

Our Lives – Our Stories: Life Experiences of Elderly Deaf People



Edited by
Roland Pfau, Aslı Göksel and Jana Hosemann

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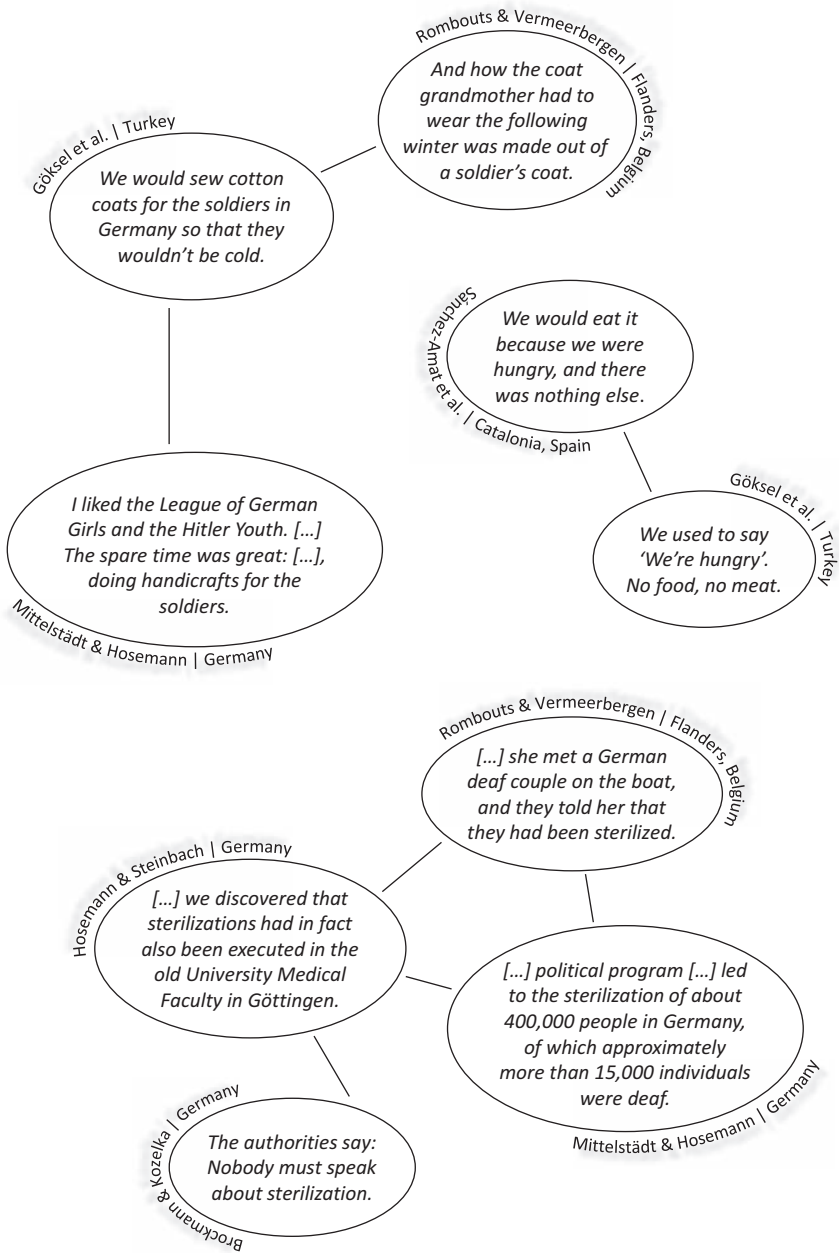
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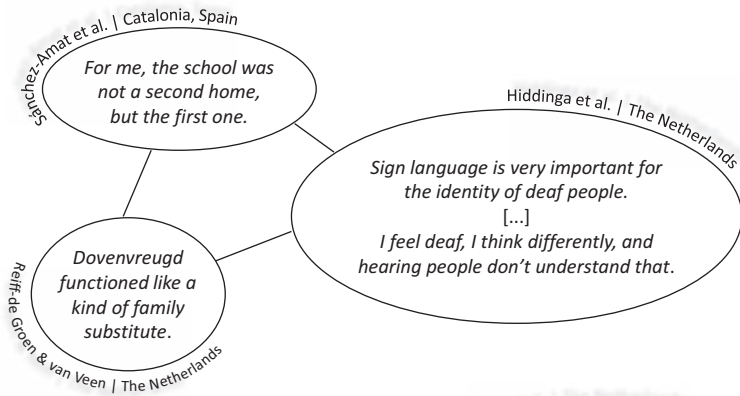
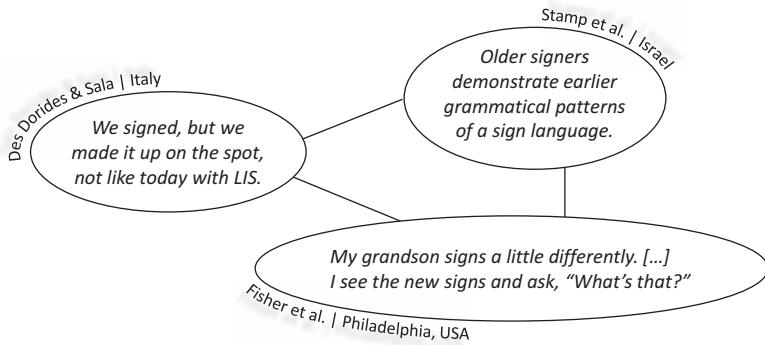
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Jana Hosemann and Markus Steinbach

In collaboration with Christa Gaisbichler, Rieke Giese, Franziska Karger, Annika Mittelstädt, Dorothee Nyga, and Benita Pangritz.

Making the life stories of Deaf seniors visible: a students' exhibition

1 How the idea of an exhibition came into being

When the SIGN-HUB project was in its second year, at the beginning of 2018, the SIGN-HUB team in Göttingen, Germany, had already collected the first 25 interviews with Deaf elderly signers. Jana Hosemann, Jens-Michael Cramer (who conducted the interviews), and Markus Steinbach were sitting in a team meeting discussing the latest deliverable and our first major step of collecting the interviews. We were also planning how we could proceed with the annotations and subtitles of the interviews, when it struck our minds: Why don't we present our first results to a broader public in an exhibition? Well, developing an exhibition, just the three of us, seemed unrealistic. But, what if we could find a group of enthusiastic students? Students who have basic knowledge of German Sign Language (*Deutsche Gebärdensprache*, DGS) and the Deaf community, students who are energetic and would not mind investing time into a course beyond the compulsory curriculum. Luckily, just at that time, a group of students was creating and directing a unique bilingual theater performance (Dickens' *Christmas Carol*), presenting the play simultaneously in German and DGS. Hence, these were the first students we asked. Also, we knew a few students who had already been involved in some of our other projects on sign language; and additionally, we could contact enthusiastic students in the DGS classes offered at Göttingen University. Consequently, we soon had an excited crew of 13 students to start this ambitious project.

2 First steps: getting everyone organized

Creating an exhibition requires content, creative ideas how to present the content, (wo)manpower, and quite some financial support. In February 2018, we applied for the students' research and teaching fellowship *Forschungsorientiertes Lehren und Lernen (FoLL)* ('research-oriented teaching and learning'), who supported our

idea with about 3,000 €, additional to project money we had already budgeted for dissemination activities. However, money is no help without people who stand behind the idea and are willing to put a lot of effort, brain power, and creativity into creating the exhibition. Hence, getting organized and becoming a team was one of our first goals. We stretched the course over two semesters, four hours of meetings every week. We needed weekly DGS-German interpreting and were lucky to find a highly committed team of interpreters who accompanied us from the very beginning until the opening of the exhibition. Once the times and course structure had been fixed, we just needed to get everyone motivated to commit to the idea and to the work that would come. The 12 credit points for the course provided by the curriculum surely didn't seem enough to compensate for the effort.

So, how did we start? At the very beginning, we met in a pub and got to know each other. We established a personal connection, shared quality time, and became a group. Instead of 'teaching' the students, Jana, Jens and Markus rather coordinated the meetings and acted like supervisors of this creative scientific process. The plan was to use the first semester to fix the content of the exhibition, in other words: watch and understand the interviews with the Deaf elderly signers, find relevant topics for the exhibition, and visit schools and archives to collect additional materials to make the exhibition more accessible and vivid. The second semester was scheduled to transform the content into pieces for the exhibition; that is, thinking about creative ways how to present the contents defined in the first semester, in order to avoid boring posters with a lot of text that nobody would bother to read. An exciting year lay ahead of us.

3 First semester (April to July 2018): content

The first challenge we faced was in fact understanding the interviews. The students' DGS competence was based on DGS courses between level 1 and level 4. However, Deaf elderly seniors, aged 70 and above, sign rather differently compared to what is generally taught in DGS introductory courses. To exemplify this discrepancy: We invited five seniors to visit our class, so we could get to know each other and learn directly about their life experiences. In order to break the ice, every student and supervisor was supposed to introduce her- or himself by spelling their name in the manual alphabet. Polite as the seniors were, they nodded friendly after each person introduced themselves. Until we noticed a little hesitation and some frowned eye brows. It turned out that the one-handed manual alphabet the Deaf community is using nowadays was not familiar to the seniors. Spelling proper names is rather a 'modern' phenomenon that is used by

younger signers, but is not common to signers who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s. Conversely, elderly signers use a two-handed manual alphabet that is not known by many younger signers today. Fortunately, Jens, who had conducted the interviews, could help us to bridge this communication gap by translating the DGS signing of the seniors into DGS we would understand. Similarly, he helped us understand the interviews by preparing pre-transcriptions of the content of the interviews. Only through this, we were able to understand what the seniors were telling in the interviews. (Note, at that time of the project, we did not yet have full translations of the interviews; these only came at a later point.)

The second challenge we faced was the lack of knowledge about sign languages and Deaf culture in the hearing majority, that is, the potential visitors of our exhibition. Like in many countries all over the world, the Deaf community in Germany represents a cultural and linguistic minority, about which the majority of the hearing population has very limited knowledge. Since very little knowledge about DGS and the Deaf community is made publicly accessible to a broader audience, prejudices about Deaf people and sign languages persist. The resulting lack of knowledge leads to an intensification of the existing communicative barriers for both Deaf and hearing people. Consequently, for our exhibition, we had to select topics that are representative of the life of Deaf elderly people. In addition, we had to find ways to display these topics in a way that would be transparent to a broad (hearing) audience (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Part of the group working on their research topics.

We decided on six main topics for our exhibition: (1) *family life*, (2) *school education*, (3) *professional education and work life*, (4) *Deaf clubs and associations*, (5) *Deaf people in Nazi Germany*, and (6) a short *introduction to German Sign Language*. With these topics, we aimed to raise awareness not only about the experiences of Deaf people in Germany but also about how their language and culture has developed. In addition, we wanted to illustrate that the Deaf community is an integral and important part of the history of each society, and that sign language and Deaf culture enrich (multilingual and multicultural) societies as a whole. One overarching goal of this project was to address prejudices against the Deaf community and to create awareness that the life of Deaf people in Germany was sometimes very hard in the past – and unfortunately sometimes still is in the present days.

In order to delve deeper into the topics, we conducted round table discussions and invited experts on different topics: for example, Elisabeth Brockmann, a historian with a hearing-impairment, who has a large private collection of documents on the sterilization of Deaf people during Nazi Germany (see Brockmann & Kozelka, this volume). Other guests were Martina Bergman, who is one of the few professional museum tour guides offering integrative tours for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, Helmut Vogel, who is a Deaf historian and president of the German Deaf Association, and Jürgen Wolf, an expert on genealogy and the aging of minorities in Western societies.

At the end of the first semester, each group presented the results of their research in a short presentation to the whole group. Whatever each group had accomplished at that time became the foundation for the next step: transforming the content into visual pieces appropriate for an exhibition that was going to attract Deaf and hearing people, old and young people, students and non-academics, as well as people with and without knowledge about the Deaf community, Deaf history, and sign languages.

In the following, we briefly summarize the main findings for four of the six topics we prepared for the exhibition: *school education*, *professional education and work life*, *Deaf clubs and associations*, and *Deaf people in Nazi Germany*.

3.1 School education

The main points of interest about the topic *school education* were: (i) the development of schools for the deaf (from the very beginning in the 14th century until today); (ii) the educational methods that were used in the schools; (iii) what Deaf elderly people remembered in the interviews about their own school and educational experiences; (iv) how these educational landscapes and settings (with a focus on methods and didactics) have changed in the last 60 years.

The study of this topic turned out to be more difficult, challenging, and frustrating than expected. Historical documents, books and articles, private photo albums and documents, the interviews with the Deaf elderly people, and movie documentaries from different European countries helped us with the first three research questions. It was interesting but also touching to see and read the personal experiences of Deaf people with oral education, suppression of sign language, and the deprivation of their communicative abilities. The fourth research question turned out to be especially difficult because there is very little documentation on the history of the existing schools for the Deaf in Germany. The schools in each federal state and region had to be investigated separately, and most of the information had to be gathered from the individual website of each school, which, however, varied significantly in their informative quality. Fortunately, most of these websites had a section on the history of the school, thus at least making it possible to put together an approximate puzzle of the schools for the Deaf in Germany at the time when the Deaf seniors had been pupils, i.e., around the 1950s. We were interested in information about when the schools were founded, whether they concentrated on oral or bilingual teaching methods, and if it was/is possible to finish the school with the general qualification for university entrance (i.e., "Abitur"). The data we were able to collect about the situation in the 1950s and today should, however, be treated with caution, because most of the data rely on statements and information provided by the schools themselves. Interestingly, many schools provided the requested information only very cautiously and reluctantly, and sometimes even used euphemistic terms about the teaching methods they use. Sometimes, the name of the school revealed the focus of education such as, for instance, *Special School for Hearing and Communication*, indicating an orally centered education. Other schools that either have started a bilingual program, or that considered the implementation of a bilingual program, or that at least introduced sign language classes in their program, typically emphasized this aspect on their website. They referred to this educational strategy as "a sign language component" or "a bilingual focus" of education. We defined the former as *somewhat oral* schools and the latter as *somewhat bilingual* schools.

It was surprising to see that the school landscape and the teaching methods used in Germany have not changed much over the last 60 years (see Figure 2). Recent educational approaches such as bilingual bimodal education and inclusion only enter this field slowly. The oral tradition is still a heavy burden for many Deaf children and adults (including the seniors), who were and are expected to lip-read for hours, receive excessive training in oral articulation, and at the same time were and are not allowed to use their sign language in class. Also, the separation of hearing and non-hearing children into different school systems



Figure 2: Schools for the Deaf in Germany, around 1950 and 2018 (poster displayed at the exhibition). Dark circle: somewhat oral school; light circle: somewhat bilingual school; dark triangle: somewhat oral “Abitur”; light triangle: somewhat bilingual “Abitur”.

is still the standard in the educational scenery in Germany. A widespread modern bilingual and inclusive education for Deaf children is not in sight, as only a few schools show a tendency towards this important educational goal.

3.2 Professional education and work life

Their experiences during their work life was one of the most prominent topics in the interviews with the Deaf seniors. The discussion with the five seniors who had been invited to our seminar and the analysis of the interviews revealed that certain professions kept re-occurring in the lives of Deaf people: for example, tailor, cobbler, carpenter, draftsman, and gardener. However, many of the Deaf seniors mentioned during the interviews that these professions were not what they wanted to learn in the first place. Rather, they had been told that these were the only professions they could learn and practice due to their deafness and their school education. Another experience that many Deaf people report, and that has also been emphasized in the interviews with the Deaf seniors, is the disappointing lack of

communication with hearing colleagues at the workplace. Most hearing colleagues, in former times but still today, are not able or willing to communicate in sign language, which leads to social isolation of the Deaf person in their work environment. Sitting alone at a desk, not knowing what is talked about while colleagues chat over coffee is a common experience for Deaf people.

Therefore, one group of students prepared the topic *professional education and work life* for the exhibition, with a focus on opportunities and barriers for Deaf people, especially in the last 60 years. During a research visit at the *Education Center for the Deaf* in Osnabrück, we discovered in an archive a list of occupations suggested for Deaf people in Nazi Germany in 1942. We realized that since then not much has changed in this respect. The list of typical professions and corresponding job trainings for Deaf adolescents (for example offered at a vocational training center for the Deaf) is still very limited compared to professions accessible for hearing people (see Figure 3). For the exhibition, we created a fictional character called “Tommy”, representing a young Deaf person searching for his profession. Tommy’s situation made the visitors of the exhibition aware of the fact that Deaf people in Germany still face many limitations in their job opportunities. Although legally Tommy has the same rights to pursue all kinds of professions and to attend all kinds of educational programs, just like his hearing peers, he is still confronted with many barriers and prejudices. The most challenging barriers are the lack of access to higher education, communicative barriers, problems in finding professional interpreters and funding interpretation, among others. The situation for Tommy nowadays has not significantly improved compared to the situation of the Deaf seniors back in the 1960s.

3.3 Deaf clubs and associations

Another topic that stood out in all interviews with the Deaf seniors are Deaf clubs and associations. These associations had and still have a huge impact and a tremendous importance for the daily life of Deaf seniors in Germany. Since almost every interviewed person was (or still is) actively involved in at least one Deaf club, it was immediately obvious that this aspect of Deaf culture should become an independent part of the exhibition. However, despite the importance of Deaf associations for the Deaf community, we had a tough time finding a sufficient amount of appropriate sources and historical information, mainly because this topic is poorly documented due to a lack of research and archiving. Hence, we mostly evaluated the interviews for personal stories and experiences that are related to Deaf clubs. During an excursion to the library of the *Institute of German Sign Language and Communication of the Deaf* (IDGS) at

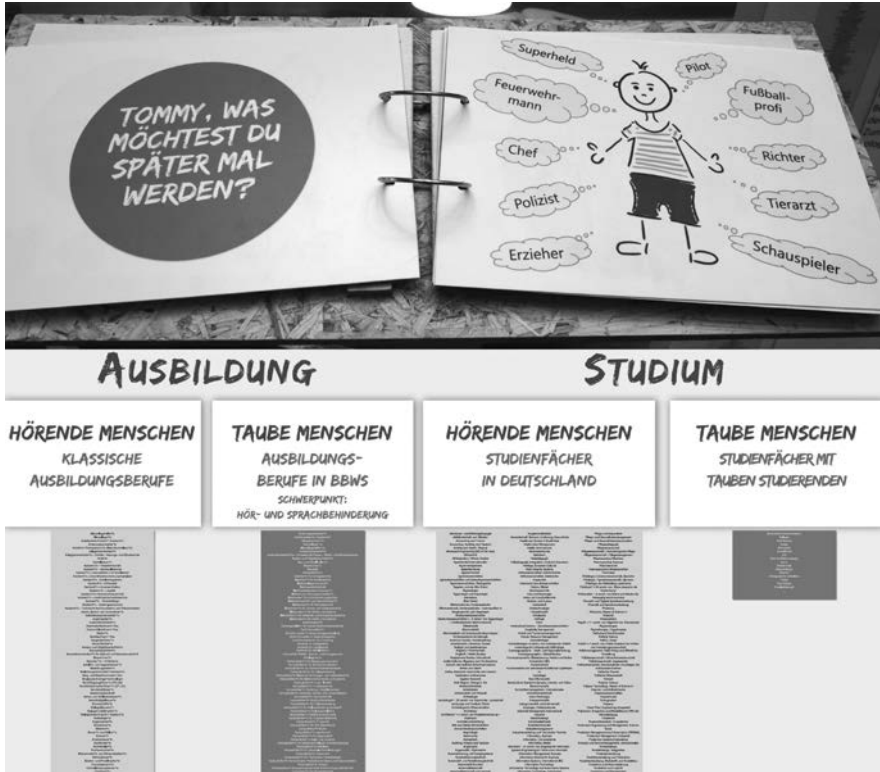


Figure 3: Top: Tommy and his dreams of professions “Tommy, what do you want to become?”: pilot, soccer player, judge, veterinarian, actor, teacher, officer, boss, firefighter, hero. Bottom: Comparison of job opportunities for hearing (light columns) and Deaf people (dark columns). In this exhibition poster, each line is the name of one job opportunity. On the left-hand side, traditional job trainings (“Ausbildung”): approx. 340 job training opportunities for hearing people vs. 170 for Deaf people at a vocational training center. On the right-hand side, options for academic studies (“Studium”): approx. 1460 different fields of study for hearing people vs. about 20 different fields of study actually studied by Deaf people. Here, you only see the upper quarter of the complete poster.

Hamburg University, we found interesting collections of gazettes and journals written by and for Deaf people. These documents gave us a vivid insight into the community, the organizations, the life, and the zeitgeist of Deaf people in Germany over time. For the exhibition, we prepared a collection of different articles from 1885 to 2016 to show the visitors which topics were and to some extent still are important to the Deaf community (see Figure 4).

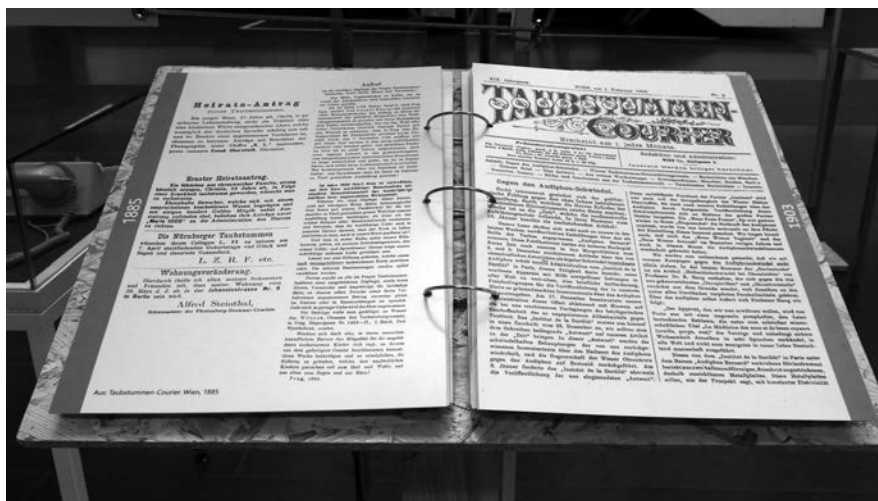


Figure 4: The exhibition hands-on book on Deaf associations: a collection of interesting and remarkable journal articles published between 1885 and 2016, which reflect the zeitgeist of Deaf people in Germany. Here, on the left page: proposals of marriage.

3.4 Deaf people in Nazi Germany

Most of the Deaf interviewees grew up in the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore, the time of Nazi Germany and life as a Deaf person during that time was an important topic in our exhibition. For obvious reasons, investigating this topic and preparing it for the exhibition was emotionally challenging. Reading about the different laws that had been passed between 1933 and 1945 in Nazi Germany, how these laws had been enforced in practice, and how this affected the personal lives of Deaf people was very distressing. For example, in 1935 abortion was legalized and enforced if one of the parents was hearing-impaired. Officially, it was required to get the consent of the pregnant woman to perform the abortion. However, we spoke to contemporary witnesses and read multiple interviews, in which the women reported that they had never consented to the abortion, but it had been performed on them nevertheless.

It was also upsetting and disturbing how formal and in clinical terms these cruel incidents were described in the historical documents. While Deaf people experienced discrimination, harassment, and persecution during their lives in Nazi Germany, we were shocked by the ‘scientific’ justification of this injustice. We read legislative texts and ‘scientific’ papers from the 1930s, in which hearing people propagandistically argued that Deaf people were inferior to hearing

people. These hearing ‘scientists’ justified the sterilization of Deaf people by arguing that it was for the benefit of the society (for a detailed analysis of sterilization and the lives of Deaf people in Nazi Germany, see the chapters by Brockmann & Kozelka and Mittelstädt & Hosemann, this volume).

Another example of emotionless reports on the sterilization of Deaf people are clinical reports, in which doctors who performed the procedure described their actions. During our investigations, we discovered that sterilizations had in fact also been executed in the old *University Medical Faculty* in Göttingen, in other words: right next to the place where our exhibition was to be shown. Hence, we assumed that we should be able to find historical documents on sterilizations somewhere in the medical faculty of Göttingen University. Since we wanted to present an original medical report from 1940, one member of our team visited the archives of the university hospital. However, tracking down a sterilization document in this archive turned out to be a mission impossible. First, the documents were stored in the basement with a cold flickering, and somewhat creepy, lighting. Second, the rooms were infested by mold. Because of this health hazard, the team member had to wear a protective suit and a breathing mask to avoid any personal risks. Third, the documents were not archived chronologically or thematically, but were stored rather unsystematically. Our team member was told that the different rooms contained documents of different medical fields and that anything with regard to gynecology was stored in a room on the right-hand side. In this room, she found many aisles with a vast number of unorganized folders. However, she was on her own and no support or guidance was available. In this dark and moldy archive, she read many documents about different groups of people on whom sterilizations and abortions had been performed, but finding documents specifically on sterilization procedures on Deaf people during the Nazi period was impossible.

These were just some of the experiences our groups had when researching about the different topics relevant in the lives of the Deaf seniors. The next step was to analyze the content and to turn it into exhibition pieces.

4 Second semester (October 2018 to January 2019): design and construction

As opposed to the first semester, in which the students could work in an academic context familiar to them, by investigating and presenting a topic in a scientific way, the second semester brought a totally new challenge to all members of the team: working and thinking creatively, as an artist, as a constructor, as a

PR manager, and as a guide. We all had to learn how to transfer our knowledge into visually appealing and informative pieces that could be displayed at the exhibition. In order to come to a successful result, we had to fight the temptation of putting our results into scientific texts, which would be difficult (if not impossible) to read for non-academics. After four to seven semesters of training in how to write a scientific text, it was a challenge for everyone to overcome this habit and to think about how to present the content in a visual, non-textual manner. Hence, two of the most frequently uttered sentences in the second semester were: “This is too much text” and “This is too difficult to read”.

Fortunately, we were smart enough to reach out for help and invited Julia Debelts, a manager for planning and creating exhibitions. She was of great help in giving us ideas on how we could present the content not only on posters but also in the form of hands-on pieces (such as the fictional character Tommy or the ‘book’ of journal articles, shown in Figures 3 and 4 above) and how we could set up and display the pieces (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: A construction plan of the exhibition space, including the positions of our three exhibition ‘islands’.

In the second semester, we thus had to work on two main tasks simultaneously: first, each content group – *family life, school education, professional education and work life, Deaf clubs and associations, Deaf people in Nazi Germany, and introduction*

to *German Sign Language* – had to create their posters and exhibits; second, we needed to build and set up everything around the exhibition. Consequently, we put together new working groups for the construction tasks: the design team, the building team, the sponsor and PR team, and the integration team. This is why each student participated in two different groups now, in a content group as well as in at least one construction group.

The opening of the exhibition was scheduled for January 15th, 2019. Hence, around Christmas and definitely in January, the workload got quite intense: posters had to be finalized and printed, building materials had to be purchased, invitation postcards and advertising posters had to be printed, and especially DGS videos had to be recorded. One of our main goals was to make the exhibition accessible to Deaf visitors by presenting all content in written German as well as in DGS and International Sign (IS). Hence, the (short) texts on the posters and on the illustrative objects had to be translated into DGS/IS, recorded on video, and then be made available via QR codes placed next to the objects and German texts.

Three days before the opening, we started to set up the exhibition. The exhibition did not only include informative posters with our research results, but also featured hands-on displays, which encouraged visitors to engage even more closely with the Deaf community. Next to 45 individual posters displayed in three different ‘islands’, we also had three television screens showing film material: excerpts from the interviews with Deaf seniors, as well as excerpts from major film productions by the Deaf community (all videos subtitled). These film excerpts provided additional visual input illustrating that our research project and the corresponding exhibition are based on real life experiences. In addition, we had four display cases with historic objects (e.g., old school journals, old telecommunications devices for the Deaf such as, for instance, a teletypewriter, and old hearing aids), two big books, a ‘wheel of fortune’ with DGS-related questions, and a ‘communication box’. The latter was a hands-on object, in which two visitors could practice their lip-reading skills (see Figure 6).

In addition to the concrete construction of the exhibition, we also had other assignments to complete. First, we set up a website in German and DGS with additional information about the project and the exhibition (<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/ausstellung/598123.html>). Second, we prepared an official opening of the exhibition at Göttingen University (see next section). Finally, we designed postcards with letters of the DGS manual alphabet and the ILY (‘I love you’) sign on the front and information about the exhibition on the back (see Figure 7). In order to invite people to the exhibition, these postcards were distributed at different places at Göttingen University as well as in shops, cafés, and restaurants in the city center.



Figure 6: The “communication box”. One visitor is wearing noise-canceling head phones (person on the right) and has to guess the question or task the other visitor is orally articulating (person on the left).

1900	1950	2000	2019
NAT. SOZ.	FAMILIE SCHULE	BERUF VEREIN	SPRACHE
1940	2002	2019	
Kindheit der Interviewpartner	Anerkennung von DGS als Sprache	Ausstellung "Lebens- geschichten"	

Lebensgeschichten tauber Senior*innen
 Ausstellung vom 15.01. bis 28.02. 2019
 im Kulturwissenschaftlichen Zentrum
 Heinrich-Düker-Weg 14
www.uni-goettingen.de/de/ausstellung/598123.html

Figure 7: Advertising postcard of the exhibition. Next to the ILY sign, we also had postcards with each letter of the DGS manual alphabet.

5 The opening of the exhibition

As is true for many projects, the days prior to the deadline (i.e., for us prior to the opening) can get crazy. And indeed, they were. Right when we put together the first poles for the display framework, which would hold together our posters and exhibits, one of the poles broke, and the construction collapsed – so did our motivational spirit. This was an absolute low, and anxiety started to spread among the group. If we couldn't fix this weak point in the construction, none of our posters could actually be presented. We therefore immediately drove to a hardware store, bought everything we needed to fix those weak spots, and found a good solution that worked. In fact, the structure remained stable, and we could continue building the islands (see Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8: Assembling the poles of the big 'island'.



Figure 9: After 14 hours of building, the basic frameworks of the islands were set up.

After three days, or 36 hours, of intense building work, figuring-out things, discussions, and emotional ups-and-downs, the exhibition was finally set up and the opening night was about to start. On January 15th, 2019, at 6 pm, our first guests arrived at the opening. It was an honor that next to approximately 60 hearing, Deaf, and hard-of-hearing guests, we also had some prominent visitors: Christian Rathmann (Professor for sign language interpreting and Deaf studies at Humboldt University, Berlin), who gave a presentation in DGS on language attitudes, Andrea Bührmann (Vice president of Göttingen University), who said the opening words, and Helmut Vogel (President of the German Deaf Association) all supported our project. The local Deaf community and the local newspaper were present (see Figure 10), and many people even came from more distant cities like Hannover, Magdeburg and Hamburg. The evening was a total success, and during the following weeks, our team was booked multiple times to give a guided tour around the exhibition.

6 Summary: what we all took from that

Similar to other projects, we did not only experience the excitement and enthusiasm right before and during the opening event, but also the exhaustion right afterwards. For six weeks, the exhibition was open to the public in the *Cultural*



Figure 10: Article in the local newspaper *Göttinger Tageblatt*: “Exhibition about the life of Deaf people in Germany” (published January 17th, 2019). Picture taken at the opening event.

Studies Center at Göttingen University. During this time, we organized guided tours for the local Deaf community, local student groups, and visitors from the University of Magdeburg, who had not been able to attend the opening. We also produced a short video (<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/virtuelle+tour/603648.html>) and had an article published in the *Deutsche Gehörlosen Zeitung* (‘German Deaf Journal’).

But the two major outcomes of this experience were the following. First, our exhibition travelled to the *Information Center for the Deaf* in Osnabrück in February 2020, where it was presented in their communication center for five weeks in the context of their 50th anniversary. Second, and maybe even more significant, we all truly grew from this experience. We learned to overcome challenges, to find creative solutions and, most importantly, to support each other and to work as a team (see Figure 11).



Figure 11: The exhibition team.

Acknowledgements: The whole exhibition adventure would not have been possible without the courageous seniors, who were willing to share their life experiences with the public. We thank all the elderly Deaf signers for sharing their stories. Thanks to everyone in the course, who gave all their brain and muscle power in order to build this exhibition: Sonja Dietschi, Hannah Fecht, Christa Gaisbichler, Rieke Giese, Viktoria Sidonie Hänsch, Wei Huang, Judith Kalinowski, Franziska Karger, Elena Kozelka, Isa Kroeschell, Annika Mittelstädt, Dorothee Nyga, Benita Pangritz, and Franziska Tießen.

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