User Story

The Day My Life Changed
by Detlev Fischer

Destiny hit me the day after Christmas in 2004. It all started with a strange feeling as if suddenly there was a lot of water in my ears. I could not follow what was happening on the television because I had experienced a sudden hearing loss in both of my ears.

“What happened?” I asked myself. A couple of minutes later my left ear normalized and I could hear again. However, there was a hollow feeling in my right side that grew stronger, and while walking I had a tendency to drift to the right side. My sense of balance was affected and every fast head movement made me dizzy.

The hearing in my right ear worsened during that evening until suddenly I became completely deaf.

On December 27, 2004, I went straight to an ENT doctor. Their diagnosis was a middle-ear infection. I was given antibiotics and everything was supposed to return back to normal. Four days later, I left for Cologne to meet my doctor and to continue the treatment. He told me to continue with the antibiotics. He trusted the diagnosis from my ENT doctor and organised another examination in his office on the January 7, 2005.

New Year’s Eve came and left without me because I was still deaf in my right ear. I felt as if the right side of my head was not there. Inside my head, where I would normally feel the hearing, was something that I could not really grasp. It felt as if there is a foreign body the size of a fist sitting in my inner ear.

I could not leave my apartment. The dizziness and disorientation while running lessened day by day, but the feeling that half of my head was missing remained.

Depression and irritation slowly took over. On the January 7, 2005, I visited my doctor again. Although I had completed the antibiotics course I was still deaf on my right side. This caused me to raise questions, and also left my doctor confused. At that point, he assigned me to an ENT specialist so I could have my right ear examined.

I explained to the ENT specialist the history of my condition since December 26. He repeatedly asked me who had diagnosed me with the “middle-ear infection” and kept shaking his head. After a hearing test was carried out, he came back with a compassionate look on his face.

It was like lightning from above. He said, “You suffered from an acute hearing loss. I do not have much hope.”

“Wait a minute,” I told myself. “I will not give up so fast!”

At this point I decided to go to the Central Military Hospital in Koblenz.

Over the next ten days I was given a therapy which, in most cases of acute hearing loss, would help to bring back hearing. On the third day I felt a change in my right ear, and could hear a sound when I stroked my finger over my ear. My hopes came back and I thought that in a few more days everything will be back to normal. I tested myself again and again in order to see any improvement. But, I grew anxious on the tenth day because I did not see any further improvements. My last hope faded away as I asked the doctor on what will happen next. The therapy was extended for another 15 days, then I waited for six weeks while the antibiotics dosage was lessened. And that was it.

“But I still do not hear anything on my right side,” I realised. The young doctor assured me, “We will prescribe a hearing aid for you.” But to me this answer was short, straight to the point, and without emotion.
Is that supposed to be it? This “residual hearing” that I sensed three days later, and this is hearing aid, is all that could be done?

I was shocked. How are things supposed to continue now? I have no idea how to live with only “one” ear. Well, I told myself, I still I have one hearing ear. Somehow it will work. Worse things can happen.

My friends visited me the next day. I left the ENT clinic for the first time and went to the cafe for a drink. What awaited me there was too overwhelming: different sounds, voices and conversation with my friends. It was a collision of sounds which all pressed against my left ear. It was bearable in a quiet environment, but as soon as all these different sounds came from all over the place I became really irritated.

Then the day came when I was released from the hospital. I was given the rest of the medication and left for my doctor. He certified a two-week sick leave for me during which I spent most of my time in my apartment. Going to the supermarket was horrifying: I found myself continuously turning around asking, “What was that? Where did that noise come from? Did I hit something? In front of me? Behind me? Or did it come from three rows down?” This kept happening for three months. The tinnitus worsened. I had to go to the doctor every second or third week and he kept putting me on a sick leave. I got the hearing aid and I tried out different kinds, but all of them gave little benefit. Although the tinnitus was somewhat reduced due to the sounds that I could hear, speech understanding was not really possible.

In April, I began to work part-time while wearing the hearing-aid to see how things would develop. It was more bad than good. The Funk-CROS hearing aid that I tried out did not really give me any breakthrough. To me, it was troublesome and it brought restrictions that were not really suitable for my daily life.

I had lost my hearing on the right side and no help was at sight. Sound localisation was no longer possible. If I spoke to someone, I could only rely on my left side. If someone stood before me, I had to lean forward to my left side in order to understand everything. I could not look at anyone as they spoke, because I always had to tilt my head.

Then the call came from Koblenz: “Mr. Fischer, did we speak about a cochlear implant?”

I receive information material about cochlear implants and had an appointment where everything would be discussed. I was told how a CI functions and that I was a special case since I have normal hearing on my left side. I began to think about this CI story and another appointment in Würzburg was necessary in order to make the right decision. I was examined and had talk with Prof. Helms, who was initiating CI treatment for Single-Sided Deafness.

I also was given the possibility of receiving a BAHA implant and found it very impressive. It was quite good when it came to speech understanding, but sound localization would not possible because in my case it would be a BAHA-CROS treatment.

It was not easy for me to make the decision to go for a CI. I wanted to know from other concerned people what they thought about a CI treatment for Single-Sided Deafness or if I should go for a BAHA instead. Today, I know how complicated and problematic this question was and I would not ask myself this again. The response from a Deaf community pinboard was equally harsh: “That is not even possible!” was more or less the blunt answer I got. First of all the indication for CI in Single Sided Deafness does not exist and no social security will pay for it, they said. I was also told that a healthy ear cannot be combined with a CI because the sounds I hear could be completely different. This was what most people said.

But in the end, I got the encouragement from someone whom I would like to thank. My gratitude goes to an individual in Hannover, and this person knows even without having to mention any names. Of course, I also want to thank the doctors in Koblenz who explained to me all the advantages and disadvantages of a CI.

Despite all the doubts, at the end of August I decided for a CI. On October 17, 2005, after a smooth surgery, I realised that the tinnitus was as good as gone. I then
waited impatiently for four weeks and finally the day that I have been waiting for arrived: November 18, the day of the first fitting. It was the day when my life changed because it was the day when I got back my hearing on my right ear.

The CI was a real piece of luck. Speech understanding and sound localisation was back. I am more than happy with the result. With the new MED-EL audio processor I noticed that my speech understanding improved significantly. The voices sound very natural, and the high frequency sounds seem to harmonise just like normal hearing.