

Welcome to the In.Fluency Podcast.

I'm Hadar, and this is episode number 2.

How are you doing? I hope all is well. I hope you're happy and you are excited about this episode. I'm very excited. And, I also feel kind of strange because this episode is all about me. Now, I'm not used to creating content around ME. I'm used to talking about YOU. I'm used to telling you what you can do to be a better speaker, to improve your pronunciation, to become more confident. That's easy for me.

But, to be here and tell you my story and everything that I'm about to tell you is strange. So I tried to imagine myself hosting a party and inviting all of you to come to my house for a party. And basically, it's just me talking to you over a glass of wine or ice tea. But since I have to be the one talking, I prefer a glass of wine.

So yes, let's pretend that that's the situation. It's evening time. We're at my house drinking whatever you want to drink, eating, nachos, and let's pretend that you're asking me, Hey, Hadar, so what's your story? What, tell me a little bit about yourself. Maybe like, how much time do you have? Cause I have a lot of things to tell you.

And then you're like, well we have all night. And I was like, I don't have all night. I have to go back home. Oh wait, no, it's, I'm actually in my home. I have to go pick up my daughters from the babysitter, so I can't talk all night. Okay, so how much time do you have, you may ask. And I'd be like, how about 20 minutes, 30 minutes tops?

And you're like, okay, cool. So, let me hear your story. And I'm like, okay, where do you want me to start? Why don't you just start at the beginning? What, you mean, when I was born? No. Hadar, when this whole English thing started. Oh, okay. So you mean when I was 21 and I just moved to New York? Yes. Okay. So let me tell you all about it.

The year was 2000. My God, it makes me feel old saying that. Some of you may not even been born in 2000. Anyway. I have been recently discharged from the army. I don't know if you know this, but in Israel it's mandatory to do your military service. And throughout those two years, when I was in the army, and by the way, guess what I did there, I was a teacher, of course.

And throughout those two years, all I could think of is I want to move to New York to find a job there. And, to become an actress. And that's what he did. I moved there and when I just got there, I was looking for a job.

And I remember walking around the streets of New York looking for a place to work. Every everywhere I walked into, they're like, no, we don't need anyone. No. And then I said, well, if I can't find a job, then I can't really stay here because they won't be able to afford it. I'll have

to leave in like a few weeks. And I was really frustrated and I think it was like the second or third day of me looking for a job.

And I remember standing in the middle of the street. I was right on McDougal and 3rd, for those of you who know New York, you know where it's at. And I was wondering whether I should make a right or make a left. And I remember this time precisely, like, vividly because I remember that it was really important for me to take the time to decide if I should make a right or make a left.

And then I made a left. And I said, I'm going to go into one more place. And if they say no, I'm going to go home, and I don't know if I have the energy to try again. I felt really defeated because I've been to like dozens and dozens of places. And then I walked down the street, and I see a sign that says "live jazz".

Now, back then I was a huge fan of jazz music. I would know all the artists and current artists, contemporary artists as well. And I was like, ah, I have to go downstairs. And I walked downstairs, and they're like, two people there. One sitting on the chair in the middle of the room. It's like all straw hats, no lighting.

The place is really run down. Little smelly, too. And there was no jazz. And I kinda like walk around. They're like, "Yeah, what do you want?" And I say, "Um, are you looking for employees?" They're like, "Come, come here, come here. Uh, what do you do?" I'm like, "I'm a bartender". Of course, I've never bartended in my life before.

"I'm a bartender". Cause I figured that's what they need. That's a bar. And then the guy I was talking to goes, "Hey Carl, when is Paula leaving?" And someone's yelling from the kitchen, "Well, in 2 weeks, Andre". I'm, like, waiting silently... "What's your name?" And I said, "Um, Julia".

Now, let me pause the story for a sec, and tell you that I decided that I'm not going to tell them my real name because then they'll think I'm not American.

I thought, I'm going to be so smart, so that way they won't ask me questions cause I don't know if it's legal for me to work or not legal. So I'm just going to tell them my name is Julia, and they'll think I'm American. And Andre goes, "Julia, so where are you from?" "Um, I'm from uptown." Okay, well, I was renting an apartment uptown and he's like, "No, but where are you really from?"

Silly me. I thought that by changing my name, people will not ask me where I'm from. I forgot that I had an accent, and a pretty thick one. It was pretty obvious that I wasn't American. And I told them that I just moved to New York and I'm from Israel. Apparently, they didn't really care about the fact that I wasn't American, and they started talking to me and asking

questions.

And started testing me about my knowledge, my bar knowledge, that I had thanks to a book called "Bartending for dummies". And I kind of memorized it, in case someone asks me questions, and I answered all these weird answers. They didn't even understand what I was saying because I was talking like book language, instead of the language that they used. And, uh, I, I probably mispronounced it too.

Anyway, so, they liked me, they liked me. What can I tell you?.. And I'm good with speaking to people. And they said, okay, you know, our bartender is leaving for Christmas. So, why don't you come for two weeks and we'll see what happens. I said, "Okay, when can I come?" "How about tomorrow?"

So I go in there tomorrow, and it's magic. I mean, the place is just amazing. All these crazy characters would come in, talk to me, tell me stories. The music was amazing. I would just like listen to all the jazz bands coming in there. There they would have two jazz bands at night. And I started to make friends, and obviously, I started working there.

So, that's it. I, I live in New York. That's, I'm living the dream. It's incredible. But of course, back then my English was not as good as my English is now. So, it was hard for me still to communicate and to express myself.

And I feel, I remember feeling very frustrated a lot of times with, one: people not understanding me. Especially when it's really loud and I had to tell them how much it costs, or ask them something, and they'd be like, "What? What, what?" Asking me to repeat themselves myself.

And, also, just constantly making the conversation about me, and we're in from and what I'm doing here and all of that. And I didn't want to make to have that conversation. I just wanted to have a normal conversation – as if I was American.

Fast forward to a year later. I was working six nights a week, sometimes seven, starting at 6:00 PM – ending at 4:00 AM, sometimes 5:00 AM. I remember falling asleep on the subway back home.

And it was a beautiful, a beautiful time. And I remember how this work has really helped me establish and improve my conversational English. Cause all I did was talk to people there, listened to their stories, share my stories, listen to the stories, to their stories, and listen to their stories a bit more.

And I picked up all those expressions and idioms, and slang, and things that I carry with me till this day. So a year goes by, and throughout that year I many things have happened. One of them is 9/11, that has changed America forever. And for us it was devastating because the

bar was downtown, and it was really close to the world trade center, and we had to close the bar for a few days.

And I remember the smell. Like, I think back then I really didn't understand the magnitude of what what had just happened. But I was there. I used to live in Harlem. And I remember going up to the roof, and I saw the smoke coming up from, you know, the horizon. And it was... it was just so sad.

And it also changed all the immigration laws. And I, back then I was still a tourist. And I said, "Okay, I need to make a decision because I won't be able to stay here for much longer." I was still legal. I had a tourist visa, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to get another one, and I knew that I wanted to stay in New York.

So I said, "Well, I, my dream is to study acting, so why not go for it here?" And that's what I did. I started auditioning two different acting schools. Now, I remember my auditions. They were horrible, horrendous, like, I was so incredibly bad. I was just like the epitome of overacting. But, I got accepted to "Circle in the square theater school".

I guess they saw something in me, thankfully. Because that decision to join the school has changed my life. Now. I got accepted, and then I had to go back home to apply for a student visa. So I told my friends that I'm going away for two months. You know, remember that back then I knew this is the place for me to be. This is where I want to live my life. And it has been a year and a half since I've been home.

And I flew back home, it was really emotional. And, and... challenging. And amazing to go back home after 18 months. And I was so naive because I went to the US embassy to apply for a student visa. I haven't even prepared anything. And... I didn't get it.

I just didn't get the visa. They said that I had lost my ties to Israel, and they're afraid that I'm not going to go back. I mean, for a good reason, I didn't plan on going back. But they said because of that they don't, they only give the student visa to people who are planning to come back and they didn't believe that I'm going to do that.

So that was the end of the world for me. Like, really. I remember myself sitting outside of the US embassy on a bench, and crying my eyes out like a baby. Bawling in the middle of the street. People looking at me like, "What is wrong with her?" And I just didn't know how I can get myself home cause I felt like I had no energy, no... nothing left in me.

I was so depressed. I wrote everyone, including the US ambassador in Israel. Like, I did everything in my power to ask them to consider this decision. Of course, no one has responded. And after a couple of months I said, "Okay, I have to figure out what to do, and how to make the best of it."

And, luckily, the school has agreed to defer my spot and to accept me the next year. And I said I'm going to take this year, and make the best of it. And try to find the connections again. So when I apply for the visa again, I'll show them that I have a good enough reason to come back.

So that year was, actually, incredible. I didn't want to spend that year in Israel, but it was a gift. Like, you know, the universe gives you gifts, and you just don't know it at the beginning. But it was a gift because that was the year where I met, for the first time, two of the people who are the closest in the world to me till this day. Two of my good, good friends that I met them in a place that I worked during that year. Had I gotten the visa, I would have never met them. And this is something like I can't even imagine my life without them around me.

And, of course, it was important for me to spend time with my family. And to understand that living in Israel is not that horrible as I imagined it to be. Because back then, like that was the most horrible thing for me to do, to go back. Because that means that I didn't succeed. And I did it, and I applied again, and I got the visa.

So in 2003 I moved back to New York city for two years of acting school. Now, I'm not going to go deep into my experience there. That's for another episode. But I'm just going to tell you that there was one class that has really changed the course of my life. And that's 'speech and pronunciation' class, where we learned everything about the pronunciation of English.

I simply fell in love with the ability to change the sounds simply by changing the position of the mouth. Or simply by understanding how everything works in the mouth or the the tongue, and the lips. And how everything affects, and affects your voice and your sound. And also, I felt that I started implementing it into my day-to-day speech.

And that had an incredible impact on my confidence in English, my clarity, how I understand people. Everything that I always talk about when I talk about acts and training. And I loved it. My teacher – her name was, um, is, still, Lee Dylan – she's one of the top accent coaches in the US – um, was incredible. She has influenced me so much. And, I still to this day hear her voice in my head the way she would yell at students who didn't get it right, or didn't do their homework. But she loved me because I was a very diligent student.

I did the work. First, because I was afraid of her. Second, because I felt the change immediately by doing it. So I was drawn into this. It was exciting for me. It wasn't a task, it wasn't a burden. I loved it.

And the second year we had different accent classes. We started working on dialects, and that was incredible too. Because that's when I started understanding how I can replace sounds. And the result is different accents. So I had to map out all the sounds in my head for

to be able to do that.

And that has helped me with understanding American accent even more, and how to control my voice even more. I was really, really in control of whatever is going out of my mouth. So I loved it. And of course, all the other classes also helped me become more confident in English, more flexible, more spontaneous. Everything that a person needs to kinda like overcome all the obstacles when speaking a second language.

Um, a year after I had graduated, I had to make a decision. My visa was about to expire and it was either finding a way to stay in the US – an expensive way – or going back home. And I decided that I need to resolve something back home. And see, maybe, I should spend my life there, or at least a portion of my life. And if not, I'll find a way to come back to New York. Back then I was already 24 or 25. And I felt like, ah, by now I should have been somewhere else, but what can I do? I need to start over. And I moved back to Israel. Now, the first year after moving back was pretty devastating. Because that year between having graduated school and moving back to Israel, I was actually working as an actress.

I mean, working is... an exaggeration because I worked at it and never got paid. But I worked at it. I was in a theater company, and we did some shows. And I did some fringe shows, and I designed lightings for some shows. Like, I was active and I also, I was also waiting tables. A lot of tables. I was working as a server and I worked a lot.

I had to pay off my student loans. And, but that year I was actually doing stuff in this field that I loved so much – acting, theater. And then I moved back and. It was a desert. Crickets. Like, no one was interested in what I did in the US. No one cared about “Circle in the square” or whatnot. Like, what school I went to in New York. No one really cared.

And I am not one of those people who would push themselves forward, or make phone calls and be like, “I have to tell you about myself. I'm so awesome. You have to represent me to agents and stuff.” So I was basically doing nothing. I was in a small theater group. And I did some small things, but I didn't find my path here as an actress.

So, I started to explore different things. Now, this is where you might be thinking, “Oh, so she started teaching excellent lessons.” So, actually, no. Four more years are going to go by without me doing anything related to accent training or acting. So, in those four years, I've experimented with many different things.

I've studied naturopathy, Chinese medicine. I worked as a server, and then as a manager, and then as a general manager in a very fancy restaurant in Tel Aviv. I did lighting design for a fringe show in the theater. I babysat a lot. And I was mostly miserable. I mean, when I worked at the restaurant, I felt like I have found my space. Because I was really good at it,

and I managed people. And I loved the apace feel of like, a service, but it wasn't for me. And, I remember one afternoon like, sitting at home, feeling really depressed. I wasn't making enough money. I was really looking for something better to do. And I felt like I wasn't fulfilling my purpose. I mean, is, is that all there is?

Like me just making people feel great about their evening, you know? Like this one night that they come in, spend a ton of money on food and that's it. They go, they don't remember me. They don't care about anything. Is that my purpose in life? And then I said, "What else can I do?" And then I said to myself, "What if I give private accent lessons, like one on one? Maybe someone would be interested in that."

And then I said, "What a silly idea. Like, no one is interested in improving their accent. It's just for actors, and no one's acting in English here anyways, so why even bother?" But I kept thinking about it, and then I said, "I'm just going to give it a try."

So I remember writing a small note saying, "Acts and classes: learn how to improve your accent. Call me." And I wrote my number. And then I went to this business district, not even in Tel Aviv, where I lived.

Um, I had to, kinda like, drive for an hour. And I went there, and I posted it on a bulletin board. Yeah, I know it sounds old-school, but remember - it was 2007, or 2008, I keep confusing the years. And, lo and behold, within a couple of days, I get a phone call. "Hi, Hadar. I'm calling about the accent lessons." I'm like, "Uh, yeah, sure."

"So, I wanted to ask you a few questions." Of course, I was not prepared. I started to just like give him random answers, and then he's like, "So, how much is a session?" I had no idea. I haven't even thought about it. So I invented a number. Of course, it was way below the market price, but, fine. And he said, "Great, when can I come?"

And I'm like, "Oh my God. Okay." "Uh, sure." We scheduled the meeting and I quickly prepared the first lesson. And I was really nervous, mainly because my English was so incredibly rusty. I was barely speaking English during those four years. And here now I have to teach someone how to speak with a proper accent. So I decided that I'm going to do the lessons in Hebrew, and only teach him the words with the right pronunciation. I was staying in my comfort zone.

Anyway, the lesson went great. The student was extremely happy and already wanted to schedule the next session. And that's how it all started. I wondered how in the world would I find more students? I mean, when I told people about it, they made fun of me, but then I knew that there are some people they're looking for exactly what I do.

So, I started doing funny things, like going to different forums and then login as one user.

Let's call that user "mint". So I would log in as "mint" and post the question, "Hi, everyone. Do you happen to know how I can improve my accent? I'm really interested in doing that." And then I would log out and log in as a different user. Let's call her "Jennifer123". And "Jennifer123" would answer "mint": "You have to check out. Hadar Shemesh. She's an incredible coach. She has helped me so much." And then login in as "mint" again, "Oh, really? Do you have her number?"

And then log in as Jennifer123: "Sure. Here it is!". And I would post my number, and I started getting phone calls from people. People, searching for accent coaches, because no one had done it in Israel before. So, that was probably the only content about improving your accent in Hebrew. And people started calling me just because I made these interactions in different forums.

That was a lot of fun, and that's how I got work. And then one day, one of my students said to me, "Hadar, you gotta set up your website. You gotta create content, and people will find you." A shoutout to you, Shola, who has started my first interaction with the online sphere – just creating a website.

And I just used, I think, Google sites, I created some content. It took me a long time. I set up my website, I quit my job. Went to Brazil for a month and got back, and said, "This is what I'm doing from now on." And it's been a year, I think. Like, I put up my website, started writing content to improve my, um, SEO. And, I think within a year of quitting my job, I started only doing this – only teaching people privately how to speak with a better accent. And I was doing that for about 7 years. I've been coaching one-on-one's, and in groups, and in companies. And then I once posted a video on YouTube. I was, actually, working on creating an online course. And the video didn't turn out that well, and I decided to just upload it to YouTube. And if forgot about it.

And then, a few months later, I'm looking at the video and I saw that there are like 60,000 views. And to me that was like mind blowing. "What? How is that even possible?" And I got all these comments saying, "This is incredible." It was my "schwa" video. You can go back and actually see it. I think, "the secret of American pronunciation" or something like that.

That's the name of the video, and I'm going to put a link to it in the show notes. But it was so funny. Like, the response was amazing, and I was just like, "What is this thing, even?" I didn't know anything about YouTube. I had a full-on business in Israel. Like, coaching people in groups. And I already hired my first coach that worked with me.

And in 2015 – I remember it because I was pregnant with my second child, I was 9-months pregnant – and I decided to shoot a lot of videos, and commit to releasing one video a week.



Which was a very ballsy commitment, especially when you're just about to have your second child. But, I guess, I like challenges. So, I decided to do that. And from then on, I do release a video every single week, and the rest is history.

I created my online course – “Accent Makeover”, that is super successful. Every time we launch, we get hundreds of students from around the world. Um, right now I have a YouTube channel with 220 thousand people, subscribers, followers. That's incredible to me, and a huge privilege to have such a large audience to share my ideas with.

I have a beautiful community on Facebook of non-native speakers who communicate and practice English together. And I have my students. I have a school in Tel Aviv with many students, who actually come in. Physically come in and coach with one of my coaches, or, um, take one of our group classes. Or people who joined my online programs. And, I mean, I can't be more grateful than that.

And now, here I am, starting my new podcast. Speaking to you, telling you my story. I'm really closing a circle here. I feel like it's a decade of doing this. And it's actually the end of the decade. I'm recording this at the end of 2019. And, I think, looking back, I think that when I was 20 I had plans for myself. I saw myself in a totally different place in 2020.

I thought that I'm going to be a famous actress living in New York, raising my kids there. And I think that from the age of 20 to the age of 30, I was laying out the foundations of my life, right? I was creating the infrastructure. And then, from the age of 30 to the age of 40, which is where I'm at 2020, I'm going to be 40. Oh my goodness.

Um, this is where I started to really fulfill my purpose, and to do what I loved. Which is teach and coach, and create content. And, and simplify English for people the way I have simplified it to myself in my head. And to make it possible – for you. To make it possible to make you feel like it is possible. That you can do it, and that you are enough, and you don't need to be a native speaker to be a good speaker.

So, I think that everything that I've gone through – and I shared with you in the last 32 minutes – all led me to do what I'm doing right now. So, I'm very, very grateful for my journey and I'm grateful for you. For being here, and tuning in, and listening to my story.

Thank you so, so much. Sending you my deep love. And I'll catch you next time on the next episode.