



Molding a Deaf Identity: Deaf Leaders, Banquets, and Community Rituals, 1830 to 1880

Let us suppose that the government established a new town in France and that it allowed all the deaf people of the kingdom to come there.¹

IN 1834, the deaf teacher Claude-Joseph Richardin proposed his vision for a deaf utopia to both hearing and deaf people. He imagined a town created by the French king, Louis-Philippe, that would be reserved exclusively for deaf people. In this ideal town, no one would speak, “because they all would have the same signs, the same ideas and the same feelings.” Richardin also imagined that in this deaf town, deaf people would be able to undertake almost any profession they would like; they could become judges, lawyers, businessmen, teachers, mayor, or even actors. They could do exactly what Richardin thought hearing people did all the time in real life. In other words, deaf people would be able to pursue their interests as they wished. Richardin was sure that in such an environment, civilization would make great strides because “each deaf person would be happy there.” Given a choice, Richardin wanted to be part of this town where he knew he could be more fulfilled than anywhere else in France.² But, of course, this town for deaf people was only in his imagination.

Although Richardin was proposing an idealized form of a deaf community, during the late eighteenth century and during the nineteenth century, a real-life deaf community did emerge in France that drew deaf

people together socially and culturally, and gave them their own identity as a minority population. The genesis, however, of this deaf community depended on real historical and cultural conditions. Unlike most ethnic and cultural communities, the culture of deaf people cannot be routinely transmitted at home from parent to child because most deaf children come from hearing families. This was why, historically, the boarding school—or residential school—played a key role in the formation and transmission of deaf culture.³ At the residential schools, these children met deaf teachers and other deaf children their own age, and so the cultural transmission began. Whether during the eighteenth century or today, deaf people, regardless of their country of origin, must culturally construct a community over time, using language, rituals, stories, and group activities to help define a cultural identity.⁴ For that culture to survive, it must be transmitted from generation to generation. Indeed, the storytelling around the iconic figure of Abbé de l'Épée is rich with cultural meaning, for the abbé's own journey—the creation of his school in Paris during the late eighteenth century—only highlighted the more important journey “from darkness to light” that deaf people experienced after they had access to schooling.⁵ Today, the story about Abbé de l'Épée has developed a timeless quality because it captures the emotions and hopes of a culture, but even this story had to be constructed at a particular point in time with care and insight from deaf people themselves.

Pierre Desloges and the Early Deaf Community

Some of the earliest comments about a deaf community in France come from Pierre Desloges (1742–?), who in 1779 became the first deaf man to publish a defense of sign language.⁶ Desloges was from the central part of France known as Touraine.⁷ He was raised in the village of Grand-Pressigny in the shadow of the castles of the Loire river valley. The local lord had appointed Desloges' father to the post of tax collector, a dubious assignment from the viewpoint of the local peasants, but one that suggests that the Desloges family was not destitute. Pierre Desloges had one younger sister, Marie-Anne, born in 1746. Like many other children of the late eighteenth century, Pierre Desloges' young life was dramatically changed by an outbreak of smallpox. He contracted the disease at the age of seven, and the resulting fever caused his deafness. The affects of the disease lingered for several years, and as a result, the young

Desloges lost almost all of his teeth and his ability to speak French.⁸ He relied on writing and poor pronunciation as the basis of his communication skills, an indication that he had received at least a little primary schooling or some individual tutoring as a child. However, he did not learn sign language, except for some disconnected home signs, until about twenty years later.⁹

Based on Desloges' own reflections, cruelty and discrimination routinely marked his young life. Even his parents did not believe that he was capable of learning a trade, which would have given him some economic stability and a measure of self-worth. He remembered that "relatives, friends [sic], and neighbors" treated him as though he was "beastly, imbecilic, [and] insane."¹⁰ The young man could scarcely communicate with those around him, but their derision cut deeply. It is no wonder that Desloges left his native Touraine.

Desloges arrived in Paris in 1761, nineteen years old and ready to make a new life for himself. Paris, at that time, had a population of more than half a million people, and a sizable number—one estimate is about two-thirds—had migrated to the city in the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹¹ Many of these people were impoverished and lived on the streets. Desloges was excited about living in a large city like Paris, which he called a kind of "marvel of the universe." He relished the chance to see new and interesting things that he thought expanded the minds of deaf people. Desloges was the kind of person who drew energy from all the hustle and bustle of the city around him. As he searched daily for work, Desloges probably encountered other deaf people in Paris, a welcome change compared to his isolation in the countryside.¹² When he was twenty-seven years old (in 1769), Desloges learned sign language for the first time from a deaf Italian man who could neither read nor write.¹³ The man, who worked as a servant in some wealthy homes, was deaf from birth. Desloges noticed that despite this Italian's apparent illiterate condition, he could function well in sign language. Though we do not know how long it took Desloges to learn the basics of natural sign language from his Italian friend, it could not have been very long.¹⁴ Desloges, who had always relied on written language for communication, now had another outlet. This was certainly a turning point in his life, for Desloges now had a practical language—he called sign language "this useful art"—that would allow him to converse with other deaf people in Paris.¹⁵

Desloges was not afraid to engage directly in the debate over language that so absorbed the elites of the Parisian *salons* during the 1770s.¹⁶ However, unlike the intellectuals of the day, Desloges was interested in more practical matters. His comments about deaf people in *Observations d'un sourd et muet* reveal his frustration with how hearing people regarded the deaf minority, and he dearly wanted to set the record straight.¹⁷ Abbé Deschamps, a teacher of deaf children from the town of Orléans, had written a book in defense of spoken language for deaf people.¹⁸ This book motivated Desloges to produce his own tract that would rebut the key parts of Deschamps' pedagogy. Desloges clearly felt that he was ideally suited to analyze Deschamps' oral pedagogy, because, as a deaf man, he was able to comment on which instructional methods best helped deaf people learn in school. Desloges was very confrontational in *Observations d'un sourd et muet*, but also very precise.¹⁹ Because he repeatedly cited pages in Deschamps' work, we know that Desloges was a careful and accurate reader who combed the pages of Deschamps' book like a detective to unearth every falsehood behind Deschamps' claims. Readers who enjoyed a sharp debate surely were not disappointed. In short order, Desloges challenged Deschamps to think about how he would learn English as a foreign language. Of course, Desloges' main point was that we always use our first language as a point of reference to learn a foreign language. It was normal, then, for deaf children first to rely on sign language before they were introduced to written or spoken French. For Desloges, this oral method was simply an inefficient way to educate deaf children. Because Deschamps had also argued that sign language was too difficult to learn, Desloges replied that it would only take six weeks to gain a sufficient mastery of sign language. He even recommended that Deschamps come to Paris to learn some signs from Abbé de l'Épée!²⁰

According to Desloges, Paris in the 1760s already had a nascent deaf community. Deaf people regularly associated among themselves, and a deaf person routinely had the opportunity to develop his signing ability with other deaf people. Those who knew a smaller number of signs gained more fluency from the constant interaction inside this deaf society. In this way, the entire community continued to evolve linguistically as the natural language of signs grew more elaborate. Desloges' social circle was the laboring class of deaf people, among whom he counted himself (he had found work as a bookbinder and upholsterer in 1776). Many of his friends had been born deaf and did not know how to read


or write French. Nor had they had any contact with Abbé de l'Épée at his residence on the rue des Moulins. They formed a different society of deaf people who were improving their lives in small steps. Through natural sign language, these deaf men were able to learn enough about the tenets of the Catholic faith to receive the sacraments of Holy Communion and to marry in the Church. These deaf tradespeople took an avid interest in the world around them and, as Desloges noted, "we express ourselves on all subjects with as much order, precision and clarity as if we were able to speak and hear."²¹

Desloges stressed that Abbé de l'Épée had not invented sign language, if only because his friends who had never gone to school made extensive use of the language. He understood, however, that there was a difference between natural signs that easily emerged in deaf society and the invented methodical signs that Épée tried to meld with the French language. Throughout his book, Desloges did not conceal his great admiration for Épée, the educator. He vigorously defended Épée and his "excellent method" against those hearing people who continued to press for oral language in the education of deaf children. On a more personal level, Desloges' short book was also a defense of a way of life that the bookbinder routinely experienced. Desloges cautioned his readers that it would be a great mistake to think that deaf people were like "automatons" that were only going to vegetate in society.²² The disturbing fact that hearing people had constructed a negative image of deaf people based on physical difference was not lost on Desloges. In so many ways, Pierre Desloges was as perceptive as he was combative.

With the publication of his book, Desloges momentarily became the center of attention in several of the Parisian *salons*. He would eventually meet with the Marquis de Condorcet, who was interested in the philosophical arguments set forth in *Observations d'un sourd et muet*, and attended other social gatherings among the intellectual elite. Desloges also published some short articles for different publications like the *Mercur de France* and the *Journal encyclopédique*, and the *Affiches de Paris*, in which he continued his defense of sign language.²³ After the publication of his book, Desloges also met with Jacob-Rodriguez Pereire (1715–1780), a hearing educator who had rejected sign language as a pedagogical method for deaf students.²⁴ The two men met twice in late 1779, and they carried on their conversations through written French.²⁵ From this exchange we learn that Desloges had actually sent Abbé Deschamps

25 aout 1790.
Genève

Monsieur

Il m'a fait l'honneur de vous remettre à crossaill. J'y ai vu au
ma lettre aux électeurs de paris, voici un grand ouvrage
de ma composition, que je vous prie Monsieur, d'avoir
la bonté d'accepter, 

ma situation est encore la même à l'hôpital de Bicêtre
ce qui est bien cruelle, car le nom seul de cette maison
fait froisser l'humanité, cependant M. de Beaumont, rien
d'intéresser à mon triste sort. Le comité pour l'extinction
de la mendicité, si il y avoit eu une séance du soir
le 7 de ce mois il auroit été lu une adresse de moi
à l'Assemblée nationale pour solliciter une maison
d'éducation pour les fous, et muets accompagné d'un
hospice pour ceux qui infirme comme je suis ne
peuvent gagner leur vie; mais le défaut de séance
à fait renvoyer mon adresse au comité qui propose
un projet pour cet objet
je ne sçais point Monsieur, que malgré les papiers

Letter written by Pierre Desloges, dated 25 August 1790. (Source: Archives Nationales, Paris: series AA12.)

a copy of his book with a personal letter. Desloges, however, was perplexed by the cleric's response: "[F]riend of truth, I [would] like to hear your voice It has guided my book, it will guide my answer." Desloges asked Pereire what this really meant. Pereire speculated that Deschamps did not think that *Observations d'un sourd et muet* was truly Desloges' own work. In other words, Deschamps had brushed off Desloges' book as a fraud.²⁶ Pereire, however, had to admit that after

réitérés que vous avez donné de patriotisme et de zèle
à la chose publique, vous n'êtes point épargné dans
les libelles séditieux, mais cela n'est point étonnant dans
un temps de fermentation & de trouble, mais j'observe
avec satisfaction, que les bons citoyens, les hommes éclairés
veulent pleine justice à vos vertus, et à votre amour
pour le bien,

J'ai l'honneur d'être avec
le plus profond respect,

Monsieur,

vos très humble et très
honoré serviteur

Desloges fond amant

Coupage à Bicêtre
Salle de H. Mazuel
ce 25 aoust 1790

Letter written by Pierre Desloges, dated 25 August 1790. (Continued)

his first meeting with Desloges, “at present, I believe that you [Desloges] are capable of everything.”²⁷ During the second meeting between the bookbinder and the tutor of deaf children, Desloges reiterated that in his book, he had “followed only [his] own experience and [his] own conviction in the defense of signed language [in his book].” Although Epée apparently did read the manuscript before it was published, Desloges told Pereire that Epée did not volunteer any comments that would have changed the book’s content. During this second meeting, Pereire

remained skeptical that sign language should be the only method used to instruct deaf children. Though Pereire told Desloges that he respected Abbé de l'Épée very much, he was personally unwilling to become involved in the controversy between Deschamps and Épée, claiming, "I am just too busy." For his part, Desloges was very respectful of Pereire, saying that "the judgment of such a well-known man" would be of great help if Deschamps chose to instigate a fight over Desloges' book.²⁸ But given Pereire's wariness of sign language, it seems unlikely that he would have taken a personal risk to defend Desloges in public.

With the outbreak of the French Revolution, it is more difficult to trace the steps of Desloges in Paris. In July 1789, the day after the fall of the Bastille, he published a brief pamphlet entitled *Letter Addressed to the Voters of Paris*, in which he lauded the actions of the National Guard in defense of the Revolution.²⁹ Meanwhile Abbé de l'Épée, who did not want his name associated with revolutionary activities, felt he had to disavow any personal knowledge of the tract, making it plain that his students were not responsible for its publication.³⁰

In 1790, Desloges wrote a letter to the minister of justice that revealed his dreadful poverty during the early years of the Revolution. Desloges had been living at the hospital at Bicêtre, a place whose "name alone makes humanity tremble."³¹ If we think that Desloges was exaggerating his plight at Bicêtre, we only have to turn to the account by the Duke de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, who had visited the hospital in his capacity as chairman of the Poor Relief Committee for the National Assembly. During his tour in May 1790, Liancourt could scarcely hold back his disgust with what he found there. Mental patients were lumped together with paralyzed men and those with syphilis. People accused of various crimes like stealing were also among the mix of humanity. In all, Liancourt counted some 3874 inmates, of whom 435 were male paupers and another 769 were servants.³² Because Desloges found himself in this hospice by 1790, the turmoil of the early days of the Revolution may have led to his unemployment or even physical disability. Once a simple bookbinder, Desloges was now reduced to indigence.

Even from his abysmal location at Bicêtre, Desloges was still interested in making the government aware of the needs of deaf people. He wrote directly to the Poor Relief Committee "to ask for an educational house for deaf people, accompanied with a hospice, for those 'infirm' as I am who cannot earn their livelihood."³³ As it turned out, the Poor

Relief Committee had already been deliberating in 1790 about the creation of a national school for deaf people. By the time the Poor Relief Committee read Desloges' letter, the committee members had already selected Abbé Sicard as director of the new Paris Deaf Institute. Several years later, while still living at Bicêtre, Desloges published a thirty-seven-page almanac called the *Almanac of Reason, for Year Two of the French Republic*. The almanac included "hymns to liberty and reason and a moral catechism for republican education."³⁴ This would be his last publication; after 1794, Desloges disappears from the historical record.

The insights that we can draw today from Pierre Desloges' *Observations d'un sourd et muet* are important for the history of the French deaf community. Desloges pointed out that deaf culture would emerge where enough deaf people congregated and interacted socially. Moreover, deaf society was different than a community formed around an educational institution. Though he strongly supported education for deaf people, he did not see it as a prerequisite to the formation of a deaf society. Desloges also defied the image of the ignorant tradesman who understood little beyond his immediate surroundings. He read books and formulated his own opinions. His friends in Parisian deaf society were also interested in debating ideas, even though most of them could not read or write French.