

## Summary

### The Deaf: the Equalization of Opportunities

The problem of deafness has been the subject of interest of many scientific disciplines. These are first of all medicine, psychology, pedagogy, logopedics, social sciences, linguistics, phonetics, glottodidactics, sociology, and others. For some of those disciplines deafness is a pathological phenomenon, for others it is mainly the subject of research, while for still others a person with hearing impairment is the object of didactic and educational interactions. The specialists of each of those disciplines are faced with different tasks and hence they need to apply different theoretical and practical solutions. However, it should be remembered that a person with hearing impairment should never be treated as merely a dehumanized object of investigations or considerations. The problem of subjectivity of deaf people, and of their conscious participation in the rehabilitation process has now been of primary importance, both in Poland and worldwide. In many countries it can be observed that the deaf themselves strive to shape their own lives, starting from the very beginnings of education up to active participation in social life. The present work is an attempt to look at the problem of deafness as a social phenomenon, and at culturally deaf people as full members of society.

Present-day literature dealing with the problems of the disabled usually devotes little space to deaf-people. Most of the publications concerned with various disabilities either do not mention the deaf at all, or discuss their problems marginally, in the range limited to people who lost their hearing at a later age, or elderly people who tend to lose their hearing gradually. The problems of people who lost their hearing in early childhood or who were born deaf and are thus separated from the rest of the society by a barrier of specific, manual means of communication, are hardly ever discussed with competence. Many investigators limit their studies to analysing the situations of people who are only hard of hearing or those who lost their hearing at a later age, because it is with them only that they can communicate linguistically – by speaking or writing. It happens sometimes that on the basis

of such contacts and investigations some wrong generalizations are made, according to which deafness is treated as an incurable disease, and persons with only a certain amount of hearing loss or those who lost their hearing at a later age, all of whom were brought up among hearing people thus representing their characteristic features and patterns of behaviour, are treated in the same way as the representatives of the culturally deaf. Such an approach can lead to considerable misunderstandings, such as for instance relating the artistic achievements of some famous people who lost their hearing at a later age, e.g. Goya or Beethoven, with the people who are culturally deaf.

This book is devoted to the people who are culturally deaf, for whom the sign language is the first language they learned. They form a community which not only has its own language, but also its own culture which is revealed in different forms, including the literary and artistic activities. It can be seen in the pantomime, the sign theatre, dance, small theatrical forms performed in the sign languages, and also in such artistic forms as painting and sculpture. However, all that is not known to general public, while at the same time many people express an opinion that the sign language is not a satisfactory means of human communication, and that it limits possibilities of development of a person who uses it. The appearance of such stereotypes is favoured by general inability of making contacts with a deaf person. The authors of such opinions usually do not know the sign language and thus their views are based merely on inaccurate observation.

The deaf themselves do not want to be referred to as the disabled or the handicapped. Being on normal level of intellectual development they wish to be treated as a language minority whose representatives are in most cases simply unable to fully master the language of the hearing majority. This largely restricts the possibilities of exchange of information and of thoughts between the hearing persons and the deaf. As a result of such a situation the deaf form a compact community within which they lead a social life, get married, etc. Some of them, being bilingual, i.e. fluent also in the language of sounds, are able to use that language too, and in such a case their problems become limited to the ability to understand what hearing persons say. However, this communication barrier, which effectively hampers mutual communication, at the same time makes difficult the organization of the process of education and employment, and also creates problems in everyday life.

The majority of people who are culturally deaf do not use the speech or lipreading to an extent that would be satisfactory for linguistic communication. For those people the sign language remains the fundamental means of communication. There is practically no written equivalent of the sign language, and the attempts at communicating in its written form are often unsuccessful for people who do not know the sign language because of completely different grammatical rules. For many years the sign language was treated as a worse means of communication, of utilitarian character only, not suitable for abstract thinking. For almost 40 years this language has been the subject of investigations, particularly by American linguists. The results of their investigations have proved that the sign language has all important features of any language except being transmitted by speech. In effect, the sign language was finally accepted as a means of linguistic communication equally valuable as the speech. At the same time cultural values transmitted by this language have regained acceptance, and many culturally deaf persons realised that they belong to a minority which, in spite of certain different features, has the right to be treated as equal. In 1988 the Parliament of Europe issued a resolution accepting the sign language as a natural means

of communication among the deaf, and in December 1993 the United Nations General Assembly agreed on a Resolution No. 48/96 known as *The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* which emphasizes the role and significance of the sign language in performing social roles by culturally deaf persons, and recommends its use in education and social life in every country. In Poland investigations into the sign language have also been undertaken, and it has been introduced into the curriculum of teaching deaf children.

The book consists of two main parts. Part I – „The Non-hearing – the deaf – the mute” presents the terminology on the subject used both in Poland and worldwide, the numerical data, the causes and consequences of hearing impairment, the problems related to compensation of hearing impairment, the problems connected with communication barriers – lipreading, the sign language and investigations into it, Signed Polish, other forms of linguistic communication including the cued-speech and Total Communication – as well as problems of cultural and social identity of the deaf and also the stereotypes of thinking and social myths which have appeared around this issue. The author presents different views and opinions, emphasizing the right of deaf persons to possess their own language and culture.

Part II – „Equalization of Opportunities” presents various problems concerning early diagnosing and aid in the development of deaf children, education on all levels, vocational counselling and employment, non-governmental organizations for deaf persons in Poland and abroad, spiritual care, participation of the deaf in culture, sports and social life, technical aids as well as the policy of social welfare and legal matters concerning deaf persons. The book is supplemented with a dictionary of basic terms related to hearing impairment.

The author of the book is a person hard of hearing since early childhood, who can speak and also knows the sign language well. For almost 40 years he has remained in close contact with the community of the deaf. He is a teacher, head of a residential school for the deaf, and has a Ph.D. degree in the humanities. He is the author of many publications in the field of surdopedagogy and the sign language.

Deaf persons live among the hearing ones. They encounter many problems on the border of the two worlds: they are able to solve some of them themselves, in solving others they obtain help from those who surround them: hearing family members, teachers and educationists, doctors, priests, vocational counsellors, social welfare representatives, other specialists, or simply friends. However, there is still a great need of popularizing the knowledge about this difficult subject among the representatives of all those public services, so as to facilitate the creation of equal opportunities for this group of the disabled. The knowledge about the deaf, as collected in the present work, based on the latest experience, collected both in Poland and abroad, should help all those who undertake the difficult task to help the disabled persons in solving their problems, fulfilling their needs, and equalizing their opportunities.