

OK, this is January 22nd, and we're at the home of Helga Gross for an interview for the Holocaust Museum. Would you tell us about where you grew up, what your family was like, your parents, your siblings, your background?

I grew up at my parents' home. I was a very happy child until Hitler changed everything. And he changed my life. It was very rough.

Did you know about Hitler and his policies? When did you become aware of Hitler and his policies?

He was president of-- in Germany, Interbruck-- oh, at the Hindenburg. President Hindenburg, when he died, Hitler took over. We were all shocked that that happened. Before, we didn't know. My grandmother was crying. My mother and father-- what's going on? We had no idea.

How old were you at the time?

I think it was 1933 when he took over, so I was 13 years old. I remember it well. When I saw my parents and my grandmother, they were all crying. I didn't understand yet. I was still too young, and I was deaf. So interviews were very difficult.

How did you communicate in your family because-- well, first tell us-- I'm sorry. First tell us about your family and were they all deaf? Or were your parents deaf? Or-- give us a little bit more about what your family was like.

My parents were hearing. My father was awkward. He really didn't have good communication with deaf people. My mother was a singer. And she really taught me how to speak, and play the piano-- and with intonation, using the piano. I practiced a lot and that's one reason I spoke well, the German language, that is.

Every morning at breakfast, we would sit with paper and pencil. And I would try and talk to my parents using a different language. My parents thought that I was using a wrong language. They said, you must speak properly. If it was wrong, then we would write down on the paper the correct way. And they told me I must read a lot of books and learn the language correctly.

So it was your mother who really was the communicator in the family?

Yes.

What about with your--

They never ignored-- my mother never ignored me or my brother. The two of us were deaf, and she always paid attention to us. I have another brother and sister as well, and they're hearing. And they played music. I couldn't hear anything, but we were very happy as children. Always music in the house. Music's in our blood, all of us.

T--t--tell-- go ahead.

When people would come to visit or to eat, there were-- we were always playing and they would ask us questions. They would say the alphabet. For five minutes we would have to write-- or I would write-- until I got everything right. And if the names were wrong, it would be like a game-- who could remember the names and who could spell them right? And I would win.

I remember being so happy. We would go out after dinner for a walk. My father taught me, what's the name of that tree? And see that bird? Here's the name of this bird. Always trying to teach me, my father was-- all of the children, actually. He would use gestures and he would move his mouth.

How did she understand what he was saying? Did she read lips, or--

Yes, I read his lips.

[PHONE RINGING]

My mother could see in my mind, but the German language, I hadn't learned it. It was a hard process.

[PHONE RINGING]

Can you tell her to stop the telephone ringing?

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Ask her again because the phone-- because the phone rang, if she would tell us again about how she and her father communicated.

Again? Start from what I said before? What do you mean again?

Yes, from what she said before about what she would walk with her father--

[PHONE RINGING]

We have to unplug the phone.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

[PHONE RINGING]

Phone's ringing again.

We're rolling again.

OK, so I'm trying to understand if her family-- did they sign? Or did they just read lips? Or how did they communicate?

We read lips and signed too. My parents didn't have anything against signing. They thought signing was beautiful. Signing has helped to relax with deaf people. It's hard to just-- and stressful to just read lips, so they preferred us to be relaxed.

Some other people's parents were against signing. And they really forced them to speech read, and the children got very frustrated. But I was very relaxed and very happy because my mother and father had a lot of music in the house, and they understood the arts. And there was a lot of love around us always. I was very lucky to have the parents I had.

Tell us about your school-- what kind of school you went to.

It was a deaf school. Did you read about-- deaf and dumb is what it means. A long time ago, they used to refer to deaf as deaf and dumb. Deaf-- stumm, in German. And I would be silent. I would just say deaf, not dumb. Now it's like handicapped. That's much better than long time ago, when they said deaf and dumb.

I would go back and forth from home to school. It was about a 30-minute walk. I was very happy with my classmates at school. We played around, we talked. Signing was not allowed in school. The teachers forced us to speech read. But when we were outside, we all signed together.

And how long did you go to this school? Was it-- did she start school in this school?

Until I was 14 years old, I went to that school. Maybe-- I went-- my mother took me to school, I think first to a hard of

hearing school. And they found out that I didn't hear well enough, so then they put me in the school for the deaf. I was nine years old-- eight or nine at the time. Stayed there until I was 14.

Then I stayed home with my parents. I was like a house-daughter. I cleaned, I cooked. They taught me how to speak, and how to do a lot of things.

Was this--

When I was-- two years later, when I was 16, this house-daughter learned to cook and sew and everything, so then I went to work. I went to work as a weaver. I learned art.

I went to school with hearing people, of course. It was really difficult for me. I was frustrated. I didn't really understand what the teacher was saying. My mother talked with the administrators about my problem and being deaf.

Bibliotheque-- I went into the library, got books, and it still didn't satisfy me enough. I needed to have that one-on-one education. But I had to accept that I was deaf, so they just went ahead and let me go to work.

I think when I was 17 or 18 years old, the boss where I was doing weaving, he really liked me. I was kind of his pet. They liked my designs.

A very small town, where he lived, the boss invited me to their house to work. There was one town, then Hamburg, and another town. The bombs started happening in Hamburg, and destroyed everything. My parents evacuated. They went south. I stayed in the island-- I stayed in the island-- on the island.

I begged my boss to contact my parents, but he refused. He just told me to stay put, and I cried so much. I hoped that my parents were still alive. I didn't know if they were dead or alive. There was no contact for a month. And finally, we received word that my parents were alive. Then my boss allowed me to go and see my parents. I stayed in the south, in Bavaria.

Ask her how old was she when she left school, and how old was she when she left--

I was 14 when I left school.

And when did you leave home?

Around 16. Our house was destroyed by fire. My father had many, many books. And the fire destroyed all of them but one. My brother and I-- the three of us, my deaf brother and I-- the other brother and sister were gone. One was in the army. My other sister was gone. My deaf brother and I, we were with my parents, and we saw what was left. A lot of people died from the bombings and the fires.

Can we go back when she was in school, and talk about what happened when the steriliz-- how they were told by their teacher when the sterilization law took effect? One moment.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

So again, my question is when did she-- how did she find out about the sterilization law? And how did they talk to her about it in school?

In the class, a teacher came into the room and said, good morning. There were six boys and four girls. And I was one of the girls. We were all sitting in like a semicircle and the teacher was standing up by the window, just looking. We were just waiting. The teacher didn't teach anything. We were wondering what was wrong.

Then came a man from the government. It was very interesting. And he said to all of us, school students-- he was explaining to us how to breathe-- and you must go to the hospital for sterilization. And we said, what? Why? What do

you mean go to the hospital for sterilization? He explained that when you grow up and get married, you won't be able to have a baby. We said, huh? It means we can't have a baby? We all looked at each other. We really didn't understand. Then he left.

I went home, and I told my mother. My mother really didn't explain it to me. Later I found out that my mother had gotten a letter from them. No, wait-- forget-- just a moment.

They chose an 11-year-old girl from my class. She had deaf parents. They took them all to the hospital at one time, and sterilized them. When they came back-- we were young, we really didn't understand. Especially clearly, we didn't understand what it all meant. Well, we just thought nothing of it and continued playing.

My father, I was like his pet, he really loved me. And I felt funny. I told my mother, why is my father so affectionate and loves me so much as compared with my other sisters and brothers? Why, what's wrong? Mother said, oh, your father likes you just like everybody else. Everybody's equal. We love to see you smile though. He called me sunshine.

Then as the time became near, I remember very well, I was in the kitchen and I was cleaning. My mother came and said, Helga, sit down. And she explained, you have to go to the hospital in two days. I said, I have to go to the hospital to get sterilized?

I was calm. I kind of accepted it. My mother must have thought something was wrong or that I was going to run away or get crazy, but I was very calm. She said, how come-- later she asked me, how come you were so calm? And I said, well, the other girls had it done, so I just accepted it, that it was fair. If they did, I guess it was my turn.

My father cried. He refused to see me. He didn't want to hug me before I left home to go to the hospital.

It was a very small, cute hospital-- a very nice place, actually. Babies-- only babies were born there. A woman did the surgery, gave me anesthetic and a shot. Everything was good and clean.

After the surgery, I woke up. I was throwing up, and I could feel something heavy on my stomach. My mother was sitting next to me. And I tapped her, she was like sleeping. I said, Mummy, Mummy.

The second sister underneath me opened the door and looked in and said, hi. Her big eyes looked in at me, and I was laughing. She was so funny-- to see her, just these two big eyes poking through the door. Oh, but the pain when I laughed, oh-ho, great pain. I said, go away.

Where was my father? He couldn't come. He was so embarrassed because he was crying for me. Later, two of my schoolmates came, and the three of us just sat and cried.

Did she know-- well, to go back a little bit, when-- how old was she when that man first came in? And then how old was she when the operation happened to her?

I was 11 or 12 years old. The other girl was 11 when she went to the hospital. I hadn't gone to the hospital until I was 16. They were hoping that I wouldn't have to go, but I wanted to become a grandmother, you see. And that's the reason-- oh, they wanted to become a grandmother if I had a child. And that's the reason my mother was crying and my father too.

Did she-- did you understand why this was happening? Why they were doing this?

Not until later-- years later. When I moved to the United States in 1954, five years later, I went back to Germany for a visit. I saw my baby sister. She had a beautiful baby.

The baby was so beautiful and I got to hold the baby. And that morning, my sister was feeding the baby. And then I realized what I felt when I realized I couldn't have any children. I started to cry. And I ran into the bathroom and just cried and cried.

When I came back out, my sister said, what's wrong? What's the matter? I said, oh, I'm just crying because I'm happy for you because you have a beautiful child. Then the next day I saw other people with babies and I cried. And as I got older, I tried to forget about it.

How old was she when this-- when this happened, when she took this trip? Was she married? Or was she single? Or--

I was married then. I was 35 years old, about.

Did the officials, the government officials, or your family explain why this had to happen to you, why this operation was going to happen?

My mother's brother was a judge, and he was trying to help us to prevent the operation. He was not successful. Oh, he was not a member of the Nazi regime, so it didn't work. My father was the same way.

I was a Girl Scout, and they were trying to force me to become a member of the Nazi party. I said, oh, no. They said, you must. I said, why? Because you can speak with hearing people and other-- and children. Well, my mother taught me how to speak.

They gave me the paper, told me I had to go to the flag-- where the flag was, and sign some papers. I refused. My weaving boss invited me to the island to stay. And I went there and I told the teacher, I'm leaving for the island, they invited me. I don't know how long I'll stay. She said, bring the papers with you. You must go in there with your papers and take them with you everywhere. My heart sank. I felt so much fear for a very long time.

I would sleep, and then I would walk to work. The Nazis, two of them would stand there with their flags as I walked by. I had the papers with me all the time. Should I go or not? Should I go or not? I would pass them. I was afraid they would pull me back by my hair. But they didn't. I'd say, no. And every day this would happen. And I'd be filled with fear as I walked past these two men with their flags.

And they were bombing Hamburg. And I needed to rest. And I thought I needed some relief. But I heard later that our teacher was dead from the bombs.

Then when I went to the south to join with my father and mother, I still had those papers with me. Then during the war, then we saw the white flag. Bombs were everywhere. And now I could claim-- come to-- from south, I went to-- could go to America.

Before I came to America-- in Germany-- the Americans, the Germans-- we lost the war. Hitler died. That was good. When we saw the white flag, it meant that we had given up, that there was no more war.

The American soldiers saw us, and they tore the papers, threw them away-- threw them in the fireplace and burned them up. Boy, did I feel relieved. And years later, when I wanted to come to the USA, my husband's uncle helped us. They-- to support us for five years. And after five years, I became an American citizen.

Before, in Germany, in Hamburg, my husband and I asked his aunt and uncle. They lived in Michigan-- Detroit, Michigan. We came as an immigrant-- as immigrants. And they were very happy to help us, to support us.

But the aunt and uncle went to the American Consulate. And at the consulate they asked for papers, and they told them about my husband and I, that we were deaf. They turned us down. They said deaf was not allowed to come to the United States. I was very disappointed.

Two years later, one American man from Boston-- he was deaf himself-- we became good friends. We told him about wanting to come to the States. And we said we were looking for freedom. And I had read books about America, and I was so impressed.

This man said, good. He helped us go to the American Consulate, and asked for our papers. And he said, I will support them. They turned us down again. Second time I was disappointed.