

The Education of Deaf Missionary Berta Foster, née Zuther (1939-2018): Deaf Education and Pastoral Care in the Divided City of Berlin, 1945-1961

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In January 1961, the 21-year-old deaf German seamstress Berta Zuther married the deaf African-American missionary Andrew Foster in Ibadan, Nigeria. The two had met in Wiesbaden, Germany, in 1959, during the 3rd World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). In 1960, Berta had embarked for Ghana all by herself. She wanted to train as a teacher of the deaf there, which was not possible for her [as a deaf woman] in Germany. Andrew had founded the first school for the deaf in Ghana in 1957. He had subsequently initiated a teacher training program there as well. Together, Andrew and Berta would go on to found more than 30 schools and churches for deaf people in 13 African countries in the course of the next few decades!

There are articles and films about Andrew Foster's life in English. In Germany, however, we know little about him and even less about his wife. In my article, I introduce Berta. I look primarily at her childhood and youth in (West) Berlin. I am interested in her schooling. I also want to know how she found her faith. What did it mean for her to go to Africa as a missionary? Berta's educational path also provides us with interesting insights into German history more generally: How were deaf children taught in the destroyed city of Berlin immediately after World War II? What changed with the progressive division of Berlin that culminated in the building of the Wall in 1961?

Berta lost her hearing in 1943 at the age of 4 after a spell of measles. By the end of World War II in 1945, Berlin was destroyed. Before the war, Berlin had featured three schools for the deaf. Now there was only one in the eastern sector of the city. It was administered by

the Soviet occupational forces. It was far away from the city center. It was hard for families with deaf children to travel such a long way every day.

Berta did not attend this school. She went instead to a school for the hard-of-hearing. But she hardly learned anything there. It was not until the summer of 1949 that a school for the deaf opened in West Berlin, on Naunynstrasse. Berta was one of the first students there. In the first few years after 1945, the teachers were former National Socialists. Some had harmed deaf people during the Nazi-era. In the 1950s, however, new young teachers were added. Berta had good memories of her school days. She blossomed. She was able to learn much better there than at the school for the hard-of-hearing. She made friends.

There was religious instruction at school. But Berta and her family did not like the priest in charge, Bernhard Stoevesand. Stoevesand also conducted services for the deaf in East Berlin and in the East German state of Brandenburg. [During these services,] he used signs. But that was only for deaf adults! Deaf children knew nothing about it. They were supposed to learn how to speak rather than sign.

It was difficult for deaf children after the war. But Berta's parents did everything they could to ensure that Berta received a good education. From 1948 to 1960, Berta took private art lessons from the well-known painter Marta Astfalck-Vietz. A wonderful time! Until the painter died in 1994, she was friends with Berta's family. Mrs. Astfalck-Vietz was an important teacher for Berta. But only after Berta had moved to Africa would she be able to use signs in class with her husband.