

„Where are you, German Association of the Deaf?“

The German deaf movement during the Weimar Republic

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Today, deaf people have many associations and organizations. Deaf people actively take part in social, political and cultural life. They advocate for equal rights and autonomy. On the federal level, their interests are represented by the German deaf association (*Deutscher Gehörlosenbund*, DGB). Its predecessor organization was founded in January 1927, almost 100 years ago.

In the 1920s, deaf people struggled with social problems and faced discrimination. Activism became important because many deaf people were unemployed. Contemporary deaf newspapers noted that 50 % of all deaf people were unemployed. One important reason was their insufficient education. Deaf children were educated in so-called schools for the “deafmutes,” where they were taught oral language and not allowed to use sign language. They could not obtain higher education. Deaf people wanted to change that.

Another threat was the stigmatization of certain social groups as “life unworthy of living.” During the mid 1920s, German politicians discussed a dangerous legislative draft. It called for the sterilization of deaf people and other people with disabilities, so that they would not pass on their “disability” to their children. Marriage restrictions were also proposed.

Protest against this proposed legislation as well as their employment situation motivated many deaf people and their local deaf associations to organize, in 1927, in a national organization, the “*Reichsverband of the German Deaf*.” This was an important step in order to lobby more effectively for deaf people’s rights in German politics and society.

The association has an eventful, sometimes tragic history. The question of its leadership repeatedly stirred debate. There was also political dissent. Because of these conflicts, the

association never became an influential advocate for all deaf people, even though it had highly engaged and progressive members.

In 1933, the Nazis came to power. Leadership in the association changed to the active Nazi Fritz Albrechts. He had joined the NSDAP in 1931. In consequence, the association did not oppose Nazi measures, but instead consented to many of them.

The association's founding history shows that many deaf people wished to solve social problems on their own. At the same time, it shows the importance of pursuing goals together and, sometimes, put on hold individual beliefs. Last but not least, it shows that equal rights need a political and social climate that values people with disabilities.