



# INTRODUCTION

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Every book needs a unifying thread. This book covers a period of time from the mid-seventeenth century to the late twentieth century and includes topics ranging from the global sociopolitical upheaval of the Second World War to the activities of a correspondence club composed of ten individuals. Geographically, the histories presented here relate experiences from the Siberian plateau all the way to a small town in Illinois. They tell the stories of, among others, artists, self-published authors, scientists, members of the Communist Party, and working-class women. The threads that unify these histories are their diversity and their relation to the lives of deaf people.

This collection has been made possible by the creation of a space for such explorations, partially via the establishment of *Deaf History International (DHI)* in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Triennial conferences organized by DHI (and often by Deaf community organizations) attract a wider range of participants than are normally found at academic gatherings. The usual denizens of scholarly meetings—academic historians and graduate students—are in the minority at these conferences, where they are outnumbered by community historians and members of the Deaf community. This book can thus be seen as an artifact of a transnational phenomenon: a widespread interest in the collection, documentation,

and dissemination of Deaf history by and for members of the Deaf community.

This book is situated within this movement of community historians and within the DHI tradition, with a mixture of articles by both academic historians and community historians. The chapters reflect the concerns of members of various Deaf communities: They uncover the histories of deaf pioneers, deaf stories as part of larger historical events, and, above all, the lived experiences of deaf people within their societies. These community historians have filled the vacuum left by the relative paucity of professional historians of Deaf history, especially outside US history. The late community historian Jochen Muhs was an internationally renowned presenter who, while best known for his important work unearthing the experiences of deaf Germans in the National Socialist era, also published pamphlets on important nineteenth-century deaf Germans. The work of individuals such as Muhs has been supported by organizations for the study of Deaf history in Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, and other countries. A number of these societies issue publications, whether books or journals, that further document the history of their national Deaf communities. The work of the British Deaf History Society—which has produced a long list of books, a regularly published journal, and an archive—is especially impressive.

Historian Joseph Amato writes, “Local history provides facts, comparisons, and contexts . . . for the abstract reaches of contemporary social sciences and history.” The “fidelity” of such community historians is to “details, anecdotes, and particularities.”<sup>2</sup> And indeed, the articles in this collection cover “particularities” and “details” of deaf experiences. But taken together, they present readers with a compelling narrative that stands alongside that of academic histories and presents the lives of deaf people as being firmly situated within the societies in which they reside. I have earlier written of the concept of “co-equality,” which is the notion that deaf people are simultaneously part of their larger societies even as they create and maintain spaces in which to live as sign-language-using deaf people.<sup>3</sup> This fluidity is present throughout *Telling Deaf Lives*. It is the “details” and “anecdotes” of deaf lives that help us understand what it means to navigate one’s difference across various places and times in history. The experience of being deaf is not solely that of being a minority

within a larger society but also that of inhabiting deaf-centered spaces, spaces that also replicate discourses found in larger society.

This multiple situating of deaf lives can be seen in Harry Lang's elegantly written reflection on writing biographies of deaf people. Lang borrows the image of a binary star—a solar system with two suns—as a metaphor for the “companion worlds” of deaf and hearing people. His biographies of deaf scientists show the contributions of deaf people in the sciences (at least ten craters on the moon, Mars, and Venus are named after deaf people) and to society at large. As Lang notes, “the experience of deaf people in history holds much power for better understanding our own world,” a truism reflected in other chapters in this volume.<sup>4</sup>

Moving from outer space to conceptual spaces of organization and resistance, Janelle Legg explores the political strategies used by Edwin A. Hodgson during a controversy over the merger of a deaf church, Saint Ann's, with a hearing church in New York City in the 1890s. Legg's meticulous research shows Hodgson as a shrewd advocate who used deaf and hearing spaces to advance the argument for an independent deaf church. As she demonstrates, deaf-centered spaces were not separate self-contained spaces but could rather serve as a “space of resistance” in which deaf arguments could influence larger society.

Deaf people have long had transnational interconnections, and the chapter by Melissa Anderson and Breda Carty shows how deaf people of different nations corresponded across great distances via the formation of the Cosmopolitan Correspondence Club, composed of individuals in Australia, western Europe, and the United States. Deaf women comprised a majority of the members of the correspondence club. Anderson and Carty's work makes an important contribution to ongoing studies of the transnational lives of deaf people. It shows that when we look beyond explicitly political activities such as conferences to a broader array of transnational interactions such as letter writing, a wider range of deaf people can be seen to be transnational actors. The club's members were “observant, aware, socially progressive people who were for the most part allied with established institutions such as schools, churches, and welfare organizations for deaf people,” and their correspondence shows an expanded space in which to understand deaf political activities.<sup>5</sup>

A cluster of articles looks at the lives and endeavors of deaf pioneers. Akio Suemori traces the story of Sei-ichirô Matsumura (1849–1891), the first president of the Kanazawa school for the deaf and blind. Suemori uncovers biographical details of Matsumura’s life, including that he was deafened at the age of fourteen and was a translator of an American geography textbook. It places Matsumura in the tradition of Japanese scholars oriented toward the West and as an important figure in Japanese Deaf history. Christopher Kurz and Albert Hlibok write of different challenges, namely those faced by Laurent Clerc, cofounder of deaf education in the United States, and interpret Clerc’s response to them using twenty-first-century ideas such as audism. Clifton Carbin’s contribution is a biography of Samuel Greene, the first deaf teacher at the Ontario Institution for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, who was present at the school’s opening in 1870. Carbin’s story of how he became interested in Greene’s life will be familiar to those who have spent time researching Deaf history. It began with “a huge, impressive 1890 portrait of a man” that hung in the school’s auditorium. Such portraits exist in numerous schools, and the discovery that they portray deaf people is often a catalyst for increased historical awareness by local Deaf communities.

Indeed, uncovering and honoring deaf people from the past is an explicit goal of many community historians. Peter Jackson is a prolific author of historical texts published by the British Deaf History Society. His contribution to this volume explores written records about three deaf men in seventeenth-century Britain. Jackson began this research by challenging himself to find the existence of deaf people before the establishment of formal deaf education in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Jackson uses archival records, a will, and other texts to uncover the lives, work, and signing abilities of three deaf men of the period. His compelling synopsis is an excellent example of a well-researched community history. Continuing in this biographical vein, Darlene Thornton, Susannah Macready, and Patricia Levitzke-Gray narrate the influence of two mid-twentieth-century Deaf community leaders in Australia, Fletcher Booth and Dorothy Shaw. They ask two questions about these leaders: “How did they contribute to the Australian Deaf Community?” and “What have they left behind”? Both leaders were

active in establishing organizations and publications that fostered deaf political awareness and strengthened the Australian Deaf community. The answers to these questions show how contemporary Deaf communities use history for the maintenance of community norms of working for the benefit of a larger community of deaf people.

Drew Robarge's essay on three US deaf photographers goes beyond thumbnail biographical sketches to explore "deaf cultural sensibilities at the turn of the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> Robarge relates how being deaf formed a crucial part of these photographers' lives, but historians can find only indeterminate visual evidence of deafness in their photographs. In the collective body of work by these three photographers, only two photographs depict sign language. Theophilus d'Estrella's photographs of students at the California School for the Deaf are representative of this lack of representation—these photographs show no evidence of whether the photographer or the students were deaf. As Robarge notes, although "deaf people might have embraced the invisibility of deafness in these photographers' works, that invisibility hampers researchers who are unable to distinguish between the deaf and the hearing in the creator and the subject."<sup>7</sup> Robarge shows deaf people living within hearing society while making significant contributions to the Deaf community in organizations, artwork, and publications. This interaction between deaf and hearing society is also present in Theara Yim and Julie Chateaufort's piece on ASL poetry. These authors look at the evolution of ASL poetry by analyzing works of prominent ASL poets Clayton Valli and the team of the Flying Words Project, made up of Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner. Valli's work was "explicitly one of validation," showing the legitimacy of ASL poetry vis-à-vis English literature. The Flying Words Project, by contrast, is a project of "radical affirmation" in that it considers deaf cultural identity alongside other cultural identities.

Fittingly, this book looks at the lived experiences of deaf people via oral histories and biographical and autobiographical narratives. A quick look at library collections of deaf works will uncover a large number of biographies and autobiographies. Albert Ballin, in his semifictional autobiography, *The Deaf Mute Howls*, makes clear the reason for this plethora of personal-experience narratives in deaf discourses: "Long, loud and cantankerous is the howl raised by the deaf-mute! . . . He ought to keep it up incessantly until the wrongs inflicted on him will have been

righted and done away with forever.”<sup>8</sup> Deaf women and men saw the sharing of personal-experience narratives as a political act, as a way to explain to an unknowing society what it means to be deaf.

Victor Palenny’s article contains fascinating stories told by deaf people in the twentieth-century Soviet Union, which were gathered via oral history interviews. It is important to note that Palenny’s work was done as part of a team of three community historians, showing deaf people collecting the signed histories of other deaf people. Palenny relates that some deaf people worked outside the Communist system to earn extra money on the side, selling postcards or cards with the manual alphabet. These stories are reminiscent of Br’er Rabbit stories in that they portray deaf people winning over hearing oppressors. Exploring similar stories in the British Deaf community, Paddy Ladd calls them examples of a “covert level of social praxis and political activity, the ‘1001 victories’” composed of small-scale acts of resistance and rebellion.<sup>9</sup>

However, the deaf experience was about not only resistance to power but also collaboration. Palenny shows another side of the deaf experience: the role of deaf people as loyal members of the socialist system. Interviewees who had prominent roles in the government-sanctioned national association of deaf people proudly related the stories of their roles as “constructors of socialism.”<sup>10</sup> Tatiana Davidenko also shows the multiple roles played by deaf people. She recounts her deaf family’s privations during the World War II siege of Leningrad. Her family’s suffering began earlier in Stalin’s time, when they lost their bakery and the author’s grandfather was sent to a concentration camp. But the main focus is the siege itself. Several members of Davidenko’s family died, and those remaining survived by escaping on a “Deaf boat” organized by the Leningrad branch of the VOG, the All-Russian Society of the Deaf. The boat left the city via Lake Ladoga, a route along which thousands had already perished.

Davidenko’s story is a chilling account of a famous historical event based on the experiences of one deaf family. She combines research by other historians with her mother’s stories, which were told only to her daughter and only late in her mother’s life. Davidenko highlights the Russian Deaf community’s fear of openly sharing negative experiences due to their oppression during the Stalin era. Equally important to this

persecution was the fear of those around them—including deaf people—who sought to adhere to the official line. Both Davidenko and Palenny show the power of oral history in uncovering a range of experiences and illuminating the ways in which deaf people navigate larger society, both resisting and adopting ideologies from the societies in which they lived.

Newby Ely also looks at deaf people's experiences in World War II by writing about the life of Hanna Holmes, a deaf woman of Japanese descent who was incarcerated with her family in a US internment camp during this period. Holmes was a child at the time, and her story is one that exposes the ineptness of the US government in ensuring educational access for her at the camp and the racism she faced outside it. For reasons not given, four schools for deaf people—in Colorado, California, Pennsylvania, and the Kendall School at Gallaudet University—rejected the government's attempts to place her and other deaf children from internment camps into their schools. She moved with her family to Illinois and, facing anti-Japanese hostility at an oral school in Chicago, finally relocated to the Illinois School for the Deaf. Holmes's story is known because she testified before the Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, was interviewed by an oral-history project, and gave testimony in a lawsuit to redress the treatment of victims of the wartime relocation. In short, her experiences were uncovered because, as a deaf person, she provided a perspective on a historical event that was different from those of other participants. Thus are deaf stories also of interest to a larger public. Hanna Holmes was discriminated against by the US government and faced prejudice from institutions and individuals because she was of Japanese descent and because she was deaf.

Kim A. Silva's article uses oral-history methods to examine a popular story in the American deaf community that gives a deaf dimension to the Amistad affair. This case involved fifty-three Africans who revolted aboard a slave ship and won back their freedom via a case argued by John Quincy Adams at the US Supreme Court. Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, pioneers of deaf education in the United States, were called upon to serve as gestural "interpreters" between the Africans and the US authorities when the ship first docked in the United States. The Africans, who were of the Mende people, also visited the

American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut. According to one story, the students were able to easily communicate with the Africans. However, the role of sign language was quickly overtaken by spoken language, with the actual trial interpreted from spoken English into spoken Mende. What is unusual about this article is that it relies heavily on what could be called folklore: stories handed down from one generation to another. Silva uses the methodological criterion of an oral historian: that an oral history must have an “unbroken series of witnesses” in order to be credible. She traces the genealogy of this story back to the nineteenth century through recollections carried from ASD teachers and staff to students, who then took on employment at the school. In addition to broadening our understanding of deaf lives, these articles by Palenny, Davidenko, Ely, and Silva illuminate unknown aspects of larger historical events: the deaf experience in various arenas during and after World War II and during the abolitionist movement.

*Telling Deaf Lives* also includes autobiographical pieces. Ulla-Bell Thorin is a deaf Swedish woman who has written six books, and among her primary motivations has been “the importance of deaf people telling their own stories in their own words.”<sup>11</sup> Five of her six books are autobiographical, and the sixth is a fictional narrative about a deaf woman. Thorin’s article is testimony to the struggles and strength of a deaf woman in twentieth-century Sweden. Tony Landon McGregor contributes an artistic autobiography that explores the De’VIA themes in his own artwork. Of particular interest is how his work developed alongside deaf mentors, from a deaf schoolteacher in his youth to informal mentoring by established deaf artists such as Chuck Baird and Betty Miller. Not only artists but also deaf patrons such as curators and critics contributed to McGregor’s development. McGregor shows us how membership in the Deaf community can be a boon to individual deaf lives.

All of the contributions in this volume go beyond written archival documents to draw upon an innovative range of sources available in sign language: oral histories collected by professional and community historians, folklore, family memories handed down through the generations, and autobiographical recollections. What these sources highlight is the richness of historical texts in sign language for understanding



the varied experiences of deaf people. Fortunately, we have means of accessing these histories. Diana Moore and Joan Naturale show the rich array of written and video sources available to scholars of Deaf history through Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) libraries. However, Marc-André Bernier reminds us that the personal documents of today's deaf people are often in “born-digital” format, which presents its own challenges for the preservation of Deaf history. He also encourages readers to preserve their own histories. Veronica Bickle, Jennifer Paul, and Bob Paul take another perspective on history, sharing their experience with writing historical fiction about deaf people. Their novel, *The Vineyarders*, is situated around the experiences of deaf people on Martha's Vineyard in the late nineteenth century, and the writers clearly elucidate the challenges facing authors of fictionalized accounts of well-known historical figures and events.

These stories narrate a diverse range of deaf lives. While an overarching thread is an intention to relate the experiences of deaf people, another commonality is worth noting. We should not lose sight of the profoundly optimistic orientation of these stories. Uncovering and sharing histories of deaf people are ways of affirming a belief that learning and change are possible and that, by sharing one's stories, one can spark understanding that will better the lives of deaf people and ultimately lead to a more just society. Ballin wrote of the desire to remedy the “wrongs inflicted” on deaf people; these stories continue that tradition. In sharing the histories and narratives of deaf lives, this book ensures that Ballin's howl is not forgotten and that the stories of deaf people continue to be told.

## Notes

1. Jack Gannon, “Birth of Deaf History International,” *Deaf History International* 1, no. 1 (1993): 1.
2. Joseph Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3–5.
3. Joseph J. Murray, “Coequality and Transnational Studies: Understanding Deaf Lives,” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 100–10.
4. Lang, this volume.

5. Anderson and Carty, this volume.
6. Robarge, this volume.
7. Ibid.
8. Albert V. Ballin, *The Deaf-Mute Howls* (1931; repr., Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 1.
9. Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2003), 329.
10. Palenny, this volume.
11. Thorin, this volume.