



Franziska was a German woman who was persecuted by the Nazis – because she was deaf.

Under the ‘Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring’, more than 400,000 people were sterilised by the Nazis between 1933 and 1939 due to alleged genetic diseases. Under this law, every person diagnosed with schizophrenia, hereditary blindness, or any other condition that was believed to be genetic was forcefully sterilised; they would no longer be able to produce offspring. Franziska Mikus was one of more than 10,000 deaf victims.



‘With a heavy heart I agreed to be sterilised a second time. This was the cruellest thing I ever had to endure. I will never be able to forget that.’

Image: Reichsgesetzblatt (Reich Law Gazette) of July 25, 1933, with the declaration of the ‘Law for the Prevention of Hereditary Diseased Offspring’

Franziska was born deaf in 1918 in Munich, Germany. Both her parents were hearing impaired themselves. When she started school, she was tested by a doctor and as she was not completely deaf, she was assigned to a class for the hard of hearing, and she wasn’t allowed to use sign language. She was drilled by her teachers, but as she could not understand words, it was too much for her. She convinced her mother to speak to the headteacher and she was put into a class for deaf children.

This class was more suitable for Franziska. She was able to concentrate, learned well and enjoyed school. When Franziska was 14, in 1933, the Nazis took power in Germany. Later that year, Franziska finished school and started an apprenticeship at a convent. She worked at the convent four days a week and continued to go to school once a week to improve in certain subjects.

Sterilisation

One day when she came home, she found her mother sitting at the table, crying. Franziska signed ‘what is the matter?’, and her mother showed her a letter. It said that Franziska and her mother had to show up at the Health Office to arrange their sterilisation.

They decided to protest and had a hearing at court. The two judges exempted Franziska’s mother, who signed a contract stating that she would not have any more children. Sadly, Franziska’s sterilisation was still upheld.

Recently, Franziska had met Christian, whom she had fallen in love with. Christian had lost his hearing in one ear when he had had scarlet fever as a child. They wanted to have children one day, and Franziska was scared that Christian would not love her anymore if she was sterilised so she did not want to go to the appointment. However, her parents insisted she go to avoid any potential repercussions.

In the hospital, Franziska was desperate. She tried to flee multiple times, and even tried to kill herself. Franziska was sterilised in 1936; she was around 18 years old.

Pregnancy

Christian supported her as best he could and they got engaged soon after. Surprisingly, in 1938 Franziska became pregnant. A doctor later explained to her her body had developed only after her sterilisation, and she was therefore capable of childbearing.

When Franziska's mother realised that she was pregnant, she forced Franziska to go to a gynaecologist, as she was worried that the baby might be malformed due to the sterilisation.

The doctor examined and then congratulated Franziska, confirming that she was indeed pregnant. But after they told him that she had had a sterilisation, his face changed. He immediately stopped treating her, presumably aware that the pregnancy was unlawful.

Abortion

Sometime later Franziska received a summons from the gynaecology clinic. When there, she had her clothes taken and was examined, and when she wanted to get dressed again, the nurses told her she had to stay. Franziska argued with them, but to no avail. She was locked up in the hospital for three days and then forced to have an abortion.

Second sterilisation

After her abortion, Franziska was told that she would be sterilised a second time, but she did not go to the appointment. Franziska was scared, fearing that the police would come and force her to get sterilised, but it never happened. Following the abortion, Franziska suffered from depression.

In 1941, Christian and Franziska wanted to get married. They went to the registry office, where they were told that proof of the second sterilisation was needed. Convinced that Hitler would win the war, Franziska accepted reluctantly to get sterilised a second time and the couple were married in July 1941.

In 1943, their apartment was destroyed by allied bombs, so they decided to leave Munich. They were given several addresses of farmers, where they could work for a place to live, but all of them declined, not wanting to take in someone deaf.

While looking for a place to live in Vohburg, a village 70km north of Munich, they were introduced to other deaf people, who allowed the couple to stay with them. Christian continued to work in Munich and he cycled 70km every weekend to visit Franziska.

After the War

After the war ended, Christian and Franziska wanted to go back to Munich. It was quite difficult at first, but they managed to find a place to stay with the help of their friends. It was not a proper apartment, though, but a windowless attic, which was only reachable by a ladder.

After a while they went to the social services to ask for a new apartment. Although it was only 24 metres squared in size, they stayed in it for 22 years.

Franziska fought for years to get compensation from the West Germany Government, but it took until the 1980s, when Horst Biesold shone a light on the sterilisations of deaf people, for Franziska to receive compensation. Horst Biesold was a teacher at a school for deaf people in Bremen, North Germany. He had heard about the sterilisations from a deaf friend and decided to write his dissertation, which was later published as a book under the title *Crying Hands*, on the topic. Shocked by what he had found out, Biesold consequently interviewed over a thousand deaf victims of sterilisations and persecution. He presented his findings to the German Parliament, and eventually the law was amended, acknowledging that deaf victims of Nazi Persecution had the right for compensation.




After the war, Christian was very active in the deaf community, and he coached many young, deaf athletes in both athletics and football. Franziska worked as a secretary for different deaf associations. Franziska and Christian had a happy marriage, but their big wish for children never came true. Christian died in 1986 of leukemia, and Franziska died in 1995.

Find out more...

Nazi Persecution of disabled people:
hmd.org.uk/disabledpeople

Life stories of those affected by genocide:
hmd.org.uk/lifestories

hmd.org.uk
enquiries@hmd.org.uk
020 7785 7029

 @hmd_uk
 hmd.uk
 @holocaustmemorialdaytrust

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