Deaf Holocaust in Germany and at a Deaf History International Conference and I am happy to have been able to respond to Peter Blake's 1998 "call for more research".<sup>1</sup> After a brief review of my background, the difference between the terms *Holocaust* and *Holokaust* will be examined as well as the word, *Shoah*. I will then discuss the significance of Deaf Holocaust studies – an emerging discipline - within Deaf History. Video clips and other visual material critical for academic study will also be shown. Finally, I will share with you the experiences of Deaf survivors whom I have met.

I was born in Moscow, Russia (then the Soviet Union, under President Leonid Brezhnev's rule). When I was two years old, my family immigrated to Israel, where we lived for seven years. In 1981, we moved again, this time to Germany, where I still reside. I was born Deaf. In contrast to a common anecdote mentioned by Dr. Carol Padden in her keynote address about people believing they became deaf from a childhood fall, I did not have a "fall." I am proud to be Deaf, and I also have a Deaf sister who is five years older than me. In 2001, I graduated from the University of Hamburg. I have been researching Deaf Jews from various perspectives: sign language studies, Deaf studies, Deaf history and pedagogy. My book about Deaf Jews was published in 2003, and I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation. In 2001, I founded IGJAD, a Deaf organization for Deaf Jews and their German descendants. As the coordinator of the 6<sup>th</sup> Deaf History International Conference I have invited Deaf eyewitnesses and Holocaust survivors and feel honored that they will be sharing their stories with us. I also set up the exhibit outside the hall.



*Zaurov's interview with  
D. Ginzursky, 2000<sup>2</sup>*

I first got the idea of researching the Deaf Holocaust tragedy and then organizing this congress when I met the Holocaust survivor David Bloch in 1993 at the Deaf Culture Festival in Hamburg. Bloch's stories greatly fascinated me, and I was unable to forget his words. In 1994 I interviewed a German Jew, Moshe Bamberger, who emigrated in 1934 to Palestine and so did not experience the Holocaust first hand.<sup>3</sup> I met other Deaf Jewish survivors at the 5<sup>th</sup> World Organization of Deaf Jews (WOJD) congress in London in 1995, and again at the

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- 1 Blake: A Call for More Research in: Ryan/Schuchman (Eds.): *Deaf people in Hitler's Europe*. Gallaudet University Press, published in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C. 2002, pp. 215-223.
  - 2 See also Zaurov: Moscow: Is there any Deaf Jewish Identity in Russia? In: *JDC Quarterly*, Vol. 32, Issue 1, December 2000, p. 16-17.
  - 3 "Sie sollen wissen, was die Juden früher erlitten haben..." - Zaurov's interview with Moshe Bamberger. In: *Das Zeichen*, No. 31/95, pp. 30-39.

21<sup>st</sup> Jewish Deaf Congress in Chicago in 1996. Before these encounters, my sense of personal responsibility was always a “bubble” on the surface, and I had known nothing about the subject. I never learned about this topic either at school or at university, nor did anyone mention it. The only related topic discussed in the university was forced sterilization. However I had the chance to participate in the class of Dr. Horst Biesold, the author of *Klagende Hände*<sup>4</sup>, (“Crying Hands”), who encouraged me after my sharing to research Deaf Jews and Deaf Holocaust. He said that there was a definite need and I must say that Biesold’s views are very important, as he opened discussion on the issue of forced sterilization and also the issue of Deaf Jews’ experiences in his book. So I am giving my thanks to Biesold again. We have to be thankful to him as a spiritual guide.

Now it has become far more than that bubble: it became one of the driving forces in my research to reveal these stories from the past. After, gathering information from books and attending Gallaudet University’s 1998 symposium, *Deaf People In Hitler’s Europe*, I decided to dedicate my professional work to this subject. I started to lecture on this topic and gave presentations at various events, including Deaf Way II (2002), Yad Vashem/Jerusalem (2004, 2006, 2008), DovenShoah-Symposium/Amsterdam (2004) and Deaf History International Conferences in Washington D.C. (2000), Paris (2003), etc. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have an increasing number of books about Deaf survivors, such as the above-mentioned book by Ryan & Schuchman or Eleanor C. Dunai’s *Surviving in Silence. A Deaf Boy in the Holocaust*,<sup>5</sup> etc. However they are in English.

In my travels, I have discovered that many people have a keen interest in Deaf Jewish History and the Deaf Holocaust in the Second World War. Unfortunately there are others who think that this is all in the past and that there is nothing new to learn. Many Deaf German people have told me that there is enough published information, or that the topic is boring. However, information to date has been limited, although new information is continually becoming available, and the topic is gaining in interest. Increasingly, there are requests for research from Deaf communities in Europe on this topic, despite the widening time gap between that tragic period and today.

Before I continue, I would like to explain the meaning of *Shoah*. *Shoah* is a Hebrew word that literally means *catastrophe*. Its pragmatic meaning is almost equivalent to the terms genocide, annihilation, destruction, or extermination of an ethnic group. The word *Shoah* is often used in the context of the tragic events of pogroms, persecutions and World War II, and refers solely to Jews and their extermination. During World War II, Jews were often persecuted and forcibly relocated to ghettos. Later, they were gassed and their bodies burned in concentration camps and death camps. Other ethnic groups who have faced persecution and were in the same camps do not identify themselves by this Hebrew word. Gypsies, for example, have historically used the word *Holocaust*.

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4 Biesold: *Klagende Hände*, Oberbiel 1988. Also published as *Crying hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany*, Washington D.C. 1999.

5 Dunai: *Surviving in Silence. A Deaf Boy in the Holocaust. The Harry I. Dunai story*, Washington D.C. 2002.

Let us look at *Deaf Holocaust* [Holocaust]. Can anyone give a definition of the meaning of *Deaf Holocaust*? Someone in the audience said that *Holocaust* means burning, fire, the burning of bodies. As an event, *Holocaust* means burning and death by fire. That is correct, but there is a more specific meaning in the context of Deaf history: *Deaf Holocaust*. Let us take a look at the meanings of the distinct words, *Deaf* and *Holocaust*, as I see them.

Firstly – Holocaust. The word *Holocaust* comes from the Greek word, *Holokauston*, signifying complete burning. In ancient times, animals were slaughtered and sacrificed, and then used as burnt offerings. The term has also been used to refer to complete destruction or consumption by fire or a great massacre, for example, Louis VII who made “a holocaust of 1300 people in a burned church”.<sup>6</sup> In the Nazi concentration camps, the bodies of murdered Jews were burned until they were reduced to ashes and dust. Today, the word is mostly used in connection with the mass extermination of Jews. In Israel the term *Shoah* [catastrophe] is used instead of Holocaust, as it is a Hebrew word and focuses on the fate of Jews, not limited to Nazi times but also to other occurrences such as pogroms in previous centuries. The linking of the term *Shoah* to the fate of the Jews is a reason why it has not been used in relation to other groups like Gypsies.

The German word *Holocaust* has been in use since at least the 1871 publication of a German dictionary and there are citations for 1931<sup>8</sup> and 1969<sup>9</sup>. Timed to coincide with the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising a mini-series called “*Holocaust*” was broadcast on American television just before Passover, in April 1978 and shown later in Germany. At this point, in Germany the term *Holocaust* shifted from a German “k” to an Americanized “c”. It has been asked why the change happened to a German word and event. Perhaps with the “Americanizing” of the word, it became possible and convenient for Germans to distance themselves from this shameful period of German history. After all, the *Holocaust* happened right here. Although this is my personal opinion, I will be using the German and American spelling respectively, according to their connotations mentioned above.<sup>10</sup> I, for one, do not want to avoid history by changing letters, and would like to return to the original spelling. When you see the word *Holocaust* in our German program book, I assure you that it is definitely the correct spelling.

In newspapers and magazines, terms such as *Bombenholocaust* [Holocaust caused by bombing] have been used occasionally, for example, when referring to the 1945 Allied bombing of Dresden, which resulted in firestorms. Journalists, of course may seek to arouse controversy, sometimes intentionally misusing words for sensational effect. However, the term Holocaust is most often used in scholarly circles to represent the tragedy the Jews endured during the Second World War. Other terms, such as *genocide*, are

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6 Oxford English Dictionary (citation of *Wanderings by the Loire*, L. Ritchie (1833))

7 *Fremdwörterbuch*, edited by Daniel Sanders, Leipzig 1871.

8 *Der große Brockhaus*, 15. revised edition, Leipzig 1931.

9 *Brockhaus-Enzyklopädie*, 17. new and revised edition, Wiesbaden 1969.

10 This differentiation only makes sense in the German language and therefore will not be used in this English translation.

used for different ethnic groups and other forms of mass killing, for instance, the genocides in Darfur and Rwanda. One should be careful with terminology to ensure that usage is specific and appropriate.

Sometimes all the atrocious acts of the Third Reich are labeled as part of the Holocaust. At this congress, we have talked about forced sterilization of Deaf Europeans during this period of history. Although forced sterilization was indeed a tragedy inflicted by severely inhuman actions, it does not meet the definition of Holocaust. Those who experienced sterilization and never faced the atrocities of the death camps are not, strictly speaking, Deaf Holocaust Survivors and, in my opinion, did not experience the *Deaf Holocaust*. Deaf Jews, however, were undoubtedly killed because of the Holocaust. As far as I know, from Biesold's reports, there are only records of 4 Deaf of Jewish backgrounds who were sterilized<sup>11</sup>; there is a need to research if they were Deaf "Full" Jews and not of mixed backgrounds, and whether there are any further examples of Deaf Jews who were sterilized. One striking difference between forceful sterilization and Deaf Holocaust is that there were Deaf persons who volunteered to be sterilized whereas there were no Deaf Jews who volunteered to be killed.

There are significantly different signs for *Holocaust* in different languages. In American Sign Language, it is signed as "destroy" (Figure 1).



Figure 1: "Holocaust" in American Sign Language

In Holland, the sign "Holocaust" is like "gunshot into the air" (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Interview with Anna Vos-Van Dam, 2004

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11 Biesold, p. 201.

Furthermore, there is a Dutch sign for *Shoah* which is similar to “behead”. The Israeli sign for “Shoah” is like the Dutch sign but in the opposite direction (Figure 3).



*Figure 3: “Shoah” in Dutch Sign Language*

In Germany, we sign “burning or fire” to indicate the Holocaust (Figure 4).



*Figure 4: “Holocaust” in German Sign Language*

There is no conventionalized German sign for “Shoah”; I have suggested using a sign derived from the sign for “catastrophe”.

For “Sterilization”, the German sign is as shown in Figure 5:



*Figure 5: Interview with Fridolin Wasserkampf, 2004*

I would now like to discuss four specific Jewish Deaf groups that existed during the Nazi regime. The first group was Deaf Jews living in mixed marriages (intermarriage) in Germany. Some Jews had non-Jewish spouses (Catholics, for example), and this often enabled them to survive. On the other hand, it was possible for Germans to divorce and leave their Jewish spouses to their destiny. There were also Jews possessing forged identification papers or they went underground. Some Deaf Jews were able to survive this way. There were also Deaf Jews who hid or escaped. The third group included Deaf Jews deported to concentration camps. They endured brutal beatings and served as labor slaves there. Nevertheless, some managed to survive. The last group is Deaf children who were able to leave Germany without their parents.<sup>12</sup> They were brought to different places in Europe, often with no idea of where their parents were or were adopted and raised without full awareness of their backgrounds. It is essential that each group be considered separately.

For those wishing to undertake research in this field, the first question is “Where do we find information relating to these tremendously different circumstances?” Much information comes from survivors and accounts of their personal experiences, but most of these experiences are not documented. Survivors often disappear quietly to unknown places. However, information can be traced through various sources, including films, recorded interviews, photos, newspaper clippings and art. Interestingly enough, I have gleaned much information in my routine research from art. The subject of a particular work can reveal a great deal about an artist, often documenting what he or she saw and experienced. Those invaluable sources contribute greatly to documenting the past, enabling us to remember what should not be forgotten.

Let us return to the matter of mixed marriages. You will see here the photographs of three prominent Deaf German Jews who were active in the Deaf community and survived as a result of being in mixed marriages.



*Felix London*

Felix London (1890-1956) was married to a non-Jewish German, Anni, and survived the Nazi regime as a result. He was the vice president, honorary member and honorary president of the *Berliner Taubstummten Schwimmverein von 1900 e.V.* (BTSV) [Berlin Deaf-mute Swimming Association] which was the largest sports association at this time. Felix London was also founder and president of *Bund Deutscher Taubstummten-Schwimmvereine* [Head of German Deaf-mute Swimming Association]. He was also the president of *Zentralverein für das Wohl der Taubstunmmen* [the Central Association for the Welfare of Deaf-mutes] in Berlin, which was one of the oldest Deaf Associations in Germany (founded in 1849). Because of Aryanization, which excluded Deaf Jews from several Associations, in the winter of 1933 he became president of the provisional *Reichsbund der Gehörlosen* for Deaf Jews. Felix was a member of the Jewish community after the war until his death with his wife in a car accident.

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12 See also the papers of Douglas Bahl and John Hay in the Proceedings.



*Martin Czempin*

Martin Czempin (1875-1960) was a *Volljude* (full Jew, a term created by the Nazis in their Nuremberg racial laws). He also survived, having converted to Christianity in 1911 on marrying his deaf wife. His grandfather Hermann survived a pogrom in Poland. Martin Czempin was the German delegate at the International Conference of Deaf-mutes in 1904 in St. Louis, USA. He taught Signed German to pastors and teachers as requested by the directors of the Deaf schools in Berlin. Martin Czempin was a stalwart campaigner for the Deaf movement and worked as a volunteer with Pastor Schulz, the vice-president of the Association for the Welfare of Deaf-mutes in Berlin. He was the president of the *Bund der Berliner Taubstimmvereine* [Head of the Association of Berlin Deaf-Mutes Associations]. His nickname was “Angel of Peace” as he served as a mediator between the

Deaf Associations in Berlin. His father Alexander was a professor of medicine who committed suicide by injecting poison in order to avoid deportation in 1943. Alexander’s grandchild Robert was in the *Wehrmacht* [German Army]. Selma, Martin’s stepmother, had emigrated to Palestine in 1936. Alexander’s other son, Kurt Heinrich, died in 1938. Martin Czempin had two Deaf sons, Hans Hubert (1912-1995) and Wolfgang (1918-2007).

Martin Czempin’s second son, Wolfgang, can be seen in the photo on the right. He was categorized as a *Mischling* (half-breed) child under Nazi race laws.<sup>13</sup> During the Nazi regime, Wolfgang managed to survive in Berlin. He was allowed to work, but his parents’ home was outside Berlin and it took him one and a half hours each way to commute to work. He became the president of the *Deutscher Gehörlosen-Bund* [German Deaf Association] between 1973 and 1988. Deaf *Mischlinge* could be sterilized if they wanted to marry. Wolfgang married after the war. Under his presidency, sign language interpreting on TV and subtitling were established. He received the *Bundesverdienstkreuz 1. Klasse* [Federal Honorary Medal First Class] in 1984.



*Interview with Wolfgang Czempin, 2002*

13 Zaurov: *Gehörlose Juden. Eine doppelte kulturelle Minderheit*, Frankfurt 2003, pp. 85f; Zaurov: Interview with W. Czempin, 2002.



*Max Rosenstein*

There were other Jewish survivors. Max Rosenstein (1872-1956) was active in the Deaf Association of Hamburg, and was a member of the committee of the 8<sup>th</sup> German Deaf-mute Conference in 1911, as well as of the committee for the celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Samuel Heinicke School in 1927. He was also the president of the *Allgemeiner Unterstützungsverein der Taubstummten* [General Support Association of Deaf-mutes] from 1930 to 1932. In 1932, Carl Dollberg, who was an NSDAP member (National Socialist German Workers Party), succeeded him as president.<sup>14</sup> The records of the association show 52 votes for Dollberg and one vote for Rosenstein, although Rosenstein had not been nominated for re-election. The interpretation of these records is unclear. The records also state that he

had done enough for the association and it was time for young people. He and his Deaf wife Anna were excluded from ATUV in 1934 and therefore lost their pension rights, although they had made contributions to the pension fund for a long time.<sup>15</sup> After the war they rejoined the organization which was renamed AGUV. Their exclusion has never been officially discussed.

Willy Oppenheimer (1873-1961), who survived because of a mixed marriage, was also on the Board of REGEDE [German Reich Deaf Association]. He was very active for the Deaf and Deaf Jewish community. He was president of the *Verband märkischer Taubstummtenvereine* [Union of Deaf-mute Associations in Mark (Brandenburg)]. On the REGEDE-Board Willy Oppenheimer was attacked physically and with verbal anti-semitism by the REGEDE-leader Albrechts (see also below) in 1928.<sup>16</sup> In 1931 he became president of the German League of Deaf Jewish Associations which was established because of the then upcoming international conference for Deaf Jews in Prague.



*Willy Oppenheimer*

Other people managed to survive in unique ways.

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14 Zaurov: *The Fate of Deaf Jewish Survivors Who Were Not in Nazi Concentration Camps* Unpublished Abstract at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Deaf History in Washington D.C./USA 2000; Zaurov (2003), p. 85; Zaurov: Interview with Bernhard Rosenstein (1999).

15 Hannen, Chr.: *Von der Fürsorge zur Barrierefreiheit. Die Hamburger Gehörlosenbewegung 1875-2005*, Signum: Seedorf 2006, p. 88.

16 *Das Band*, No. 6/1928, p. 54-55.





*Interview with Lovis Varges, 2005*

Here, I would like to introduce the Deaf family Varges. Lovis Varges (1937-2005) should have been here with us at this conference but he unexpectedly passed away recently. His Deaf mother Else was Jewish and married to the Deaf artist Heinrich Varges in 1926. Else's Deaf brother Bruno (1896-1940) was murdered in KZ Sachsenhausen. Else risked her life to retrieve his urn from KZ Sachsenhausen. Heinrich converted to Judaism at the time of his marriage, and then later, back to Christianity to protect his family. The Nazis jailed him for three months in order to force him, under

torture, to sign divorce papers but he refused. Heinrich Varges was the president of the Association for Deaf Artists in Berlin after the war. Lovis told me how he faced the anti-Semitism of his teacher, Liepelt, in the Deaf school of Berlin after the war. Liepelt was a board member<sup>17</sup> of REGEDE and supposed to appear as the interpreter to Lovis's final exam for becoming a car mechanic but – on purpose - did not show up.

Now, I would like to introduce short biographies of Deaf Jews who were prominent in the Deaf community and who were murdered by the Nazis.

Paul Kroner (1880-1943), was the treasurer of BTSV and a co-founder of REGEDE 1927. As I mentioned in the conference opening ceremony, Kroner was also a self-employed dentist and taught Deaf pupils dentistry. He is to be seen in the documentary *Verkannte Menschen* [Misjudged People] which was made in 1932.<sup>18</sup> He was very well-known in the Deaf community. Kroner helped to ensure that the funds of the Central Association for the Welfare of Deaf-mutes in Berlin were safeguarded during the recession following WW I. Kroner was also co-founder of the BTSV and a member of BTSV for over 30 years. He had been made an honorary member as early as 1920.<sup>19</sup> He was later excluded from BTSV and deported to Auschwitz.



*Paul Kroner (right)*

17 It was at that time not uncommon for a teacher from a Deaf school to be on the board as an advisor. The role of Liepelt needs further research; it would be particularly interesting to know if he had deaf parents.

18 Booklet of the film "Verkannte Menschen. Ein Film aus dem Leben der Gehörlosen", published by the *Reichsverband der Gehörlosen Deutschlands*, Berlin 1932, p. 17.

19 Guhr, O.: Aus der Gehörlosenwelt. Berlin. Paul Kroner 50 Jahre. In: *Die Stimme*, No. 12/1930, Leipzig, p. 3.



Der neue geschäftsführende Vorstand des Reichsverbands der Gehörlosen Deutschlands, E. V.  
 Von links nach rechts: Lipitz, Sallin, Becker, Levy, Erdmann, Siegel, Meißner, Prof. Wahn, Berlin.

REGEDE board 1929

Alphons Levy (1888-1942) was a merchant<sup>20</sup>. The photograph on the left shows the REGEDE board with Levy in the middle. In 1927 he was the REGEDE treasurer. He was also treasurer of several associations, such as the Central Association for the Welfare of Deaf-

Mutes in Berlin, the BTVS and *Frohsinn* [cheerfulness], a Deaf Theater club. Levy was also on the editorial staff of *Das Band*, a newspaper for the Deaf Jewish community, and the *Deutsche Allgemeine Taubstumm-Zeitung* [German General Deafmute Newspaper] which was one of the most widely read Deaf community newspapers beside *Die Stimme* [The Voice]. He was among the first Jews deported to a ghetto in Lodz, Poland. Kroner, Kaiser, Levy, London and Czempin were friends and saw each other frequently. They also worked together. The last piece of news that came from Alphons Levy was when he sent a postcard from Lodz to Czempin's family. Before his deportation Levy had lived in Erwin Kaiser's apartment.

Although Kroner, Levy and others were prominent in the German Deaf community, the current German Deaf Association, DGB, REGEDE's successor, has not given proper acknowledgement and appreciation of these men's activities and their contributions to the Deaf community, since without their efforts, there would have been no REGEDE at that time in Berlin, despite its sizable Deaf community.

One irony of REGEDE's history is that it was founded in order to resist the implementation of the forced sterilization legislation. The first president was Albregths (1892-1945). He retired after a short time and later returned as the president of NS-REGEDE in 1933. Albregths had joined the NSDAP before Hitler's rise to power and directed an official NSDAP office for the Deaf in Berlin<sup>21</sup>. No research on Albregths has been undertaken by the DGB to date. Albregths retired in 1928 from REGEDE after he had physically and verbally attacked Willy Oppenheimer.<sup>22</sup>



REGEDE by-law 1937

20 In some documents, his profession is mentioned as “chemist laborant”.

21 *Gehörlosen-Jahrbuch* 1932/33, p. 106.

22 *Das Band*, No. 6/1928, p. 54-55.