Name: Ivana VINKO

Gender: Female

Age: 30.

Country: Croatia

EBU Member: Croatian Blind Union

Number of words in original language: 971

**Braille – the best friend**

It was at the beginning of my school years that I first got acquainted with Braille. While my peers were carrying spelling books with cut out letters falling out, I was towing around heavy Braille books and a Braille writing machine, or punching paper with a stylus. This mysterious dotted script attracted great interest among my friends. They asked me to write down the alphabet for them and competed to see who would be the first to write a word in Braille without making a mistake. Everyone immediately learned the letter “g“, because it reminded them of a little square.

The Braille machine would often break down in those days, because children would put pieces of chalk and pencil into a little hole, hoping that the dots would be printed in colour or standard black print. I also took part in sabotaging the machine, not because of coloured dots, but because of my resistance to Braille. I wondered why I had to type on some weird, noisy machine, while my classmates were writing in their notebooks. I did not want to be any different from my peers. I wanted to learn the same letters my friends were learning. My parents approved of that, but at the same time, they encouraged me to learn Braille as well. I quickly mastered it, but did not want to use it. I thought it would be useful for my peers to learn Braille. That way, I would be equal, and they would be able to copy from me during the exams.

My resistance was finally broken when my mother started to read required reading books to me. It always seemed that she had stopped at the most interesting part and I begged her to continue,even though she would read to me for hours each day. I did not spare other family members or friends either. I asked them to read books, magazines, newspapers, comic books, everything they could get their hands on. My brother once read out a cookbook from cover to cover, hoping I would finally get bored and stop bothering people around me. His efforts were in vain.

The books grew thicker, my demands more frequent and my family and friends more tired. They finally sighed with relief when I mastered Braille well enough, joined the Croatian Library for the Blind and started to read on my own. I realized that it is much simpler when I can decide on how fast to read and when to stop. From that moment on, Braille and I became best friends. I was literally keeping watch in front of the house, waiting for the postman to appear with Braille books from the library. I have nothing against audio books, but if I can choose, Braille will always be the first choice. Braille book can be read in silence, without recorded voice interrupting my stream of thought. I can sit outside and enjoy the sounds of nature without earphones. Only with a Braille book can I experience the real sensation of reading. There is nothing more beautiful than moving your finger across the letters, turning pages and the rustling sound of paper.

Love for books grew into love for libraries, which determined my life’s course. I enrolled on Library Studies, from which I have recently graduated. I often transcribed studying materials to Braille because I could remember better when I imagined them as Braille text.

Working occasionally in the library, I noticed that only a small number of members, especially among young people, still borrow Braille books. Those who learned Braille in school are slowly forgetting it because they do not practice reading. There are few of those who read it daily and many never learned Braille at all. I often hear: “I have audio books, I don’t want to bother with Braille books”, “I have no time to learn Braille” or “It’s too late to start learning”. These are all just mere excuses. I believe the only problem is motivation and the willingness to learn. The fact is that it is easier to learn Braille as a child just starting school, than as a person who lost sight later in life. It is because a child is expected to learn how to read and write. Adults should in some way be encouraged to also use Braille. Courses, competitions and similar activities might spark their interest. Some blind people quickly give up on reading Braille because the initial progress is very slow. But as the saying goes: “practice makes perfect.” Persistence plays a major role in all this. Quitting does not help you achieve anything in life.

Many of my teachers taught themselves Braille so they could correct my exams. They did not have to do that, as they could always ask the teacher of visually impaired students to read the answers for them. I could have read the answers myself, but there was always a risk that I would change them to my benefit. My mother would transcribe my foreign-language textbooks or math tasks, and, when I was still playing piano, she would transcribe music notation for me. Both my teachers and my mother quickly mastered Braille, despite their other responsibilities.

A blind person who does not know Braille and cannot use standard black print is illiterate, regardless of their education level. Braille is not a bogeyman. It is a basic and universally accepted script for the blind. If we do not use it, no one will do it for us. If we dismiss it, so will others. Braille books will no longer be produced, because there will be no need for them. Do we want this to happen? Do we want to lose this invaluable writing system for the blind? Do we want to depend solely on technology just because it is easier, faster and simpler? Dr Franjo Tonković, Croatian teacher of the visually impaired who was blind, said: “Braille script should not be regarded as less worthy than any other great pioneering scientific accomplishment of previous centuries. Its invention, at the very least, has the same meaning for the blind, as the Johannes Gutenberg’s printing machine has for the sighted”. Therefore, let us not be ashamed of our own script. All we have to do is dedicate some of our time and learn it. Once it is mastered, it will be our best friend.