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The Vietnamese Community in Israel: A Profile

Sabine Huynh

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1. From Vietnamese refugees to Vietnamese Israeli community

In June 1977, an Israeli cargo ship on its way to Japan came across a boatful of 66 Vietnamese people and took them on board. They were the first of three groups of Vietnamese refugees who were granted political asylum in Israel between 1977 and 1979. Following the Vietnam war, and fleeing the subsequent “re-education” camps, most members of the Vietnamese Diaspora scattered throughout Europe, Canada and the United States, hoping for a better life. In 1977, Israel, under Prime Minister Menachem Begin, became one of the first nations to grant asylum to Vietnamese refugees. These refugees are also known as boat people. The estimates for boat people who left Vietnam range from several hundred thousand to over two million people. In Israel, these refugees are now Vietnamese Israelis: a Vietnamese Israeli is an Israeli citizen, who resides in Israel, and who is of Vietnamese descent.

The work I am presenting in this paper is the socio-demographic chapter of a broader sociolinguistic research project (in progress) on Vietnamese-Hebrew code-switching/mixing. A study of sociolinguistic variation cannot be done without a thorough investigation of the speakers and their social context. This research project is also being carried through in preparation for the sociolinguistic research I will undertake in Canada in 2008-2009, within the Vietnamese communities of Ottawa-Hull (bilingual Vietnamese-English and Vietnamese-French communities). This future research will be done under the auspices of the Halbert Centre for Canadian Studies, and the Sociolinguistics Laboratory of the University of Ottawa.

A documentary made by Israeli director Duki Dror on a Vietnamese family established in Israel since 1979, *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen* (2005), shows Vietnamese Israelis greeting their counterparts in 1979, with placards in Vietnamese reading “Welcome to Israel, our second homeland” (see Huynh 2005: 24). As for Prime Minister Menachem Begin, he greeted the newcomers in a language they did not know: Hebrew, and the Vietnamese refugees subsequently brought up their children in a Hebrew speaking environment. The second generation can be considered “Vietnamese Sabras”, since they automatically acquired Israeli citizenship by and at birth, and they speak Hebrew with native fluency.

Through Duki Dror’s film, which as a documentary film can be considered an ethnographic document, viewers get what is commonly called a “feel” of the community through second-hand observation, and most importantly, one can see that, notwithstanding its small size, a real Vietnamese community exists in Israel. This movie shows that the Vietnamese members who were born in Israel speak fluent Hebrew, serve in the army, and for those who are fluent bilinguals, readily engage in code-switching. Viewing this film made me want to find out more about this special community, and about what keeps its members together.

When I asked around, I realised that nobody knew how many Vietnamese there are today in Israel. Some members of the community said there are 100, others claimed a higher number: 400. Some estimate that there are about 20 Vietnamese families in the country, and that they approximate 100-200 people. I managed to

approach 32 families, thanks to home visits and questionnaires, which makes about 147 people. My guess is that there are probably about 30-35 Vietnamese families in Israel, and that the Vietnamese community comprises about 150-170 people (Israeli spouses are included). It is probably one of the tiniest minority group in this country, and that is one of the reasons why it should be accounted for. In a population census that only displays three distinct population groups, Jews, Arabs, and “Others,” their presence goes almost unnoticed in Israel. Also, they are not organised in any formal immigrant’s association, which makes them less accessible to researchers.

About 360 Vietnamese people came to Israel from 1977 to 1979. As political refugees from Vietnam, they were all granted Israeli citizenship. It is said that the 1977 group (66 people) was composed for the most part of Vietnamese Catholic intellectuals. The 1978 group (about 100 people) was composed mostly of Vietnamese Chinese people (ethnic Chinese people who have lived in Vietnam for generations). They are known as the “Afula group” in the community because they were hosted by the Afula absorption center when they arrived. The third and biggest group arrived in 1979 (192 persons), and was mostly Kinh people, the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam (about 85 % of the population). They were hosted by the Sderot absorption center. It is said that most people from the first and second groups, more well-off, left Israel to rejoin family in Canada, Europe and the United States. Apparently, a certain number of Vietnamese refugees also left Israel when the 1991 Gulf War broke out. It seems probable that more than half of the original community left Israel.

How do we define a community? “There are social units to which people feel they belong and which are less abstract than social classes. For this smaller-scale, more concrete, unit we reserve the term *community*, used in a specific, technical sense” (Milroy 1980: 14). Among Vietnamese Israelis, the core of the community is the family unit, around which their life evolves. According to Vietnamese tradition, the family is a social group formed by the union of two persons. As people do in Vietnam, some Vietnamese Israelis live as an extended family group that sometimes includes three generations (grandparents, parents, and children). The extended family is the main economic and social unit. If the children and grandchildren do not live with the grandparents, they may still try to live either in the same neighbourhood, or in an adjacent one. For a displaced people such as the boat people, the family plays the main role in promoting and preserving Vietnamese culture and values. Most of the boat people who remained in Israel come from small fishing villages located in coastal central Vietnam (around the town of Nha Trang). Close family and community ties replace the village ties. The Vietnamese community in Israel is young, and composed mainly of people aged 25 to 50.

2. Data Collection

2.1. The Bat Yam-Jaffa network

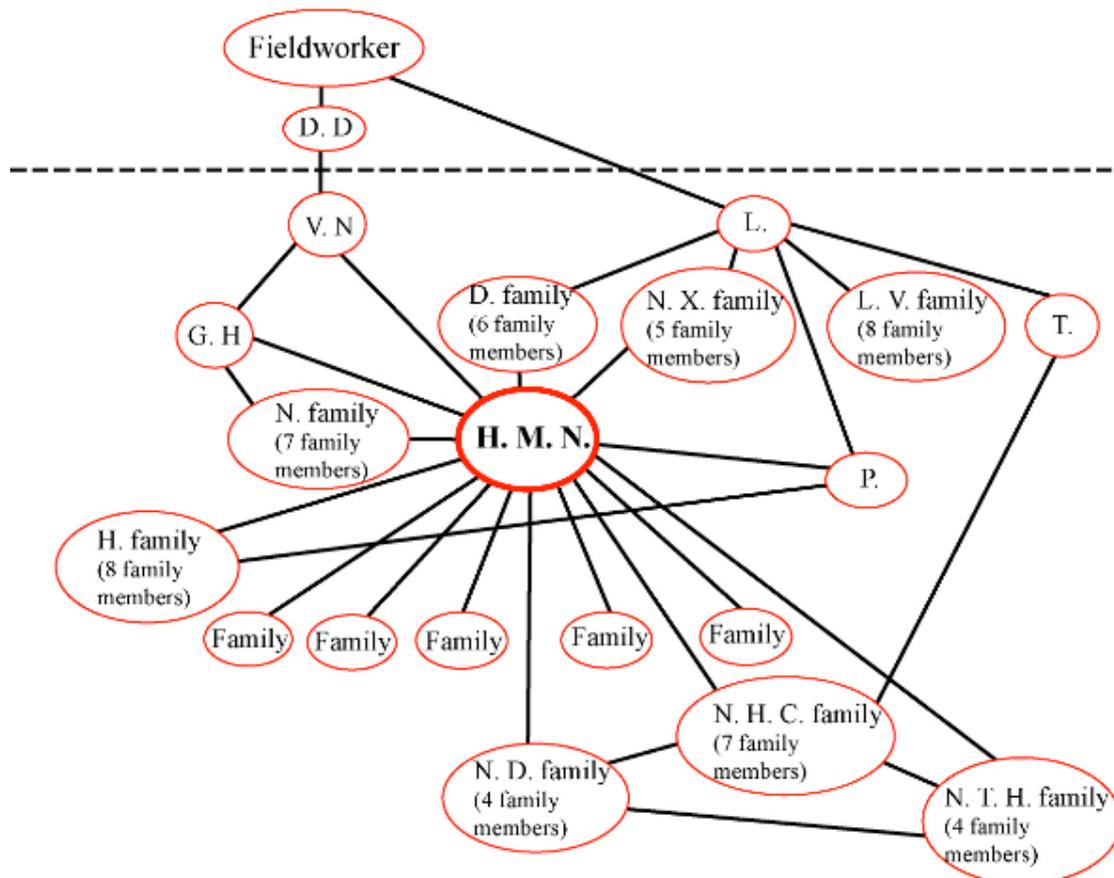
Sociolinguistic analysis combines research methods from the fields of linguistics, anthropology, sociology and statistics. Like many sociologists and sociolinguists, I adopted the concept of social network and equipped myself with “a status that was neither that of insider, nor that of outsider, but something of both – a friend of a friend, or more technically, a second order network contact” (Milroy 1980: 44). This approach is a structural one: individuals are bound together by friend and family links. My study is based on the “introductions and friendship networks” technique (see

Haeri 1996: 23). I relied on connections and on networking efforts. Individuals were studied in their networks. In this work, I designate the informants by their initials (many of them bear the same common family names).

I started the fieldwork in November 2007 by calling film director Duki Dror, who provided the contact details of a Vietnamese acquaintance of his, V.N., who is a second-generation Vietnamese-Israeli woman. One thing leading to another, I eventually got to meet all the members of that woman’s family. First her uncle, G.H., and then her father, H.M.N., became my intermediaries. I also met a second-generation Vietnamese Israeli man by chance, L., in a restaurant, and he introduced me to his circle of Vietnamese friends (see Chart 1).

H.M.N. has been my main intermediary. He happens to be a highly respected member of the community, despite the fact that he has no institutional status, no institutional education beyond primary school, and is not even the oldest community member. My link with him guaranteed good faith, and being introduced as “a friend of H.M.N.’s” opened the doors to many families. H.M.N.’s extended family lives in Jaffa and Bat Yam, as well as his friends and acquaintances. “The Bat Yam-Jaffa network chart” shows that he clearly appears as the focal point of the network (see Chart 1). He is in the center of a high-density personal network structure, which makes him a community leader. I am extremely grateful to him for introducing me to most of the families I interviewed.

Chart 1: The Bat Yam - Jaffa Network (a portion of)



I worked in the community by attending private gatherings, as well as dinners at people’s homes or at restaurants owned by community members. I also went to

Vietnamese New Year celebration events in February 2008. The contacts within the community are mainly based on family ties. The community's perception of the family unit is very high, and usually, a gathering means a family gathering. The only way to penetrate the community may be to cultivate relationships with one family first.

2.3. Questionnaires and questioning

Specific socio-demographic information was collected by giving out questionnaires in face to face interviews. The questionnaires were anonymous, professionally typed in Vietnamese, and contained a few explanatory lines about the research project. The questions covered the topics of gender, age, educational level, Hebrew language acquisition, years of residence in Israel, town of origin, marital status, household size, home location and size, professional occupation, attitude towards salary earned, hobbies, ethnicity of friends, attitude towards the Hebrew and Vietnamese languages, food preference, trips to Vietnam, attitude towards living in Israel or in Vietnam, Vietnamese holiday celebration, and religion.

Most of the time, the forms were filled out on location, by the fieldworker herself, because the community members' reading and writing skills in Vietnamese had either considerably weakened for lack of practice (30 years), or was simply null (second-generation). 34 questionnaires were completed, 19 by men and 15 by women. It must be pointed out that the boat people, having fled oppression in Vietnam, are still reticent to expose themselves through talking about private matters. Therefore, some of the questions asked in the questionnaire were considered inappropriate by some people, for instance the ones concerning the education level, salary, food, friends, and religion. They expressed concern at revealing private information. Moreover, many first-generations felt that a questionnaire was a form of intrusion, and refused to fill it out. The data collected thanks to the questionnaires is presented throughout this paper.

Information was also collected by interviewing community members about topics of general interest to them, such as their history, their livelihood, their house, their culture and their language. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, at the interviewees' home. With their consent, some interviews were recorded, to preserve the information, treated as confidential. These recordings may be used for future sociolinguistic analysis. But most of the time, the recording conditions were bad because of loud background noises caused by music and television, which were turned on in the fieldworker's honour, who could not allow herself to spoil her hosts' fun by asking them to turn the volume down or off. In such case, information was recorded in a notebook. Also, in most families, the voice recorder would have been a deterrent. One has to keep in mind the context: these people ran away from Vietnam in order to preserve their life and freedom. Consequently, even after thirty years have passed, some still have engraved on their mind this irrational fear of being exposed and interrogated. The questionnaires show that second-generations travelled to Vietnam twice as much as first-generations. Some first-generations even claim they have no wish to return to a country that wronged them, and that they still feel their life could be in danger if they went back. But this is not a general trend, since some members also expressed the wish to move back to Vietnam when they retire, and some have already done so.

I moved gradually from pure observation to more participant observation, as anthropologists do, which helped me become an active member of the community. I

also moved from asking non-directive to more directive questions. Non-directive questions involve asking the informant to discuss a general area of culture, such as a Vietnamese dish or holiday, or what it was like to learn Hebrew, for instance.

Due to my background in linguistics and sociolinguistics, I resorted to what is known as the “sociolinguistic interview”. Obviously, the more culture-specific, personalised and familiar the questions become, the better, since they elicit casual speech. Therefore, I used William Labov’s conversational modules to progress from general, non-specific and impersonal questions – relating to demography, neighbourhood, and social practices, to more personal ones – relating to work, family, history, community, hopes and fears. According to Labov, optimal personal questions are of the last type: those which elicit “narratives of personal experiences”, that is to say that put the interviewee into story-telling mode. For instance, I asked questions like: what was the best Vietnamese New Year celebration you ever had? The most tried and true question is known as the “danger of death” question (Labov 1984: 33) such as “when did you ever fear for your life?”, or “what is your biggest fear?”

3. Physical Location: the Gush Dan Area

The Vietnamese community of Israel is concentrated in the Gush Dan area, the largest metropolitan area of the country, comprising the city of Tel Aviv (pop.: about 383,000, metropolitan area: about 3 million) and localities around it (see map of Gush Dan area in annex). Probably 90 % of the Vietnamese community resides in urban localities in the area south of Tel Aviv, that is to say in Jaffa and Bat Yam. These cities were the main sites of our research. It seems that about 2/3 of the Vietnamese community reside in Bat Yam: out of 32, 16 families live in Bat Yam, 7 in Jaffa, 6 in Tel Aviv, 2 in Holon, 1 in Netanya, 1 in Haifa, and 1 in Rishon Letsion. I was told that there are a few Vietnamese Chinese people living in Kfar Saba and Afula.

The city of Bat Yam is close to the country’s industrial centers and is mostly populated by inhabitants from lower socio-economic strata (total pop.: about 160,000). Bat Yam is constituted mostly of a mix of old Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, North Africa, Turkey, and new immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Jaffa is considered a mixed city, because of its mix of Arab and Jewish population (total pop.: about 48,000). It is perceived as mostly poor, economically disadvantaged, and suffering from a high crime rate (see Levine 2007). In 1950, Tel Aviv and Jaffa were united as a single municipality, and nowadays Jaffa is considered to be part of Tel Aviv. The Ajami neighbourhood of Jaffa is the poorest Tel Aviv neighbourhood (see Galili & Nir 2000). Vietnamese families live in the Ajami and Yafo Daled neighbourhoods, in the cheap housing projects. The second-generation Vietnamese Israelis have moved out of Bat Yam and Jaffa to live in Tel Aviv.

It seems that most members of the Vietnamese community feel they belong to this metropolitan area. That is where most of them received accommodation after they left the absorption centers. Others were accommodated in Sderot, Beer Sheva, Rishon Letsion, and Afula, but they quickly moved to the Gush Dan area, where they could find work more easily. In a way, the localities south of Tel Aviv, such as Jaffa and Bat Yam, represent their hometowns in Israel. Also, this area is not affluent, which seems to make them feel more comfortable.

To illustrate this, a female member of the community, living in a ground floor apartment in Jaffa, has felt free to convert the tiny plot of dirt in front of her window into what looks like a small Vietnamese herb and vegetable garden, where lemongrass

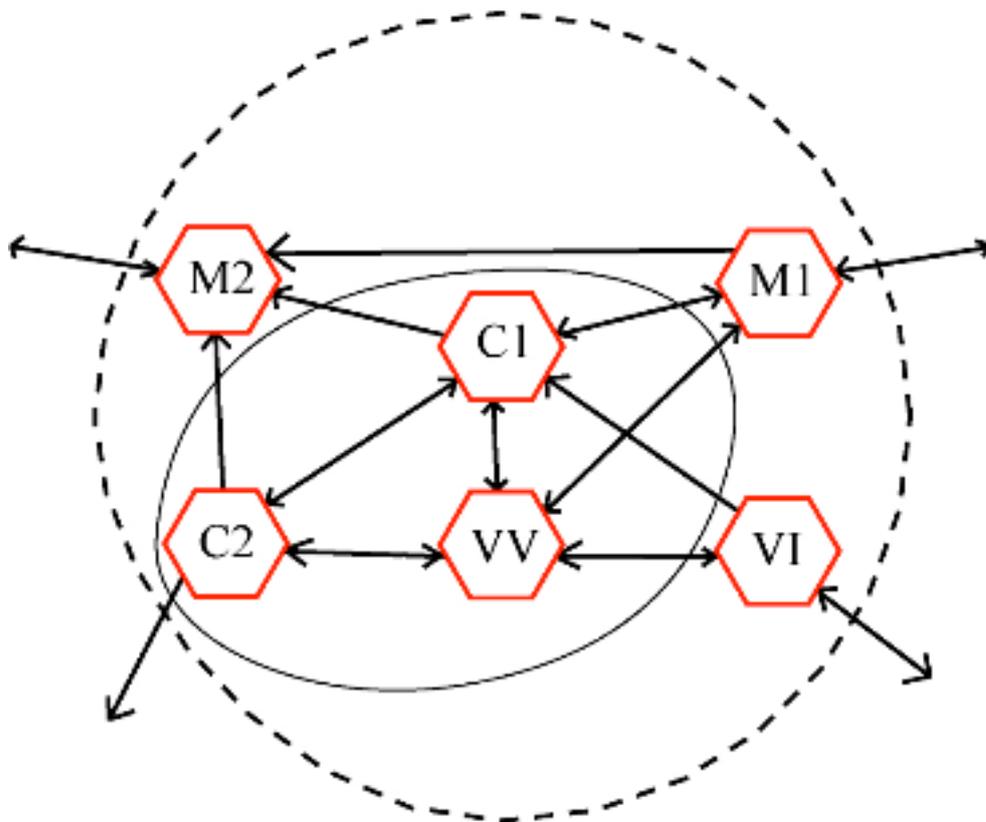
grows next to chili-peppers and green papaya. By doing this, she has linked the landscape of community, culture and food together. Thus, trying to use traditional Vietnamese ingredients in cooking is also a way of showing affiliation and allegiance to the community. Therefore, in addition to sharing a common language and a locality, the Vietnamese community members also share a common food. “It is not only words that have the power to bind and connect, to shape the anarchic flow of human experience into a continuous narrative that begins to heal what has been torn apart by violence. There is also the silent and mysterious transaction of a hand burying a seed in the darkness of the earth” (Klindienst 2006: 127-128). Let’s recall that the word *diaspora* refers both to exile and seeding, since it comes from the Greek word *diasperein* “to spread/sow/scatter about”.

There seems to have been appropriation of the location by the Vietnamese residents and affirmation of territoriality. Some of the members, despite having encountered opportunities to get superior housing elsewhere, have preferred to stay in Jaffa or Bat Yam. One first-generation member, who was adopted as a child by Israeli parents upon his arrival in Israel, and grew up in the center of Tel Aviv, even moved to Bat Yam, in order to be within the community he feels he belongs to. He married an Vietnamese woman he met in Vietnam.

4. Community Interactional Patterns

Sociolinguists agree to say that knowledge of the community interactional patterns is essential to linguistic investigators, since it helps them interpret patterns of linguistic variation, and to describe systematic differences in language use between individuals. Several interactional patterns can be observed, they are represented by arrows in the “Social Interactions” Chart.

Chart 2: Social Interactions



- C1 = "Conservative" 1st-generation
- C2 = "Conservative" 2nd-generation
- M1 = "Modern" 1st-generation
- M2 = "Modern" 2nd-generation
- VV = "Vietnamese woman + Vietnamese man"
- VI = "Vietnamese woman + Israeli man"

-  Bat Yam-Jaffa environment
-  Vietnamese Israeli community

The community can be divided into six groups. I split up the first- and second-generation groups into four groups, which I called the "conservative" ("C1", "C2") and the "modern" ("M1", "M2"). The adjective "conservative" is meant to designate the people who stick to the community members and to the Bat Yam-Jaffa environment, and prefer not to socially interact with outsiders and with non-Vietnamese. "Modern" means they socially interact also with outsiders, and outside of the Bat Yam-Jaffa environment. The second-generation group can also be divided into "conservative" and "modern" ("C2" and "M2").

During the past eight years, Vietnamese women from Vietnam have contributed to enlarging the community. They are either married to second-generation Vietnamese men, or to Israelis. The men met them in Vietnam, married them there, and brought

them to Israel. I will call this group “VV” (Vietnamese woman married to Vietnamese man), and “VI” (Vietnamese woman married to Israeli man).

Members of a same group usually interact with each other. The arrows show the direction of the relationship: a double arrow means that interaction is initiated by both groups, whereas a simple arrow, going from VI to C1 for example, means that even though interactions exist between both groups, VI is probably more eager to interact with C1 than the other way round. These remarks apply to members pertaining to different families. If members belong to the same extended family, then interaction arrows are double, whatever group they are in (family interactions are not represented here).

Group C1 is the core group and is linked to all the others. The condition for being part of the community is to have interactions with C1. Members of groups VV and VI get to interact with other groups via group C1. Members of groups C2, M1, M2 and VI also socially interact with outsiders. M2 members prefer not to initiate interactions with C members, whereas M1 do. Group M2 is the only group whose members only initiate social interactions with outsiders, and not with people of the Vietnamese community.

Group VI lives outside the “Vietnamese territory” of Bat Yam-Jaffa: in Netanya, Haifa, and Kfar Saba. This group initiates interactions with group C1 community elders in order to become integrated into the community. Group VI also interacts with Vietnamese students that are enrolled in a work/study program in Israel (at the Rupin agricultural college).

5. Community loyalty factors

5.1. Vernacular loyalty

We just saw that allegiance to the Vietnamese community is achieved through sharing a family, a common locality, a common food, a common network of friends, and a common language or linguistic behaviour. “The heavy use of dialect is understood by the community to symbolize local loyalty” (Milroy 1980: 17). The use of Vietnamese can allow us to measure loyalty towards the Vietnamese community. C1 members do not engage much in code-switching, and in conversations they tend to stick to the Vietnamese language. Linguistically, C2 behaves in the same way as C1. On the other hand, M1 members seem to enjoy switching linguistic codes, and using Hebrew. Newcomers groups VV and VI like to practise their English, and to switch between Vietnamese, Hebrew and English.

M1, M2, and VI are viewed by C1 and C2 as marginal because they are believed to reject community values. They know Hebrew and English, which are the prestige dialects in Israel. In the community, women belonging to group VI enjoy a status that is inferior to women belonging to group VV, because they tend to have interactions with outsiders, and speak less Vietnamese at home (only to their children).

I observed that not only newcomers of group VI have learned Hebrew, but they have also adopted Israeli women’s dress code and manners. Newcomers of group VV, who married Vietnamese men, seem to show less enthusiasm for learning Hebrew and integrating into Israeli society. However, interestingly enough, they still try to speak Hebrew with their children, and they give them Hebrew nicknames. Their husbands claim that they took a Vietnamese spouse in order to preserve their Vietnamese origins. The question that arises is whether young and modern

Vietnamese women transplanted outside their country will accept the role of guardian of traditions.

Using the Vietnamese vernacular is a symbol of adherence to the old established Vietnamese community. Vietnamese is probably the most important unifying element for the Vietnamese community. Showing vernacular loyalty is equivalent to showing community loyalty. The vernacular is therefore viewed by the old established community as a “positive force” (Milroy 1980: 19), and not as an ethnic language located at the bottom of the sociolinguistic continuum, with a prestige dialect at the top. “A great deal of recent work by social psychologists (see especially Ryan, 1979) has confirmed that low-prestige ethnic and status groups everywhere perceive their language or dialect as a powerful symbol of group identity” (Milroy 1980: 18). Despite differences in knowledge and practice, all the informants interviewed confirmed that maintaining the Vietnamese language is highly important to them, and those who do not master it fluently would be willing to do so and to enroll in Vietnamese classes, if they existed.

On the other hand, most of the first-generation refugees seem not to strongly feel the need for Hebrew in daily-life activities and for job opportunities. The main reasons for that is that they do no longer feel a strong need to assimilate into Israeli society, and they hold occupations for which very poor to less than average knowledge of Hebrew suffice. Moreover, most of the first-generation claimed they did not have the time to study at all, and whenever they get time off work, they prefer free time to class time.

Upon their arrival in Israel, the refugees received six months of free Hebrew classes at the absorption centers’ language schools. Many of them could not attend the course for more than a month, or even a couple of weeks, due to pressure to find a job in order to support their family. Moreover, Hebrew, whose script was novel for people used to Latin characters, was perceived as a very complex language, especially by those who only attended primary school. Since the Hebrew language has always been one of the main assimilation tools in Israel, we can assume that the Vietnamese refugees have never been assimilated into Israeli society. Hebrew seems to have been a real obstacle to their integration. The fact that they were neither Jews nor Arabs did not help either, because it means that they did not benefit from support groups already established and organised in Israel.

Lastly, most households now watch TV stations from Vietnam daily, thanks to satellite TV. Vietnamese TV could have provided the first-generation Vietnamese Israelis with significant assistance in ensuring their children learn about the Vietnamese culture, language, and values. They also enjoy watching digital and video-recordings of Vietnamese movies, domestic news, and entertainment programmes. This activity is usually done together, with family members and friends. Discussions conducted in Vietnamese during the social gatherings then crystallize around what is being heard and watched. These discussions play an important role in transferring knowledge about Vietnamese culture to younger generations, and in ensuring the Vietnamese language is still practised at home.

5.2. Socioeconomic status

Sharing the same socioeconomic status level seems to have also contributed to strengthening the sense of community. This happens through holding similar occupations. The “favourite” one for most of the first-generation Vietnamese is to work in the restaurant business, as cooks. Being a chambermaid in a hotel comes

second, for first-generation Vietnamese women. Some first-generation members do not work because they are either ill or retired. Others are employed in factories. 8 second-generation Vietnamese Israelis approached out of 25 also work in the food preparation industry.

Even the few informants who own their restaurant work as full-time chefs in it. Restaurant owners usually work alongside with their spouse in the kitchen. Very often, when asked about their occupation, the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants would reply that “like everyone else” (*k'mo kulam*, in Hebrew), they hold a kitchen staff position. They claim that this occupation suits their education level.

Out of 34 people surveyed (first- and second-generation), 14 only have primary education, and 13 also have some secondary education. 5 informants attended college (three male informants did so in Israel, and two female informants did so in Vietnam). And two informants, one male and one female, both of them born in Israel, have been to university in this country.

Newcomers of groups VV and VI also tend to become food preparation workers, after they were placed by first-generation immigrants who already work as kitchen staff somewhere. Most households therefore enjoy similar economic levels in terms of family income.

Members who have been more successful professionally are not necessarily considered more highly by the community. A phenomenon which is equivalent to socioeconomic levelling down is observed among the community.

There are a few first-generation members who have been employed in factories (aluminium factory, air-conditioner factory) for the past twenty years or more. When interrogated on their choice not to work in the food industry, they replied that even though as factory workers they may receive a lower salary than people employed in the restaurant business, they still prefer security of employment to living precariously, from one job to another. Also, they have social benefits, and a pension plan. From what I could observe, they seem to enjoy better housing conditions. They are perceived as being wealthier, healthier, and as looking younger, than their counterparts.

Over all, the members of the Vietnamese community seem to be very hardworking. 10 hours is an average working day for most, 6 days a week. Both husband and wife work. Having a job ensures status. Status is a very important notion in Vietnamese society. Each time I met new people, they would start quizzing me about my age, my marital status, the town and street where I live, my occupation, my husband's occupation and my parents's occupation. It is not considered impolite to do so, as they are attempting to ascertain your relative position. Vietnamese people are deferential, and it is crucial for them to know which kinship and status term they may use while addressing you.

Most Vietnamese families live in a 2- to 3-bedroom apartment. Most first-generations own their home, and have only recently finished paying the mortgage. Some live in extended families that include three generations (grandparents, parents, and children). What usually happens is that the grandparents, who are first-generation, bought the home, and their children can stay there for as long as they would like, especially if they are male. If they get married, they may choose to leave, or to keep on living with their parents, provided their spouse accepts the arrangement. It is usually done that way if the spouse is Vietnamese, since in Vietnam, by tradition, the bride goes to live with her husband's parents. Among the people I met, only those who are single, and those who are second-generation, live in smaller rented apartments. The modest house interior of first-generation immigrants often includes

Vietnamese artefacts, brought back from trips in Vietnam, in a wish to re-create a Vietnamese environment.

5.3. Faith and ancestor worship

Most Vietnamese families worship their ancestors. This is a long-established Vietnamese custom and probably the most unifying factor of Vietnamese culture. It consists of having an altar dedicated to the memory of the dead, with photographs, incense sticks, and flowers or fruits. If the family is Buddhist, the ancestors' altar will be next to the altar for the Buddha, and if they are Catholic, it will be next to some altar dedicated to Christ.

The Vietnamese community in Israel comprises two main faith groups: the Buddhists and the Catholics. Out of 34 people surveyed, 16 were Buddhist, 7 were Catholic, 10 claimed to follow no religion, and one converted to Judaism. The Vietnamese Catholics said they prefer to marry Catholics.

6. Perspectives with the “Family Trees Family Roots” project

This analysis showed that despite its apparently negligible number of people, a Vietnamese community based on family and friends' networks does exist in Israel. 150-170 people is not much if they do not share anything, but it is a significant number if they are all intricately involved in a community that in some way or the other eventually exports its own dynamic and values into the other Israeli communities they live alongside with.

Very early in my research, I realised that in order for it to be successful, I had to find a way to demonstrate my gratefulness to the community in another way than just by uttering words of thanks or offering small gifts, especially since the community members initially showed reticence. The key was to find what could be the nicest present for a community whose existence here was born from an Israeli Prime Minister's initiative, but whose people, after receiving Israeli citizenship, were almost completely forgotten, to the point that they are now constantly mistaken for foreign workers from China, Thailand and the Philippines. Moreover, since they have mixed feelings about that, they do not want any attention drawn to themselves: “If they forgot us, then let it be, let us be forgotten for good”, was a sentence I heard often.

In Vietnamese society, family is the fundamental unit, the main social unit, so I realised that a nice way to thank the community for helping me in my research project would be to celebrate its families. Consequently, I set up a project which I called “Family Trees Family Roots”, and I asked every family that wished to be involved to draw their family tree for me. Since the roots of these families are planted firmly in Israel (most refugees did not have children when they arrived in this country), I decided we would show it by creating a big board displaying the Vietnamese Israeli family trees. Once the board is completed, we intend to find a permanent home for it, and naturally, we are hoping to display it at the Menachem Begin Center in Jerusalem. Most informants agreed to give their family tree, despite the fact that they were reluctant to fill out the questionnaire, and expressed disbelief that anyone could truly be interested in them. This project also addresses their concerns about the community's disintegration, and their fear that it might fall into oblivion. To this day, 18 families have given their tree in, which concerns about half of the community.

The “Family Trees Family Roots” project could enhance the sense of pride and belonging for Vietnamese people in Israel. Indeed, this project contributes to the recognition and celebration of the positive qualities displayed by the members, especially the first generation, who, against all odds, managed to start a new life, to build and raise a family, and to preserve their freedom, culture and values in Israel, a Jewish state. The Vietnamese Israelis have shown remarkable resilience. By recalling that, this project could enhance their perceptions of self-worth, and encourage them to form a cultural association.

The community is now growing, mainly thanks to the fact that Vietnamese Israeli men have married Vietnamese women in Vietnam and brought them to Israel. Yet, it could disintegrate easily, for many reasons. Firstly, the newcomers of groups VV and VI do not seem inclined to have more than one or two children, and therefore to be housewives. Secondly, some of the second-generation members are still trying to leave Israel for countries they feel could be better to live in. Interestingly enough, some are now living in Vietnam, whose economy is gradually opening up, providing opportunities for returning Vietnamese. Thirdly, once they retire, some first-generation members will try to rejoin their children abroad, or will go back to Vietnam. Lastly, the young “Vietnamese Sabras” cannot be expected to take a Vietnamese spouse. They will most likely take a Jewish one (some already did so), especially since they have been brought up in a society that has not necessarily nurtured non-Jewish or non-Arab ethnic communities. Such a context leads “Vietnamese Sabras” to distance themselves from their origins.

All these reasons are secondary to the fact that most of the Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Israel thirty years ago have never been truly integrated into Israeli society. Paradoxically, successful assimilation might have helped them feel confident enough to form a strong and distinctive group, proud of its culture and values, which in turn might have led Israelis to pay more attention to them. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz has recently brought to the Israeli public attention two success stories involving Vietnamese Israelis, one being a budding poet (Vaán Nguyen, Haaretz 03/04/08), and the other one a business woman currently representing Bank Hapoalim in Singapore (Dao Ruchvarger Wong, Haaretz 18/04/08). By achieving success, they attracted attention not only to themselves, but also to the Vietnamese community as a whole. Such success stories are not uncommon in Vietnamese communities residing in Canada, Europe or the United States, where Vietnamese communities thrive and are well organised in various associations.

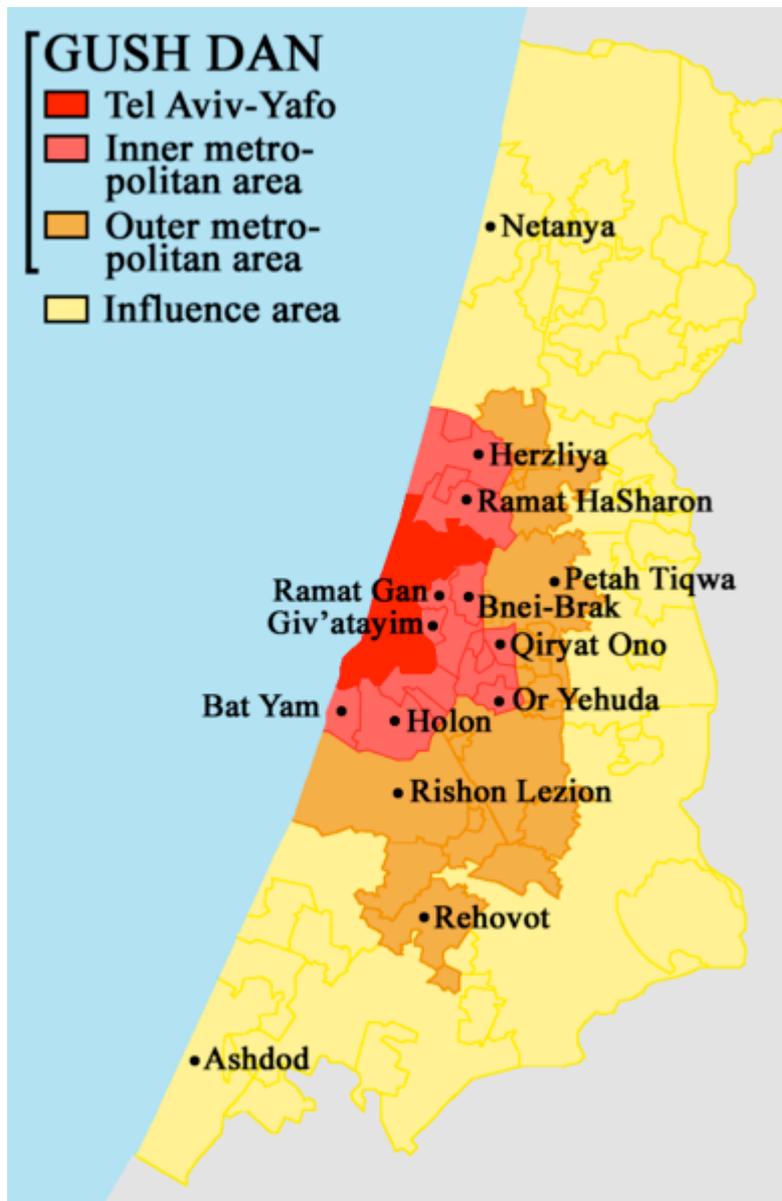
This year, in 2008, Israel is celebrating 60 years of existence, and Vietnam and Israel are celebrating 15 years of diplomatic relations. The “Family Trees Family Roots” project could positively bring the Vietnamese community of Israel to the attention of its fellow Israeli citizens. This project could hopefully inspire the creation of a Vietnamese cultural association that would involve senior citizens, the last guardians of Vietnamese culture in Israel. They could start with providing Vietnamese language tutorials and Vietnamese cooking classes, they could also teach about the various Vietnamese holidays and traditions, thus bringing cultural awareness and education, as well as cultural exchanges between the Vietnamese community and Israeli society. Eventually, this may enhance the second- and third-generation Vietnamese Israelis’ interest in nurturing their origins, thus contributing to Israel’s increasing cultural diversity.

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Annex

Map of the Gush Dan area



(Gush Dan map, made by Rf from the Catalan Wikipedia. Public domain)

