ELENA RADUTZKY

Viva la Differenza!

Those who know me well, know that I have two serious chronic diseases. The first is rheumatoid arthritis, which has had some serious consequences, not the least of which for my signing skills. I can no longer make a fist, nor can I raise individual fingers. As a result, my deaf colleagues teasingly tell me that when I sign now, I "slur" like a drunk. My second chronic disease is a mental obsession: I am constantly driven to guarantee access to communication to those who are denied it, and this affliction dates back to long before I entered the Deaf world.

I was born in Brooklyn in 1944 into a family of Eastern European immigrants from four countries. They arrived in New York Harbor, welcomed by the Statue of (so-called) Liberty! What a linguistic opportunity: I could have become multilingual and multicultural, effortlessly; each grandparent had only to speak to me exclusively in their language.

Not a chance! They were all browbeaten into believing that to succeed, they must shed their language, culture, and accent and (heaven forbid) must never talk to the grandchildren in anything but English. My sister and I would enter the room while our grandparents were conversing in Ukrainian. Grandma would immediately whisper to Grandpa "Onuki tut" ("The grandkids are here"), and they would immediately switch to their broken English. Young as I was, I was furious!

Lucky for me, my Uncle Pete married Maria, a beautiful Cuban woman who spoke a language my family could not understand—Spanish! That was it! I was determined to master it. (I'm a tad embarrassed to admit that my prime motivation was revenge.) I even

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Elena Radutzky, editor of the *Italian Sign Language Dictionary,* founded and directed the Mason Perkins Deafness Fund for twenty-five years.

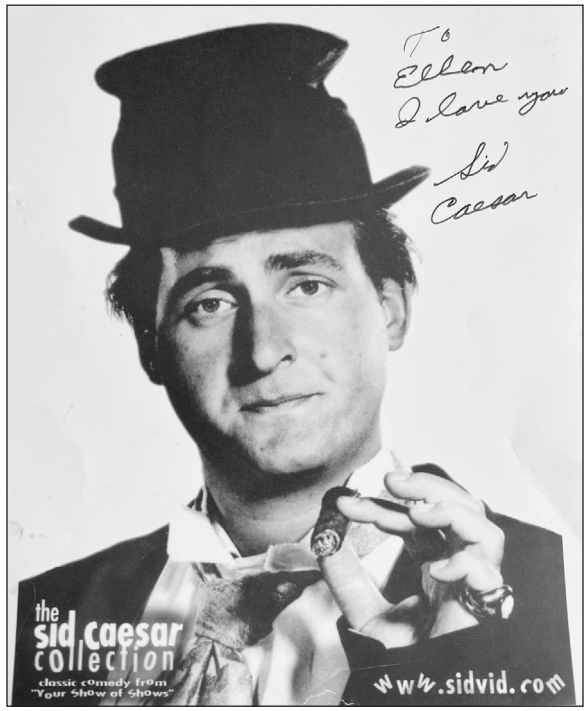

Figure 1. The American television comic Sid Caesar. Photo courtesy of the author.

changed my name from Ellen to Elena. I studied Spanish through junior and senior high and majored in it for my BA, then lived and studied for a year and a half in Spain to become fluent.

Obviously, my language deprivation was nothing like what most Deaf children go through. Yes, I was deprived of being bilingual as a child, but I acquired my native English from my parents, which enabled full cognitive and linguistic development at the appropriate developmental moment in time. Furthermore, I was fully accepted by my parents as being similar to them. This is not the case with 95 percent of deaf children, who are born to hearing parents. But what drew me to the Deaf world and sign language? My father happened to be the best friend of the famous American television comic and mime, Sid Caesar (figure 1).

From the age of ten, I spent many weekends at Sid's home. He had a Deaf gardener named Eddie, my first Deaf experience. Eddie did not use full American Sign Language (ASL) with Sid, but they got on

fine because Sid was an expert mime, had remarkable gesturing, and had learned fingerspelling and a dose of ASL from Eddie. Since I had acted in camp and school plays, I was intrigued by this visual-gestural communication. I must have tucked ASL deep into my gray matter, but I did not pursue it until much later. (Sid became attached to the Deaf community and starred with deaf actress Phyllis Frelich in *Love Is Never Silent*, a Broadway show based on the 1970 novel by Joanne Greenberg, *In This Sign*. I dedicated my doctoral dissertation to him.

I began my PhD program in 1976 at New York University (NYU). It was chaired by Neil Postman, and inspired by Marshall McLuhan, examined communication environments. Each student was to select a communication medium to analyze throughout the program. I did not know what to choose. The very evening before the decision deadline, on my way to class, I entered the wrong room and found twelve Deaf students, hands flying in the air in lively conversation. I stood there gaping. This was definitely not Sid and Eddie's language. I excused myself and closed the door. I turned around to find an announcement for an intensive course in ASL taught by the great Mary-Beth Miller, beginning the very next day!

From the first moment in Miller's class, I knew I had found what I had always been seeking: a communication environment uniting my acting talents and my love of languages and linguistics, that would send me on a lifelong adventure down a visual-gestural path. Fortunately, one of my professors was a signer and approved my choice wholeheartedly.

I had spent a year in Italy in 1970–71 and returned in 1977 to investigate the Italian Deaf community and its sign language. I presented my intentions to Vittorio Ieralla, president of the Italian National Association for the Deaf (ENS). Apparently, no research had yet been conducted on what everyone called *mimica*, and later formally called by ENS *linguaggio mimico-gestuale*. There was strong resistance by the non-Deaf to consider this form of communication a real language. So the ENS, then a national government agency, sadly took a neutral stand for many years. Ieralla assured me, however, that upon my return in 1979, the ENS would help in any way it could.

Back at NYU, I immediately applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to research sign language in Italy and, in particular, the evolution of sign phonology and iconicity. I crossed my fingers and contacted

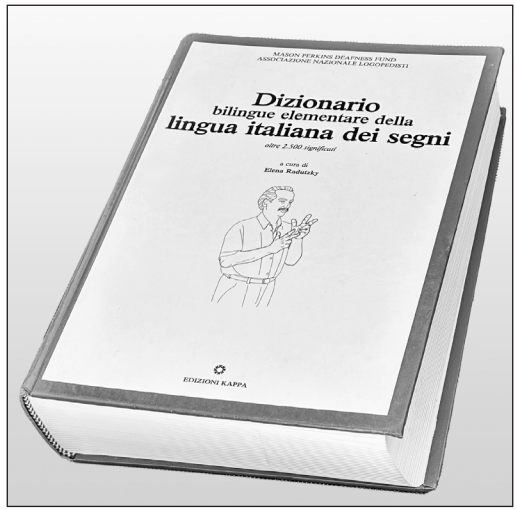

Figure 2. Cover of the 1992 *Dizionario bilingue elementare della Lingua dei Segni Italiana*. Photo courtesy of the author.

William Stokoe at his Linguistics Research Laboratory at Gallaudet University.

The year 1978 was the year of my good fortune. Stokoe welcomed me into the lab; I don't remember sleeping much. By night, I devoured all the material I was able to lay my hands on at the lab and in the library. By day, Stokoe and members of his staff, Charlotte Baker, James "Woody" Woodward, Lloyd "Andy" Anderson, Harry Markowicz, and a guest colleague from France, Bernard Mottez, prepared me in fieldwork and how to train willing and capable Deaf people in Italy to research their own language. They equipped me with the tools to eventually create a sign language dictionary (Radutzky, ed. 1992), which like Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg's *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (1976/1965), was based on sign language principles.

Woody was clear and knowledgeable in field research on North American, South American, and Asian sign languages. He showed me how to administer a sign version of a Swadesh List. Bill gave me priceless input on how to elicit signs without the influence of spoken language and would stay in touch for years as an important supporter

of Italian Sign Language (LIS) research. Charlotte showered me with the fruits of her research in nonmanual communication in sign language and important insights on iconic features of signs, which she knew should be considered a basic sign parameter. At one point, she took me into her home so my learning could continue on into the evenings.

Andy invited me to join him at the NSSLRT (National Symposium on Sign Language Research and Teaching) conference in San Diego in 1979 where I met many prime movers, including Ursula Bellugi and Penny Boyes Braem. (I would come to know Ursula as "Ursie," and when she'd later come to work with us at the Italian National Research Council [CNR; Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche in Italy]; she and I would focus on comparing compounds in ASL and LIS. I hung on her every word.) Andy later joined me in Italy to create a symbol keyboard for ordering signs in our dictionary. His contribution was immeasurable.

But it was Penny's groundbreaking dissertation on ASL handshapes, her concept of morphophonology, Nancy Frishberg's (1975) model of sign phonology evolution, and Robbin Battison's (1978) research on hand dominance that were the bases for my dissertation.

My research task was comparatively easy: I had their models to test with LIS, but each of these researchers pioneered in developing the original rules.

When Penny heard that I had applied for a Fulbright in Italy, she urged me to contact Virginia Volterra, a remarkable psycholinguist at the Institute of Psychology of the Italian National Research Council (IP/CNR) in Rome. She was examining how Italian hearing children acquire Italian and wanted to begin researching whether deaf children of deaf parents acquire sign language in an analogous fashion.

Virginia and I met in February 1979, and I was invited to be a research fellow. In the following two years, a first group of people started to collaborate in Rome. Maria Luisa Verdirosi (a child of deaf adults [Coda] and ENS librarian) and I were among the hearing members of the group. Serena Corazza and Benedetto Santarelli were Deaf, and both had Deaf parents. (Benedetto would become a key collaborator on our dictionary and an extraordinary model for most of the signs, drawn expertly by Paolo Canova.) The group,

together with other colleagues, produced the first description of LIS in a CNR report that evolved into a volume published in 1987. (See also Volterra, Caselli, and Corazza in this issue.)

Virginia asked me to adapt my experience in teaching English as a foreign language and, with Serena, develop an intensive course in this sign language, for which we immediately coined the term *Lingua Italiana dei Segni*, which changed a few years later into *Lingua dei Segni Italiana* (also identified as LIS). Serena taught the course to the expanded research group.

It is important to understand that, at that time, Italy had neither sign language courses, nor professional or academic training for working with deaf children or adults using sign language, so it was tantamount that these areas be developed, simultaneously. Virginia rolled up her sleeves and set about filling gaps. She began by creating the first LIS course to train professionals and the first interpreter training course at the Region of Lazio's Professional Training Center, for which I served as coordinator. Next, she called on me to supervise a pilot news program anchored by Deaf anchors on RAI 2, a public television station. We were all so proud of it, but the news program was quickly shot down by a powerful faction against signing who unfortunately knew people in very high places.

In 1983, the United Jersey Bank administered the trust of the late philanthropist Mason Perkins, who lived in Italy. The bank invited me to create a nonprofit organization for children with sensory disabilities in Italy. Virginia's various assignments for me had proven an excellent introduction to Italian government agencies, so I counted to ten, and the Mason Perkins Deafness Fund (MPDF) was born. MPDF's mission was NOT to focus on deficit, trying to make deaf children hear (everyone in Italy was concentrated on doing only that!). Our mission was to discover and nourish the potential of Deaf and DeafBlind children. It was to offer support for families of Deaf children, train as many Deaf people as possible to work with Deaf children, to create multimedia materials for the bilingual classroom, and to create a LIS dictionary. I insisted that every project request had to come from within the Deaf community. I was neither Italian nor Deaf, so I took great pains to avoid any imposition on their culture.

Together with the Gruppo SILIS association, founded in 1984 and still actively run by Deaf individuals, MPDF created the textbook series for teachers and students, *Metodo Vista,* in 1997, adapted for LIS from the *Signing Naturally* textbooks and DVDs for teaching and learning ASL. The American authors were invited to Italy to train LIS teachers how to use the textbook at all levels with our intensive workshops. MPDF also adapted Stokoe's system for LIS to transcribe single signs to organize our dictionary and, inspired by Penny Boyes Braem's (1981) thesis, created morphophonological handshape groups.

Training Deaf Italians was essential. As I was a former Fulbright awardee, it was natural for me to request the Italian Fulbright Commission to administer, and Gallaudet University to host, annual scholarships funded by MPDF for Deaf Italian students, who would then return to Italy and work to improve, directly or indirectly, the lives of deaf and DeafBlind children. It was entitled The Fulbright Deafness Program. A CNR researcher would be invited every year to be on the selection committee. Ceil Lucas, a sociolinguistics professor at Gallaudet (and later editor of SLS), would masterfully coordinate the program onsite. It would be a dream come true in 1985.

But training one or two Deaf students a year was not enough. So, the MPDF began offering intensive live-in workshops between 1992 and 2002 at a Perugia retreat to train all categories of professionals who work with Deaf children. A roster of Deaf professors from Gallaudet—including Gil Eastman, Clayton Valli, MJ Bienvenu, Paul Dudis, Raychelle Harris, Donalda Ammons, and Erin Wilkinson—each conducted intensive workshops for twenty to thirty participants. The students hailed from all over Italy, most of them had been working alone; the workshops became as supportive as they were instructive, fostering new groups of colleagues, and eventually associations.

Steven Collins masterfully sensitized the Deaf community to communication by and with DeafBlind individuals. Another area was museum accessibility, and Hollie Ecker and Emanuel von Schack joined Carlo Di Biase to offer museum workshops to participants.

One workshop particularly stood out. Marie Philip (figure 3) of The Learning Center near Boston was invited to train potential Deaf educators to teach young Deaf children.

Figure 3. The American teacher trainer, Marie Philip. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

I'll never forget how her workshop began. I was standing behind the camera, and Marie came to me, kindly took my hand . . . and threw me out of the room! She explained that she would be making each student pull out everything from deep in their guts and be forced to face it all in front of the group: that if they were to have

the responsibility of working with young Deaf children, they had better know who they were and feel proud of it. She assured me that if a hearing person were present, they would not feel free to do that. Great wisdom! There are indeed moments when it is critical for Deaf and hearing students to be separated.

Looking back, training Deaf educators was pretty fancy stuff, given that the *Legge Gentile*, a law from 1923 in Italy, forbade anyone from teaching in public schools without "a healthy and robust constitution," so just being deaf was probably one of the reasons why there were so few deaf teachers and trainers in public and private schools for the deaf for many years to come. For details about Italian schools and deaf instruction, see Amatucci (1995).

In 1985, there were nearly no Deaf students enrolled in Italian universities, and of the few who attended, none were signers. At the outset of the scholarship program, I had to beg to secure a special waiver from Fulbright to accept Italian Deaf students, who only had high school degrees, into the program. Interpreters would not begin working at Italian universities until 1992. LIS had not yet been recognized by the Italian government, so it was very fortunate that the Ministry of the University, Scientific, and Technological Research did. The Deafness Program also added another annual scholarship funded by the Roberto Wirth Fund (now CABSS), which continues to give support to families of Deaf and DeafBlind children.

MPDF also created intensive interpreter training workshops, bringing together untrained "informal" interpreters, mostly Codas from all over Italy, leading to the creation in 1987 of one of the early Interpreter associations, ANIOS. Sharon Neumann Solow, Nancy Frishberg, Dennis Cokely, and Anna Witter-Merithew were among those who conducted intensive workshops for hearing interpreters; later on, Sherry Hicks and Steven Collins taught relay and ASL/LIS interpretation for deaf interpreters, and MJ Bienvenu taught a workshop on International Sign in preparation for the Deaf Olympics in Rome. MJ later held an extraordinary workshop to train trainers of LIS teachers! In 1992, the MDPF program started offering research and training scholarships for US graduate students in Italy.

What can I say? I know firsthand the importance of diving headfirst from one's own culture into another. It is important to understand

the other culture, yes, but most importantly, it is that contrast that enables you to analyze and compare both. Until you see someone eating with chopsticks, it will never occur to you to analyze the fork—you'll just simply EAT.

At Gallaudet, where sign language is the language of instruction, our Deaf Italian Fulbrighters were able to analyze both the American and Italian environments. Once back in Italy, they grabbed shovels and began to move mountains. Two are now president and vice president of the ENS, two are national advisors, others are presidents of ENS regional branches, still others include LIS teachers, relay interpreters, an art historian, a museum guide, a cinematographer and photographer, and a vice president of the EUD. Two founded Italian Deaf Pride, and others founded organizations such as Cooperativa Dire, LISLandia, and LISSubito (LISNow). And in 2021, Italy finally recognized LIS as a language (one of the last European countries to recognize its indigenous sign language), and it will now be taught at universities where interpreters will also be trained in degree programs.

In 1990–91, I also worked for Disney in Rome. My role there was to supervise the transformation of all Disney animation and movies from English into Italian, so in 2005, I felt equipped to work with Euromedia, a multimedia company in Perugia, to create interactive videos for the bilingual classroom. One video, *Un picnic tutto pazzo* (*A Crazy, Crazy Picnic*), featured a Deaf collaborator and performer, now cinematographer, Emilio Insolera, who just happened to be a Fulbrighter. Emilio, Mauro Mottinelli, and I created a DVD of the MPDF dictionary, and in 2014–2015 Rosella Ottolini and Vannina Vitale (who are, of course, Fulbrighters) worked with Euromedia me to produce an app replete with filmed sentences and phonological variants.[1]

I cannot close without mentioning the Cossato school in Biella, Italy. I had taught speech therapists in Piedmont how to use sign language in therapy. One of them, Maria Teresa Lerda, from the local health center in Cossato, began working with young deaf children and asked if it would make sense to find a public preschool and create a bilingual section, Italian/LIS. (It was fortuitous that a Deaf local, Daniele Chiri, was returning from a Fulbright at Gallaudet, where he was studying preschool deaf education!). I replied with an enthu-

siastic "Yes—provided you can find a very open-minded principal." And find one she did: Ermes Preto from the Scuola Statale di Cossato immediately embraced the concept. The experiment began in 1994. Daniele was named LIS educator for the bilingual section (ages three to five). The Ministry of Education labeled it *Maxi-Sperimentazione*, for which I was the external consultant.

A win-win-win triangle was enacted: the school, the local health center's speech therapy unit, and the parents' organization, Vedo Voci (I See Voices). At the outset, some parents chose not to put their hearing children in the bilingual section: they were worried that there would be insufficient attention on learning Italian. The hearing children in the bilingual section were pretested for Italian, tested again midyear, and at the end of the school year. The post-test proved their fears unwarranted. After that, there would be a waiting list every year to get into the bilingual section. Teachers and consultants for this project wrote a book entitled *Una scuola, due lingue* (*One School, Two Languages*, Teruggi 2003), for which Virginia and I wrote the preface, which mentions the tests used. Cossato was a success and was visited by schools worldwide. Families with deaf children moved there.

I close with this memory: A three-year-old deaf child, Lisanna Grosso (who later became a Fulbrighter, too), was in the first bilingual class at Cossato. The program grew to include middle school, and then high school. Lisanna was part of the first graduating class to go all the way. And now, Lisanna has returned to Cossato as a teaching assistant and university lecturer! (See figure 4.) Is there any greater satisfaction?

I have had the good fortune to "be in the right place at the right time." In Italy, where "helping the poor deaf" had long resounded, we dared to take the first giant steps toward ensuring that Deaf children would receive the tools they need at the appropriate moments, for every situation, empowered to go forward, independently, on their own.

In 2010, I entrusted the MPDF to Siena, within the walls of the famous Institute for the Deaf, Istituto Pendola, where it is in the best of hands with Miriam Grottanelli. I have returned to research and teaching, and our group will expand the LIS dictionary. I now strongly advocate training teachers fluent in LIS, especially deaf teachers, to work with Deaf and non-deaf children with multiple

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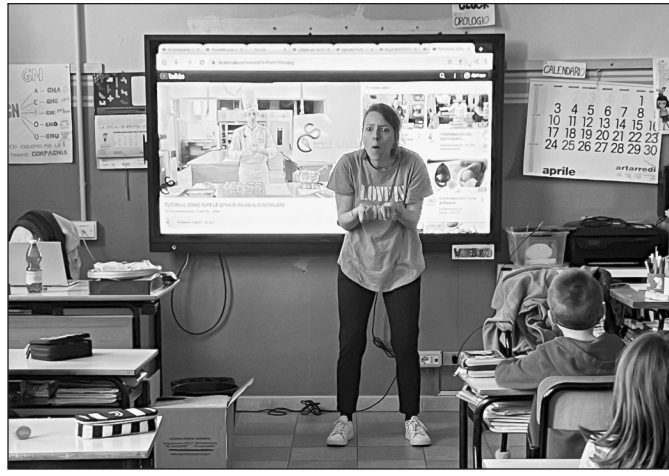

(b)

Figure 4. Lisanna Gross (a) as a child participant in a bilingual school project and (b) as an adult teacher herself. Photo courtesy of Lisanna Grosso.

disabilities that prevent them from speaking. Indications are that Deaf educators may prove exceptional here. The benefits of sign language appear to have limitless boundaries. And despite my advancing age, there is still no apparent cure in sight for my second chronic disease!

Note

1. The link for the DVD is https://www.lismedia.it/dvd-dizionario-bilingue-elementare-della-lingua-dei-segni-italiana-lis, and the link to the app is https://www.lismedia.it/app-lis-linguaggio-segni-movimento.

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career in 1974 when she asked Bill Stokoe for a job as a research assistant in his Linguistics Research Laboratory. In 1978, she began graduate study in linguistics at the University of California, San Diego, where she worked at the Bellugi lab at the Salk Institute and became faculty in 1983, carrying out research on **American Sign Language**. In 2000, she began a decades-long collaboration with colleagues Wendy Sandler, Irit Meir, and Mark Aronoff, studying an emerging sign language in a village of Bedouins in southern Israel.

Siegmund Prillwitz, a linguist at the University of Hamburg, began organizing seminars on German grammar for teachers of the deaf in 1979 and became fascinated by deaf children signing during breaks, despite it being forbidden in the classrooms. He started exploring sign language with a small group (Alexander von Meyenn, Wolfgang Schmidt, Heiko Zienert, and Regina Leven) through regular Monday meetings at his home, which, over time, led to the opening of the Center for **German Sign Language** in 1986, and the founding of the Signum publishing company, which produced some of the first articles and books in German on all aspects of sign language and Deaf culture.

Elena Radutzky's journey into sign language started early through a friendship with a deaf gardener of a family friend. Later, with a bachelor's in Spanish and Italian, and a master's in language and communication, she happened to witness twelve deaf students in heated debate, a moment which solidified her decision to focus on sign language for her doctorate. After field research training at Stokoe's lab in 1978, she received a Fulbright Scholarship and moved to Italy to begin working on her dissertation and teaching deaf Italians how to research **Italian Sign Language**.

Päivi Rainò's interest in sign language research was influenced by her deaf parents, who highly valued their sign language. In the late 1970s, she started taking sign language courses and became involved in **Finnish Sign Language** research as an intern under Professor Fred Karlsson at Helsinki University, working especially on mouth movements.

Terhi Rissanen became interested in researching sign language in 1982 when, as a twenty-nine-year-old with a bachelor's degree in linguistics and two children, one deaf and one hearing, she started