

Deaf conference makes a signal case for greater understanding

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Signing off: delegates Maxim Vaynar, Shlomo Waks, Boris Eselson, Mark Zaurov, Ruth Aluf-Levin, Peter Farago, Sandzek Weicher and Mihaly Hollo discuss pertinent issues during a conference break PHOTO: JOHN NATHAN

By LORRAINE KIRK

The usual buzz of conversation at the start of an international conference was strangely absent.

Instead, hands and facial expressions were being used to greet old friends and chat to new ones.

This was the scene on Monday at the start of the fifth World Organisation of Jewish Deaf conference, held in Holborn, central London.

More than 200 participants from Britain, Israel and, for the first time, Eastern Europe had gathered for three days to discuss the conference theme — "Towards a freer world."

Things were even more animated in the main hall, where a British sign language interpreter was at work on the right side of the platform, translating the opening speeches.

On the left side, an international sign language interpreter — himself deaf — was involved in a three-

way relay. He watched another interpreter translating speeches into British sign language, which he then had to convert into international signing.

And yet more interpreters were at work for the benefit of foreign participants who understood only their own country's sign language.

As with any Jewish event, the audience busily conversed among themselves. But in this case, they were able to carry on "conversations" across the room without disturbing the speaker.

For hearing guests, the conference offered an insight into the communication barriers which the deaf have to surmount.

Opening the event, Israeli ambassador Moshe Raviv praised the crucial role played by the world organisation in improving conditions for the Jewish deaf.

Leading figures from the international deaf community stressed the need for equal rights — and

better education about the problems facing the deaf.

A short drama sketch performed by deaf actors vividly illustrated both the difficulties of using a telephone and the freedom afforded by the minicom system, which allows users to type in messages.

Papers presented to delegates covered issues ranging from the relationship between Israeli and Arab deaf people to the stresses experienced by minority groups.

One of the expert speakers, Dr Brendon Monteiro, pointed out: "Deaf people don't always develop communication within the family and this prevents people developing to their true potential."

The conference was sponsored by the Hackney-based Jewish Deaf Association.

Its executive director, Pat Goldring, commented: "We hope our theme of moving towards a freer world will initiate vast improvements for deaf people worldwide."