

FOREWORD

With the establishment of the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817, we saw the development of a definable deaf community in the United States. Today, the deaf community at large is considered to include not only people who are deaf or hard of hearing but hearing family members who have an identity within the deaf community.

In 1929 when memoirist Miriam (née Scharfman) Zadek was born, the only deaf communities consisted of students who attended deaf schools. Elementary education was available, but beyond junior high, schools mostly prepared deaf students to work in manufacturing and trades such as print and machine shops. Postsecondary-level education was limited to approximately seventy-five students per year at Gallaudet College (now University).

The normalization of being deaf was somewhat unthinkable back then. The prevailing belief was that “deafness” was something that needed to be fixed. Deaf people needed to be helped. They needed to be pitied. Such paternalistic thoughts now are neither politically correct nor real.

With the passage of time and increased advocacy, including the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (P.L. 101-336), limited access to the rest of the world has collapsed. Services such as sign language interpreting, notetaking, and enhanced access to communication through video relay services has led to a paradigm shift. Gallaudet University now has its fourth deaf president after 124 years of only having hearing presidents, there are deaf executives in multiple Fortune 500 companies such as Microsoft and Google, numerous deaf attorneys and physicians, and so much more.

Still, it can be challenging even now for those outside the deaf community to understand that being deaf is merely a biological characteristic that offers access to a rich cultural and linguistic community, not a defect.

Miriam Hearing Sister is essentially one hundred years of family drama and achievement. As the middle daughter of a Jewish New York family, Miriam lives half-in and half-out of the deaf world. She portrays her two deaf sisters as fun-loving and capable and especially regards her older sister as a role model. As a child, she sees her family life as unremarkable, no different from other families. During pubescence she is confronted by the terrifying reality of Hitler exterminating the Jews and the “handicapped” throughout World War II. Postwar, she is daunted by dire warnings that come from within her household. Her choices will affect the equilibrium, the life, of the entire family.

Although the story begins in the 1920s and continues through the 2020s, the importance of *Miriam Hearing Sister* is its relevancy today. The presence of deafness holds a critical role for all family members.

At the age of ninety-three my aunt Miriam’s identity has not changed much. She is still filled with fire and compassion. Through her activism, she continues to push forward the goals of the deaf community—and she looks upon her entire family with pride.

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