

[INAUDIBLE]. OK. So the gentleman went to Washington DC, and he typed out everything, and finally, they allowed us to come to the United States, thanks to this gentleman from Boston. We'd been waiting for two years on a list. There were many people.

Finally, they called us. Well, actually, it is less than two years. They called us to come to America. The first and second times, there were so many questions.

And there was a list, and one of the questions that they asked had you been a member of the Nazi party? And I answered, no! And in my mind, I looked back, and I thought, oh, if I had said yes, they wouldn't let us come to the US, if I had joined way back when. This is true.

So I'm so happy that that never took place, that they didn't force me. So they swore us in. You have to obey the laws in the United States, and they explain some of the rules. We said, yes, yes I do. I do.

OK. Let's go back, and again, I need to know if they explained why this operation needed to happen to you deaf children.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

She has to start the answer with my question.

They explained to the deaf children that they didn't want deaf children-- that they had to be sterilized, because they didn't want deaf children to have children who would grow up and be deaf as well. So this is how they explained it to us. My brother was deaf, as well as me. So a long time ago, in the generation, it just happened to the two of us. We don't know why. This other classmate of mine, her parents were hearing, and she was free from it, because her father was a member of the Nazi party.

Did you think, because there was so much time that passed from the time that they first told you-- so you were 16, and they took you for the operation. Did you think all that time that you were still possibly going to get this operation?

Well, really, I wasn't even thinking about it. My mother didn't explain it to me enough, and the teachers certainly didn't explain it to all of us. Once was enough. That was all, once they told us and not more than that. So I really didn't give it much thought.

Did anyone, either in your family or in the school try to stop them from doing these operations?

The school, people from the school but not my family.

OK. She has to, again, nobody's going to know what I asked her.

The men that came from the government to our school told the teacher to choose which children that we should send to the hospital for sterilization.

But did anyone try to stop them from doing it?

My uncle who was a judge tried to stop it from happening, but he failed.

OK. After-- no that's [INAUDIBLE] after the war, how did the operation affect your plans to marry?

My husband, I felt sorry for my husband. He was sterilized too, and he had gotten the letter. And they sent him to the hospital, and he refused. He rebelled against it. Then, he got a second letter, and he rebelled again.

The third time, they came and took him to the hospital without any anesthetic. They just tied his hands down, and they

sterilized him, and he screamed. But he was very strong in his mind, very wonderful.

He was a good sportsman. He was in the Olympic swimmers. He was an Olympic swimmer. After the operation, no, he went downhill.

So he was looking for a woman, and then he found me, and I was a good swimmer too. So we had peace of mind neither of us could have children. So it was a good marriage in that sense.

How old was her husband when they did this to him?

I think he was 17 or 18 years old, I think.

He was 17 or 18 years old what?

When they sterilized him. His aunt from Michigan had come to see him. My husband must have gone to the hospital for sterilization, and his aunt said, come with me. Come with me, and he said, no.

He was in the headlines, because he was a famous swimmer, like Johnny [? Wissmiller ?] was in the States. He kept all of these clippings together, and his aunt did. And his father said to him, you have to play with girls, before you have a baby, before you get sterilized. And he said, no, I don't want to play with girls. But it failed. They took him anyway.

So even though he was a famous, admired athlete, that didn't keep them from doing this to him?

No. I don't know why, but they didn't ask him any questions really. I really don't like to think of the past so much, and he didn't think about it. We now have to look forward. I feel sorry for thousands of people who died. In the camps, they had it worse than I did, actually.

I'm thankful. I'm very thankful. I'm still alive. I'm 80 years old. I can climb. I can do lots of things.

I have a question. It sounds like your family life was wonderful.

Yes.

So to your parents, there was nothing wrong with you, but you couldn't hear, except you couldn't hear.

Right.

And then, the government--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And then the government comes and says, you're defective.

Defective? My parents were very proud of us, and they were proud that I could come to the United States. They applauded that, without an interpreter, just the two of us, ourselves. Because that world is certainly different, and I learned English.

In Germany, I learned English there too. I could say goodbye. I love you. Thank you, just a little bit of English, and then I progressed.

But my question is, when you were a child there, in the school, when they were doing these operations, did you suddenly feel like something was wrong with you that you-- before, you didn't feel like anything was bad about you, and then now somebody is telling you you're no good.

Later, I woke up, when I realized it was because I couldn't hear. I was really very innocent when I was younger.

So in fact, she didn't know why they were doing the operation?

I knew that they were doing the operation so I couldn't have children to perpetuate deafness.

So she did know that.

Yes. I knew why they were doing the operation.

OK. Do you have any more questions that you'd like to know about this? Because really, I pretty much got everything. No, I'm asking you.

I have one.

OK. Yeah.

I had a few, but--

There was a conversation in some papers that she carried with her for a long time and then were torn up, and I never quite understood what those papers were. But apparently they were bad papers. [INAUDIBLE].

Explain what the papers were.

It said that I was a member of the Nazi party, because I was a Girl Scout. So those papers that I carried said I was a leader of the Girl Scouts, and so I had to carry those papers that said I was a member of the Nazi party. I really wasn't, but that's what the paper said. They were forcing me to join, but in the back of my head, I knew. God helped pull me back.

I would not go in. I had the papers to become a member, but I wouldn't do it. And every day, when I would walk from the house to the job, and I would pass by the soldiers. I would just feel the fear that they might ask if I was a member or not, and for years this went on. After America claimed Germany, that's when I felt like a bird, free, I could fly free.

But the papers said she was a member of the Nazi party?

They weren't filled in. The papers were not filled in. I just carried them with me. There were no answers, and I hadn't signed the papers. So they didn't really say anything. I didn't sign them.

An American soldier said I must go to my boss and ask for a file to see if I had anything on my record, but I had a clean record. The Nazi had a huge file in the basement, and they found papers on them, because I knew some of the people. Some of my friends' uncles or nephews, they came from Bulgaria to the United States, and they said, do you remember? And they asked them, were you a member of the Nazi party? And they denied it.

They said, OK, you're accepted, and then they could support these people when they came to America. When you went to the American consulate, you had to take an oath two to tell the truth. And they asked, are you a member of the Nazi party, and somebody confessed to saying, yes.

They took their file. They put their name in the file. So I was afraid that that same thing would happen to me. So I never signed those papers.

Do you have any questions that arose during this?

As a deaf woman, did you know German sign language, and then how, when you came to America, did you learn American Sign Language?

I would meet friends and I asked them to help me. And I picked up a dictionary, English, German, German and English, so I could learn different signs. And the Lutheran preacher at the church, I asked him to come to my aunt and uncle's house to teach me finger spelling and sign language for one year, and that's how I learned.

What happened to your brother with regard to the sterilization? Was he supposed to be sterilized also? No, they didn't sterilize him. He has twin daughters. They're both hearing, beautiful girls. He was lucky.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

He didn't avoid it. He was supposed to go to the hospital, but the hospital was full. And it was wartime, and many soldiers and people were being rushed to the hospital. There was no available space for him, so he didn't go. So they did not sterilize him.

He was very happy. I was happy. People would ask me, do you feel bad that your brother has two children and you don't have any? I said, no, I'm very happy that he has twins. I'm just happy that I have two beautiful nieces.

Did any health officials or anyone come to your family to explain that they thought deafness was hereditary?

No, nothing.

There was no discussions about that?

When I was 28 years old, I came to the United States. Germany, during wartime, was different. It was a very rough life over there, but it was different here.

But when you were going through this operation, or when they took you for this operation, did anybody explain that deafness was hereditary, and this was something that they had to do?

No, nothing, nothing was explained. Only once did the teacher tell us that you can't have babies. We're going to make you not have babies, so that the deafness doesn't become perpetuated. And that was it, just one time, and we didn't have any time really to focus on it. It was a very confusing time for all of us, all the time confusion.

Now, you're making me look back on it more in depth. I didn't realize about the deaf world itself back then. They would call some of the mentally retarded. They would mainstream them in a church.

All of us deaf people, mentally retarded people, they would put them-- there was a church, and a lot of the people died from fire. Most of them were mentally retarded. They would take them away to this church, and years later, some of the kids were still alive.

Most, if they were deaf, they were allowed to go to the church. They were healthy, except they just couldn't hear, and so they would send them off on their way. You know, to the gas chambers, to the camps. I didn't know where they were really taking them.

One boy came from Guatemala, South America. His father sent him to school for the deaf. He was two or three years older than me. He went out of class from school. He liked me.

He explained all about the Nazis and how bad it was, and I learned a lot from him. And I said, how do you know, and he said his uncle took care of him. His father stayed in South America, and his uncle took care of him. His uncle told him about the Nazis, and they said they will kill everybody, all the German kids. They'll sterilize all the German kids.

He knew so much. That's when I started to become afraid, and he was fearful as well. I talked to my father, and he would just try to pacify me and calm me down. He'd say, don't worry, don't worry. My father was very sensitive.

My father's sister, my aunt, and I asked my aunt, I said, is Hitler bad? I went to Munich for a visit with another aunt, and I learned from them that Hitler was bad, and we should all be against Hitler. But we had to do it very quietly, and they'd listen to the radio.

And if they'd hear out of their county, like from England or out of their country what they were saying against Germany, they'd listen very carefully. They'd have to be careful, because there would be a knock at the door, and they put them in jail. So I learned from my aunts.

Then, I told my father. They told me, Hitler's bad. My father said, sh, sh. He was frightened. He said, if you talk against Hitler, they'll put you away.

They warned that the enemy could hear you all over. It didn't matter where you were. So you needed to be careful, if you said anything in front of anybody, because they could take you and send you to the camps. So I learned a lot from my two aunts and from the boy from Guatemala.

Ask her how old she was when this happened.

I was still in school. Maybe I was 12 years old, 11 or 12 years old. I'm trying to remember. I kind of forget some things about the past.

OK. I think we're done. OK. We need to sit and be quiet for 30 seconds. Room tone. All right. OK.

We have the [INAUDIBLE].

That's right. The date's on the back of it.

1977, I think.

Right. She was born what year? 23?

[INAUDIBLE].

This is [? Helga ?] Gross at age 14 in front of the School for the Deaf.

And that's in Hamburg?

In Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany.

[INAUDIBLE].

I can do this. I might be able to give you a little squeeze in.

Did you give me the wide one?

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[INAUDIBLE].

I don't want to go in any farther, because the picture's [INTERPOSING VOICES]

Well, yeah, we're just way beyond the limits of magnification.

OK.

I can't do any moves on the [INAUDIBLE].

Right.

OK. So [? Orville, ?] you can tell us what's going on here.

OK. This is Helga [? Gross ?] with her mother and father. Helga is on the left, and her sister is on the right on her mother's lap. Helga's on her father's lap, and her sister's on her mother's lap. [INAUDIBLE].

OK. It's turning.

[INAUDIBLE].

Helga's father died at 90 in 19--

61.

61. Let's see if we can get--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[INAUDIBLE].

She talked so much about her father.

My father was in England for 26 years and was married there, and then his first wife died. He met a second English woman for years, and then there was the first world war. My father moved out of England.

[INAUDIBLE].

So the two of them together have five children? My mother was very young. She was only 23 years old. My father was 50. Wow. OK.

Here we go.

[INAUDIBLE].

If people come by, and they watch, and they see video tape rolling, and they see her signing, you can have captions.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

So this is Helga, Helga's mother. Helga is on the bottom left on her mother's lap. Standing up is her sister, and the baby is her hearing brother.

[INAUDIBLE].