



Raili Ojala-Signell
Alone I Made
the Signs of
My Way



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“Raili, have you ever looked in the mirror, when you sign?” Pastor for the deaf Eino Savisaari asked me this question at my first sign language course in 1973.

Raili Ojala-Signell: Alone I Made the Signs of My Way

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remember

*I remember if I do remember
at least I should be reminded to remember
otherwise I would not remember
it would be so good, if I remembered
what I should remember
but who is it to tell me that I should remember even that
when I hardly can remember
what I should remember
I would not mind otherwise, but it would be good
if I remembered why it was good to remember
but I just cannot remember
how it was when I remembered
all the important things to remember
in order to have remembrances to share
for others to remember*

Author's notes

Because I wrote my stories over a twelve-year period, between 2000 and 2012, some of them repeat events which have already been mentioned in previous stories. My Finnish memoirs received some criticism for this repetition. I have taken note of these repetitions in this English translation by mentioning them each time they occur. As my stories are their own entities and were originally intended to stand on their own this kind of repetition was partly necessary.

In some of my stories I have used capital letters to show that a deaf or deafblind person is signing that expression or that it is a gloss of sign language. This type of transcription of sign language has been used in sign language dictionary and research work in many countries because sign language as a visual language could not be written. From this way of noting the difference between sign languages and spoken languages, I have wanted to show that sign language has its own grammar and word order, but that, of course, the full richness of sign language is missing from this type of notation, since it fails to take account of all the facial expressions, the use of the hands to show, for instance, how big or how fast etc. something is, the way in which space is used too in relation to expressing where and when everything takes place. I do hope the readers of my book are aware, or will become aware, of how rich sign languages are in their ways of expression and that it is in no way my intention to suggest that the language of deaf and deafblind people is poorer than that of spoken languages.

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Prologue

"I am not deaf, but not quite hearing either. I feel that both these worlds live happily and strongly in me. Of course I am also much else besides these elements, which makes me the Raili that I am." – This is how one could describe the stories of Raili Ojala-Signell on her experiences as a hearing child of deaf parents. Vivid mini short stories offer insightful flashes and door openings to a world that is not so well known: where she was born and where she has lived multi-dimensionally and colourfully all her life with her family, work, training, advocacy, and in her leisure activities. These stories include a strong positive suggestion and above all belief that ignorance and prejudice against deafness, sign language, and sign language culture can easily and surprisingly be made to vanish.

The stories, intriguingly, include insights, which change fluidly within one story and from one story to the next. Insights into a deaf, and a deaf blind individual, a hearing child of deaf parents, representatives of the hearing majority, and a worker in the field of deafness appear in the stories along with their experiences, often in a humorous way. These views make it easy for the reader to become absorbed in the situations, ambiences, and emotions in the stories. With their help the reader can also identify with the experiences and even with the identities depicted.

Regarding identity and difference of experience, it is interesting to note that the experiences of hearing children of deaf parents and of deaf children do not differ much in the end. As a deaf child of deaf parents it was easy for me to dive into the world of the writer and experience it, so that I did not think of the differences between our two groups at all. These differences are minimal after all, maybe more like shades of difference, although one would imagine that the world of sounds would be the most decisive area of difference. I was once in a while thrilled that I could, through these stories, return to scenery, situations, and people that I have not encountered since I was a child. Joy, happiness, grief, and sadness seized me in their turn, when I re-lived these stories.

The stories seem to have a certain basic structure, which at the end is condensed into some kind of solution, surprise, discovery, or clever ex-

planation. But the end can also be left completely open to make the reader ponder more deeply; for instance, how things could have been totally otherwise. Some stories seem almost to be paintings or visual prints of a happening or a passing moment, which the reader can follow like a spectator of a short film in which they can submerge themselves.

Raili Ojala-Signell's stories gently portray how deaf culture is much more than not hearing sounds or the so-called inability to hear, or that living as a deaf person might be only a very painful process in the path of life. These stories convey a whole way of life and its traditions, into which the writer has merged herself like any member of a linguistic and cultural group. For me, joyful and surprising were descriptions which were connected with sounds because they were so unbelievable and unimaginable as expressions from the world of deaf people I know.

The stories include positive life experiences as well as sad incidents, which are part of life, solemn experiences, prejudices, and people in doubt, all of which one can survive as a whole and stronger person. The deaf community offers the means for this survival, means born from the lives of people living in the community, which one can easily identify with. These are beautifully included in these stories.

Any person interested in deaf culture and sign language, or a professional who has long worked in the sign language field, can benefit from this book. I believe that this book also can be meaningful to the children of deaf parents and their families. For the families, these stories can bring light into the wide field of deafness and reveal the fact that the whole community is so very many-sided. The book is a welcome addition to the literature which is still scarce in this field, and also to the rich tradition of storytelling in the deaf community.

Markku Jokinen

Executive Director, the Finnish Association of the Deaf

President, the European Union for the Deaf

Honorary President of the World Federation of the Deaf

How I became me

*I was not asked
if I wanted to
alternatives
were not given*

*born hearing
genes from my parents
ran in the family
deafness*

*a step not yet taken
words not yet uttered
but already producing
signs with my fat hands*

*relatives were sighing
grandmothers moaned
cannot be deaf, too
poor little one*

*hearing ears
open eyes
sharpness of two
the adult world demanded*

*a hearing person
wanted to talk
to my parents and
then I was needed*

*difficult words
adult matters
for a child to perceive
and convey*

*beautiful language
richness of expression
whole deaf culture
suckled from mother's milk*

*interpreter mediating
thoughts, feelings
something even
left unsaid*

*impartial, objective
honest, exact
not taking
any sides*

*too much to ask
when feelings lie
always on the side
of the weaker*

*did I choose
to work in this field
or did I simply take
the road signed to me*

*two languages
two cultures
between two worlds
I have been a bridge*

*but what am I
not deaf
not completely hearing
will I stay as a bridge*

I

Deaf world



“I am not deaf, but not quite hearing either. I feel that both these worlds live happily and strongly in me. Of course I am also much more, which makes me that Raili that I am.” – This is how one could describe the stories of Raili Ojala-Signell on her experience as a hearing child of deaf parents. Lively, mini-short stories offer insightful flashes and door openings to a world that is not so well known: where she was born and where she has lived multi-dimensionally and colourfully all her life with her family, work, training, and advocacy work, and in her leisure activities. These stories include a strong positivity and above all belief that ignorance and prejudice against deafness, sign language, and sign language culture can easily and surprisingly be made to disappear with information.



Views of a deaf, of a deafblind individual, of a hearing child of deaf parents, of representatives of the hearing majority, and of a worker in the field of deafness appear in the stories along with their experiences, often in a humorous way. These views make it easy for the reader to become absorbed in the situations, ambiences, and emotions in the stories. With their help, the reader can identify with the experiences and even with the identities depicted. The book is a welcomed addition to the literature which is still scarce in this field of deafness and also to the rich tradition of storytelling within the deaf community.



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