

FORENSIC TECHNICIAN CREATES FACIAL COMPOSITE TO TRAP SERIAL RAPIST

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A serial rapist was recently apprehended after his computerized facial portrait was created and subsequently identified by a police source. The facial composite compiled by Sergeant Major Ronen Levy, a Jerusalem forensic field technician, was, according to the witness, extremely similar to her attacker. During further interrogation of the suspect, similar attacks and numerous house break-ins around the capital were also uncovered.

The ability to produce an accurate facial composite is due in part to the descriptive capacity and memory of the eyewitness, as well as to the artistic and graphic skills of the forensic technician.

Superintendent Joseph A. Levi, Head of the Criminal Album and Facial Composite Unit, adds that in order to create a high quality computerized

portrait, “The expert must be a good listener, competent in the application of facial construction software, including Adobe Photoshop and perhaps most importantly, have an inherent sensitivity for faces and facial structure.

“There are two main areas of expertise in our unit,” explains Levi. “Firstly, we have fully trained field technicians who are stationed in 60 units throughout the country and for whom we provide guidance, supervision and expertise. They learn skills such as the photographing of suspects and storing digital images into our criminal album database and the application of cutting-edge recognition software to describe and define automated offender searches. In addition, each sub-district has a technician who receives several weeks of training and practice in computerized facial composite reconstructions.”

Recently, when an eyewitness came forward to identify a person who was suspected of using a stolen credit card, it was the Criminal Photo Album Database that provided the match. Gone are the days of manually searching through tin filing cabinets filled to the brim with offenders’ photographs. In today’s on-line digital era, the Criminal Album Database has amassed over 200,000 mug shots, each carefully categorized and numbered, to be instantaneously accessed at the touch of a keyboard.

In accordance with Israeli law, digital photographs of suspects may be obtained, together with fingerprints, from persons who have been arrested. Recently, questioned individuals have also been included in the list. The Criminal Album Database, as a result, is constantly being updated with approximately 25,000-30,000 new mug shots added each year.



Based at Police HQ, the Criminal Album and Facial Composite Unit is part of the Division of Identification and Forensic Science Photography Laboratory. It provides expert opinion in facial morphology comparisons in cases such as identity theft involving forged ID documents where two photographs may be analyzed and their morphological features compared. In addition, the unit is undertaking several research initiatives.

“We are investigating what makes a composite accurate,” explains Levi. “For example, we record the order that an eyewitness remembers each facial feature and are checking to see if there is any significance or correlation between the order with which a facial feature is recalled and the accuracy of that composite.”

Both witness and technician independently evaluate the resultant facial image and

if discrepancies exist then changes are made to correct the composite until it matches the witness’s memory.

Perhaps a somewhat peculiar case that the unit recently investigated is that of a house break-in, where a handbag belonging to the victim was found outdoors, in the vicinity of the property. A quick search inside the handbag revealed a photograph of an adult male, which was later matched to that of a suspect in the Criminal Album Database.

Superintendent Levi, who has a degree in Applied Science, collaborates with other law enforcement experts working in the field of computer-aided facial composites and can be contacted directly at Tel. +972-2-5429492 or by e-mail: jalevi@police.gov.il

