Divided into nine parts, with short chapters, the memoir *Miriam Hearing Sister*, by Miriam Zadek, charts the changing family dynamics of the Zadek family, their surroundings, and the Deaf community. In particular, it primarily explores what it means to be a family member, ally, and sister of Deaf siblings before, during, and after the Second World War. The book deals with key themes in the historical experiences and feelings of families who have members with disabilities: expectations, relationships, parental worries and fears, stigma, assertions of independence and autonomy, and advocacy and alliances. Miriam’s childhood and teen experiences include being exposed to parental fears regarding disability, acknowledging disability stigma, being curious about her sisters’ experiences, and recognizing that there are both similarities and differences between siblings who are deaf. The memoir is a coming-of-age story focused on disability and familial relationships.

Miriam is Sylvia and Shirley’s middle, hearing sister. Sylvia and Shirley were born deaf. Sylvia, strong and independent-minded, had qualities that Miriam admired and tried to emulate. Growing up in a culturally Jewish family in Mount Vernon, New York, during the 1920s, Sylvia attended the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City, an oralist school founded in the mid-1800s that focused on “aural habilitation” (p. 121). Miriam’s mother’s decision to send Sylvia to this school was consistent with the prevalent oralist approach to education during the 1920s. Despite her schooling, Sylvia learned and taught Miriam sign language, and they communicated with one another using this modality but hid it from their parents. Miriam’s mother did not know sign language, and her father, who was hard of hearing, used hearing aids. Miriam’s mother ultimately allowed the deaf sisters to use sign language at home. However, she insisted that Miriam’s sisters use their voices when communicating with the family’s hearing members, including Miriam. But Miriam learned sign language and communicated with her sisters when not in the presence of their parents. Miriam’s ability to use sign language, distinct from her mother’s inability, forced her to serve as a translator between the Zadek parents and Sylvia. This was a key driver of Miriam’s allyship with the Deaf community in adulthood. This alliance was reinforced by Miriam serving the same role with her younger sister, Shirley.

Parental fears and worries permeate the Zadek story. For instance, when Shirley was born and they learned that she was also deaf, their mother had a nervous breakdown, causing Miriam, Sylvia, and their mother to move to Florida for two months. Their father and Shirley stayed in...
New York. Unlike her mother, Miriam saw the benefits of having another Deaf sister: she writes that if Shirley were as much fun as Sylvia, everything would be alright. The only thing that made having a Deaf sister like Sylvia different, Miriam writes, is that “she didn’t live at home during the week like my friends’ sisters” (p. 23). Instead, while in New York, Sylvia lived at a boarding school that separated her from her family during the work week.

Separation characterizes the Zadek family dynamics. Sylvia’s temporary separation from family life while at the boarding school allowed her to develop within a Deaf community but also produced disconnection and conflict between her parents and herself. The separation of family members as a product of moving to Florida speaks to the strong stigma of having a disabled child during the interwar period and the consequences such stigma could have on families during this time. During these separations, Miriam embraced a primary role as interlocutor for the family. For example, moving to Florida resulted in Sylvia being mainstreamed in school, highlighting her difference from her teachers and peers. None of the teachers knew sign language, forcing Sylvia to lip read. When there were communication disconnects, Miriam, as a sibling, had to serve as translator. When given this assignment by the teachers, Miriam assured Sylvia that she was being asked to explain content to Sylvia if she did not understand but was confident that Sylvia would understand since she was so smart. As for Shirley, before entering school, her mother hired a tutor to teach her how to lip read and speak. Shirley resisted. Miriam watched this dynamic, understanding that her sister was being asked to “master a language she couldn’t hear,” a project that Miriam infers was absurd (p. 46).

Living with uncertainty also characterizes the Zadek family’s dynamics. After returning to New York, Miriam’s childhood curiosity led her to ask her mother why her sisters were deaf. She received an answer she considered unsatisfactory: no one knew, although it was assumed that her father’s hearing issues, resulting from the 1918-20 flu epidemic, were connected to her sisters’ deafness. “That was the story I would grow up with,” but, exposing her feelings of guilt at being the only hearing sibling, Miriam wondered if this could truly be the reason why her younger sister, Shirley, was deaf since she, Miriam, can hear (p. 35). She asked this question as the middle child, pondering how deafness skipped a child in her family. Much later, at age seventy, when genetic testing for hereditary deafness had become available, Miriam learned that having two copies of the recessive GJB2 gene mutation is the cause of her sisters’ deafness.

Being the hearing sister, neighbors assumed that Miriam undertook greater responsibility than her sisters and even had to care for them. Her mother felt insulted that others thought this, claiming Miriam did not bear any more responsibility than other children. Given the example of Miriam serving as the communication interlocutor for her sisters, her mother appeared to be in denial, but her response reflects the underlying stigma exposed by a neighbor’s attitude: deaf people need extra protection and care. In reality, this was not always the case. Sylvia was tasked with being Miriam’s beach swimming buddy because of her swimming skills. Miriam states, “I think it was because Sylvia was such a good swimmer and so competent at everything that not one of us stopped to think: If Miriam gets into trouble [in the water], Sylvia won’t hear her cries for help” (p. 59). The limits of Sylvia’s independent streak and her mother’s fears are revealed when Miriam was told about Sylvia getting lost at Coney Island. Her parents felt despair, wondering how to search for Sylvia if she could not hear her name being called. These deep fears are repeated in different ways throughout the book, pointing to the experiences of parents of children with disabilities during this time period.
The fragility of all community members was revealed when one of Miriam’s other neighbor’s children contracted polio during one of the many outbreaks New York City experienced during the interwar period. When the children eventually recovered, Miriam’s mother and her neighbors forbade talking about polio because it was upsetting and could expose the vulnerability of everyone to disease and disability. This silencing, Miriam points out, disallowed children’s curiosity, particularly about learning what the illness experience of polio was. Such silencing mirrored the inability of Miriam’s parents to explain the cause of her sisters’ deafness. Hiding discussion about disability was a way to perpetuate stigma and shame about impairment. Trying to ignore it was also a coping mechanism for parents who chose to act as if everything was fine.

Parents were not the only ones who maintained a culture of silence and secrecy. Miriam recalls that her siblings’ friends called her Miriam Hearing Sister because she had secret ways of communicating with them, including sensitivity to body language and lip reading. After returning to New York, Miriam eagerly served as Sylvia’s connection “to the outside world” (p. 65). She made phone calls for Sylvia to her friends (via their hearing family members) to protect Sylvia’s privacy from her parents about her teenage plans and social relationships. When Miriam had to accompany Sylvia to meet up with boys, Sylvia made Miriam promise not to tell her parents about any of it and to refrain from interacting with her friends.

Miriam Hearing Sister also deals with the differential expectations of employment for people with disabilities during the Second World War. Though Sylvia and Miriam were to graduate simultaneously from high school and middle school, their parents and society saw different potential for each child. Her parents expected Miriam to follow a high school professional educational track and Sylvia to continue at her school for the Deaf on a vocational track that included sewing and domestic arts training. “Being deaf wasn’t thought of as an obstacle in the semi-skilled trades. Sylvia was seventeen and wanted to go to work in a factory” (p. 71). When the war began, Sylvia worked as a radio assembly technician, a role also undertaken by other Deaf people. It was a job where no one had to “make the employer understand that deafness did not interfere with performance” (p. 85). Since hearing men had left the job market to fight overseas, women were replacing them making it easier for Sylvia to become employed. There, Sylvia proved her independence to her mother and found the kind of community she had experienced at school. However, Sylvia’s mother remained concerned about Sylvia’s ability to find a job in the future. Her worries point to a defense of the abilities of people with impairments to work and support themselves, but within a circumscribed vision of full integration through lip reading and learning to live within the hearing world.

Eventually, Miriam’s mother became active in her youngest child’s school, forming a mother’s group to support parents in raising their Deaf children. In this respect, she was ahead of her time. The mothers became activists and became friends. The group became an important outlet for their mother, who, in prior decades, had exhibited shame, silence, and defensiveness about raising two Deaf children. Once she had built a supportive community, she realized how to advocate for children with disabilities. But she also asked Miriam to join the group to share what it is like to have two Deaf sisters. Miriam was appalled by this request, especially when asked how her friends related to her sisters, if she was embarrassed by them, and if she wanted them around. The questions came from a mother who detailed how her own children were embarrassed by their Deaf sister. Miriam responded that, instead of asking them to leave her alone with her friends, she interpreted for her friends so that they could understand what her sisters were signing. Finding this mother’s questions out of bounds, she wonders,
“weren’t they [the mother’s hearing children] all part of the same family?” (p. 120). Why would they want to banish or hide their own sister? To Miriam, this was impossible to fathom.

As Miriam reached high school age, she recognized how stigma can turn into discrimination and genocide. In 1941, as her cousins and uncles joined the US Army to fight in the war, Miriam heard the news that Adolf Hitler intended to, and did, eliminate disabled people in Germany. She wondered if this meant that her siblings would be killed because they are deaf. Just as she had been taught to be quiet about the serious vulnerabilities that come with having a disability, she covered up her deep fears from her friends and her sisters. But she worried deeply that Hitler might come to American shores. With time, Miriam also learned that Hitler was exterminating the Jewish population of Europe. The atrocities of the war hit home: “Here I was, Jewish, dark-eyed, with curly auburn hair, and two deaf sisters” (p. 90). In her later years, she learned from a cousin that, indeed, her deaf aunt died in the Holocaust, and so did other close relatives.

Amid the war, Sylvia became engaged. Miriam relays how Sylvia continued to assert her independence, claiming her autonomy in apartment hunting, job training, demanding her privacy, and building a life with her husband. Miriam took note, hoping that one day she would be just as independent as her older sister. Shirley embodied a similar independence. When forced, in the 1940s, to wear hearing aids at school and elsewhere, Shirley refused, arguing that people treated her as if she could hear perfectly when she wore them and so did not face her when speaking. Finding them bothersome, she threw the aids in the trash.

As her sisters built their own lives, Miriam felt that her identity was limited to being the hearing sister. In part 6 of the memoir, Miriam realizes that she wants to chart her identity separate from her sisters. She found the vehicle for identity formation through reading. She found happiness in Jewish celebration and community rather than religious services or theology. She found her distinct form of independence through political activism. She found a mentor in the local Zionist movement, who made Miriam realize that there were pressing concerns outside her family. This leap beyond her family identity was transformative as it facilitated a pathway through which Miriam could define herself rather than only in relation to her sisters. Miriam continued this path as the only woman in her family who attended college.

Miriam learned lessons at college that transferred to her disability advocacy, “to broaden the conversation, learn about differences, and don’t assume only one way is right” (p. 147). She used this perspective to reinterpret her mother’s assertiveness from being solely controlling to modeling a form of parental advocacy and raising her daughters to be assertive and determined. She later used this approach as a social worker with children, allowing distrustful young clients the space to develop trust in her and communicate with her in their own way. Miriam attributed the skill of seeking out multiple ways of communicating to her sisters, who, she claims, made this approach intuitive and natural. In this way, Miriam acknowledges disability as fundamentally productive. Challenges from her parents to this inclusive perspective, however, persisted. Miriam’s father told her that he adamantly opposed her marrying a hearing-impaired man. At the time, she was dating a deaf man at college. With deep family loyalty, Miriam questioned whether she needed to carry this burden or whether she could decide for herself who she would marry. She wanted to figure out her relationship between the hearing and Deaf worlds. This quandary led her to move away from home into a dormitory in order to rethink her family relationships and become something more than Miriam, the Hearing Sister. Another challenge made Miriam realize that the stigma of disability was attached to her as a sister of Deaf women. Right before she was about to get married in 1952, her fiancé’s father tried to con-
vince his son not to marry Miriam because she is “damaged goods” (p. 160). Luckily, her fiancé did not tolerate his father’s interference, so Miriam and Bob started to build their careers and a family in the following years, despite her father-in-law’s hope of marital failure.

Toward the memoir’s end, Miriam ponders the effects of growing up hearing in a deaf world. She touches people to get their attention before speaking, raises her eyebrows and tilts her chin when asking a question, and reads lips in hearing and deaf settings. She feels uncomfortable when she cannot see a person’s face and uses gestures and expressions that derive from fluency in sign language. Through her work, Miriam also has understood the necessity of sign language for deaf children’s education and well-being.

Two decades later, Miriam leveraged her communication skills and inclusive approach to develop a model intervention for families with children who had “communicative disorders” (p. 167). As part of the work, Miriam counseled parents on how to best communicate with their children and emotionally connect, subsequently improving their family dynamics. Her work also grappled with similar issues she had experienced: articulating a child’s place in the family and the uncertainty of changing roles and responsibilities. She then founded Baltimore’s first American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting service agency in 1986. As she gained more experience in this area, she realized the need for specialized interpreters and the continued barriers to an equitable, mainstream education due to this need.

Miriam Hearing Sister concludes with a mention of how historical changes affect family dynamics around disability. Instead of shunning different modes of communication, for instance, Miriam’s mother showed amazement at how new communication technologies at the end of the twentieth century allowed her deaf nieces and nephews to succeed. Miriam, as a social worker specializing in communication and family dynamics, witnessed these changes and their results, making her wonder if her family’s dynamics could have been “fuller” if her parents had allowed all available forms of communication in their home. She thinks so. Yet her status as Miriam Hearing Sister, which she desired to distance herself from at certain periods, allowed her to traverse both the hearing and deaf worlds, for which she is ultimately grateful.

Although the memoir raises important questions about family, disability, deafness, identity, and historical change, it should be read and used as the genre it is. I can see this memoir as forming a supplement to historical material in a disability history course, but I would not recommend using the text alone. In my assessment, there is not enough discussion of historical context or rigorous reflection on the various themes to suffice. As a memoir, the themes are dealt with as part of an individual narrative and are therefore constrained by one woman’s story. The book’s value lies in its exploration of what a non-disabled sibling’s experiences were in the early twentieth century and how those experiences influence a life trajectory, and in its articulation of individual questioning and growth at different historical moments.
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