

## An Interview with Miriam Zadek

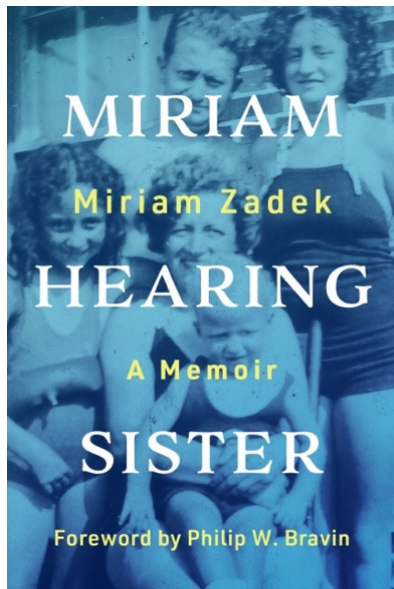
### **Content warning: suicide**

Miriam Zadek is the author of [Miriam Hearing Sister](#). Her memoir documents her experiences growing up with two Deaf sisters in a New York Jewish family.

**Gallaudet University Press:** What was your purpose in writing a memoir?

**Miriam Zadek:** Over the years, I took notes, wrote segments from memory. I knew that there was a story, a history of family, which should be shared.

The question was, in what way, for whom, and what memories was I ready to confront. Could I really write about Daddy, his devastating comment to me about suicide? But it was important to face, that he felt the responsibility for deafness might rest on his shoulders—for he wore the hearing aid. Little was known about genes at that time. Additionally, I wanted to write about family strength, about forging ahead, and about how, as we accumulate knowledge, our perceptions change over time.



**GU Press:** If you could change anything about your childhood, what would it be?

**Zadek:** The obvious answer, to many, would be that my sisters would not be deaf. But my answer is not that. Within the structure of our family, I would hope that my mother's "nervous breakdown" wouldn't have happened, though she and we survived that because of her basic strength.

If I could change anything about my childhood, I would have sisters who came home from school every day. I would have a father who would be able to convey his warmth and concern to Sylvia and Shirley in a way that would be understandable to each other. I wish there were times when we could all sit at the dinner table and talk together, sign together.

**GU Press:** Your memoir is a series of vignettes that capture specific moments throughout your life. What was your process for selecting which memories to share?

**Zadek:** There were moments of clarity, which demonstrated what was going on in the family, and moments of humor. There were many incidents which showed that life with deaf sisters was not different from lives in hearing families.

I love the episodes about Sylvia and Carl. I love recalling the relative's response when she announced her engagement. I hear still, in my imagination, the exact words of the family as she walked in, exhibiting her engagement ring!

I loved being Sylvia's confidante, and the hearing, helpful appendage when she took me along to the train station. And just now as I write this, I realize that I had forgotten her words at the rail station when I revealed that I had a crush on a deaf boy: "Not for you. Deaf, not Jewish." Words said in a more devastating way by my father years later.

I also felt that it was critical to recognize the support and help I had from the people who came into my life at different times—witness the doctor at Barnard, the dean of the college, and the dean of girls at high school.

I wanted to demonstrate the intrinsic strength that there was in our family. I also feel strongly about having arms out around others, and that by sharing both accomplishments and moments of despair, we enable others to also confront what they face today. Though today, for deaf families, there is a different world. The Americans with Disabilities Act did not exist then. Educational programs, offering more than vocational opportunities, were rare. In fact, the range of interventions was often limited to either sign language or oralism, not a spectrum of choices or a blending of all.

I have a picture of my younger sister, taken when she first received speech language therapy, probably published in *The Volta Review*, a publication of the A.G. Bell Association, or in a document from the Lexington School. The image, now over 80 years old, is too faded to see. However, the caption on the bottom is clear, "This three-year-old was born today as she started speech language therapy." How devastating! This kid sister of mine—full of life, playing games, asking me to spin her around so we could entertain the lady who lived across the street—this was not a child born at three! This was my little sister, interacting every day, in every way.

**GU Press:** What kinds of discussions would you like your book to inspire?

**Zadek:** What happens in a family manages to shape the future for some members. My mother, who saw herself as a traditional married woman, focusing on home and hearth, became a vocal and effective advocate on behalf of those who also had deaf children. She established friendships and support groups, the first at Lexington School. I am so convinced that what one

is dealt in life influences their path. For me, my life with deaf sisters formed the basis for a lifelong career, focusing on therapeutic interventions with families where communication was shaping their concerns.

**GU Press:** What do you feel is the most important takeaway from your book?

**Zadek:** There are so many unknowns. New realities can be met and addressed. What life was like for a deaf person 100 years ago is different today. We can be stumbling through life initially, and then when confronted with something so unfamiliar, it can move us into a different space. But in that space new opportunity arises, new knowledge, and others with whom to share and be companions.

Click here to find out more about [\*Miriam Hearing Sister: A Memoir\*](#).

