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Deaf Heritage – Where is the difficulty?

The Finnish Deaf community was born in the middle of the 19th century when the first Deaf Schools were founded. At the turn of the century the Deaf community became organized and soon the preservation of Deaf cultural heritage started. So the Museum of the Deaf was founded by the Deaf themselves and the main purpose of the museum was to help Deaf people to build a positive identity that is based on Sign Language and the Deaf way of life. In contrast to this the hearing world often has seen deafness as lack of something and purely as a negative medical condition.

Although the task of the museum is to empower the Deaf community, history always includes difficult periods and processing these cannot be avoided. Often these periods are in relation with the hearing society that sees deafness as a problem. In the beginning of the 20th century racial hygienic theories reached Finland and the hearing society wanted to abolish deafness. This was done by banning Sign Language from Deaf schools and later by forbidding marriages between those who were born deaf. These both resulted in difficult experiences that are not yet openly dealt with in public arenas.

In this paper we examine how a museum can present difficult issues concerning one minority group and what is the role of the museum in processing these matters. Is its role only to present these and work as an arena for discussion or can it take a more active role and maybe even take a stand?

CV

Tiina Naukkarinen is the Museum Director of the Finnish Museum of the Deaf, whose job is to take care of recording, researching and exhibiting the cultural inheritance of the Deaf in Finland. She took her M.A. degree in the University of Helsinki her main subject being ethnology. During her career she has worked in various cultural history museums and one of her main achievements has been the developing of the Museum of the Deaf into a

professional museum that today receives state funding. She has produced study material on Deaf history and given lectures in several international conferences arranged by the Deaf. Her special interests include history of printing. She has been nominated twice as Expert on Deaf culture by the World Federation of the Deaf.

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