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SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE
ISRAELI SIGN LANGUAGE

J. Shunary
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J. Shunary

The origin of the Israeli Sign Language (ISL) is closely related to the founding of the Association for the Deaf in Tel Aviv at the end of the 1930's. In order to obtain an understanding of the social background leading to the formation of ISL, a number of the association's founding members and present leaders were interviewed.*

In the early days the deaf community in Tel Aviv was very variegated; it was comprised of members from both Eastern and Western communities, mainly new immigrants from Germany and persons born in the country. While many were illiterate (never having attended school nor received any language instruction), some of them had completed their schooling in Europe at special schools for the deaf, and others had attended the only existing local school for the deaf founded in Jerusalem in 1934. Those individuals who could read (at least up to the level of reading a newspaper) were regarded by the others as the "Educated" (and will be referred to as such in this paper). Of the immigrants from Germany who had studied in schools for the deaf until the expulsion of Jewish pupils, some had attended a large Jewish school at Weissensee, near Berlin. It was one of the teachers of this school who later established the Jerusalem school previously mentioned, while two former pupils are still among the leaders of Israel's deaf community today. They and others brought into the country the German sign language. It is now very

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difficult to determine which of the original German signs did in fact displace local signs, and which were rejected by the local deaf population as being unsuitable. (For example, one source claims that the signs "not good," "Jew," and "English" were discarded.) Usually the German signs, described by one veteran as highly flexible and refined, were accepted as being in accordance with the character of locally used signs. It is therefore probable that there was a process of mutual interaction between local and imported signs, with a resulting trend towards increased refinement and stylization of newly created signs.

At the end of the 1930's and in the early 1940's members of the deaf association customarily met on the Tel Aviv seashore and in a certain cafe on the main road, or in private homes. Although many were illiterate or poorly informed and were not able to obtain much information from the usual channels, this lack did not prevent them from playing important roles in the forming society. The home of three members served as a central meeting place. A central social role was also played by another member, a tailor of limited means. Although illiterate, he was an outstandingly warm host and his house was always crowded with visitors. Another focal meeting place was the home of "Educated" Egyptian-born brother and sister who had recently immigrated from France. Conversation at meetings concerned everyday affairs, work, current events, films they had seen, jokes mimed by a few members with considerable pantomimic talent and a good sense of humor, and naturally, plain gossip too. News items were related to those who were illiterate by the "Educated." At that time group games as they are played today were not the custom. However, the Europeans used to invent sketches, and programs were performed for special occasions, religious festivals, etc. A member who was hard of hearing served for some time as producer of these sketches.

Initially group meetings were held almost daily, but as time went on and members began marrying, usually with one another, they became less frequent until they were limited to weekends only. In summer the seashore continued to serve as the regular meeting-place. Although communication was mainly by means of sign language, the Educated also used speech. In fact, a separate group was formed by some of these able to speak, but it subsequently disintegrated even though the general public of the deaf community did not object to it. Finger-spelling was not used by the Hebrew-speaking group; when some new immigrants from Europe tried to use the German finger alphabet, they were met with derision by the local community, and the attempts ceased.

In a later period some meetings took place in a cafe where the proprietor used to reserve a special table for the deaf on regular evenings during the week. Many of the married couples did not attend these meetings however, either due to the expense involved, which they could ill afford, or because they had to look after their small children. Subsequently, the Tel Aviv municipality gave them a flat for use of the club, and later on, the gymnasium of a school. Although the gym had no windows, was leaky, and was often bitterly cold in winter, cultural activities nevertheless went on. Among other things, one of the members who had studied in Germany led group activities on housekeeping for married women. According to one source, there were parties and plays for every festival and ceremonial occasion. By now there were already about eighty members. (The association had been founded in 1944 and its numbers greatly increased after World War II.) With the immigration of hundreds of thousands of newcomers, the local deaf began to come in contact with people from many different countries using novel signs. Many of these new signs, stemming from varying national backgrounds, were described by our informants as "lacking in logic and inelegant."

The new deaf immigrants, mainly from Hungary or Rumania, for some time conversed only among themselves, until they absorbed ISL. Unlike the period of absorption of many German signs a decade earlier, the deaf community now rejected the new signs, for in the meanwhile ISL had crystallized as a language, developing its own special character. It did, however, absorb those signs by which the newcomers denoted their countries of origin. The sign for Czechoslovakia, for example, was originally a Czech sign, the Hungarian sign is used to denote Hungary, etc.

After a spell of isolation, contact was made with the new immigrants by the local deaf community, and much help was extended to the newcomers in settling down, getting work, accomodation, medical insurance, and other matters involving knowledge of local conditions, formalities, etc. Here the "Educated" were especially helpful in assisting in transactions with the various government and municipal offices and agencies. Another function of the Educated was to serve as peacemakers in family disputes! Many of the illiterates came from North African countries where no special educational facilities had been developed for the deaf. The Educated would fill in this lack to the best of their ability, explaining problems and concepts familiar to the hearing world to the less educated deaf. One member who had arrived at the time of the establishment of the state, and had learned Hebrew well, tells how occasionally, while recounting a story, he would find himself stumped over the lack of a sign and would have to use speech. In such cases, only the educated could understand. To get the meaning across to the others who could not lipread, it was necessary to compose whole stories, and create a situation in which the meaning would be brought home. Now that ISL has become greatly improved and enriched, such cases are rarer than they were twenty years ago. However, with improved facilities and hence the higher educational level of the deaf, new problems have arisen which would merit some study.

In the early 1950's the illiterate deaf tended to converse about private matters in the club, while the educated discussed such matters as the establishment of the association, the need for a regular meeting place, and the setting up of branches in different parts of the country. Signs were often invented in the course of communication, ad hoc, for the purposes of a discussion under way. (This is apparently a common occurrence known to any lecturer to the deaf.)

Eleven years ago, the Helen Keller House was built to serve as the national center for the deaf. Located in a suburb of Tel Aviv, the house serves as the center for the biggest deaf community in Israel. Only with the opening of this center were cultural and educational activities on a larger scale made possible, and it is no wonder that it also serves as the center for the creation of new signs. Here signs which have grown up naturally are authorized, cancelled, or approved. Much time elapses before a new sign comes to the knowledge of most of the deaf community and gets accepted. The occasions of meetings, festivals and parties speed up this process. Any doubts or problems concerning the use of signs which crop up in the Jerusalem center are brought for final decision to the center in Tel Aviv. Although Tel Aviv determines standard ISL, the Jerusalem sign language has a special character of its own, for it seems that old signs from the Jerusalem school for the deaf have been preserved. Also, Moroccans communicate among themselves in a language that contains many Moroccan signs; however, this language is understood by many native Israelis. And in the deaf club in Haifa some local signs are used, thus creating a type of dialect. A number of other dialectical variations also exists.