

amidst Tough Idealism

Israel Shows Human Frailty

By PETER DESBARATS

Staff writer Peter Desbarats and The Star's editorial cartoonist, Ed. McNally, recently visited Israel. This is the first of a series of four illustrated articles on their impressions of that country.

journalist. The net result of a great deal of conversation and observation, crammed into a dozen days, was an impression of a complex multi-dimensional nation alive with familiar hopes, fears, complexes and anxieties.

This is the portrait I want to sketch in a few short articles. I did not go to Israel to gather statistics on economic growth, housing and irrigation. I wanted to discover a believable country.

State of Uproar

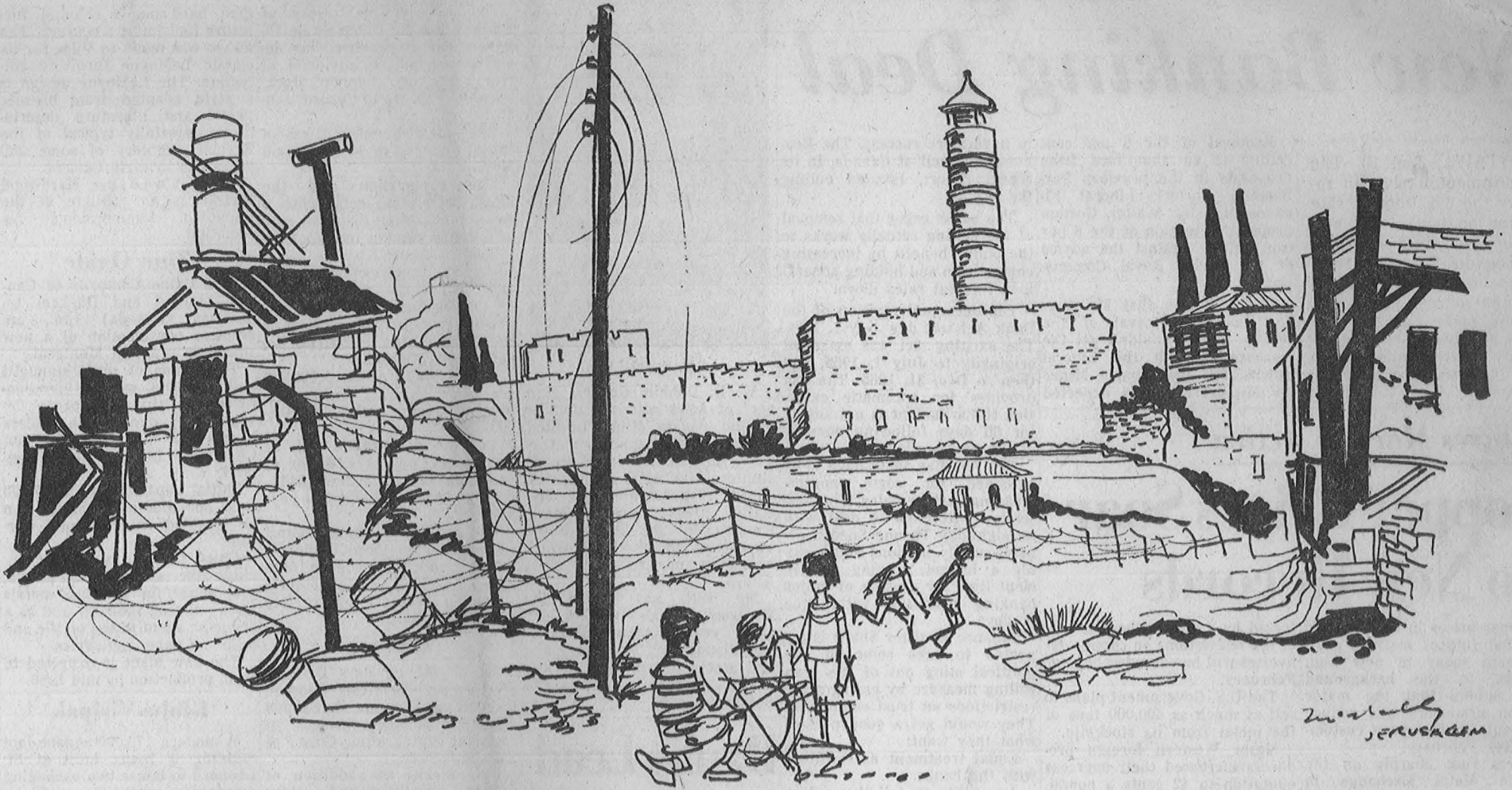
With elation I report that things in Israel, as everywhere else, are in a glorious state of uproar.

A few random examples:

In Jerusalem the taxi drivers were fuming because ultra-orthodox factions were trying to bar all vehicles from certain quarters of the city during the Sabbath. A shoemaker in the Holy City was insulted when I declined an offer to spend the Sabbath at his home smoking hashish with a few friends. He lived near a district where a local morality committee had hung signs above the narrow streets threatening dire penalties for women wearing slacks, shorts and other improper dress. In the ancient city of Jaffa on the Mediterranean coast, an almost equally ancient French stripper giggled and bumped her way through a routine that would be banned in contemporary Paris. In the dining room of Tel Aviv's Sheraton Hotel, ash trays were removed on the Sabbath as a reminder that smoking was forbidden.

Like any country where religion exists near the surface of public life, Israel glitters with paradoxes.

There is fierce debate about plans to introduce television, regarded by some Israelis as a frivolously decadent amusement. But as the discussion rages, wealthy Israelis cluster about their imported television sets to watch programs beamed



Israeli children play among ruins in the Arab quarter of Jerusalem—the strip of No Man's Land that bisects the divided city.

from neighboring Arab countries. I was told—not that one has to believe everything—that those who can't understand Arabic simply switch off the sound and stare at the novel images.

The practice may not be the last word in educational television but apparently it does wonders for one's social status.

Unlike Canada, Israel does not worry about its "national identity." Despite the diverse origins of many of its citizens, it is a remarkably homogeneous nation united by language, religion and common idealism. But every nation needs some anxiety eating at its soul. Israelis worry about their idealism.

Should they purchase new Volkswagens with reparations money from West Germany merely because the money goes further when used to buy German goods? Should they worry about their expanding waistlines while their Arab neighbors remain sveltly and dangerously undernourished? If they are highly educated, should they remain in Israel or emigrate to some other country where there is more money and greater scope for their professional work?

These are questions which are discussed in Israel today although, on the whole, the state continues to exist on an unusually high level of common dedication. Discoteques in Tel Aviv may be filled with long hair and Cuban heels but I also saw, in the Galilee near the Syrian border, young men and women struggling to transform a military outpost into a farming settlement. At they worked, they were guarded by armed sentries. A few miles away, several days before, a young man had been hauled from his tractor and strangled, apparently by Arab marauders.

Kibbutz Problems

Near Acre, in the Upper Galilee, Zev Kofsky, a former teacher in a Jewish school in Montreal who emigrated to Israel in 1948, stood at sunset on a hill overlooking his kibbutz and the hostile mountains of Lebanon. Last year he had been elected to the senior administrative post on his collective farm, Gesh-Haziv. He talked matter-of-factly about the problems of kibbutz—whether children should eat evening meals with their parents in the main mess hall or in children's dining areas, whether to expand the chicken hatchery this year or next. It was only when he groped for English words to translate Hebrew farming terms, words which he had never heard in east-end Montreal, that one realized how long ago he had left Montreal and how strong must have been the drive which not only brought him to Israel but



American tourists in Knesset Garden, Jerusalem.

kept him there in a rigidly communal way of life.

This drive remains a potent factor in Israeli life, but it exists in a nation of growing complexity. A few hours after leaving Gesh-Haziv, I stood with a group of tourists about the bar of an older and much wealthier kibbutz in the Galilee, drinking dry martinis and comparing the merits of guest houses and swimming pools at various kibbutzim.

Grim Reminder

After a huge dinner, the tourists sprawled over sofas in the lounge and listened to a lecturer, a member of the kibbutz, praise the virtues of life in a communal agricultural society. The next morning, the tourists glanced curiously at the entrances to the kibbutz's air raid shelters as they walked to the pool.

"I worked on a kibbutz for several months before I arrived here last year, but it wasn't for me," said a young Jewish girl in Jerusalem, a former Londoner sharing a flat with a non-Jewish Canadian couple.

"On the kibbutz you never saw anyone but members of the community. After a while, when the others were folk singing or dancing in the evening, a group of us, mainly new arrivals, used to go to one of the rooms and drink gin and talk about the outside world.

"We made a point of being friendly with an Arab who worked on the kibbutz. Some of the older members didn't like that."

Although she was disillusioned with kibbutz life, she remained a "convinced Zionist" and was working for a pittance in a school for

emotionally disturbed children.

"You can't live only for yourself," she said.

This sort of remark is encountered frequently in Israel. It expresses something that is deeper than the simplified moral idealism of the 14-year-old student, writing in a Jerusalem newspaper, who criticized urban Israeli girls who "spend their days knitting, flirting and gossiping, and their nights walking up and down Dizengoff street" instead of acting like proper "religious girls who spend two years as teachers, in development areas, working hard, fighting ignorance, and living in primitive conditions." It expresses a feeling that life is less selfish in Israel than in other countries. There is a great sense of belonging to an interested group.

"Not that I really belong yet," said a recent immigrant from England. "In England, I was a Jew. Here, I am English. My Hebrew is lousy. But already I think of Israel and not England as home."

During my stay the new port of Ashdod on the Mediterranean coast south of Tel Aviv was opened with appropriate fanfare. The first ship, a 6,000-ton Swedish freighter, steamed ceremonially into the harbor and was immediately rammed by an over-anxious tug. It docked with two badly dented bow plates.

Journalists who visit Ashdod in future won't hear about this; but for me the crumpled bow of the Vingalund is a symbol of Israel's admirable fallibility.

TOMORROW: Germany and Israel.



Fink's Bar where pork chops are on the menu.