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8 fascinating facts related to Israel’s founding

Israel21c

Israel just celebrated 77 years of independence this May 1. The passage of time and the solemn black-and-white photos of the period lend a feeling that the historic events and the nascent country’s first footsteps were orderly, well-thought-out affairs. In reality, things couldn’t be more different: the country’s very name was hotly debated, the Declaration of Independence was far from ready on time, and a state emblem was yet to be found.

The following fun and fascinating facts surrounding Israel’s founding demonstrate that the country’s famous atmosphere of both balagan (chaos) and resourcefulness has been here right from the start.

1. 1948 wasn’t the first time a government was declared
It’s common knowledge that the State of Israel was founded in 1948, but it’s far less so that some people tried to bring it about five years earlier. In 1943, when World War II was still raging, veteran Zionist leaders convened a large public meeting called “The People’s Congregation” from which a temporary Jewish government would be elected. Nothing momentous came out of the lengthy speeches, but they tried.

2. The country’s name wasn’t an obvious choice
Options besides Israel included Zion, dismissed because it’s a biblical name for Jerusalem, and also to distinguish between the general Zionist movement and Israeli citizenship; Ever, after the biblical figure Eber, and similar to the Hebrew word for Hebrew, Ivrit; and Judea, rejected in order to differentiate between Jews and Israeli citizens. Israel was the name suggested by the country’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion.

3. The famous Independence Declaration backdrop? Rather makeshift
Israel’s independence was solemnly declared at the entrance of what was back then the Tel Aviv Museum. The famous photos show long drapes, Israeli flags, a portrait

of Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl, and serious-looking men assembled on stage and on chairs in front of them. The drapes, it appears, were hung to hide nude paintings on the walls. The chairs were taken from surrounding cafés, and the portrait of Herzl and the flags were borrowed from the United Israel Appeal because the decorating budget didn’t quite stretch to purchasing them. The whole thing took 24 hours to put together, but the results ended up looking absolutely timeless.

4. The declaration’s signatories didn’t in fact sign it
Israel’s Declaration of Independence is a beautiful work of painstaking calligraphy, so painstaking that it wasn’t completely ready in time for the signing ceremony. As a result, its signatories did not add their names to the bottom of the text, but rather to a piece of parchment that was later sewn by its designer’s wife into the complete scroll. Ben-Gurion read the text from a plain typewritten piece of paper to which he added some handwritten notes.

5. The first flag flown in Jerusalem was colored with crayons
Rebecca Affachiner was a

true trailblazer, becoming one of the leading Zionist figures of the early 20th century and dedicating her life to the Jewish community and Zionist cause. Among her remarkable achievements was flying the first Israeli flag in Jerusalem, on May 14, 1948, following the announcement of the establishment of the state. Resourceful woman that she was, she sewed the flag herself and used simple blue crayons to color in its Star of David and stripes.

6. The government invited the public to design the state emblem, then rejected hundreds of proposals
Shortly after the foundation of Israel, the new government invited the public to submit proposals for the state emblem, specifying that it must feature a seven-lamp candelabra, seven stars, and the colors blue and white. Dutiful artists sent in 450 proposals, and eventually a design by Gavriel and Maxim Shamir of Shamir Brothers Studio made the cut. Their drawing included a modern-looking candelabra and stars alongside olive branches but was later changed to feature the candelabra from the Arch of Titus in Rome and the word “Israel.” The stars were dropped, and the result appears on lapel pins and coins



The drapes hanging behind Israel’s leadership were put in place to cover nude paintings, and the portrait of Herzl was a quick loan. (Government Press Office/Zoltan Kluger)

everywhere.
7. Tel Aviv’s first annual Independence Day parade failed to march
In Israel’s first two decades, a military parade took place every year as part of Independence Day celebrations. But in 1949, a year after the state was founded, things didn’t quite take off as planned. The parade started out OK, but soon the overenthusiastic crowd in Tel Aviv’s streets blocked it from proceeding further. The highly embarrassing predicament led one newspaper editor to wonder how the same army that had just a year earlier managed to defend the whole country failed to make it across a simple street.

8. Israel’s first Knesset met in a movie theater
The Knesset, or house of parliament, is a true landmark in Israel, with its majestic architecture, sculptures, and famous glass-stained windows. But the legislative assembly’s first home, bizarrely enough, was none other than a grand movie theater in Tel Aviv called Kessem (Magic) Cinema. The huge building, constructed in 1945, boasted more than 1,000 upholstered seats and enjoyed a fabulous seaside location. For most of 1949 it hosted Israel’s first parliamentarians until they moved to Jerusalem. It was eventually torn down and a residential building rose in its place.